

WINTER RENSHAW

WALL STREET JOURNAL
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A
heartless
love
story

STONE
COLD

STONE COLD

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WINTER RENSHAW

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Also By Winter Renshaw

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DESCRIPTION

From #1 Amazon and Wall Street Journal bestselling author Winter Renshaw comes a scorching hot forbidden romance.

—

The most humiliating moment of my life begins with an early morning message from my ex's notoriously heartless best friend.

Jovie—

In no way does this mean my opinion of you has changed.

I'm reaching out because sometime in the middle of last night you tagged yourself in Jude and Stassi's engagement photo.

I don't care if you were drunk or it was unintentional. I suggest you remove it immediately since the wedding is in two months (which I'm sure you know since you were clearly FB stalking them). The damage is done, but no reason to make things more awkward.

You're welcome.

Stone

I waste no time removing my humiliatingly accidental tag before the sharp-tongued novelist in me fires off a response to the man who harbored extreme and inexplicable hatred of me during the three years I dated his best friend in college.

Only I didn't expect him to respond.

And nothing could have prepared me for what he would say ...

... or for all the ways this gorgeous villain with cruel icy blues would become the biggest plot twist my life had ever known.

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For those who saw them first.

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If someone doesn't have a heart

you can't go around

offering them yours

—Rupi Kaur, *Home Body*

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Chapter One

Jovie

Three back-to-back text message chimes wrench me from the deepest sleep I've ever known. My head throbs as I lift my cheek from the pillow and squint toward my nightstand where my phone glows in the early morning darkness of my room. Heaviness sinks into my bones and my vision is bleary, but I grow more awake with each passing second.

A fourth chime beckons me, followed by a fifth.

Inching across my bed, my legs tangled in hot sheets, I grab the electronic banshee, tap in my code, and attempt to find out what all the fuss is about.

MONICA: Jovie ... omg!

MONICA: Girl, wake up. It's urgent ...

MONICA: Seriously. This. Is. Not. Good.

MONICA: Okay, you really need to wake up now. Everyone is seeing this.

MONICA: This is legit a personal emergency of the worst imaginable kind. If I don't hear back in two minutes, I'm

coming over.

Monica is my best friend and I love her dearly, but she's also the queen of personal emergencies. Everything is urgent in her world.

I tap her name and lift my phone to my hear.

"Oh, my god, you're awake," she says in one long gasping breath.

"What's going on?" I ask, glancing at the time and wondering if she realizes it's not even 6 AM. I attempt to pull in a long, deep breath only to forget that my nostrils aren't working thanks to this nasty head cold I've been battling all week.

After several days of not getting an ounce of sleep, I make an executive decision to down some heavy-duty cold medicine I found in the back of my cabinet and slept like a log ... until now.

"I tried signing on to your Facebook account but you must have changed your password," she says, which only begs an entirely different realm of questions.

"Why would you need to log into my account? Is it Chauncy?" I ask. Her husband is a bona fide ladies' man with a shameless wandering eye, and she is equal parts jealous and loyal. It's a toxic combination and this wouldn't be the first time she's needed to do some internet sleuthing via my account.

"No, no. Jovie, this isn't about me," she says. "It's about *you*."

I sit up, my heart inching up the back of my throat. "Wait ... I'm confused."

“So you didn’t do it on purpose?”

“Do *what?*”

“Tag yourself in Jude and Stassi’s engagement photo.” Her words blur together and sound far away at the same time.

“Mon, I would never,” I say with a chuckle. While last night is a bit of a Nyquil-induced haze—and I’ve been known to social media creep my exes out of sheer boredom—tagging myself in my college boyfriend’s engagement photo is the last thing I’d do.

“But you did,” she says. “It’s there. It’s there for all the world to see. Well, at least his eleven hundred twenty-seven friends, her six hundred and two friends, and your seven-hundred eighty-nine friends. “Hang on.”

My phone buzzes five seconds later, gifting me with a screenshot of a smiling Jude looking down at his blushing-bride-to-be, his arms wrapped around her whittled waist as she gazes up at him with stars for eyes.

I put the call on speaker.

“Zoom in,” Monica says.

I pinch and zoom, inspecting the image.

And then I see it.

My name in the upper lefthand corner of the image, parallel to the orange-sicle sunset in the background.

“H ... how?” I manage. “This is ... I didn’t do this.”

“Then who would?” she asks.

“I ... I don’t know?” I sit up, brushing the hair from my face as I study the image. I haven’t spoken to Jude in years.

Five years, to be precise—not that I’m counting. It’s basic math.

He dumped me shortly after our college graduation, after going on a guys’ trip to Tulum with ten of his closest friends. While most of them came back with things like suntans and gift shop t-shirts and hangovers ... Jude came back with *her*.

Stassi Guinness.

They met at a bar the second night of the trip (she was there for her sister’s bachelorette party) and they were inseparable from that point on (or so I’m told). In the blink of an eye, our three-year relationship came to a screeching, grinding halt. My place in Jude’s heart was replaced by a head-turning leggy blonde with family money and access to her daddy’s private jet at all times.

Not that I’m bitter.

I just didn’t expect for my steady, no-frills, drama-free college relationship to go down in a blaze of humiliating glory accented by every cliché in the book.

Two months before his trip, we were ambling through the local mall, hand in hand, sipping matching matcha lattes, window shopping for engagement rings, and talking about what our next move was going to be.

And then ... plot twist ... Stassi happened.

No one saw it coming—but once it did, it was all anyone could talk about in our overlapping social circles. For months, my inbox blew up with messages from people I hadn’t talked to in years. The worst ones were from friends who thought they were doing me a favor by sending me screenshotted photos from Stassi’s private Instagram account. They’d always come with a message like, “Ugh, she’s insufferable” or “if she

were any more plastic she'd be a human Barbie." They meant well, but after a while I had to ask them to stop sending me those.

Jude had moved on, and I was trying to.

"Can you remove the tag?" Monica asks.

"Yeah, of course." I place the phone aside and grab my laptop off the nightstand. Only when I crack the lid open, the screen stays black and the password prompt doesn't appear. "Shit. I think my computer's dead."

"Just do it from your phone," she says.

"I deleted the app on my phone when I did that social media fast last month," I say. If I install it, I'll have to re-enter my password using one of those code generator authenticator app things and to be honest, I'm not even entirely sure how those work. I just know that I made my account so insanely secure that I basically made it impossible for me to get back in—at least on my phone. Everything's good to go on my laptop ... if it would just start. "Hang on. I need to find my charger."

Untangling myself from my sheets, I all but trip to the door, burst down the hall, and locate my laptop cord in my office.

"Okay, I'm back," I say as I finagle the plugs. A minute later, I'm logged into my computer.

Double-clicking on the web browser, I clamp my hand over my mouth to stifle a gasp when I realize I'm already logged into Facebook ... and the last image pulled up is the very same one I'm tagged in. There's no denying I did this.

"You're quiet," Monica says. "Everything okay?"

It's true.

It's real.

It happened.

"How would I ... why would I ... I don't understand ..." I can't finish my sentence. If I could crawl into a hole right now and die, I would.

"Can you remove the tag?" Her question is frantic. She fully understands the nature of this grave mistake.

"I'm trying." I'm terrified to click anywhere on the image, worried I'll somehow tag myself again, but I hover my mouse above the sunset corner of the image anyway and give it a right click. "Oh, sweet Jesus," I say when the option to remove the tag pops up.

I can't click it fast enough.

"All right. It's gone," I say.

But the damage is done.

Glancing at the upper right hand corner of the screen, I spot twelve new messages waiting for me.

I'm guessing Monica wasn't the only one who noticed the tag ...

"This is mortifying," I say.

"I'll be honest, my secondhand embarrassment is going strong right now," she asks. "How did this even happen?"

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I say, "I don't know. I've been sick lately. I took something to help me sleep last night ... it made me a little loopy ... I must have been out of it?"

Years ago, I was prescribed a sleep aid that used to give me mild amnesia and eventually led to me sleepwalking. One morning I woke up to find an empty can of tomato soup in the

kitchen, next to a bowl and spoon, and my tongue and the roof of my mouth were both raw, as if I'd scalded them. I never took another pill again after that, but I figured I'd be safe with some over-the-counter NyQuil ...

Apparently not.

"What are you going to say if someone asks you about it?" she asks.

"Nothing. I'll probably just pretend like it didn't happen." Odds are the twelve people who saw it and reached out to me will forget about it soon enough.

"Oh," she says. "You could always say, like, you were on your second bottle of wine when your old song started playing on your favorite Spotify station, which made you nostalgic, so you took a glimpse at his profile just to reminisce for a moment, but then you saw their engagement photo and accidentally clicked something—"

"—I don't owe anyone an explanation."

"But they're going to ask. You know they will. And if you don't give them any details, they'll fill in the holes in the story with details of their own. That's how rumors spread ..."

I shrug, even though she can't see me. "Oh, well."

It's not like I have an ounce of control over anything people will or won't say.

"I don't know how you're not beside yourself right now. I'd be freaking out," she says.

"Maybe it's because you're freaking out enough for the both of us?"

I'm so drenched in humiliation I can taste it on my tongue and smell it in the air and every time I blink, I can see that

engagement photo on the backs of my eyelids—but what’s done is done.

“I need to hit the shower,” I say.

I want to wash the events of last night and this morning out of my hair and off of my skin. I want to scrub it from the forefront of my mind and replace it with anything but. I want to sing at the top of my lungs to some Sia or Robyn or some old-school, upbeat Taylor. Anything to move forward from this unfortunate incident.

“Appreciate you looking out for me though,” I say.

Monica and I met the first day of our freshman year at U of Maine. We had Econ 101 together and by the end of the first class, we were both completely lost and almost in tears. She asked if I wanted to study with her, which then led to dinner and drinks and parties and best friendship that spanned the following four years and the five years that have lapsed since.

“You going to be okay?” she asks.

“Of course,” I say.

No question that my ego is bruised, but bruises never last forever. Eventually their intense colors fade and with a little bit of time you never see them again.

“Kay. Text me if you need anything,” she says before ending the call.

I’m about to sign off of Facebook when a thirteenth message dings my inbox, and a chat window pops up on the bottom part of the screen. The sender? My ex’s best friend—a man I haven’t seen, heard from, or thought about since college.

Jovie—

In no way does this mean my opinion of you has changed.

I'm reaching out because sometime in the middle of last night you tagged yourself in Jude and Stassi's engagement photo.

I don't care if you were drunk or it was unintentional. I suggest you remove it immediately since the wedding is in two months (which I'm sure you know since you were clearly FB stalking them). The damage is done, but no reason to make things more awkward.

You're welcome.

Stone

Wow ...

The little green icon next to his name tells me he's still online, so without thinking twice, I fire back a response to the man who never made any bones about his abhorrence towards me the entire time Jude and I dated.

Stone—

Oh, my gosh! It's so wonderful to hear from you after five years of dead silence. While I'm sure you took great pleasure in sending me such a delightfully condescending message via Facebook, I can assure you that by the time it was received, the tag was already removed.

Should your best friend inquire about the mishap, feel free to tell him it was an unfortunate accident involving an ill-fated amount of NyQuil.

Nothing more, nothing less.

I hope all is well with you, and that the Wizard of Oz finally gave you that heart you'd been missing.

Best,

Jovie

I hit 'send' before I have a chance to delete the last line.

I don't make a habit out of being petty, but when it comes to Stone Atwood, I have no problem bending my own rules.

He was the worst.

And apparently, he still is.

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Chapter Two

Stone

“The tag’s been removed,” I tell Jude over the phone. Standing in front of my office window, I stare toward the Portland coast, taking in the harbor horizon and watching the boats drift through the fog and into their ports. In the distance, a fog horn sounds, which always reminds me of summers at Jude’s dad’s lake house in northern Maine.

“Thank God,” he exhales through the phone. “Stassi’s convinced Jovie’s trying to sabotage the wedding.”

I bite my tongue to keep from reminding him that Jovie is a lot of things, but a saboteur isn’t one of them.

“She says she took some NyQuil or something ...” I didn’t quite buy her excuse. I was too busy being impressed with her quick wit and ability to put me in my place—no easy feat.

“You talked to her?”

“We didn’t *talk*,” I say. “I messaged her online and told her to take the tag off ... like you asked.”

Messaging someone on a social media site I haven't used in years isn't normally my style, but I've long since deleted Jovie's number and it seemed like the most efficient way to reach out to her.

"Yeah, but did you ask her why she did that?" he asks. "How'd you know about the NyQuil?"

He's coming across as far too curious for a man who's about to get married in two months.

"I didn't ask her," I say. "She told me to tell you that it was—and I quote—an accident involving NyQuil, nothing more, nothing less."

He's quiet, as if he has to think about it for a second; wrap his head around it.

"That doesn't make any sense," he says.

"It makes sense if you're not trying to make it make sense." As a divorce lawyer for the past several years, I've witnessed the dissolution of enough relationships to learn firsthand that half the time people do things, they don't know why they do them. Love, hatred, and everything in between makes people act in ways they normally wouldn't dare.

"Is she ... did she seem okay though?" he asks. "Do you think she's upset that I'm getting married?"

Does he seriously think she's been pining away for him for the past five years? Hoping he'd change his mind and come sprinting back to her? I hope for both of their sakes the answer is no. I've never understood why people would want to dig up bones they buried a lifetime ago.

"Maybe you should ask her yourself?" I answer his question with a question.

In the last five years, Jude hasn't once brought up his ex-girlfriend. I refuse to believe he suddenly gives a damn about her feelings in this whole equation.

"I doubt she'd want to hear from me," he says, pausing as if he hopes I'll disagree.

"A little late to start giving a shit about her, don't you think?" As his oldest and closest friend, I've always reserved the right to be brutally honest with him. Then again, I don't tend to mince words with anyone. Only telling people what they want to hear involves mental gymnastics that I don't have the time or energy for.

It's one of the reasons I spent the entire three years of their relationship opining about how wrong they were for each other every chance I got—which wasn't often in the grand scheme of things. They were together twenty-four-seven, three-sixty-five, minus a handful of days here and there. The three of us even lived together our senior year in a two bedroom off-campus apartment Jude's father rented for us. Every day I'd come home from class, there'd be a flickering floral candle on the kitchen island, fluffed and carefully arranged sofa pillows, and some soft music playing from a Bluetooth speaker. I never admitted it to either of them, but I didn't hate that part of the arrangement. It beat the spilled-beer-and-gym-bag scented bachelor pad we had the year before.

"What, just because I dumped her means I can't still care about her?" Jude asks.

"That's exactly what that means." I opt not to go into detail about the way it all went down. I already went for a jog this morning; no need to take another one down memory lane. "Anyway. I've got a meeting in ten. You need anything else?"

Before he can respond, Stassi's nasally whine fills the background.

"I gotta go," he says, his voice low. "Let me know if you talk to her again."

Jude ends the call without giving me a chance to remind him once more that Jovie and I didn't *talk*—we messaged. And only because I was asked to. Huge difference. And had Jude not hung up so quickly, I'd have also informed him I have no intentions of continuing that—or any—conversation with her. The tag has been removed and the short-lived incident will be forgotten about soon enough.

Life goes on. It always does.

A knock at my door steals my focus from this nonsense.

"Come in," I call out.

A second later, in waltzes my law firm's newest junior partner—Becca. A sultry smile plays across her full mouth as she locks it behind her. I know what she's thinking. I know what she wants. But now is not the time. That and I've been planning to end this fuck-buddy arrangement for weeks now—I just haven't gotten around to it thanks to a heavy workload.

Becca struts to my side of the desk, perches on the edge, and reaches for my tie.

"Stop." I lift a hand and lean back.

Her megawatt smile disappears and her vivid emerald gaze turns a shade darker. "What's wrong? It's Monday ... you said you always like to start your work week with a—"

"—I know what I said." I slide open my top left drawer, reach inside, and pull out the two items I brought from my apartment this morning.

Lacy crotchless panties the color of midnight.

And a purple toothbrush.

“You left these behind last week.” I slide them toward her.

She laughs through her nose, like she thinks I’m being cute.

“Yeah,” she says, brushing her inky black hair over her shoulder and crossing her legs. “So?”

“The week before, you left a pair of running shoes,” I say. “And the week before that, you left some mascara, hand cream, and a box of tampons.”

She wasn’t even on her period—and I’d have known given the kinds of things we were doing on my kitchen table, my washing machine, and lastly, in my shower.

“You know my rules,” I remind her. I made myself perfectly clear before Becca so much as set a red-bottomed stiletto inside my apartment.

“Oh, come on.” She runs her palms over my shoulders. “You’re so tense ... you just need to lighten up a bit. You need a release.”

“I’m good.”

“I thought we were having fun?” Her pretty face tilts to the side as she feigns a pout.

“We *were*,” I say. “Until you started leaving your shit all over my place.”

Becca wastes no time rising from my desk. She smooths her hands down her blouse before tugging her skirt back into place.

“I guess you weren’t lying,” she says under her breath.
“You really are a coldhearted bastard.”

I lift my palms in a sorry-not-sorry sort of way as I watch her move for the door.

“I tried to warn you,” I say as she leaves in a huff.

And I did.

Last December we spent the entirety of the office Christmas party drinking entirely too much Dom Perignon and flirting like smashed idiots, and when she cornered me later that night and asked if I wanted to ditch out of there early and go back to her place, I told her under no uncertain terms that I was only interested in one thing—and that I’d only ever *be* interested in that one thing.

A leopard can’t change his spots.

Not if he tried.

Not if he could or even if he should.

Not even if he wanted to more than anything in the world.

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Chapter Three

Stone

Age 10

“My dad said you could have your own room if you want, but I told him we could just share the bunk bed in my room,” my best friend, Jude, says after we leave my mother’s burial. “I told him you probably didn’t want to be by yourself.”

Jude puts his arm around my shoulders, but I don’t feel them.

Everything around me looks like a dream; realistic and familiar but not real.

I can smell the peanut butter toast he had for breakfast.

I can feel the rain drops sprinkling from the sky.

I can hear the people all dressed in black having quiet conversations behind us.

We walk to the silver limousine parked under a shade tree. A driver opens the passenger door for us.

“You want to play Xbox when we get home?” Jude asks when the door shuts. He’s probably trying to take my mind off of things, but I’m not in a mood to do much of anything.

“Nah,” I say, staring ahead at the piece of glass separating the back of the limo from the front.

“You want to swim?” he asks.

“It’s raining.”

“Maybe we can read some comic books? I just got the new Morpho Man. I’ll let you read it first,” he says.

“I kind of just want to be alone.” The air in the limo is stuffy and hot, and all day I’ve been feeling like the wind’s been sucked from my lungs. I press the button to crack my window a couple of inches. I can breathe a little better, but I still feel like my chest is being crushed from the inside.

A minute later, Jude’s dad, climbs into the back seat of the car, his black suit coat damp with rain.

Jude moves out of the way and his dad takes the spot beside me.

“It was a beautiful service, kid.” Paul gives my shoulder a squeeze. It’s the only thing he’s said to me all day, but he’s always been a man of few words, only saying something when he feels it’s meaningful enough to share.

Last year, my mother went to the doctor with a searing headache. At first they thought it was a migraine. It turned out to be an inoperable brain tumor that had already spread throughout her body. They gave her two weeks to two months to live.

She lasted six.

With my grandparents long gone and my dad out of the picture, she was anxious about who would look after me once she was gone. That's when Paul stepped up. Jude and I were already joined at the hip. He promised Mom it was no big deal, even telling her he'd always wanted another son. I don't know if that's true or not. Maybe he was just adding that part to make her worry a little bit less. I'm just thankful I don't have to go live with strangers.

Thunder rumbles through the sky as the limo takes us out of the cemetery and to Jude's house on the other side of town.

I turn around to look back at the rainy graveyard, but Paul slips his arm over my shoulder.

"You'll learn soon enough," he says, "that life's too short to look back. Keep looking forward, Stone. You should always be focusing on your next move."

I'm not sure what he means.

Maybe someday I'll figure it out.

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Chapter Four

Jovie

I check my stagnant word count for the ninth time this morning. I'm sitting at forty-one thousand with fifteen chapters left to write until the break-up scene and at least another nine chapters after that. An email from my editor sits in my inbox, a gentle-yet-stern reminder that this book is due next week.

When I signed the contract for Heartsong Books to publish my fifth novel last year, I wasn't expecting that ten months later I'd be going through a divorce. To be fair, we were doomed from the start. The husband and wife part lasted half as long as the boyfriend and girlfriend part—which was a laughable five months.

No one ever tells you that insta-love often leads to insta-heartbreak.

Or that quickie marriages sometimes lead to snail-paced divorces.

Everyone tried to warn me not to rush into anything, but convincing someone that the man they love isn't the Prince

Charming he's pretending to be is no easy task. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to see it. A romantic at heart, I thought I knew what love was.

It turns out I didn't have a clue.

And maybe I still don't.

It doesn't keep me from believing in it any less though.

For now, I just want to put the past behind me and forget Jason Whitlock ever happened.

Rising from my desk, I stretch my arms over my head, do a few squats, and refill my water bottle in the kitchen. Swiping my keys off the counter, I run out to grab the mail from the cluster of mailboxes outside.

Ida Moss's blue hydrangeas are in full bloom and her heavy-headed pink peonies nod in the agreeable June breeze. If my nose were in working order, I'd be able to smell their sweet fragrance. For now, I'll just appreciate their beauty.

A minute later, I grab the stack of mail from my box and head back into my apartment—the top half of a 19th century Victorian someone turned into a charming four-plex decades ago. Rifling through the various envelopes, mailers, magazines, and fliers, I stop when I get to a bill from my law firm.

It turns out it doesn't matter how long you were married—divorces can be as messy and expensive just the same.

Last I heard, Jason's seeking fifty percent of the royalties I'd earned while we were married. If it were chump change, I'd cough it up just to get him to sign the papers. But we're talking a comfortable six-figure sum. He's also gunning for alimony, given the disparity of our incomes, but my lawyer says he doesn't stand a chance. We weren't married long

enough for him to grow comfortable with any sort of cushy lifestyle. We hadn't even had time to buy a house—thank goodness.

“Jovie, hi,” Ida steps out onto her front porch, her spotted rescue pooch Domino pulling on his leash and wagging his tail as he tries to drag her closer to me. They make their way down the steps and across the lush green yard that separates her house from my place. “Do you have a quick second?”

“Sure. What's up?” I keep a careful distance, so as not to infect her with whatever nasty virus is coursing through my veins at the moment.

She pushes her gray curls back with her red-rimmed glasses, using them as makeshift headband.

“I need to fly home to Chicago for a few weeks,” she says. “My sister's husband just passed away and I need to be there to help her sort through everything. She's a bit of a mess. Anyway, I've been calling every kennel in Portland all day and no one has room for Domino for a three-week stay. Damn tourist season.”

She rolls her eyes, and I get it. In the off-season, our city's population rests at a comfortable sixty to seventy thousand people. In the summertime, it can swell upwards of two million.

“I hate to put you out,” she says, “but is there any way you could watch him? I'd pay you.”

Her soft hazel eyes plead with mine, and Domino sits like the sweet boy he is, tail wagging with hope.

I had a dog when I was a kid, so I'm not a stranger to the basics of this sort of thing. And it probably wouldn't kill me to have an excuse to go for a walk a couple times a day.

“Um, yeah. I can watch him,” I say.

Ida winces. “And it would need to be at your place. I’m having some remodeling done, and I’m afraid it would be terribly noisy and dusty for you . . . a little stressful for him.”

“Sure,” I say. “He can stay with me.”

“Are you absolutely positive?” She steps closer, her hand splayed across her chest. “I really don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“It’s no problem at all. I could use the company anyway.”

“Oh, thank heavens, Jovie. You’re a lifesaver. Truly.” She does a happy dance before shortening Domino’s leash. “I’m going to get him packed and then I’ll bring him by in the next couple of hours if that’s okay? My flight leaves this afternoon.”

“Sounds good.”

Ida heads inside with Domino in tow and I return to my desk, hoping to get a couple chapters done before welcoming my furry houseguest.

One chapter later, I take a standing break, cracking my knuckles and massaging the stiffness from my neck. Before I dive back into my story—a historical arranged marriage romance about a headstrong duke and his female cousins’ sassy best friend—I check my Facebook account. The old saying that writers will do anything to avoid writing is unfortunately true, especially as of late.

I clear out the twelve messages from this morning, each and every one of them asking me about the mysterious tag on Jude and Stassi’s photo. When I get to the bottom of my inbox, I find the one I sent to Stone earlier. It shows as read. No

response. I give it a re-read, suddenly wondering if I was too harsh.

I was panicked. Embarrassed. Angry. And the words flowed from my brain to my fingertips before I had a chance to walk away and give them a second thought. Maybe I should have ignored it, maybe I shouldn't have met his condescension with condescension of my own.

Biting my lip, I debate whether to offer him an apology or an olive branch or something.

Dragging in a deep breath, I begin to type out a message. Only before I can finish it, the dot beside his name flicks from red to green and three dots fill the screen.

He's writing me.

Sitting back in my chair, I hold my breath as I wait for his message to come through.

Jovie—

I couldn't help but pick up on a little sarcasm in your previous message. Also, I took it upon myself to research the side effects of NyQuil, which are as follows: dizziness, drowsiness, upset stomach, blurred vision, nausea, and dry nose/mouth/throat. I was unable to verify that accidental Facebook tags are among common side effects. Might I advise you to contact your doctor? It would be a grave misfortune if this were to happen again.

Best,

Stone

PS—Not sure if you're aware, but The Wizard of Oz hasn't been giving out hearts since August 25, 1939, when it was revealed that he was nothing more than a con man pulling levers behind a curtain. I'm sure you can relate given your profession.

My jaw falls.

The audacity is strong with this one.

And what the hell is he talking about with *I'm sure you can relate given your profession?*

With my fingers on fire, I sit up straight and hammer out my response.

Stone—

I'm not sure I'm seeing a correlation between a historical romance author and a fictitious flimflammer. Care to elaborate? Also, I appreciate that you took it upon yourself to research my NyQuil conundrum, but I assure you it wasn't necessary. I'm switching to non-drowsy Mucinex effective immediately.

Also, please confirm that those research hours were pro-bono and not billable, as I did not request your generous assistance in this matter.

Best,

Jovie

A moment later, three dots fill the screen before disappearing completely. I wait a few minutes for a response that never comes.

Returning to my work, I force any and all thoughts of Stone Atwood from my mind.

I lived with him for a year in college ... five years later, I refuse to let him take up residency in my head.

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Chapter Five

Jovie

Age 19

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look like you want to be anywhere but here.” A guy with windswept sandy brown hair corners me, a red Solo cup in his hand. His Kelly green polo strains against his broad chest and shoulders, and he reminds me of someone who races sailboats in the summer.

“What makes you think that?” I ask, taking a sip from my third fuzzy navel wine cooler of the night. It tastes like pure cane sugar and chemicals going down, but relaxation sinks deeper into my bones with each downed ounce. Too much of these, though, and I might never be able to look at a peach so long as I live.

Becca’s older sister gave us a ton of random booze leftover from her 21st birthday party last weekend and given the fact that we’re not old enough to buy it ourselves, beggars can’t be choosers.

His lips tug into a half smile. “Because you haven’t left this spot since you got here.”

“So you’ve been watching me this whole time?” I lift a brow. This is the second house party we’ve been to tonight, and as soon as we arrived, the girls I came with scattered like leaves to the wind. I’ve yet to see a familiar face, so I’ve just been hanging out.

“Watching you? No. Noticing you?” he asks. “Yeah ...”

“Hm. I’ve been here at least two hours and this is the first time I’ve seen you—and I’m basically a professional people watcher. I think I’d have noticed you noticing me by now.”

“I’m Stone,” he says, cutting through the bullshit. “And I think I completely botched whatever the hell I was trying to do.”

I crack a smile, appreciating his honesty.

“Hitting on me?” I ask.

He sniffs a laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I guess that’s what that was?”

“I’m Jovie,” I say. “And I’m willing to look past your awkward first impression if you can find me a drink that isn’t beer and doesn’t taste like overripe fruit.”

“Consider it done.” With that, Stone takes my empty wine cooler bottle and returns a minute later with a hard lemonade.

“I’m not sure if you know this or not, but lemons are technically a fruit.” I take the bottle from him anyway and screw off the cap with my bare hands. It leaves an indentation in my palm, but I’m too distracted by the intensity of his hooded hazel gaze to care.

“It was that or beer,” he says. “And you explicitly stated no beer so I was forced to make an executive decision.”

“Fair enough.” I can appreciate a guy who listens; a guy who isn’t afraid to make a decision under pressure. I tip my drink in his direction. “Thank you.”

“So ... *Jovie*,” he says my name like he’s trying it out on his tongue for the first time. “Is that like ... Bon Jovi?”

“One and the same,” I say. “Only spelled with an i-e.”

“Were your parents Bon Jovi fans?”

“They were. Believe it or not, I was actually conceived in the bathroom at a Bon Jovi concert,” I say. “August 1996. It was the *These Days* tour. Van Halen opened.” I squint, trying to recall all the details my parents have overshared with me over the years. “Saratoga Springs, Florida. It was raining cats and dogs that night. My mom was there with her boyfriend who ditched her for her best friend. My dad was there by himself because—I dunno—he does a lot of random things by himself. Anyway, they met and then I happened then they got married and now they’re boring, middle-aged schoolteachers living happily ever after in Kennebunkport.”

“Pretty sure I was conceived in the back of an El Camino behind a strip club,” he says.

I laugh.

He doesn’t.

“Oh,” I say. “I thought you were joking.”

He takes a sip of beer. “I wish I wasn’t.”

“That’s a hell of a way to come into the world though,” I say. “Not a lot of people can say they were conceived like that.

I bet there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of us Bon Jovi babies.”

I swallow a mouthful of hard lemonade. It’s just as saccharin as the fuzzy navel wine cooler sloshing around in my empty stomach. I should have eaten before we went out tonight, but I came back from a four o’clock class, took an online test that was due at midnight, and grabbed a shower before meeting up with my friends.

I’m about to ask him about his interesting moniker when the room begins to tilt and spin.

I think I’m going to be sick ...

The burn of bile rises up the back of my throat, but I swallow it down.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Will you excuse me for a second?”

Abandoning my perch in the corner of the party house’s packed living room, I squeeze through throngs of partygoers in search of the nearest bathroom. Racing down the hallway, my stomach on fire, I try every door until I find one that opens.

I spot the vanity first, then the shower.

I don’t even notice the dark-haired guy zipping his fly until I’m already curled over the sink, expelling orange-tinted liquid Mount Vesuvius style.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” The guy sharing the bathroom with me throws his hands in the air and takes a step back.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, tasting the bitter, disgusting liquor all over again with each word.

Hunched over the sink, I keep my head down.

“You okay?” He scratches at his temple before brushing his dark waves across his forehead.

“Yeah,” I lie. Another wave of nausea rolls through me, but I manage to stave it off. “That’s what I get for drinking on an empty stomach.”

“Rookie mistake.”

“I know, right?”

The handsome stranger hands me a roll of toilet paper.

“Thanks,” I say as I tear off a few sheets. I dab my mouth before washing my hands.

“Hey, you, uh ... want to grab something to eat?” He checks his watch. “This party’s kind of lame, and I was thinking about moving on anyway. There’s a 24-hour diner around the corner with the best late-night pancakes ...”

“Late-night pancakes are my weakness,” I say. “Do they have chocolate chip?”

“They do. But they don’t hold a candle to the maple pecan,” he says. “What do you say? You in?”

“You had me at late-night pancakes.”

We exit the bathroom together—a move that garners a handful of stares, oohs, and aahs from the people loitering in the hall, but my bathroom stranger friend doesn’t seem to notice and I couldn’t care less.

Passing the living room, I stop to glance to the corner where I was chatting it up with Stone before things took an unfortunate turn—but he’s gone.

It’s a shame.

He seems like a guy who would appreciate a late-night pancake.

“You okay?” my new friend asks.

I take one last scan of the place, searching in vain for the Kelly green polo and the sandy blond sailor.

“Yeah,” I say. “Let’s go.”

We’re a block into our journey when he says, “I don’t think you told me your name.”

“Jovie,” I say, though I don’t feel like going into the whole how-I-was-conceived spiel. “What’s your name?”

“Jude,” he says, his hands jammed into his jeans pockets as we stroll under a moonlit sky.

We don’t leave the diner until a quarter past four in the morning. It turns out Jude is an avid bicyclist/hiker/climber, business management major, and collector and curator of all things nineties and early 2000s pop culture. We reminisce about Orbitz, Fruitopia, and Heinz purple ketchup, and he promises to show me his Pog collection one of these days.

When he drops me off at the front entrance of my dorm, he wastes no time asking for my number. I rattle it off without giving it a second thought, and then I make my way upstairs and wash up for bed before he has a chance to kiss me. I’m not sure if he would have tried, but I didn’t want to risk it seeing as how I was puking my guts up mere hours ago.

Crawling under the covers, I replay the past several hours in my head. Despite only spending a handful of hours around Jude, something about him put me at ease. It felt like I was spending time with someone I’d known my whole life. By the end of our time together, I’d almost forgotten about the humbling way our paths crossed.

I close my eyes, nuzzle against my pillow, and take a deep breath.

All things considered, tonight wasn't half bad.

My thoughts drift away one by one, fading into the early morning hours, but before I'm out completely, I think about Stone.

Maybe I'll run into him again one of these days.

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Chapter Six

Stone

“Hey, Stone.” Stassi answers Jude’s door in a baby blue satin robe, her hair twisted into a terry cloth towel. She holds the lapels together with her left hand, her giant engagement diamond glinting on the late afternoon sun. “Jude’s just finishing up a Zoom. Come on in.”

She slinks to the kitchen in her feathery house slippers, looking like some heroine from a vintage James Bond film.

“You want a beer while you wait?” she asks, reaching for the fridge. “I think we have some IPAs ...”

“Nah, I’m okay.” I take a seat on one of the bar stools, pull out my phone, and tend to a couple of emails. Jude’s a talker and there’s no telling how long it’ll be until he’s done with his car.

“You excited for the wedding?” she asks.

“Probably not as excited as you are.” My voice is monotone, and I don’t look up from my screen.

“It’s going to be weird for you, isn’t it? Your best friend’s going to be married and you’re still ...” her voice trails. Ever since she tried introducing me to her college sorority sister a couple years back, she’s been bitter about it not working out. She even went so far as to tell me I’m a waste of a perfectly good bachelor—intelligent, attractive, successful. She then went on to prattle off a list of all the women she knew who would jump at the chance to be with me—as if that was a compelling enough reason for me to throw all of my personal convictions out the window and settle down.

I told her I’m not her pet project and I don’t need to chain myself to another human being to feel fulfilled.

“If anything, it’ll be weirder for Jude,” I say. “He’ll be married and his best friend’s still living the good life.”

Stassi frowns. Or at least she tries. I’m assuming the fresh Botox makes it challenging.

“They say people grow apart from their friends after they get married,” she says, twisting the ring on her finger. “And it’ll be especially hard after we start our family ... Jude’s not going to have as much free time as he has now.”

“Jude has free time?” I ask. “Since when?”

Stassi’s got his schedule so booked out with dinners, double dates, and influencer-style travel excursions, that I have to reserve him months in advance. He’s harder to get into than a Michelin star restaurant in Paris.

She rolls her eyes, but she can’t deny I have a point.

Silence settles between us, and I half-expect her to mosey back to her room to put some clothes on or dry her hair, but she stands there. Planted. Staring at me from the other side of their marble island.

“Jude said you talked to his ex?” Her question sounds rehearsed, as if she’d been holding it in all this time, waiting for a chance to ask.

“I didn’t talk to her,” I say. “I messaged her on Facebook.”

“Do you believe her about the NyQuil?” she asks.

My gaze flicks up from my phone screen. “Does it matter?”

She lifts a lanky shoulder to her ear before letting it drop. “I just think it’s weird, is all.”

“Maybe try not to think about it at all.”

Stassi huffs. “Easy for you to say. She’s not the ex of the person you’re about to spend the rest of your life with.”

“True.”

“I just think it’s really messed up what she did.” Stassi grabs a bottled Fiji water from the fridge before returning to her post. “I mean ... who does something like that?”

“Are you really that threatened by it?”

