



MAID *without* HONOR

An Age Gap Best Friend's Dad Billionaire Romance

SOFIA T SUMMERS

MAID WITHOUT HONOR
AN AGE GAP, BEST FRIEND'S DAD,
BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

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OTHER BOOKS BY SOFIA T SUMMERS

Forbidden Temptations Series (Age Gap Romances - this series)

[Daddy's Best Friend](#)

[My Best Friend's Daddy](#)

[Daddy's Business Partner](#)

[Doctor Daddy](#)

[Secret Baby with Daddy's Best Friend](#)

[Knocked Up by Daddy's Best Friend](#)

[Pretend Wife to Daddy's Best Friend](#)

[SEAL Daddy](#)

[Fake Married to My Best Friend's Daddy](#)

[Accidental Daddy](#)

[The Grump's Girl Friday](#)

[The Vegas Accident](#)

[My Beastly Boss](#)

[My Millionaire Marine](#)

[The Wedding Dare](#)

[The Summer Getaway](#)

[The Love Edit](#)

The Husband Lottery

Christmas in the Cabin

A Very Naughty Christmas

Forbidden Doctors Series

Doctors Surprise Twins

Written in the Charts

Forbidden Fantasies (Reverse Harem Series)

My Irish Billionaires

Toy for the Teachers

Three Grumpy Bosses

Feasting on Her Curves

SAM AND JUDE: THE PLAYLIST

- “Crimson + Clover” by Pom Pom Squad
- “It’s a Shame” by First Aid Kit
- “Dinner & Diatribes” by Hozier
- “Sunrise” by Norah Jones
- “Best Fake Smile” by James Bay
- “Better Man” by Little Big Town
- “Gold Rush” by Taylor Swift
- “Happy & Sad” by Kacey Muscgraves
- “I’m on Fire” by Soccer Mommy
- “Ever Since New York” by Harry Styles
- “Let Me Love You Like a Woman” by Lana Del Rey
- “Woman” by Mumford & Sons
- “The Man with the Axe” by Lorde
- “Father and Daughter” by Paul Simon
- “Hey Jude” by The Beatles

DESCRIPTION

It isn't that hard to be a good maid of honor.

Always support your bride-to-be, co-host a gorgeous bridal shower,

And never, *ever* sleep with the father of your bride.

In my defense, I didn't know who he truly was when we met.

My best friend's father was more like a myth or a legend,

Yet the silver-haired fox I met after a canceled flight was charming, courteous,

And oh-so-clever enough to get me to fall for the weekend.

It was never supposed to be 'til death do us part.

That's how I preferred it.

No strings. No rings. No heartbreak.

Now, I'm faced with the consequences of my actions again and again.

There's the engagement party, the family dinners, the wedding preparations.

Southern society weddings are so much work, and the sinful look in his eyes is too tempting.

I'm a maid of honor for now, but if people knew the truth, they might realize "maid" and "honor" are two words that will never describe me again.

CHAPTER ONE

SAM

It struck my tired body like an arrow to the chest. After hours of waiting, my brain begged for denial, but the words lighting up the screen absolutely refused.

FLIGHT CANCELED

After twelve hours of waiting, the airline finally gave up. The snowstorm meant to pass by quickly had parked itself over New York City. The delays were only supposed to last until the runways got cleared, but that wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

"I could've flown in anywhere," I muttered to myself. "Why didn't you fly literally anywhere else?"

Grumbling, I dragged my backpack and my body from the seat, heading toward the chain coffee shop. Splurging on the special lounge didn't offer much comfort through the night.

With my carry-on rolling behind me, I knew caffeine wouldn't solve my problems, but it could keep me standing.

"One iced coffee, black," I told the woman behind the register. "Oh, and a doughnut, please."

“Which one?”

I looked up, blinking a few times. Right, there were options.

“The chocolate heart-shaped one,” I decided with a cursory glance.

Tapping my credit card, I shuffled through the motions of the other worn travelers stuck in the February snow. We moved like objects on a conveyor belt.

I picked up my drink and shuffled toward the sugar packets. Taking a bite of the doughnut, I instantly regretted asking for it.

How could it taste stale already?

“That bad, huh?” a rich, resonant voice asked beside me.

My eyes flicked up and to the right. I’d seen him at my gate in the early hours of the morning. Both on our laptops, we stayed up as others disappeared to get more comfortable elsewhere or hit up last call at the bar. He’d caught my attention time and again.

I worried that he’d notice at some point.

The man was a handsome contradiction. His long woolen coat and steel watch probably cost more than most people’s rent, but the Eagles T-shirt underneath had faded with a thousand wears.

Though his hair looked more silver than dark gray, his face seemed so youthful. His clean-cut, classic features had been shadowed by a long night’s facial hair, but it only stood to soften the cheekbones strong enough to cut the icicles forming outside.

I thought I might collapse when he flashed a winning grin.

I stopped scrunching my nose and smiled back. “It’s going against all laws of logic. I thought it was fresh, but it tastes about a week old.”

“I think they’re shipping in all the old stuff from other shops,” he replied. “Cream?”

“Um, yeah.”

We moved like we had done this all before. He handed me one of the packets to pour into my cup before dumping one into his. The allegedly hot coffee didn't steam like I expected.

“They really should call this ‘tepid black swill’,” he mused.

“I think that's too hard of a name for this crowd.” I picked up two paper packets. “Sugar?”

“I'm not sure it'll save this, but thanks. I'm Jude, by the way.”

“Samantha,” I offered back. “Most people call me Sam, though.”

“Who doesn't call you that?”

“My parole officer.”

Jude froze. When our eyes met, he laughed again, but mothers and parole officers were one and the same, right? I forced myself not to smile.

“Well then, Sam, do you want to split a table?”

My eyes swept around the compact room dressed in shades of depressing brown. The barstools along the wall were taken up by stranded passengers trying to charge their devices. Of the three tables, two were taken up by one family, so if I wanted to sit down . . .

“Why not?” I agreed.

My body was exhausted enough that my schoolgirl butterflies couldn't go too far. After all, Jude was just a man, a very handsome and likely wealthy man stuck in the same predicament as me, and misery always loved company.

“What brought you to New York, then?” I asked as we took the last table in the corner.

Jude shoved his leather duffle under his chair. “Business. My company has an office here. We're going through a transition period, and I was sent to help out. You?”

“Shopping,” I admitted. “I’ve just gotten back from Portugal, and I needed some new clothes. I figured New York might have a slightly better selection than Charleston.”

His eyebrows went up. “Portugal?”

“I was there for three weeks.” I forced down a swig of the swill. “I did three weeks in Greece before that, but I was working most of the time.”

“Are you a travel writer, then?”

“No, a coder. I just work remotely, so I travel when I can.”

He didn’t look bored as I rambled about winter walks on a Portuguese beach. Jude took another drink from his paper cup and winced. Holding up the cup in his hand, he tried to make sense of it, like staring at it with his light blue-gray eyes would somehow get the coffee to explain itself. I tried not to laugh.

“God, this is a hell of a way to be spending Valentine’s Day,” he muttered under his breath.

Reality slapped me in the face.

“Oh, my gosh,” I realized. “It’s the fourteenth now, isn’t it?”

“Or we’re stuck in some kind of miserable snow-induced time loop.”

“Then, we should try and break the cycle.”

Jude sat taller like the remark actually had merit. He pulled out his phone and made a call. As he ended the conversation, his free arm reached across the table to steal the doughnut from my hands.

I opened my mouth to protest, but he said, “You don’t need to eat that. The hotel where I was staying has an excellent restaurant, and my suite’s still available.”

“Are you inviting me with you to a *hotel room*?” I paused for the question to sink in. “Lord knows . . . what did they put in that coffee?”

He laughed again, brighter and warming me in a way air never could.

“I can’t tell you what’s in this cup, but I won’t be a jerk and abandon you here. The airline’s going to have to reimburse you, so we might as well save ourselves from this . . . this purgatory. You can get a room until the new flight’s booked, and if they don’t have one free, well, my suite does have two bedrooms.”

My eyebrows went up. I swallowed hard.

“I might be a murderer for all you know,” I pointed out. “Maybe I was serious about having a parole officer.”

“I doubt that.”

“I might steal everything you have.”

Jude showed off a winning smile, confident that he couldn’t lose.

“All things are replaceable. Now, come on, let me buy you a better breakfast.”

Jude just didn’t have the heart to leave me behind, and when the hotel van drove us across the boroughs, I saw the streets’ salt had fought a losing battle. He’d saved us in the nick of time. Our bags were carried upstairs as we headed into the Valentine’s Day breakfast, proving Jude had the perks of being a frequent resident.

One look around the hotel told me why. With its handful of sleepy-eyed patrons, the dining room mixed lofty Brooklyn chic and vintage Italian flair. The red roses on every table and the morning special for two didn’t have to mean anything, but . . . did I want it to mean something?

Twisting the gold bracelets around my wrist, nothing felt logical anymore. I pinched myself under the table. I didn’t wake up.

“Is this espresso really better than our airport coffee?” I joked as our breakfasts arrived.

Jude thanked the waiter before turning back to me. His gray eyes grew serious.

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“Then, what should I joke about?”

“Why not tell me more about that beach in Portugal?”

“Ericeira?” I cut into my frittata. “There’s not much to it, but the place is stunning. It’s considered some of the best surfing in the world. I only took, like, one lesson, though.”

“I don’t know if it can beat Newport Beach, not back in the day, anyway.”

“Not anymore?”

He shook his head. “Work’s got a way of bleeding into the weekend, but I’m hoping to get back into it. Especially with a guide like you, Portugal might be exactly what I need.”

Jude scattered lines like that across our conversation. Every single time, he smiled and wrote it off like it was no big deal. It crazed me. It excited me.

Every subtle flirtation became a small shock to my system.

By the time we went upstairs, my body had started forgetting its fatigue.

The new range of emotions overwhelmed everything else, yet he wasn’t more than a kind stranger. I didn’t want to read too much into it. In a penthouse suite overlooking the snowy skyline and river, I needed to find some grounding in reality . . . as if it were even possible.

A glass of water had to suffice.

Fresh out of the upstairs shower, my bare feet padded down the stairs. Jude was watching snow and ice collect on his terrace. A question lingered in my mind.

“Jude?” I called, walking over to the wall of glass where he stood.

“Yes, Sam.”

“Why did you bother with me today?”

He smirked at the line. “*Bother?*”

“You know what I mean.”

His features softened. In the span of a few seconds, Jude's gaze turned my white robe to nothing at all. I pulled it tighter against my chest.

"I'd seen you at dinner."

"When?"

"At the airport," he added. "You sat at the far end of the busy bar. For that whole hour, I wondered why I shouldn't go talk to you. I spent all night wondering . . . just don't ask me why."

"Why, then?"

A smile toyed at the corners of his mouth. "I wish I knew."

"Maybe we knew each other in a past life," I guessed. "Maybe you didn't want to be alone for the holiday."

His expression faltered for a fraction of a second.

"I don't expect anything from you, Sam."

"But expectation and desire aren't the same thing."

"No," he had to admit. "They're not."

"So . . . if we were here for the holiday . . . if we weren't just stranded in the snow," I began to ask, but the rest of the question struggled to come out.

I hated to know the answer, but God, I needed to know I wasn't alone. Jude didn't offer a reply at first. He tucked a stray lock of blonde hair behind my ear.

"I'd give you the chance to refuse," Jude murmured.

The rasp of wanting filled every word.

"And what if I don't want to?"

I didn't know my heart could race so quickly. With my hair pulled up onto the crown of my head, his grip easily curled around the back of my neck. My palms pressed into his chest just as my back pressed against the frozen windowpanes. Caught between fire and ice, I had no interest in escaping, no desire to do anything but savor Jude's promise tingling against my ear.

“There will be no going back.”

“No,” I agreed, the word barely audible. “There won’t be.”

My labored breath escaped through parted lips. Blood rushed to my head. My fingertips dug into the well-loved cotton of his shirt. I remembered being tired once, but that was a lifetime ago. Right there, I only knew him. Everything else lived behind glass.

For a second, I imagined that Jude might take me right there, against the window. Possibilities flashed across my mind’s eye, but as our lips met, everything grew quiet.

Slowly, and then all at once, we ignited.

With his guiding hand, my head tilted back. A shuddering breath filled my lungs. Tongues against teeth, our kiss consumed every piece of me. Everything beyond Jude’s reach faded away. Nothing existed outside his touch. It lured our chests to press tighter together. His fingertips traced the length of my spine until they found the small of my back, and then, we were dancing.

Jude led our footsteps twirling together toward an open bedroom door. I glimpsed light wood on the walls and curtains drawn back from another wall of glass. Still, my eyes could hardly leave him. I became too fixated on casting aside every infuriating scrap of fabric keeping us apart.

I didn’t want to indulge a fantasy. I wanted to burn in it.

The fiery heat pooling at my center blazed hot enough to keep me warm for the rest of winter. Still, it grew. Jude’s body didn’t seem real. Every lean muscle my fingertips traced felt molded to perfection. Men like him were only supposed to exist in myths.

They weren’t meant to be undoing the sash of my robe. Their steely eyes were never supposed to hold mine captive. With nothing else between us, we fell together. My knees folded against the edge of the bed. The downy comforter caught us.

Jude worked to memorize the outline of my curves, roving over my sides with his grip before stopping at my breasts. His

mouth stole the very air from mine, but when he broke our kiss, I nearly whimpered in disappointment.

“I—I don’t have . . .” He struggled to find the word through our haze, but I caught on.

“Implant,” I answered between soft gasps. “We’re okay.”

“We’re okay,” he echoed quietly.

My lips reassured him with every tender brush along his jaw and neck. Time froze around us. All I cared about were our shuddering breaths on the edge of anticipation.

“Nobody has to know but us.” My kiss pressed into the hollow of his throat. “As long as we’re here, I’ll be your Valentine.”

“And what will I be?”

His grip tightened at my sides. Possession compelled him. Rolling us around, I sprawled out on my back, contentedly pinned under his weight. It would have been nice to stay there forever.

I smiled up at him. “You can be whatever you like, sweetheart.”

The glint of mettle lit up his eyes. Sparks flew over my skin while his hand wandered down between my legs.

There was no denying how I craved him, not that I wanted to hide it. My tired body longed to be touched. As he claimed his kiss from one pair of lips, Jude’s two fingers traced over the others, but impatience got the better of us both.

Our bodies connected. Guiding Jude to press deeper, I twisted my legs around his like climbing vines growing in tandem with the pleasure inside me. He rocked into me. My hips rose to meet him. From a crimson passion to a rosy flush of heat, we painted each other every shade of red. The colors blinded me when my release took hold, but Jude held on tighter.

“Hell, Sam,” he cursed into my hair.

We left each other feverish and breathless on a white dream cloud until sleep claimed us both. Sweat pearled at my neck. My lungs struggled to calm, but I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so content. Somewhere between dreams and reality, I heard Jude speak.

"I don't know you," he muttered almost to himself, "but I think I could love you."

My body curled into his as I yawned. "Maybe . . ."

Time became kinder then. For two days, there wasn't a world outside our hotel. Jude told me about Southern California and the summer he spent renovating a house in the canyons of Topanga.

We spent evenings in the terrace's hot tub and had dinner brought to us. There was no need for shoes and very little need for clothing. The suite became our bubble, our haven, and it was almost a shame to see it burst.

The airline finally rebooked our flight.

"If you're ever bored in Charleston, you know how to reach me," Jude told me at the terminal. "Just give me a call."

"And you'll come running?"

He grinned. "Probably."

We exchanged numbers and emails. We both planned to be in South Carolina through the summer, but I had fine lines drawn around men like Jude. Weekends like ours weren't meant to be relived. Trying to relive those moments would be like trying to reclaim a fading dream—futile and frustrating.

Over the speakers, his boarding class was called. We had reached the end.

"I'll keep that in mind," I told him anyway, having no time to explain myself. "You . . . you take care of yourself."

"You too, Sam."

One hopeful smile. One small wave.

Just like that, I figured our time had come and gone. We woke up. We were heading back to reality, and as I stood there

waiting, I imagined that Jude's fascination with me would melt faster than the snow outside.

He'd forget the feelings he'd never quite explained, not that it worried me. After all, they were never meant to outlive the dream.

CHAPTER TWO

JUDE

The silver roof reflected every ray of light right back into the sky.

One man. Four bedrooms. *Five* bathrooms.

Renting this river house definitely made sense.

Getting out of my car, I walked around the side yard to see why I'd picked the place. The shade trees cast their shadows over the grass and toward the wide expanse of water and the dock stretching out into its depths.

A chilled breeze blew off the water, but after the bitter blizzard in New York, South Carolina's so-called winter felt quaint. I hoped this piece of southern paradise might give me the peace I'd been hunting. I'd finally have the time to tie up loose ends and make space for something better.

That reminded me—I needed to text her.

Made it to my house, I typed, already heading inside. *I'm about to go find my bedroom and office.*

Slipping my phone into my jeans' back pocket, I went and pulled the car into the half-empty garage. The boat inside took

up the other half, and I had no intention of moving it.

“Keys, keys,” I mumbled under my breath.

I fished them out of the deep recesses of my coat. With a few failed attempts, I made it into the house, disarmed the alarm, and sucked in a deep breath. The whole main floor lingered with the scent of pine cleaner. It was there in the foyer, the living room, and even the elevator. Housekeeping must have spent hours polishing every plank of the wood floors.

Every window I passed took advantage of the view. Upstairs, I finally found the one corner of the house I needed. The home office and the main suite were side by side. Walking the twenty steps from my bed to the desk would beat the forty minutes I used to spend in traffic.

Of all the things I’d miss about running the company, the commute was at the bottom of my list, but I’d stopped brooding over the change months ago. It was time to move on to the next chapter, or rather, unpack all my junk.

The boxes arrived ahead of me, and thankfully, the movers had followed my instructions. Each carefully labeled container sat waiting in their respective rooms. My vinyl records, my office supplies, and my computer were all there.

I wanted to be ready for my first meeting as Chief Creative Officer of Elysian Records. Hell, I made the title up for myself so I wouldn’t need to be sitting in that mariner’s blue room looking bewildered through a camera lens. Ushering in a new age meant setting an example. Everything would thrive as it always had.

My company and I were heading toward bigger and better things, or rather, the business was headed toward expansion. I was heading to sort out my clothes.

Detouring back downstairs for my carry-on first, I started memorizing the bedroom. Its wide French doors opened onto the upper deck. Of the two walk-in closets, I had plenty of space for the suits I never quite liked and the denim I

preferred. The T-shirts settled neatly into the gleaming lacquered drawers.

I shut the last drawer, and my phone hummed in my pocket. She had typed back three emojis I didn't understand plus one sparkling pink heart. I waited for the actual words.

I'm glad you made it! We'll have to go out as soon as you're up for it. I've got a list of all the restaurants you can't miss!

The exclamation points weren't even an exaggeration. Ever since she was small, my daughter had been excited about everything. She embodied pure joy.

My happiness used to be her fist curling around my thumb, but her hands were too big now. She was teaching small children how to write their names and be kind to one another, yet for the first time ever, we were living in the same city.

Why not tonight? I messaged back.

It's a school night. I wish I could!

I tried to suggest Friday instead, but an incoming call stopped me short.

"Diego," I greeted him. "How are things in California? Has it sunk into the Pacific yet?"

"Not yet." He played along but didn't laugh. "Look, I know you're still traveling after the weather delay, but I've got some artist contracts that need your electronic signature. I'd send them over to Allison, but she won't officially start as CEO until Monday. I checked it over with legal. It's your name we need on the dotted line."

"Of course, you did." I ran a hand through my hair. "Look, email them over, but be sure to CC Allison too. I don't want her to feel like I'm not giving up the reins. She's the one running this circus now. I'm just the clown in the corner."

"But our very best clown, sir."

I chuckled for us both. As Chief Counsel of Elysian, Diego and his matter-of-fact mentality never wavered. He crossed every T and dotted every I. If it wasn't for him, the label

would have been swallowed up by some bullying corporate Goliath years ago. We were the guards keeping Elysian Records true to its founding ideals. Honestly, that was the only reason I stuck around these days.

“I also have some concept art and demos from the Artists and Repertoire Department. They’re looking for your opinions in your capacity as Creative Director.”

“It’s *Chief Creative Officer*.”

“To-may-to, to-mah-to.”

Walking into the bedroom, I actually heard one little laugh on the other end of the line.

“Amused yourself, did you?”

“I have my moments,” Diego replied, letting out another chortle. “Now, they’ll need your feedback by Friday.”

“Friday. Got it.”

“And I won’t be your messenger boy forever. Once we find an executive assistant who can work with you remotely, we’ll all be better for it.”

“Trust me, I don’t expect you to keep this up,” I assured him. “I like doing my own dirty work, you know. I can manage without a third hand.”

“Can you?”

“We’ll find out over the next few weeks, won’t we?”

Diego’s sigh didn’t hold much confidence. With no small talk to offer, he set me free again, leaving me to my laundry and lunch. Housekeeping had been good enough to accept the grocery delivery, so the refrigerator wasn’t bare. Seeing it all made me see the holes in my original list.

“Sandwich it is,” I decided aloud.

The sourdough slices were dropped into the toaster. The basket of dirty clothes came with me to the mudroom. Wincing, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d washed my own clothes. Wanda, my housekeeper, knew what I liked better than I did, but I had been young, single, and poor once.

The days of loitering around a laundromat came back to me. Grabbing shirts and socks by the fistful, I shoved it all into the silver basin until a tiny tapping caught my attention.

Something dropped at my feet out from between the bunched-up fabric. A small white dot stuck out against the knot in the floorboard. I tossed in the T-shirt and bent down.

It was one of Sam's bracelets, a tiny freshwater pearl on a threadbare string. Mesmerizing me, her wrist glimmered the whole time we were together, even in bed. Her entire world fit in her suitcases, and she scattered pieces of herself wherever she wandered.

This must have been the piece she left with me.

I didn't ask for more than what she gave. Every hour or so, I expected her to be a figment of . . . I didn't even know. I wasn't creative enough to dream up someone like her, and the bracelet in my hands proved it all had been real.

The toaster dinged through the wall. My head shot up. Without moving, my mind had traveled back to New York, but Sam wasn't there anymore.

I hadn't seen her when the plane disembarked. Somewhere in Charleston, the soles of her feet padded across a different floor. I didn't suspect that one of my socks had weaseled its way into her suitcases. If it had, she had no reason to treat it with the same care. I carefully slid the pearl into my pocket where my phone hummed again.

How about Friday? You can come see my new apartment, and we can order in! Speaking of places, how's yours?

My girl beat me to the punch.

It's great, I answered as impulse struck me. You know, it would even be great for an engagement party. How about it?

Heading to make my sandwich, I laughed under my breath. There weren't enough heart emojis to convey her enthusiasm, but I got the gist. The more I considered it, the more I liked the idea.

A party could prove to be the better use of this oversized house . . . and the perfect distraction.

CHAPTER THREE

SAM

Horns honked everywhere. Bumper to bumper, the traffic refused to follow the directions of the frazzled security guard. Hauling a rolling suitcase with each hand, I hustled through the lawless sea of cars toward the nearest parking lot. The cherry-colored Volkswagen stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Sammy!” Cassidy squealed over the noise. “Sammy! Ohmigod, you made it!”

She hopped off the hood of her car and jogged my way. Those pink runner’s leggings of hers actually served a purpose. As her arms latched around my neck, it felt like Cassidy was working out more than her glutes. I liked my yoga classes and walks as much as the next gal, but *damn*.

“It’s so good to see you, Cass,” I greeted once she released me.

She took the bigger suitcase from me. “Hey, I guess it worked out that your flight got delayed. It’ll be great to catch up with you on my day off. Are you sure you’re up for hanging out, though? It’s okay if you wanna go rest.”

“I’ve been trapped in a Brooklyn hotel. Trust me, I have plenty of energy.”

Although, Jude did his best to run me ragged. The tops of my ears flushed with heat remembering it all, but I didn’t have much interest in gushing over any man, really. Instead, I shoved my stuff into Cassidy’s trunk. We made off like bandits in no time.

“Pick something for us,” she insisted, handing over her phone. “You always pick the best music.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“Don’t play games! You’ve always made the best playlists. Come on, pick something for us—something for our big day together.”

I scrolled through her phone as Cassidy cut through the cars, not batting her thick eyelashes. Her sporty hatchback moved like a hot knife through butter.

Intentionally keeping my eyes off the road, I found the right album. Its instant opening vocals caused Cassidy’s face to light up. The sound of a guitar filled the speakers.

“*First Aid Kit*,” she fawned, pulling back the sunroof cover. “You know how much I love them!”

“How could I forget?”

I never forgot anything about Cassidy Goldwyn. We sat side by side on the first day of kindergarten. By the end of the day, it became almost impossible to split us up. I loved her with all my heart, and I would scream it from every rooftop in South Carolina.

With blonde cornsilk hair and baby blue eyes, Cassidy looked like the kind of fairytale princess the bitter pieces of me longed to hate. She taught kindergarten. She spent weekends feeding the hungry and probably saving puppies. Someone like Cassidy wasn’t supposed to be real, but *she was*.

Cassidy had always been one of those positive, selfless people. She saw the sunny side of everything. She never failed to find a way forward.

The fact that she had an obscenely wealthy father was just the icing on her unicorn cupcake.

Even if she'd been born with a hunchback and scales for skin, her golden heart would still have made Cassidy look pretty.

Those eyes left the highway to sweep over me quickly.

“Gosh, you look gorgeous. I love this red on you. You look ready for a day somewhere amazing, like London or Paris!”

I glanced down at my clothes. The Charleston weather demanded a quick wardrobe change in the airport's bathroom. Out of everything in my carry-on, the thin burgundy sweater looked the least wrinkled.

“My stomach's more ready for a meal,” I teased. “You promised me food, remember? I can show you the texts to prove it.”

“Don't get your panties in a bunch! I thought we could stop by our favorite coffee shop for a quick latte and iced coffees before our spa day. Does that sound good?”

“I'd like it even better if we could also get lunch later.”

A peal of giggling bubbled out of her. I sounded starved, like I hadn't been living in Portugal. I fell in love with the fortified wine and every amazing flavor I found, but there was still nothing like a biscuit with a thick slice of salty country ham.

It tasted like nostalgia and a thousand different memories. Cassidy never disappointed me. We hit up our favorite spot, the one we discovered once I got my driver's license. I didn't hesitate to take my first bite right by the register.

Finally, I had made it to Charleston. The biscuit relaxed me almost as much as the hot, bubbling soaking my feet were enjoying at the spa. I sighed into the armchair and took another sip of my iced coffee.

“I think I want this one,” Cassidy told the assistant, tapping the lilac color on the nail color chart. “Six-twenty.”

“Yes, very good,” the woman agreed with a quick nod.

Cassidy turned back to me.

“You haven’t said anything about your wedding plans yet,” I pointed out. “Where are we so far?”

“We’ve got a hotel booked for the second weekend in July.”

“And?”

“And that’s about it,” she confessed. “This is why I’m so glad to see you, Sam. I need someone to push me into making a decision.”

“What about Delilah or your mom?”

Cassidy had been my friend since that first morning of school, but Delilah had befriended us by the afternoon. She found us at lunchtime, shared her Oreos, and by the end of the school day, our duo was a trio.

“Mom’s busy with the Junior League and has all the wrong ideas about the wedding,” Cassidy confessed. “Managing her makes managing everything else . . .”

“Impossible?”

“Almost.” She took a sip of her iced mocha. “And Delilah’s busy expanding her wine store. She’s got a new place downtown, you know.”

“I heard. She sent me about a dozen pictures of the empty space. I’d love to see the finished product.”

Next to her coffee, Cassidy’s phone lit up with a silvery chime. She gasped with excitement.

“Oh, great! Dad’s made it to his place!”

She began typing furiously.

“And how is Daddy Warbucks these days?”

Cassidy rolled her eyes but smiled anyway. “He’s doing just fine, thank you. After I told him about the engagement, he decided to move here for a year. He’s selling his studio or something like that, and he wants to help.”

“You mean I’ll finally get to meet him?”

“Hopefully.”

The only mental image I had of Mr. Harlow was sculpted through old photographs of a man masked by baseball caps and sunglasses. He never seemed to leave the West Coast, either.

Except for the one week of summer camp, Cassidy had spent all her summers flying out to see him. The only time I ever heard of him coming to Charleston was for Cassidy’s Bat Mitzvah, but of course, I came down with pneumonia that weekend.

“So, where is he staying?” I wondered.

At my feet, the pedicurist started buffing my heels.

“Dad’s got a friend with a second home out there. I offered him my guest suite, but he insisted I didn’t need to plan a wedding and keep track of him too. He said that engaged couples deserve their own space.”

“He’s got a point,” I had to admit. “I mean, you’ve got work, Tucker, wedding plans, *me*.”

“And you can be such a handful.”

I laughed. “No, if one of us is a handful, it’s Delilah.”

“True,” she agreed, setting down her phone. “She’s proud of it too.”

Cassidy settled into the massage chair, but she got impatient. Her fingers tapped. It took only a few minutes before she picked up her phone again, and the response she read made her eyes widen in disbelief.

“No freaking way.” She typed furiously. “Sammy, Dad’s just offered for us to have an engagement party at his house. I know it’s a lot to ask, but you’re going to have to help me. If we’re going to do this, we’ll—”

“Need to do it soon?” I finished. “Text Delilah for the wine.”

“Already on it.”

Between the time our toes dried and we went to get haircuts, Cassidy and I suddenly had plenty to talk about.

We debated food trucks versus traditional catering, seafood versus barbecue, and what kind of dessert to serve. I suggested getting flowers wholesale and keeping things as low-key as possible, but it was hard for Cassidy.

She wanted everyone to have a good time. She didn't want anyone to feel alienated or offended. As sweet as she was, Cassidy sometimes became a victim of her own good manners. Her agonizing and emailing carried us all the way to our haircuts.

Cassidy had to ensure that every single strand was trimmed just right while I was happy to get a professional to trim my golden-*ish* blonde hair. My DIY French girl bob had grown into more of a shaggy sheepdog. The stylist combed through the waves as she asked me about it in her country twang.

"You wanna keep the length?"

"Yeah, I'm growing it out," I explained. "She's getting married in July, and I've got a feeling my hair'll need to be in an updo."

"You growin' out the bangs too, then?"

I stopped myself from shaking my head. "Um, no, I like a little curtain bang of some kind. The hair just falls in my face, and when it's too long, I flick my head like a boy band member."

"Oh, I understand. I'll take good care of ya, sweetheart. Let me go grab a new spray bottle from the back."

She meant it, too. Staring back at myself in the floor-length mirror, I didn't realize how long I had muddled through a mediocre haircut. My dark eyes went round at the change.

"You can actually see my curls," I realized, fussing with the soft hair.

The middle-aged woman pushed up her glasses and brushed off my shoulders.

“I used some of our new air-dry cream,” she told me. “I’d be happy to sell you a bottle.”

“Sell me two.”

I felt like a new woman coming out of the day spa, but Cassidy and I had a long way to go with a party to plan and a wedding to prepare.

“Now, if it becomes too much . . .” she started to say on the sidewalk, but I held up a hand.

“Don’t worry. This is why I’m here in Charleston,” I assured her. “I came to spend the summer with you and help you with whatever I can. If planning an engagement party today is what I need to do, then that’s what I’m doing.”

Cassidy stopped to squeeze me with those strong arms again.

“Thank you, Sammy. I’m so lucky to have you as my maid of honor.”

“I love you too, Cass.”

Over the last few years, I’d been traveling almost nonstop. I could count on one hand how many days we’d spent together in a year, and when Cassidy told me about her engagement, I realized things had to change, if only for a while. We’d lost time together. Before I knew it, Cassidy would have kids of her own with a husband and some perfect suburban house.

I wasn’t sure where the time went. It slipped through our fingers like water, but this could be my chance to change that. At least for a little while, no moments needed to be missed.

I would be there for Cassidy and everything her wedding entailed. Come hell or high water, I was going to be the best possible maid of honor a woman could possibly be.

CHAPTER FOUR

JUDE

A bouquet of pink lilies in one hand and a bag from the wine store on my wrist, I took the back stairs one at a time. Cassidy said the apartment was cheaper with no elevator, but I didn't see how it was worth it. I hated to imagine hauling furniture up these steps.

"Twenty-six ... twenty-six."

I muttered the number to myself until I spotted it on one of the black doors. I knocked, and a familiar, silvery voice called from behind it.

"I'm coming!"

Footsteps thumped closer. A latch came undone. With a wide smile and open arms, she threw the door back. Cassidy didn't even stop to look through the peephole.

"Dad!" she chimed before kissing my cheek. "It's so good to see you! Oh, look, you even put on a good shirt for me!"

"My T-shirts are the best shirts."

"Maybe when they were new," she quickly interjected.

The inky blue shirt was made of chambray, which didn't look much different from denim, and I paired it with greenish pants. The label called them *sage*.

"I figured this would make you happier, and if it didn't . . ." I offered her the flowers. "I brought these as a consolation prize."

"We should get these in water. Come on inside."

Turning on her heels, Cassidy led us down a short hall into the apartment. The lofted ceiling let the high windows wash the living room with yellow evening light. The red brick wall and knotty wood floors showed the building's age, but Cassidy had polished it up in her way. She bought colorful furniture and covered the white wall in prints and photographs, yet there were touches of the young man standing at the sink.

"Hey, Mr. Harlow!" he greeted me.

"What did I tell you at Thanksgiving, Tucker?"

"Hey, *Jude*," he amended. "Give me a sec, I've got fish hands right now."

"No worries. I went to that wine place you recommended, Firefly?"

Taking out her milk glass vase, Cassidy beamed. "That's Delilah's new shop! Isn't it the best? Did you see her?"

"No, just the guy behind the register, but he recommended a white wine from Uruguay. I don't think I've ever had wine from there before."

"I'm sure it's good," Tucker remarked, wiping his hands dry. "Everything we've gotten there has been nice, but to be honest, I like wine made with fruits. I'm not the best judge."

Good-natured as ever, Tucker came around the counter and extended his hand to shake mine. His dimpled grin looked school-picture ready. His brown eyes crinkled at the corners. Even though he stood a good six inches taller than my six-foot frame, the man always looked a bit like a boy. Perhaps that was why he did so well in pediatrics.

He might have done even better in the NBA.

“Don’t worry, I’m not much better,” I assured him. “I blindly trust what people tell me about most alcohol.”

“You’re both my favorite lightweights,” Cassidy joked with a bubbling laugh. “Now, sweetie, how much time is left on dinner?”

“You made the salad, right?” Tucker asked.

She nodded. “It’s in the fridge.”

“It’ll only take me fifteen minutes tops to get the fish on the table.”

“Perfect. That will be just enough time to show Dad around.”

Reaching around Tucker, Cassidy filled up her vase with water before brushing past. The kitchen was compact, typical for an apartment, but the pair moved around each other without issue. Cassidy sashayed around Tucker. He grabbed his pan and seamlessly stepped to the side. They danced together through every mundane minute of ordinary life. From across the counter, Cassidy glanced back at her groom before reaching for my arm.

“Call out if you need me,” she told him.

Tucker smiled with a look saved only for her. I picked it out when they visited for Thanksgiving. It had been hard to ignore the truth ever since.

He really does love her.

“All right, so you can see the living room.” Cassidy grabbed me by the elbow. “Up here, we have the guest space.”

We climbed the winding spiral staircase to a lofted area overlooking the second set of living room windows. The sizzling of Tucker’s hot pan could be heard underneath us while Cassidy explained that the pinwheel quilt had been made by his grandmother.

She proudly talked about matching the colors of the loft to the patchwork shades before taking us back downstairs and down another short hall. We passed a small office space set for two before reaching the end.

“And ... this is our room.”

She gestured to the open bedroom door. Inside, the space was simple, with a linen duvet neatly made. The yellow nightstands told me who slept on which side.

“I’ve still got to do some work in here, but it’s, like, ninety-five percent finished,” she remarked.

“It’s nice, but I expected bunk beds in here.”

“Then I guess you’re not expecting grandchildren.”

Crossing her arms, she gave me a knowing look. She wasn’t the little girl I’d dragged to Dodgers games or who begged me for ice cream on the beach boardwalk. I had to keep reminding myself, pinching myself internally to remember how many years had passed.

“I’m only kidding, Cassie.”

“I know you love to joke, and anyway, don’t worry too much. Until Tucker passes his board certifications, there won’t be any storks arriving here. I’ve made that clear.”

“You’re young. You’ve got time.”

“Says the man who was nineteen when I was born.” Cassidy giggled to herself. “Thinking about having my first kid around twenty-seven or twenty-eight makes me feel insanely ancient compared to you.”

I chuckled. “What’s that line fathers are supposed to say, though? Do what I say, not what I do? I love you, but I don’t recommend having a kid in college to anyone.”

Back then, I had been living in a half-renovated Topanga compound with three of my friends, trying to turn it into a functional recording studio. I spent summer mornings cleaning out horse stalls and weekends playing handyman. Meeting Cassidy’s mother felt almost impossible. Both young and ambitious, we sat around bonfires at night thinking anything was possible and forgetting the consequences of everything else.

I spent Cassidy’s life doing my best to amend that recklessness. If it weren’t for her, I might not have been so

driven to see the studio succeed and grow into a record label. I forced myself to prove that I wasn't the schmuck her grandparents, my in-laws, thought me to be.

I owed so much to that happy accident. She deserved the world in return, but the apartment's narrow hallway wasn't the place to get all sappy and sentimental.

"Speaking of plans, have you given any thought to that engagement party?" I asked to change the subject.

"Oh, sure, I've got loads of ideas, and I'm waiting to hear back from a few catering vendors before I set a final date."

"Well, be sure to give my credit card information to whomever you pick. I don't expect you to pay for anything."

"I know, Dad."

"I hope it's not putting too much on you."

"It's not," she assured me, turning back down the hall.

"If you'd like, I could make a few calls and arrange things myself."

As I followed, Cassidy shook her head. "No, it's okay, really. Delilah's agreed to get the beer and wine, and Sammy's helping me with the arrangements."

"Sammy?"

My footsteps slowed. I blinked twice in confusion. The name sounded familiar, but I didn't have a face to match.

"Yeah, you know, *Sammy*," Cassidy continued. "She's the one who used to make me all those mix CDs I brought to California. That's her over there, the one with the braces and the purple wig."

As we stepped back into the living room, her hand waved toward a bookcase tucked behind the staircase. A few framed photographs sat among the books, and one showed three little witches with their arms tangling them all together. In their glittery black hats and colorful wigs, the three girls grinned excitedly. Cassidy I picked out easily on the left. From the one or two times I'd seen Delilah, I knew the girl with glasses and

lime-green hair had to be her, but the middle girl, I didn't know her face well . . .

Or, maybe I did?

I knew the CDs Cassidy mentioned. If she made them, the girl's taste in music wasn't half bad. I could mark each summer by the playlists she sent with Cassidy across the country.

"How long have you known her again?" I asked.

Tucker laughed while finishing up his recipe. "I don't think there was a time those two didn't know each other. They've been joined at the hip as long as I've known Cassie here."

"If there's ever someone I'd leave you for, sweetie, it would be her," Cassidy teased before kissing her fiancé's cheek.

He shrugged. "Hey, I wouldn't blame you."

I laughed along with them, but turning back, I stared at the photograph. Something haunted me from the back of my head. Its wheels turning faster and faster, my mind hunted for the thing I couldn't put my finger on. It swore the answer lived in the photograph

"Sammy and I met the first day of kindergarten," Cassidy finally answered. "We were seated side by side in class, and when I realized I forgot my pencil box, she let me share hers. We met Delilah at lunchtime. She was in the other kindergarten class at school, and well, that was it. They're both going to be my maids of honor because I refuse to pick one."

"But if you had to . . ." Tucker joked behind me.

"No!" Cassidy exclaimed. "That's never gonna happen!"

Lost in their banter, the couple didn't notice me frozen in place. They didn't see the look in my eyes. The longer I stared at the picture, the more the feeling crept under my skin.

Sammy ... Samantha ...

A jolt of horror coursed through me. It shocked my nerves and made my eyes widen, but my mind was running away with itself. The unfounded panic didn't need to consume me. Smiling to myself, I shook my head and turned away from the framed photograph.

I needed to forget it. I was being paranoid. My eyes and the wires in my brain were getting crossed, and it had me thinking things without any real evidence. Samantha was a common name, and Charleston was a big city.

Besides, the world couldn't possibly be that small.

CHAPTER FIVE

SAM

“I thought this party was supposed to be small,” I remarked.

Pulling up through the circular driveway, Delilah let her car crawl past the spotless sedans and oversized SUVs. We passed people who looked more suited to the Kentucky Derby than an engagement party, and Delilah’s old beater Jeep stuck out like a willful sore thumb.

“Well, you know Cassie’s family.” Delilah whipped into a free spot on the grass. “There’s only big and bigger.”

“There were only fifty-some names on the invite list, but it looks like fifty cars are already here.”

“Maybe everyone drove separately,” she guessed before grinning. “Maybe there are fifty party crashers inside.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

With the evening sunshine on my skin, the gentle wind blew off the water over my exposed shoulders and ruffled Delilah’s long black floral skirt. My hands absently patted my braided updo and smoothed the sides of my scarlet linen. Luckily, it hadn’t wrinkled too badly on the ride over.

“Wow,” I whispered while crossing the lawn. “This house is gorgeous.”

Delilah flicked her golden-brown eyes my way. “Well, what else did you expect of a *gazillionaire*?”

“He’s only a millionaire, remember?”

Cassidy told us forever ago that her dad bought some music studio with his friends, and it became popular. Award-winning albums had been written within its very walls, and the place was his second child. Throwing her auburn hair over her shoulder, Delilah cackled.

“Yeah, *only a millionaire*,” she echoed with a sarcastic edge. “I’ll bet his place in Malibu only has five bedrooms.”

I tried not to snicker. “Actually, I think Cassidy said it’s got three.”

“Three? Oh, the poor bastard.”

We both laughed as we reached the wide front porch steps, not noticing who passed us by. I could already hear music playing through hidden speakers, some sixties folk-rock song with a name I didn’t remember.

“It looks like the usual suspects,” Delilah muttered beside me. “I’m gonna need a sangria.”

“You and me both.”

When we saw Cassidy for her birthday breakfast, she swore that she wanted to keep things as casual as possible, but many women still wore their heirloom pearls and designer heels. The two men in the front porch rocking chairs had donned their suits, yet the appraising and disapproving gazes all looked the same no matter who wore them.

Even if they didn’t like the slit in my skirt or the tattoos on Delilah’s forearms, I doubted they could look down on this house. It was even more lovely inside.

Clean and classic, it was traditional without any trace of pretension. A body could sink into the cream-colored sofas while rainbow bouquets of tulips chased the last of the winter blues away. In this house, spring came early.

“Sam!” I heard a small voice call out. “Delilah!”

Her brown ringlets bounced as she came running up to us. Talia was all limbs and wide grins. She didn’t look much like her big sister, but they each had their mother’s lithe frame. Everything else belonged to their fathers.

“Hey, since when did you get so tall?” I teased as she wrapped her arms around my waist. Her head brushed against my cheek. “You’re supposed to fit in my pocket, remember?”

“What did you expect? I’m *ten* now,” she declared before hugging Delilah.

“Then, since you’re so old and mature, can you show us where the drinks are?” Delilah wondered. “I’m feeling parched.”

“Sure, it’s this way.”

Waving her arm, Talia lead us through the bodies cluttering up the grand living room overlooking the riverfront. Partygoers scattered themselves across the patio and toward the pool. I felt the breeze as they opened and shut the glass doors.

“Here!” Talia gestured into the sunroom.

A hired waiter poured wine and uncapped beer bottles from a temporary bar top. Only a few people bothered to drop something into her tip jar. Pulling a five from my purse, I asked for two sangria and one soda.

“So, did your mom invite her friends to this?” Delilah asked Talia behind me.

“Can’t you tell?” Talia answered. “I think the entire women’s league is here. I mean, she at least asked for permission first, but you know Cassie.”

“Always a little too nice?” Delilah suggested.

I turned around and handed them their drinks. “Maybe she’s just the right amount of nice, and everyone else needs to stop being *fu . . . fudge heads*.”

Talia sipped her soda. “You can swear around me, Sam.”

“I wasn’t worried about you.”

A white-haired woman narrowed her eyes as we passed by. Five minutes into the party, I was already causing trouble, slipping into old habits and anxieties.

It all got worse once we reached the thick of the crowd. Names started pairing up with the faces. Eyes caught mine and began taking me hostage and letting my friends slip away.

With their barrage of questions, they wanted to know where I ran off and what I had been doing. Incredulity flickered behind their practiced smiles. They didn’t understand why I’d left South Carolina.

What could be better than country clubs, cups of sweet tea, and rubbing elbows with Charleston’s finest? My mother certainly didn’t know.

“Samantha,” she greeted me with a peck on the cheek. “It’s nice to see you dressed up for once.”

I rolled my eyes and ignored the dig. Standing near a dining table of Mexican appetizers, my mother reached down for one of the jalapeño hushpuppies while scrunching up her nose. My father stood beside her in one of his many cardigans, calm and collected as ever.

“Hey, Dad.” I hugged him. “How’s school?”

“It’s AP test prep time,” he told me. “The girls seem confident, though. I think they’ll all do well. I ran into Cassidy at one of the teacher’s meetings. She said you helped with this party?”

Mom piped up, “Did you pick this food as well? It’s not the easiest to eat, tacos.”

“It’s from the food truck Cassie and Tucker visited on their first date,” I explained. “It’s supposed to be sentimental, and it’s nothing a napkin can’t help.”

Adjusting his glasses, Dad grinned. “That’s sweet. Have you seen her?”

“No, not yet. I keep getting pulled in by other people asking me where I’ve been. I already lost Delilah and Talia.”

Mom handed the hush puppy to Dad, refusing to let it stain her lilac suit. On the surface, everything appeared perfect. She even smiled at two guests getting guacamole across the table.

“You’ve been hiding out in your godmother’s carriage house,” she tried to chime. “I told my friends you came home. They’ve been wondering why you don’t join us at one of our lunches. Even Sutton Whitley was curious to see you again. You remember him from school, don’t you?”

“Sure.”

Sutton had been a two-faced brat who’d dreamed of becoming a first lady like Nancy Reagan. She didn’t have a stick up her butt. She had a whole freaking tree trunk, and there was no kinder way of putting it. Even if Sutton didn’t have it out for Cassidy, I would never have liked her.

“Then, why don’t you come to the next one?” Mom pressed me.

Because I’d rather get an enema.

The idea of Cobb salads and mindless gossip made me want to hurl, but outside of her law firm, the women’s group was everything to my mother.

She called it invaluable networking, much like her golfing and the yacht club. Dad once showed me the old photographs of her as a bra-burning feminist. Standing there, it seemed hard to believe that had been the uptight woman I saw now.

“I’m pretty busy,” I half-lied.

“You need to at least come to dinner, then,” she countered too quickly. “It’s tomorrow evening.”

“I mean ... I guess I could.”

Agreeing blindly never ended well. I should have read the fine print first, but this party had me scrambling for quick escapes.

She continued, “We’re hosting a dinner party for our newest senior associate, and speak of the devil!”

Oh, God, *this* was her plan all along.

Mom knew I didn't like the society lunches, but it was all a ploy. Cornered in the dining room, the view through the wall of windows couldn't calm me. My father's sympathetic smile did nothing. Reality crept over me like an ominous shadow, and the smell of a familiar cologne made my stomach turn.

"Thaddeus!" Mom exclaimed like a bad actor in a cheap play. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see you here! I heard Tucker's asked you to be his best man."

A self-assured laugh consumed the air around me.

"You know he couldn't find anyone better," Thad joked. "We've been friends forever."

I didn't want to turn around. My feet were ready to fly toward the front door, but Delilah drove us. I hadn't seen Cassidy yet. Everyone else pulled me back and forth like a raging torrent. It took everything I had to keep my bearings. My polite smile masked how badly I longed to scream. Turning slowly, I sucked in a deep breath.

With his coiffed dark hair and crooked smile, Thad Drayton looked exactly as I remembered him, even if the tan sport coat was new. He sipped his ice-cold glass and stood tall over me. Unwelcome memories flooded my vision. When Thad gave me a sudden side hug, I remembered the hand on my back was one I used to hold. I'd hoped to hold onto it forever, but that was another life and another me.

"It's good to see you, Sam," he remarked in his resonant voice laced with Southern civility. "Vivian told me you were back in town, and with the wedding, I wondered when we'd run into each other."

"Tucker's made you his best man?" I echoed, not knowing what else to say.

"Yeah, but it's like you and Cassie. Who else was he gonna pick?"

"I ... I don't know."

I tried to laugh, but the sound rang hollow. If I gripped my empty glass any tighter, I feared it might shatter, but Mom

beamed beside me. She believed this little reunion was going well. I saw it painted all over her exaggerated expression.

He's such a good match for Samantha.

She won't be silly enough to let him go again.

She's got nowhere to run.

Of course, plenty of people thought Thad came from good money and a respectable family. The Draytons once owned not one but two Charleston plantations, and Thaddeus took pride in his family's roots poisoning the blood-stained Southern ground. It gave him his lifetime of comfort and little luxuries.

I didn't see the flaws in his story until I saw our childhood from the outside in.

I got older. Life made me wiser.

All those good graces and manners obscured a mountain made of ruined lives, and Thad kept on grinning. His greatest concern lived in the stitching of his tailored clothes. Picking a crumb off his lapel, he continued talking like history never existed . . .

Like *our* history never existed.

"I don't know if you've met him, but this guy Tucker met in college, Owen, will be the groomsman. He couldn't make it tonight."

"What a shame," I mumbled along.

My mother gripped Thad's shoulder with her free hand. "Why don't you tell Sam about your promotion? I think—"

"Sammy?" A sweet voice called over the chaos.

Cassidy had never been so heaven sent. The sight of her looked like salvation.

"Hey, Cass!" I squeezed her tightly and leaned into her ear to whisper. "*Get me out of here.*"

She didn't bat an eyelash. Grinning, she freed me of my empty glass and said hello to my parents. Nobody suspected

an angel in a long toile dress of anything deceitful. Her warmth made Cassidy the perfect cover.

“You’re going to have to forgive me,” she told them. “I’ve been looking for Sammy everywhere! I’ve got someone that I’m dying for her to meet.”

“It’s quite all right. You girls go have fun,” Dad answered.

Mom shifted where she stood. “Don’t forget the dinner. Six o’clock.”

“Six o’clock,” I repeated.

I prayed I was done with unwanted reunions. Linking arms with Cassidy, we weaved through the crowd and out onto the screened porch where she must have always been, AKA the one area of the party I hadn’t visited.

Platters of dessert were spread over a buffet table decorated with even more tulips. We both reached for some of the trés leches cake. It was the first thing I’d tasted since I’d arrived.

“How’d you get stuck with Thad?” Cassidy asked between bites.

“How do you think? *Mom*. Good thinking with that excuse, though.”

“Oh!” She took my half-eaten cake from me. “There really is someone I want you to meet! Delilah and Tucker are keeping him company out here.”

“Him?”

The unwanted reunions were supposed to be over. I thought I’d made it across the battlefield to take shelter with my friends. Pushing through the swinging screen door, I stepped out onto the porch not expecting to be blindsided.

Thad made my stomach do somersaults, but the sight of him made me want to melt through the blue boards of the back porch. My knees were already going weak. Cassidy’s nudging forced me to move closer.

“I did a summer study abroad course on viticulture in Argentina,” I heard Delilah explaining. “I signed up for fun, but it turned out I was really taken by wine and how it’s made.”

“Dad! I finally found her!” Cassidy exclaimed.

Adjusting the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, he stood from his patio chair. The conversation paused. The world tilted on its axis. The rumpled silver hairs were now combed and swept back from his sun-kissed face. His strong jaw had been shaved clean. In his gingham shirt, he looked almost more handsome than I remembered from our shared bed, the private hot tub, and that one time in the shower.

My whole body flinched on sudden impulse. I couldn’t think about that here, not now.

“Sammy, this is my father, Jude Harlow,” Cassidy declared. “Dad, this is Sam. She’s the one who helped me get everything ready.”

