



SWINGING *and a* MISHAP

*He thought he was out at first...
Now he'll be sliding into home.*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TARA SIVEC

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“Hawks fans still in shock after centerfielder, Shepherd Oliver, sustained season-ending injury last night in the 5th inning of the playoffs against Chicago.”

Two years ago, I was a pretty big deal. I thought I had it all, until a blast from my past popped up on my social media feed, keeping my ego in check and reminding me how basic I am. Except sassy Wren Bennett isn't just a blast from my past. She's the only woman I ever saw a future with.

Even though my soul leaves my body every time she says she hates baseball and has never watched me play, a year's-worth of messages filled with laughter and sarcasm only remind me how amazing my “pen pal” is. Unfortunately, it doesn't matter how fine I look in a pair of baseball pants; I'm still 3,000 miles away, and she's taken... or so I thought. Maybe I should have thought a little harder before I dropped her like a seeing-eye single into the outfield.

When an injury has me questioning everything about my life, I can only think of one place I need to go and one person I need to see. Home, to Summersweet Island, to get back my “pen pal.”

Now I just need to make sure single mom Wren knows I didn't come back for a change, and I didn't come back for a job. I'm swinging for the fences, and I'm finally coming home to make her mine. If only she'd stop insulting me and stay in one place long enough for me to tell her. She wouldn't try to drown me with a tub of ice cream, right?

I'm sure it'll be fine.

Swing and a Mishap

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For Drew.

My favorite baseball player in the whole world.

Never, ever read past this page.

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PROLOGUE

Two years ago...

Official Shepherd Oliver: Hey! Long time, no talk! I hope you don't think it's creepy I'm private messaging you after not talking since, oh, a few years after high school. I just get a little weird about having personal conversations out in the open on social media in front of the whole world to see, so I thought I'd move our discussion from the video you posted.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Okay, that makes me sound like a celebrity diva. I'm NOT a diva, I swear. I will lose my shit if there isn't grape Bubblicious bubble gum in the locker room on game days, but that's a superstition and for the well-being of my team and has absolutely nothing to do with me being a demanding princess. This privacy has less to do with me and my personal business and more to do with my friends and family and THEIR personal business. Our fans are awesome but rabid. Someone showed up at my cousin David's house once with a present for me, because David commented on one of my pictures, and this fan went down the Google rabbit hole until she found his address.

Official Shepherd Oliver: This fan didn't break into his house and boil a bunny or like, cut off one of her fingers and leave it on David's front porch or anything. The present was actually a very lovely scrapbook she put together. So many cool freaking stickers. And only ten pages of Photoshopped pictures of the two of us in compromising positions accompanied by a poem about how true our love is. It's fine. Nothing bad happened, and she's safely behind bars now.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Wow, so I'm really making it sound like a super idea to continue talking to me. You can go ahead and block me now. I will completely understand. Tell everyone I'm sorry I couldn't make it home for the high school reunion a few years ago.

Wren Bennett: LOL OMG!

Wren Bennett: Sorry! I hit Enter too soon. Probably because I was laughing so hard. Or crying? I don't know. Your life is strange but much

more exciting than mine. And it's totally fine about moving our conversation private. I get it. You're a big, famous professional baseball player now. Seriously, congratulations on all your success, Shepherd! It's amazing. And thank you for the tip you gave me on the video I posted of my son's first time at bat from his game last week. He stepped into the pitch instead of stepping out when he swung at his next game and got a triple. I screamed so loud I couldn't talk for days LOL!

Official Shepherd Oliver: Holy shit, that's amazing! Good for him. There is absolutely nothing better than learning a new skill and watching it work for you. It's kind of crazy I just happened to get on social media for the first time in forever, and your video was the first thing to pop up. I haven't logged in to any of my stuff in ages. My PR person handles all of that for me, but she's on vacation, and my teenage nieces keep yelling at me for not being cool or knowing how to use the SnapGramInstaWeb whatever. Anyway, your son's got a beautiful natural swing, and it caught my eye. I'm glad I could help. Seriously, any baseball questions you have EVER, don't hesitate to ask.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Sorry, am I overstepping? I'm sure his dad can give him whatever help he needs.

Wren Bennett: You're definitely not overstepping. And his dad... isn't big into sports. Your expertise is definitely appreciated.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I wasn't sure if he was in your lives or not and didn't want to be a jerk and come right out and ask. There aren't any pictures of him on your account or anything. Not that I was a creeper and looked (I was totally a creeper and looked). And also, like ZERO pictures of your son (Insert sarcasm here). Wow, it's like you don't even care that you're his mom.

Wren Bennett: Ha ha, very funny. I realize there are an alarming number of pictures and videos of Owen on my social media. Whatever, don't judge me. I'll slow my roll when he's a teenager in a year, complains that I'm being annoying, and wants nothing to do with me. *crying emoji*

Official Shepherd Oliver: I am definitely not judging you. I think it's awesome you're so proud of him. Also, have you seen my mother's

social media lately? Why in the hell did I ever buy her a smartphone and teach her how to use it? She posted a throwback picture of me in little league, the first time I ever played center field. I'm on my back making grass angels in the outfield while picking my nose.

Wren Bennett: I know. My sister printed it and hung it up in her office at the golf course.

Official Shepherd Oliver: By "my sister," you mean you, right?

Wren Bennett: Gotta go, late for work!

Official Shepherd Oliver: I feel so betrayed! Make it up to me by watching me play tonight. Home game against the Longhorns, prime time on channel 3.

Wren Bennett: Maybe. We'll see how early I get home from work. Don't think I've ever seen one of your games. Sorry!

Official Shepherd Oliver: GASP! I feel more betrayed right now than when April Miller dumped me two days before senior prom.

Wren Bennett: OMG I forgot about that! It was the first time in Summersweet High School history the prom king didn't have a date. If it makes you feel any better, April Miller is kind of a ho now. Gina at Starboard Sweets told me April went to a bachelorette party in Vegas last month and came home with herpes from a bartender she hooked up with at the Chippendales show, and now she can't get a date to save her life.

Official Shepherd Oliver: So the rumors are true—Herpes really IS the gift that keeps on giving. This news pleases me. Your betrayal has been forgiven.



Official Shepherd Oliver: Nice comeback for a win against the Rangers last night! Tell Owen to turn his hips more when he's swinging. His hips need to get in front of his shoulders before he plants his back foot. He's a little guy like I was at that age. Getting his hips going will help him drive that ball just as far as guys bigger and stronger than him.

Wren Bennett: You know I didn't start talking to you again just to use you for your baseball knowledge. But thank you!

Official Shepherd Oliver: Oh, I know. It's definitely because of my sparkling personality and how great I look in a pair of baseball pants. Also, I told you two weeks ago what you could do for me as payback for my brilliance. Would you look at that? My inbox is still void of the video I requested.

Wren Bennett: You know what you asked for is weird, right? And if you came home to visit Summersweet Island every once in a while, you wouldn't need a video, and you could experience what you desire live and in person.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I still can't believe I haven't made it back to the island since I left. What's it been, like thirteen years? It's just hard with my schedule and now that my parents live over on the mainland closer to my sisters and their families. And since my parents are retired and have become travelholics, they always want to fly out to wherever I am to visit. I know. I suck.

Wren Bennett: You DO suck. You're such an awful human being for buying your parents a gorgeous new home in Norfolk so they can use their cottage here on the island as a vacation home and making it so they never have to work again, as well as setting up the Little Cleats Foundation, a charity that donates over 5,000 little league uniforms to teams that can't afford them every year. I'm kind of disgusted I'm even talking to you right now. *puking emoji*

Official Shepherd Oliver: I don't remember you being such a shit-talker in high school.

Wren Bennett: I've seen some shit, so I talk some shit.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Keep it up. It looks good on you, Bennett. Also, send me the video I requested and know you recorded. SEND IT!

Wren Bennett: OMG...

Wren Bennett: *video attachment* And no, I did NOT set it to porn music, you weird perv.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Seriously? You couldn't even record this in slow motion for me? You, dipping your hand into a container of salt water taffy from Chew on This while letting the delicious wax-paper-wrapped nuggets of heaven drop from your palm at normal speed is just pointless and awful cinematography.

Wren Bennett: Were you hit in the head by a pitch recently?

Official Shepherd Oliver: Shhh... I'm on the 13th viewing of this video. I can almost taste them. I fucking miss that salt water taffy, man. Send me another video next time you're there. And for the love of the salt water taffy gods, RECORD IT IN SLOW MOTION. Do a closeup of you unwrapping a piece too. Slooowly.

Wren Bennett: I'm blocking you.



Official Shepherd Oliver: Hey, you still up? I have a really important question.

Wren Bennett: Who is this?

Official Shepherd Oliver: Seriously? I'm messaging you from my official Instagram account like always. My name and picture are literally right there in front of you.

Wren Bennett: You could be a troll impersonating the famous pro baseball player, Shepherd Oliver, who I went to high school with. So many crazies in the world these days. Elvis followed me on Twitter yesterday. Apparently, he's alive and well in Tucson and has 136 followers. You're going to need to do something to prove to me you're really who you say you are before I can continue this conversation. Tell me something only the real Shepherd Oliver would know.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Or you could just scroll up and look at the ten thousand messages you've sent me over the last few months since we started talking again. You're very needy.

Wren Bennett: Who messaged me two nights ago from the grocery store because he couldn't decide between mint chocolate chip or cookie dough ice cream? Oh, that's right. NOT you, because you're a troll pretending to be Shepherd Oliver. BYE.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Your family owns one of the best ice cream stands in the entire world. When I am having an ice cream crisis, of COURSE I'm going to message the ice cream queen. And might I remind you that your lack of an immediate response during my crisis caused me to get recognized by a fan? I had to put up with seven selfies all with different filters in the goddamn freezer section and was so annoyed by that point I ended up putting sherbet in my cart. Sherbet is where ice cream goes to die, Wren.

Wren Bennett: A troll could easily google that information about me. Not good enough, TROLL.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Fine. Something only the real Shepherd Oliver would know? Okay then, after exactly 3.5 vodka slushes, you think you can sing and like to send videos of yourself doing so at two in the morning. #itsoundslikeaherdocatsdying #dontquityourdayjob

Wren Bennett: It was ONE video two nights ago, and you know I didn't mean to send it to you. It was supposed to go to my sister to cheer her up. You are the worst. I swear to God you better have deleted that video.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Of course I deleted it! Speaking of your sister, I see Birdie is still rage posting on social media about people showing their true colors. Her best friend still hasn't spoken to her?

Wren Bennett: Nope. Not a word in months. I feel so bad for her, but I don't know what else to do.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I remember meeting Palmer Campbell with you guys a few times back in high school. He seemed like a cool guy, and he's definitely a badass on the golf course. You're a good sister. Don't beat yourself up over it. I'm sure they'll work it out.

Wren Bennett: Yeah, you're probably right. They'll work things out eventually. Anyway, what was the important question you had for me?

Official Shepherd Oliver: *video attachment*

Official Shepherd Oliver: My question is, when you play this video, do the island dogs start howling and do the windows in your cottage start breaking?

Wren Bennett: I hate you so much right now. You said you deleted it!

Official Shepherd Oliver: My fingers were crossed when I typed that.



Wren Bennett: If you had to pick between the Devils or the Warhawks for a baseball travel team to play on, which would you choose?

Official Shepherd Oliver: I played for the Warhawks. It's pricier but in my opinion worth the extra money. Your son will get a lot more one-on-one training during practice with them than he will with the Devils. And the Warhawks offset the costs of the tournaments you'll play with a lot of fundraising, so in the end, you most likely won't even pay tournament fees. When you take Owen to tryouts, ask for Brian Riggle and tell him I sent you. He's in charge of Owen's age group.

Wren Bennett: THANK YOU!

Official Shepherd Oliver: I'm at the airport now getting ready to board a plane to Houston for a game, but as soon as I get to the hotel, I'll send you a few YouTube videos of some training drills he can do to get ready for tryouts.



Official Shepherd Oliver: Help me. I'm dying.

Wren Bennett: Are you being overdramatic, or do I actually need to call 911?

Official Shepherd Oliver: When am I ever overdramatic?

Wren Bennett: You sent me an audio clip of nothing but you screaming the other day when I told you no.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I asked you if you've watched me play on TV yet. What response was expected after an answer so flippant and appalling?

Wren Bennett: I'm a little busy at work right now. You want to get to the point of this message anytime soon?

Official Shepherd Oliver: Hey, I didn't tell you to slack off and check social media during work hours. Anyway, no big deal, just hiding out in the men's room at a club in L.A., and I'm pretty sure someone is receiving oral pleasures a few stalls down, and now I can't leave or they'll know I'm in here and it will be really awkward.

Wren Bennett: Are you... going to the bathroom right now??????

Official Shepherd Oliver: No!

Official Shepherd Oliver: Also, possibly yes.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Look, this isn't about me right now. Let's focus on what's important. I'm at a stupid club opening for a friend of a friend, and I only showed up, because David Beckham said he'd never speak to me again if I didn't, and then my dad would never speak to me again if he stopped getting free soccer tickets. Now that the photo ops are over and there's no more free food being passed around (best goddamn crab cakes I've had in my LIFE, and the waiter told me it was because they use fresh dill), I'm bored as hell, so I've been hiding out in the bathroom playing Solitaire on my phone and was just about to beat my top score when two people came in here thinking the bathroom was empty. I can't concentrate on my card game with all this moaning and slurping.

Wren Bennett: That's a lot to unpack in one message. I'm gonna need a minute.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Oh, take your time. I've been stuck in here going on 40 minutes, and it doesn't seem to be ending any time soon. This guy has a lot of stamina. I bet he takes Ginkgo Biloba supplements.

Wren Bennett: 40 minutes???? You should probably check and make sure that poor woman is okay. She'll never be able to use her jaw again.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I'll never be able to take a shit in a public restroom again.

Official Shepherd Oliver: You know, if that's what I was doing, but I totally wasn't.



Wren Bennett: I really hate tourists.

Wren Bennett: No, I don't; I take that back. They're wonderful and buy enough ice cream to pay our bills. Uuugh... whatever! How's your day going?

Official Shepherd Oliver: Screw my day. What's wrong? What happened?

Wren Bennett: I just got yelled at for fifteen minutes, because I don't have any ice cream that doesn't taste like ice cream.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I don't even know how to reply to that statement.

Wren Bennett: Yep. Exactly.

Official Shepherd Oliver: What an asshole. Give me their name. I'll talk to the guy at the field and have him splash it across the jumbotron right before a commercial break with the hashtag loseralert

Wren Bennett: LOL! Thanks, but I'm good now. She finally left a few minutes ago, and I saw her walk into Hang Five Arcade, so I'm sure she's currently complaining to them that they have too many arcade games.

Official Shepherd Oliver: If she comes back, don't say anything. Just give her a big thumbs-down and a frowny face.

Wren Bennett: I don't remember your customer service skills being so poor when you worked at the Dip and Twist in high school.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Your mom would have kicked my ass if I got out of line back then. Also, I was but a young, dumb, teenage boy. I'm a man now, baby.

Wren Bennett: Uh huh, sure. Do you still need me to help you pick out what shoes go with the outfit you planned on wearing to the charity benefit on Friday, big man?

Official Shepherd Oliver: Look, there are a lot of rules in fashion, and I've been on too many best dressed lists to screw this up now.

Wren Bennett: You were on ONE, and it was only because I told you to burn that purple suit you planned on wearing.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I play for the Washington Hawks. Our uniform color is purple, and several members on the team got matching suits because #teamspirit

Wren Bennett: If you wear an old, beat-up pair of Nikes with your tuxedo to A BLACK-TIE CHARITY EVENT, I will never speak to you again.

Official Shepherd Oliver: See? Was that so hard? #bestdressed4ever



Official Shepherd Oliver: I have something totally awesome and kick-ass to tell you, but I am really, really mad at you right now, and I'm never speaking to you again, so that has to come first.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Did you hear me? Never speaking to you again, Wren Bennett.

Wren Bennett: And yet, you're still talking, Shepherd Oliver.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Owen's baseball team was \$3,000 short of the funds they needed to play in the tournament finals in Myrtle Beach, and YOU DID NOT TELL ME OMG I AM SO MAD RIGHT NOW I COULD BREAK MY BAT OVER MY KNEE.

Official Shepherd Oliver: But that would hurt and probably break my knee instead of the bat. WHATEVER I AM NEVER SPEAKING TO YOU AGAIN.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Seriously, Wren. How could you not tell me they needed that money?

Wren Bennett: You can't even last five minutes without speaking to me. You're not very dedicated to your anger.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Stop being cute when I'm mad at you.

Wren Bennett: Stop being mad at me then. You must have seen an old post, because I put together a last-minute fundraiser, and we have the money we need to go to the tournament now.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I didn't anticipate this kind of betrayal from my pen pal. Next time you need ANYTHING, especially if it has to do with Owen's baseball, you damn well better ask for help.

Wren Bennett: Pen pal? Did you go back to 1983 and write that in your diary?

Official Shepherd Oliver: I did. With Lisa Frank stickers and a purple pencil that smells like grapes.

Wren Bennett: Your man card is starting to go up in flames.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Did you forget I have older sisters? They burned my man card the day I was born and dressed me up in their doll clothes. It's a damn good thing I look fucking AMAZING in my uniform. With my dark-brown hair, this purple-and-white jersey really makes my blue eyes pop. It's a sight to behold. And yes, pen pal. We live 3,000 miles away from each other, and you don't call, you don't visit, you don't watch my games on TV.... It's like you don't even care.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Also, what was the deal with your sister's vague post the other night that just said "He's a putz" over and over?

Wren Bennett: That's a new nickname we gave her former friend Palmer.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Catchy. I like it. Do go on.

Wren Bennett: Nothing much more to tell. He won a major golf tournament, and she drunk-Facebooked before we could stop her. That's why I still haven't told her you and I have been talking all this time. She's so sad and in a funk most days, and I don't want to vomit my happiness all over her when she's so upset.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Being my pen pal makes you happy, does it? Do you see butterflies and rainbows when you get a new message from me? I'm particular to sparkly unicorns (see Lisa Frank). I have it in writing now, so you can't take it back.

Wren Bennett: No, but I can definitely take back the package I dropped off at the post office this morning.

Official Shepherd Oliver: OMGOMGOMG did you send me more salt water taffy??? I ate my last piece from the last package you sent at practice a week ago, and I wept in the goddamn batting cages. WEPT, Wren. It wasn't pretty.

Wren Bennett: I know. You've sent me 32 messages since you ate your last piece, telling me you ate your last piece.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Aren't you glad I commented on a video you posted of your son's first time at bat from his game almost a year ago? Which led to us becoming the best pen pals ever, and now I'm always stocked on Summersweet Island salt water taffy, and your awesome kid is well on his way to playing in the major leagues.

Wren Bennett: Slow your roll; he JUST turned thirteen. But yes, I am glad for your sage advice, especially since he's playing middle field now.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Christ, Wren, it's CENTER FIELD. You know, the same position I famously play and kick major fucking ass at? ESPN only named me one of the top five center fielders the last seven years in a row.

Wren Bennett: I only know you're a famous baseball player because you won't shut up about it. You know I only watch the sport when my son is playing.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I swear to God my soul literally leaves my body every time you type those words.

Wren Bennett: Can I go to sleep now, or have you kept me up this late just to annoy me?

Official Shepherd Oliver: Oh, shit! How could I forget the awesome and kick-ass thing I needed to tell you before I yelled at you for MAKING ME VERY, VERY ANGRY? Can't forget my main reason for messaging you and bringing HAPPINESS AND JOY AND UNICORNS AND RAINBOWS AND LISA FRANK INTO YOUR LIFE!!!!

Wren Bennett: I'm blocking you.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Oh, God, don't do that. Then there'll be TWO Bennett sisters rage posting on social media about their former friends. The world can only take so much before it implodes. Anyway, I wanted to thank you for kicking my ass and telling me to do what I wanted with my contract negotiations instead of listening to other people. I didn't need a fucking pay raise; I needed job security. I'm happy to say the no-trade clause will remain in effect until the end of my contract, and the

percentage they were going to give me in more pay will now be going to the Little Cleats Foundation, like I originally wanted.

Wren Bennett: Congratulations! I told you they would give you whatever you asked for. Never doubt me again, Shepherd Oliver.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Dear Diary: My pen pal is super cool and smart! Maybe someday she'll get a soul and watch one of my games on TV and actually start liking the sport of baseball.

Wren Bennett: Don't hold your breath. #soboring #likewatchingpaintdry #idratherdomytaxes

Official Shepherd Oliver: *Shepherd Oliver has reported you for offensive behavior*

Official Shepherd Oliver: *Shepherd Oliver has BLOCKED YOUR ASS*

Wren Bennett: Nice try. You can't get rid of your pen pal that easily. I know where you live, and I know your favorite taffy flavor. #itsvanilla #becauseyabasic



Wren Bennett: Hey, you okay? Haven't heard from you in a few days. Gabriela Rojas stopped by the Dip and Twist last night. We were talking about that senior prank you guys organized where you filled the hallways with thousands and thousands of rubber ducks. Remember that?! Students and teachers still find a random rubber duck hidden around the school every once in a while. That will never stop being funny.



Wren Bennett: Hello?? Is this thing on?? Owen hit a grand slam last night. Did you see the video?!! I don't think I'll ever stop smiling!!!! Where are yooouuu?!!!



“Hawks fans are still in shock after center fielder, Shepherd Oliver, sustained a season-ending injury

last night in the 5th inning of the playoffs against Chicago. He'll undergo surgery today, but it's unclear at this time if this will be a career-ending injury."

CHAPTER 1



Shepherd

“I had a good streak going.”

Present day...

“**Y**OU’RE REALLY DOING it. You’re really moving to some Podunk island in the middle of nowhere. Shepherd Oliver, greatest center fielder in Hawks history, retiring to be a fucking high school baseball coach.”

Twisting the top off a bottle of beer, the only thing left in my fridge at this point, I slide it across the counter of my kitchen island. My friend and former teammate, Nick DeVera, stares around the house I’ve lived in right on the Puget Sound in Washington for almost fourteen years since I was first drafted. Nothing remains inside the 5,000 square foot modern home made from natural steel and black-stained cedar except for a few cardboard boxes in the entryway by the front door and a couch in the living room. So our voices echo off the now bare walls.

“It’s so empty and cold in here. Kind of like your soul.”

Nick snorts with the beer bottle pressed against his mouth, tipping it back and taking a drink as two of the movers come back inside and walk through the open-floorplan home into the living room to grab the couch. Nick and I remain quiet while the men work, having learned early on in our professional baseball careers to always watch what kind of personal information you talk about when strangers are present. One time, I hired a guy to come over once a week and go through

my fan mail for me. I had to fire him after week two for recording a private conversation I had on the phone with my manager and then selling it to the tabloids.

While the two guys lift up the couch that sits right in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows with a panoramic view of the Sound, I look around the place, trying to see it from Nick's perspective when he joked that it's so empty and cold now. To me, it looks and feels exactly the same. Whether it's filled with all the furniture, art, area rugs, and pointless knickknacks my interior designer decorated the place with, or the rooms and walls are completely void of anything, it will always be empty and cold.

There aren't enough priceless paintings or statement furniture pieces in the world to make up for the lack of warmth, love, and noise that other people bring to a home, or to stop me from missing the family of my own I thought I'd have filled this huge house with by now. It was the only reason I bought something so large at such a young age. Baseball was always the most important thing in my life, and I kept telling myself I had plenty of time for everything else. Year after year, I put the game above all else, and for what? An empty and cold house, because all that time passed me by faster than my sprint speed, and now I'm almost thirty-five and still alone.

"No one has seen or heard from you in months since Alana dumped you, and then out of the blue, I get a phone call telling me to come over and help you finish packing," Nick finally continues when the movers are back outside loading the couch onto the truck.

Vomit doesn't rush up to my mouth from my gut when Nick says my ex-girlfriend's name, so at least that's progress. She made a ridiculous media circus out of asking me to make things exclusive a year ago on home plate when I made the winning run that took us to the playoffs, but at least she had the decency to break things off quietly and in private after my injury and after I told her I was thinking about retiring and never playing pro ball again.

“And yet you’ve been here for twenty minutes and haven’t packed a thing.” I scoff.

“Neither have you. You hired movers *and* packers, you rich, lazy dipshit,” Nick replies with a smirk, telling me I’m forgiven for the radio silence all this time. And for leaving him high and dry in the outfield.

Nick was drafted as the starting right fielder for the Hawks a year after me. On our team, a bullpen relief pitcher will come out between innings and warm up the left fielder, leaving the center and right fielders to warm each other up. Nick and I were forced to create a friendship and a bond from day one, whether we liked each other or not, if we wanted our team to succeed. Thankfully, neither one of us are too big of assholes, and we hit it off immediately. Now I’m leaving him with an egotistical rookie center fielder whose opinion of himself is currently higher than his batting average.

“I have to do this, man. Summersweet isn’t a Podunk island in the middle of nowhere. It’s right off the coast of Virginia, and it’s where I’m from; you know that. They needed a high school baseball coach, and I needed a new job,” I remind him with a shrug, flipping his beer bottle cap around through my fingers.

“You haven’t been *from* there since you left a million years ago. Your parents don’t even live there anymore. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter.” Nick laughs, finishing off his beer and sliding the empty bottle across the counter to me so I can toss it in the trash. “Coach told me Doc was happy about the rehab you’d made on your knee and signed off on you returning to work right before spring training this season. We all assumed your injury was too bad to come back, and that’s why you wouldn’t talk to any of us or give any interviews, you asshole.”

Fucking Coach.

I love that guy to death. He was the closest thing to a dad I had here in Washington when my own father couldn’t be here at all times. I trusted him and the advice he gave, and he was

always the first person I went to when I had a problem and my dad was busy. But he's a bigger gossip than the entire small island of Summersweet put together.

"I had a lot of time to think during all this—"

"Of course you did," Nick stops me, getting up from the bar stool and walking around the island to help himself to another beer from my fridge. "You locked yourself away in a condo in the mountains for six months and never picked up my calls or answered my texts. Do you even *know* how many funny memes I sent you during that time that you didn't even appreciate?"

"Believe me, I saw all the Jesus memes you sent," I deadpan as he comes back to his barstool and twists the cap off his fresh beer.

"Come on, that one with him knocking on someone's front door that said *Open the door, man; I gotta shit* was hilarious!"

I give Nick a few minutes to laugh to himself while he thinks back on all the ridiculous messages he sent me while I was locked away feeling sorry for myself, before I continue.

"When I slipped on the bag at third base during that game, I heard the tendons and ligaments in my goddamn knee pop, and I knew it was bad before my body even hit the ground."

Nick winces, but thankfully enough time has passed that I no longer hear that sound in my head every waking minute of the day, and it no longer wakes me up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. I can only imagine how my teammates felt, being stuck in the dugout, watching the team funny guy—the man who never shuts up or stops trying to put people in a good mood, who has sucked it up and played through every injury with a smile on his face—writhe around, clutching his knee and screaming in pain. Nothing was funny after that, and I stopped giving a shit if *anyone* was in a good mood, myself included.

"All those days in the hospital, all that time recovering after surgery, and the months and months of rehab, I had no

idea if I'd ever play again, and that scared the shit out of me," I tell him, all the thoughts I've agonized over pouring out of me after being locked inside my own head for so long with no one to talk to about it. "But it didn't scare me, because I was afraid of never playing again. It scared the hell out of me, because the thought of never playing professional ball again... it didn't freak me out at all. It *relieved* me. So, I started making a list of all the things I love about playing compared to all the things I hate about playing. Let me tell you—that list looks a lot different now that I'm almost thirty-five from when it did when I was in my early twenties."

"Well, obviously," Nick rolls his eyes. "You were young and pretty back then and pulled in a lot of tail. Now you're old and washed up, get winded by the time you make it to second, and all your tail is going to the rookies now."

I drop the cap I'm still twirling in my fingers to punch Nick in the shoulder. Not hard enough to injure him, since he still has to be able to catch a fucking ball. Just hard enough to piss him off. And the punch isn't about the loss of constant female companionship. I haven't given a shit about that in...

Exactly two years, when I suddenly became obsessed with checking social media.

Nick is currently glaring at me while he rubs his shoulder, because even with the knee injury I went through, and even though I am considered "old" by professional baseball standards and actually at prime retirement age, my sprint time is still the best on the team. I can still catch or stop every ball that comes to me in the outfield. And I'm still a beast behind the plate. I have the skill after my injury; I just don't have the heart.

"I don't love it like I used to. The money and the fame don't give me someone to talk to who understands when I'm having a shit day, or to call when I'm lonely out on the road. It doesn't give me someone to make it better after an eight-hour grueling practice, and it doesn't give me kids to play catch with out in the front yard," I explain to him, dropping my head

to look at the two baseball caps I'm now fiddling with on the counter. "You don't get it. You have all of that. You have Amanda and the kids, and you have a reason for wanting to keep busting your ass and putting your body through hell to play the game and bring home a paycheck for them. I have enough money that I never have to work for the rest of my life. Who the fuck am I even doing this for anymore?"

"No, I get it. I do." Nick nods. "If I didn't have Amanda and the boys, I couldn't imagine still doing this job and not having them to come home to."

"I thought I was making the right choice trying to settle down and be serious with Alana and she would be that for me —"

"Oh fuck off, you never once thought that about her," Nick scolds, pointing his beer bottle at me. "You made a hasty decision under pressure on national television so you wouldn't look like an asshole in front of the entire world. She was a vapid social media influencer you met at a party who made you carry her purse in public so she could take ten thousand selfies. She was never going to be your person, and she proved that point by dumping your ass when she found out you weren't going to be a big, famous ballplayer anymore, and she no longer had someone to get her into the best club openings and parties."

All I can do is sigh, because he's right. Alana Caldwell was convenient. I said yes to a date with her, because the person I really wanted to date lived three thousand miles away. And I agreed to make things more serious and exclusive with her a few weeks later, because the person I really wanted to be serious and exclusive with was taken.

Or so I fucking thought.

I didn't just spend the last six months feeling sorry for myself about my injury and about how empty my life is. Before she ended things, every minute I spent alone in the hospital when Alana was too busy to visit, or every time I called and she had one excuse after another for brushing me

off and not having time to talk, it was never more obvious what a bad decision I made. And not just with making things exclusive in front of the whole world or saying yes to that first fucking date. But with my ridiculous decision to abruptly cut off all communication with one of the most important people in my life after that television debacle a year ago, because I thought it was the right thing to do.

And because I thought she was taken. All this goddamn time.

She would have put her life on hold and talked to me on the phone for hours after my injury if it's what I needed.

She would have sent me more messages than Nick to try to cheer me up when I was rehabbing, and she probably would have been the only one to succeed.

She would've absolutely gotten on a plane to come to me if I asked.

But I fucked up and I let her go, because I never thought she was an option for me. And I knew the only way I could move on with my life was to move on from *her*, as shitty as it was and as shitty as it made me feel.

“Coach also let it slip you went back to Summersweet a few weeks ago, but he said you were barely there a full twenty-four hours before you turned right around and came back to Washington. When I asked him what the fuck happened in that short amount of time for you to immediately turn in your resignation and pack up your life here, he said I needed to ask you that. But I'm pretty sure I already know the answer.”

Nick pauses, and a slow smile spreads across his face.

“You're not moving back home for a change or for a job you don't even need. You're moving back home to finally get you your pen pal! It's so sweet I could puke.”

The corner of my mouth twitches at Nick's exuberance as he pumps his arms in the air and dances his big body around on top of my bar stool. Nick was the only person who knew

about my yearlong “pen pal” relationship with Wren Bennett, and it was only because he caught me smiling down at my phone one too many times. He snatched it out of my hand once at practice when I was icing my shoulder in the dugout, and Wren had accidentally sent me a video of herself drunk, singing very, very badly but adorably. Nick naturally assumed I was laughing at a funny meme I hadn’t shared with him and wouldn’t give my phone back to me until he read through damn near all of our messages.

“I’m happy for you, man, but are you sure about this? You really want to retire from pro ball to be a... high school baseball coach?”

“If Jack Carter can do it, so can I. He’s perfectly happy being retired from the game and coaching at Fullton State,” I remind him, referring to our friend who played for the Mets and was one of the greatest pitchers of all time.

“Jack fucking Carter is an anomaly, and don’t forget; he’s got his Kitten to make everything better. I’m assuming since you’ve already packed up your life and made this big decision that you took my advice of apologizing to your pen pal for being an asshole, she forgave you, and now you’re going to live happily ever after on a Podunk island in the middle of nowhere? When’s the wedding, and can I wear purple?” Nick asks, laughing and shielding his face with his arms when I raise my fist and threaten to punch him again.

Nick was never a fan of me cutting off all communication with Wren a year ago, mostly because it turned me into the moodiest of bastards. He’s been telling me to apologize to her ever since I ran out of my last package of salt water taffy and spent fifteen minutes screaming at him in the locker room about what a shitty friend he was for never sending me any surprise goodies in the mail. I didn’t just miss the damn taffy, and Nick knew it. I missed *her*. I missed hearing how her day was, I missed her giving me shit all the time. I missed giving her advice about Owen’s baseball. And I even fucking missed her kid, and I’d never even met him. I’d seen enough videos and heard her talk about him so much it felt like I had though.

When I got the clean bill of health from my surgeon and the Hawks' team doctor, and months later that empty feeling in my gut still hadn't left me, I knew why. I knew what was missing, and I knew what I had to do, where I needed to go, and the only person who could make this feeling go away. I wanted more from Wren the very first time we talked again after high school. She made me laugh when I was feeling sad and alone in a hotel room in Minnesota, eating room service by myself in bed with the local news on. I had been mesmerized by a butter sculpture of a woman, while the rest of my team was out to dinner with their significant others.

But when we spoke about her son's father still being in their lives, she never corrected me. I naturally assumed they were still together. I turned us into pen pals and kept us strictly in the friend zone out of respect for her. I never asked about him again, and she never brought him up, but he was always there, hovering in the back of my mind. This nameless, faceless man who got to see the smile on Wren's face when he said something that amused her, who got to hear her voice when she said his full first and last name, because he said something that annoyed her. The man who got to hold her when she was having a bad day, who got to celebrate with her when she had a good one, and who had the privilege of waking up to her in his bed every morning.

It was hard not to hate a man I'd never even met.

Every damn time I saw a new message pop up in my inbox, every time she said something to make me laugh, every time I felt less lonely out on the road when she'd send me ten pictures of cleats and ask me which ones were best for Owen, I would almost cave and tell her I would give my left arm to have her standing right in front of me instead of thousands of miles away. My right arm to see if she tasted as good as I imagined. And my entire baseball career and all the money I've ever made to see her wearing nothing but my jersey and hear her moaning my name while wearing it.

I had every intention of going right to Wren as soon as I got to Summersweet Island a few weeks ago and apologizing

as soon as I saw her, begging her to be my friend again, even if we could never be more. I would gladly take any part of her she would give me and that her man would be okay with. And then she wasn't at the ballfield during her son's game when I was in town, because she had to work. And I got to hear quite a few conversations from Wren's family while I watched the last hour of the game, to make me realize a quick trip to Summersweet Island to apologize to Wren would never suffice.

Stopping by just to beg her to be my friend again was definitely no longer on the table.

Seeing her again and then turning right around and going back to Washington to live and figure out the rest of my life was absolutely no longer in the cards for me.

Knowing what I know now... the next time I see that woman, I am never, *ever* leaving her again.

Thinking back to that game a few weeks ago, I have never been more thankful to find out Wren's sister Birdie was just as chatty as she used to be back in high school.

"She's going to be pissed she missed you if this is just a quick overnight trip. That woman has more T-shirts, hoodies, and jerseys with your name on the back than anyone else I know, watches every single game like it's a religious experience, and God forbid any of us interrupt her while you're playing."

"I wish Wren wasn't working. There are too many baseball rules I don't know or understand. I never thought I'd say this, but Wren being a baseball freak since birth and it being the only thing she has ever watched on TV since she learned how to use the remote as a toddler would really come in handy right now."

"Did I tell you guys Wren's sperm donor might be coming to Summersweet to visit Owen? That piece of shit hasn't set foot on this island in years, only calls when he wants something, and now he thinks he can just come here and fuck

up their lives in person instead of doing it by phone or text like always.”

“He told her she was looking old the last time he called. Can you believe that shit! He’s also on wife number four now, while Wren continues to be sad and alone like always, so that’s just great.”

“I swear something was up with her a few years ago, and I thought she’d met someone. She was always so happy and giddy and disgusting all the time, even when sperm donor would call and try to bring her down. And then poof! It was gone and she was back to being the same sad and lonely Wren who does everything for everyone else and never makes time for her own happiness. She really needs something new in her life to shake things up. I can’t handle seeing her like this anymore.”

“Nope. I didn’t get the chance to see her or apologize yet,” I finally admit to Nick, pulling myself out of my trip down memory lane. “Once I got there and realized I never wanted to leave, I figured I needed a plan in place before I even attempted to talk to Wren again and make things right between us.”

Deciding to join my friend in a beer before I have to leave for the airport, I grab the last one out of the fridge, twist the top off, and hold it out between us. Nick clinks the neck of his bottle against mine, and we bring them up to our mouths, but I pause with a smile on my face.

“And I also realized Wren Bennett has a shit-ton of explaining to do.”

CHAPTER 2



Wren

“Pitches be crazy.”

“**W**HAT IN THE hell are you eating?”

Leaning closer to my phone I have propped up against a small jar candle in the middle of my kitchen table, I take another slurping bite off my spoon.

“Jell-O shots. YOLO!” I shout before leaning back in my seat and dipping my spoon back into my bowl to stir everything around.

“It looks like you took one of Owen’s Jell-O snack packs out of the fridge, dumped it into a cereal bowl, and then poured vodka over it.”

I slurp another bite of strawberry vodka Jell-O into my mouth and smile at my best friend’s face on the screen of my phone, currently judging me from thousands of miles away.

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.” I shrug.

“Wren Elizabeth Bennett!”

“Emily Jean Flanagan!” I shout back.

Her long, beautiful, ginger-red hair sways around in its high ponytail when she shakes her head at me, her bright green eyes glaring at me through the screen when I take another bite of my concoction.

“All right, now it just looks like you’re eating Jell-O vodka soup. Put that down right now!” she orders.

I do as she says and set the bowl on the table off to the side of the phone, pushing it out of my reach so I'm not tempted to continue day drinking/vodka soup eating.

"I miss you. I wish you were here." I sigh dramatically.

Neither one of us says anything for a few quiet seconds, both of us just staring at each other like sad puppy dogs. My sister Birdie and her best friend Tess Powell both work at Summersweet Island Golf Course together. Birdie as the social media and marketing director, and Tess as a bartender in the clubhouse. I've always been insanely jealous they get to work together and see each other all the time, and even more so the last couple of years. Growing up, it was always the four of us together, but since Birdie and I are sisters, and even sisters who are the best of friends need a break from each other every once in a while, Emily Flanagan with her fiery hair and her fiery spirit was always my ride or die. The one person I tell everything to, who only judges me if it's for my own good and will always, *always* tell me the truth.

Ever since Emily moved away four years ago to follow her dreams, Birdie and Tess never make me feel like a third wheel when I'm with them, but I always feel Emily's absence. Especially when Birdie, Tess, and I get together at my family's ice cream shop, the Dip and Twist, for something we like to call Sip and Bitch. A time to gather and drink vodka slushes from the ice cream shop while sitting at the purple picnic table we carved our names into as children, complaining about whatever is troubling us.

Usually, Emily is able to FaceTime with us for every Sip and Bitch, but she's been busy the last few months and we haven't been able to reach her on those nights. I'm such a good friend that I thought inviting her to my own private Sip and Bitch in the comfort of my own kitchen while my son is at school was a brilliant idea.

"Stop being sad. And for fuck's sake, stop watching the recording of your sister's proposal on national television," Emily demands.

Turning away from my phone guiltily, I pick up the remote control from the table, aiming it at the small TV that sits on my kitchen counter and switching it over to a baseball game. Right as Birdie was reaching into the cup on the 18th hole in a tournament Palmer played in Hawaii a few days ago, where I know she'll pull out his ball from his winning shot, as well as a small, black ring box.

The most romantic thing I've ever witnessed, and I'm probably biased, because it happened to my baby sister. Palmer worked it out with the golfer who shot before him in the tournament to slip the ring box into the hole after the guy sunk his putt so it would be there when Palmer made his own shot next. Since Birdie and Palmer have this thing where she runs and jumps into his arms at the end of whatever tournament he plays, Palmer set her back down on her feet after he made his shot and asked her to grab his ball out of the cup for him. All of the spectators on the golf course in Hawaii and everyone in the world watching on television let out a collective gasp and an "Awww" when Birdie stood back up with a confused look on her face as she held the ball and the ring box in her hand then turned around to find Palmer down on one knee on the green.

My mom and I knew the proposal was going to happen. Palmer Campbell, being the sweet guy he is, came up to the Dip and Twist a few hours before he and Birdie were to leave for the airport and asked our permission to propose to her while they were in Hawaii. My mom and I both burst into tears immediately, and Palmer apologized for not asking us sooner, but he was afraid we'd... well, act just like that every waking minute we were around Birdie until she had the ring on her finger. Which made sense. Mom and I barely kept it together when we said goodbye to them at the ferry dock. Birdie could tell something was up with us and jumped right to the conclusion that we were acting all fidgety and weepy saying goodbye to her, because we knew something bad about the plane she didn't. Palmer had to literally pick her up and put her on the ferry to take them to the mainland, with Birdie

shouting the entire way about how that was the last time she would let him pick her up and put her where he wanted her.

Since my mom and I knew when the proposal was going to happen—and after fifteen years of unrequited love, Birdie was finally going to get her happily ever after—of course I set my DVR to record the entire thing. I was beyond happy for my baby sister and the love of her life. She deserved to be happy with a man who treats her like a queen. I was only a little bit sad and a tiny bit jealous that I'd probably never get to experience something like that. I had my shot, and I blew it by keeping my mouth shut for entirely too long.

“I have to continue watching that proposal until I'm numb from it all,” I explain to Emily. “I've calculated that twenty-seven more times should do the trick. Birdie and Palmer's plane landed a little bit ago, and she's coming straight here to show me the ring, where I will happily and dutifully sit by, while my sister recounts every single tiny detail of the proposal at least five times before pulling out a binder I'm sure she made on the flight home filled with pages and pages of wedding planning ideas. I really am so very happy for her.”

“Try saying that without grimacing next time,” Emily helpfully suggests before continuing. “And I know I haven't talked to Birdie as much as you lately, but I feel like I can confidently say she will recount her proposal to you *at least* twenty times and you can bet your sweet ass she made a binder on the flight home, and probably one for you as well, so buckle up. And hey, it's okay to be a little sad. We're thirty-four and still single with no dating prospects in sight.”

“At least you have a hot quarterback to lust after.”

“Look but don't touch. You know the rules I signed when I became a California Vipers Cheerleader. Football players are off-limits to cheerleaders. Which really makes absolutely no sense when you think about it. Football players and cheerleaders were literally made for each other, and we're consenting adults.”

Emily has always been the type of person to act first and think later. As a dancer and gymnast all her life and a cheerleader in high school and college, Emily decided on her thirtieth birthday to attempt one of her bucket list items: Fly to California and try out to be a professional cheerleader for one of the nation's most popular and well-known football organizations. The California Vipers Cheerleaders are an American staple, and everyone here and all over the world has heard of them. Their sexy, skimpy uniforms are iconic, and replicas are sold for adult costume parties at every costume store around. Their yearly calendar for charity sales breaks new records every year it's released. And not only do they dance at every nationally televised professional football game for the Vipers, they're hired to travel around the world to perform at some of the most publicized events there are, like the Grammys and overseas to perform for the troops who are deployed.

The three months of grueling tryouts Emily went through ended in her making the team and shocking the hell out of her, when I knew without a doubt she'd do it. I also knew when she left and said she'd only cheer with them for one year before coming back home that she'd probably change her mind when she got out there and saw everything the world had to offer. She was too talented and too amazing to stay here on Summersweet Island and not follow her dreams for as long as she wanted. At least we talk all the time, and I get to see her when she comes home for Christmas to visit her parents every year, and those visits are something I spend months and months planning and looking forward to. I also get to see her on TV, which is the coolest thing ever.

"Can we go back to discussing the reason for you making vodka soup before noon? Please tell me that text you sent me was a joke and Kevin isn't really planning on coming out to Summersweet Island," Emily pleads, pulling her foot up to the chair she's sitting on and resting her chin on her knee.

"Well, he *says* he's coming, but you know how that goes. He makes a lot of promises he can't keep. I guess he heard

Owen's baseball coach quit and the freshman team is coachless right now. He's *very* concerned about his son's progress and wants to speak to the athletic director about why it's taking so long to hire a replacement." I nod with a look of complete seriousness on my face, which makes Emily snort.

"Does he even know what position Owen plays?"

"Still thinks he's a pitcher," I say with an eye roll. "Because according to Kevin Stratford, the pitcher is really the only player anyone cares about and who gets the biggest paycheck in the majors. He's such a piece of shit. Why did I have a one-night stand with a piece of shit?"

"Uh, because the boy you had a crush on in high school and never had the balls to tell got drafted to play ball clear across the country for Washington that night, we paid Julie Mayer to buy us a bottle of tequila, because we were only twenty, and you proceeded to be sad *and* shitfaced, then slept with a pretty frat boy who said all sorts of sweet and wonderful things to you, who we had no idea was actually a pile of human garbage from North Carolina under that sun-kissed tourist skin." She inhales dramatically after all that.

Resting my arms on the kitchen table, I drop my head forward and let it *thunk* against the wood top, not really sure at this point if I'm agitated because I had to hear once again how stupid I was fifteen years ago, or because just the *mention* of the boy I had a crush on in high school, and for far too long after, makes my insides feel like they just shriveled up and died. Again. Because they already did that once a year ago after he made himself such an important part of my life and then disappeared without a word.

A muffled honking sound from out in the driveway of my cottage has me pulling my head up from the table to look at the time on my phone, knowing the noise is most likely Birdie finally home from Hawaii.

"*Hello, Summersweet Island residents! I'm engaged!*"

I laugh in spite of my current misery when I hear my sister shout from the driveway to anyone currently in their cottages on my street, knowing she's probably been screaming that since the minute she stepped off the ferry.

"Sounds like Birdie's home." Emily laughs as Birdie continues to announce her happy news over and over so loudly outside that even *she* heard it through the phone. "I have practice tonight, but we should be done by nine. If you girls have Sip and Bitch later, I'm in. Tell Birdie to send me a picture of that rock."

"Will do. Love you, Emmy."

I blow her kisses, and she does the same.

"Love you too, Wrenny. For fuck's sake, take a shower and do something other than a messy bun to your new gorgeous dark hair before you go to work later. You never know when a hot, single guy who isn't a pile of human garbage will stop by for a scoop."

Rolling my eyes at her when she winks at me, I blow her one last kiss before ending the call and getting up from the table just as my front door flies open so hard it hits the opposite wall.

"I'm engaged, bitch!"

My younger sister by four years stands in the doorway, her long blonde hair hanging loose around her shoulders, her blue eyes shining bright with happiness, the most beautiful bronze tan on her skin from ten days in Hawaii, and a giant rock on her finger that sparkles when the sun shining through my open front door hits it. Wearing a pair of dark skinny jeans, nude open-toed heels, and a floral turquoise boho top with spaghetti straps, she looks stunning and positively glowing with love and happiness.

My hair used to be the same shade of golden-blond with caramel highlights until a few months ago when I took Owen over to the mainland so he could have dinner with Kevin and he told me I looked old. I borrowed some of Emily's *act first*,

think later mojo, took a ferry over to a salon on the mainland a few days later, and came back with a shocking shade of dark chestnut. Even with different hair colors, Birdie and I could still pass for twins most days, standing at the same height of five foot five inches, with the same slender build and the same pale-blue eyes.

My eyes have never shone with happiness like hers, and my body has never vibrated with excitement like hers though.

Shoving all my jealousy and sadness aside, my sister and I both scream at the top of our lungs before running across my open-floorplan cottage and meeting in the middle of my living room in a screaming, crying, jumping up and down hug.

“You’re engaged!” I shout, squeezing my arms around her waist tighter as we keep bouncing around in a hug circle.

“I’m engaged!” Birdie cries back when we stop jumping and pull apart enough to swipe at our tears, and I can grab her left hand, yanking it closer to my face.

“Holy shit, it’s huge,” I whisper in awe, twisting and turning her hand to get a better look at the four-carat, princess-cut diamond framed by round diamonds that branch out into three rows of *additional* sparkly diamonds to make up the white gold band around her finger.

“That’s what she said,” Birdie replies with a laugh through her remaining happy tears, just like I knew she would. “Seriously. That’s what I said over, and over, and over in Hawaii. I honestly don’t even know how I can walk right now. It’s like every time Palmer looked down and saw his ring on my finger, his cock grew three sizes that day. And then the true meaning of sex came through, and Palmer found the strength of ten cocks, plus two!”

All I can do is shake my head at my sister’s distortion of a quote from *The Grinch*, feeling a little bit of my own green monster trying to rear its ugly head after so many months of having to hear all about how great my future brother-in-law is in bed.