She uncaps her water. “No. I’m not threatened. It’s just weird that she’s trying to insert herself into our life all of a sudden ... five years later ... two months before our wedding.”

“See ... you’re saying you’re not threatened—but you sound threatened.” I delete a few more emails, exhaling, silently urging Jude to hurry the hell up.

“It’s hard to explain,” she says.

“Then don’t.”

“I just ...” she continues anyway, and I’m convinced she simply wants to hear herself talk at this point. “I know I was technically the other woman.”

She wasn't technically the other woman. She *was* the other woman.

Cupping her hand over her heart, she leans forward. "And I live with the guilt of that every single day."

No, she doesn't ...

"But I wouldn't blame her for hating me," she says, making it even more about her than it already was. "I just figured we were past that whole thing, you know? Like, let it go. Let us live our life in peace."

I've learned over the years that sometimes it's better to keep my trap shut around this woman or she'll make Jude's life a living hell for the next few days. What he sees in her, I've yet to understand. He's mentioned how loaded her family is—some off-shoot of the Kennedy family with oil money. And he's shared on far too many occasions how "dynamite" she is in bed, bragging about how there's nothing she won't do. I imagine those are a couple of the factors at play here. The rest, quite frankly, is none of my damn business.

I'm not his keeper.

I'm simply his best friend.

"What's up?" Jude shuffles into the kitchen, tucking his phone in his shirt pocket. He makes his way to his fiancée first, who leans in for a kiss. She lifts her hand to his cheek, giving it a soft pat before peering up at him through a fringe of dark lashes too thick to be real. "You ready, counselor?"

"Yup." I respond to another work email, pretending not to notice when he gives her yet another kiss.

"You sure you don't want to go, babe?" Jude asks her.

“No, no. This is your thing,” she coos. “I would never impose on your trivia nights.”

She says that now, but I have a hunch things are going to change after she pops out their first tiny human.

Jude turns to me. “You driving?”

I nod. Jude’s a terrible parallel parker so I refuse to let him drive us downtown. Sitting shotgun while he pulls in, pulls out, and cranks his wheel fifty ways to Friday isn’t exactly my idea of a good time.

Twenty minutes later, we pull up to The Bronze Whaler for 90s trivia night—our first Monday of the month tradition. I know these nights are limited, each one another grain of sand through the hourglass. The closer we get to Jude and Stassi’s nuptials, the more in danger these outings are of becoming extinct.

We make our way in, registering at the table and grabbing our buzzer before ordering a couple of beers and snagging our favorite high-top table. Ten minutes later, the game kicks off with a series of easy questions. We nail the first three.

“You hear anything else from Jovie?” Jude asks between the fourth and fifth question.

I’d almost forgotten that I replied to her earlier.

I didn’t mean to. And I hadn’t planned to. I came out of a particularly contentious mediation session and the next thing I knew, I was pounding away at my keyboard, letting off steam.

“What does the acronym A-O-L stand for?” the trivia host asks into her microphone.

I hit our buzzer, but the table to our left gets it first.

“You weren’t kidding when you said Stassi was upset about that whole thing,” I divert the topic, but only slightly.

Jude exhales before reaching for his beer. “It’s all she’s been talking about all day.”

“What is the first name of the sheep that was cloned in 1996?” the trivia hosts asks.

I slap the buzzer.

“Team Stude at table two,” she calls on us, using the ridiculous moniker we came up with as kids—an amalgamation of our first names.

“Dolly,” I answer.

“Correct! Team Stude is still in the lead with four points,” she says. “Next question ... who sang the song *Steal My Sunshine*?”

A table in the back snags that one.

“How’s your dad doing?” I ask. Last I heard, Paul was living the good life at some place in West Palm Beach. The older he’s gotten, the less he can tolerate Maine’s punishing, everlasting winters.

“Good,” Jude says. “He’s excited to come back and see everyone.”

It’s been at least a year since I saw Paul last, and while he isn’t my dad, he’s raised me since I was ten and given me copious amounts of life advice that’s yet to be proven wrong. We text every now and again—mostly him checking in the way a father would. I appreciate it just the same.

“Moving on,” the host says. “Name the highest grossing film of the nineties ...”

Jude smacks the buzzer and calls out the answer. “*Titanic.*”

The host points to our table. “Another point for Team Stude.”

I’ve never understood Jude’s obsession with all things nineties. He was hardly out of diapers before Y2K. If I were an armchair psychologist, I imagine it might have something to do with those years being the only ones he had with his mother before she passed.

“Name the butler in the popular series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*,” the host says.

The table to our left gets this one.

“Going to grab another round,” I say. “Think you can hold the fort down?” It’s a stupid question because of course he can. The man eats, breathes, and sleeps this shit. I’m convinced he’d sell the soul of his firstborn child for a time machine if he could.

He gives me a thumbs up and I head to the bar. While I wait for our drinks, I pull up my phone and check my Facebook messages for the sake of filling the time.

Tapping on the last message from Jovie, I give it another read, and then I tap on her profile. I haven’t read it in ages. Actually, I’m not sure if I’ve ever taken the time to look at it. Scrolling to her bio section, I stop when I get to the part that mentions she’s the *bestselling author of the Dashing Dukes of Pembroke Place series*.

I click through a few of her photos—many of them book covers with frilly fonts and shirtless men holding long-haired beauties in long flowing dresses. The description beneath the fourth image says it’s recently been optioned for a TV series.

I'd always given Jovie shit for majoring in creative writing. I thought it was a frivolous major, that she wouldn't be able to get a real job with it. And I never squandered an opportunity to razz her for sticking her nose in those drugstore paperbacks she'd leave all over the apartment when we lived together.

But she proved me wrong.

She proved us all wrong.

I pay for our beers with cash and return to the table.

"I got us two more points," Jude says. "Still in the lead."

His phone lights on the table and a text from Stassi fills the screen. He doesn't notice, and I consider not pointing it out, but I'd hate to get him in hot water with the future ball and chain.

"Stassi just texted you," I say.

He checks his phone and fires something back.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

We miss the next question.

"She was asking if I put the deposit down for the flowers because she just got a bill," he says.

And here I thought it was something that could have waited until he got home ...

"Next question," the host calls out. "In what city do the Simpsons characters reside?"

We hit the buzzer at the same time. I let him answer.

"Springfield," Jude calls out.

Twenty questions later, we walk away reigning champs. I'm pretty sure we've answered every trivia question they've asked tenfold, but tradition is tradition, and one of these days, these nights will be a thing of the past.

We grab a couple slices of pizza from Pie City Pies before hopping back into my car and heading to his neck of the woods.

We're halfway there, an old Radiohead tune playing low on the speakers, when Jude clears his throat.

"Do you think I'm doing the right thing marrying Stassi?" he asks.

I'd slam on my brakes if we weren't already cruising past a green light.

"A little late to be asking that question, don't you think?" I ask back.

He's quiet.

"You getting cold feet?" I glance at him through the corner of my eye.

His knee is bouncing, and I'm mentally preparing the speech I'd been wanting to give since the day he professed his undying devotion to that woman.

"Forget it," he says. "Forget I said anything. I'm just ... yeah ... it's gotta be cold feet."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." He fixes his attention out the passenger window, like he's here but half a world away at the same time.

I swallow all the things I wanted to tell him, and I remind myself that my only job is to be happy for him and to support

him as he navigates this bullshit existence that we call life.

If things ever fall through, at least he knows a good divorce attorney ...

I'll even do him a solid and take him on pro-bono.

If our roles were reversed, I know he'd do the same for me.

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Chapter Seven

Stone

Age 19

“You ready, man?” Jude sneaks up behind me, squeezing my shoulders.

I shut my laptop lid and spin around in my desk chair. His hair is shower-damp and the overpowering scent of his woody cologne permeates the confined space of the dorm room we share.

“I thought we weren’t leaving for another couple hours?” I ask.

He claps his hands together. “That was the first plan. New plan is, that girl I’ve been telling you about is coming here, then we’re going to grab a bite to eat at Meyer’s Pub, then we’ll start at Friday After Class at Nightshade.”

For the past week, all Jude’s been able to talk about is this girl he met at the house party we crashed last weekend. He ran into her in the bathroom and apparently they went out for

pancakes? It didn't make sense and he's not the best at sharing every finite detail when it comes to anything, but he's been obsessed ever since.

Every time I come home from class, he's on the phone with her. Sometimes I'll catch them on the phone in the middle of the night. And when they're not talking, they're texting.

I've known Jude long enough to know he falls hard and fast for every girl, but he swears this one's different than the rest. He's also coming off a bad breakup. His high school girlfriend of two years dumped him last month and he's been a wreck ever since. His dad always says the best way to get over the old one is to get under a new one—or something like that. So that's always been Jude's MO. He's never single for long. In fact, I don't even think the dude knows how to be single.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, exhaling. "I was hoping I could finish this paper before we left. I'm on the last section. I'll probably skip dinner and meet you guys at Meyer's."

"Lame," he says. "As your best friend, brother from another mother, and roommate, I'm afraid I can't allow that."

I smirk. "It's not up to you."

"Come on. I really want you to meet this girl. She's nothing like Brittany. You're going to love her, I promise."

"And if I don't love her?"

"Then you're a fucking idiot. Now come on. She's going to be here any minute." He waves for me to stand. "Hustle, Atwood. Move it."

The way he's bouncing around on the balls of his feet and flailing his arms reminds me of a kid waiting in line for a super hero movie, already hyped up on sugar and soda. It's

been a long time since I've seen the man this excited for anything.

Brittany sure as hell didn't put this kind of pep in his step.

If anything, she brought him down.

Those two were always fighting, always bickering, and always knee-deep in their drama-of-the-week. The day she dumped him, I silently celebrated. I felt guilty of course because Jude was destroyed. He sulked around, refused to go out, and only left his room to go to class. Even then, he'd oversleep and miss half of them.

Last Friday I had to sit him down, tell him to snap the hell out of it, and forced him to go out. Being underage, however, meant our only options for going out were to wander along Farley Street looking for the houses playing music and packed with people.

That's the night he met this chick—whoever she is.

That's the night I also met Jovie.

I don't tend to get hung up on girls, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thinking about her constantly. Despite only sharing a brief conversation, it felt like we were clicking. She had the cutest fucking smile too. Dimples and all. She was gorgeous with wavy blonde hair that stopped at her lower back, eyes bluer than the Pacific. Full lips the color of ripe strawberries.

But more than that, she was witty and funny and genuine and didn't reek of desperate insecurity like most of the other girls that night, who were falling down drunk and wearing hardly more than a couple squares of fabric on their overly tanned bodies.

I noticed her when we first walked in. She was sitting by herself on the armrest of some sofa, sipping a peach wine cooler and bobbing to the music, her eyes closed. In a world where being alone is a death sentence for most, she was the picture of contentment.

Maybe it was the three beers I'd already chugged, but I decided to shoot my shot.

Everything was going well until she excused herself for a second—and never came back. People do that shit all the time—they walk off to do something, run into someone they know, and get sidetracked. Despite the fact that she never came back, I didn't take it personally. Odds are I'll see her around again either on campus or at some random party.

Before my mother passed, she always said, "What's meant for you will always find you."

She hasn't been wrong yet.

In the past nine years, I found a home with Paul and Jude, a hell of a deal on a vintage Mustang the week before my seventeenth birthday, and a full-ride college scholarship to the University of Maine. All things considered, I'm sitting pretty good and my life's only getting started.

Jude grabs a couple beers from our dorm fridge. We're getting low, but Jude's dad comes once a month to visit and he always stocks us up.

"Knock, knock," a woman's voice sounds from the open doorway as I pop the tab and toss back a mouthful.

"Jovie," Jude says. "You found us."

I almost choke on my drink.

Fuck me.

It's *her*.

She throws her arms around him and he pulls her in, burying his head against her shoulder.

“Jovie, this is my roommate, Stone,” Jude says a moment later.

Her ocean eyes light as if she recognizes me. But I keep my expression unreadable. While Jude's been rambling on about this woman all week, I shared a little bit about the girl I'd met as well. I didn't have as much to say since we'd only talked for maybe ten minutes before she vanished, but I told Jude when I found her again, I planned to ask her out.

“Jovie, nice to meet you,” I say before she has a chance to point out the fact that we've already met. Her gaze flickers as she squints, as if she's trying to determine if I truly don't recognize her or if I'm simply pretending. “We should probably head out if we want to get a table.”

“Yeah, let's bounce,” Jude says, slipping his hand on the small of her back. “Meyer's is crazy on Friday night.”

I saw her first.

I talked to her first.

I wanted her first.

But Jude has her now, and it's been ages since I've seen him this alive, this high on life.

What kind of best friend would I be if I took that away from him?

Chapter Eight

Jovie

“Feel free to go anywhere you want.” Talking to a dog feels silly, but Domino’s been sniffing the same row of bushes for a solid five minutes now, looking for the perfect spot to do his business. “The world is your oyster.”

A woman jogs by with earbuds in, giving me a brief smile. I wave back. I’ve never understood the concept of running for pure enjoyment, but I can appreciate a nice, long walk in a beautiful day.

“Come on, buddy,” I say. “I’ve got five more chapters to write before I can call it quits today, and I *really* want to call it quits.”

I’ve been hopped up on decongestants and English breakfast tea all morning, but I hit my stride sometime around 10 AM and I need to get back into it before I lose it again. Once I hit my word count for the day, I have a binge session of *Selling Sunset* waiting for me.

Finally, he lifts his leg, does his thing, and trots back to the sidewalk. I adjust his leash and follow behind. As soon as we

get back to my place, he laps some mouthfuls of water from his bowl in the kitchen before settling onto his orthopedic dog bed.

This is only our second day together, but I think we're going to be okay (aside from the box of Kleenex he tore up this morning when I was in the shower).

I brew a fresh cup of tea and settle in at my desk. By one o'clock, my stomach rumbles. While I know I should eat something, nothing sounds appetizing. Not being able to taste or smell has really sucked the fun out of that sort of thing.

I take a break, stretch my legs, and trek to the kitchen to grab a piece of string cheese and a pear, neither of which taste like a dang thing.

By the time I return to my desk, I check my email and putz around online for a few minutes before mindlessly checking my Facebook. I don't normally check it this often, but I'm curious to see if Stone wrote me back after my last message yesterday ...

The little red notification shows I have one new message.

Holding my breath, I click on it.

My stomach does a miniature somersault when I see his name in bold and a new, unread message beneath it.

Jovie—

Fictitious flimflammer ... that's a phrase you don't hear every day. Is that how your characters speak in your books? Also, since you're having difficulties making the connection between what you do and what the Wizard of Oz does, allow me to simplify. You were both selling things that aren't real.

Not only that, you both promote the notion that happiness is something we can only get from someone else.

Now, before you get on your high horse and tell me that love is real, allow me to impart some additional wisdom on you (and yes, this is pro-bono). Science has proven that what we humans call “love” is nothing more than a chain reaction of chemical reactions in our brains, which flood our body with hormones that make us feel certain emotions. It’s a biological drug so powerful that some people can become addicted to it.

I’m sure you’re familiar with the phrase “love addict?”

Anyway, I imagine the people reading your stories are doing so because something in those pages triggers some kind of hormonal response that gives them a hit of dopamine and oxytocin and gives them all the feels.

To each their own. I won’t judge as we all have our vices. I just wanted to clarify my stance.

Best,

Stone

With my jaw cocked to the side, I tap out a response.

Stone,

I appreciate the clarification, but I have to respectfully disagree. While “love” in a scientific sense can be boiled down to a cocktail of hormones, “love” is a many faceted concept. It can be physical, emotional, philosophical, and spiritual. We can feel love in more ways than one. Some

people feel it in their bones. Some people feel it in their heart. Some people feel it in their head. Love feels different to everyone who feels it. It's magical in a sense. We can't see it—but we can't deny it.

It has the power to change lives for the better (and sometimes for the worse).

People kill for it.

People die for it.

People uproot their entire lives for it.

To refer to it as nothing more than a chain reaction of hormones is an insult to anyone who has ever experienced it.

I'm genuinely curious—have you ever been in love?

Best,

Jovie

The message shows as 'seen' immediately, but I don't have time to sit around and wait for a response so I minimize my browser and pull up my Word doc. I'm halfway through a new chapter when my computer chimes, alerting me to a new message.

Jovie—

In my experience as a divorce attorney, I can attest to the fact that statistically half of the married population in existence believes they're in love at one point or another. But eventually that love turns into a resentment so intolerable that those very same lovebirds will spend thousands of

dollars and a year of their life trying to sever their once inseparable ties.

True love is supposed to last.

The majority of the time it doesn't.

No one's immune to playing the fool.

Best,

Stone

I waste no time responding.

Stone—

You didn't answer my question so I'll ask again: have you ever been in love?

Best,

Jovie

Three dots never appear on the screen, despite the message showing as 'seen'. I wait a handful of minutes before closing out of my browser completely. This book isn't going to write itself.

But as I'm deep in the throes of a love scene between the Duke of Wimberley and Lady Lattermire, I can't help but wonder why Stone deflected my question.

During the three years I dated Jude, I never once saw Stone bring a girl home. I'd watch in awe as some of the

prettiest ones would all but physically throw themselves at him and he wouldn't bat an eye.

Once, I even mustered up the courage to ask Jude if Stone played for the other team or if he was closeted. It wasn't my business, but I wanted to make sense of it. Jude assured me Stone was as straight as an arrow, and I never questioned it again after that. The two of them grew up together. They were thick as thieves. If anyone would've known, it would've been Jude.

I finish another chapter and pull up my Facebook again—curious to see if he's responded yet.

But there's nothing.

Clicking through his profile pictures, I rest my chin on the top of my hand. There are only five total. The most recent one looks like a head shot from his law firm. The one before that is a picture of him fishing off some dock, the sun setting over the horizon. The third image is Stone and Jude, their arms around each other, palm trees in the background. The fourth is a photo of Stone and Jude as kids, both of them straddling bikes, their knees scraped and covered in band-aids and dirt.

The final image hits me like a surprise left hook.

It's the three of us in Jude's car. Spring break. Sophomore year. We took a road trip up the coast to spend a week at Jude's dad's lake house. In the picture, Jude is driving, Stone's riding shotgun, and I'm squished in the backseat between piles of pillows, bags, and snacks. The three of us are grinning wide, our faces slightly softer and younger than they are now, our eyes shiny and bright.

After Jude and I broke up, we stayed Facebook friends online. I didn't want to seem petty and be the first one to

delete him, and maybe he felt the same. I fully expected Stone to delete me at some point. He was never a fan of me for reasons I could never figure out. Maybe he was jealous of how happy Jude and I were? Maybe he was annoyed at constantly being the third wheel? It was impossible to know what he was thinking because getting him to open up about anything was like pulling teeth. Eventually I stopped caring if he liked me or not.

But the fact that he posted this picture and left it up all these years ... begs more questions than answers.

Dragging in a deep breath, I let it go, closing my laptop lid, and then I grab Domino's leash to take him for another walk. I need a change of scenery and some fresh air and a new perspective.

Stone has always been an enigma; an impossible riddle.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to crack him open just to see what's inside.

Sometimes I wonder if it's nothing but a frozen block of ice.

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Chapter Nine

Stone

Age 20

“Hold on, hold on,” Jovie scrolls through the playlist on her phone. “I have the perfect road trip mix.”

We’re halfway to Paul’s lake house and we’ve already stopped three times—once so Jude could take a piss on the side of the road, another time so Jovie could stretch her legs after riding a half hour in the backseat, and a third time so we could play musical chairs. Apparently Jude was up late last night working on a paper and he asked if I’d take over behind the wheel while he crashed in the back.

I figured Jovie would crash in the back with him seeing as how the two of them can’t go more than five seconds without touching one another or exchanging lovey dovey looks, but instead she climbed into the passenger seat, buckled up, and told me my Legal Beagle podcast was making her die a slow, painful death.

“Aw, yeah. Here we go ...” Jovie leans back in her seat as a song by American Authors plays over the speakers. Swaying in her seat, she sings along—though not too loud. Eyes squeezed tight. She cracks the window a few inches and the smell of her raspberry perfume fills the air. “Come on!”

Jovie punches my arm.

“Don’t you just love this song?” she asks between lyrics. “Best Day of My Life—this song instantly puts me in the best mood.”

I focus on the road while she sings along. We don’t make it past the next exit before she’s unbuckling her seatbelt and opening the sunroof.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“What’s it look like?” She hoists herself up, until her upper body is sticking out the top of the car.

“Hope you like bugs in your teeth,” I tell her.

“What?” she yells from above me. “I can’t hear you?”

I don’t buy it.

Glancing at the rearview, I check to see if all this commotion has woken the sleeping prince in the backseat, but he’s out cold.

We cruise another couple of miles before Jovie finally lowers herself back into her seat as a Rolling Stones song comes on.

“That ... was amazing,” she says, sweeping her hair back into place. “You have to try it sometime.”

“I’m good.”

“No, seriously. Do you want to stop and I can drive so you can try it?”

“Thanks but no thanks.”

“You know ... I’ve known you over a year now, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen you just let loose.”

“That’s because I don’t need to let loose.”

“But you never seem like you’re having fun.” She pulls her sunglasses off her nose, cleaning them with the hem of her tank top.

“That’s because I’m not having fun ... I’m studying.”

She slips the glasses over her face and angles herself to me. “What made you want to become a lawyer?”

“It just seemed like a natural fit.” I like the idea of sticking up for people. That and I can be an asshole if I need to be. Some people are too soft for a career in law. “What made you want to get a degree in creative writing?”

“Because I have a million stories inside of me and holding them in is sheer torture,” she says. “Sure, I could’ve been a teacher or a doctor or something practical, but then I wouldn’t have time to write all of these stories. I had to pick. So I chose the one that spoke to my heart the loudest.”

“Poetic.”

“Try telling my parents that.” She tucks a strand of ice-blonde hair behind one ear.

“They don’t approve?”

“It’s not that they don’t approve, I think they’re just worried I won’t have a job after college,” she says. “I think they keep picturing me as a starving artist.”

“Valid concern,” I say. “Do you have a back-up plan in case the writing thing doesn’t pan out?”

“Nope.” Jovie reaches for her Diet Coke from the center console, taking a sip. “The writing thing is going to work out.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know,” she says. “It’s like a gut feeling. I can’t describe it. I close my eyes and I can see my future so clearly. When I try to imagine myself doing anything else ...” she swipes her hand through the air. “... it’s all black. There’s nothing. Writing is it for me. If it’s not writing, it’s nothing.”

“Sounds like something a starving artist would say ...”

She sniffs through her nose. “My parents would agree with you on that.”

The song changes to an Alanis Morrissette number and I peek back at Jude again. “Should we wake him up? He used to have the biggest crush on Alanis. I’d hate for him to miss out on the acoustic live version of *You Oughta Know*.”

Jovie glances over her shoulder, a slow smile spreading across her pink lips. “Nah, he looks peaceful. We should let him sleep.”

Jude sleeps the rest of the drive there and Jovie sings along to every song while interspersing random tidbits of information like a human VH1 Pop-Up Video.

For past year that she’s been Jude’s girl, I swear the guy hasn’t stopped smiling. Not once. Every time she walks into the room, he lights up like a damn Christmas tree, and any time she goes home for the weekend or has a girls’ night, he sulks around like a man child. And I kind of get it ... she brings sunshine everywhere she goes. She’s in a perpetual

good mood, never hesitating to offer a witticism or crazy antic as long as it conjures a laugh or smile out of someone.

This woman truly gives no fucks. She's just out here living her truth.

Secretly, as much as I feign annoyance at her little song and dance numbers, her corny dad jokes, and the little dramatic re-enactments she puts on every time she tells Jude about a book she just finished ... I find it all sexy as hell.

Sometimes I wonder what would've happened had she not run into Jude in the bathroom at that party. Would she have come back? Would we have talked all night? Would she have given me her number?

Would *I* be the one lighting up every time she comes into the room?

It's dangerous to let my mind wander down that long and winding road to nowhere. What's done is done. There isn't any scenario I can think of in which Jovie could ever be mine. Even if she and Jude break up one day, she'd still be off the table.

No self-respecting man would ever go after his best friend's ex.

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Chapter Ten

Jovie

“You feeling better yet?” Monica asks over FaceTime Wednesday night.

I take a sip of chicken broth, tasting the salt on my tongue but nothing else.

“We’re making progress,” I say.

“So will I be seeing your face at brunch this Saturday?”

I give her a thumbs up and take another swallow. “God willing.”

She chuckles, sweeping her dark hair into a messy top knot. “Oh, did anything ever happen after you took that tag down the other day?”

I begin to shake my head and then I stop. “Yes and no.”

“What? What’s that mean?” she leans closer to her phone.

“Remember Stone Atwood?” I ask. “Jude’s best friend.”

She sways back, her head cocked. “Do I remember Stone Atwood ... what the hell kind of question is that? Of course I

remember Stone Atwood. Who could forget that icy stare and those broad shoulders?”

On the other side of the room, Domino snores on his dog bed, his little paws flicking like he’s chasing something in his sleep.

“So he messaged me that same morning you called,” I say. “And we’ve been messaging a little bit ever since.”

“Really? Stone?”

I nod. “It’s weird. I don’t know if we’re flirting or if he’s just being an asshole to me and I’m giving it back to him but the whole thing is ... unexpected.”

“Do you think he wants to reconnect?”

I shake my head with a vehement no. “Absolutely not. There’s nothing to reconnect. He was always Jude’s friend. Like they were a packaged deal. I was always the third wheel and Stone made no effort to hide his feelings about that.”

The number of times Stone appeared to enjoy my company, I could probably count on one hand, maybe two. Most of the time I couldn’t get him to talk to me, let alone acknowledge my presence.

I never pointed it out to Jude because I didn’t want to cause any issues between them, but I always wanted to know if Stone was always like that—or if it had to do with me. Once I was so determined to crack a smile out of him that I danced around their dorm lip syncing to the Spice Girls and making a complete fool out of myself only for him to walk off halfway through to take a phone call down the hall.

“Then what do you think he wants?” Monica asks.

I shrug. “I don’t think he wants anything. I think he’s just being ... Stone.”

“That says so little while saying so much.”

“Exactly.”

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Chapter Eleven

Stone

The Hannaford Supermarket is packed on this Friday afternoon. I imagine we're all doing the same thing; ditching work a couple of hours early, grabbing some dinner items, and heading home to kick off our weekend. I wonder if this is what Paul meant when he told me there's no such thing as a unique experience.

I tuck a six pack of Heineken beneath my arm and head for the meat counter to grab a porterhouse and half a pound of stuffed mushrooms.

"I mean, what would you feed a dog if you had one?" A pony-tailed blonde in neon blue yoga pants asks a pimple-faced butcher.

"I don't have a dog, ma'am," he says, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"But if you did though," she says.

"I'd probably feed him kibble, ma'am." His eyes shift toward the long line forming behind her.

“I guess I’ll just take two sirloins,” she says. “The eight ounce, not the five.”

The young man wraps the steak in brown paper for her before sealing it with a sticker.

“Anything else?” he asks.

“That’ll be all, thank you,” she says before taking the package, turning on her heel—and walking right into me. “Oh my god. I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you there.”

In her defense, I was probably standing a little too closer, but the little old lady behind me kept inching closer to me, which made me inch closer to her and it became a big circle jerk of inching.

“Jesus,” I mutter under my breath when our eyes catch.

I’d know those Pacific ocean blues anywhere, the ones so effervescent they almost make me forget it’s been about a week and a half since I ignored her last message.

“Jovie,” I say.

“Stone?” She squints, as if she doesn’t believe her eyes. Then again, I imagine I look slightly different than I did five years ago. Shorter hair. More muscles. Dressier clothes. Bigger big dick energy ...

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

The little old lady behind me clears her throat, and I motion for her to go around me.

“I’m watching my neighbor’s dog and he’s refusing to eat. I think he’s depressed. I thought maybe if I got him a steak ...” she shrugs. “What are *you* doing here? I thought you were in Baltimore?”

She remembered ...

Our senior year in college, I was accepted into the University of Maryland School of Law that upcoming fall.

“Yeah,” I say. “I was offered a position up here from one of my law professors who was opening a practice here.”

Her lips inch into a wistful yet friendly smile. I’m sure it’s strange seeing me here—of all people. Or maybe she’s looking at me but thinking about Jude. It’s hard to tell. I imagine seeing me all these years later rustles up some old memories she wasn’t prepared to think about at the grocery store on a Friday afternoon.

The last time I saw Jovie was before the ill-fated Tulum trip. We were sitting around eating burnt frozen pizza from the campus convenience mart and downing cheap beer. And if that weren’t enough, Jovie forced us to play some God-awful card game where we had to shout certain phrases and clap and make fools of ourselves, but by the end of the night I was drunk enough to actually enjoy it.

The last thing I remember before passing out on the living room couch that evening was Jovie covering me with a blanket before adjusting my pillow so I wouldn’t have a kink in my neck.

I mumbled something to her about not being half bad.

She replied with a coy, “Yeah, I know.”

Everything turned black after that.

Who’d have ever thought that would’ve been the last time we’d hang out, the three of us?

Certainly not me.

I doubt Jude did either.

“You know, I’m still waiting for you to reply to that last message,” she winks and crinkles her nose. “You left me on a cliffhanger.”

“I didn’t feel like answering it.” And it’s the truth.

“That’s your prerogative, I guess.”

I’ll admit, I debated sending her another clever deflection last week, but then I got busy with work and decided it was best just to leave it alone. Besides, some things are better left unsaid.

“You know Jude lives here too,” I say, leaving out any mention of Stassi because it goes without saying.

She lifts her brows. “Okay ...”

“You haven’t run into him yet?” I swear he’s never home. Stassi’s always got him running to this festival or that concert or this new restaurant.

She shakes her head, her ponytail flicking over her shoulders.

“I’ve only been here about a year,” she says. “I moved here with my ex ... and I guess I haven’t gotten around to leaving yet.”

My chest tightens at the idea of Jovie being with someone new, some faceless pencil dick who probably doesn’t deserve her. From the second time we met, I knew she could never be mine. But even after Jude left her, I never once stopped to picture her with someone new. No need to torture myself.

We linger in silence for a beat, as if neither of us wants to go, yet there’s nothing more to be said.

Her full mouth curls at the sides, flanked by two perfect dimples as she stares up at me through a fringe of curled

lashes. I've known far too many people who let themselves go after college. The stress of a corporate gig, a robust travel schedule, and a social life that revolves around drinking on the weekends tends to do that to a person. But Jovie looks even more beautiful than she did the night I first saw her.

There's a calmness about her, as if these last several years in the real world have given her the kind of education she couldn't get from a four-year institution.

Jovie waves her package of steaks. "I should probably get home and feed Domino."

"Right." I rake my hand along my jaw, taking her in for what very well might be the last time.

"It was nice seeing you though."

Most of the time, when people say that, they never mean it.

"You too," I say.

She walks away, turning back once more. "You should really think about answering my question ..."

"Not a chance."

She laughs before spinning on her heel and heading to the front of the store to check out.

A moment later, I realize I'm standing there wearing a dopey grin. I'm sure I look like a damn lunatic.

I wipe the expression off my face, get back in line, and order my filet mignon.

Years ago, I used to wonder what would be worse: Jude and Jovie getting married and me having to spend the rest of my life watching my best friend live happily ever after with

her? Or Jude sending Jovie packing and me never having to see her again.

It never occurred to me that there could ever be anything in between.

Now I know.

Only I don't know how I feel about it.

None of these scenarios end with me getting the girl.

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Chapter Twelve

Stone

Age 20

“Can I ask you something?” Jovie asks before flopping onto Jude’s dorm bed. He should be back from class in the next hour, but she claimed she was already on this side of campus and it was easier just to wait here.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” I don’t look away from his computer.

“Do you honestly not remember meeting me the first time?”

My fingers stop clacking away at the keyboard, and I turn in my chair to face her.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. “What kind of question is that?”

“The night I met Jude ... I met you right before I got sick in the bathroom. You got me a hard lemonade and we talked

about my name. You really don't remember?" She rolls to her side, resting her cheek against her hand.

"You're talking about something that happened last year," I say. "I can't even tell you what I ate for breakfast this morning."

She picks at a loose thread in his comforter. "Maybe you were drunk."

"Maybe."

Her scrutinizing gaze flicks onto mine. "You didn't seem drunk though."

I shrug. "I don't know what to tell you."

I'm not proud of my dishonesty, but that ship sailed last year when Jude introduced us for the first time and I immediately decided to pretend like *that* was our first time meeting. It's too late to go back on that, and in the end, it wouldn't serve a purpose. No one would benefit from it. It'd only make things awkward. Besides, my intentions were honorable. I didn't want Jude to know the girl I'd been crushing on was the girl he'd been talking to that entire time. He deserved to be happy, especially after Brittany.

"I finally listened to that Wilco album you told me about," Jovie changes the subject.

"What'd you think?"

"I liked it," she says. "I listened to track 2 on repeat for, like, two straight hours yesterday."

"Love track 2."

"See." She cracks a smile. "We have more in common than you think."

I'm well aware.

The two of us—aside from our night and day personalities—share more of the same interests than she does with Jude. For starters, we both love indie and classic rock but we opt for classical during study sessions. Jude prefers silence or nineties music—nothing in between.

Jovie and I share many of the same favorite restaurants—Cerro's on Hudson, The Screaming Burrito on Halleck, and the campus-town Nathan's hot dog stand at 2 AM on a Saturday night after the bars close.

When it comes to politics, we lean the same direction while Jude leans staunchly toward its opposition.

Any time the three of us attempt to pick a movie together, inevitably Jude and Jovie disagree. She, like me, prefers the artsy independent flicks, while Jude has never met a Marvel Cinematic Universe blockbuster he didn't love.

“Hey, babe.” Jovie climbs off the bed when Jude strolls in.

He drops his backpack on the floor and wraps his arms around her.

I look away, returning my attention to my research paper after jamming ear pods in and dialing the volume up enough to drown out the sound of his lips on hers.

Chapter Thirteen

Jovie

“What do you think of this one?” Monica pulls a vintage Pucci scarf from a rack at the downtown Portland Flea and Fashion market Saturday morning.

“Let me see.” I place my iced coffee on a nearby table and take the colorful silk fabric from her, inspecting the edges for fraying and the rest of it for moth holes. Lifting it to my (currently functioning) nose, I inhale its scent to ensure it doesn’t smell like it’s been sitting in someone’s dank basement for the last forty years. “Green light.”

“You think it’s worth two hundred though?” she asks.

“Everything’s negotiable. Offer them one-fifty and see what they say.”

Monica carries the scarf to the woman behind the next table, and I browse a rack of vintage designer sunglasses, trying on some oversized 3203s by Nina Ricci. I check my reflection in the lens of another pair, giggling when I see how ridiculous I look. Unfortunately I’m no Jackie Kennedy Onassis. I’m more of a bleach-blonde, free-spirited, hopelessly

romantic Lee Radziwill. I put them back and try some vintage Ray-Ban aviators next.

“Got it,” Monica says when she returns. She folds the beautiful silk piece into fourths and tucks it into her bag. “Did you still want to hit up that jewelry stand on the end?”

“Yes,” I say, returning the sunglasses to their stand. “And then can we grab brunch? I’m dying for some buttermilk pancakes from Becky’s Diner.”

I check my watch. If we get there in the next twenty minutes, we should be able to snag a table without a huge wait.

Ambling down the cobblestone streets, we pass a booth selling gigantic cinnamon rolls and coffee, another one shilling freshly cut flowers, and a third offering aura readings.

“Have you ever done that?” I nudge Monica’s arm and point to the aura booth. “I wonder what color my aura is.”

“Yours is probably yellow or orange. Like sunshine. Maybe some pink too, for love,” she says. “What do you think mine would be?”

“Blue,” I say. “Because you’re loyal and true. Should we try it?”

Monica shakes her head, her lips bunched. “I can think of a hundred other things I could do with that fifty bucks.”

“You have a point.” I glance down at my toenails in desperate need of a pedicure. Several weeks in the throes of a book deadline has made them an afterthought. I make a mental note to get them done later today.

“Oh, hey, can we hit up the jam stand super quick?” Monica points across the way. “This place has the *best*

marionberry jelly, and Chauncy loves their apple butter.”