I had no place to run. With watchful eyes, I plastered a smile on my face and prayed, begging for forgiveness and asking for divine intervention. Cassidy had appeared as my saving grace only to lead me into a nightmare, one too lovely to be so awful.

The wedding hadn’t even started, but without a doubt, I was the worst maid of honor *ever*.

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SIX: JUDE

Somewhere in the back of my head, my worst suspicions cackled at the sheer irony of the moment. They mocked me for hoping it couldn't be true. My paranoia had proved correct.

It really was her. Cassidy's *Sammy* and my *Sam* were one and the same. Although, she was never mine. Not really.

"Sammy, this is my father, Jude Harlow," Cassidy declared, blissfully ignorant that we had met before. "Dad, this is Sam. She's the one who helped me get everything organized for today."

On the surface, Sam looked calm. Nobody suspected a thing. Nobody here knew, but her widening eyes told me what she couldn't say aloud.

Play dumb.

I followed her lead. Extending my hand, I offered her a smile and played the ignorant fool. The role fit me easily. Clearly, I had been playing myself all month long.

"It's wonderful to finally meet you after all these years," Sam told me through her photo-ready grin. "The way Cassidy talks about you, it almost feels like we've already met."

I laughed along with the group, but inside, dread and distress collided together. They sent shockwaves through my system.

Did my expression look too manic? Was my smile insincere?

As my eyes flicked over to Cassidy, I felt my pulse counting every second that passed, waiting for my daughter to realize.

She was going to see it. She would definitely know.

I took a sip of my drink and kept smiling.

“Delilah was just telling us about how she got into the wine business,” I remarked.

Tucker piped up. “Honestly, I can’t believe I haven’t heard this story before.”

The others became our escape route. Settling down in the opposite chair, I put space between us, but it wasn’t nearly enough. The golden hour put her in a perfect light. Everything beautiful inside her glowed as she grinned for her friends. She tucked her stray blonde tendrils behind her ears, and my breath caught.

As she crossed her legs, the light glinted against her delicate gold jewelry and brought out the earnest warmth of her brown almond-shaped eyes. They reminded me of hot coffee cups begging to be held. Her peach-tinted cheeks warmed my hands, and her smile disarmed me.

Saying I “desired” Sam felt so lacking. The word didn’t hold enough weight. For nearly a month, I’d grappled with the emotions simmering underneath my skin, and seeing her again, they couldn’t be denied.

I longed for her charm, her laughter, and the generosity that lived in her touch. The feminine curves now wrapped in red were simply a bonus—a tempting cherry on top. Her eyes flicked my way. Her fingers brushed over the crook of her neck.

I’d kissed her there once.

Was it terrible that I wanted to do it again?

Rising to my feet, I told the group, “I need another drink. Can I get you guys anything?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” Sam answered hurriedly.

Her hands tightened together in her lap.

“Can I get a water?” Cassidy asked.

I nodded. “Sure thing.”

I didn’t know whether it felt better or worse to walk away. Distance should have helped the shock subside, but my

breathing continued to be erratic. Even as I spoke with others who caught my attention, even as I lingered inside, my unraveling thoughts remained with Sam.

She slipped away from the group. Another hour passed by, and the evening stars emerged. Guests slowly trickled out. Restless and desperate, I needed to get her alone and help her understand.

Where had she gone?

It wasn't until I said goodbye to some of Cassidy's family in the foyer that I had an epiphany. *Upstairs*. The house remained dark, but Sam still could have wandered upstairs. She had a way of creeping into my life and permeating every piece of me. My head whipped around. Nobody was looking.

"Nobody has to know but us."

Sam's words haloed around my mind as I took the steps two at a time. A light glowed in through the office window. The guest bedroom's door had been opened, and out on the upper deck, I found one stray guest settled into one of the Adirondack chairs.

She'd managed to turn on the fire table, and her heels had been discarded beside an empty plate. In the glow of the firelight, Sam smiled honestly for the first time that night. The expression held such bittersweetness. Regret lingered in her eyes.

"Hey, Jude," she greeted me as if she were sharing a secret. "I wondered whether you might find me up here."

"I knew you weren't downstairs, so ..."

Her eyebrows rose with curiosity. "You were looking for me?"

"Of course."

Giving herself away, Sam picked up a bottle of red wine and a spare glass tucked out of view. It was the kind we used to make the sangria.

"Want a drink?" she asked me.

“Please.”

Sam rose from her seat, leaving the sanctuary of the fire behind. We met each other at the deck railing. At that height, we floated among the tops of the trees. The lights across the river sparkled for us like the stars overhead. The landscape sprawled out before us. My attention was too taken by the stray baby curls coiling at the nape of her neck.

All that beauty painted in the shades of violet night, and I continued to be taken by her. Already intoxicated, the generous glass of wine felt pointless. I took a swig of it anyway.

We stood there side by side for a long minute. The silence had all the subtlety of a freighter. Its siren blared in the distance, but my body froze in place. Against the railing, my knuckles whitened when Sam spoke again.

“What does she know?”

Her question rang in my ears.

“Nothing,” I promised her. “I haven’t mentioned it.”

“But . . . now that we know . . .” Sam began to say, but she struggled to find the right words.

I answered, “It won’t do anyone any good to come clean. We didn’t know.”

“Even if I had learned your last name, I don’t think I would have thought about it. I was so tired, and I mean, it’s not even her last name.”

Cassidy had been using her mother’s name for a long time. Back when we divorced, we knew it was better for Cassidy to live with her mother. It made more sense for her to be Cassidy Goldwyn. People wouldn’t ask as many questions. Her presence wouldn’t be questioned in her grandparents’ synagogue. Hiding the Harlow name in the middle seemed only logical.

“It’s just a name,” I mused. “It never changed who I am to her.”

Taking a swig from her glass, Sam frowned. “You’re right. It doesn’t.”

“You know, when I got here, Cassidy mentioned you. She always called you ‘Sammy’. She never gave me much to go on. Maybe I didn’t want to ask too many questions, but I never reached out because I was waiting for my suspicions to be proven wrong.”

“You didn’t want me to be Cassidy’s friend.”

She didn’t phrase it like a question.

“No,” I confessed. “I didn’t, and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left you in the dark after our weekend. Maybe tonight wouldn’t have been such a surprise.”

“There’s no point in agonizing over hypotheticals about what’s already happened,” she assured me quickly. “Trust me. It’ll only lead to a headache.”

“I figured the wine would do that,” I teased lightly.

For a moment, I thought the joke fell flat, but Sam smiled. Her radiance gently sparkled. Her body twisted toward me, and her arm propped against the railing.

My hand itched to skate over that arm. The gentle scent of her floral perfume wafted around me. My fingertips longed to trail over her bare shoulders, savoring all the places I’d missed. Sam let out a soft sigh, and time slowed again. I was slipping back into a world of our own creation.

“I’m not mad about your not reaching out,” she told me plainly, ruining my mirage. “I mean, we only spent a few days together. We were exhausted, and we were trapped in a snowstorm. I didn’t expect flowers on my doorstep or some grand gesture. I just . . . enjoyed what we had while it lasted.”

“You weren’t surprised at all? It didn’t bother you?”

Why did that thought wound my pride?

Sam shrugged. “I wondered where you were. I thought about reaching out myself to see how you were. I mean, it’s like if you meet a British guy in Bali and your trips are

overlapping for two weeks. You go on a few dates and take a zip line tour together.”

“This doesn’t sound entirely hypothetical,” I interjected, “And I’d never go on a zip line tour. Those things look like a death trap.”

She laughed lightly. “You know what I’m getting at, though. Sometimes, it’s fun while it lasts, but you both know it was never actually meant to last.”

“Yeah . . .” I let out a long exhale. “I know.”

The only trouble was I didn’t do well with flings or casual devil-may-care affairs. Some friends had once labeled me as a serial monogamist. When I dated, I was all in without ever holding back.

That was probably how we’d ended up here. Easily taken, Sam had caught me hook, line, and sinker. She had plenty of fish in her sea. I didn’t doubt how many men had vied for her attention over the years, yet she went for me, the fishy bastard in the barrel.

Her weight shifted, and she inched closer. It took all my strength not to reach out. With her gaze holding mine, I grew weaker with every passing minute.

“To be honest,” she began, her voice softening, “I thought you had grown bored with me. You were older, and like I said, we had been sleep-deprived. I figured you got here, got a good night’s sleep, and came to your senses.”

“*Came to my senses?* About what?”

Her head turned toward the water. Another heartbeat of silence followed.

“That I was too young to be worth the trouble or the time,” she admitted before brightening her voice. “I didn’t ask for two forms of ID and proof of address, but I knew you had to be older, like thirty-five or so. You didn’t need to spend more time with a twenty-something living out of her suitcases.”

Taking in a deep breath, I shook my head. My brain couldn’t comprehend it. I was the one not worth her time. I

didn't think little of myself, but on paper, she and I . . .

I exhaled. The confusing pieces came together.

“And here I was thinking I was the problem.”

A smile toyed at the corners of her mouth. Just barely, I felt her fingertips brush against the back of my hand still holding onto the rail. My grip softened. Swallowing hard, I let Sam's hand dare to cover mine.

“We don't make sense,” she murmured. “You'll be heading back to California in a year, and I planned on traveling again once the wedding's over. We're heading in opposite directions. As nice as it all was, this, *you and me*, is a bad idea, and that's not even considering Cass—”

“Cassidy?” I finished for her.

Looking ill, Sam nodded. Guilt already plagued her. I saw it there in the shadows cast by the fire behind us. The world grew darker, but her pain was unmistakable. It killed me that I had no comfort to offer her.

Bringing her close to me would only be a mistake.

“Nobody has to know but us,” I swore in a whisper.

Her fingers laced with mine. I told myself to savor it. I imagined it would be the last time I'd ever have Sam alone like this. For the sake of our loved ones, this needed to be it.

“I'm not the kind to kiss and tell,” she replied. “Are you?”

“Rarely.”

“Rarely?”

I couldn't help but crack a sliver of a smile. “Some kisses are too good to be kept a total secret, and yours begged to be mentioned.”

“So . . . who did you tell?”

“The mirror . . . about a dozen times.” I laughed under my breath. “I guess that's the beauty of being out here. All my friends and I have a country between us, not that I would tell them anyway. In a way, I like keeping you all to myself.”

“I know the feeling.”

Sam bit her lower lip, and I fought back every impulse. I couldn't make her into a bad habit. We'd both agreed this was a bad idea. Even as I forced myself to accept the ugly truth, my mouth wanted to refuse. My hands still longed to curl around her waist and lure her into the shadows of the bedroom.

Couldn't we reclaim the fantasy one more time?

I took a step back. Samantha had just described our time together as fleeting and finite. Perhaps for her, the lingering emotions weren't there. She finished her wine, offering me no signs of an answer.

“It's getting late,” she remarked. “I promised to help with cleanup.”

“You don't have to—”

Sam held up a hand. “It's for Cassidy.”

“Of course.”

We were both there for the same person. Her existence carved a chasm between Sam and me. Nothing changed that, not my wounded ego or any fantasy. I stopped indulging the stirrings in my chest. Sam turned off the fire table.

“Wait,” I blurted out.

Nearly forgetting, I reached for the pearl buried deep in the seam of my pocket. Its twine tangled around my fingers, but I kept carrying it with a flicker of hope which was now fading.

“I found this is my things,” I explained. “I believe it's yours.”

Sam admired the bracelet with delighted surprise. She offered her wrist, letting me tie it back on.

“It's the wishing bracelet I picked up in Brooklyn. You're supposed to put it on, make a wish, and when it falls off, the wish will come true.”

“What did you wish for?”

She shook her head. “I . . . I don’t remember anymore.”

Picking up our two empty glasses, I knew Cassidy would start to wonder where we were. We had to head downstairs and leave our surreal little world. There could be no trace of what had happened there or in New York.

The truth was treacherous, and Sam still looked so tempting. If I ever indulged my desires, my bad habits might flourish into fatal addictions. There would be no going back, no hiding from the secrets living deep within my bones.

Samantha was already my favorite problem to have. The palpable attraction made everything far more complicated, but I never wanted to lose it. She had returned to me at last, even if it was in the worst possible way. Still, I refused to lose her again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SAM

Fighting back my yawns became a losing battle. I had plans for my Sunday. I wanted to get laundry done and prep for the work week, but all I could do was loaf about on the couch and agonize over Jude.

I didn't want him to kiss me. Our situation was problematic enough, and yet, when he let me go, disappointment clouded over my logic. My heart begged to take it all back and erase the bargain we'd made. My lips tingled with the desperation to find his, but they would have to settle for the coffee mug.

After a few weeks and a few adjustments, I knew how to move about the small carriage house kitchen. I'd memorized the creaks in the pine floors and where to reach for one of the antique silver spoons. The checkered tablecloth over the kitchen table bathed in the afternoon light just as it did every sunny day. The dwarf sunflowers I'd bought myself started leaning toward the window.

It was calling us all out into the garden, outside where the fresh air might clear the cobwebs in my mind. Taking my mug

in one hand and a glass in another, I stepped out through the sliding glass door.

My godmother and her sister had put a lot of effort into this place tucked in the far corner of their yard. Designed to be a vacation rental, they wanted it to exude Old-World charm and offer the comfort of Southern hospitality.

Every piece of furniture had been salvaged from consignment shops and brought back to life, except for the living room television.

Louise Engel was the mastermind and architect preserving every piece of this estate. Even though she had a small squadron of gardeners on her payroll, I found Louise in the potager garden gathering herbs and pulling weeds. She looked up at the sound of my arrival.

“I brought you some iced tea just the way you like it,” I told her.

Adjusting her sunhat, she laughed. “You know me so well. Now, be a lamb and help these ol’ bones up.”

Louise’s five-foot-tall fairy-like figure didn’t fool me. Her sharp blue eyes never missed a thing. She’d spent too many years chasing after her four daughters and working shifts as a hospital nurse.

Running a hand over her white pixie-cut hair, she gave me the rare gift of seeing her sit on a nearby bench. She let out a long sigh before accepting the drink.

“Everything’s still good with the house?” she asked between sips.

I crossed my legs and nodded. “It’s perfect. I just wish you’d let me pay more in rent.”

Louise scoffed. “Claudia and I need more money like we need holes in our heads. The rental’s for fun. Our folks left us plenty of money, and Claudia married money. Why do we need more of it?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I just feel like I’m cheating you two.”

“You’re doin’ no such a thing,” she swore, patting my thigh. “You’ve always been like one of my grandkids. It’s nice having you around, especially since all my girls scattered to the wind.”

I only ever knew my mother’s mother, Louise’s best friend. The two loved taking me shopping and on day trips to Folly Beach, and when Grandma passed away, the adventures didn’t stop. She had been my mother’s godmother, my godmother, and sometimes, it felt like Louise was the most motherly figure in my life. I could turn to her for anything.

“Louise?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Would it be bad if I lied about being sick tonight?” I wondered, looking down at the pearl bracelet on my wrist. “I’m supposed to go over to my parents’ for dinner.”

Louise scrunched her nose in confusion. “Why is that so bad?”

“Because Mom’s having people over to celebrate Thad Drayton’s promotion.”

“Oh, bless her.” She shook her head, disappointed at the news. “Vivian never knew when to quit, but you’ve got to go. You said you would come, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then, be a woman of your word, and feel free to take some flowers from the garden. Bringing a gift will give you the freedom to leave early if you want.”

Louise winked, and I found myself giggling beside her. Things never had to look so bad. With our drinks finished and the dread chased away, I went back to put on some better clothes and get ready to leave.

Mom never said it was formal, so my light washed jeans and white silk blouse felt like more than enough. If I was wrong, the pink and yellow daffodils could earn me forgiveness.

“How nice of you, sweetheart,” Dad thanked me at the door. “Not everyone’s here yet, and your mom’s in the bathroom. You wanna help me in the kitchen?”

“Sure.”

It felt like old times. Muscle memory carried me through the familiar ranch house and into the brown and beige kitchen stuck in the last century.

Getting a pitcher for the flowers, my mind fell backward through a million different weeknight dinners and Saturday pancake breakfasts. I couldn’t fit so easily on the kitchen counter anymore, but I still enjoyed being Dad’s spare hand.

“Why don’t you prep these green beans for me?” he asked. “I need to check the chicken.”

With a nod, I let myself get lost in the tasks. I didn’t have the burden of greeting strangers and making small talk with my mother. Passing hellos came and went as one or two people stepped into the kitchen for ice or to say hello to Dad. It wasn’t until we gathered in the dining room that I faced the gauntlet.

“You’re right there, Samantha.” Mom gestured to a seat at the table for eight. “Right next to the young man of the hour.”

Thad pulled out my chair wearing a seemingly innocent smile and a red gingham button-up. It reminded me of a picnic blanket.

“It’s good to see you again,” he remarked, settling down to my left.

A woman I almost remembered sat down on my right. She was another partner’s wife, quiet and unassuming. Like me, she was here to fill a chair and sit as decoration among the brocade-covered walls and quietly enjoy her dinner on my parents’ wedding porcelain.

Women like her scared the hell out of me.

Fighting back an ominous chill, I took the roll basket from Thad as I tried to make conversation and the best of a foreboding situation.

“So, have you already started making plans for Tucker’s bachelor party?” I wondered, keeping my voice light and diplomatic. “I figured you would do something big for him.”

“I’ve got some ideas Tucker won’t like.” Thad laughed at a thought he didn’t share. “The other guy, Owen, have you met him?”

“Once or twice.”

I remembered him from college, but by then, I’d started keeping my distance from Tucker’s friends. They were all kind and likable enough. There was only one I wanted to avoid.

I should have learned back then that my life and Thad’s would always be tangled up together. Around us, the lawyers talked of how fewer businesses were retaining corporate lawyers, but I caught my mother’s approving glances our way.

“Owen says we should do whatever Tucker wants,” Thad continued. “I don’t think we should do something he’ll hate, but it’s supposed to be fun. A little joke won’t kill the guy.”

“I agree with Owen.” I tore my roll in half. “Tucker’s thinking of Cassidy’s feelings more than his own. He wouldn’t want to do anything that might upset her.”

“And what would upset her?”

“Exactly what you laughed about five seconds ago.”

I spread butter over my bread while Thad’s dark eyes narrowed. They appraised me for a second. Then, that masking grin returned. It looked almost off-kilter and too charming to be squeaky clean. I avoided him the best I could.

“You’ve always been sharp,” he complimented. “Maybe I should take you out and we can talk over some of your ideas for the wedding. It’ll help things if we could get along, you know.”

I sucked in a deep breath. “Yeah, I know.”

“And I know a newer restaurant in town you probably haven’t tried. It’s super exclusive—tasting menus and advanced reservations and all. I know a guy who could get us in this week.”

“What if I’m busy this week?”

Thad wasn’t deterred.

“Everyone’s gotta eat, Sam,” he pointed out. “I’ll meet you there after work one day, and we can catch up.”

“Catch up . . .” I echoed, trying to get comfortable with the thought.

“And if we talk about old times, well, who knows?”

Not thinking of a good way to refuse him, I surrendered with a nod.

“Okay,” I agreed.

One dinner wouldn’t hurt. I’d manage, and at the far end of the table, Mom beamed.

“It’s so nice to see you both chatting,” she declared before addressing the table. “You know, these two have known each other since they were six years old? I met Thaddeus’s mother through the women’s league, and it was by chance that Thaddeus was nearly the same age as my Samantha here and going to the boys’ school partnered with her girls’ school.”

“Why not merge the schools, then?” the wife beside me asked.

Forever the advocate, Dad piped up. “It’s actually been shown how female students show more long-term interest in STEM and academics in all-female settings. With the implicit bias of gender removed, they have more space to be competitive and valued as students in the classroom.”

“Not that you’d ever discriminate against your students, Dad,” I added.

“If there’s a reason our Samantha works in computer software, I’d like to think that’s part of it,” Mom declared proudly. “Any of the tech companies in Charleston would be lucky to have her.”

And yet, they didn’t have me. That was why my mother’s smile fell and the underlying message echoed loud and clear. It

created the same old questions and the explanations I had to offer a thousand times over.

I enjoyed traveling.

No, I couldn't be promoted, but I was happy with my job.

I didn't have a boyfriend or spouse to worry about. I didn't feel desperate to get one, either.

Perhaps the hollow answers kept the curious looks on the others' faces. My half-truths wore thin from years of overuse, and as the evening waned on, my patience did too. My bones slumped with fatigue. It took my last effort to hug my parents goodbye and take the leftovers my father offered.

"Take care of yourself, Sam," Dad whispered in my ear.

I squeezed him tighter. "You too, Dad."

I hurried down the driveway like a trapped animal breaking free, and in my car, I stared at my hand white-knuckling the wheel. My bracelets glinted under the neighborhood streetlights, but the one small pearl stuck out among the gold chains and tiny gemstones.

I'd lied to Jude that night. As he double-knotted the bow on my wrist, I remembered exactly what my heart wanted when the shop assistant tied the string on the first time around.

The shop had hearts stuck on its windows. A couple nearby browsed the ring display, and watching the world turn around me, I wished to be in love.

I longed for the kind of romance poets pined over and tried to put into words. One minute later, I deemed the wish impossible and stepped back onto the city sidewalk, but did I believe it now?

If I thought it meant nothing, I shouldn't have been sheepish about sharing with Jude, but wishes never came true if you confessed them. The magic was broken, so I remade it into something else.

With the string's synthetic fibers, I only needed to introduce a little heat. A few passes over, a flame melted the

knot together. Now, the bracelet would never fall off. I'd have to cut it to make any lingering wishes come true.

No intrusive thoughts needed to come alive, especially the ones related to Jude. In the silence and in the dark, I wondered how things might be different between us. It haunted me in all those in-between spaces. I imagined how life might look if we held onto the weekend of madness, but like the snow melting, an ending always felt inevitable.

Our happiness would be steeped with guilt. Our careers and goals would tear our worlds in two. In time, Jude would grow disinterested, and I'd get restless. I had no interest in self-fulfilling the prophecy, but . . . it would be better if we got along. Just because our foolish fantasy needed to die in the past, that didn't mean Jude and I couldn't get along. Life might be easier if we did, for Cassidy's sake and ours.

Pulling out my phone, I fished for his saved email and sent a message.

HEY, Jude, it's me. I figured it might be easier, if you ever want to reach out, that you should have my cell phone number instead. With the wedding and us both being here in town, it may make life easier in the long run.

I TYPED out my phone number and pressed *Send*. By the time I got home, a text came through from a number I didn't recognize.

I SAW YOUR EMAIL, the first one read.

STANDING BY MY FRONT DOOR, I watched another pop up.

I HOPE we can be friendly, even if being friends right now isn't the best idea, he wrote. *Although, if you ever feel like you need something, I'm here.*

WHY DID that sound so comforting? Why did tears threaten to well up in my eyes?

After a long evening of playing a part, I was exhausted. My eyes were tired and dry, and my body begged to go upstairs to bed. That's what it had to be.

Jude had nothing to do with it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JUDE

“The New York acquisitions have been finalized thanks to Jude’s help,” Allison announced through the computer screen. “Our marketing and public relations teams are working on press releases and streamlining the studio with the rest of Elysian.”

None of what Allison announced was news to me. I had been there with Legal to sign the paperwork. I’d convinced the retiring owner of the recording studio to sign his building and business over to Elysian. Now, I only had to sit there in the dying afternoon light and nod along.

My mornings in South Carolina felt relaxed and unhurried. Thanks to the time difference, I could go for a swim or a run before showering and starting work, but as the four o’clock meeting rolled around, my stomach growled for dinner. My eyes nagged me for an extra shot of caffeine. Training myself to enjoy the new schedule took more out of me than I’d realized.

The nonstop video calls didn’t help, either. Even though Allison successfully took the helm, others still needed to meet with me. Business timestamped from my tenure continually

required reviewing. I wasn't in a place where I could kick back, take it easy, and only work two or three days a week.

Life couldn't be like that weekend in New York.

My collected smile faltered for a second, not that anyone noticed. Everyone focused on the speaker, not the gray-haired man in the far corner. I didn't have to worry about running this circus anymore. I only had to sit among the peanut gallery and let my thoughts take hold of me like fingers curling around my neck.

It had been three days since Sam emailed me, and every night since, I'd fought the urge to tap her name in my contacts. Her number became a ticking time bomb in my palm. When my mind wandered and I found myself idle, my thoughts drifted to her face and that tempting thought.

I glanced out the window to see where she'd once sat on my deck, her soft curves all wrapped in Scarlet-Letter red. Flashing backward, memories of her smile took me to my second morning with her when she'd made us coffee drinks to go with the hotel's eggs and toast. She shook the silver cocktail shaker and joked about earning her tips.

She had that coffee drink in Athens, but I forgot the name. It sat nagging on the tip of my tongue like the taste of her and the feel of her gentle kiss.

I bit my lip and forced my eyes back to the soulless camera lens.

It wouldn't be so terrible to message her.

Our financial officer continued over quarterly report updates. The official presentation would happen at our next meeting.

If anyone knows how to work remotely and enjoy it, it would be Sam. She could tell me how to adapt and adjust.

One half-decent excuse was all I needed. Pulling up my messages on the computer, I typed one message and then another while the meeting dragged on.

HEY, Sam, I've been staring at screens all day in nonstop meetings. How do you do it? How does anyone work like this?

If you can tell me the secret, I'd be happy to buy you coffee or a meal sometime. You could show me how you made those Greek frap things again. I feel like I need one.

“ALL RIGHT, IT'S FIVE O'CLOCK,” Allison realized. “Whatever new business remains, I motion that we table it until our next meeting.”

“Second,” I called out.

Everyone wished each other well. Screens went black, and finally, I was free to leave the office and figure out dinner. Leftover salmon sat next to half of a salad.

“That'll work.”

With the news keeping me company, I fixed myself a glass of sparkling water and ate in the kitchen. The podcaster's voice recited the reports from around the world as I sat and stabbed the pieces of apple and kale. Hunched over the kitchen island, the house began to feel both too big and too cramped.

I debated going for another jog or getting more work done when my phone buzzed.

It was Sam. Her answer lit up my screen.

THE RECIPE'S on the internet, she told me. I bet you'll outdo my frappés in no time.

I HEARD her phantom voice narrating the answer. Kind but diplomatic, she kept me at arm's length, yet the dance didn't end. Her compliment felt like a nudge or a quiet encouragement. Something reckless told me to keep going.

EVERYTHING TASTES BETTER when it's made by someone else, especially you.

NO REPLY CAME. AS I took my bowl to the dishwasher and moved to the living room, I figured I'd gone too far or I overthought Sam's answer. Perhaps I only saw what I wanted to see in her. Out on that deck, I thought . . . well, it didn't matter, did it?

My presumptions never made anything true. I wasn't arrogant enough to assume that I knew Samantha Rutledge after two frozen days.

I needed to move forward with my life. I had bigger things to worry about.

Sitting down on the couch, I let the news peter out before sending Human Resources another email. We still hadn't filled my assistant position, and if I could get the busy work off my plate, my life would feel less tedious. I had stepped down as CEO to not be so absorbed in contracts, phone calls, and soul-sucking meetings.

I wanted more hours to myself. I itched to rediscover the gangly renegade hustling indie rock bands and making phone calls to music festival directors. Back then, I refused to go along with how things were supposed to be done. My friends and I were impulsive, but our company had come so far. Last time I talked to one of the guys, he was building his dream ranch just outside of Austin. Another was living it up with his French wife in Lyon.

They'd followed their dreams elsewhere, and I'd stayed right there, tending what we'd started together. Staring at a half-written email, I was struck by a wild realization.

I had never known a man could get lost standing still.

Writing up a request for more assistant interviews, I pressed *Send* and sighed. I needed to take another step forward. I had to find a new ambition, but where was I supposed to look? As a boy, I'd found my dreams of following the music back when my mother gave me a personal cassette player and permission to borrow the family's tapes. The world came alive through every note and melody, but there were no sparks in the silence of this hollow house.

Time passed by me. Lost in a carousel of thoughts, I almost missed the doorbell ringing. I ran my finger under the collar of my T-shirt as I tried to decide who it was.

Was Cassidy stopping by? Had I ordered something and forgotten about it? Hell, it wouldn't be the first time. I had

happened more and more since I'd hit forty. All the years after felt like a snowball effect, but the thing on my doorstep wasn't some early sign of dementia.

I pulled back the door to a pair of wide, curious eyes, and that scarlet shade had been traded for a little black dress. Sam looked beautiful, dazzlingly devastating as always, but she looked like somebody else too. I didn't know the emotions tucked deep within her almond-shaped eyes. Holding up a paper bag, she smiled hesitantly.

“How do you feel about tiramisu?”

CHAPTER NINE

SAM

I didn't know why I'd put on my best black dress for him. I slid on my favorite slingback heels, walked myself over to the nearby car-share sedan parked two blocks from my place, and met Thad at the restaurant he swore to be amazing. As I stared down at my tiny plate of ham croquettes, all the reasons that had tricked me into coming here were long gone.

For old times' sake, he'd said.

Didn't that mean good old times?

"I'm sure you had something like this in Europe," Thad remarked, inspecting the breaded ball. "You did, didn't you?"

I nodded. "Sure, they served them at a wine bar I liked, but, um, how did work go today?"

Dressed in one of his sharkskin suits, Thad beamed proudly. He still loved boasting about himself, gesticulating as he went on about some deal or another. He bragged in the same way when we walked into this dining room. He told me about how his friend had invested in the restaurant group, how hard it was to get a reservation, and how it had been ranked as one of the best restaurants in the city.

My mother had never convinced me that corporate law could be interesting. Thad's story about some contract couldn't entice me either, but I wasn't up to sharing stories. It never felt like Thad listened, anyway.

His eyes didn't hold mine with rapt attention. Gray with the faintest touches of blue, *his* eyes held the first shades of morning light, and they invited me to be still and draw closer to the comfort of it all . . .

Snapping back to attention, I told myself not to think about him. *He* wasn't Thaddeus Drayton. He wasn't having dinner with me, and yet, my mind continued to wander. It flowed through those pale waters, tempting and unknown, until Thad asked me another question.

"After the meeting today, I asked your mom if you were planning to stay in Charleston again, but she didn't know." Thad chuckled under his breath. "You're leaving a lot of people in the dark right now, you know."

"Well, I—"

The waiter cut my answer short. Trays of caviar and toast replaced our empty plates. A new wine pairing got poured. Idle chatter of other patrons and the clinking of silver on China only held the silence for so long.

"I plan to leave after the wedding," I told him. "I haven't pinned down where I'll be going next, but Switzerland is gorgeous in its shoulder season. I love hiking there and seeing the lakes and markets, but you know, I've always wanted to stay in La Paz too."

"La Paz?"

"It's a city in Bolivia."

Thad set down his silver spoon. His angular face scrunched up, contorting in confusion and disdain. If I ate the salty fish eggs, I would be making the same expression.

"Why would you want to go there?" he asked, incredulous with traces of disdain. "What's even in Bolivia?"

“People, art, culture. La Paz has a lot of European influence. I’ve heard from friends that it’s a beautiful city.”

“Who? Delilah? I thought she went to Brazil or somewhere.”

It took everything in me not to roll my eyes.

“No, she spent her summer in Argentina,” I amended. “I mean the friends I’ve made traveling like my friend Darcy. She spent three weeks in La Paz once. After she told me about it, I’ve had it on my list.”

Thad’s eyebrows went up. “Does that list of yours ever get shorter?”

No, it didn’t.

Every time I went somewhere, I learned of other places I might go. France led me to Germany and Austria. Australia took me to Bali and Thailand. Everywhere I went, I met new people. The more I learned, the dumber I felt, but Thad liked his lording position high up on that horse of his. Here, waving to the waiter and eating caviar like bean dip, Thad was exactly the man he wanted to be.

And it was why we would never be getting back together.

His phone buzzed in his jacket. He didn’t think twice of pulling it out or how I waited for his attention to come back to me, not that I even wanted it. His slick, crooked grin splashed across his face.

“Well, maybe you’ll change your mind before the summer’s over,” he decided.

“I don’t think so.”

“Never say never, Sam. Go ahead and try the caviar. It’s local.”

“I don’t like fish eggs.”

He shrugged it off. “You know, being around Cassidy doing all this girly wedding stuff, you might catch the bug yourself.”

I choked out a laugh. “I’m sorry. Did I miss a proposal?”

“No.” Thad chuckled along, taking it all as a stupid joke. “I meant more about settling down and all. It’s just . . . you and me, we had a good thing, right? I mean, some mistakes were made . . .”

You cheated on me.

“Things were said that maybe weren’t the best . . .”

You gaslit me about it.

“But we could be good for each other.”

Only when you had me under your thumb, right where you liked your women.

My answers stayed inside my head. Shifting in my seat, I knew they wouldn’t help anything. My hurt feelings were better off buried deep in the dirt and never dredged up again. Still, studying him from across the white tablecloth and flickering candlelight, I tried to see the boy I’d once loved.

I wanted that boy to be as golden and perfect as everyone made him out to be. When it suited Thad, he became charming and clever. We shared friends here, and Charleston was a lovely city.

Was it worth hoping Thad could be better? If I gave him a chance, would the risk ever offer any reward? The questions twisted my stomach into knots until I sprang out of my seat.

“Sorry, I need to run to the restroom.”

No response was needed. I slung my purse over my shoulder and headed to the ladies’ room. A tufted bench sat by the sinks. Orchids decorated the counter, and the space sounded quiet. I took the chance to breathe.

Maybe if I texted Delilah, she might call me in five minutes lying about an emergency. It was my cheapest trick, but if it meant ruining Thad’s night, she would jump at the chance. The plan changed when I saw silent messages glowing on my screen.

HEY, Sam, I’ve been staring at screens all day in nonstop meetings. How do you do it? How does anyone work like this?

If you can tell me the secret, I'd be happy to buy you coffee or a meal sometime. You could show me how you made those Greek frap things again. I feel like I need one.

“OH, JUDE,” I whispered aloud.

He meant the frappé, a coffee drink I made for him with our hotel's cocktail shakers. I didn't have the arm to get it frothy enough. It hadn't been anything special, but the memory felt dangerous. The smile toying at the corner of my lips hinted at trouble.

THE RECIPE'S on the internet, I replied. I bet you'll outdo my frappés in no time.

IT TOOK him less than a minute to answer.

EVERYTHING TASTES BETTER when it's made by someone else, especially you.

DID he realize how flirty that sounded, or could the man not help himself? Heading back to my table, I tried to forget it. I fumbled my way through the rest of the chef's tasting menu and nodded for Thad when he whipped out his platinum credit card. Knowing it to be the path of least resistance, my show for Thad only made me want to come out of my skin.

There was only one pair of eyes I wanted to see and one man I wanted kissing me goodnight. Out on the sidewalk, Thad looked down at me.

“We'll do this again sometime,” he said, but it sounded like a royal we.

I sucked in a deep breath. “We'll see, won't we?”

He beamed like a man with an unearned prize. As he leaned down, I turned my cheek. Politeness only offered Thad so much, but a kiss wasn't one of them. Frustration echoed in his gaze.

“The office is going to be busy tomorrow. I'll try to call you next weekend.”

“Drive safe, Thad.”

I couldn't drive fast enough. Escapism was a dangerous diversion embodied in a man I couldn't desire. Everything about it felt so wrong—the stop at the bakery, the dash through traffic, and the drive over the bridge. Dusk settled into darkness as I found my way back to his temporary home. Not even asking, I only came with a sliver of hope and a sugary bribe.

I rang the doorbell and counted my heartbeats.

Seventy beats later, Jude pulled open the door. He looked more gorgeous in his faded festival T-shirt than Thad ever would in his suits. Jude's eyes widened with surprise but not disappointment.

“How do you feel about tiramisu?” I asked.

Another heartbeat of silence followed. Jude scratched the back of his head.

“I usually have it with coffee or wine,” he answered. “I've got both here, if you want.”

Jude gestured down the hall. Leading us toward the ivory kitchen, there were no questions and no second-guessing. Overthinking only led to awareness and guilt.

“Red or white?” he asked.

“Red,” I answered. “I'm not picky about what kind.”

He uncorked a bottle, and a few minutes later, we found ourselves back upstairs, sitting by the firelight. The gas flames glowed blue at their core. They reflected the intense curiosity in Jude's gaze.

“I know I shouldn't have shown up like this,” I began. “If you can't tell, the dessert's a bribe.”

He swallowed his first bite. “You don't need a bribe to come over here, but . . .”

I already knew what he wanted to say. The pieces of me begging to scream out at the river answered before he finished.

“I went out to dinner with Thad Drayton tonight,” I blurted before taking a swig from my wine glass. “I don't know why I

went. We dated back in the day. He says he wants to be friends again, but it's pretty clear that he wants more. Everyone wants it to be more."

"Except me," Jude added.

Did jealousy flash across his face? In the darkness, I couldn't be certain.

"He's Tucker's best friend, you know," I explained. "Cassidy and I grew up around them. They went to the boys' school in town, and when Tucker finally struck up the nerve to ask Cassidy out in college, well, it seemed suitable for Thad and me to pair up too. Everyone we knew loved the idea. We were the fantastic foursome our freshman year, all four of us at the same school."

"But you can't be with someone because it makes other people happy," Jude remarked. "Not if he doesn't make you happy."

"No," I agreed, my racing heart slowing down. "If Thad really made me happy once, I can't remember it anymore. There were times I'd told myself I enjoyed our time together, but it . . . it wasn't real."

Jude set down his fork and sighed. "I don't know much about this Thad guy. I think I met him for a second at the party, but he sounds like an ass."

A smirk stretched over my face. I tried to hide it with a bite of tiramisu.

"He's very sure of himself and who he thinks I am," I replied.

"Well, that's his first mistake."

"What is?"

"Thinking he knows you. A man presuming anything about a woman only makes him a clown."

"Red nose and all?"

It was Jude's turn to smirk. His handsome face lit up and glowed in the firelight. My need to shout faded away. As my

spirit settled, a need to share a secret took the place of the restless frustration.

“I tell people that I enjoy traveling and I want to do it while I can,” I confessed in more than a whisper. “I think I told you that too.”

“Something along those lines.”

“But . . . the truth is that I can’t tell the truth.” I dragged the tines of my fork between my lips and tried to make sense of it. “I mean, I can’t tell people I hate Charleston because I’m exhausted by justifying my choices. I can’t tell my mother or my friends that I hate being around Thad for more than a minute. There are all these things I want to say, but it’s always easier to follow the path of least resistance for the sake of the people I love. When I’m here, though, I feel it carrying me down a path I don’t like. I’m not who I want to be.”

“You know,” Jude mused, “I think I know what you mean.”

“You mean you also have a scheming mother and a pompous ex haunting you?”

He chuckled. “No, but I understand feeling not like your truest self.”

One more forkful had my plate empty. Only drops of wine remained in my glass. I couldn’t buy myself any more time.

“When I’m away from here, I have the freedom to understand who I am without any expectations or pressure from other people. It’s going to be a struggle holding onto that person this summer, so short story long, it would be nice to have a friend who isn’t so biased.”

From his deck chair, Jude reached out. His fingers wove with mine again, and my heartbeat quickened again. His touched offered a different kind of pain, a sweet agony offering a surreal delight. I shouldn’t have held his hand tighter. I needed to let go.

“I’ll be whoever you need to me to be. I’m here,” he promised, but he had a confession too. “To be honest, I’ve never been the type of man who can do casual encounters. Call

me old-fashioned, but I liked knowing someone before we, well, *you know*.”

A memory of our hotel bed danced across my mind. Silvery shadows and phantom touches quickly filled my thoughts. Every time I saw a glimpse of what was, I found myself falling backward and deeper into something I didn't quite understand.

“Then, why did you say yes to me?”

Jude glanced down at our tangled hands and looked out toward the water. “I'm not sure. Something about how you said it appealed to me, but I'm starting to think the most appealing thing about your offer was you.”

“Oh, what?” I tried to tease. “You just had to have me as your Valentine, even if I was only giving you a weekend?”

He took hold of my gaze, claiming it with his own.

“Yes.”

Those gray eyes had never looked so clear. My joking smile faltered. The weight of his declaration pressed into me, refusing to be ignored.

“Does that bother you?” he asked.

I swallowed down the remains of my wine as I shrugged. A lot of replies came to mind, but none of them felt right. No words fit the moment.

“Should it?”

Jude shrugged. “That's up to you. I'm beyond playing games, but I won't pretend that our situation isn't . . .”

“Precarious?” I suggested. “Lord knows, I feel like I'm looking down the edge of a cliff most days.”

“Then, let me pull you back.”

I didn't stop him from pulling me up from my seat. A chilled night breeze blew over me, but it paled next to Jude holding me close. I found myself chuckling quietly as we began turning to the count of four. The wine flushed my cheeks and the tops of my ears.

Dancing around, Jude never bothered putting on music. The only melody was the one Jude hummed off-key. The soft breath tingled against my ear, making me laugh even more. I could've sworn he was doing it badly on purpose.

“You look prettier when you smile,” he murmured.

I didn't even mention that he couldn't see my face. My cheek pressed against his shoulder, and his five o'clock shadow tickled my nose.

“That line doesn't really work on women,” I countered gently.

He continued anyway, “Your shoulders relax. You breathe easier, but do you know when you're the most beautiful?”

“When?”

“When you're asleep and the weight of the world can't touch you.” His fingertips pressed into the small of my back. “If I could give you that kind of peace all the time, Sam, I . . .”

The words got lost as a raindrop tapped my forehead and woke us up from the illusion. One drop and then another, the weather quickly chased us inside. Jude threw open the door. With the rush of air conditioning, a shiver coursed over my skin, yet I kept grinning.

“You can't drive home in this weather,” Jude declared, watching the few stray drops transform into a steady shower.

“It's only a little rain. I don't think I'll melt.”

“I'd rather not risk it.”

“That's just an excuse.”

Jude beamed, unabashed and undeniably heartbreaking.

“You're right,” he agreed. “It is.”

Outside, rain poured down and washed over the windowpanes. I imagined our abandoned wine glasses were filling up with water for nobody to taste, but they didn't matter. All I cared about was letting my fingers trace the lines of Jude's face. The moment and its swelling feelings returned.

I committed every slow breath to memory and savored his arm wrapping around me. My feet were already slipping out of my shoes. They wanted to count the steps to the bed.

“You know this is going to be a problem,” I murmured. “We’re making trouble for ourselves.”

“Not tonight, though.”

“No,” I agreed, our lips brushing against each other. “Not tonight.”

CHAPTER TEN

JUDE

Three days of waiting and wondering had lured me to this moment. Sam had been smart to keep me at bay. She was the stronger one between us. More radiant and resilient, she did her best to do the right thing, but I was too selfish. My desires became too much.

Our clothes became heaps on the floor. Her fingers made quick work of each scrap of fabric. Half naked and every inch of me alive, I felt the backs of my knees hit the bed. We toppled backward together, tangling ourselves together in a way which I selfishly hoped couldn't come undone.

“Sam,” I mumbled, forgetting all my good sense.

There was only her name ... only *her*.

I grew intoxicated by the taste of wine. Drinking her in, I felt her tongue dance with mine before wandering down over her chest. Which part of Samantha did I like best? Which piece of her had I missed the most?

It became too hard to decide. Even her fingers running through my hair felt too good for words. As my teeth teasingly

nipped at her breasts, her gentle moan sent a shiver down my spine.

“Tell me to stop,” I urged her.

My worst desires took control. I should never have been left alone with her, not if we knew what was good for each other, but I felt captivated anyway. Peppering kisses across her stomach and down her inner thigh, I only fell deeper into the madness.

“Don’t,” she muttered above me. “Don’t you even dare.”

How could I refuse?

Her legs spread wider, welcoming me in. Nothing stopped me from tasting her. With my grip fastened against her full, feminine hips, I knew of no dessert or drink that gave me more pleasure than she did.

Her hips instinctively shifted toward the good sensations. Her hands ran through my hair, keeping me right where she liked me best. I couldn’t imagine anywhere better.

“Shit,” she cursed in a whisper.

She died a little. A shuddering wave of ecstasy crashed over her body, but Sam craved more. With the rain pelting outside, I let myself get washed away in everything I wanted, what I longed to do to her and I wished to be for her.

Words failed me. All I had were my desperate kiss and possessive grip on her curves. Hovering over her, I let my lips tell Sam everything I couldn’t. I prayed to hidden stars that she understood, even if I couldn’t. My delirious mind was too caught up in the feeling of her hands tugging down my underwear.

She set me free, letting her hand wander up and down my length as our kissing grew more fervent and reckless. Her thumb massaged my crown until my hardened member begged to be inside her.

“Let me have you,” I managed to plead, my voice heavy and breathless. “Let me have you one more time.”

It didn't seem real to have our bodies connecting once more. Guiding my length, Sam let me push deeper. Her hands slid up my chest already misting with a fine layer of sweat. It all felt like a fever dream.

"Have me," she whispered.

Her fingernails dug into my skin and tore open my bleeding heart. I gave her everything. Moving in time with my racing heart, I pushed deeper and deeper until her breath caught against my ear. Euphoria took hold of her, yet I refused to relent. My rocking thrusts continued through the overflowing pleasure. Her walls clenched around me.

"Jude," she breathed in a careful whimper. "Oh, my God, Jude."

Her spine arched up while her head craned back. She died for the second time as a soft cry of pleasure left her lips. With one final push, I left myself with nothing but worn muscles and a dull ache of wanting in my chest.

I had no reason to hold back what she welcomed. I wouldn't deny Samantha what she readily craved.

As my release coursed through me and into her, my entire body collapsed. We lay there in the shadowed silence, gasping and spent.

The right words still wouldn't come.

Creeping over, Sam dropped her head against my shoulder. I held onto it. My fingers brushed over her tangled hair as her gasps cooled my skin. It took a long time to find the will to move. My head kept spinning even hours later.

"Don't leave tonight," I finally mumbled.

"I won't," she assured me. "I don't want to melt."

After cleaning ourselves up, Sam and I never left that king-sized bed. We stayed together until the rain slacked off and our stomachs growled for breakfast. It made me resent hunger, mornings, and sunshine, but I liked seeing Sam at my kitchen table. She wore her wrinkled dress and the remnants of sleep in her eyes.

“Coffee?” I said, handing over a hot mug.

“Thank you,” she replied.

I still remembered how she took her coffee. I never forgot a moment of our sacred snow days, but pushing the milk and sugar her way, I let Sam fix her cup. I went to get the toast popping out of the little steel machine and grabbed the strawberry jam from the fridge.

We sat side by side with our simple breakfast. Eventually, Sam spoke first.

“I know we agreed to keep our distance from each other,” she recalled between sips of coffee. “We still should, but I don’t think that’s gonna work anymore.”

“No,” I had to agree. “We’re past the point of no return.”

But ... where did we go from there?

Facing a fork in the road, Sam stared down at her breakfast plate with her expression torn in two rough pieces. I knew what pulled her apart. She wasn’t the only one who understood the consequences, but I was too taken to be a righteous man. After finding her again, I didn’t want to even consider letting her go.

“Nobody has to know what we’re doing,” she mused almost to herself. “If we keep this between us, it won’t kill anyone.”

“It would be nice to have a friend here,” I added.

Her warm eyes flitted my way. “I’m not going to be in Charleston forever.”

“Then, while we are here, why don’t we make the most of the time we have? What did you tell me that morning? I could be—”

“Whatever you wanted to be,” she finished for me. “My sweetheart Valentine.”

“I could still be that man . . . when you want him.”

“And what happens if I don’t?”

The question sounded like a test. Biting into her toast, Sam studied me carefully.

“I know how to bow out,” I promised. “I won’t ever make you do something you don’t like, Sam. You . . . you can cut the strings whenever you like.”

She smiled. Some quiet secret remained in her expression.

“Okay,” she agreed.

She reached over to push the fallen hair from my forehead, and from the look in her eyes, I knew our pact was made. Signed and sealed inside us, nobody would ever see the truth of Sam and me. I only needed to throw on a pair of jeans and drive her home.

“You can let me out here,” she said, gesturing to the sidewalk on a short side street among the old, stately mansions.

I only saw trees and a high stone fence. Where was she going? Where did she even live?

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, there’s a hidden garden gate through there,” she said. “Trust me.”

I gave her more than my trust. Pulling up to the curb, I parked and felt Sam’s lips briefly brush against my cheek. They were gone too soon.

“How about we get dinner?” I suggested before thinking twice.

“I’ve got a work shift today,” she answered sympathetically. “And I’ve got wedding stuff too, so . . .”

“A raincheck, then.”

“Thank you,” she said, but I didn’t know what for.

The ride home?

The night?

Breakfast or our bargain?

With more questions than answers, I watched Sam step out into the sunlight and sneak through two magnolia trees. I rolled down the windows to make sure she didn't call to me, but I only heard the squeak of aging metal. A gate latched shut.

"There really is a gate, then," I realized.

My wandering mind told me to take the long way home. I didn't know how I would survive this whole affair. Ever since New York, I'd regretted making her a temporary fling. I wanted the chance to know her better and take her home, but I came from a dying age. I'd never learned how to be coolly casual with women or start a relationship knowing its end.

I struggled to wrap my head around it until I looked at it from a new perspective. Crossing back over the river bridge into Mount Pleasant, I saw the light breaking through the clouds.

Perhaps Sam and I were destined to have something so beautiful it could only survive in a fleeting flash of a moment. Too much kept us apart. Life made it too complicated to make the dream stay, but if we were never meant to last, well, I would make sure the memory lasted me a lifetime.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SAM

“*Three hundred?*” Delilah blurted out from Cassidy’s kitchen. “You can’t seriously be inviting three hundred people to this wedding, Cass.”

Sitting across from me, Cassidy sprawled her legs under the rounded coffee table and nodded. She, in her typical way, had a feast of snacks and drinks spread out for us across her kitchen counters.

Delilah and I didn’t need bribes to come help tie tags onto wedding favors. We were happy to come over any and every Friday night.

After all, this was our job as maids of honor, but Delilah hadn’t eaten since breakfast. She needed sustenance before diving into our workload.

“Well, I’ve got a lot of cousins on Mom’s side,” Cassidy explained. “She also wanted to invite family friends, and Tucker has a good-sized family too. His sisters are married with kids, and we’ve got our friends. It’s just kinda added up.”

Delilah walked back over to the coffee table, handing me a glass of wine before settling down cross-legged and looking

unimpressed. She took a bite of her pretzels and hummus.

“I like how you buried in there that your mom invited people too,” she pointed out before picking up another pretzel. “What percentage of the guests are hers? Twenty? Thirty? *Half?*”

“Like, forty people,” Cassidy insisted. She stamped another brown paper tag with gusto. “It’s mostly a formality, and they’re almost all connected to her charity friends. They’ve always wanted me to join their group.”

I fought back a groan. “Don’t, for the love of God.”

“I don’t plan on it,” she assured me. “They might look nice on the surface, but I know they mainly lunch together and talk about each other behind their backs. It’s cutthroat pettiness, and I’m not interested.”

“But on a brighter note, what are you doing in your spare time?” Delilah wondered. “You look like you’re becoming some kind of iron woman.”

Cassidy beamed. She flipped her ponytail over her shoulder and handed me a fresh stack of favor tags. Delilah got to snipping strings.

“Tucker and I have been doing this couple’s strength training course,” she explained eagerly. “It’s so amazing! We do partnered exercises, but it’s also about communication and trust building. The woman who runs the class is a retired therapist with her own personal trainer’s license. She also has a blueberry farm.”

“Is that where you got all this jam from?” I asked.

Glancing over, I saw that cases of tiny sample jars sat stacked together, waiting to be addressed. Each one was filled with half a cup of violet-blue preserves waiting to be spread on biscuits or toast. It suited the wedding’s blue scheme well.

“Yep!” Cassidy chimed. “I bought the jars, and she processed them for me with some berries she had in deep freeze. We’re also going to have the jam between the layers of our wedding cake.”

“And wouldn’t it be better if we were able to enjoy more of that amazing cake than people you don’t know or like?” Delilah added. “I mean, seriously, your mom just wants to impress these people. Doesn’t she?”

Cassidy almost frowned. “She is paying for a good chunk of it. I didn’t ask for her and Joe to contribute, but they offered. I mentioned that Dad wanted to buy my wedding dress, and well . . .”

“It became a competition of sorts?” I guessed, shifting and unable to stay comfortable.

It killed me to think of him, but what did I expect?