Gross. And also, uuugh I miss sex... even if it was shitty sex. At least it was sex.

“All right, enough about me,” Birdie suddenly says, pulling her hand out of mine, grabbing onto my arm, and tugging me over to my couch. She pushes me down onto the cushions then perches her butt on the edge of my coffee table, facing me with our knees touching. “Let’s talk about you and all the exciting things that happened while I was gone.”

Her smile is even bigger than when she burst through my door, and she’s bouncing up and down on top of my coffee table while she stares at me.

“Um, don’t you want to tell me all about how Palmer proposed?” I ask in confusion.

Birdie waves her hand at me before dropping it down to rest on my knee. “It was on TV. You already saw all about how Palmer proposed. Tell me *everything* that happened while I was in Hawaii. Don’t leave out one detail.”

Now, both of her hands are squeezing my knees, and I’m starting to wonder if she got *too much* sun in Hawaii and it melted a little of her brain.

“Don’t you have a binder or something for me? I know you bought at *least* ten bridal magazines at the airport and dog-eared all the pages I need to look at,” I say, looking around her to see if maybe she dropped the magazines on the floor when we hugged.

“There’s plenty of time for wedding planning. Tell me about *you*. I thought for sure it would have at least forced you to do something else with your hair,” Birdie mutters, looking at all the stray pieces of dark hair that have come loose from my *more than* messy bun at this point. “Or maybe put on something other than one of your son’s old baseball T-shirts.”

I look down at the blue cotton Warhawk’s shirt that served as Owen’s uniform last travel season and shrug.

“I don’t have a daughter I can share clothes with. I have a teenage son the same size as me, and I’m going to take full

advantage of that. His shirts are comfortable,” I remind her. “And I don’t know what *it* you’re talking about, but nothing happened while you were gone. Nothing exciting ever happens on Summersweet Island, except for that time Palmer came back after not speaking to you for two years, and you almost lodged a driver in his skull.”

“A 9-iron.”

“What?”

“I almost lodged a *9-iron* in his skull,” Birdie corrects me. “A driver head is too thick and round and would never make it through all that tissue and bone.”

Once again, I just stare at my sister and shake my head.

“So, nothing *at all* happened while I was gone?” Birdie asks again, the happy, newly engaged sparkle in her eye starting to dim a little.

Seriously, what the hell is happening right now? Why is my sister currently not on the 100th retelling of her proposal?

“Uh, I worked, dealt with a couple of annoying tourists who wanted to complain about everything, had dinner with mom a few times...” I trail off, trying to think of what I did in the last ten days since Birdie left. Something... *anything* that will fulfill whatever this obsession she currently has and get her to move on. “Let’s see. Me and a couple of other parents on Owen’s team have been filling in as coaches until they find a replacement, so that’s been taking up a lot of my time. Chad and Nadine asked me to take Tyler to practice for them a few times because they wanted to have some date nights, and Katrina doesn’t have time to order the rally towels for the spaghetti dinner fundraiser, since she and Adam are going to that couple’s spa, so she asked me to handle it. Markell finally hit a bunt properly after I worked with him at practice the other night, so that was pretty cool. Ummm, oh! Melanie told me The Barge is going to start serving their pumpkin pancakes soon, so *that’s* exciting.”

I smile and nod at Birdie, and she just stares at me, blinking and opening and closing her mouth a few times before she finally finds the words she wants.

She definitely got too much sun.

“You have *got* to stop saying yes to everyone who asks you for a favor,” Birdie complains with a shake of her head. “So you’re telling me that nothing of importance happened from the night of Owen’s game a few weeks ago, the one you couldn’t make it to because Lorraine Nardini called off because she had the flu and you had to take her shift, until right this minute when I walked in the door? Absolutely *nothing?*”

“If you’re referring to sperm donor’s visit, it hasn’t happened yet. Do you honestly think I wouldn’t have called you in Hawaii if he showed up here?” I scoff. “Also, I wouldn’t put that in the *exciting* pile. That goes in the *dear God in heaven, what have I done to deserve this bullshit* pile.”

“Obviously, I wasn’t talking about Killjoy Kevin. We’ll definitely be discussing that in detail at Sip and Bitch tonight. So you’ve got nothing, huh? Weird...” Birdie trails off.

Leaning forward, I press my palm against my sister’s cheek and then against her forehead.

“Seriously, sweetie. Are you okay? I’m going to have some words with your fiancé if he didn’t make sure you reapplied sunscreen all day. Did you forget to hydrate? I told you that Hawaiian sun is a lot stronger than—”

She swats my hand away and huffs in annoyance, and I don’t think it’s because I’m mothering her like usual.

Okay, maybe I know what’s going on here.

“You missed absolutely nothing, Birdie,” I reassure her, leaning forward and rubbing the side of her arm. “I’ve told you a hundred times to travel with Palmer as much as you want. I love that for you. I swear to God. I know you think every time you leave you’re going to miss out on something here, but you truly aren’t. Like, ever.”

My sister never really left Summersweet Island until Palmer came back to town. Just like myself, this small island is our home, we love it here, and we never want to live anywhere else. Where I've gotten to do a lot of traveling over the years due to Owen's baseball, Birdie never really had the opportunity or cared to go anywhere. Now that she's getting to travel more, she feels like she's going to miss out on things here. She and Palmer travel *maybe* once a month, and it's usually only for three days at the most. I've told her over and over she's being ridiculous, but clearly it hasn't sunk in to her beautiful, stubborn head yet.

"I have finally come to terms with the fact that no one misses me when I leave," she teases, knowing Tess and I both miss the hell out of her when she's not here, and Summersweet Island Golf Course—or SIG, as the locals call it—practically falls apart without her. "I'm not talking about my stupid worries. I'm talking about a visit from—"

Birdie's cell phone rings from the back pocket of her skinny jeans, cutting off what she was going to say as she leans to the side and pulls it out. We both share a laugh as Buckcherry's "Crazy Bitch" plays from her phone. She assigned that ringtone to Palmer because of a video that went viral of him having a very public meltdown on the golf course during a tournament that someone hilariously set to that song. Thankfully, Palmer has never been in the same room with Birdie when he's called her phone, so he has no idea that's his ringtone.

The song cuts off as Birdie answers the call, the smile on her face turning into a frown of annoyance.

"What do you mean Murphy made you do it? He's in his seventies and you can outrun him."

I laugh as Birdie gets up from the coffee table with the phone pressed to her ear, miming the act of drinking to me as she rolls her eyes at whatever Palmer is saying to her on the other end. Murphy Swallow was our neighbor growing up, still lives in the cottage next to our mom, and he works at SIG with

Birdie and Tess. He's like a stand-in grandfather to us, if that grandfather was constantly sarcastic and threatened everyone around him because he hated people. For some reason, the miniscule soft side he keeps buried down deep has only ever been shown to my family. After all these years, we're still not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

"You know damn well Murphy wouldn't really slit your throat if you didn't do shots of whiskey with him to celebrate our engagement." Birdie sighs, mouthing to me that she'll stop by the Dip and Twist later for Sip and Bitch as she walks toward the door and puts her attention back on her fiancé who just drunk dialed her. "Yes, I'm coming to Dockside Eddy's now to rescue you. Lock yourself in the bathroom and wait for me until I get there. I'll call Murphy and tell him to stop making you drink. Yes, I'll also tell him to stop telling everyone there you're a pussy. Yes, I promise."

I'm still laughing as Birdie shuts my front door behind her, and I push myself up from the couch. I have just enough time for a shower before I need to run snacks and drinks up to Owen's practice after school—because Bethany asked me to switch with her, since she and Derek decided to go on a last-minute vacation to Florida—before I head to work.

Walking down the hall, into my bedroom, and right over to my closet, I stare at the stacks and stacks of folded T-shirts and sigh, blindly grabbing one from a shelf along with a pair of ratty yet comfortable jean shorts.

Definitely going to dress to impress all those hot, single guys who will be coming for me tonight. Ha-ha, so funny. I'm definitely buying Birdie sunblock the next time I'm at the store.

CHAPTER 3



Shepherd

“That’s a swing and a miss right there.”

“HEY, SHEP! I thought that was you. Good to see you again, man.”

I happily smile and shake hands with Kent Freeman, a guy who was two years younger than me in high school and who now teaches social studies at our alma mater. I chat with him on the sidewalk in front of Starboard Sweets for a few minutes before continuing on down Summersweet Lane.

Shaped like a bean in the Atlantic a few miles off the coast of Virginia, Summersweet Island is around four square miles, has seven hundred year-round residents, and two main roads: Summersweet Lane, which I’m currently on, that crosses perpendicularly in the middle of the island, taking you across the longest length from north to south, and Ocean Drive, which takes you vertically up the middle of the shortest length of the island east to west. Ocean Drive will take you from the ferry dock—golf cart and bike rentals and public beach down on the lower west bank—to the golf course and the one upscale hotel on the other side of the island on the east bank. Summersweet Lane’s north and south banks are for the permanent residents and where the houses, long-term cottage rentals, schools, vet, hospital, and other residential necessities are located. The stretch of Summersweet Lane right in the middle of the island that I’m currently walking on is what everyone considers downtown or Main Street. That’s where you’ll find a couple of bars, a diner, a pizza place, one Italian

restaurant, the best ice cream stand in the entire world and where I'm currently headed, the grocery store, three small motels, and short-term cottage rentals. As well as a handful of other tourist spots and places for the locals to hangout, unwind, or grab stuff they need until they can get to the mainland or get something delivered.

“Well, hey there, Shepherd! I didn't know you were in town. Your mom just had lunch with mine last week.”

Stopping on the sidewalk again, this time in front of the arcade, I spend a few minutes talking with Tisa Graves. Our mothers have been in the same book club that does more wine drinking than book reading since Tisa and I were both in diapers and shoved into playpens to fend for ourselves while our mothers day drank and read porn.

On my last trip here, I only went to the high school baseball field and then returned to the ferry dock to go back to Washington when the game was over, keeping my identity a secret so it wouldn't be splashed all over the tabloids by morning. Now, I have no problem flipping the brim of my baseball cap around to the back of my head, smiling and greeting old friends. It's not just because it's a Wednesday night, summer is almost over, and pretty much all the tourists have thinned out, making it less likely my whereabouts will be made public anytime soon. Summersweet Island residents are very private and protect their own. As soon as I got off the ferry earlier, one of the local police reassured me he'd make sure no paparazzi stepped foot on the island, and he'd do everything he could to keep hordes of fans away if word got out.

I didn't keep to myself a few weeks ago because I was worried the entire world would find out I was on the island by midnight. I kept it to myself and swore her family to secrecy, because I didn't want *Wren* to know I was on the island until I was standing in front of her and she wouldn't be able to run away from me until I had a chance to apologize. Now that I'm making my way down Summersweet Lane, past the arcade, the candy shop, and the diner, and the bright glowing lights from

the Dip and Twist are in sight, I don't care who sees me or knows I'm back.

Aside from the few places to eat, almost all the businesses have shut down for the night. Usually when you walk down Summersweet Lane at 10:00 p.m., it's bustling with people and activity. Golf carts are whizzing by on the street, tourists are shouting and laughing, island music is playing from the loudspeaker mounted above the tourist information booth, and all the lights from all the businesses are flashing brightly. The end of summer means shorter hours for everyone, the dark storefronts and closed signs on all the windows I walk by and the chill in the air from the ocean breeze making this island feel almost like a ghost town aside from the handful of locals walking home from a late dinner or out for a late-night stroll. No matter what time of year it is, the Dip and Twist never closes before ten and, if there are customers, never closes until the last person is served. Where other businesses strictly close by seven this time of year, since they get less and less customers the later into the season it is, the only ice cream shop on the island will remain open late into the night, because Summersweet Island residents can't resist its treats and will make damn sure they make up for the loss in tourist revenue during the chilly months.

My heart thumps rapidly in my chest, and I have to wipe the sweat off my palms on my black athletic shorts as I pick up my pace the closer and closer I get to my destination, but my happiness right now far outweighs my nerves. As soon as I stepped off the ferry and back onto Summersweet Island, it was almost like a huge weight was lifted off my chest, and I felt like I could breathe again. I hadn't felt that way since the last time I'd been here a few weeks ago, but my trip was too short for it to have much of an impact. Now that I'm here again, now that all my suitcases and half of my belongings have been delivered to the cottage I'm renting until I decide on a permanent place and the rest has gone into storage, I want to jump up and down and scream like a little kid, knowing I never have to leave again if I don't want to.

I'm happy, because this is the first step to a new and hopefully much less lonely future.

I'm happy, because living here means living closer to my family, and I'll be able to see them all the time now instead of just a handful of times a year.

I'm happy, because I can walk down the street and not be hounded for pictures, and autographs, and pieces of myself. The only thing people want from me on Summersweet Island is to genuinely know how I am.

I'm happy, because I can throw on a pair of tennis shoes, athletic shorts, and a white Adidas hoodie with a hat and not worry that a paparazzo is going to snap a picture of me from the bushes, where TMZ will say Shepherd Oliver looks lazy and like he's given up on life, when it's the exact opposite.

Hopefully my life is right inside the building I'm now standing in front of, and I'm going to make it damn clear I will never give up on her again.

My smile almost hurts my cheeks as I stand here on the sidewalk in front of the Dip and Twist. I forgot how much I missed this old-school place I used to work at in high school, where Laura Bennett taught me the value of a hard day's work as well as taking pride in it.

It was also where the boss's oldest daughter taught me about "hardness" in a different way every time she bent over into the freezer. I learned that strategically placing a gallon of ice cream over my crotch would help me with that problem by immediately deflating my cock, because *that shit is fucking cold*.

Just like your standard, old-school ice cream stand, the Dip and Twist building is around eight hundred square feet with a brick façade on the bottom half, and from the waist-high counter and up, it's nothing but windows. Those windows are covered in advertisements for all the cold treats Dip and Twist has to offer, and I can just make out some movement inside through a few of the posters as I make my way around to the

back of the building and the door to get inside. My happy-go-lucky, bouncing footsteps come to an abrupt halt when I get to the back of the building and I'm standing in front of the propped-open door that leads into the Dip and Twist, the bright florescent lighting from inside spilling out into the darkness.

I was a man on a mission as soon as I made sure all my boxes and shit made it to where they were supposed to. I didn't unpack anything. I didn't move anything out of the way. I just climbed over boxes and haphazardly placed furniture the movers put wherever they wanted and jogged all the way into town, too excited to even think about going back down to the ferry dock to rent a golf cart. That could wait. I didn't want to waste one more second not talking to Wren, and I headed right here without even thinking this might be a bad idea.

Am I really going to barge in here late at night and chance scaring the hell out of her if she's here alone? Is it really a good idea to surprise her like this after dropping her without an explanation and ignoring her for a year?

She'll probably kick me in the nuts. She'll definitely punch me in the face.

"...fucking Shepherd Oliver. *That's* your problem right there!"

A muffled female voice coming from inside the building has my mouth stretching into a wide smile and my nerves disappearing like one of my homeruns into the stands. I'd know that voice anywhere, even after a year. I've seen enough videos of her son playing ball where she was yelling, cheering, and chanting in the background to recognize that sweet, delicate timbre with the mouth of a sailor when she's *super* pissed anywhere. The fact that news must have traveled faster than I expected around Summersweet since I got here an hour ago, Wren knows I'm here, and *I'm* the reason she's super pissed only makes me smile wider as I take a step into the building, not even caring that my element of surprise is gone.

I don't care how pissed she is or how much it's going to hurt when she kicks me in the balls. I just want to hear her say

“fucking Shepherd Oliver” again, but this time, let’s try it as a verb.

The temperature immediately drops at least ten degrees when I step inside the back of the Dip and Twist, since the ladies keep the thermostat low at all times just to ensure nothing melts from the time they make the ordered treat until the time it gets to the window and into a customer’s hand. I shove both my hands into the wide front pocket of my hoodie over my stomach to keep them warm as I walk past a metal shelf filled with napkins, stacks of paper cups, and tons of Styrofoam bowls in various sizes. A shelf I was in charge of stocking as soon as I walked inside the door for my shift back in the day.

When I get to the end of the metal shelving and turn the corner, my feet come to a stuttering stop again. But this time, it’s with the added bonus of a rise in my blood pressure, a drop of my mouth wide open with my tongue hanging out, a sweaty palms reappearance that I’m currently squeezing together in the pocket of my hoodie, and a goddamn hard-on that a gallon of ice cream definitely won’t be able to make magically disappear.

I hear the crack of a bat followed by the cheer of a crowd, and the fact that I’m listening to one of my favorite sounds in the world while looking at one of my old favorite sights has me yanking one hand out of my hoodie pocket to grip tightly to the wooden counter next to me that’s used for cutting up fruit for toppings before my knees give out.

Even though it’s been a lot of years since I got chubbies watching Wren Bennett lean over into a huge deep freezer, my dick definitely remembers how equally hot *and* adorable it is to watch short little Wren have to rest her stomach on the open lip of the freezer while bending the whole upper half of her body inside the thing. The very tip of one tennis-shoe-covered toe is scrambling for a hold on the floor, while the other one kicks back out behind her as she stretches and reaches for the three-gallon tub of ice cream that must have been pushed to the far back of the freezer.

I'm on a sensory overload unlike anything I've ever experienced before, my eyes and ears being filled with so much goodness that any second now my head is going to explode. Both of them. I was clearly wrong with my initial assumption.

Wren didn't find out I'm here, and thank you, Lord, for the blessings you are currently bestowing upon me.

“The Hawks give up another run to Tampa as center fielder, Kilo Lucas, tries to make a run-saving catch with a long fly ball but just can't get there in time, making the score now eight to two, Tampa.”

I don't bother looking away from the sight before me to glance at the small, flat-screen television hanging on the wall when the next play results in an easy out at first and the game goes to a commercial break at the end of the inning. It brings me enough joy just *hearing* baseball currently playing in the back of the Dip and Twist for a woman who swore she never watched the game on TV, not even mad about the fact that I'm not in Tampa right now playing in that game a hell of a lot better than my shitty replacement.

“Oh, for fuck's sake, everyone knew Kilo wasn't going to make that catch. He couldn't catch the south side of a barn if someone threw it at him. You seriously replaced Shepherd Oliver with a piece of trash like Lucas. You went from having an MVP center fielder who didn't even *finish* last season, and he still ended it with a .305 batting average, forty-seven homeruns, 115 RBI, and a nineteen defensive runs saved rating, for a piece of trash *who can't catch a fucking ball!*”

I don't bother looking over at the game on TV, because doing more than one thing at a time right now is too much for my brain to handle while Wren not only loses her shit on my behalf, but rapidly spouts off my facts that even *I* sometimes have to look up when someone asks me for them. And also, because of that God. Damn. *Perfect* ass on full display while she loses her shit about *me*, deep in the belly of the deep freezer.

Holy mother of God is it hotter in here all of a sudden?

“Fuuuck me.”

Thankfully, Wren’s head is so deep into the freezer she doesn’t hear the quiet mutter I can’t stop from slipping out of my mouth as I stare at smooth, tan, and toned legs, leading up to a perfectly full and round ass covered in a pair tiny jean shorts. The frayed and tattered edges are currently sliding up dangerously high with the position she’s in until my vision tunnels and I see nothing but the underside of two smooth, sweet, perfect ass cheeks peeking out from under them that I just want to sink my teeth into.

A gentleman would immediately rush over and assist the poor, tiny, adorable woman, but I was never a gentleman in high school when I would stand off to the side and quietly enjoy the show, and I’m not about to start now.

“We need to get these bats going. You boys better remember that Tampa pitcher’s got a nasty backdoor slider with a perfect break back over the plate...”

Wren’s muffled voice gets clearer as the upper half of her body pops up and out from the freezer and she slides down the front of it until both her feet are back on the ground.

All of the air in my lungs leaves me in a *whoosh*, my chest gets tight, my heart starts pounding so fast it feels like I just ran the bases a hundred times, and the grip I have on the counter next to me has turned my knuckles white and made my arm start to shake with how hard I’m holding on so I don’t launch myself across the room at her. I knew seeing Wren again after so long, after the bond we formed that I so selfishly ripped away, and after how goddamn much I missed her that it would be a struggle to just stand here in her presence and not yank her body against mine so I can finally know what she feels like in my arms, or crash my mouth against hers so I could finally know what she tastes like.

All of those things are still scrambling around in my brain. But now they’re magnified by a thousand at the sight of Wren

standing a few feet away with her back to me, wearing a white T-shirt and her long hair up in a high ponytail so I can clearly see 26 in purple smack dab in the middle of her shirt, along with OLIVER printed in all caps and also in purple stretched across the back of her shoulders.

She's wearing my fucking name on her back.

All those months of conversations, all those times I teased her....

Her own words typed on a screen rapidly flash through my mind, and it's a wonder I don't rip the counter from the wall.

Sorry! Don't think I've ever watched one of your games.

Nope, I have no clue what position you play.

You know I only watch the sport when my son is playing.

Stop asking if I've watched you play. The answer will just make you cry, like always.

#soboring #likewatchingpaintdry #idratherdomytaxes

Wren Bennett, the woman who swore she'd never watched one of my games and who clearly knows more about the sport than half the coaches I've had over the years, *is wearing my goddamn name on her back!*

I've seen plenty of fans, female and hot, wearing my name and number over the years, and it always brought a smile to my face from their support. Knowing Wren has been supporting me when I didn't even know it, seeing my name touching her skin, it brings something out of me I can barely control no matter how tightly I'm gripping the counter.

She's *mine*. She's been mine since the first day I met her; it just took me too many fucking years to do something about it. But I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to finally do something about it, and no one is going to stop me.

Like maybe wrap that ponytail around my fist while I'm bending her over the—

Stop it! Apologize for being an asshole first!

“Come on, DeVera, you’re our only hope,” Wren mutters, her back still to me as she hugs the three-gallon drum of ice cream in her arms and looks up at the TV mounted on the wall next to the freezer. Two pitches sail right into the catcher’s mitt. “That’s fine; let those two go by. You saw them, so now you know what to do. Lay off the high ones, DeVera. Give us a nice line drive out to center.”

Hearing her talk about my friend calms the beast inside me a little, and I finally let go of the tight grip I have on the counter to shove my hand back inside my hoodie pocket with the other one. I still want to bend her back over that freezer and fuck her from behind while looking at my name across her back, but I can smile about it now instead of growling like a wild animal.

“Franklin’s backdoor slider breaks over the plate, and that’s a swing and a miss for Nick DeVera,” the announcer states.

“Son of a bitch... you had one job to do.” Wren sighs, making me chuckle softly to myself in spite of my hard cock I have nothing to shield with.

“Yeah, Nick really does like the high ones. No clue why the league pays that clown so much.”

My hands are shaking inside my pocket as Wren’s body slowly turns around to face me when she hears my voice. My last name across her shoulders disappears from sight until her gorgeous blue eyes are wide and locked onto mine. Not 3,000 miles away from a photo on a screen, but three feet and close enough to touch.

Mine.

It’s the only word flashing over and over in my head as I drink in the sight of the woman in front of me whose mouth drops open in shock, and a small gasp comes out of her before the giant drum of ice cream drops from her arms. It lands with a *thunk* right at her feet, but she pays no attention to it as she

stands here in front of me, not saying a word, just rapidly blinking like she can't believe I'm here.

I can't believe it either. But I *am* here, and I'm not going anywhere. It's time for me to finally do something about it, and *hell no*, no one will stop me!

Right when I open my mouth to rain sunshine, rainbows, and unicorns down upon Wren, her mouth quickly snaps shut, her wide, shocked eyes narrow on me with fire in them, and her arms that hung limply down at her sides after she dropped the ice cream cross aggressively in front of her as one of her white Converse starts tapping against the tile.

"Well, look who the cat dragged in," Wren finally addresses me, definitely not using that sweet, delicate voice. It's sarcastic and filled with an edge that quite frankly scares me a little, considering there are sharp objects within reach.

I take a subconscious step backward even though five seconds ago I could barely stop myself from launching at her and pinning her up against the freezer.

"This is *just* great. Perfect! Shepherd Oliver, another pile of human garbage I have to deal with." Wren sighs in annoyance.

Okay, so maybe *one* person is going to stop me.

Well, fuck.

CHAPTER 4



Wren

“We are having major league fun!”

“**M**EAASURE ME.”

My body jolts, and I look up from the empty wine glass in my hand and the bottle of wine with the cork still firmly in place sitting on the white marble top of my small breakfast bar counter that juts out from the main counter against the wall. The sound of my son’s voice makes me realize I didn’t even hear the front door slam shut when he got home just now. Glancing at the clock above my kitchen sink, I realize I’ve been standing here just like this, staring at nothing and not pouring the drink I so desperately needed since I got home from work, for the last fifteen minutes.

Who am I kidding? I needed a drink a half hour ago when I heard that voice while I was grabbing more vanilla to put in the front cooler and knew it wasn’t coming from the TV.

“Awww, I missed you too, and I had a *great* evening. Thanks for asking.” I smirk at my son, setting the wine glass down, since my brain has currently forgotten what I’m supposed to do with it. I need to act as normal as possible in front of my kid, even though I want to scream at the top of my lungs right now.

He’s here... on the island. Why in the hell is he here?

Owen, who is in no way *ever* phased by my sarcasm, cocks his head at me, a wavy brown lock of hair falling down into one eye, the same pale shade of blue as my own, when I

embellish a little on that last part, since there was nothing *great* about the end of my night at all.

I can't believe he's really here.

“Yeah, yeah, I missed you, even though I just saw you at practice a few hours ago when you dropped off snacks.” Owen waves me away with his hand, the deep timbre of his voice still shocking to my ears. One day, I had a boy with the pitch of a toddler when he bid me goodnight, and I woke up the next morning to a man telling me we were out of milk and he couldn't find any clean socks.

Like most nights I work, my sister, my mom, or Murphy will grab Owen after baseball practice and let him hang out at their house until I get off. He's almost fifteen and can absolutely stay home alone whenever he wants, but my son prefers being spoiled rotten at someone else's place. And at least when he's with one of them, they can make sure he does his homework and eats something that isn't from the Hot Pocket or Ramen family. Sometimes they'll drop him off when I get home, and other times Owen will just walk, depending whose cottage he's at and who lives closer. Aunt Birdie's cottage is usually a walking night, since it's the next street over and he can cut through yards.

“You've been at your aunt's house since then, and I've been at work. I'm still allowed to miss you,” I remind him as he grabs a banana from the basket on the counter between us and starts peeling it, while I lean over and swipe that piece of hair out of his eyes.

As a brand-new freshman in high school, sometimes he lets me, and sometimes he swats my hand away and rolls his eyes at me. Thankfully, tonight is a “letting me” night, and I try to let the soft, silky feel of his hair through my fingers as I get it out of the way of his eyes calm my nerves and get rid of the anxious butterflies in my stomach.

Seriously... why is he here on the island?

“Which is exactly why you need to measure me,” Owen says, pulling me back out of my wandering thoughts. He takes a big bite out of the banana, his next words muffled as he speaks while he chews, all the manners I taught him when he was a toddler instantly disappearing as soon as puberty hit. “You know every time I go to Aunt Birdie’s house, I come back taller. Measure me.”

He points the half-eaten banana at me like a gun, trying to give me a stern look, and I chuckle at him when the banana peel flops around his knuckles.

With my same heart-shaped face, same upturned button nose that looks a little pointy in profile, same dimple only in our right cheek, same eyes, same full lips with a deep cupid’s bow, thick, wavy hair, and small, short stature, I’m thankful every day that looking at my son is like looking in the mirror and I don’t have to stare at Kevin all day every day for the rest of my life. It’s bad enough I’ll have to *deal* with him, sporadic as it might be. The only part of his father Owen got was his brown hair, the same color as dark chocolate, which Owen keeps a little longer and shaggier, claiming it looks “cooler” that way when he wears his baseball cap and the ends curl up under the edge of it.

He’s my mini-me and my twin, even more so now that I’m no longer blonde. He’s the calm to my storm, and the reason I wake up every morning and bust my ass. Just one look at him makes me realize I’ve done at least one thing right in my life.

But sadly, Owen Alexander Oliver got my height. Or lack thereof. The poor boy has been waiting years to finally hit five feet, and now that he made it there a few months ago, I am constantly forced to check on the status of his growth. He’s had enough of the nickname “Smalls” on his baseball teams, but I’m afraid that one might be there to stay, since he’s had it so long, even if by some miracle he’s taller than anyone in the Bennett family. Five foot five is our absolute limit. We don’t grow them any taller than that.

“Come on, Mom, measure me. I got taller; I can feel it.”

“You did not grow since the last time I measured you. Which was three days ago. You were only at Aunt Birdie’s for a few hours,” I remind him as he tosses me his empty banana peel over the counter. I easily catch it and drop it into the trashcan shoved into the open nook under the breakfast counter right in front of where I’m standing.

“You know every time I go to Aunt Birdie’s I grow.”

Every. Damn. Time. It’s become a joke between all of us at this point.

Humoring him, since I know he won’t stop badgering me and go to bed when it’s ten thirty on a school night, I grab the measuring tape out of the drawer to my right, and we both walk over to the archway opening that leads from the kitchen into the living room. Toeing his tennis shoes off and kicking them out of the way, he backs up against the wall of the archway and stands tall, right next to almost fifteen years of dates, ages, and lines drawn on the white-painted wood in various colors and mediums, marking Owen’s height through the years.

Bending down to stick the metal lip of the measuring tape under the back of his heel, I quickly stand back up, sliding the tape measure open against the wall next to him as I go. Locking it in place and pressing the case against the wall, I lean to the side and grab one of Owen’s school folders from the small coffee nook counter next to the archway. Pressing the folder down on top of his head next to the tape measure, I use his “super scientific” method of making sure I get an accurate measurement, staring at the line markings on the tape. Blinking a few times and then staring again, I look at my most recent measurement of exactly five feet written with a purple pen the other day, on top of all the other five-foot measurements the last few months. Then I look a few lines up on the tape measure where the folder is currently resting on top of Owen’s head. With a few more blinks and a lean to the side so I can look down at my son’s feet and make sure he isn’t cheating by lifting up, I glance back at the folder I’m holding steady and shake my head.

“Son of a Baby Ruth... you have got to be kidding me,” I mutter, which makes Owen’s face light up while he lets out a whooping shout. “You are now five feet and a half inch. How did you grow a half an inch in three days? Is that even possible? What the hell does Aunt Birdie feed you?”

Owen laughs as I grab a pencil from a cup on the coffee counter and notate today’s measurement on the wall before unlocking the tape measure. It *zips* back up inside itself, and I hand Owen the folder to put away while I put the tape back in the drawer.

“They don’t feed me. They starve me while Uncle Palmer beats me with his golf clubs and Aunt Birdie hooks my brain up to electrodes and makes me watch fetish porn,” he replies easily, shoving his folder in his backpack resting on one of the bar stools and then hefting it up by one strap over his shoulder.

“Good God, Owen—”

“Did someone say fetish porn?” Birdie shouts when this time I *do* hear my front door slam shut. I glare at my sister as she breezes into my living room with another bottle of wine in her hand, still beautiful and glowing with happiness, while I smell like rotten milk and have chocolate sauce in my hair and a coating of stickiness over my body that will require at least a twenty-minute hot shower to remove after a shift at the Dip and Twist.

“Don’t ask the questions if you can’t handle the truth, Mom.” Owen shrugs, taking another banana from the basket on the counter, giving my sister a high-five as they pass each other in the living room, and then turning the corner to disappear into his room.

I’m not an idiot. I know I can’t shield my son from everything. He has a smart phone, he has access to the internet, and he has other teenage friends, some the same age and some older now that he’s in high school and playing on the freshman baseball team. He’s going to hear things, and he’s going to see things unless I want to keep him in his room in a bubble for the rest of his life. I’ve just always taught him

to be responsible, respectful, to never give out personal information to anyone, if someone asks him for a picture of his feet it *is* a big deal and it *is* creepy as hell, dick pics live forever, and don't be a bully online or *anywhere*. He knows he can talk to me about anything, and he does. Sometimes, he overshares. Okay, *all the time*, he overshares. I'd much rather he overshare than lock himself in his room and lock me out of his life. I'm his mother *and* his father, and I never want him to feel uncomfortable talking about *anything* with me. Even if I have to grin and pretend like I don't want to vomit when the word "porn" comes out of my baby boy's mouth.

"I never should have let you, Tess, and Emily have a hand in raising my son," I tell Birdie when she gets to my kitchen island and sets her wine bottle down on the counter next to my fridge. "Why is he talking about fetish porn when he gets home from an evening at your house?"

"He actually taught *us* a thing or two over dinner tonight," Birdie informs me as she pulls a magnetic corkscrew off the side of my fridge with a crab on it that says **Dockside Eddy's**. "Did you know Climacophilia is when you get turned on by someone falling down the stairs? Palmer was laughing so hard I think he peed his pants a little. I tried to get Owen to push him down our back deck stairs to see if it sparked anything, but Palmer wasn't up for it. He was drunk but not that drunk."

While Birdie uncorks her bottle of wine and then pulls two more wine glasses down from the cabinet above her, I walk around the breakfast bar to take a seat at one of my wooden turquoise stools, grabbing my phone and pulling up Emily's contact information then clicking on the FaceTime button.

"Sorry I'm late! You didn't start Sip and Bitch without me, did you?" Tess asks, walking through my front door with her own bottle of wine while I wait forever for our crappy island Wi-Fi to connect the call to Emily.

I don't even blink when I see Tess's short, poker-straight bob with blunt bangs across her forehead is no longer a vibrant shade of fire-engine-red and is now bright purple. Tess

changes her hair color as often as I buy a new Hawks jersey or T-shirt.

Oh... my... God, he saw me wearing one of his shirts! This night just can't get any worse.

The call to Emily finally connects, and it rings and rings while Tess takes a seat next to me, and Birdie sets down a full-to-the-brim glass of red wine in front of each of us.

“I would have been here earlier, but Bodhi made me read him a bedtime story before I left,” Tess huffs in mock-annoyance as she carefully brings the wine glass up to her mouth so she doesn't spill it and takes a sip.

There's a small tilt to the corner of her mouth against the lip of her wine glass, letting us know it doesn't annoy her in the least that Bodhi Armbruster, Palmer's old caddie and the first serious relationship Tess has ever had, is obsessed with reading romance novels and has brought Tess over to what she calls “the dark side.” The two of them read together every night in bed. With his shaggy blonde surfer hair and bohemian lifestyle, living out of vans and on people's couches most of his life and never cashing the checks Palmer paid him to be his caddie because money just didn't mean anything to him, we were *all* surprised when Bodhi found his way into Tess Powell's heart. She's a hard-ass who organizes her life down to the second, would prefer chewing off her own arm than ask anyone for help, is diligent about saving money and having a plan, and would much rather light the male gender on fire than have anything to do with them. But no one was more shocked than Tess when she fell in love with the jobless, homeless, easy-going man when he lived on *her* couch after coming back to the island with Palmer.

It's adorable, especially since Tess has been saying since our first Sip and Bitch when we were twelve and called it Sip and Fuss, because we were classy young ladies, that she would never settle down, have kids, or get married. The settling down has definitely happened. Any minute now, she'll be eating her own words about the other two; I just know it.

“Can you explain now why you sent us an emergency text that Sip and Bitch needed to move to your place instead of at our purple picnic table at the Dip and Twist?” Tess asks.

I end the FaceTime call when Emily doesn't answer, tossing my phone onto the counter with a sigh as I stare at my wine glass. The red liquid starts to spill over the top and drip down the side when Tess accidentally bumps her knee against the underside of the counter as she crosses her legs.

“The Dip and Twist has now been contaminated. We can never have Sip and Bitch there again.”

Bending forward after my dramatic statement, I wrap my mouth around the lip of the wine glass and start slurping as much wine in as I can until the level gets below my mouth and I can't successfully do it hands-free anymore.

“*Jesus*, you want a trough for that? What the hell happened tonight?” Birdie asks when I don't even take my mouth off the glass; I just grab the stem and bring it with me as I sit up, tip the glass back, and drink half of it before I speak again.

“Shepherd Oliver is here on Summersweet Island, and he came to the Dip and Twist to see me,” I blurt out quickly when I pull the glass down from my mouth, my heart starting to pound in my chest when I don't even have to close my eyes to picture him standing there a few feet away from me.

Looking at that boy always made my heart flutter and tied my tongue in knots whenever I tried to speak to him. He was the gorgeous, popular, outgoing jock constantly surrounded by people, and I was the shy, quiet girl with only a small handful of really close friends, with no time for extracurricular activities, because someday, the Dip and Twist would be mine, and I spent all my free time learning about the family business.

After a year of feeling like I knew him better than anyone else in the world and just having to be satisfied with pictures of him on the internet, in magazines, or all the times I saw him playing on TV, it felt like a dream when I turned around and he was *here*. I forgot all the tears I cried over him, because he

was standing right in front of me. Close enough to touch. Close enough that I could slide my arms around his waist and see if he still smelled like the woody cologne he always wore with a faint hint of leather from living with a baseball glove on his hand. And close enough to see both of his dimples when he said something sarcastic to me, and to drink in the sight of his six-foot four-inch frame that he added a shit-ton of delicious muscles to in recent years. Instead of having to imagine how absolutely hot, innocent, and adorable he looks while reading his words on a screen.

He's still hot, but he's definitely not innocent and adorable. He's a jerk and he's cruel, and I'm not about to be fooled by his dimples again.

"I knew it!" Birdie shouts, pointing her finger at me accusatorially. "You liar! I specifically asked you if anything exciting happened the last few weeks, and you said no!"

"Uh, that's probably because it hadn't happened yet when I talked to you earlier today, and I can't see into the future. He came to the Dip and Twist like, forty-five minutes ago."

"Oh," Tess mutters, her eyes widening in shock. "So he *didn't* come and see you a few weeks ago when he was here?"

"What!" I screech, quickly lowering my voice when I remember my son is probably trying to sleep not that far away. "What do you mean he was here a few weeks ago? Why am I just now finding out this information?"

"He stopped by at the tail end of that game of Owen's you couldn't make it to because you had to work. He swore us to secrecy, which was actually kind of weird, since you guys haven't seen each other or talked since you were like, twenty, but whatever," Birdie tells me as she refills my glass and tops off Tess's, a heated flush coming over my skin, knowing my sister is going to borrow one of Tess's lighters and set me on fire when I tell her everything. "And then I got busy getting ready for Hawaii, you never said anything, and I kind of forgot about it until I got back. I don't know why he left last time without talking to you, when he specifically mentioned

wanting to tell you he was here himself, but yay for you! No wonder you're drinking to celebrate, although you're being kind of dramatic about it. Your favorite baseball player in the whole world came and said hi. You must be freaking out. Did you ask him what David Beckham smells like? I know they're friends. Was it everything you thought it would be? Did you have him sign your shirt? Turn around; let me see."

If I didn't feel so guilty right now, I'd find it incredibly cute my sister is excited for me, thinking the celebrity pro baseball player Shepherd Oliver stopped by the Dip and Twist to see little ole me. I swat Birdie's hand away when she leans over the counter and grabs my shoulder to try to look at the back of my shirt.

Too bad celebrity pro baseball player Shepherd Oliver didn't stop by the Dip and Twist tonight. Just a guy who really meant something to me, who made my stressful days at work go by faster, and who made the lonely nights after Owen went to bed or when he spent the night elsewhere ones filled with laughter and a lot less loneliness. I lied to him about watching him play on TV, and I lied about how big of a fan I was and just how much I knew about baseball, but I didn't lie to him when I told him I honestly always forgot he was a big deal unless he brought it up. He was just *Shepherd* to me. Someone I could be myself with, someone I didn't feel like I had to mother, and just someone who cared about me other than my family.

Or so I thought.

Since I don't have enough room in my brain right now for one more thing to add to the WTF section located right over the nerve that makes my eye twitch, I decide to worry about why the hell Shepherd came here a few weeks ago, mentioned me to my family, and then left without even talking to me until tonight. Not wanting to put this off any longer, I take another couple of huge sips of my wine before setting the glass back down and calmly folding my hands together to rest them on the counter. As quickly as possible, I give my sister and Tess the *CliffsNotes* version of my yearlong... *whatever* with

Shepherd Oliver before he stopped talking to me with no explanation last year, until I saw him again tonight.

God, his lips are perfect. And that extra muscle on his lean frame is just glorious—

Nope! Focus, Wren! He's a jerk who doesn't give a crap about you.

“Shit. She ain't lyin’,” Tess says.

Birdie is still scarily quiet, and I look away from her wide eyes locked right on me to see that Tess is scrolling through something on my phone. I lean over and see she's pulled up my Instagram and is currently looking through all of Shepherd's and my private messages.

“Oh my God, Tess, boundaries!” I scold her, snatching my phone out of her hand. “You don't just take someone else's phone and start reading their messages.”

“There are no boundaries when I see a conversation in there about a forty-minute blowjob with Shepherd Oliver!” she fires back, right when my phone rings in my hand, and I look down with a sigh of relief when I see Emily's name flashing across my screen.

“It wasn't a blowjob *with* him. He was just in the same.... You know what, it's none of your business, and this is exactly why I didn't say anything,” I tell her, answering Emily's FaceTime call and not even bothering to give her a smile in greeting as I hold the phone up in front of me when her face comes on the screen. “I told them about Shepherd, and by the way, he's here on the island. He stopped by work to see me, and now I'm going to drink myself into a coma.”

There's a beat of silence and a shocked blink from Emily from the couch in her apartment in Beverly Hills. Right when she opens her mouth, most likely to give me some sort of encouraging words, my sister finally remembers how to speak again. Both she *and* Tess scream at me so loudly Owen is definitely going to come out here and yell at us.

“You told Emily and you didn't tell us?!”

My kitchen then turns into an episode of Jerry Springer while Emily, Tess, and Birdie argue amongst themselves about me while I'm standing right here, multiple "stupid twat", "don't talk to me like that, motherfucker", and "eat shit" comments flying around the room with ease as Birdie grabs the phone out of my hand to hold it herself.

I pour myself more wine.

It doesn't take long before I hear an ear-piercing whistle come from my phone, and all arguing about who should have told who about what is instantly cut off. I glance over at my phone in Birdie's hand and smile at Emily when she pulls her thumb and forefinger out of her mouth after effectively shutting everyone up.

"Yes, Wren told me and only me, because I'm her ride or die," Emily explains in a calm, clear manner to the other women in my kitchen. "Just like Birdie told Tess all about how she never felt like she was enough for Palmer and Wren didn't find out until later, and just like Tess told Birdie she thought she was falling in love with Bodhi and didn't admit it to Wren until she overheard Tess on the phone."

I point my wine glass at both of them just to wordlessly give my support for what Emily is saying. I was a little sad neither one of them came to me first with such important things, but I understood the type of bond the two of them have.

"This is just... a really big shock," Birdie says, shaking her head back and forth at me, still unable to believe I hid a yearlong... *whatever*, with Shepherd Oliver and never told her. "The jock of all jocks, homecoming king *and* prom king, most popular guy there ever was at Summersweet High, and the guy you had such a massive crush on that you learned everything there was to know about baseball back in middle school, talked to you for an *entire year*, and you never said a word. I thought something was up with you a few years ago, but I figured I was just hallucinating. I mean, *Wren!* This is like all your high school and teenage fantasies come to life in an explosion of magic and wonder! Like an episode of *Sabrina*,

but without the Satan worshiping and sacrificing of human souls. And you're just sitting there drinking wine like it's no big deal!"

"Speak for yourself," Emily pipes up from the phone. "I just sacrificed a human soul over lunch yesterday before my mani-pedi. And I'm pretty sure it's a big deal." She gives me a sympathetic smile from the screen. "You can scream. I know you want to."

God, I miss her so much.

"I'll go outside and do it on the empty beach like a civilized person later," I tell her, trying to smile but realizing it hurts too much as I glance at Tess and Birdie.

"We were... friends. Or something," I tell them. "As much as I always forgot that he was famous and a big deal, I still saw the women he took to parties and the ones on his arm for events. He wasn't sitting around pining for me or anything, so I just enjoyed the fact that I had someone in my life I wasn't related to who seemed to care about me and how my day went. Or so I thought. He private-messaged his way into my life, made himself such a big part of it until my day didn't feel whole unless I talked to him at least once, until I trusted him and depended on him, and it felt *so good* having someone else help me make decisions about Owen for once. And then he ripped it away without so much as an explanation, stopped replying to my messages, and never spoke to me again until he showed up in the back room of the Dip and Twist tonight."

I'm pretty sure I know *why* he stopped talking to me that week of all weeks, but I am in no way mentally prepared to discuss *that* with everyone right at this moment. It's bad enough I still remember how hard it was to try not to vomit or cry myself to sleep the multiple times I was watching ESPN and had to see the replay of a woman who looked like a Victoria's Secret model profess her undying love for him right on home plate. And I can't even think about how close I came to booking a flight to Washington the day after his injury. I

was typing in the expiration date on my debit card before I realized how stupid it was.

I hear a *click*, and suddenly there's a small flame waving back and forth in front of my face.

"I can make one phone call and find out what cottage he's staying in," Tess says, the fire from her BIC lighter flickering when the breeze from the ceiling fan above us hits it. "I know from previous experience that baseball hats go up fast. Just ask Palmer."

"He's still pissed you burned his lucky hat," Birdie complains as I gently take the lighter out of Tess's hand, the flame extinguishing when her finger slips from the button. I set the pink lighter down on the counter then think better of it and push it farther out of Tess's reach.

"As tempting as it sounds, we're not lighting his stuff on fire."

"So, you're going to give him hell *and* the silent treatment? Excellent. I used to like the guy, but he's on my shit list now. I'll start practicing my resting bitch face. Is dickhole still a good insult, or did we find something better yet?"

"I'm partial to limp dick. It's funny whether it's true or not." Emily shrugs.

"Go with fuck wagon," Tess helpfully suggests. "It's aggressive and makes you think of a mom from the '70s, a Virginia Slim hanging out of her mouth while she flies down the highway, reaching into the backseat of her station wagon to beat her kids who won't stop fighting."

"We're not going with *any* of those things," I interrupt them. "I'm a thirty-four-year-old mother of a teenage boy and a business owner, who needs to set a good example. I stormed away from him without saying anything to him because I was in shock, and I just needed to get away from him to clear my head. I deserve answers, and I'm going to deal with him. Just not right now. I need some time to get my head together first."

Birdie reaches over the counter and rests her hand on top of my clasped ones, and Tess reaches over and rubs her palm against my back.

“You got this.” Emily winks at me from my phone screen that Birdie is facing in my direction. “You’re a strong, independent single mother, who sometimes lets people take advantage of how incredibly nice and giving she is, but still a badass bitch.”

I smile at her, knowing she’s right, about both things, when Tess leans closer to me.

“When you say you stormed away from him, please tell me you didn’t do it quietly.”

“Oh, I absolutely called him a pile of human garbage before I walked away.” I nod seriously.

Everyone barks out a laugh, knowing that is not like me at all. I’ve never told Kevin how I feel about him in fifteen years. My motto has always been to kill people with kindness. I’m not a mean person who calls people names just to make myself feel better. Usually. Thirty seconds in a room with Shepherd and I had no problem telling him what I thought of him. Weird.

“So, in conclusion, I am going to deal with Shepherd Oliver, just not right now. Besides, I might get an early Christmas present and wake up tomorrow to find out he’s already gone.” I shrug, taking a drink of wine to cover up my lie that I would be happy about something like that.

It doesn’t make me happy thinking I might have blown my one chance to finally get answers out of the guy face-to-face. Whether I’m mad and hurt by him or not, the thought that the thirty seconds he stood in front of me before I ran away might have been the only time I’ll ever be that close to him again makes my chest feel tight and my throat get thick with emotion, and I struggle to swallow the wine in my mouth.

“Holy shit, *the* Shepherd Oliver is on Summersweet Island and came to the Dip and Twist, and you didn’t tell me?”

All three of us along with Emily on the phone turn and look in the living room when we hear Owen shout. He's standing in the middle of the living room shirtless with just a pair of gray athletic shorts on, his hair mussed from his pillow, holding his phone up and out toward me with an annoyed look on his face. I can't really see the screen of his phone from here, but I'm assuming one of his friends must have spotted Shepherd in town earlier, snapped a picture, and sent it to him.

"Looks like you might have to deal with Shepherd a little sooner than you thought," Birdie tells me as I drop my head to the counter and smack it a few times. "You needed something to shake up your life. This could be a lot of much-needed fun for you."

Not only did my son get my looks and my height, but he also got my love of the same professional baseball player, so that's fun for me right about now. While Owen continues to berate me from the living room for not telling him his favorite baseball player in the world and the reason why he became a center fielder is on the island, I continue smacking my head against the counter, hoping to knock something loose that will give me the strength to deal with this.

CHAPTER 5



Wren

“I’d hit that.”

“**B**UT DID YOU see that ass? *My God*. My husband never had a round, firm ass like that, even when he was a teenager. It looks even better in person than it does on TV.”

“Tisa talked to him last night right when he got to the island and said his laugh still sounds like warm, melted chocolate is being poured over your body.”

“Sharon Worsham saw him jogging on the beach this morning shirtless and spilled her coffee right down the front of her shirt, and her boobs got third-degree burns. She said it was totally worth it. I’ll forward you the photo she sent me. That man is *ripped*. He was hot in high school, but this is on another level.”