We cut across to the other side of the street, weaving through pockets of Saturday morning browsers, young families pushing strollers packed with flowers and flea market finds, and locals walking their dogs. Maybe I should have brought Domino, but he doesn't seem to want to do much of anything lately. I can hardly get him off his bed half the time.

I've been FaceTiming with Ida throughout the week, and he wags his tail when he hears her voice, but he still barely eats. I think he took three whole bites of the steak I made for him last night. I saved the rest of it for later, in case he changes his mind about starving himself. Ida assured me that as long as he's eating something he'll be fine, but I still feel awful.

I browse a selection of artisanal jams and jellies while Monica buys her jelly and apple butter. At the last minute, I decide to buy a jar of raw wildflower honey. At twenty bucks, it's no drop in the bucket, but it's better use of my money than the aura reading I was considering a minute ago.

We zag back across the street, making a beeline for the jewelry stand I was eyeing on our way here.

“What is it about shiny pretty things that makes me feel like a kid again?” I slide an oval-shaped mood ring over my left index finger, and the stone gradually changes from deep, dark indigo to a vibrant violet, which is supposed to mean happy or excited. “Did you ever have one of these?”

“I had a million of them,” she says. “And my sister lost each and every one. Or so she claims. I'm pretty sure she was just giving them away to her friends ...”

I place the ring back and inspect a pair of lotus flower earrings.

“Some cultures believe the lotus signifies strength, resilience, and rebirth,” the jewelry maker says from behind her table. “In Buddhism, it stands for fresh starts and new beginnings.”

“These are certainly beautiful.” I hold them up to my ear and check my reflection in a nearby mirror.

“The silver really brings out the blue in your eyes,” the woman says.

“I agree,” Monica chimes in. “You should get them. Have to admit, the meaning behind them is pretty spot on for you. Maybe it’s a sign ...”

“All right, fine,” I say, handing them to the woman. “They’re too perfect to pass up.”

“Twenty-five dollars even,” she says. “And for an extra five, I’ll throw in that mood ring.”

“Sold,” I say, digging my debit card from my bag. I hand the ring to Monica. “Don’t let your sister steal this one.”

She slides it over her right ring finger before placing her palm over her heart. “I love it, thank you. And I won’t let her anywhere near it.”

With our purchases in tow, we trek down the cobblestone street once again, this time heading toward the infamous seaside Commercial Street for brunch. Every time I finish a book, I always look forward to grounding myself back into reality. It usually requires something to see, something to touch, something to taste, something to hear ... and the Saturday flea market almost always ticks all of those boxes.

As much as I love mentally residing in some far-off land where people fall in love and no one gets hurts and they all

live happily ever after in the end, it's never a bad thing to step away from that from time to time.

“What's Chauncy up to today?” I ask after we put our names on the wait list.

The hostess said it would be fifteen to thirty minutes, so we step outside and find a place to sit in the sunshine.

“Getting a quick eighteen holes in with his dad and brother at the club,” she says. “The usual.”

“Are things getting better between you two?”

Last I knew, they were two months into marital counseling.

“Yeah, actually,” she says. “He's been making more of an effort to be present, and he's been doing little things for me lately—making me coffee when I'm running late for work, surprising me with lunch dates or leaving roses on the kitchen table for me to come home to ... he's trying. And I am too. I'm learning to pick my battles. For instance, when he leaves his beard shavings in the sink instead of rinsing them out ... I wipe the sink down myself instead of biting his head off. And when he leaves his gym shoes by the back door for me to trip over, I calmly move them out of the way instead of throwing them into the garage like a crazy person.”

“That's good,” I say with a chuckle.

“Marriage is hard as hell, Jovie,” Monica sighs before bumping her shoulder against mine.

“If only you'd told me that a year ago.”

Monica rests her cheek against my shoulder. “You couldn't have known Jason was going to be a royal douche. I honestly thought you two were perfect together. He made you laugh.

You had fun. His family adored you and your family adored him ...”

I’d met him via Tinder of all things, after a string of failed Hinge and Bumble dates. And I had zero hope or expectations that he was going to be different from any of the others. But when he suggested we hit up a karaoke dive bar and wasted no time taking center stage and commanding the audience with a cheesy Tom Jones number, I fell hard. Not because he was an amazing singer, but because he didn’t give a damn what anyone thought about him. He was simply up there having a good time and putting a smile on people’s faces.

Our second date entailed morel mushroom hunting in the woods—a first for me but a unique and memorable experience nonetheless. We scoured some woods outside the city for four straight hours and came out with a small bag that we ended up giving to grandmother, who was so thrilled by our gift that she cried happy tears and promptly invited us in so she could show me how to fry them “the Whitlock way.”

For our third date, Jason arranged a picnic in a lighthouse—another first for me. And while I sipped sweet wine and nibbled on expensive cheeses, he read to me from a book of sailor stories.

To say I was quickly enchanted by him would be the understatement of the century.

Everything was wonderful until the ink was dry on our marriage certificate a few months later—that’s when the real Jason came out. Detached and moody, his kisses became fewer and further between and he began staying late at the office and spending his weekends with “friends.” After a month of living together, he told me he needed space; that he felt suffocated by my sheer presence.

I thought we were hitting a rough patch, that he was probably just stressed with work and adjusting to married life and we'd come out of it soon enough. I figured if I backed off and stayed patient and supportive, all would be fine.

But things only got worse.

We weren't married but six months when he served me with divorce papers.

The hostess steps outside and calls my name, and it's perfect timing because my stomach won't stop rumbling, and I'd much rather be shoving my face with buttermilk pancakes than reminiscing about my failed marriage.

"Your server will be with you shortly," she says after seating us at a small table in the middle of the restaurant.

I'm perusing the menu and trying to decide between fresh squeezed orange juice or a glass of iced tea when Monica gasps.

"What's wrong?" I glance over my menu.

"Don't look now," she says. "But, um, Jude and Stassi are at the table behind you."

My stomach drops and my blood runs cold. I ran into Stone yesterday at the grocery store and he mentioned Jude lived in the area. I figured I was bound to run into him eventually—I just wasn't expecting that to be here and now.

I'm not sure how I missed them on the way in ...

"Did they see us?" I keep my voice low, but loud enough for her to hear over the tinkle of cutlery on plates and the chatter of customers.

Monica leans to her left a couple of inches, stealing a quick peek past my shoulders.

“Um, yeah,” she says before giving a quick wave.

“Oh my god.” I keep my head down. “Did you just wave?”

“Jude waved first,” she says. “I was waving back.”

Jude *waved*? He could have easily pretended like he didn’t notice but instead he went in the complete opposite direction of that.

Our server trots up to our table, crouching down with his pen and pad of paper in hand.

“Hi, I’m Chet,” he says. “Sorry about your wait. What can I get you ladies to drink this morning?”

We both order orange juice, but I have a feeling I’m going to be too distracted to enjoy it. The energy in this quaint diner is suddenly different now, and the carefree morning we’d been having is officially ... *off*.

I’ve spent the last five years trying not to think about Jude (or the heartless way in which he left me). After the initial shock wore off, the rest of it was relatively easy. He was out of sight and out of mind. Every once in a while, if I heard an Oasis song or happened to be flipping channels and TBS was airing *Dumb and Dumber*, I’d be transported back to my college days with him. But other than that, life was moving on just fine.

“You should say hi,” Monica says.

“Why?” I scrunch my nose because I’d much rather prefer to be two passing ships in the night—or in this case, two passing sailboats in a seaside café.

“Because he’s already spotted us,” she says. “And now he’s coming this way.”

Before the shock of her statement has time to register, Jude is already standing beside us.

“Jovie,” he says. “Monica. Wow. Haven’t seen you guys in ages.”

Monica and I exchange looks. His casualness is a little off-putting given the magnitude of our last interaction combined with the accidental tag the other week, but if he can pretend like nothing happened, then so can I.

“Jude,” I say. “Hi. It’s been a minute.”

His lips—the same ones I used to kiss—arch into a warm smile. “It’s so crazy running into you here. You in town visiting or what?”

“No ... I live here,” I say.

“She moved here with her husband last year,” Monica volunteers.

“My *ex*-husband,” I clarify, not that it matters.

Jude’s dark gaze drinks me in a moment longer, as if he’s studying me in a new light, imagining me as someone else’s wife.

“Love, I’m going to use the ladies’ room. Meet you outside in the car?” A sinewy blonde brushes her hand along his arm, leaning in and depositing a peck on his cheek with her pillowy lips the color of cherry blossoms.

I’ve only ever seen Stassi in photos—images I was certain were photoshopped or filtered. Now that I’m seeing her in person, I can confirm that she’s just as flawless as she appears online. There isn’t a blemish or wrinkle across her entire face, and her glossy golden hair drips down her shoulders in slow-motion, like a shampoo commercial. A subtle whiff of

expensive, exotic perfume fills the air, competing with the scent of coffee and maple syrup.

“Sounds good,” Jude tells her. He doesn’t introduce us and for that I’m glad: no need to make this ten times more unpleasant than it already is.

He watches her walk away.

But so do I.

With her pink and green Lilly Pulitzer dress and the cashmere sweater draped over her shoulders, she looks like she belongs at a tennis match—not a hole-in-the-wall diner. Not only that, but she’s got the long-legged strut of an international fashion model, and I count no less than five turned heads by the time she disappears into the restroom.

“How long have you been living in Portland?” he asks.

“About a year. You?”

“I came here right after senior year,” he says. “Stassi’s dad offered me a job.”

“So what is it you do for work?” Monica asks, batting her lashes like she’s innocent when we both know she’s digging for dirt.

“I’m the chief logistics coordinator for Guinness Oil,” he says.

“I don’t know what that is, but it sounds important.” Monica shoots me a wink.

“I heard you write books,” Jude says.

I nod. “I’ve written a few ...”

Monica swats her hand at me. “Jovie’s being modest. She’s written a bunch of bestsellers and one of them was just

optioned for a TV series.”

His brows raise. “Wow. Good for you.”

Our eyes catch and he lets his linger for a minute too long, as if he’s adding up all of these tidbits of information and trying to form an idea of the woman I’ve become without him. Despite the fact that we’ve remained ‘friends’ on social media, my profile is pretty bare bones. A handful of images and no mention of my quickie marriage anywhere. I prefer it that way—privacy is priceless, and the ones who need to know what’s going on in my life will always hear it from me firsthand.

Our server returns with our orange juices and a promise to come back to take our orders shortly.

Jude waves his ticket and glances toward the cash register in the front of the diner.

“I better go take care of this. It was good running into you guys,” he says before his attention locks on me again. “I’m glad you’re doing well, Jovie. I really am.”

“Thanks,” I say, leaving it at that.

“Monica.” He turns to her, tipping his chin down. “Good to see you too.”

“As always,” she says, plastering a fake grin on her face that would appear genuine to anyone else but me.

The instant Jude leaves, I exhale a long, hard breath.

“That was interesting.” Monica dips a paper straw into her orange juice and takes a sip. “Did you see the way he was looking at you?”

I roll my eyes.

“No, really. He couldn’t take his eyes off of you,” she adds. “And did you see the look on his face when I mentioned you moved here with your husband?”

I reach for my glass. “I wasn’t really paying attention ...”

“Whatever,” she says.

Our server returns just in time for Stassi to emerge from the ladies’ room. For a fleeting moment, our gazes intersect. She looks away first, her nose tilted up ever so slightly and her high heels clicking on the tile floor as she passes.

“Who the hell wears five-inch heels to a diner for breakfast?” Monica asks once Stassi and our server are long gone.

“Maybe they were going somewhere else after this.” I shrug, unfolding my paper napkin and spreading it across my lap—as if that could make our food arrive any faster.

“Do you think she has a personality?” Monica asks.

I chuckle. “You don’t have to do this ...”

“Do what?”

“You don’t have to rag on her to make me feel better,” I say. “It’s fine.”

“I’m not ragging on her. I’m genuinely curious,” she says. “She just seems like such a little snot. And we already know she’s a boyfriend stealer.” Monica shudders. “Something about her just turns me off. I don’t know. It sure makes you wonder what he sees in her. She looks like she’s allergic to fun and costs a lot of money to maintain—and you’re telling me he wants to spend the rest of his life with *that*?”

“Stop, stop,” I stifle a laugh and wave my hand at her. “I don’t pretend to understand it. I figure they probably deserve

each other and that's all I need to know.”

She stirs her OJ with her straw. “You’re a bigger person than I am. If Chauncy ever left me for someone like her, you’d have to stop me from giving him a vasectomy with rusty scissors.”

None of that surprises me.

Monica’s loyalty to her husband is only outpaced by her mile-wide jealous streak.

“Anyway ...” I say when our breakfast arrives at warp speed.

We spend the rest of our meal discussing her newest PR client and my next book idea and where we want to go for our girls’ trip this summer. By the time we’re done, I almost forget about our run-in with Jude.

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Chapter Fourteen

Stone

“Tuxes are officially ordered,” Jude says over the phone Monday afternoon.

“Ah, good. I was starting to worry,” I say, monotoned.

“Don’t act too excited,” he sniffs back a laugh. “Stassi changed them to black and white at the last minute. She said the navy blue was too cliché.”

“She would know,” I say, still monotone as I sent an email to my assistant about pulling a file for me.

“You sound like you’re busy.”

“And you sound like you’re bored.”

Odds are he is. When he first started dating Stassi, her dad took a liking to him and offered him a job here in Portland; some mid-level management position where he was in charge of a small department. After a few years, he worked his way up. And once he and Stassi got engaged, her dad created some position for him at the top—something with a respectable title, minimal responsibilities, unlimited PTO, and a fat paycheck.

Some people are born lucky.

Others marry into it.

“I ran into Jovie over the weekend,” he says.

I stop typing, my fingers frozen over the keys.

“No shit?” I ask. I didn’t mention running into her at the grocery store the other day. It seemed neither here nor there. That and we hadn’t spoken since last week.

“She looked good. Like different. But in a good way. Older.”

“Did you think she’d still look like that baby-faced twenty-two year old you once knew?”

He exhales. “Yeah. Kind of. In my mind, she looked just the way I remembered her. Did you know she got married?”

I squint. “No.”

She mentioned she moved here for an ex, but I assumed it was a boyfriend, not a husband.

“I guess she moved here with her husband, but then she said it was her ex-husband ...” his voice dwindles into silence. “It’s just so weird.”

“What’s weird? That she moved on?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Did you think she’d sit around waiting for you to come back or something?”

“No,” he says. “I mean, I don’t know. I guess I never really thought about her that much over the years.”

I’m not surprised. He couldn’t get rid of Jovie fast enough once we got back from Tulum. With Stassi as the new object

of his affection, it was out with the old and in with the new.

“Aren’t you two still friends on Facebook?” I ask.

Right after he dumped her, he mentioned to me he wasn’t going to block her on social media because he thought it would be “healthy” for her to see him happy and moving on. He thought it would give her closure. I figured eventually she’d unfollow him or cut ties, but she never did. The whole thing was strange, but I tried not to look into it. People do all kinds of things for all kinds of reasons.

“Yeah,” he says. “But I don’t think she’s updated her profile in years. At least last I checked.”

“So you creep on her sometimes?”

“I have a couple of times over the years.” His tone is sheepish. “Don’t you ever get curious about people and wonder what they’re up to?”

“Of course, but the last place I’d look is online. None of that shit is real,” I say. And I know from experience since almost every divorce I handle involves one spouse submitting incriminating screenshots from social media and the other spouse denying their validity because ‘everyone lies online.’

“I wonder who the guy was,” he says.

“And I’m wondering why you give a shit all of a sudden. You’re getting married in less than two months. You need to get your head *in* the game, not out of it.”

A light rap at my door provides the perfect interruption to this conversation.

“I gotta go,” I say. “Thanks for the update on the tux.”

I end the call as my door swings open.

“That was fast,” I say, expecting it to be my assistant with the files I requested a minute ago. Only it’s Becca. “Oh.”

“I’m going out of town next week and I need you to meet with one of my clients.” She lays a file on my desk.

“I’ll have to check my schedule.”

She rolls her eyes. “Please.”

“Can’t you ask one of the other partners?” I ask. “We just brought on two new junior partners in the last month.”

“I don’t trust them with this case.” She taps her candy apple red fingernails against my desk. “It’s not as cut and dry as the ones they’re used to. It needs a little more ... finesse.”

“Which part needs finessing? The case or the client?”

“Both.”

Few things in this world excite me more than a chance to get my hands dirty with a good challenge.

“I guess I can help,” I say, keeping a straight face.

“He’s coming in next Friday,” she says. “One o’clock. I’ll have your assistant add it to your calendar.” Checking her watch, she adds, “I’m late for a meeting.”

Becca turns to leave.

“You’re welcome,” I call out when the door swings closed. Reaching for the file, I glance at the name along the label tab.

Jason Whitlock.

Never heard of him.

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Chapter Fifteen

Jovie

Age 21

“Do you ever get tired of being the third wheel?” I ask Stone as we camp out in Jude’s car as he pumps gas.

“I should ask you the same thing.” His nose is buried in his phone.

I give his shoulder a playful smack. “I’m not trying to insult you. I’m asking if you ever thought about, I don’t know, dating someone. Then we could double date or something. Could be fun?”

He looks up from his screen, though his eyes are focused on the hood of the car.

“I date,” he says, a hint of umbrage in his tone.

“When?”

“All the time.”

“I’ve never seen you date anyone,” I say. I’ve been with Jude almost two years now and not once has Stone brought a single girl around or so much as mentioned one.

I’m beginning to think he has impossible standards. He probably has some over the top notion of what the ideal woman is like, and anyone who doesn’t hold a flame to that is automatically cast aside. I knew a guy like that once. Nothing less than perfect was good enough for him.

“Do you think I sit around twiddling my thumbs when you guys are out?” He messes with the radio before settling on a classic rock station. A Led Zeppelin song plays over the speakers.

“I don’t know what you do when we’re out ...”

“Trust me, I’m not sitting at home alone feeling sorry for myself.”

I raise my palms, apologizing. This conversation took a wrong turn and now it’s completely off the tracks.

“So what are they like?” I ask.

“Huh?”

“The girls you’ve dated. What are they like? What’s your type?” Before he has a chance to take my question the wrong way, I add, “Maybe I have a friend or something you might hit it off with?”

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Are you ... do you ... are you into ... men?” I ask, hoping I don’t come off as insensitive.

“Definitely not,” he answers without hesitation. “Not that there’s anything wrong with dating men, but I very much prefer women.”

That settles *that*.

Jude climbs behind the wheel once he's done fueling, putting an untimely end to my Spanish Inquisition.

I settle into the backseat behind Stone, where I always sit. Despite being Jude's girlfriend, I've always let Stone ride up front. I figured I pilfer enough of Jude's time as it is, the least I can do is not steal Stone's spot.

One of the first things Jude ever told me about Stone was that they were like brothers, and that they made a pact when they were kids that they'd never let a girl come between them. I respect that, and I'd never want to come between them anyway.

Their bond is special, and I love that they have each other's backs come what may.

We should all be so lucky.

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Chapter Sixteen

Stone

Age 11

“Mr. Hudson, as you know, this kind of behavior is strictly prohibited at Callahan Elementary,” Principal Higgins folds her hands over her desk as she talks to Jude’s dad.

Paul’s leg bounces as he sits across from Principal Higgins, and as he chomps his cinnamon gum, his jaw flexes with each chew.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve met regarding Jude’s behavior, nor is it the second,” she continues, “and should your son decide to put his hands on another student again, we’ll have no choice but to expel him.”

“And what about the other kid?” Paul breaks his silence.

Jude and I exchange looks from separate corners of the room.

Principal Higgins blinks slowly. “I’m not at liberty to discuss the disciplinary actions of other students.”

“From what I understand, the other kid’s been messing with Stone for the past couple of months,” he says. “We’re talking constant, incessant provocation. Now, Stone’s done a stand-up job ignoring it because he’s a good kid with a straight head on his shoulders, but seeing how the school has done the bare minimum in thwarting the antagonistic actions of this other student, Jude took it upon himself to take matters into his own hands.”

The principal’s gaze flicks from Jude, to me, then back to Paul.

“Jude and Stone are a package deal, all right?” Paul says. “They’re brothers. They look out for each other. What hurts one, hurts the other. You mess with one, you’re messing with both of ‘em.”

“I can appreciate their bond, Mr. Hudson, but as the administrator of this school, the physical safety of my students is paramount,” she says.

“Which is why your staff should have handled this day one, not let it drag out for months until it escalated into the very thing we were all trying to avoid.” Paul rises, turning back to us. “Boys, grab your bags, this meeting’s over.”

Principal Higgins sits frozen, her mouth half open, and we follow Paul to his parked Impala out front.

The ride home is quiet; not even the low drone of the talk radio station Paul usually listens to any time we’re in the car.

He doesn’t say a word until we get to the house.

That punk Bryan Quick may have started this whole thing a couple months ago, but today during lunch, Jude decided he

was going to finish it. What began with Bryan's usual taunting and name-calling ended with Jude's surprise left hook straight to his nose. But Jude didn't stop there. Once Bryan was knocked to the ground, he pounced on him, laying into him until they were pulled apart by a janitor and two lunch ladies.

Bryan was bawling like a baby and blood was dripping from his nose onto his brand-new Nike dry fit shirt. The whole cafeteria was laughing and cheering. Jude's attack wasn't only for me—it was for every other kid Bryan Quick had messed with this year.

I thought for sure we were going to be in huge trouble when our teacher said Paul was coming in to talk to the principal. The number of times I've seen Jude's dad upset, I can count on one hand—and it's never pretty. It usually involves spit flying from his lips and his face turning the color of beets. I've even seen him punch his fist through a door once (though that was because he caught his girlfriend cheating on him after he shelled out two grand to fix her car).

But today his anger seemed to be directed at the school, not us.

We head inside, the three of us walking side by side. Before we get to the door, Paul hooks his hands on the back of our necks.

“Good job today, boys,” he says. “But don't do that shit again.”

Jude and I fight off matching smiles as Paul heads in, cracks a beer, and takes a seat on the back patio alone. We grab snacks from the pantry—a bag of hot Cheetos and two cherry Gatorades—and make ourselves scarce while Paul cools down.

For the first ten years of my life, it was just my mom and me. Never in a million years did I think I'd ever have anything close to a dad or a brother. Now that I do, I can't imagine my life without them.

No matter what happens, I'll always have their backs.

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Chapter Seventeen

Jovie

I heat up some leftover sirloin for Domino and push his food bowl toward his bed. He rises, sniffs it, then spins three times before lying back down with a huff.

Grabbing my phone, I play the video Ida sent me earlier in the week, just a recording of her talking to Domino in a lovable grandmotherly tone. The first few times I played it, he'd wag his tail a couple of times.

Now he just looks at me like *I'm* the idiot in this equation.

He's not falling for it anymore.

“Want to go for a *walk*?” I ask, emphasis on walk. His ears perk and his gaze follows me as I grab his leash. A moment later, he reluctantly makes his way to the door, and I pet the top of his head before hooking onto his collar. “Good boy, Domino.”

By the time we hit the sidewalk, it's dusk. The sun is low in the cerulean sky and the salty air has turned tepid. Summers in Portland are magical—the perfect antidote to punishing winters. Of course, only a handful of residents stick around all

year. The overwhelming majority are visitors, part-timers. Here for a good time, not a long time.

Domino stops to sniff a bush before choosing the perfect spot to lift his leg.

“Since when did you get a dog?” A woman’s voice half startles me.

I glance up and find Connie Carrington, the woman who lives above me in the four-plex. She’s always been cordial enough, if not a little on the chilly side. Another neighbor told me she went through a divorce a few years ago, came out with enough to retire early, and now spends her days sticking her nose in everyone else’s business.

“Oh, he’s not mine,” I say. “I’m watching him for Ida Moss.”

“Who?” Connie scrunches her nose.

“The woman who lives in the house to the west of us,” I say.

“Oh,” she says. “Well, what kind of dog is that?”

I glance at Domino, wondering if it’s even possible to surmise such a thing with his polka dotted fur, stubby legs, hazel eyes, and long body.

“Some kind of mix,” I state the obvious. “You’ll have to ask Ida when she gets back.”

“When’s she coming back?” Connie asks.

“Sometime in the next couple weeks?” I shrug.

She inspects Domino again, her eyes squinting and her lips forming a frown. Maybe she’s not a dog person?

“It was good to see you,” I say, giving the leash a gentle tug to prompt Domino to start walking—which he thankfully does.

Connie bats her hand, muttering something under her breath before heading to the mailbox.

“Some people just like being miserable,” I say to Domino. “Don’t take it personally.”

Half an hour later, we’re back from our walk, and he makes a beeline for his bed only to stop short in front of the steak I warmed up for him before we left. In a matter of minutes, he inhales it all, then finishes with a trip to the water bowl.

I text Ida with the good news, and then I plant myself on the couch, turn on some Netflix for some background noise, and spend the hour that follows Googling dog breeds like a woman on a mission. I could easily ask Ida, but she hasn’t replied to my last message yet and I don’t want to bother her.

After growing bored with my fruitless internet searches, I drag out my laptop and check my email.

My life is a constant flux between working ten- or twelve-hour days to meet a deadline and then having weeks upon weeks filled with more free time than I know what to do with. There’s never an in between.

Since my split with Jason, I’ve viewed Portland as a lily pad of sorts. I figured sooner or later I’d hop to the next one, but the longer I’m here, the more I fall in love with this city, with its cobblestone streets, Victorian architecture, and the constant ambience of seagulls, tugboats, and crashing waves. Being a half hour from my hometown means I can go home

any time I want, but at the same time, I feel like I'm half a world away.

On the days when I want a change of scenery, there are a countless little towns all within a short drive from here, all of them offering their own brand of charming architecture, lush foliage, and unique vibes.

And the locals here are beyond friendly, most of them happy to chat up a stranger for a minute or two or stop to help you change a tire or give directions.

In a world where everyone's constantly moving at a breakneck pace, time moves a little slower here.

The past five years have been a giant blur consisting mostly of writing deadlines and bad dates.

I pull up my Facebook account and search up Stone's profile, tapping through his pictures until I get to the one of the three of us. There were times, I felt like I was dating both of them. Not romantically, of course. But we spent so much time with Stone that it felt like he was a permanent fixture in the relationship.

Sometimes I wonder what would've happened had I not gotten sick in the bathroom the night I met them. Would I have chatted Stone up all night? Would I have given him my number? Would anything have come of it?

Jude was easy to fall for. If Stone was guarded and subdued, Jude was his outgoing alter ego. Jude was magnetic, making friends everywhere he went, chatting up strangers like it was the most natural thing in the world. Stone was more restrained, careful about who he let into his inner circle. It took a lot to earn his respect.

To be honest, to this day, I still don't know if he ever respected me—or if he just tolerated me because I was Jude's girl.

Tapping my messages, I pull up our previous conversation where my question still remains unanswered, and I replace it with a new one.

Stone—

Did you ever like me?

Best,

Jovie

I bite the backside of my thumbnail when I see that he's online. His response comes instantaneously.

Jovie—

Define "like."

Best,

Stone

I tap out my response and sit back, waiting, watching.

Stone—

Fine. I'll be more specific: when I dated Jude, did you ever enjoy my company or did you simply tolerate me?

Best,

Jovie

He replies a minute later.

Jovie—

I don't understand the context of this question so I'll ask a couple of my own with the intention of gaining some clarity. Why do you need to know? And why now?

A little pro-bono advice for you: dwelling on the past has never done a damn bit of good for anyone.

Best—

Stone

I roll my eyes. I don't have the energy for his signature deflection and unsolicited advice, so I type one final message.

Stone—

Please call me so we can discuss further. I'd hate for my sentiments to get lost in translation, and I'd love to put my query to rest in a timely manner. I can be reached at 555-284-7711.

I'll be standing by.

Best—

Jovie

He reads my message immediately. I shut my laptop and glance at my phone, willing it to ring, but fully expecting it not to ...

I wait another minute, then another before checking to make sure it's on.

It is.

Trekking to the kitchen, I refill my water, sort through a pile of mail, and grab a fun-sized Snickers from my chocolate stash. I've all but given up when the faintest buzzing sounds from the next room.

Jogging back to my couch, I grab my phone off the coffee table and almost choke on my spit when I see an unfamiliar-yet-local number calling.

I clear my throat and answer on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Jovie." Stone's voice comes through the line.

"Wow," I say. "I didn't think you'd actually call."

"I didn't think I would either," he says with a tease of sarcasm in his tone. It's precisely the kind of response I expected from him.

I pull a throw pillow into my lap and get comfortable.

"Did you ever like me?" I ask once more. "As a person, I mean."

"What brought this on?"

“I was just thinking,” I say. “Doing some self-reflection. You know me ... my mind never shuts off for two seconds. That’s what you told me once, and you weren’t wrong.”

He chuffs. “I seldom am.”

“Anyway.” I roll my eyes at him, even though he can’t see me. “We spent a lot of time together back in the day.”

“We did.”

“Most of the time I felt like I annoyed you, like you were only around me because you had to be,” I say. “But other times, I felt like we were having a good time, like maybe you enjoyed my company? I was just wondering if that was all in my head or were we actually having fun?”

He chuckles. “Were *you* having fun?”

“Of course.”

“Then that’s all that matters.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question,” I say. “What did you really think of me back then? And be honest.”

He’s quiet for a second, and then he exhales into the phone. “I have court in the morning, Jovie. Can we do ... whatever this is ... another time?”

“It’s a simple question begging a simple answer.”

“And I’m an exhausted man who just worked a sixteen-hour day and has to go before a judge tomorrow and convince her that my client deserves the house in the Hamptons, the vintage Ferrari 328, the collection of rare coins, an eight-figure lump sum, plus alimony for the next twenty years. I really don’t have the mental bandwidth to talk about anything else right now.”

In true Stone fashion, he sounds annoyed ... but his actions speak otherwise.

Why call if he's so exhausted and has to prep for a trial in the morning?

"Fine," I say. "Rain check?"

He blows a breath into the phone. "Yeah. Sure."

"When?"

He snickers. "I'll pencil you in for tomorrow night."

"Please *Sharpie* me in for tomorrow night," I say. "Preferably around seven if your schedule allows, Counselor."

After a bout of silence, I check my phone screen to make sure he's still there.

He is.

"I'll call you tomorrow at seven," he says.

The subtlest twinge tickles my insides at the thought of resuming this conversation tomorrow, though I haven't the faintest clue where this excitement is stemming from. Confusion aside, maybe it's simply the fact that it feels good to reconnect with an old friend? A blast from the past? A piece of my younger years?

Whether Stone liked me or not, we were a significant part of each other's lives for three years.

That's got to count for something.

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Chapter Eighteen

Stone

I'm driving back to the office after court when a call from Jovie comes in. I tap the answer button on my steering wheel.

"Thought we agreed on seven o'clock," I say.

"Oh my god. I'm so glad you answered," she says, breathless. "I'm in a bit of a ... situation."

"And I'm the first person you thought to call?"

"No," she says. "You're the third."

"Okay ..."

"So you know the dog I'm watching?"

"The one eating USDA prime steak dinners? Yes."

"So ... last night, I was walking him, and I ran into my upstairs neighbor, Connie," she says. "She was asking me a bunch of questions about the dog, and I didn't think anything of it because she's always been on the nosier side. Anyway, this morning my phone rings—and it's my landlord. Connie called to complain that I'm keeping a dog in my apartment ... never mind that I told her it was only for another week."

I can already envision this woman. I've met clients like her all the time—the strict rule followers who get off on policing everyone around them. People like that tend to be angry at the world. Not only that, but they have too much time on their hands. It's an unfortunate combination.

“Anyway, my landlord said I have to find somewhere else to keep the dog,” I say.

“Your landlord sounds like a dick.”

“I've called every kennel in town. They're all full because it's peak season,” she continues. “I can't stay at my neighbor's house with him because she's having her bathroom renovated and there's a lot of noise and dust. I called my parents, but they're leaving for an Alaskan cruise in a couple of days. I asked Monica, but her husband's allergic to everything under the sun.”

“And now you're calling me.”

“I know you don't owe me anything, but I didn't know who else to call ... Ida said she can see about moving her flight to an earlier date, but until then ... what am I supposed to do?”

“Can you find a pet friendly AirBnB?”

“I found three in the area, and they all rent for a thousand bucks a night.”

“What about small-town kennels? Surely they're not all booked.”

“Stone—this dog is stressed enough being out of his element and away from his owner. I don't want to make it worse by sticking him in a car for a couple of hours and ditching him in some unfamiliar place.” Her voice breaks.

Jovie's always had a soft spot for animals. The year we lived together she found a robin's nest that had been knocked from its tree after a bad storm. After determining that the mother had abandoned it, she brought it inside, called up a wildlife refuge and spent hours researching how to care for the two nestlings, and she kept them safe and fed until they were big enough to fly away.

As an orphan myself, her selflessness wasn't lost on me.

I pull up to my office, shift into park, and sink back in my seat. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I drag in a long breath.

I've never been an animal person.

Hell, I'm not even a plant person.

"Stone," she says. "I'm desperate here ... and it'll just be for a few days until Ida can get back. I will do anything."

"I don't need anything from you."

"I know, but I'm just saying, I'll make it worth your while somehow. I don't know how, but—"

"—fine."

"What?"

"I said fine," I repeat myself.

"Really?" The hopelessness that was in her voice a moment ago is gone.

"I'll be home around six tonight," I say. "I'll text you my address."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," she says.

We end the call, and I grab my briefcase and head inside. I've never owned so much as a goldfish in my life and now I'm going to be roommates with a depressed, homesick mutt.

As much as I'm not looking forward to the next three days, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to seeing Jovie again.

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Chapter Nineteen

Stone

Age 21

“What do you think of that one?” Jude slurs his words, using his beer bottle to point to a scantily-clad redhead on the other side of the bar. It’s not the first time she’s made eyes at him, and I can tell by the smug glint in his eyes that he’s enjoying the ever-loving sin out of the attention. “Should I go talk to her?”

“The hell’s the matter with you?” I want to smack some sense into him, but I doubt he’d feel it.

A week ago, Jude and Jovie got into some fight and he’s been on the prowl ever since. Deep down, I know he’s afraid to be alone. He’s not trying to be a douche on purpose. This is his built-in defense mechanism. He’s always got to have something else lined up just in case, and he’s been this way our whole lives. I’m not saying I agree with it, but Jude is Jude. This is what he does; what he’s always done.

“What?” he asks, tipping the bottle against his lips. “You think she’s sitting at home, waiting for me to call her and apologize?”

I don’t know what she’s doing tonight. I just know our place feels a little less alive without her in it. There’s no music, no flickering candles, no fluffed throw pillows. This morning I found a pair of Jude’s dirty boxers on the bathroom floor as well as a glob of toothpaste hardening in the sink. He hardly qualifies as a neat freak, but at least he was a little less of a slob when she was around.

“Mm kay.” He places his empty beer bottle on our table and pushes himself off the stool. “Wish me luck. I’m going in.”

I grab the back of his shirt in my fist and reel him in.

“Sit your ass back down before you do something you’re going to regret,” I say.

He tries to stand again, but I keep my grip on him.

“At least let me order another round,” he slurs.

By my count, he’s on his eighth beer. I should’ve cut him off a while ago. It’s a miracle he’s upright and conscious.

“I think we better pack it up.” I toss back the rest of my drink. “Wait here. I’m going to go close out my tab.”

When I return a few minutes later, Jude is gone ...

And so is the redhead.

Chapter Twenty

Jovie

“You have arrived at your destination,” my GPS announces over my car speakers. *“Route guidance is now finished.”*

I pull up to a row of three-story brownstones in the West End, just outside of downtown, and find a parking spot. Climbing out, I grab Domino’s things from my trunk before helping him out of the backseat. He stops to sniff a patch of nearby grass, his eyes alert and his ears perked. I can’t imagine what’s going through his little mind right now, but at least Ida will be home in a few days. All of this relocating business will be over for him soon enough.

I locate house number thirty-seven and steady my bags in my arms before knocking on its glossy black door. This is exactly the kind of place I’d imagine a lawyer living. Everything is neat and manicured, yet the classic colonial architecture lends a feeling of prestige, history, law, and order.

The door opens a second later and Stone’s commanding presence fills the doorway. He leans against the jamb, his

white dress shirt unbuttoned at the top and his tie hanging loose around his shoulders.

“Good timing,” he says. “I just got home a few minutes ago. Come on in.”