“It’ll be easier this way,” Cassidy insisted while not meeting our eyes. “Everyone’s going to have a lovely time, and Tucker and I will be married. Once it’s all said and done, who’s gonna know the difference?”

Delilah smirked. “Your parents’ bank account. Hey, maybe we should invite all of Charleston and be done with it.”

That got out a giggle out of the room. Nibbling and working, we continued our assembly line late into the evening, but I didn’t forget the look Cassidy offered us when she surrendered.

It’ll be easier.

I knew the tag line too well.

We all became mistresses of picking our battles in order to win the war. As Cassidy took on her wedding like a military campaign, I fought with the guilt stewing inside me. I couldn’t vent or share my conflict. It was all too tied up in Jude. Erasing him from any story felt too impossible, but more than that, I hated to lie to my two closest friends.

It felt better to stay silent and go with the flow of our casual conversation. With my lips sealed, I worked until my stomach growled and forced me into getting a plate of my own. It made me notice a paper cut on my thumb that I had totally missed. Engrossed in my job, I hadn’t even felt it.

“Can I get you guys anything?” I asked.

My friends shook their heads.

“I’m good for now,” Delilah replied.

Cassidy stood up, tugging at her running shorts’ waist. “Actually, I’m gonna use the bathroom.”

“Scream if you fall in,” I tried to joke, but my heart wasn’t in it.

My eyes were too busy following Cassidy’s hazel eyes with all their sweetness and blissful ignorance. She should have snatched the cheese knife off the counter and stabbed me in the gut. My self-inflicted torment had to be worse. It weighed down on my back. Even in my comfiest leggings and old Lorde T-shirt, nothing felt right. Every nerve hummed with the cruelest truths.

You slept with her father, even when you knew better.

If she finds out, you’ll break her heart and lose her trust.

What kind of friend are you?

I shoved some baby carrots into my mouth to keep from screaming, but heading back into the living room, Delilah saw the anxiety painted over my face. She took a sip of her tea and scrunched up her nose.

“Are you okay, Sammy babe?” she asked, her voice hushed but empathic. “You look a little . . . *constipated*. Maybe not literally, but constipated in the heart.”

I couldn’t help but smirk. “Is that even a thing?”

“It is if I say so.” Delilah grinned, prouder than ever. “I heard on the grapevine that you went out with Thad this week. I mean, that guy makes me hurl. I wouldn’t be surprised if you wanted to talk about it.”

“No, it’s not that,” I began but stopped. “Well, it is. Where did you even hear about it?”

“Your mom told Cassidy’s mom, and Cass texted me about it that morning. We were both ready for an SOS text.”

“I almost did text you once,” I recalled, my memory wandering through the reckless choices I’d made. “I went a

different route, though. I made it through the dinner largely unscathed. Thad was okay enough.”

“*Wow*, what a rave review. Drayton the dumbass was okay enough!”

“Delilah, be serious here.”

“I am,” she swore. “Cassie might be too wrapped up in her own insanity to see, but something has been off about you all night.”

“It’s just ...”

Her eyebrows went up. “What?”

I couldn’t tell her. I needed to throw her off the scent, even if I longed to make my burdens lighter. These were my consequences to bear.

“Nothing, really,” I lied. “I know you don’t like Thad. Cass has to like him because he’s Tucker’s oldest friend, and since he’s going to be Tucker’s best man, I’m just thinking about us seeing more of him. He wants us to get along for the good of the wedding.”

Delilah rolled her eyes. “What a load of bull.”

“Well, whether he means it or not, it’s true. Cassidy has enough drama to deal with. I don’t want to add to it.”

“Are my ears burning or did Sammy just say my name?”

We both looked up to see Cassidy sauntering back into the room, detouring to snatch up a brownie on the way.

“We were talking about her dinner with Drayton,” Delilah explained. “She wants to be civil with the groomsmen while we’re getting this wedding together?”

Cassidy gave her a knowing look. “And you want him to take a long walk off a short pier, right?”

“For starters, sure.” Delilah took a sip of her drink. “Fingers crossed there would be sharks floating around the pier.”

“He’s really not that bad,” Cassidy swore. “I know he can be arrogant at times, and he has what my mom would call ‘testosterone poisoning’, but it would be good to see you all getting along. We did have good times, you know? Remember my twenty-first birthday party? It was Thad’s idea to get the piñata and fill it with those tiny plastic tequila bottles. Everyone loved that! And he’s been a good friend to Tucker!”

Delilah shook her head. “You always love to see the best in people. I love you, but you’re not gonna change my mind. I don’t hold much hope for that Owen guy, either.”

“Oh, Owen’s wonderful! He’s kinda subdued and moody, but he’s got such a good heart,” Cassidy exclaimed. “Between us, I think he’d make a better best man than Thad, but don’t tell Tucker I said that.”

Delilah whipped her phone out of her jeans pocket. She smiled wickedly.

“Oh, I’m gonna text him!” she exclaimed. “He’s over at his game night, right? Are both the guys there, Cassie?”

“No! No, don’t!” Cassie squealed, reaching over the coffee table and rolling onto the floor. “I’m confiscating your phone!”

“I’m not in your class, Miss Goldwyn! You can’t!”

The two scrambled for the cell phone, laughing their heads off until it all became too much. Infectious, the sound had me giggling too, but I didn’t forget. The words still permeated every waking thought. Sitting there, I couldn’t hold onto the lie forever. I broke my silent promise once after running straight to Jude, and Cassidy’s kindness only went so far.

While the others caught their breath, I got to work on the last round of jam jars. My fingers tugged at the twine, hurrying from one to the next. My insides were torn in two and then into four jagged pieces. Guilt shredded me into nothing, yet I sat there like nothing had changed. As my instincts whispered Jude’s name, I knew he was already my worst habit.

Where was that cheese knife again? After lying, they had every right to carve into me and cut out this growing ache in

my chest. My vice gripped me so tightly that I might never feel the twist of the knife. Nobody but Jude would ever see this pain.

“You said you’ll have the jam in the cake, right?” I remarked. “Have you already picked a baker?”

Cassidy sat up, shaking her head. “Not yet. I’m looking for one who will fill the request.”

“I’ll help you look, then,” I offered. “Whatever you need to be done, we can do.”

“Mom’s already asking about putting on a luncheon for me as my bridal shower. If you’re really offering, maybe—”

I held up a hand to stop her. All the wheels in my head began turning at a breakneck pace, all wondering how I could create the best shower a bride ever had.

“That’s our job,” I assured her. “It’s tradition for the maid of honor to host the shower. Just tell your mom to email me some invite suggestions. That’s all we need.”

Delilah nodded in agreement. “We’ll put on a hell of a shower for you, Cassie. Don’t you worry.”

That’s what I needed. Penance could make up for my dishonesty and deceptions, but party planning didn’t amount to the atonement I required.

Every time my heart drifted toward Jude, it drifted away from Cassidy. Every time I indulged our attraction, the clandestine feelings pushed our friendship deeper into an early grave. This was only the start of this madness, but I had to see it all through.

I would be her guardian, her champion, and her cheerleader. Even if she invited a thousand people, I’d work until my fingers bled and the wedding reached perfection. I didn’t care what became of me.

Then, when the bottom dropped out from under her feet, when she learned the truth about my sins, maybe she could find it in her heart to forgive me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JUDE

“We’ll resurrect the imprint by signing on some new artists,” Allison explained through the video call. “I’ve directed the Artists and Repertoire team to send over a few of our stronger options, but I trust you’ll know the best way to rebuild the brand.”

I nodded. “It’ll take time to decide where the direction of the label should go, but knowing its history, I believe looking to the past will be our best answer. I’ll delegate out to the media and marketing teams, and I can talk with Edison over in Artist Development. He can give me better insight into providing a launch timeline.”

“Can it be delivered by our next C-level meeting?”

I flashed a grin toward the camera lens. “Of course.”

With the cogs of my mind turning, I already saw half of what I needed to do. The old record label had been retired years ago, but buying their parent company gave us the right to bring it back to life. Its Nashville roots made it ideal for a Southern or folk sound. Our growing Tennessee offices would be perfect to take on the project. My biggest struggle would be

putting together presentation documents without an assistant to help.

“If you need someone to help, let Linda in HR know, and we can reach out to one of our more promising interns. They’re always looking to prove themselves,” Allison remarked with a laugh. “They might even be a little too eager, if you ask me.”

“That’s what happens when you hire all the interns who show promise. They try to look promising.”

She flipped her long braids over her shoulder. “But didn’t you used to direct HR to hire pretty much all of them?”

I tugged at the sleeve of my original Bonnaroo T-shirt, trying not to laugh at myself.

“Well, they all did a good job.”

On my computer screen, Allison’s eyebrows went up. She nodded, saying nothing, but I knew the expression on her face. It took a lot for the label to not hire an intern. After surviving the interview process and managing to complete the six-month stint, it seemed cruel to reject any of those college kids. I had been them once—a young, hopeful kid with more ambition than sense.

“Sure,” Allison agreed. “Anyway, unless you have anything else on our agenda, I have a meeting with our leadership in Promotions.”

“Good luck, Allison.”

She waved with both hands, showing off her wide smile and the massive engagement ring that I’d only just heard about.

“Take care of yourself, Jude. We’ll talk soon.”

Quickly getting up, I walked across the office to pick out a record to play. Paul Simon suited the moment, letting a few minutes of work slip away into hours hunched over the desk. The vinyls were supposed to be my break, a chance to stand and flip my album sides, but the meeting with Allison had me entrenched in planning and development.

I pored over the history of the brand. I considered styling and publicity. The big picture took shape with the tiniest details, and by the time sunset seeped through the windows, my stomach growled. I had no clue how long had it been since my record ended, but my neck hurt like hell.

Rubbing a sore spot, I stood with a long, groaning sigh. Old habits didn't die hard for me. They came back from the dead again and again. When I was a new CEO, I spent countless evenings and afternoons like that one.

It wasn't like I had a family to see. My daughter lived on a completely different coast, and being in California, I worked to give myself a good enough reason to not be around. The success of Elysian proved that the hard choices I'd made had all been worthwhile. I earned every reason to take pride in my company and my life, but Cassidy had grown up.

I didn't need to work like this anymore. Looking over my notes, I saw everything to be solved with an email or two. Elysian paid people to do this kind of work. I only had to make the final calls and finishing touches. Why was I hurting myself here?

I only needed to delegate. I took on the new job to be flexible and work at my leisure. I hoped to find a new ambition besides creating a worthwhile excuse for not seeing my only child grow up.

Did I not have anything better to do?

I spent a long time cooking dinner that night, specifically choosing a recipe that consumed time and filled the house with the aroma of red wine, spices, and herbs. It made the place feel a little less lonely. The television played in the next room with the first games of the baseball season. A baseball cracked against a bat. The crowd cheered while my short ribs sizzled in the bottom of the Dutch oven.

It gave me time to work out in the basement, shower, and watch the fourth inning of the game. Occasionally, my thoughts drifted toward who I might call. A softly Southern voice echoed my name, but she wasn't there. I'd promised not to use her as my Charleston crutch.

I didn't need Sam. I needed a hobby.

With my dinner close to done, buying a boat to dock out back wasn't an option, so I browsed through the books in the living room. Novels of all kinds filled the cubed shelves surrounding the television. Each sat there willing to occupy my mind, but indecisive as ever, I thanked the interruption of a phone call.

"Hey, Dad," Cassidy greeted me quickly. "I hope this isn't a bad time."

I dropped one of the old mysteries onto the nearby armchair.

"No, not at all, I was just . . . finishing up dinner."

I checked my watch. The oven still had fifteen minutes to go.

"Oh, same, Tucker and I got takeout from this new Greek place tonight. I think you'd like it," she replied. "That's not why I called, though. I've got an appointment to try on wedding dresses this weekend, and well, I know you said you wanted to buy my dress last Christmas."

"Do you want my credit card, then? I can drop it off—"

"No, Dad." She laughed at me across the line. "I want *you*. I was hoping you'd be free this Saturday afternoon."

"Doesn't your mom want to be there?"

"She kinda did, but she's celebrating her fifteenth wedding anniversary this weekend. The appointment came up as a last-minute cancellation, and I didn't want her and Joe to cancel their plans. Talia's already having a sleepover with some friends. Besides, I'd really like your opinion."

"The man who likes living in old T-shirts?" I teased.

"Even still, you do have good taste, and I know you'll give me your honest opinion."

"What about your friends?"

"Oh, Sammy and Delilah are both coming. We're gonna go out for breakfast together and meet you at the place, if you're

coming.”

I smiled to myself. “How could I miss it?”

Effusive and excited, Cassidy thanked me over and over, but I hardly heard it. Why did the thought of seeing Sam sound like a tempting bonus? My heart leapt at the chance to spend a minute with her, even if we had to be in mixed company.

Enough. I was becoming too idle and too anxious. After all, I came to Charleston to regroup and rediscover who I wanted to be in this next chapter of my life. It was time to start following through on that plan.

“What time should I meet you girls?” I asked.

Swallowing back my silent wanting, I listened to Cassidy, but the thought of Sam followed me. Red wine splashed over her memory. The taste of her kiss came alive with the scent of dinner nearly done. Rose petal lips brushed against my cheek, causing a shudder to shoot up my spine.

“It’ll be great,” Cassidy remarked. “We’re going to have a great time.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

I hoped for a distraction and a change of pace with Sam. Promises couldn’t be made only to be broken. We swore not to let this run too deep, and one look in a hall mirror showed the face of a liar. I had to learn to be someone else to Sam, for her sake and mine. Otherwise, if my fixations couldn’t end, I was about to become her worst problem.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SAM

Saturday started with a coffee run. With Delilah as our chauffeur, we all came alive thanks to the hit of caffeine, gearing us up for the morning to come.

Cassidy's T-shirt dress hid away all her new shapewear and special underthings required for ballgowns. She did her best not to fidget as we walked up to the storefront. Over our heads, the springtime sun became a glaring light. It hit me like a spotlight.

Behind her sunglasses, Delilah knit her eyebrows together. "Not to be a downer, but will the dress come in time for the wedding? Don't they need, like, six months minimum?"

"Not here," Cassidy explained. "This woman's a local designer. Most of the dresses in the shop you can buy and take away, but she's got a seamstress in-house who can alter a gown for me."

"Sounds nice," I replied.

I saw why Cassidy had picked out this bridal boutique. The gallery was whiter than snow, spacious, and filled with decorated frosted cakes with floral appliques and shimmering

pearl beads. Silk magnolia flowers decorated the front desk in homage to the shop name. The boutique was still so fresh and new that every customer appeared as a blessing.

“Your other guest is already here,” the attendant told Cassidy. “You ladies can join him and get settled before we take our bride back to the changing rooms.”

The sprightly older woman led the way through the divided salons. Her lavender hair and round wire glasses stuck out among the shades of ivory, but she was kind and eager to show off her employer’s designs. I welcomed every distraction.

Already waiting for us, Jude had claimed the vintage armchair covered in the softest shade of gray while the velvet couch sat empty. It suited him too well. With his legs crossed, he made his navy cashmere sweater look like a second skin. Everything about him appeared so at ease.

I didn’t know how he managed it.

The shop assistant took Cassidy back to a changing room with some selections she had requested over the phone. We were left waiting in the far corner of the room . . . just Delilah, Jude, and me.

“It’s good to see you both again,” Jude greeted us, filling up the lull. “How’s your business, Delilah?”

“Great. We just got in another new red wine from a winery I love in Texas,” she answered, her tone brightening the more she talked. “It smells just like a charcoal grill, which sounds crazy, but I can’t wait to try it with something smoked or barbecued. I swear, it’s going to be the wine of the summer.”

“You’ll have to save us some bottles,” he replied. “I’m sure Sam will want to try it too.”

“Maybe we could try it together some time.” My heartbeat quickened at the mistake, and my muscles clenched. “If you’re willing to put up with us, maybe we could all come over with Cassie and have dinner with you.”

The corners of Jude’s mouth twitched with a smile nobody else noticed. As his tone dropped lower, I heard the intent

between every one of his words.

“You’re welcome any time.”

In that silvery glint of resolve, I saw all the ways Jude hoped to see me. He didn’t reach out. His hands stayed by his sides, yet I felt the ghost of his palm against my back. My lips inched apart for a kiss not even coming. Delilah and I sipped our iced coffees and made small talk, but the feelings never faded.

Pretending to be calm flourished into a new kind of torture. I buried my emotions alive, deep down in the dark shadows of myself. My palms grew hot and clammy. No matter how many times I rubbed my hands along my hips, the jeans never took away the tingling. I only wanted to reach out. My heart begged to be honest, yet I crossed my legs, folded my arms, and ignored it all.

Two sets of heels clicked our way.

“Okay!” Cassidy’s voice called down the short hall. “This is the first one, and I’ve got, like, six others to try. Feel free to be honest, please. I want to know what you all think.”

Jude smiled. “I think you look lovely all the time.”

With the help of the assistant, Cassidy mounted the pedestal set before us and a three-way mirror. The dress she chose was contemporary and made of some heavy satin, but Cassidy put the gown in its best light. With her hair swept up and out of the way, she let the sleek train flow out behind her while smoothing the bow on her waist.

I had to ask, “Do you think this fabric will be comfortable for the weather?”

“Well, it’s indoors. We’ve booked the observatory room at The Basset Hotel,” she replied as her reflection glanced my way. “Still, I think it should look kinda summery, not too stiff.”

Delilah nodded. “Yeah, this isn’t really you. You’re more fun and flowery and fresh.”

Cassidy agreed again, and so it went. From one to the next, we examined each dress, trying to picture Cassidy on her big day. I thought she might get frustrated after a while, yet her excitement grew. She beamed as she walked out in her fifth ballgown, even if it didn't suit her.

"The color's not right," she already knew. "I'm not big on this champagne beige shade, but I do love the lace and this skirt."

"Then, why try it on?" Delilah wondered.

"Because it's fun!" Cassidy gestured across the long room. "You guys, they've got bridesmaids dresses here too with plenty of samples in stock. You should try some on! I mean, that would be okay, right, Esther?"

The shop assistant smiled eagerly. "Of course, my dear."

"But this is your day, Cass," I pointed out. "We don't need to—"

"It'll be more exciting if I'm not doing this alone, and it can help me get the full picture, you know? We'll all have the full effect!"

Delilah looked over to me on the couch. "Should we humor her?"

"I guess that depends." I cleared my throat and dared to meet his eyes again. "Would you mind it?"

Jude shrugged. "Why wouldn't I? I've got nowhere else to be today."

"All right, let's go have a look," Delilah decided, reaching for my wrist.

We left our purses on the sofa and headed off as Cassidy went to put on her next dress. Combing through the shades of blue, I didn't know where to begin or whether the racks ever ended. It felt more limitless than the sea itself.

"You'll try these on," Delilah insisted. "They're gonna fit you better than me."

"I'm a twelve."

“Well, I’m a super-sweet sixteen. There are lot more here that your hips can squeeze into than mine, and someone should stay in the peanut gallery with Jude. He can’t judge us all.”

“You’re right.” I snatched up the three dresses of our choosing. “Someone should stay.”

That person couldn’t be me. With the help of another shop assistant, I retreated into the temporary shelter of a dressing room, pulling off my Breton-striped sweater and sliding into Delilah’s first choice. I got lucky by only having a strapless bra clean and that I’d shaved the night before. Otherwise, stepping out of the dressing room would have been that much harder.

I didn’t want to put on a show for him. Nothing about it felt innocent.

“I love that blue on you, Sammy!” Cassidy said with applause.

My mouth fell open. Taking her in, I didn’t have the words.

“Wow, Cass, you look ...”

She looked like the princess of a secret garden. Only short on bird friends and a baby deer, no knight-in-shining armor came to claim her. Tucker hadn’t been allowed. From what I heard during our coffee run, he had to work a weekend shift at his hospital’s clinic, but Delilah and Jude offered enough of a reaction.

The attendant rushed off to get a veil as Cassidy rose to her pedestal. She let the tulle skirt swish, allowing the shimmering material to catch every fracture of light. Lace flowers trailed down from the bodice. Ivory ribbons kept the corseted top in place, but more than anything, Cassidy glowed. Her smile softened into something earnest and secret. She didn’t look to us.

“You look stunning,” I finally complimented her. “Do you like it?”

After a beat, her hands smoothed the sides of the ballgown. “It’s a lot lighter than I expected. It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

Cassidy only sought one pair of eyes. Her eyes widened with each second she had to wait. She needed him to love it as much as she did, but Jude didn't care whether it was pretty or not. It could have been encrusted in diamonds or made of dishcloths.

“Does it make you happy?” he asked her.

Cassidy turned to face her father. Taking in a deep breath, she looked back down at the dress. Her eyelids fell shut for a silent moment.

“Yes ... no ...”

“How are you feeling, then?” I wondered.

“Like . . . it's all starting to get real, like I'm going to marry Tucker. I mean, I used to talk about it all the time. I worried I was getting annoying about it, but it's really happening.”

“Yes,” Delilah agreed. “And it's about damn time, too.”

The room laughed. The heavy weight of realization drifted up and away, and the mood grew light again. Without a doubt, this had to be Cassidy's dress. Esther brought a floor-length veil to complete the picture and champagne to toast the occasion. Cassidy had never seemed so thrilled.

“It's my turn to sit on the couch!” she exclaimed, never mind she was still wearing her dress. “Go on, Sammy, get on the pedestal!”

I had forgotten that I'd changed clothes, even with the snug zipper digging into my back. I took fistfuls of the long navy skirt in my hand and stepped up to the plate. As everyone else smiled, the weight of the world fell back on me.

Jude's pale blue eyes washed over me like water. I drowned in the look, sinking deeper into the frustration of silence. My focus had to be dragged over to my friends.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “Thoughts?”

“No.” Delilah shook her head.

“Is that a no to the dress or no thoughts?” I pressed her.

“No to the dress,” Cassidy chimed before sipping her champagne. “Try on another! Put on a show for us, Sammy!”

“Yes, let me entertain you,” I joked, already hopping down. “Let me make you smile.”

Smirking, Delilah knew the song, adding, “And we’ll have a real good time.”

It was a good thing they were there too because I got red-faced and huffy after four dresses. Down to the last dress, I worried we wouldn’t have as much success, but the soft blue chiffon showed promise. The off-shoulder sleeves and wrapped waistline were a little Greco-Roman and very much forgiving toward any figure. The cut made it easy to move as I hurried barefoot back to the main room where everyone sat with rapt attention. When I stepped up, I learned how high the thigh-slit went.

“That’s the one,” Cassidy decided without a second thought. “That has to be it.”

“I like it,” Delilah noted.

And yet, I stood there in Cassidy’s shoes—right where she had been twenty minutes earlier. My curious mind wondered what he thought of the dress, and even worse, how it might feel for Jude to tear me out of it. Rising up on the balls of my feet, I let my toes curl in sheer anticipation.

“That’s settled, then,” he declared, turning toward Esther. “We’ll get this wedding dress and two of those for Delilah and Sam.”

Cassidy sat up in her seat. Her free hand flew to her father.

“You don’t have to do that,” she insisted. “When I—”

Jude stopped her there.

“This is what I want to do,” he stated matter-of-factly.

In the three-way mirror, I studied him for when his attention flitted my way once more.

“It’s too generous,” I remarked toward his reflection. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m not sure I can accept it.”

“Every girl deserves to be treated to nice things, Sam.”

My chin rose higher. “I don’t know if I like being called a girl.”

“Every young woman, then,” he amended. “Is that better?”

“A little.”

Glancing back over my shoulder, I caught the sly smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. The silvery glint of his eyes flashed again. It was like he couldn’t help himself. Jude just had to be a bit of a cad, or perhaps it was me bringing out the wicked side of him.

Maybe we brought it out in each other, a fiery spark I couldn’t quite name. I felt ready to run, ready to self-destruct and blow everything apart. Hell could take it all in my best handbasket. Having to stand there and pretend was its own hellscape, anyway.

My hot palms smoothed over the skirt’s sash. I forced myself to focus on the fabric. I needed to let my mind slip away for a moment until I found my own footing.

Fire and water. Mania and ease.

Jude and I were a mess of contradictions. Nothing about it made sense. How could one man unravel me with his mere presence? Where was my self-control?

“Thank you, Dad,” Cassidy offered with a hug around his neck, “for the dresses and for being here.”

A knife plunged into my back.

My best friend.

His daughter.

Those damning little labels never went away, did they?

They had me by the throat as I changed back into my usual jeans and blouse. I took comfort in what I already knew, savoring the feel of soft cotton as I stepped back into the room. Only Jude stood there.

“Cassidy and Delilah went to get measured,” he explained as if my expression asked. “She’ll be coming back for you.”

My arms folded over my chest. Even in my favorite lace top, I felt naked and undone. My fingers reached to ensure the sleeves were still there. With the coast clear, my voice dipped into a whisper.

“You didn’t need to do that,” I insisted, watching as Jude slid his wallet into his pocket.

“Not to be that guy, but the cost of the dress isn’t much to me.”

“But it’s not just your being nice to Cassidy’s friends.”

“And why not?”

“Because, well, we ...”

I didn’t have the guts to say it aloud in such a public place. I huffed out a sigh.

“It’s not the same,” I continued to insist. “You need to let me pay you back.”

Jude’s forehead furrowed. “Because I gave you a gift?”

“Yes.”

“Here’s a counteroffer. Go out to dinner with me, not because I bought you one silly little dress but because you’d enjoy it.”

My shoulders relaxed. My arms slipped from their own grip. His hold over me never ceased, but it never felt cruel or controlling.

“Can’t it be both?” I wondered in a whisper.

Jude flashed his winning smile, happy to be a proven champion.

“If that’ll make you happy.”

Just as I began to ask when, footsteps came toward us. The briefest of touches brushed against the back of my hand, but I only glimpsed Jude’s fingers pushing themselves into his

pockets. I didn't dare ask if it was real, not that it mattered. One shared look, and we both knew.

Our date was set. Not soon enough, every desire stirring inside us would be laid bare, and nothing would be able to hold them back.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JUDE

I almost didn't believe the directions Sam gave me. With my car rolling down the narrow side street, I passed the heavy iron gate like she said. I found a more modern gate hidden under an oak tree blocking a gravel drive. The path curved into the hidden distance, but reaching for the keypad, I pressed in the five-digit code and . . .

Oh, my God, I thought. It worked.

Articles came up when I searched the address online. The centuries-old estate had once been owned by Abraham Lincoln's granddaughter. Its gardens were award-winning with even more celebrity than the massive white mansion peaking through the trees, but it wasn't my destination.

Driving along the privacy hedge, I found myself at a quaint place made of whitewashed brick. The old carriage doors had been replaced by black steel windows and one wide front door. A brick patio had been laid to make the house more inviting. Passing by patio furniture and potted plants, I walked up onto the stoop, evened my breath, and knocked at the door.

“You made it,” Sam greeted me barefoot and with a warm smile. “Sorry, I’m not ready, but it’ll only be a minute. Why, um . . . why don’t you come in?”

Sam stepped back to let me take it all in. While the long walls showed the same brick, I saw where the newer walls had been plastered white. Gauzy curtains let the afternoon light filter over the vintage furniture and country-style kitchen. It looked romantic and, in a way, plucked from another world. It suited Sam well.

“Take all the time you need,” I assured her. “I brought you these.”

Old-fashioned as it was of me, I held out the peonies wrapped in brown paper. Their heady scent had perfumed my car the whole ride over. It made me wonder if they were too much or if Sam even liked flowers. Regardless of her hold on me, there was so much about her I didn’t know. Her endearing smile seemed to be a good sign.

“They’re beautiful.” She took them, admiring their white and pink petals. “Thank you, Jude.”

Breezing into the kitchen, Sam reached into a cabinet for a jade glass pitcher, filling it with water. The paper crinkled as she unwrapped the flowers. The knotted floorboards creaked as she set them on the kitchen table. As I studied her, Sam felt like a different woman from the one who showed up on my doorstep. Her sapphire dress billowed as she moved freely about her space. Nothing dimmed her painted-pink smile or the gold in her eyes.

“I wasn’t sure which flowers were your favorite,” I remarked.

“So you bought the most expensive ones?” Sam teased.

She sat in one of the kitchen chairs to slip on her shoes. Fastening the ankle straps, she laughed lightly under her breath, but I smiled along.

She disappeared down a short hall into what had to be a bathroom. Sam returned with her hair pushed back with a bejeweled headband. Her fingers toyed with an earring.

She continued, “I like any flowers that have a scent, actually. Well, it’s hard not to love sunflowers, but most flowers are bred these days for looks. Nobody cares about how they smell. It doesn’t seem natural.”

“No,” I realized. “Not really.”

Sam grabbed her purse from a hook by the front door. “I’d take a handful of lavender over a dozen scentless roses, but I won’t begrudge any gift.”

“That’s good to know.”

“All right, I’m ready.” A wide grin stretched over her face. “How do I look?”

“Beautiful.”

She always looked so damn beautiful.

From the passenger’s seat of my convertible to the front door of the restaurant, Sam caught each fracture of light and made it her own. She talked with her hands animatedly, bringing to life everything she said. I forgot where we were for a moment and who we were to each other. Opening the door for her, it was almost as if we’d left Charleston behind.

Were we back in New York, or had we moved on to someplace better?

“I’ve heard really good things about this place,” she commented. “I won’t lie. I’ve been stalking their social media pages all week.”

Taking in the room, I saw why. The French-style bistro looked like a bright piece of modern Paris. The white plates in waiters’ hands were a feast for the eyes as much as the other diners seemed to enjoy them bite after bite. It had to be why the place buzzed like a Saturday on a Thursday night.

“How many?” the hostess asked upon arrival.

“Just two,” I told her, but if I’d known the place was so popular I would have made a reservation. “How long will it be?”

“Twenty to thirty minutes,” she replied. “Although, you’re free to eat at the bar. There’s no wait, and you can catch the tail end of our happy hour.”

“That’s fine by me,” Sam remarked before looking my way. “Jude?”

I smiled at the hostess. “Please, lead the way.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I ate at a bar. We tried the five-dollar cocktails and split the appetizer on special. With her legs crossed under the counter, Sam let her foot brush against mine as we chatted over her work day. I’d never met anyone who worked like she did.

I hated to sound old or out-of-touch, but Sam was living proof of a new age.

“*Bustier* is always putting up articles and content,” she explained to me. “They need people managing their website pretty much twenty-four-seven, so they hire people like me to do it in shifts. I have to use this custom-made laptop to keep my computer from crashing mid-shift, but as long as it works, I’m free to work from wherever I like. It was a change from what I planned to do after college. I ended up donating nearly all of my professional clothes, but I don’t miss them.”

“I know what you mean,” I agreed. “After my friends and I decided to start our own record label with Elysian Studios, the worst part was being stuffed into suits, and that was before you could beg for investors on the internet.”

“You look better in jeans, though.”

“I didn’t realize you were taking notes on how I looked.”

Even as my eyebrows went up, she admitted nothing. The empty appetizer plate got taken away by our waitress. Our entrées arrived.

“How did you get into the music business, anyway?” Sam wondered. “I mean, I remember your telling me about fixing up the house in Topanga Canyon, but I didn’t realize that was the studio.”

“Is it sad to say I got into the business because I can’t play an instrument to save my life?”

Sam grinned. “No. It’s precious, actually.”

Precious? No woman had ever called me precious before, not even my mother.

I took a sip of my cider drink and explained, “I loved music. When I was a kid, I used to borrow my mother’s personal cassette player and listen to any tape I could get my hands on. I’d lie on my bedroom floor and imagine the songs were all for me, and when I went off to college, I tried to find a way to be a part of that.”

“That’s where you met Bethany, right?”

I waited for the moment to get awkward. I figured the question would be more tense, but taking a bite of her soft shell crab, Sam didn’t look bothered by my past. Perhaps she simply hid it well.

“Yes,” I answered. “I was at UCLA when Bethany arrived for law school. I don’t know what she saw in me, exactly. She was a little older and probably smarter, but . . . it happened.”

Sam’s voice dropped into a whisper. “It’s nice to know you don’t make a habit of dating younger women. I’d hate for you to be a stereotype.”

“I’ve always been an impartial dater,” I agreed, hoping to make light of it. “Still, I . . .”

My words stopped short. No matter what I tried to do, the truth made my smile falter. I couldn’t hide my emotions quite like Sam.

“What?” she asked.

“This is a first for me,” I confessed and set down my fork. “I don’t usually go out with anyone who is . . .”

“Eighteen years younger?” Sam guessed.

I hadn’t done the math. In all honesty, I’d tried to put it out of my head.

I nodded. “When we met, I didn’t realize how old you were. I didn’t think much about it.”

“I didn’t think much about your age, either.” Sam took a bite of her dinner. “I mean, I noticed your hair, but you never seemed old. You look fairly young in the face.”

“It’s the benefit of a being a dermatologist’s kid,” I joked. “Lots of sunscreen and moisturizer.”

“Besides the SPF, you seemed to take care of yourself. You were kind and easy to talk with. You still are, but years were never the issue between us.”

As candid as she was, Sam let her expression say the one thing she couldn’t. I found myself nodding again. It didn’t matter how happy we were or how much I enjoyed her company. That inconvenient truth always hung between us.

Those few days in New York felt like a lifetime ago.

“Still, we have to eat, don’t we?” she offered more optimistically. “I always like a reason to go out.”

“Me too.”

We drifted the conversation back to lighter things, like the best thing we’d ever eaten and places we’d always wanted to try. I laughed again when Sam told a story about crying in a Korean market stall. Making fun of it now, she recalled how her eyes had watered from the smell of the noodle shop alone.

“I never should have gone in!” she exclaimed. “I should have known my mouth couldn’t take it, but my friends kept saying it was so good. I had to try it for myself. Hell, that kimchi still haunts my dreams sometimes. I swear it nearly killed me.”

By the time we finished sharing our chocolate mousse, I regretted having to go. I didn’t want to drive Sam home and return to that big, empty house by the river. I stared at the light glowing down on her front door. It called to her against my wishes.

“You know,” she mused, her head pressing back against the seat, “if you’re not ready to go, you could come in for

coffee.”

“Would you like that?”

Sam’s golden-brown eyes shimmered with more words left unsaid. We weren’t supposed to be doing this. We had made a pact, but I hated that bargain from the beginning. I despised every line Sam tried to draw between us. Perhaps that was why I crossed them so readily. When she offered an inch, I readily claimed a mile.

Her attention flicked toward the door. “I think I would.”

“You have to be certain,” I urged her.

A heartbeat echoed between us. I held my breath and waited.

“I’ll be certain if you come inside.”

As her head turned my way again, we both knew what was happening. Sam didn’t have to spell it out for me. She would give me the coffee eventually, but like the sun, it wasn’t going to come until morning.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SAM

From the moment I woke up, I knew our night would end like this. I spent all afternoon scrubbing the carriage house and myself clean. I agonized over every leg hair and each speck of dust. If this was our last night together, if this was meant to be our swan song, it needed to be perfect.

The lock latched shut, and my back was pressed against the door. All through dinner, Jude had held back. He remained gallant and good, but in the shadows, he let go and gave in to every desire. With my fingers running through his smooth silver hair, Jude shoved up my skirt and gripped my hips. They rolled on instinct, moving toward his growing bulge, and I moaned into the feeling.

Jude muffled the sound with his kiss. His mouth consumed mine. He became a man possessed and pleading for more, but I had to know one last thing. I needed to hear his answer.

Pulling only an inch from his lips, I asked him, “What would you say if I told you to leave me alone and forget it all?”

His gray eyes saddened with an endearing sort of bittersweetness—the kind I grew desperate to kiss away. Through ragged breaths, his answer sounded soft and earnest.

“It would hurt,” he said. “If that’s what you wanted, I’d walk away and never bother you again, but I wouldn’t forget you, Sam. I never could.”

One fragile heartbeat passed between us. Then, my hands wrapped themselves around his cheeks. Our lips crashed together again, colliding as the world tilted on its axis. Jude and I were falling, falling onto the old Chesterfield couch and into each other’s arms. As his arms curled around me, I felt his palms pressing flat against my back.

“You don’t have to hold onto me,” I swore between kisses. “I’m not going anywhere.”

A smile toyed at the corners of his mouth which moved away from mine. His lips wandered across my cheek. His warm breath tingled against my ear.

“Let me hold onto you anyway.”

All my cleaning didn’t matter. One by one, our pieces of clothing got tossed onto the floor. My headband was lost, hitting a window or a wall. I couldn’t be sure.

I was too entranced by the sensation of Jude over me. Devouring my breasts, he let his tongue swirl over one nipple before wandering to the other. I whimpered against the feeling. I bit my lower lip to fight back a louder cry, but my legs were already curling around his. My hips began to grind against the hardened length growing against my thigh.

It all had me burning. Writhing in the delirium, I felt my skin flush in a wave of heat. My cheeks must have been wine-stained red and my lips swollen pink. We moved so feverishly that I had no time to think about what we were doing.

I only knew the beating of my heart, the faint salt of sweat, and him.

“Is this all you wanted?” I taunted him, already knowing the answer.

“Hell no,” he swore in a near growl.

His hand had already slipped down between my legs. Hot and heavy, his shuddering breath blew against my ear. He outlined my entrance before slipping his finger inside. My spine arched against the feeling, but I didn't relent.

“Are you gonna fuck me, baby?” I went on, forcing out the words through my growing gasps. “Are you gonna make me feel good?”

“I'm going to give you whatever you want.”

A Cheshire cat grin stretched wide across my face. Drunk on the passion, I knew what I wanted more than anything. I felt it as clear as the moonless night sky outside the living room window and the pale light in Jude's eyes.

“Don't you dare let me forget,” I begged.

I wanted his name branded on my spirit and his mark blossoming on my neck. With his teeth grazing over my throat, Jude quickened the pace of his ministrations. His fingers curled against my walls until every piece of me trembled.

It was only the beginning. It was far from enough.

Fueling my fire, the pleasure emboldened me to take hold of Jude's shoulders and turn the tables on him. His head fell against the pillows, and a wicked smile lit up the night. I didn't look away, not even as I licked his finger clean.

“You can't be real,” he murmured, his voice thick and decadent like faded velvet. “You shouldn't be real.”

“Do I need to prove it?”

I lowered myself inch by inch until Jude was fully sheathed inside me. Sweat pearled at the nape of my neck, but my body ached for more. Kissing him again, I felt Jude's hands slip down and settle around my hips. My eyes shut tight. Instincts took control.

There was no him or me. No world existed beyond those walls. It was simply us. Where my hips began to falter, Jude's grip on my backside encouraged me forward. When I lost the strength to kiss him, Jude kept ahold of me anyway.

His lips moved from the corner of my mouth toward the hollow of my throat. Lost in the rhythm, we rocked against each other, grinding and writhing in sheer ecstasy. I felt the climax coming. My fingers and toes curled against the very edge, yet I held on. I refused to give up the moment until it was all but impossible.

Then, it crashed over me in a torrential wave. My entire body collapsed, and my skin cooled in the fine mist of sweat. Still, Jude clung to me.

He played with the ends of my hair. Our panting breaths filled the silence. As the air kicked on in the house, I shivered, but Jude only pulled me tighter against him.

“Should we go upstairs?” he mumbled.

I nodded slowly. “We just need to clean up first.”

I didn’t have much strength beyond brushing my teeth and splashing cool water over my face which was redder than a scarlet letter, but I had no capacity for shame or regret. The tingling delight lingered long after I crawled under the bedsheets with Jude. Though he made the bedroom feel smaller, neither of us minded the intimacy.

It was all so new to me. Falling asleep, I memorized the scents of rosemary and mint still on his skin. I watched his thick eyelashes flutter through some dream until my own slumbering fantasies claimed me. Vague images danced across my mind, but by morning, I forgot them all.

Watching Jude’s eyes open was like seeing the sunrise. His soft gray irises held shades of baby blue. It was the color of morning light before the sun crept up from its horizon. When Jude kissed me, though, I discovered every shade of burning orange and fiery red. The light flashed against my closed eyes, and I came alive.

“Morning,” I greeted him.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he replied with an endearing rasp. “I believe you promised me coffee?”

“I can make that happen.”

Before long, black coffee filled its little pot. Steam hissed from the top while the stove's flames burned an unmistakable blue. Going through my usual motions, I sautéed spinach in the pan, offering myself the illusion of health as I poured it over the scrambled eggs and cheese. Jude's presence lingered behind me.

He sat at the kitchen table sipping his coffee and studying the flowers he bought. I wasn't used to sharing this kitchen or this place with anyone. Hell, it had been years since I'd let a man in like this, but Jude had seen the controlled chaos of my bathroom and the books on my bedside table. Jude hadn't batted an eye at any of it.

Still, it unnerved me more than having sex ever did. No strings meant no heartbreak, yet there we were, at my kitchen table with our eggs and toast. We acted like everything was normal and nothing had changed.

Has anything changed, though?

Sunrise came like the dawn breaking in Jude's sleep-heavy eyes. No lightning struck my house. Nobody died. Surprise, surprise, we made it through another day.

"I like how you did the eggs," Jude complimented across the table.

"Thanks." I reached for the butter knife. "I want to say it's special, but I do it because I never learned how to make omelets. I never flip them right. They always break."

"So, you skip all the heartache?"

I nodded. "It makes mornings less stressful."

My body began to relax. Minute by minute, I got used to having someone there with me. It was what I'd once wished for. I lost count of how many times I ate alone imagining what it might be like to have someone else there.

This breakfast was what I wanted, and Jude proved to be such a good man . . . one even better than I'd dared to dream about.

"Do you have any plans for today?" he asked.

“Just a work shift. Why? Are you looking for company?”

His expression faltered. Jude glanced down at his plate.

“Actually, it’s a teacher workday for Cassidy. I promised I’d take her lunch and come see her classroom.”

I felt another crack in our glass bubble. The demise of our relationship was already there, just refusing to be ignored. Our fate wrote itself all over the walls. As my stomach twisted, I had to put down my fork, but the coffee didn’t seem appealing either. Jude couldn’t help but notice.

“Sam, I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” he insisted. “I enjoy my time with you, but if it’s too much or too painful, I can’t be the reason you’re hurting.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that, not exactly.”

“Then talk to me, please.”

Jude reached across the tablecloth for my hand, but what was I supposed to tell him? Every time I thought I had it all figured out, I looked at Jude again.

I did a double-take, and everything fell apart. We made promises not to get attached or to mess things up for the people in our lives, but how were we actually doing that?

“I’m only worried about what’ll happen if we keep this up,” I admitted. “I like being with you. When I don’t think about what other people might think or feel, everything is so, so easy and good. It makes it that much harder to remember that you and I can hurt people by being together.”

“But is that a reason to be unhappy?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

Jude pulled my hand to his lips. His thumb ran over the knuckles he’d kissed before letting out a quiet exhale. Even if he didn’t like it, Jude never tried to refute my fears. He wouldn’t dismiss them.

“Whenever you decide, promise you’ll let me know,” he told me instead. “That’s all I ask.”

“I will. I promise.”

Happy as I was to have him there and as sad as it was to see him go, the worrying thoughts stayed long after Jude left. I didn't know what it meant to risk anything for a man.

The people I loved most always came first. I had my friends, my work, and me, but that didn't stop me from secretly wanting more out of life. It didn't keep me from wanting him, regardless of the dull ache in my chest.

In the end, though, would Jude believe our relationship was worth the struggle? Would he trust that *I* was worth it? I just couldn't be sure.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JUDE

Though classes were cancelled for the day, the upper school's boarding students lazed across the green lawns of Leigh Hall. They looked to be happy out of their uniforms and out in the sunshine. Their silvery laughter carried across the grass and over the trees.

It reminded me of when Cassidy was in their shoes. It hadn't been that long since she graduated from this place. Now, she worked as a teacher in the early school. She sported an ID badge and a purple T-shirt emblazoned with the school's logo with enthusiastic pride.

"You made it!" she chimed before throwing her arms around my neck. "And you brought food!"

I held out the brown paper bag. "I got sandwiches from a marketplace nearby."

"Perfect, but before we eat, I'm dying to show you around!"

Back when I first toured the school with Cassidy's mother, this building hadn't existed. Its interior atrium served as an activity space with classrooms circling the playground. From

the outside, the red brick building had been made to match the original architecture, but inside, every detail was contemporary, considered, and state of the art.

“It’s all sensory friendly and ADA certified,” Cassidy explained as we headed toward her room. “There is a playground outside, but on rainy days, it’s great to get the girls out of their desks and moving around. Have you ever tried to manage twenty bored five- and six-year-olds?”

I chuckled. “No, and I’m not about to start.”

While showing me into her classroom, I didn’t know how a kid could even get bored in this place. There were a library corner, toys, cubbies of craft supplies, and clusters of little desks. I recognized Cassidy’s handwriting on each and every name tag. She had put so much heart into every detail.

This was her pride and joy, and seeing the light in her expression reminded me of myself. Teaching didn’t compare to a few young upstarts starting their own music business. In many ways, Cassidy’s work was far more important than anything I ever did.

Gesturing to one of the tiny plastic chairs, I joked, “I don’t know if I can fit in one of these. Do you have one in an extra-large? If not, I guess I could try it . . .”

I slowly crouched down farther and farther. The chairs were even lower than I thought, but my daughter yanked me upright.

“I’m not letting you break my girls’ chairs!” she exclaimed with a laugh. “Come on, there’s a picnic area out back. Those benches will fit your fully grown butt.”

Cassidy took us out another side door. From there, I noticed the playground she’d mentioned and a building I remembered as her original school. It belonged entirely to the middle grades now, according to her.

Unpacking the two panini sandwiches, Cassidy mentioned that the high school had expanded as well. Leigh Hall had flourished and thrived in the years since I’d visited, but it wasn’t unrecognizable from the school I remembered.

My mind turned back to Cassidy's graduation day. In her white cap and gown, she had us take photographs under one of those centuries-old trees. The day was such a whirlwind. I barely stayed in Charleston twenty-four hours before Cassidy and I took off on the graduation trip of her choosing. I remembered the week in London far better, but had I seen Samantha that day? Had I seen her cross that same stage and not even registered who she was?

"Dad?"

"Oh, thank you, Cassie."

I blinked myself back to the present. Sitting across from me, Cassidy held out a bottle of green tea from the staff vending machine. I cracked off the cap and took a long drink. Neither it nor the spring breeze made me forget, but I accepted that Sam had burrowed herself under my skin. I accepted it, rolled up the sleeves of my chambray shirt, and moved on.

"How are wedding plans coming along?" I asked to think of anything else.

"Good. Great, even," she assured me. "I was scared at first, but enough people are pitching in that it's going smoother than expected. Tucker and I started thinking about where we might like to go on our honeymoon."

"What are you thinking? Another trip back to London?"

"It's not a bad idea." Cassidy smiled, thinking back to our vacation. "Mom and Joe just got back from a resort up in Rhode Island that they raved about. Paris would be the iconic go-to trip idea, but I think Tucker and I might do something a little more tropical."

"Atlantic or Pacific?"

She chewed and swallowed her bite of panini. "We're looking at places around the Caribbean. I've gotta admit, though, that I forgot Mom married Joe fifteen years ago. It doesn't feel like that long."

"Isn't Talia ten?"

“It’s hard to wrap my head around that either, but the hardest thing to believe is how, twenty-four years later, you still haven’t married anyone since Mom.”

Laughing at the thought, I shook my head. It wasn’t like I’d lived as a monk over all that time. I even dated one woman for five years, yet it never came close to being a marriage-worthy relationship. The only reason we lasted so long was likely because we both traveled for work.

“How did we get on the subject of my love life?” I had to know.

Cassidy shrugged without an ounce of guilt. “Blame all this wedding talk. Call me biased, but you deserve someone who appreciates you. You’ve got all this time now that you’re Creative Chair of Elysian.”

“Chief Creative Officer,” I amended.

“Sure, whatever.” Cassidy waved her hand. “Either way, South Carolina seems to suit you, and who knows, maybe there’s someone in Charleston who could make you happy.”

“Is this all a ploy to keep me around?”

She couldn’t keep up the innocent act. Bashfulness blushed her cheeks. Cassidy tried to hide her guilty grin behind more of the panini I’d bought her. Still, I saw it all.

“It’s not the worst thing in the world living in the same city as you. Just think, neither you or I had to fly somewhere to have this lunch.”

“That’s true.”

“Although, whether she’s in California or the Carolinas, I wish you’d find someone nice . . . someone special.”

I struggled to hold my tongue. Part of me wanted to come clean and confess. I had dinner with an amazing person. If she asked me, I’d spend the rest of my life in Charleston, but I couldn’t tell Cassidy. I hadn’t even told Sam yet.

She needed time and space to think. While a quick shower and a shave freshened me up, the look in Sam’s eyes that same

morning stayed with me. It had me thinking that burdening Cassidy with the truth would only be in vain.

Sam worried so much about hurting the ones around her. I broke plenty of promises the night before, but I held onto this one secret with scrupulous determination. Cassidy still could not know.

“Maybe I’ll meet someone like you say,” I half-lied. “It sounds nice, but between being here and getting settled into this new position at the company, I . . . I don’t know if I’m in a place to be in a more serious relationship. How about you ask me again in a year?”

Cassidy rolled her eyes and grinned. “We’ll see if I can hold out for that long.”

She wouldn’t be the only one. Though my daughter accepted my answer, I knew a day might come when I had no good way to talk myself out of such questions. I liked my dinner with Sam too much, and I enjoyed my mornings with her even more. If our night was any indication, I had no chance of a life with anyone else.

People teased me for being overly romantic, for being too devoted or beguiled by a woman, yet they had no idea. Even there at the picnic table, I felt myself falling deeper and deeper into a new kind of attraction. I didn’t want to echo Sam’s fears. I refused to be a cause for her concern.

Although, at the rate things were going, Sam wouldn’t be able to chase me away, no matter what she did or who it might hurt. I couldn’t change how I felt, even if I struggled to describe it.

To put it simply, I was about to become Sam’s worst problem.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SAM

Sunlight shone through my eyelids, turning my vision pink. My head craning back, I listened to the rustling leaves and the idle conversation of the two sisters. They found me there working in the rose garden. My computer and notebooks sat scattered over the iron table, but I made space for the tea tray and finger sandwiches.

“Do you remember the girls’ trip we took with June down to Florida?” Louise asked her older sister. “We were in Little Havana having dinner at that one place.”

Claudia laughed lightly. “And that one young man refused to leave her alone. He insisted that she dance with him. It didn’t matter that she was engaged to Samuel.”

“What did my grandpa say to that?” I asked, opening my eyes. “Did Grandma ever tell him when you all got home?”

Louise waved her hand. “Oh, your grandpa brushed it off. He knew June only had eyes for him.”

“I think he said something like, ‘as long as I get the last dance, darling’,” Claudia mused before sipping her tea. “He was always a gentleman with June.”

Tucking one leg under me, I liked to think of my grandmother when she was young and still looked like me. I could almost see her borrow her father's old Ford and drive her two friends down the country highways. That spirit, that sheer delight in living, echoed deep within me.

Claudia Holloway set down her silver-rimmed teacup and crossed her legs. In her ivory linen ensemble, she embodied Southern taste and old money, but she refused to be uncomfortable.

I expected her to look tired after the five-hour drive back from visiting her grandchildren. After one night's sleep, though, her ice-blue eyes were brighter than ever, and her mind seemed sharper than the blunt ends of her chin-length bob. She toyed with her sapphire ring, smiling serenely.

"You know, if June were still alive, she'd be right here with us," she remarked. "That's the bargain we all made. When our husbands passed on or we kicked them to the curb, we were all going to buy a big house and live together."

"It's a shame she isn't here," I agreed, more to myself than aloud.

Reaching over, Louise patted my thigh. "But havin' you around, sweetheart, it's like June's right here with us again."

"I hope we're not keeping you from your work, though," Claudia added. "You don't need to indulge us."

I waved my hands. "No, no, I'm not on the clock today. I was just working on some side projects, nothing major."

That was the beauty of my work. With four shifts a week, I had a day free to make a little extra pocket money or be as lazy as I liked. I never understood the pull of hustling, gunning for promotions, or any aspect of corporate life. Why struggle for more when I had everything I needed to be content?

There in the garden, it became hard to feel anything but untroubled and easy. The high sun kept my exposed shoulders warm, and the late-spring roses were emerging all around us. Every shade imaginable was ready to burst forth in these sisters' Eden. I hated to have it all spoiled.

The footsteps of another came our way.