“Taryn Johnston saw him at Summersweet Grocery and sent me a picture when he was in the produce section getting grapefruit. Look at those biceps testing out the firmness of that fruit.”

“Zoom in. Oh my *God*, I think I just got pregnant. Taryn is doing the Lord’s work. Send that one to me too.”

“Me three! I need something new for my diddle files, since I—”

“Ladies!” I finally shout, turning around and narrowing my eyes at the moms sitting in the bleachers a few feet behind me on the other side of the chain-link fence I’m leaning against,

all hovered around someone's phone. "There are teenage boys present. Can we tone it down a bit, please?"

Uuugh, why do I always have to be a mom?

The cluster of women immediately stops gossiping about the man who kept me up all night, and I immediately feel bad. My irritation right now isn't really with them; although, if I have to listen to one more person talk about how hot Shepherd Oliver is, I might light this entire baseball field on fire.

"Sorry! Just a little tired and crabby today," I quickly explain with a small laugh, not wanting them to be mad at me.

They all give me sad, sympathetic smiles, and I try my hardest not to let it bother me, but I fail. It always bothers me when people look at me with pity, but I just smile and pretend like it doesn't. Poor single mom Wren, who has a douchebag loser as a baby daddy. I'm not the only single mom on Summersweet Island, not by a longshot. I'm just the only single mom with no life outside of work and her son. Where those moms are living their best life swiping right, most of my excitement comes from swiping my comforter back from my bed and face-planting into my pillow.

"I'll send you the shirtless picture of Shepherd Oliver on the beach. That will cheer you right up." Ashley Morgan nods at me with a confident smile.

"Please don't," I mutter, when I hear the crack of a bat and realize I'm supposed to be coaching baseball practice.

On top of a massive hangover headache from hell and bone-weary exhaustion I haven't felt since my son was a colicky newborn, with Owen's team not having a coach right now and a big tournament coming up soon, I organized a small group of parents who know a lot about baseball to help fill in after our coach quit a few weeks ago. I wasn't supposed to be in charge of practice again until tomorrow, but Alex's dad has the flu, and I'm the only other parent coach who doesn't work off the island and has a more flexible schedule to be able to be here right after school gets out.

I'm *always* the only other parent who has a more flexible schedule and no life.

“Nice one, Dominic!” I clap and shout to the right fielder who just made a beautiful running catch of a pop-up, paying attention to practice instead of feeling sorry for myself. I have one of the seniors on varsity helping out tonight by hitting pop-ups over and over to the outfielders. I give Dominic a high-five against his glove he holds up for me when he jogs in from the outfield. “Head over to the batting tee to get some hitting drills in, and send Max out here to me when you get there.”

“On it, Ms. Bennett!”

When Dominic is gone, I take a minute to watch Owen make his own perfect catch, letting him and his two other teammates nab a couple more for a few minutes before I move them over to batting practice and transfer the rest of the batters to the outfield for pop-up drills. Closing my eyes, I rest my elbows on top of the fence behind me, letting my hands dangle down in front, ignoring the quiet chatter of the moms in the bleachers who have moved on to talk about their weekend plans. I take a few deep, calming breaths and enjoy the smell of the ocean and fresh cut grass, and my favorite sounds in the world—the *thwacks* of bats connecting with balls and the *pops* of pitches flying into gloves.

I spent the rest of last night after Tess and Birdie left finishing off an entire bottle of wine by myself and then staring up at the ceiling in my bedroom all night after a quick shower, barely getting two hours of sleep. I'm tired, hungover, and annoyed with myself, and not even a few hours off from the Dip and Twist this afternoon can make me feel better. Listening to the moms talk about Shepherd just reminds me that he's *here*, and I didn't imagine it. I tossed and turned all night long thinking about how I behaved when I saw him standing there in front of me, and thinking about that again right now just amplifies my headache and the nausea churning in my stomach, not even my favorite sounds making it better.

I called him a pile of human garbage.

“How are you holding up?”

My eyes pop open, and I turn my head to see Birdie standing on the other side of the fence, resting her arms on top of it right next to mine. Her blonde hair is parted down the middle in two French braids, and she looks as adorable as always in one of the outfits she wears to work—a white fitted T-shirt with the SIG logo on it in black, and a matching black-and-white short golf skirt. I paid more attention when grabbing a shirt out of my closet this morning and at least didn't put on one with Shepherd's freaking last name in all caps on the back. But I'm still wearing one of my kid's old T-shirts like always, with another pair of ratty jean shorts and my favorite worn-in pair of white Converse. At least I put a new messy bun in my hair when I woke up instead of leaving in the one I went to bed with after my shower last night. That's progress I'd say.

“I want to vomit into the nearest trashcan, and I wish someone would turn off the sun. It's so bright,” I whisper and then hiss after that last part, making my sister laugh.

“Sorry. Tess and I probably should have taken the rest of the wine with us when we left. And I didn't mean about your hangover. I meant about *he who shall not be named*.”

“You can say his name. It's fine,” I tell her, pausing to glare at my son a hundred yards away and then shouting across the field when he unnecessarily falls to the ground and rolls after making a catch. He almost dropped the ball with his need to make himself look cooler. “Stop trying to showboat, Bennett! Just catch the ball!”

“Oooh, Owen got yelled at by his *mooom!*”

Sadly, that burn wasn't shouted by one of Owen's teammates, but by his aunt. Owen sticks his tongue out at Birdie before getting back in line.

I have never been one of those parents who wears rose-colored glasses around her child. I will be the first one to call him out when he's being an idiot. When I made the decision

about stepping in to coach, I made absolutely certain Owen would be okay with it. He's always been okay with me helping out at practice, but this is different. I'm *running* practices, and I can't let my own kid walk all over me or get away with anything, or fifteen other teenage boys—all of them taller than me by at least six inches and outweighing me by no less than thirty pounds—will think they can do the same thing. Owen doesn't want me to treat him differently than anyone else on the team, so I don't. And that includes calling him out when he's being an idiot.

"I called him human garbage," I finally say with a sigh a few minutes later when the boys are all doing what they're supposed to for the time being.

"If it smells like garbage, then it probably *is* garbage, and what that man did to you smells like absolute shit."

"You have very strange analogies sometimes," I muse, quickly sobering as my thoughts go back to what we're discussing. "I don't like that I was mean to him, Birdie. I'm not a mean person. I could be a smartass and a little lippy when we were talking, but not mean. He's not a pile of human garbage, he's the exact opposite. He's sweet, funny, kind, caring, and generous. I can't treat him badly just because he found someone who appreciated all those things about him and he didn't need me anymore. I can't be mad at him for having a life or for falling in love, but I am still hurt. We were friends. He called me his pen pal. I mean... it was silly of me to ever have any kind of fantasies about him or get mad about him finding happiness."

I just wish he would have found it with me.

"So that's it? No threats to bust his kneecaps with a bat? No shouts of *limp dick* from across the parking lot? You're just going to forgive him and go about your merry way?" Birdie asks, a little disappointment on her face that there won't be any violence.

"I'm not the kind of person to hold a grudge."

You know, going forward. We won't count this last year.

“Like I told you guys last night, I’m going to be mature about this. As soon as I see him again, I’m going to apologize for being mean, so I can ease my conscience, and then give him a chance to explain,” I finish.

“Probably a wise decision to make peace as soon as possible.” Birdie nods. “Audrey Hessler at Island Brew told me when I stopped for coffee this morning that he’s renting a long-term cottage, not a short-term one. If he’s gonna be here for a while, you’re bound to run into each other, and there’s no sense in making it awkward like I did with Palmer when I kept running away from him and avoiding him.”

She did do that, even though I kept telling her not to.

And I heard the same thing about Shepherd and the cottage rental from one of the other moms before they started talking about him like a piece of meat. Summersweet Island law states that when a rumor is told twice, it’s now fact, so that’s just great.

“*Harrison!*” I shout, pausing our conversation again to focus my attention on practice and our shortstop behind the plate. “You can’t hit the ball if you can’t see it! Keep your head down *all the way through* your swing.”

Birdie and I are quiet for a few minutes, watching Harrison step up to the plate for his next pitch. He keeps his head down like I told him to, and if he were hitting in a game instead of taking soft-tosses from one of his teammates sitting on a bucket right next to him, and his hit went out into the field instead of into a net a few feet away, it would have definitely been a nice line drive. I shout out some words of encouragement to Harrison, a small smile of satisfaction on my face until I start talking to my sister again as I stare blindly out at the activity on the field.

“The next time I see Shepherd, I’m going to be polite, and mature, and apologize. You’re absolutely right, and there’s no point making things awkward.” I sigh, looking down at the

hem of Owen's old T-shirt, focusing all my attention on a string that came loose as I fiddle with it. "It's going to be awkward enough seeing him all the time and pretending like he doesn't mean anything to me, even after how much he hurt me."

He's got someone important in his life now. I don't know if she'll be joining him here on the island or not for his extended stay, but I might as well just assume it and start preparing myself now. Even if he gives me a rational explanation for what happened between us, he's still not mine. He never really was; I just borrowed him for a little while. Now, he has someone willing to go on national television and tell the world how much she loves him, when I couldn't even tell him watching him play on TV was always the most thrilling moments of my life, aside from messaging with him. I can't even hope for friendship again. No woman in their right mind would be okay with their man talking to another woman as much as we did, and I really can't blame her.

My sister pats my back soothingly right when I hear the *ding* of an incoming text on my phone. Pulling it out of my back pocket, I click on the new text without paying attention to who sent it.

"You're welcome!" Ashley chirps from the stands behind me when the photo she sent opens up as large as possible on my phone and my knees almost give out.

"*Jeesus* Christ, that's what he looks like under his Hawks jersey?" Birdie groans from over my shoulder as she looks down at the phone in my hand, and I can hear her panting in my ear.

Or maybe that's me.... Yep, that's me. *Sweet mother of God, he looks like he was chiseled out of marble.*

Unable to help myself, I press my fingers against the screen and zoom in a little, bringing the phone up closer to my face while Birdie is practically climbing the fence behind me to get a better look over my shoulder.

“Forgive him. Forgive him immediately, even if he tells you he dropped you because aliens invaded his brain and he lost all control. Doesn’t matter what he says with a body like that.” Birdie hums in approval, her chin now resting on my shoulder.

“Wow... I mean.... *Wow*” are the only words I can manage to mumble as I look at a picture of Shepherd covered in glistening sweat, sand kicking up behind him as he jogs a few feet away from the crashing waves, wearing nothing but a pair of blue athletic shorts, a baseball cap on backwards, and a truckload of lean, rippling, sweat-covered muscles.

“Sharon must have the newest iPhone with multiple camera lenses. Look at that detail,” Birdie whispers almost reverently. “You can count the hairs of his happy trail.”

I’ve seen plenty of pictures of Shepherd over the years, some he posed for and some that were candid taken by paparazzi. Plenty of them hot as hell. But this is otherworldly, and I’m starting to wonder if the possibility of him being taken over by aliens is true and they genetically altered him.

“I mean... that can’t be real, right? Someone must have Photoshopped this from the time Sharon took it until now,” I mutter, cocking my head to the side to really appreciate the beauty of the V-shaped indent by his hips and lower abs.

“Oh, that’s definitely real. And it’s not even my good side.”

Birdie and I both screech at the same time, but where she has the luxury of being empty-handed when she turns to face the man we were just ogling, my shock at being caught red-handed makes my phone fly up and out of my hands. Bobbling with it for a few seconds before I finally get a hold of it again, I ignore the chuckle from the man behind me. Willing the embarrassed blush off my cheeks as I quickly shove my phone back into the pocket of my shorts, I lift a determined chin in his direction when I finally turn to face him.

And then regret it immediately when I see his dimples, my eyes wanting to look anywhere but at them. Naturally, they fly right down to his torso. Doesn't matter if it's now covered in a soft, black, cotton T-shirt with the Hawks mascot on the front. My eyes will never, ever stop seeing Shepherd Oliver shirtless whenever I look at him. That image is now burned into my brain, and another soft chuckle from him, that does indeed feel like warm, melted chocolate being poured over my body, tells me he *knows* that image is burned into my brain.

Look up at his eyes, you idiot!

When I finally do, the satisfied smirk on his face is still there, but it softens a little when he speaks.

“Hey, Wren.”

When my body threatens to break out in goose bumps just hearing him say my name again, a spark of annoyance flashes through me, and I glare at him. He can't just sneak up on me like this, *twice*, and be all, *Hey, Wren*. Who does he think he is?

“What do you want?”

The short, clipped words are out of me before I can stop them. Instead of immediately feeling bad, the smile on Shepherd's face that grows bigger when I'm rude to him just ticks me off more.

What are you doing? You're supposed to be apologizing to him!

“Just wanted to check out practice for a few minutes.” He shrugs easily, flipping the brim of his baseball cap around backward, so his eyes aren't shielded anymore.

“Oh, now he's just playing dirty,” Birdie whispers in my ear, always melting whenever Palmer turns his hat around so he can see her better.

Whatever. There's no melting happening just because a few silky tufts of brown hair are adorably poking out of the hole in his hat now and I can clearly see his bright blue,

sparkling eyes that are so gorgeous I've had multiple dreams about them staring down at me.

And multiple orgasms—

Nope! Absolutely not. He sucks!

Crossing my arms in front of me, I hold steady with my glare, looking at a spot *between* his eyes instead of right at them.

“Well, now you've checked it out, and now you can leave. If my players see you here, they will never finish practice.”

“So you've got it covered?” Shepherd asks, a look of total seriousness on his face, and for a minute, I think he's actually going to listen to me. I instantly feel bad about my attitude and my shoulders droop a little. “You don't wanna maybe, I don't know... do a little practicing out in ‘*middle field*’?”

His use of the stupid terminology I messed up with him on purpose, and the fact that he's probably been standing here for God knows how long watching me pretty expertly hold practice, means he absolutely knows the jig is up and that I lied to him.

“Isn't it called center field?” Birdie pipes up, because of course she does. “I don't know much about baseball, but I do know where my favorite nephew plays.”

Shepherd lets out another small laugh, but this one borders more on annoyed than filled with humor as he mirrors my pose and crosses his arms over his chest. It causes another spark of annoyance in me, but this time it's an entire Fourth of July grand finale filled with fiery explosions.

“Funny thing about that,” Shepherd muses, with absolutely no amusement at all as he continues to hold my stare while he talks to Birdie. “I didn't think your sister knew a damn thing about baseball. Knew for certain she'd never done something as *boring* as watch me play on TV. So color me surprised when I was here a few weeks ago, and you told me what a big fan she was and just how many of my jerseys and T-shirts she

owned. I think you said over twenty, right? Or was it twenty-five?”

Now Shepherd *does* smile as he looks at me, and my head slowly swivels to glare at Birdie over my shoulder.

“Oops!” she squeaks, making a grimace face with her teeth. “I might have forgotten to mention I let that part slip.”

Knowing my brain can only handle one thing at a time right now, I look away from her and decide to deal with her betrayal later. Who gives a crap if he knows I lied? We’re not even friends anymore. If he thinks he can stand here being all high and mighty with me when he was the bigger jerk, he can kiss my butt.

“Whatever. So I’ve never missed one of your games,” I tell him with a roll of my eyes. “Your ego was big enough. You didn’t need someone else fawning all over you, giving you a bigger head with compliments. And I *never* told you I didn’t know anything about baseball. When I told you I never watched you play, you *assumed* I didn’t know anything. I just didn’t bother correcting you. If you don’t mind, I’ve got a practice to run and don’t need any distractions right now.”

“So I’m a distraction, am I?” Shepherd asks, with a stupid twinkle in his eye and a smirk on his lips.

A flash of Alana Caldwell kissing those lips while they stood together on home plate goes through my head, making my chest get tight and my throat clog with emotion, which just pisses me off even more that he’s trying to be all cute with me.

What is wrong with you, Wren? Get a grip! Take a deep breath, remember who you are, and stop being mean! This is not you! Start over, apologize, and then agree to avoid each other at all costs for the rest of his “extended stay” here.

Right when I take a deep breath of courage so I can take the high road and kill him with kindness, another incoming text chimes from my back pocket.

“You might wanna get that,” Shepherd tells me when I ignore it. “Unless you’re afraid it’s another shirtless picture of

me and you won't be able to handle it.”

Growling a little under my breath, I pull my phone back out of my pocket, no need to open the text when I can clearly see what it says on my lock screen.

There's no way.

“Is that a joke?” Birdie asks, once again looking over my shoulder.

The group text to all the parents on Owen's baseball team from the athletic director is definitely not a joke, and I read it three times before it sinks in.

Dear freshman baseball parents, I'm happy to announce I've finally hired a new coach. It is with great pleasure I let you know Summersweet's own Shepherd Oliver has decided to retire from professional baseball and take the position permanently! Let's all give him a great big welcome back home!

“Well, this is awkward,” Shepherd says, nothing but humor ringing loud and clear in his voice. “Looks like you're fired, Coach. Don't worry; I'll be gentle with the middle fielders while they're scoring touchdowns and hitting goals.”

All right, I didn't act that stupid about baseball.

“You... You...” I stutter, unable to believe what is happening right now.

“You, you amazing, wonderful, handsome man who looks Photoshopped with his shirt off?” Shepherd suggests when I can't find my words.

I had every intention of apologizing to this man for being rude to him the last time I saw him. Because I'm not a mean person and I don't say mean things to people just to make myself feel better. My mouth just opens and closes like a fish out of water, trying to form the words to apologize to him and start over, but I can't make them come no matter how hard I try. He's still standing here smirking at me, I'm still mortified

he caught me drooling over his naked torso, and now he's going to be Owen's freaking baseball coach, and I'll never be able to avoid him!

So many words are flying around in my brain, all of them wanting to be heard, the insults wrestling with the apologies until everything bubbles up all at one time, and I'm only able to sputter out the first ones to cross the finish line.

"You... You... *fuck wagon!*"

"What happened to being mature?" Birdie whispers in my ear as I whirl away from Shepherd's wide, shocked eyes to face her.

"Eat shit, limp dick!"

"Whoa, hey now!" Birdie shouts, holding her hands up in front of her and taking a step back from me. "I'm on your side."

"I'm sorry," I quickly mutter as she lowers her hands and nods.

I don't even know what is happening with me right now. I feel like I'm going crazy, and now that the flood gates have been opened, I can't close them, and I can't stop being mean, and it's all because of the hot and infuriating man standing right next to me.

"Forgiven. Totally understandable. Carry on," my sister encourages.

When I hear Shepherd loudly and obviously clear his throat like he's waiting for his own apology from me, I bend down and grab the red drawstring bag with the Summersweet High School mascot on it that I put a few bottles of water and a granola bar in for myself before standing back up to face him.

"You're still a fuck wagon. Sorry, not sorry."

With that, I turn and start to head off to the parking lot victoriously, my feet stuttering to a stop when I realize we had an audience through this entire exchange. All the mothers in

the stands sitting huddled together are staring between me and Shepherd with their mouths dropped open in complete and utter shock. I'm not really sure if it's because Shepherd Oliver is standing right in front of them, Shepherd Oliver is now going to be coaching their sons, or that I just called Shepherd Oliver a fuck wagon. Loudly. *Twice*. After scolding them for being inappropriate not ten minutes ago.

"I hope you all have a *wonderful* evening. It's always a pleasure seeing you."

For some ridiculous reason, I add a curtsy with my big smile for all of the women with wide-open mouths and then start walking away as fast as my feet will allow without taking off into a full sprint and looking like even more of an idiot.

"Was it a pleasure seeing me too?" Shepherd shouts after me, and I can hear that damn humor in his voice.

In reply, I continue walking faster and stick my fist up in the air. And since I've already disgraced this children's ballpark with my foul language enough, I don't stick my middle finger up with it like I want to, but I know Shepherd gets what I'm throwing down.

"Is that a yes, or are you trying to imitate John Bender in *The Breakfast Club* when he walked across the football field at the end?" Shepherd cheerfully yells.

"*Don't you... forget about—*"

I tune out the sound of all the moms in the bleachers suddenly belting out the iconic song from that '80s movie, along with my traitor of a sister shouting over top of them.

"Oh my *God*, I love this song!"

Dropping my fist in defeat, I speed walk the rest of the way to the parking lot, seriously hating my life right now.

CHAPTER 6



Shepherd

“Never let the fear of striking out keep you from playing the game.”

THE LAST FEW nights of practices with my new team have been crazy, to say the least. They’re a great group of kids with a shit-ton of talent. Being out on the field with them, teaching them new techniques, and the thrill of watching them succeed, along with being able to still eat, sleep, and breathe baseball but in a much more relaxing and fun way, just makes me realize once again what a good decision I made by coming back here.

But we just finished with practice number three, and it still takes me over forty minutes to calm the boys down at the start of each one and convince them to get to work and stop asking me questions about what it’s like playing pro ball. I can’t fault them for their enthusiasm. It’s actually pretty damn sweet. Until around the thirty-five-minute mark when no one has picked up a bat or a ball yet. But I still go easy on them for now. I couldn’t even imagine what I would have done as a freshman in high school if one of my baseball idols came to my school and started coaching my team. I’m trying as hard as possible to get them to see I’m just a normal guy who grew up on this small island just like the rest of them. It’s just taking a few of them a little longer than others to chill out, but that’s fine. I’ve got all the time in the world now.

When I hear the putter of a golf cart as it pulls into the Summersweet High School parking lot, I smile to myself as I

lean against a light post on the sidewalk in front of the baseball field. After the last few days of showing up to practice a half hour early to get set up and finding Owen already there setting up for me, followed by watching him get rides home from everyone in his family except his mother, I came to the conclusion that Wren is avoiding me. Deciding to show up to practice an *hour* early today, I keep my smile firmly in place even as she scowls at me the entire time she pulls up to the curb.

“What’s up, Owen?” I greet my favorite player, although I will never tell anyone he’s my favorite player, because coaches aren’t supposed to have favorites, just like parents. But they do. Oh, they do. It just depends what day you ask them.

Owen mumbles out a quick hello with his eyes downcast, bumping his fist against my outstretched one as he quickly climbs out of the passenger seat of Wren’s golf cart. I don’t know if Owen is my favorite kid because he’s the spitting image of Wren and even after only a few days I can see he has just as big of a heart as she does, or because he is the only kid on the team who hasn’t fawned all over me since I got here. He hasn’t asked for an autograph, he hasn’t begged for a picture, and he hasn’t hounded me with a thousand questions about my career. He’s reserved, a little shy, and mature for his age, always the one scolding his teammates when they won’t stop with the questions, pulling them away from me and telling them to get to work.

But I’ve been dealing with fans since I was twenty years old. I know what it looks like when one of your biggest fans is standing in front of you, but he or she is doing everything they can to play it cool and not look crazy. Owen Bennett could be the poster boy for that kind of fan. Which just makes me chuckle to myself as he grabs his bat bag from the back of the golf cart and starts to quickly scurry away to the field.

Like mother, like son. It seems they both want to make sure my ego stays in check.

“Hey!” Wren shouts to Owen’s back, the scowl momentarily disappearing, since she’s no longer looking at me. “Are you forgetting something?”

I look back over my shoulder as Owen pauses and does the same to look back at his mom.

“I love you. You’re the best mom in the world,” he deadpans, making me laugh again as he gives his mom a wave and then keeps walking.

When I turn back to look at Wren, a smile is lighting up her face as she stares after her son. She’s so goddamn beautiful, especially when she’s looking at her son with so much love shining all over her face, it makes my chest get tight. I heard one of the kids on the team say something to Owen about how he keeps forgetting his mom isn’t blonde anymore. It doesn’t occur to me until this moment she’s now a brunette. I hadn’t even noticed her hair color change the couple of times I’d seen her since I’ve been back.

All I’d seen was *her*. And all I see now is her, sitting behind the wheel of her golf cart, her hair up in its usual messy, adorable pile on top of her head with long pieces hanging down around her face. She can hide it from most people, but I can clearly see the exhaustion, mental and physical, from all the responsibilities she has to handle and decisions she has to make alone. I’ve never felt like more of an asshole than I do right now, standing here beside her, knowing I gave her a shoulder to cry on, two ears more than willing to listen, and never hesitated to help her with anything she needed. And then I took it away, because I was stupid and selfish. She needs to know how sorry I am and give me a chance to fix things between us, if she’d just stay in one place long enough for me to tell her.

“So, I thought maybe after practice, we could—”

My words immediately die on my tongue when Wren’s happy, loving smile immediately turns into a Grumpy Cat frown when she finally looks away from Owen and at me.

“Eat shit.”

Her golf cart sputters back to life, and she zips away from the curb before I can even take my next breath. I’m only in shock and feel a little defeated for about thirty seconds before I throw my head back and laugh.



GETTING UP FROM the bottom bleacher, I smile and grab the large peppermint mocha with extra whipped cream that I know is Wren’s favorite from her mentioning it a few times during our chats. Owen told me she had to be at the Dip and Twist for a delivery at five this morning, so I know she must be running on fumes after working all day and then coming straight to Owen’s game.

I watch Wren walking toward me in a pair of blue-jean overalls with a white tank top underneath, and she’s so fucking adorable I don’t understand why she’s single. I don’t understand how I got so lucky that I came back here and no one has snatched her up yet.

She pauses when she gets to me, since I’m blocking the way for her to get past and go up into the stands with the handful of other parents that are here early.

“How was your day? I got you a peppermint mocha.”

“Thanks!” Wren smiles at me cheerfully.

Too cheerfully.

She takes the cup from my outstretched hand, and with her eyes still on mine and a smile still on her face, she leans to her right and drops the coffee right into the trashcan.

“Right.” I nod, making sure I absolutely do not laugh even though I want to, stepping back and turning to the side with my arm out so she can pass. “Carry on then.”

And she does. Making sure to stomp on my foot as she goes.



“EXCELLENT NIGHT FOR practice, don’t you think?”

“Bite me.”

“I can certainly arrange that... I’m *kidding*! Put that lighter away. Why do you even have that on your person?”



“I’D LIKE A double-scoop of toffee crunch, please.”

“We’re out.”

“Okay... mint chocolate chip.”

“Out.”

“Chocolate chip cookie dough?”

“Oooh, just sold out.”

“Let me guess. You’re out of every ice cream flavor I could possibly want.”

“Who says professional baseball players are dumb?”

“Do people say that?”

“I say that. About you.”

“Same time tomorrow?”

“Eat shit.”



“ARE YOU STALKING me?”

“Is that what they call picking up dinner to go from The Barge? Kids these days... always coming up with some kind of new slang.”

“You are so annoying. Go away.”

“I didn’t realize I wasn’t allowed to enter this great establishment with the best diner food in the world when

you're here. Should we set up a schedule? Friday's are pumpkin pancakes day, so I'm gonna need that one."

"Well then, you'll definitely want Wednesdays. That's bullshit sandwich day. You seem to like the taste of bullshit in your mouth."

"Mooom! Why are you being weird? Oh my God!"



"HOW LONG DO you plan on keeping this up?"

"What day is it?"

"Monday."

"Forever. Fuck off."



"GET IN."

"Oh no, it's fine! I'm cool!"

My golf cart idles on the curb of a side street just around the corner from the high school. After I put all the equipment away in the storage shed next to the baseball field, I made sure all the guys on the team had left and no one needed a ride home. I started heading to my cottage and noticed Owen stopped on the sidewalk to get a better grip on everything he's carrying.

"Seriously, Owen. Get in. I'm not letting you walk that far with a bat bag and a heavy bucket of balls," I tell him when he doesn't move from the sidewalk and bites his bottom lip as he looks down at the bucket almost overflowing with baseballs.

My original assumption that Wren had been avoiding me during drop-offs and pick-ups from practice last week was only half true. She definitely made other people pick him up for a few days so she wouldn't have to see me. But she didn't drop Owen off a half hour early to avoid me. I found out from the varsity coach that Owen Bennett has been coming to

practice early since he was in tee ball, and according to the coach, “Driving his mother crazy wanting extra practice all the time.”

I guess when Owen was younger, Wren would go out onto the empty field with him, playing catch to warm him up before everyone else got there and timing him while he ran sprints between bases. Once he got older and no longer needed a parental chaperone, he now takes it upon himself to make sure he gets here early every single day before anyone else. He reminds me so much of myself it’s almost scary. And I know for a fact he *never* drove Wren crazy, because she’s exactly like my parents. Working her ass off day in and day out to make sure he has the best coaches, the best equipment, the best training, and the best opportunities. My parents worked their fingers to the bone, never really enjoying what life had to offer until all their sacrifices paid off and I was able to make sure they never had to sacrifice again.

“It’s fine. I swear!” Owen tries to reassure me. “It’s not my mom’s fault. I was supposed to go home with Dominic, because he has his golf cart license and he’s the only one of my friends my mom trusts to not act like an idiot behind the wheel, but his girlfriend asked him to come over, so he ditched me. I could call my mom, and she’d totally come get me, but I don’t want to bother her, because she’s busy. It’s fine. I don’t mind walking. I walk all the time. It’s good exercise!”

Jesus... the way this kid is making absolutely certain I don’t think Wren is a bad mom, and how overenthusiastic he’s trying to make walking two miles home with a heavy bat bag and an even heavier bucket of balls sound, makes me want to cry like a fucking baby.

This past week has been fun, poking at Wren, driving her crazy, and forcing her to acknowledge me, even if it’s just to insult me, but that’s all I’ve been doing. Driving her crazy and just adding one more thing to her plate that she has to deal with. She still has to deal with me, but maybe it’s time I make it a little easier to do so. Starting with making her life a little easier.

“I know it’s not your mom’s fault,” I tell him softly, getting out of my golf cart and rounding the front of it until I’m standing right in front of Owen. Bending down, I grab the handle from the bucket of balls and heft it up. “You have a pretty awesome mom. She reminds me of my mom. And my mom would have absolutely kicked my ass, whether she was busy or not, if I didn’t call her for a ride home.”

Owen’s eyes finally meet mine, and for the first time in a week, they aren’t filled with nerves when he talks to me as he grins.

“Yeah. She’d totally kick my ass if she knew I walked two miles home.”

Both of us laughing, Owen follows me to the cart, tossing his bag into the large, heavy-duty plastic cargo box attached to the back that turns my cart into a sort of makeshift pick-up truck, while I lift the bucket up over the edge and set it down inside.

Not wanting him to get all quiet and nervous around me, I don’t waste a second keeping up the conversation as we get in the front of the cart and I pull away from the curb.

“Thanks for all your help getting the guys to focus and start practice every night.”

Owen just shrugs. “I’m glad to help. They’re so ridiculous wanting you to sign all their stuff and take a hundred selfies with you.” He snorts, quickly looking away when I meet his eyes.

Thankfully, the sun set an hour ago and the handful of streetlights we pass as I whiz down the street aren’t bright enough for him to see my grin.

“I finally finished unpacking all of my stuff from Washington, and I found an extra shirt and jersey they printed from the last series I was in that I already signed and must have forgotten to give to anyone. And Rawlings just sent me a brand new S100 Pro Comp batting helmet with the aerospace-grade composite fiber shell. Remember those collectors-

edition hats for the 100th anniversary of the Hawks that they only made 100 of? I saw one or two of those in one of the boxes. I don't really need any of that stuff. I could give it to you, but if you don't want it...."

"Oh my *God*, yes!" Owen shouts, his head whipping back to me, before quickly clearing his throat and looking all serious again. "I mean... sure, whatever. If you're just gonna throw it away...."

"Right, right." I nod, biting down hard on my bottom lip when I feel his eyes staring at my profile as I turn a corner. "Well, it's all yours."

"Thanks. That's really nice of you."

I've been around a lot of teenagers, with charity events on the team and with my own nieces. But I don't think I've ever been around one who always remembers his manners. Wren has raised a fine young man, and it makes me even more determined to do right by her. I had the same freshman coach as Owen did before the guy quit, and he was an asshole and an awful role model. But I only played on the freshman team for a week before I was bumped up to varsity. And my varsity coach was one of the best men I'd ever known aside from my father. He molded me into the player I am today, and taught me that winning isn't everything. That the game isn't everything. That the paychecks and the fame will someday disappear, and some day your body won't let you play this game that you love so much, and some day your heart just won't be in it, and what are you going to do then?

I want to be that kind of coach to all my players, but especially to the one sitting beside me. Because his mom means more to me than he knows, and not only do I want to fix things between us so I can show her she never has to do things alone ever again, but I want to fix things between us so I can be here to watch Owen grow into the amazing human being and baseball player I'm absolutely confident he'll be.

Owen points out which cottage is theirs, and I pull into the short driveway in front of the small house right on the beach.

“Thanks for giving me a ride, Coach. And I’d just like to apologize on behalf of my mom for her behavior over the last week. She’s not usually that weird.”

I chuckle at Owen sounding like the adult in the relationship, turning in my seat to face him.

“You don’t have to apologize. That’s all on me. I... did something that hurt her a while ago, and I deserve her *weirdness*.”

Owen’s eyes suddenly narrow on me.

“You hurt her?”

“I did.” I nod, not wanting to say too much, but also not wanting to lie to him.

“Kevin hurts her all the time, and she won’t let me do anything about it.”

I can practically feel the anger radiating off of him from two feet away. Gone is the shy teenager trying to keep a lid on his excitement, and in its place is a pissed off young man who’s tired of seeing his mom hurt.

“Kevin’s your dad, right?”

“Sure. If you want to call him that.” Owen shrugs. “I usually call him douchebag, asshole, or sperm donor.”

“Unfortunately, any man can be a father, but it doesn’t mean he should be.”

Owen snorts. “No shit. She won’t let me do anything about *him*, but if you hurt her again, I *will* make you pay.”

In any other situation, sitting in an idling golf cart being threatened by a fourteen-year-old who barely weighs more than a hundred pounds would be hilarious, but this isn’t funny. Not in the least. The fact that Wren has been hurt so much that her son is more than willing to try to kick my ass when I could easily hold both his arms behind his back with one hand makes my heart break right in half. He shouldn’t have to defend his mother like this. *No one* should have to defend her like this,

because no one should have ever had the chance to hurt her that badly in the first place. Myself included.

“Understood.” I nod at Owen seriously. “Believe me, I’m doing everything I can to make up for being a jerk before. And I promise you right now, Owen, I will *never, ever* do anything to hurt her again. If I do, you have my permission to kick my ass.”

He stares at me quietly for a few minutes, and I don’t know what he’s looking for. I can only hope he hears the sincerity in my words and sees it on my face.

“I might have a way you can suck up to her” are the first words he says to me, letting me know I’m temporarily forgiven.

“Lay it on me.”

“So, people are *always* asking her to do stuff, because they don’t have time,” he starts to explain. “Like *she* has the time, but whatever. My mom’s too nice to ever say no to anyone. Our living room is currently filled with boxes of candy she needs to stuff into goodie bags for the baseball boosters, new printer ink and reams of paper for flyers that need to be made for the spaghetti dinner to raise money for our uniforms next year, the concession stand schedule for all the parents with kids on the team who have to volunteer needs to be made, and like, ten other things I’m sure I’m forgetting.”

“What are you asking me, kid?”

Owen pauses for a beat before replying. “How good are you with a glue gun?”

“Will there be glitter and Lisa Frank stickers involved?” I naturally ask.

“I don’t know who Lisa Frank is, but I’m pretty sure my mom won’t let me have a girl over when she’s not home.”

With a laugh, I turn off the golf cart and get out with Owen.

“You’re in luck. I freaking *love* glitter and stickers.”



“I CHANGED MY mind. I don’t want to do this. Peace out. I’m going home!”

“Nice try, Owen, but you live here. If you want me to order pizza, hand me the scissors and the glitter.”

“Please... not the glitter again.”



“WHOSE HOUSE ARE you in? Why is my baby brother so sparkly?”

“Savannah, focus! I FaceTimed you, because you need to see these felt pennants I’m making for each member of the team with their last name and jersey number. Pinterest has failed me. Why do these look bad?”

“Those are hideous. Did you use iron-on decals? You need a Cricut.”

“Owen, does your mom have a Cricut in the house?”

“My mom would freak out if there were bugs in the house.”



“THERE’S GLITTER IN the bathtub. Why is there glitter in the bathtub? We weren’t even *in* the bathroom!”

“We’ll get that out later. Does this font say ‘*This spaghetti dinner will be a blast!*’ or ‘*This spaghetti dinner will end in bloodshed!*’? Does it need a border? More stickers?”

“*Why is there glitter in my socks?*”



“WILL YOU STOP yelling at me and just google it? I’m sure trace amounts are fine, Owen.”

“And *I’m* sure we don’t need Google to tell us that trace amounts of glitter in three dozen cookies for the welcome bags for the opposing team for tomorrow night’s game is *not* fine.”

“What’s the worst that could happen? They shit sparkles and rainbows for a week?”

“Okay, that was pretty funny. I’m still googling it.”

“Whatever, *Mom*.”

“My mom’s right. You *are* annoying.”



“YOU HAVE TO pull the scissors faster against the ribbon to get a perfect corkscrew curl. Like this. We’re almost done with the goodie bags. Only ten more to go.”

“I can taste the glitter in the air now.”

CHAPTER 7



Wren

“What a screwball.”

“**Y**OU *HAVE* TO talk to him now. Really talk to him. Not just call him a bag of dicks and drive away.”

“I never called him a bag of dicks,” I tell my sister. “That’s a good one though. I forgot about that one.”

I feel a hand wrap around my ponytail and gently tug, pulling my face up from where it was buried into my arms on top of the bar at SIG. I always love coming to visit Birdie, Tess, and Murphy at the golf course, especially when we get to hang out in the small bar in the clubhouse nestled in between the pro shop and the restaurant. It’s decorated in dark forest-green carpet and furniture, with rich cherry wood accents and a stone fireplace off to one side. It reminds me of a quiet, fancy study in an old mansion, where you can curl up with a book by the fire and enjoy the peace and quiet. Since it’s later in the season and there are less tourists on the island, the golf course only has a quarter of the number of usual customers. Right now, me, my sister, Tess, and Murphy are all crowded around the bar, and we’re the only ones in here, thank God. No one else needs to witness my breakdown.

“He crafted for you,” Birdie says softly when my eyes meet hers.

Sitting up the rest of the way on my barstool when she drops her hand from my hair, I look around at all the eyes staring at me in the same soft way.

“I still think someone needs to bust out his kneecaps. Preferably me,” Murphy mutters from where he’s standing at the end of the bar, arms crossed, with a scowl on his face.

Okay, so all eyes except for Murphy. With his receding white hairline and a little bit of a beer belly that is absolutely caused by beer, even with an angry look on his face, he still slides a bag of cookies down the shiny bar top toward me. Like the grandfather we never had, Murphy is more grumpy than grandfatherly, but he taught me and my sister a very valuable lesson when we were younger. If you suck it up, you eventually get cookies. We learned this lesson when Murphy made us cry by calling us “a bunch of little asswipes” when we were kids and kicked a ball over the fence into his yard, but he promised to give us cookies if we’d just suck it up and stop crying. So we did.

As I easily stop the bag of Pepperidge Farms Strawberry Thumbprint Cookies before they go sailing past me down the bar, I rip into the white bag, grab three cookies at once, and shove them into my mouth, sucking it up and refusing to cry. I did enough of that last night when I got home from work to a quiet house, since Owen was asleep, and found boxes and boxes of finished projects I agreed to do and hadn’t had time to accomplish yet. All of them perfect and looking like they were professionally done, neatly boxed and lined up in date order for when they’re needed.

“Did he sew red yarn into paper plates to make it look like baseball stitching?” Tess asks, zooming in on one of the many photos on my phone I took last night once I could see through the tears.

Shoving another cookie into my mouth, I nod, spraying cookie bits all over the place when I reply without even bothering to finish chewing or swallowing, because *fuck manners* right now.

“He did. Oh yes, he hand-stitched those. But scroll over three photos. He used my *actual* sewing machine to make

pillowcases with baseballs on them for the giveaway baskets for the spaghetti dinner raffle.”

“You have a sewing machine?” Tess asks, looking up from my phone. “Do you know how to use it?”

“Of course I know how to use it. Murphy taught me.”

Tess’s head whips to Murphy, still standing at the end of the bar with a perma-scowl on his face.

“*You* know how to use a sewing machine?” Tess asks him.

“Who the fuck do you think hems my pants, the Tooth Fairy?” he fires back. “You women need to focus! I need to know if I should grab the baseball bat out of my golf cart I keep there for knee-breaking emergencies.”

Getting another cookie out of the bag, I shove it in my mouth with the other one I still haven’t finished chewing, spewing more cookie bits *and* words around the bar.

“He sewed, he used puff paint, he put stickers on all two hundred and fifty spaghetti dinner flyers, I will be cleaning glitter out of my curtains for months, and he did it all after a week of me being a total bitch to him.” I sniffle while I finish chewing, lean over the bar, and tug the white bar towel off Tess’s shoulder to clean up the crumbs in front of me as she continues looking at the pictures. “I’m being mean to him, and he’s using a fucking Cricut to make fucking felt pennants to hang on the fucking dugout for the boys during fucking games. I don’t even *own* a fucking Cricut!”

“You’re giving a lot of fucks for someone you’ve been trying not to give any fucks about over the last week,” Birdie reminds me as I toss the towel to the side, rest my arms back on top of the bar, and smack my head down onto them.

“Whatever. My son is also now grounded for the rest of his life for conspiring with the enemy and then racing out of the house for school this morning before I woke up just because he knew I would kick his little ass,” I grumble against my arms.

“Don’t you touch one hair on that perfect boy’s head, or I will rip you limb from limb,” Murphy warns me from a few feet away.

Murphy Swallow has a soft spot for the Bennett women, but it’s *nothing* like the one he has for my son, and it’s the only thing that cheers me up right now. The only time any of us have ever seen that man smile was the day he came to see me in the hospital when I had Owen and my mom put him in Murphy’s arms.

“Let me see the note again,” Tess says from above me.

Not bothering to lift my head, I reach back behind me and pull the folded-up piece of paper out of the back pocket of my jean shorts, holding it high in the air above me.

Tess grabs it out of my hand, and I hear the crinkle of her unfolding the piece of paper that was left on top of all the boxes when I got home last night, followed by her reading the words out loud that I already have memorized.

“Don’t be mad, but I gave Owen a ride home from practice. I was already going this way, and it seemed stupid to make Dominic go out of his way. Your son mentioned some projects you haven’t had time to get finished, and just in case you forgot, I enjoy a craft project or two. And before you get mad and call me a fuck wagon again (hilarious, BTW), I did not spend any money on anything. Honestly, Wren, how does someone not have a craft room in their house? You’re lucky I already unpacked mine. A quick trip back to my place gave me everything I needed. Well, almost everything. Your neighbors, Rob and Tianna—lovely people who invited me to dinner next Friday and to snuggle their dogs—let me borrow their Cricut. I mean, have you ever seen more perfect, straight edges on vinyl baseball decals? So, in conclusion, you can’t be mad at me, and you need to find a new place for your silverware in the kitchen, because that is now your ribbon drawer. Relax. Take a bubble bath. Read a book. Do something for YOU, and don’t stress. At least not about this stuff. Have a good rest of the night, Shepherd.”

When Tess finishes reading the note, nothing can be heard in the bar except for the ticking of a clock hanging on the wall above the glass liquor shelf, Birdie tapping her fingernails on the bar two seats down from me, and my snotty, whimpering, muffled crying from where my face is still smushed into my arms on the bar. I get to enjoy the quiet and wallow in my misery for thirty seconds before all hell breaks loose around me.

“Who cares if she’ll be the other woman, she needs to screw his brains out!”

“Fuck him! Who cares if he can sew. He still hasn’t apologized to her for being a shit!”

“Excuse me, Tess, can I just get another beer?”

“Either you take him out at the knees, or I will, but someone needs to do it already!”

“Does no one even care how sweet this is? It’s like something right out of a movie.”

“Fuck movies! Let’s burn his shit!”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to bother you guys. Tess, any chance I can get that beer now?”

“Can we make a decision already? I need to eat and take my water pill.”

“Fuck water! Burn. His. Shit.”

“My tee time is in like, three minutes. I just need one beer.”

“Jesus Christ, Jared, here’s your beer!” Tess shouts, twisting the top off a bottle and then smacking it down in front of the poor man who works at the ferry dock that has been trying to get her attention. “It’s on the house!”

It was probably pointless for Tess to shout that to the man after he grabbed his beer and ran at top speed out of the bar and into the pro shop. He wasn’t going to stick around long

enough to pay for it anyway, just in case Tess decided to grab a lighter instead of his beer.

“Listen, I think you need to—”

“I think you all need to shut the hell up!” I shout, making all of them shut the hell up and stare at me like I’ve lost my mind. Which I probably have. Too bad this isn’t a recent loss, and I’m pretty sure I lost it in eighth grade, the first time I ever saw Shepherd Oliver take his shirt off.

“I’m sorry, but none of you are helping right now,” I continue, softening my voice so I don’t hurt their feelings. “I feel like I’m going crazy. He did these incredibly sweet and amazing things for me, and I owe him so much for that and I’m so grateful, but a part of me is just still so angry. He just brings out the mean in me, and I don’t know why.”

Birdie gets up from her bar stool and moves to the one right next to mine, wrapping her arm around my waist and resting her chin on my shoulder.

“I know you haven’t had any experience with this since sperm donor certainly never brought this out of you. You’ve refused to ever have a one-night stand again since then. The one relationship you had lasted three months, just because you were both too nice to break it off sooner *absolutely* doesn’t count. Nor do the handful of awful blind dates you’ve been set up on,” she says quietly. “But Wren... Shepherd doesn’t bring the mean out of you. He brings out the *fire*. There’s a big difference. Why do you think I spend half my time arguing with Palmer? Because it’s fun. And it’s *especially* fun making up.”

As I swipe at the tears on my cheeks, Tess nods from behind the bar.

“Sadly, that’s true. Bodhi drives me up the goddamn wall, but *man* does he make up for it later on.”

Since Birdie’s right and I have absolutely no experience with any of this, I’ll just have to take their word for it. And not collapse into another pile of tears, because even though it

secretly *has* been kind of fun giving Shepherd hell the last week, none of what they're saying matters. He's still not mine. I still don't get the benefits that they're so helpfully reminding me aren't available to me.

"Right, well, if you guys will excuse me, I have a crafter to apologize to," I tell them, sliding off my stool, giving them all a smile I don't feel, and heading toward the double French doors that will take me outside.

"Grab the bat from my golf cart just in case!" Murphy shouts after me.



THWACK.

My heart skips in my chest when I hear the sound of a bat connecting with a ball, not just because it's one of my favorite sounds in the world, but because of who made it. My heart always tries to jump out of my chest whenever I see Shepherd step up to the plate and power through a swing.

I've been sitting in the bleachers for the last fifteen minutes since I got to the high school, just watching Shepherd hit a bucket of balls on the empty field while school is still in session. He's not in his uniform with the ass-hugging pants, but it doesn't matter. Even wearing a pair of black athletic shorts and a fitted, long-sleeved, ocean-blue Nike shirt, watching him toss up a ball and then launch it out by the fences beyond the outfield without breaking a sweat is a sight to behold. With every hit he makes, I watch the muscles in his biceps bulge, the ones in his powerful thighs tighten when he bends his knees into his stance, and my breath leaves me with a *whoosh* every time he connects with the ball. I've seen it a million times on TV, but there's something special about seeing it in person.

As he continues to go through the bucket of balls he dumped around home plate, I get up from my spot in the bleachers and make my way down the stairs. Walking through the gate in the fence, I stick close to the fence line inside the

field, paying close attention as I walk just in case Shepherd suddenly hits a line-drive foul in my direction. When I'm standing a few feet away in the dirt and he bends down to grab another ball, I let him know he's not alone out here.

"I wondered why that ball was getting bigger, and then it hit me...."

The stupid baseball pun is out of my mouth before I can stop it, Shepherd's eyes flying up when he hears my voice while he's still bent over, reaching for a ball. Feeling all hot, sweaty, and itchy with his eyes locked on mine as he slowly stands back up, I shove my hands into the back pockets of my jean shorts and start kicking my toe around into the dirt. Thankfully, I'm on my way *to* work, and my white T-shirt with the Dip and Twist logo on it is still free of chocolate sauce stains.

"That was the worst pun *ever*," Shepherd says with a small laugh, and I can't help but return his grin, even though I kind of want to throw up right now. "God, I've missed you."

My heart skips again when he whispers those last words, and I have to squeeze my hands into fists in my back pockets before I'm tempted to yank them out and launch myself into his arms. I haven't let myself stick around long enough in his presence to fully appreciate just how overwhelming it is. He's so beautiful it makes me want to cry. I still look at him and just see Shepherd. I don't see the fame, and I don't see the fortune; I just see *him*. And he's so sweet, and thoughtful, and I wish he'd just be a huge asshole and treat me like crap. I'm used to dealing with people who don't consider my feelings first, and I've become an old pro at trying to shut everything off when Kevin tells me I'm looking old, or when he tells me I'm not a good mother because I work too much, or when he calls me a bitch because Owen wants nothing to do with him, or when he likes to tell me that he has plenty of women to keep him company and it's just pitiful that no one wants *me*.