I take a step across the threshold, only Domino doesn't follow.

“Come on, buddy,” I say in my most reassuring tone.

He looks to me and then to Stone before sitting on the concrete stoop.

“He's not used to being around men,” I say. “Maybe he's intimidated by you? Crouch down a little.”

Stone drags in a loud breath, like he's inconvenienced by having to stoop down to a dog's level, but he'll get over it.

“Now pat the tops of your thighs,” I say. “And smile.”

He shoots me a look.

“Just do it.” I hand him the leash before fishing out a piece of steak from one of the Tupperware containers I packed. “Here, offer him this.”

Stone takes the tender bit of beef and holds it out.

“What's his name again?” he asks.

“Domino.”

“Here, Domino,” he says, monotoned.

“Maybe ... try to sound ... more upbeat?” I give a gentle suggestion. “Like a kindergarten teacher.”

“What does a kindergarten teacher even sound like?”

“I don't know ... like a Disney princess,” I say. “Happy and chipper.”

His lips press flat and he turns to face Domino again.

“Domino ... come here, boy.” His voice is so gentle I fight the urge to chuckle. This is the first I’ve experienced the softer side of Stone.

Rising from the front stoop with his tail tucked, Domino makes his way into the house, sniffing the bit of steak Stone is offering him before taking a bite.

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” I say before closing the front door. Bending down, I scratch the underside of Domino’s chin. “You’re going to be fine, buddy.”

Domino nudges Stone’s hand when he finishes his treat.

“What’s he want?” Stone asks.

“Either he wants you to pet him or he wants more steak. Probably the latter.” I hand Stone another piece to feed him. “I brought all of this things ... his dog bed, his kibble, his food and water dishes, his toys. Oh, and I brought this for you.”

I pull a bottle of Malbec from one of the bags.

“It’s a small token of my appreciation for opening your home to this little guy.” I hand it to him.

“You didn’t have to,” he says, accepting it anyway.

I wave my hand. “Not a big deal. Oh, I also brought a couple of fresh steaks in case he still refuses to eat his kibble.”

He unhooks Domino’s leash, hangs it on the coat rack in the corner, and gathers all of the dog miscellany I’ve dumped at my feet. I follow him to the kitchen and help him sort everything out.

“Are we still on for our phone call tonight?” I ask.

He checks his watch. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

I pull up a chair at his kitchen island and rest my chin on the top of my hand.

“It’s something that always bothered me,” I say. “Not knowing if you liked me or if I annoyed you.”

“Seems like such a trivial thing to care about.”

“Trivial to you, maybe.”

He retrieves a corkscrew from a nearby drawer and reaches for the Malbec. Next he takes two stemless wineglasses from a cupboard.

“Drinking alone has never been my thing.” He pours the first one and slides it my way before filling the second.

I take a sip, both surprised and amused by his hospitality.

“There’s power in not caring what people think about you,” he says.

“I don’t care what people think about me,” I say, “but I always cared what you thought. You’re not *people*. I can’t lump you in with everyone else.”

“And why not?”

Shrugging, I try to explain the very thing I don’t fully understand myself. Maybe it was the fact that you always want what you don’t have, and in this case, it was Stone’s approval. It’s ridiculous, I know. But for whatever reason, the more distant and cold he was, the more I thought I could melt his iciness with my warmth. I always hoped that one day I’d have a breakthrough; that I’d penetrate his permafrost and meet the real Stone—not his frozen façade.

But that day never came.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe because with everyone else, it’s obvious where they stand. But with you, it’s always been this giant question mark. And I don’t do well with question marks. I’m curious. I’m a writer. I’m obsessed with the human experience. I crave facts and details. I love understanding why people do what they do; all of their goals and motivations and conflicts. Everyone is complex to a degree. But you? You were an enigma I could never solve.”

“I’m not a character in one of your books.” He lifts his glass to his lips, pausing to peer at me over the rim.

That may be true, but he’s still a character in the story of my life.

Domino makes his way from my side of the island to Stone’s, and he lets out a faint whimper before sitting.

“What’s he doing?” he asks when Domino lifts a paw.

“I think he’s begging for a treat.” I grab the container of steak, pop the lid, and slide across the island. “He’s been with me over a week and not once has he asked me for anything. He must feel comfortable around you. I think he likes you.”

“Or maybe he just doesn’t like you.” Stone keeps a straight face but shoots me a wink.

“You two have something in common already.”

Stone slips Domino a few bites and almost loses a finger in the process.

“Looks like someone got their appetite back,” I say, making a mental note to text Ida when I leave. “So, anyway.” I swirl my wine. “Back to the topic at hand. Were we or weren’t we friends back in the day? And be honest. Sometimes I look

back at my time with Jude and my failed relationships and my dumpster fire of a marriage and I wonder if *I'm* the common denominator. Is it something *I'm* doing? Am I off-putting?"

I always thought I had a fair amount of self-awareness, but then again, doesn't everyone?

"Nah," he says. "Maybe you just have shitty taste in men."

I lift my brows and straighten my spine. "Damn. Don't let Jude hear you say that."

"Jude knows how I feel about how things went down."

"Really?" I rest my chin on my hand again, leaning closer. "You stood up for me?"

"It was less about standing up for you and more about pointing out what an idiot he was being, but sure. You can call it that."

Jude broke up with me the same day he got back from Tulum. Never mind a week of boozing and partying followed by a day of international travel, he couldn't dump me fast enough. By that point in time, I'd already graduated and was living back at home with my parents for the summer while I searched for a job. Our original plan was that whoever found a job first, the other one would follow. At that point, we were both jobless, and while our careers were uncertain, I'd never worried about our future together.

The whole thing blindsided me.

I never saw or spoke to Stone again after that—until recently. I always considered him a casualty of the breakup. He was always Jude's friend and that's where his loyalty belonged. It never felt right to reach out to him for any reason, though I thought of him often.

“Did you ever find someone?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“Romantically. A girlfriend or whatever. You were always so secretive about your dating life,” I say. “I remember being so worried about you because it was like you were living in Jude’s shadow.”

Stone sniffs, his gaze flicking to the side and back. “I never lived in his shadow.”

“You did though. You let him have all the fun and do all the living and you sat back like some loyal henchman.”

“We’re all entitled to our opinions.” He tops off his wine.

“From an outsider’s perspective, that’s what I saw. And that’s what I was when it came to you two ... an outsider.”

He tosses back a generous mouthful. “You were about as inside as it gets.”

“It never felt that way to me.”

“You can’t be serious. You were with him damn near twenty-four-seven. You came on every road trip. You slept over every weekend when we lived in the dorms and then you lived with us senior year. For three straight years, I couldn’t eat, sleep, or breathe without you being in a ten-foot radius of me. You were *everywhere*, all the time.”

“So it *did* bother you,” I say. “You were just tolerating me all that time.”

His intense gaze catches onto mine, holding it captive for an endless moment.

“It bothered me.” He exhales, his cool blue gaze studying mine. “But not for the reasons you think.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

Stone

Age 21

“What the hell?” I ask Jude when he creeps through the apartment door Sunday morning.

He fumbles through the dark, kicking off his shoes and nearly tripping over a kitchen bar stool before attempting to sit down.

“I fucked up.” He buries his face in his hands, rubbing his eyes. Though I don’t think he’s crying. Jude never cries. I think he’s probably hung over and exhausted as shit.

“You went home with that redhead, didn’t you?”

His silence makes my stomach sink, despite the fact that deep down I already knew. I knew the second I turned around last night and he was gone. I knew with every step I took back home to an empty dorm.

Jude exhales, and the stench of stale alcohol and cheap perfume fills the kitchen.

“Jovie texted me last night around 3 AM,” I say. “She couldn’t get a hold of you.”

My jaw clenches when I think of him shoving his dick inside some random chick when Jovie was sitting at her parents’ home, worried about him.

“I know,” he says. “She wanted to FaceTime me, but ... I couldn’t.”

“Because you were fucking someone.”

Sitting up, he tilts his head back with a groan, staring at the ceiling. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Own it,” I say. “Tell her. Come clean, otherwise it’ll be hanging over your head every time you look at her.”

“She’s going to end it if I tell her.”

“Do you even love her anymore?” For the past year, the intensity of their relationship has gone from scorching hot to a notch above simmering. I’m sure part of it had to do with the newness wearing off, but every once in a while Jude would make a comment that would have me questioning whether or not he was serious about Jovie anymore.

“Of course I do.” He shoots me a dirty look before his eyes return to the pitiful shit brown they were before. I can love this guy like a brother, but I don’t have to love everything he does. “I can’t tell her. I don’t want to lose her.”

“You do realize how your actions last night contradict what you’re telling me right now ...”

“I was blitzed. You know that. Wasn’t thinking straight.” He sniffs. “Whose side are you on anyway?”

“It’s not about picking sides.”

His phone vibrates in his pocket before I can elaborate.

“Shit. It’s her,” he says when he checks it. Tapping the green button, he answers, “Hey, babe ...”

His voice is sweet and sleepy—which tells me he intends to act like he simply slept through the missed calls.

“Yeah, sorry,” he says in the same tone he used to use when he’d play hooky from the golf course he worked at back in high school. “Jude and I went out last night and then I ended up crashing as soon as we got home.”

My throat tightens with every lie he feeds her, and I take a good, hard look at my best friend. From the moment we met in kindergarten, we were as thick as thieves. We’ve always had each other’s backs, always covered for each other without question. What one of us lacked, the other never failed to make up for it. His extroversion cancelled out my introversion. My good grades made up for his mediocre ones.

But today I’m seeing him a new light.

With his hair disheveled, the stench of bad decisions wafting off of him, and that fake-ass voice he’s using, there’s nothing admirable about him now. He’s nothing but a sorry man trying not to lose a girl he shouldn’t have had in the first place.

“Yeah, I’m sorry too,” he says. “I hate when we fight ... I know ... I’m going to grab a shower ... love you too ...”

He ends the call and releases a hard breath. “Jesus. That was the most terrifying forty-eight seconds of my life.”

I’d speak, but my jaw is clenched too tight.

“She’s on her way home now,” he says. “I doubt she’ll ask, but just in case she does ... you’ll cover for me right? You know I’d do the same thing for you.”

Grabbing my phone and keys and stepping into my sneakers, I head to the door. I need air, space, and copious amounts of distance from this entire situation. But before I leave, I turn back and look him dead in the eye.

“I would never ask you to do the same thing for me,” I say, “because I’d never put myself—or anyone I love—in that position in the first place.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Stone

“So what were your reasons then?” Jovie’s eyes glint from the other side of the island, her head cocked sideways.

“My reasons were congruent with those of an immature twenty-two-year-old who thought he knew everything about everything.”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s such a *Stone* thing to say. Try again.”

“Does it matter what my reasons were?”

“It matters to me,” she says. “If you weren’t bothered by my constant, twenty-four-seven presence, as you put it ... what were you bothered by?”

I swallow a mouthful of wine to buy some time. No good can come of being honest. It wouldn’t have made her mine back then, and it won’t make her mine now. Jude was far from perfect and maybe he didn’t deserve her, but he doesn’t deserve to be stabbed in the back by his best friend for it.

“I thought we were supposed to be talking about whether or not I’ve ever been in love,” I change the subject. “Wasn’t that the original question at hand?”

“That was the *original* original question. The question we were going to discuss tonight was what you really thought of me back in the day,” she says.

She got me with that one.

“You must be one hell of a lawyer.” She tilts her wineglass toward me. “The way you tap dance around questions so effortlessly.” Leaning forward, she drinks me in. “That head of yours has always fascinated me.” Jovie’s full lips tug up at the side. “I never had to wonder what Jude was thinking—he wore all of his emotions on his sleeve. What I saw was what I got with him. But with you ...” her voice trails and her eyes grow distant. “I probably thought about you way more than I had any business thinking about my boyfriend’s best friend.”

My stomach flips.

“What do you mean?” I can’t help but ask that question because I may not ever get the chance again.

“Didn’t you ever wonder?” Her eyes flick to mine. “I just ... I met you before him—even though you claim you don’t remember—and I’ve always wondered what if I never would’ve met him that night?”

“You’ve ... always ... wondered that?”

Her mouth presses firm and she nods. “Yeah. I have.”

“I thought you were happy with Jude?”

“I was,” she says. “He was fun. And charming. And aside from the way things went down, being with him was easy—if

that makes sense? When we broke up, deep down, the tiniest part of me was actually relieved.”

I'm relieved hearing that.

“This is going to sound silly,” she continues, “but I always felt like you and I had more in common than Jude and me.”

It doesn't sound silly at all—it's the truth.

“But you were so distant,” she adds. “Every once in a while, I felt like you noticed it too. But looking back, I'm pretty sure it was all in my head.” Jovie takes another sip. “Wishful thinking maybe.”

“Wishful thinking?” I heard her perfectly clear—I just want to hear her elaborate.

Her cheeks flush.

“I ... I think I ... kind of ... had a crush on you back then ...” Jovie buries her face in her palm before peering at me between her fingers.

“You *think* you did?” I ask. “Or you *did*?”

“It was innocent.” She sits straighter. “I never would've acted on it. And honestly, this is the first time I've ever said those words out loud. But yeah, there was something about you that always made me wonder ... anyway, now that I'm a little older, a little wiser, with a few more years behind me, I think it comes down to what you said before.”

“What did I say before?”

“That I have terrible taste in men,” she says. Her eyes widen. “No offense to you personally ... you're just incredibly emotionally unavailable and I think there's something about that that drives women crazy.”

“Is that so?”

“Take a few of my bestselling books, for example. They all have one thing in common. The hero always has a heart colder than the Arctic ocean and the heroine is always the only one who can melt his icy exterior. He won’t change for anyone except her—and at the very essence of the story, that’s what makes him so swoony.”

“Interesting observation.”

“Anyway.” She waves her hand. “We’ve gotten way off track here. We’re supposed to be talking about *you*. Let’s go back to square one... have you ever been in love?”

“Once,” I say without hesitation.

Jovie’s brows arch, and her face turns crestfallen for half of a moment.

“Good for you,” she says. “Is she still in the picture?”

I’m looking at her ...

“Yes and no.” I top off her glass, then mine. “It’s complicated.”

“Nine times out of ten it isn’t though,” I say. “It’s only complicated because we make it complicated. Love is almost always quite simple. Either it’s there or it’s not.”

“That may be the case for most, but not for all.”

“So who is she?” Jovie asks. “What’s she like? Tell me about the woman who finally melted Stone Atwood’s heart.”

“I’d rather not,” I say. “It’s kind of a sore subject at the moment.”

More like excruciatingly painful. The only woman I’ve ever loved just confessed that she used to wonder about me,

used to innocently crush on me ...

I never expected life to be fair, but this is downright cruel.

“Ah, I see.” Before she can ask another pointed question, her phone rings from her bag. Digging it out, she frowns at the screen. “It’s Monica. You remember Monica, right?”

“Monica Yarbrough,” I say.

“It’s Monica Wiest now, but yes,” she says. “Hang on. I need to take this ... hey, Mon ... what’s up?”

Sliding off the bar stool, she walks into the next room—my pitch-black study. I turn my attention to Domino, who is sitting near my feet, staring up at me with shiny dark eyes.

“You want more steak?” I grab a piece from the container on the counter. He lifts a paw before licking the drool from his lips. I toss it to him because I’m not about to almost lose a finger again, and he catches it in his mouth. “Impressive.”

“Sorry about that,” Jovie says when she returns. “She’s going through a thing with her husband right now ... I should probably go be with her ...”

“Of course.” I hide my disappointment at the fact that I was enjoying her company, as bittersweet as it was.

“Thank you again for taking Domino.” She slides her bag over her shoulder before clasping her hands together. “Seriously. You’re a godsend. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I nod. It’s not like I had a choice in the matter. Her call was frantic and convincing—and I wanted to see her again.

“I’ll reach out to you after the weekend,” she says when I walk her to the door. “Ida’s supposed to be back early next week. Call or text if you need anything.”

With a quick wave, she dashes down my front steps and climbs into her car.

I return to the kitchen to finish the last of the Malbec.

Her confession plays on a loop in my head the rest of the night.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Stone

Age 21

“I put your mail on the counter.” Jovie peeks her head into my room. It’s been five days since Jude fucked around on her, and I’ve yet to be able to look her in the eye once. Watching the two of them prance around the apartment—flirting and grabbing each other’s asses and stealing kisses—all the while knowing what happened ... is weighing heavily on my mind.

“Thanks,” I say from my desk, keeping my back to her.

“We’re ordering Chinese tonight.” She’s still here. “Did you want the usual?”

“I’m good.”

“It’s Jade Garden,” she says, her voice sing-songy. “Your favorite ...”

“I’m good,” I repeat.

“Oh. We’re going to that indie flick later, the one about the ambulance driver and the heart transplant patient, if you want to come with?”

I imagine Jude’s only seeing that one out of pure guilt. Ordinarily they’d be catching the latest Marvel flick or anything starring Liam Neeson, Denzel Washington, or Mark Wahlberg.

“I’ve got a paper due Monday, so ...”

“We can wait until next weekend to see it.”

“I can catch it later this week. You two go on without me.”

Silence lingers between us. I glance behind me to see if she’s gone, but she’s just standing there, her hands jammed into her back pockets and her expression baked in deflated sadness. Sadness that’s directed at me, not the man who stuck his dick in crazy behind her back.

“Do me a favor and get the door, will you?” I ask, hoping she takes the hint.

“Sure.” She steps into the hall, tugging the door shut behind her. I wait for her footsteps to follow a few seconds later.

A week ago, I’d have ordered Chinese with them and went to the damn movie.

Now it doesn’t feel right.

And I can’t spend another day watching the only woman I give a damn about in the arms of a fool who doesn’t know how good he has it.

She should be in my arms.

Not his.

And she'll never know it.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Stone

“Mr. Atwood, your one o’clock is here,” my assistant pages me over my phone.

“Send him back.” I reach for the file folder Becca left on my desk the other week. I meant to glance over everything sooner, but I’ve been swamped.

There’s always been something in the air this time of year that makes people want to embark on life changes. Some people buy a house or a boat. Some people book a cruise. And then there are the ones who decide to divorce their spouses.

Maybe part of it has to do with being cooped up all winter. The cold season here is everlasting and unforgiving and, at times, isolating. It’s the ultimate marital stress test.

A man with jet black hair slicked back with some kind of pomade waltzes through my door. I rise from my chair, step out from behind my desk, and shake his hand.

“You must be Jason Whitlock,” I say. “Stone Atwood. I’m filling in for Becca today. Good to meet you.”

His grasp is firm. He's wearing an insulting amount of expensive cologne and a cashmere sweater (never mind that it's June).

"Please have a seat." I point toward my guest chair and return to my own. "I'm not entirely familiar with your situation yet, so bear with me while I go through your documents."

I flip the file folder open and scan the paperwork inside.

"It says here you originally filed with Wasser, Leeman and Smith," I say. "Is there a reason you're no longer working with them?"

"Yeah," he says, crossing his legs wide and leaning back. His jaw is angled and his brows are heavy. "Negotiations weren't going as well as I'd hoped. A buddy of mine recommended your firm. Said you were the best in town."

That's not the first time I've heard someone say that. In fact, the overwhelming majority of clients we take on heard of us from someone else. Word of mouth is the best advertising money can't buy.

"And what exactly are you seeking from ...?" I scan the documents, searching for the name of the other party. My heart drops and my veins turn hot. "Jovie Annabeth Vincent."

"Half of everything," he says. "That's how it works, right? You get married and what's yours is mine and what's mine is yours and that whole thing."

"Not exactly." My jaw is clenched as I attempt to maintain my composure. "The state of Maine isn't a community property state, so marital assets aren't typically divided fifty-fifty unless there was some kind of prenup in place or you're able to make a compelling case to the court."

“I thought it was an equitable distribution state?”

“Equitable distribution is not the same as equal distribution,” I say. “It simply means things are divided fairly.”

“All right. That shouldn’t be an issue then. It’s not like I’m asking for everything under the sun here. I’m just asking for enough to get myself back on my feet,” he says.

Jason is attractive by most standards, and his body language is confident. But his entire demeanor reeks of entitlement. I don’t want to know what Jovie saw in this man that made her fall hard enough to wear his ring on her finger.

“It says here the two of you were married less than a year,” I say.

“Right.”

“Was the decision to split mutual?” I ask. “Amicable?”

“Not exactly,” he says. “The spark kind of died out.”

“That quickly?” I ask out of curiosity because I can’t help myself.

“It happens.”

“Not as frequently as one might think,” I say. “Did the two of you attempt to make any sort of efforts to save the marriage? For instance, did you try counseling?”

He rolls his eyes. “Counseling never works.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Does it matter?”

“The court will want to know,” I say. “In order to divide assets equitably, they’ll need to know about the emotional

investments at play here, not simply the financial investments.”

He blows a breath between pursed lips. “She wanted to try therapy, but I’ve never been into that kind of thing. Sitting around, talking about feelings? I’d rather stab myself in the balls with rusty scissors.”

I’ve only been in this man’s presence for a handful of minutes and already I’d like to do the same—to him.

“That’s certainly not going to work in your favor,” I say.

“Can’t we just lie? I mean, it’s my word against hers.”

“We absolutely cannot lie,” I say.

He chuckles through his nose, like he thinks I’m kidding.

“Oh, come on,” he says. “There’s got to be a way we can paint this in a better light. Isn’t that what lawyers do?”

I ignore his insulting question and flip through the remaining documents.

“It says here you’re seeking fifty percent of her earnings for the last fiscal year and you’d like fifty percent of any royalties stemming from the book she wrote while the two of you were married,” I say. “Did you help her write that book?”

“No,” he says. “But it’s a marital asset, right? Kind of like if I would’ve opened a business when we were together. She’d be entitled to a portion of those earnings or a share of the company.”

“Did you bring anything into this union?”

“I mean ...”

“It says here, you have a 2015 Audi A6 that you still owe thirty grand on ... a handful of credit cards with balances

totaling around eighteen thousand ... fifty-six thousand in student loan debt ... and it looks like Ms. Vincent has a sizeable brokerage portfolio, a retirement plan, as well as a six-figure savings account. She brought significant assets to the marriage while you brought a mountain of debt.”

“When you put it that way ...” His attention darts to the folder. “It looks bad. And I get it.”

“I don’t think you do.” I shut the file folder and shove it across my desk. “I’m sorry, Mr. Whitlock, but my firm won’t be able to represent you.”

He chuffs, his chest puffing through his cashmere sweater. “I already paid a retainer.”

“We’ll see to it that it’s returned to you in full.” I rise and straighten my tie.

“I don’t understand ...”

“We’re not the firm for you. Please show yourself out.” I walk him to the door, and he damn near trips over his fake Gucci loafers. “The check will be in the mail.”

Returning to my desk, I compose an email to Becca and copy her assistant, instructing them to release the client and return his retainer.

The subject line reads *Conflict of Interest*.

The number of times I’ve turned down clients in my career so far, I can count on one hand. I have no doubt I could’ve made some semblance of an argument for Jason if I tried—as unfair as it would have been to Jovie. There are always loopholes and exceptions if you look hard enough.

But I would never—could never—do that to her.

Her greatest strengths are also her fatal flaws: she loves too hard and trusts too deeply.

She doesn't deserve to be punished for falling in love again.

And she won't be.

Not on my watch.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Jovie

I pull up to Stone's place Monday evening, check my reflection in my visor mirror, and trot up his front walk. After I left the last time, I spent the entire drive to Monica's cringing in mortified self-reflection.

I still can't believe I told him I used to have a crush on him

...

It just ... slipped out.

The entire thing was made ten times worse by the fact that he didn't react. He didn't flinch. He barely blinked. There was no shock on his face. No smile. He just stood there, stoic and expressionless.

Perhaps on a deeper level, I was hoping he'd 'fess up that he entertained the same thoughts back then. But once again, it was nothing more than wishful thinking. The wind was then completely taken from my sails when he mentioned that he was in love with someone and it was complicated.

I ring his doorbell and take a deep breath, scraping my confidence off the ground.

“Hey,” he says when he answers. “Come on in. I was just making dinner.”

The scent of freshly grilled steak fills the air.

“For you or for Domino?” I ask.

“Both,” he says. “You hungry?”

“I already ate ...” I leave out the fact that I spent the entirety of the afternoon stress-eating Oreos and baked Lays as I contemplated how this was going to go.

All weekend, I debated sending him a message blaming my confession on the wine and attempting to play it off, but every rough draft was cringier than the one before so I let it go.

“Hey, buddy.” I crouch down when I find Domino, and I scratch behind his ears. “Are you ready to go home?”

Ida snagged a flight home today, and I promised I’d swing by and get Domino before picking her up from the airport.

“Were you good for Stone?” I ask.

He wags his tail.

“He was great,” Stone says as we head to the kitchen. “Almost makes me want to get a dog myself.”

“Really?”

“I said *almost*.”

“You ready?” I say to Dom. From the corner of my eye, I spot his toys and bed and leash.

“At least let him finish his steak.” Stone stabs a sirloin with a fork before slicing it into manageable pieces and placing it in Domino’s food bowl with a small handful of dry kibble.

“He’ll eat his kibble for you?”

“As long as I mix it with the steak.”

“That’s brilliant. I don’t know why I didn’t think of that.”

“The trick is, you have to make the kibble appetizing first,” Stone says. “Then once he starts eating it, he thinks it’s his idea.”

“Good to know,” I say, although I doubt I’ll be in charge of watching Domino again anytime soon. I wait for him to finish scarfing down his kibble and steak before collecting his things. “We should get going.”

“I met Jason today,” Stone says.

“My Jason?” I ask, though he isn’t *my* Jason anymore. And if I’m being honest, he never was mine to begin with. He was nothing more than an opportunist who saw a golden goose. “Are you representing him?”

“No.” Stone’s voice is firm and his gaze is so intense it anchors me into place. “In fact, after reviewing his case, I told him we wouldn’t be able to offer him representation.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“I have to ask ... what did you see in that tool anyway?”

Thinking back to the Jason I first met is as painful as it is bittersweet. Painful because in hindsight I can see what a fool I was. Bittersweet because for a brief moment I thought that what we had was special ... and real.

“A wise man once told me dwelling on the past has never done a damn bit of good for anyone,” I feed him his own words.

“Sage advice,” he says.

I check my watch. “We should head out. Ida’s flight lands in thirty minutes.”

Stone hooks Domino’s leash onto his collar and walks us to my car, helping me load up.

“He liked indie movies,” I say.

“Beg your pardon.”

“Jason ... I met him at a Sunday matinee showing of *Hope Has Two Faces*. We were the only ones in the entire theater ... he was sitting behind me.” I drag in a breath of humid summer air. “After about thirty minutes, he leaned in, tapped me on the shoulder, and asked if the movie was terrible or if it was just him. I told him it wasn’t him. We ended up walking out and grabbing a drink down the street at this little bar.”

I open the rear passenger door. Domino jumps in.

“He was nice,” I say. “In the beginning. He liked independent films and Wilco. And in some ways, he reminded me of you.”

“After meeting him today, I don’t know whether I should be flattered or offended by that.”

I laugh. “I meant for that to be a compliment.”

“I’m still not convinced that it is ...”

“He reminded me of all the things I liked about you.” I swat at his arm. “Anyway ... thanks again for taking him in. And I guess I’ll see you around?”

He takes a step back, stopping at the curb, his hands in his pockets and his gaze homed in on me. Something about this moment feels finite and complete, yet at the same time, there’s an ache in my chest. A homesickness of sorts. Like the way I

always felt as a kid when we'd leave my grandparents' farm in upstate Maine; like I was leaving behind a piece of myself.

"Who's handling your case?" Stone asks before I climb into my car. "Your divorce."

"Ben Majors. Why?"

"Fire him," he says.

"Why?"

"If Jason shops hard enough, he'll eventually land a shark. I want to make sure you're represented by someone who can handle that."

"And who would that be ... you?" I ask.

"I can't work with you. Conflict of interest. But I'm going to talk to my partner—who is actually my former law professor," he says. "Taught me everything I know."

"You don't have to do that for me ..."

"I'll be in touch later this week," he says.

With that, he heads inside.

Domino whimpers when he watches Stone disappear into his home. I reach back and pet the top of his head.

"Same, Domino," I say with a sigh. "Same."

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Stone

“I can’t stop thinking about the other day,” Jude says over the phone the next morning. “Running into Jovie ... what if it’s a sign? Of all the cities in the world, she’s here.”

“To be fair, it’s not that big of a stretch. She grew up in Kennebunkport,” I say.

“I wonder who she married?” He ignores my comment. “And why it didn’t work out?”

“What’s it to you?”

“What,” he snorts. “I’m not allowed to be curious?”

“How would Stassi feel if she knew you were curious about what your ex is up to?”

Jude exhales. “What Stassi doesn’t know won’t hurt her. I’m just wondering out loud, okay? Don’t make it deeper than it is.”

A rap on my office door steals my attention. Glancing up from my computer screen, I find my partner and former law professor, Mike Delgado, standing in my doorway.

“Your assistant said you wanted to talk to me?” he asks. He’s dressed in his signature corduroy slacks and windowpane print jacket with the suede elbow patches. You can take the man out of the university, but you can’t take the university out of the man.

I cradle my phone on my shoulder.

“Yeah,” I say before telling Jude I’ll call him later. “Come on in.”

Mike takes a seat across from me, unbuttoning his suit coat and settling in. “What’s going on?”

“Need a favor.” I straighten my tie. “I have a friend who needs new representation. Currently divorcing some douchebag who’s trying to rake her over the coals. I don’t think he has a leg to stand on, but I want to know she’s in capable hands.”

“You know I’m scaling back ...” He pushes his tortoiseshell glasses up the bridge of his aquiline nose. Earlier this year, he announced he was thinking about retiring after Christmas. Since then, he’s been divvying out his workload and turning down clients left and right. “The last thing I want to do is get my hands dirty with a new case.”

“I realize what I’m asking here.”

“Why don’t you take her on?”

“Conflict of interest,” I say. I use my best poker face.

“I see.” His lips press flat and he nods, knowing better than to ask further questions.

“I wouldn’t ask this favor of you if it wasn’t important to me,” I say. “This town is full of perfectly capable family law attorneys, but she needs a killer whale, not a sand shark.”

Mike's expression lights at the compliment, his hazel eyes all but beaming from behind his thick lenses.

"I'll cover all of her fees if I have to," I add. Though after glancing through those documents yesterday, it would appear that she's more than capable of affording high-end representation.

Rising from the guest chair, Mike pulls his phone from his pocket. "I've got a call to make, but I'll consider it—and only as a personal favor to you. Get a hold of her and have her come in. I'll do a consult and we'll go from there."

As soon as he's gone, I pull out my phone and shoot Jovie a text.

ME: I got you a meeting with Mike Delgado—best divorce lawyer in Portland. When are you available?

JOVIE: You didn't have to do that ...

I pull up Mike's calendar on my computer and search for the next available opening.

ME: How does Thursday look for you? Eleven AM?

JOVIE: I'll be there.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jovie

“So the therapist said that since Chauncy’s love language is touch and mine is words of affirmation, that we need to make more of an effort to make sure the other one is getting what they need,” Monica says Wednesday afternoon as we go for a stroll along the Eastern Promenade loop. “Sometimes I just hate being touched, you know? Like I need my space. But then Chauncy takes it personally and thinks I don’t like him just because I’m not clinging all over him.”

“Relationships are all about compromise ...”

“And then if I’m pulling away physically, he pulls away verbally,” she continues. “He kind of retreats into himself and gets all quiet and sulky. And then because he’s not telling me he loves me a million times a day, then I’m taking it personally and thinking he doesn’t like me anymore. It’s this vicious cycle.”

“And this was never an issue before you two were married?”

“No,” she says. “Weird, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I don’t really know what to tell you right now other than it’s good that you guys are aware of this now. It means you can work on fixing it.”

“Yeah, no. I know. I just wanted to vent,” she says as we stop at an overlook to check out the view of Casco Bay.

I grab my phone and snap a picture of the crashing waves and the handful of sailboats in the distance.

“Did I tell you Stone’s helping me find a better lawyer?” I ask.

“What’s wrong with Ben Majors?”

“Apparently Stone met with Jason, realized who he was, found out what he’s going after, and now he’s insisting that I go with someone from his firm. He says he wants to make sure I don’t get raked over the coals.”

“Really?” Monica rests her hands on her hips. “That’s ... that’s kind of sexy.”

I roll my eyes. “Stop, it’s not like that.”

“Oh, it isn’t?” Her tone is baked in sarcasm. “So you just happened to confess that you used to have a crush on him and now he just happens to be hooking you up with the best legal team in town, but *it’s not like that*.”

“He’s just being nice.”

“He’s not even getting laid and he’s being nicer to you than my own husband’s being to me.”

“Let’s not compare apples and oranges.” I slide my phone back into my pocket. If there’s anything I’ve learned in my twenty-seven years so far, it’s that love and marriage complicates everything. “Stone’s just doing me a favor.”

“On top of the other favor that he already did for you with the whole dog thing,” she says as we continue on. “I don’t remember him ever being this nice to you back in college? In fact, if memory serves me correctly, it was quite the opposite.”

“People are allowed to change.”

“True.”

“Plus, I was dating his best friend and infringing on all of their guy time. I would’ve hated me too back then,” I say. “Anyway, he already said he’s in love with someone and it’s complicated.”

“Maybe it’s complicated because he’s starting to have feelings for someone else? Someone he never saw coming? Someone he just so happens to be bending over backwards for? Now wouldn’t that be the ultimate plot twist?” Before Monica can say another word, her phone rings. “Ugh, it’s Chauncy.”

“Shouldn’t you be more like *aww, it’s Chauncy?*”

She chuckles before slapping a love-drunk grin on her face. “Aww, it’s Chauncy!”

“That’s better,” I say.

“I don’t know what he could possibly want. I told him we were going on a hike.”

“Maybe he’s calling to tell you he loves you?” I say. “Words of affirmation and all that ...”

“Hey, what’s up? Yeah, no, I need you to sign for that delivery.” she takes his call, and I walk a few steps ahead to give her some space—and to be alone with my thoughts for a minute.

I refuse to read between the lines of Stone's unexpected kindness and generosity.

The last thing I need is to get sucked into some wishful thinking narrative where everything means something, where the world seems to be conspiring to bring us together like we're living in the pages of some romance novel.

Happily ever afters rarely exist in real life.

And rarely does anyone ride off into the sunset with their ex-boyfriend's best friend.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Stone

“Hey, hey.” Jovie stands in my office doorway Thursday, shortly before noon. With an emerald green pencil skirt, a starched white blouse, her hair slicked back into a low bun, and her lips shaded dark pink, I hardly recognize her and end up doing a double take. “I have something for you.”

She makes her way across the room, her hips swaying in the skintight fabric, and she places a plate of cookies on my desk along with an envelope.

“These are from Ida,” she says. “She really appreciates what you did for Domino. And I hope you like chocolate chip cookies ... she said to tell you they’re the Alton Brown recipe, which is supposedly the best one. I may or may not have snuck one on the way here, so I may or may not be able to confirm that they’re life-changing.”

“I’ve never heard a cookie described as life-changing before.”

“Don’t take my word for it.” She slides the plate closer to me.

“I’m actually meeting a client for lunch today, but I’ll save these for a three o’clock pick me up.”

“That’s an impressive amount of discipline you’ve got there. I wouldn’t last ten minutes with these,” she says. “I do this thing sometimes where I stress bake. Usually when I’m nearing the end of a deadline, I do all kinds of crazy things to procrastinate ... I’ll organize all of my closets, I’ll take a trip to the bookstore and come back with a stack of bestsellers that I definitely don’t have time to read, and then I’ll bake at least one cake or batch of cookies—that I end up throwing out half the time because if I don’t I’ll inhale the entire thing in one sitting.”

“Sounds like you have zero self-control.”

“Pretty much,” she says. “But only when I’m writing. When I’m not writing, I’m a pretty average, boring person.”

“I doubt that.”

“Okay, fine. Slightly less neurotic, slightly less manic, a little more in the driver’s seat.”

“Everything go well with Mike?” I ask. “What’d you think of him?”

“Yeah.” Her brows lift. “He’s great. Very knowledgeable ... said he’s taken on similar cases to mine in the past ...”

“Did he say if he’d take you on?”

“He said he would.”