“Sam?” he called through the trees, and sure enough, Thad emerged in one of his tan tailored suits. “I thought I heard your voice. The, um, housekeeper said I could find y’all out here.”

Shoving up her denim sleeves, Louise pursed her lips. Claudia said nothing, even though she smiled politely. A hundred remarks stayed hidden behind their composed faces.

“What an interesting surprise to have you visit, Thaddeus,” Claudia greeted him first. “How’s your mother? I don’t think I’ve seen her since I . . . *stepped down* from the women’s charity league.”

Claudia got bored with the women and quit.

“She’s good. I’ll let her know you asked about her,” he offered.

She picked up her tea again. “Oh, please do.”

“That law office of yours must be in a state with you bein’ gone in the middle of the day,” Louise commented. “How are they managing without you?”

Thad chuckled. “It was a busy morning, so I’m taking a long, late lunch, and if it’s not too much trouble, I thought Sam might be able to join me. It’s always better to have company.”

Even still, he wasn’t asking. He saw me dressed and making conversation, and his expression waited for my acceptance. He slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks. I tried to think of an excuse.

You were going to be friendly for Cassidy’s sake, I reminded myself. One lunch won’t hurt you.

I let out a quick sigh. “Well, why not? I could use a coffee break.”

“And I’m sure Thaddeus here is buying,” Louise insisted, “Like any young man should.”

“Of course,” he agreed, flashing a smile that tried to win the women over.

It didn’t.

Sharing a silent look, the two sisters excused themselves and disappeared back toward the main house, leaving Thad to follow me. I had to change out of my old flip-flops and grab my purse, but before I knew it, Thad's flashy car was gliding down the back gravel path and toward downtown.

He and his Tesla took us to a market and eatery with high white walls and steel pipes running along the ceiling. With the peak of the lunch rush waning, there were plenty of seats among the tables and booths pushed against squat dividing walls. We wove through the maze to get his salad and my coffee. At the last minute, Thad convinced me to get some smoked salmon on toast.

"You never do well with coffee on an empty stomach," he recalled by the register. "It used to always mess you up."

I gave an awkward smile to the cashier while Thad laughed it off. His angular features softened as he did so. In some ways, it was nice knowing he remembered something about me. I didn't know if he remembered my birthday, my favorite flowers, or even the color of my eyes, but . . . it was something.

"Do you remember the time we drove up to Lake Norman back in college?" he recalled as we stepped out onto the market patio. He picked a table next to the wrought iron fencing. "We were leaving so early that you forgot to eat breakfast, but you had some of the hot coffee from Cassidy's thermos. We ended up stopping at that truck stop in the middle of nowhere for a good half hour."

I tried to smile along. "It's nice to know you can laugh about it now."

"We had some good times, you know. Do you remember coming here?"

"Sure." I nodded. "We used to come on double dates here for the weekend brunch."

Tucker and Cassidy sat on one side of the table. Thad and I took up the other. Going back through the memories, I remembered being happy and imagining that I had fallen in

love. Everything appeared so vividly at nineteen. I couldn't see anything beyond the pretty scenes before me.

I didn't know about the messages Thad kept secret in his back pocket. Those girls probably thought they were in love too, each hoping Thaddeus Drayton could become the young man of their dreams. Those dreams dried up for me like a raindrop on burning black pavement.

"We've come a long way since then," he mused, pulling open his paper salad box. "We've both grown into different people."

"Have we?"

I took a bite of my toast while anticipation built within me. I knew where he was going. The other shoe didn't need to drop.

"For instance, today we finalized the contract that earned me my promotion," he continued. "I'm on track to be the youngest partner in the firm, and I've put a lot of that stupid nonsense behind me. You know, when you're trying to impress other guys, you do dumb stuff. It's easy to forget what you've got that's good."

"No, I wouldn't know."

Thad's smiled soured a little, but he persisted. Trying to win me over, he sat taller in his seat. He twisted the cap off his sparkling water and worked to make a show of himself.

He was a promising young professional with good looks and a pleasant smile. He ate healthy lunches and clearly worked out, and he could afford to give me all the same things. In return, I only needed to be his adoring audience.

Thad never wanted company or companionship from a woman. He only ever demanded an audience to all his imperfect glory, but playing such games exhausted me. No amount of caffeine would suffice.

He persisted, "Isn't it nice being like this again? Didn't you once want a life like this with, you know, me?"

“Maybe I did once, but that was a long time ago. Like you said, we’re different people.”

“Not that different. Nothing a few compromises couldn’t fix.”

I scrunched up my face in confusion. Shaking my head, I couldn’t fathom what Thad thought.

“Compromises?” I repeated skeptically. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean that you could stop all this tourist stuff and settle in Charleston. We could go on trips every once in a while, but it’s not safe for a single woman to be traveling. It’s not smart.”

“Not smart? I—”

“And you could move in with me. With this raise, I’ve just put a bid on a condo in a new luxury complex. You could have your own little office for your computer stuff and help me when you’re not working. We’d be a team.”

I laughed from the shock of it all. He oozed pretension from every pore on his body. Every word of this delusion demeaned how I lived. Why did he even want me? What was he trying to prove? Cackling from the madness of it all, I reached for his hand across the table.

“Thaddeus,” I said, keeping my smile from shifting into a sneer. “What you’re talking about, whatever you imagine a few dates might do, it’s not happening. I’m not interested in being with you or anyone right now. I like my life, and even if I didn’t, well, I wouldn’t consider giving us a second chance. The best you can ever hope from me is, at best, a casual acquaintance.”

The shoe dropped at last, and Thad’s veil of good manners went with it. His mouth fell into a frown. With his delicate ego wounded, he retreated, but determination lingered in his hardening gaze. Thad lost this battle. Still, he refused to surrender in his campaign to win me over.

“Is this about all that ancient history?” he demanded. “Can’t you get over it? All that happened forever ago.”

“And George Harrison’s passing ruined any chance of The Beatles getting back together.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

I took a swig of my coffee and let my face deadpan. “Regardless of what anyone wants, you can’t resurrect what’s dead.”

“Your mom said you talked about me.”

“*She* talked about you,” I corrected. “I listened.”

“Is there someone else?”

Swallowing, I shifted in my seat. We got lucky that the patio had cleared. I despised the idea of a peanut gallery watching Thad grill me. Even as I deflected each blow, I wanted this to be over.

“Not specifically,” I told him. “Not that it would even matter.”

“Wouldn’t it?”

“No. My relationships are my business, not yours.”

Thad contorted his face. Nodding, he understood, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed swallowing this truth. He didn’t like seeing me rising from my seat.

“I’m going to get a cab home,” I decided, pulling out my wallet. “I’m sorry, Thad, but you did bring this up.”

“You can at least finish our lunch.”

“You’re the only one having lunch. Here, this should cover the cost of my coffee and toast.”

Holding out a ten-dollar bill, I didn’t care whether it insulted him further. There could be no debts between us. Thad would not be owed anything by me.

“Like Louise said,” he remarked bitterly, “a man should always pay.”

I sighed and shoved the money back into my wallet. Adjusting the strap of my bag, I knew we had fought enough for one day. I already imagined how this would get back to my

mother and our mutual friends. Whatever the outcome, it wasn't going to be good.

“Enjoy the rest of your meal, then,” I told him in my most diplomatic way. “If you have something to ask about the wedding, email me, but otherwise . . . I think it's best that we keep our distance.”

I didn't look back as I headed down the street toward the nearby college campus. I refused to wait where Thad might watch me. His gaze bore into my retreating figure, but that didn't keep me from standing a little taller with pride.

After everything between us, through all the madness Thad craved to dig up from its shallow grave, I held onto my dignity. I wasn't going to be his quiet wife at the dinner party. I refused to be the little woman with the little office. Thad was right.

I had become someone else—someone stronger, more unapologetic, and cleverer than before. No matter what anyone wanted, the old me had died, and she was never coming back.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JUDE

“Thank you, Mr. Harlow,” the balding man told me, handing over my bag. “Please, come again.”

“Thank you for your help today.” I nodded politely. “Take care.”

Outside, the glaring afternoon sun demanded for me to put on my sunglasses. The heat felt so different from what I knew in California. Humid air clung to my skin, and outside my old T-shirts, my usual collared shirts didn’t feel designed to stand up to the coming summer.

Tucker had been kind enough to suggest the shop. Apparently, the century-old store was where Tucker bought all his good clothes. The place existed like a relic. There were well-dressed men waiting to assist you and a tailor in-store.

After a week of waiting, my new shirts had been refined to suit my shoulders and chest. I had to admit it was a better experience than any I’d had in New York or Los Angeles. It almost made me like suits and stiff-collared shirts.

Only almost.

Walking back down King Street, I had parked my convertible in a lot near the college. The reddish stone buildings and ancient trees trimmed in Spanish moss called to me. If I dropped off my bag, I could take a walk through campus, seeing the landscaped gardens and every corner steeped in local history. It wasn't like I had anything better to do.

I turned a corner. Some of the school's Greek housing could be seen in the distance, but my eyes went elsewhere. I could have picked those soft features out of the thickest crowd. I would have sensed her presence blindfolded.

Across the street, Sam sat in a tan slip skirt with her blonde hair pulled back. Loose pieces fell around her face as she studied the man across from her. Sunlight touched those exposed freckled shoulders. The moment shouldn't have been anything special, yet it held me there on the sidewalk. I didn't dare call out, not when I watched her throw back her head and laugh.

She reached for his hand. The sight of it stopped my heart. Telling him something unintelligible, Sam didn't realize she had an audience, and Thaddeus Drayton had no clue what a lucky little prick he was.

I knew she didn't like him. She'd told me about their history. It didn't change anything, though.

I had to look away.

Turning on my heels, I forgot all about my idea of taking a walk. The contentment of my afternoon errands vanished in a puff of smoke. That sight of her became all I could see and all I thought about. It rubbed salt in every wound I'd worked hard to ignore.

Sam had been so careful at our dinner. In public, she'd never touched me so casually. She didn't feel the freedom to laugh loudly or take up all the space she desired. I would have given it to her. Whatever she needed to feel reassured, I willingly offered up, yet she kept distance between us.

The man she didn't even like was allowed to hold her hand, but I could not.

Driving up to the waterfront home in my overpriced German car, I didn't feel allowed to have problems. Wars raged in other countries. People went hungry as they slept on the streets, but my pain became singular. I'd never considered myself as jealous or petty. There was a first time for everything, though.

I inhaled the scents of lemon polish and pine through the house. The cleaners were long gone, leaving me to storm upstairs alone. I left my shopping bag on the freshly made bed and changed into my workout clothes. In an old T-shirt from Tommy James and the Shondells, I wanted to believe my feet pounding against the road could somehow beat the bad feelings out of my system.

One mile passed and then another. I looped the neighborhood and started over. Five miles in, my run hadn't run down the feelings I wanted to chase away. We weren't supposed to be like this.

Sam and I had agreed to let our fleeting emotions go away when we did, but with sweat pearling against my spine, I couldn't ignore the unwanted jealousy or how the surprise of her had struck me dumb on the street.

Which feeling was worse? Which damned me more?

You're fixating, I scolded myself. *You don't need to obsess over this.*

Peeling off my sweaty clothes, I dropped them into the empty hamper and stepped through the shower door. The hot water washed over me. Steam rose up into the bathroom air, but it did nothing to stop the runaway words racing through my head. Even the sunlight cutting through the shuttered window reminded me of Samantha.

It might be easier if you were here, Sam, if you told me I'm acting crazy.

I shut my eyes and let water run down my face and neck. If Sam had been there, she would not have even been given the

chance to speak. Our only reassurances would have come from her inviting me closer and her lips locked with mine.

If only her lips might be enough.

Struggling to put my finger on it, begging my addled mind to find the words, I became overwhelmed by the unnamed emotions igniting within me. They took hold of me while begging for my hands to take hold of her.

My fingers gripped the memory of her legs wrapping around me. Digging into the hips not there, my grasp clung to a phantom as my back pressed onto the beige stone tile. No amount of soap cleansed me. The tension refused to circle down the drain. Instead, it grew inside me. My body reacted, hardening against it. Every muscle begged for her, yet all I had was myself.

Desperate for release, I reached down and took my own length in hand. My head fell back against the shower wall. I stood there naked in more ways than one. With every stroke, I ran through the images of Sam seared into my mind. She was there in her hotel robe, across from me at a table, smiling into her pillow, and relaxed in my arms. Each damned me a little more.

My pace quickened. My heart pounded. With my eyes shutting tighter, I didn't want to believe it. I told myself to play along with her desires, yet I couldn't anymore. She had a stranglehold on me from miles away. She ravaged me even as a ghost.

My thumb rolled over my tip as I shuddered against the truth. I had fallen head over heels. Careening into these feelings, I didn't know if rock bottom existed. I sucked in a sharp breath. My hand moved with all the rapid fervor fueled by the one thing that never should have existed in the first place. Finding my release, my eyes shot open. My chest rose and fell with gasping breaths from the shock.

I love her.

I had to come clean, if only with myself. Cool nonchalance did not exist under the hot shower, yet it felt almost chilled

against my skin. The truth burned inside me hotter than anything I'd ever known. All those feelings I'd struggled to pin down made a home for themselves in the silent declaration. My selfish desires became impatient to be recognized and seen.

Even if Samantha never loved me, even if she kissed me goodbye the very next day, I knew deep within my bones that I'd never adored any woman quite like I adored her. It was such an awful thought. It ruined everything, but denying it only turned me into a blind fool.

My eyes were wide open now and able to see for miles. No matter what became of me, there was no undoing a thousand small moments which led to this inevitable epiphany. I loved Sam with all of myself, and regardless of what came next, there could be nobody else.

Nobody like her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SAM

“I think we should pin down a venue and go from there,” I remarked at the dining table. “I’ve gotten confirmations that the Saturday we’re looking at is available for these two venues.”

Turning my laptop around, I showed Delilah the two event spaces on King Street. Each renovated space had an airy loft feel and an outdoor terrace. Both showed promise, but Delilah knew the deciding factor.

“I know these people. They’re very kind, very professional, and they use my wine service,” she explained. “If we’ve got a choice, I’d pick them.”

“Catering company it is, then,” I agreed. “Well, that takes care of the food too.”

“And the wine!”

Rain tapped on the tall, narrow windows of Delilah’s apartment. It was an old Eighteenth-Century building like her wine shop below and most of the buildings in the neighborhood. The heart pine floors squeaked. The old pipes

let out the occasional groan, but Delilah knew how to make it pretty.

She put plants in all her windowsills and convinced her landlord to paint the kitchen cabinets a cheerful daffodil yellow. An oversized jute rug kept our feet from getting too cold. With music playing on the tiny television, it was easy for us to get comfortable, spread out, and plan Cassidy's shower.

If there had to be a proving ground for a bridal party, the shower was it, and all eyes were on us. We had been researching details for days before finally sitting down. Still, those opinionated guests couldn't help but stick their noses into our plans. A textbook of instructions and "helpful suggestions" overwhelmed us. Many of them came from Thad's mother herself, Miss Almighty Maribelle Drayton herself.

I pulled my hair up into a bun and let out a huff.

"Okay," I said, already typing up the confirmation email. "We've got a place. We said we wanted to do a brunch or lunch thing, right?"

"It'll be easier and cheaper," Delilah replied, pulling up the sleeves of her old hoodie. "I was thinking we could set up a mimosa bar and do some appetizer foods instead of a sit-down meal."

"We could also invite more people that way."

"Oh, geez," she grumbled while her dark eyes grew wide. "Maybe we should do a sit-down meal, then."

"Aren't these the same women who hire your wine bar service?"

"Yeah, which is why I see more than enough of them."

I laughed under my breath and shook my head. "Why don't you tell me what game ideas you found instead?"

The gift bingo was a regular go-to. I'd seen it at three different showers I'd attended in the past, but the mad lib wedding vows were new. Of course, Cassidy opening gifts would be our main event. Each woman in attendance lived to

outdo the other, and there was no perfect time than giving the best gift of them all.

Checking off box after box, Delilah and I were close to having every detail covered. It took a second glass wine for each of us, and for Delilah, a trip to the bathroom.

“This is what I get for having that five o’clock coffee,” she joked. “My bladder isn’t getting any younger.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

My overnight bag had already been stashed in Delilah’s home office. We could even call it a night once I finished putting together the email invitations, but I doubted I’d be able to sleep that much. The daybed in Delilah’s office was comfortable. I had plenty of reasons to crawl under the covers. My phone messages, or the lack thereof, kept me from getting a good night’s sleep.

Jude’s messages were becoming fewer and far between. The length got shorter. His words seemed aloof. After that morning, I worried that I’d put in the nail in our coffin by sharing my fear, or perhaps Jude had grown bored with the idea of me.

Wasn’t that what I expected? If he let me go, wouldn’t it make things easier for us all?

Unable to help myself, I sent him another message.

HOPE YOU’RE DOING WELL. Work still busy?

HE MENTIONED that work had been hectic the week before. Without an assistant, Jude did everything for himself. He had no gatekeeper or right hand.

CLOCKED in forty hours this week, he quickly replied. I hope your week was better than mine.

AT LEAST HIS fast answer seemed like a good sign.

Coming back in the room, Delilah asked, “What’s with the look? Is Thad bothering you again?”

“No, it’s not that,” I said, but Delilah went off on her rant, anyway.

She popped over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of coconut water. Pouring it into a fresh glass, she grumbled to herself before venting. The cool drink did nothing to cool Delilah down.

“You know, I ran into his mom last week. She came into the shop, but she was going on and on about the *right sort of clients* and how her idiot son had some new clients coming over to talk business connections. It must’ve been some kind of side hustle because it didn’t sound like anything to do with the firm.”

“The Draytons do know how to get into other people’s business.”

“Tell me about it. Still, it was Thad this and Thad that! God, he’s worse than an STD, always becoming a problem,” she fussed. “Sometimes, I wish he’d just fall into a ditch.”

“And die?” I guessed.

“Well, maybe not *die*.”

Delilah’s face said otherwise. She tried to hide it as my phone dinged on the kitchen table. Though I snatched it up, her quick eyes caught the name.

“Paul McCartney?” she remarked. “You can’t really be texting one of the Beatles.”

“No, I’m not.” It was Jude.

MAYBE WHEN WORK SLOWS DOWN, we can meet for lunch or dinner again.

I’D LIKE THAT.

SLIPPING my phone into the side pocket of my leggings, I saw Delilah’s curiosity piqued. Her eyebrows went up. Her intense stare bugged me to no end.

“He’s nobody,” I insisted.

She pursed her lips. “Then I must be a complete dummy. Come on, Sam. Who is he?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Her eyes got wider. “Why? Is it someone I know? But who would you call Paul?”

When Jude and I started texting more, I knew his name couldn’t be found in my phone because of moments just like this. The famous song came to mind, and now, the name change didn’t do me a lick of good. I still found myself stuck.

Was it the wine that loosened my lips, or after a few weeks of this strange limbo, I felt desperate to unburden myself with these frustrations? The words came fumbling out of my mouth. They begged to be said and to be heard.

If anyone could keep my secret, it would be Delilah.

“Cassidy’s father, Jude Harlow,” I began. “We, well . . . we met in New York.”

Squinting, Delilah stared at me for a long minute as if I were a magic eye poster. She searched to see the illusion, and I knew the exact second she realized. Her whole face lit up in recognition and then sank into horror.

“Oh, my God,” she hissed. “I mean, *oh, my God*, Sam, you mean you met him as in . . .?”

“Yes, yes. Whatever you’re imagining, I’ll just say yes.”

She grabbed me from across the small round table, digging her nails into my arm. Her eyes became rounder than a full moon.

“You didn’t just drag me into this,” she fretted before gripping me harder. “How? Where?”

“We were supposed to be on the same flight out of JFK. I—I didn’t think about who he might be. We didn’t give backstories. We were both stuck, and he was good-looking and friendly and . . .”

“Interested?”

When Delilah released me, I groaned, running a hand down my face and then back over my loose hair. It, like all things in my life, felt like a tangled-up mess. I wasn’t sure if it would ever be neat again.

“Sure, let’s call it that,” I muttered like someone might hear. “I can’t tell Cass, especially not now, but every time I’m with her now, it’s painful. My mother keeps bringing up Thad every we time we talk. The only trouble is, this time, I can’t just leave.”

Delilah shook her head. “Nope, skipping town won’t help with this problem, and damn, it’s a hell of a doozy. I don’t know how you’re gonna get out of this one!”

“*Delilah.*”

“Sorry, sorry.” She held up her hands in surrender. “It’s nice to know you trust me, but Cassie can’t know.”

“No, she can’t.”

“And you say your parents still haven’t let up about Thaddeus?”

I shrugged. “Dad couldn’t care less about him, but Mom won’t let up.”

If my mother knew the truth, she might be singing a different tune, but when I went over for lunch the weekend before, Mom interrogated me for answers over why I hadn’t called Thad. Part of me wanted to tell her right there. I was five seconds from screaming into my plate of salmon that afternoon, but only Delilah knew the truth.

She had been the one who told me the worst truth of them all. Way back when, we swore to keep the secret between us, gambling that Thad would implode his friendships with the people we knew. Almost seven years had passed since then, and our bet hadn’t come through.

It wasn’t just the lies. It wasn’t just the girls he saw on the side or even the growing alcohol problem. In our last summer together, Delilah had been the one to find out he’d contracted an infection from one of his one-night stands.

She knew the girl from her summer job, but Thad had lied to me. He’d tried to corner me into having sex with him, like my not getting infected might be proof enough, and after he screamed and called me every name in the book when I fought back, Thad and I were done.

Delilah and I agreed never to tell Cassidy. We never wanted to put her in an awkward position with Tucker and his friends. As two hopeful teenagers, we'd always assumed our Thad problem might disappear. He never did, though. My problems only piled like a mountain over him, and they all threatened to bury me alive.

"I used Jude as a more impartial ear over the last several weeks," I confessed. "I thought we were friends, but I don't know, I guess the relationship's run its course. It's not like it makes sense for us to be friends or . . ."

"Or what?"

"Nothing." I finished the last of my red wine. "I'm just conflicted, that's all, and I'm sorry for dragging you into this madness. I know you've got a lot on your plate."

"Hey, don't be sorry. You know I'm always here for you, even if you're God knows where."

"Are you sure?"

Delilah stood from her seat and locked her arms around my neck. Her thicket of brown hair fell against my face. It tickled my nose, but I didn't mind. It felt too good to have someone know.

"I love you, Sam. No matter what you do, that won't change. I'll always be on your side."

"Thanks, Delilah."

Her kind words eased some of the tension in my chest, but it didn't change one nagging thought. Something was different with Jude. Whether it was him, me, or a combination of things, I felt it deep within my bones that our relationship had shifted, but was it for better or worse?

CHAPTER TWENTY

JUDE

I saw her there like light shining through stained glass. Coming home from the office, I found her out in the tropical garden built into the cliffside. The ocean stretched out and faded into the background, yet out of its pristine blue and the green of the scrub trees, Sam was more colorful and radiant than anything else.

She sat with a baby in her lap—a little girl this time. Sometimes, she held a boy or even two children, but the expression in her warm brown eyes remained the same. We could go around the world a hundred more times. I still wouldn't find anything more perfect.

A dog barked nearby, sounding off that I had come home. She grinned at the sight of me. The small girl turned her head, covered in soft sandy blonde curls she'd inherited from her mother. They felt soft to the touch.

"How was your day?" Sam asked me for a change.

I told her of my visit to the office, promising they wouldn't need me for another week. I didn't want a reason to leave our hideaway in the Malibu Hills. Sam had her own work to finish.

There were dinners to be made and eaten, and we talked of spending one afternoon down at the beach. As the child scrambled off the white chaise, she ambled toward the sound of the dog.

I couldn't tell where she went.

"It's a shame, though," Sam mused. *"It's time for me to go."*

Her smile faded. The colors began to bleed together. Reaching for all I was worth, my hand did not find hers. Samantha drifted away as realizations took over. The child and all that contentment vanished alongside her.

In that fragile scene, I saw everything I could possibly want from a life with Sam, but I was not the man in her life. Different versions of it came and went. The possibilities started out beautifully infinite, yet the outcome never changed.

The California hills became a desolate prison. My heart ached from how much love I had to give. Hurrying from room to room, I hunted for anyone to take it, but there was no child and no Sam. Not even that dog could be seen. They all left me, if they ever existed at all.

Shooting up in bed, I gasped for fresh air. My chest heaved with every inhale, and my hand clutched bare, shirtless skin. I stared into the cool darkness of the bedroom. After so many nights, it seemed strange that I had not grown used to it. The shifting nightmare was quickly becoming my closest companion.

The few weeks without seeing Sam had only made things worse. For once, I tried to follow her lead. I told myself that my love wouldn't be welcome, so I refused to see Sam until I got my madness in check. Keeping my distance had only backfired.

Flopping back into the pillows, the frayed ends of my sanity weren't the scariest part of these sleepless nights. Frazzled nerves and an uneven heartbeat became a small price to pay by comparison.

I began thinking between the fifth and fifteenth version of this dream of all the possibilities that might exist. I began to fear what I might be losing in the process of giving Sam time.

I had to call her. It was too late in the night to show up on her doorstep, and a soulless text offered no way of conveying sincerity through tone. Sam needed to know my full meaning, even if it scared my heart into running a mile a minute. Reaching for my phone on the bedside table, I only expected to leave a voicemail. A voice on the other side took me by surprise.

“Jude?” she mumbled in disbelief.

I heard the sleep in her voice. In my head, I saw how she rubbed her face and let out a long, slow breath. She didn’t complain.

“I woke you,” I realized, hearing the grogginess in my own voice. “I didn’t expect you to answer.”

“But I did, so . . . what can I do for you?”

My mouth opened but no words came out. Calling her on impulse, I’d never stopped to think my explanation through. I ran a hand through my rumpled gray hair and forced something to come out, anything that would make me seem like less of an ass.

“I saw you out with Thaddeus,” I confessed. “A few weeks back, I saw you two out. You laughed and reached for his hand. There wasn’t a reason for you to hold back from him, not like me, and after our dinner, you wanted to figure things out for yourself. I didn’t want to pressure you, but if I’m being honest, it freaked me out.”

“What about it?”

Sam held no bitterness in her question. She only wanted to understand.

“How it made me feel seeing you both,” I muttered, hunched over and staring at my oversized bed. “I wanted to get over it. I didn’t want you to think less of me, and if I didn’t address it, Thad wouldn’t matter to me—what he was to you and how he could be with you.”

“Were you jealous of him?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“And you didn’t want to pressure me by . . . telling me this?”

“In a way.”

A beat of silence followed. I listened to Sam’s soft breaths on the other end of the line. I held out for an answer, even though part of me prepared for Sam to hang up.

“I wish he didn’t matter,” she said softly, yawning in between. “Whether we like it or not, he’s a part of my world here and a part of my past.”

“I know.”

“But you should know, back when you saw me, I was, um, telling him off.”

Confused, I didn’t have the wherewithal to make sense of it.

“Wait, what?”

Sam yawned again. “Thad thought that because we had dinner once, we were getting back together, and I told him that was never going to happen. He didn’t like it at all. Apparently, he’s been telling people all about it, including my mother, but you wouldn’t know that.”

“Dammit, I’ve been an idiot.”

“Maybe.” Sam laughed lightly. “You’re allowed to make a mistake once.”

“Just once?”

“Let’s say once a year, you can have a get-out-of-jail-free card from me.”

“How about two a year?”

Sam laughed again, and the weight on my shoulders lightened. I only hated that I didn’t hear it in person. It was a shame my hands couldn’t reach out, but that was my mistake to remedy.

“If I can’t get another pass, maybe you can come over soon? I can make dinner, and we can talk more.”

“I’d like that.”

“When, then?”

“We’re having Cassidy’s bridal shower this Saturday. I have a hundred different last-minute things to do with Delilah, but I could come see you once it’s over.”

“Saturday night?”

“Saturday night,” she agreed. “I can even bring my pajamas, if you want.”

A smile spread over my face. “How can I say no to that?”

“But it’s only on one condition.”

“Tell me.”

“Stay on the phone until I fall asleep.”

As Sam grew silent, I spoke of everything and nothing at all. I told her about my afternoon swimming now that the river was warm enough. I talked about visiting a farm stand and the strawberries I bought. Something about it felt cathartic. Talking to Sam again, the words poured out of me like water until I heard her breathing become even and slow.

“Good night,” I whispered into the phone.

My lips weren’t able to press against her temple or cheek, not that I worried. My self-inflicted torment had disappeared, and the night grew peaceful again. Come Saturday, things would be changing for the better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SAM

The pearl-adorned hens clucked all around me. In the room of forty-odd women, half of them belonged to the infamous Women's League.

They all had known Cassidy since she was small. On the surface, they were supposed to be women supporting women and local charities, but it never seemed like anything more than a bunch of snobbish gossips.

Cassidy agreed for the women to be there. With her mother paying for part of the wedding, including her friends in the wedding festivities seemed appropriate, even if it was frustrating.

"I swear to God," Delilah grumbled in my ear. "If one more woman asks me if I'm seeing anyone, I'm going to throw myself out a window."

We spent all morning getting the room together. I had put on my red linen dress before ever making breakfast. While the others got their beauty sleep, Delilah drove us over in her Jeep before the vendors arrived.

She made her Jackie O shades and oversized coffee a relatable aesthetic. Her favored sunflower dress would match her better for the party.

We had to hit the ground running and leave no minute wasted. Thankfully, Delilah had found us a good deal on rental furniture for the room and rattan chairs for the rooftop terrace.

We bought orchids and tropical greenery wholesale to make our own bouquets. Pink and orange balloons floated around the overflowing gift table. After all the fuss, the shower was going strong, and Cassidy couldn't stop beaming. I only wished some of these sourpuss people would crack even a fraction of her smile.

Maribelle Drayton had to be the worst of them.

Whether she had a foul mood or one too many face injections, I didn't know. She had mimosa after mimosa sans orange juice, so though nobody said anything. She was chugging all our sparkling wine. We had an attendant working the bar, yet I got stuck there handing people tiny umbrellas and making polite conversation.

"Samantha, how nice it is to see you," Maribelle greeted me with her tight smile. "Your dress is nice. I feel like I've seen it somewhere before."

"On me, probably," I replied. "I wore it to the engagement party."

Her light laugh rang hollow. It never reached her appraising eyes as she swept back her shoulder-length blonde curls. Did she look an older, haughtier version of me?

Hell, is that why Thaddeus never leaves me alone?

I hid my horror and offered my best fake smile. My halo braid made me no angel, though. I got the slight urge to wring her scrawny neck as she continued.

"That must be it," she said. "With all these events, I'm used to having so many clothes that I can go a whole year without wearing them. Just the other day, my Thaddeus and I were out entertaining some associates of his. My husband

unfortunately couldn't come, and it's even a worse shame that my son has to take his dear mother!"

Slathering on the false sentiment, Maribelle didn't care how I rocked back on my heels or searched for an escape. She had me caught right there in the corner. My only option seemed to be breaking through the wall, and I grew tempted.

"It's hard dating these days, from what I hear." She refreshed her glass of wine. "You never know who the *right sort of people* might be."

I blinked twice in shock. I knew exactly what she meant. In this buzzing party, I never imagined that she'd publicize her sentiments among mixed company.

"The right sort of people?" I echoed, my voice thick with skepticism.

"Oh, you know!" She laughed again. "There are just some women who are, well, born of a better caliber than others."

I sucked in a sharp, sudden breath. "Yes, because girls are dying to be compared to a gun."

"That's not what I—"

"Maribelle, have you written your well-wishes to the happy couple?" I asked, gesturing to a far table and cutting her off. "I don't know if you'd call Cassidy the *right sort of woman*, but I'm sure she would love for you to write a note in her guestbook."

As quickly as I sent her away, another troublesome battle brewed. I couldn't catch a break.

"Sam," Sutton greeted me without any warmth.

"Sutton, I'm glad you made it."

Big, fat, bald-faced lie, I growled in my head.

Most people tried to forget that Sutton and Tucker were ever together, but even there, she persisted with her vendetta. She told stories about Tucker and pushed the boundaries of my good graces. Any glimpse of her made my blood boil. Putting on airs like all the older women, Sutton flipped her straight

brown hair and offered a lip-curling smile. It looked less pleased to be included and more like she smelled a fart.

“I’m surprised how well you and Delilah did putting this sweet little party together,” she remarked by the mimosa bar. “I didn’t expect party planning to be your strong suit.”

“A woman can have many talents.”

She sipped her drink and narrowed her muddy brown eyes. “You never like parties, though. After spring formal, I remember you didn’t want to come out with the rest of the group. You dragged Cassidy and Delilah back home. We were all so sad to see you go, but Tucker and I had a good time anyway.”

“Don’t lie, sweetheart.” Delilah stepped up behind her. “Everyone knew that you spent the rest of the night sick in Emily Hall’s bathroom. Tucker had to lay you down in the trunk of his Mom’s car.”

“Who asked you?” Sutton huffed.

Delilah took my wrist and shrugged. “Why the hell are you even talking about it?”

Not waiting for an answer, we left Sutton to gawk in her garish green dress. Her envious face verged on the same color, but we couldn’t stop to appreciate her fuming. It was time for Cassidy to start opening her presents. She settled herself on the peach loveseat looking like an angel in her ivory eyelet lace. Delilah and I had worked hard to keep it that way.

“Okay, ladies!” Delilah declared to the room. “While Cassidy opens the gifts you’ve all graciously brought, we’re going to play a little bridal shower bingo! You know how the game goes. We have bingo sheets made with gifts from our beautiful bride’s registry, and if you get five in a row up, down, across, or diagonally, you’ll earn one of the special door prizes!”

The women cooed with excitement. Handing them cards, I felt my face close to cracking from my plastered grin. My body grew jittery, and my mind raced a mile a minute. In the back of my head, a voice reminded me where I was going once

the party ended. I needed to make every minute of Cassidy's delight count.

"You're too good to me," she said as I handed her the first gift. "Thank you, Sammy."

I squeezed her shoulder. "I'm only doing my job."

One by one, I handed her gift after gift. There were silver bags, ivory boxes, and an overwhelming number of bows. Each woman sat taller when her gift was revealed while across the room, Bethany whispered with my mother in the corner.

I only needed one guess what they were talking about. When Mom's eyes met mine, she gave herself away in an instant. I almost heard the conversation playing out in my head.

"It's been so good having Sam home," Bethany Goldwyn might have said.

My mother agreed, *"I know. She's such a good girl with such potential. I just wish she'd settle down and take life more seriously. She can't live out of a suitcase forever."*

It was all in my head. Paranoia couldn't get the better of me. Prying my eyes away from the pair, I shook off the annoyance and focused on making Cassidy's day flawless.

Jude is making dinner, I reminded myself. *Before you know it, you'll be barefoot, bare faced, and free to slouch.*

I could hardly wait. I had an overnight tote bag packed and hidden in the corner, but the more I thought about it, the more the nagging guilt festered inside me. I needed to escape it. Wasn't I allowed to be happy? If I kept it quiet, couldn't Jude and I have our secret moments together?

I grabbed another heart-covered bag and tried not to think about it.

My insanity needed to wait. With the last of the presents opened and all the prizes passed out, I almost didn't believe that the four-hour event was over. The guests took doggy bags of the mini-quiches and lemon tarts while saying goodbye to each other. None of them offered to help clean up.

“I don’t know if I’m going to fit this all in my car!” Cassidy realized.

Delilah patted her back. “Don’t worry. My old Wrangler can fit more than you think.”

It took at least ten trips in the elevator to get it all down, but we made it. Cassidy hugged us both goodbye in the parking lot.

“With my mom’s cousins in town for the shower, we agreed to meet them all for dinner,” she explained. “I’ve got to go if I want to make it to the restaurant, but seriously, thank you both for everything you did. You two are the best bridal party a girl could have.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Delilah teased. “I’m expecting a five-star review, or six, if it’s possible.”

Laughing, Cassidy took off in her Volkswagen. Her hatchback faded into the distance of the golden afternoon, and for the first time, I felt the ache in my feet and lower back. My shoulders slumped into my groaning sigh.

“Are we done yet?” I asked Delilah as we trudged back upstairs. “Is the wedding over?”

She snorted. “I wish. Sorry, Sammy, the wedding’s only just starting.”

“How are we gonna survive it?”

“Together, hopefully.”

It didn’t hurt to have an escape, though. The thought of seeing Jude felt like a mini-vacation. Torn as I was, I longed to be a good friend to Cassidy, but my heart melted like wax in the afternoon heat. Even the memory of his phone call had me helpless.

His tired voice held all the sweetness of tender affection. It felt innocent and charming. I thought ladies were supposed to offer their knights tokens of affection, but stirred from my sleep, some part of me dreamed that Jude had flipped the script and changed the age-old story.

It had me ready to run to him and away from all the stress of the day. Heading out to my rideshare, I couldn't climb in fast enough. The traffic had me antsy. The rest of the world made me weary.

After weeks of wondering and waiting, I only longed to collapse into Jude's arms. I was ready to breathe again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JUDE

The house smelled of vodka sauce simmering in the pan. Scents of garlic and spice filled the kitchen, mingling with the sound of an alternative music station my computer created. I didn't know the song playing, but I liked it.

As the doorbell rang, the melody became lost to me. All my senses were lost to the woman standing outside on my front porch. I flung open the door. Smiling at me, she looked almost the same as the first time she came to the house. I remembered her done-up hair with the same baby hairs falling behind her ears. The red dress was unforgettable, but one distinct and unmistakable thing had changed.

My lips met hers the second she crossed through the threshold. With my hand flying to her waist, I realized how much I missed this . . . and how much I missed her. All of our wasted time suddenly seemed so pointless.

"Was that too much?" I asked, breaking away against my selfish wishes.

Sam smiled then. Her eyes flitted over my face as we stood inches apart.

“No, it was nice,” she assured me. “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too.” I forced myself to breathe again. “Do you want to come into the kitchen?”

“Yeah, I thought I might.”

Using my hand as a propping post, Sam tugged off her metallic heels before following me through the house. She left her shoes and large tote bag by the stairs, waiting to take it up later. First, she needed a glass of her stolen sparkling wine and to park herself on my kitchen island.

“It wasn’t until the party was over that I realized I hadn’t been drinking anything,” she explained while I uncorked the bottle. “When I saw the spare, I figured I’d helped pay for it.”

“So, you can’t call it stealing, can you?”

I pulled out two glasses and handed her one. The way Sam watched me made it that much harder to pour.

“No,” she agreed. “I guess I can’t.”

“Was it good, though? Did the party go well?”

“Oh, sure, Cassie had a great time. Her friends from work were nice, and she enjoyed the gifts and the games. It’s just that seeing some of those people makes things more stressful being here.”

Something inside me twitched in reaction. It didn’t like hearing about her pain, even if she continued to smile.

“Like who?” I wondered.

“Oh, those snobby charity women . . .” Her voice trailed off as she took a sip of her wine and I turned the heat off under the pasta. “Have you ever heard of fawning?”

“Like the deer?”

Sam laughed. “No, it’s a therapy thing. Actually, it’s something I made a therapist explain to me over one of our video chats. It’s a coping mechanism that’s kind of like people-pleasing on steroids. I used to do it. When I’m around those people, I have to fight the urge to do it again, and it’s . . .”

“Exhausting?”

“To put it kindly.”

“We can skip dinner, if you want,” I suggested as a half-joke. “I’m fine with an early night.”

Shaking her head, Sam couldn’t be fooled. She heard what I implied and saw it written all over my smile. If sleep was what she needed, then following me up to bed was Sam’s worst possible option.

“Oh, no,” she swore and hopped down off the counter. “I’ve only eaten a banana and, like, two mini-quiches. I need a real meal.”

“And I can help with that.”

Sam grabbed the salad from the fridge, giving me time to fix two bowls of pasta and follow her out onto the screened porch. As she appraised the scene, a gentle wind blew off the river. Her expression softened toward flickering tea lights and lilacs on the table. Pride demanded that I make an effort, yet seeing her in the early evening sun, my nerves had me wondering if I tried too much.

“You’ve really outdone yourself,” she complimented me.

“Call it making up for lost time.” I set down the plate in front of her and rolled up the sleeves of my white shirt. “It’s been some weeks since we’ve seen each other.”

“Six ... but who’s counting?”

Me, but I didn’t want to own up to it.

I’d shared so much of myself with Sam. Still, I wondered whether I was giving her too much. We walked such a fine line that I worried we might collapse with one wrong move. Each conversation became a tightrope act over a minefield.

“I feel like I should apologize for that,” I remarked. “I shouldn’t have let that boy live rent-free in my head.”

“He’s got a habit of doing that, but it’s not like I called you. I didn’t reach out or ask if something was wrong. If I had known—”

I held up a hand. “No, don’t be sorry, Sam.”

“Then, you can’t be sorry either.”

“But ...”

She ate a forkful of her gnocchi, studying me as she chewed. The gold in her gaze flickered in the golden hour. It warmed me more than the late spring’s heat.

“But what?” she asked softly.

There was danger in that expression of hers. Through all my pining and hopeless romanticizing, I felt why Sam held back in worry. I had never been a fan of the California gold rush. It made fools of hopeful people, and looking into Sam’s eyes, I saw how easily she could make a fool of me.

Too many people craved to be admired like that, and one of them persisted with his pawing at her. He didn’t want to give up. He refused to back down and bow out, but when the time came, would Sam let me be her champion? Would these feelings she’d created come to be nothing more than fool’s gold or a cheap treasure?

I refused to let that happen.

“I don’t want to feel like I’m having to fight against someone else,” I confessed. “It takes enough out of me just keeping up this pretense.”

Her lovely face softened. The teasing dwindled down into a kinder, more tender warmth. Reaching across the table, she let her fingers brush against the tips of mine.

“He’s not what I need,” she promised with soft assurance. “Even without our history, a life here would never be enough. I won’t be caged in by other people’s expectations.”

“But can I be enough?”

The words slipped out before I gave them a second thought. Sam didn’t let me regret them.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. There’s no competition.”

Nodding in understanding, I let that sleeping dog lie. We had a meal to eat and better things to talk about. When our

plates were empty, it was far better to leave those nagging thoughts behind and walk out to the end of the dock. We took the chocolate truffles I'd picked up from the market, eating them as the sun set over the horizon.

The lengthening days gave me more time with Sam. I could tell her about work and helping the imprint grow. The long hours kept me from her. They gave me an excuse to hide away in the house, but that night, I had a chance to share it.

"We're opening up this new label with an artist from Nashville. They're opening a larger office there."

"Will you be going to help . . . like in New York?"

I shook my head. "Nah, they don't need me, but they sent me the single. Would you like to hear it?"

Sam grinned. "Of course."

Tucking back the pieces of her hair, I gave her the earbuds always shoved into the bottom of my pocket. She closed her eyes and waited for the first chords to play. Her face lit up, glowing like the stars overhead.

"I know her!" she exclaimed while keeping her eyes shut. "Oh, this is so perfect. I'm already in love."

The world grew quiet enough that I heard traces of the gentle guitar drift over the water's wind. Under me, the sun-bleached boards squeaked as I shifted. Watching Sam, seeing her smile with that effortless warmth, it was better than any song I'd ever heard. She handed me the earbuds once the music ended, but the beaming delight stayed on her face.

"You know, I found her through one of your mix CDs. She'd done a cover of a Bruce Springsteen song, I think."

Recognition flashed over her face. "I burned that off the internet. Wait, does this mean you'll give me some kind of finder's fee?"

"For illegally downloading music?" I laughed, shaking my head. "I don't think that's how it works."

Her eyes half-closed, Sam's lips curled into a smile. It toyed with me, pulling at my heartstrings as she leaned closer.

I smelled the wine and chocolate on her mouth. Taking in a ragged breath, I felt her warm hand press against my cheek. Every bone in my body weakened, and if we hadn't been sitting, I might have collapsed into the river.

“Then, what will you give me?”

I swallowed. “What do you want?”

If it was money, she could have it. I'd give her every penny I had and rob a damn bank. She only had to keep looking at me that way. If she stayed this close, I'd do everything in my power, but that's not what she desired.

“It's been a long day,” she murmured sweetly. “How about a shower?”

The day faded, and any sense of time went with it. Taking her bag with one hand and me with the other, Sam led upstairs into the shadows which kept us hidden and safe. She took off her jewelry, leaving it on the bedside table like they always went there. All those hidden yearnings came flooding back.

From the second I saw her again, this had been the moment I'd craved and never gotten. I watched her unpin her beach blonde halo and follow me to the bathroom door. Was she shimmering in the low light, or did I have stars in my eyes?

“Can you help me out of my dress?” she whispered.

Sam didn't require a reply. Turning, she let my fingers find the hidden zipper running down to the small of her back. My hands were on the verge of trembling in anticipation, yet Sam inclined her neck for me without hesitation. She welcomed my mouth against the crook of her neck and just behind her ear.

The last traces of her favored perfume lingered there. I breathed in a memory of gardenias in June. Her chest rose and fell. Her soft gasp caught, echoing the desires burning in me. Peeling back her clothes piece by piece, I felt like the naked one.

Some part of me had been holding out for her, knowing she waited to be seen and heard. The golden shimmer of her gaze was a candle in the window. She took no interest in

money or material things. Her heart would never be bought or persuaded to forget its vigil. Sam was too resilient, and she spent too much time clinging to the dream.

She only longed for the man in her life to come home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SAM

If wanting Jude was a sin, then the water could wash me clean. The heat would soothe away any sense of shame. His touch could become the balm for my aching heart. Leaving the bathroom light dimmed halfway, we met in the middle of the warm rain falling overhead. His chest pressed against mine as he took my breath away.

“*Sam,*” he mumbled like a prayer.

Every kiss grew deeper with passion and desperation. All the time apart compelled him to grip me harder, roving over my sides while my skin grew slick. We leaned against the stone wall for support. Otherwise, when his strong hands moved to cup my breasts, I would have collapsed onto the shower floor.

Jude made a second meal of my throat and a mess of me. I welcomed it all. Every sensation woke up something I didn’t need to understand. I savored it between every gasp growing in the exquisite agony. The farther his hands went, the more my body begged to be touched.

Things had never been like this with a man before. It was as if he knew, or perhaps the needy pieces of ourselves reflected each other. Maybe our secret desires were the oldest of friends.

“Why did I keep you waiting?” he muttered against my shoulder. “What was I waiting for?”

“The right time?” I guessed, using what little words I had.

His light eyes found mine as his right hand wandered down between my legs. The water wasn't the only thing making me wet. It took no effort for Jude to slip one finger into me and then another. He coaxed a whimper out of me while showing me his torment. With his thumb massaging that tiny nub, Jude was the one who shuddered.

“Don't let me be that fucking stupid again,” he urged me. “Don't let me go.”

“No, Jude,” I breathed. “I—I won't let you go.”

He had seen too much of me. He shared too many of my secrets. Our fates were tethered together, no matter what came for us. After all my agony, I needed things with Jude to be different. I wanted to open up. I longed to let my emotions run deeper and my heart know more.

When I cut and ran, how far did I go before I realized I was alone? I crossed the world discovering pieces of myself, and I clung to them all with a white-knuckled grip. I guarded myself with contrived fantasies and lovely dreams. It's how I used Jude in the beginning, but holding onto him, feeling him against me and within me, I didn't want to be that way anymore.

“Take me,” I whispered between pleading gasps. “Just take me.”

Jude didn't deny me. Gripping my thigh, he hoisted my leg higher. I felt his length graze against my skin, already hard and impatient. It needed little guidance. Our bodies knew what they desired. Throwing my arms over his shoulders, I moaned into his mouth, still hungering for more.

I couldn't tell if it was steam or an unreal haze surrounding us. My eyes fell shut. My pulse quickened as each nerve came alive. Jude pushed to the hilt before thrusting into me again with measured purpose. He refused to hurry the moment, leaving me as the one coming undone from the building euphoria.

My head grew lighter. Oxygen left the room, but Jude offered me air. He claimed his pleasure and gave me life in return. Rocking, my hips moved toward the sensation until I felt myself on the brink of a climax.

"Jude," I began to plead. "I . . . I lo—"

The words got lost in my breathless cry. My fingers curled into the back of his wet hair, and with one final thrust, Jude's release coursed through me. He held onto me as my final thought circled the drain. It took me a long time to find the strength to speak.

"Do you want to take an actual shower now?" I wondered.

With his forehead pressed down on my shoulder, Jude chuckled. The vibrations rippled through me, adding to my delirious delight.

"I think we both need it now," he joked before laughing again.

Jude was never quite satiated, though. I scrubbed myself clean with the soap I'd grown to associate with him. The shower filled with that herbal garden of rosemary, eucalyptus, and mint. The peppermint shampoo made my scalp clean and free of all gunk from the party. I could finally run my fingers through my hair without getting tangled up in the hairspray.

I shouldn't have bothered to pack a pair of pajamas. It wasn't like I needed them.

With the lights out and curtains drawn, I forgot where my skin ended and Jude's began. My body curled against his under the covers while the fan circled above us. Every inch of me felt comfortable and content.

"Do you have plans tomorrow?" I asked, hating to break the silence.

“I’ll have breakfast with you,” he muttered. “Then, I’ll drive you home.”

“What if you didn’t drive me home until Monday?”

I heard the smile in his low, intoxicating answer.

“I don’t know, beautiful. If you stick around too long, I might never take you back.”

I readily tested the theory. Wearing one of his many T-shirts and the cotton shorts I brought, I lazed around Jude’s house all Sunday long. We watched a movie in the living room and took our time cooking dinner. It was almost like New York, but there by the water, our secret winter gave way to a kinder spring. If I didn’t have a shift scheduled, I would have been tempted to stay right there beside him.

“Let me know when you get home,” I told Jude before kissing him goodbye.

In the bright morning light, I waved him off from the front steps of my carriage house in yet another one of his album T-shirts. The heathered gray fabric felt soft against my skin, worn from years of wear. It felt so nice, I doubted I’d give it back.

“I wondered when you might be coming back.”

Whipping around, I saw Louise standing there with her gardening gear and a knowing look in her ageless eyes. My cheeks flushed from the surprise.

“Louise, I—”

She laughed, defusing the tension in my chest. Still, my mind scrambled for an innocent explanation. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

“Oh, don’t you fret,” she insisted. “It’s not the first time I’ve seen that car ’round here, but all women are allowed our secrets, aren’t we? It’s not like my husband was the only man I ever loved, not that he needed to know. You’ve gotta enjoy your youth while you can.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

She came over to where I stood like a deer caught in headlights. My face must have amused her. She laughed again while pulling something out of her plastic tub of tools.

“A package got delivered to the wrong house. I thought I’d bring it over.”

I looked down at the cardboard box. From the address label, I knew it was the shoes for Cassidy’s wedding. The day would be arriving in the blink of an eye, and after that . . .

What would come after that?

“Thanks, Louise,” I managed to say. “I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, and honey, you know I meant it.”

“Meant what?”

“That you’re allowed a few secrets, especially from that momma of yours.”

Louise knew my mother better than anyone living. After all, she was Mom’s godmother too, watching her grow up from the time she was a baby. I didn’t need to explain myself. Nodding, I realized my secret couldn’t be in better hands.

I was safe.

My heart felt satisfied.

I had computer work to do.

Unlocking the door, I fell into the patterns of my usual workday. I fixed my coffee and set up shop at my living room desk, but I didn’t feel quite like the same person.

My fingers moved more quickly. My shoulders and heart stayed relaxed and light. A change drifted through the air, and after that weekend, nothing inside me would stay the same.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JUDE

Summer arrived with a fury, dumping water over the city and filling the sky with violet streaks of light. It became a relief when the storm broke. After a tedious workday and final rounds of interviews with possible assistants, I was due at dinner with Cassidy and Tucker.

I looked forward to seeing them both and getting out of the house, but I didn't love the thought of getting washed away before reaching the restaurant.

"Some storm, huh?" Tucker remarked, combing his fingers through floppy hair. "It pretty much laughed at my umbrella when I was leaving the hospital."

"Are things going well over there with your residency?" I asked him.

"Oh, it's good. I really like working in the family clinic with all the kids that come through. I thought I wanted to work in a hospital setting, but private practice doesn't sound too bad."

"Would you set up your own?"

He shrugged. “It’s more of a passing thought, but there are plenty of pediatric practices around town who look for doctors. Some surgeons will do hours in their practice and work a shift at the hospital too.”