Of course I've never truly believed the things he says to me, but that doesn't stop it from hurting any less. Laura

Bennett always taught me to know my worth. But words can cut, and when you've been sliced over and over for fifteen years, sometimes it's hard to see past the scars and remember who you are. I don't know how to handle a man who spends hours with glitter and a glue gun for me just so I don't have to stress out about it. And I don't know what to say to a man who always looks at me with a smile even when I'm telling him to eat shit.

Shepherd takes a step toward me, which moves him out of the shadows caused by the dugout and into the bright afternoon sun. All my confusion and emotions that make me want to do nothing but cry dry up instantly as a loud bark of laughter suddenly flies out of me, followed by a full solid minute of hysterical giggling.

“What's up, *Twilight*?” I finally manage to spit out through my laughter, making Shepherd's confused smile by my amusement turn into a frown.

“All right, that's the third time today someone called me that,” he complains, crossing his arms with a huff that just makes me start laughing even harder. “Someone also called me Edward at Island Brew. What the fuck is going on with everyone today?”

At this point, I'm bent over at the waist while I gasp for breath, grabbing my phone out of my pocket and clicking on the camera app, switching it so it's in selfie mode. Holding my phone out and up in front of Shepherd's face, it only takes a second for him to see what the entire town has seen today while he's been out and about.

“Son of a bitch,” he mutters, turning his head from left to right. No matter which way he turns, he's still standing in direct sunlight. And he still sparkles.

“Do you not have a mirror in your cottage?” I snort, bringing my phone back, locking it, and shoving it back in my pocket.

“It was dark when I left this morning,” he grumbles.

“Well, that will teach you to use so much damn glitter. It was in my bottle of Tylenol,” I tell him, raising one eyebrow at him.

“Sorry. I had a headache after FaceTiming my sister for the second time so she could remind me how to use the Cricut.”

All I can do is shake my head at him, unable to keep my smile contained.

“Thank you. For everything you did last night and for taking Owen home. You have no idea how much that helped me.”

Shepherd takes a few steps toward me until there’s only two feet separating us. Part of me wants to take a step back, because he’s not making it any easier on me stopping myself from wrapping my arms around him, but now I can smell his yummy cologne, and my feet won’t let me move.

“Don’t *ever* thank me for helping out with shit people shouldn’t have piled on your plate in the first place.”

My heart starts beating faster, and I forget we’re standing out on a baseball field at a public school. It feels like it’s just the two of us and no one and nothing else matters but right here and now.

“I’m so sorry, Wren,” Shepherd whispers, my hands starting to shake in my back pockets and tears starting to prickle the backs of my eyes. “Hurting you was the last thing I ever wanted to do. I thought I was doing the right thing, but it was stupid, and selfish, and I’m so sorry. I have missed you every minute of every day I haven’t been able to talk to you.”

And just like that, I’m yanking my hands out of my pockets and closing the distance between us. As soon as my body slams into his and my arms go around his waist, Shepherd doesn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around me, keeping me held firmly against him. Turning my face to the side, I close my eyes and rest my cheek against his chest.

“Apology accepted,” I finally reply softly, listening to the quickly beating *thump-thump-thump* of Shepherd’s heart

against my ear, perfectly in tune with my own rapidly beating heart. Feeling the weight of his strong arms around me and his warm, solid body pressed tightly against mine for the first time, nothing else matters and everything finally feels right in my world. “It’s fine.”

“I’m pretty sure the last week has proven it’s *not* fine,” Shepherd says with a small laugh that rumbles through his chest and against the side of my face, making me squeeze my arms tighter around his waist and breathe him in. I feel him rest his chin on top of my head, and I smile against him, just enjoying the feel of being in this man’s arms when I’ve been dreaming about it almost all my life.

“I’m sorry I was so weird.”

I feel his chest bounce with laughter again, and he slowly starts rocking our hug from side to side, shifting his arms around me and hugging me tighter.

“I like it when you’re weird.”

We’re both quiet for a few minutes, still wrapped up in our hug with his chin still resting on top of my head.

“I’m sorry,” he says again quietly.

“Stop.” I laugh softly, clasping my hands together against his lower back when I finally pull my head away from his chest so I can look up at him. And regret it immediately.

I’m *several* inches shorter than him, but even with our height difference, I’m still closer to his mouth than I’ve ever been before. All I’d have to do is push up on my toes, and my lips would be on his. I try not to, but I can’t help it. My eyes flicker down to his mouth, and something that sounds like a groan rumbles deep in Shepherd’s chest, forcing my eyes back up to his. A muscle tics in his jaw as he stares down at me, no longer rocking us from side to side.

“Believe me, I get it,” I finally speak, needing to break the silence. “I saw it on the news. It was very sweet and romantic. I’m happy for you.”

It was stupid, and over the top, and ridiculous, and I want to puke on the front of your shirt right now.

Lost in the feel of Shepherd's smell, Shepherd's body, and Shepherd's arms around me, imagining it was just the two of us and nothing else mattered, it completely escaped my attention that this entire time, we've been standing right on home plate. Exactly where Alana Caldwell stood wrapped in this man's arms and then sealed their new, exclusive relationship with a kiss. It's not the same home plate, but it reminds me it isn't just the two of us, and it never was. All of the butterflies flapping around excitedly in my stomach suddenly turn to nausea.

"No, you *don't* get it," Shepherd tells me as I try to pull back out of his arms, but he holds tight and doesn't let me. "Go to dinner with me tonight. Let me explain."

This time, I unwind my arms from around his waist, bring them between us, and shove against his chest as hard as I can until he finally releases me and I take a few steps back.

"There's nothing you need to explain." I laugh instead of cry, waving him away with my hand as I take another much-needed step back from him. "Believe me, I get it. You apologized, and I thank you for that. I know we can't go back to the way it used to be, but at least now we can be civilized when we see each other."

I don't know how I manage not to throw up in the dirt when I say those words, but I do. I even punctuate them with a smile.

"Okay, I'm obviously not doing this right," Shepherd mutters, running a hand through his short hair in frustration. "I want you to go to dinner with me tonight. As in a date. With me. Tonight. Maybe I should have led with that."

If this was a year ago and he was standing right in front of me, looking so adorably nervous, I would have jumped up and down screaming in joy. But this isn't a year ago. And this is some *bullshit*.

“Are you kidding me right now?” I mutter, holding back the urge to shout at him.

Barely.

“I’m so bad at this,” he complains, taking a step toward me while I take another one back before I punch him. “I’m trying to say I’m not with Alana anymore. She broke up with me. So it’s cool now! We don’t have to just be *civilized* with each other.”

He punctuates his words with a small laugh, and that sound is louder than a gun being shot right next to my ear and does just as much damage. My vision tunnels, I see spots, and my legs no longer want to support my body, but for some reason, they do, and I don’t know how I’m not curled up in the fetal position in the dirt right now. Everything I’ve always wanted is happening right before my eyes. Shepherd Oliver wants to date *me*! But it’s all bullshit, and I’m so tired of trying to shut everything off when someone cuts me.

“Well, aren’t *I* just the luckiest girl in the world that you got dumped,” I whisper when my brain finally catches up to what is happening right now and I remember how to speak. I shake my head at him as the stupid tears I told myself I wouldn’t cry spill over onto my cheeks. “Shepherd Oliver is on the rebound and wants to date little ole me.”

“That’s not what I—”

“*God*, do you have any idea how long I’ve waited to hear those words from you?” I ask, cutting him off and swiping angrily at the wetness on my cheeks. “Since I was thirteen years old and you told me I looked pretty when you stopped by the Dip and Twist.”

I watch as his body jolts in surprise, and I don’t even give him time to fully recover from what I just said before much more than tears start pouring out of me. Fifteen years of word vomit comes out right along with them.

“But you were the outgoing, popular jock surrounded by people, and I was the boring, quiet girl who blended in with

the wallpaper, who always forgot how to speak when you were around,” I sob as Shepherd’s mouth drops open in shock, and I take another step back from him. “I wanted you in high school, and every time I watched you play on TV after that, and I *still* wanted you a year ago through every single one of those messages, and it’s no coincidence I decided to get drunk and have a one-night-stand for the first and last time on the very same night you were drafted to play for Washington, so you can just go to hell with asking me out *now* because you got dumped! I’ve waited more than half my life for you to finally see me and finally want me, and I’m so glad it’s *cool now* and she *broke up with you*, but I deserve better than to be someone’s second choice just because he’s bored and lonely. So no, I don’t want to go to dinner with you, and I don’t want to date you, because my mother raised me better than this. I *deserve* better than being someone’s fucking consolation prize, no matter how goddamn good he is with a glue gun.”

I don’t even care when a sound comes out of Shepherd unlike anything I’ve ever heard before that almost brings me to my knees and stops me from walking away. Part sob, part growl, part someone just stabbed him with a knife. It’s painful and it’s heart-wrenching and it perfectly matches the look on his face that I don’t care about either, as I turn around and walk away, leaving him in the dirt behind home plate.

“Wren!”

I hear Shepherd shout my name, and I pick up the pace, flinging open the gate and exiting the field.

“How in the hell could you have ever been a consolation prize, when I didn’t even know you were a goddamn choice!”

My feet stutter at his words when I reach the sidewalk, but I quickly recover and keep right on walking. Because maybe I *do* still care, but I just can’t handle it right now.

CHAPTER 8



Shepherd

“You caught my heart.”

Official Shepherd Oliver: Testing, testing, is this thing on? Hey, all you cool cats and kittens!

Official Shepherd Oliver: Okay, probably not the time for jokes. I don't even know if you check your messages on here anymore or not, but I have to try something. You won't answer my texts or my phone calls. There was a small, contained fire in my driveway last night, and now I can't find my new Nike hoodie, so I'm assuming I can't ask Tess about you. And Birdie said she really wanted to talk to me, but sister code prevented her from doing so. I'm trying to give you some space. Otherwise, you can bet your sweet ass I would be on your doorstep right now. Fuck, Wren... How could you just say something like that to me and then walk away?

Official Shepherd Oliver: I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at myself, not you. NEVER you. I never should have let you walk away. I was just in shock. All of this is on me, because I'm a fucking dumbass. I just promised your son a few nights ago that I would never hurt you again, and not more than 24 hours later, I broke that promise. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I keep giving you reasons that I have to apologize. Everything I wanted to say came out all wrong the other day. I can't believe you actually thought... Actually, I can. Because I'm a dumbass who doesn't know how to use words. Please, talk to me, Wren.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I see you haven't read these yet, so I'm probably typing all of this into the void, but whatever. I have to do something, because this is killing me.

Official Shepherd Oliver: You said to me, “Do you have any idea how long I’ve waited to hear you say those words?” Well, ditto. Fucking ditto, Wren. Christ, do you have any idea how hard it is saying this shit to you right now, after everything you said to me, when you’re not standing right in front of me so I can put my arms around you again, and hold you again, and tell you everything I should have said that I didn’t? Everything I meant to say that came out all wrong, because you know what, Wren? You tie my tongue up in knots too. You always have. So, here you go. Everything I should have said that I didn’t when you came to me at the ballfield the other day and I was an idiot. Alana was never, EVER my first choice. She was just there, when the person I really wanted was 3,000 miles away and I thought she was taken.

Official Shepherd Oliver: That day at the Dip and Twist, when I told you that you were pretty, that’s actually kind of a funny story. We had just won the tournament to take us to the state finals, and my dad naturally brought me to your family’s place to celebrate, like always. We were standing in line, it was a few weeks before 7th grade started, and he said to me, “So, what 7th grade girl do we have our eye on this year?” You were helping your mom out and had just stepped up to the window to hand someone their order. My dad looked down at me staring at you with a big shit-eating grin on my face, and do you know what Simon Oliver said next? “Wren Bennett?” He snorted. LEGIT SNORTED AT ME. Then he said, “She’s out of your league. Aim lower, kid.” You were always out of my league, Wren. I knew from the moment I met you that you were nicer than me, kinder than me, sweeter than me, and better than me. I never deserved even one minute of your time. But you were the prettiest girl I’d ever seen, and after you handed me my sundae, I couldn’t walk away without telling you.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Do you remember my first day of work at the Dip and Twist? It was a week after my 16th birthday, it was a slow Sunday afternoon, it was just the two of us, and you were in charge of training me. I dropped the container of sprinkles three times that afternoon. It was the first time you ever said something sarcastic to me. Honestly, before that point, I thought you hated me, because you’d always walk away whenever I was around and would barely say two words to me. The third time I dropped the sprinkles, you put your hands on your hips and said, “Thank God you don’t do that during

games.” And then you quickly apologized for saying something mean, while I laughed the entire time we cleaned up the mess. Do you know why I dropped that container three times that day? Because every time I went to reach for it, you were standing right next to me, and you brushed your arm against mine. I literally blacked out all three times and don’t even remember letting go of that plastic container.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Remember the beach party Megan Pickard threw after homecoming our junior year? You were cleaning up all the plastic Solo cups everyone tossed all over the place, and I came over and helped you. I told you that stupid story from when I was a kid and my sister dared me to pee on the electric fence at my grandparents’ farm. I tried to stop myself from telling that story as soon as the words started tumbling out of my mouth, but you started walking away from me, and I just didn’t want you to go. And then you were standing there in the moonlight with the ocean splashing around your bare feet and ankles, looking up at me with those gorgeous blue eyes, and I got nervous. I felt the need to repeat the line “It was like sticking my dick on a 9-volt battery” a hundred times, because you were just so pretty, and I just wanted to kiss you. But I didn’t. Because the sound of your laugh made me forget my own name, and I told you about electrocuting my junk instead.

Official Shepherd Oliver: You know how senior year in physics class we were always in the same group for projects, even though it was usually alphabetical by last name? Since Coach Dunham was our teacher, I made a deal with him that I’d drag and rake the infield and re-chalk the lines after every practice for the entire year if he always put us in the same group. Worth it.

Official Shepherd Oliver: I told your mom my dad wouldn’t let me work Saturday mornings because I needed to train and I needed to switch to Saturday nights instead. I didn’t have to train. You worked with Connor Daniels on Saturday nights, and all he did was stare at your ass whenever you weren’t looking, and I didn’t trust him being alone with you closing up on those nights. And then your wonderful mother changed the schedule, and I was the one staring at your ass whenever you weren’t looking, sooo....

Official Shepherd Oliver: Remember how the National Honor Society would sell single roses every year for Valentine's Day that you could have delivered to someone during class? And remember how you, Tess, Birdie, and Emily would all send each other roses, and every year you got one from a secret admirer, and you would all sit around blaming each other, because you thought it was a joke? It was me. Now I'm realizing I should have just signed my fucking name.

Official Shepherd Oliver: You know what my first thought was when I signed that contract the night of the draft? It wasn't about how much money I'd make, it wasn't about how cool it all was, and it wasn't about what it would be like the first time I heard the roar of the crowd when I stepped out onto the Hawks' field. It was that I'd be moving away from you and I didn't know when I'd ever see you smile again, or hear you laugh again, and that I'd just wasted a whole bunch of years never telling you how I felt, and now it was too late.

Official Shepherd Oliver: When I saw you replied to my ridiculous messages two years ago, my hands were so sweaty I dropped my phone and cracked the screen.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Every time you replied back to me, I felt like the luckiest goddamn man on the planet. You were always nicer than me, kinder than me, sweeter than me, and better than me. I never deserved even one minute of your time, but you still gave it to me. And I wasted it by not tell you that you were NEVER second choice. You're not a consolation prize and you're sure as hell not a goddamn rebound. You're THE prize, Wren. You're the only reason I've tried to be nicer, kinder, sweeter, and better, so that some day when I pulled my head out of my ass, I would be worthy of the time you give to me. And you're the only reason I moved back home to Summersweet Island, so if you can't find it in your heart to forgive me, I don't know if I can stay here. Because I know damn well, especially after the things you told me, that I can't walk around this island and just be civilized when I see you. I will never be able to be around you again without wanting to kiss the hell out of you.

Official Shepherd Oliver: Please talk to me, Wren. Please. Give me a chance to show you everything I never told you.



“*FUCK!*”

My frustrated shout is punctuated by the sound of my cell phone smacking into the stone tile on the floor of my kitchen when I whip it across the room as hard as I’d throw a ball to make a play at 2nd. It tumbles and skitters across the floor until it comes to a stop by one of my kitchen chairs as I let my head fall to the back cushions of my couch and stare up at the ceiling.

It was a stupid idea to send Wren all those messages. I should have run after her the other night, made her stop, and made her understand. To say I was in shock after everything she told me is an understatement. I honestly don’t even know how I managed to shout what I did to her before she disappeared around the corner of the dugout. Every word she said to me felt like someone took a knife and started carving into my chest. And if I never have to see Wren standing in front of me trying to be so strong while tears poured down her cheeks, tears that *I* put there, it will be too soon.

I’ve spent the last two days since Wren left me standing by home plate at the high school walking around like a zombie. I didn’t even have the heart to run practices. I scheduled the boys for some extra training in the weight room instead, but I know I can’t keep doing this. Those boys deserve better. I took this job so I could be a good role model for them. Although being a poster boy for what it looks like when you make bad choices in life might scare them all straight.

There’s a light tapping at my front door, and even though I’d rather ignore it and spend the rest of my night feeling like shit and word vomiting in private messages that will never be read, I’m curious who could be stopping by. And frankly, I’m starting to get tired of my own shitty company. Pushing up from the couch and suddenly feeling like a hundred years old instead of thirty-four, I slowly pad across the carpet in my bare

feet to the front door, pulling it open without bothering to check the peep hole.

“Here, take this. It’s heavy.”

A large, rectangular box is shoved into my chest, and I quickly grab it and move out of the way as my mom pushes her way inside my cottage, bending down so I can kiss the cheek she tips up to me.

“It’s nice to see you too after three months,” I tell her, kicking the door closed behind me as I watch her walk into the living room and survey my small, temporary home.

“You *just* FaceTimed me this morning. And you still look like shit,” she reminds me, moving into my kitchen and setting a big, insulated bag on my counter that was hanging by a long strap off her shoulder. She then starts opening and closing drawers and cupboards, making sure I put everything away neatly. “You know I would have come to visit sooner to help you unpack, but your dad and I just couldn’t resist tacking on a few extra days to our Alaska cruise.”

My sisters have always complained that I’m Mom’s favorite. Savannah and Sophia are twelve and thirteen years older than me. I’m the “oops” baby, the youngest, and the only boy, so maybe sometimes I get spoiled a little more. The only reason my mom wasn’t camped out on my floor before I even arrived on the island was because I bought my parents a cruise for their anniversary. Being the supposed “favorite” just means my mom is a lot more comfortable giving me shit all the time and telling me when I’m being an idiot.

“Why are you bringing me your Cricut?” I ask, setting the box down on my coffee table and then moving over to one of the barstools against my small kitchen island, instead of dwelling on why I look like shit, since that’s most likely the reason for my mom’s impromptu visit.

Her and my dad were already scheduled to come over to the island this weekend for dinner, but after our FaceTime call when they got home from the airport this morning and her

freaking out that I looked miserable, I should have assumed she would stop by before the weekend.

“You bought those Cricuts for all of us for Christmas that one year, and I love you, Shepherd, but you know I never use mine. Your sister said you had a craft emergency the other night, so I figured I’d bring it with me,” she says, quickly pulling spatulas out of a drawer and then sticking them into a silver bucket on the counter by the stove with a few other utensils.

I quietly watch her work, not even a little bit ashamed that having my mom here makes me feel just a little bit better. She moves back to the insulated bag sitting on the island in front of me and starts pulling out what easily looks like a month’s worth of food in plastic containers, going back and forth between the bag and my freezer, stacking the containers neatly inside.

“I forgot how small these cottages are,” my mom muses when she finishes filling my freezer and then continues nosing through my kitchen, giving me a pointed look when she sees my Tupperware cupboard is still a mess. “I can’t believe we raised three children in one of them, with only one bathroom and such a tiny kitchen. Although we only had the three of you for a few years before your sisters were off to college. It was still a struggle with just you, your dad, and me always on top of each other all the time.”

It feels like someone just sliced me with that knife again when I think about Wren raising Owen in one of these cottages. The rentals aren’t exactly the same as the permanent resident cottages. The resident cottages have a few more square feet of space, but not much. Don’t get me wrong; Wren’s cottage is adorable, decorated in white and light-gray with turquoise accents and beach knickknacks here and there. It has a perfect view of the ocean, and it’s warm, inviting, comfortable, and perfectly her. But I know how hard she works and how much she sacrifices, and I know she deserves more than a two-bedroom cottage with a bathroom she has to share with her teenage son. She deserves space, and luxury,

and a closet she can fit a semi-truck in, and a theater room she can binge her favorite shows in, and a Jacuzzi bathtub she can do laps in, and anything else in the world she's ever dreamed of.

"Your freezer is now stocked with comfort food. Chicken noodle soup, chicken paprikash, my homemade beef stew, meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and chicken pot pie, so that should make you look a little less like garbage," she tells me while she moves my kitchen towels to a different drawer.

My stomach doesn't even growl when she lists off all my childhood favorites I watched disappear into my freezer a few minutes ago. I haven't had much of an appetite since Wren told me the only reason she got pregnant by a complete piece of shit who left her all alone all these years was because I was a pussy. I must make some kind of pitiful sound, because my mom pauses with her hand still in my new towel drawer that used to be where I kept my placemats, her head whipping around on her neck to look at me.

"All right, that's it!" she says, slamming the drawer closed and marching over to the other side of the island opposite me. "When I asked you what was wrong this morning, you said *nothing*. When both your sisters called you earlier and asked what was wrong, you told *them* nothing. I can clearly see it isn't nothing, Shepherd Christopher Oliver, so spit it out. What happened? Is it baseball? Do you miss it that much? Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. I wish I could—"

"It's not baseball," I quickly cut her off when she reaches across the island and places both her hands on top of mine. "I told you when you called last week everything is great on that end, and it still is. I made the right decision. I've got a great group of kids I'm coaching, and I can't wait for you to meet them and see a game."

She gives me a smile, but it's one filled with just a tiny bit of sadness, even though she tries to hide it. My mom has been more upset than *I* have about the end of my career. She always said nothing made her happier than watching me play, and she

admitted a few months ago that it made her kind of sad to turn on the television and not see me playing anymore. Even though I'm almost thirty-five, she'd been watching me play since I was four years old. She said it was tough knowing she was getting old and she had to come to terms with the fact that the time of watching her baby boy play ball was finally over. I'm just hoping watching me coach will fill that void for her a little bit.

“Well, if it's not baseball, then what's going on?”

I start to explain to my mom just what happened the other night, but I quickly realize she's going to need more than that to get the full picture. Taking a deep breath, I start from the beginning. The very beginning. Once I start talking, I don't stop until I'm finished, the words tumbling out of me quickly, because no matter how many times I've relived this over and over the last few days, it hurts even worse saying it all out loud. My mom stands quietly on the other side of the counter with her hands still resting on top of mine, her eyes getting bigger and bigger as everything pours out of me, until twenty minutes have passed by the time I finish.

“...and if she would just read her messages, she would know all this, she'd finally understand, and maybe she'd let me see her again.”

At least two solid minutes of complete silence ticks by in my small kitchen until my mom finally processes everything I just word-vomited and will hopefully give me some much-needed advice.

“I'm so sorry, Shepherd,” she whispers quietly, giving my hands a squeeze. “But I agree with your dad. Wren Bennett? You *really* should have aimed lower.”

Just like my dad when I was thirteen, my mom snorts and shakes her head at me.

“I'm so glad you stopped by. I feel much better now,” I reply drolly, which just makes her roll her eyes at me.

“You’re not getting any sympathy from me. You made one of the sweetest girls I’ve ever met cry. Probably more than once,” she reminds me, my shoulders sagging as my head drops to stare at the counter so I don’t have to see the disappointment in her eyes.

“I know,” I mutter.

“First things first. I’ve been meaning to ask you this, but I kept forgetting. Why wasn’t there ever any kind of statement made about you and that self-involved, vapid, waste of oxygen breaking up?”

My mom only met Alana once when she came out to Washington for a long weekend just to hang out when I had a few days off. When my mom opened her arms to give Alana a hug in greeting, Alana just turned and held her phone up and took a selfie of the two of them instead. The rest of the weekend was spent wrapping my arms around my mother and pretending like I was giving her a hug every time she started to lunge for Alana to snatch the phone out of her hand during one of Alana’s thousands of selfie sessions.

My hands pull out from under my mom’s as I drag them across the counter when I sit back on my stool, cross my arms in front of me, and sigh.

“Honestly? I just didn’t give a shit at the time, and then I forgot. She was the last thing on my mind.” I shrug. “She asked me not to say anything until she was ready, and I just wanted her the fuck out of my condo at that point. I told my agent and publicist I didn’t give a shit and I didn’t want to hear about anything unless it was something negative I needed to handle. Since I never heard anything, it literally was the furthest thing from my mind. I told you guys and Nick, and I guess I just assumed she told people and it would have gotten around by now.”

Another few minutes of silence go by, and my heart starts beating faster, waiting for my mom to give me the words and tell me what to do to make this better. She breaks the silence

by smacking her hands down aggressively on top of my counter.

“I didn’t raise you to be a pussy, did I?”

Well, that certainly wasn’t what I was hoping for.

“Jesus, Mom. Please don’t say that word ever again,” I mutter, my eyes flickering up to see her staring at me pointedly. I should have known we’d be quickly moving on to the *giving me shit and telling me when I’m being an idiot* portion of the evening.

“Your sisters have bigger balls than you,” she complains with a huff.

“Savannah, yes, but Sophia? Come on. That’s just insulting.”

Turning away from me, she marches over to my freezer. Flinging open the door, she starts grabbing the containers she just put in there, piling them in her arms until she has them all, slamming the door closed, and then walking back over to the counter.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m taking back the comfort food I brought you,” she replies with a breezy smile, shoving each plastic container back into the insulated bag she brought and then yanking the zipper closed. “You don’t deserve comfort until you find your balls, march over to that young woman’s house, get down on your hands and knees, and beg for her forgiveness *to her face.*”

I twist around on my barstool when she puts the strap of the bag on her shoulder and starts walking out of my kitchen, bitching at me over her shoulder the entire way.

“Spilling your guts after all this time in a bunch of messages online... I’m gonna need to get a bumper sticker that says *Honk if your kid is as dumb as mine!*”

“She won’t talk to me!” I remind my mom as she waves me away with her hand over her shoulder, her back still to me

as she opens my front door.

“Stop being a pussy, march your ass over there, and talk to her!” she shouts back, not even bothering to look at me or even say goodbye as she walks right out my front door, yanking it shut so hard behind her a framed picture of our family from last Christmas that was sitting on a small table in the entryway topples over and smacks down onto the table.

“Well... I probably deserved that,” I mutter when I’m alone again in my cottage.

It only takes me a few seconds of silence before I’m scrambling off my barstool and racing around the cottage, trying to find my golf cart keys. I drop them three times, because my hands are so goddamn sweaty, while I curse and mutter at myself for once again being such a dumbass. My mom is right. When Wren wouldn’t talk to me, I should have marched my ass over to her cottage and *made* her listen. Which is exactly what I’m going to do right now.

If I can find my fucking wallet. Where the hell did I put my wallet?

After five more minutes of frantic searching, my cottage now looking like it was tossed during a robbery with pillows, cushions, and mail spilled on the floor, and a few chairs toppled over, I finally find my wallet. There’s another knock at my door, and I pause from pulling it out of the crevice of my love seat, letting out an annoyed sigh as I turn and march across the living room.

If I would have also picked up my phone from where it was still lying face down under my kitchen table while I searched for my keys and wallet, and if I would have also checked social media when I grabbed my phone, I would have seen that in the last hour since my mom’s visit, every single one of my messages had been read.

“I know I’m a pussy! You really didn’t need to come back and call me a pussy again. I got it the....”

My words trail off when I yank open my front door, and standing on my front porch under the glow of my porch light isn't my mother with a pissed-off look on her face. Standing on my front porch, in a Dip and Twist T-shirt and a pair of my favorite jean shorts, with a nervous yet hopeful look in her eyes that are swimming with tears, and her phone clutched tightly in her hand, Wren looks up at me with those beautiful, watery blue eyes and cocks her head to the side while I try to remember how to breathe.

“If I promise not to call you a pussy, will you promise that everything you said in these messages are true?”

My hand is gripping so tightly to the edge of my open door I'm surprised I don't splinter the wood. I was *just* cursing at myself for not saying everything in those messages to Wren's face, and I should be repeating all of them right now to her without even hesitating. Everything I want to say is on the tip of my tongue, but she's standing right here in front of me, and all I can think about is how I told her I'd never be able to be around her again without wanting to kiss the hell out of her. I never knew how true those words I typed to her would be until right this moment. My need for her is unlike anything I've ever experienced before, shocking me to life and finally pulling my head out of my ass.

“Every fucking word” is all I can manage to growl before I'm stepping out onto my porch, grabbing her face in my hands, and swooping my head down, crashing my mouth against hers.

CHAPTER 9



Wren

“You better bring the heat.”

I MIGHT NOT have a lot of experience with relationships or sex, but I’ve been kissed plenty. The one thing all those lackluster kisses that led up to this moment taught me is that they were *all absolutely wrong*. They were tentative and boring, slow and dull, and I realized they were a mistake before they were even finished.

When Shepherd’s mouth slams against mine, I swear I hear the *thwack* of a bat connecting with a fast ball, and everything is instantly *right*. We fit together like two missing pieces of a puzzle, and when his tongue pushes past my lips and tangles with my own, I *feel* like I’m that ball being catapulted into the sky, my feet leaving the ground, turning and tumbling as I sail through air. There’s nothing slow or dull about the way this man kisses me, and for the rest of my life, I will never, ever regret it. His tongue plunges into my mouth, swiping and swirling in a way that makes me feel it *everywhere* from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

I understand it now when I’ve heard women say “*His kisses drive me wild.*” I feel like I’m going crazy, but in the best possible way. I want to scream, and I want to whisper, and I want to laugh, and I want to cry. He sucks on my tongue, and I immediately moan into his mouth, never in my life being turned on by a kiss until now. I’m so crazy turned on I’m fisting the front of Shepherd’s shirt to pull him closer, feel him

everywhere, and deepen the kiss on my own this time as I push up on my toes.

I hear him growl into my mouth, and I feel it rumble from his chest pressed against mine, when I suddenly feel like I'm turning and tumbling through the air all over again, until I realize Shepherd has whirled me around on his front porch without breaking the kiss. My feet scramble backward to walk with him, clutching tighter to the front of his shirt while he kisses me with the same frantic urgency that's coursing through my body. I brace for the feel of my back being slammed against the side of the house, but it never comes. We kiss, and we kiss, and we kiss as one of Shepherd's hands drops from my face while we move, his arm quickly wrapping around me as we go. That firm, protective arm around my body is what slams into the side of the cottage instead of my back, and knowing he's trying to protect me even while we're both mindless from this kiss makes me realize just how much I've been missing all my life by kissing the wrong people. It makes the fire I've felt raging inside me since the first touch of his lips explode into an inferno that I never want to extinguish.

He holds me like an angel, soft and protective and full of care, one hand still gently cupping my cheek with his other arm wrapped firmly around me. But he kisses like the devil, hard and punishing and like he's trying to claim me. His tongue sinks deeper, and I moan into Shepherd's mouth again, one of my legs wrapping around the back of his, tugging him closer until his body flattens against mine, pushing me harder into the arm he holds around me against the side of the house. He sucks on my top lip in between deep, bruising kisses, and my body reacts like he just put his mouth between my legs and did the same thing.

I jerk against him, needing some relief from the burning ache he's created, and I whimper so loudly into his mouth when I rub right up against his hard cock straining inside his shorts that Shepherd's hand comes off my cheek to smack loudly against the side of the house right above my head. There's nothing I can do but cling to him. I'm so dizzy from

the feel of his lips and tongue trying to memorize every inch of my mouth that the one leg I'm standing on would give out if he weren't holding me so tightly against him. Shepherd bends his knees and pushes back up, his hardness rubbing against me until I see stars behind my closed eyes and my leg locks tighter around the back of his thigh.

His kiss is desperate and possessive, telling me with each swipe of his tongue and each gasping breath of mine he swallows into his lungs that I'm *his*. That I've *always* been his and he meant every word in those messages. And when I feel his powerful body shudder against mine with the force of his own need as I jerk my hips and *rub, rub, rub* that sweet ache away against him in the same rhythm as his tongue swiping against mine over, and over, and over... I know he has me. Every part of me belongs to Shepherd, and it always has. The small handful of men who came before him were just placeholders until the right one came along. The one whose kisses tell me even better than the words he wrote to me that I've always been his.

The sound of someone shouting a few houses away brings me back down to earth, smothering some of my need with a reminder that having my first orgasm with another human being instead of my own hand probably shouldn't happen out in the open on Shepherd's front porch, no matter how badly I want it to.

Giving myself a few more seconds to enjoy Shepherd's dizzying kiss, I finally let go of the firm grip I have on his shirt. With a gentle push of my hands against his chest, I yank my mouth away from his, both of us groaning softly at the loss. His arm is still firmly around me, his other hand is still against the side of the house above my head, and we're still pressed tightly together from our thighs to our chests as we stand here, lips an inch apart, breathing heavy and staring at each other. Shepherd's heated gaze as he looks down at me does nothing to cool the fire still raging inside me, and I try to look away, but I can't. No one's ever looked at me like this before, like it's taking everything in him not to rip my clothes

off me and fuck me against the side of the house, and it's addicting. I could stand here all night, drinking in the sight of his flushed skin, the muscle ticking in his jaw covered in a five o'clock shadow of scruff, the feel of his heart racing under my flattened palms, and his eyes darting back and forth between my eyes and my lips.

Nothing can be heard but the sound of the waves crashing against the shore on the other side of Shepherd's cottage and the rapid beating of my own heart in my ears, neither one of us saying anything. I don't even know what to say to him right now. Not one thing in my head could accurately convey what he just did to me and how I feel in this moment. How do you tell someone that all these years, you've been walking around dead inside, and with one touch of his lips, it shocked you back to life?

I don't know how. Especially right now with his hardness still pressing into me, and how I can still feel his mouth on mine, and his breath is panting quickly against my lips, and I just want to kiss him again and forget about the rest of the world. So I don't say anything, because I don't want to screw it up. I want this moment, this first kiss I've been dreaming about since I was a teenager, these couple of minutes in time to remain as perfect as they are in my head right now without me messing it all up by saying something stupid.

Untangling my leg from around his, I duck down and move out from under his arm he's still holding against the side of the house then quickly make my way over to the porch stairs and down them. My hand comes up as I walk, and my fingertips touch my swollen lips just to reassure myself I didn't imagine things, now that I'm away from the warm cocoon of his body.

"So is that a yes for a date then?" Shepherd shouts after me, making me smile against my fingertips as I take a peek back at him over my shoulder while I quickly make my way down his front walk.

He's still standing where I left him, but now he's leaning back against the side of the house where he just kissed the hell out of me, like his legs might give out if he tries to walk. It just makes me smile even bigger as I look away from him, dropping my fingers from my lips once I get to the sidewalk, and shout back.

“We'll see! Message me.”



Shepherd: Did that kiss really happen, or did I imagine it?

Wren: Who is this?

Shepherd: That is not, nor will it EVER be, funny again, Wren Elizabeth Bennett. You know damn well who it is, since you can see the texts I sent you the last few days that you never answered.

Wren: Oooh, bringing out my full name. Will I get a spanking too?

Shepherd: Maybe I'm the one who should be asking who this is. Jesus, Wren. A man can only take so much in one night. I can still taste you, and I can still feel you against me, and I can still see the way you touched your lips when you were walking away from me with that shocked, beautiful smile on your face. Like you couldn't believe it happened. And if you say one more thing like that, I might actually break my phone this time by crushing it in my hand instead of throwing it across the room.

Wren: Why did you throw your phone across the room???

Shepherd: Because I'm a dumb boy who made a girl cry, and I was pouring my heart out to her, and she wasn't reading my messages. Or, you know, it slipped, and now it has a cracked screen.

Wren: You know what this reminds me of? That time I kept messaging you, and you never replied to me, and then you stopped talking to me for a whole year. But you know, my HEART was cracked.

Shepherd: Ouch, I deserve that.

Wren: At least when I started talking to you again, it only took two days and you got a kiss out of it, you big baby.

Shepherd: Damn, Bennett, are you finished?

Wren: Hold on. Remember that time I poured MY heart out to YOU, and you just let me walk away and then said all the perfect things in messages instead of to my face?

Wren: Okay, now I'm done.

Shepherd: Never, ever change, Wren. I kind of like you.

Wren: Good. Because I kind of like you too, person I now have saved in my phone as "Random Guy I Kissed."

Random Guy I Kissed: You're hilarious. Also, thanks for the chocolate sauce transfer from your shirt to mine during that kiss. It was delicious.

Wren: OMG! You're lying. And what do you mean it was delicious if it was on your shirt?

Random Guy I Kissed: I mean, I just assumed it was chocolate sauce when I looked down and saw it after you left, but a licking taste test confirmed it.

Wren: Eew, what if that wasn't chocolate?!!!

Random Guy I Kissed: I mean, if you left a brown substance on my shirt that wasn't chocolate sauce, we have much more to be concerned with than me licking a mystery stain off my shirt.

Wren: Give me that shirt next time I see you, and I'll wash it for you. OMG I'm sorry!

Random Guy I Kissed: You will do nothing of the sort! Why are you apologizing? Since when is chocolate bad? Was there a memo sent out I don't know about? Do you know how many years I've dreamed about you and chocolate sauce living together in perfect, naked harmony? Don't ruin this for me now. LET ME HAVE MY CHOCOLATE FANTASY, WREN.

Wren: How do you do that?

Random Guy I Kissed: Do what? Turn you on and then make you want to vomit all within 0.3 seconds? It's a gift.

Wren: LOL no! Make me feel... I don't know... normal. That's not the right word, but now I'm thinking about YOU and chocolate sauce, so thanks for that. My tongue was just in your mouth, and I should feel weird and my skin should be all itchy, and I should be second-guessing every word I'm saying to you so I don't say something stupid, but I'm not. Kissing you was just as natural and easy as messaging you that first time. And nothing feels weird, and it still feels like we're US but different, and you know what? I'm just gonna shut up now before I make things weird.

Random Guy I Kissed: I like it when you're weird. And I feel the same way. I thought I'd be nervous texting you after what happened, but I've never felt so... calm. And now you've got me saying the wrong words, because I am anything but calm. I can't stop thinking about that kiss, and it's driving me crazy, because I just want to kiss you again right now. But talking to you is never weird. It's always right, and it's always perfect. Also, I'm gonna need a minute or two, because now I can't stop thinking about your tongue being in my mouth. And how do you feel about phone sex, yay or nay?

Wren: LOL! I feel that maybe it's time for me to shut my phone off and go to sleep.

Random Guy I Kissed: Probably a wise decision. About that date... You free tomorrow night?

Wren: I might be. What did you have in mind?

Random Guy I Kissed: Like I'm really going to tell you everything I have planned for our first date.

Wren: It's only been fifteen minutes since I left you. You already have our date planned?

Random Guy I Kissed: Sweetheart, I've been planning our first date since I was thirteen years old. Brace yourself. I plan on burning you a compilation CD with all the best O-Town songs I illegally downloaded from the internet. I'm gonna page my bros on their beepers so I can give them the 4-1-1, and then I'm gonna log onto MySpace and pick out just the right profile song to convey my feelings. I'll probably kiss you under the moonlight while Enya plays in the background. Other than that, you're just gonna have to be surprised. I'll pick you up at 7.

Wren: I can't believe I thought I was the weird one.

Wren: Oh, and Shepherd? I'm definitely a yay on the phone sex. Could be fun. I've never tried it before, so I don't know if I'll be any good at it. Is clothing optional? I'm assuming touching is allowed, right, or what would be the point? Do we do it on a phone call or over text? I don't know if I can concentrate if I'm typing with one hand and touching myself with the other. Is it a back and forth kind of thing, like you go first, and when you finish, it's my turn? You know what? I'll just google it.

Random Guy I Kissed: Jesus Christ, Wren. Help me. I'm dying.

Wren: Always with the dramatics. Sleep tight. See you tomorrow.

CHAPTER 10



Wren

“We’ve got some fan interference on that play.”

“I WANTED TO give him the benefit of the doubt, but it’s been three days now without a word, so screw him.”

“He’s still hot, but he’s a limp dick motherfucker! I told you it was a good idea to burn that sweatshirt and send a message that you will *not* be trifled with!”

“I’m so mad I let it slip you were a fan. His stupid ego is clearly bigger than his tiny dick now.”

“Seriously, who does he think he is? Coming back to town and asking you on a date like he’s doing you a favor. *Oh, hey, babe, it’s cool ’cause I’m single now, yo.* Fuck him!”

“You stood there in front of him crying your eyes out, telling him you’ve had a thing for him *forever*, and he just let you walk away! And then he hounds me all over town trying to find out how you are. How do you think she is, *bitch*? Okay, so he only stopped me once when I was coming out of the pharmacy, and he was really sweet and looked really sad, but whatever. Fuck him!”

“Sip and Bitch in the morning is rough, but I am *digging* these mimosas before work. What a time to be alive. Fuck Shepherd Oliver and his selfish yet hot ass! Sip and Bitch, ladies!”

Tess and Birdie *finally* stop bitching about Shepherd long enough to clink glasses and sip the orange juice and

champagne I splurged on this morning. I can't even be mad they haven't bitched about their own men since they got here and have spent all morning bitching about mine instead.

Mine... Shepherd is mine...

That thought just makes the smile I've had on my face since I woke up grow even bigger, one hand coming up to press my fingertips to my lips as I top off Tess and Birdie's glasses with more champagne with my other hand. Considering I called an emergency Sip and Bitch at the ass-crack of dawn in my kitchen after Owen left for school and before everyone has to be at work, I felt bribery was necessary. Especially because I ran out of the Dip and Twist fifteen minutes into Sip and Bitch *last* night with a lie about Owen not feeling well. And *especially* with what I'm about to tell them after I let them go on and on in a rage since they got here. I know I should have told them about the messages as soon as I finished reading them last night while Tess took fifteen minutes to complain about Bodhi leaving the toilet seat up, but I didn't. I just wanted to make a decision about Shepherd on my own without their input. I needed to trust my own instincts, and I think it worked out quite well for once. I just hope they feel the same way.

Pushing the plate closer to them of fresh, homemade donuts I made before the sun came up when I couldn't sleep from replaying that kiss over and over all night long, I'm hoping it will soften the blow as well. They are *really* raging on my behalf... while I'm standing here on the other side of the counter from them, thinking about every moment of that kiss for the hundredth time. The way he felt pressed up against me, the way his mouth moved against mine, the way his *body* moved against mine, that jerk of his hips between my thighs....

My kitchen is suddenly filled with quiet moaning instead of cursing the ground Shepherd walks on as each woman double-fists a donut, sitting on my stools on the other side of my counter, while I shift nervously from foot to foot where I stand. Just like I hoped, Tess and Birdie's faces immediately

soften from their Shepherd rage like I fed them something magical. And these aren't even the maple bacon donuts from the mainland that Birdie is obsessed with and Palmer always butters her up with. They're just a tube of Pillsbury biscuit dough that I fried in oil and then sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. But I know the power these donuts wield, since I already ate an entire tube of deep-fried dough before they got here to calm my nerves. It was working up until now.

"Why are you smiling so much?" Tess suddenly asks around a mouthful of donut.

Reaching out, I snag one of the donut holes and pop it into my mouth so I'm not smiling anymore.

"And why are *we* the only ones doing all the bitching, when you've been the one out-bitching us the last couple of nights, and you're the one who called this emergency Sip and Bitch?" Birdie questions, setting her half-eaten donut back on the plate and leaning forward to rest her elbows on the counter to study me closer. "Have you finally snapped? Maybe three Sip and Bitches in a row were too much."

Clearing my throat and fidgeting my feet, I look down at one of the paper towels I ripped off the roll to use for napkins. I stare at my fingers as I start tearing the paper towel apart into tiny little pieces so I don't have to see the looks on their faces when I speak.

"Well... it's a little hard to bitch about the man now, after I went to his cottage last night, he kissed the *holy shit* out of me, and if I hadn't pumped the brakes, I might have let him round all the bases and slide into home right up against the side of his house, and I can positively confirm that his dick is neither tiny nor limp, so who wants more champagne?" I blurt out all at once, grabbing the bottle and holding it in the air with a big, toothy smile on my face.

There's a long enough bout of silence after my confession that I have plenty of time to relive each and every delicious moment of that kiss once more before all hell breaks loose around me. Birdie and Tess are shouting so loudly I almost

want to cover my ears with my hands. Instead, while they rant and rave across the counter from me about how I've lost my goddamn mind for letting another man walk all over me, and how now they're *really* going to light all his shit on fire for taking advantage of me, I calmly set the champagne down, turn, and walk away from the counter.

"If you would have shut up about Bodhi and the damn toilet seat, we wouldn't have this problem right now!" Birdie shouts at Tess.

"It's not *my* fault all that pretty Shepherd carries around turned her brain to mush! It's happened to the best of us!" Tess fires back while I grab my phone from the arm of my couch where I left it when I said goodbye to Owen as he was walking out the door for school.

I pull up Instagram as I walk back over to them and quietly stick my arm between the two of their arguing faces, getting another few minutes of silence when Tess grabs the phone from me. I stand behind them with my arms crossed while Birdie and Tess lean shoulder-to-shoulder with their heads bent forward over the screen, reading the messages Shepherd sent me yesterday all within the span of a few hours while I was busy at work. Both of their shoulders are shaking with quiet sobs by the time they finish, turning around on their stools to face me with their tear-stained cheeks, sniffing noses, and quivering chins.

"It was always *you*," Birdie says with a cracked whisper as another tear falls down her cheek.

The clock in my kitchen ticks the seconds away in my quiet cottage until I start fidgeting uncomfortably again with the way these two are staring at me so pitifully, and all hell breaks loose for the second time.

"I'm sorry! We are such assholes!"

"Speak for yourself. I'm a fucking delight. I'm still sorry for saying you lost your goddamn mind, but fuck you for

making me cry while the sun's up. That is against my religion!"

"He's perfect! Marry him immediately and have all his babies!"

"Fuck marriage and kids and just fuck *him!*"

"He is the sweetest man in the entire world. Oh my *God*, I could just die!"

"Didn't I tell you him moving back here would be a good thing? This is such a good thing. Fuck yeah, all the good things!"

Bringing my hand up to my head and closing my eyes, I take a few minutes for the whiplash Tess and Birdie have given me to go away and for them to finally be quiet so I can think. When it's silent in my kitchen again, I drop my hand and look at them.

"You guys really *are* a bunch of assholes. After everything Kevin has put me through, do you honestly think I would let someone do that to me again? Please, just trust me first before you make assumptions," I tell both of their shocked faces, softening my voice as I continue, taking a step closer to them. "I know I've let Kevin walk all over me. And I know I've let him make me feel like he's better than me and like I don't have a voice. And I know you guys have had to sit back and watch that happen all these years, and there was nothing you could do about it, and I can only imagine how hard that was for you. I love you both so much for sticking up for me all the time, but I *do* have a voice, and I *do* have a backbone. I just forgot how to use them for a little while. But Shepherd... I don't know, he brings them out of me. I'm not an idiot. At least, not anymore. I'm not just gonna fall for perfect words sent in messages. Actions speak louder than words, and last night... let's just say I approve of his actions so far."

My phone dings with an incoming text in Tess's hand, and before I can grab it from her, she's dropping her head to read it.

“Who the hell is **Random Guy I Kissed**, and why is he sending you a text that just got me pregnant?” Tess screeches. “How many men did you suck face with last night?”

“Give me that,” Birdie orders, smacking my hand away when I try to reach for my phone. “Jesus *Christ*, I think I just came. Palmer really needs to up his dirty talk. But seriously, who the hell is this random guy you kissed? Shepherd is going to kick his ass!”

My cheeks are already flushed, wondering what Shepherd could have said as Birdie keeps smacking my hands away.

“Will you give me my phone?! That’s Shepherd! It’s just a joke between the two of—*Sweet mother of God*,” I groan when Birdie finally turns my phone around so I can see the screen.

Random Guy I Kissed: I woke up this morning, and I could still taste you. Christ, your lips are perfect. Everything about you is perfect, but especially the little sounds you make when I’m between your thighs. Can you still feel how hard my cock was for you, baby? 11 hours and 15 minutes until our date.

And just like that, I’m wet while the sun’s up, which I thought was against *my* religion.

“Oh my *God*, you have a date with him tonight?” Birdie asks excitedly, bouncing up and down in her seat when I finally manage to snatch my phone out of her hand.

My phone immediately dings with a text as soon as I grab it, making me jump and let out a little squeak when I see it’s another message from Shepherd. It’s like he knows I’m standing here in my kitchen halfway to an orgasm just from a damn text, and he wants to make me even *more* uncomfortable. Except this is Shepherd we’re talking about, and I should have known better.

Random Guy I Kissed: You’re not the only one who can google phone sex. Boom! Wait... is it too early for phone sex? Is that like, just a nighttime thing? Was that something we were supposed to schedule first? It did feel a little scandalous typing the word “cock” before lunch.

I should have done more googling. 11 hours and 14 minutes until our date.