I exhale. “Good, good.”

“He also told me that you were one of his best students,” she says. “And that you told him you couldn’t represent me due to a conflict of interest ...”

“I didn’t want my representation of you to be biased in any way. The court tends to frown on that sort of thing.”

“I see,” she says. “Regardless, thank you. I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done for me lately.”

I nod. “Sure.”

“I should get out of your hair ... just wanted to drop off Ida’s thank you cookies ...” She glances at the door, though her high-heels remain planted. “Stone?”

“Yes?”

“I’m really glad our paths crossed again.”

“Can you please tell me why you terminated my client’s relationship—” Becca storms through the door, stopping in her tracks when she spots Jovie. Tugging her Oxford top into place, she clears her throat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were with someone.”

It’s Becca’s first day back in weeks, and judging by the wild-eyed expression on her twisted face, I take it she just read my email about Jason.

“Becca, this is Jovie Vincent, a longtime acquaintance of mine,” I say. “Jovie, this is Becca Ratliff, a junior partner here at the firm. Jovie here is divorcing the client I terminated.”

Becca’s gaze skims from me to Jovie before returning.

“I wish you’d have consulted with me before the termination,” she speaks says, ignoring Jovie. Her arms fold tight across her chest. “A little professional courtesy would go a long way.”

“You were away,” I say. “I didn’t want to bother you while you were sunbathing and sipping fruity drinks in St. Croix.”

I saw her Instagram while she was gone—and the series of thirst trap photos she posted showcasing what a wonderful time she was having with her girlfriends. While the captions were definitely directed at me, I found nothing but amusement in them. They were desperate, unoriginal, and had the opposite of the intended effect she was going for.

If anything, they only cemented my decision to cut things off.

Becca's Pilates body and book smarts are unfortunately overshadowed by the fact that she's as basic as they come.

“Forgive me for taking a long overdue vacation,” Becca says, her words curt and snipping. “Some of us have actual lives outside the office. Not everyone can be married to their job.”

To which I say, “To each their own.”

“Anyway.” Becca unfolds her arms, glancing at Jovie, who's staring at the floor like an innocent bystander caught in our crosshairs. “I'd like a minute with you *alone* at some point this afternoon so we can finish this discussion.”

“I'll pencil you in,” I say without so much as making a move toward my calendar.

With that, Becca's gone, leaving nothing but a trail of her department store perfume—the same one she used to spray between her legs before our little *entanglements*. Knowing her, I can only assume that move was intentional.

“Sorry about that,” I tell Jovie.

“Do you and your partners always talk like that?” she asks.

“No. Becca's been a little ... contentious ... lately.” I check the time on my phone. I'm due across town in thirty

minutes to meet with a current client over lunch at a restaurant she owns. A restaurant stuck in limbo due to a bitter and costly divorce battle. Unfortunately when married couples undertake a joint business effort, division of assets can get tricky. That's why it's imperative that Jovie has the best representation when Jason tries to claim royalties from the book she penned during their time together. There's no hard and fast rules here. It'll boil down to who can present the most compelling argument. Things could get particularly dicey if Jason attempts to say he inspired the book—or worse, that he helped write it. It would be his word against hers and given my brief interaction with him the other day, he doesn't appear to be beneath lying.

“Maybe I was reading between the lines, but I get the hunch that it's not the client she's most upset about.” Jovie winces. “That was a lot of animosity packed into a short amount of time.”

I laugh through my nose. “You don't miss much, do you?”

“Is that ... *her*?” Jovie's voice is low and her chin is tucked. “The woman you're in love with?”

I almost choke on my spit. “No. Not even close.”

Becca pales in comparison to Jovie in every way imaginable.

No contest.

Her shoulders fall as she exhales. “Well, I'm still very curious about this mystery girl.”

“Then you're wasting your precious energy because nothing can ever come of it. We're at an impasse.” I shut down my computer, grab my briefcase, and head for the door.

“Why not?” she asks, stepping into the hallway while I lock up.

“I told you. It’s complicated.”

“Maybe I’m not the best person to take relationship advice from,” she says as we walk to the elevator. “But I know a thing or two about love.”

We step into an open elevator and I press the button for the ground floor. Subtle floral notes from Jovie’s perfume fill the space, and I drag an intoxicating breath into my lungs, only allowing myself this brief moment to enjoy it.

Back in college, she used to wear this gardenia-musk perfume on her date nights with Jude. It used to linger in our dorm room long after she left, clinging to the air, to my skin, to the inside of my nose and the back of my throat. Once, however, she caught me on a particularly irritable day after I’d bombed an exam, and came home to the two of them making out in our dorm room. They stopped when I walked in, and Jovie asked me what was wrong. I snapped at her, instantly claiming her perfume was giving me a headache.

She never wore it around me again after that.

“I appreciate the offer.” I keep my attention trained on the glowing buttons despite the fact that I’d kill for another opportunity to delight in her hourglass silhouette and the way that emerald green pencil skirt caresses her heart-shaped ass just so.

The elevator deposits us on the main floor, and we head outside, her heels clicking on the marble and then the concrete as she treks behind me.

“I’m just saying, if you ever want to talk about anything, you know how to reach me,” she says before we go our separate ways.

The midday sun beats down on both of us and she shields her pretty eyes with her hand, reminding me of the time the three of us went to the shore for an afternoon and somewhere along the trip, she lost her sunglasses—which wouldn't have been a huge deal if she hadn't had LASIK surgery two weeks before. Her eyes were still sensitive to the sunlight, and she'd been instructed to wear sunglasses outdoors at all times.

Jude offered to buy her a cheap pair from a gas station, but when we got there, they were sold out. I ended up offering her mine. Jude didn't bat an eye, didn't insist on being the gentleman in the equation.

Looking back, it was like that more times than it should have been.

I climb behind the wheel of my car and watch from my rearview mirror as Jovie fetches a pair of mirrored Ray-Ban aviators from her bag and slips them onto her pretty face.

If I'm not mistaken, they're the very same ones I loaned her that day at the shore.

She held onto them all of these years.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Stone

Age 22

I lean against the railing of my hotel balcony, watching as the azure blue sea laps along pristine white beaches. Tulum is a sight for sore eyes. We've been here one night and already I never want to leave. If I weren't already set to start law school this fall, I probably wouldn't.

"You coming out or what?" Jude calls from inside the room we're sharing. I turn around to find him spritzing cologne on his starched shirt and stepping into a pair of loafers. We're hitting up some club tonight that apparently has a dress code.

And here I thought this was supposed to be a casual guys' trip.

"Yeah," I tell him. I drag another salty ocean breath into my lungs and head back in to grab a quick shower and get

changed into something nicer than the shorts and t-shirt I'm currently wearing.

An hour later, we're sitting in some club where a pseudo-celebrity DJ is spinning dance cuts and throngs of beautiful girls are tossing back shots and living their best lives.

"You having a good time?" Jude asks over the blasting remix pumping through the speakers.

I nod, taking a small sip of my smooth-as-silk tequila-on-the-rocks. For eighteen bucks, I'm savoring the hell out of this. The night is young, our week is just kicking off, and my funds are far from unlimited.

A group of girls in colorful dresses that leave very little to the imagination stroll past our table. The tallest one—a bottle blonde dressed in virginal white that plays off her suntanned skin—locks eyes with Jude.

She smiles.

He smiles.

My stomach sinks.

"I'm going to grab another drink. You want anything?" Jude asks, his vision trailing her before she disappears completely into the crowd.

"I'm good."

He makes his way to the other side of the crowded bar. I scan the place, searching for the blonde in the skintight dress with the Day-Glo tan.

Ever since Jude stepped out on Jovie a couple months back, I've been holding my breath waiting for something to happen again. Infidelity is a slippery slope—not that I speak from experience. It's just something Paul drove into our heads

growing up. He always told us once you cheat, it's only a matter of time before you do it again.

Much to my relief, Jude returns with a fresh beer, sipping the foam off the top.

“This place is kind of lame,” he says.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I scoff at him. Personally I'm here for the top shelf tequila, killer music, beautiful people, and vibrant atmosphere. We don't have anything like this back in Maine. We're a world away from lighthouses and lobsters.

“I don't know, I just feel like we should move on after this,” he says. “Bar crawl or whatever.”

“We paid a twenty-dollar cover just to get in here,” I remind him. The cover, plus the drink, plus the tip, means I'm already forty dollars poorer than I was when we first got here, and it's only been twenty minutes. “Sit back and relax.”

Jude takes the seat next to me and nurses his beer while the music pumps. A couple of the guys with us flag down a cocktail waitress and ask her to bring a round of Bacanora shots to the table.

I'm scanning the room when I spot a flash of white again. The blonde Jude had his gaze on a few minutes ago struts past our table, flicking her hair over her shoulder and turning back to make eye contact with him.

She smiles—again.

As does he.

“What do you think Jovie's up to tonight?” I ask him in a not-so-subtle attempt to steer his mind in the right direction.

“She went to her cousin’s bridal shower in Montpelier or something,” he shouts over the music. “Why?”

I sit back. “No reason.”

No reason at all ...

“I can’t get over how *f-uh-cking* hot the girls are here,” he says, swallowing a mouthful of beer and scanning the place again. “It’s insane. Like the ones back home look like 1800s schoolmarms compared to these chicks.”

I roll my eyes. Meanwhile, he can’t take his off of the next group of women who pass our table. With their long, lanky bodies and their two-piece dresses and their taut and filled faces, they’re beautiful in their own way, but they’re not my personal cup of tea. I prefer hair I can run my fingers through without it getting tangled in extensions, skin color that looks like it was touched by the sun (or nothing at all) over something that matches orange soda.

Two women—each looking like carbon copies of each other—stop in front of the DJ booth to snap a selfie, their lips puckered and their fingers holding peace signs.

Jude elbows me before pointing to the blonde who won’t stop walking past us every five seconds. “That one won’t stop eye fucking me.”

“Ignore her.”

“Are you out of your damn mind?” Jude laughs, tossing back the rest of his beer. “You seriously expect me to ignore the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life?”

“I do,” I say. “Because you have a girlfriend back home.”

“Doesn’t count if it’s not on American soil.”

Without another word, he heads to the bar to grab another beer. For a moment, I think he's in the clear—until he takes the long way back to our table. I watch as he bumps into her—on purpose—and uses it as an excuse to apologize. Or at least it appears that way. It also appears that he's introducing himself. I look away. I can't take another minute of this shit.

It's a solid twenty minutes before he returns, but at least he returns alone.

“Her name is Stassi.” Jude's standing a little taller, wearing the smug arrogance of a hunter about to snag the ultimate catch. “Believe it or not, she's from Portland—Maine, not Oregon.”

“Wow,” I feign shock and interest. “That's fascinating.”

“I know, right? I told her I'm Maine born and raised and I've never seen anything like her before ...”

“And that line actually worked on her?” I ask.

He nods. “Must have. Because she's coming over later.”

I almost choke on my sip of tequila. “To our room?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Think you can crash with Cory and Derek tonight? We'd go to her place, but she's here for her sister's bachelorette party and she's sharing a suite with, like, five other girls.”

“You want me to crash on the floor of Cory and Derek's room so you can fuck some girl that you just met twenty minutes ago?”

“Come on, man.” Jude chuckles, his face flushing the way it does when his liquor starts to catch up with him.

“No,” I say. “And before you bitch about it, it's for your own good.”

I know how this is going to go. Tomorrow he'll be filled with regret and blaming his bad decision on alcohol instead of accepting full responsibility like a man. Then he's going to rope me into this, begging me to cover for him with Jovie.

Jude rakes his hand through his hair. "God damn it. I hate when you're right."

A cool burst of relief washes through me, colder than the air conditioning they're pumping into this packed bar. Maybe I'm finally talking some sense into him.

"You'll thank me tomorrow," I say. "For now, just sit back and have a good time."

"Yeah." His shoulders slump as he nurses his beer like a sulking man child. While his attention is still trained on the blonde, at least his ass is glued to his seat. It's still a victory in my book. "It's just ... what could it hurt, right? Jovie would never know. Literally. We're in a different fucking country."

"Jesus Christ," I mutter under my breath.

"I'm thinking about proposing to Jovie when we get back," he says. The audacity and timing of his statement makes me physically ill. "Not right away, of course. But sometime this summer."

"Really? I'm all but chaining you to your seat to keep you from screwing some random girl and now you're talking about how you want to marry Jovie?"

"You didn't let me finish." His words slur into one another and he waves his hand in my face. "I'm just saying, if I'm going to spend the rest of my life with one woman ... why can't I have one last ..."

His words trail into nothing, but he doesn't need to finish his thought. I know where he's going with it. Jude will justify

anything if given the chance. He's probably lost in his own mind right now, qualifying this entire thing six ways from Sunday.

"Because you're better than that," I say. "And because Jovie deserves better."

He elbows me before turning his unfocused gaze in my direction. "Why do you give a shit about her all of a sudden? You've never liked her. I know it. She knows it. You know it. The state of Maine knows it."

I don't laugh at his lame attempt at being funny, and I don't tell him how dead wrong he is.

"I'm trying to save you from yourself," I say. "You do stupid shit when you're drunk."

"Isn't that kind of the whole point? We're young and dumb and we're allowed to do stupid shit." He turns his attention back toward the icy blonde. "Sometimes I feel like I can close my eyes and see my entire future with Jovie. Marriage, kids, a nine-to-five, boring, ordinary stuff. She's a good girl. And she loves me. God, does she love me. But sometimes I wonder ... are we only together because nothing better has come along?"

"You think she deserves better than you?"

"I think on some level we're both kind of settling," he says. "Like she's pretty, right? And smart. And fun. And she checks all the boxes. But sometimes I wonder if there's someone else out there who can, I don't know, keep me on my toes a little more."

"Do you think Jovie feels like she's settling with you?"

He blows a hard breath through his nostrils, giving it some contemplation. "Kinda. Yeah. I don't think she realizes it though."

I toss back the last of my eighteen-dollar tequila, letting it burn on the way down.

“Dude, you’re sucking the wind out of my sails here.” Jude smacks me on the back. “This conversation is way too heavy for a night like tonight.”

The song changes to a techno remix of some House of Pain number and Jude hops up from his chair, making his way to the dance floor and jumping to the beat like the drunk idiot he is tonight, his drink lifted in the air. A few seconds later, he disappears into the crowd.

I don’t see him again the rest of the night.

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Chapter Thirty

Jovie

“Jovie?”

I’m strolling down Fore Street, savoring my mocha gelato and basking in the midday sun when someone calls my name.

Turning around, I almost drop my spoon when I spot Jude Hudson striding toward me, a man on a mission. His long legs bring him closer with each step and given the fact that we’ve now made eye contact, there’s no way I’m getting out of this.

“Hey,” I say, not making an attempt to be overly friendly. I can be cordial just as I was at the diner the other day, but it would have been perfectly acceptable for him to notice me and keep on walking.

It’s what I’d have done had I noticed him first.

“I thought that was you,” he says. “So crazy running into you. *Again.*”

“Right.” I don’t know what else to say, so I take a bite of ice cream and scan the picturesque sidewalk instead.

“We didn’t really have a chance to talk before, so I wanted to say hi.” His hands rest at his hips and he stares so hard at me he doesn’t blink. It’s almost as if he’s visually pinning me into place. “So ... how long have you been in Portland?”

I squint against the sun. “I don’t know ... a year or so?”

“And you’re writing books?”

I gather a long, warm breath. I loathe small talk. “Yep.”

“How ... how have you been?” he asks next.

“Talk about a loaded question ...”

He rakes his hand through his perfect wavy hair—a move that used to send me back in the day. Now it feels cliché and insecure, like he’s grooming himself shamelessly in front of me.

“I just feel like ... we should catch up or something?” He laughs through his nose, like he’s trying to be off-the-cuff. “I mean, I get that things were crazy between us for a while, but ... I think about you, Jovie ... a lot ... and—”

“—aren’t you getting married soon?” I interrupt his ramblings.

His brows knit. “Yeah. But that doesn’t mean I can’t still think about you from time to time. I’ve always wondered how you were doing, but I never wanted to reach out and bother you. Bumping into you twice now ... after you *accidentally* tagged yourself in that picture the other week ... it’s like the universe is conspiring to bring us together in some way.”

He says accidentally as if he doesn’t believe it was accidental at all.

“And why would the universe want to do that?” I keep a straight face despite the fact that all of this is comical to me. If

I weren't enjoying the hell out of this mocha gelato, I'd be cringing so hard right now.

He laughs a nervous sort of laugh. "I don't know—closure?"

"Did you not get closure when you made the decision to end our relationship?" I flutter my lashes and take another bite.

His lips press flat, as though he's searching for the right words to say.

"None of this is coming out the way I want," he says. "I wasn't expecting to see you again."

"Likewise."

"Do you think maybe we could meet up sometime? Go for coffee or something?"

"Why?" My brows knit.

"To talk ..."

"About what?"

His lips curl into a sheepish half-smile—but what was once charming is now nothing short of off-putting. I take a moment to examine his attire ... the fitted navy slacks, the crisp linen button down, the Gucci watch on his left wrist accessorized with a leather bracelet, all of it finished off with an expensive pair of leather loafers. There's no way he dressed himself. The Jude I dated was a ripped jeans and t-shirt kind of guy. Now everything about him screams Instagram boyfriend.

"I don't know," he says. "Everything. The way it all went down was pretty wild, and I've always felt bad about hurting you like that. You deserved better. What we had meant something. I was young and stupid and only thinking about myself."

“I don’t disagree with any of that.”

He checks his designer watch, the face of it glinting in the hot sun. “I have a couple of hours right now if you want to go sit down somewhere and talk?”

“I’m going to pass,” I say, my eyes flicking onto his.

“Really?” Genuine shock registers over his tragically handsome face and the very same lips I used to kiss attempt to muster another word, only nothing comes out.

Whether he wants to rehash everything, apologize to make himself feel better, or entertain his cold feet, my ship has long since left the harbor. I have no need to sail those same tired waters.

“Nostalgia is a beautiful liar,” I say before leaving. “Take care, Jude.”

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Chapter Thirty-One

Stone

Age 22

I spot Jude by the breakfast buffet the morning after he ditched me at the club. He's still in last night's clothes and his hair could use a good combing, but he's wearing the shit-eating grin of a man who spent the night getting his dick wet.

"You look like shit," I say, coming up from behind.

He startles before turning to face me. "Hey."

"They said they're making more eggs in the back," the blonde from last night slips between us, stealing Jude's attention. Even without the skimpy dress, she's easy to recognize in her skintight athleisure, her overfilled lips, and her messy blonde hair pulled into a neat bun on top of her oval-shaped head. "They'll be out soon."

I shoot Jude a glare.

“I’ll grab us a table,” she adds, leaning in to kiss his cheek before trotting off.

“What happened to that just being a one-time thing?” I ask. “Now you’re having breakfast with her?”

He rubs his eyes—the bags suggesting that he didn’t sleep a wink last night.

“What, I can’t have breakfast with her?” he asks.

“Breakfast can turn into a lot of other things real quick if you’re not careful.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m never going to see her again after this, so it’s not going to turn into anything.”

There he goes, qualifying his actions again.

“Your dad would be pissed if he knew you were fucking around on Jovie,” I play the guilt card with zero shame. Jude’s father is his Achilles heel. He idolizes the man. He worships the ground he walks on and then some.

“And how’s he going to find out?” He spoons a heaping serving of hash browns on his plate while we wait for someone to refill the scrambled eggs. “What, now you’re trying to blackmail me? You going to tell on me to my own father?”

“Of course not,” I say. I force a breath through my nostrils and re-strategize. I’m taking the wrong approach with him. “Sorry, I just ... I don’t want you going home with an even guiltier conscience.”

He snorts. “Let me worry about that, not you.”

I’m not getting through to him.

“Maybe you’re right,” I change my tune, opting for some good, old-fashioned reverse psychology. If he can hear how

ridiculous he sounds, maybe something will click.

He gifts me a sideways glance. “Oh, yeah? About what?”

“Everything,” I say. “You’re only twenty-two. This is really the only time you can be young and stupid and carefree before you’re saddled with a career and responsibilities ... who cares if you put yourself first as long as no one finds out ... we only live once.”

“Exactly,” he says.

My throat burns and my tongue is on fire with everything I truly want to say to my best friend right now.

“And yeah, I think you are settling for Jovie.” The words cross my lips with minimal effort, though I feel the sting of them deep in my chest. “From the outside looking in, it seems like things have gotten stale. I bet that’s why you’re getting restless. You two don’t really have that fire you had in the beginning. It’s more of a low flame.”

“You think?”

“I do,” I lie. Jovie still has that fire in her eyes when she looks at him, but his has long since died out. “I think you’re one wind gust away from being extinguished.”

A teenaged server dressed in all white refills the scrambled eggs. Jude takes two servings—one for him, one for the blonde.

“When you put it that way ...” He nods and his dark brows lift, as if he’s entertaining a silent conversation in his head.

“Jovie’s loyal as hell,” I say. “I think she’s with you because she hasn’t had a reason to leave you yet—she hasn’t had a reason to think that there might be someone else out there who makes her feel alive again.”

He places two healthy scoops of fresh sliced strawberries, bananas, and pineapple onto his overflowing plate, taking the last of what's left in the buffet serving bowl—never mind the ever-growing line of people behind him.

“Maybe you're both holding each other back,” I say, twisting the invisible knife I inserted moments ago. It's not easy speaking this way about Jovie, but it's crucial to remind Jude that she could easily find love in the arms of another man. “Maybe it's time you let her go so you can both be happy again.”

I'm straddling the finest line here.

Part of me wants to save Jovie from the heartbreak of being dumped by a man she's loved with her whole heart for the past three years. The other part of me wants to save her from the heartbreak of marrying a man capable of fucking around behind her back and sleeping like a baby afterwards.

I'm straddling the finest line.

“You know what?” He turns to me, his sleep-deprived eyes suddenly crystal clear. “I think you're absolutely right. Screw it. I'm going to have a fucking blast while I'm here, and when I get home, I'm going to end it with Jovie. Life's too short, man.”

With that, he heads over to the table-for-two the blonde has claimed for them.

I take my breakfast up to the room, and I spend the remainder of the morning stewing over soggy oatmeal, dry bacon, and salty hash browns.

Later in the day, I meet up with some of the other guys for an afternoon of snorkeling and zip lining. I slap a smile on my

face and try to convince everyone that I'm having the time of my life, but inside little pieces of me are dying.

It's the strangest thing, standing amongst palm trees, vivid blue skies, a gentle rolling sea, and a soft-sweet breeze—and wishing I were anywhere but here.

Several days from now, when we're back in Maine, Jude's going to break Jovie's heart, I'll never see her again ... and in a way, all of this will be my fault.

I planted the seed in fertile soil, knowing it would germinate all week until it would eventually bloom.

I remind myself it's for the best, that Jovie deserves better than him, and then I tell myself that someday—if I'm lucky—the feelings I have for her will fade away until there's nothing left; until the gaping hole inside my chest closes up once and for all.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Stone

I'm over halfway through my work day when I get a text from Jovie. Closing out of my email, I dedicate all of my attention to the single sentence displayed across my phone screen.

JOVIE: Guess who asked me to get coffee with him today?

ME: ???

JOVIE: Your best friend.

I drag my hand along my jaw, shaking my head. What the hell was he thinking? And why the hell would she tell him yes?

ME: How'd it go?

JOVIE: What makes you think I went?!

ME: Just assumed.

JOVIE: I have more important things to do than reminisce with an ex over some ancient relationship. For instance, I could do some laundry ... Alphabetize my spice cabinet ... Declutter my salad dressing collection ...

Outline my next book ... Watch some mind-numbing PBS documentary on the Industrial Revolution. All of those things would take more priority over coffee with Jude.

ME: Burn ...

JOVIE: You should have seen his face. He was almost too stunned to speak. I think he honestly expected me to jump at his invite.

JOVIE: Sorry. I know he's your best friend and I'm totally making fun of him right now, but I'm far too amused by the whole thing. It was like five years' worth of karma playing out in real time.

ME: You've never struck me as the type to take karma into your own hands.

JOVIE: Me neither.

ME: Where did you leave things?

JOVIE: I told him to take care and I walked away.

I'm in the midst of typing my reply when Jude calls.

"Yeah?" I answer.

"You'll never believe who I ran into a little bit ago ..."

Sinking back into my office chair, I swivel until I'm facing the window. "Who?"

"Jovie," he says with more exhilaration in his tone than a husband-to-be should possess when speaking his ex's name. "And she completely rebuffed me."

"Rebuffed you?"

"I asked her if she wanted to grab a coffee and talk and she acted like she couldn't be bothered with it." His tone is laced with genuine hurt.

“Can you blame her?”

“I was trying to be the bigger person ... I thought we could talk about everything and that maybe she could use some closure,” he says.

“Maybe you’re the one who needs closure,” I say. “From what I understand, she moved on just fine.”

“The whole thing with her tagging herself in the engagement photo ... that was a cry for attention.” He ignores my statement. “I just wanted to let her know how sorry I am for the way things went down.”

“It’s been years, Jude. I think it’s a little late for heartfelt apologies.”

“Whatever.” He blows a breath into the phone. “Her loss.”

I bite my tongue.

“Anyway,” he says, “the real reason I was calling was to see if you wanted to get a round in this Saturday. Weather should be perfect for eighteen holes and I can get us an eleven o’clock tee time. Stassi’s dad and brother are coming. We just need a fourth.”

“Sure.” I’ll never turn down a round of free golf at Stassi’s father’s country club.

I end the call with Jude, unable to return to my text messages fast enough.

ME: Smart move.

JOVIE: I know.

ME: How’s Domino doing? Almost kind of miss the little guy ... almost.

JOVIE: Really? I didn’t think you were a dog person.

ME: Neither did I.

JOVIE: I'm sure Ida would let you visit him.

ME: I don't want to bother her. It's not a big deal.

JOVIE: I'm glad he left a lasting impression on you. You're not easy to impress.

ME: Says who?

JOVIE: Am I wrong?

ME: No.

JOVIE: Case dismissed.

JOVIE: Anyway, I just wanted to tell you about my run-in with Jude. I'll let you get back to lawyer-ing.

ME: Speaking of, did you fire Ben Majors yet?

JOVIE: Not yet. I'm working up the nerve to send him a Dear John letter. Trying to find the right words as he's been nothing but nice to me this whole process.

ME: Which is exactly the reason you should have fired him a long time ago. A good lawyer would've had this case settled months ago. A terrible lawyer will drag it out and rack up an exorbitant amount of billable hours in the process.

JOVIE: Where were you when I needed this advice last year?!

JOVIE: And how much do I owe you for it?

ME: My hourly rate is \$400, but I'll give you the friends and family rate.

JOVIE: Wait. Does this mean we're friends???

ME: Define "friends."

JOVIE: Merriam-Webster defines a friend as “a person who is not an enemy or foe.”

ME: Then I suppose that makes us friends.

She sends a gif next, some actress from The Office doing a happy dance.

JOVIE: That reminds me, you still haven’t answered any of my questions ...

ME: Don’t hold your breath.

JOVIE: I wouldn’t dream of it.

JOVIE: But now that we’re friends ... I have tickets Friday night to see this local band ... they do covers of old pop songs but make them sound like ... well, like indie rock. Anyway, Monica was supposed to go but she’s been sick all week. You want to come with?

I exhale and compose my thoughts for a few minutes, mentally weighing both sides of the argument. On one hand, it’s innocent. It’s simply two acquaintances going to a concert. On the other hand, Jude would be devastated. Hanging out with your best friend’s ex goes against the very tenets of our decades-long friendship. It’s an unspoken code no true friend would so much as think about violating.

JOVIE: You’re quiet.

JOVIE: No pressure, but I know you’d love this band ...

JOVIE: Also, I have center seats in the third row.

She could have nosebleed section seats and I’d still want to go with fucking bells on.

ME: I’ll let you know by tomorrow.

I can't believe I'm even considering this.

She sends me a link to some YouTube video next. I click to open it, landing on a four-minute cover version of The Postal Service's *Clark Gable*... a song I introduced to her a lifetime ago—a song about wanting to believe that the kind of love you see in the movies can be real.

A song with a line about using a stand-in. It always made me think of her, Jude, and me.

I was always the stand-in.

JOVIE: This is the band ... I mean, come on. They're incredible. How can you say no?

She isn't wrong.

JOVIE: I know I said no pressure, but here's one more ...

She sends another link, this time to a cover the band did of The Shins' *New Slang*—a song that lyrically made little sense but put a slow, wistful smile on Jovie's face the first time I played it for her. She called it “emotionally devastating in the best way possible.” We both agreed it was a song you played when you wanted to feel it and not simply hear it.

The truth is, this local band could be ruining Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin classics via god-awful screaming emo covers, and I'd still suffer through them just to spend a couple of hours next to her.

ME: I'll think about it.

I tell her again. I need to buy some time—and hope to God I can talk myself out of what I really want to do.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Jovie

Age 22

I wait on the other side of airport security, rising on my tiptoes to peer over the crowd of weary travelers lugging bags behind them, stepping off the escalator one by one like tired lemmings. My heart trips a little when I spot Jude's signature neon orange Nike ball cap. I clap my hands together and wait patiently for him to spot me from his side of the crowd.

For the past week, he's been in Tulum with spotty cell service. We probably talked a total of ten minutes combined. After the first couple of days, I told him not to worry about it, that I wanted him to have a good time and I'd be right here waiting for him when he got back.

Our eyes lock from across the room and I give him a smile and a wave. He makes his way toward me. Stone walks a couple of steps behind him, his chin tucked low as he scrolls through his phone.

“Hi, baby!” I throw my arms around Jude, breathing in his faded aftershave and the musky scent of his warm skin. “Look how tan you got ... damn.”

Rising, I press my lips against his—only to be met with a quick peck.

I brush it off. It’s almost 10 PM, and they’ve been traveling all day. I’m sure Jude’s hungry and exhausted. Knowing him, he’s probably counting down the minutes until he can take a shower. He always feels grimy after flying.

“You two have a good time?” I ask them as we make our way to baggage claim.

No one answers me, though Stone has ear buds in his ears so he gets a pass.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I tease, elbowing Jude.

From the corner of my eye, I study my boyfriend. He yawns, his eyes watering, and he scans the crowd. Despite being right beside me, he somehow feels a world away.

Twenty minutes later, the three of us are piled into my car, and I’m driving them back to to the apartment they sublet for the summer. I moved out of the one we shared the week after graduation, opting to save some money and live at home for the summer (or until I land a full-time job). But the two of them stayed back. Jude’s dad had recently sold his house and moved to Florida, so it’s not like they had anywhere else to go.

It’s a silent two-hour drive from the airport to their place in Orono. With Stone passed out in the backseat and Jude scrolling through his phone and clearly not in the mood for idle chat, I pull up a playlist on my phone and let that fill the background.

By the time we arrive, it’s close to midnight.

Stone climbs out of the backseat before I have a chance to shift into park. After a quick “thanks for the lift,” he heads inside, wheeling his bag behind him.

Jude hasn't moved ... he's simply sitting there, staring blankly over the dash, his eyes unfocused.

“You okay, babe?” I rub his arm and lean closer.

He recoils. Or maybe it's a flinch. It happened so fast.

Was he daydreaming?

“You mind if I crash here with you tonight?” I mentally calculate the time it'll take for me to get back from here to Kennebunkport. I took a nap earlier today, knowing it was going to be a late night, but I also figured I could crash here.

“Actually, I don't know if that's a good idea,” he finally speaks.

“What?” I laugh, certain he's being sarcastic. But he isn't smirking or winking. In fact, he isn't registering an ounce of any kind of emotion that I can tell.

He gathers a breath and turns to me, his dark eyes hollow almost. “Jovie ... I did some thinking this week.”

My stomach drops yet my mind is empty, like it's suspended in a place of disbelief despite every fiber in my body knowing something's not right.

“We've had a good run ... but I think we can both agree things have gotten stale lately.” His words are mechanical, rehearsed. “The spark we had ... it's gone. There's no fire in your eyes when you look at me anymore, and I think we're both just waiting for someone better to come along.”

My jaw hangs for a second, but I straighten my shoulders. “You're entitled to your opinions, but you don't get to tell me

how I feel.”

He lifts his hands. “Fair enough. But it doesn’t change the fact that our best years are behind us.”

His gaze drops to his hands, which are resting calmly in his lap. They’re not trembling, they’re not fidgeting. He’s not picking at his hangnails or a loose thread in his shorts. Nothing about this moment feels difficult for him, and yet my heart is shattering into a million pieces—and I feel the sting of every shard.

“We were literally window shopping for engagement rings, what, a month ago?” I rake my hand through my hair and gather a fistful. “You leave for one week to spend time with your friends and now it’s suddenly over? We don’t even get to talk it out? It’s just ... over? Like that?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Wow. Nice,” I say. “And you had the audacity to let me drive you from the airport to your apartment—two fucking hours—and then you *dump* me?”

He’s silent.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I yell.

I’ve never raised my voice at him. Ever. Not once in over three years.

“Where did this come from?” I ask. “I don’t understand.”

Jude rakes his hand along his stubbled jaw. “There’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to come out and say it.”

Every part of me is paralyzed with his words, from my head to my lungs to my heart to my quivering fingertips.

“Jovie,” he turns back to face me. “I met someone in Tulum.”

My stomach drops.

I’m going to be sick.

“You’re ending our three-year relationship because you met some random woman on vacation?” I ask, half laughing but with tears in my eyes. Never in a million years did I think we’d go out like this. Then again, I never thought we’d ‘go out’ at all.

I was happy. I thought he was too.

I think about that day in the mall, strolling hand in hand, sipping matcha lattes and gazing at sparkling diamond rings like we had the rest of our lives ahead of us.

“I’m sorry,” he says in one big, long exhaled breath. I can only interpret this as relief—like he’d been stressing about this conversation for days and now he feels lighter having gotten it off his chest.

Lighter ... because he no longer carries the burden of his stale relationship.

“That’s all you have to say? You’re sorry?” I swipe thick tears from my cheeks. “You get to go into your apartment, back to your same old routine, with your best friend, and you get to fall in love all over again with someone new, and me? I get ...”

I swallow the words that are too painful to continue while I drown in a sea of confusing emotions I wasn’t expecting to feel tonight. A half hour ago all I could think about was crawling into Jude’s cozy bed, snuggling into his arm, and sleeping hard until the sun came up ... like it was any other morning.

Now I'm grappling with the fact that every happy memory from the last three-plus years of my college career will now be tainted with him. Every image, every photograph, every song, every movie from these years ... will forever be bittersweet and stained.

"Get out," I speak through a clenched jaw.

He doesn't hesitate. Within seconds he's already wrangling his bag from my back seat and striding toward the walkway to his apartment entrance.

I drive away, hardly able to see through the tears that refuse to stop falling, but before I exit the parking lot, I glance into my rearview mirror to see if he has stopped to look back. Only he's already to his door, disappearing inside, dragging his suitcase behind him.

And here I thought Stone was the coldhearted one.

Turns out it was Jude all along.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Stone

“You’re early.” Jovie greets me with a mile-wide smile Friday night. “I don’t remember you being this punctual back in the day.”

I don’t tell her it’s a miracle I’m here at all.

Yesterday I decided we were both adults and it was just a concert, so I told her I’d come.

But ever since then, I’ve done nothing but attempt to talk myself out of going. Three hours ago I was scribbling a list of pros and cons on my yellow legal pad at the office, only to crumple it into a ball and chuck it into the nearest trash can.

The pros were just as stacked as the cons.

It was win-win—or lose-lose, depending on how I looked at it.

Ultimately, I deemed it a draw.

She fishes her keys from her purse as she locks the door behind her. The scent of her soft perfume fills the air in the hallway, enveloping us both in an invisible embrace. It’s

unfamiliar to me yet perfectly Jovie. Pleasing, unpretentious, and sexy.

“You ready?” She brushes a blonde wave off her bare shoulder.

I nod. “I’m parked out front.”

We make our way outside, and I offer her my hand as she navigates the narrow front steps in platform sandals.

The curled hair, the strapless sun dress, the heels ... I can’t help but wonder if she always gets this dolled-up for concerts?

I scold myself for entertaining those kinds of thoughts.

We’re merely two acquaintances attending a show.

Nothing more, nothing less.

We climb into my car. She fusses with the hem of her dress, straightening it just above her knee.