Waiting for our table to be cleaned, Tucker helped pass the time with eager conversation of his growing career in medicine. He talked over the sound of other conversations and clinking glasses.

The laid-back seafood spot was built into the corner of an old warehouse. Its high ceilings made everything a little bit louder, including another rumble of thunder outside.

“I guess the storm’s not done with us yet,” Cassidy mused while looking out through the glass doors.

Rain washed over the roof, but we had our seats under a blown-up photograph of men harvesting oysters along the Low Country shores. Unlike them, we all could rest easy and enjoy the crab dip. Cassidy smeared some onto one of the grilled toast points. Done for the school year, she leaned into the indulgence with a self-satisfied smile.

“I don’t care if I can’t fit into my wedding dress,” she chimed between bites. “I might need another order of this.”

Tucker grinned beside her. “Well, I think the seamstress can let your dress out, but I doubt one thing of dip will be a problem.”

“Then, you don’t remember me and my cousin’s smoked salmon spread last Hanukkah.”

“I remember your not wanting to look at fish for three days after,” he teased back.

Cassidy beamed, unashamed and brimming with pride. “And yet here we are!”

“Speaking of the wedding,” I piped up, “How’s the planning going? Do you have everything together?”

“Yep!” Cassidy paused for the thunder overhead. “We’ve got my final fitting scheduled, and Tucker’s going with his

guys to get suits from that place downtown. Have you made an appointment with their tailor?"

"The suit's already in my closet," I replied.

She clapped twice. "Perfect! I was hoping you could come to my wedding dress fitting. Mom will be there, and Talia, I think. I don't know what she'll be doing with all her summer camps, but I'd like you to be there and see the final product."

"You don't want me to wait until the big day?" I asked before taking a drink of water.

Cassidy prodded her fiancé's arm. "No, he's the only one who has to suffer."

"If it'll make you happy, then sure."

"And don't forget the Friday night before we're having a blessing at the temple," she reminded me. "Well, it's not the Friday before but the Friday before that. It's usually the service right before the wedding, but with rehearsal plans, the rabbi agreed to do it a week early."

"Is the rabbi officiating?"

Tucker shook his head. "Since my family's Lutheran and Cassie's Jewish, we decided to do more of an interfaith thing, but we know it's important for her family to still see some of those traditions."

I nodded. "Yeah, sure."

Those were probably the same people who'd urged Bethany and me into getting married way back when. We could have stood our ground, but like Cassidy and Tucker, we were young. It made things easier to appease the old gatekeepers of family tradition. Thankfully, though, Cassidy wasn't making her decisions while heavily pregnant.

She had the freedom to make the most of her wedding. Relaxing into her seat, Cassidy talked more about her plans for the wedding ceremony and the last-minute details left to do. Her baby blue eyes were alive with possibility, but I almost found it impossible that this grown woman was my little girl.

The Taylor Swift T-shirt tracked. I'd fussed with that same silky ponytail a thousand times in her life, but the diamond boulder on her finger and the self-assurance were good to see but foreign. She didn't look to me for answers anymore, only welcomed me to watch her life from the wings.

Where has the time gone?

Trying not to get too maudlin, I kept the conversation light, talking more about summer plans and listening to the happy couple banter. I began to forget the storm looming in the background. It was all but out of my mind until I went to pay.

"I'm gonna run to the bathroom," Cassidy told us before heading toward the back.

We were only waiting for her in the foyer. Tucker and I were talking about the baseball season and what teams looked promising when the front door swung open. It let in a gust of damp wind and an unwelcome sight.

"Hey, Thad," Tucker greeted him. "I, um, I didn't expect to see you out."

It wasn't Thaddeus that made Tucker's congenial smile falter from confusion. It was the girl on his arm—a five-foot brunette with neon fingernails. The sight made no sense to me, or apparently, to Tucker.

If he had this girl, why was he hunting down Sam every chance he got? Why did he hound her and drive her to distraction? Was it to prove something? Did Thad reel women in to throw them back out once he lost interest? My jaw clenched at the notion.

I hated guys like him, even when I was young and impulsive myself. I fell in and out of infatuation maybe too easily. I never strung women along, though, and I sure as hell didn't go out with one girl while trying to keep another at home.

What is wrong with this bastard?

Behind them, another wave of rain washed over the glass. A flash of lightning lit up the parking lot. We were all stuck with each other for the time being.

“Oh, Tucker, this is Lexie,” Thad said as if he suddenly remembered what manners were. “Lexie, this is my friend, Tucker, and uh . . .”

I spared everyone the headache. “Jude Harlow. I’m his future father-in-law. My daughter just went to the bathroom.”

“Oh, okay,” Lexie replied in a silvery little voice which reminded me of a child’s.

I wanted to bite my tongue. Cassidy wasn’t going to be much longer, but my impulses hadn’t been lost with my youth.

“Was Samantha not free?” I dared to ask, staring Thad down as I said it.

His tanned features twitched. I had him cornered and about to break a sweat.

“Who’s Samantha?” Lexie asked, her upturned face scrunching up.

“Was I wrong?” I went on. “I thought you went out with Samantha, or maybe I’m getting confused.”

Tucker and the brunette turned to Thad for answers. Scratching the back of his head, he tried to laugh it off. His date might have bought it, but Tucker clearly didn’t.

“Samantha’s just a friend from back in the day,” he told his date. “She’s nobody.”

“Nobody?” Tucker echoed. “You told me you took her out. You said you might be getting back together.”

“Yeah, well, she turned me down,” Thad grumbled.

Frustration and embarrassment flushed over his face. He sucked in a sharp breath and narrowed his dark eyes at me, but I would never get rattled so easily.

On the other hand, Cassidy had no clue that she walked into a war zone.

“Oh, hey!” she chimed before assessing the scene.

“We’ve just been chatting with Thad and his date, Lexie,” I explained to Cassidy. “Lexie, this is Cassidy.”

“Well, this has been fun, but we’ve got a reservation,” Thad interjected. “We will, uh, see you guys around.”

“Yeah,” Tucker muttered. “Sure thing.”

Trying to do the math in his head, Tucker’s numbers didn’t add up. He smiled for Cassidy, but he watched his friend leave with that same quiet confusion. I hoped my glare would throw daggers in Thad’s back. He followed the hostess over to a nearby high top table still in my line of fire.

“There’s an ice cream place next door.” Cassidy tugged at my arm just like when she was small. “Why don’t we go wait out the rain over there?”

“All right, Cass.”

The battle ended faster than it began. Throwing aside my weapons, I shrugged into the navy rain jacket I brought along, but something other than rain hit my back. I felt Thad’s dark glare boring into me. I sensed his resentment and disdain even through the glass door.

No doubt about it, the feelings were mutual.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SAM

Rain tapped against the bedroom windows. Somewhere through chapter fifteen of my book, the sound lulled me into a dozing state. The lamp was still on when my eyes shot open. My phone rang on the bedside table, and I imagined only one person could be calling. I tugged at the collar of his faded gray T-shirt and picked up the phone.

“You can’t make a habit of calling me like this,” I said, ready to hear his voice and grin, but I wasn’t ready for the actual reply.

“Who the hell’s callin’ you at midnight?” the caller slurred into the phone.

My heart stopped. I swallowed hard.

“Thad?” I sat up in my bed. “What, I mean, why are you calling?”

“It doesn’t matter where I go, you always come up!” he fussed. “I went out tonight, and of course, you had to come up. It ruined my whole night! I had plans, you know! I wasn’t supposed to be doin’ this!”

“You aren’t making any sense.”

“I went out to a place Tucker recommended, and I . . . I saw that asshole dad of his!”

Did he mean Robert Williams? Mr. Williams was a pharmacist, and like his son, one of the nicest people I’d ever had the pleasure of meeting.

Thad went on, “That Jack, James, Jude . . .”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Do you mean Jude Harlow, Cassie’s father?”

A small voice in my head screamed that I should go ahead and hang up. Thad made no sense. He was drunk and likely going to forget this whole conversation, but I fought the urge to throw my phone at the old brick wall. Shattering that device might have saved me so much trouble.

“Yeah, he was out with Cass and Tuck, and it was like, he just had to bring you up!” Thad fumed. “I don’t even know why he did it! It’s not like I know him, that California bastard, but it totally messed with my date.”

“Date? What date?”

“The receptionist from my haircut place. She does nails and has tits.”

I instantly glowered. Was it some sick masochism keeping me from hanging up?

“What a glowing review,” I mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Thad, you’re drunk. You need to go home.”

“I am! That’s the problem. I’m home, and there’s nobody here! I bought this damn condo. I’ve got the clothes and the car and the money, and I’m right here without a damn date! I’ve tried, like, a zillion times to move on from you, but people keep bringing you and putting you in my way. It makes me look like such a loser!”

“If you wanted to get back together, why were you on a date at all?”

“Because you didn’t want to come home with me either!” Thad growled on the other end. “After hearing about you, Lex wanted to know who you were and how I knew you and why and all these stupid questions!”

She sounded far better off without him. My name might have ruined Thad’s night, but it saved hers. Numb to it all, I didn’t care how Thad groaned. This behavior wasn’t just old hat for him. Thad did enough to become boring, but the ranting phone call had to be a first for me.

I never wanted to know a second one.

It sounded like Thad slumped into a chair, a couch, or some kind of cushion. Part of me secretly hoped he had passed out. The conversation would be over then.

“Why don’t you love me anymore?” he asked, much to my dismay. “Don’t you remember the good times? Don’t you remember loving me? W—we . . . we could be like that again.”

I recalled plenty. There were nights out at the pizzeria just off our college campus and tailgate parties. There were study dates in the library where Thad brought coffee for us both, but I also remembered all the nights I’d wondered where he had gone.

I checked my old flip phone a hundred times waiting for a text that never came because he was off with someone else. Even when I caught him, even when I had proof of his lies, he called me the crazy one. He insisted that I didn’t trust him enough and that nobody would ever love me like he could. There was no better man than Thaddeus freaking Drayton.

Of course, I remembered it all. I sometimes wished he could give me back my girlhood and all those wasted nights like he gave back my things. I dreamed of him shoving everything into a cardboard box and letting me forget.

I might have been his girl that got away. Maybe he considered me his path not taken or whatever line he tried to sell. For me, Thad was a sickness I could never shake. He was poison, and I wanted him out.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t love you once, but we were kids. We didn’t even know what that meant.”

Thad still didn’t know. Scoffing, Thad let contempt fill his response.

“That’s exactly what you would say.”

I ignored him. “We’re not teenagers anymore, and I can’t let you treat me like . . . like some kind of toy. You can’t pull me out whenever you want and toss me into a box when you’re bored. You can’t treat any woman that way.”

“Says who?” he fired back. “Who says I do that?”

The first question was the honest answer. My temples pounding, I regretted ever waking up. I held no love or hate for Thad, but I wanted him gone.

“Nobody has to tell me. You were a shitty boyfriend, and you know, when I got back to town, I went out with you to show my mother that I made an effort. Really, though, I hoped you had grown. I wanted you to be a better man, but you’re still the same shitty guy I dumped forever ago. Now, go to bed, Thaddeus. You’re drunk and making a fool of yourself.”

I hit the red button on my screen and flopped back down into my pillows. Was it too late to go to Mount Pleasant? If I swam the river, would Jude be waiting on the other side?

I set aside my book and ignored the impulse. I couldn’t use Jude every time I wanted an escape. Some things I had to face on my own, but right then, I only wanted to go to sleep and forget the lump in my throat. It was a stupid, futile gesture.

The rain finally slacked off, and the night stretched into the dark hours of morning. All the while, I stared into the darkness while every old memory played on a loop in my head. The vicious cycle cut into every single scar.

I refused to cry. I wouldn’t give Thad’s memory the energy, but there was no chance of reprieve either. I just had to resign myself to a long night, hoping tomorrow might be kinder.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JUDE

I wouldn't make the same mistake twice. With the sun shining and the skies clear, I headed over to see if I could catch Sam at home. I followed her lead, bringing two coffees and a biscuit bribe. In my good denim shirt, I tried to show how I'd made an effort. She had to see that I cared in every sense of the word.

Even if she didn't want him, Thad made a bad habit of putting Sam on edge. My confessions weren't going to be easy. I hoped some baked goods might ease the blow. The boy spent enough time occupying my mind rent-free. He didn't need to haunt us both.

I pulled through the gate and drove down the path toward her house. When I knocked, I took a step back and tried to find the right words, but Sam caught me off guard. Her smile had been shimmered with gloss, and her hair was all tousled and wavy as if she'd just come from the beach.

Did she always work alone looking like this?

Did I not know some remote working dress code?"

Tugging at her short black shirtdress, Sam explained, "Hey, you're in luck. I just got out of my monthly team

meeting.”

My shoulders relaxed. That made far more sense.

“I thought I might surprise you with some coffee and something to eat. If you’re busy, I don’t need to stay.”

I realized that my sudden urge for honesty should’ve been given a second thought.

Shaking her head, Sam said, “No, I was just about to take my lunch break. Even the best worker bees have to eat.”

“Do you think a biscuit would be good?”

“Sure, but I don’t—”

I brandished my brown paper bag. “I’ve got two. The special was fried green tomatoes and basil.”

“*Oh.*” Sam blinked in pleasant surprise. “That sounds really good, actually.”

Before long, we sat out among the patio furniture shaded by what Sam called a mimosa tree. The pink feathery blossoms fanned out over us and fell across the ground. Sam took a sip of her cold brew and watched more flowers flutter in the breeze and over the glass table sitting in front of us. Another gentle gust wiped them all away.

“I haven’t had my usual coffee today,” she remarked. “I forgot to buy more grounds last time I went to the store. I used to go grocery shop all the time, but here, I’m only doing it once every two weeks.”

“Why were you shopping all the time?”

Sam unwrapped her biscuit and shrugged. “It’s the thing you do in other countries. My fridge would always be this small thing in my itty-bitty kitchenettes or I’d be sharing a communal kitchen. Plus, it’s the culture around food in other places. There are open air markets every day, and you can go pick up what you need for that day and maybe the next.”

“Like in London,” I recalled. “I lived there for a few months back when Elysian opened a European headquarters there.”

“Sounds like I’m not the only cultured one.”

I shook my head. “No, you are. I spent more time in offices than sightseeing. I was there to work and was pretty much on my own. If I wanted to go to museums, it wasn’t like . . .”

“You had someone to share them with?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“You could’ve met someone,” she suggested.

Eating my first ever fried green tomato, I swallowed and smiled.

“I know you’re not going to believe me, Sam, but I’m not one to pick someone up at random.”

“You got me.”

“But you were the exception.”

Sam tried to hide her grin behind a bite of biscuit. It didn’t work, but she saw through my bribery, guises, and pleasant conversation.

“As nice as this is,” she began before sipping her coffee, “I don’t think you came here to talk about European markets.”

We were having such a nice time. It felt wrong to ruin things. The mere mention of his name would be like a stain on our day, but Sam needed to know. I took in a deep breath and mustered all my courage.

“Last night, when I went to dinner with Cassie and Tucker, we ran into Thaddeus,” I explained while attempting a gentler approach. “I know where you stand with him, but I thought you should know that he was out with someone else. If he’s saying he still wants you back, well, I doubt he’s telling the truth.”

Sam set her biscuit down in its wax paper. She didn’t show any signs of distress.

“Why did you want to tell me?”

“I figured there’s always use in being armed with the truth. I’m sorry, Sam. I didn’t want to mess up your day.”

“You don’t have to feel bad,” she said, picking up her biscuit again. “I already know.”

My eyebrows furrowed. “Did Cassidy say something?”

“Thad called, which is more of a shock just because people these days rarely call. After seeing him, though, you all messed something up with his date. My name came up. That girl of his asked questions. Apparently, she didn’t like his answers.”

“I can’t say I feel bad about that. The poor thing dodged a bullet.”

“I know,” she agreed. “I appreciate your honesty, though. It’s nice to think that you’re looking out for me. I . . . I don’t always have that, but it’s not easy for people to watch my back when my back is literally an ocean away.”

“But you know how to take care of yourself. You’re resilient and clever. I mean, I’m not even sure how you get around. You don’t have a car, and I had to use a whole moving pod to get my crap to South Carolina.”

Throwing back her head, Sam let out a free and bubbling laugh. It floated high in the air and made everything brighter before she finished her lunch.

“I bet it was those T-shirts of yours.”

“And my records,” I agreed. “I like to use them when I work.”

“Well, *for the record*, I do have a license. I’ve even got this membership for a car service that offers rentals on demand. If I need a car, there are two parked two blocks over that I can use, but getting around in the States just in general is harder than anywhere else. In Asia, I rented scooters. In Europe, I rented bikes or walked. Other countries have all kinds of trains and are much more walkable. When I’m here in South Carolina, I kind of hate having to drive to get everywhere. New York City has the subway at least.”

“Los Angeles isn’t for you, then,” I joked lightly.

Sam grinned. Her body leaned forward as if she were about to share a wonderful secret, and I inched closer on instinct. I needed to know the thought flickering in her eyes.

“I don’t know. Maybe you won’t catch me on Sunset Boulevard, but I’ve always liked the idea of surfing beaches, farmer’s markets, and restaurants by the pier,” she shared. “Malibu has always sounded nice. I’d be willing to give it a chance.”

“Would you need a place to stay?”

“Maybe. Do you still want a traveling buddy?”

I shook my head. “Beautiful, I’ve got plenty of friends.”

“You know what I mean.” Her hand ran along the side of my hair. “Besides, I think I prefer you as more than a friend.”

“Oh, I know I prefer it.”

“Then, would you like to be more than friends right now? I’ve got another twenty minutes before I need to get back to work.”

Her lips parted for me, moving in a manner so wonderfully familiar to me now. The sound of her breathing became sweeter than any song, and to it, my mind danced through all the possibilities of how things could go.

“Where?” I asked.

Her fingers curled around the back of my neck as her lips curled into that wicked little grin.

“Why not here?” She kissed me once to tempt me. “Why not now? Nobody’s around to know.”

“What about—”

“My godmother is off at the beach with some of her archery friends, and her sister’s off spending a week with her grandkids.”

“Archery? I think I want to meet this lady.”

“You can one day,” Sam assured me. “But right now, you’re all mine.”

But that had always been true. From the first moment I kissed her, I never got enough of Sam’s lips against mine. I was charmed by her teasing golden-brown gaze and rendered absolutely helpless.

It took nothing at all for Sam to steal the coffee cup from my hands. Leaving it on the nearby table, she freed me to drag her into my lap. Her legs straddled my waist. Everything we did remained hidden away, even as the sun warmed our skin. The garden walls and shade trees concealed our tryst, and this became another secret for Sam and me to share.

“Doesn’t this feel nice?” she murmured.

“Too good,” I muttered back. “I think there’s a reason this is considered illegal most places.”

“But only if you get caught.”

Her teeth dragging over my lower lip, Sam tugged at the zipper of my pants and yanked away the fabric. My aching dick sprang to life, but it wasn’t enough for her. She wrapped her fingers around the shaft and stroked. Every twist of her wrist elicited another groan from deep within my chest.

She didn’t just drive me to distraction. Samantha Rutledge wanted to drive me over the edge of a cliff. I already felt myself falling into that bottomless chasm. If there was an end, I didn’t want to know it. I’d never survive the crash.

“I’ve been wanting you from the moment I left you,” Sam whispered.

My palms pressed into her hips before grabbing fistfuls of fabric. My mouth brushed against the diamond on her ear. The sentiment was wholly shared.

“There’s not a moment to lose, then.”

Pushing aside the thin, soaked-through cotton, she lowered herself onto me inch after inch until I was balls deep inside her and past the point of no return. I couldn’t be bothered by what anyone might come across us doing. My selfish desires

overwhelmed any scrap of good sense I had. With Sam grinding against me, my only concern was our shared satisfaction.

We found our rhythm with ease, moving in time with our aching hearts. It felt like paradise and radiant passion. Even while trembling, Sam tore into my shirt to let her fingers dig into my chest. I'd welcome any scratches she left there. They would be proof that this all happened. I could look in the mirror and know it was real.

"Oh, Jude," she moaned, her forehead leaned against mine. "Oh, God, I—"

"Don't stop," I urged her. "Don't give up."

Sam didn't. Until her thighs trembled around me and her spine arched back, she held on with everything she had. My hands slid up her back and held her right there. When the release came, it found us both all at once, and for that fragile moment, time stopped.

The world grew quiet. My vision was filled with a blinding light, but I felt Sam there with me. She kept me grounded and sane.

It took a long minute for us to get our bearings again. Trying to stand too soon, Sam's legs gave way. She fell right back into my lap. I wanted to call it a sign and keep her there forever.

"You've made a mess of me," she remarked, wiping the smudged makeup from her face.

"Are you mad about it?"

"Based on the way I feel, I don't think I could be mad about anything, but how do we keep ending up like this?"

I chuckled, feeling drunk on the sheer delight and the day.

"Maybe if I saw more of you, I wouldn't be so tempted."

When she found the willpower to stand on her own, I recalled what she said over lunch. I remembered the wistful flickering in her eyes as she spoke of being on her own. If she knew how badly I wanted to be that person for her, Sam would

never feel that way again. I could always be her supporter, her admirer, and her champion. All she had to do was let me stay beside her.

Was that too much to ask, or was that being too honest?

“Thank you for coming by today and for lunch,” she told me by the car. “It was good seeing you.”

“It’s my pleasure.” I kissed her lips one last time. “And thank you for . . . *dessert*.”

“Sure, if that’s what you want to call it.”

Sam continued to laugh as she waved me off. In my rearview mirror, I watched her get farther and farther away from me. I hated to see it. I didn’t want to think about any kind of goodbyes.

If I had my way, our lives would always be like our Sunday together or those days stuck in the snow. We could relive our happiness everywhere from Morocco to Mexico. I could give up my arbitrary things and let them stay at home. I’d travel the world over and back and do everything Sam ever wanted, if I could only be with her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

SAM

My guilt fought an uphill battle. A class at the ballet barre studio Delilah frequented only added a spring to my step. Heading up the stairs toward Cassidy's apartment, the tingling of happy feelings covered my skin.

I struggled to be anything but happy while thinking of Jude. I held onto the memory of his touch, his company, and his heartbreaking smile, even as some small voice whispered it was wrong. Shame couldn't touch me that evening.

It was like the old cliché said—if this was wrong, well, I didn't want to be right.

Perhaps when I woke up from the surreal state and had my morning coffee, I would feel bad for the grin I wore into Cassidy's place, but nobody seemed to mind. Tucker caught me at the front door sliding his keys and wallet into the back pocket of his jeans. His light brown hair looked bouncier than usual, if it were even possible.

"Have a good day?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "It wasn't too bad. Where are you off to?"

“As good as that pizza smells in the kitchen, some of my old friends from the school swim team are in town,” he explained, double-checking the buttons of his palm-printed shirt. “Thad arranged for us all to meet up tonight.”

“Have fun, then,” I remarked before he slipped past me. “Just not too much fun.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Cassidy called out, “Sammy, we’re in here!”

Kicking off my flats by the door, I followed my nose to the kitchen where Delilah was already pouring herself a glass of iced tea and Cassidy tossed a salad. Delilah still wore the polo from one of her wine events as she sighed.

“You’re not gonna believe what Cassie just told me,” she insisted.

I set down my tote bag and pulled out a scrunchie. “What?”

Looking back and forth between them, the conversation became an exchange of different faces. Cassidy became sheepish, but Delilah bulldogged Cassie with a nod of her head and an unrelenting stare. Pulling up her sweatshirt sleeves, Delilah exposed the constellations drawn across her inner arm and refused to give up.

“We’ve got twenty more guests coming,” Cassidy finally admitted.

My jaw went slack. “From where?”

“From her mom’s old office,” Delilah explained. “Apparently, she went to the retirement party of some old lawyer friend, and she talked up the wedding, and next thing we know, two dozen lawyers got invites to this little shindig.”

“But only twenty said yes!” Cassidy amended as if it mattered. “I just need to do rearranging with the seating plan for the reception and send out some emails to vendors. You can help me with that before we start on the hotel goodie bags, right, Sammy?”

“Sure.”

“And I get to type up a welcome letter to go in all the bags,” Delilah remarked with her most sarcastic smile. “Apparently, Maribelle Drayton swore to Bethany that it’s ‘such a nice finishing touch’.”

Delilah didn’t fail to add the air quotes.

“It’s funny that she didn’t offer to help, then,” I had to admit, but we all knew.

All Maribelle knew how to do was sip cocktails, plan parties, and fret over her only son. How she did all that and maintained her snobbery was a mystery to us all. She couldn’t possibly have an ounce of energy to spare.

“Would you want her here sharing our extra-large pizza?” I asked before grabbing a slice.

Delilah snorted. “*As if she eats pizza.*”

Even Cassidy snickered, adding, “As if she eats.”

We all took our plates and spread out across the living room, each setting to our respective task. Conversation floated around and between us, drifting in and out. Chewing on a pizza crust, Cassidy’s sudden comment broke a lull of silence.

“I think my dad’s seeing someone.”

Looking up from her computer, Delilah cocked her head to one side. “What makes you say that? I mean, who does he even know here?”

“He can meet people, you know,” Cassidy replied. “He just, I don’t know, seemed extra happy when Tucker and I saw him last. He had this look in his eyes that I’ve only ever seen before meeting a new girlfriend.”

Choking down my bite of food, I swallowed hard and reached for my water. My giddy feelings ran and hid like the cowards they were. Part of me wanted to run with them.

“Girlfriend?” I repeated before letting out an awkward laugh. “You say that like he’s had a lot of them.”

Cassidy shook her head. “No, not really. Dad’s more like a, um, a serial monogamist. He sticks to one woman for a long

time. I don't think he likes casual relationships.”

“I don't do casual relationships either. That's what vibrators are for,” Delilah insisted from across the room. She stood and hoisted up her jeans. “They do the deed, don't make awkward small talk, and when they're all cleaned up, they fit oh, so nicely in my bedside drawer.”

Cassidy snorted with laughter, covering her blushing face. Throwing back the last of her tea, Delilah headed toward the kitchen with a Cheshire-Cat grin, but I couldn't join in the fun. My laughter was too light and hollow. Running my hands over my bun, I began to fidget as the conversation continued.

“It's not like him to be secretive about this, though,” she went on. “He's always been open about his relationships with me. I mean, I don't hear about any dirty laundry, but he usually introduces me to his significant others.”

Right then, I saw why Delilah had made her joke. She cracked open a beer and poured it into her glass. She struggled not to look over at me on the living room floor.

“Maybe it's new,” Delilah suggested. “With the wedding and his being here, maybe things are just . . . tricky.”

“Tricky?” Cassidy echoed.

“Yeah, tricky, you know.” She kept going like a runaway train. “He's trying to be here for you, and he's figuring out that work stuff with his new creative whatever job. With everything else, maybe he hasn't had the time to process it all. Maybe once, um, once the wedding's over, he'll come clean.”

My entire body clenched from the anxiety. At least Delilah stopped talking. Next to me, Cassidy mulled over the thought. She flipped her blonde ponytail over her shoulder and ate a forkful of her salad, chewing on the idea and the spinach.

“Yeah,” she agreed after swallowing. “Yeah, Delilah, maybe you're right.”

“Of course, I am,” Delilah joked again. “People love calling me a witch, or well, something that rhymes with witch, anyway.”

Silently, I gave Delilah a small but grateful smile, even if she scared me for a second. My secrets hit too close to home. Cassidy was catching on, and if someone didn't tell her soon, I feared how long it might take her to put two and two together. That incalculable math plagued me long after we called it quits that Friday night. Unlocking my front door, I gave up.

I needed nothing more than a bath, a book, and my bed.

My head started clearing once I rinsed the conditioner from my hair. I let my worries wash down the drain and saved my thoughts for another day, but climbing into bed, it seemed fate didn't want me to relax. My phone rang once, twice, and again. If I didn't answer, the unwelcome caller wouldn't give up.

I let out a groan and answered, "Hello, Thaddeus. Has somebody died?"

"Wait, what?"

"That has to be the only reason you would call me at . . . five minutes past midnight on a Friday," I replied. "Or, technically, it's Saturday now."

"You haven't been answering my texts, Sam."

My eyebrows went up. "And that wasn't enough of a message?"

"I only wanted to apologize," he swore, his voice pleading. "I—I wasn't myself the other night. I didn't want to argue with you, but I'd been drinking. I wasn't thinking straight."

It sounded like he'd been drinking tonight too. His syllables slurred together even while he tried to hide it. I already knew he'd been out with his boys. If their night was anything like years ago, Tucker had been the designated driver while Thad fashioned himself the ringleader of their circus. Thad always called it a good time. It never hurt to have a little fun.

"I'm sorry," he added, making me sit taller against my pillows.

The apology was a first for him. I didn't need to be bitter and point it out. My free fingers curled into the comforter, pulling it closer. For whatever reason, I felt compelled to shield myself before answering. The black slip I wore left me too exposed.

"That doesn't change what you did," I pointed out. "I've told you where I stand on our relationship. I'm starting to get tired of repeating myself."

"Just give me one more dinner. Let me make it up to you."

"No, thank you."

His pleading started to sour. "If you want to put this behind us, won't talking help?"

"I suggest you talk about it with a therapist."

"Excuse me?" Thad couldn't hide his drunken state or his offense. "Why would I need to get my head shrunk?"

"Ask one," I replied. "It's late, Thad. Good night, and please, if you ever cared about me, don't call again."

I didn't wait for an answer. Flipping over the phone, I let the device fall silent and my historic romance novel got shoved under the blankets. My Victorian marriage drama could be saved for another night. Right then, I only wanted the sanctuary of my four-poster bed.

I balled myself up. The bedroom lamp went dark, letting the full moon glow through the cracks in the blinds and against the brick wall. It wasn't enough to comfort me. My eyes shut tight for the night, but desperate for any kind of sleep, it seemed I would never have peace.

The closure I once craved was never going to come. Thad didn't have it in him to offer it. My friends didn't even know. There were so many secrets and too much old baggage to unpack. Sooner rather than later, I would have to escape.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JUDE

I thought I'd never escape the Friday night traffic. It was lucky I wanted to get to the temple early and see Cassidy before the service began. As the first few filed in through the lobby doors, I saw her there surrounded by a small circle of people.

Sam stood among them smiling, but the expression didn't quite reach her eyes. I noticed even from a distance. Before I ever crossed the stone floor and stepped into the glow of the stained glass windows, I sensed her warmth fading. Putting my dark checked blazer around her shoulders couldn't fight off that kind of chill.

"Hey, Dad," Cassidy greeted me, bubbly and eager in her familiar fashion. "I don't think you've met Owen Braun yet. He's Tucker's groomsman."

Cassidy gestured to a young man with green eyes and a camel-colored suit. Without question, Owen was the kind of man others struggled not to use as a measure of themselves. He had the build and look of an action star. Standing a hair shy of six feet, I never considered myself short or scrawny, but I only came up to the bump on his tanned Roman nose.

He didn't seem to think much of it, though. He didn't stand there flexing for show. Underneath it all, Owen was quiet, reserved, and kept his chin held high, yet his eyes flicked down toward Delilah and her long Bohemian dress. It took a genuine effort for him to meet my gaze.

"It's nice to meet you," he said in a Southern baritone. "I've heard good things about you from Cassidy."

"You know her?"

Owen nodded. "Tucker and I lived together senior year of college. Housing paired us up."

"I got the luck of the draw," Tucker joked lightly. "Other than Cassie, he's the best roommate I've ever had."

Owen flashed a surprising smile. As he ran a hand over the back of his dark hair, there was no malice or threat in his expression, but . . . *could wolves grin?*

"Probably because I was gone half the time with Air Force ROTC," he pointed out.

My eyebrows went up. "You're in the military?"

It shouldn't have surprised me. Giving Owen a second appraisal, it was obvious.

"Reserves. I work in reconnaissance."

Cassidy looked over as the temple doors opened. Others began filing through.

"I guess we should all find our seats!" she chimed.

Like a contemporary concert hall, the gently sloping aisle carried our group down toward the front, but I fell back. I looked for a wrist decorated in dainty gold bracelets and a woman with tired eyes.

"Hey," I murmured, catching Sam for only a second. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Between work and wedding stuff, I'm just a little short on sleep, that's all. It's nothing a little coffee or a quick nap couldn't cure."

“But you’re not getting either of those.”

“No,” she had to admit. “Not right now.”

I found myself wedged between Bethany and Delilah, who couldn’t seem to stop looking at that Owen Braun. Her attention became fixated, and I had a feeling I knew why. I wore that same look with Samantha. Only the start of the service’s first song broke the spell.

The Hebraic lyrics made me and all the other gentiles stick out, but I knew the services from my days with Bethany following our daughter’s rites of passage. This had always been important to the Goldwyn family, and while I never called myself a religious person, the traditions became important to me

This was my daughter’s culture and her family. When she had children of her own, they would be raised in the same traditions, but thinking of such days aged me. I ran a hand over my gray hair as a clock raced forward in my head. Sands through the hourglass slipped between my fingers, and I couldn’t hold on.

I needed life to slow, but that only ever happened when someone else slowed my pace.

My heart knew the answer. It shouted it over the sound of the temple service, but I didn’t want to listen yet. I didn’t have the chance to let her fingers knit together with mine. In the crowded congregation, I had to set aside my pining thoughts.

The Torah scrolls were coming through. With the music growing into a celebratory chorus, those struggling with the Hebrew pronunciation could clap along and sing out the one word.

Adonai! Adonai! Adonai!

My Lord. My Lord. My Lord.

As the chanting and clapping continued, a group of men came by with the holy text, allowing it to be touched by those who wished it. Many in the congregation averted their eyes while others welcomed the sight. The story went that if anyone

saw the scrolls fall then they had to undergo a period of fasting, and nobody wanted that.

I didn't have to worry about going hungry, not for food or drink. Across the congregation, my eyes remained fixed on only one sacred thing. Watching Sam clap along to the music didn't demand any penance. I only had to feel the pain of not being able to reach for her hand or fix the thin ribbon strap of her evergreen dress. So close and so far away, I wondered if prayer might help make sense of this pining.

There was one way to end my agony, but I couldn't do it. I wouldn't put that on her.

Tucker and Cassidy stood proudly at the front of the crowd. I saw the nervous jitters in Tucker, but Cassidy had grown up following the prayers. Holding onto her fiancé's hand, she recited the Torah blessing loud and clear for the congregation. She stepped back for her rabbi to read the scrolls. I didn't know the words, but watching Cassidy made me brim with pride.

An eternal light shone from within her. With it, she looked ready to face anything. All that mattered was the path she chose.

But ... what life had I chosen?

By the end of the service, Cassidy and Tucker only had to face the traditional well-wishes of the temple. They stood in the center of the lobby. The scent of black coffee hung in the air, but sweetness came with it.

Chocolate coins and caramel candies rained down over their hands. Holding on tight to Tucker, Cassidy laughed like a kid, squinting and scrunching her shoulders against the blessings of good fortune and a happy future. She was Tucker's angel in soft cotton lace. When he kissed her, the room applauded. Children scrambled under their feet to pick up the sweets, and as I looked on, I began to see a fork in my road.

Bethany had moved on and remarried years ago. My friends had their families, and even my child was about to

create her own home and family. All around me, people started their lives over with a new act.

Why couldn't I?

It wasn't too late for me. Forty-four wasn't that old, but as my eyes scanned the crowd, my heart only wanted that kind of life with one singular person. I couldn't imagine anyone else sharing my mornings or nights. Lost in the idea of it all, I didn't notice when Bethany came up beside me.

"What are you thinking about?" she wondered, taking a drink from her little foam cup.

"Cassidy, life," I replied.

"You're coming to the house, right?" Bethany didn't ask like a question. "We're having some family and friends over for drinks and snacks."

"If you've got the room," I agreed, but it was easier said than done.

In the crowded suburban home, I hunted for her, looking from room to room. Bethany's friendlier cousins stopped me to chat. They wanted me to try the stuffed dates or some wine, but I didn't stop looking.

I needed to tell her. Even if she never loved me back, I had to get the aching truth out of my chest. Only honesty could set me free, but I wasn't the only one trapped. Talia tugged on my sleeve in the kitchen.

"Hey, Jude, have you seen my dad?" she asked me. "That guy told me Dad wanted me."

I shook my head. "What guy are you talking about, kiddo?"

"Tucker's friend, Thad."

In the far corner of the living room near an archway I hadn't noticed, Sam stood tensed up and braced for a fight. My temper flared instantly. Blood rushing to my head, I forgot my drink cup and pushed past a pack of warm bodies. It didn't matter whether Sam could handle it herself. Everyone knew

how to survive and to manage, but neither of us needed to face life alone, not anymore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SAM

It felt like the silence before the storm. Bracing for impact, I knew the week was going to be a wild one. My work schedule had been replaced with spray tan and manicure appointments. I needed to get my hair cut and help finish the welcome bags for the wedding guests staying at the hotel. Delilah and I had to divvy up the tasks just to maintain a semblance of sanity, but my heart begged for one more moment of quiet peace. It didn't seem like too much to ask.

“That’s Kit,” Talia told me, pointing through the cage at a ginger-haired guinea pig. “The brown one is Kat.”

Handing them each some carrot ends, I laughed. “Like the candy bar?”

“I had one in my backpack when we were picking them out,” she confessed, showing off her snaggle-toothed grin. “Mom calls them her little garbage disposals.”

“I can see why.”

We sat in the sunroom feeding them all kinds of leftover veggie scraps from the platter of crudités. Part of me acknowledged that I should have been mingling with the other

party guests, but for five seconds, I didn't want to be the dutiful maid of honor. Talia and her two pets were far better company.

"People are gonna start looking for us," Talia remarked like she heard my inner monologue.

"Well, they can wait another second," I decided. "Your bobby pins are coming loose."

On a chaise lounge surrounded by Bethany Goldwyn's workout equipment and houseplants, I sat down behind Talia. I tenderly pulled the silver star pins from her hair, smoothing her bobbed ringlets back. I restored each one to their proper place as she spoke.

"It's been nice having you home, Sam," she muttered quietly. "We miss you a lot, you know."

"I miss you guys too," I confessed.

"Mom says you might stay in Charleston this time."

I sighed. "She's been ... misinformed."

As I place the last pin, Talia turned around with widened doe eyes. "Then, where are you going?"

I opened my mouth to speak. I tried to find a diplomatic answer, but an intruder interrupted me like he always loved to do.

"That's a good question."

Thad stood in the doorway with a drink in hand. He didn't hide the conceit in his smile anymore. Ten-year-old Talia wasn't worth his charades.

"Your dad's looking for you," he insisted.

"Come on, Sam," she said, reaching for my wrist, but Thad stopped her.

"Sam and I need to talk. It's grownup stuff," he insisted.

Talia scrunched up her nose. "You're not a grownup. My sister says your dad bought your car. What kind of grownup still has their parents pay for stuff?"

Thad huffed, impatient and annoyed. I didn't need her fighting my battles for me, though, even if it was pretty funny. Concealing my smirk, I patted her shoulder.

"It's okay. Go see what your dad wants."

Talia still took the chance to glare at Thad before shoving past him. I stood tall then, smoothing the emerald crepe fabric of my skirt. My arms then folded as I frowned. Thad had already lost the privilege of my politeness.

"What do you want?" I asked point-blank.

He finished off his liquor-laden drink. "I've been calling you."

"I'm well aware."

"Then, why aren't you calling me back?" he demanded, his voice dipping lower into a spiteful tone. "I thought you wanted to be friends, Sam."

I shifted where I stood. "I said we could be friendly acquaintances, and cornering me at a party hardly fits that bill."

"Well, you damn well didn't make it easy. You probably know all the hiding places in this house."

"You're right. I do."

Brushing past him, I went off to find another. I could run upstairs to Cassidy's old bedroom or hide among the crowd in the kitchen. With all these people around, I only had to make it hard for Thad to get me alone, but I already made that mistake. He wasn't letting me slip away so easy. He snatched at my elbow the second it got within his reach.

"We are adults, no matter what that kid says," he grumbled. "We can talk things out if you'll just stop making a scene and listen to me."

I shook my head. "You're not as clever as you think you are, Thad, and I'm not the one making a scene."

His face hardened. "Aren't you?"

Another hand gripped his wrist, and my heart stopped. I knew that herbal cologne and the grasp yanking Thad off me. The look on Jude's face grew steely and sharp as the two men stared each other down. With all the friction in the air, I feared that sparks might fly.

Silver against stone. My past versus my present.

"She wasn't," Jude muttered. "Remember where you are, Thaddeus."

He turned his head. Outside that sunroom's door frame, people hovered around the dining table covered in food. A few had their interest piqued.

"You owe me a dinner, Sam," Thad insisted, but he left it at that.

I held my breath until he disappeared. When I exhaled, my muscles suddenly felt tired. I only wanted to lie down in the silence. All these parties became too much.

"Talia told me," Jude offered before I asked. "She came into the kitchen looking for more trash to feed the guinea pigs."

"Was her father actually looking for her?"

He shook his head. "No. He's outside saying goodbye to Cassie and Tucker, and I think it's time we get out of here too."

I nodded silently. By all accounts, nobody suspected Jude as he offered to take me home. Cassidy hugged us both goodbye on the front lawn and thanked her dad for seeing me home. He was a good man. He could be trusted, but after the long evening, I didn't think twice about him pulling up to his own house. I never stopped to think as we left the suburbs behind and crossed the Cooper River Bridge.

We had the whole party fooled. We were so good that even I thought nothing of it.

"I should've gone home," I said, already walking into the house.

Jude flicked on a light in the mudroom. I didn't want to take off my shoes. Worn down by the world, I needed to stop running to him. I should have gone anywhere else.

“Why?” he asked. “Are you not feeling well?”

“You have to stop protecting me,” I continued. “People are going to notice. Cassidy will notice.”

I had met all the frayed ends of my rope. There was nothing more inside me to give, nothing more to do. After so many months in this city, I feared I'd finally lost myself, and part of me wanted to kick myself for relying on Jude once again.

I knew right then why some babies cried for no reason at all. Frustrated and without words, that's all my body wanted to do, yet Jude remained patient. I didn't fight him as he led me into the living room to sit down or as he made me a glass of water.

“I didn't want to leave you alone,” he confessed to me. “I don't trust that boy.”

“It's not your fight, Jude.”

He sat down beside me on the plush sofa. The lamplight glowed against his curious expression. He only asked to know and understand.

“Why not?” he pressed me gently. “Why shouldn't I care?”

“Because it's not right!” I fretted, my voice pitching up. “It makes me . . . you make me . . .”

I abandoned the water glass on the side table. It seemed too heavy in my hand. Gravity weighed down on me. The world began closing in. Sucking in a deep breath, I remembered the last time I felt this way.

It had been right before I put South Carolina behind me, a few weeks after my college graduation and a few weeks before my passport came.

I buried my face in my hands. Salted tears tried to drip through my fingers. Even as I fell apart, Jude didn't shy away. His hand swept down my hair and settled down my back. A

wave of comfort washed over me, but I despised it. I hated it all.

“God, I hate how you make me feel,” I muttered into my hands.

“How do I make you feel?”

How could I possibly answer that? Too many thoughts came to mind.

Like the only woman standing in a crowded room.

Like my name and my heart would always be safe with him.

My jagged edges had smoothed over, never to cut a new wound or draw blood again. They found a place to fit comfortably without fear or regret. With Jude, settling beside him would never mean giving up my freedom, but he shouldn't have. Everything logical and sensible told me to get over him and walk away.

“Loved,” I whispered anyway. “You make me feel loved, and it's awful. I'm not supposed to be loved by you. You're . . . you're . . .”

You're Cassidy's father.

Yet when Jude pulled back my hands, I saw a man with empathy brimming in his eyes. I felt the faint calluses on his fingers holding mine and breathed in the herbal scent of his cologne. His words were well-worn velvet to my ears.

“Since when is loving someone a bad thing?”

“Since we're not supposed to be like this,” I lamented, my words fragile and barely there. “Since we can still hurt people.”

Jude shook his head. “It won't be anything that can't be fixed.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I won't stop trying until it is, not for anyone or anything.”

“Why?”

He became quiet for a second. He debated something in himself before making his confession. I saw it there, but we both had been living in denial for so long. I almost didn't believe my eyes or ears.

“I love you, Samantha. I . . . I never expected for you to love me back. Not that it's impossible, but . . .”

The man so sure of himself in every other situation sat beside me, fumbling with his feelings. It took me back to that morning by the window where snow froze the world beyond us. We were all we had and all we needed.

“I don't expect anything from you.”

No assumptions and nothing owed. Jude loved me without asking for anything in return. He didn't ask me to give up pieces of myself or be someone I didn't like. Through the stray tears and the heart-wrenching agony, I found myself smiling.

“I love you too, Jude,” I murmured back. “I love you so much.”

Disbelief flickered in his pale eyes, and then, his whole face lit up. Jude grinned like he won a prize, but was that me? Was I the golden statuette he coveted, or was I something better? As his hands wrapped around my face, as he pulled me closer, I felt nothing but cherished and loved.

I was his. He was mine, and for that night, we were enough.

CHAPTER THIRTY

JUDE

Ever since New York, I searched for the woman I met, the one who smiled at me from across a breakfast table. I saw rare glimpses of her from time to time. I tried to reach out, but she had hidden herself away. I spent so long looking, waiting, and recklessly hoping.

The world wore her down. It abused her generosity. It pushed to her the edge of breaking, but I wouldn't let her suffer alone. If she wanted to fall apart, I could be there to help pick up the pieces. I'd do whatever she asked.

I only wanted to see Sam happy again.

I had found her, or rather, she'd found me. Pulling me closer, we fell back into the throw pillows. Sam's heels clattered against the hardwood floor, but I hardly heard them over the pounding of my own heart. Blood rushed to my head. Breathing became a battle.

She loves me, I kept thinking. Oh, my God, she actually loves me.

"You can stay in one of the guest rooms," I mumbled like a fool.

Even as we twisted together, I half-expected to wake up. My hands didn't believe what they touched while knowing they were welcome. I pushed past the green skirt and pressed into her soft, smooth thigh, yet none of it felt real.

"Why don't you take me to your room instead?" she suggested between hungry kisses.

How could I deny her? Combing through my hair, Sam had me coming unglued. We fell to pieces for different reasons, but we fell together. I became helpless after those three words crossed her lips. After that, I could only coax her off the couch and onto the stairs, feeling selfish with every step.

I didn't deserve to be so lucky. I didn't know how I earned her two fingers curling under my waistband. With my back pressed against the wood-paneled wall, I claimed every breath she offered while her hand trailed over my hardening bulge. I couldn't hold her tightly enough. The thought of being too close became impossible.

Our clothes marked our path down the darkened hallway. She pulled apart buttons while I tugged the zipper along her side. I ached to have Sam in my bed wearing nothing but her earrings. I longed to have her body heat warming my skin, and it couldn't fast enough. Impatience had my hands on the verge of trembling as my legs hit the side of the bed. In the shadowed room, lights poured through glass doors to cast a pale glow over her silhouette.

"Say you'll stay with me," she asked before undoing the hooks of her bra. "No matter what comes next . . . no matter where I go."

My voice turned to gravel as I answered, "Where else would I be?"

I couldn't define my home by four walls or a mailbox anymore. My mouth lived at the crook of her neck where Sam made space for me. Craning her head back, she relished the pleasure before luring me to the bed. My hands rooted themselves along her sides, slowly roving over her full hips and up toward her breasts.

With her body hovering over mine, her stray hairs fell down against my face. Her half-moon eyes became all I saw before her mouth crashed over mine again. Her tongue brushed against my teeth, and as my thumbs rolled over her nipples, Sam's gentle moan hummed into my mouth. It thrilled me to no end.

Her pleasure was my obsession. Every touch turned into a chance to see how I might make her forget the weight on her shoulders. With her hips gently rocking against my rigid length, each second had me closer to coming absolutely undone. Sam could toy with me all she liked. If it pleased her, I would let her ruin me a thousand times over.

"How much do you love me?" she asked, gripping my shaft. "How long has it been?"

Her hand slowly stroked up and down. My entire body shuddered.

"You're not being fair," I growled.

I dared to look up at her.

"Should I be?" she whispered.

Her hand twisted. She knew every nerve to hit. With a sharp inhale, I felt every muscle jolt in reaction, and Samantha only smiled.

"Hell, no," I swore.

"Tell me, then," she pleaded gently. "Tell me when you loved me first."

"Since New York," I confessed before groaning again. "I've wanted you for so long."

"Why not tell me sooner?"

"Because I didn't think you'd like it."

"I don't," she murmured before coming closer to my ear. Her thumb rubbed over my tip which was already dripping in anticipation. "I love it. I love you so much it's killing me."

"Let me make you feel better, then."

Had it been her plan all along? Our tables turned, and Sam moved so easily. Her back hit the bed. Her head sank into the pillow. Guiding myself into her, it was nothing for me to slip inside. She played me like the love-struck fool I was, but I was her fool. She made me into the only man allowed to put that starry-eyed smile on her gorgeous face.

We found our rhythm together. Sam braced herself against my shoulders, letting her nails prick my skin. Her hips rose to meet each rocking thrust. My mouth at the hollow of her throat, I only heard her panting breaths quickening with my heartbeat. Any other sounds faded away.

“I love you,” she whimpered. “*Jude, please.*”

She didn’t need to beg. Sam never had to even ask. All of me, the good, the bad, and the pathetic, belonged to her. Whatever she craved, she only had to take it if it made her happy, so I gave her everything I could. Trembling euphoria built inside her. Her spine arched up into me, yet I refused to relent.

I waited until the climax claimed her in a rushing wave. Her arms laced around my neck, and I let go. Collapsing, we fell apart together until Sam and I were nothing but racing hearts and limp bodies. I didn’t question the tears holding onto the corners of her dark eyes. I only kissed them away.

“We don’t have to be anywhere until four tomorrow,” I reminded her gently, brushing back her fallen pieces of hair. “We can stay here as long as you like.”

“And do what?”

If I had the strength, I might have shrugged.

“Tell me where you want to go.”

She took in a deep breath. Her body relaxed again, and her features softened. There, in the moonlight, I saw the Sam I loved best.

“That could be a lot of places,” she replied.

“Well, then, why don’t we get cleaned up while you make a list?”

It didn't take long for us to splash cool water over our faces and brush our teeth. Showering could be saved for the morning. Clothes were for people who cared. Her bare legs tangled with mine under the bedsheets as she offered me a mint-flavored kiss.

"I always leave when I start getting like this," she admitted. "There are a lot of people I love here. It tears me up, but when this city gets to be too much, I start losing myself. I . . . it scares me."

"Like tonight?"

Sam nodded, burying her cheek deeper in the pillow. "That's when I need fresh air."

"Where should we find it, then?"

"Well, there's always Europe. I love spending time around the Mediterranean, but I've always wanted to stay longer somewhere like Dublin or Paris. I try to avoid the more expensive cities."

"Money won't be an issue this time."

She grinned. "I figured you'd say that."

"But where do we stay?" I asked. "You can't just hole up in hotels."

Her fingers found mine under the covers. Weaving together, they settled against the cool mattress. It didn't matter to me if we were in a five-star suite or a cardboard box. As long as I had Sam like this, I would be content. No matter where we were, I'd sleep well.

"There are companies with furnished apartments you can rent on a weekly or a monthly basis," she explained. "They're set up with everything you need to work from the apartment, or there are co-living communities."

"Co-living? Like . . . a commune?"

"No, the cheaper ones are more like hotels or hostels," she explained, not hiding her small laugh. "They've got rooms and suites set up with communal kitchens and office spaces. They'll also have restaurants and events like yoga classes or

dinner parties. I spend more time in those, but that's because I'm usually alone. They're better for meeting people and making friends."

"I don't mind making friends, but you won't be alone this time."

"No, we won't be."

Yawning, Sam's eyes began to fall shut. The long night was ready to take her. She'd already started nestling closer to me, letting my arm drape over her body. Plans began taking shape in my head. I had more questions and people to call, but that all would wait until morning.

"I love you, Sam," I muttered before kissing her temple.

She took in a deep breath. Her body relaxed under me.

"I love you too, Jude."