I'm still laughing to myself while Birdie freaks out that I have a date with Shepherd. I don't even know what made me joke about phone sex with him last night. He just brought something... *scandalous* out of me, I guess. I'm suddenly a popular person this morning when yet another text chimes from my phone.

"Please be a Shepherd dick pic, please be a Shepherd dick pic," Tess chants softly with her eyes closed and her hands up in the air with her fingers crossed as I shake my head at her and look down at my phone again.

Sadly, it's not another vagina-clenching text from Shepherd or one that makes me laugh and puts me at ease. For the first time since Owen was born, I don't internally scream when I see the name **Piece of Shit Dickhole Motherfucker** that Tess so kindly changed in my phone six years ago and the first time Kevin asked me if I'd gained weight. Not even a text from Kevin before I've been properly caffeinated can worsen my good mood this morning, thinking about my date with Shepherd tonight.

"It's not from Shepherd; it's from Kevin," I tell Birdie and Tess as I quickly skim his message and roll my eyes.

"Why are you smiling? Why is she smiling?" my sister questions nervously while I show them his text.

Piece of Shit Dickhole Motherfucker: It would be nice if you sent me the ferry schedule like I asked you for days ago. It's really mature of you to try to stop me from seeing my son. Again.

Tess growls, and Birdie lets off a whole stream of curses that lasts for a solid minute, both of them trying to reach for my phone to put Kevin in his place for me. This is what Kevin does. It doesn't matter that I sent him a link to the ferry schedule years ago or he could easily look this information up online. If he asks me for something and I don't reply in a timely fashion, it's *my* fault and *I'm* the reason he never sees

his son. He does the same thing with Owen's baseball schedule. He hasn't been to one of his son's games in over three years, so I just stopped sending the schedules to him. Again, he could easily look this information up online, but *I'm* the bitch who keeps him from his son and makes it so he can never see him play. I'm ashamed of myself that I just *took it* for so long. That I allowed someone to treat me this way when I don't fucking deserve it and I never have.

"You guys," I tell them calmly, holding my phone out of their reach as I quickly type up my reply. "I've got this. And I'm smiling, because I have a voice and a backbone, and it's about time I start using them."

Quickly hitting Send before I second-guess this newfound confidence, I turn my phone back around to face the girls as Tess reads my reply out loud.

"You know what would be really nice, Kevin? If you started acting like a decent human being for once. Looks like we can't always get what we want. The ferry schedule is online. Where it's always been," Tess finishes, looking up at me with a smile and sniffing loudly. "Our little girl is all grown up. I'm so proud."

All of a sudden, my good mood thinking about my date with Shepherd tonight starts to plummet.

Oh God. Kevin is coming to Summersweet Island.

I *just* got Shepherd, and sure, I have some great new confidence now, but I'm still just a girl who wants to impress the guy she likes, not throw him into the pit of my shitshow life right off the bat. All that fried dough starts churning in my stomach while Birdie takes a sip of mimosa before speaking.

"Is anyone else *super* excited for Killjoy Kevin to get to the island now?" she asks, raising her hand in the air like she's at school.

"What? No! Are you high?" I ask, turning the volume down on my phone before I set it on the counter so I don't have to hear when Kevin's rage-filled reply comes in, while

also pressing my hand to my stomach to try to quell the nausea.

He already knows about my one-night-stand stupidity. Does he really need to come face-to-face with it? Uuugh...

“Considering how much pot Bodhi smokes and how close we’re sitting to Tess right now, we could *all* be high from second-hand smelling and not even know it.” Birdie shrugs. “But seriously. I’m getting all tingly just thinking about that douchebag coming for a visit.”

“Yep, I’m feeling a spark of something. This is gonna be fun,” Tess agrees, both of them oblivious to my growing panic.

“There is nothing fun *nor* exciting about Kevin coming to Summersweet Island. Do you remember the last time he was here? That apology tour took me a week after he left, going around to all the people he insulted the whole twenty-four hours he was on the island,” I remind them.

“Honey, that douchebag doesn’t stand a chance when Shepherd Oliver gets his first good look at him.” Tess chuckles as Birdie nods and joins in with the laughter.

“It’s not his fight,” I mutter quietly, not even believing the words coming out of my own mouth. I’ve only kissed that man once, but once was enough to tell me there is no way he will just stand by and let me deal with Kevin alone.

“A man who says the things Shepherd said to you in those messages, who straight up tells you that you are *the* prize for him, is going to defend your honor whether you want him to or not. Oh yeah, this is gonna be fun.” Birdie nods with a big smile.

“You’re both cut off from alcohol forever,” I mutter, walking around the counter and moving the champagne out of their reach.

Fine, so I’m smiling a little bit to myself as I grab their glasses and put them in the sink. And sure, some of the nausea goes away while a whole bunch of fantasies of Shepherd riding in on a white horse to scoop me up and away from the

evil villain play in my head. Whatever. It's still not his battle to fight.

"All right, I've got exactly fifteen minutes before I need to leave for work," Birdie announces, hopping down from her stool. "Plenty of time to pick out an outfit for you to wear on your date."

It's like they *want* to make me lose my mind this morning. I wasn't nervous at all about my date with Shepherd until now. My closet is filled with nothing but T-shirts and shorts. And while I'm sure Shepherd's ego would absolutely love for me to wear one of *his* shirts on our date, I can't wear a freaking T-shirt on a date with Shepherd Oliver!

Birdie grabs my arm and starts tugging me toward the hallway, once again oblivious to my current state of panic.

"Wren's closet has nothing slutty enough for a date with Shepherd. We're gonna need to go to *your* closet," Tess tells Birdie with a snort, grabbing my other arm and tugging me toward my front door.

"Did you just call me a slut?"

"I'm sorry, was it someone else who had sex with Palmer the first time they kissed?"

"No, no, that was me. Damn, that was a good day. I don't think she should go slutty on the first date. And she definitely can't wear anything from *your* closet or she'll look like she's going to a funeral."

"It's funny because it's true. Whoever thinks it's a good idea to call off work and go to the mainland shopping, say *aye!*"

"Aye!" Tess and Birdie shout together while I let them drag me toward the door.

"The *ayes* have it!" Birdie announces, pulling her phone out of her pocket to call the golf course. "I'll call Mom after I call SIG and have her take your shift today."

I don't even bother reminding them I have a voice while they talk around me and make plans for me as they grab my purse and drag me out the door. I'll let them interfere just this one last time, because I can't wear a freaking T-shirt and a pair of shorts on a date with Shepherd Oliver.

CHAPTER 11



Wren

“Looks like he’s swinging for the fences.”

Wren: I have to ask you something, but I feel like you’re going to be difficult about it.

Random Guy I Kissed: I am never difficult.

Wren: Rrriiight. Sure, okay.

Random Guy I Kissed: How about you just ask me so you can be pleasantly surprised?

Wren: Fine. I’m running late. Is it okay if I just meet you wherever?

Random Guy I Kissed: No.

Random Guy I Kissed: Absolutely not.

Random Guy I Kissed: N-O.

Random Guy I Kissed: This is a proper first date, and I will properly pick you up. Just tell me when.

Wren: What happened to not being difficult?

Random Guy I Kissed: I’m not being difficult; I’m being a gentleman.

Wren: Listen, today was a whole thing with my sister and Tess where they made me... go to a MALL. I got dragged to entirely too many stores, where I was forced to try on entirely too many clothes in front of a bunch of mirrors that LIE. There was some day drinking at a spa where people touched my feet, followed by an accidental nap so I could forget about the feet touching, which made me late dropping

Owen off at his friend's house for a sleepover, and now Birdie won't stop yelling at me about shoes.

Random Guy I Kissed: Breathe, sweetheart. Whatever you need, you got it. Just meet me here at my cottage whenever you're finished. Take all the time you need. I've waited my whole life for you. I'm not going anywhere.



I MIGHT NOT have been living my best life during my plethora of single years, but I've still been on enough dates to know they are always awkward and they are never as romantic as movies and books make them out to be. None of them had any effort or thought put into them, and all of them included dinner someplace here on the island I've been to a thousand times before, where everyone I know and have grown up with gets a front-row seat to the evening. Which is in no way romantic at all, especially when you're in twelfth grade eating pizza at Island Slice with Jeff Lindauer, and Erika from the pharmacy runs up to your table to give you the box of super plus tampons she forgot to put in your bag when you were there earlier.

These dates were never special. They were just a few hours spent with someone else where I kept glancing at the clock, wondering how much longer I had to suffer and make small talk. No one ever bought me flowers, no one ever held my hand, and no one ever pulled out my chair or opened my door. My sister and Tess and even Emily... they're strong, independent women who give zero fucks about things like that. They're happy to buy their own flowers and open their own doors. They don't need outdated gestures from a man to make them feel special. I like to think I'm pretty strong, and I've had to be independent whether I wanted to or not. That doesn't mean I'm not still a little old fashioned at heart. I still want the romance and the effort.

I've waited my whole life for you.

Shepherd's text still has the power to make my eyes fill with tears even an hour later as I'm walking around the side of his cottage. And especially with the long-stemmed purple rose in my hand that I found next to a note and a small votive candle in a glass jar on his front porch, telling me where to go. I knew before I even got here that this date with Shepherd would be romantic and special just because it was with *him*, but I never expected the man to just reach inside my head and pull out everything I've ever imagined when the date hasn't even started yet.

My feet come to a stop, and I let out a gasp when I see a trail of flickering votive candles in small jars that lead down his side yard and disappear around the corner of his back deck on the beach. There are at least fifty of them, the tiny dancing flames glowing in the grass as I bend down next to the first one when I see another note and another long-stemmed purple rose lying next to the candle in the grass. I grab the second flower and see from the glow of the candle that the note just says **Follow the trail.**

Standing back up with my heart fluttering wildly in my chest, I continue walking through the grass of Shepherd's side yard next to his cottage. I follow the trail of flickering candles, pausing to bend down every few feet when I see another purple rose lying in the grass, until I get to the side of his deck. Another note and purple rose are lying right where the grass meets the sand. Bending down again, I grab the final rose to add to the bunch in my hand and read the note.

Put on the blindfold that's under this note. I promise I won't do anything weird or pervy.

With a smile, I grab the pink satin blindfold from the grass, laughing softly when I see it says **The princess is sleeping** in white lettering across the eyes. Knowing this is probably something Shepherd actually wears when he sleeps, I can't keep the smile off my face as I stand back up and pull the blindfold over my head, careful not to damage the bunch of roses I'm still holding.

I smell Shepherd before I feel him, a fresh hint of soap and his intoxicating cologne invading my senses and making my heart beat even faster. Heat spreads through every inch of my body when I feel a hand on my hip, and it slowly slides around the front of me and across my stomach until Shepherd's arm is curled around me, pulling my back snugly against the front of him.

My breath shudders out of me with my eyes squeezed closed behind the satin mask when I feel his warm, wet lips press against the side of my neck. My head tilts to the side, and I rest my free hand on top of his arm as it tightens around me and he kisses his way up my neck. My skin breaks out in goose bumps, and I shiver against him when he pauses with his lips hovering right by the shell of my ear.

“Do you know why vanilla has always been my favorite taffy flavor?” Shepherd asks quietly, his warm breath skating over my ear as he nuzzles his nose against the side of my neck. “Because you always smell like vanilla. And I always imagined it's what you taste like.”

His lips are back on the side my neck, but this time when he kisses me there, his teeth gently nip the sensitive skin and his tongue quickly follows, my knees almost giving out when he pulls his mouth away to speak close to my ear again.

“In case I forget to tell you at the end of the night, this was the *best* date I've ever had in my life,” Shepherd whispers.

I have to swallow past the lump in my throat when I finally say my first words to him.

“The date hasn't even started yet. How do you know it will be the best?”

Shepherd presses his lips once more to the side of my neck before pulling away.

“I just know.”

I can hear the smile in his voice as his arm loosens its hold from around me, and his body brushes against the side of my arm when I feel him walk around to stand in front of me. The

palm of his hand gently glides down my arm until his fingers are sliding across my palm and he's wrapping his hand around mine, lifting it up toward him. His kisses the top of my hand, holding his lips there for a few seconds, making my heart try to beat its way out of my chest. Pulling his mouth away, Shepherd gives my hand a reassuring squeeze as he starts tugging me forward.

“Just walk slow; I've got you.”

Tears prickle the backs of my eyes beneath the mask, the candles, the flowers, the nuzzling, and the handholding completely overwhelming my cold, dead heart, along with his words. He *does* have me, and I want him to know I trust him. Quickly kicking off the flip-flops Birdie bitched at me for thirty minutes about *not* wearing with the sexy romper she and Tess picked out for me, I let Shepherd blindly lead me forward with his big, warm hand wrapped securely around mine, knowing he'll never let me fall. My feet sink into the soft sand as I feel him walk me a good ways out onto the beach, the sound of the crashing waves getting louder as we go, the ocean breeze ruffling my hair around my face that I didn't put up into a ponytail or a messy bun for once.

We suddenly come to a stop, and Shepherd turns me around in the sand until it feels like I'm facing the way we just came. He lets go of my hand, and I feel the blindfold being gently pulled off me. It takes a few seconds of rapid blinking for my eyes to adjust and for Shepherd to come into focus. My heart flutters in my chest when I get my first look at him again after we kissed and after just talking to him via text since then. His hair with the close-shaved sides and just long enough on top to grip with your hands is neatly pushed back and to the side, his jaw is smooth from a fresh shave, and both of his dimples are popping out as he smiles down at me.

“Hi,” he whispers, his smile growing bigger as excited butterflies start flapping around in my stomach.

“Hi, yourself,” I reply with a soft laugh. “You clean up nice.”

That's an understatement if I ever did hear one. I've seen him "cleaned up" plenty of times in photoshoots for magazines, but knowing he did it for *me* just makes it even sweeter. In a light-gray fitted button-down made from a soft jersey material instead of the typical polyester blend, he's got the first two buttons undone and his sleeves cuffed and pushed up to his elbows. His hands are shoved into the front pockets of the slim black dress pants his shirt is tucked into and paired with a black belt. I try not to drool over the muscles in his forearms and how his shirt clings to his biceps, but it's pretty much impossible at this point. He's so beautiful it hurts, and he's so adorable with his bare feet in the sand I wish I had my phone with me so I could take a picture of him and have it for always.

"You take my breath away."

It's a cheesy statement, but there's nothing cheesy about the way Shepherd looks at me when he says it, his eyes trailing slowly over my body from my head to my feet, making me more than a little glad I let Birdie and Tess drag me around all day putting me through hell. We finally agreed on a plum-colored, long-sleeved, wraparound-style, super-short romper. I wanted to wear a lace bralette under it, considering the front of the romper plunges into a deep V right below my breastbone, but I was outvoted by the two annoying women in the dressing room with me. With some strategically placed double-sided tape, and the way Shepherd can't seem to take his eyes off me, I guess their decision was a good one.

"Thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful," I tell him, bringing the small bunch up to my nose and taking a huge sniff. He doesn't need to know it's the first time anyone has ever given me flowers and this small handful I'm clutching is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me before.

"Yeah, you might want to hold off on saying that," he starts, my eyes coming back up to meet his in confusion. "So, I just want to note before you turn around that I called my sisters and my mom for date ideas, and they had a lot of

suggestions and I spent way too many hours on Pinterest. I just.... Just blame Pinterest.”

Shepherd trails off with a sigh, and laughter bubbles out of me and my heart melts right in my chest at how nervous he sounds and looks while he shifts foot-to-foot in the sand in front of me, his eyes dropping from mine as he kicks at the sand. Slowly turning away from him, my laughter cuts off with a choked gasp, and it only takes seconds before my eyes are so filled with tears as I look around I can barely see out of them.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, a shaking hand coming up to press against my mouth as I blink the tears away. Instead of disappearing, they just fall down my cheeks while I stare out at the beach in front of me and what Shepherd has done.

“It’s too much, right? It’s probably too much....” he trails off nervously from right behind me.

The excitement I had over the small handful of long-stemmed purple roses I’m still holding down by my side suddenly seems incredibly lame right at this moment.

In the sand in the shape of a giant heart that’s easily the size of my cottage is vase, after vase, after vase overflowing with purple, long-stemmed roses. Several hundred beautiful crystal vases, and thousands upon *thousands* of stunning, fully bloomed, purple roses, at least a few dozen in each vase, stand tall in the sand in the moonlight. A small glass jar with a flickering candle just like the ones that led me around the side of Shepherd’s cottage are nestled in the sand next to each vase to complete the heart design.

And inside the giant rose and candle heart sits a large cabana draped in mosquito netting that’s been pulled back and tied to the posts to look like curtains, with a chandelier hanging down from the ceiling in the center. The soft glow of lights from the fixture shines down on a table set for two that looks like it was picked right up out of a five-star restaurant on the mainland and plopped down into the sand. The table is draped with a white tablecloth and topped with more purple

roses, fine china, and crystal goblets, with the glow of a few more candles sparkling off the stemware. A trail of purple rose petals leads to the romantic setting in the sand, and just when I think it couldn't possibly get any better, I hear the soft strains of violins begin to play. Glancing back to Shepherd's deck and where the music is coming from, I see two men dressed in tuxedos standing just inside his deck railing, playing a slow, romantic melody with the violins they have held up to their shoulders and tucked under their chins, the music mixing with the sound of the crashing waves.

"I can't believe you did this," I tell him with a raspy voice filled with tears and emotion as I look back at the cabana. "I've never even *seen* purple roses before. The colors each stand for something. Did you know that? Like, red is for love, and yellow is for friendship. But I don't know what purple is for. You probably just picked purple because it's the Hawks' color."

I feel both of Shepherd's arms encircle my waist as he steps up behind me, pulling me back into his chest as he rests his chin on top of my head.

"Huh, never heard about the color thing," he muses. "You'll have to look it up later."

There's something in his voice that tells me he knows exactly what the color purple means, but I let it go for now as he continues speaking, and I stare out at the breathtaking sight that he had set up just for *me*.

"You deserve to have everything you've ever dreamed, Wren. And according to Pinterest and all the yelling my sisters and my mom did at me, this is what every woman dreams of for a first date. I probably went a little overboard with the—"

I turn around quickly in his arms when his voice starts getting adorably fast and nervous again, his words immediately cutting off and a look of horror coming over his face when he looks at mine.

“No, no, no, no! I’m not supposed to make you cry again!” Shepherd says in a panic, both of his hands coming up to cup my cheeks, making me laugh through my tears.

I quickly push up on my toes and calm his panic by pressing my lips to his. I hold them there for a few seconds before pulling back to smile at him.

“These are happy tears,” I reassure him. “I just can’t believe you did all this for me.”

Shepherd lets out a sigh of relief, kissing my forehead before dropping his hands from my face and lacing his fingers through my hand that isn’t still holding on to the small bouquet of roses to continue walking through the sand.

“Oh, this is just the beginning.” He smiles down at me. “I wasn’t kidding about the hours I spent on Pinterest. Do you know how hard it is to book a last-minute plane to fly by with an LED night sign with a message on it?”

“You’re lying.” I shake my head with a laugh as we walk along the purple rose petal path in the sand to the cabana.

“You’re right,” Shepherd says with a serious nod, dropping my hand when we get under the cabana to pull out my chair for me. As soon as I’m seated, he quickly kisses the top of my head, chuckling as he walks around the table and takes his seat across from me. “It wasn’t hard at all to book one of those things.”



“MIDDLE FIELD... I still can’t believe you called it *middle field*, Wren.” Shepherd laughs as he shakes his head at me. “How did you even type that without making yourself vomit?”

I laugh as I pop a white chocolate truffle into my mouth, knowing my cheeks are going to be seriously hurting tomorrow from all the laughing I’ve done tonight. It turns out Shepherd really was teasing about booking a plane to fly by with a message on it, and I’m glad for that. I think my heart would have actually melted right out of my chest if he’d done

one more crazy-romantic thing for me. The flowers, the cabana, the live music while we ate, and the food were more than enough. Shepherd even hired a chef to cook for us in his kitchen, and he made us the best lobster risotto and filet mignon I've ever had in my life. Two servers dressed in tuxedos that matched the musicians came out to the beach to bring us our courses covered with fancy silver domes, quickly disappearing back inside Shepherd's house to give us privacy. The conversation never stopped all through dinner, and neither did the laughter, from both of us. He told me about silly pranks he and his teammates pulled on each other over the years and bragged about his friend Nick and the beautiful family he's created. I told him about the joys of raising a boy who maybe got too much influence from all his crazy aunts. We reminisce about high school and the conversations we had online when we first started talking again, and everything is easy and perfect and just how I imagined a date with Shepherd would be.

Now that dinner is finished, the servers have cleared off the table, and the musicians have gone home, we've moved away from the cabana to another small area in the sand Shepherd had set up for us for dessert. Surrounded by another small circle of candles in the sand are piles and piles of pillows and blankets, with a large wooden tray off to the side with an assortment of chocolate truffles, a bowl of fresh strawberries, and a bucket filled with ice and a bottle of champagne that Shepherd popped as soon as we sat down. We're both stretched out on our sides facing each other after drinking a glass, our elbows resting in the pillows with our heads resting on our hands, a warm fleece blanket draped over my legs that Shepherd put there when he saw goose bumps on them a few minutes ago.

"Why didn't you ever tell me about Owen's dad?" Shepherd asks quietly, the last bit of truffle in my mouth suddenly hard to swallow.

I knew it was only a matter of time before he'd want to move our conversation to something a little more serious, and

it looks like that time has come.

“Do you really want to ruin the best date you’ve ever had with something so messy?” I joke with a humorless laugh.

Shepherd reaches over to grab my hand that’s currently fiddling with the edge of the blanket beneath me, lacing his fingers through mine and tugging me closer until my face is just a few inches from his.

“I like messy,” he tells me with a small smile. “I wish you would have been messy with me the first time I asked.”

A spark of guilt shoots through me, and I look down from his eyes to stare at our clasped hands resting on top of a small pillow, watching Shepherd’s thumb rub back and forth soothingly over top of mine.

“I liked you,” I tell him softly, still staring at our hands. “I mean... I *really* liked you. And I couldn’t believe you were actually messaging me, and talking to me, and I know I should have told you the truth, but I just didn’t want the guy I had a huge crush on all my life to think I was a loser. And it’s not like I thought you would *ever* be into me, or ever come back here to live and find out. You had this amazing, glamorous life, hanging out with celebrities and being on television and in magazines, and I was just the idiot on the other side of the country who got drunk and made a poor decision and have let that poor decision treat me like shit for entirely too long. So I never elaborated when you asked if he was in our lives. Because he was. He *is*. It’s just sporadic and it sucks the life out of me every time, and I didn’t want you to know that part of me. I didn’t want you to see how weak I was or how much I let him walk all over me.”

“Hey, look at me,” Shepherd urges softly until I finally bring my eyes up to his. “You are *not* weak, and you never have been. *Look at you*. Look at what you’ve done without any help from that piece of shit. I have never met a more amazing young man than Owen. *You* did that. And you run a business, and you take care of everyone else around you. You are

anything but weak, Wren. You're the strongest person I've ever met."

I told myself I wouldn't cry anymore tonight, but clearly Shepherd didn't get that memo. He lets go of my hand to reach up and cup my cheek, swiping away at my tears with his thumb.

"Just remember you said that when Kevin gets to the island. I guess he's coming for a visit. Yay," I deadpan, and Shepherd leans forward in the pillows and blankets to give me a quick, soothing kiss, a brush of his tongue across my top lip, and a few small pecks before he pulls back.

"I know you think he's your problem to deal with, but not anymore. Not now and not ever again, okay? Whatever you need from me, it's yours. If you need me to kick his ass, done. If you need me to make sure Tess has a full supply of BIC lighters and lighter fluid, done and done. And if you need me to just stand behind you, giving you support... sweetheart, you've had that since the day I got here."

"I don't want you getting involved in this mess." I shake my head, but Shepherd just smiles at me.

"I told you. I like it messy," he replies, kissing the tip of my nose and then pulling back.

"You've had it pretty easy since you got here without anyone hounding you or trying to get into your personal business," I remind him. "The island police have stopped a couple of paparazzi and sent them back home before they even got off the ferry. Paparazzi are innocent little kittens compared to what Kevin Stratford will do if something doesn't go his way. I don't want you getting pulled into that when you've done everything you can to avoid the press since your injury and since you retired."

Shepherd just smiles again, scooting closer to me in the pile of pillows and blankets, his hand dropping from my cheek to slide over my hip and around my back, curling into me and tugging me up against him.

“You let *me* worry about that,” he orders while I place my hand against his chest right over his heart, the steady beat against my palm immediately calming me just as much as being this close to him does. “In case you’re forgetting, I’m kind of a big deal. I can handle a little dipshit like him.”

Shepherd winks at me, making me laugh, even though he has absolutely no idea what he’s saying. Kevin is a narcissistic asshole who cares about no one but himself, and with one call to Daddy, all his problems are magically fixed. As soon as he knows Shepherd Oliver is here, and that we’re dating and he’s in Owen’s life, Kevin is absolutely going to make a scene, and it’s not going to be pretty. He’s never wanted me or my son, but that’s not going to matter, because he’s a special kind of asshole like that.

But Kevin isn’t here right now, and I don’t want to think about him anymore. I just want to enjoy the best first date I’ve ever had with the best man I’ve ever met. I want to enjoy the fact that I was right to trust my instincts the other night when I went to him after I read his messages. Deciding to try my hand at being bold, I tilt my head forward until my mouth is hovering right over Shepherd’s, sliding my hand up his chest and around to the back of his neck.

“Can we be done talking about messy stuff now?” I whisper, brushing my lips back and forth against his until I hear a soft groan come out of him, making me smile against his mouth.

Shepherd curls his arm around me tighter, pulling me closer, sealing his lips to mine, and pushing his tongue past my lips at the same time. Just like the first time we kissed, as soon as his tongue brushes against mine, I feel like I’ve been sent out into orbit. Time stops, the waves are no longer crashing, and everything around us ceases to exist. It’s just the two of us on this beach, surrounded by pillows and candles. My hand grips tighter to the back of Shepherd’s neck as he tilts his head, deepening the kiss as I pull him harder against my mouth while his tongue swipes and swirls around my own and drives me out of my mind.

I'm making out with someone on a beach after the most romantic dinner of my life. I've never made out with anyone on a beach, although I've fantasized about it plenty of times. And I've certainly never made out with anyone who could make my toes curl and make me forget I'm on a public beach where anyone can see us, even if it is late at night. Shepherd fulfills every fantasy I've ever had, and it's a heady feeling, and one that makes me want to lose control and lose myself in him. All he has to do is touch me and I want him. Curled up against his warm, hard body, with the smell of him surrounding me, his lips claiming me and bruising me with the force of his kiss, and all the words he's said to me tonight, every inch of me aches with need for him.

My leg comes up and slides over his hip, the blanket falling away as I pull him closer, whimpering into his kiss when I feel how hard he is, knowing it's for *me* and because of *me*, and I just want more. I want Shepherd to erase all the messy and replace it with nothing but the perfection of *him*. His smell and his taste and his touch, brushing over every scar and taking away every pain.

My hips jerk to feel his cock rubbing against the pulsing ache, and Shepherd responds with a growl from deep in his chest, his arm tightening around me and his mouth tearing away from mine to kiss his way along my cheek and down to my neck. My hand slides up the back of his head, pressing his mouth harder against the side of my neck. He sucks on that spot right below my ear, and I see stars. Squeezing my eyes closed, I let out a choked whimper when I feel his hand grip my ass, jerking me against him to help me swivel my hips and grind myself on his hardness while he nips and sucks on my neck. That pulsing ache mixing with a delicious fiery burn makes me start panting through my needy whimpers. My head drops back to give Shepherd better access to my neck while I happily dry-hump him, not even caring we're on a public beach.

“Oh, hey there! You're not my two missing swingers!”

Until I do.

A man's voice from right above us in the sand is like someone just threw a bucket of ice-cold water all over both of us. Shepherd and I break apart and scramble away from each other in the pillows and blankets like two teenagers who were just caught making out by someone's dad.

Except it's not someone's dad... and hopefully will never be someone's dad.

"Wait just one minute," Bodhi says, his face dropping to a clipboard he's holding in his hand while my face is currently turning the same shade as a tomato, and I'm panting so hard I sound like I just ran a marathon. Or almost had a dry-humping orgasm from the man who is currently on the other side of the blankets from me, holding a pillow over his crotch and glaring up at the man who always looks like a homeless surfer with his shaggy blonde hair, faded and ratty T-shirts and shorts, and always smells like a mixture of pot and patchouli.

"*Are you my missing swingers?*" Bodhi asks, looking back and forth between me and Shepherd. "I didn't see your names on the list, but I'll double check. Tess never told me you two were kinky."

Bodhi wags his eyebrows at both of us and winks before looking back down at his clipboard.

"We aren't swingers!" I finally tell Tess's boyfriend when I remember how to use words again. "What are you even doing out here? Swingers? Does Tess know about this? *Are you guys swingers?*"

I whisper that last part, my eyes widening, not even believing I'm having this conversation right now when, just seconds ago, I was blissfully unaware anyone else was on this damn beach. Bodhi just chuckles and shakes his head at me, tucking the clipboard under his arm.

"I can barely handle Tess. No way could I manage *two* women. And I don't share, nor do I really like an extra dong being in the room with me and my woman. It's distracting. I'm the activities director for a small swingers get-together this

evening. We were just about to get started with the ring toss, but we lost Rick and Janet. You guys wanna be Rick and Janet for the night?”

“No!” Shepherd and I both shout at the same time.

“Suit yourselves.” Bodhi just shrugs, turns, and starts walking away toward where I now see a group of about twenty people at least ten cottages down, sitting around a fire on the beach.

When he’s gone and it’s just Shepherd and me again, we both look at each other for a few seconds and then start laughing. He stands up from the blankets and walks over to me, holding out his hand and helping me up.

“I’ll walk you out to your golf cart.”

I hate that the night is ending, but it is really late, and I have to be at the Dip and Twist early in the morning. As Shepherd laces his fingers through mine and holds my hand as he walks me through the sand, grabbing one of the vases of purple roses as we go with a promise to bring as many as I want back to my cottage tomorrow, I’m just happy knowing this is only the first of many more dates to come.

Once Shepherd secures the vase of flowers on the floor of my cart, we spend a few minutes standing in his driveway, kissing goodbye. He finally pulls back, puts me behind the wheel, straps my seatbelt around me, and gives me one last peck on the cheek before standing back up.

“Drive safe and text me when you get home. Enjoy the roses.” He smiles at me, taking a step back and sliding his hands in his front pockets as I start the golf cart.

“I will. And I’ll also look up what purple means.”

“You do that,” Shepherd winks at me as I start backing out, wondering if my heart will ever stop fluttering every time I’m around him.

Twenty minutes later when I’m home, I’ve texted Shepherd that I’m safe, and I’m curled up in bed wearing just

one of my Hawks T-shirts with his name on the back, I grab my phone from where I have it plugged in on my nightstand, pulling up Google.

My breath hitches when the results pop up within seconds, my eyes fill with tears, and I feel exactly like I did the minute I turned around on the beach earlier and saw everything Shepherd had done for me. Like I can't believe it's actually *real*.

Because according to Google, the purple rose means "love at first sight." And Shepherd didn't just give me a small handful of purple roses. He filled the beach with every purple rose he could possibly buy. Because a man who loves glitter and knows how to use a glue gun, who spends hours on Pinterest while also commandeering the help of his mother and sisters for our date, would know *exactly* what the purple rose meant.

CHAPTER 12



Shepherd

“Make sure you cover all the bases.”

“HE NEEDS TO take things slow and not overwhelm her.”

“My dude had *thousands* of roses flown to the island on a private jet, one to represent every day he never took his shot with her. He basically just took a shit on caring about that. I say full speed ahead, bruh.”

“Fine, so the roses *were* pretty cool, but still. He needs to slow it down a bit. She’s been through a lot, and I’m just saying. She’s a nice, small-town girl. She’s not a baseball groupie ho. He needs to have some respect.”

“Have some respect for that ass, am I right? *Ow, fucking hell, Pal!*”

“That’s my future sister-in-law you’re talking about. Next time, I’ll punch you in the throat instead of the arm. He needs to take a step back and court her like a proper gentleman.”

“Like you courted her sister in that maintenance shed on the back nine at the golf course? Is that what we’re calling it now? That was some loud, aggressive *courting*. You almost *courted* her right through the shed wall. You even *courted* her panties clean off of her. Did you ever find those babies?”

“We’re not talking about me; we’re talking about *him*. And he needs to remember she’s a mom.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“You just have to be... gentler.”

“No, you don’t. Wren’s a total MILF. Lady in the streets, freak in the sheets.”

“Don’t ever say that in front of me again,” I finally speak, looking up from the pumpkin pancakes I’ve been shoveling in my mouth across the booth from Palmer and Bodhi at The Barge while they discussed my life without me.

“Can I say it when you’re *not* in front of me?” Bodhi asks, pointing his fork at me with pancake pieces stuck to the end and syrup dripping down onto his plate.

“Um... sure.”

“Right on.” He smiles, shoving his fork in his mouth and then talking around a mouthful of pancake. “I’m so glad Tess and Birdie are finally letting us be friends with you. Sorry about the sweatshirt burning. I tried to hide all the lighters from Tess, but she’s a goddamn ninja with those things. I think she sews them in her bras. It looked like a really nice sweatshirt too. Palmer will buy you a new one that’s less flammable.”

“Why do *I* have to replace the sweatshirt? It wasn’t *my* girlfriend who torched it,” Palmer complains.

“Who drove the getaway golf cart? It certainly wasn’t *me* who has an obnoxious blue cart with flames painted on the side, spinning rims, and a full lighting and sound system,” Bodhi reminds him.

Palmer looks over at me with a small grimace.

“Yeah, that was me. But you need to understand just how persuasive Birdie can be. I am powerless when she takes her shirt off. If it makes you feel any better, I definitely did not let them stop at the liquor store on the way home to buy a celebratory bottle of vodka. Right home to bed for all of them to think about what they’d done.”

When I got a text from Palmer this morning asking if I wanted to grab breakfast with him and Bodhi, I couldn’t have been happier. Nick has been busy with the season, and we haven’t had time to do much more than exchange a couple of

texts since I got here. I thought it would be great to finally make some new, close friends, and it was an added bonus they were already a part of Wren and Owen's lives and could give me some much-needed advice on how to move forward with her. I realized my mistake as soon as I sat down, placed my order, and haven't been able to say one word since then. So much unsolicited advice has been given that now I'm second-guessing everything I've done and said to Wren since I got here.

Did I overwhelm her? Have I been coming on too strong?

I check my phone on the table for the tenth time since I sat down and tried to tune out the two men across from me, but there still isn't a reply to the text I sent Wren this morning when I woke up. Just a simple, **Good morning, beautiful. Have a good day at work. Text me if you need anything.** Maybe she hasn't needed anything and she thinks she doesn't need to reply until she does.

Or maybe she looked up what the purple rose means and blocked your ass because you freaked her the fuck out—goddamn Pinterest.

“Well, if it isn't the Golden Girls, sitting around gossiping over lattes.”

When we hear Murphy's sarcastic voice, we all look up from our coffees we're sipping to find him standing right next to our booth. Well, Bodhi looks up from his plastic cup of chocolate milk with a lid and a straw.

“Which Golden Girl are *you*?” Bodhi asks him.

“I am neither golden nor a girl.” Murphy crosses his arms and glares at him.

Bodhi just leans forward in the booth, resting his elbows on the table, taking a loud, slurping drink of his chocolate milk before he replies. “Yeah, but there are four Golden Girls. There's only three of us,” Bodhi reminds him. “You're definitely Sofia. Old and mean, barking at everyone to get off his lawn.”

“People need to stay the fuck off my lawn,” Murphy mutters while Bodhi continues.

“I’m clearly Blanche, Palmer is Rose, and Shepherd is Dorothy.”

“I am *not* Rose,” Palmer complains. “*You’re* Rose. You are definitely the naïve, gentle soul, and I’m Blanche, fun-loving and spontaneous.”

“You don’t have the balls to be Blanche. Take it back!”

“How in the *hell* did any of you dipshits actually find women?” Murphy interrupts the two men arguing across from me.

“It’s a goddamn miracle, Murph,” Bodhi tells him with a serious nod before slurping more of his chocolate milk through the straw.

Murphy doesn’t even say goodbye. He just walks away from us with a bunch of muttered curses under his breath, grabbing a bag of takeout food from the lunch counter next to the register then disappearing out the glass front door.

“All right, can we get back to what we were talking about before the Golden Girl interruption, *Rose*?” Palmer asks Bodhi with a smirk.

“Fuck off, I’m *not* Rose. And I think my dude just needs to go with the flow and be in the moment. Do what feels right,” Bodhi says with a nod in my direction as I wipe my mouth off with a napkin and sit back in the booth. “I mean, I asked Tess to marry me last night, so YOLO!”

“What the fuck?” Palmer shouts, giving an apologetic wave and smile to the other patrons eating breakfast at the diner before lowering his voice. “You? Marriage? Is that even legal? I feel like several states *and* countries would have put you on some sort of list by now.”

I have to laugh at what Palmer says. I haven’t known Bodhi very long, but you don’t have to know him long to realize he is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Just so laid

back and happy all the time without one single care or responsibility in the world, never satisfied doing the same thing or being in the same place all the time, and someone who never, ever wants to be tied down. He's a free spirit, and the fact that he's been here on Summersweet Island for so long and in what seems to be a very committed relationship with Tess is just mind-boggling to everyone who knows him.

Palmer told me when Bodhi excused himself to go to the bathroom right when I got here that it's only a matter of time before something starts calling to Bodhi from far, far away, enticing him and bringing back that constant need to see it all, go everywhere, and experience everything. It made me a little sad for badass, fire-starting Tess, but then I remembered she probably knows many ways to kill a man like Bodhi and make it look like a surfing accident, so she'll probably be fine. And anyway, I have my own shit to worry about.

Like whether or not all the dirty, dirty thoughts I've had about Wren since she whimpered into my mouth and rubbed that sexy-as-hell body all over me on the beach last night are appropriate thoughts to have about someone's mother. Is it proper etiquette to think about how it would have only taken a few more rough jerks of my cock between her sweet thighs before I could finally know what she sounds like when she comes? Was it wrong to go inside my cottage after she drove away, close and lock my door behind me, and then pull my dick out of my pants right in the entryway? My balls were so fucking heavy with the need to come after that make-out session with Wren that I couldn't take one more step without getting some relief. It was probably definitely a no-no to stand there slumped against the door in the pitch dark of my house with my head thrown back and my eyes squeezed closed while I relived every single second of that kiss.

Her ass gripped tightly in my palm while I helped her move that sweet pussy against my cock.

Her breathy pants of need while I sucked and nibbled on the side of her neck.

How I could feel even through my dress pants that she was hot and wet just for me.

I spit in my hand and shuttled my palm up and down my cock at the speed of light, bucking my hips and coming in my fist so hard I roared Wren's name, and then I almost passed out in front of the fucking door.

Having a hard-on under a table filled with pumpkin pancakes just seems very sacrilegious to the whole pumpkin spice movement, and now I have all the shame.

"You seriously asked Tess to marry you last night?" Palmer asks, pulling me out of my dirty thoughts *about someone's mother!*

"Yep," Bodhi replies, setting his fork down and pushing his empty plate closer to the edge of the table for the waitress to take.

"What did she say?" I ask, knowing Tess well enough to know she probably punched him when he asked, but I don't see a black eye or any sign of swelling in his nose.

"She said, '*No. Fuck off,*'" Bodhi replies with a smile, crossing his arms in front of him like it's no big deal his marriage proposal was turned down, but I just laugh, because that definitely sounds like Tess.

"Okay, then what happened? You seem very relaxed," Palmer contemplates, turning in the booth to look at Bodhi and study his face.

"I don't know man. She put her mouth back on my dick, and I went back to watching a *Riverdale* marathon." He shrugs. "It was right at the good part where Cheryl watches that video and finds out—"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Palmer complains loudly, covering his ears and shaking his head back and forth. "I'm not to that part yet. Don't spoil it for me, you asshole!"

My laughter at how ridiculous these two are just continues until I start choking and I have to take a drink of my water the

waitress just refilled when she stopped by to clear our plates.

“You seriously asked Tess to marry you while she was giving you a blowjob?” Palmer asks in disgust, dropping his hands from his ears to shake his head at Bodhi. He has every right to be disgusted. Palmer just proposed to Birdie on national television in the most romantic way possible for the whole world to see, and Bodhi couldn’t even turn *Riverdale* off. It’s just hysterical and so Bodhi.

“It was a very deep experience, and I’m not just talking about in Tess’s throat, *ba-dum-tiss*.” Bodhi snorts after using his fingers like drumsticks on the table. “Anyway, she said no, but it’s cool. I don’t know if I’d really be good at having a wife anyway. Don’t you have to like, remember where you left them and remember to come back? I still don’t know where I left those rad Oakley sunglasses that shaman in Tibet gave me, but you know, I just found another pair someone left on the beach, so that was totally lit.”

Palmer just continues to shake his head at Bodhi as he turns back in the booth to face me.

“Please take my advice and never, ever take *his*,” Palmer says, pointing his thumb at Bodhi.

We both watch him using the screen of his phone and a ray of sun coming through the diner window to shine a blinding light in another patron’s eye, giggling the entire time until Palmer reaches over and snatches the phone out of his hand with an annoyed growl.

Right, so Bodhi is probably not the voice of reason. Got it.

Now that the table has been cleared except for our coffee cups that were just refilled and a new plastic cup with chocolate milk has been dropped off for Bodhi, I lean forward and rest my arms on the table, clasping my hands together.

“Okay, then I need advice on Kevin.”

As soon as I say his name, I instantly see a change in their moods and demeanors. Both of their shoulders get tense, their eyes narrow, Bodhi cracks his knuckles, and Palmer growls a

little. It raises the hackles on the back of my neck. I've never seen either one of these men in anything other than a good mood, even when they're annoyed. If just the sound of this asshole's name gets them this worked up, I can only imagine what kind of bullshit he's done to Wren all these years. She hasn't elaborated, and I don't want to push it. Seeing the look on her face during the little bit she did tell me about the guy made me realize I don't want to put her through that again. I don't want to make her relive anything that has to do with him again, and I will do everything in my power to make sure she never feels weak.

"Tell me," I demand in a low voice, squeezing my clasped hands together tighter so I'm not tempted to grab something breakable and throw it across the room.

Palmer lets out a deep sigh, mirroring me to rest his arms on the table and fold his hands together, while Bodhi pulls something up on his phone and then turns the screen around so I can see.

"Meet Kevin Stratford. Handsome little fuck, ain't he?" Bodhi snorts as I get my first good look at the man I've hated since before I knew anything about him.

I don't even realize I'm holding my breath until it comes out of me in a shaky rasp while I study his face, seeing absolutely no sign of Owen except for the dark-brown hair. I don't know why that bothered me so much, wondering if that sweet, amazing young man would look anything like his piece-of-shit father. Maybe because I know how much that would suck for Wren, having to look at a small replica of the man who has made her feel less than what she is for so many years, on the body of the person she loves more than anyone or anything else in the world. It eases a little of my anxiety, knowing my initial assessment was right, and Owen is a perfect mini-me of Wren.

Kevin Stratford *is* a handsome little fuck; I'll give Bodhi that. He's good-looking in a clean-cut, douchebag, frat boy way, wearing his light-pink chinos with a white button-down

and a pale-blue linen jacket, standing on the deck of a mega-yacht in the middle of the ocean, holding a designer pair of sunglasses up to his mouth so he can douchebagily hold one of the earpieces in his teeth.

What a dumb fuck.

“He’s loaded, but not really,” Palmer starts. “It’s all Daddy’s money. And before you lose your shit that he’s never given Wren anything, that’s because she wouldn’t let him, even if he offered, which he never has anyway. His parents have never met Owen, but they mail him \$200 every year in March for his birthday, so at least Wren has never had to pay for a pair of his cleats.”

“Except Owen’s birthday is in October.” Bodhi snorts humorlessly.

“He’s a hedge fund manager at his dad’s company in North Carolina,” Palmer goes on, while I continue staring at this asshole, already calculating how much money his plastic surgeon will make fixing Kevin’s pretty face when I’m done with him. “Which is just a fancy title for *‘I don’t do jack shit to earn a paycheck, and my daddy bails me out of every problem I have.’* I actually met him the same night Wren did. I’ll be honest with you; he was a charming motherfucker. Said all the right things, only had eyes for Wren all night long. Shit, I almost wanted to sleep with him by the end of the night. And then the stick turned pink and he showed his true colors. I only saw him one other time right after Owen was born and I was home for a visit. That was more than enough. He’s a condescending prick.”

“I’ve never met him, but I’ve heard plenty from Tess, and we’ve both seen all the screenshots of the texts he’s sent and listened to the raging voicemails he’s left over the years,” Bodhi adds, finally pulling the phone away. “Last time he was here, the first thing he said to her was *‘You’re looking a little fat. Maybe lay off the ice cream.’*”

A vision of Kevin’s pristine, pale-blue linen jacket covered in blood suddenly forms in my head as they continue, putting

me through a special kind of hell that I know pales in comparison to Wren actually having to go through it.

“Always tells her she’s a shitty mother because she works too much,” Palmer says, my arms starting to shake with how hard I’m squeezing my hands together on top of the table, while also trying not to vomit the stacks and stacks of pumpkin pancakes I inhaled, as I sit here listening to what Wren had to endure all this time.

“Remember the text he sent on Christmas Day that one year, telling her it must suck to spend another holiday alone because no one wants her?”

“Don’t forget the five-minute voicemail where he called her a C-U-Next-Tuesday, because she wouldn’t let Owen fly to Vegas alone for Kevin’s fourth wedding.”

“He always blames her for why he never sees Owen. He literally just called her a bitch yesterday, because she wouldn’t give him the ferry schedule.”

“He tells her she’s dumb and stupid *all* the time.”

“Always saying things to her like, *‘If you really loved our son, you wouldn’t...’* dot-dot-dot, fill in the blank. Every decision she makes is always the wrong one, according to Kevin.”

“I can’t even say the last thing...”

“You have to. He needs to hear it all.”

“He makes fun of her constantly for being the... worst lay he’s ever had, and he goes into a seriously disgusting amount of detail about her being cold and dead and... *fuck*, I wanna puke just repeating that, because this is my future sister-in-law, but there you go. Kevin Stratford in a nutshell. How do we want to kill him when he gets here?”

“I vote for fire!” Bodhi announces, raising his hand high in the air. “Tess just bought marshmallows.”

It takes me at least five minutes of deep, heavy breathing with my eyes closed while Palmer and Bodhi discuss the

easiest way to kill a man before I finally feel like I don't want to flip the table, break every single plate and glass in here into a shattered pile on the floor, and then drop to my knees and scream at the top of my lungs until my voice is hoarse.

When I feel calm enough, I unclasp my hands, lean to the side, pull my wallet out of the back pocket of my jeans, and throw down enough money to cover all our breakfasts along with a very generous tip for the server who had to listen to all this insanity the last hour and a half while she waited on us. I cut off Palmer's protests about picking up the tab by telling him he can get the next one. Even though I'm probably going to regret all the advice I was bombarded with this morning, it feels good to have friends here and to be able to make future plans with them. It just feels so settled and so homey, even while thoughts of murder are running rampant through my head.

"Why is he so calm?" Palmer asks Bodhi as I slide out of the booth, both of them joining me before Palmer looks at me when we all get out into the aisle. "Why are you so calm?"

"I'm anything *but* calm right now. I'm trying to rise above and handle this the mature way," I tell them as we make our way toward the front door, waving and saying hello to a few people we know as we go. "Plus, I *just got* Wren and Owen. I don't really want to screw that up by going to prison. Have you *seen* the type of craft rooms they have there? Appalling."

"See?" Bodhi smacks Palmer on the arm as we get out onto the sidewalk and into the bright late-morning sunshine. "I told you he was Dorothy. Grounded and sarcastic. We're gonna be such good friends forever!"

The three of us laugh, Bodhi and Palmer promising to have my back when Kevin gets here if I need anything, and then we go our separate ways. Palmer heads off to join Birdie at SIG, since he picked up a few golf lessons to teach this week, and Bodhi walks off toward the beach to probably fall asleep in the shade of a tree somewhere.

I drive back to my cottage to get packed up and changed for the game later, since I need to head up to the school, review some film from our last game, figure out the batting lineup, make sure the field is in tip-top shape, and keep as busy as possible so I don't look up Kevin Stratford's address and go pay him a visit that ends in me needing bail money and a good lawyer.

My cell phone dings in my hand with an incoming text as I'm loading up my golf cart in my driveway before heading up to school. Pulling it out of a side pocket of my backpack, I smile when I see the message.

Wren: Hi! Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. I forgot my phone at home and left work to get it really quick and just saw your message —as well as all the flowers filling all my tables and counters that weren't here when I left for work before dawn. I don't even want to know how you got into my cottage when I wasn't home, and I don't care. It smells like heaven in here, and it's SO FREAKING PRETTY!!!! Thank you for not bringing *all* of them though. I probably would have been trapped in here LOL! See you at the game tonight.

Okay, so at least it's good to know I didn't overwhelm her with the flowers or send her screaming in the other direction. Now I just need to figure out a way to slow things down and give her the respect she deserves after everything Kevin has put her through, without trying to rip her clothes off of her every time she's standing anywhere near me.