“Did you listen to those songs I sent you?” she asks, eyes sparkling in the fading evening sun.

For a moment, I get lost in her ocean blues, stuck in this moment, in a rare bout of forgetting where I am and what I’m doing and that life exists beyond the glass and metal that encapsulates us.

“I did,” I say, hoping my pause wasn’t too obvious.

“They’re amazing, right?”

“I won’t disagree with you there.” I listened to the songs she sent, plus all three of their albums. “Their original stuff is impressive.”

I pull into the street and head to the venue, an outdoor amphitheater on the east side of town, overlooking a popular bay.

“Isn’t it?” she asks. “I swear, the first time I heard Beautiful Regrets I listened to it on repeat for hours. It’s one of those songs I can never get sick of no matter how many times I play it.”

“How’d you hear about this band?”

She rolls her eyes. “My ex. They were playing a show at some bar last year, and he knew the manager and got us the hookup. But I refuse to let that keep me from enjoying them.”

“Rightfully so.”

Thirty minutes later, we’ve made it through the security checkpoint, gotten our wrist bands, and beelined it toward the drink tent.

An IPA for me

A pineapple margarita for her.

“Did you know, back in Regency days, a pineapple symbolized friendship and hospitality? People would give them as gifts or set them out when they had company. These days it’s code for being a swinger or something ...” She takes a sip, her eyes rolling in the back of her head. “This is so good, you want to try?”

She lifts it in my direction. My gaze immediately lands on the straw and my mind immediately muses on her lips.

“No thanks,” I say. “Not a fan of sweet alcohol.”

“You only like the bitter stuff. The stuff that puts hair on your chest.”

“We all have our preferences.”

“I could eat pineapples for days,” she says. “Chunks, tidbits, juice, adult beverages ... I’m not picky.”

“I remember.”

The year we lived together, she would stock our fridge full of those skinny cans of Dole pineapple juice, the ones with the metal pull tabs. And she'd drink one every single morning at breakfast.

“People have a way of taking perfectly lovely things and ruining them,” she says. “Like the pineapple and its symbolism. Stripped the poor thing of all its dignity and made it sexual.”

“Is it that deep?”

She takes a drink, peering up at me over the rim of her plastic cup.

“Do you know why I write historical romance?” she asks.

“No, not at all ...”

“Courting and passion and desire was basically an art form once upon a time. People took it seriously. There were protocols and rules and respect. People weren't afraid of a little sacrifice back then, whether it was their land or their title or their ego. They'd give it all up for the right person.”

“You don't think you're romanticizing it a bit?” I ask. “Surely it wasn't always rainbows and butterflies. I'm sure there were fathers marrying their daughters off for political and monetary gain.”

“Shh.” She clamps her hand over my mouth, an unexpected move that sends a tingle through me if only because she's standing that much closer now, her face mere inches from mine. “Don't ruin the good stuff with the bad.”

Jovie releases her hold over my mouth and takes a step back.

“My apologies,” I say.

“Some people actually find that romantic,” she adds. “It’s a trope ... arranged marriage. But in those books, they always fall in love in the end.”

An image flashes in my mind’s eye—a series of them actually. Jovie brushing her teeth, hunched over the bathroom sink, a thick paperback spread eagle on the counter. Jovie stirring boiling pasta, a book in her left hand. Jovie splayed out on the living room sofa, a pile of drugstore paperbacks on the coffee table. During lazy, rainy weekends and snowed-in mornings, she would devour them by the stack. She was always reading. And it was always romance. I guess I never paid much attention to the content beyond that. I just knew she loved love in all its forms—real, imagined, idealized.

“You’ve always been a sucker for a happy ending,” I say.

“Should we find our seats?” She checks her watch. “Show’s about to start.”

We make our way through the throngs of concert attendees. I place my hand on the small of her back so as not to lose her. A minute later, we’re in the third row, center. The crowd packs in. The sun sets behind us as the moon rises over the bay behind the amphitheater.

The opening act takes the stage—a guy with a lumberjack beard, an electric acoustic guitar, and the apparent voice of an angel.

But all the harmonic melodies, bright lights, starry skies, and crashing waves don’t hold a candle to the gorgeous woman to my right. She’s got her gaze trained ahead on the show, but all I see is her.

Everything around us fades to black. For the two hours that follows, it's as if we're the only ones here.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Jovie

“You sure you want to read this?” I dig a paperback of my latest book from the box of advanced copies my publisher sent a few days ago.

Stone and I were chatting on the drive home from the concert when he mentioned he’d never read a romance book. I told him it was the sort of thing everyone should experience at least once in their life.

“Only if you’ll sign it first,” he says with a straight face and a wink.

I don’t expect him to read it. In fact, I’m certain he’s only humoring me. But truth be told, we were having a good time tonight and I wasn’t quite ready for the evening to end.

I dig a Sharpie from my kitchen junk drawer and flip the cover open.

To Stone—

Enter at your own risk (and thank me later).

Jovie Vincent

I close the book and hand it over.

“You want a drink?” I ask, nodding toward the microwave clock. “The night is young.”

He eyes the time—eleven seventeen—and twitches his full lips to the side.

“One won’t hurt,” he says.

“I have vodka and pineapple juice,” I say. “Or some Coors Light Monica’s husband left here over New Year’s. I can’t promise they’re not expired, so ... pick your poison.”

“Wine,” he says without hesitation.

Stone pages through my book while I uncork the bottle of blueberry wine I dug out from the back of my fridge. It was a gift a couple of months ago, and it seemed too special to waste on a night of Netflix binging, so I held onto it.

“What’s so great about these anyway?” he asks as he studies one of the pages. “Romance books.”

I pull the cork. “In real life, love is unpredictable. If you read a romance novel, you know that no matter what trials and tribulations the hero and heroine go through, it’s all going to work out in the end. Happily ever afters are guaranteed.”

“But if you know how it’s going to end, doesn’t that take the fun out of reading?”

“Nope.” I grab two wineglasses and pour them each halfway full. “That’s the whole point. You can sit back and relax and enjoy the ride, knowing the story’s going to take you exactly where you want it to.”

I push a glass toward him.

“You don’t have to read it if you don’t want to,” I say. “They’re not everyone’s cup of tea.”

“I want to,” he says. “Nothing wrong with broadening my horizons ...”

“That’s the spirit.” I take a sip. “Oh, full disclosure: the Duke of Stonington may or may not be based loosely on someone I knew once upon a time ...”

His hooded gaze narrows.

“There’s a sprinkle of everyone in all of my books,” I say. “I’m like an alchemist but with words. A little of this, a little of that ...”

“You based the hero on me?” His eyes drop to the cover, where a tall, dark, and handsome model with an unbuttoned shirt holds a fainting beauty in his arms.

“Bits and pieces,” I say. “He’s kind of hard to read. And very serious most of the time. And he’s loyal to his homeland. He likes his routine and he’s a bit of an introvert. A little difficult to get to know—until he lets you in.” Waving my hands, I add, “I don’t want to spoil it for you, so I’m going to stop talking.”

He sniffs a chuckle, and I hope he’s amused by all of this and not horrified. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything at all ...

“All right,” he says. “You know, my mom used to read these kinds of books. She’d buy them at the Goodwill. Ten cents each. Sometimes a quarter. They always had guys with long hair on the front, that’s what I remember the most.”

“Pretty sure I would’ve instantly loved your mom.”

His lips press flat, and he stares off to the side for a moment. “Yeah. I think you would have too. Everyone who met her loved her.”

“What was her name?” I ask because in all the years we’ve known each other, I never got the nerve to bring her up. Jude always said it was a sore subject and with Stone being as closed off as he was, I didn’t dare go anywhere near that.

But now that he brought her up, maybe he’s okay talking about her?

“Elise,” he speaks her name slowly, gently.

“Elise,” I echo. “That’s beautiful.”

“I was ten when she passed,” he says. “It’s weird when I think about the fact that I’ve lived over half of my life without her now.”

“I bet she’d be so proud of you now.”

He nods once. “I’d like to think so. We didn’t have much time for any kind of life guidance or words of advice from the time she was diagnosed to the time she passed. After a while, she wasn’t really all there. She was in a lot of pain, so they had her on morphine and everything else.”

I want to move closer to him, to put my hand on his or wrap my arms around him, but he’s never been the touchy-feely type, and I don’t know that there’s anything I can say or do to take the sting out of this conversation.

“How old were you when you went to live with Jude?” I ask.

“Ten,” he says with a wistful smile. “Paul was the father I never had ... the one I never knew I needed. I owe a lot to that guy.”

“I love Paul,” I say. “I think of him from time to time, all of his sage advice and witticisms. It’s so weird that Jude came from him. Paul would give anyone the shirt off his back. Jude would but then he’d complain about the cold until you gave it back. Sorry, I know he’s your best friend.”

Stone laughs. “Yeah, no, you’re right. And it is weird.”

“Your friendship was always so fascinating to me ... the two of you were night and day yet you were glued together.”

“Trauma bond, probably.” He takes a mouthful of wine. “Jude lost his mom when he was five, I lost mine at ten. No one else could relate to what we’d gone through.”

“Be honest, did he ever get on your nerves?” I lean over my kitchen peninsula, resting my chin on top of my hand. “Like I adore my younger sister, but sometimes we’d get into the nastiest fights after being around each other too much.”

“Of course,” he says. “I love him like a brother—and he annoys me like a brother. But there were always more good times than bad.”

“Nostalgia is a beautiful liar,” I say. “It lets us paint the past anyway we want to.”

“Poetic,” he says, tossing back the remains of his wine. “On that note, I’ve got a tee time in the morning. Meeting Jude and his future in laws for a round at some country club north of here.”

“Jude golfs?”

“He does now.”

“Well, good for him,” I say. He was always more of a pickup basketball or flag football rec-league kind of guy. Every once in a while, he’d go on a spurt where he’d take up jogging,

but it never lasted more than a month or two. He never could stick to one thing long enough to get good at it.

“Thanks for the book.” He lifts it in the air as I walk him to the door, and before he goes, he turns back to give me one parting glance. Only this glance lingers longer than most.

My stomach trills, but I chalk it up to the margaritas and wine.

If this was a date, this would be the part where we kiss goodnight.

“Thanks for coming with,” I say. “I had a good time.”

“Me too.”

I clear my throat, silently reminding myself this isn't a date. Not even close. But damn if I didn't wish that it were.



“I can't remember the last time I had that much fun,” I tell Monica Saturday morning. “Maybe it took the pressure off because it wasn't a date, you know? We weren't trying to impress each other. It was just ... two people hanging out.”

“I always thought you belonged with Stone instead of Jude back in college. And to this day, I still swear you had the wrong guy.” Monica drops her bag on my kitchen table and takes a seat. “That night at that party, I told you you were going to meet someone. I had a gut feeling, remember?”

“I do.” I sit across from her, tired but wired from the events of last night.

After Stone left, I washed up for bed, only sleep never came. It eluded me as I chased it for hours. My mind wanted nothing more than to replay the night in real time, re-living and relishing every detail.

“You chose wrong. I’m telling you. And this is your second chance. This is the universe giving you a do-over.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Stone always seemed annoyed when I was around. I think he only tolerated me because I was his best friend’s girl.”

“You know that old cliché where a boy pulls a girl’s ponytail in the schoolyard, but it’s really because he likes her?”

“Nah. I think I’d know. He was always so cold to me.”

Monica throws her hands up. “I still think it was a cover up. He was trying to overcompensate for how he really felt. Or maybe he was trying to deny how he felt. Either way, nobody’s cold to people for no reason at all. Everyone’s got their reasons.”

While Stone seems to have thawed a bit since college, almost everyone gets a little better with age.

But still, I can’t help but wonder if Monica’s onto something.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Stone

“Check these out.” Stassi’s brother, Sutton, lifts a shiny golf club from his bag. “Just got new grips on these last week.”

Stassi’s father and Jude look on, impressed, but they just look like ordinary rubber grips to me.

“Custom,” he adds. “Fitted to my exact finger size and everything.”

“Where’d you go for that?” their father asks, his Rolex twinkling in the morning sun. A few minutes ago, I watched him climb out of his chromed-out Escalade and snap at the valet to help him hoist his clubs out of the trunk. He then slipped him a crisp bill of some undetermined amount and went inside only to emerge with a cocktail. Never mind the time of day.

Sutton pulled up behind him in his Porsche Cayenne, copying his father move for move.

Meanwhile, Jude and I parked in the general lot and carried our clubs to the clubhouse ourselves.

I hope for Jude's sake he never becomes one of them—the kind to walk around like the rules don't apply to them. Not that it would bother me any, it's just that the world already has plenty of people like that. They don't need one more.

Every once in a while, I'll catch glimpses of a version of Jude I don't recognize. Like he's assimilating into the Guinness family lifestyle. It was bound to happen sooner or later—and Jude was worried early on about them liking him, especially since he hailed from a blue collar background.

He was concerned he wouldn't be deemed good enough for their princess.

It turns out, though, that whatever the princess wants, the princess gets. If the man she wants isn't highbrow enough, the Guinneses will make him highbrow enough.

I think about what Stassi said the other day, about how once they start a family, Jude won't have time to hang out anymore. I've seen it happen with colleagues over the years and other friends who went straight from college into the married-with-kids life. And I get it, you have to put your family first. It's just how it goes. It just hurts watching my best friend fade into the man they want him to become ... essentially a stranger.

Jude tees off at the first hole, followed by his future father-in-law. Sutton and I wait in the golf cart we're sharing.

He fusses with the radio, tuning it to some classical station, and then he turns to me. "So, uh, are you cool with the line-up change with the wedding?"

I wrinkle my nose. "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't he tell you?" Sutton asks. "He was going to swap you and I ... it's just that Stassi thought since I was actual

blood family, that I should be the best man.”

My stomach knots, caving in as if I’ve just been sucker-punched.

First of all, that’s the most ridiculous notion I’ve ever heard.

And second of all, why the hell didn’t Jude tell me himself?

“At least you don’t have to come up with a speech anymore.” Sutton slaps my back. “Takes some of the pressure off. I know Jude said you were stressing about it a bit.”

I was only stressing because I was struggling to find the words to describe Jude and Stassi’s relationship in a way that didn’t reek of superficiality. All I could think about was that night at the club in Tulum, and how she was a virtual siren, calling him away from everything he thought he wanted back home.

“You’re next, Stone.” Jude says from his cart as he places his club back into his bag.

I grab my club and a ball and head to tee off, contemplating how long it’s been since they made the change and when Jude was going to tell me.

I can still remember with vivid clarity the day Jude asked me to be his best man last year. We were leaving nineties trivia night and he stopped me to tell me he had something important to ask me. With tears in his eyes and everything, he told me he’d be honored if I stood next to him at the wedding as his best man. He then went on to elaborate on how it will be the most important day of his life and how he can’t imagine getting through the day without me by his side.

Now Stassi gets to walk in and sweep all of that off the table because she wants her brother to stand there instead?

“Jude, you didn’t tell him about the best man change,” Sutton says behind me.

“Oh, shit,” I hear Jude say.

I tee off, watching long enough to track my ball to a general area, and then I trudge back to my cart.

“When were you going to tell me?” I ask him.

“I was waiting for the right time.” His words are timid and reserved. I’m guessing Stassi stole his fucking balls when she made that change, too.

Suddenly I don’t feel so bad about going to the concert with Jovie last night.

Loyalty clearly means something different to each of us.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jovie

It's been almost two days since the concert, and while my weekends are normally quite productive, I've done nothing more than sit around thinking about Stone. Pacing my kitchen, nibbling my thumbnail, I stop when I spot his neon green glow-in-the-dark souvenir beer cup from the concert.

Grabbing my phone, I snap a photo and send it his way.

ME: You forgot this Friday night.

To my surprise, he responds right away.

STONE: It's all yours.

ME: The problem is, I already have about a million glow-in-the-dark souvenir beer cups. I don't have room for one more. And I'd hate to toss it because it's a perfectly good glow-in-the-dark cup.

STONE: Fair enough. I can come by and pick it up. How about tomorrow night? Around seven?

I do a mini hop in my kitchen. If he's willing to drive clear across the city for a plastic cup, then maybe Monica's theory

has a little bit of weight?

ME: That works.

ME: Have you started the book yet?

STONE: I have.

ME: And?

STONE: It's surprisingly hard to put down.

ME: I can't tell if you're being sarcastic ...

STONE: I'm not. I don't usually read this kind of stuff, but I'm finding myself drawn into the story. I can see the appeal of the escape. I have to say, though, the Duke of Stonington is kind of an asshole.

ME: I like to think he's just misunderstood.

STONE: Aren't we all ...

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Stone

I'm about to head out the door Monday night when Jude shows up.

“Hey,” I get the door. “Everything okay?”

It's not like him to show up without calling, and the forlorn look on his face is suggestive of some sort of storm brewing.

He hoists a duffel bag over his shoulder. “You care if I crash here for a bit? Stassi and I got into it. She kicked me out.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You're getting married next month.”

“I know.” He rolls his eyes.

“What happened?” I stand back and let him in.

He drops his shit by the door and makes a beeline to my kitchen, helping himself to a beer. He twists the cap with his bare hands, grips the neck of the bottle, and takes a swig.

“She was on my phone ... and apparently decided to go through my search history.” His eyes avert to the floor; a look

of shame.

“Oh, god.” No good can come of going through someone’s search history, it’s like going through their innermost private thoughts without any context. “What’d she find?”

“She saw that I’d been Googling Jovie ...”

“What? Why?”

He takes another swig, this time bigger than the one before. “I don’t know, I guess she was still weirded out by the Facebook tag thing.”

“No. I mean why were you googling Jovie?”

He shrugs. “I told you the other day ... running into her lately has got me thinking ... and I guess I was just curious. Wanted to know what she was up to ...”

I shake my head.

“I know, I know I fucked up.” He places one hand in the air, as if to stop me from the lecture he knows is brewing.

I glance at my keys and phone resting lifeless on the counter.

I spent all day looking forward to tonight, to seeing Jovie again.

Now I have to cancel.

Grabbing my phone, I fire off a quick message. Better to rip the Band-Aid off now than leave her hanging or thinking I’m ghosting her.

ME: So sorry—something just came up. Rain check on the glow-in-the-dark cup?

I wait a moment, but she doesn’t respond right away.

Jude takes a seat at my kitchen island and rambles on about Stassi, word vomiting every detail of their relationship problems—problems that should've been hashed out in marital therapy months ago, like I recommended.

I gave him all my best advice as to how to set up a marriage for success and how to avoid divorce, or at least a nasty divorce.

But Jude seemed to be more focused on the prenup than anything else, and he laughed at the idea of going to therapy when they were quote-unquote happy.

I can't believe I'm about to defend Stassi, but here I go ...

“See, that's the problem with you, Jude—you're always looking out for number one and in the end it gets you in trouble every. Single. Time,” I say. “Not only that, but you're afraid to be alone. You wrap your entire identity in your relationships—relationships that you're willing to chuck out the window the second there's a hairline fracture in the foundation. You've got to quit while you're ahead. Go home, apologize to her, grovel on your hands and knees, and make sure she knows you're committed.”

He takes another drink of beer, his eyes hazy and unfocused. I can't tell if he's wallowing in self-pity or digesting the advice I just shelled out.

“If I was getting married in a month and my fiancée was googling her ex-boyfriend from college, I'd be having second thoughts too,” I say. “Look at it from her perspective.”

Jude buries his head in his hands, breathing hard through his fingers.

He knows I'm right.

“You can crash here tonight,” I say. “You both probably need time to cool off. Guest bed’s made up. It’s all yours. But first thing tomorrow, you go home and you make it right with Stassi. Be the man I know you can be.”

Or rather ... the man he should be.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Jovie

“So it appears that your ex has found himself new representation,” my new attorney says Tuesday. Opening a file folder, he produces a stack of white papers. “And this is what he’s proposing.” He slides them to me. “This is your copy. Now feel free to take that home and go over everything, but I will say, I’m familiar with his attorney, and her bark is far worse than her bite. I’ve had a chance to comb through this already and I’ll say it’s pretty reasonable. If I had to guess, I’m willing to bet he’s talked to enough lawyers to have a little bit of sense knocked into him.”

I page through the papers, but my nerves get the best of me and all the words jumble together. I’ll have to read this when I’m at home. Every time someone passes the window outside Mike’s office, I get a little flutter in my chest at the off-chance that it’s Stone.

“He’s still asking for spousal support, but given the brief nature of your marriage and the fact that the two of you were renting a modest apartment by your income’s standards, there’s no judge with half a brain cell that’s going to go for

what he's asking. He'll be lucky if he gets anything at all, in my opinion," Mike says.

I exhale, my thoughts a little less dizzying than they were a moment ago.

"That's a relief," I say. "I'm still kicking myself for not signing a prenup. I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's hard to think when you're in love," he says, softening his words the way my father always does when he's giving difficult advice. "No one wants to take off the rose-colored glasses until they have to. You were in love, you married for love, and that's okay. You weren't the first and you certainly won't be the last. Anyway, go over everything, shoot me an email if you have questions, and we'll go from there."

I thank Mike before gathering the documents, and then I show myself out, only on the way out, I make a wrong turn and end up in some unfamiliar corner of the building. Nothing but office after office, all of them with identical cherrywood furniture, executive-blue carpet, and sweeping views of the parking garage.

"Can I help you?" A woman's voice calls. I turn around to find a somewhat familiar face peering down her nose at me. It only takes a second for me to recognize her from the last time I was in Stone's office.

"I'm just looking for a way out of here," I say with a nervous chuckle.

Her gaze drips from the top of my head to my shoes before she huffs a response.

"Take a right at the end of this hall, then go through the third door on your left," she says. "Past the reception area, you'll find the elevator bay."

I barely have time to thank her before she spins on her heel and leaves, her hips swaying with each long-legged stride.

Heading down the hall, I turn right when I get to the end—only to be met with another hallway with identical offices. Only these offices are missing computers. And human life. And all of the lights are turned off.

Did she give me bad directions on purpose?

I spend what feels like another ten minutes wandering the halls in search of a glowing red “exit” sign when I round a corner and bump right into Stone himself.

“Oh, geez. I’m so sorry,” I say.

“Hey.” His midnight black suit and navy tie give him an ominous presence, unlike the more relaxed vibe his khakis and t-shirt gave off Friday night at the concert.

“I was just meeting with Mike ...” I point behind me, but honestly I have no idea if there’s where I came from. I’m beyond lost at this point.

“I figured.” He drinks me in. “Sorry about last night ... Jude stopped by unexpectedly.”

“Is everything okay?”

He winces. “I can’t really go into details.”

I know better than to pry. And besides, it’s none of my business even if I’m extremely curious ...

“You’re a good friend,” I say.

“I know.” There’s a flicker of a smile on his face that disappears before it fully registers.

“Hey, you want to grab lunch or something? There’s a taco truck setting up around the corner ...”

He checks his watch, his full lips moving from one side to the other. “Yeah. I’ve got some time.”

“Okay, cool,” I say. “I’ll be completely honest; I’m lost so I’m just going to follow you.”

He chuckles, nodding toward the hallway to my right.

“I ran into your friend a few minutes ago,” I say when we step off the elevator a minute later. “The one you were supposedly not in love with.”

“Becca?” he asks.

“I don’t know her name. I just know I asked her how to get out of here and she gave me bad directions.”

He sniffs. “Sounds about right.”

“What’s the story with you two anyway?” I ask as we hit the sidewalk.

“We were hooking up. She wanted more. I didn’t. She continued to step over the line. I ended things. End of story.”

“So she was falling for you.”

“She was falling for an idea of me,” he says, checking his phone as we walk. “She wasn’t falling for the real me.”

“How do you know?”

“I couldn’t tell you when her birthday is. Or what her favorite pizza topping is. What kind of music she likes. The name of her hometown. When I tell you it was purely physical ...” he trails off.

“Did you even try to get to know her? What if she could’ve been the one? She must’ve felt something for you, there had to have been some chemistry?”

“Not for me there wasn’t. She’s vapid, vain, and dull—a trifecta of red flags.”

“Really? Aside from the dirty looks, she’s very beautiful. And she must be smart and driven if she’s an attorney.”

“See, that’s exactly the problem with people these days—we’re constantly projecting our ideas onto people we hardly know. That’s why half of all marriages end in divorce. People fall in love with the idea of marriage or the idea of what a marriage should be instead of falling in love with the flawed human being they’re marrying.”

“Damn, Stone. That’s deep for noon on a Tuesday.”

We stop at a food truck around the corner, nab a place in line, and grab an assortment of tacos to share before finding a park bench.

“Do you ever think you’ll get married someday?” I ask. “I know it’s a random question, but I’m curious given your profession if you’re leaning one way or another.”

“To be honest, I don’t think about it. It’s not even on my radar.”

“If you met the right person would you?”

He takes a bite, chews, and wipes a drop of sauce from the corner of his mouth. “She’d have to be one hell of a woman.”

“Call me crazy, but I still believe in finding that one person and spending my life with them. I love the idea of sharing my life with another person, knowing their nuances and idiosyncrasies, having little inside jokes, traveling the world together, making our own traditions and building a life all our own. People say life is short, but I disagree. I think life is long.”

“Couldn’t agree more on that last part, but I’d rather spend my long life alone than with the wrong person.”

“Maybe if we’re lucky, we’ll both find the right person someday.”

“Sounds like exactly the kind of thing a romance novelist would say.” He shoots me a wink and nudges his shoulder against mine.

“I’ll hold my breath if you hold yours.”

“Deal.”

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Chapter Forty

Stone

Jude's been living in my house for five days now.

Five.

Long.

Days.

Every night when I get home from work, I'm held prisoner to his pent-up ramblings about Stassi. By now, I'm quite certain there isn't a damn thing I don't know about the woman, from her elaborate eleven-step skincare routine, to her emotional PMS tendencies, to her mother's affair with the Spanish tennis instructor. He also has the audacity to say that according to Stassi, they don't even know if Sutton is her full-blooded brother or a product of an affair her mother had twenty-five years ago. Never mind that we still haven't discussed the way he handled the whole best man line-up swap situation.

I let it go in an attempt to be the bigger person, but it still stings when I think about it for too long.

“She wants four kids, Stone,” he says, half-slurring since apparently he’s been hitting the bottle since noon. “Four. Do you know what that’ll do to our sex life? When we first met, she said she wanted maybe one. And now she wants four. She’s already picked out their names and everything. It’s like I’m not even part of the equation—I’m just some sperm donor.”

He slams the lid of the laptop he’s been using to work remotely all week, and then he digs inside the fridge, grabbing another beer. I’m not one-hundred-percent sure, but the clothes he’s wearing today look an awful lot like the ones he was wearing yesterday.

I place my hand over the beer bottle he’s yet to open, and I gently maneuver it away from him.

“Go take a shower. Shave your face. Put on some clean clothes. And then go for a walk to clear your head,” I say. “Everything’s going to work out fine.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“By the way, I called your dad. He’s flying in first thing tomorrow.”

“Why the hell’d you do that?” Judging by the twisted expression on his face, I’d say he’s none too pleased.

“Because it’s someone else’s turn to try and talk some sense into you. I’ve been trying for five days and I’m not getting through. If anyone can, it’s him.”

Chapter Forty-One

Jovie

It's been a few days since I've heard from Stone, so I shoot him a text Saturday afternoon.

ME: Hey that new indie movie came out on Prime ... it's the Bryce Dallas Howard film where she's stuck in a dark room and she has to figure out who put her there before they'll let her out. It looks really good and Monica won't see anything that might remotely give her nightmares, so ... you want to come watch?

STONE: When?

ME: Tonight?

STONE: Paul just flew in today. Called him in for backup with Jude.

ME: Oh, damn. Is it that bad?

STONE: Let's just say I wasn't expecting to have a roommate this week.

I can't help but wonder if Jude's wedding has been called off? But I can't bring myself to ask. It doesn't feel right.

ME: How long is Paul visiting?

STONE: No clue.

The weight of disappointment sinks into my bones, deflating my posture and my energy.

STONE: Maybe I can come over tomorrow afternoon? I figured I'd get Paul on the same page and then give them Sunday to themselves.

ME: That works!

The disappointment that resided in me a moment ago has now evaporated into something lighter, like a ripple of excitement in parts of me I didn't know existed. I pull up my favorite radio station on my phone and get a bit of housework done. This energy needs to go somewhere, might as well put it to good use.

A sink of dishes and three loads of laundry later, I've barely put a dent in my day—or my energy levels.

But this time tomorrow, he'll be here.

This time tomorrow can't come soon enough.

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Chapter Forty-Two

Stone

I spot Paul's tangerine hibiscus shirt and khaki cargo shorts from a mile away outside the security terminal at the airport.

He waves when he spots us, flashing his blinding white smile which has only become more vivid with his leathery Florida tan.

"How are my boys?" he asks, giving us side hugs a moment later. "Good to see you, good to see you. You guys hungry? I'm famished. All they gave us were these little bags of pretzels. My god, you can't even feed a mouse that kind of shit."

I chuckle. Paul hasn't changed at all since the last time I've seen him. In fact, I don't think he's changed at all since the day we first met.

The three of us head to Paul's favorite seafood restaurant—some hole in the wall in south Portland that serves all-you-can-eat clam chowder and some of the best crab cakes on the coast (according to Paul).

An hour later, our bellies are swollen and Paul orders another round of drinks before sinking back in his chair, rubbing the remains of his former six-pack stomach, and saying, “All right, fellas. Lay it on me. What’s going on here?”

I zone out while Jude gets his dad up to speed. I’ve heard the story a million times this week already.

Dragging his palm along his five o’clock shadow, Paul presses his lips flat, nodding, listening, digesting.

“You messed up big time, kid,” Paul says when Jude is finished. “But the question is, do you even want to fix it? Because I get the sense you’re accepting that you messed up rather than taking responsibility for it. Big difference. If you accept something, you wash your hands of it.” He claps his hands together. “But if you take responsibility for it, you own it, you apologize, and you learn from it and you make it right. Have you tried to make it right with Stassi?”

“She won’t take my calls,” he says. “And she changed the locks on the house.”

“She shut you out,” Paul says, squinting.

“Yep,” Jude picks at a straw wrapper, plucking it to bits.

“Can you blame her?” Paul asks, tossing his hands in the air.

“I think she’s overreacting a bit,” Jude says. “Locking me—”

Paul sticks his hand up to silence him. “Nope. Wrong. That’s where you’re going wrong here, son. You’re not the victim. She is. You’re crashing at your friend’s place but she’s sitting at home looking at all the reminders of the life you two were building together while you were going behind her back looking up an ex-girlfriend.”

Jude reminds me of a scolded child, the way he refuses to meet his father's pointed gaze.

"Have you apologized?" Paul asks.

"Many times," Jude says. "Over text and voicemails. Email too. She wants nothing to do with me."

"You talk to her parents? Are they aware of what's going on?" he asks. "I'd think they'd want to know since they're the ones forking over the cash for this big fancy wedding."

Jude buries his face in his hands. "If they are, they haven't said anything. I've been working remote all week just to avoid going into the office in case her dad knows."

Paul whacks him on the back of the head. "The hell's the matter with you? I thought I raised you to be a man, not some damn spineless pansy." He leans across the table, his finger pointed in his son's face. "Here's what you're going to do. You're going to get in your car, you're going to drive over to *your* house that *you* own, you're going to bring a bouquet of pretty flowers, and you're going to sit outside that door until she lets you in. I don't care if you're sleeping on concrete tonight, you're not leaving until she sees that you're still in this. That you still give a shit." His gaze flicks across the table to me. "Stone, back me up here."

"Agree. That's exactly what you should do," I chip in.

Jude is quiet for a beat. "But what if I don't want to? What if I'm having doubts too?"

"What are you saying?" Paul's eyes grow wild and animated.

"I don't know if I want to go through with the wedding," Jude says, almost mumbling.

“Christ.” Paul throws his napkin over his dinner plate and flags the server to check on our round.

I steal a glance at my phone. Something tells me it’s going to be a long night.

While Paul gives Jude another lecture, my mind wanders somewhere else completely, and I can’t help but wonder what Jovie’s doing tonight ... and how much I’d rather be wherever she is than here.

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Chapter Forty-Three

Jovie

I close the blinds and make my living room dark Sunday afternoon, my best attempt at emulating a movie theater environment.

Stone will be here any minute, and I haven't stopped peeking out the window for the past half hour on the off-chance he shows up early. Not that he'd show up that early, but you never know.

I check my reflection in the bathroom, making sure my top knot is messy enough for a casual Sunday afternoon hang while also ensuring I didn't overdo it on the makeup. A little something to shape my brows, a couple swipes of curling mascara, and a pinch of strawberry lip balm is all I'm wearing. There's a fine line between looking decent and looking like I'm trying too hard.

It's funny—all the times I hung out with Jude and Stone together in the past, after a while I stopped worrying so much about how I looked. Living with roommates has a tendency to do that. Stone's seen me at my best, but more than that, he's

seen me hungover on a Saturday morning, makeup streaked beneath my eyes and hair in a tangled mess, looking like I'm knocking at death's door.

How times have changed ...

I'm heading back to the living room when there's a knock at my door. My heart lurches into my throat and an anticipatory flash of heat singes my cheeks. I wasn't like this the night of the concert.

"Get yourself together," I whisper out loud while straightening the hem of my white v neck top before tucking half of it into the waist band of my black leggings. Clearing my throat, I get the door and greet him with an overly zealous smile. "Hey!"

He lifts a six-pack of beer in one hand and an orange bag of peanut butter M&Ms in the other.

"You still like these, right?" He lifts the candy.

"They're my favorite ..."

Jude could never remember which M&Ms I liked, so he'd always show up with a random flavor. Sometimes it was peanut. Other times it was some limited edition version like brownie or pretzel. Rarely did he get it right, but I always gave him props for trying.

Stone nailed it on his first and only time.

"Thank you," I take the candy to the kitchen and he follows me in. "I've got the movie queued up, just going to make some popcorn ..."

He places his beer in my fridge, and while it's a little move that might mean nothing to anyone else, I take it as a sign that he feels comfortable around me.

I place a bag of Orville Redenbacher in the microwave and fix myself a vodka and pineapple juice.

Three minutes later, my apartment smells like the inside of a movie theater and we're seated side by side on my sofa, each of us sharing half of the middle cushion after I teasingly insisted that it was the best seat in the house.

I click the play button on my remote and settle back, a bowl of popcorn sprinkled with peanut butter M&Ms in my lap.

An eerie song plays over the opening credits, haunting and melodic, and Bryce Dallas Howard's character, Tallulah Givens, wanders the winding sidewalks of a university campus at night. She's in a rush to get wherever she's going, and every few steps she peers over her shoulder as if she's worried she's being followed.

From the corner of my eye, I steal a glimpse at Stone—ensuring he's just as entranced as I am. He pops a couple of kernels into his mouth, his gaze focused on the disconcerting scene playing out on the screen.

The music crescendos before stopping altogether ... just in time for someone off screen to snatch Tallulah from behind.

I gasp.

The screen cuts to blackness.

Tallulah wakes in a dark room, her footsteps echoing and her voice bouncing off the walls as she cries for help.

We see nothing but the whites of her eyes.

I place my hand over my heart, which is ricocheting in my chest at a hundred miles per hour. For a moment, I almost forget I'm sitting in my living room with Stone, our thighs

touching and the faintness of his masculine cologne mingling with the buttery tang lingering in the air. For the next ninety minutes, I hardly blink. I'm nothing but startled gasps and a bundle of nervous energy. In the final scene, when the lights flick on and Tallulah's captor is revealed to be the wife of her college professor, I almost toss the remains of my popcorn across the room.

"I knew it," I say. "I didn't want to believe it, but I had a hunch ..."

Stone chuckles. He always used to tease me about how involved I got when it came to watching movies. He'd always say he could tell a movie was good if I was behaving as though I were actually in the movie instead of merely watching it.

A projector fills the walls of Tallulah's room with images of her and her much older professor in compromising positions; him plowing her from behind as she's bent over book-covered desk; another of his head between her thighs as she melts into his leather office chair. A third video shows her riding him, her milky breasts bouncing without a care in the world as her face showed a sultry concoction of pain and pleasure.

In the final scene, the locked door swings open and the wife lets Tallulah go. As she sprints through her college campus, she sees the videos playing everywhere—projected against the campanile, along the side of the library. Her body is on full display and she stands in horror in the middle of it all, thick tears streaming down her ruddy cheeks.