This would take more than picking a place and packing our bags. People were going to learn the truth. If this was what Sam needed, we had to ruin everything to be together, pick up the pieces of the past, and create a mosaic of our future. Not everyone would be pleased, but holding her there in the silence, I knew Sam was worth it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SAM

The countdown had officially begun. It was only Monday, but while Cassidy was off picking up her wedding dress, I spent the morning doing battle with a florist trying to go over the agreed budget and bring in flowers Cassidy hadn't selected. It wasn't lost on me that all the man's suggestions were more expensive blossoms. He knew the bride-to-be had the Bank of Harlow behind her. He thought he might take advantage.

The man thought wrong.

Several stern words later, I backed him into a corner and forced him into refunding five percent as a discount for the trouble. My mother would have been proud to see me argue, cutting the man off at his knees through negotiation, but I didn't do it for her.

Cassidy didn't need any worries giving her a gray hair or putting bags under her eyes. She needed to be as calm, collected, and pleased as possible. If I had an aneurysm in the process, so be it.

It should have been a relief to get out of my house and out to lunch, but the meal had a caveat. Coming from work, my

mother sat there with Dad still entrenched in work and sporting a beige plaid suit. Dad kissed my cheek.

Around us, the Greek restaurant buzzed with a corporate lunch rush. Mom hardly stuck out among the rest of the suits in all their shades of gray and brown. Their clothes dared to make the colorful restaurant look drab and my T-shirt dress too casual.

“It’s good to see you,” Dad greeted me for himself and Mom. “How are things going so far with the wedding?”

“Oh, you know, already crazy,” I replied.

Mom looked up from her phone. “Good, Samantha, you made it.”

“Busy with something?”

“Oh, I’m mediating a merger right now. It’s nothing new.” She waved one hand and grabbed her water glass with the other. “Our client’s just a little antsy about the process.”

“How about you, Dad? How did the school year end?”

Adjusting his wire-framed glasses, he gave me a gap-toothed grin that couldn’t have been any wider. It made him look about ten years younger and he sat taller with pride. Even with his salt and pepper curls, Dad almost looked boyish.

“All my girls passed their advance placement tests, so I’d call that a win!”

“Good job! Is Leigh Hall gonna give you a bonus?”

Dad snorted out a laugh. “Of course not!”

As the waiter came to take our orders, I began to hope the lunch wouldn’t be so bad. Mom had left half of her brain back at the office. Dad had the relaxed delight of a teacher on summer vacation, and I was about to eat some amazing food. The cereal I ate five hours earlier had long since vanished from my stomach.

Three bites into my meal, Mom had to bring him up. She was cutting into her salad while cutting into me with her pointed question.

“Have you spoken with Thaddeus lately?”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

“Please, Mom, for the love of all things holy, can we not talk about him just once? You’ve been hounding me all summer.”

“You really have, dear,” Dad agreed.

“Only because I want what’s best for you,” she argued. “I know for a fact that he’d like to make amends.”

“That’s not gonna happen,” I swore adamantly.

“Not with you being so bristly and stubborn,” Mom rebutted. “He has literally come to me in the office and spoken so sincerely about you. If you’d just listen to him, you’d see what I mean, but you’re ignoring his calls now. You refused to see him. It’s like when you left him the first time, and you still won’t tell us why.”

Dad shook his head. “You don’t have to explain your choices if you don’t want to, Sam.”

“But believe me when I say that Thad could be really good for you,” Mom persisted from across the table. “He’s shown himself to be hardworking, capable, and—”

“And what if I told you he was trash?” I countered.

Mom laughed. “Oh, Samantha, I’ve met him. I know who he is.”

“But—”

The ping of her phone cut me off. This time, it was Dad’s turn to sigh.

“Sorry, it’s that client,” she said, typing away at her phone. “One second.”

She didn’t look remorseful at all. Staring at the screen, her French manicure tapped against the glass. Dad sat between us, cutting into his chicken and proving that love was indeed patient and kind. He bore all things and kept no record of my mother’s wrongdoings. He looked to me instead.

“Your mom and I started a series the other night that I think you might like,” he remarked, trying to change the mood. “It’s a mystery set in rural Quebec. The forest scenes are absolutely beautiful.”

I followed along, hoping the tirade might end. Still, my toes tapped against the checkerboard floor. Anxiety built in my chest.

“I’ve never been there, but maybe we could go sometime,” I suggested between bites. “It could be like those summer trips we used to take to the Appalachian mountains, remember?”

“Of course. Is your friend who lives out that way doing well?”

“Darcy? Yeah, she’s good. She had her second baby not too long ago. I saw some pictures online.”

“Well, my congratulations to her.”

Mom set her phone back down and jumped into the conversation.

“As I was saying, I think you should—”

“Honey,” Dad stopped her. “I love you, but I don’t think you need to say anything more. Sam’s perfectly capable of making up her own mind about a boy. Personally, I don’t think any of ’em are good enough, but I’m biased.”

“Maybe they aren’t, but there’s no point in hiding that the older Sam gets, the worse her options become.” Her attention turned back toward me. “You can’t be single forever, and at a certain point, the old saying comes true—the good ones are either taken or gay.”

“Then, if Thad is so damn good, why isn’t he taken? Why has he never kept a girlfriend, and why did I ever leave him?”

Mom’s mouth drew into a hard line. Behind her steely gaze, I saw a flicker of hurt.

“I don’t know, Samantha. It’s not like you ever talk to me.”

What was I supposed to tell her? In the crowded room, how could I dredge up years of history I only wanted to

forget? Dad was the history expert, not me. He could keep all the textbook pages for the likes of presidents and past civilizations . . . but not for my embarrassment or heartbreak.

Years had passed, yet I never wanted to be the woman put in that awful position. It felt like I'd fallen for a con and been made into a fool by a boy who never loved me. What girl ever wanted to share that?

"He might be a decent lawyer, but Thaddeus Drayton is not a good man. I can't make you see that." I waved to the waiter. "I'm sorry. I have to go."

Dad frowned. "Go?"

"I've got a spray tan appointment and some more calls to make to vendors about their arrival on Saturday," I said, but I had more than enough time.

I just didn't want to there anymore. I loved being with Dad, and though some piece of my heart still loved Mom, I felt too exhausted facing them. I needed to go.

Getting the rest of my lunch to-go, I hugged my dad goodbye tightly and offered one to Mom by default. I didn't look her in the eyes before turning away. There didn't seem to be much of a point. She had her eyes wide shut, and I couldn't change her any more than she could change me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JUDE

My back pressed into the wall of the long bench. Behind the curtain, I heard the sound of zippers coming undone and polite conversation as my legs bounced. The little girl beside me watched them.

“Why are you nervous?” she asked curiously.

“I’m excited,” I lied.

I was definitely nervous, and Talia didn’t buy it. In her equestrian coat and tan pants, Cassidy’s mom and sister left some horse riding day camp early to be there for the final dress fitting. Bethany sat on the other side of her, typing up some email on her phone. I thought she had taken a step back from her work as an attorney, but her legal consulting still tore her attention away from the frustrating wait.

I guess that was the silver lining of working. It gave one’s mind something to do— something to chew on and consider. Part of me wished I had it.

“Mom, can I go to the bathroom?” Talia asked, her head whipping Bethany’s way. “I saw one by the front desk.”

“Sure, baby, go on. We’ll be right here.”

Hopping off the tufted seat, Talia scampered down the hall as her boot steps faded away. Bethany and I were alone, and I couldn't remember the last time we found ourselves like this. She ran a finger under the collar of her striped blouse and let out a sigh.

"Can you believe that we're here?" she whispered while tucking her phone back into her handbag. "Sometimes, it feels like I was changing her diaper just last week or taking her to school. Where does the time go?"

"It flies, I think." I chuckled once under my breath. "This is what we get for blinking."

Bethany laughed, crossing her legs as her eyes went back through time. My ex had never been the sentimental sort. She wasn't a fan of romantic gestures, particularly public ones. Perfumed flowers gave her a headache, and she preferred public radio over silly love songs. Still, she had her moments.

I remembered one where her hair looked long and silky like Cassidy's. At that bonfire party, we were both caught between the flickering firelight and the full canyon moon. I adored that Bethany. She couldn't be that girl forever, but studying Bethany's wistful face and fine lines, I saw that girl again.

"We should never have gotten married," she muttered as if she heard me thinking. "We were never right for each other. I knew that from the beginning, but dammit, Jude, you were so cute."

"You didn't look too bad yourself," I recalled. "Do you still have that denim skirt?"

"It's somewhere in the attic. I like to think I'll be able to wear it again, but it wouldn't be the same even if I managed to get into it."

No, nothing would be the same. We got older and grew up. Over twenty-six years had passed since then. It was all ancient history. It didn't need to be changed or even missed.

Bethany continued. "I wanted to save the world back then. You dreamed of bringing art to the people. We were so

hopeful, so full of . . .”

“Shit?” I whispered.

She laughed again. “Probably, but out of all that, we got our girl.”

“I know.”

Her face softened again. Giving me a small smile, Bethany reached out and squeezed my hand. I knew the emotion in her eyes before she ever named it.

“You know, Jude, every time I see Cassie, it makes me really glad that I met you.”

I nodded, squeezing her hand right back.

“Me too, Beth. Me too.”

“Okay!” Cassidy called from behind the heavy white curtain. “I’m almost ready!”

Bethany cleared her throat. “Your sister went off to the bathroom. Give her a second!”

I rolled up the sleeves of my gray linen shirt, buying time until the curly-haired horse rider bounded back. Hopping into her mother’s lap, Talia gave her big sister the go-ahead.

“Show us!” she exclaimed.

The shop seamstress pulled the curtain. Light poured out from the changing room, and on her pedestal, Cassidy beamed. The frothy floral ballgown looked even better than I remembered. With her veil falling over her shoulders and running down past the hem of her full skirt, every inch of Cassidy caught the overhead light. She was almost iridescent or incandescent.

Even in my head, I was at a loss for words.

“Perfect,” was all I could say.

Cassidy’s eyebrows went up. “You like it, then?”

I could only nod in agreement.

“I thought I’d wear Grandma’s necklace and earrings,” she explained, touching the teardrop stone strung around her neck.

“Like that old saying goes, I thought it could be my something old and blue. Delilah and Sammy gave me this perfect little charm bracelet for my birthday this year. Mom’s letting me borrow her pearl hair comb from her wedding to Joe. It’s getting polished at the jeweler’s, but I’ll have a little bit of everything from everyone.”

Fussing with a white gold chain, Cassidy grinned with pride at the thought. I remembered that jewelry set from my parents’ wedding photos. The gemstones’ pale ocean shade had been lost to the black and white of the past, but in that moment, the aquamarines came alive with color. They reflected all the light glowing from within their new bride.

Cassidy looked like her grandmother standing there. She had a bit of me and even her mother, but more than that, she looked like her own woman. Twisting around to see herself in the mirror, she had no clue of how far she’d come. She could make angels cry with her loveliness and light. Even Bethany teared up beside me, holding her younger child tighter as they both smiled.

“It’ll be gorgeous,” Bethany agreed. “Don’t you think, Talia?”

Talia nodded. “Yeah, you look like a princess, Cass, but won’t it get hot?”

Smoothing down the tulle, Cassidy laughed. “I thought you could hide under the skirt with a fan. That wouldn’t be too weird, right?”

“Um . . .” Talia scrunched up her nose. “I’m gonna pass.”

My grown-up girl then turned to the seamstress to ask about the bustle of her dress, smiling down at the petite white-haired woman as she did so. I had been so worried trying to shield her from the world. I longed to protect her from the truth and, selfishly, her opinion of me, but Cassidy didn’t need a shield. I didn’t have to stand guard against her bad dreams anymore.

She stood on her own with resilience and grace, and before I knew it, she would be a married woman. I couldn’t keep her

from the truth any longer. I had to trust that Cassidy could handle seeing me as a man with faults and feelings . . . including my feelings for Samantha.

If anyone could face the truth, it was this young woman standing before me. I refused to spoil her moment. We were counting down the days until her big moment, but once the vows were said and the cake had been cut, things would need to change.

The silent vow etched itself into the back of my mind. There was no way around it. When Cassidy came home and the honeymoon was officially over, I would have to come clean.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SAM

I thought there were going to be six people at our table. I followed the host of the Southern-style spot through the lunch crowd, not thinking much about the choice to be outdoors in the growing summer heat. I didn't expect our one table to take up the entire restaurant patio. Somehow, five guests had turned into twenty.

Cassidy had put the lunch together as a way of saying thank you to the ones who helped her the most. Delilah and I were the obvious choices. From talking about it, I knew she invited a friend from work who did all the calligraphy for the wedding invitations as well as two others who helped create the table numbers and other crafty things that I never could.

I could count each name and fit them all on one hand. What the hell had changed?

Mineral water in hand, Cassidy popped up out of nowhere. Her blush lace dress looked rosier under the covered red awning. Her cornsilk hair had been curled, sprayed stiff, and pushed back with a rhinestone headband that matched her shoes. She looked like a glossy magazine page all done up to perfection . . . all except her face.

“We . . . well, we have a few extra people for our get-together,” she told me between swigs of water. “My mom thought they should be invited.”

My eyebrows went up. “She did, did she?”

“It’s all good though,” Cassidy swore before her voice pitched up. “It’s all good, good . . . good, good, good.”

“Cass, how many cups of coffee have you had today?”

Her manic eyes caught mine. “Oh, just one, one really big one.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” she chimed, though her coral pink smile looked close to cracking. “I love this dress on you, Sammy, and the sleeves, what would you call those?”

“Balloon sleeves. If you like it, I can show you where I bought it.”

“Oh, that would be so nice. I—”

“Cassidy, dear!”

Across the room, one of the new lunch guests waved to Cassidy, and she had to go. I was left standing there with more questions than answers. My eyes scanned the space like that might help.

It only made things worse.

Beside one of the potted palms, I saw Bethany Goldwyn, Maribelle Drayton, Sutton, and my mother. They sipped their iced teas and offered each other practiced smiles. It was a nightmare trifecta . . . plus Cassidy’s mom.

“Samantha!” Mom called once she caught sight of me.

I had to walk over. There was no place to hide or any way to turn back time. Toying with the pearl pendant around my neck, I stepped forth into the fray.

“Hey, um, Mom, I didn’t know you’d be here,” I replied.

The party was for those who helped with the wedding. What had she ever done?

“Bethany invited me,” she explained, gesturing with her glass. “I gave her the name of the man who owns the hotel group they’re using. The firm has done some consulting work with them, helped with corporate contracts and such, so he gave Bethany a little friends and family discount.”

I should’ve known. My mother lived for her contacts and connections. If she got cut, I imagined she might bleed people’s phone numbers.

“And Sutton.” I turned toward her. “Are you going to be officiating or something?”

Maribelle laughed beside me. She couldn’t smile through the fresh round of injections.

“I invited her today,” Maribelle declared. “I know it’s rude to assume, but I figured with Cassidy becoming a married woman and settling down, well, she could use some female friends. She has her two maids, of course, but between that Delilah and her shop and your traveling God knows where, Cassidy deserves to have some support from a young woman like herself.”

“Like herself?” I parroted, nearly mocking the haughty connotation. “So, what, is Cassie gonna join your charity group now? Is she going to give up work, eat Cobb salads, and hate her friends like y’all do?”

“*Samantha*,” my mother hissed.

I wasn’t apologizing. Even as the polished belles shifted and squirmed, I stood firm.

“It’s quite all right, Vivian,” Maribelle remarked. “We all know your child’s the spirited sort. Maybe it makes her the bridesmaid and not yet a bride. We can’t begrudge that feisty little spark, can we?”

The backhanded compliment concealed the knife going into my back. Sutton snickered into her glass. Bethany sucked in a deep breath, trying to play along, and Maribelle batted her fake eyelashes like she was more innocent than baby Jesus.

“If I don’t want to be a bride, that’s by choice,” I insisted. “I’m perfectly fine right where I am. I don’t need a man to be

happy.”

Sutton smirked. “The last woman I heard say that got married to her roommate, but they seem to be content with their life and their cats.”

“And what’s your excuse, Sutton?” I threw down the gauntlet. “Does that mean you’re gay?”

Her eyes went wide. She huffed with offense, but I had no chance to relish in the success of my blow. Abandoning her glass, Mom grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me over to the edge of the patio away from all the others.

“What is wrong with you?” she hissed at me. “You’re acting like a child.”

I glared back, my nostrils flaring and my fists clenched. “I’m annoyed that these women invited themselves to Cassidy’s luncheon. I’m not being childish. I’m standing up for myself. Is that a crime, Mom? Is it a crime because I don’t want to wear a pantsuit like you or shove myself into some suburban purgatory?”

“Is that what you think my life is?”

“It’s what you want for me,” I countered. “It’s why you keep pushing me toward Maribelle’s stupid son.”

“Maribelle was just telling me how nice it would be for you and Thaddeus to make up. He misses you. With Tucker and Cassidy getting married, you all would fit so well together. You could have a life around your family and friends—”

“But I don’t love him. I don’t even like him.”

“Why not?” Mom refused to understand. “The Draytons are decent people, and Thad is suitable.”

What woman wanted to settle for suitable? I scoffed at the word.

“Mom, that’s not a good enough reason, and what do you really know about Maribelle, her husband, or her son? How are you sure they’re decent?”

I knew for a fact that they weren't, but my mother rarely scratched the surface of people's façades. She dwelled in facts, what she could touch, and what she saw. If I told her the truth back then or even now, I doubted she would believe it. Everything she knew would be overturned and destroyed. My heart couldn't trust that she would accept my story . . . or even me. There was no point in wasting my breath on any of it.

"Look, I'm not here to fight with you," I told her. "I'm here for Cassidy and to be her maid of honor."

Mom dropped my hand and frowned. "Excuse me for keeping you."

I didn't let the jab get to me. It was time to be seated, and at the center of the table, I found myself wedged between Delilah and Cassidy and surrounded by more charity women. They were apparently doing some kind of fall carnival this year to support a food bank. Some wondered if they should have a beer garden for the adults.

Seeing an opening, Sutton's head whipped our way. She ignored her wedge salad and set down her fork. Once I saw the look in her eyes, I held mine in a tight fist.

"Are you going to help with the carnival, Cassidy?" Sutton asked with honeyed words.

Some murmured between them. Cassidy was more than welcome to join their clique. She was so kind, so good, and so helpful. She would be the perfect addition.

Cassidy shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I've got too much to do at school. One of our teachers is retiring, and we're trying to grow the program."

"You're still doing that?" Sutton snipped.

"Do you mean working?" Delilah fired back beside me. "Yes, she has a job and a life, unlike some people."

"Cassidy does an amazing job teaching," I added. "Leigh Hall should be thrilled to have her."

Others agreed, nodding in approval at her noble profession. Teachers weren't thanked enough. The Women's

League should have a party for teachers, some said.

Still, Sutton continued, “Is wiping noses and teaching the alphabet really what you want to do with your life? It’s well and good for a while. Nobody’s saying that you haven’t done a good job, but if dear Tucker’s a doctor, doesn’t he deserve a wife who’ll support him? How will you manage a family and a classroom like that? I mean, what will people think?”

Screw my half-eaten tomato pie. I was ready to brandish a weapon and shut her up forever, but Cassidy’s eyes narrowed. Like her father, she got that same fierce metallic glint in her gaze, that unrelenting mettle. She answered as if Sutton were one of her petulant children.

In many ways, she was.

“They’ll think what they like,” Cassidy declared. “I love teaching, and I love Tucker. I’m not compromising on either.”

Sutton brushed back her bangs and tried to pretend that she was winning the debate. Nobody believed her.

“Well, if I were in your shoes, I—”

Cassidy groaned. “Oh, for the love of all things, *save it.*”

Sutton’s jaw went slack. For most of the women at the table, they had never seen Cassidy so angry. They didn’t realize that under those Southern social graces and kind words, she could cut someone down when necessary. Even the nicest people in the world had their limits.

“You dated for three months a lifetime ago,” Cassidy reminded her sharply. “It didn’t work out, so quit playing the victim. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to use the ladies’ room.”

Delilah and I shared a look before watching our friend disappear through the double doors. I waited until the party forgot the exchange and moved on with their conversations. Pulling the napkin from my lap, I stood.

“I’ll mind the crowd,” Delilah muttered to me. “Go take care of her.”

“On it.”

Sure enough, I found her in the restaurant bathroom with her hands braced against the marble sinks. She wasn't crying or fuming. Cassidy only looked tired. Letting out a weary exhalation, she turned and leaned against the sink.

"You were always the best at hide and seek," she recalled.

"Well, it's not really hide and seek when I watched you leave," I pointed out. "Wanna talk?"

"What about?"

"Anything. Nothing. It just looks like you've got something to say."

Cassidy pursed her lips. Her hazel cast themselves down at her bejeweled feet. She watched the rainbow rhinestones catch the light.

"I know how people see me," she said first. "I know they think I'm this, like, pretty little princess or whatever. I'm supposed to be so sweet and nice, and they take advantage of it without trying. I . . . I want to kick myself when I let them, though."

"Are you talking about the extra guests?"

"Here, at the shower, at the wedding." Cassidy let out another grumbling groan. "Mom promised to pay for the extra guests today, so it's not like I should be bothered by it. They're just friends eating lunch together. It shouldn't get to me."

"But it's your wedding. *You* are the bride."

"Funny how that works, huh?"

When a stranger came in, I made a show of washing my hands for those few minutes. Cassidy refreshed her lip gloss and fussed with her manicured curls. Nothing about her looked out of place, not before or even after the stranger left.

"I'd be lying if I said this was the wedding I dreamed about." Cassidy folded her arms against her chest, still watching herself in the massive mirror. "Back when we first talked about getting married, Tucker and I thought about going somewhere by the water. He grew up having these family shrimp boils and oyster roasts with his father's family, and we

wanted to do something kind of like that. It would be relaxed and ours.”

“That sounds nice.”

“We’re hoping to do it for a vow renewal one day, like maybe on our five-year anniversary. It’s just that our parents are all paying for most of this. People have agreed to take time off work and fly down for this. This big hotel wedding might not be my dream, but the truth is, I don’t really care anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

Cassidy shrugged and smiled. Turning toward me, I saw tears misting in the corners of her precious eyes.

“I don’t care about how I marry Tucker,” she whispered. “I don’t need a fancy white dress or a big party. I just so sick of not being married to him. Oh, God, Sammy, you don’t know how many times I’ve been tempted to drag him down to the courthouse, but weddings aren’t about the couple. We’re supposed to invite everyone into this next chapter of our lives. It’s as much about our families as it is about Tucker and me. I can’t *not* think of them. I can’t just do whatever I want.”

“Well, whatever you need, I’m here for you, Cass, and if you need it, I’ll beat back these women with a stick. Just say the word.”

She laughed, her face brightening as I pulled her into a hug. With my chin over her shoulder, Cassidy never saw how my smile faltered. I had been no better than the ones who abused her kindness. I saw her as somebody I had to protect, but in all honesty, I was only protecting myself. Shielding myself from my worst fears, I clung to Cassidy too tightly.

I needed to let go and trust in my best friend.

After her fitting, Jude had called me. We talked late into the night about his desire to come clean and how it might look. The thought made me nervous. I lost sleep tossing and turning over what might happen, but heading back into the restaurant, I knew Jude had been right. We needed to be honest and come clean.

Cassidy was sick of not being married to Tucker, and I had grown sick of hiding my love for Jude. I couldn't spend a life with him hidden away. We deserved more.

Come what may, I had to hope that everything would work out for the best. I prayed that Cassidy would be able to accept it. After all I'd done, good and bad, she only had to find in her heart and believe that I'd earned her forgiveness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

JUDE

The time difference seemed to be on my side, for once. After hours of planning and research, I sat in front of a video call explaining the redirection of my role. Some looked enthused. Most were surprised at the sudden change of pace. The last one left, Diego scratched at his nose and mulled over the news.

“You said you discussed this with Allison?” he asked me.

“Of course,” I told him. “I sent her a drafted proposal for creating the team underneath me before I scheduled this meeting. She wasn’t here just because she had a doctor’s appointment, and I didn’t let her skip it for my sake. You know my contracts and power better than me. You know I can do this.”

“I know, but . . . based on what you’re planning, you’re going to lose some of that power,” he pointed out, his tanned face unmovable as ever. “Your title is about to become more ceremonial. You’ll be like a figurehead of sorts.”

“And wasn’t that the original idea with my becoming Creative Director?”

“I thought you called yourself the *Chief Creative Officer*?”

I threw my hands up, forcing the desk chair to roll back. “That’s my point! What does that even mean? What have we even been doing these last few months? It’s like any time someone gets stuck, they look to me. Elysian can’t stop seeing me as the man with the answers, and that’s my fault. I haven’t removed myself enough. I’ve been doing my own grunt work and sitting in all these virtual meetings that I don’t even like!”

Diego frowned. “Not much of a retirement, huh?”

I shook my head. My days with the nine-to-five grind were over. My patience had worn thin. After looking into the things Sam mentioned, I stopped remembering why I wanted to keep a grip on my record company to begin with. It had been beyond my control for a long time, and I didn’t want to admit it.

The days of making indie albums in Topanga Canyon were long gone. I wasn’t hustling acts at fledgling music festivals, and I wasn’t a suit offering my blessings to every company executive. That era had come and gone. The people I left in my stead were doing far better than I ever could.

“A little restructuring won’t hurt anyone,” I continued. “I know we just hired an assistant to work for me, but we can reshape the department around her. She can even help pick out the people if she wants. She’ll be working with them more than I ever will.”

“Although, she didn’t apply for a job with this description. You’re creating a gray area.”

“And if anyone can sort it back out into black and white, it’s you,” I encouraged him. “You know how to deal with the ramifications. CC me on any emails you send over to Business Affairs and Human Resources. If anyone has a hissy fit about this, direct them to me.”

Diego snorted. “*Hissy fit?*”

“It’s something my daughter says.”

Somewhere over the bridge and in the city, she was off enjoying her final hurrah as an unmarried woman. I imagined Cassidy wore something like sequins and a crown procured

from a party store. Neither Tucker nor Cassidy was the type to be out and about on a Thursday night, but with all the events lined up for Friday, Thursday quickly became the only viable option.

I hoped they were safe. They all deserved to have a good time.

Those selfish pieces of me wondered what it would be like to cross paths with the party, giving me the chance to see Sam sparkling through the night. Fixing dinner, I consoled myself with thoughts of spending spring in Paris and winter in Mexico City. I could take Sam out every night we wished, and when the darkness turned to dawn, I'd be the man taking her home. It was only a matter of time and careful planning.

For now, those friends could have their fun. I just didn't expect to be getting a call during the peak of their partying. I moved the hot pan off the burner and reached for my phone ringing on the marble island. Sam's name lit up the screen.

"Hey, Paul McCartney," she greeted me with a bubbling laugh.

I tugged at the back of my Eagles T-shirt. "I think you've got the wrong number."

"No, I don't," she swore. "That's how you're saved in my phone."

"Let me guess ... because of his song?"

Sam started singing over the line, "*Hey Jude, don't let me down. You have found her, now go and get her.*"

"How much have you had to drink?" I propped my elbows against the counter while listening for the answer.

"Oh, two or three glasses of champagne. I did have a cheeseburger from a food truck parked outside. All the bubbles still went to my head, though," she replied. "Hey, Jude, does your name have anything to do with that song?"

"I'd love to say no."

I hated to admit it, but my mother seemed to be a victim of Beatles mania in her youth. I counted myself lucky that she

didn't call me Ringo. The friendly teasing was nothing new, but Sam was the first to make me enjoy it so much.

She giggled again. "Well, believing that denial, what are you doing right now?"

"I'm letting my shakshuka rest for five minutes. What about you?"

"I went to the bathroom between sets," she explained. "Champagne always messes with me, but it seems it makes me miss you too."

"You must really be drunk."

"I'm not," she insisted. "I only wanted to hear your voice for a minute, but you've got food to eat. I can't keep you."

I stood taller, straightening my spine. It was the longest we'd spoken since last Friday. Her friends could spare her a few seconds longer. If I'd had the chance to see her sooner, I might not have felt so anxious.

"How are you getting home?" I had to know.

"We're all calling cars when the show ends. Don't worry. We're being responsible."

"What time does the show end?"

"Around midnight."

"How about you let me be your ride home, then?"

A heartbeat of silence followed. For a second, I worried the call got dropped, but the smile on Sam's face echoed through her reply.

"I can't let you do that."

"And you think I'm going to leave you in the hands of some stranger and his Ford Taurus?"

Sam snorted. "I don't think they make that car anymore."

"Come on, Sam," I urged her. "Text me your address and let me see you home."

She sounded too precious and too pretty. My impatience to see Sam took hold. Even if we had years ahead of us, I didn't

want to waste the chance of that night. Too many lonely hours had passed without Sam in my life.

“Maybe I’m feeling generous because this show’s for charity, or maybe it’s the alcohol,” she mused.

“Blame it on whatever you like, beautiful.”

“All right,” she surrendered. “I’ll see you at midnight.”

My grin stretched from ear to ear. Like everyone else, I had earned a reason to celebrate. I ate my meal and got myself together. She was going to be with me before I knew it. In the cover of the car, I’d hold onto her even for a minute—the first minute of forever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

SAM

No bachelorette party had ever been so perfect.

Applause erupted all around us as a grand display of confetti rained over the stage. The fundraising goals for the local AIDS organization had been surpassed ten-fold. Unconventional as it was, Delilah had been right to suggest the drag show.

No drunk men were around to hassle us, but plenty of queens in wigs kindly teased and put a spotlight on our bride-to-be. It was such a good time that nobody even noticed the ten minutes I vanished into the bathroom.

In her tiara and sash, Cassidy sipped her champagne while eating it all up. Her cheeks had never been so pink. The shade rested somewhere between her blush sequined dress and her hot pink heels.

“She did that number better than Madonna ever could!” Cassidy exclaimed before throwing back the last of her glass. “That was your friend, right, Delilah?”

Delilah nodded, still clapping. “Yeah, Our Lady de Heaux is my hairstylist, but I usually call him Matt.”

Cassidy howled with laughter. Nearly falling from her chair, one of her teacher friends caught her in time.

“I just got the name!” she squealed with delight.

“And on that note,” I decided, “I think it’s time we sent you home, sweetie.”

The lights on the stage came up, and the bar had its last call. Gathering our things together, we all paid our tabs and began to figure out our rides, but my car was already on the way. The bubbles all floating up to my head made it easy to excuse my giddy grin. Nobody suspected a thing. Cassidy’s work friends had no idea, and Delilah was tipsy enough not to notice.

“You two are the best maids of honor ever!” Cassidy gushed as we spilled out of the club. “This was an *amazing* bachelorette party! I—I don’t know what those boys are doing on their bar crawl or whatever, but it can’t be as fun as this. I mean, who likes crawling, anyway? Babies?”

Her sequins sparkled as she hugged me, Delilah, and the other three women. Taxis pulled up and others waved goodbye. In my hand, my phone buzzed.

I PARKED AROUND THE BLOCK, Paul McCartney messaged me. I’ll feed the meter until you’re ready.

I WONDERED what he would think at the sight of me. The mini-dress Delilah convinced me to wear was definitely illegal in some countries. The skirt’s hem verged on obscene, but I loved the fluttery black feathers and sequins. Like a cross between a flapper and a Vegas showgirl, I had no better time to dress up than this. There would be no better time to leave a smudge of fuchsia lipstick on Cassidy’s cheek and revel in the night.

“Tucker’s texting,” she realized on the street. “Aww, he says he misses me!”

I snorted. “He’s going to see you in less than an hour.”

“Still, it’s sweet,” she said as her driver pulled up, but Cassidy looked around. “Where’s your ride, Sammy?”

My grin faltered. We were the last two. Everyone else had gone. I only needed to get Cassidy into that backseat as other club patrons passed us by.

“Oh, she’s waiting a block over,” I half-lied. “I’m gonna go meet her.”

“My driver can take you over there! It’ll only be a baby detour.”

I shook my head, waving at the driver whose photo glowed on Cassidy’s cell screen. Opening the door to the backseat, I only had to offer a little encouragement and make sure the plastic tiara didn’t get knocked out of Cassidy’s teased-up hair.

“I can handle walking one hundred feet,” I assured her. “If I managed getting lost in Morocco alone, I can do this.”

“If you’re sure . . .” Cassidy got in the car but rolled down the window. “I love you, Sammy.”

“I love you too, Cass.”

If I had known what waited for me, I might have taken Cassidy up on her offer. She wouldn’t have needed to get out or see Jude, but I didn’t expect what waited for me around the corner. I only had to follow my feet as my stilettos tapped against the sidewalk. Scanning for the familiar silver convertible, I didn’t brace myself for an uninvited guest.

Thad loomed up out of the darkness in his all-black outfit and a cold look. Surprise, surprise, he had been drinking. I smelled the brown liquor on his breath and clothes before he ever got close.

“Tucker said you girls were nearby,” he remarked. “I can’t believe you went to a gay bar. It’s so—”

“Colorful? Exciting? Terrifying for a man with fragile masculinity?”

Thad rolled his eyes. Somehow, I had channeled my inner Delilah, but I didn’t care what he thought. He wasn’t spoiling my night, not while my ride waited for me. Holding onto the silver chain of my purse, I scanned the street for Jude’s convertible.

“Yeah, whatever,” he mumbled, not that I listened.

“It was fun. Now, if you’ll excuse me . . .”

I moved to brush past him, heading toward a silver car that had to be the one. History began repeating itself. Stuck in this toxic cycle, the bubbles in my head burst as Thad reached for my arm, but I moved faster this time. I knew how to learn from my mistakes. I put myself under the streetlight, moving away from the shadows, yet it made Thad’s frustration that much more obvious.

Why was he so desperate to catch me? What did he have to gain?

“Leave me alone,” I demanded.

He shook his head, hate spreading over his face.

“Don’t make me the goddamn bad guy,” he cursed. “Hell, Sam, aren’t you the one who said you loved me once? Why can’t you just be a good little girl again?”

“That’s not how it works!”

My heel caught in a crack on the sidewalk. I stumbled, and it was just enough time for Thad to catch me. As he stared down at me, I saw no love in his eyes.

“I always get what I want,” he muttered. “I’m not going to lose this time.”

My heartbeat raced with a jolt of adrenaline. I felt him coming. My body braced itself, ready to fight.

I fumed, “You piece of sh—”

Those were the only words I got out before Thaddeus forced my chin up to meet his. The kiss tasted like old wine turned to vinegar. It caused me to recoil and sneer. I didn’t hesitate to bite down on his lower lip, forcing him to cry out as the metallic salt of blood touched my tongue. Taking control, my hands quickly shoved against his chest. I felt Thad fall back, but I hadn’t pushed him that hard.

Someone else was pulling at him, dragging Thaddeus to the ground. His gray eyes sharpened like steel. They threw

daggers when looking down at the bewildered boy on the ground. Taking in a gasping breath, my eyes grew round and wide.

“Don’t you dare touch her,” Jude growled, crouching down to face his opponent head on. “She’s not a damn piece of meat.”

I didn’t know where he came from. I tried to decide whether his arrival was for better or worse. Hearing the vitriol in his voice, I couldn’t be sure. I never wanted a one-man cavalry to come charging in for my sake, but Jude was already there. I wasn’t going to deny him.

Thad sneered. “And she’s not your kid. What do you care?”

“Because I’m a man with a shred of decency, you little shit,” he fired back. “She told you no. Now, you have five seconds to respect that, or I’m going to hold you down while Samantha teaches you the meaning of the word. You got it?”

Thad quickly nodded. As I wiped the awful flavors out of my mouth, he saw the disdain in my eyes. There was nothing but a black heart under those handsome features. He only ever wanted to take every girl he saw and chew women up. I shouldn’t have been surprised. I didn’t expect anything but for him to scurry away into the shadows.

Still, after all that time, part of me hoped I’d been wrong about him. That scrap of the girl I had once been continued to hope that Thad held some redeeming feature, but there was no chance of saving him or the moment. It only proved how optimism could be a curse.

Jude rose to his feet and reached for my shoulder. “Are you okay, Sam?”

“I—I’m fine.”

It wasn’t the unwelcomed kiss wounding me. Deep down, I felt the old me six feet under and sealed in a concrete tomb. She’d never rise from her grave, but I heard her knocking on the coffin door. All her old scars still lived in me.

“Can I take you home?” Jude asked gently. “At least let me see you to your door.”

I nodded, taking in a deep breath.

That still had to be in the wedding. Cassidy deserved that picture-perfect day, and my history and baggage couldn't change that. For her, I'd smile and pretend, but with Jude, I didn't worry about being happy. He let me lace my fingers with his and follow him blindly from the shadowed scene. In the safety of his car, we took off into the night, never once looking back.

I watched the world breeze by until we reached my place. Jude shifted into park and looked over at me. The lights of the dash cast him in a dream-like glow.

“Would you rather be alone?” he asked, his voice calm and patient.

“No.” I shook my head. “I don't want to think about fretting alone all night. It'll be much easier to keep an eye on you here.”

His low chuckle eased the tension in the air.

When it mattered, I fought back. When I needed it, I drew my hard lines in the dirt, but that didn't mean I wanted to do it all on my own. Life didn't seem so abusive with Jude beside me.

Following me into the house, he made us chamomile tea while I washed off the night. All that glitter and makeup faded away. I traded it out for a T-shirt and a bare face, but the look in Jude's eyes was no less devastating. I didn't need to be dolled up to capture his attention. There, in the quiet of my room, the outside world melted away.

“Feel better?” he asked as we slid into bed.

He only wore his fitted boxers, giving me the freedom to feel every inch of his six-foot frame. I wanted him against me. I wished to give him more, but fatigue claimed me. With my head on Jude's chest, I draped myself over him and smiled. The smell of rosemary filled my nose.

“Now, I do,” I replied.

His arm wrapped tighter around me. “I hope he didn’t spoil your night.”

“No. I just wish I saw your reaction to my dress.”

“It was enough to kill a man,” he muttered. “I hate that I didn’t take it off you myself.”

“Another time, then.”

Letting out another yawn, I refused to let the one blip of cruelty overshadow my evening or permeate my dreams. I slept safe and soundly in Jude’s embrace. I had nothing to fear and no reason to fight. When the morning light filtered through the bedroom, I awoke to a shade of pale blue-gray like the color of Jude’s eyes.

Fog rolled over the river outside. The world remained peaceful, and until the sun broke through, I only had to admire his silvery doll’s lashes as the night drifted away.

“See something you like?” Jude asked, opening one eye and then the other.

“Something I love,” I muttered back. “I realized something, though.”

“And what might that be?”

“I never thanked you for coming to get me . . . not properly, anyway.”

Perhaps I was still a bit intoxicated or caught up in a hazy dream. It didn’t matter to me. With my hand cupping Jude’s cheek, I let my leg drape over him. Memories of his devotion came flooding back, and if we weren’t leaving my bed, I knew exactly how to show my appreciation and see if it might be possible to love Jude any more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

JUDE

Sam woke me up faster than coffee ever could. Twisting and turning under the sheets, her legs draped over me, fastening me beside her. Her hands laced around my neck as I lost track of everything beyond her. Those beach blonde waves fell like a curtain around our faces. Her Mona Lisa smile became the only thing I could see.

She pushed back the covers and left me exposed to the chilled morning air. Time slowed. My eyes begged to shut, but watching the fan circle slowly overhead, I hardly had the will to move. Sam claimed it for herself. Her lips slid across my jaw and down my breastbone. Her warm hands followed, tracing over the places she left behind.

“Are you going to let me love you?” she murmured.

I sucked in a deep breath. “Yes, beautiful.”

“Will you be all mine?”

“Always.”

I heard the smile in her voice as my eyelids surrendered along with every muscle in my body. Down between my legs, Sam dragged her tongue from base to tip and took me in hand.

She let her wrist twist up, down, and around while my breathing grew labored. Under my skin, my entire body burned. I felt the urge of wanting more, but it tore me up to imagine her stopping. Holding back her hair, I never wanted the sensation to end.

She was an addiction, an obsession, and a salvation all rolled into one.

“Sam, I . . .” I started to say, but I had no words.

Nothing sounded good enough. With pleasure building in my chest and pooling at my center, I let myself get lost. Sam kept me tethered to reality. She could take me higher and bring me down to earth again. With her lips around my tip, I gave myself over to everything she offered in that early gray light.

Time slipped away from me. Whether it was two minutes or two hours we stayed like that, I couldn't tell. My breath caught when it became too much to bear. I found my release, and Sam took it for herself. She swallowed before meeting my eyes with a self-satisfied grin.

“Isn't that better?” she wondered softly, the dry rasp of sleep still in her voice.

“Yes, but don't I get to return the favor?”

It wasn't like I could leave the bed without it. Shifting her weight under mine, I made Sam sprawl out across the mattress.

“You wanted to make me happy,” I reminded her. “You wanted me for yourself.”

Guiding her arms, I pushed her shirt up and over her head. I kissed Sam's shoulders and the crook of her neck. Her body moved under me, but she didn't shy away.

“That's true,” she had to admit.

My lips moved to the hollow of her throat. Heat radiated from her skin.

“Then, let me have what I want.”

“Take it,” she insisted. “It's already yours.”

My hand outlined her curves upon the invitation. It pushed past the thin piece of cotton, reaching for her slick folds and little pink bud. Kissing one breast and then the other, I felt her shuddering gasp course through me. My thumb circled over her clit. It moved to coax another whimper of pleasure from her body while my two fingers curled against her walls.

I refused to be the only one who fell apart.

Sam writhed against the euphoria. She tried to muffle her cries, but I knew them all. I committed every one to memory. I felt her chest's rise and fall until one shuddering breath made her call out.

"Jude."

My name echoed through the room as she went limp underneath me. Sam caught her breath. I licked my fingers clean, and some part of me called it my new favorite flavor. Another part wanted to fall back to sleep. The only trouble was that I didn't know if I'd ever woken up.

Slowly, Sam's limbs crept over me like climbing vines. Her hand reached to turn my cheek her way. Moving like her puppet, my eyes closed. Our noses brushed against each other before our lips lazily met.

We had no reason to rush or pull ourselves apart. With the cool breeze blowing over us, all was divine. All was well.

"Am I dead?" I muttered. "Is this a dream?"

"No, it's Friday morning."

I shook my head against the pillow. "That can't be right."

"Are you calling me a liar, Jude Harlow?"

"No," I swore as she pulled herself closer. "You're too smart and too good to me."

"That sounds about right," she remarked before kissing me one last time. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, how about breakfast?"

"I think I can manage that. Stay right here."

Fussing around her small kitchen, I managed to make coffee and toast while being a man of my word. I washed some strawberries from her fridge and brought it all upstairs. Sam stayed in that four-poster bed of hers. Wearing nothing but her bedsheet, she lingered beside me well into the morning. We let ourselves forget every obligation until it became impossible.

I kissed her goodbye at the front door and went home to change. In a few quick hours, I saw her again all fresh and glowing. She wore that little black dress of hers. Her hair was all curled and perfect, but I couldn't touch them or even get too close. She waved from across the room.

We had plenty to keep us apart. The hotel observatory was a long room with ornately trimmed walls painted a decadent shade of blue. One of the long walls let out onto a rooftop with seating and greenery that led back into the rooftop bar.

According to the hotel's day-of event coordinator, the bar would serve as a pre-function space before the ceremony began. She explained it all to us as we began to practice around the staff moving in chairs. I tried to listen, but my attention kept drifting elsewhere.

"Okay, so the piano will be here," she said, gesturing to a corner of the room. "We'll have the aisle running from this main door, so if everyone could please line up."

The stout, bow-legged woman hustled from person to person, moving faster than I ever expected. She knew exactly what needed to be done, and we were all her stubborn sheep. I made sure to keep out of her way as the others continued to practice. Bethany's niece pretended to scatter petals from an empty basket. Tucker and Cassidy stood at an arch waiting to be decorated.

I only had to mind my own business, but one foolish boy didn't know how to do that. Sliding up to me, Thad placed himself to my left without a word.

"There are plenty of other places to stand," I reminded him.

He straightened his shoulders, flexing his chest and posturing.

“I thought you might like some company,” he muttered. “You don’t seem to go without it for long.”

“*Watch yourself.*”

“Oh, I need to watch myself? Tell me now, do you think I ran away last night?” he asked, edging each word like a threat. “I saw how you held onto her and how you looked at her. I might have been drinking, but I’m not blind.”

“You saw nothing,” I swore. “You’re just throwing a tantrum because someone isn’t giving you what you want, not that you even want her.”

I’d seen his type before. If I were a certain kind of man, I could have ruined his life without even lifting a finger. I had the means to squash him like a roach, but that would only be pointless. With his particular brand of arrogance, Thaddeus was bound to self-destruct.

He snorted out a laugh. “Like you’d even know.”

“I know more than you think.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I refused to be baited by an overgrown boy. Crossing my arms, I kept my eyes staring ahead as the others practiced the seven Jewish blessings. Delilah mimed handing Sam a microphone before she began reciting from an index card. Beside me, Thad grumbled.

“Sure, try to act like you’re better.” His lip curled back into an arrogant sneer. “But I’m not the one screwing around with a girl almost half my age, am I? And your daughter’s friend too. That’s got to be the cherry on top.”

“And I’m not the one getting friendly with warmongers.”

While I did my research on furnished apartment rentals and the best up-and-coming cities, I paid others to do some professional digging into Thaddeus Drayton. Curiosity might have killed the cat, but this time, satisfaction brought it back with a surprising array of secrets.

He tried to hide it all behind his superior airs and social graces. Thad wanted to laugh it off, but I knew the ugly truths about the boy playing with fire.

“I know what kind of contracts you’ve been working on,” I muttered. “The kind of deals you’ve been making after hours. Does your firm know about your little side hustle?”

Thad sucked in a sharp breath. “Are you going to tell them?”

“If you give me a reason,” I promised, not breaking my glare, “I definitely will.”

His hands slid into the pockets of his black suit slacks. He backed away one step at a time, yet I still held onto his gaze. I refused to be the one to break or surrender. He was vindictive, selfish, and loved to see those who wronged him hurting. If he wanted to fight, I wouldn’t stop him. I only needed the right excuse, but Cassidy called out to me.

“Dad, let’s practice walking in!”

“Sure,” I agreed, turning my back on the moron.

I smiled for her. I put on a show and did as asked, but my thoughts couldn’t leave him or the woman he tormented. If I knew anything about Thaddeus Drayton, it was that he refused to quit or know what was good for him.

Our fight was far from over, but if he came for me or any of the people I loved, I wouldn’t hesitate to make good on my promises and end him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

SAM

Even from across the smaller sunbathed ballroom, I noticed how agitated Jude had become. He hid it well, shaking hands and smiling for the other dinner guests, but I had come to know him too well. His jaw clenched. His grip tightened around his glass. He appeared picture-perfect in his pristine navy suit. Still, I saw everything simmering underneath and the metallic glint of his eyes sharpening to a razor's edge.

What made him so upset?

My fingers curled around the stem of my wine glass. I had no way of discreetly reaching out, and in the room of a hundred out-of-town guests, I needed to play the part of a gracious maid of honor.

“Do you need more water?” I asked Cassidy, working hard to stay focused on her. “Are you hungry or need a break?”

She grinned. “No, no, I’m fine, Sammy. Thank you.”

The happy couple decided to divide and conquer the room until the meal began, and I dutifully followed a half-step behind. We wandered from table to table, greeting the wedding guests who had just checked into their hotel rooms.

In her white satin cocktail dress, Cassidy became the perfect picture of a bride. Her painted lips stretched into a wide smile, and every word became effusive and kind. I did my best to mime her, but my throat had started to dry out from all the small talk.

Delilah had gone to get us two water bottles emblazoned with the wedding logo. Glancing over, I saw she held the waters, but her attention was fixed on the broad-shouldered groomsman I hadn't gotten a chance to know yet. Between avoiding Thad and helping Cassidy, my attention was overly occupied.

Cassidy did say Owen Braun served in the military reserves. It took a quick appraisal to see that he damn sure looked the part, and Delilah, well, I knew that smile on her face.

She was *into it*.

Walking from one table to the next, I prodded Cassidy in her side. She stopped and turned.

“Hey,” I hissed. “Have they met before?”

Cassidy looked where I pointed. Her eyebrows shot up, and her smile shifted into an amused smirk. We both knew what was happening across the dining room.

“If they haven't, Owen's definitely about to meet our Delilah,” Cassidy joked. “Come on, I've gotta find my cousins from New Jersey. We can tease Delilah tonight in the hotel room.”

Still, I had to say something when dinner finally began. We sat at the bride's table with her parents, her sister, and even Jude's mother. It tried not to think about who she was or what she might think of me. Impressing her wasn't my problem for the evening. Under the light of those crystal chandeliers, there were far bigger problems to worry about.

“So,” I muttered to Delilah between courses. “What did you think of that Owen guy?”

“He was nice enough.”

“That’s not what your face said thirty minutes ago.”

Delilah scoffed, elbowing me under the table. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“I could tell you the same thing.”

I needed to laugh and see my friend roll her eyes, but Delilah didn’t distract me enough to not watch a horror show unfold in real time. The waiters with their silver ties emerged to take away our dinner plates. It was time for dessert, but first, we had thank-yous and speeches to hear. Standing at their sweetheart’s table, Tucker graciously spoke for himself and Cassidy while keeping brief. I’d forgotten what was coming next, though.

“For tomorrow night, Cassidy and I have asked two people from our families to offer toasts, but we know that many of you all have well-wishes you’d like to share,” he explained into a microphone. “That’s why we’d like, before the dessert comes, to open up the floor to anyone who might like to speak. If not, that’s okay! I know Cassie here won’t mind getting her gelato a few minutes faster.”

The room laughed along. First, a man who introduced himself as Tucker’s uncle spoke, then one of Cassidy’s northern cousins, but I didn’t brace myself for the third man to take hold of the mic. Thad’s grin looked too smug to be a good sign, and based on the glazed look in his dark eyes, I knew he’d been drowning himself at the open bar.

A pit formed in my stomach.

“If we haven’t met, I’m the other Thaddeus Drayton,” he began proudly. “Some of you might have met the senior Thaddeus because over the years, Tucker and I have been like family to each other. We grew up in the same neighborhood. Our fathers were already friends, but damn, Cassie, all your cousins here put Tucker’s family to shame. I didn’t know there were so many Goldwyns in America, but you’re all great! It’s been wonderful seeing how my best friend’s family is growing . . . just, you know, getting bigger and bigger. It’s so great to see.”

Then, Thad looked my way. It hit me even from twenty feet away. Adrenaline coursed through my veins. His haughty grin twitched, and a bolt of horror shot through me.

Oh, no.

People were shifting in their seats. Their polite smiles grew anxious, but Thad continued anyway. He didn't care what people thought of him. It didn't matter who he hurt with all this collateral damage. Standing taller, he was ready to rage through that rehearsal dinner like a hurricane.

“And there's not just the Goldwyn family!” he exclaimed through the speakers. “There's the man, the myth, and the legend, Jude Harlow! Jude, I don't know if you ever knew, but Tucker here used to be scared of you. He was so terrified of meeting you for the first time that he nearly made himself sick, but at that first Thanksgiving in California, Jude was nothing but nice to him. By the time Cassidy and Tucker flew home, Tucker told me he felt like family, and he knew that these people, the Harlows and the Goldwyns, were going to one day be his family.”

The words should have been sweet, but they rang out with bitterness and spite. Everyone heard it. Murmurs and confused looks rippled through the crowd. Behind him, Cassidy began to look uneasy. No amount of silent glaring got Thad to stop drunkenly rambling.

“What's he doing?” Delilah muttered beside me.

I shook my head. “I . . . I don't know.”

But I did. Thad was angry. He was reckless and beyond ready to lash out. The awful truth screamed from the back of my brain.

You caused this! It's all your fault!

I had to do something to stop the catastrophe. If not, Jude looked five seconds from boiling over. His handsome features hardened to stone while his eyes went red with fury, but I was faster. Shooting up from my seat, I was the only one willing to forgo any semblance of Southern grace. We all didn't need to suffer.

Only me.

As I wove through the tables, I knew I was too late. Thad saw me and began to spit out his cruel point. He shoved it like a dagger right into my chest.

He nearly shouted, “And your family is gonna grow too, Cass, more than you even know! Just look at your dad. With all that damn money of his, I’ll bet he won’t be for long. You might even be calling someone else ‘Mom’ soon!”