This should be fun.

CHAPTER 13



Shepherd

“You caught my heart.”

“HEY, BLUE! IF you’re just gonna watch the game, buy a ticket! That was a strike!”

Even though I’m supposed to be paying attention to the game in front of me, just like every time I’ve heard that beautiful, sassy voice shouting from the bleachers, I look back over my shoulder, finding Wren in the middle of the stands surrounded by other parents, completely forgetting I’m supposed to be coaching a high school baseball game.

The stands are crowded with island residents to cheer on their Summersweet Wildcats who are currently undefeated, but no matter how loud everyone has gotten during the game, I can always pick out Wren’s voice. It’s like my ears are specifically honed to her, pulling my focus away from the game and putting it only on *her*. On how goddamn beautiful she always looks whether she’s standing on the beach under the moonlight in a sexy as hell romper or sitting in the stands under the lights in a hoodie and jean shorts straight from work. On how passionate she is about the game of baseball, not only yelling at the umps all night when they make a stupid call but throwing out shouts of instruction and encouragement to the players, each baseball term effortlessly flying out of her mouth, making my dick jump to life in my shorts at a fucking high school baseball game. Just like it did that day I came up on her coaching practice, except *that* day I had to actually put

my hands over my crotch I was so hard watching her masterfully lead practice.

I always laughed whenever Wren would mess up baseball terminology in our messages and thought it was kind of adorable. There is definitely no laughing involved when I hear beautiful, sweet, sometimes sassy Wren Bennett shout things like...

“Choke up on it!”

“Hit it harder!”

“Way to pull it out at the end!”

“That one’s going long and deep!”

And, “Can you grab me some nachos?”

Yeah, so, I’m in hell. *Everything* she says turns me on now, and it feels like I jinxed myself by saying I needed to slow things down and stop picturing her naked all the time. Now, I’m picturing myself eating nachos off her bare tits, and a man can only take so much, dammit!

When Wren’s eyes meet mine from the stands and she gives me a small smile and a little wave with her fingers, it takes a hell of a lot of strength to look away from her and back to the game. I know it’s not me out there playing on that field, but looking up into the stands from where I’m sitting at the end of the bench in the dugout, in the same spot I used to sit in high school and look up into the stands, wishing Wren was there cheering me on, I almost feel like a teenager again and my girl finally came out to watch me play. And the fact that *my girl* is the one I’ve been dreaming about since I was that teenager sitting on this bench and glancing up into the stands through the fence just makes it sweeter. And harder to keep a tight leash on my need for her. Being here in this place with the same old smells and sights and sounds, it’s hard to stop remembering all those fantasies I used to have about Wren back in the day, where she’d come to one of my games in high school and we’d celebrate the win by her riding my cock in the dugout after everyone went home.

All of the shit Palmer and Bodhi told me about Kevin suddenly flashes through my head, pouring a cold bucket of water on my fantasies. I need to be concentrating on erasing every bad thing that asshole has ever done and said to her with nothing but good, instead of all the cock riding fantasies, for fuck's sake. Nothing but reminders that she is strong, and beautiful, and amazing, and perfect exactly the way she is, and not just someone I want to bend over a chest freezer and fuck into oblivion.

A bunch of *boos* and shouting from the stands when the ump calls the last pitch a ball reminds me I should probably concentrate on this game first before I do anything else.

Pushing myself up from the bench, I stand in front of the chain-link fence surrounding the dugout, reaching up to rest a couple of my fingers in each hand through the fence holes to hang on while I focus my attention on our pitcher, Carter. He started tiring out halfway through this final inning, and after two walks in a row before this current batter, I called a timeout for a chat with him and our catcher on the mound.

I could see the fear in Carter's eyes as I walked across the infield toward him with a calming smile on my face, knowing exactly how a situation like this would have played out with their old coach. A lot of screaming, yelling, blaming, and humiliating as the man pulled him from the game to replace him with someone else who could finish strong. With the Devils only trailing us by one run, bases loaded, and two outs, it's a stressful situation not only for me as a coach, but for the pitcher as well. When I saw the determination on Carter's face as soon as I met him on the mound, and he was adamant that he could strike this guy out and finish the game, I nodded, handed him a ball, patted him on the shoulder, and told him to kick some ass.

I can't expect my players to trust me if I don't trust them. Carter is well on his way to a full ride in college for baseball, and he's smart enough to know when his arm has had enough. If he says he's still got some heat left, I'm going to believe him. Now it's a full count with three balls and two strikes, and

my heart is pounding in my chest, and my fingers almost slip from their grip on the fence they're so sweaty.

"Take your time, kid," I mutter, watching Carter take a deep breath on the mound while the other team starts heckling him.

He shakes his head when the catcher gives him a sign he doesn't like, nods when he gets a good one, and then his eyes flicker over to mine. As I keep a positive smile on my face, Carter's eyes go back to the plate, he winds up, and he executes a perfect changeup that confuses the hitter. The kid swings too early, and the loud bark of the ump shouting, "Strike!" sends a roar through the stands behind me. Carter ends the game just like he said he would, and I'm throwing my fists in the air, screaming right along with the fans.

The rest of the Wildcats abandon their positions on the field to race to Carter on the mound, joined by the handful of players sitting in here on the bench with me. We spend the next fifteen minutes celebrating and then shaking hands with the opposing team and coaches before the kids are all packing up their shit strewn around the dugout and heading out with their parents or friends to continue the celebration with pizza at Island Slice, like usual.

I stay where I am right by home plate as a bunch of parents on the team file through to make sure their kids picked up all their stuff and to shake my hand and thank me for coaching another great game. Everyone seems to have gotten used to me being here now, and the awkwardness and constant staring has died down.

It's not until I'm finally alone in the dirt and the stands have almost cleared out that the only person I've wanted to talk to the entire night finally pushes open the gate in the fence and makes her way over to me. Sliding my hands out of my pockets, I'm unable to keep the huge grin off my face watching Wren walk toward me, knowing she's mine, and she's walking to *me*, and in just seconds, one of my favorite PG fantasies is about to come true when she'll walk right up to

me and into my arms to kiss me on home plate. I didn't just win the championship game with a grand slam that will take us to state like the hundreds of times I've played this fantasy out in my head since I was a teenager, but it's still just as exciting knowing it's happening right after I coached my team to a win.

Wren stops a few feet away from me, and when she's close enough that I notice she isn't returning my smile, I give her a quizzical look, wondering why she stopped all the way over there and she isn't in my arms right now. Especially after everything Palmer and Bodhi told me today, I want nothing more than to hold her and cherish her and erase every bad thing Kevin has ever done and said to her with nothing but good.

"You okay?" I ask, taking a step toward her and then pausing, wondering if something happened since the game ended. Maybe that piece of shit sent her another text.

I'll kill him.

"Yep, great!" Wren quickly replies with what I now know is one of her fake smiles. The same ones she uses when someone asks her for a favor she's too busy to handle but doesn't have the heart to say no.

Wren's eyes keep flickering away from me to look down, her whole body tense from her stiff shoulders down to her locked knees, and I start to wonder if maybe she just feels weird coming right up to me, making the first move. We haven't been out in public together since our date, and maybe she just feels nervous even though there are only a handful of people left in the bleachers and they're not even paying attention to us as they walk down the stairs to head off to the parking lot.

"Can I get a kiss for my awesome coaching abilities then?" I ask, holding my arms out and giving her a mischievous smile, letting her know she has absolutely nothing to feel weird about and I'll take all the PDA she wants to give me.

Wren just giggles, but it sounds forced, her eyes still glancing away from mine and down every few seconds while I watch her wring her hands together in front of her. Everything about this feels wrong when it should be nothing but right, and something starts nagging at the back of my mind the longer Wren stands there looking uncomfortable and not closing the distance between us.

The memory of the last time we stood in this spot just like this when she admitted how she felt about me suddenly flashes through my mind... along with the reason for her pushing out of our hug. The reason for her tripping over her own feet so she could step back and away from where we were standing. The reason for her tears. The reason for her feeling like she was my second choice. And the reason her eyes kept glancing down that night just like they are now. It immediately hits me she's not just looking down so she doesn't have to meet my eyes because she feels weird or nervous. She's looking at home plate. A mere six inches from where I'm standing.

It's not the same home plate, but it doesn't matter, does it? She still had to watch me kiss another fucking woman on national television there. When Palmer told me the name of the bar where Wren met Kevin, I vowed to never step foot in that place. Just the thought of my wonderful, sweet Wren being taken advantage of there was enough to make me want to vomit and rip the whole building apart with my bare hands. And here I am, just standing in the same place I kissed another woman, wanting *Wren* to kiss me, probably making her feel like she's not special at all and I'll just kiss *anyone* on home plate.

Fuck!

Quickly closing the distance between us, I realize there's something bad I need to erase from her memories first, before I can worry about the ones Kevin left behind. Gently separating her hands she's still wringing together, I lace the fingers of both of mine through hers, tugging her toward me as I start walking backward.

“What are you doing?” Wren asks, her shoulders no longer tense and an easy smile coming over her face the farther away we get from home plate, making my chest hurt that I was such a fucking idiot.

I don't say anything; I just squeeze her hands and continue walking backward, stopping when my feet are on first base. Pulling Wren closer until the smell of vanilla is surrounding me, I take one of our joined hands and wrap them around Wren's lower back, tugging her closer until she's pressed against the front of me. Letting go of her other hand, I cup her cheek and tilt her face up.

“Kissing you on first base,” I finally answer in a whisper before I do just that.

I gently press my mouth to her full, sweet lips, taking my time to caress them, worship them, and kiss her the way she should have been kissed her entire life—adoringly, and like she's the most exquisite treasure in the world. Because she *is*. And she needs to finally understand that.

Ending the kiss with a few soft pecks, I pull my head back and can't help but smile when I look down to see Wren's eyes still closed with a dreamy look on her face. She quickly blinks them open when I slide my hand off her cheek, unwind our arms from around her, and start walking backward again, pulling Wren along the baseline with her hand in mine until we get to second.

Repeating the same maneuver as soon as my feet hit the base, I wrap our joined hands behind her back and pull her up against me, giving her another slow, worshiping kiss on second base. And then I do it again on third, and the pitcher's mound, and I jog her all the way to the outfield, and kiss her in left, center, and right, Wren breathless and laughing as I kiss her all over this fucking baseball field. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes are shining with happiness, and all the sadness when she first stood a few feet away from me by home plate is long gone from her face by the time we make it back to the dugout.

Wren is wrapped tightly in my arms with hers dangling over my shoulders, while she stands up on her toes, and I give her one last soft, loving kiss before pulling back to look down at her smiling brightly up at me.

“I’m sorry for acting weird by home plate. I was being stupid,” she whispers, making a deep growl rumble from my chest.

“Enough.”

That one word and the force in which I stress it has Wren quickly clamping her mouth closed. Unwrapping my arms from around her, I bring my hands up between her arms still draped over my shoulders and hold her face in my hands.

“You are brilliant, and amazing, and *never* stupid. I did some *bullshit* once before on home plate, and you have every right to feel some kind of way about that, and if you want to kick me in the balls, I will allow it.”

My words hit their mark just like I hoped, and Wren’s shoulders shake with laughter, and that bright, beautiful smile is back on her face as she cocks her head to the side while she looks at me.

“You’re crazy.” She smiles up at me with a shake of her head. “I’m okay now. We can finish this with a kiss at home.”

Dropping my head down, I press my forehead against hers.

“Don’t you get it yet?” I ask quietly. “Whether it’s at first, or second, or in the outfield. No matter where I kiss you, Wren, I’m already home.”

When a small, sweet whimper comes out of her and she quickly lifts her chin and kisses me, I wrap my arms back around her again and hold her tightly, looking forward to all the rest of the bad I can replace with good. While silently cursing at my cock to go back to sleep, feeling Wren’s hot, sexy body all snuggled up against mine while her tongue is in my mouth.

Ending the kiss and breaking apart, I grab her hand again and start walking us toward the parking lot, grabbing my bag from the dugout as we go.

“Come on, let’s go meet Owen and everyone else up at Island Slice and celebrate.”

With my girl on my arm as we walk through the doors of the pizza place ten minutes later, spending the rest of the night sitting at a table eating, laughing, and just having a damn good time with Owen and a bunch of his friends from school who don’t play baseball, I know I’ll do everything I can to make sure that easy, relaxed smile never leaves Wren’s face.

Fucking into oblivion—*bad*.

Showing her she’s worth the time to take things slow—*good*.

CHAPTER 14

“Looks like he’s playing in extra innings.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you got a giant movie screen to set up on the beach just for the two of us!”

“Nothing but the best for my girl. Now get over here and cuddle me on this couch after I dragged it all the way out here in the sand. The movie is about to start.”

“Did you really drag it out here by yourself?”

“Of course not. I paid someone to do it. I was just trying to impress you with how big my muscles are, but this thing is heavy, and sand is bullshit.”

“Don’t worry; I’m impressed. How did you even get a popcorn machine to work out here? Holy hell, this is real movie theater butter.”

“Sour Patch Kids, Milk Duds, Junior Mints... what kind of sweet are you in the mood for to go with that salty?”

“How about these ones right here attached to your face?”

“...”

“...”

“*Fuuuck* I can never get enough of your lips. *Oh shit*, not the ear. Don’t nibble the—*Sweet Christ*. Okay, ha-ha, would you look at that! The movie is starting, and you should sit right over there, and I’ll just sit way over here.”

“*Field of Dreams*? Why am I even surprised? Are you gonna say the words to this entire movie right along with it?”

“That would be annoying. Of course not. *My father’s name was John Kinsella...*”

“You’re gonna cry, aren’t you?”

“You’re goddamn right I’m gonna cry. I changed my mind. Get back over here and cuddle me.”



“OWEN, WE NEED to have a talk.”

“Okay, Coach, what’s up? I know I skipped running sprints, but I was—”

“It’s not about baseball. It’s about your mom.”

“Oh my God! What happened? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine! Shit, I’m really awful at this. It’s nothing bad. It’s good! It’s really good. Well, *I* think it’s good, and I know your mom said she already had a talk with you, and she said *you* said it was good, but I really feel like we need to have a man-to-man talk and—”

“You and my mom are dating. I know. It’s cool.”

“Okay... but are you *sure* it’s cool? I’m gonna be spending a lot of time with her and be around a lot, and I will *never* disrespect you or your mother, but... you see, Owen, when a man and a woman really like each other, eventually—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there. You’re starting to make this weird. The guys are staring.”

“I don’t want to make this weird.”

“Good.”

“Great. And just so you know, just because your mom and I are dating, it doesn’t mean I’m going to give you any special treatment on the team to give them anything else to stare at.”

“Got it.”

“*What the hell do you mean you skipped your sprints, Bennett? Get your ass over there and run!*”

“You’re doing it again. You’re being weird.”

“You know what, just accept the fact that this is gonna be weird for a while, and I’ll buy you a car.”

“Change it to a motorcycle and we have a deal.”

“Don’t push it. Go run your sprints.



“YOU ARE SO bad at this.”

“I know!”

“Maybe we should just stop. Call it a night, you can go home, and we can try another time.”

“I am not a quitter, Wren! I’ll get it right. Just let me keep trying.”

“All of this *trying* is starting to get painful. Slow and gentle, Shepherd. Stop rushing it.”

“The more you tell me to slow down, the faster it just makes me want to go.”

“And look what happens. You try to cram it in there without any finesse and ruin everything. You are so out of practice.”

“Look, it’s been a while for me, Wren, okay? You need to just be patient and let me find my groove.”

“Here, let me show you. I’ll just place my hand on top of yours and... *there* we go. See? Just gently press it right in there. Now tap it lightly a few times. Yaaas, just like that. Mmm, that’s nice.”

“People are staring.”

“Let them stare. You finally made a cone without breaking the damn thing into a million pieces in your hand by slamming the ice cream down on top of it with the scoop.”

“There’s a line of customers waiting. I was trying to be quick and efficient. Remind me again why I thought helping you out up at the Dip and Twist tonight would be a good idea for a date?”

“Because you’re sweet and when you found out I was getting a shipment of ice cream tonight, you basically demanded to come help me. Which is probably a good thing. Bending over that chest freezer all night with my butt in the air because I can’t touch the ground is annoying. Shepherd? Are you okay? You look flushed all of a sudden and like you might pass out.”

“I’m fine. I’m great. I’m just perfect. Why do you ask? Who wants ice cream?”



“THIS IS INSANE. Absolutely insane. You know that, right? You can’t just have someone land a helicopter wherever you want on Summersweet and pick us up.”

“Actually, I can. And I did. Now just hold on tight and enjoy the sunset view while we fly around the island. If the headphones are too tight, you can adjust them.”

“You have to stop spoiling me. This is crazy.”

“What’s crazy is that it took me so long to do something completely disgusting and obnoxious with my money. But it couldn’t be more perfect that I waited, because you deserve all of the disgusting and obnoxious things.”

“Um... thanks?”

“That sounded better in my head. Okay, get ready to look out your window in about ten seconds for your next surprise.”

“Shepherd! Seriously, the new pair of white Converse you had delivered to the cottage this morning, the masseuse you sent by to give me an hour massage when I got home from work, and the sunset helicopter ride are more than enough. You didn’t have to... draw a giant penis in the sand that I can see from up here?”

“What? No! It’s not a.... Son of a bitch, it is. I knew I shouldn’t have left Bodhi in charge of writing the message in the sand for me.”

“I mean, it’s very anatomically correct. So much detail. Wow, he even used rocks in a spray coming out of the tip. That’s pretty artistic. Can you have the pilot circle back around? What was he *supposed* to write?”

“He was supposed to write ‘You’re my home.’”

“That’s very sweet and romantic.”

“It certainly *was*.”

“Knowing Bodhi, he took that literally. You know, the whole baseball analogy of sliding into home. Get it? Giant penis... sliding into—”

“Yep, got it, great! What time did you say we needed to pick Owen up from your mom’s house?”

“I didn’t. We don’t have to—”

“Oh but we do! We’ve been neglecting him. I don’t want him to hate me for taking his mom away from him all the time.”

“I mean, when you put it that way....”



“MOM, DAD, YOU remember Wren—”

“Young lady, you get right over here and let me give you a hug for all the bullshit my son has put you through. Do you like meatloaf and chicken pot pie? I brought you some for your freezer.”

“Any chance those are *my* meatloaf and chicken pot pie, Mom?”

“Shut up, you big pussy.”

“*Mom!* Come on, Dad, help me out here.”

“I don’t know what you want *me* to do. I still think the poor girl needs to have her head examined for slumming it with you. No offense, Wren.”

“Quite all right, sir.”

“None of that *sir* bullshit. Call me Simon or call me Dad.”

“Well then, dinner will be ready in just a few minutes, Simon. Probably right when Owen gets home from his friend’s house. If you guys want to make yourselves comfortable, I’ll —”

“Sweetheart, sit down and relax. I’ll get dinner.”

“Shepherd, I can—”

“Sit. Relax. I got this.”

“There we go. There’s the man we raised to not be a pussy. Sorry for the delay, Wren. We’ll just be out on the deck, enjoying the view. Call us when dinner is ready!”

“I’m glad you’re finding so much humor in how highly my parents think of me.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make it up to you later after they’re gone and Owen is asleep.”

“Didn’t I tell you they’re spending the night? Must have slipped my mind! Don’t worry; they practically *begged* to sleep on your big, comfy sectional. Literally, it’s all my mom would talk about and how they didn’t want to cut their visit short and have to rush and get the last ferry off the island, and how they’re just *dying* to stay up all night and have a slumber party with Owen and get to know him, and you know what? You just sit down at the table, and I’ll go out on the deck really quick and remind them about that just in case they forgot, and then I’ll be back in a jiffy to get dinner out of the oven!”



“I DIDN’T LIE down on the couch and put my feet on your lap so you’d rub them.”

“I made you walk all over the island. You deserve a foot rub.”

“You seemed very adamant that we go everywhere today. We had breakfast at The Barge, we got your taffy fix at Chew on This, we played a few games at the arcade, and we had

lunch at SIG and said hi to Tess, Birdie, and Murphy. Then we picked up groceries, grabbed pizza and ate it at the picnic tables of the Dip and Twist, rode bikes through the park, and we had dinner on the deck of Dockside Eddy's. Any reason why we went on a Summersweet Island tour today?"

"First things first. What's the one thing we did at each of those places?"

"Besides make out like a couple of teenagers?"

"Nope. Exactly that. We went on a tour of Summersweet Island today, because I wanted to make out with Wren Bennett in all the places I fantasized about making out with her when I really was a teenager."

"That's a lot for a girl to live up to. I hope it met all your expectations."

"Sweetheart, you exceed my expectations just by being in the same room with me. You were worth the wait. You will *always* be worth it."

"You're really good at this."

"Being all mushy and disgusting, or the foot rub?"

"Both. I'm kind of getting used to all this spoiling."

"Good. Because I never plan on stopping."



"IF YOU'LL EXCUSE me, ma'am, I just need to reach around you and grab that empty plate. Have I told you how beautiful you look this evening?"

"You know I'm in charge of the spaghetti dinner, and I'm the one who's supposed to be doing all this, right? But you do look quite fabulous in that frilly pink apron."

"When was the last time you actually got to sit down with your family and friends at one of these things and just eat, enter to win raffle baskets, and have fun?"

"Um, never?"

“Exactly. Here’s my wallet. I need to finish clearing all the tables. Go buy a shit-ton of tickets for that basket on the end with all the fall décor in it. I want that goddamn lantern shaped like a pumpkin, and did you *smell* that apple pumpkin pie candle? Need it.”

“When you’re done clearing the tables, don’t forget to clean the cafeteria kitchen.”

“That was hot. Order me around again.”

“People are staring.”

“Let them stare. I’m kissing my woman at a spaghetti dinner in the Summersweet High School gymnasium. If you close your eyes, you can almost hear the romantic melody of ‘Hero’ by Enrique Iglesias playing, and we can pretend like we’re slow-dancing at homecoming.”

“You’re crazy. I’m going to go buy some tickets now.”

“If I don’t take that pumpkin lantern home with me tonight, there will be hell to pay. *You can be my hero, baby!*”

“Please don’t sing that song. So you don’t want me to put tickets on the date night basket? There’s chocolate sauce, a bottle of wine, some dirty books with shirtless men on them, this thing called a flogger I saw in a movie and sounds like it could be fun, and a few toys that require batteries. Although I already have the little silver bullet and that butterfly one, but I guess you can never have too many vibrating toys.”

“I.... What the...? *Holy shit...*”

CHAPTER 15



Wren

“Looks like a backdoor slider to me.”

“SO THAT MAKES twelve dates in two weeks, and... nothing? Maybe his dick is broken.”

I roll my eyes at Emily, holding my phone up in front of me with one hand and resting my chin in my other hand with my elbow on the purple picnic table at the Dip and Twist. For the first time in recent history, Tess and Birdie couldn't make it to a Sip and Bitch. I probably could have just stayed in the comfort of my own home for this one, since I could Sip and Bitch with Emily anywhere, but I needed to get out of the house.

I have the night off, Shepherd was over on the mainland helping his dad fix a leaky sink at his parents' house, and Owen had a few guys on the team currently sprawled around my living room surrounded by stacks of empty energy drink cans and bags of junk food on a PlayStation marathon. Needing to escape the constant arguing and shouting of a bunch of teenage boys acting like toddlers, the Dip and Twist was naturally my first choice.

“It's not broken. I've rubbed up against how *unbroken* it is several times.” I sigh, feeling like such a jerk for complaining to Emily for a solid fifteen minutes since I sat down.

These last few weeks with Shepherd have been absolutely amazing. He's spoiled me so much I don't know how I'll ever go back to not getting a professional hour-long massage once a

week or not having to cook dinner *ever*. Shepherd either takes me to dinner, cooks dinner while ordering me to relax, or grabs takeout, making sure Owen is included on the nights he's with us. And on the small handful of evenings we haven't hung out, my freezer is fully stocked with all the food Shepherd's mom brought with her when his parents came for a visit and ended up sleeping on my old, disgusting couch, both of them being super enthusiastic about it for some reason, staying up all night to play board games with Owen.

And don't even get me started on the extravagance. I didn't even know Shepherd *owned* a boat until it was delivered in the middle of last week. Ferry? What's a ferry? It was like having a hot fudge sundae for the first time and knowing you'll never be able to eat plain vanilla with nothing on it again. Screw waiting in line for twenty minutes just to go over to the mainland to grab a few things from Target. I made Shepherd take me to Target twice in one day just because he could, laughing like a lunatic as we flew by the ferry dock with everyone waiting in line. It was glorious.

These last few weeks have been amazing, and I constantly have to pinch myself, because it feels like a dream. We're never short on conversation or laughter, I'm always counting down the seconds until I can see him again, and the way he is with Owen is so natural it fills my eyes with tears every time I watch them together. But ever since our first date when we were interrupted on the beach by Bodhi, Shepherd has been nothing but a perfect gentleman. And while I love every minute of his romantic and sweet side where he takes his time kissing me soft and slow, making sure I know how much he cherishes me, I'm seriously starting to wonder if that wild, uncontrolled, growly man who dry-humped me against the side of his cottage during our first kiss is the part that was a dream.

It doesn't *feel* like a dream. Every time I close my eyes and think about that kiss, I have to rub my thighs together and shift in my seat, because I can still feel him there, so deliciously hard between my legs. My vibrators—the ones I already

owned, since of course I bought an obscene amount of tickets with Shepherd's money so he could take home that damn pumpkin lantern instead of putting any money into the date night basket—have gotten such a workout after all our nights together that my precious, beautiful silver bullet waved the white flag in surrender and refuses to fire back up.

“Yo, earth to Wren!” Emily shouts through my phone, snapping her fingers as I blink out of my daze. “Stop thinking about Shepherd naked and focus.”

I feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment and a whole lot of something else, when now I *am* thinking about Shepherd naked.

“I don't know what else to do. I did what you said when we talked before Shepherd took me on our second date at the beach movies and I've started being bolder,” I explain. “I nibbled his ear, I looked at him suggestively a few times like I practiced in the mirror, I talked about my toys, and I even grazed my hand against his butt *twice*.”

“What are you, twelve?” Emily asks with an incredulous stare. “Just take your pants off and tell him to fuck you.”

“Emily!” I whisper-shout, looking back over my shoulder and then glaring at her. “There could be children sitting here at these tables!”

“You do realize it's ten o'clock on a school night, your mom already closed, and I can clearly see all the empty picnic tables behind you, right?”

“Who needs to take their pants off?” we hear yelled behind me.

“Shut up, Ed!” Emily shouts as loud as she can through my phone before lowering her voice to talk to me. “Ed doesn't count.”

Glancing back over my shoulder at the older man sitting in his golf cart along the front curb of the Dip and Twist, drinking his nightly butterscotch milkshake, I give him a sheepish smile and a wave before turning back to glare at her.

“Be nice to Ed,” I scold. “You know he’s just waiting for my mom to finish so he can make sure she gets home okay. It’s sweet. Don’t be rude.”

Ed Walton, the owner of Dockside Eddy’s, has been coming up here for a nightly milkshake for as long as I can remember, making sure my mom and I are safe after locking up for the night.

“That man only comes up there now for gossip and you know it.” Emily scoffs, and I shrug, knowing she’s probably right. Ed has gotten more than an earful on the nights he’s been here for Sip and Bitches. “And now you just gave me the answer to your problem. Dammit. I was hoping Shepherd was smarter than this....” Emily trails off with a shake of her head.

“What are you talking about? What’s the answer to my problem?”

“Dude.” She snorts, bringing her face closer to the screen. “He *mommed* you.”

“He *what* me?”

“Oh man, he’s *momming* you so hard.” She sighs.

“Is that a weird Urban Dictionary sex thing I’m gonna have to look up and then regret looking up like the blue waffle thing I still have nightmares about? I already told you there have been no sexy times, weird or otherwise. He hasn’t even touched my boobs.”

Emily’s face gets smaller on the screen as she leans back against the headboard of her bed, resting her outstretched arms holding the phone on her bent, blanket-covered knees.

“No, it’s not a weird Urban Dictionary thing with moms, although there is that lactophilia fetish where guys get turned on by breast milk.”

“I’m sorry I asked,” I murmur with a shake of my head.

“In a nutshell, he’s no longer looking at you like a hot piece of ass he wants to fuck into next week. Shepherd now sees you as a *mom* who he has to be gentle with and treat with

respect,” Emily explains, my body now flushing with annoyance for that man instead of need.

“But I’m not *his* mother,” I complain, quickly running through every minute we’ve spent together just to make sure I never scolded him or treated him like a child, because that would certainly suck.

“But you’re *someone’s* mother, so it doesn’t matter. One of the guys probably got in his head and told him to slow things down. You said they told him about all the shit Kevin has done to you when they hung out at breakfast, so I’m sure *that* didn’t help either. A guy like Shepherd would *really* want to make sure you are being respected after the crap Kevin has pulled. My money is on Palmer. He’s a sensitive little shit.”

Son of a Baby Ruth....

“What’s going on? What did I miss?” my mom asks excitedly, wiping her hands on the black apron she has tied around her waist as she walks around from the back of the shop to join me at the purple picnic table.

My mom and I have always been close. Birdie makes fun of me all the time, because I have always told our mom everything, good and bad. Birdie likes to have her secrets, but I don’t know. There’s just something different about my relationship with our mom, and I know it’s probably because I followed right in her footsteps, both of us getting pregnant by a loser tourist at the age of twenty. At least our sperm donor walked away and never showed his face again after Birdie was born, but it still formed a special bond between us. Like we’d both gone through the same war and lived to tell the tale. She’s as up-to-speed as Emily on my last few weeks of dating Shepherd, so at least I don’t have to go through another rundown of all our dates, making me feel guilty all over again that I’m even complaining about anything. I’d much rather hold on to my anger with Shepherd right now than go back to feeling bad.

“Well, Laura, you missed the sad reality that Shepherd has mommed Wren,” Emily explains as my mom waves to her on

the screen, her smile quickly falling as her head whips to the side to look at me.

“Oh no,” she whispers. “He mommed you? I never expected this from Shepherd Oliver.”

“How in the hell do *you* know what that means?” I ask.

She scoffs. “Um, hello? Because I’m a mom. And in case you’ve forgotten, I have a very healthy sexual appetite.”

“Eeewww,” I mutter as Emily claps her hands and cheers.

Literally. She’s a goddamn professional cheerleader. I have to wait a full two minutes before she finishes three rounds of her *S-E-X. Go Sex. Get it, Laura!* chant.

“Remember Todd, the veterinarian?” my mom asks when Emily finishes.

“The one with the stutter?” Emily questions.

“No, that was Adam, the surf instructor. He was *very* good at oral.”

“Mom!” I complain, starting to realize maybe Birdie is right and our mom and I share entirely too much.

“Anyway, Todd and I went on three very sensual dates,” she continues while I try not to vomit when my mom says the word *sensual*. It’s almost worse than *moist*. “After the third date, we started sharing personal things. I told him about you girls, and his penis just turtleheaded itself back up inside poor Todd’s body, never to be heard from again. Sad, really. We had such a connection, and I felt like it could have gone somewhere.”

An unladylike snort comes out of me when my mom says that. Where I’ve spent my entire life dreaming about fairy tales and castles and a knight in shining armor, my mom has been perfectly content hopping from one man to the next after our father walked away. Laura Bennett decided then and there that no one would ever walk away from her again. She’s never kept a man around long enough for him to go anywhere, and they

are always stunned stupid when she kicks them to the curb because she's bored.

"It's happened a few other times over the years," my mom continues with a shrug. "I never cared, but that's me, and you're *you*. And you deserve to have a man who not only spoils you in life but spoils you in the bedroom. But Shepherd is a very stubborn man. Once he gets something in his head, I don't know how easy it will be to get it out."

"Fuuuck me," I mutter with a huge sigh.

"Not likely." Emily snorts, quickly sobering when I glare at her. "I'm kidding! Tess and Birdie have told me a few things about the way that man looks at you while you've been out and about around the island the last few weeks. There's still hope."

"Oooh, yes!" my mom agrees with a big smile and a nod, grabbing my phone right out of my hand so she can hold it. "I forgot about that. Oh, Emily, you should have seen the way that man stared at her cute little tush every time she bent over when they worked here that one night. And Katrina Ogden told Kelsea Moore who told Dee Trejo who told *me* that when they were playing cornhole out on the beach in front of Dockside Eddy's one night after dinner, poor Shepherd kept adjusting himself in his pants every time our sweet Wrenny walked away from him!"

"Who got a woody from cornhole?"

Everyone ignores the shout from Ed in his golf cart as Emily picks up where my mom left off.

"I got a text from Jilly Bradel that said she was sitting on her boyfriend's front porch two nights ago and saw Shepherd and Wren kissing goodnight in Shepherd's driveway," Emily says to my mom, sitting forward again in her bed and bouncing up and down in excitement, while I wonder if it's possible for a person's face to actually go up in flames. "You know how her boyfriend is on leave from the Army and he's renting a long-term cottage right next to Shepherd? Anyway,

she said Shepherd was all calm and cool with his hands in his pockets as Wren drove away, but Jilly said as soon as Wren's golf cart was out of sight, it was like that man just lost his composure. Bent over at the waist with his hands on his knees, body heaving with all the rapid, deep breathing he was doing that Jilly got concerned he was gonna pass out. Although she didn't seem too concerned about the possibility of having to perform CPR on Shepherd Oliver—let me tell you.”

A spark of jealousy flies through me, and I momentarily forget my mom and my best friend are talking about how Shepherd has behaved around me when I wasn't looking, like I'm not sitting right here.

I will take out Jilly Bradel at the knees with a baseball bat if she even looks at Shepherd again.

“He definitely wants to put his bat in her grassy infield.”

I really wish it was my best friend who said this last thing.

My mom laughs at her own joke, while Emily kindly informs her Shepherd dropped me off at a spa on the mainland yesterday while he ran some errands, and since I was all massaged out at that moment, I decided to get waxed.

“Okay, we can work with this.” Emily nods, her face suddenly all business. “Wrenny, it's time for you to bring out the big guns.”

“I... I thought I had,” I reply nervously. “It took two shots of vodka from the portable bar in the sand next to the popcorn machine when Shepherd was busy setting up the movie projector just for me to get up the nerve to kiss his neck and graze my teeth over his earlobe.”

Emily just throws her head back and laughs. And laughs, and laughs, and laughs, my mom joining in with her until I finally slam my hand down on the table and they zip their lips.

“Shut the hell up and just tell me what to do.”

“That's my girl,” Mom says with an encouraging smile, patting me on the back. “You go get yourself the D.”

“*Jesus*, Mom,” I complain while Emily tells me what to do.

“Listen, kid. You two have had no problem talking and spilling your guts about your gross feelings and shit once everything was out in the open. It’s time for you to do the same thing with sex. You need to tell him what you want and show him you are much more than just someone’s mom. That you are a sexy piece of ass who deserves a good fucking for the first time in her life.”

Mom nods at what Emily’s saying, and my palms start to sweat, glad that my mom took my phone from me and is still holding it; otherwise, I’d probably drop it. She’s absolutely right, even though it makes me nervous as hell, and now I’m pissed again. I’ve waited my whole life for this, and Shepherd is continuing to make me wait. The *nerve* of him!

“How long is he gonna be busy with his parents?” Emily asks, and I look at the time in the upper corner of my phone screen.

“He said he’d call me as soon as he left their house and got to his boat. He hasn’t called yet, so it will be another forty minutes or so after he does.”

“I love how causally you throw out *his boat*, like it’s a canoe instead of a million-dollar sport yacht power boat with two cabins below deck.” Emily laughs, making me roll my eyes at her. “Change of plans. You’re going to text him right now and tell him there’s an emergency at the Dip and Twist.”

“What? Why? I don’t want to lie and scare him,” I tell her.

“No, no, this is good,” my mom nods in agreement. “Not a scary lie, just something small that will make him come running. Like, you dropped a three-gallon drum of ice cream on your foot and you think it’s broken.”

“Oooh *yes!*” Emily cheers. “And you really don’t want to bother him, but no one else is answering their phones, blah, blah, be your sweet, usual self who doesn’t want to put anyone out, and then *bam!* You’re getting fucked into next week.”

I just shake my head at her.

“I don’t understand how me lying to him and then him racing here and finding out it’s a lie is going to make him want to do anything of the sort.”

“Laura, move the phone around so I can see Wren’s back,” Emily orders.

My mom quickly does as she’s told, and Emily disappears from sight along with my mom’s arm. Before I can turn my head and ask my mom what the hell she’s doing, her hand holding the phone is already coming around from behind me to hold it up in front of us, and I can see Emily’s smiling face again.

“Oh, this is gonna be a piece of cake,” Emily muses. “A very hot and dirty piece of cake.”

“Still not following,” I remind her, raising my hand and waving it in the air.

“Wren, you’re wearing his last name on your back. Big and bold, the word **OLIVER** is splashed across your shoulders,” she tells me as I look down at the fitted white T-shirt with the Hawks mascot on the front. “If you’re turned around when he walks in there, he’ll be a goner for sure. Probably won’t even be able to control himself. I’m getting hot just thinking about it.”

It’s the same shirt I was wearing the day I saw him again when he snuck up on me in the back of the Dip and Twist. Thinking back to that moment, I push aside all the hurt and anger from that day and just focus on my memory of what Shepherd looked like when I turned around and saw him standing there in front of me. He was panting, his hands were clenched into fists, there was a muscle ticking in his jaw, and I guess I just thought he was annoyed when I called him human garbage. But now that I really concentrate on that memory, replay it in my head slower, his features and his entire demeanor actually softened once he was no longer looking at

my back, and he laughed when I called him human garbage. He only looked like *that* as soon as I first turned around.

And he looked like that the night I came to his cottage, when he flung the door open and saw it was me standing there on his porch instead of his mom.

And he looked like that when we scrambled away from each other on the beach when Bodhi interrupted us.

And even though it was a surprise to hear all the things my mom and Emily said about the way Shepherd has looked at me when I wasn't paying attention since then, I caught that look about him a few times myself these last few weeks when I've glanced back over my shoulder at him. I've just never had anyone look at me like that, and I didn't know what I was actually seeing. Shepherd really *does* want me. He just doesn't think he should for some ridiculous reason.

"In conclusion, you wearing his name on your back is basically like a dude pissing all over his woman," Emily finishes, making me grimace at that visual. "You're claiming that man as *yours* in bold, all caps, and bright purple. It was different when he first got here, because you weren't *his* yet and he had to control himself. He doesn't have to control himself anymore; he just needs to be reminded of that."

Emily gets closer to the screen and lowers her voice.

"Honey, you better have something in that back room to hold on tight to this time."

I shiver at her words, so many visuals flashing through my mind I should be ashamed of myself, since my freaking mother is sitting right next to me, but it's no use now that Emily has put the thoughts in there. I'm so anxious to get this plan in motion I kind of want to scream about why we're still just sitting around here doing nothing.

I've been careful not to wear any of my shirts with Shepherd's name on them since he got here, because I just had a feeling he'd never stop teasing me. But that's clearly been my problem. Maybe *I* should have been the one teasing *him*.

“Come closer, little one,” Emily encourages through the screen, crooking her finger at me with an evil smile. “We don’t have much time as soon as that text is sent, and I have much to teach you. Laura, I’m putting you in charge of Wren’s phone, because I don’t trust her to follow through.”

“Heeey,” I complain. “I can send one little text.”

“Right, but what if he replies?” Emily asks. “You’re going to feel guilty and come clean, and then all this will be for naught. You get to bat first, but your mom gets to play cleanup if needed.”

With a sigh, I reluctantly agree, since they have more experience with this than me, hoping all this shit pays off.



Wren: I’m so sorry to bother you! I know you’re busy with your parents. When you get this, could you come to the Dip and Twist? No rush or anything! It’s just... I sort of dropped something on my foot, and no one else is answering their phones. I’m fine! I’m not like that old lady from the commercial, “Help! I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up!” I’m quite comfortable in a chair actually; I just don’t think I can drive my golf cart home.

Shepherd “Hottest Man I’ve Ever Kissed” Oliver: I’m on my way. DON’T MOVE.

Wren: I just noticed you changed your name in my phone. And thank you for coming!

Wren: Scratch that. Don’t tell me what to do. If I want to move, I’ll move. I just crossed my legs. What are you gonna do about it, Oliver? Spank me?

Wren: I didn’t mean to say that last thing.

Wren: Yes, I did. Ignore that text. Spank me, big daddy.

Wren: etyufv98tiwljr;kfd;’afl6789

Shepherd “Hottest Man I’ve Ever Kissed” Oliver: Did you hit your head too??? DON’T MOVE.



BY THE TIME I hear a golf cart skidding through the gravel of the Dip and Twist parking lot outside and come to a stop, I've remembered each and every old Lamaze breathing technique and have been using them to keep me calm while I waited. I needed to pull out every trick in the book to remain calm after the wrestling match for my phone I had with my mother during that stupid text exchange until she finally left me alone to go home.

Now, I'm standing here facing the chest freezer, my palms resting on top and my eyes closed after following Emily's strict instructions, *hee-hee'ing* and *hoo-hoo'ing* my breaths when I hear the back door fly open so hard it probably smacks against the outside bricks, and a momentary flash of guilt flies through me.

"Wren?!" Shepherd shouts, my breathing technique coming to a halt when I hear his panicked voice and forget how to breathe.

This man thinks I have a head wound, and now I'm probably going to confirm it. Also, why in the hell do we keep it so cold in here? I should be wearing more clothing.

"Wren! Where are—*Fuucking Jesus Christ.*"

I know exactly when Shepherd gets around the corner and sees me when his voice immediately goes from panicked to WTF. I make sure not to fidget nervously with my back to him, even though I really, really want to. Following Emily's strict instructions, my T-shirt with Shepherd's name across the back is now pulled up and tied into a knot right under my boobs with my torso on full display. And since I've clearly lost my mind this evening and I'm so desperate I'll do whatever anyone tells me, my jean shorts are now neatly folded on a shelf, and I'm just here in a pair of black cotton, cheeky hipsters with my back to Shepherd, pretending to be casually standing in front of the freezer *with my goddamn pants off in my place of business—what in the holy sweet shit am I doing!*

“I... I’m.... Whaaat is happening right now?”

Taking pity on how absolutely freaked out Shepherd sounds, I press my nervous, sweaty palms harder on top of the freezer, take a deep breath, and look back over my shoulder at him.

And quickly realize Emily is a goddamn genius.

Shepherd’s not freaked out at all. Not in a WTF way, at least. His hands are clenched into fists down by his sides, a muscle is ticking in his jaw, he’s panting, and he doesn’t even know I’m looking at him, because his eyes keep flickering back and forth between his name splashed across the back of my shoulders and down to my ass.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, what do I do next? What did Emily say I should do next? Something with chocolate sauce, right?

Swallowing thickly, that possessive look in Shepherd’s eyes does something to me that immediately makes these cheeky hipsters flood with wetness between my thighs. But he’s still standing there trying to control himself, and now I remember I’m annoyed with him. Whirling around to face him, I almost laugh when I hear a little whimper come out of Shepherd when my ass cheeks and his last name disappear from sight. But I don’t laugh. I just cross my arms in front of me.

I’m standing here half naked, and he’s standing there looking good as hell in my favorite black Nike shorts and fitted blue long-sleeved shirt, and yep, my eyes dart down and widen a little when I see a very obvious bulge in his shorts. And that just pisses me right the hell off even more, because hello! *Standing right here half naked with several places you could put that bulge!*

Everything else Emily instructed me to do flies right out of my brain. I have a tendency to word vomit around this man, so I might as well stick to tradition. Once my mouth opens, there

is absolutely no stopping it, just like that day by home plate when I ripped my heart wide open for him.

“Listen, buddy, I’m a mom. And I will be a mom until the end of time, and there is nothing I can or *want* to change about that. But I’m not just someone’s mother. I love that you think I need all this control and respect from you, and I appreciate it; I really do. But I’m a fucking thirty-four-year-old woman who has only had boring sex in the goddamn missionary position a *sad* amount of times, and I’ve never had a man look at me like you look at me, or make my toes curl when he kisses me like you do, or almost dry hump me to a screaming orgasm in record time like you do, or make me *literally* kill my favorite vibrator with overuse like you do. Now I feel ridiculous standing here with my ass hanging out when you’re all the way over there, and I’m supposed to lie to you again about how I had to take my shorts off because I spilled chocolate on them. But I just took them off because I hoped you would finally fucking do something about it! I have waited my entire life to feel like this and to want someone like this, and this is some straight-up bullshit that I finally have you and you’re *still* making me fucking wait! *Fuck!*” I shout in annoyance, finally taking a breath to throw my hands up in the air while Shepherd continues to stand there staring at me with his mouth open.

All of a sudden, his mouth snaps shut, he turns around, and he stalks away from me. It doesn’t even occur to me what’s happening until he’s disappeared around the corner, and I hear the *slam* of the back door again, and I’m standing here alone again.

“You have *got* to be shitting me” is all I can mutter in a shocked voice, skipping right over the hurt that I poured my heart out to him *again*, and he screwed it up *again*.

Except Shepherd is coming back around the corner and stopping to stand ten feet away from me again before I can even properly build up any anger. His hands are still tightly held into fists down by his sides, arm muscles tense and

bulging, while he pants like he just ran the bases and stares at me with a big smile on his face this time.

“Sorry, just had to lock the door...” He trails off and the smile immediately drops from his face as his eyes slowly move over my body from my head down to my bare feet. My heart beat wildly in my chest when his tongue slides across his lips before he speaks again in a low, growly voice. “No one needs to walk in here and see what I’m about to do to you.”

An excited gasp flies out of my mouth followed quickly by a squeaky, “Oh my God, yay!” and I even channel Emily by clapping my hands together in cheer.

It’s a good thing I took in that initial gasp of air, because before I can blink, Shepherd has stalked across the room to me, his body slamming into mine along with his mouth, cutting off my air supply.

CHAPTER 16



Wren

“He just slammed it out of the park!”

“TURN AROUND.”

Shepherd’s voice is quiet and serious when he finally rips his mouth away from mine. Now *I’m* the one panting as I look up at him when he unwraps his arms from their tight hold around me to set his hands down on top of the freezer on either side of me. His hard body is caging me in, pressed up against my soft spots in all the right places from my thighs to my chest. Letting go of the tight grip I had on the front of his shirt when he kissed me, I drag my palms down over his chest as I drop them, hearing Shepherd take in a choked breath when I slowly turn around in his arms. Since he doesn’t back up or give me any room to move, my body rubs against his as I go, which means that bulge I saw from across the room is now thick and hard as it slides against my hip and the cheeks of my ass until I’m finally facing the freezer again. My hands flatten on top right next to Shepherd’s, my heart thumping loud and rapidly in my chest when I watch one of his hands leave its spot next to mine.

I hear myself purr like a kitten when I feel his big, warm hand slowly skim its way down my spine, adding just a little pressure as it goes until my hands slip forward a few inches on top of the freezer.

“Do you have any idea what it does to me to see my fucking name on your back?”

Shepherd doesn't give me time to answer, and I wouldn't be able to even if he did. I forget how to breathe *and* speak when he grinds his hips a little, that glorious, hard bulge pressing right between the cheeks of my ass through his shorts and my underwear, letting me know exactly what it does to him.

I'm wet and pulsing with so much need I almost want to scream. Shepherd's hand leaves my spine and grips tightly to my hip as he leans forward, his front pressing into my back until my stomach is pushed into the front of the freezer, and his lips are hovering right by my ear. The feel of his warm breath against the shell makes me jerk my hips back against him, wanting more, *needing* more. Shepherd's fingers dig into the side of my hip, and he mutters a few curses into my ear, and *God* does that make me even wetter, knowing I did something to drive him crazy.

The heat from his body and his smell surround me as he holds me trapped against the freezer. I can feel the rapid beat of his heart through his chest pressed against my back, and just remembering the words he said to me before he stalked across the room about how no one needs to see what he's about to do to me make my entire body feel like it's on pins and needles, and every hair on my arms and on the back of my neck stands on end with anticipation.

Shepherd's lips attach to the side of my neck, and I shiver when I feel his tongue skate out and taste me, my knees almost giving out when his hand leaves my hip, sliding around the front of my body until his palm is pressed flat against my lower stomach and his fingertips have found their way just under the waistband of my hipsters.

"You need to tell me if this is too much, Wren," Shepherd says in a raspy, whispered voice right by my ear again. His hips jerk forward just enough to remind me how much he wants me while his fingers dip just a little bit lower into my underwear. "You are a goddamn dream come true, and I want this to be good for you."

“It’s already good,” I quickly reassure him, twisting my head around over my shoulder until his lips are hovering right over mine as I pant against them. “Please, Shepherd...”

I don’t even know what I’m begging for I’m such a mindless ball of need; I just know I need him to do something before I die. Everything is hot, and tight, and pulsing, and I need some relief. I barely have time to take another breath before Shepherd is answering my plea. He cuts off my pants of need with his mouth, his lips fusing to mine at the same time he finally drops his hand the rest of the way down into my hipsters.

My mouth parts with a gasp when I finally feel him where I want him, Shepherd’s tongue swirling around mine as the tips of his fingers slide through my wetness and then circle my clit. I see stars, and my knees buckle as he just circles and circles his fingers and kisses me breathless until I have to rip my mouth away from his to take a heaving breath.