She ruined the wife's life.

The wife ruined hers.

“That’s so messed up,” Stone says when the end credits roll. With his arm splayed along the back of the couch, he tips his chin toward me. “It’s funny how you’re all about your romance books, but you watch stuff like this.”

“Movies are different,” I say. “I can appreciate the element of surprise in a good film.”

Rising from my spot, I carry our popcorn bowls to the kitchen.

“You want another beer?” I ask.

“Sure,” he calls back. “I feel like I need a cigarette after that last scene ...”

I laugh. “That was certainly unexpected.”

I’m not sure if it’s the plethora of sex scenes blasting across the screen a moment ago or if it’s the abundance of vodka coursing through my veins, but I’m suddenly feeling very ... awake ... down there.

Then again, it doesn’t take much to get me going these days. The last person I slept with was Jason and that feels like a lifetime ago at this point. Pretty sure it’s a barren wasteland these days, tumbleweeds and all.

I hand Stone his beer and take the seat beside him, pulling my legs up and angling my body toward him. For a fraction of a moment, I find myself studying his chiseled jawline before visually tracing the curve of his shoulders as they round out to his generous biceps. Dragging in a slow breath, I briefly imagine him ripping my clothes off, taking me right here, right now, on the sofa. Having his way with me like one of the dukes or viscounts or earls I’ve written of a hundred times before.

Shaking my head, I snap myself out of my silly reverie.

“Did you ever finish that book?” I ask.

“I did.”

“And?” I lift my brows.

“Ten stars.”

I laugh through my nose. “Usually it’s a five star rating, but I’ll accept ten. Ten’s good.”

“Are all of your books usually that ... explicit?” he asks carefully.

“Oh. God. Yes. Bodice rippers all the way. Go big or go home.”

“They look so innocent on the outside, the bright colors and pretty costumes. I was expecting something more ... frilly?”

“Pro tip, those are usually the dirtiest ones.” I give him a wink and reach for my pineapple vodka.

“Is that what you like? What you’re into? *Bodice rippers*?”

“In books or in real life?”

“Either.”

My cheeks flush with warmth. I’ve never discussed this subject with anyone except my agent and editor, and then it was only from a technical and marketing standpoint.

“Love them in books,” I say, “never experienced it in real life. It turns out most twenty-year-old guys get all their moves from Porn Hub and not from the pages of Regency romance novels.”

“That’s a shame.” He drinks me in, and even though we’re in the darkness of my dimmed living room, I’m overcome by the undeniable heat of his spotlight.

“Isn’t it?” I agree. “There’s something inherently sexy about a man who wants a woman so badly he can’t contain himself. A man who has to have her at any cost, a man who wants to touch her so badly he physically aches. And then there’s that magical moment when he realizes she feels the same ... that she wants to give herself to him in the most carnal way ... there isn’t time to mess with a million buttons and corsets and layers of fabric, slips, and petticoats and bloomers ... he has to have her.” A dreamy sigh leaves my lips. “When he rips through that layer of protection, that armor—which is what it is essentially—and gets to the inner essence of her, the most private parts of her are exposed. That’s when he can finally have her and she can give herself fully to him.” I fan myself. “God, my heart’s pounding just thinking about it.”

Stone takes a sip of his beer, and he hasn’t looked away from me yet.

“Sorry, I’m rambling and this is probably boring for you,” I say.

“Not at all.”

There used to be a time when Jude would occasionally ask what I was reading, and the second I tried to go into any amount of detail, he’d pick up his phone and get distracted, tuning me out.

But Stone is listening, and the captivated expression on his face is almost asking for more.

“Have you ever felt that way?” I turn the tables on him. “Have you ever wanted someone so badly you could rip their clothes off? Have you ever wanted to make someone yours? Truly yours? In the most animalistic way?”

He swallows, rubbing his lips together and looking away before finally nodding.

“Yeah, actually. I have.”

“And did you do it?”

He pauses, peeling the label off his bottle. “I never had the chance, no.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“The woman I wanted in that way ... she was taken by someone else.”

“Now that’s a tragedy.”

“To put it lightly.”

I rest my elbow on the back of the sofa, and place my cheek against my hand. Studying Stone through a different lens, I try to imagine him pining for someone. The slightest twinge of jealousy scalds my middle when I think of this faceless woman.

“For years, I stood back while another man kissed her. Another man told her all the things I wanted to say to her. Another man held her in his arms,” Stone says. “Only to throw her away when he was done with her.”

My breath hitches.

“It doesn’t get more tragic than that.” His voice is hushed and low, and suddenly the distance between us is narrowing faster than I have time to process any of it.

In a red-hot instant, his mouth claims mine.

His kiss is soft at first, and his hands cradle my face while his fingers slip gently into my hair. But the sweetness doesn’t

last long before it's replaced with a kiss so punishing, so greedy, I lose my breath.

His tongue pierces between my lips, dancing against my own. He tastes like beer and peppermint and the bittersweetness of the deepest longing.

Years of hatred and confusion fade into the background. All of this feels as wrong as it feels right. By the time we come up for air, our story is a tender tragedy written in the brightest of stars.

Everything we could have had ...

Everything we could have been ...

I lie back on the couch and Stone glides his body over mine, trailing kisses along my neck as his fists grip my t-shirt—and in an unprecedented and unexpected move ... he rips it straight down the middle.

His hot mouth presses into the valley between my breasts, and then he shoves the lace fabric of the cups down. Taking a nipple in his mouth, his teeth graze my delicate flesh. My stomach caves and my hips buck beneath him. His hardness presses against me with each grind. He steals another punishing kiss, and I rake my fingers through his sandy hair—something I've wanted to do since forever ago.

I can't believe this is happening, but I know if I question it too much, I'll lose out on the moment—and I want to be here for this moment because this moment is everything.

His hardness rubs against the outside of my leggings in slow, rhythmic movements as he exhales hot, wanton breaths against the bend of my neck. He trails another path of kisses down my collarbone, along my chest, near the center of my stomach, and finally he stops above my waistband. With an

unremitting jerk, he tugs my leggings off and throws them aside.

Lowering himself between my thighs, he presses them apart before kissing the damp mound of my lace panties, sucking my clit through the sheer fabric. My body trembles, surrendering as he teases me. With every soft stroke, I sink deeper into the sofa cushions and further from reality.

Sliding his fingertips beneath the sheer material, he rips the gusset. The sensation of cool air drapes across my sex only to be replaced by the hot heat of his mouth as he devours me harder, faster, greedier than ever. His tongue slides in and out, followed by his fingers. First one, then two. My stomach caves and my mind runs in circles, unable to wrap itself around what's happening because it's all happening so fast.

“You have no idea how long I've wanted you,” he says. The scent of my arousal lingers between us as he works biting kisses into my soft flesh, inching closer to my breasts, my neck, and finally my mouth.

“Really? I never knew ...”

He stops consuming me for a moment, tipping his head up until our eyes lock.

“I never wanted you to know,” he says. “I never wanted anyone to know.”

I try to speak but he silences me with a kiss, driving his hips and his hardness harder against me. The swell of his cock sends me reeling, and my entire body aches with anticipation.

“You should've been mine,” he whispers against my ear, sending a spray of goose bumps down my arm.

“I ... I wanted you too ...” I manage, breathless and hot. “I just ... I was afraid to admit it—and I thought you hated me.”

He stops cold, his body freezing against mine as our eyes hold again.

“I never hated you, Jovie,” he says. “I was in *love* with you.”

Cupping his face, I press my mouth against his, letting his words play on a loop in my head.

Deep down, in the unexcavated depths of my soul, I always felt drawn toward this man in a way I could never fully articulate to myself. It was always a feeling. Irrational and inexplicable. A niggling sensation in the pit of my stomach, a silent “what if” question creeping into the folds of my mind here and there.

His fingers drag the length of my inner thighs before exploring me all over again.

“Put me out of my misery.” His voice is low, his tone demanding. “And I’ll put you out of yours.”

“I want you inside of me,” I whisper, wrapping my hands around his neck and breathing him in.

Sitting up, Stone tugs his shirt over his head before pulling his wallet from his back pocket. With his eyes never leaving mine, he produces a gold foil packet, which he rips between his teeth. His hair is messy, his chest rises and falls with hard, steady breaths, and his animalistic eyes glint in the dusky room.

This man wants me.

He wants me so badly he ripped my clothes off and devoured me like I was made solely for him.

My heart hammers in my chest. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, savoring the carnal scents mingling in the air—

my arousal, his spicy aftershave.

The sound of his zipper follows next.

I open my eyes as he slides the rubber down his generous, veined cock. Shoving my thighs wide, he positions himself at my entrance, teasing my clit before sliding it in, inch by inch, until he's all the way inside of me, filling me to the hilt.

I remind myself to breathe, to relax, but this isn't about that. This is about pure carnal desire. His. Mine. Ours.

My fingertips dig into his arms as he drives himself inside of me again and again.

Deeper.

Harder.

Faster.

All of him.

All of me.

Nearly a lifetime of wanting, a lifetime of going without ... has led us to this moment.

I don't know where we go from here—I only know that Stone Atwood is not like the rest, and while it's always been the worst thing about him ... it's also the best thing.

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Chapter Forty-Four

Stone

We collapse in a heap, gasping, our skin sticky sweet and the electric buzz of satisfaction racing through our veins. I taste her mouth one more time before peeling myself off of her breathless body and making my way to the hall bath to clean up. When I come back, I find her in the same position I left her in ... utterly spent.

“Here.” I lower myself to my knees, running a warm washcloth along her inner thighs before finishing at her tender sex.

A long white scar down her left leg catches my eye. It must be eight, ten inches at least. A quarter of an inch wide. Thick and raised. Slightly jagged.

“What happened?” I ask.

She bites her lip, propping herself up, hesitating.

“I had an accident ... many years ago ...” she finally answers.

“What kind of accident?”

“I fell asleep behind the wheel of my car,” she says. “The night Jude broke up with me ... it was late, and I was already tired. I’d been crying. My eyes were ... swollen shut I guess ... they think I passed out for a minute and drifted over the center line and hit a median. Rolled my car. Ended up with a concussion. Fractured wrist. Thirty-five stitches in my scalp ... Broke my femur in two places.”

She traces the scar before dragging her knees to her chest as if this, of all things, is what awakens her vulnerable side.

“Why didn’t you stay at our place that night?” I ask.

“I asked ... Jude said no.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Heat creeps through my veins, replacing the satisfaction that lived there only moments ago.

That bastard didn’t just leave her with emotional scars, he left her with physical ones too.

A daily reminder.

I slip my hands around her left leg, gently coaxing it flat, and then I lower my lips, grazing the jagged white line with a kiss.

“You deserved better than him,” I say.

“I know that now.”

“I’m sorry you have to live with this reminder every day the rest of your life.”

Her eyes turn glassy, and she lifts a shoulder. “It’s just scar tissue ... it’s harder, thicker, more protective. I like to think of it as my body’s way of saying no one will ever hurt me like that again.”

God, I love this woman. Her strength, her beauty, her way with words. The way she doesn't let anyone dim her light, yet at the same time, she's not afraid to be vulnerable.

Jovie Vincent is the real thing in every sense of the phrase.



I sit in my car for a bit before heading inside where Jude and his dad are waiting. An hour ago, I was surfing the highest of highs, so caught up in everything with Jovie, I didn't think about coming home and looking Jude in the eyes. I didn't think about what I was—or wasn't going to say to him.

Killing my engine, I step outside and make my way up the front walk.

The house is dark and quiet when I step in.

“Paul?” I call out. “Jude?”

No one answers, and for that I'm admittedly relieved.

I need a moment to be alone—to process the surreal events of this afternoon.

I kick off my shoes, drop my keys and wallet in the kitchen, and make my way to my study. Collapsing in my favorite chair, I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

I could have stayed all night if she let me, living between her thighs, tasting her lips a million times again ... but alas, she had long-standing dinner plans with a friend.

It's impossible to know where we go from here—where we *should* go from here.

All I know is that I want to go with her.

Wherever that may be.

Chapter Forty-Five

Jovie

“I slept with Stone,” I blurt the second Monica walks into my apartment Monday afternoon. She’s bringing by a handful of dress options I might borrow to wear on for an upcoming interview for a local news station.

She drops her bag on the floor and drapes the clothes over the nearest chair, her mouth agape. “You what, now?”

“I slept with Stone,” I say, clearer this time.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” She waves her hands frantically in the air. “Okay, back up. How? When? Tell me *everything*.”

I give her the rundown, going into detail only where it counts, and when I’m done she’s practically bursting with excitement. Her tanned cheeks are cherry red and her fingertips flutter and she bounces in my kitchen chair like a child on Christmas morning.

“I think you were right,” I say.

She cups her ear, “Let me hear that one more time. A little louder for those in the back.”

She points to the row of house plants in front of my window.

“Look at you, all giddy and whatnot. I don’t think I’ve seen you smile that big since ... well, I won’t go there. But you’re glowing and I love that for you.”

“He said he was in love with me back in college ...”

Monica jumps up and down, nearly knocking over her chair. “I told you! Did I not?!”

I laugh, her exhilaration nothing short of contagious.

“Omg, so what’s next? What happens now? Does Jude know?”

“He left yesterday ... I haven’t talked to him since ... and I don’t know ... we didn’t talk about Jude,” I say. “And quite frankly, I couldn’t care less what he thinks.”

Monica takes a seat, worry lines spreading across her forehead.

“Stone’s always been too loyal for his own good. He better not try and pull some bro code card shit after this,” she says.

“You think he would?”

“I don’t know. How’d you leave off yesterday?”

“I had dinner plans with Ida and he said he had to go home because Paul and Jude are staying at his place,” I say. “It wasn’t weird or awkward or anything, it was just a casual goodbye.”

Her mouth curves at the side.

“Hm. Okay. And you haven’t heard from him since?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“Text him.” She points to my phone.

“And say what?”

“Thanks for the lay? Can we do it again sometime?” She laughs. “I don’t know. Just cast your reel out and test those waters ...”

I grab my phone, hands shaking, feeling every bit a rookie as I tap out a message.

ME: Just realized you forgot to take your neon beer cup home with you yesterday ...

I cringe when I show her. “It’s lame, but it’s all I’ve got right now.”

She throws her hands up. “Whatever works.”

A second later, the message shows as ‘read’ and three dots appear.

STONE: Thanks for the reminder. I’ll have to stop over and grab that soon.

I show Monica my phone. “This is good, right?”

“I’d say so.”

STONE: Maybe tonight? 7 o’clock?

My stomach somersaults and my jaw drops. I show her his message.

“I told you,” she smacks the table in celebration. “I told you, I told you, I told you.”

Chapter Forty-Six

Stone

Jude's camped out at my kitchen island when I get home from work Monday, his nose buried in his laptop. Outside, Paul smokes a cigar on my patio, chatting it up with the blonde fifty-year-old widow next door.

"What's up," Jude says without looking my way.

"When you didn't come home last night, I thought maybe you'd patched things up with Stassi," I say.

He squints at his screen, shaking his head. "Nah. We talked and she let me stay last night."

"That's good."

He tilts his head to the side, like he disagrees. "I'm still on her shit list."

"Really?"

"I told her I wished it could be like it was in the beginning."

"The beginning ... as in *Tulum*?"

“Yeah,” he says.

“You were strangers then. Horny college students. You realize it’s impossible to go back to that ... nostalgia’s a beautiful liar, you know.” I use Jovie’s line because it’s brilliant and it’s fitting and it’s true and he needs to hear it.

His gaze hardens, like the words are registering in real time.

“It just feels like I’m making the wrong decision here,” he says a moment later.

My body turns tense at his statement. If he’s referring to choosing the wrong woman, that could mean he’s still hung up on Jovie ...

“Five years is a record for you,” I say. “And sure, you’ve had some ups and downs. No such thing as a perfect relationship. You really want to throw in the towel now? At zero hour? Your wedding’s in three weeks ...”

“Maybe I’m not meant to be married.”

I hunch over the kitchen island, blowing a hard breath through pursed lips, gathering the strength to deal with this beloved idiot.

“Cold feet, Jude,” I say, clapping my hands together. “That’s all it is. Cold feet. Both of you. Suck it up. You’ve got a two-hundred-thousand dollar wedding just around the corner. Guests flying in from all over the world. You’ve got your bachelor party in a couple of weeks. You’ve had your wedding showers. You’ve got a cushy job at your future father in law’s company. You’re set for life. All you have to do is walk down the aisle with Stassi and say I do.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“Because it is. This is what you wanted, remember? *She* is *who* you wanted,” I say. “I don’t understand how you suddenly *don’t* want any of it. What changed?”

“You act like I’m the only person in the world to second guess themselves. Unlike you, not all of us are immune to self-doubt.”

“I’m not immune to self-doubt.” I stand up straight.

“Everything you’ve ever wanted—you’ve gone for it.”

That isn’t true.

Not everything ...

“Stassi ... she’s a good girl,” Jude says, though I keep my opposing opinion to myself. It’s not my circus nor my monkey. “But sometimes I feel like I’m never going to live up to her expectations. Hell, she dresses me like I’m some kind of project. She has to approve every piece of clothing that touches my body before I walk out the door. And the Range Rover? I’m not a Range Rover guy—you know that. She picked that car out. And the color too. What the hell even is Amalfi Blue? And sometimes I just want to go to a sports bar and have wings, but getting her to go anywhere that doesn’t require reservations months in advance is like pulling teeth.”

“Let’s focus on the things you *do* like about your future wife ...”

His mouth forms thin line and he shoves his laptop aside. “I don’t know ... it’s hard to think of those things right now.”

“I see that. Give it a try anyway.”

It takes a concerning moment longer than it should, but he throws his hands in the air before knitting his fingers behind his neck. “Okay, fine. She speaks French. Fluent. When we go

to La Fontaine, it's kind of hot listening to her order for us. And she does this little thing with her nose when she laughs, like it crinkles a bit. And she's always making our house feel like a five-star hotel. Fresh flowers. Egyptian cotton sheets. Little candles everywhere. She makes everything into an occasion ... which was annoying at first, but then I realized it was her love language. She likes to give gifts. It's her way of showing she cares."

"Good," I say. "What else?"

He shrugs. "She always lets me pick the music when we're driving somewhere."

"And?"

"And her parents love me—so that's a plus," he adds. "I don't know. I feel like I'm scraping the bottom of the barrel here. None of these things change the way I'm feeling."

The sliding door slicks open and Paul steps in.

"Why the long faces, guys?" He ashes his cigar into his empty bourbon tumbler. "Cheer up, it's happy hour."

Moving for the fridge next, he cracks himself a beer and grabs two more, placing one in front of each of us.

"Jude's still hellbent on talking himself out of marrying Stassi," I say.

"For fuck's sake." Paul slams the beer opener on the counter. "Are we really back to this? She's a nice young lady and you could do a hell of a lot worse."

Jude's silence is deafening.

"What is it with you and walking away from perfectly good women? First there was that girl back in college ... Jovie I think was her name ... she was a real catch ... probably

didn't realize she could do better than you but loved you anyway ... and then you tossed her to the side as soon as Stassi came along. Stassi made you grow up a bit. She got you a big boy job and made a man out of you. But here you are backtracking and God only knows why." Paul shakes his head and chugs his beer. "You need to do some soul searching, Jude. And you don't have much time to do it."

"Does Stassi even want you back?" I ask, realizing our conversation took a left turn before we could get to that. "What'd she say last night?"

"She's on the fence," Jude says.

Ah.

There it is.

"Said she's been feeling this way for a while now," Jude adds. "I think it all came to a head after she looked at my search history."

This isn't about Jovie or cold feet: it's about Stassi's indifference and Jude's inability to be alone.

He doesn't want Jovie because he misses her or he's suddenly grappling with unresolved feelings ... she's nothing more than his Plan B.

I leave my beer untouched. I don't think I could drink it anyway—my jaw is clenched tight and my head is throbbing.

"I've got a client dinner to get ready for," I say. "Rain check on the beer, Paul."

I head upstairs, change, and exit through the garage to avoid seeing Jude again.

I don't know where I'm going to go, just that I can't be under the same roof as him right now or I might say something

we'll both regret.

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Chapter Forty-Seven

Jovie

“Hi, stranger,” I say when Stone shows up at my door just past six. Exhaustion colors his handsome face, and he looks every bit the part of a man who’s had a *day*.

A few minutes ago, he called and said he was in the area. I didn’t hesitate to invite him over. I don’t know what this is yet. It’s all so new and confusing and wonderful. And labels only ever seem to ruin things. Whatever it is, I just know I haven’t stopped grinning for days and sometimes I get so caught up in a daydream I can’t feel the floor beneath my feet.

He greets me with a biting kiss, pinning me against the wall.

His hands run down my hips, sliding behind my thighs as he scoops me into his arms and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around him and lace my fingers around the back of his neck. Stone kicks the door closed with his foot then carries me to the couch.

His five o’clock shadow is rough against my neck as he tastes my flesh, and his fingers tug at my shirt as if he’s half-

tempted to rip it off me again. I pull it over my head this time. If this is the rate we're going, I'll be out of a wardrobe this time next month.

I reach for his belt, work his zipper, and wrap my palm around his cock. I pump his length before taking his throbbing heat between my lips.

With his hand in my hair, he releases a guttural groan as I swallow his length again and again. A few minutes later, he releases—sending hot spurts down the back of my throat. I swallow in one go and wipe the corners of my mouth.

Pulling me into his lap, he buries his face in the bend of my neck before wrapping me tight in his arms. He doesn't say anything. There's an unspoken understanding flickering between us, the kind of thing that would only be ruined with words.

This is our story.

And for the first time, we're on the same page.

His steady hands circle my waist before exploring my curves. I kiss his stubbled jaw, working my way to his ear then down his neck. I want to taste and memorize every part of him. I want to catalog it until it no longer feels surreal.

I rock against him, beckoning his hardness to come to life again.

Tossing my head back, I empty the thoughts from my head along with the never-ending list of questions. He's clearly not in the mood to talk tonight, and I'm more than happy to be the release he needs.

He's my release, too.

Life is long. And hard. And confusing. And unpredictable. But right here, with him, everything feels like it's finally beginning to make sense.

We take it to the bedroom, and for the hour that follows, we lose ourselves in unapologetic carnal enchantment.

Lying in his arms when we're done, I spot his gaze travel to the scar that runs down my left thigh.

"Does it bother you?" I ask. "Seeing that? Does it make you think of Jude?"

He traces his fingertip along its hard ridges. "It bothers me that this happened to you."

"I'm over it, really. Nothing I can do about it now." I capture his hand in mine and interlace my fingers with his. "It's not going anywhere."

He swallows a hard breath. "Yeah."

"Does he know?" I ask. "Does he know we've been spending time together?"

"No." His jaw flexes and he stares up at the ceiling. "He's not in a good place right now."

"I see."

"I'll tell him," he adds. "When the time is right."

I believe Stone, yet the smallest part of me hopes he isn't stringing me along. I don't think he's the type to do that, but then again, I didn't think Jason was going to be the type to exploit me after a whirlwind marriage.

There was a time it felt real with him too.

Stone rolls to his side, facing me, and he takes my cheek in his hand. "I don't want you to worry okay? Whatever happens,

it's my problem, not yours.”

I nod, and he seals his promise with a kiss before sitting up.

“I have court in the morning or I'd stay,” he says.

I wrap my naked body in my sheets and watch him get dressed in the dark.

He kisses me once more before he leaves, and I wait for the click of the door before tiptoeing to the living room to watch him out the window.

Thirty seconds later, he's stepping onto the front stoop and making his way down the sidewalk. As soon as he does, Ida and Domino emerge from the house next door. Domino rears up, wagging his tail and pulling on his leash, attempting to drag Ida closer to Stone.

I watch as Stone gives her a disarming wave before lowering himself to Domino's level and scratching behind his ears.

I can't make out what they're saying from up here, but it appears he's introducing himself. Ida claps her hands on her cheeks when she puts it all together—at least I'm assuming that's what's happening. The next thing I know, she's wrapping him in a hug.

I laugh to myself, watching their cute little exchange.

I have to admit, the softer side of Stone is throwing me for a loop—and I'm loving every minute of it.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Stone

Paul is watching sports highlights in the den when I get home. Meanwhile, Jude's Amalfi Blue Range Rover is missing in action.

"Where's Jude?" I ask.

"He went home." Paul's glassy eyes are glued to the TV, like they've been fixed there for hours. "Stassi said he could come home, I guess."

I jut my chin out and take a seat on the leather sofa. "That's good."

"Damn right it is. I think we might have finally gotten through that thick skull of his." Paul reaches for the remote on the table beside him, muting the TV. "You're a good influence on him, you know that? You've always helped him keep that head of his a little straighter on his shoulders. Without you around, who knows how he would've turned out."

"I wouldn't say that," I say. "You might've had a little something to do with it too ..."

He bats his hand. “All’s I’ve got is a bunch of overused sayings. But you? You’re smart. You’re educated. You’ve got your shit together. I think he looks up to you more than either of us realize.”

“You think?”

“You’re the first person he goes to with all his problems. You’re the first to know what’s going on in his life. He doesn’t do a damn thing without your stamp of approval. When you two were kids, I used to joke behind his back that you were his security blanket. I think he’d be a little lost without you.”

While Paul’s words are meant as a compliment, the guilt of knowing that I’ve slept with Jovie twice now gnaws away at me.

I’ve justified my actions with anger and resentment.

These kinds of things never end well.

“What’s the matter over there? I hear a lot of sighing and huffing.” He pauses the TV and careens his neck my way. “Got something on your mind? It isn’t healthy to bottle that shit up, believe me. There’s this guy I met down in Florida. Spent his whole life in the closet, if you know what I mean. At least until his sixty-fifth birthday. He came out after his father passed. Guess he didn’t want to disappoint him or something like that. Anyway, he died of a heart attack on the beach three months later, never got to live his truth. Don’t let that be you.”

“I slept with Jovie,” I say in one long breath.

While I thought it’d feel better to have it off my chest, something about my confession only makes me feel ten times heavier. I’m anchored in place, ready for one of Paul’s infamous come to Jesus lectures.

“Oof.” Paul shakes his head, sitting up in his chair. “That’s ... that’s a doozy.”

I was expecting a bigger reaction than that.

Still, I don’t know what else to say, so I choose silence.

“Do you *like* her or was she just a lay?” he blinks.

“I love her, Paul. I’ve loved her from the moment I met her.”

His curious expression lightens and a smile crawls across his thin lips. “Well, hot damn. Stone’s in love.”

“You don’t think I’m a piece of shit for sleeping with my best friend’s ex?” And then I add, “While he’s going through a personal crisis?”

Paul waves his hand in the air, as if to clear a slate. “The whole thing about *bro codes* and exes being off limits, I’ve never understood. In my day, that wasn’t a thing. These ridiculous rules you guys put on yourselves are comical, really. You can’t put all these restrictions on your own happiness. And you know what else? Jude had a shot with her years ago and he blew it. He had her and he let her go. He hooked her, caught her, reeled her in, and then he threw her back into the sea. As far as I’m concerned, that makes her fair game.”

“I have a feeling he’s not going to see it that way.”

“Then let that be a lesson to him.” Paul points at me, driving home his words. “A priceless one at that. One in the hand is not always worth two in the bush. You have something good? You keep it. You hold onto it. And you never let it go.”

“When should I tell him?”

“After I fly out tomorrow,” he says with his raspy smoker’s chuckle and a twinkle in his eye. “I’ve got no desire

to stick around for that fight. You two can sort it out like the grown men you are.”

Something tells me it’s not going to be that simple.

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Chapter Forty-Nine

Jovie

I wake in Stone's bed Saturday morning, disoriented for a moment. Last night was the first time I stayed over, and while I meant to leave after we had our fun, he insisted I stay for a second round—which turned into a third round sometime around 2 AM.

The clock on his nightstand reads a quarter past eight, and while I'm so exhausted pain sinks into my marrow, I'm back in that wired-but-tired stage. Who has time for sleep when everything is buzzing and Technicolor?

I slide out from beneath his covers and find one of his white button-down Oxfords draped over the chair in the far corner of his room. I pull it over my head, fluff my hair out from the collar, and tug the hem into place a few inches past my rear. The faded scent of his cologne clings to the starched fabric, and I steal a greedy lungful before tiptoeing downstairs to his kitchen to make coffee.

With a little bit of work, I manage to locate his K-cups, some almond milk creamer, and a couple of mugs.

I'm brewing the first cup, when I turn to place it on the island—only to be met with a fully clothed man standing on the other end of it.

I scream, dropping the mug on the porcelain tile, miraculously managing to jump out of the way of the scalding hot liquid.

“Jude, what are you doing here?” I ask. I cross my arms over my chest, uncertain of how transparent this shirt is.

His face is twisted and his gaze is frozen, pointed. “I should ask you the same thing.”

A second later, the heavy thud of trouncing footsteps coming down the stairs grows nearer, and Stone makes his way to the kitchen. In his wrinkled t-shirt, low-slung sweats, and messy bed head, the scene has been set.

There's no denying that this is exactly what this looks like.

The two of them are locked in a visual standoff, neither one saying a word.

Jude's nostrils flare, and his creamy complexion turns a deeper shade of scarlet by the second.

Earlier this week, Stone confided in me that Jude and Stassi were both having cold feet about the wedding, and while it killed him to keep quiet, he wanted to wait until Jude had less on his plate. He didn't want to give him one more thing to deal with on top of everything else. His logic made sense at the time.

Now it's irrelevant.

“What are you doing here?” Stone asks Jude.

“Came back to get the rest of my things ... thought I could come in through the garage and not wake you ... sure as hell

wasn't expecting to walk into *this*." Jude's steely gaze drifts from Stone to me and back. "I knew it."

Jude sneers, pointing his finger in the air.

"I fucking knew it. You piece of shit," Jude says, charging toward Stone. "You lying sack of shit."

I'm unsure if Stone's silence is his way of pleading the fifth—or if he's weighing his options here, trying to choose between his best friend and a girl.

If I were him, it'd be a no-brainer.

They're practically family.

Jude and Paul are the only family he's got.

I'd never expect him to give that up for me.

"I thought it was strange ... how you had one of Jovie's books in your study," Jude says, "and then when you used that line on me last week ... the one about nostalgia being a beautiful liar ... it's the same thing Jovie said to me when I ran into her last month ... I knew then and there, Stone, but I wanted to give you a chance to come clean. To tell me like a man."

Stone still hasn't said a word.

"You're my *best friend*," Jude says, his voice breaking but his face remaining stoic. "My *brother*. How could you?"

"I won't insult you by denying any of this," Stone finally speaks. "But you have to understand ... I've been in love with Jovie from the moment I saw her ... and I saw her first. She was the girl at the party that I told you about freshman year. The one I couldn't stop thinking about all week. The one I shut up about when you brought Jovie home because the girl I liked

... was also the girl you liked. And as your best friend, as your *brother*, I saw how happy she made you, so I let it go.”

“Wait,” I turn to Stone. “You told me you didn’t remember meeting me that night ... I asked you several times and you denied it every time.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I know. I thought I was doing the right thing at the time.”

“By lying?” I ask.

“It’s a bit more nuanced than that,” he says, letting his hands fall at his sides. “But yes. I lied to you, Jovie, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s fucked up is what it is.” Jude’s expression hardens all over again and he points at Stone. “You were the one who told me to break up with Jovie.”

Stone’s jaw clenches.

“Is that true?” I ask him.

“He told me our relationship was stale.” Jude turns to me. “That you didn’t have that fire in your eyes anymore when you looked at me. We had a whole conversation about it in Tulum, didn’t we, Stone? You told me life was too short to spend it with someone who doesn’t make me feel alive—but fuck me. You just wanted to break us up so you could have her for yourself.”

“That’s not—no,” Stone says. “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

“Then what was your end game? Huh? Because you sure had a compelling argument that day.” Jude’s flustered complexion deepens again, and he grabs a fistful of hair.

“I wanted you to leave her so she could find someone better, someone who actually deserved her.”

Jude’s hand falls to his side with a lifeless flop, and he scoffs.

“And who would that be?” He looks Stone up and down.

“Anyone but you,” he says.

Without another word or any sort of warning, Stone charges at Jude again, this time with his arm pulled back and ready to swing. I scream as Stone blocks his strike. Jude stumbles back, his chest puffing and his eyes crazy.

In a frenzied instant, their friendship flashes before me—at least what I know if it.

The loss of their mothers, stories of their boyhood, their infallible loyalty ...

While the two of them continue to scream words at each other they’ll probably regret one day, I dash upstairs, throw last night’s clothes on, grab my things, and go.

Jude isn’t perfect.

Neither is Stone.

But they’ve always had each other, and I can’t come between that.

Chapter Fifty

Stone

I make my way to Jovie's apartment door Sunday morning, a paper gift bag in hand. She left in the midst of all the chaos yesterday at my house, and I haven't been able to reach her since. She isn't returning my calls or texts, and while I don't blame her, I still need to know she's okay.

There was a lot that didn't get unpacked.

I can only imagine what she's thinking ... and what she's assuming ... especially when it comes to the conversation Jude and I had in Tulum.

I rap on her door and wait. There isn't a floorboard creak, the hum of a TV in the background, or any other sign of life. I noticed her car parked out front when I got here, but it doesn't mean she's home.

Taking a seat on her welcome mat, I place the gift bag beside me and wait.

When she's ready to talk, I'll be here.

Until then, I've got nothing but time.

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Chapter Fifty-One

Jovie

I round the block towards my apartment and tighten Domino's leash. Yesterday, Ida decided to attend a quilting convention upstate and she asked if I could stay at her place and watch her dog overnight. The renovations were apparently complete and she made a point to tell me her guest room was all ready for me.

Desperate for a distraction from the events of that morning, I didn't hesitate to tell her yes. I'd have said yes anyway, but her request couldn't have come at a better time.

I packed an overnight bag, put my phone on silent, and spent my Saturday night with a spotted mutt, delivery pizza, and a Grey's Anatomy marathon.

None of it made me think of Stone any less.

"Hold up, buddy," I say when I spot Jude's car parked out front. On closer inspection, I surmise that he's not in it, which means he's probably at my door. "This way, Domino."

I lead him to my building and we make our way through the front door and up the stairs to my unit. He whimpers the

instant he smells Stone. Within seconds, he's pulling on his leash so hard I worry he'll choke himself, so I unclasp the lead. He darts to Stone, who's sitting on my doormat, and he smothers him in wet kisses. The poor thing is wagging his tail so hard, the rest of his body wags with it.

Stone gives him a satisfying scratch behind the ear, all the while dodging his wet slurps, and eventually manages to get on his feet.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," he says. "I've been trying to reach you."

"Yeah." Lowering my chin, I say, "I thought we could use a little bit of space after yesterday."

He frowns, his hooded eyes squinting in the low light of this hallway. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," I insist, injecting a lighter tone in my voice. But it isn't true. I'm not okay. I was floating on cloud nine only to have it explode in my face unexpectedly. "A little shell-shocked, maybe, but I'll be fine. What about you? Are you okay?"

I inspect his face for any black eyes or busted lips.

But he's clean as a whistle.

As handsome as always.

"I am," he says before scratching at his temple. "Jude on the other hand ... he might need some time."

"Some time for what?"

"To accept that *this*," he motions between us, "isn't going anywhere."

I try to speak, but the words refuse to leave my tongue.

This isn't what I expected at all after yesterday. In fact, I expected the exact opposite of *this*.

Stone steps closer, narrowing the distance between us and pinning me into place with his icy Alaskan blues.

"I wanted to clear something up that Jude said yesterday," he says, his eyes searching mine. "When he told you I'm the one who talked him into ending things with you ... it's true."

I rub my lips together as the sting of his words soak through me. At the time, I was hoping it was something Jude was making up in the heat of the moment. I wanted it to be a lie.

"I don't understand," I say, pressing my hand against his chest. "And just to be clear, I'm not angry ... Jude breaking up with me was one of the best things that could have happened to me. I just want some context."

Stone massages the back of his neck, peering over my shoulder as he searches for his words.

"I was tired of him hurting you," Stone says.

"What do you mean?" Up until then, Jude had never hurt me. At least not to my knowledge. Aside from a handful of quarrels here and there, we were happy and in love.