Seeing nothing but red, feeling nothing but hatred for the prick who loved making me miserable, I let my hand fly across his face. The slap echoed through the microphone’s speakers. The back feed rang sharp in my ears, but I hardly heard it.

“Get a hold of yourself,” I hissed, but it was too late.

The dust settled around me, and I began to see how Thad got exactly what he wanted. A hundred pairs of eyes grew wide with some mixture of confusion or surprise. Owen, the only man in the room big enough to single-handedly manage the fuming Thad, popped up out of nowhere. As I grabbed the microphone, he snatched back Thad’s arms. Thad struggled to no avail.

“We’re going to get some air,” Owen declared for them both.

Running up, Delilah took the microphone and laughed, “Oh, Thad, he’s always wanted to try stand-up comedy. It’s a shame he’s no good at it, but really, seeing everyone here, it’s clear to see how much Tucker and Cassidy are loved. Sam and I have been helping Cass for months now, and . . .”

The words drifted away. The guests welcomed the change of speaker, but I didn’t care about them. Turning slowly, one pair of hazel eyes remained on me.

She heard Thad’s words. She saw my reaction as clear as day. Cassidy Goldwyn was many things.

Dumb wasn’t one of them.

Everything imploded all at once. Swallowing back the bile, I bolted from the room. My skin felt too hot. My black cocktail dress became confining. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

Were the walls of the hallway closing in? I heard something moving, but it was just the swinging side door. It fell shut before being thrown open again.

"Are you okay?" Jude asked, but I didn't have time to respond.

As warm applause came from the next room, another concerned face emerged through the door. Her green and gold eyes hadn't lost their intensity. That metallic glint of resolve never faded, and right behind her, Tucker's eyes found mine with a desperate hope for answers. His mouth fell open. Cassidy was the only one able to speak.

"What did Thad mean?" Cassidy demanded, her gaze boring into me. "Samantha, *what did he mean?*"

Right there in the hotel hallway came the moment I had been dreading. Waiters breezed past trying to ignore us, but I saw their fearful faces. Every nerve in my body became electrified, shocking my system. Bile rose higher in my throat.

Though I shook my head, I would never shake the feeling. I couldn't look away from Cassidy. Tears welled in my eyes, but I forced myself to stare back.

"I—I never wanted you to find out, especially not . . . not like this," I tried to explain through every stumbling syllable. "If I could go back, if I could change things, God, Cassidy, you don't know how much I've been punishing myself over this."

"That's not an answer."

"It's . . . It's a lot to explain."

"Then, start somewhere."

I swallowed hard. "Jude and I met in New York. We were on the same canceled flight, and . . . and . . ."

The answer refused to come out, but Cassidy filled in the picture. Her eyes shut tight and tears stained her pink cheeks. Mascara ran with them.

“Have you been . . . since then?”

Words failed me. I dug my own grave, believing it was where I deserved to be.

“Kind of. Maybe. We—”

“I don’t want to hear anymore,” she decided, her voice cracking.

Stupid and senseless, I continued, pleading, “I didn’t realize who he was to you. I love you so much. You’re one of the most important people in my life, but Jude and I—”

“*Don’t say his name.*” Cassidy cut me off with a raised hand. “Don’t talk like that. All this time, you have been keeping this from me. I can’t believe you both lied to me all this time. You said you wanted to be here for me, but was that ever true? Why were you even here? All these months, why did you even care?”

She spun out, careening as realizations sucker punched her one after another. I saw it there in her face—the anger, the horror, the betrayal, and the embarrassment. Jude tried to reach out.

“Cassidy, I—”

When his fingers brushed against her shoulder, Cassidy recoiled as if his touch spat acid. She swatted the hand away. Her face contorted, and she retreated into Tucker. He didn’t know what to think of it. His arms just embraced her while a door swung open behind us. The whoosh of air brought in the two bewildered faces of Delilah and Bethany. Both pairs of eyes went wide trying to make sense of the scene.

“You’re not going to make this right!” she fired his way. “I can’t believe, I can’t . . . You can’t be here anymore. I—I can’t look at you, at either of you.”

Delilah piped up. “What’s happened?”

“I can’t.” Cassidy shook her head, saying it over and over. “I can’t right now.”

As if her body wanted to reject the truth, a look of nausea swept over Cassidy’s face before she let out a ragged exhalation. She cast her eyes up to the ceiling, forcing her features to school themselves as Bethany came closer. Cassidy took the tissue her mother offered. She burrowed into her purse for face powder and a comb.

“I think it’s best that you do as she says,” Bethany decided, not looking up. “Dessert’s almost over, anyway. You’re better off being discreet.”

I wasn’t sure if she meant me, Jude, or the both of us. Either way, I didn’t have the gall or guts to stand there another minute. The ground needed to swallow me up, yet it refused.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Cassidy choked out.

She pulled herself from Tucker, taking her mother’s makeup and turning away. There was no goodbye or chance of apology. As Delilah squeezed my arm, her silent sympathy provided no comfort. I felt numb to everything watching the three women go.

My two best friends left me behind.

“I’m sorry,” Tucker apologized, not knowing what else to say.

I sucked in a sharp breath and nodded. “Me too.”

Stuck in the painful silence, I stood there feeling the pulsing in my ears and the pit in my stomach. The tears didn’t stop. They came without sobs or any crying out. Everything I had been holding back, for all that godforsaken time, came pouring out.

“Come on, Sam,” Jude whispered.

He took my hand tenderly. Holding onto me as if I might break, he led me away from the party and the scene of the disaster. The sounds of clinking glasses and idle conversation faded away. Beyond my mourning, there was nothing else to be done.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

JUDE

I might have handled screaming. I knew how to deal with tirades and anger, but Sam's behavior unnerved me. Silently tormenting herself from within, she wallowed in the tub of my hotel suite. Her attention focused on one spot on the wall while her fingers and toes turned into prunes. The water masked the tears on her face that came and went like passing rain.

"I knew it would hurt her," she mumbled. "I've ruined her wedding."

"No, you didn't ruin anything. That wasn't your fault," I tried to say, but she hardly registered the reply.

Crouching by the tub, I placed my hand over hers, feeling how cool it had become. Her head turned my way ever so slightly. The pain in her eyes wounded me.

"Everything will be set right," I told her. "I gave you my word, Sam. I promised I'd do everything I could."

Sam must have heard how the words rang hollow. Turning away from me, she let her blank stare return to the fanciful wallpaper, yet I didn't blame her. What was I supposed to do

so late that night? The best thing I'd done was get Sam's bags from her room a floor below.

Sam, Cassidy, and Delilah were all supposed to be spending the night together. Now, the suite sat empty, haunted by everything that had gone wrong at dinner. My eyes swept over Sam's suitcase on the bed as my cell phone rang.

I swallowed back the nerves. Seeing my ex-wife's name was rarely a good sign, and it wouldn't be that night. I brought the phone to my ear and braced for impact.

"Hey, Bethany," I began. "What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me why our daughter's upstairs in her old bedroom inhaling a pint of ice cream and listening to her old CDs," she replied, not pulling any punches.

I stepped into the living room, shutting the bedroom's pocket doors behind me. Whatever was about to be said, Sam didn't need to hear half the conversation. I didn't trust her wary mind to fill in the blanks.

"Is she alone?" I asked.

"No," Bethany answered before letting out a sigh. "Delilah's here with her. Joe's going to drive them back to the hotel in the morning."

"Good."

"It's not good, Jude!" she huffed. "Cassidy cried the whole way home from her rehearsal dinner talking about how who's going to walk her down the aisle. She didn't even let me say your name."

"Then, why exactly are you calling me?"

"Because from what I can tell, your damn impulses have nearly ruined our daughter's wedding! Who else am I supposed to call about this?"

"She didn't tell you what happened?"

"No."

"Well, it's not the best." I sucked in a deep breath. "It definitely won't win me father of the year."

Bethany's tone deadpanned. "You watched me shit myself while giving birth to our daughter. I've earned the right to see your ugly sides."

I let out one bittersweet laugh before slumping down onto one of the small, tufted sofas. Through the window, I saw the Lutheran's famous steeple illuminated over the city. Its light cast a dull glow through the open blinds over all the brass fixtures and brocade fabrics in their stately shades of blue. The room looked too good for my mess.

"To make a long story short," I started off reluctantly, "I met Sam in New York for a brief period of time. I didn't know who she was to Cassidy. We were on the same canceled flight, ended up having breakfast, and I . . . I liked her."

"*Liked?*" she echoed, her skepticism pushing for a better answer.

My voice dipped lower. "I fell for her. Samantha was always so worried it would hurt people, but I wasn't smart enough to listen."

A pregnant pause held me from the other end of the line. Running a hand over my hair, I wondered if Bethany had just hung up.

"I guess twenty-five years haven't changed you," she muttered. "Still as lovesick and persistent as ever."

"Beth, I never meant for Cassidy to find out like this. I didn't want anything about my feelings for Sam to spoil Cassidy's wedding. Once she got back from her honeymoon, I was going to come clean and make things right."

"How?"

"I was working on it."

Grumbling on the other end, I knew how Bethany must have looked. Her eyes were scrunched tight. Her two fingers pinched the bridge of her nose. I had seen the look a hundred times over in our short-lived marriage.

"Look, I can't tell you what to do," she said. "You're a grown man. Sam's an adult, even if I remember when she and

Cassie played house with their dolls.”

“But I don’t.”

“I get it. She was never a child to you, but Sam was Cassidy’s friend first.”

“I know.”

“She was like Cassidy’s sister long before I ever had Talia.”

“I know,” I replied again.

“This was never going to end well.”

“No,” I had to admit. “Keeping it a secret didn’t make anything easier, either.”

“No,” she agreed. “Right now, though, we need to make this as painless as possible for her. We’re not getting our deposits back, and Cassidy says she’s not canceling the wedding.”

“I guess that’s a good sign.”

“I’ve already talked with Talia. If Cassidy’s still upset in the morning, she’ll stand in for Sam, and I’ll walk Cassidy down the aisle alone. It’s not traditional or even ideal. The girls’ dresses won’t match, but it’ll be fine.”

Bethany always knew how to manage a crisis. It’s what made her a good mother and why I trusted her to raise our daughter with an entire country between us. Between the two of us, we always made things work, but this was a trying test of Bethany’s talents.

“I know you’ll take care of it,” I offered. “Whatever you think is best, I’m sure it is.”

“But you’d better be there, Jude.”

I shifted in my seat. My eyebrows knitted together.

“Wait, what?”

“You have to go to the wedding. I don’t care how bad things are between you two. If you aren’t there to see Cassie get married, you both will live to regret it.”

“I ... I don't know, Beth.”

“Yes, you do,” she insisted. “It's not like you to be scared of anything.”

“I'm not *scared*.”

I was terrified. It took me back to the days of being nineteen with a newborn and a courthouse wedding certificate that was barely a month old. I had no clue what I was doing. Everything I played by ear. Each day felt like a wild improvisation, yet even if it scared me, I kept going.

It didn't matter how my pulse quickened or adrenaline coursed through my veins. I had to be better for my family. I needed to do the best I could.

“Okay,” I said finally.

“Okay? You're going to be there.”

“I—I'll come to the ceremony, yes.”

We talked a little more over logistics or whether anyone asked questions about the strange scene at the rehearsal dinner. Thaddeus was a drunk fool. It meant nothing. As far as anyone knew, everything was perfectly fine, but hanging up, my chest felt anything but.

Guilt crept over me and bore down on my back. The rose-colored shades fell off my eyes, and I felt the full weight of why Sam had dreaded this day. For her sake, I always wanted to be hopeful and offer her comfort, but it took me too long of a time to rise up from my seat. I needed to stop pretending that I had the answer, if only for the night.

Pulling back the pocket doors, I saw Sam standing there with her suitcase unfolded at the foot of the bed. Her damp hair was combed back. The scent of night-blooming flowers lingered around her. Wearing a pinstriped sleepshirt, she rubbed a fragrant cream into her hands.

“We can't miss it,” she said all of a sudden.

“You heard that, huh?”

Sam nodded. “The second half, I think.”

It had been a long time since I'd discarded my suit and washed my face clean. Crawling into bed beside her, I let my tired body sink into the plush mattress. Sam pulled the covers over us. There in the dark, I began to see that I didn't need to solve every problem the moment it happened. I didn't have to put on a brave face for investors, employees, or a curious public.

Draping my arm over her waist, I asked Sam, "Are you sure you want to go?"

"I have to be there for her, even in some small way," she whispered back. "I'll sit in the back. With all those people there, Cassie will never even see me. I'll just be another pattern in the wallpaper."

"Okay."

I kissed her forehead, breathing in the scent of her jasmine. Sam tucked herself closer to my chest. No, I didn't have all the answers.

I only needed her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

SAM

To call me a wallflower was an overstatement. In my dark green dress, I existed like the stem or leaves. I forced myself into the background of the background, trying too hard not to be seen.

Standing next to Jude made me too obvious.

Even in the far corner, we stuck out like sore thumbs at our cocktail table. Paranoia told me that every passing glance was a condemning glare.

“Do you think they know?” I whispered to Jude.

“I doubt it,” he replied, taking a swig from his glass. “It was kept pretty quiet last night, and if they did hear, nobody has the nerve to talk about it.”

Nobody had the sense to kick *it* out either. Even though he spoiled the rehearsal dinner, Thad stayed on as Tucker’s best man. Perhaps watching him up there was part of my cosmic punishment. He glad-handed familiar faces and carried on like he hadn’t been casually cruel, but I would be damned before missing Cassidy’s wedding day.

For her, I shrank into the shadows with my glass of cucumber water. Guests gathered all around us in the pre-function space and out onto the rooftop terrace. They sipped their drinks, nibbled on the charcuterie, and admired the sweeping views of downtown. I only had to hide in their shadows for a few hours. The massive crowd became a strange sort of blessing for me and for Cassidy.

With those few hundred people, I became another face in the crowd, nobody special and nobody worth remembering. It was the perfect place to hide, yet I couldn't help myself. My heels tapped with nervous tension. My mind raced through all the preparations happening a few floors down.

"I hope everything's going okay," I muttered. "The makeup artist should be there by now. Delilah said she'd be sure she got paid, and the dress is already there."

I ran through my maid of honor checklist even though it wasn't mine anymore. Delilah had been keeping me up to date, asking questions about the tasks meant to be divided and conquered. She was handling it all now, and to her credit, Delilah did it like a champ.

"Don't worry." Jude reached for my hand tapping on the navy tablecloth. "It's all falling into place thanks to your help."

"Is it, though? Did I do everything I could?"

Sighing, Jude let his grin brighten the room. "Nobody expects you to be perfect, Sam, but you got pretty damn close."

All except for one fatal mistake.

I shook the thought away and washed down the bitter taste with another drink of water. Although I refused to regret loving Jude, I hated myself for lying. A long night's sleep and a good breakfast made the problems seem smaller. Still, the anxiety wallowed inside me. Our deception had been cruel and selfish, and there would be no good way to make this right with Cassidy . . . if we ever got a chance at all.

"Don't beat yourself up," Jude murmured.

I struggled to look away from his eyes. Our fingers wove together as his expression became infectious. With Jude so close, I breathed in that familiar herbal scent while fighting back my smitten smile. My heart didn't deserve to flutter and feel so deliriously light.

“Can you read my mind now?”

“No. It was an easy guess.” He leaned closer. “You wrinkle your nose when you're agitated or upset.”

I had to stop myself from covering my nose.

“And you start sighing when you're trying to keep calm.”

“Sue me.” Jude let out another half-sigh before catching himself. “We both want this to go well for her.”

“I know, and I'm sorry you won't get to be up there with her.”

“As long as she's happy, I'll be fine.”

It was our mantra for the evening. Everything else needed to go smoothly. Instinctively, my eyes scanned the room to be certain of it. If one single thing looked out of place, I would . . .

“Oh, my God,” I muttered. “The *au-freaking-dacity* of that cow.”

She really had no self-respect.

Gliding off the elevator, Sutton brazenly wore a wedding dress. She could call the floor-length dress eggshell, ivory, or champagne, but it was one hundred percent a wedding dress. Taking on this grand finale of a snub, where did she even find the gall? Whatever she thought, Sutton needed to think again.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing Jude by the wrist.

Our pity party was officially over. We had more important matters at hand.

“What?” he asked. “Where are you taking me?”

“I'm gonna need cover.”

People were already whispering. Eyes glanced over and back to their friends with a knowing look. If Cassidy heard about this, it would be the last straw. I had already spoiled her wedding enough. Sutton didn't get to add insult to my injury.

Pulling my credit card from my bra, I hustled over to the bar and told the man, "I need a glass of your darkest red wine, and I mean near-pitch-black burgundy that will stain the darkest of souls forever."

He nodded, bewildered by the request. Jude looked just as confused standing beside me. He didn't argue or fuss. Leaning against the sleek bartop, he only waited for an answer.

"I'm going to need you to walk with me like you're having too good of a time," I explained hurriedly. "Do you understand?"

"Not at all, but I'm willing to play along."

"That's why I love you."

The reply slipped out so easily. It took me off guard, yet I liked the feel of the words on my tongue and the ease of them. Jude flashed another grin that warmed me from within. It was only a heartbeat later that the drinks came, and we each took a swig to steel ourselves. The red wine was smoky, earthy, and redder than blood—the perfect shade for revenge.

I whispered to Jude, "Follow my lead."

Our arms linked together, we pushed through the crowd. I grinned like a fool and pretended to tell a funny story. Jude readily played along, not letting a single silver hair get ruffled by the madness.

"I told him!" I exclaimed. "I told him, but he wouldn't listen!"

Sutton came into view. Chatting with some of Tucker's friends, she had her head turned away from me. It only took one fake stumble on the edge of the hotel carpet. My stiletto heel pretended to catch, I yelped, and the flowing white dress became splotted with maroon. It nearly matched Sutton's face as she reddened with fury.

“You bit—” she started but stopped herself. “Look what you did to me!”

Abandoning my glass on a nearby cocktail table, I put a hand to my mouth before pretending to fret. I feigned a gasp as onlookers began watching.

“Sutton, I’m so, so sorry!” I lamented too effusively. “I would’ve loved to have finished that wine myself. It’s such a waste of good grapes.”

Jude nodded along. “Highly recommended by the bar staff.”

“Ugh!” Sutton scowled, fuming as her eyes darted between us. “I don’t care about the wine! What are you going to do about this?”

I opened my mouth to say I had a spare dress she could borrow in my hotel room upstairs, but another voice drowned mine out. As other guests let the spectacle play out, Delilah came pushing through.

“I have a dress you can borrow upstairs, Sutton,” she declared.

“Will it even fit?” Sutton sniffed. “I mean, we’re not exactly the same size.”

“Well, it’s not like there’s a Bloomingdale’s nearby.”

Her lips drew into a thin line. Sutton glared down at the wine stain.

“I guess it’ll have to do,” she said, but she refused to be pleased about it.

The doors began to open to the ceremony space. The crowd around us got distracted, but catching my attention, Delilah leaned into my ear. My heart had no time to settle.

“We’ve got a DEFCON one with Cassie,” Delilah hissed. “She’s locked herself in the bathroom and won’t let the makeup artist put on the fake eyelashes. Nobody can get her to come out.”

Oh, no.

My eyebrows shot up. “And you think I can?”

“You’re the only one with a chance,” Jude muttered beside me.

Nobody gave me time to protest. Delilah slipped a spare suite key into my palm, and before my mouth opened, Jude nudged me toward the elevator doors. He followed close behind like a sheepdog herding his one-woman flock. Jude made sure I followed the other two onto the elevator. Even while Delilah tugged Sutton through the next door of the adjoining room, he kept nudging me toward the door. I could hear the chaos happening on the other side.

“She needs you, Sam,” he encouraged. “You know you need her too.”

I stared at the brass numbers on the door.

“I know,” I whispered before slipping in the plastic card.

A light turned green on the handle. The door unlatched, and slowly, I pushed it open. Jude didn’t follow me into the fray of women. There, Bethany Goldwyn stood in a living room with an impatient makeup artist and a bemused photographer. Makeup sat all scattered across the gleaming dining table. Bobby pins were left forgotten on the oriental rug. As the only pristine thing, Cassidy’s dress hung against the wall, looking even more lovely than the day I first saw it.

“You came,” Bethany said, almost sounding surprised.

We didn’t have time to waste.

“Where is she?” I asked. “Where’s the bathroom?”

Bethany pointed through a pair of double doors. It wasn’t far off from Jude’s suite. I followed my feet past a king-sized bed to another smaller pair of white pocket doors. Behind them, someone sniffled.

“Just give me some space,” I murmured to Bethany.

Nodding, she shut the bedroom doors. Silence let the sniffling grow louder, and for a second, I froze. My palm pressed flat against the cold wood. I didn’t know where to begin.

A knock couldn't hurt, could it?

My knuckles rapped against the door in two quick beats, but my heart beat faster. I took every ounce of courage I could muster to call out.

“Cassidy, it’s me,” I said.

The sniffing stopped.

“What are you doing here?” she shouted out.

“Because I’m a glutton for punishment. I’d let you stay, but I don’t think Tucker can marry you through a bathroom door.”

“Did Delilah go get you?”

“Yes,” I confessed. “We ... I got worried.”

A weight slumped against the door, compelling me to crouch down. I felt her there. Cassidy was so close, yet I still couldn’t reach out. With my weight balanced on the balls of my feet, I leaned forward.

“Can we talk?” I asked hesitantly. “If you want to insult me, you can. You can invent new swears to call me.”

“I don’t want to do that.”

“If you don’t want to be mad at me, what do you want to talk about?”

“Nothing. Everything.” She sucked in a deep breath. “I thought I could do this on my own. I told myself it didn’t matter what the day looked like, but that was a lie. I can’t even make myself believe it.”

“What’s wrong, then?”

“You! Sammy, I—I can’t do this without you, but I can’t just forgive you. I can’t get past it right now, no matter how hard I try.”

“I’m not asking you to forgive me, Cass,” I assured her. “Honestly, I never expected it.”

“You were my first real friend,” she persisted. “Whenever I needed you, you were there. Do you remember when you

coached me through using my first tampon?”

We were in eighth grade gym class. Bethany had only ever let Cassidy use pads, but we only had a tampon between us. With dodgeball about to start, I had to do something to help.

“We talked through the stall door kinda like this, but, you know, I’d rather be beside you if you’ll let me in.”

The silence felt like another lifetime, but another lock clicked open. Holding my breath, I waited for enough space to make it into the bathroom. She had on nothing but a floral satin robe, yet her hair looked braided, curled, and sprayed with enough product to survive a world war. Crawling back, she leaned against the glass shower door, snatching more tissues from a box she dragged down from the sink.

I sat down on the marble floor too. At her level, I tried to make myself as small as possible. My legs tucked themselves under my body. I wrapped my arms around my chest to keep from reaching for Cassidy too soon, but time ran against us.

“The ceremony space looks beautiful, you know,” I remarked quietly. “Everyone’s already in awe.”

Cassidy blew her pink-tinged nose. “That’s nice.”

“Cass, you can hate me for as long as you like. I know I lied to you, even if I felt ashamed of what I was doing. Sneaking around and keeping secrets did nothing to help, and I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for putting you in this position and spoiling your special day so far, but if you’ll allow it, I want to be there for you again.”

“How?”

“Let me help you get ready and make it through the next few hours,” I pleaded softly. “Come tomorrow, you can be as angry as you’d like for however long you want.”

Cassidy pursed her lips. Thinking it over, she stretched her legs across the floor. Her legs slowly relaxed.

“I . . . I get why you lied, but I’m not ready to forgive you or my dad. I’m not ready to talk about it.”

“That’s okay.”

“But I need you there beside me,” she admitted, her words barely a whisper. “I need you and Delilah more than I need this hair or that dress out there. You know all those mix CDs you used to make for me?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve still got them all. They’re pretty scratched up, but I’ve got ’em in my bedroom.”

“We even listened to a few of ’em last night,” Delilah added as she suddenly emerged in the doorway. “Do you remember being obsessed with Lana Del Rey? One summer, you definitely were.”

A smile toyed at the corners of my lips. “I kind of do.”

“Cassie can show you once you’ve made up, but right now, there’s a wedding going on upstairs,” Delilah reminded us. “There’s a groom about to burst from excitement and a bridesmaids dress hanging in the next room.”

“What did you do about Sutton?” I asked.

“Gave her a wrap dress and told her to choke on an appetizer,” she replied with pride. “Now, can we finish doing your makeup, Cass, and can Sam put on her dress?”

Cassidy began to smile again. “Yeah, Sam, you should put the dress on.”

“Isn’t Talia already filling in for me?”

“My sister hates standing in front of people.” She shrugged it off. “Delilah, can you find my father for me?”

“I don’t have to look for him. He’s hovering in the hallway trying to appear nonchalant, but he’s definitely *chalant*.”

“Tell him he’s walking me down the aisle,” Cassidy decided. “It’s like Sammy said, there will be plenty of time for me to be angry later.”

CHAPTER FORTY

JUDE

For the first time in my life, a whirlwind had turned chaos into order. Everyone worked to erase any trace of the drama. Dabs of makeup hid tired eyes, and in a mad dash, Sam made her quick wardrobe change. The airy blue dress poured over her curves like water. Out in the hotel hallway, it looked like nothing had ever gone amiss.

“You ready?” Sam asked as some young woman in black handed her an ivory bouquet. “You’ve got your tissues?”

I cracked a grin. “What makes you think I’ll need a tissue?”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Cassidy stepped out into the hall, and I realized what Sam meant.

My daughter looked like even more of a vision than in the wedding boutique. Not a hair out of place, she glowed in the light that always lit her from within. It put a smile on her face and added rosy color to her cheeks. Fluffing her skirt, she looked up at me.

“I’m gonna need you to pull down my veil,” she reminded me. “It’s kind of tradition.”

I did as she asked, following a half-step behind. Cassidy led the way for us all toward the elevator. We all took turns heading back upstairs to the observatory. In my head, the minutes counted down.

We knew this day was coming. From the first moment I ever held Cassidy in my arms, I told myself that she wouldn’t stay six perfect little pounds forever. She was bound to grow up and move on, and I couldn’t have been prouder of her.

Last to arrive, the hotel staff kept us away from the ceremony’s entrance. Everyone got in line and stepped out into the light. I counted every breath. Beside me, Bethany seemed to be doing a better job of keeping it together . . . until I saw her cry.

I reached into my jacket pocket. “Here.”

“Thanks,” she whispered.

With the bridal party down the aisle, the music swelled and shifted into a new melody. The pianist’s flourish struck a chord inside me. I couldn’t let it go, even as Bethany moved to our daughter’s side while I took the other.

“Cassidy, I know I haven’t been a perfect father, but I—”

She took my hand and stopped me with a small smile. Her sweet hazel eyes peered through the veil.

“It’s okay, Dad,” she assured me. “We’ll worry about it tomorrow.”

“I hope not then. You’ll be flying off on your trip.”

She didn’t need to pack our problems in her suitcase. After these fraught days, she deserved to relax and feel the light on her face. I needed her to be happy.

“Later, then,” she agreed.

The coordinator hustled over, looking frazzled already. “Are we ready?”

Bethany nodded beside me. “We are.”

Getting into position, there was no turning back now. We stepped into the long blue room filled with loved ones, lesser friends, and an abundance of ivory flowers. Cassidy didn't look at any of it. Her focus stayed straight ahead toward the man she loved most. I'd never seen her so certain, so absolutely sure.

Bethany and I did our jobs. Pulling back her veil, I kissed her cheek and took my step back. Samantha smiled at me from a few feet away, encouraging me even through reverent silence.

The ceremony had been planned so well. Under the floral arch, Cassidy said her vows with clear perfection. She must have said them a million times over in her head. Tears misting in the corners of his eyes, Tucker could hardly wait to get his out.

It came time for the show of the tradition—a way to appease the white-haired cousins with stiff upper lips. The piano player began a lilting melody as the seven loved ones assembled in their practiced line. Sam took her place, saying the fifth blessing when it came time to take the microphone. The lilting kindness of her voice rang out, but her attention stayed on me.

“Blessed are the ones who bring people together and unite the divided,” she recited from memory. “In joy, we have come to witness this marriage of many cultures. It is said everyone gets married at a wedding. Bless the happy couple bringing us together through your union today.”

The officiant offered her blessing. The last words were declared.

“Tucker, you may now kiss your bride!”

Cassidy threw her arms over his shoulders. She didn't wait for him while the whole room erupted in applause. My Cassidy was now somebody's wife, and he belonged to her more than any other man possibly could . . . even me.

The masses moved downstairs little by little once the music ended. Cocktails and appetizers awaited them on silver

trays, but the wedding party needed to take their pictures first. We were hustled and corralled by the photographer's assistants, keeping us all on schedule. Out on the terrace, we all waited patiently, but I caught how Sam kept her distance from Thad.

Her eyes stayed on the city. She smiled for the camera, but once the flash went off, her fake smile went with it. She didn't look angry or upset, but watching her made me uneasy.

"Can I get one with me and Grandma Maggie?" Cassidy asked. "I think there's a concrete bench around the corner that could be a good spot."

The photographer agreed. Heading around the bend of the building, Cassidy disappeared from view. Tucker's parents headed down with their photos finished, but I lingered with the maids of honor and groomsmen.

Bethany started checking her phone while Talia and her father looked out on the city. We were caught in our little bubble and perfect prey for the one snot-nosed bastard who couldn't help himself.

"You put on a good show, don't you, Dad?" Thad muttered with a smirk.

My eyes cut his way. "Shut up if you know what's good for you."

"What?" Thad snorted. "I mean, after that spat of yours, I'm shocked to see you here."

Owen quickly noticed. The military man stood taller, but Sam was the one to intervene first.

"You're the one who shouldn't be here," Sam swore in a near growl. "I've put up with your crap for too long, and if you don't cut it out, I'll take that smirk of yours and stick it where the sun doesn't shine. *Got it?*"

"I'm not the slut here," he spat back.

Everyone turned on a dime. With that one word, my knuckles went white. Tucker's head whipped around in shock, and Delilah looked ready to throw Thad over the roof if Owen

hadn't held her back. Sam was the only one within reach, though.

After all her heartbreak, she was the one who earned the right to grab Thad by his silver tie and watch his eyes go wide.

Her lips curled back in a sneer. Her eyes darkened to an ominous shade, and sudden as it was, I'd never been so afraid and adoring of a woman. She wore her murderous look well.

"Oh, yes, you are," she hissed. "You're the one who can't keep it together or keep it in your damn pants. You're the one who had fucking Chlamydia and still tried to force me into having sex with you. If there's anyone here who needs to go to hell, it's *you*."

"What?" Tucker demanded to know, his face growing fierce. "Thad, are you kidding me? Is that what really happened to you?"

Sam sniffed once. Before I realized what she knew, her hands snatched the flask from his navy suit jacket. Bethany turned around. In the corner of my eyes, I caught her attention, nodding where Cassidy was.

She got the message. Taking her daughter's hand, Bethany sheltered both of her girls from the scene, not that it saved the tears burning in Sam's eyes. Nobody could save her from the pain.

"Tell your friend that you're a drunk, Thad," Sam spat. "Tell him how you refuse to lose and refuse to listen when a woman tells you no. She has to fight you off instead."

"*You bastard*," Tucker swore before lunging.

Thad reeled back, but I caught Tucker in time. He didn't need to hurt his hand or get blood on his suit. For his bride, he had to remain photo-ready.

"Calm down," I told him in a low tone, forcing myself to be logical too. "Cassie will be back any minute."

"Sam is Cassidy's family!" Tucker went on anyway. "She's my family, and that's how you treated her? Dammit, she should've done more than slap you."

“She should’ve cut off his balls,” Delilah muttered.

Thad thought he could get away with it. Still smiling, he stepped away from the venomous women and laughed nervously. He opened his mouth to make up some lame lie.

“She’s making it up. She’s lying because—”

“Because what?” I fired back at him.

Tucker didn’t give Thad a chance for rebuttal. Pulling himself from my grip on his arm, he smoothed his jacket and huffed.

“Get out of here,” Tucker told him. “Get out of this hotel and my life, and don’t you dare think about bothering my family ever again.”

Owen raised his eyebrows. “Do I need to carry you out again?”

“No,” Thad grumbled. “I’m going.”

For the first time, he kept his word. I didn’t know if it would be the last of him. As Sam shoved his silver flask into the nearby garbage can, I had no way of sparing her from the past, but I could let her hug me.

“You did it,” I whispered to her. “You’re okay.”

“I am,” she agreed.

Delilah took her hand gently. In their two matching dresses, the maids went off to check on their bride. Owen decided to follow behind Delilah, leaving me and my new son-in-law alone. The summer breeze suddenly sounded loud, or perhaps our silence had the subtlety of a freighter.

“You did good,” I remarked, patting his shoulder. “I’m sorry about your friend.”

Tucker gave me half-smile. “Thanks, but I think I always knew Thad was . . . problematic?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“There are a lot of words you could use for him, but after what Sam said, I can’t forgive him. I can’t write off his actions

anymore. I've got to be the better one."

"You already are."

Sliding his hands into his pockets, he closed his eyes and took in a deep, long breath. The dust settled around us over the terrace and its potted plants. His smile became more earnest.

"When I first started dating Cass, I felt like she was always measuring me against you," he confessed. "You were, like, more of a myth than a man."

I laughed, shaking my head. "I'm not that special. I've definitely made mistakes in my life and with Cassie."

"I know. I even knew it before last night." He paused for a moment and turned to me. "She will forgive you, you know. Cassidy loves you too much."

"I hope you're right."

As much as I loved Sam, I hated the thought of Cassidy leaving me behind. I had been callous with her feelings. I'd underestimated her strength and how much she'd grown. A few nice words or a trip to the ice cream shop wouldn't make things right, but I had to hold onto my hopes for a little while longer. After all, the wedding reception hadn't even begun.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

SAM

Sitting at her sweetheart's table, Cassidy finally had the stress-free wedding she deserved. The ballroom glowed for her in shades of ivory and cream. The wine flowed freely, and the air smelled of roses. With Owen stepping in to give the best man's toast, everything fell into place and I could breathe again.

I grabbed a glass of pink champagne and toasted the happy couple cutting their cake. In such a massive crowd, I got lost in the commotion of the party. I chatted with guests and put on my best smile, maintaining that semblance of honor my position required. Between the dancing, music, and old acquaintances, I didn't see Cassidy until it came time for her to change.

Delilah brought down the little white dress from the hotel suite. In ten minutes, Cassidy and Tucker would be riding off into the night, or rather, around the block in the hotel's vintage cab. Their honeymoon suite was still on the property.

"You've got everything you need for tonight?" I asked Cassidy, undoing the pearl buttons running down her back.

She clutched the corsetry and nodded. “Yes, I’ve got my bag packed. It’s in the new room.”

“Any naughty lingerie in there?” Delilah asked as she stepped through the door.

Wagging her eyebrows, she smirked at her own silly line, but I knew why she tried to keep the mood in the hotel bathroom. The space in the handicapped stall only had so much room. The bridal ballgown took up half of it, and the rest of the free air grew tense with all the words left unsaid.

“Tucker told me about the argument,” Cassidy said before stepping out of her dress. “I noticed he’s gone.”

“Yeah, he is.”

Her voice grew quieter. “What don’t I know?”

“A lot,” I admitted. “I never wanted to put you in an uncomfortable position. I didn’t want to make you choose.”

“That’s starting to sound like the story of my life.”

“Cassidy, I—”

She shook her head, stopping me.

“We can talk when I get back,” she decided.

I had to nod and agree. The guests were being corralled out into the hotel patio and given sparklers to hold. In her white dress, Cassidy had only minutes before grabbing her groom and taking off into the night. We didn’t have the time for a heart-to-heart.

“Have a safe trip,” I told her. “Enjoy the beach.”

“Thanks, Sam ... for everything.”

Her final smile reflected the melancholy in her gaze, but she pushed it all away when she stepped out to meet Tucker. The newlyweds hugged their parents goodbye. People cheered, and cameras flashed. Just like that, Cassidy took off in the yellow cab, and I was left with nothing but the hope that she meant what she said.

I didn't know what I'd do if I lost my best friend, but at the very least, I'd done my job.

After the send-off, the party dwindled down. A coffee service came out, and the music mellowed. Old standards mixed with familiar love songs as I made a home for myself by the bar. I was on my second glass of sparkling wine when Jude appeared with cake.

"I'd give you a gold star for tonight, but the hotel was fresh out," he joked. "Will cake suffice?"

I accepted my fork with a wide grin. "Oh, cake will most definitely suffice."

"Can I get a vodka tonic?" Jude asked the bartender.

Two minutes later, he had it while I tasted the cake I'd helped fight for. It was lemon layers with ruffled white buttercream and blueberry jam filling. Cassidy had exactly what she wanted, and it was undoubtedly divine. Jude picked up his fork and let his voice dip below the music.

"Jokes aside, I don't know if today would've happened without you."

"It was my mess to clean up," I reminded him. "That doesn't make me special."

"You were trying to protect someone you love. Even if you messed up in the process, you did it for the right reasons."

"*We* did it for the right reasons," I amended. "We both got her down that aisle today."

"And now that we have, what's next?"

One look in Jude's eyes, and I knew the answer. He had at least a dozen different ideas and a hotel room until ten o'clock the next morning. Recalling our history with hotel suites, I felt something sinful spark within me too. It was only when the song changed that Jude inclined his head. A new idea came to mind.

"Let's dance," he declared.

"Oh, I don't know."

He stole the last forkful of our cake and took my hand. I didn't get a chance to protest. Leading me around the half-filled tables, Jude must have seen that I had no excuses. He must have seen the urge to say yes written all over my face. Under the shimmering chandelier, our bodies caught the faint rainbow refractions of light. They danced over Jude's white shirt and in his lovely light eyes.

It was so easy to love that light.

"Hey," I realized while Jude placed his hand on my back. "I know this song."

His lips brushed against my ear as he murmured, "If I remember correctly, you stole it off the internet and burned it onto a CD."

It was the old Bruce Springsteen cover I fell in love with at eighteen. The Southern singer crooned over her mellow guitar, slowing down the lyrics so that Jude and I could sway. Our feet circled each other on the parquet floor. Our hands wove together, and nobody seemed to notice.

"Tell me now, baby, is he good to you?" she sang through the ballroom speakers. *"And can he do to you the things that I do? Oh, no, I can take you higher . . . Oh, oh, oh, I'm on fire."*

"I can take you upstairs," Jude told me, but I shook my head.

"I want to finish this song first."

The music stayed with me, though. Heading out the side door and up the elevator, I heard the lines echoing through my mind. The world seemed to be in love with itself. Even Delilah was making eyes at the wedding's new best man, but my best had me enchanted. I didn't think about the loves we left behind. I only wanted my love, my Jude, and no one else.

Holding onto me, we left the party behind to get lost in our own delight. His arms wrapped around my waist in the elevator. My back pressed into him, and I felt his burning desire pressing back. It became a quiet temptation. It compelled my steps to get quicker and my body to come alive.

Once Jude swiped his key card through the handle, it was all I could do to not fall through the open door.

“Beautiful,” he muttered, untying the sash around my waist. “So. Damn. Beautiful.”

Our lips met, and I took the breath from his lungs.

“Did you buy me this dress just to take it off?” I had to know, but I needed to kiss him too.

I ached for his hands to cast aside the dress and for his mouth to savor every part of me. With my head inclined, Jude’s teeth grazed over my neck before gently nipping at my ear.

“A man can dream, can’t he?”

The words sent shivers across my skin. Dancing once more, we moved together through the living room. My heels hit the wall as I kicked them back. My fingers yanked apart Jude’s buttons and let the tailored navy suit become a pile on the couch. We made a mess of each other, not thinking twice about what was happening.

He and I were beyond that now. The wine went to my head, and my heart felt light. Only pleasure compelled me. Undoing the zipper of his slacks, I couldn’t wait to forget where my body ended and his began.

I longed for him, all of him, every day of my life.

Falling back onto the freshly made bed, I fell for Jude for the thousandth time. I adored every silver hair on his head and kissed him until I grew senseless. I didn’t hide how all of my anticipation soaked through that sheer bit of lace. Jude wasn’t the only one on fire.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” I taunted him, gently pushing him toward the center of the bed. “You wanted my dress on the floor and me coming undone?”

I threw off that final piece of fabric. Nothing stood between us now. Skin brushed against skin. Our hands wandered wherever they wished. My legs straddled Jude, spreading wide and inviting him closer. With my hand

wrapped around his length, I felt his grip dig deeper into my backside.

“It’s only fair,” he swore against my mouth. “Every time I see you . . . when you’re close . . . it’s almost too much to bear. I love you.”

“I love you too, Jude.”

Lowering myself onto him inch by inch, I relished how his lips trailed down my throat and to the tops of my breasts. My hips rolled against him. My clit brushed against his skin, and when the first small wave of euphoria hit me, Jude’s grip encouraged me to keep my pace.

We had come too far to give up or surrender. Anchored against his shoulders, I let my body move as it desired and allowed instinct to take control. I had nothing to hide in those shadows cast by the open blinds. Under the city lights, my heart and I were both adored and safe in Jude’s capable hands. His embrace became my home. I only had to give in to the sheer, unadulterated pleasure.

“I love you,” I pleaded like I’d never say it enough. “I love you so much.”

My toes curled. My spine longed to twist and writhe, but I kept going until the climax claimed me. I didn’t give up until, in near unison, Jude and I became wholly satisfied.

We fell back together again, still linked, intertwined, and breathless. I shut my eyes and let our breathing slow to a comforting pace. Lying there, those fragile minutes felt like forever, but my skin grew cold. My fine mist of sweat dried up and sent a chill over my skin. Jude and I only had to clean ourselves up and crawl back under the bedsheets.

“I could spend the rest of my life like this,” he muttered while pulling me into his chest. “Do you think we can buy this room?”

“I think you already have a house, and you promised to travel with me.”

Jude chuckled. “And it’s too late to turn back now.”

The good feelings reverberated through me as I made his chest my pillow. Though I teased him, my heart quietly agreed. It felt so natural being in his arms. Wherever he was, I was at home, and that didn't have to change.

We ruined everything to be together. Now, we needed to pick up the pieces of the past, pack them away, and find the right path forward. That all could wait, though.

"You know what I realized?" I lifted my head from his shoulder. "I haven't been swimming all summer."

"We can do it tomorrow, or we can do it all week. We'll go pick up a swimsuit and that fancy computer of yours. You can work and swim as much as you like at my house."

"Louise might wonder where I've gone."

Jude laughed once. "We'll leave a note on her front door—*I've gone swimming with the boyfriend. Don't wait up.*"

"Is that what you are?"

"Well, *man-friend* sounds pretty damn weird."

"You could be my paramour," I teased. "Maybe you're my significant other, my lover, my mate, my *inamorato*—"

"Okay, no, that's not a real word."

"It is!"

"No, it isn't," he swore. "If you keep lying, I'm going to have to do something about it."

"But it's real! Look it up!"

Jude didn't care. I saw the sinful grin on his face. He only wanted an excuse to pin me underneath him again. His lips needed a reason to press behind my ear while I laughed.

Excuses, excuses. It was only foolish pretense.

He needed no label or title. Jude was simply Jude, *my Jude*. With my hands in his hair and our legs tangled together, I let him be whatever he wanted. He only had to remain beside me because with him . . . anything felt possible.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

JUDE

Over the empty patio chair, I watched as a group played chess out on the concrete patio wedged between two old buildings. Some had coffee drinks. Others enjoyed an early beer. Taking a swig of my iced chai, I began to think I should have chosen the latter, but a glass of beer or wine wouldn't have settled the tension tightening my rib cage and tightly gripping my lungs.

Every breath I took came with slow, even purpose while I waited for her to show. Within walking distance from her school, I offered this meeting place as neutral ground. I had a feeling we were both going to be uncomfortable no matter what.

“Hey, Dad,” I heard her call.

My head whipped to the left. A big canvas tote was hoisted high on her shoulder, and while clutching it, she gave me a small wave and an even smaller smile.

A week in the Virgin Islands had been good to her. In her overall shorts and breezy yellow blouse, Cassidy looked tanner and her hair blonder, but she didn't have the ease of a woman

coming back from her honeymoon. Her hazel eyes looked weary.

“Did you order already?” I asked.

She nodded, barely hugging me. “Um, yeah, they’re gonna bring it out.”

By the hedges and the old fountain, Cassidy and I settled across from each other. The weight of what needed to be said hung between us, yet we waited. A short young man, easily still in high school, came hustling out with a pink iced tea and a scone. Cassidy picked at the pastry with her fingers as she told me about her classroom.

“Since one of the kindergarten teachers retired, I’m going to be the senior teacher this year,” she explained. “It’s weird because I’ve only been there for, like, two years now? I don’t feel old enough to be telling my colleagues what to do.”

“But you are,” I remarked. “They wouldn’t give you the job if the school didn’t trust that you can handle it.”

One side of Cassidy’s mouth smiled. “Well, there are only three of us, so I get the distinction of managing our reports with the principal and helping open up the school after summer break. So far, it’s a hoot.”

“And your trip was good?”

“Oh, sure.” She nodded and took a sip of her tea. “We went kayaking, snorkeling, and visited the hotel spa one afternoon. All in all, it was a beautiful place. Tucker and I even talked about going back in five years.”

“That’s great. I, um, I’m glad you two enjoyed yourselves.”

A summer breeze blew over the patio. I took in a deep breath, trying to stay calm. With Cassidy watching me, we both knew this small talk was merely buying time. I didn’t know where to begin.

“I think it’s your turn to ask the questions,” I decided aloud.

I folded my hands on the metal table. Perhaps I should have worn something better than another dumb concert tour T-shirt and showed that I'd tried to make an effort to be better. Flipping her long hair back over her shoulder, Cassidy didn't seem to notice. Her eyes went elsewhere as her lips pursed. We sat in silence for an agonizing minute.

"I don't want to be the selfish or petty kid," she began. "I never want to be the reason you split up with anyone, but I've gotta admit it's still weird to think about you and her, you know, *together*. I don't feel ready to forgive the lying, either."

"That's okay," I assured her.

"Can I ask a question, though?"

"Of course."

She picked off a bite of her scone, wondering, "Why her? Why Sam?"

I'd thought about that question a thousand times over. Over those last few days, I pored over every moment, going back to the very beginning. I wasn't naive enough to be so beguiled by a pretty face or think that's all it ever was. Caught at a crossroads of my life, I found Sam there by happenstance. I looked across the airport bar and saw someone searching—someone like me.

I cleared my throat and sipped my drink. "You know, I spent the last two decades making my business my life. Once your mom finished law school and our marriage had dissolved, I knew she wanted to come back to South Carolina. All her family was here, and she didn't have much of a life in California outside of you, me, and a handful of friends. She wanted to come home . . . because I hadn't given her one. I could've come here with her. We could have stayed married for you, and I would have found a job here."

"Doing what? You were made to be in the music business."

"If only I played an instrument," I joked lightly, but my chuckle petered out. "Anyway, I, um, I've done a lot of thinking over those choices, and I realized I spent all those

years at Elysian justifying my choices. Sure, I dated. I liked having someone in my life. I don't know anyone who dislikes being in love, and I was in my twenties. I could've easily remarried forever ago, but I wasn't exactly free to commit to anyone. All I thought about was you, Cassie. I wanted to give you the best life possible, even if I couldn't be there to see it."

Cassidy's features softened. It made her look like her mother, the one I met at a summer party a lifetime ago.

"Dad, you know I never felt deprived or unloved," she insisted. "I loved our summers together. It made me feel special to think I could go off and have this amazing adventure with my dad. Mom was always great, and eventually, she found Joe and had Talia. I've never felt short of anything. I don't want you feeling guilty for staying in California and doing what you loved."

"I know."

"So, what does this have to do with Sam?"

I shrugged and let out a sigh. "Now that you're a married woman, now that you're grown and I've stepped back from the company, I started seeing how I filled up your absence with work. I was looking for the next chapter of my life, and well, I found Sam. She . . . she has something I didn't, or well, *I don't*. She taught herself to be content wherever she is with whatever she has while I've always been chasing something. She knows how to choose herself when it matters and still be generous and kind, and I love her for it. Sam creates her own happiness, and the selfish parts of me wanted to be like that too. I know that might be hard for you to hear. I know it's strange, but it's true."

"It's what makes her a good friend," Cassidy mused to herself. "A best friend."

"I'm not going to say it was fate. I won't tell you to be happy for me, but Cass, I am sorry for letting this hurt you and become a burden in your life. All I've ever wanted was to be a light in your life. I love you so much, and out of everything, having you as my kid was the best thing I've ever done."

Tears misted in the corners of her green and gold eyes. Her smile became more earnest. Running a hand over the back of her neck, Cassidy tried to shake the emotions away. She didn't want to fall apart in public.

"I might be your kid, but like you said, I am an adult now," she replied. "I want to be mature about this. I want you to be happy, and I'd never forgive myself if I ruined your relationship with someone who can make you happy like that."

"But it's okay if we don't get back to how we were," I pointed out. "Things were bound to change between us. It's life."

"I know."

"And I still love you, Cassie."

"I know, Dad." She smiled more brightly. "I love you too."

As she finished her scone, we talked about the old times. Cassidy remembered baseball games and Sundays on Malibu beaches. In many ways, she was still that little girl running through the waves in her pink swimsuit. She was the kid who had me check the closet for monsters and the teenager making me play the mix CDs her best friend made. Still, Cassidy was more than the sum of her parts. The light glowing from within her was far more than I could measure, and I knew that, in time, we wouldn't go back to what we were.

Cassidy and I could become something better.

"I hope you know that I'm never in a million years going to think of Sammy as my stepmom," she joked while I walked her back toward the school.

She still had more to do before going home to see her friends. With Tucker going out with some friends from work, Cassidy had to meet Delilah and Sam for dinner in town in an hour. Cassidy didn't want to waste the time driving home to a quiet apartment.

I laughed along with her. "I don't think we're there yet. We've got a long way to go, Sam and me."

Cassidy's feet slowed to a halt. Her mouth opened. Then, she bit her lower lip. Something her eyes looked scared to ask, but curiosity won out.

"Is that something you want, though?" she wondered hesitantly. "One day, would you . . . will you marry her?"

"That kind of depends on Sam."

She rolled her eyes. "*Come on, Dad.*"

It wasn't something I said aloud, but my heart whispered it every time I looked at Sam or heard her voice echo through my head.

"I hope so," I answered. "I'd certainly like to find out."

And yet, I knew that was only half of the truth. I longed for everything with Sam. I wanted to see the world through her eyes and fulfill even the smallest of her dreams. Then, when we were tired, we could rest together and build a life we both loved. We would make a simple life spectacular.

"It was never just a fling, then," Cassidy mused.

"No." I shook my head. "I'm no good at those."

"You never were."

When Cassidy hugged me goodbye, I hated to let her go. I itched for her arms to stay wrapped around my chest and for her silky head of hair to always stay under my chin, but it was time for our second chapter. I had to let go. We needed to turn the page, but all those old pages would still be there. Even if I loved Sam, that didn't change my love for my daughter.

"Take care of yourself," I muttered into her hair. "We'll talk soon, okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

Her wide wave was the last thing I saw before she disappeared into the school building. Another warm breeze blew through the street, ruffling my shirt and my hair. I took in a deep breath of it and let my shoulders relax. Thoughts of rings and bells drifted across my mind.

Life was about to be much, *much* better.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

SAM

Delilah made the reservation long before the pre-wedding drama and the uncertainty of Cassidy's willingness to see me. As the sound of a clock tower rang out in the distance, I walked along the city sidewalk past the growing throng of college-aged kids. The local college would be having its move-in days, and nearby apartments were quickly becoming occupied.

Summer had come and gone in the blink of an eye, but its humid heat clung to my skin. It crept up under my slip skirt and settled on the nape of my neck. My childhood taught me to get over the weather. It was the sight of the restaurant's sign that made me uneasy.

Was she going to be pleased at seeing me? When I looked her in the eyes, would Cassidy be able to meet them? I swallowed back the nerves, and grabbing onto the front door handle, I went in regardless of my nerves and latent fear.

We all had to start again somewhere.

In the trendy Italian restaurant, Delilah and Cassidy were being seated in one of the high-backed booths painted a deep

mariner's blue. It brought out the shade of Delilah's fiery orange dress and the hesitation in Cassidy's eyes. She blinked almost in surprise as if she maybe wondered whether I'd show or not.