“*Goddamn*, you’re so wet for me, baby,” he growls against my mouth, making me whimper and lighting my body on fire with his words and the way he expertly swirls his fingertips around my pulsing bundle of need.

My head turns away from him and drops forward, and my eyes squeeze closed as Shepherd’s body crowds me even harder against the front of the freezer to keep me upright, like he knows my legs are just about done holding me up, while his hand between my thighs builds my need into something I didn’t even know was possible. My palms smack down on top of the freezer, and gibberish flies out of my mouth when Shepherd’s lips attach to the side of my neck right as he plunges two fingers inside me.

“Holy... *shiii-uuht*,” I mutter in a dragged-out curse as he holds his long, thick fingers deep inside my body and starts rubbing the heel of his palm against that pulsing ache until I’m jerking my hips forward against his hand.

“*Jesus*, you feel so good,” Shepherd mutters against the shell of my ear, dragging his fingers slowly out of me. He

makes my entire body shudder as he pulls his fingers up to circle my clit a few times before quickly dipping back down to plunge them back inside me. “So hot and tight around my fingers.”

He stresses this by thrusting them deeply in and out of me until I’m whimpering and moaning, and my hips are jerking forward for more, more, *more* of what he’s doing to me.

“Don’t stop,” I pant as Shepherd’s thumb starts torturing my clit while his digits pump in and out of me. “Oh God, this is so hot. Can we do it this way? I’ve read about it in books, and it sounds so dirty.”

“Jesus, you’re so fucking sweet it’s killing me,” Shepherd mutters against the side of my neck, grinding his hard cock against my ass while he tortures me with his fingers, but it’s not enough. I need more. I need *all* of him.

“You’re killing me too,” I pant, moaning loudly when he thrusts his fingers deep. “My pants are off; just fuck me already!”

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, and I curse Emily a thousand different ways in my head. My hips halt in their thrusting, Shepherd’s hand pauses between my legs with his fingers still inside me, and neither one of us breathes or moves for a few seconds until Shepherd finally breaks the silence with his mouth right by my ear.

“Did... Did you really mean to say that?”

When I can actually feel myself clench around his fingers, I forget about how unlike me that was and just go with it. I’ve waited long enough, and I deserve this.

“Yes. Yes, I did. You gonna stand there all day, or finish what you started?”

Good God, who am I right now?

All of a sudden, Shepherd is yanking his hand from my body and my underwear without any warning. Before I can complain, his hands are gripping the hips of my underwear

from behind me and then yanking them roughly down my legs. I don't even bother looking back when I kick them off my ankles and somewhere across the room, because *holy shit, this is really happening!* I'm actually bouncing up and down on my toes when I hear him rustling with his shorts behind me and pulling them down, until I feel his hands gripping tightly to both my hips and his mouth is right by my ear again, panting while I do my part to finish ripping away that last thread of control still keeping him in place.

"I'm not fragile. You won't break me," I quickly remind him quietly before he can say anything else, just in case there are any lingering doubts that he has to be gentle and respectful with me at this particular moment in time.

"You keep saying stuff like that, and this is going to be over before it even starts," Shepherd warns me quietly, tugging my earlobe through his teeth, my whole body vibrating with anticipation, since he's still not touching me anywhere else aside from his hands still tightly gripping my hips.

Let's go! Break me right in half with that monster cock!

Shepherd's entire body jolts, making me realize I just said those words out loud. And then everything happens in the blink of an eye and all in one smooth, hot, fluid motion, and I suddenly feel Shepherd *everywhere*. My body is crowded against the front of the freezer as he bends me over it, wraps one arm tightly around me, bends his knees, and thrusts up hard.

"Oh my God!" flies out of my mouth along with my hands smacking down on top of the freezer as Shepherd just lines himself up and fucks right into me with one hard jerk of his hips.

He holds himself still deep inside me, so thick and full and perfect it takes my breath away. His arm tightens around my body while rapid-fire curses pant out of his mouth pressed right against my ear.

"Fuck. Jesus. *Holy shit*. Give me a minute."

I feel his cock pulsing against my walls, and I whimper wanting more, swiveling my hips and making Shepherd let out a choked groan, taking no more than the minute he needed.

“Hold on tight, baby,” he growls against the side of my neck before all hell breaks loose in the best way possible, and he *fucks me already*.

And because deep down inside he’s still a gentleman at heart, he keeps that one arm tightly around me to protect my body from smacking into the front of the freezer as he starts moving. There’s nothing I can do but hold on tight as Shepherd brings his other hand back between my legs, working my clit with his expert fingers as he drives his cock into me over and over.

“Yes, yes, oh *God*, this is so much better than missionary,” I chant as Shepherd takes me against the freezer. Because that’s what he’s doing. His fingers build me higher and higher as he works my clit, and his cock claims me as he plunges it into me over and over.

“*Goddamn*, your pussy is like a fist around me. So fucking perfect and tight.”

“Wha... uhhffuck...”

I don’t even know what’s coming out of my mouth at this point, and I don’t care. This is the best moment of my life, and I want it to last forever, but there is something about that dirty talk coming out of Shepherd’s otherwise sweet and romantic mouth right against my ear. It has me hurtling faster and faster to my release, my hips jerking erratically against his hand while his fingers slip and slide and swirl faster and faster around my clit.

“Jesus... *Jesus*,” Shepherd mutters, peppering kisses down the side of my neck as his hips slam against my ass. “You take my cock like a *goddamn dream*, baby. Fuck, I’m so glad you’re mine.”

No matter how many times I’ve dreamed about this moment with this man, absolutely nothing compares to reality

and hearing him call me *his* while he makes all my dirty fantasies come true. Every lackluster, boring, missionary position moment before this, where I never even came close to getting off, is instantly bleached from my mind, and nothing remains but Shepherd saying and doing dirty, dirty things to me in the back of the Dip and Twist.

“Say something else. Say something else!” I demand, Shepherd’s laughter rumbling through his chest pressed against my back as he bends me over the freezer more. My feet spread out a little more, and I arch my back right when he thrusts into me roughly.

His arm that was holding me tightly leaves my body, and his hand smacks down on top of the freezer next to mine when it makes him sink so deep inside me we both let out choking moans. As he moves against me harder, his fingers swirl faster and faster around my clit.

“You like it when I tell you how good you feel while I’m fucking you?” he asks in a low voice, my whole body shuddering at his words when I feel him smile against the side of my neck. He pulls his cock all the way out and then slams back inside me, making the air in my lungs leave me with a *whoosh* when he answers for me, since I clearly can’t speak now. “Yeah, you do.”

Shepherd starts moving in earnest now, deep then shallow thrusts inside me, and my hands slip forward more on top of the freezer. My eyes squeeze closed, and my mouth drops open as I pant and whimper while he keeps whispering deliciously dirty things in my ear. His free hand that he smacked down next to mine on top of the freezer suddenly wraps around my ponytail. A completely inhuman sound comes out of me when he grips it in his fist and then tugs my head to the side, giving him better access. While his fingers work masterfully between my legs and his thrusts get rougher, Shepherd trails his tongue up the side of my neck, ending with a sucking, biting kiss right under my ear.

“Come on, baby,” Shepherd whispers, his fingers on my clit moving in a rapid diagonal pattern, my orgasm building and building with each panting breath he speaks against my ear and each swipe of his fingers. “Let me feel that tight pussy milk my cock.”

“Hooo-fuuu-ohhh *shit*, yes!”

His words and what he’s doing to me are so hot there’s no way I can stop this orgasm, even if I wanted to. It’s hurtling through me with the speed of a freight train and will probably do just as much damage when it crashes through me. Without any warning, I feel myself doing what Shepherd wants. I’m tightening around his cock as he starts thrusting harder, my release exploding out of me and rolling through me in thick, heavy, pulsing waves, my hands smacking down on top of the freezer again as I chant his name as I come.

“Oh, fuck!” Shepherd shouts, his thrusts becoming jerky and erratic behind me as I moan all the way through the longest orgasm in history until I am out of words and sounds.

My mouth is dropped open in some kind of orgasmic shock as both of Shepherd’s hands are suddenly gripping my hips, yanking my body back to meet his in such a deliciously hard and bruising way it prolongs my orgasm until I’m pretty sure I might have actually died. Once, twice, three times Shepherd thrusts into me until he holds himself still and deep as he comes with my name roaring from his mouth like a lion on top of a mountain, definitely making me feel like *anything* but someone’s mother right now.

My arms finally give out, and I collapse the rest of the way across the top of the freezer with Shepherd following. His hips twitch against me, and his entire body shudders with the last of his release as we go, until my chest and my cheek are flattened against the top of the freezer, with the side of Shepherd’s face pressed against the other side of mine.

It takes several minutes of heavy breathing before I feel human again, while I enjoy the feel of Shepherd’s body on top

of mine, even if he is holding himself up a little so he doesn't crush me, while his cock still pulses inside me.

"Are you okay?" Shepherd pants, lifting his face from my cheek and bringing one of his hands up to brush a few long strands of hair off my face that came down out of my ponytail. "Jesus, did I hurt you? Tell me you're okay."

The concern in his voice makes me smile as he peppers kisses all down the side of my face, over and over until he's covered every spot he can reach, and I start to giggle.

"I'm more than okay," I respond with a contented sigh, which ends with a small gasp when I feel Shepherd slowly drag his hips back and pull himself out of me. "I can't believe I've been missing out on this my whole life. That was way better than anything in a book."

I feel Shepherd laugh softly against my back, and then he's pulling away from me, helping me stand upright and then quickly turning me around to face him. His hands immediately come up to cup my cheeks, and he dips his head and gently presses his lips to mine. I bring my own hands up to rest on top of his as he brushes his thumbs back and forth against my cheeks. Shepherd kisses me soft and slow for several long minutes until my heartrate starts picking up again right as he ends the kiss with a few brushes of his lips against mine before resting his forehead on mine.

"I thought I was doing the right thing by being a gentleman. I had no idea I was actually driving you as crazy as you were driving me," Shepherd says, making me laugh. "Don't ever be afraid to tell me what you want again, as soon as you want it, okay?"

I nod, pushing up on my toes and giving him a quick kiss before pulling back. After what just happened here, Shepherd has pretty much created a monster, and now it seems I have no problem telling him what I want.

"Got it. So is now a good time to tell you I've never received oral and I'm really anxious to try out being on top?" I

ask, making Shepherd groan as he drops his hands from my cheeks and wraps his arms around me. “Should I make a list of everything I want? I’ll just make a list. We’ll go alphabetical starting with blowjob. Sorry, anal will have to wait for a special occasion, like your birthday.”

I let out a squeal when Shepherd’s hand comes down with a *smack* on one of my bare ass cheeks as he holds me in his arms and shakes his head at me with a huge smile on his face.

“I can’t believe Bodhi was actually the voice of reason.” Before I can ask him what he’s talking about, Shepherd lowers his voice to a whisper. “I’m so glad you’re mine.”

My heart goes *pitter-patter* in my chest, extremely happy to know just how good he is at spoiling me *everywhere*.

CHAPTER 17



Wren

“It’s all fun and games until someone loses their balls.”

Mom: I see you got the D last night.

Wren: MOM!

Mom: Don’t be shy now, child! I didn’t realize Shepherd was such a... voracious and wild lover. Good for you!

Wren: It’s entirely too early for this.

Mom: It’s fine. You don’t have to confirm it verbally. I’m currently looking at the proof. While messy, I am very delighted for you. Chaotic lovers can be super exciting, but I am not cleaning this shit up by myself.

Wren: Are you drunk? It’s not even eight in the morning yet.

Mom: Were YOU drunk last night when you left the Dip and Twist like this after your boning?

Wren: Don’t say boning. No one says boning. And what are you talking about? Left the Dip and Twist like what? Shepherd and I left it exactly the way you did after you closed.

Mom: So you DO confirm there was boning! Sorry, fucking.

Wren: Yep, boning is fine. Just say boning.

Mom: Seriously, Wren, the place is a mess. No one is happier than I am that you finally got the cobwebs cleaned out from down under, but get your cute little tush up here and help me clean up the mess.



“WE DID *NOT* do this,” I tell my mom for the second time as I stand next to her in the back room of the Dip and Twist and survey the damage.

“Pity,” she muses, and we both bend down to lift up one of the metal shelves that was knocked over to stand it back up against the wall, the Styrofoam cups and bowls that were stacked there now strewn all over the floor. “I’ve broken a few shelves and knocked things off walls during boning a couple of times. It’s always a rush.”

“Can we please focus on what the hell happened here last night after Shepherd and I locked up?” I ask her as I grab the broom and dustpan to start sweeping up all the containers of sprinkles that were dumped on the floor, while my mom starts restacking things on the shelves and throwing away stuff that’s damaged.

“You’re sure you locked up?”

“Positive.” I nod, thankful that whoever did this only dumped dry goods and we don’t have to mop up chocolate sauce or caramel. “Shepherd has this OCD thing where he’ll go back to a locked door three times to check it before he leaves. I know for sure he did it last night, because I teased him about.... You know what, I just know.”

No need to tell my mother that when Shepherd said, “I have to do it three times in a row.” I snorted and replied, “Too bad you don’t feel that way about orgasms.”

It was like finally having good sex flipped a switch in me and I could no longer control what came out of my mouth. Shepherd definitely didn’t mind, since he almost gave me another orgasm when he kissed me goodnight against the back wall of the Dip and Twist. *After* we locked up. And he only stopped, because Ed drove by one last time, circling his golf cart around the building and catching us there like a couple of teenagers before laughing and then zipping away.

“Laura! You in here?”

Speaking of the orgasm-blocking devil.

My mom and I both pause in our cleanup when Ed walks around the corner, his feet stuttering to stop with a muttered curse. “You said the place was a *little messy*,” Ed states, raising one bushy white eyebrow at her.

“I also told you when I called you five minutes ago to see if you saw anything last night that you didn’t need to come here,” she reminds him, grabbing a pile of crumpled napkins from the floor and tossing them in the large trash bag next to her.

“Give me that garbage bag and go sit down,” Ed orders her, making my mom huff as he snatches the bag out of her hand and starts picking up a pile of plastic lids that are all broken. “The wife will be here in fifteen minutes to help after she drops the grandson off at school, and Margot and Kathy will be here soon after to help out as well. You go out front and get ready to open, and let us handle the mess.”

My mom and I share a smile and a look. No matter how long I live here, I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to how much this island comes together whenever anyone here needs them.

“I’m sure it was just a tourist who got drunk and had nothing better to do.” My mom shrugs.

“That deadbolt was hit clean off the door. Probably with a hammer or something,” Ed informs her as my mom goes rushing around him and the corner, disappearing to check.

I just raced right inside the back door that was propped open when I got here a few minutes ago, and didn’t even think to go back out and look at it once I saw the damage inside. Clearly, my mom hadn’t noticed either, a shocked look on her face when she comes back around the corner.

“I didn’t even notice the deadbolt was gone, since we never lock it. I just noticed the handle wasn’t locked when I got here. There’s a damn hole in our door!” my mom complains.

“Shepherd made me lock the deadbolt,” I tell her with a shrug.

“Already called Billy down at the station. He’ll be stopping by in a little bit to get your statement, and Margot is picking up a new deadbolt from the hardware store on her way here,” Ed says, dragging the full garbage bag over to the side and then grabbing a clean one from the box on the counter. “Like you said, probably just a drunk tourist that got bored.”

“Orrr...” my mom trails off, looking at me pointedly.

“I already told you Shepherd and I didn’t do this. I am *not* lying,” I whisper, leaning closer to her so Ed doesn’t hear.

“Did you say you and Shepherd did this?” Ed asks, pausing as he shakes out the new garbage bag. “Huh. He really doesn’t look like the wild lover type. It’s always the quiet ones.”

“Oh my God,” I mutter. “For the last time, we didn’t do this. From this point forward, no one is allowed to talk about my love life, got it?”

I look away from both of them when my cheeks heat with mortification that Ed was even anywhere near here last night while Shepherd and I were...

Nope, don’t think about that right now or you’ll start moaning in front of them.

At least we were behind the wall that separates the front of the shop from the back and no one could see us from outside, thank God. It was definitely hot, and I would like to repeat it ASAP, but not with spectators. And now I need a moment to pinch myself, because I have a love life.

I have a love life!

“I wasn’t talking about you and Shepherd. I was talking about Kevin,” my mom tells me, making me laugh.

“Kevin? Why would Kevin trash the Dip and Twist? And he’s not even *on* the island yet.”

“Because he’s a special kind of asshole?” Ed pipes up, and my mom nods.

“You know that man always sneaks onto Summersweet a good few hours before we catch wind of it,” she reminds me.

He does do this. A *real* father would come right to his son as soon as he steps off the ferry, especially since it’s been six months since the last time Kevin even spoke to Owen. But that’s never been the case. Kevin only thinks of Kevin, and as soon as he’s gotten off the ferry the handful of times he’s come to this island, he’d much rather walk around trying to flaunt his wealth and social status, putting down the island and trying to make everyone feel small before he eventually comes to find his son.

“Well, it’s been at least eight hours at this point,” I say, bending down to grab a pile of pink plastic spoons and walking them over to the garbage bag Ed holds open for me. “Kevin would have definitely pissed someone off in eight hours, and we’d have heard about it. He’s an asshole, but he’s not a criminal. He would never stoop so low or get his hands dirty for something like this.”

I snort at just the idea of it and then groan when I bend over to pick up a plastic tray, realizing it’s stuck to the floor, my hands coming away covered in chocolate.

So much for them only dumping dry goods.

A white-hot ball of rage rushes through me when I remember meeting Kevin over on the mainland for lunch when Owen was four, and all Kevin did was complain about how messy Owen was and “*I know it’s tough for your small brain to understand this, but my shirt costs more than you make in a month, and you can’t really afford to replace it if it gets ruined.*”

My phone dings with an incoming text, and I quickly wipe my hands off on a towel before pulling my phone out of my back pocket. My mood instantly goes from pissed the hell off to calm and deliriously happy.

Shepherd “Hottest Man I’ve Ever Kissed” Oliver: Where are you? Is everything okay? I’m down by the ferry dock and just got to your booth to help set up. It’s been too long since I kissed you. Hurry up.

“Go, we’ve got this,” my mom reassures me as she reads the text over my shoulder, leaning in to kiss my cheek. “The Summersweet Festival waits for no one, and our booth is always the most popular. Go to your man and get to work.”

With another confirmation from Ed that they’ve got everything handled, I head out of the Dip and Twist and get in my golf cart to drive down to the beach by the ferry dock.

Every year to officially close out the summer tourist season, the island puts on the Summersweet Island Festival down on the main public beach. There are carnival rides, food vendors, and games, and at the end of the night, everyone sits along the beach to watch the boat parade. Any island resident who owns a boat can be in the parade as long as they’ve registered with the festival committee. Everyone who participates in the parade goes above and beyond to decorate their boats with Christmas lights, disco lights, entire themes complete with people in costumes, music blasting from boat speakers, fog machines, and choreographed dance routines. People go all out, the boats are judged by a committee, and someone goes home with the grand prize of a year’s supply of taffy from Chew on This.

Obviously, Shepherd was the first person in line on registration day to enter the boat parade. All the businesses on the island set up a booth for the festival, and once Shepherd and I finish setting up the one for the Dip and Twist, we’ll be heading over to his boat to get it ready. With what else? A *Field of Dreams* theme. He ordered an obscene amount of cornstalks to attach all along the railing of the boat, bright spotlights that will shine down from the sails, a giant movie projector screen will be set up along the back side of the boat playing the movie, and he even rented authentic, 1910 White Sox uniforms for the entire freshman baseball team to wear while they ride on his boat for the parade. It’s absolutely crazy and so absolutely Shepherd.

Pushing the Dip and Twist break-in out of my mind, I zip down to the ferry dock and *my man*. I always have fun every year at the Summersweet Island Festival, but I have a feeling this year will top all the rest. Once Shepherd and I finish setting up the Dip and Twist booth and then decorate his boat, we have the rest of the day to have fun, since I scheduled a bunch of teenagers to take the shifts at our booth and, for the first time ever, did not schedule one for myself. And also for the first time ever, Birdie, Tess, and I all have dates, and we're going on the best triple date ever.

Without even knowing it, Shepherd is going to make another dream of mine come true, even if it's something as simple as having someone hold my hand while we walk around all day enjoying the festival.



“IF YOU SIT back down at the table and finish your lunch, I promise I’ll let you have the rest of this candy apple.”

“You never should have let him enter that cotton candy eating contest,” I tell Tess, trailing off as we all sit at a picnic table, watching Bodhi alternate between giggling and screaming as he runs around our table in circles.

“I didn’t think he’d actually eat fifteen fucking bags of cotton candy with a candy apple chaser,” she mutters. “On top of the elephant ears, funnel cakes, deep fried Oreos, churros, and two apple fritters. Fuck it. This needs to end.”

“You want me to—”

Tess holds her hand up to Shepherd as he starts to get up from his spot next to me straddling the picnic table bench.

“I got it.” She sighs. “This is why I’m never having children. I’m already raising a man child.”

Thrusting the half-eaten candy apple at me from across the picnic table, I have just enough time to grab the stick before Tess bolts up and off the bench like a sprinter out of the gate.

“Oooh, shit!” Shepherd, Birdie, Palmer, and I all wince and shout at the same time when Tess takes Bodhi out like a linebacker, wrapping her arms around his body as she dove at him.

“He might actually need X-rays on that shoulder,” Shepherd mutters, standing up and resting his hands on top of the table to lean over and get a better look at Tess lying flat on top of Bodhi in the sand next to the freshly squeezed lemonade stand.

Between gasps and heaves after getting the wind knocked out of him, Bodhi reaches up and around Tess’s body to smack her ass.

“He’s fine.” Birdie snorts. “Let’s go ride the merry-go-round.”



“YOU MUST BE AS DOPE AS WEED, ’cause right now, you’re all I need!”

Tess just snorts at the shout from behind us and rolls her eyes.

“Hey, come on. Don’t walk away. Come over here and give me some sugar!”

“Go on, Tess. Go give the man some sugar.” Birdie laughs.

“He already had some of my sugar, thank you very much,” Tess replies, picking up the pace, suddenly in a much bigger rush to find the gyro stand.

“He really looks sad that you aren’t stopping or acknowledging him. I almost feel bad for the guy,” Palmer muses.

“Not many things cause me grief in life, Tess Powell, but you sleeping with a carnie is right at the top,” Bodhi complains, the happiness from his sugar high long forgotten as he looks back over his shoulder with a frown at the man

running the balloon dart game, heckling Tess as we walked by. “I’m not high enough for this.”

“It was just a crazy thing I did in my twenties; I didn’t know he’d be here. Come on, baby,” Tess coos, wrapping her arm around Bodhi’s shoulders. “I’ll let you feel me up in the Tunnel of Love. How does that sound?”



“NO, YOU CANNOT feel me up in the Tunnel of Love,” I remind Shepherd for the third time as our cart shaped like a swan turns on the metal track, taking us through another curtain of heart-shaped beads and into another dark room with nothing but red heart lights on the walls.

“Come on, just thirty seconds under your sweatshirt; that’s all I’m asking for,” Shepherd pleads in a whisper, his lips right by my ear as we snuggle together in the front seat. “Come on, why can’t I?”

Shepherd’s palm rests on top of my bare thigh, his thumb brushing back and forth under the frayed hem of my jean shorts, making me seriously reconsider my stance on this, his breath against the side of my neck making my nipples harden and beg for his touch.

“Yeah, why can’t he, Wren? Just let him do it.”

“That’s why,” I remind Shepherd, my nipples immediately deflating.

Looking back over my shoulder, I glare at Birdie while she curls up into Palmer’s side then turn back around to move a few inches away from Shepherd.

“I told you we should have gotten our own swan,” he complains as we turn another dark corner.



“YOU ARE SO bad at this.”

“I know!”

“Maybe you should just stop. I don’t really need a third one.”

“I am not a quitter, Wren! I will give you that third one or die trying. Just let me keep trying.”

“Slow and gentle, Shepherd. Stop rushing it.”

“The more you tell me to slow down, the faster it just makes me want to go. How many times do I have to tell you this?”

“And once again, you’re trying to cram it in there without any finesse and ruin everything. You are so out of practice. Here, let me—”

“Oh no! You aren’t going to get all up on me like you did that day at the Dip and Twist when I kept breaking all the cones! I can toss a fucking baseball into a laundry basket from ten feet away, all right? That third stuffed otter will be yours; mark my words.”

“People are staring.”

“They’re staring, because you’re currently holding seventeen stuffed animals in your arms, soon to be eighteen, and they are in awe at my festival game-winning ability. Step back. Give your man some room.



“JESUS, ERYKA COOK just knocked that woman out with one punch,” Tess says in awe from our blanket on the beach, watching the boat parade right off the shore.

“I had no idea Shepherd bought one of those cannon things to shoot squishy foam baseballs into the crowd,” I reply, wincing when Kimberly Clark straight-up shoves Celeste Devries facefirst into the sand to grab a ball that flies out onto the beach as Shepherd’s *Field of Dreams* boat slowly floats by, the boys all having a grand old time out there in their old-fashioned uniforms.

Even with a Christmas-themed boat complete with ten giant Christmas inflatables, a snow machine, and a man dressed as Santa who walked along the beach handing out candy canes while their boat went by, I'm pretty confident Shepherd's *Field of Dreams* boat will take first place.

Regardless of the small amount of bloodshed, the entire crowd of spectators is laughing and shouting for Shepherd's boat, having the best time of their lives while they hilariously wrestle and knock each other down along the shore to try to grab one of those squishy baseballs.

"I'm never going to hear the end of how Shepherd's balls won this boat parade, am I?" I ask the girls.

Birdie and Tess just laugh as everyone finally calms down when Shepherd's boat is out of sight, and *Abba* starts blasting from the loudspeaker of the next boat in line, flashing with strobe lights and a disco ball while people dressed in costumes from the '70s dance around the top of the boat.

"You will *literally* never hear the end of the ball jokes," Tess reassures me as we all get up and disco dance with the rest of the beach.



"I'VE NEVER HAD SO many people holding my balls at one time."

"My balls were just *flying* at faces."

"Wars were waged over my balls."

"Did you see that black eye Jan Rowe gave that tourist just to get her hands on my balls?"

"How many men can say their balls won a parade? Usually people just *throw* a parade for my balls."

"Are you finished?" I ask when Shepherd finally takes a breath.

"Yeah, I'm all out of ball jokes. What should we do now that I have you all to myself?" he asks, tightening his arm

around my shoulders as we walk through the almost deserted festival. “I was thinking something along the lines of putting my bat in your box.”

A choked laugh comes out of me as Shepherd wags his eyebrows like a dirty, lecherous villain. “Hey, it wasn’t a ball joke. Give me some credit.”

“That was awful, and also, we’re in a public place at a festival,” I remind him, even though we just had sex in a public place last night, it was the hottest moment of my life, and just thinking about doing something like that again makes my skin get all warm and tingly.

My eyes are now darting all over the beach, looking in between booths and calculating ride times in my head, wondering if two minutes and thirty-seven seconds in the Tunnel of Love by ourselves this time is long enough for anything creative, when Shepherd chuckles softly and walks us toward the rides.

“I’m kidding. I’m in the mood for some ice cream. Let’s stop by your booth before they pack everything up, and then how about a walk through the funhouse?”

For a split second, I remember Shepherd told me last night to always speak up and tell him what I want immediately. I mean, I’d only be doing as he requested by telling him I’d like a festival orgasm, please and thank you. I can count on one hand how many people are still walking around, and my kid left to go hang out at Dominic’s house after the boat parade. Tess took Bodhi home to give him a bath and put him to bed, and I have no idea where my sister and Palmer disappeared to. So it’s fine; it’s totally cool. Let’s just bribe someone to shut something down. *Hell yeah*, I want to be wild and spontaneous!

But Shepherd is looking down at me all soft and sweet, and I really should just be enjoying how romantic this is, walking through the festival with all the pretty lights like we’re the only two people here, and besides. I already made the first, first move. It should be his turn, right? I don’t know

how this stuff works, dammit! I should have asked Tess before she bribed Bodhi with another funnel cake for the road to get in their golf cart.

“Funhouse sounds great!” I squeak out instead, wondering where the hell my nerve went.

While also being completely oblivious to the fact that Shepherd’s sweet and soft look quickly changed to that dirty, lecherous villain one as we walked up to the Dip and Twist booth, and he ordered a boring large vanilla cone.

CHAPTER 18



Wren

“I know my way around the bases.”

“**F**UNHOUSES ARE CREEPY.”

“Why are you whispering?” Shepherd laughs, squeezing my hand in his as we come around a dark corner and stop in front of a distorted mirror that makes us look very short and wide.

“Because it’s creepy in here!” I remind him. Each dark corner we’ve turned, I’ve been waiting for something to jump out at us. “It’s the whole clown theme. I hate clowns.”

I shudder as I stare at all the clown faces spray painted multiple neon shades on the walls around us, glowing under the black light from above.

Shepherd just looks away from me with a smile to take another leisurely lick of his vanilla cone while I try not to stare at his tongue and fail. He’s been taking his sweet old time with that cone ever since he got it and we walked over here to the funhouse. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was trying to torture me. And since I *don’t* know any better, I’m just assuming he really likes that damn cone. Thankfully, my phone dings with a text, and I pull it out of my back pocket, tearing my eyes away from Shepherd while he turns his body this way and that, laughing at his wide reflection in the mirror in front of us.

Spawn: Mom! Are you still at the festival?! Did Shepherd tell you the awesome thing that happened??? Isn’t it the coolest?!

“What is my son talking about?” I ask Shepherd, holding my phone up.

He pauses with his torturous licking to turn his head and read the text.

“Shit, he was supposed to wait until you got home.” Shepherd sighs and then shrugs with a smile. “It was just a little surprise. Something I set up for him. Tell him you’ll be home in a little bit, and he can tell you all about it then. We’ve got a funhouse to finish, and this cone is starting to melt.”

Since I refuse to growl at an ice cream cone, I tell Owen exactly what Shepherd said then slide my phone back in my pocket. When I start walking to the corridor that will take us into the next horrifying room, Shepherd quickly grabs my hand, tugging me back to him until I’m pressed up against the front of him.

Dipping his head down, he presses his mouth to mine, and the coldness of his lips from the ice cream does a little something to me when he deepens the kiss and his tongue slides against mine, warming everything back up. Ending the kiss way before I’m ready, Shepherd pulls his head back, takes another long lick of his ice cream, and then smiles down at me.

Clearing my throat before I scream, I turn away from him and walk down the hall into the next room, my feet stuttering to a standstill a few feet inside, with Shepherd slamming into my back at my sudden stop. He steadies me with a hand on my hip and a humorous look on his face.

“I’m not scared. I just didn’t want to smack my face into a mirror like I’ve seen all those people do on YouTube videos. This is not a room you walk through quickly, man.”

Shepherd just laughs at me as I stare at his reflection in the mirror in front of me while he stands behind me, *still licking that fucking cone—oh my God, why hasn’t he finished it yet?*

The room we’re now in is one of those nothing-but-mirrors rooms, where people go racing through, thinking they see an

opening, when it's actually another mirror. I've been through these things plenty of times to know you walk at a snail's pace with your arms out in front of you if you don't want to suffer a concussion or embarrassment when you bounce off the glass and land on your ass. The room is very dimly lit with just the soft glow of purple lights above us, black carpet below us, and strips of neon rope-lighting lining the bottom of all the mirrors. As far as the eye can see, there's nothing but hundreds and hundreds of me, standing in front of Shepherd, while he orally pleasures a vanilla cone over my shoulder.

Wonderful.

"Here, hold this," Shepherd suddenly says, reaching around me to hand me his cone, grabbing my shoulders, and turning me around to face him once I have it, then pushing me a little until my back rests against the mirror behind me.

Once again, I force myself not to attack an intimate object as I hold his ice cream and take a quick glance in the mirror behind him to look at hundreds of reflections of Shepherd's perfect ass to make myself feel better.

"I think we need to take a minute before we walk through this mirror maze," he muses, pulling my eyes away from his great ass as he dips his head back down to kiss me.

Shepherd kisses me until I completely forget we're in a horrifying funhouse, and the taste of vanilla on his tongue makes me rethink my stance on how boring the flavor is, until he's ending the kiss and pulling back just enough so he can look down into my eyes.

"Do you trust me?" he whispers, his hands cupping my cheeks.

I let out a shaky laugh, still disoriented from that kiss while also being in a room full of dizzying mirrors.

"Yes, absolutely, but if this has anything to do with clowns, all bets are off."

Shepherd just smiles at me, pulling his head back from mine and dropping his hands from my face.

“Give me a taste.”

My body pulses and clenches at his words, and then I realize he’s looking down at his goddamn ice cream cone I’m still holding in my hand between us that’s starting to melt. With a sigh, I bring it up to his mouth and try not to weep when he takes a big, long lick before speaking again.

“You do know I can read your face like a book, right?” he muses, the corner of his mouth tipping up until I can see his dimple, making my cheeks flush with embarrassment, and *okay fine*, a whole hell of a lot of need. “Keep holding on to that for me, would ya?”

The next sound out of my mouth is a shocked gasp when Shepherd instantly drops to his knees in front of me, skillfully unbuttoning my jean shorts and yanking them down my legs before I can even blink. My shorts are in a pool around my ankles when I take in a shaky breath, thankful for the mirror behind me to lean against as I watch Shepherd. He’s just *staring* between my thighs, his line of sight directly on the center of my white lace thong I pulled out of the far, far back of my top dresser drawer that Tess bought for me years ago and still had the tags on them. Not that I thought anything like *this* would happen here, but I had hoped for a little fun later tonight after the festival.

Trying not to clutch the ice cream cone in my hand so tightly it crumbles and squishes all over the place, my eyes dart back and forth between Shepherd actually kneeling in front of me and the reflection of Shepherd kneeling in front of me just over his shoulder with all the zig-zagging mirrors behind him, while I also try not to squirm while he just looks at me.

“What are you—*Oooh, sweet Lord,*” I moan loudly when Shepherd’s hands grip my bare upper thighs and he just dives right in, nuzzling his nose against my lace-covered mound, my eyelids fluttering closed and my head thunking back against the mirror.

It takes a few seconds of him just rubbing his nose back and forth over me, whispering about how incredible I smell, until that lacy scrap of material is so wet I might need to wring it out.

“Sh-Shepherd,” I choke out a few seconds later when I can remember how to breathe again, pulling my head up to look up at him and instantly regretting it. With all the reflections of the back of Shepherd’s head bobbing and turning from side to side while he just inhales me and rubs his face back and forth over me, I almost don’t finish my sentence, but I have to. “We’re in a funhouse on the beach where someone could walk in at any minute.”

I hate myself as soon as the words are out of my mouth, especially since before we even came in here, I was searching everywhere for a private spot for us, but seriously. Anyone could walk in at any minute! That makes it kind of hard to enjoy this, and I really need to pull my shorts back up.

Shepherd pulls his head back and doesn’t even look up at me. He just stares between my thighs like someone put him in a trance, his fingers digging into the flesh of my thighs a little harder. Another gasp flies out of my mouth when Shepherd lets go of one of my legs to drag the tip of his pointer finger down my lace-covered center. When he feels how wet I am for him, he looks up from his position on his knees in front of me with a smirk.

“You did notice the ferris wheel had been stopped for a good half hour before we came in here, right?” Shepherd asks softly, dragging his finger down over the front of my thong again until I whimper and my hips churn, seeking more of his touch, really not giving a shit if anyone walks in here at this point, as he continues talking. “Palmer slipped the ride operator a hundred bucks to keep him and Birdie at the top for a while.”

It takes a lot of brain power to think about what he’s saying while he continues to rub the tip of his finger up and down over me with the lightest of feather touches. I did notice

the ferris wheel had been stopped for a while, but I just assumed it was having mechanical issues or no one wanted to ride it. Knowing how protective Shepherd is of me, even though the festival is pretty much dead right now, there's no way he would be down on his knees getting ready to do what I think he's going to do to me if there was even the slightest chance someone would walk in here. He knows how absolutely mortifying that would be for me and not at all hot.

That finger Shepherd has been torturing me with slides under the edge of my thong between my legs, when what he's saying finally clicks and I remember how to speak.

“Do I even want to ask how much you paid the funhouse operator so we could be alone in here?”

Shepherd slowly drags his finger holding that scrap of wet lace to the side until...

Holy shit, he's totally looking at my naked vagina! Don't be weird, don't be weird, don't be weird!

“For something like this?” Shepherd asks, licking his lips as he just kneels there, staring at me. “This is priceless, baby. I gave him my fucking credit card.”

Before I can laugh and ask him if he's joking, I let out a strangled cry as he closes the distance and dives right back between my thighs, his tongue licking right up the center of me exactly like he did to the ice cream cone a hundred times tonight.

“Oh my God!” I shout, my head smacking back against the mirror behind me and my eyes squeezing closed when I feel Shepherd's hands slide up higher until his thumbs slip through my wetness and part my lips for his mouth.

“Christ, your pussy tastes like heaven,” Shepherd growls before taking another long swipe with his tongue, spreading me wider with his thumbs, his breath panting over my pulsing clit when he stops just before his tongue gets to it and drives me out of my mind.

“Open your eyes and give me a lick,” he suddenly orders.

I don't even think; I just open my eyes and shove the ice cream cone in my hand at his face, moaning when he takes a great big lick of the melting ice cream. The heels of his hands push my legs wider apart, and then his mouth moves away from the cone I'm holding to go right back where it was.

Gibberish and curses fly from my mouth when his cold, flattened tongue finally licks slowly against my clit, circling and circling until the coldness disappears. There's nothing left in its place but Shepherd's hot, wet tongue licking and lapping and intensifying the throbbing until my knees start to shake and my free hand quickly reaches out to grab a fistful of his hair to hold on tight.

Shepherd pulls his mouth back from between my thighs, and I have a two-second reprieve where I can catch my breath while he glances up at me, his eyes hooded and dark with desire, all for *me*.

"Go ahead and rip my hair out of my head if you want to," he tells me, growling when I tighten my grip. "I don't care what you do to me, as long as you scream my name when you come all over my mouth."

There's no time to compliment Shepherd on his dirty talk, when he quickly wraps his lips around what's left of the ice cream, sucking in a mouthful while I'm still mindlessly holding it in front of my stomach, before his cold lips are wrapping around my clit again. He clamps down and sucks while the tip of his chilled tongue flicks back and forth, over and over until the coldness disappears again and there's nothing but warm, wet heat between my legs once more, and I forget my own name.

The ice cream cone drops from my hand with a *splat* on the black carpet, and my jaw drops open with whimpers and pants as I look at the reflections just beyond Shepherd's shoulder, heightening the pulsing, throbbing need he's created. I just stare at the images in front of me of Shepherd down on his knees, pressing and holding my bare thighs wide open with his palms. The view of my wet, aching pussy on full display

every time Shepherd's head bobs and moves, where I can not only feel his mouth wrapped around me and working me over so perfectly, but I can *see* it in the reflection. There's something so much hotter about that, watching his mouth move against me, feeling it happen while I watch, making me feel like I'm outside of my body watching a movie of Shepherd feasting on me like I'm the most delicious dessert he's ever tasted. Like I'm watching the best porn *ever* and getting off on it. And holy hell am I getting off on watching what's happening, hundreds of Shepherds on his knees with his head buried between my thighs, giving me oral in a funhouse. I watch my fingers tighten their grip in his hair, moaning loudly as I tug him harder against me, thrusting my hips and moving myself against his perfect mouth, needing him to suck harder and lick faster.

Holy shit, I'm going to pass out when this orgasm hits.

I watch through the reflection as Shepherd lets go of one of my thighs, and I see his hand disappear from my line of sight until I feel what he's doing, and one of his long, thick fingers sinks deep inside me while he flicks his tongue back and forth over my clit.

It's all too much, and I can't keep my eyes open any longer. I squeeze them closed and hold onto the back of Shepherd's head with both my hands, feeling his head bob and twist and turn as he licks and sucks, fucking me with his finger, until I'm doing exactly as he ordered and screaming his name as I come against his mouth.

His tongue never stops licking and his finger never stops pumping in and out of me through my release, until I barely have time to recover before Shepherd is up from his knees and pushing his shorts down just enough for his cock to spring out. With my hands still gripping the back of his head, I bring his mouth down against mine, tasting myself on his tongue and moaning into his mouth when he wraps both his arms around me, lifts me up so I can wrap my legs around his waist, and pins me against the mirror behind me by plunging his cock inside me in one hard, deep thrust.

There's nothing I can do but tighten my legs around him and hold on tight as Shepherd fucks me against the funhouse mirror, his quick and powerful thrusts smacking his groin right against my clit, reigniting another orgasm that has me moaning into Shepherd's mouth while our kiss never stops. My body tightens and clenches around him with a second orgasm, making Shepherd rip his mouth away from mine to bury his face in the side of my neck, thrusting into me deep and hard one last time before he comes, cursing and groaning and praising my name with his lips press against my shoulder.

With a few more jerky pumps of his hips between my legs, Shepherd groans and then collapses against me, pinning me harder against the mirror while we both pant and try to catch our breaths.

"Jesus *Christ*, you make me come in an embarrassingly short amount of time," he complains with a small chuckle, our bodies still pressed tightly together, and I enjoy my view of Shepherd's bare ass in the reflection over his shoulder.

With his cock still pulsing inside me, my body clenches around him again while I stare at the picture we make in the mirror, and I smile when Shepherd lets out another loud groan, complaining about how I'm going to kill him. My cheeks are flushed, my eyes are bright and wild-looking as Shepherd holds me pinned against the mirror at my back, and my legs are still wrapped tightly around his waist. My ankles are locked together above that great ass, with his shorts pushed down right below it, because he didn't even bother taking them all the way off he needed inside me so badly.

"I will never again in my life call vanilla ice cream boring." I sigh contentedly, running my fingers gently through Shepherd's hair after almost ripping it all out by the roots, while he peppers kisses along my shoulder and up the side of my neck as he pulls his hips back and pulls himself out of me.

I've never acknowledged the fact that I looked up what the purple rose meant right after our first date, and Shepherd has never asked me if I did. I know he's just waiting for me, giving

me time, and not wanting to put any pressure on me. And even though I know telling someone you love them probably isn't ideal right after they gave you your first screaming oral orgasm, I can't help it, and the words are right there on the tip of my tongue just begging to be unleashed. Shepherd is just going to continue being perfect and amazing and making all my dreams come true, and keeping one last stupid wall up with him out of fear of getting hurt is just silly and a waste of time.

Deciding it might be best to actually put on pants before I make this declaration of love, I swallow my words until we're at least out of the funhouse and away from all the orgasms.

"Not so basic now, am I?" Shepherd asks with a smirk as he keeps his hands on my hips and holds me steady while I unwrap my legs from around him and slide them down until my feet are back on the carpet.

"Eh, you're all right. That ice cream cone was really the star here tonight."

My laughter is cut off by a squeal when Shepherd brings his palm down with a *smack* against my ass then kisses that squeal right out of my mouth, while I think about the best way to tell him I love the shit out of him.



"YO! DON'T FORGET your AmEx, dude."

Shepherd just laughs at the shocked look on my face when we exit the funhouse, and he grabs his credit card a carnie holds up between two of his fingers as he leans against a light post. Well, the only two fingers he has on that hand....

"Don't look at me like that; I already told you what I did to secure that funhouse," Shepherd says with another laugh, sliding his freaking *black AmEx* into his wallet before shoving it into the front pocket of his shorts and then grabbing my hand as we walk toward the parking lot. "Don't worry; I called and put a limit on it first. I'm not an amateur."

“You’re insane.” I shake my head at him with a huge smile on my face that I just can’t seem to erase ever since Shepherd got back down on his knees in the funhouse and helped me put my shorts back on before we walked out here.

“What’s insane is that I will be tasting you on my lips for the rest of the night, driving me crazy while I’m in my bed without you.”

I shiver at his words, and Shepherd lets go of my hand to wrap his arm around my shoulders, tugging me against his side as we walk past all of the closed and dark rides and shut-down booths.

“Shepherd, I—”

My phone chimes with a text, cutting me off and pissing me right the hell off for the interruption, until I pull it out and see it’s from Owen. Since he’s probably home by now and alone, I should make sure there isn’t an emergency. And besides, I’d kind of like to text Owen before we get home to see how he feels about Shepherd possibly having a sleepover. He spent the night when his parents slept on my couch, but he slept on the floor in the middle of the living room. I don’t know how appropriate it is to have a man spend the night in my bedroom, since I’ve never had to cross this bridge before, but Owen’s going to have to get used to it at some point. And tonight, there’s no way I’m letting Shepherd go back to his place after he drops me off. Plus, I’m hoping after what I tell him, he won’t want to leave my side anyway.

As I open up the text as we walk, Shepherd drops his arm from around my shoulders to fish his golf cart keys out of his pocket, and I quickly skim the text. And then read it again. And one more time just to make sure I’m not seeing things, my heart hasn’t started thundering in my chest like a heard of elephants, and my hands haven’t gotten sweaty and shaky for no reason. The third time does the charm, and the words my son sent to me finally register, and all of that happy, post-orgasmic glow and love lighting me up instantly goes dark like someone flipped a switch.

My feet come to a stop in the grass as everything I ate at the festival today starts churning in my stomach, making me want to throw up. Shepherd keeps walking a few steps before he realizes I stopped, the smile on his face when he looks back at me immediately dropping.

“What’s wrong? What happened? Is it Owen?” he quickly asks when he rushes back to me and takes the phone out of my hand when he sees the look on my face.

Although I don’t know what he’s even seeing when he looks at me, because I don’t even know what the hell I’m feeling right now. Sad? Mad? Hurt? Shock? All the above? I study Shepherd’s face as he reads what Owen sent me, hoping maybe it’s a joke, something the two of them cooked up just to freak me out. But I watch the calmness settle over Shepherd when he realizes Owen isn’t hurt, and I watch the smile light up his face when he looks up from reading the text, and it feels like someone just stabbed a knife into my chest.

“Seriously, that kid is so impatient. Well, surprise! Isn’t it great?”

I hear myself make some sort of sound like a choked whimper when I realize it’s not a joke, and it suddenly feels like someone shoved me off a cliff and I’m falling, falling, falling....

Shepherd laughs softly, probably thinking I’m so overjoyed at what he’s done I can’t find words, and pain ricochets through my body like I just slammed into the ground.

Except it’s the pain of knowing who pushed me that hurts the worst.

“You set up a meeting with a college baseball scout for my son tonight and didn’t tell me?” I ask with a shaky whisper while it takes everything in me not to throw up when I say those words out loud. I hate that my voice sounds small and weak, and I would give anything for my eyes not to be filling with tears right now so I could at least *look* strong, even though I don’t feel it.

Shepherd just shrugs with that easy smile on his face, like it's no big deal my son sent me a four paragraph text gushing about how Shepherd set up a FaceTime call with the scout tonight, and how Shepherd sent him Owen's stats and he's impressed, and how he's going to come out and catch one of his games soon, and how it's the best thing that's ever happened to him, and how Shepherd even hired a retired professional baseball player from the Virginia Rebels to start giving him private batting lessons.

"Isn't it awesome?" Shepherd asks happily, oblivious to me standing here in front of him feeling like my insides are being ripped out of me. "It's an amazing opportunity Owen would never have otherwise."

And there it is.

He would never have it otherwise, because I could never give him something like this. I can't just flash my black AmEx and get whatever I want for my son. I have to work my ass off and miss out on so much of his life just to give him the things I can, and *God*, that's never hurt more than it does right now. All of those sacrifices I made, thinking I was making my son happy, and it will never be good enough. It will never be *enough* when someone else can so easily give him so much more.

It was sweet and romantic when Shepherd did it for me, and all the other times he pulled strings and did something insane and over the top for *me*. But it's not sweet and it's not funny when he does it for *my son* without even asking. When he sets up a meeting I could never set up, and pays for a professional coach I could never afford, and makes plans for *my son's future* without even consulting me. I have always had control over every decision that's made regarding Owen, and it's the only thing I have ever had control over in my life, and now it's just being ripped away from me, because no matter what I do, it will never be enough.

This man that I gave my whole heart to when I was thirteen years old is standing here in front of me with a smile

on his face, making me feel like what I do for my son isn't good enough, just like Kevin. And I know. *I know* in my head they aren't anywhere near the same, but I can't tell my heart that when it feels like it's being cut apart slowly, piece by piece. Right when I thought I had a backbone, it crumbles like dust as every jab Kevin has ever made at me flashes through my head.

"Public school? Wow, way to care about our son's education by not sending him to private."

"Do you even care how embarrassing it must be for him to never have designer clothing? Oh, that's right. You can't afford it."

"You know all you have to do is ask, and I'll pay for that expensive but he needs. Come on, Wren, let me hear you beg for it. How much is our son worth to you?"

"So is this what the funhouse was all about?" I ask, swiping angrily at my tears that are falling fast down my cheeks as Shepherd looks at me in complete confusion. "Keeping me distracted so I wouldn't question that text Owen sent me when we got in there? Well done. It definitely worked. No one can say you aren't dedicated to the cause."