"Do you remember the night the two of you had that big fight, and you went home to stay with your parents to get some space for the weekend?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"And you tried to call him and he told you he was out with me?"

I nod.

“He slept with someone else that night,” he says. “Some random girl from a bar.”

My stomach hardens. Five years, a career, and a failed marriage later, the betrayal stings the same.

“I’m sorry.” He takes my hands in his. “I tried to stop him ...”

“Don’t apologize for him, Stone. It wasn’t your fault.”

“He begged me to cover for him the next day, and he swore it was a one-time thing,” Stone continues. “And then he met Stassi in Tulum, and all the apologetic bullshit from that morning was out the window. Maybe I should’ve stayed out of it, but goddamn it, Jovie, I couldn’t stand back and let him take advantage of your trust like that.”

“So you told him you thought we were stale?”

“Something along those lines.” He exhales. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing for him.”

“I didn’t want you to get hurt. In the end, you got hurt anyway.” His eyes fall to my thighs, where the tail end of my scar is visible from beneath my shorts. “You could have died that night.”

His beautiful eyes rest on mine, and I drink him in the way he’s done to me countless times since he’s been back in my life.

“I always wondered why you had this chip on your shoulder,” I say. “Now I’m thinking it wasn’t a chip at all. It was the weight of Jude’s bullshit and lies.”

He manages to crack some semblance of a smile.

“You said Jude didn’t deserve me,” I say. “But he didn’t deserve you either.”

Brushing his thumb along my lower lip, he grazes his mouth across mine. It’s the tenderest of kisses, an apology and a promise all wrapped into one. I melt against him, slipping my arms around his broad shoulders.

“You don’t have to pick me over him, you know,” I say. “I’d understand—”

“—stop,” he says. “I want *you*. And if he wants to be a part of my life, he has to accept that. I made that clear to him yesterday. I also made it clear that he’s been a shitty excuse for a best friend, and if he wants to keep throwing that term around like it means something to him, then he needs to start acting like it.”

I suck in a breath, impressed.

“How’d he take all of that?” I ask.

“Not well,” he says. “But he’ll figure it out when the time is right.”

“Optimism is a good look on you,” I tease.

“I think some of your sunshine must have rubbed off on me lately.” He leans down for another kiss, but I turn my cheek. “What?”

“There’s one more thing we need to discuss before any of this moves forward.”

“All right.”

“You lied to me about the night we met,” I say. “You told me you didn’t remember. From the gist of your shouting match yesterday, I think I determined that it had something to do with both of you liking me and you stepping back so Jude could

have me? Didn't realize I was a commodity to be had, but okay ...”

“Jude was coming out of a bad breakup and you brought out this part of him I hadn't seen in years.” He rolls his eyes. “That entire thing had nothing to do with you being traded like an NFL quarterback and everything to do with me trying to do the noble thing at the time ... the kind of thing I'd want him to do for me if it was the other way around.”

“Hate to tell you, but he wouldn't have done the same for you.”

“I know that now.” He grabs a gift bag off the ground and hands it to me. “Anyway, I'm sorry I lied, and I hope this makes up for it.”

Reaching in, I pull out a soft, wash-worn t-shirt in a faded shade of black.

“The night we met, you told me you were one of thousands of Bon Jovi babies.” His eyes twinkle with humor. “Whether or not that's true is impossible to know. What I *can* tell you is there are approximately one hundred and fourteen t-shirts being sold online from the 1996 *These Days* tour.”

I unfold the fabric and feast my eyes on a vintage image of Jon Bon Jovi, Richie Sambora, David Bryan, and Tico Torres in all their nineties rocker hair glory.

“Believe it or not, I bought this a week ago,” he says. “Had it overnighted. I was so nervous to give it to you, but I wanted to come clean about that night. I was hoping this would be a way to soften the blow.”

“The fact that you remembered at all ...” I flip the shirt over, reading off all the tour dates until I get to Sarasota—the

night I was conceived. “Thank you. This is probably the most thoughtful gift anyone’s ever given me.”

With the shirt clenched in my hand, I throw my arms around his shoulders.

“I know this isn’t some love story out of one of your books,” he says, “and I can’t promise you that any of this will be predictable, ever, but Jovie, I’ve been in love with you for over eight years. And I promise you, I’ll love you the way you deserve to be loved—the way you always should have been loved.”

He kisses me, deep and hard. A kiss Clark Gable would have been proud of—a kiss I feel in the unexcavated depths of my soul.

“I love you,” he says, his mouth grazing mine.

“I love you too,” I say. “I always have.”

Stone isn’t cold anymore.

He’s *fire*.

And now? He’s finally mine.

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Epilogue

Stone

2 years later

They say when you know, you know.

Granted, I've known Jovie was the one for me from the minute I laid eyes on her from across the room at that party ten years ago. But it's time to make it official.

The ring box damn near burns a hole in my pocket as I wait in line. Several yards ahead, she's set up at a card table, surrounded by stacks of paperbacks that she's signing for readers who lined up at 6 AM for a chance to have thirty seconds with her.

"Are you a big Jovie Vincent fan?" the middle-aged woman behind me asks. She wheels a cart of books behind her, all of them bearing Jovie's name.

"You could say that."

“You don’t strike me as a Regency romance guy.” She giggles as she looks me up and down. “Did your girlfriend or boyfriend put you onto these books?”

“My girlfriend did, yes.”

“I always tried to get my husband to read them,” she says. “I used to dog ear the good scenes and leave the books on his nightstand. You’d have thought I was asking him to donate a kidney or something.” She swats a hand. “He just hates to read, is all.”

The line moves ahead at a snail’s pace.

I peek around the crowd, sneaking glimpses of Jovie doing her thing. Her hair is curled, bouncing at her shoulders as she speaks emphatically with her hands, her lips are slicked in red gloss, and she’s wearing her favorite gold reading glasses—the ones with the cat-eye frames. A baby blue sundress hugs her curves, but she promised I could rip it off of her tonight.

“Won’t be much longer now,” the woman behind me says as she watches Jovie from our post back here.

I’ve been waiting ninety minutes so far, and by the looks of things, it could be another ninety before I get anywhere near her table.

Still, I waited years for this woman—what’s another hour or so?

“Where are you from?” the woman asks.

“Here in Portland,” I say. “You?”

“Montpelier.” She scrunches her nose and shrinks her shoulders as she offers a proud smile.

“Wow. You drove all the way here to meet Jovie?”

“I’m her number one fan,” she says, nodding to her cart of books.

“It appears that way.”

“A few years ago, I had surgery on my foot, and I was laid up for weeks. My daughter-in-law brought me a stack of books from the library, and one of Jovie’s was in there. I’ve been hooked ever since,” she says.

The line trudges ahead once more.

“What do you do in Portland?” she asks.

“I’m an attorney.”

“Oh, how lovely. My niece is an attorney too. She does corporate law. I don’t pretend to understand any of it. It’s all Greek to me,” she says. “What does your girlfriend do? I assume she lives here as well?”

“She’s an author, actually.” I nod toward the front of the line, and the woman offers a confused half-smile as she tries to understand my gesture. “Jovie is my girlfriend ... Jovie Vincent.”

Her jaw falls and she fans her face. “You’re kidding me. Oh, my—wow. That’s ... what are you doing in line? Shouldn’t you be up there with her?”

I lift my finger to my lips. “She doesn’t know I’m here.”

Sliding the red ring box from my pocket, I show just enough for her to comprehend what’s going on.

With tears in her eyes, she claps her hands over her mouth.

“I won’t say a word,” she says.

“Appreciate it.” I give her a smile and a nod before glancing toward the front of the line again.

For the past eighteen months, we've been holed up in my townhome. I converted the guest room to an office, where she can write day or night with a view of the bay out one window and the downtown skyline out of the other.

Most of the time I can find her there, our rescue pup, Duke, keeping her feet warm as her fingers clack away at her keyboard until all hours of the night. It never gets old—Jovie crawling into bed in the middle of the night after a long stretch of writing. She always feels bad for waking me, but I don't mind. I usually take her tired hands in mine, give them a gentle massage, and listen for her breath to grow slow and steady as she falls asleep in my arms.

A few months ago, we ran into Jude at the farmer's market. With jeans, a t-shirt, and a pretty brunette on his arm, he looked every bit the part of the man I know and a far cry from the man he was when he was with Stassi.

The two of them calling off their wedding was a wise move on both parts.

I can spot a divorce coming a mile away, and those two were about to book a one-way ticket.

He gave me a wave from across the way, followed by a bittersweet smile of sorts. I wish I could say he grew up and learned the errors of his way. I also wish I could say he was happy for me, the same way I was happy for him all that time ago.

Paul has assured me everything worked out the way it was supposed to.

Maybe with a little time, we can revive the remains of our friendship and see if it still has a pulse. For now, it lives on in

my memories. But I don't spend much time thinking about the past these days.

I don't live there anymore.

The line moves again, and I pull out my phone to go over my proposal speech again.

Early in our relationship, Jovie made me promise that we'd never talk about getting engaged nor would we look at rings together. She wanted it to be a genuine surprise.

I check the ring box, inspecting the inside to ensure the antique rose-cut stone is still securely inside.

With my heart hammering in my chest, I wait patiently for my turn. And the minute I'm up, Jovie squeals, running out from behind her signing table and throwing her arms around me.

"You came to surprise me," she says. "That's so sweet."

"Actually." Digging into my pocket, I produce the ring box and promptly fall to one knee.

Her red lips form a perfect O-shape as she realizes what's happening.

"Jovie Annabeth Vincent," I say, "You're the love of my life. My blue sky. My lighthouse. You're my personal plot twist and the song that's been stuck in my head for the past ten years. I want to spend the rest of my life falling asleep with you in my arms and waking up to your blaring podcasts as you take your hour-long showers and use all the hot water."

She chuckles, as do the readers who have gathered around us, forming a half circle.

"Will you marry me?" I prop the box open, but before I can retrieve the actual ring, she's already jumping up and

down, physically unable to contain her excitement—a good sign.

“Yes, yes!” She pulls me up from the floor and throws herself around me, nearly knocking me over. “I’ll marry you.”

The half-circle of readers surrounding us cheer and applaud.

And just like that, Jovie Vincent gets her happy-ever-after ... after all.

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SAMPLE - Whiskey Moon

DESCRIPTION

A broken marriage pact gives way to a devastating love that won't let go in this heart-wrenching contemporary romance from Wall Street Journal and #1 Amazon bestselling author Winter Renshaw.

Bogie had Bacall. Carrie had Big. I had Wyatt.

Growing up, he was the handsome cowboy next door, an unlikely confidant, my best friend, my first kiss, and my favorite person.

We were just a couple of small-town kids with ambitions bigger than the stars in our eyes. The summer after graduation, we made a pact: I'd go to college in New York and he'd stay and take over his daddy's ranch. If by twenty-eight we were both still single, we'd get married ...

But as we stood in our high school gymnasium the night of our ten-year reunion, Wyatt told me he loved me too much to marry me.

He'd never broken a promise to me in his life, but in a single heartbeat he broke the only one that ever mattered.

He said it would all make sense someday, that there would come a time I might even be able to forgive him.

But then I stumbled upon the truth.

And there was no forgiving a secret this shattering—one that made me question if I ever knew him at all; one that only made me want him that much more.

Bogie had Bacall. Carrie had Big. I had Wyatt.

PROLOGUE

Ten Years Ago

Blaire

“So ... what’d you wish for?” I ask as we leave the Whiskey Moon festival in downtown Whiskey Springs. The flashing carnival lights, laughter, and heady sweet scents of cotton candy and funnel cake grow distant by the second.

I slip my hand into his, taking in the orange-pink moon in the late June sky. Most people would call it a strawberry moon, but a hundred years ago or so, some locals got the good idea to call it a “Whiskey Moon” and make it into an annual celebration. Legend has it that any wish you make under this moon comes true—one way or another.

“I’ll tell you what I wished for,” I volunteer since the cat’s got his tongue, though that’s nothing new.

He slides his keys from his tight jeans pocket and unlocks the passenger door of his truck for me.

Wyatt gets like this sometimes—unbearably quiet. Lost in his head. Though I’ve never quite figured out where he goes when he tunes the world out like this.

“Say something. Tell me what you’re thinking about.” I nudge Wyatt’s shoulder, knowing full well that he hates it when I ask him what’s on his mind. It’s for his own benefit, though. It’s not healthy to be stuck in your own head all the time, holding everything in.

He sniffs, adjusts his faded hat, and then flashes some semblance of a smirk before kissing my forehead and heading around the truck bed. A minute later, we’re headed west, beyond the city limits, and his gaze is trained over the dash of his dusty pickup.

Gravel plinks against the underbelly of his ‘76 F-150 as plump summer bugs meet their maker in the golden

headlights. Cracking my window, I drag in a lungful of tepid mountain air.

“Wyatt. Come on now.” I lean closer, ignoring the protest of my seatbelt. The perpetual scent of freshly cut hay, worn leather, and ozone fills the narrow space between us as I trail my fingertips up his forearm. “Two months from now, there’ll be no one here to pick your brain. You’ll have all those beautiful thoughts in there and no way to get them out.”

Lord knows I’m teasing about the last part, but then again, am I? I’m told Wyatt never said a word until he was three years old. He was toddling around the mechanical barn at his family’s ranch when his daddy took a fall on some spilt oil and hit his head against the side of a sickle attachment. Calm and steadfast, he made it back to the house to find his mama in the basement doing the wash. Tugging on her shirt, he pulled her toward the stairs, uttering the word “Dada” again and again. Wyatt’s Mama was so overjoyed with tears at the fact that her little boy was finally talking, that she didn’t pick up on the urgency of the situation ... at first.

Either way, it all came up roses. Wyatt saved his daddy’s life and saved his mama from wondering how they were ever going to get their son the proper medical diagnosis and help he needed while managing a barely profitable farm in the middle of nowhere.

“What are you going to do when I’m gone, huh?” I relax into my half of the bench seat, slide my sandals off, and kick my feet onto the dash. “What are you going to do when there’s no one else to bug you?”

“I’ve got Cash for that,” he says, referring to his precocious youngest brother.

“Who’s going to keep all your secrets?”

“I’ll write ‘em down in my diary.” He keeps a straight face, but his aquamarine gaze glints in the dark, reflecting against the electric moon over the horizon.

“Who’s going to ride the line with you? Someone needs to keep Ginger straight. You know how she gets when she hasn’t been ridden in a while.”

I think of my spirited red mare, though she isn’t technically *mine*. She lives with and belongs to the Buchanans. Wyatt found her at a sale barn a few years back. The poor thing had a reputation for being feisty. Rumor was no one wanted her because she had too much personality and was beyond her best taming years. But she reminded Wyatt of me—or so he says. Anyway, he bought her for the low, low price of three hundred and fifty bucks and spent an entire summer breaking her so I’d have something to ride.

“Mama says she’ll keep her ridden for you,” he says.

“Your mama’s already got enough on her plate ...”

Renata Buchanan is a force of nature who both fascinates and terrifies me. A former rodeo beauty queen, she married Ambrose at the age of twenty-one, traded in her tiara for a cowgirl hat, and birthed not one, not two, but four rowdy, rough-and-tumble boys. She’s equal parts gentle and tough, loves hard, and protects her own harder.

“Why do I get the sense you want me to talk you out of leaving?” he asks.

Willie Nelson croons on the staticky AM radio, and the truck bounces over a patch of potholes as we soar through winding roads and over dark hills like a Wyoming rollercoaster ride. These are the little things I’m going to miss when I’m in New York.

Gathering a hard breath, I let it go.

“I don’t know ...” my thoughts trail, but I continue, “because maybe I want to know that you’re going to miss me? Or something?”

Wyatt slows down as we approach our turn at the Gallagher corner, the one with the dilapidated one-room schoolhouse and the ancient mulberry tree with the gnarled limbs. My stomach cartwheels in anticipation as we approach the line shack where we’ve spent countless late nights together talking and dreaming and enjoying each other’s company in more ways than one ...

For years, this has been our thing.

And he’s been my person.

In two months, I’m leaving it all behind ...

“Why *wouldn’t* I miss you?” He turns to me, his dark brows meeting, and for a flicker of a moment, I’m reminded of the first time I saw his gorgeous face. We were just a couple of freshman kids hiding in the back of a social studies classroom for reasons we didn’t share at the time. I borrowed a pencil from him when my lead broke. He stole glances at me when he thought I wasn’t looking. Every so often, our eyes would catch, and I swear to God I saw stars. *Literal stars*. I spent the rest of the day lightheaded, floating on a breeze with a song in my head like some Disney princess who finally met The One.

After that, I *had* to know him.

I couldn’t *not* know him.

He was all I thought about from the moment my eyes opened first thing in the morning, until the moment my head hit the pillow at night, and even then, he’d visit me in my dreams.

Teenage infatuation aside, I never could've anticipated just how close we were going to become or that he'd become my first everything.

Wyatt stops the truck outside the stone-covered line shack, his headlights pointing into the pitch black one-room shack. Inside rests a rickety double bed layered in antique quilts, a rocking chair, a card table, a kerosene lamp, a wood-burning stove, and a handful of canned goods. Back in his grandfather's time, they'd hire men to stay with the herds over the winter. It was always single guys with no families and sometimes no pasts. Men passing through looking for a temporary job or loner types who wanted to be alone with their thoughts for months on end.

People like Wyatt, in a way.

His older brothers have done the line shack stint a winter or two, but never Wyatt. He was never old enough. But now that he's graduated high school and he intends on staying to work the ranch, I imagine he'll get a turn—which means I'll have no way to reach him for several months on end. Some of the line shacks are so remote there isn't a cell tower for hours and there certainly isn't postal service.

"You really think I won't miss you?" His voice is low, as if he's equally hurt and insulted. Unfastening my seatbelt, he pulls me in until I'm tucked under his arm.

His breath warms the top of my head as I drag him into my lungs and let everything about this moment sink into my marrow. It's the strangest sensation—being stuck in the beautiful present yet mourning something you're about to lose at the same time. It's magic and heartbreak all rolled into one.

"I *know* you'll miss me," I finally admit. "Maybe I just wanted to hear you say it."

“You’re a shit liar, Blaire,” he says without hesitation.

I peel myself from the comfort of his embrace. “I beg your pardon, Buchanan?”

“This isn’t about me missing you. It’s about you being scared.” His words drop a bomb of silence into the small space we share. “You want me to beg you to stay. You want me to tell you not to go to New York. But I’m not going to do that. You’re going.”

My throat dries. I try to swallow, but nothing happens.

It’s the most he’s spoken all night—and he isn’t wrong ...

Since childhood, I’ve dreamt of moving to New York, taking acting classes, and seeing my name in lights on Broadway. My father always said I had a penchant for theatrics, that I was born a “dramatic soul.” But I can’t help it if I feel everything more intensely than anyone else, that I can cry on demand, that I used to read old movie scripts in elementary school instead of *Little House on the Prairie* and *Babysitter’s Club*. I can’t help that one lifetime isn’t enough for me. I want to live a thousand of them, and the only way to remotely do that without being certifiable is to step into a written role and become someone else for a couple of hours at a time.

“I’ll be damned if *I’m* the reason you stay,” he says before killing the engine. “Don’t you dare go throwing your dreams away on my account.”

Wyatt Buchanan is a lot of things. Selfish is the least of them.

Reaching for the driver’s side door, he props it open, keeping it ajar with his booted foot.

“Who’s the quiet one now?” he asks. Nodding toward the line shack, he gives me a solemn-faced wink. “Now get your ass inside so I can show you how much I’m going to miss you when you go.”

I slide out, meeting him by the entry as he tends to the combination lock—his birthday, my birthday, and the day we first met. The door creaks open a second later, and he leads me inside by the hand.

In an instant, he backs me against the closest wall. His lips find mine in the dark, our peppermint tongues dancing. The man may not talk much, but it never keeps him from putting that mouth to good use.

Moonlight spills in through the western window, highlighting our silhouettes just enough to ensure we don’t trip over the rocking chair on our way to the bed. Scooping me into his arms, he carries me to the lumpy mattress as I slip his favorite old co-op hat off his head and run my fingers through his sandy blond waves. His daddy always teases him about his hair, pulling on the strands that curl around his ears and stop barely above his shoulders and calling him a “pretty boy.” And he is pretty—those blue-green eyes with the fringe of dark lashes, his dimpled chin and that jawline for days. He’s a sight for the sorest of eyes.

I imagine he’d have cut his locks by now had I not protested.

He leaves them long for me.

Wyatt does a lot of things for me.

Pinning me against the mattress, he slides a pillow beneath my head before trailing kisses down my neck and along the tops of my spilling cleavage. Shoving the hem of my tank top

up, he moves for my stomach next. Dragging his tongue along my bare flesh, he breathes me in all the while working the top button of my jean skirt.

Staring at the black ceiling, I close my eyes and let my mind wander. It's difficult to enjoy this, to be present for Wyatt, when our carefree days together are limited. It's funny, when you're young you think you've got all the time in the world. Then one day, you hit adulthood, you graduate from high school, and reality slaps you in the face.

These summer nights are all we have—and they're numbered.

Lately I can't stop thinking about what it'll be like once I leave and come back. Will we still be us? Will it be strange? What if he meets someone who makes him feel all the things I make him feel and then some? What if *I* meet someone?

We're both naked now, though I have no recollection of who removed which article of clothing and in what order—I've been too busy conjuring up a laundry list of what-ifs and worst-case scenarios.

His tongue snakes between my thighs, and I grab a fistful of his thick waves, trying like hell to focus and enjoy this. Crawling over me, his hardness presses into my inner thigh as his mouth and hands work my swollen breasts.

But just like that—Wyatt stops.

Climbing off of me, he lays on the empty half of the small bed, his head propped on his hand.

“What?” I ask. “Why'd you stop?”

He shoots me a look that suggests I know the answer to my own question.

“Come on.” I trace my fingers along his chiseled chest and scoot closer, and then I lift my mouth to his—only to be rebuffed. “Really?”

“You’ve been like this the last two times.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” He drags an overworked hand through his messy hair. “Distracted.”

I sit up slightly, resting on my elbows. “Can you blame me?”

“No,” he says. “Not at all.”

My eyes rest on his, seeking refuge and basking in his understanding. Ever since my acceptance letter from New York Theatre Arts Academy arrived in the mail last fall, my dad and stepmom have been full speed ahead on Operation Move Blaire to New York. It’s everything I ever wanted, but it’s happening so fast.

“You’re leaving the only home you’ve ever known to go thousands of miles away and bunk up with people you’ve never met. It’s a lot to put on a person,” he says. “But if anyone can do it, it’s you.”

For years, Wyatt has teased me about walking into a place full of strangers and coming out with a handful of shiny new best friends. In all honesty, I’m probably too friendly for a place like Manhattan, but I aim to use it to my advantage. The world of acting and theater is all about networking. You don’t make connections by being a wallflower.

“What if I hate it?” I ask. “What if I become one of those cliché actors? The ones who drop out of school and wait tables to pay their rent and never get callbacks?”

“Then you come back here.”

“And do what?” Visions of myself opening a community theater and staging productions of *Oklahoma!* and *Shakespeare in Love* come to mind.

“Work the ranch with me,” he says.

I wrinkle my nose. Wyatt lives for working the ranch. It’s all he’s ever done and all he ever wants to do. One of these days, he’s going to take over his daddy’s land and never look back. And he should. He’s damn good at it. He’s up before the sun every day doing chores without so much as a complaint, and when he’s not cutting hay or checking cattle, he’s sharpening machinery and running into town for parts—almost always with me in tow.

I’ve loved being his little sidekick, but I’m no Renata Buchanan.

“You’ve got jokes,” I say.

“Then get a job at your daddy’s bank.”

“Double no.” I would never—and could never—work for my father, and for a myriad of reasons.

“Point is, you’ve got options. It’s not everything or nothing. It’s not success or failure.” He slides one hand behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. A long, slow breath sends a rise to his chest, and when he lets it go, he turns back to me. “But I mean it. If you don’t like it there, if it’s not what you thought it would be, if you change your mind about whatever it is you want in this life, come home and I’ll be waiting for you. We’ll pick back up where we left off.”

I tip-toe my fingertips along the dip of his right tricep. “I would never expect you to wait for me.”

“Where else am I going to go?”

“No. I mean ... I don’t expect you to wait for me *romantically*. If you meet someone else, I’ll under—”

He silences me with a kiss. A brief and punishing kiss, but a kiss nevertheless. “There’ll never be someone else. Only you.”

“You don’t have to say that.” I slink a shoulder to my ear. “You’re trying to make me feel better, but I just want to have a real conversation.”

“All of our conversations are real.”

“You know what I mean ...”

Wyatt squints in the dark. He’s never been one to bullshit or sugarcoat. He doesn’t mince words. He’s a straight shooter and only speaks when he has something he feels is worth the time and energy it takes to form the words that leave his perfect lips. But while I know all of this, I can’t help but assume a part of him is trying to make a part of me a little less scared about leaving.

“We don’t have to idealize this,” I say. “And we don’t have to make promises we can’t keep.”

“I’ve never broken a promise to you in my life.”

“Exactly. So why risk ruining your winning streak?”

Wyatt rolls his eyes.

“Will you come visit me in New York?” I ask. I’ve yet to bring this up this until now because I know how he feels about big cities. He thinks he’ll get claustrophobic with all the shoulder-to-shoulder crowds and all the dead-eyed people crammed into underground trains. He likes the peace and quiet, the wide-open spaces. He needs to be able to see the

stars at night and to breathe clean mountain air. Also, he's never been on a plane in his life. His parents are so busy with the ranch that they don't get around to traveling, and it's always a chore to find someone to cover work duties anyway.

"If you want me to," he says without hesitation.

I laugh at the mental image of my strapping Wyoming cowboy navigating airports and gray city blocks.

"I wouldn't do that to you," I say. "I plan on coming home as much as I can. Will you write me letters?"

"Thought you said you couldn't read my handwriting?"

"Ever heard of email?" I ask. "I'd even settle for a text. Nothing elaborate. Just let me know whenever you're thinking about me ..."

He sniffs. "I'd be blowing up your phone then."

"I won't mind."

Wyatt threads his callused hands through mine, pushing a hard breath through his nostrils.

"It's going to be hard, Blaire," he says. "Talking to you. Texting you. But not being able to see you any time I want."

"We can FaceTime."

His eyes catch mine. "I mean in person."

The pit of my stomach grows heavy and a hot threat of bile rises up the back of my throat. Is this the precursor to a breakup speech? Is he saying he's a man and he's going to have needs while I'm gone? It doesn't seem like Wyatt's style, but for the past few months, I keep getting this feeling like I'm on a runaway train headed for a crash collision. Things have been too good these last few years, and if there's anything I've

learned in my short little life, it's that good things rarely ever last. It's a truth my father has ingrained in me from a young age, shortly after the untimely death of his one true love ... my sweet mother.

I sit up, because lying down for a talk like this doesn't seem right.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"Nowhere. I just ..." my breath turns shallow and the room grows hot. "Continue with what you were saying."

"You're going to be in a new place. You'll probably get homesick a time or two. And if you keep talking to me, you're going to keep missing me, and all it's going to take is a bad day or two to make you want to pack your things and catch the next flight home," he speaks like it's gospel. "I know how these things happen. I saw it with Tripp and Cassidy."

"You can't compare what we have to what your brother had with Cass."

"Maybe. I guess what I'm trying to say, Blaire, is that I don't want to hold you back. I want you to go to the city and chase your dreams and when you catch them, I want you to run like hell."

"And I can't do that if we're talking every day?"

"You can. But it'll be hard."

My cheeks bloom with warmth, and I slide off the bed, fanning my face as I pace the small space beside the bed.

"I knew it. I knew you were breaking up with me. Oh my god. I'm such an idiot." I fish around in the dark for my clothes, which are strewn around the shack.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” He climbs off the bed, wrapping his hands gently around my wrists and turning me to face him. Capturing my full attention, he cups my cheek in his hand before leaning down to deposit a slow kiss. “Never.”

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at.” I press my ear against his chest, taking in the steady thrum of his heart.

“You and me, Blaire, we’re so much more than labels and all that nonsense,” he says. “I’ve told you that from day one.”

It’s true. We’ve never referred to each other as boyfriend or girlfriend or high school sweethearts or any of that. Our closeness has spanned beyond anything a label could ever define. We’ve always just been ... us.

No questions, no doubts: just Wyatt and Blaire.

“I want the world for you,” he says. “But you can’t have the world if you’ve got one leg straddling New York and the other one back in Whiskey Springs.”

“Maybe that’s not for you to decide.”

“Then let me ask you this. If I asked you to stay. If I told you right now that I wanted you to never leave Wyoming and we’ll let everything happen how it’s going to happen ... would you?” He studies me in the dark, though I can’t bring myself to look at him.

He knows the answer to that question.

And so do I.

I’d stay in a heartbeat.

“I could marry you tomorrow,” Wyatt says. “And good God, would I be the happiest man alive. But ten, fifteen, maybe twenty years from now, there may come a night when

you're lying in bed wondering ... what if I'd have gone? What if I'd have at least tried?"

Silence clings between us for a moment, and I picture myself at forty. A thin gold wedding band on my finger. A couple of kids or so. An unfulfilled dream in my heart and the opportunity to chase it long gone.

"I'm not going anywhere," he continues. "I'll be here. I'll always be here. Was born on this ranch and I'll die here too." Wyatt takes my hands in his. "*Go*. Go to the city. Make me proud. Make *yourself* proud. And if you decide it's not what you want or you'd rather be here with me, I'll be waiting."

I love the sound of that.

It's the best of both worlds.

But I'm also not naïve to the fact that he's a young man—an insanely attractive one to boot, and he's going to have needs. And one of these days, while I'm studying lines at a coffee shop in Brooklyn, there could be another pretty little thing riding my horse and sitting shotgun in his truck and putting that dimpled smile on his face.

"What if I make it so big, I never come back?" I ask. While the odds of me becoming some rampant breakout actress are akin to winning a lottery jackpot, there's always a chance.

"Then you'll have everything you've ever wanted, and you'll have me to thank for pushing you out the door when you were digging your heels in."

Drawing in his musky scent, I release a soft sigh. "I just wish I could have it both ways. I wish I could go knowing that I was going to end up with you in the end, no matter what."

His lips bunch at one side and his brows furrow. “Maybe you can.”

“What do you mean?”

Brushing a strand of hair from my forehead, he says, “How about we make a pact?”

“What kind of pact?”

“In ten years, if we’re both still single—and I know I’ll be—we get married no matter where we are in life. If you’ve made it, if you haven’t. If I’m running the ranch, if I’m not. We’ll worry about the specifics when the time comes. But for the next ten years, I say we focus on all the things we want to do while we’re young and free knowing we’ll come back to each other in the end.”

“So like a marriage pact.”

“Yeah. A marriage pact.”

“You sure you want to make a promise like that?” I cock my head.

“Never been so sure of anything in my life,” he says without pause. “You’re the only one for me, Blaire. If I have to wait ten years to call you mine again, it’s a small price to pay when we’ve got the rest of our lives to make up for it.”

My stomach somersaults and I slink my arms over his shoulders, rising on my toes to kiss every inch of the face I’ve memorized down to the last freckle.

“I love you so damn much,” he says, scooping me back into his arms and placing me back on the bed. “I’ll wait for you, Blaire. I promise.”

Wyatt Buchanan already stole my heart and soul, and just like that, he also steals my forever.

Chapter One

Ten Years Later

Blaire

“Wait, I thought you had the night off?” My roommate, Giada, leans in the doorway of the cramped Lower East Side bathroom we share, eyeing my all-black work ensemble.

I smooth my hair into a low bun before securing it with a clear elastic. “I did. But I was asked to come in and cover.”

“Ah.” She pouts.

“I know.” I tame a flyaway before slicking on a coat of classic red long-wear lipstick. We were supposed to do mud masks, order Thai, and binge watch some new true crime doc on Netflix tonight, but my boss called and all but offered me her first born if I’d come in tonight and pick up a few tables. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise. Diego sprained his ankle this week, and Masha is out of town, Brennan is still in training, and we’re already short in the kitchen.”

“No, it’s fine. I get it. Someone has to save the day. Might as well be the person who never says no to anyone.”

Turning to face her, I place my hands on her arms. “Don’t be mad, okay? I already feel awful.”

She rolls her eyes, pretending to be annoyed, but I know she gets it. Giada grew up in Jersey, the daughter of a

restaurateur. She practically lived in the back office of her family's popular Italian restaurant for the bulk of her childhood. Clanging pots and pans were her lullaby some nights. By twelve, she was filling cannolis. By fourteen she was learning how to properly grate fresh Parmigiano Reggiano. By sixteen, she was working mandatory weekend shifts and stockpiling tip money as her ticket out of there. And by eighteen, she cashed in her life savings and moved to the city to make her own way, vowing never to work in a restaurant again.

These days, the smell of chicken parm still makes her nauseous.

I squeeze past her and trot to my room, swiping my apron, keys, and phone from my nightstand, only to find a slew of missed calls all in a row. My heart trips for a second when I think about the audition I had last week. I was so certain I nailed it, and the casting director seemed overly enthusiastic about the subtle nuances I was bringing to the character, but so far it's been ... crickets.

I scroll through my phone, only to find it wasn't my agent who called me repeatedly—it was my stepmother, Odette.

Odette *never* calls me.

It's always been my father who calls.

A cool sweat blankets my brow as I dial her back. My heart inches up my chest with each stilted beat, and my mouth runs dry.

“Blaire?” Odette answers in the middle of the first ring. “Oh, thank goodness you called back.”

“Is my father okay?” I cut to the chase.

She hesitates. “He’s ... he was just admitted to the hospital over in Greenspout. He’s okay. For now. But he took a fall earlier today. At least that’s what I think happened. I found him behind the garage. He was cleaning the gutters, and he must have fallen off the ladder. He was disoriented, but there was a contusion on his forehead and he’s complaining of blurry vision, so they want to keep him overnight for observation.”

I exhale and take a seat on the edge of my bed.

This could’ve been so much worse.

“I was just thinking ... that it might be nice if you came home?” She speaks slowly, carefully. “I know we’ve always come out your way, but I think it’d mean a lot to your father to have you home again. Just for a visit, you know. Something to lift his spirits. And I don’t know, maybe you could have a talk with him about finally retiring? His doctor’s been pushing him to hang up his hat for years, but you know how your father is. Stubborn as a mule.”

I stifle a chuckle, but not at my father—at Odette. I imagine she’s the main reason he’s yet to “hang up his hat.” They’ve been married since I was five, but they’ve never been overly wild about each other. It always seemed like a companionship sort of arrangement. My father was a lonely widower with money and Odette wanted someone to take care of her. I’m sure he also thought he was getting some kind of mother figure out of the deal for my benefit, but motherhood was never on Odette’s bucket list. The woman doesn’t have a maternal bone in her body, but at least she was always real about it. She’s never been fake or pretended to care when she didn’t. She’s always kept me at arm’s length and it’s been no skin off my back.

We have an understanding.

We all do.

“Blaire, are you still there?” Odette asks.

“Yeah. Yes. I’m just ... trying to figure out the logistics ... I’ve got an audition next week ... and we’re short at work ...”

“Need I remind you this is your father we’re talking about?” Her voice is cutting and curt.

I bury my face in my hands. I know how this sounds. And she’s right. Over the years, I’ve gotten away with giving them a million excuses as to why I can’t come home. But now that my father is laid up, all of those excuses are null and void.

It isn’t that I don’t want to see him or that I don’t want to come home—it’s that I don’t want to see the other *him*.

Wyatt Buchanan.

For ten years, I’ve avoided the man like the plague.

But to be fair, he avoided me first.

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About the Author

Wall Street Journal and #1 Amazon bestselling author [Winter Renshaw](#) is a bona fide daydream believer. She lives somewhere in the middle of the USA and can rarely be seen without her trusty Mead notebook and laptop. When she's not writing, she's living the American Dream with her husband, three kids, the laziest puggle this side of the Mississippi, and a busy pug pup that officially owes her three pairs of shoes, one lamp cord, and an office chair.

Winter also writes psychological suspense under the pseudonym of Minka Kent. Her debut novel, THE MEMORY WATCHER, was optioned by NBC Universal in January 2018 and her book, THE THINNEST AIR, was a #1 Amazon Kindle bestseller and a Washington Post best seller five weeks in a row.

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