"Hey, you guys," I greeted them.

Delilah knew to slip over toward the window. "Hi, Sam. Have a seat."

The perky older waitress saved us from a minute of small talk, but it only took so long to take drink orders. As she vanished toward the bar, Delilah let out a huff.

"All right, let's call out the elephant in the room and get it out of the way," she insisted. "I can't eat with this kind of tension around me!"

"Cassidy, I'm sorry," I blurted out.

"Sam, it's okay. I—"

A dam broke loose inside me. The words refused to be stopped.

"It killed me to lie to you. I mean, it's such a long story now. I don't know how much of it you want to hear, but all this time, I couldn't stop thinking about how we, Jude and I, might hurt you. Cassidy, you've always been one of the most important people in my life, if not *the* most important person, besides Delilah here."

"Thank you," Delilah added, patting my shoulder.

"If you want to cuss me out or berate me, go ahead. Part of me knows I deserve it. I jeopardized our friendship and let my secrets nearly ruin your wedding. I spent so much time worrying, but if I had just been honest—"

"*Sam*," Cassidy interjected.

I felt like one of her kindergarten girls. Looking at me, she took in a slow, deep breath. I mirrored the action on instinct, and my shoulders eased themselves. My pulse began to slow.

"I'm just really sorry for everything. I . . . I don't want this to ruin things between us."

Cassidy winced as if the apology pained her.

“Oh, Sammy, you can’t keep begging for forgiveness every time we see each other,” she said, pushing her long blonde hair back behind her ears. “I’ve stopped crying about it, really.”

“You have?”

She shrugged. “I mean, things still aren’t normal, but I’m coming to terms with it. I know you didn’t want to hurt me. I know how much you care.”

“I do, Cass.”

“I talked with Dad today. I talked it over with Tucker a lot, like, maybe too much, but it’s like you said, I don’t want this to ruin things either.”

“So ... you’re not ... mad?”

“I am, a little, but I’m moving past it. I have a life to live, and I can’t live if you keep apologizing or giving me that Bambi look. Otherwise, I’m gonna be the one saying sorry all the time!”

“You don’t need to do that.”

She had no reason to be sorry. As our waters and wine bottle arrived, I sat there thinking about how long I’d punished myself for being happy and feeling loved. Cassidy had her happily ever after. She had a wedding band to match her diamond ring, and while the next chapter of my life may not have the same storybook sweetness, it was mine.

I wanted everything with Jude. I had to stop regretting my desire for more.

“This is the last time, but I’m sorry for, you know, being so overly apologetic. There’s no point in making you even more uncomfortable. All this time, though, I felt bad about what was happening. I’ve spent so much time pushing against people’s expectations. I guess . . . I’ve got to let go of mine too.”

Pouring the wine for us all, Delilah piped up. “Then maybe, Sam, the person you need to forgive is yourself.”

Forgive myself? How? Where was I even supposed to begin?

Even after the bill had been paid and we all hugged each other goodbye, I tried to figure out how I might offer myself that kind of compassion. It wasn't like relaxing on the beach for a week would change me. Cassidy's honeymoon pictures looked amazing. Every photograph she showed us was stunning and serene, but they offered no solutions.

For so many years, I'd set my eyes on my ideal self—the kind of woman I wanted to be. That didn't mean I had let go of the past. I'd guarded my heart because of Thaddeus for all that time, and deep down, I knew there was one reason I beat myself up about my mistakes. There was only one person I needed to speak with if I truly wanted peace.

In the back of the cab, I pulled out my phone, not trying to understand what had come over me. Overthinking would only make it worse. I only had to press the name in my contacts and put the phone to my ear.

My mother greeted me. “Hello, Samantha.”

“Hey, Mom, is this a bad time?”

“No, I just finished cleaning up dinner with your dad,” she explained. “Why? Is something wrong?”

I shook my head, not that she saw. Taking in a sharp inhale, this moment had been a long time coming. I'd fought so many battles in my life. I justified my actions again and again, but this was the one conflict I'd spent years trying to avoid.

If I ever wanted to be free, it needed to be said.

“Not exactly,” I replied. “There's just something I need to say, something for you to hear, but . . . I'm not telling you this to be mean or to lash out.”

A pause followed. On the other end of the line, I heard Mom sigh.

“I'm listening.”

“When you always pushed me toward Thaddeus, when you told me all the things I should do, it made me feel like I wasn’t good enough. I felt like I needed to become someone I wouldn’t like. It, well, it reached a point that I hated who I was, and I left Charleston, left the country, to figure out who I was outside all this, this *insanity*. In some ways, I know you only wanted what was best for me, but I think you forgot me in the process—*the real me*.”

It took everything I had to choke out the last sentence, but I held my breath and waited. I didn’t take it back. I refused to make the words smaller. On her end, I thought I heard the scrape of the chair.

“Oh, my dear,” she muttered, the endearment fretful and bittersweet. “If I had known how he treated you, if I had even gotten out of my one-track mind for a second, we never would have gotten here. I, um, I planned to apologize after Bethany told me what happened.”

“But I didn’t tell you back then,” I admitted. “I could have said something.”

“No, Samantha, I spent a lot of my life making myself *amenable* to men. I hate to say it but it’s true.”

“The suits, the clubs, *the golfing*,” I pointed out. “You’ve never liked golf.”

“I did it to be a part of their clubs. I wore suits so they wouldn’t comment on my skirts. At least they make women’s suits in colors these days. God, I used to wear so much brown and gray.”

It was the first time I welcomed my mother’s bluntness. With her quiet, bittersweet laugh, she didn’t hold back from being honest. She didn’t hesitate to answer my question.

“Then, why did you do it?”

“Because I wanted a better life for you, but you’ve made one for yourself. Your dad teases me about it. He thinks I didn’t like that it was all your idea and not mine, but I’m proud of you. We are both so proud of you and everything that you’re doing with your life.”

“Thank you.”

“And when you find the time, maybe you come home and give us more things to brag about to our friends.”

I rolled my eyes, but I laughed a little. I asked her about work. I told Dad hello to be kind, but the conversation was long finished. My shoulders became lighter by the time I reached the carriage house. I even felt taller getting out of the cab.

The invisible burdens I’d put on myself for so long fell away with each step up the gravel path toward my home bathed in the fading summer light, yet it didn’t stand alone. A car was parked beside the house, and a tall, handsome figure became silhouetted by the golden hour.

In the front porch light, Jude smiled with a bouquet of lavender wrapped up in one hand and a paper bag from a bakery we both knew well.

“I know how you feel about tiramisu,” he remarked as I came closer.

“It’s best served with coffee or wine. Which would you prefer?”

That wonderful, winning grin spread over his face. It made me want to melt right there on the stoop. Taking the lavender from his hands, my entire body relaxed. It became impossible not to grin.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

“All right, then,” I declared, pulling out my keys. “Let’s see what we have.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

JUDE

Rubbing the lavender petals between her two fingers, the floral scent drifted over the aroma of her French press and the sugar of the tiramisu we split. It had been the last one in the shop, but Sam didn't mind sharing. She sat closer to me at the kitchen table. Her bare foot brushed against my leg. Even after all these months, Sam got the better of me without even trying.

“What have you been up to today?” she asked casually, bringing her fork to her lips.

“I saw Cassidy,” I replied.

“I did hear about that. She sounded positive when she talked about it.”

“Did she?”

Sam nodded. “But that's all I'm going to tell you. I won't be your spy, Harlow. Some things will have to stay between us friends.”

“I wouldn't have it any other way.”

I sipped my coffee as she asked, “So, what else did you do?”

“I finally hired an assistant . . . and an assistant for my assistant,” I confessed. “Elysian took on a whole team of people, actually, and they’re all to support, well, *me*.”

Sam’s eyebrows went up in surprise. Her fork tapped against the jade plate as she swallowed. After all this time, I would finally be true to my title and my original intentions.

“What for?” she wanted to know. “What are they going to do for you?”

“Make my life easier, or rather, make *our lives* easier, I guess. My job as Chief Creative Officer, Creative Director, or whatever the hell they want to call me, it was supposed to be more of a formality, but I’ve been working twenty-some hours a week when I’ve been lazier. One week, I still clocked in over forty hours.”

“That’s too much, Jude.”

“I know. That’s why I requested a new team of people to work under me. They’ll expedite, and my new assistant will be more of a gatekeeper for me. She’ll make sure I don’t hole myself up in an office doing busywork all week.”

Sam laughed before teasing, “It sounds like she’s going to be my hero. Can I send her flowers?”

“We’ll send them together.”

It felt strange to say it, knowing I finally let go of my company. Leaving Cassidy that afternoon, I got all the contracts from Diego that afternoon. I signed them before giving myself a second chance to reconsider, not that I needed it. Sitting there with Sam, all I wanted to think about were the next steps we were about to take. I remembered everything I craved from Sam the first time I saw her in her scarlet sundress.

I didn’t have to restrain myself like that anymore. Admiring Sam didn’t cause the same kind of hurt. We had come so far, but we still had many miles to go.

I mused, “I’ll always be there for the company. It’s like my second kid, but I think both of my kids are grown enough to

stand on their own now. I'm going to stop coddling them . . . or try to, at least."

I took a bite of the tiramisu and watched Sam mull over the thought. She seemed to like it. Her eyes sparked with an idea I didn't have to understand. I'd spent too long trying to read her mind. Right then, I only had to enjoy the smile on her face.

"And what are you going to do with all that free time?"

Mischief sparked in her eyes. The first time I saw it, Sam called herself my Valentine. She propped her chin on her fist while waiting for an answer.

"I'm hoping to spend it with you."

Sam tutted her tongue. "Oh, Jude, didn't anyone tell you that absence makes the heart grow fonder?"

"Are you already getting tired of me?"

"Not at all," she swore with a grin. "I'm just warning you, that's all. You might get bored with me."

"I don't think that's possible. If I get bored, it'll be with the scenery, not you."

Although, that felt impossible too. Colors seemed brighter around her. Even in her quaint cottage-like kitchen, the place appeared to be gilded in the fading sunlight. Fiery shades of rose and gold washed through the windows as they transformed to a softer blue-violet. With Sam, the simplest places became prismatic. Everything tasted better, and the future looked bright.

I wondered if I kissed her right then, would it taste like the first time I savored the flavor of coffee-soaked dessert on her lips? Could it possibly be better knowing I didn't have to let her go?

"Is that your plan, then?" she mused softly. "You're going to stay somewhere until you get bored by it and then, what, move on?"

"Not exactly."

“Then, tell me, what would you like to do next?”

I couldn't help but grin as she inched closer. Her eyes widened, but I saw how they laughed at me. That Mona Lisa smile made me lose my train of thought for a moment. I liked Sam toying with me too much. Leaning closer, I lowered my voice as if this were all some wild scheme.

“You once told me you planned to leave Charleston after the wedding, right?”

“I did,” she agreed, letting her breath tingle against my skin.

Her dreamy half-closed eyes studied me too intently.

“I was thinking we could spend the next six months traveling, except for maybe at the holidays. Then, when we get tired, we can go out to my house in Malibu and stay there until we get restless again.”

Sam beamed. “Where exactly would we go?”

“Where haven't you gone?”

She shrugged. “I've been to every continent except Antarctica.”

“We could change that.”

Laughing, Sam threw her head back. Her hand fell over mine. Everything felt so simple. As darkness fell, the world around us grew light.

“I don't need to see penguins and ice!” she said, still giggling at the notion. “I don't care where we go. I only need to be with you and to have you with me. The rest will simply be geography.”

“We can pick a place together, then.”

“Perfect.”

“And to seal our little deal, I should probably give you something . . .”

Sam's dark blonde eyebrows knitted together as she tucked her hair behind her ears. Her expression grew more serious.

Genuine curiosity flickered within as she watched me reach into the pocket of my jeans. I debated holding off on giving this to her, but like I told Cassidy that very afternoon, I was no good at casual flings. I needed to hand Sam this small box for the sake of my sanity. The gesture was selfish and impulsive in that way, but she smiled all the same.

“I saw this in a local place when I was out exploring downtown,” I remarked. “Since I knew your birthday was coming up in October, I thought I might give it to you then, but I’ve never been a patient man.”

The pleasant surprise made Sam glow. With careful purpose, she slowly opened the hinge on the gray velveteen box. Her eyes rounded, and her lips gently parted. She had something new to hold between her two fingers.

In the dying light, she admired the dainty opal ring. The gold band embedded with dust-like diamonds glinted and gleamed. Sam studied it intently, watching as the prisms of color danced within the ivory stone.

“The shop manager told me opals were the October birthstone,” I explained. “I had to steal one of your rings to know the size. I promise you’ll get it back, though, and since this was short notice, I can get you something better down the road. You can even help pick it out.”

“*Don’t you dare,*” she said in a rush. “It’s perfect, Jude. It’s all so perfect.”

“Would you like help putting it on?”

Holding out her left hand, Sam never needed help putting on her jewelry, but she happily indulged me. She lit the candles on the table as the night descended. We still had a few bites of our dessert left. There was more to be planned, but it all could wait. With my ring on her finger, it all became too much.

“I love you, Samantha,” I murmured, the rasp of want giving me away.

She reached out with her bejeweled hand, running it through the side of my hair. When it rested against the crook

of my neck, I was done. The whole house could burn around us, and I would never have noticed.

“I love you too,” she whispered before my lips met hers.

Sam’s mouth parted for me. Her gentle breaths pulled me closer.

“Did I ever tell you I bought this dress in New York?” she asked between kisses. “I picked it out the day before we met. I’ve been waiting for you to take it off me.”

“Well then, let me help you with that.”

She let me pull her invisible strings. Rising up from her seat, Sam followed as I led the shuffling dance toward the living room. The last taste of our dessert didn’t matter anymore. All I wanted was her—her chest pinned against mine and her legs tangled around me. I saw it all unfolding as we made it to the sofa. There wasn’t a chance in hell that I could make it upstairs.

“After we’ve been to all the places,” she wondered, still teasing, “Jude, what will we do then? What happens after we’ve seen everything we want to see?”

I kissed the corner of her mouth, trailing toward her ear. My fingers found the zipper hidden against her spine. Sucking in a deep breath, I found that familiar scent of night-blooming flowers, and if I got my way, I would get to know that heady perfume for the rest of my life.

“I thought we’d get married,” I whispered.

Sam answered without words. Her lips found mine again with eager delight. The zipper trailed down her back. With a quick movement, the hooks of her bra came undone, and we fell back together. She held onto a fistful of my hair while I made a mess of the scarlet linen keeping Sam from me. Her legs curled around me like climbing vines, and with my last shred of sanity, I began to agree with her teasing remark.

It didn’t matter where we went. No matter how far we flew or where we settled, I already had the whole world in my hands. A whole new life was right there in my grasp, and it all lived right there in my Samantha.

EPILOGUE:

SAM - ONE YEAR LATER

The garden glowed under the dozens of lights strung high up in the trees. Fireflies flickered in the twilight along the far edge of the dance floor. Summer heat surrendered to the violet shades of night, but Louise refused. Our desserts had just been rolled out for the party.

“You told me I couldn’t have a wedding cake,” she told me. “I got the next best thing!”

“Buying out a whole pastry shop instead?” I laughed in disbelief.

Around the cream puff towers covered in caramel, it looked like every French pastry imaginable was there on the cloth-covered carts. The hundred guests eagerly greeted the waiters offering sweets and coffee around the dining tables and lounge spaces. From yard games to the music, the reception was more than I ever needed, but Louise insisted that this was what I got for running off to get married.

It was just our feet in the white sand that afternoon. With no guests or the burden of their expectations, Jude and I exchanged vows under a palm tree in Tulum, Mexico. A

photographer captured the moment while a guitarist strummed along. My ivory silk dress wasn't anything special, nor was Jude's linen suit, but those things didn't matter much.

Like Cassidy said, I was just so sick and tired of not being married to him.

Jude and I were staying in Mexico City when we saw a couple emerging from a grand church. It got us talking and dreaming again, and before we knew it, I was researching elopement coordinators from the comfort of our furnished apartment. Everything came together in a month or so. It helped that no expense had to be spared, though.

Some feelings got hurt when people weren't warned, but the ones we loved most knew. Louise promised me a party at her house before our vows were ever exchanged. She kept her word the first weekend we came back to Charleston. With the help of Delilah and Cassidy, Louise put together an evening grand enough to heal anyone's wounded ego. Even my mother looked pleased while chatting among friends.

"You've outdone yourself," I complimented Louise, pulling her into a hug. "Thank you so much for everything."

"It's the least I can do, sweetheart." She patted my back, rubbing her hand over the silk which got a second chance to be worn. "It's been a hoot planning this party with your girlfriends. Now, you go on and spend some time with them and that new husband of yours. Enjoy yourself!"

Most weeks, it felt like all I did was enjoy myself. I still had work, of course. There were rainy days and bumps along the road, but all in all, my life had become as close to perfect as possible. I never realized it was possible to have a life where happiness always won out.

I wove through ivory tables and candlelight with the same foolish grin I often wore. When guests stopped me, I thanked them for coming and told them to enjoy all of Louise's amazing hospitality. It took me a good fifteen minutes to find my friends as she said. Sure enough, though, Delilah, Tucker, and Cassidy were all playing a game of cornhole at the edge of

the party. Delilah dominated regardless of it being two against one.

“You’re being too nice about it,” Cassidy urged her husband. “You don’t need to let her win!”

Tucker laughed. “I’m not! Delilah’s beating us fair and square.”

Stepping into the light, I smelled the faint smoke of a fire pit nearby mingling with the scent of a coffee service. Louise had really spared no expense.

“Who knew cornhole made you so competitive?” I teased Cassidy. “This can’t be the thing that splits us up.”

“Oh, you know it won’t!” She swore before pulling me into a side hug.

Tucker tossed another bean bag across the grass. Overshooting it, the bag dropped at Delilah’s feet. She squealed in sheer delight at her victory.

“Best three out of five?” Tucker yelled out to her.

Cassidy reached for his arm. “Oh, baby, you don’t need to get beaten three times in a row. Even my optimism has its limits.”

“And that’s saying something,” I added.

Laughing along, Cassidy squeezed me a bit tighter. We had officially put a new meaning to absence making the heart grow fonder. I didn’t know if she and I would ever be like this again. Saying goodbye the summer before, it seemed that traveling and time did us both good. Cassidy learned how to see Jude and me together. We figured out how to talk without making it feel awkward, and slowly but surely, we found our way back to being the friends who’d shared crayons in kindergarten.

“The flower’s coming out of your hair,” I realized, pulling back from her. “Let me fix it.”

Pinning down the silk orchids stuck in her bun, everything felt natural again. Any shame or guilt I once felt had been washed away with the seasons, leaving this shining moment in its place.

“Why don’t we get some coffee?” Delilah suggested. “I’m going to need a pick-me-up if Tucker’s demanding another game.”

“And I’m going to need a beer to nurse my wounds,” he joked.

Leaving us to it, Tucker went off to the bar as the rest of us wandered through the gardens. We passed under an archway and into a space where a cart sat under an oversized umbrella with more tables set up between the roses. We grabbed our iced coffees and hid ourselves away in the corner.

“Thank God you’re drinking coffee,” Delilah joked. “When you told us the news, Cass and I—”

Cassidy swatted her arm. Delilah fussed with the strap on her sunflower-covered dress, not getting the fuss.

“What?” I had to know.

“It’s nothing,” Cassidy swore, but Delilah went on.

“Cassie thought you were gonna be pregnant.”

I nearly spat out the drink. Swallowing and laughing, I watched as anxiety turned to pleasant relief.

“You wouldn’t have been the first,” I assured her. “My mother interrogated me for twenty minutes over our call.”

“I mean, it wouldn’t be a bad thing!” Cassidy insisted. “If you were, you’d make a great mom, and well, I know my dad’s, well, *he’s my dad.*”

Delilah snorted. “What high praise!”

The two bantered back and forth. Smiling to myself, I didn’t need to tell them that their hopes weren’t too far off. Jude and I had already started talking about our family. We’d seen all the right doctors and made plans to settle in Malibu when it happened, but those details were staying between Jude and me.

We weren’t putting expectations or timelines on ourselves. The only opinions needed were our own. Although, for all I

knew, our secret hope might have already come true. I only had to take the test in our bathroom to be certain.

“You know, before that, you should have another wedding ceremony,” Cassidy pleaded for about the tenth time. “Stateside this time!”

“She’s sad that she never got to be your matron of honor,” Delilah added before sipping her drink.

My eyebrows went up. “And what about you?”

“Well . . .” Delilah shrugged. “Even if it’s cheesy to admit, I do love any excuse to spend time with you two.”

“And this time, we won’t have any drama with an ex,” I remarked. “Although, I’m a little surprised Thad didn’t show up here tonight. He’s never one to turn down an open bar.”

Their easy smiles faded away. Cassidy set her cup on the table. With her hands retreating into her lap, she shared a hesitant look with Delilah. It wasn’t funny this time.

“What don’t I know?” I finally dared to ask.

Shifting in her seat, Cassidy bit her lip. Delilah let out long, heavy sigh before letting her voice dip into a hushed tone. It didn’t feel like a secret I wanted to know.

“Thaddeus died a few months back,” she told me. “We figured your mom would’ve told you.”

Cassidy reached for my tapping fingers. “If we’d known, we might have told you, but it was right around the time you were in Tulum, and nobody wanted to spoil your trip.”

“H–how?” I mumbled.

It didn’t make sense. Shaking my head, nothing let the sudden news settle. Was it crazy for me to feel sad about it? Was I sorry that Thad never got a chance to be redeemed? He was far from perfect or even good, but sitting there, a small part of me wished better for him.

“It was a freak heart thing,” Cassidy continued. “He was driving home one night after a weekend trip. They said it

might have had something to do with his drinking or an undiagnosed condition.”

“There was an investigation and everything,” Delilah added. “People were asked questions to be sure it wasn’t anything suspicious.”

“And it wasn’t ... right?”

Delilah pursed her lips for a second. Something stayed hidden in her eyes.

“No,” she said. “It was just one of those unfortunate things. Even I felt bad for his family.”

“We all did,” Cassidy agreed softly.

Neither the iced coffee nor the cream puffs made me forget the news. As callous as he’d been, after the pain he caused, Thad’s short life looked sad. He left this world alone and probably frightened. Some might have called it just desserts, but I hadn’t hated him in a long time.

I had my husband to thank for that.

All those worries which used to consume me stopped living rent-free in my mind. Instead, I looked to those adoring gray eyes and watched a grin break over Jude’s face. It was like watching the dawn. Every time, I found something else to love. My thoughts grew quiet and my heart content. Our eager guests had kept us apart, but even through the flowers and the fray, I found him.

“Having a good time?” I asked, reaching for his hand.

His fingers laced with mine. “Much better now that you’re here.”

Standing at the edge of the dance floor, Jude looked like a midsummer night’s dream in his linen suit. The undone button at his white collar tempted me closer, begging for me to tug another open and then the next. I forced myself to be patient. Life might have been fleeting, but we had time.

“Dance with me?” he asked as the song slowed into a new melody. “You promised me at least one.”

“Yes, I remember.”

Jude didn't give me a chance to slip away. Abandoning his beer glass, he led me through to the center of the dance floor. The days of hiding away with Jude in the shadows were long gone. Under the string lights, Jude settled his hand at the small of my back. My cheek leaned against his shoulder, and as they always did, our imperfect pieces settled together.

“I know you said we shouldn't try too hard,” he murmured under the music, “but at least three different people have made comments about us starting a family.”

I laughed into his chest. “Yeah, you're not the only one.”

“I'm not getting any younger, you know. If you want to get out of here . . .”

My head shot up, and my eyes found his. “I thought you wanted to dance!”

“I want a lot of things, beautiful,” he offered with a teasing smile. “Sometimes, they conflict with each other.”

With a roll of my eyes, I settled back into the crook of his neck, and the party faded away. The smell of the sprawling gardens got lost to traces of Jude's cologne. The music moved in time with the rise and fall of Jude's breathing. Around us, time crystallized. Life slowed, and we didn't need a single flake of snow.

There would be a time for all things soon enough. Before bed, I would confess my suspicions, and I'd take that pregnancy test. Right then, though, I only wanted to hold onto Jude for a few minutes longer. I longed to memorize how his lips brushed against my temple and his chest hummed with the tune.

It all washed over me so beautifully.

Every end was a beginning of something else, and Jude and I were two ends meeting to come full circle. I made my wish, we got caught up together in that snow, and it seemed the fates tied our hearts with messy little bows.

The months passed. The knots tightened. That was all our doing, though.

Falling in love might have been fated, but staying in love became a never-ending choice.

Come what may, every day became another chance to be with Jude. Being present with him never felt anything less than a gift. It didn't matter if we were walking through the lavender fields of Provence or lounging on the black sand beaches in Hawaii.

I cherished every moment Jude and I shared. I thrived on the light in his eyes and the feel of his assuring hand, and for as long as we both lived, I would never get enough.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

DELILAH

From the wine bar, I watched the couple of the hour slowly sway together. Cassidy could have her feelings about Sam and Jude, but even through the crowd of dressed-up bodies and under the dimmed light, I saw how they suited each other clear as day.

Whether it took a bit of serendipity or a twist of fate, Sam and Jude found something in each other that no amount of money could buy, and they were ready to dance off into the sunset. Between her champagne giggles and growing yawns, Tucker had coaxed his wife toward their car.

That just left, well, *me*.

I raised my Chardonnay to a toast nobody shared before throwing back the last swig.

“Hey, Harry, can I get another?” I asked the bartender.

“Sure, Boss.”

The lanky twenty-something knew to give me a big girl pour. It wasn't every day I got the chance to drink my wines. Usually, I set up the bar, gave the staff directions, and stashed

the spare cases in some hidden corner. Paying customers rarely asked me to enjoy the event too.

Taking the fresh glass, I let the floral and fruity notes hit my palette, but something richer and deeper washed over me from behind. He moved like a thief in the night. He never stepped into the spotlight or put on any kind of show, yet I always sensed him. Even after all these months, Owen's presence still struck me like an invisible arrow through the chest.

"I had a feeling this is where I'd find you," he remarked in his resonant Southern baritone. "I guess my gamble was a good one."

Turning on my heels, I caught the unearthly flash of his green eyes and a smile hidden at the corners of his mouth. His clean-shaved jaw twitched, but he continued to give nothing away. Owen wasn't the one who knew this game, though.

"I didn't expect to see you here tonight," I said, letting my eyes sweep over the party before coming back to him. "I didn't realize you were such good friends with Sam and Jude."

"I think they wanted to be polite."

I leaned against the bar top. "You weren't supposed to be getting in until tomorrow."

"I caught an earlier flight."

"And the first thing you did was put on a suit and come find me?"

Gesturing to the bartender, Owen smirked. "Among other things, yes."

"Sir?" Harry asked.

"One mineral water, please," he told the guy. "Thank you."

Owen held the conversation captive and me on tenterhooks. Waiting for his water, he made me wonder what stayed hidden behind his composed features. Everything about him was so at ease for a man who'd spent the last year sneaking through the wilds of the Middle East. Only his olive-toned skin seemed a shade darker. If he hadn't sent me

messages at all hours of the night, I might have assumed that Owen spent the last year hiding from me.

He sipped his water and smiled my way. Not hesitating, Owen inched closer to me. His quiet words pulled me down from my tenterhooks and left me with bated breath.

“I heard a . . . *rumor* when I got back,” he confessed.

My hands reached for my long ponytail. Its ends tickled against my exposed back. Every one of my nerves seemed alive and on a toe-curling edge.

“Rumor?”

“That Thaddeus Drayton passed away,” he murmured, watching me intently, “and you were likely the last person to see him alive.”

“And so what if I was?”

“I heard you might know something. That’s what people assume, anyway.”

I took a long, purposeful sip of my wine. For a man who made information his business, I couldn’t be surprised. These questions had become old hat for me. Even at my friend’s elopement party, surrounded by all that finery, I had no chance of outrunning the whispers.

“What do you think?” I countered. “Do you believe what some stupid, snobbish people are saying about me?”

Owen chuckled. The sound was richly sweet like dark caramel and worn like well-loved leather. It was awful how many times I’d heard that laugh in my sleep, but when Owen reached for my hand, I knew I had a new fantasy to replace it.

“All I know for sure is that I missed you, Delilah.”

I hated to say it. Men weren’t supposed to make a mess of me like this, but Owen Braun existed as a man among men. He didn’t shy away from me or the tension building between us.

As the tip of my tongue brushed against my lower lip, I sucked in a breath, hoping it might help me keep my cool.

It didn’t.

“I missed you too,” I confessed in a whisper.

I had missed every callus on his strong hands and that knowing look in his eyes. Messages scattered across the night could never replace him. Thanks to one surreal night, the months had passed with frustration and secret pining, but Owen was back now.

Fireflies flickered in the far shadows as the evening waned into night. The party started losing its novelty. I felt history repeating itself between Owen and me, not that I minded. I had been waiting for this moment. I imagined a dozen different ways our reunion might go, but one thing remained clear.

After holding onto a mere memory for so long, there would be no holding back.

Delilah and Owen get their very own secret pregnancy romance soon. While you wait for that one, how about checking out the [**Forbidden Temptations series here.**](#)

If you want to read more about Sam, she made an appearance in **Christmas in the Cabin**, and you can read that story [**here.**](#)

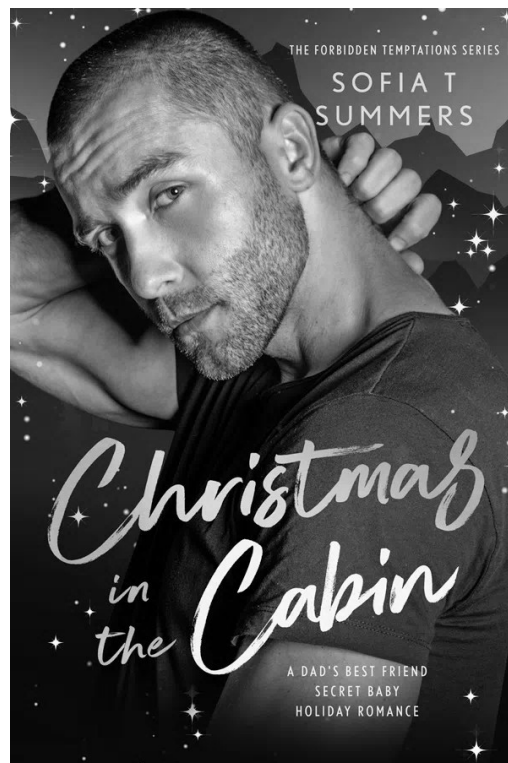
Driving home for Christmas, I couldn't outrun the snow or Nick Wallace.

I had travelled the world, but nothing prepared me for that fateful night in his cabin...

Not even for the baby girl who arrived eight months later.

[**Get Christmas in the Cabin here.**](#)

CHRISTMAS IN THE CABIN (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

**Driving home for Christmas, I couldn't outrun the snow or
Nick Wallace.**

**I had travelled the world, but nothing prepared me for
that fateful night in his cabin...**

Not even for the baby girl who arrived eight months later.

There were secrets pride urged me to keep.

Nick never learned about his daughter, *our* daughter,

And I kept my word that my father would never know what
we did.

Their friendship didn't need to be shattered like all my hopes.

**Now, fate is calling me back home for an extended holiday
season.**

There will be no quick getaway this time.

People say that time heals all wounds, but what can an all-
consuming kiss do?

Everything always looks better under the glow of holiday
lights,

But will the harsh light of reality be the end of everything I
once craved from Nick?

This Christmas, will I finally stop running?

PROLOGUE

DARCY

Over and over, I turned the key in the ignition. Every time I thought the engine might rumble to life, it failed me again, and all my hopefulness dwindled into helplessness. Stuck on the side of the mountain, I had another thirty minutes to get to my dad's place, but my Mustang wasn't going to make it. My dear Shelby was beautiful, but she couldn't fight the snow and ice piling up in this wild storm. She could only sit there and maybe keep me warm.

Looking at the gas gauge, I realized that wouldn't be much longer, either. The little red hand sat around the one-quarter mark. I didn't know if that was enough to keep the heat running all night long. If the gas could somehow make it to morning, I imagined the car's battery might not.

No bars on my cell phone. No chance of driving out of this ditch. Plus, I was a little too far out of the small mountain town to walk back for salvation.

"Merry freakin' Christmas to me," I muttered.

The cheerful music on the radio sounded like it was mocking me. With a huff, I pulled the key from the little slot.

The speakers went dead. The heat stopped blowing from the vents, but there was enough heat in the car to keep me warm. I had my mittens and my hat . . .

I was definitely going to die. *Froze to death in her car*, the obituary would say. I could already see the local news's headlines.

“Black Sheep?”

The voice made me jump. Turning my head, a familiar pair of blue eyes met mine. I couldn't believe it.

“Nick?” I called through the icy window. “Is that you?”

I didn't need to ask. I had memorized every strand of his sandy blond hair and the crooked bridge of his nose. It was the only imperfection on his otherwise perfect face. The smile he offered always looked wry, even when he was being earnest.

With that same grin, he exclaimed, “Funny running into you out here!”

“No, it isn't!” I protested. “I'm stuck.”

“Then, get out of the car!”

I scoffed. “You just want me to abandon my car?”

“It's not going anywhere!”

As I glanced through the windshield, snowflakes fatter than goose feathers were starting to cover my car. He was right. This was my one chance at a Christmas miracle.

I had to take it.

Bracing myself for the cold, I grabbed my purse from the front seat before rushing to the trunk. I shuddered against the wind, trying to unlock it with my mitten-clad hands. God, I didn't want to take them off. My fingers would be purple in seconds.

“Give me the keys,” Nick insisted.

I looked over to his shoulder and then up at his face. His red knit cap had his blond hair pushed down across his intent gaze. He was used to the cold, making it easier to retrieve my

suitcase and throw it in the backseat of his old blue Chevrolet. Shivering again, I didn't protest.

"I guess I should thank you," I said as Nick slid into the cab beside me. "I would probably have died out here."

"Oh, you're tougher than that, but why were you driving that thing in a snowstorm? What happened to your hatchback, and shouldn't you have some boyfriend with you? Bill mentioned you were seeing someone."

"I sold it when I left for Costa Rica. I didn't need two cars, especially when I was going to be out of the country."

"Is that where you've been?" he wondered while shifting into drive.

"Costa Rica was in the spring and South America this summer. I did a Schengen visa in Europe this fall. I got back from Copenhagen last week. That's where I left the boyfriend."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "Don't be. I'm certainly not."

We had only ever been a traveling fling. He wanted to head east to New Zealand. I wanted to head home for the holidays. As fun as the guy was, there was no point in pretending we were a great love affair.

Nick laughed, flashing that teasing grin. "Did you visit that Red-Light District?"

"You're thinking of Amsterdam, and do you think I'm the kind of person to visit brothels and sex shops?"

"No, Black Sheep, you've never been that kind of girl."

"Darcy." I sighed. "Why can't you ever call me Darcy?"

He chuckled again, turning around the switchback edge of the mountain. It didn't matter that we could barely see. Nick knew these roads like the back of his hand. He probably had every inch of Banner Elk and the surrounding mountains memorized. I just had to settle into my seat and try to keep calm.

It was never easy being around him, especially in close quarters.

“What?” he teased. “You don’t like your old nickname?”

“It was fine back in the day, but I’m twenty-five now.”

“How about Darlin’ Darcy Rose?” Nick persisted with his game. “I can’t call you that anymore either?”

I shifted in my seat, averting my eyes. “I would prefer you didn’t.”

“Fine, Darcy it is then.”

“Thank you.” I paused, glancing out the window. “So . . . why were you in town, anyway?”

“I was picking up my mail before the post office closed. I needed some odds and ends from the store. You know, the usual.”

Nick turned right when he should have turned left.

“This isn’t the way to my dad’s.”

He shook his head. “Oh, I’m not taking you out to your dad’s.”

“What?” I turned to watch the road’s fork vanish from view. “Nick, he doesn’t know where I am! My phone wasn’t working back there! Just let me out. I’ve got bars now. I can call him.”

“You want me to leave you out on the side of a road . . . on Christmas Eve . . . in the dark . . . in a snowstorm?”

As he laughed, I remembered hoping to be home in time for Christmas Eve dinner, but I figured that was a pipe dream.

“I’m sure Dad could come get me.”

“Visibility is getting worse by the minute. You really want your father out in this?”

“No,” I mumbled begrudgingly.

Nick flashed a triumphant grin. “That’s what I thought. Now, my cabin is only ten minutes from here. You can spend the night with me, and I’ll take you over to your dad’s house in

the morning. You'll be there just in time to dump out your stocking and eat your special Christmas breakfast. I promise."

"Fine. It's not like I have much of a choice, anyway."

"No, you don't."

Surrendering, I crossed my arms over my chest and wondered, "When did you even get this cabin?"

"I got rid of my grandparents' old trailer. I used the land to build this place last year."

"I guess I have been away for a while, then."

The truck rumbled. The road shifted from smooth asphalt to uneven gravel. Nick slowed to a crawling pace as we passed through trees and caught glimpses of Christmas lights glowing in the night. At the far end, we rounded a patch of woods and came into a clearing where a log cabin sat with a green metal roof, a big stone chimney, and a carport on the side.

The little cabin looked like a haven in the dark, gray night. The winds whipped around us. I hated to open the truck door, but I told myself it was safer inside. Everything would be better if I just got inside the house, so in a rush, Nick grabbed my suitcase from the back and led me through the side door. The mudroom had hooks on the walls and a place for our boots. Passing by the washer and dryer, we stepped into the kitchen that felt undeniably warm.

It wasn't just the temperature. The place was just so *cozy*. I recognized half of the furniture from his grandparents' place, like the old kitchen table and the China hutch complete with blue Wedgwood plates. Even the olive-green cabinets had their charm, but I couldn't rest easily in the space.

Nick's hair still fell across his eyes. His cheeks were pink from the winter's icy cold. I had run all over the world, but I couldn't escape him, not here, not in this storm.

"I got a lasagna at the store," he declared while setting down his paper grocery bag. "I was planning to bake it for dinner. That okay?"

"I'm good with lasagna," I assured him.

“Good. You can take the bed upstairs. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

My shoulders slumped. I had to protest.

“No, Nick, I can’t put you out.”

“It’s no big deal,” he insisted while unpacking his groceries. “I fall asleep on the couch all the time watching television. Just go upstairs. You can put your stuff down and get comfortable.”

“Okay, okay.”

I didn’t need many directions. There was only a loft over the back of the house. Walking past the bathroom and behind the couch, I caught sight of the little Christmas tree covered in colorful lights and old ornaments sitting just beside the fireplace. The bedroom overlooked the living room with its large bed and simple furnishings. Nick had never been the kind of man to need much, but he did have a few things around from his past. I was pretty sure the patchwork quilt was something his Grandma Peggy had made.

Not dwelling on the man’s bed, I got myself out of my cold jeans and sweater, trading them for leggings and my oversized Duke sweatshirt. It was big enough that it didn’t matter if I wore a bra. My chest just looked like a heap of heathered gray cotton. With my wild thicket of dark hair pulled up into a bun, I decided there was nothing attractive about this outfit.

Nick Wallace would never want me anyway, cute pajamas or otherwise.

After calling Dad to explain, I followed my nose back downstairs to the kitchen. Nick might not have been trying, but I hated how good he looked with his flannel’s sleeves rolled up to his elbows. I could see the tattoos scattered across his right arm, including the bright petals of a blooming red rose.

His backside in those jeans didn’t help, either.

“Need any help?” I asked while forcing my voice not to crack.

He slid the lasagna into the oven, and the heavy metal door creaked shut. Nick set a timer.

“You could cut up some lettuce.”

I tried to joke. “I didn’t know you ate salad. I always took you for a meat and potatoes man.”

Fortunately, he chuckled. “I don’t mind eating a few green leaves every so often. Besides, I’m not a teenager anymore. I can’t just eat crap and expect to fit in my pants.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling.”

Nick definitely wasn’t a teenager. He was in his late thirties and about fourteen years too old for me, but that didn’t change how my heart fluttered when he got close. It didn’t change how I leaned into the smell of the clean scents of aftershave and pine tar soap. I swallowed hard.

“You got anything to drink?” I asked while working hard to chop up the romaine.

“I, um, have some sweet tea and some beer.”

“You got anything stronger?”

“Whiskey?”

“Sounds great,” I replied with a forced smile. “Let’s put a little tea in that and call it a cocktail.”

“All right,” Nick agreed. “What’s botherin’ you, then?”

“Bothering me?”

“You always get jittery when something’s bothering you, and I’ve never known you to drink anything stronger than a shandy.”

“Well, I’m not that girl anymore. I enjoy plenty of cocktails now, especially margaritas and palomas.”

“That doesn’t mean something’s not botherin’ you.”

I grumbled to myself. Of course, Nick had to be the guy who gave me my first drink. Shaking my head, I forced away the unhelpful thought. I couldn’t just melt into a puddle on his kitchen floor.

“I just feel bad about not getting home tonight,” I lied.

“Don’t worry too much,” Nick tried to assure me. “I’m sure your Uncle Mickey and Aunt Erin are keepin’ your dad company tonight.”

“Yeah, they’re probably playing card games and listening to Dad’s old Christmas cassettes.”

I could see it all in my mind’s eye, letting my muscles and my worries ease themselves. Everything felt easier by the time we sat down to dinner. I was already working on my second spiked sweet tea, and Nick was nursing a beer. Our little salad and take-and-bake lasagna tasted pretty good.

“Merry Christmas Eve, Darcy,” he offered, clinking his bottle to my glass.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” I repeated before gulping back more of my tea.

“So, it’s only seven thirty. What do you want to do?”

I wanted to bury myself under his quilt and forget where I was.

“We could watch a movie,” I suggested instead. “Or . . . we could play a card game, or um, you got checkers?”

“I’ve got a deck of cards, no checkers.”

“Well then, I guess this night is ruined.”

Nick rolled his eyes and offered that wry grin. “Sure, it is, Black Sheep.”

I rolled my eyes at the old nickname but said nothing. He was letting me sleep in his bed for the night. He was feeding me dinner. I couldn’t complain. I just needed a third sweet tea to get over it.

With *It’s A Wonderful Life* playing in the background, Nick and I found ourselves playing our fourth game of Go Fish on the plush brown couch. We played by the light of the Christmas tree and the fire burning in the heavy stone fireplace while a red plaid blanket covered my lap. On the little screen in the corner, George and Mary were finally getting hitched.

“You got any threes?” I asked Nick.

“Go Fish.”

I reached over to the coffee table, a slab of heavy wood straight from the trunk. The bark still ran along the rough edges, but I didn't focus on the piece of furniture. My tipsy head was too excited.

“I fished my wish!” I exclaimed too giddily, laying down a book of threes. “Now, do you have any queens?”

“Here,” Nick surrendered.

Handing over his two queens, it was only a matter of seconds before I was declared the winner, but we only could play the same game for so long before the fun faded.

“I think that's enough Go Fish,” Nick declared, gathering the cards.

“What now, then?”

His head turned toward the television. “We could just watch the movie.”

As I settled myself down, George Bailey's honeymoon began. Rain poured down outside his house like the snow falling down outside. I watched as his new wife smiled at him. My body curled tighter against the end of the couch.

“You know, I ran into Kevin Booth when I was at the grocery store,” Nick remarked. “He asked about you, wanted to know if I knew where you were.”

Kevin Booth took me to my senior prom. We were together for less than a month, and he was my only foray into dating in high school.

“Why would he ask about me?”

Nick shrugged. “Maybe he's still into you. Why? You don't like him anymore? I thought he was your first crush. I've certainly never heard of you dating anyone else.”

George and Mary were heading to bed. They looked so happy together.

“He wasn’t my first crush,” I blurted out.

“Then, who was?”

“Nobody you know.”

“I’ve served beer to just about everyone within fifty miles of here,” he remarked in disbelief. “I’m sure I know him.”

“No, you really don’t.”

He prodded my shoulder. “Come on, don’t lie to me.”

“*Nick.*”

“Is it really that big of a deal? It’s ancient history.”

No, it damn well wasn’t.

“I thought we were gonna watch this movie.”

“We will,” he said with a chuckle, “right after you tell me who you liked instead of Kevin.”

I knew exactly what I was doing, but I’d had too much whiskey to care.

“You, okay?” I huffed before taking a gulp of my drink.

There was no sense of shame as I turned to meet Nick’s surprised eyes. It was the most serious I’d ever seen on him. His Southern lilt grew thicker with the rasp of his voice.

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“I liked you, Nick. You were always the good-looking bartender at my dad’s bar, and well, you were always nice to me. That didn’t help. I was eighteen and foolish. Honestly, what did you expect?”

Apparently, whiskey was a truth serum for me. I used my last scrap of good sense to decide to never drink it again.

“You think I’m ... *good-lookin*?”

God, Nick’s baritone voice sounded like whiskey tasted—strong, dark, and damn intoxicating.

“Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“No,” he said. “You’re just Black Sheep.”

“You also called me ‘Darling Darcy Rose’.”

“It’s just a nickname,” he insisted, quickly at a loss for words. “You were always hanging around the bar. You were Bill’s daughter. It didn’t mean . . . I never . . . I—I think you’ve had too much to drink.”

“No, I haven’t. I could touch my toes right now. I could do it and sing a whole song in French.”

“Darcy, you don’t—”

I cut him off by trying to stand, but I hadn’t prepared for getting caught up in the blanket. I wasn’t ready for anything. All too quickly, I stumbled and found myself falling into Nick’s capable arms. His face was inches from mine, and my hand managed to press into his strong thigh. My fingers were inches from the bulge in his dark jeans.

Was it always that big or is he just happy to see me?

“I really shouldn’t be taking advantage of you,” I mumbled. “You’ve had two beers tonight.”

“Three,” Nick amended.

“I’m not drunk, but you probably are. I should, uh, just go to bed.”

“Yes, you should.”

And yet, my whole body was frozen in place. The heat rising up my spine should have me thawed out, but I couldn’t move away. I was trapped in the steely-blue cage that was Nick’s gaze. I could see the chiseled lines of his face and smell the scent of aftershave looming on his neck.

Back in the kitchen, a cuckoo clock chimed midnight.

“Merry Christmas, Nick,” I offered softly.

His chest rose and fell with labored breath. “Why did you say those things?”

“Because you asked.”

“What, would you do anything I asked of you?”

“Maybe.”

He exhaled heavily. “*Darcy ...*”

Nick muttered my name like a curse, but he didn’t push me away. Nothing could stop our lips from meeting. It felt as inevitable as the snowstorm outside. One kiss became two, and two turned into more. Growing dizzy and light, my head fell against the throw pillows. I could feel Nick’s calloused hands sliding under my sweatshirt and cupping my breasts. I didn’t stop myself from moaning into his mouth.

It was everything I’d always wanted. All those years of pining finally culminated in this.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” he muttered, his kisses wandering down to my throat.

I could feel his bulge growing hard against my thigh. No matter what he said, I could feel how Nick wanted me, even if I didn’t totally believe it. It was right there in his hungry kiss and roving hands, but it still didn’t feel real.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered.

“Hell, Darcy.”

The scene became a mixture of golden, dim light and cold shadows. The fire began to die out as our clothes became a pile on the floor. Every time Nick exposed a new piece of me, his mouth devoured the skin. His broad frame consumed mine, and I was nothing but happily helpless under him.

I had found my haven in the snow. He was six-foot-four and smelled like winter and smoke. My fingers could run freely through his hair and down his tanned chest, and I didn’t think to hide. It was never like me to shy away. I could only let my legs spread wider as Nick’s hand began to feel me out. He found me dripping wet, ready, and willing. His two fingers traced my folds with slow intention.

“You shouldn’t be this beautiful,” Nick growled. “I shouldn’t want you like this.”

I pleaded in a whisper, “Let me have you this once. It’ll only be one time.”

His lips crashed against mine again, and our bodies connected. I felt every inch of him push into me. As I shut my eyes, my head fell back. My hips knew how to move. My hands knew to anchor themselves against his shoulders. Every piece of me began to move on instinct while pleasure built up inside me. It grew like a fire, sparking and flourishing into a raging swell of flames in my heart.

That's what we were—shadows and skin, bone and smoke. Nick rocked me into the deepest climax I'd ever known, and he left nothing but the bones on my skin. Breathless and gasping, I inhaled the scent of the wood fire as my eyes opened. Shadows grew over us together.

I never made it to bed that night. In the morning, the sunrise woke me. Squinting my eyes, I took in a deep breath scented with pine soap, salt on skin, and the ashes of a cold hearth. The world outside looked white, and I was pinned between the back of the couch and Nick's naked frame. His tattooed arm fastened me against him over our blanket.

"Darcy?" I heard Nick grumble as he opened his eyes. "Dammit. Damn it all."

His swears sounded nothing like the night before. There was no wry smile on his face or touch of affection. In a rush, I felt him pull away from me before finding his boxers and jeans. The world quickly grew cold. I wrapped the blanket around me to keep warm, but it wasn't enough.

"I shouldn't've let this happen," he muttered in a rush. "We'd both been drinking. I should've known better. God, what would Bill think? After all he's done for me, I wouldn't blame him for shootin' me dead."

The fire had gone out. My heart froze over.

"You're right," I declared quickly, unable to listen to any more of Nick's muttering. "We had both been drinking. It was stupid, and nobody will ever know, especially Dad."

Buttoning his jeans, Nick looked at me with apologetic eyes. "Darcy . . ."

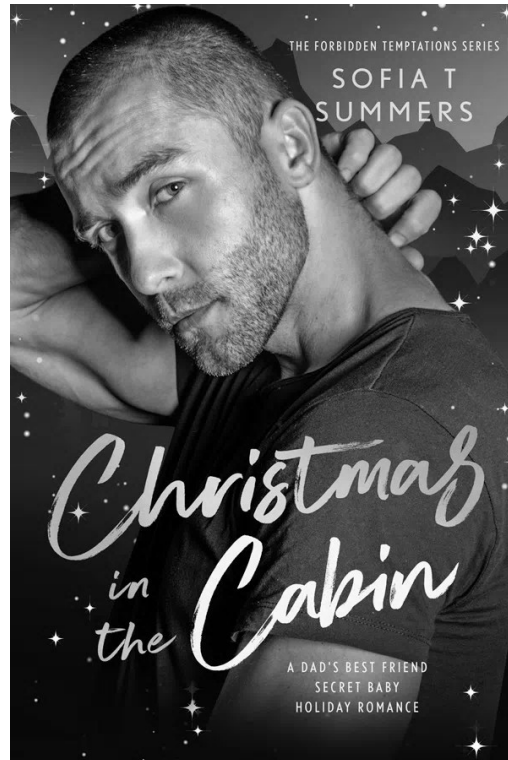
No warmth lingered in the sound.

“It’s fine,” I insisted, standing with the blanket. “I’m gonna get dressed so you can take me home.”

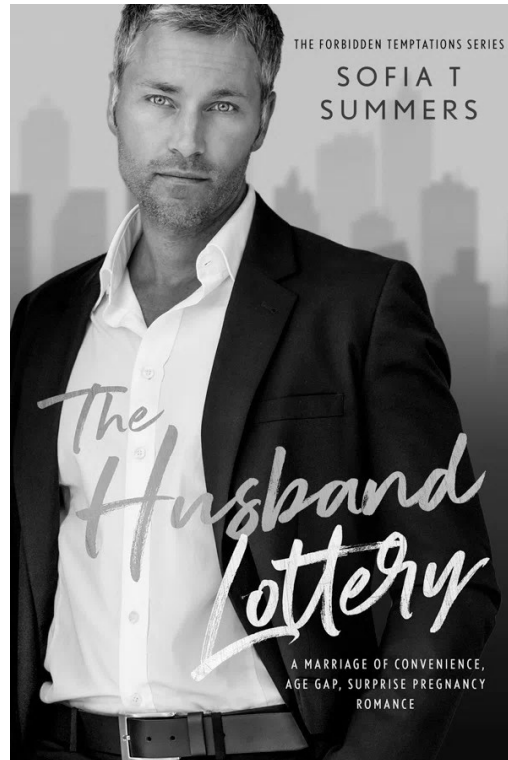
Not waiting for more, I hurried upstairs and promised that nobody would know how my heart broke that Christmas morning, especially Nick Wallace.

End of preview.

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