"Whoa, what the fuck?" Shepherd asks, closing the distance and wrapping his hands around my arms when I'm suddenly just so fucking tired I don't even care about moving away from him. "I don't know what's happening right now, but what happened in the funhouse has absolutely *nothing* to do with Owen's text. Baby, what's wrong? This is a good thing! Why are you crying?"

"I never thought in a million years you would ever make me feel like what I do isn't good enough for my son."

Shepherd's head jerks back like I just punched him, and his hands drop from my arms and hang limply at his sides. And the nightmare that has haunted me since Owen was born comes crashing back in bright, vivid technicolor. The one where Kevin returns and he suddenly wants our son, and cares

about our son, and he can give him more, and do more, and *be* more than I ever could, and in the blink of an eye, he's taking him away from me, making him happier, and giving him everything I never could.

“Wren, I never—”

“Don't,” I cut Shepherd off with a shake of my head, choking on every word that comes out of my mouth when just minutes ago I was getting ready to tell him I love him, and *Jesus*, does that make it even harder to breathe. “He's *my* son. *Mine*. You don't get to just come in here and flash your money and your fame and make all his dreams come true without talking to me first! I have spent his entire life being made to feel like I'm a piece of shit, because I can't give him everything he has ever wanted in life, and I am not about to stand here and let *you* make me feel this way too.”

“How can you even *say* something like that, after everything....” Shepherd's raspy, pain-filled voice trails off, and I can't do this anymore. I don't care if my words hurt him, because his actions cut deeper.

Grabbing my phone out of his hand down by his side, I continue wiping the tears off my cheeks as I walk around him. Shepherd brokenly whispers my name again as he quickly reaches out and grabs my arm, but I don't even look back at him as I shake it off and keep walking.

“I can't do this with you right now,” I say as I hear him walking behind me. “*Please* don't follow me. I need to go home *alone*, to be with my son.”

CHAPTER 19



Shepherd

“Put me in, Coach.”

“**Y**OU DONE FUCKED up, bro.”

I throw the next dart even harder at the board hanging on the wall, and Bodhi lets out an annoyed huff from right next to it when the dart smacks against the metal wire separating the sections and drops to the ground.

“That’s the tenth dart you’ve broken the tip off of tonight,” he complains, bending over to pick up the broken pieces from the ground and tossing them into the trashcan next to him. “If you break another one, Ed won’t let us play with his toys anymore.”

“It’s fine. I’ll just buy him more fucking darts by flashing all of my goddamn money around,” I snap, whipping another dart at the board. This time, it gets wedged so deeply into the clapboard wall next to it that Ed might need to use the claw end of a hammer to pull it out.

When I reach for another dart from the pile on the high-top table next to me inside Dockside Eddy’s, Palmer quickly reaches out from his barstool across the table and swipes them all out of my reach.

“No more sharp objects for you.” When I narrow my eyes and growl at him, Palmer just laughs at me. “Sit your ass down, hotshot. I’m not afraid of your bark, when you were sitting here crying into your beer when we got here.”

“Fuck off,” I mutter, slamming my ass down on the barstool and finishing off the last warm, disgusting swallow of beer in my glass before smacking it back down.

Yes, I was sniffing back fucking tears when he and Bodhi decided to show up here to give me shit when I didn’t fucking invite them. I just want to be left alone, because I’m pissed.

And sad. And hurt, *goddammit*. I can’t believe after everything that’s happened between us and everything I’ve said to Wren that she would honestly think I was *anything* like that piece of shit Kevin. It rocked me right to my core when she accused me of making her feel like what she did wasn’t good enough, and it fucking *hurt* that she thought so little of me when I thought she was my entire universe, and I was just trying to do something nice.

“Listen, man, you overstepped, and you’re just gonna have to suck it up and deal with it.” Bodhi shrugs as he takes a seat at his stool.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now? All I did was something thoughtful for Owen. Something nice. I didn’t do it to be an asshole flashing my money around, and I definitely didn’t deserve the shit she said to me,” I remind him, getting angrier by the second the more I replay the words Wren said to me last night, and everything I was forced to tell Bodhi and Palmer when they got here and wouldn’t leave me alone until I spit it out.

I thought for sure when I looked up from my beer a few hours ago and saw them standing next to my table that they’d gotten an earful from their women and they were here to kick my ass. I was positive there had been a Sip and Bitch last night after Wren walked away from me that had lasted well into the night and maybe even possibly was still happening. Color me surprised when they were completely clueless about what was wrong, Birdie and Tess hadn’t even spoken to Wren since the festival yesterday, and *Ed* was the one to call them and tell them to come up here, because he was afraid I might start flipping tables.

I have no idea why in the hell she didn't tell them. Why she didn't complain all night long about what a douchebag I am, *just like fucking Kevin Stratford*. And that's what keeps putting a chink in the armor of pissed off I've surrounded myself with. And that's what keeps making me *feel* like the douchebag Kevin is that I haven't gone to her and made her talk to me, but I'm too hurt this time.

"You didn't deserve being compared to Kevin; I'll give you that. But you definitely deserved to get your ass handed to you." Bodhi nods.

Palmer and Bodhi have kept their mouths shut and let me bitch for the last two hours while I broke half of Ed's darts, but clearly they're finished keeping them shut.

"You wanna tell me how I fucked up too?" I ask Palmer with a humorless snort.

"Don't look at me." Palmer shakes his head as he grabs his bottle of beer. "I fucked up with Birdie, and I still don't know why she forgave me. Looks like Bodhi really *is* the voice of reason."

"Right on." Bodhi nods again with an easy smile as Jimmy Buffett starts playing from the sound system.

I usually love nothing better than coming to Dockside Eddy's to relax at the best fresh seafood and oyster bar in the world. With its low-key vibe right on the dock of the permanent resident end of the island and nautical artifacts hanging on the mismatched clapboard walls, it's always a great place to hang out and chill. But nothing can make me feel chill at this moment in time, not even Jimmy Buffett and the view of the sun setting out over the ocean through the windowless walls that lead out to the deck.

"Look, I know you don't want to hear this, man," Bodhi continues, resting his arms on the table and leaning closer to me. "But you *did* overstep just a little. I know you love Owen and you want the best for him; we *all* do. But Wren is his mom. You made a really big decision about him without her,

and you set up a video conference that she didn't even know about, with a man she's never met and knows nothing about, at a college on the other side of the country."

Fuck. I did do that. But it's just because California has one of the best college ball programs around, and it doesn't change the fact that she still accused me of throwing my money around just to make her feel like shit, and that's not cool.

"And honestly, dude. I don't even think it's about the money. Not really." Bodhi shrugs, reading my mind as he starts chewing on the end of the straw left over from his Shirley Temple. "You need to put yourself in Wren's shoes for just a minute here and think with your head instead of your anger. She has had Owen all to herself his entire life, and now, suddenly, she has to share him. It's scary for her, and she probably feels like she's losing him already because he's growing up so fast, and then you get him a college scout, reminding her he *is* growing up fast and he'll be leaving soon, and yeah. That's a tough pill for someone like Wren to swallow, whose entire life has revolved around that kid and his happiness. You've got fifteen years of history to compete with and fifteen years of Wren being the only real parent in Owen's life. And I know it's not a competition, but I'm just saying, ease up a little on the anger and give her a break. Let her get used to the fact that they aren't alone anymore and she doesn't have to do everything on her own any longer."

Son of a bitch.

"You're *not* Kevin Stratford." Bodhi laughs. And then throws his head back and laughs some more until he finally gets it out of his system. "And Wren *knows* you're not him, man. I'm pretty sure if you would have sat her down and given her a heads up about this instead of surprising the shit out of her and making her feel like she was losing control, she would have been totally cool. Probably not *ship Owen to California* cool, but I don't think she would have minded him just having a conversation with the guy and gotten some advice. Come on, this is Wren we're talking about. It was a shock, and that poor woman probably still has PTSD from Kevin, so I'm sure all

sorts of fun things he's said to her over the years about how she could never afford to make Owen's life better were running through her head when you guys sprung that on her."

That one glass of beer I've been nursing for hours starts bubbling and churning in my stomach, making me feel sick. Why didn't I use my fucking head? My only excuse is that I'm new at this, and I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Bodhi's right. I love Owen, and I just want the best for him, and I never meant to make Wren feel like what she's given him *isn't*. All I've wanted my entire adult life is a family I could spoil and give the world to, and now that I have it, I didn't even think. I just charged full speed ahead without even considering Wren's past or how it would make her feel.

"The good news is there wasn't a Sip and Bitch scheduled last night," Palmer reassures me. "I would put money on the fact that Wren didn't bitch to the girls, because as soon as she got home, she felt like shit for what she said to you."

And there it is, the reason why I kept feeling some kind of way, because Wren didn't complain about me to her sister and Tess. Sip and Bitch is in their blood. They've been doing it since they were kids to complain about everyone who has ever pissed them off or hurt them. It just feels and sounds so much like Wren that I know he's probably right. My sweet, amazing woman with a heart of pure fucking gold, who never wants to do anything to make someone mad at her, would definitely regret the things she said to me as soon as she walked away and really thought about everything that happened, and how I'd rather fucking die than *ever* make her feel like she's not good enough. And I've done nothing but sit around being pissed off, waiting for *her* to come to *me*, because I felt like the wronged one here.

Jesus Christ, I suck.

"For fuck's sake does no one answer their goddamn phones?"

All of us look up from the table to see Murphy standing next to it, looking even more pissed off than I've felt for the

last twenty hours and fifteen minutes.

“Mine’s dead.” Bodhi shrugs.

“I left mine out in my cart,” Palmer adds.

Flipping over my phone I left face down on the table on vibrate, I see two texts from Murphy and five missed calls, one of the texts nothing but a video attachment.

“Well, while you three yentas were sitting around discussing your monthly visitor, Kevin the Dickfuck has been here being his usual dickfucky self,” Murphy mutters, making my blood run cold and my entire body get tight with rage. “He already went to the athletic director and tried to cause a big fuss, saying it’s not appropriate Owen’s mother is sleeping with the coach.”

I stand up from my stool so fast it goes flying backward and topples over onto the floor.

“Calm down, son. We’re gonna handle this,” Murphy warns me, stepping forward to press a firm hand on my shoulder. “You need to look at that video first so you’ll know everything we’re dealing with.”

Even though all I want to do is race out of here and find Wren and Owen and make sure they’re okay, I grab my phone from the table, pull up Murphy’s text, and jab my finger on the video to bring it up.

Palmer and Bodhi get off their stools and crowd around me to watch a cell phone video that looks like a bunch of kids recorded from the backyard of a cottage behind Dip and Twist. Even though the video was taken at night, I can clearly see the brick building behind them, even with the lights all off and the place dark, thanks to the security light shining down from a pole in the parking lot.

“Sharon Worsham’s grandkid is the one recording the video,” Murphy explains while the video pauses for a few seconds because of the shitty island Wi-Fi. “He didn’t show it to anyone right away, because he was out doing something he

wasn't supposed to after curfew with his friends and he didn't want to get in trouble."

"Are they doing the cinnamon challenge?" Bodhi asks excitedly. "Oh man, it's so fucking funny when they start coughing and looking like dragons snorting brown smoke out of their noses. Rrraaawwrrrr!"

"I don't know what the hell those idiots are doing. Just pay attention to what's happening behind them," Murphy orders.

The video is less than a minute long, and Palmer is the first one to speak when it finishes. I'm too afraid to open my mouth, or I'll let out the guttural roar building up inside me and scare the hell out of everyone in here.

"That motherfucker is the one who trashed the Dip and Twist," he mutters from over my shoulder.

As clear as could be, even though it was taken well after midnight, not far behind the teenagers eating spoonfuls of cinnamon and choking and laughing their asses off is none other than Kevin fucking Stratford breaking the deadbolt off of the backdoor of the Dip and Twist with a hammer and then waltzing right inside like he owns the place.

"I guess when he got wind that you and Wren are dating and that you're playing a huge role in Owen's life, it pissed that little weasel right off," Murphy explains. "He seems to think he can prove Wren is an unfit mother by trashing the shop and complaining about her all over town."

"Where the fuck is he?" I growl as I shake Murphy's hand off my shoulder, turn, and start stalking toward the front door.

"No one's seen him since he left the AD's office." Murphy hustles after me with Palmer and Bodhi quickly following. "He could be anywhere at—"

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I stop right in front of the door to look down at it, my heart dropping right down to my feet. If I wasn't currently thinking about all the ways I plan on fucking up Kevin Stratford, I'd probably fall right to my knees and cry like a baby.

Love of My Life: I'm sorry. I'm SO sorry. I didn't mean anything I said, and I was just scared and stupid and being ridiculous. He's here. I need you, Shepherd. Please. I'm so sorry.

Yep, if I wasn't currently thinking about all the ways I'm going to ruin Kevin Stratford's life, I wouldn't even be able to start walking again and put one foot in front of the other to get me the hell out of here and get me to my woman. Because even though Wren is probably still scared and hurt by the line I crossed that I never meant to, she's the strongest goddamn woman I know. Because even through all her confusion and pain, she can suck it all up and let me know when she needs me. And doesn't *that* just make me feel like an even bigger dick for staying away from her and not being able to suck up my own issues? I never should have let her walk away from me last night. I should have made her talk to me and gotten to the real root of the problem like a mature adult instead of a toddler who got his feelings hurt.

"I'll call Tess and tell her to bring the lighter fluid and blow torch," Bodhi chirps as I slam my hand against the front screen door, and it flies open to smack against the outside of the building.

"I'll call Birdie and tell her to bring... well, *Birdie*. She's been wanting to kick Kevin in the balls for years," Palmer announces.

"Who are you calling?" Murphy asks as I bring my phone up to my ear, and he climbs right into the front seat of my golf cart with me.

Even though Wren has always thought this is *her* fight, and I told her I would never step in unless she asked me, I still did my own digging on the asshole who fathered Owen right after I talked to the guys that morning at The Barge. Wren is finally making the call to the bullpen and bringing me into the game, and I'm not going to screw it up. I know exactly what I need to do to end this bullshit once and for all so she and Owen can finally have some peace.

“I’m gonna throw my goddamn money around the *right* way this time without crossing any lines,” I tell Murphy as the call connects to a hedge fund company in North Carolina.

CHAPTER 20



Wren

“I was taught to hit and steal.”

“YOU DIDN’T KNOW he was failing Algebra? Why am I not surprised?” Kevin asks smugly, and I just sigh, looking down at my phone for the tenth time.

It serves me right that Shepherd isn’t replying. God, I was so awful to him last night.

“I’m not failing!” Owen shouts angrily, and I quickly look away from my phone and wrap a reassuring arm around my son’s shoulders, so freaking pissed off Kevin ambushed us when we were playing catch in the front yard.

Playing catch with Owen always calms me down and makes everything better. Every year that he’s gotten older and he’s needed me less and less, no matter what I’m doing, I will always stop everything when he hands me my glove and asks me to toss him some balls. For a few minutes in time, I can stand out in this yard and pretend like he isn’t growing up right in front of my eyes, and all I see standing across the yard from me is that little boy who’d rest his head on my lap while we watched a movie, and who wouldn’t let me go to sleep until I read him three bedtime stories.

For a few minutes tonight, I was able to forget about what a stupid, *stupid* mistake I made last night with Shepherd. I’ve spent all day beating myself up about it, trying to find the right words to say to him to apologize and hope that he forgives me

for saying such hurtful and callous things to him I never meant, and then Kevin had to come along and ruin it.

And now I have a headache, because he won't fucking shut up.

"I'm *not* failing, Mom," Owen quickly reassures me, looking at me with worried, pleading eyes, and I just want to punch that smug look off Kevin's face for making my baby feel like this. "I failed my last test, and it brought my grade down to a D, and I already sent a text to Chris, and he's gonna come over tomorrow and start tutoring me again. I was gonna tell you; I swear."

"I know," I tell him softly, giving him a reassuring smile and squeezing my arm around his shoulders tighter. "It's okay."

"Maybe if you didn't work so much or spend so much time sleeping around with his coach, you'd know what our son's grades were," Kevin sneers.

"Screw you," Owen immediately growls, and I have to tighten my hold on him when he tries to charge.

"Nice manners you've taught him."

"Oh, eat shit, Kevin," I finally mutter, having had just about enough of the last ten minutes of him berating me about my parenting skills and what a slut I am in front of my son.

"Nice. Really nice, Wren. What an *excellent* role model you are." Kevin snorts, not even realizing what a hypocrite he is, as he just stands here in *my* fucking front yard, on *my* island, in his stupid pastel button-down and white linen pants, wearing loafers with no socks, and so much product slicking his hair back I wish Tess was here with a lighter.

"Owen, go inside."

"But I—"

"Go inside!"

I can count on one hand how many times I've raised my voice with my son, and Owen knows when I mean business. Just to make sure he knows my anger isn't aimed at him, I quickly lean in and press my lips to the side of his head. I take a deep breath of the smell of his hair fresh from the shower he took before we came out here to play catch, before whispering in his ear.

"I love you. I've got this. I promise. Go inside."

Owen pulls his head back to look at me, and I smile at him, dropping my arm from his shoulders and holding my fist out to him. He gives me a fist bump and a crooked smile then turns and starts walking away from me, my heart swelling with pride and making me remember that no matter what Kevin says, I have done an excellent job raising him.

For once, I'm glad Owen isn't a toddler when he slams his shoulder into Kevin's as hard as he can as he walks by him, making me let out a snort of amusement. Especially when Kevin curses in pain like a big baby and starts rubbing his arm. As soon as Owen is up the steps and the front door is slamming shut behind him, I let go of that tight hold I had on my anger, not wanting my son to witness his mother losing her shit. Glancing down at my silent phone one last time just in case, I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

It's fine. I can do this. This isn't his fight anyway.

"Let me tell you what's going to happen, now that—"

"In case you didn't hear me the first time, eat shit," I cut Kevin off, slowly opening my eyes. "Yes, I work a lot, and yes, I wasn't aware that Owen had just failed a math test *this morning*, because I was at work. But where in the *fuck* have you been for the last fifteen years? You've never given a shit about *my* son, so don't pretend to give a shit now. You're just threatened, because someone else came along to take the place you never deserved. He's better than you, and he's kinder than you, and he only thinks of Owen's happiness instead of his own fucking agenda, and *God* I love him so much for that. *Fuck!* You are *such* a piece of shit!"

I throw my hands up in the air in frustration, because it doesn't even matter what I say to this man; nothing is going to get through that narcissistic, bullshit head of his.

"You sure do talk a big game, acting all tough when you actually called in the cavalry, because you're *weak*," Kevin mutters, jerking his chin back behind me.

Before I can ask him what the hell he's talking about, I turn around to see Shepherd stalking across my front lawn, with Palmer, Bodhi, and Murphy not far behind him, as Tess and Birdie squeal up to the curb in Tess's golf cart.

Shepherd's eyes are locked on mine as he moves. My heart is pounding in my chest that he's actually *here*, and I have just enough time to lock my knees and brace myself before he's just walking right into my body, wrapping his arms around me, and crashing his lips to mine. My arms fly around his shoulders, and I cling to him as tightly as I can, whimpering into his mouth when he kisses the hell out of me, plunging his tongue through my mouth and bruising my lips with the force of his kiss.

"Um, hello? We were in the middle of a discussion."

The annoyed complaint from Kevin has Shepherd yanking his mouth away from mine with a growl as I slide my hands down to rest against his chest to feel the steady beat of his heart beneath my palms, reassuring me that he's really here and I don't have to do this alone. I know I can; I just don't *want* to. Shepherd keeps his eyes on mine as he quickly unwraps his arms from around me to bring his hands up and cup my cheeks.

"Sorry I'm late. Traffic was a bitch." Shepherd smiles down at me, making me laugh and shake my head at him, knowing he probably passed a minimum of two golf carts on his way here. "You okay?"

"I am now. I just have a headache that weighs around 175 pounds, reeks of Axe body spray, and won't shut the hell up."

Shepherd chuckles, and I just stare up into his blue eyes looking at me with so much love in them, wondering how in the hell I could have *ever* compared him to Kevin.

“You came,” I whisper, finally feeling like I can breathe again now that he’s standing right in front of me and he doesn’t hate me for what I said to him last night.

“Of course I did. I should have been here sooner. I’m so sorry.”

“No.” I shake my head, fisting the front of his shirt in my hands. “*I’m* sorry. You are nothing like him, and I never should have said that to you. I was just scared, and I felt like I was losing Owen, and it has nothing to do with you or the money or what an amazing thing you did for him, even though I’m still kind of pissed you didn’t talk to me about it first, and that can never happen again, and I swear to God if my baby moves to California, I will gut you like a fish.”

“And I will gladly hand you the knife,” Shepherd chuckles softly, dropping his head to rest his forehead against mine while his thumbs brush back and forth against my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry I lashed out at you like that. I just kept hearing all the stupid crap in my head I’ve been hearing for years and I took it out on you.”

“Voice of reason right here, folks!” Bodhi shouts from where he’s leaning against Kevin’s golf cart in the driveway.

“What a weak little bitch.”

I have to lock my knees once again and push like hell against Shepherd’s chest when he drops his hands from my face and tries to move around me to get to Kevin.

“Hey, knight in shining armor,” I say softly, bringing one of my hands up to the side of Shepherd’s face to get him to look at me instead of the idiot who can’t keep his mouth shut behind me. “I’ve got this. Let the queen handle this one.”

Shepherd finally looks down at me, the corner of his mouth slowly tipping up until I can see his dimple, and all of

that fire and murderous rage he was aiming at Kevin disappears from his face.

“As you wish, my queen,” Shepherd says softly, smirking at me as he takes a step back and sweeps his arm down and up in a graceful arc, pointing me in Kevin’s direction.

I just want to kiss that damn smirking mouth of his again, but I have some trash to take out first. Turning around with Shepherd at my back, and the rest of my family and friends standing around my yard supporting me, I glare at the man who has made me feel like shit for far too long, finally understanding that he doesn’t have any power or control over me anymore unless I give it to him. And I’m done giving it to him. Especially when I have a man like Shepherd standing behind me, making sure of it.

“Get the hell off this island and don’t come back,” I tell Kevin, crossing my arms in front of me.

“I’m not just going to stand around and let some washed-up baseball player take what’s mine.”

“Oh, hey now,” Shepherd pipes up from behind me. “I *just* retired like, a month ago. I won’t be washed up for at *least* five years.”

“Oooh, better make it four,” Palmer shouts from the driveway, where he has his arm wrapped tight around Birdie’s waist, looking like he’s trying to hold her back just like I did with Shepherd. “The Bennett sisters are exhausting.”

Everyone laughs when Birdie elbows Palmer in the stomach, and then Kevin has to go and ruin it *again*.

“In case you’re forgetting something, I’m his father, and there are laws preventing this pathetic little bitch from keeping me from my son.”

I just sigh, so used to these words at this point, but I have to quickly bring my hand up and hold it against Shepherd’s chest when he growls and steps right up against my back. I know it must be killing him that I won’t let him rearrange

Kevin's face, but I love that he's staying behind me and letting me fight this battle.

"Really? You're his father?" I ask Kevin, taking a step toward him. "What's his favorite color? His favorite food? His favorite snack? What PlayStation game does he play more than any other? What was his first word? What's his shoe size? What does he always ask for when he's sick? Who's his favorite teacher?"

Kevin opens and closes his mouth, unable to answer even one goddamn question about his own son, just like I knew.

"Neon green. His mom's spaghetti and homemade garlic bread, but it has to be angel hair pasta or it's just gross. Salty is Cool Ranch Doritos, and sweet is a Hershey bar with almonds. MLB The Show 20, although he still sneaks in a lot of Fortnite but will never admit it to another living soul. 'Titi,' which is short for auntie, which made Aunt Birdie deliriously happy and Mom not so much. Seven and a half. A Sprite with a straw and Flavor Blasted Goldfish crackers, but they have to be put in the plastic Spongebob bowl. And Mrs. Schneider," Shepherd rattles off without missing a beat or even pausing to think.

God, I love this man so much.

"You're his coach and you're screwing his mother," Kevin tries once again with his sad attempt at making me feel bad. "Of course you know a lot of stuff about him, because you're around him all the time."

"And whose fault is that?" I fire back. "No one but yourself. You've had fifteen years to be a father to that amazing, wonderful boy inside that house and to get to know him, and you chose not to. It says a lot about a man by the way he treats his child's mother. You've never hidden the way you feel about me in front of him, and it's spoken *volumes* over the years. It's *your* fault Owen can't even stand to look at you or be in the same room with you, not mine, and certainly not Shepherd's, who is more of a man than you could ever even hope to be and has done nothing but love us and take care of

us, and never once makes us feel like we aren't good enough for him. So for the last time, take your narcissistic bullshit off this island and stay the hell away from me and Owen. He has a father now, and it certainly isn't you."

Everyone in the yard starts clapping, cheering, and whistling when I finish my speech, but I stay still and quiet as Kevin's face gets beet-red and his hands clench into fists at his sides. I silently watch the anger building up in him, knowing something super special is about to come out of his mouth, because he *really* doesn't like to be embarrassed in front of other people.

"Oh, you're a fucking cunt!"

"Nope," Shepherd immediately states calmly from behind me.

With a gentle shove against my shoulder to push me out of the way, Shepherd takes three giant steps forward, pulls his fist back, and punches Kevin right in the face.

There's a collective "*Oooh*" of pain from the front yard crowd.

"You *asshole!* You broke my fucking nose!" Kevin wails in a muffled voice, bent over at the waist with his hands up over his face and blood pouring through his fingers.

Shepherd just shakes out his hand and turns back around with a smile on his face as he walks back to me.

"Sorry, my queen. I couldn't let that one stand."

"You're forgiven," I tell him with a smile. "How's your hand?"

Shepherd lets me take his hand and bring it up to my mouth for a quick kiss to make the pain go away.

"Hurts like a bitch, but probably not as much as his face." Shepherd winks, pointing his thumb back over his shoulder at Kevin, who is now freaking out about the blood stains on his expensive shirt.

“Do you have any idea who my father is?” Kevin shouts while Shepherd and I just stand here staring at each other with sappy smiles on our faces. “You are going *down*, you piece of shit! Oh my *God*, I am going to own you!” He just laughs like a maniac while his phone starts ringing in his pocket.

“I know you’ve got this handled, baby, but do you mind if I take one more swing, just for old time’s sake?” Shepherd asks, making me wonder how I ever survived without him in my life.

“Swing away, Oliver.”

With a kiss to the tip of my nose, Shepherd turns and wraps his arm around my shoulders, leaning against me casually while Kevin’s phone continues to ring from his pocket.

“Actually, I do know your father, Kevin,” Shepherd tells him with amusement on his face as he brings his hand up to study his nails, making me laugh. “We had a nice little chat on my way over here. Turns out Roger Stratford is a *huge* Hawks fan, and he was just so delighted to get a phone call from little old me, Shepherd Oliver. Coincidentally one of his favorite Hawks players. But I mean, can you blame him? I’m a pretty big deal. You gonna get that?” Shepherd pauses to glance down at Kevin’s pocket where his phone is still ringing and then shrugs.

“Anyway, he wasn’t too happy about all the bullshit his son has been pulling, and *really* wasn’t happy about the whole Dip and Twist thing, you naughty boy.” Shepherd chuckles and wags his finger at Kevin.

“Are you kidding me? He really *did* trash the shop?” I mutter, glaring at Kevin, who is now starting to turn an alarming shade of green as Shepherd continues.

“Turns out he’s been trying to get season tickets for years and hasn’t been able to. But no worries, Kevin! I hooked Daddy up. He’s got season tickets behind home plate for life and a press pass to get into the locker room whenever he

wants, to go with it. Seriously, you might want to answer that phone now.”

The ringing finally stops when Kevin pulls his phone out of his pocket with a shaky hand, bringing it up to his ear. His eyes widen and actually fill with tears, and no one says a word until Kevin suddenly runs as fast as he can out of my yard.

Bodhi, Tess, Palmer, and Birdie all step away from his golf cart as he scrambles inside it with the phone still up to his ear, backing up and peeling away so fast he almost runs right into Tess’s golf cart parked against the curb. It’s not until he’s out of sight that everyone finally throws their heads back and laughs.

“And that, ladies and gentleman, is what it looks like when daddy has your yacht and your Porsche impounded, and then threatens to cut off the rest of your money.”

When Shepherd leans in to give me a kiss, I quickly bring my hand up to his mouth to stop him.

“Hold that thought. I need to go inside and get Owen.”

Knowing there’s no way I can truly celebrate what just happened here without my son, I turn and race back into the house, feeling happier and lighter than I have in a really long time.

175 pounds of douchebag lighter, to be exact.

CHAPTER 21



Shepherd

“Swing and a Mishap.”

I DON'T EVEN pay attention to the celebration happening behind me. I just stand here in the middle of Wren's yard staring at her front door she disappeared behind a few minutes ago with a big, shit-eating grin on my face. I bounce on the balls of my feet, not wanting to move an inch until she and Owen come back outside.

Until *my family* comes back outside.

“He's better than you, and he's kinder than you, and he only thinks of Owen's happiness instead of his own fucking agenda, and God, I love him so much for that.”

Wren's words I heard her say to Kevin when I first got here and started stalking across her yard play on a repeat in my head, along with the part where she told him Owen's father was here now, and it certainly wasn't *him*.

Goddamn, that woman can make me feel like the king of the world with just a handful of perfect words, and I'm so proud of her for the way she handled things today. It's not until I hear some loud cursing from Tess and Birdie back in the driveway that I turn around in confusion from my happy vigil staring at Wren's door.

Right as a body slams into mine along with a mouth against my lips. There's a moment of confusion as I wrap my arms around the woman and wonder how Wren got out of her house and behind me so fast. And then I realize Wren's lips

aren't this sticky, her body isn't this bony, she doesn't drown herself in so much obnoxious perfume it gives me a headache, there's no way Tess and Birdie would be screaming their heads off if Wren were kissing me, and *what in the holy Jesus fuck is happening right now—I know exactly who the hell this is!*

“You have *got* to be shitting me right now!”

A shout from the woman I'm *supposed* to be kissing has me waking the hell up and jerking my head back from the gross, sticky mouth that was on mine. Just in time to see a seriously upset Wren standing in the doorway of her house, right before she steps back inside and slams the door closed.

“What in the actual *fuck*, Alana?” I scream, my head whipping back to the biggest mistake of my goddamn life as I shove her away from me and take a bunch of steps back as I swipe the shit off my lips from her stupid lip gloss.

“Let me at her! *Let me at her!*” Birdie screams from the driveway as Palmer stands behind her with both his arms wrapped tightly around her flailing body.

Tess just reaches into her golf cart and pulls out a blow torch, turning the knob until the gas hisses out of the nozzle and then clicking the ignite button until fire shoots out the end as she smiles serenely at my ex.

“Do you have any idea how dirty and disgusting that ferry was?” Alana complains, looking down at her phone in her hand, not even realizing she's about thirty seconds from going up in flames. “You could have at least sent a yacht for me if you wanted me here.”

“Seriously. What. In. The. *Fuck!*” I shout again, wondering if I'm in the goddamn Twilight Zone. “Is it National Ex Day and no one told me? Is there a hashtag I should be using? Why do I feel like I'm in the worst fucking romantic comedy of all time? Who's writing this shit?”

I scan all the faces in the yard, but everyone just looks at me with blank expressions except for Tess, who looks like she might start humping the blow torch in her hand.

“Oh, don’t be like that, Sheppy,” Alana coos, making me actually dry heave. Loudly... and violently. “That friend of yours, Kevin something or other. He sent me a message on Instagram and told me how much you missed me and how you were just too shy to tell me yourself.”

“Fucking Kevin,” I mutter, shaking my head and then looking at the woman standing in front of me with her fake tits, and her fake teeth, and her fake lips, and her fake hair, and so much plastic in her body she *really* should be concerned with that blow torch and not about me.

I can’t believe I ever thought for even a second that she could take the place of Wren. Perfect, gorgeous, sweet, soft Wren who tastes like heaven and who might not *ever* forgive me for opening the door and having to witness me kissing this woman *again*.

Goddammit!

“Listen, Alana, you need to get the hell out of here. *Now,*” I tell her, not even giving a shit if I hurt her feelings. I need to get my ass inside that house and make sure Wren’s okay. “I don’t want you here, I never wanted you here, and I never *will* want you here. The only woman I will *ever* want is inside that house right now, probably fucking devastated and—”

“Oh shit,” I hear Palmer mutter with a laugh, making me look away from Alana.

And my dick immediately gets hard.

Because after everything she’s gone through and after everything that happened here tonight, I should have known Wren wouldn’t be devastated by opening her front door to find me kissing Alana. She’d be *pissed*.

“You might wanna run, bitch.” Birdie laughs as we all watch Wren walk down her front porch steps, casually twirling and flipping Owen’s bat in her hand as she goes, like that vampire Jasper in the *Twilight* movie she made me watch after the glitter incident, with a Tess-like, evil smile on her face.

I actually let out a fucking whimper, and my dick pulses in my shorts as Wren steps down off the porch and easily taps the end of the bat against the heel of each sneaker-covered foot as she walks toward us, like a pro walking up to the plate and tapping the dirt off his cleats. Like *I've* done walking up to the plate a million times, and *goddamn* do I want to throw her down on the ground and fuck the hell out of her right now she's so hot. She looks like sexy, supervillain Harley Quinn walking into a room full of dudes whose asses she's about to beat without breaking a sweat.

“Sweetie,” I say gently as I move farther away from Alana. “You okay?”

“Just great, honey!” Wren smiles brightly as she walks right by me, wrapping both her hands around the handle of the bat and bringing it up above her shoulder as she goes. “You came to the wrong fucking island, on the wrong fucking day, and kissed the *wrong fucking man, bitch.*”

“Oh shit...” I mutter, watching Alana start walking backward so fast she trips over her own feet as Wren winds up to take a swing at her head.

I have just enough time to sprint the few feet Wren made it past me, quickly wrap my arms around her body from behind, and lift her up off her feet right before she does. Wren wriggles and struggles in my arms, cursing and growling so loudly it makes Tess shut off the blow torch and move to hide behind her golf cart.

“Fine! I'll go! This shitty island sucks anyway and doesn't even have a Starbucks,” Alana complains with a huff, flipping her blonde hair over her shoulder as she turns and walks away.

“Oh my gosh, I *love* your shoes!” Tess says to Alana when she walks by her, making Alana pause and smile at her.

“Really? Thanks!”

“No,” Tess says, her smile dropping. “Fuck off. You're a twat.”

“Whatever,” Alana mutters, stomping off down the street, complaining about how useless this place is without Uber.

When I finally feel like it’s safe to set Wren down, I ease up on my hold around her, bringing her back down to her feet. She tosses the bat to the grass before turning around in my arms.

“Thanks for stopping me. I would have felt bad if I actually hit her. You know... later. In like a week or so.”

“I know.” I laugh, reaching up to brush a long strand of hair off her face that fell out of her messy bun.

“I love you so goddamn much,” I tell her. “It really is a good thing I stopped you, or that could have been a swing and a mishap.”

Wren just shakes her head at my bad pun as I dip my head down to hers. I’m immediately stopped with a palm pressed against my forehead.

“Oh no. No way, buddy. You are *not* kissing me with that mouth again until your entire body has been bleached of whore,” she warns me, looking down at my lips in disgust for the first time since I got to Summersweet, and I just laugh again.

“Can we order pizza? All this drama made me hungry,” Owen complains as he comes out of the house, walks down the front porch steps, and makes his way over to us.

“Everything makes you hungry,” Wren reminds him.

“I’m a growing boy, and I need to be fed on the hour, every hour.” He shrugs when he makes it to us, and I hold my fist out for him, but he just keeps his hands in his front pockets.

“Not until you wash the whore off.”

“Owen!” Wren laughs through her scolding.

“Don’t you *even* blame that one on us!” Birdie says as she and Palmer walk over to join us, along with Tess and Bodhi

and Murphy, and Owen finally laughs and bumps his fist against mine.

“Don’t you dare yell at my perfect boy,” Murphy grumbles as he wraps his arm around Owen’s shoulders. “Somebody better figure out dinner fast. I need to take my water pill.”

“What did I miss?”

We all turn as Laura comes running up the driveway.

“You want to tell her, or you want me to?” Birdie asks Wren.

“She’s all yours,” Wren immediately says, letting someone else handle something for her, as I lace my fingers through hers and we all start making our way into Wren’s house.

“There’s still time to change your mind,” Wren warns me as we walk up the steps behind everyone while Palmer calls and orders pizza, and Birdie starts telling everything to their mom. “You don’t just get me and Owen; you get this whole crazy, messy nuthouse.”

“But I don’t like sausage! Tess, tell them I don’t like sausage! I am *not* eating if there’s sausage, and you can’t make me!” Bodhi complains from inside the house as we pause right in front of the open doorway.

“I like it messy,” I remind her.

“I love you. Just in case that wasn’t obvious.” Wren smiles up at me.

“I know. I mean, I *am* kind of a big deal.”

“Oh my God.” She laughs with a roll of her eyes, grabbing my hand and pulling me into the house.

A house filled with love, and people, and noise, and where I get to enjoy the first of many dinners with my family that I’ve waited my entire life for.

EPILOGUE



Wren

Two weeks later...

Shepherd: Remind me again how many scoops of topping go in a flurry.

Wren: Four. Are you sure you're okay taking this shift by yourself? I can be up there in five minutes.

Shepherd: I'm fine. Just like I was fine the last three shifts I worked. The Dip and Twist is still standing, and no one died. Aren't you supposed to be watching a movie with the girls and relaxing?

Wren: Did you forget Birdie wants to talk wedding plans tonight? There will be no relaxing.

Shepherd: Oh God. Did she bring the binders?

Wren: The binders, 27 bridesmaid dresses to try on, each one more hideous than the last, and I have looked at so many invitation styles I told her to just send everyone a fucking email. I don't think I'm in the bridal party anymore. This is it. This is how I die.

Shepherd: Do we have to invite her to our wedding?

Wren: Wait, what????!!!



Palmer: What's everyone wearing tonight?

Bodhi: Uh, a T-shirt and shorts. We don't have to dress up, do we?

Tess: You are NOT wearing a T-shirt and shorts to Shepherd's first interview since retiring. I'll find you something nice to wear.

Shepherd: You guys can seriously wear whatever you want. Wren and I will be standing by the dugout at the high school ball field, and ESPN wants everyone else sitting in the bleachers for wide shots.

Wren: Except you're definitely not wearing that purple suit you laid out on the bed this morning. I already put it in the pile to give to charity.

Shepherd: Dammit!

Bodhi: Right on. I'll stick with my Dave Matthews shirt.

Tess: That shirt is from the 2001 tour. You are *not* wearing that shirt, for fuck's sake. Stop acting like a child.

Wren: Be nice, Tess. Let him wear the T-shirt. Just don't let him wear one of those hideous bridesmaid dresses LOL!

Tess: I already burned three of them LOLLOL!

Birdie: You assholes do remember I'm in this group text, right?



Three weeks later...

Shepherd: What about a shopping spree at Nike?

Wren: No.

Shepherd: I could rent out his favorite amusement park!

Wren: No.

Shepherd: Get him his own golf cart?

Wren: I'm going to have to say yes to one of these birthday present ideas for Owen, or you're just going to keep giving me bigger and more extravagant ideas, aren't you?

Shepherd: Now you're catching on! Let me spoil the boy, Wren. I won't do it for every single holiday. Just these first ones.

Wren: Fine. But he's only turning 15 this weekend. He still has another year to go before we even discuss getting him his own golf cart. And

major holidays only, Shepherd Christopher Oliver.

Shepherd: I am NOT returning the jet ski I got him for National Sundae Day, so you're just going to have to deal with it.

Wren: That is not even a real thing.

Shepherd: It's November 11th. As a proud ice cream shop owner, I'm disappointed in you for not knowing your own national holiday.



Five weeks later...

Mom: I see you got the D last night.

Wren: MOM!

Mom: We definitely did not have another break-in, since Shepherd installed a security system akin to that of Fort Knox, and yet, there are spoons, and cups, and bowls all over the place.

Wren: Well, I don't know what to tell you. Shepherd and I went to dinner with his parents on the mainland last night. Maybe YOU made the mess this time.

Mom: Oh shit, that's right! I did LOL! Wow, I had a lot of wine last night. It's all coming back to me now. Stuart was a very wild lover. We might need to replace one of the shelves in the walk-in freezer. Didn't realize we'd broken that off as well.

Emily: S-E-X! Go Sex! Get it, Laura!

Wren: Don't encourage her, Emily!

Wren: I don't even want to know why you were in the walk-in.

Mom: Nipple stimulation is much easier in a freezer.

Emily: Is this the same Stuart who did that thing with the grapes and your toes?

Mom: No, that was Stuart Franklin. This is Stuart Larson, the one who can fold his tongue in half during oral.

Shepherd: Please, for the love of God, someone remove me from this group text.



Wren: It has a Jacuzzi tub I can do laps in!

Shepherd: I know, baby.

Wren: Did you SEE the theater room???

Shepherd: I did, baby.

Wren: My God, you are really going to cry watching *Field of Dreams* in this thing. It's huge!

Wren: That's what she said LOL!

Wren: HOLY SHIT HAVE YOU SEEN THE CLOSET??? I can fit a semi-truck in here.

Shepherd: What do you think? Do you think it's big enough for you, me, and Owen?

Wren: Shepherd, this house is big enough for half the island to live in. I can't believe Miss Abigail and her husband are actually selling this place and moving to Costa Rica.

Shepherd: I didn't want to put in an offer until you got to do a walk-through. It's your decision, Wren. If you don't like it, I'll build you whatever the hell you want.

Wren: I love it, and I love you. You're insane, and this house is too big and extravagant, but OMG I want to hump the kitchen backsplash it's so pretty. Did you know there's a pasta faucet? Like, what even IS that?! I don't care, but I need it. Hurry up and get home from your sister's house so we can tell Owen and I can properly show you how much I love you.



Two months later...

Wren: It's been too long since I've had your cock inside me. Do you have any idea how hot I get just thinking about it? I love how big you are, stretching and filling my tight, wet pussy.

Shepherd: Jesus Christ, woman.

Wren: You like that, baby? Would you like it if I slipped my hand inside my panties? I'd just slide my fingers through all that wetness you made and slowly push two of them inside me, wishing it was you, thrusting and pumping and filling me up so good.

Shepherd: JESUS CHRIST, WOMAN! Are you trying to kill me???

Wren: Can you feel how tight and wet my pussy is wrapped around your big, strong cock? Remember last week when we snuck out onto the baseball field after dark when it was empty and the lights were all off? Remember how I straddled your lap on the bench in the dugout and I wasn't wearing any panties under my skirt? God, it felt so good sitting on your strong, firm thighs, while you clutched my ass and I slowly brought my body down onto your stiff, beautiful cock. You told me I felt so good, and tight, and you spread your legs beneath me and widened my thighs around you and fucked up into me so good, do you remember? Can you feel me bouncing up and down on your lap, taking every inch of you deep inside me? I'm so wet right now just thinking about riding your dick and how hard you came inside me.

Shepherd: And now I'm dead.

Wren: Maybe you'd like it better if I got down on my knees for you, sir. I could wrap my warm, wet mouth around that big, stiff cock and lick and suck you hard and deep until you come down my throat.

"Wren," Shepherd growls in warning.

"No, keep going, it was just getting good."

Shepherd and I look back over our shoulders at Bodhi sitting right behind us in the bleachers, leaning forward and shoveling popcorn in his mouth. Shepherd reaches up and presses his palm against Bodhi's forehead to get him to move back before turning around to look at me with one of his eyebrows raised.

“Okay, so maybe a Friday night high school football game was a bad time to test out my new phone sex skills.” I shrug, sliding my phone into the front pocket of my hoodie.

Shepherd does the same, and I slide my arm through the crook of his elbow to snuggle closer to him as he kisses the top of my head, and we go back to watching the game. The third quarter just started, and right now, the Summersweet Wildcats are winning by one touchdown. Going to Friday night football games is a tradition, even if we don’t have any family members who play on the team. I love the hot summer months, but I *really* love the cool fall and winter months when we can wear sweaters and light fires and snuggle up for Friday night football.

“Are you jealous that Birdie and Palmer are making out under the bleachers? We can go when they get back.” Shepherd wags his eyebrows at me and makes me laugh before he continues in a lower voice, putting his mouth right by my ear. “I’m also pretty confident we’re not supposed to be sitting right next to each other when phone sex happens, but *damn*, baby. That was seriously hot. Your research seems to be going quite well.”

“Let me know when you’re finished with the books Bodhi gave you,” Tess pipes up from her spot next to Bodhi in the row behind us. “And you better not have un-dog-eared all the dirty pages. I refer to those when I need extra inspiration before sex.”

While Tess and Bodhi argue behind us about how he’s the only inspiration she should need, I look over at the scoreboard and calculate how much time is left in the game. After practicing my phone sex skills and quite frankly just being anywhere near Shepherd, I can’t wait to go home and be alone with him.

Home...

Good God, just saying that word makes it seem so small and insignificant when the ginormous mansion Shepherd bought for us is so big I could drive a car through the

entryway. Miss Abigail and her husband hadn't been living in the home for a few months, so it was completely empty and just waiting for us to move in. Which we did, the same day Shepherd made the offer, at the insistence of Miss Abigail, who just couldn't handle having the home her husband built for her when they first came to Summersweet empty for even one more day while the paperwork went through. She was so happy the house would be going to a Summersweet local, especially when we told her they were more than welcome to stop by and see the place whenever they were in town, that she hired a gourmet chef to cook dinner for us every night our first week there as a special thank you. The fact that her home is now *mine*, the castle that always starred in all of my fairytale fantasies growing up, and I'm living in it with the man of my fairytale dreams was seriously thank you enough, but *good God* that spicy shrimp pasta the chef made on night two almost gave me an orgasm at the dinner table.

At the very southeastern end of the island next to SIG, the 6,000 square foot, three-story, fairytale home with light-gray siding and white pillars sits right on the water with its own private dock for Shepherd's boat. And Owen's jet ski—although he's still not allowed to ride that damn thing without an adult. With four bedrooms and five-and-a-half baths, we have stunning, panoramic views of the ocean from all of the floor-to-ceiling windows, a gourmet kitchen, a theater room, an insane pool with waterfalls and a freaking grotto, and one of my favorite parts: Huge, white, wraparound porches on the second and third stories that I plan on curling up with Shepherd and watching many, many sunsets together. Of course *he's* already planned to put a flat-screen television out there by the electric fireplace so we can watch baseball games, and Owen has already invited the entire freshman class for a pool party in the heated pool next weekend.

But my absolute favorite part about the whole house? It's definitely the archway from my cottage that Shepherd had a contractor remove and install in the entryway of the kitchen at our new house, with fifteen years of height markings for

Owen. Including the most recent marking yesterday of goddamn five-foot one after, of course, a sleepover at Aunt Birdie's.

I look up at Shepherd and smile right before he tilts his head down and presses his lips to mine. It's a soft and gentle kiss while the crowd around us cheers when the Dukes fumble the ball, and it's picked up by a Wildcat for a fifty-yard run before he's tackled. But there's no such thing as a *gentle kiss* with us. As soon as I feel his tongue push past my lips while we stay seated in the bleachers as everyone around us jumps to their feet when the Wildcats score another touchdown, I seriously consider leaving the game early or kicking Birdie and Palmer out from under the bleachers like Shepherd suggested.

Every morning I wake up, I have to pinch myself that this fairy tale is really my life. And every time Shepherd kisses me like this, like there's no one else in the world but the two of us, I can almost forget that only a few months ago I thought I would be alone and miserable forever. It's not all unicorns, and glitter, and Lisa Frank stickers all the time. I still have days when I feel like I'm not doing enough when Shepherd does so much for us, but those days are getting fewer and farther apart, and I'm getting more and more used to being spoiled, thanks to him. I'm not gonna lie; going to the mall now is a freaking *blast* when you don't have to take a calculator with you and decide if you'd rather have a new pair of shoes or buy groceries that week, and you can just have your boyfriend pop you right over there on his boat.

"Will you two stop sucking face? You're missing the game," Murphy complains, forcing Shepherd and me to end our kiss when he flops down onto the bench in front of us as everyone else in the crowd sits down when we make the two-point conversion.

"Did you get me my Twizzlers, Snickers, Nerds Rope, and KitKat?" Bodhi asks excitedly from behind us as Murphy hands him back a hot dog.

“Tess said you’re not allowed any more sugar tonight,” Murphy reminds him, while Bodhi throws a small temper tantrum.

“Hey, Shepherd, can I get one of those Wildcat football hoodies in a large?” Alan, one of the football parents, asks as he pauses in the aisle by our row.

“You want your last name in glitter letters or just regular?” Shepherd asks, pulling his phone out to make a note of the order.

“Dude, do you even have to ask? Glitter me up.”

Alan gives Shepherd a fist bump before continuing to walk up into the bleachers with his nachos while I just smile and shake my head at my man.

Did I forget to mention our monstrosity of a home has a monstrosity of a craft room? It looks like Belle’s library from *Beauty and the Beast*, except every shelf is filled with basket after basket of craft supplies, and *yes*, there is a damn ladder on wheels. Deciding to continue practicing his Cricut skills on my family and friends, Shepherd started making Wildcats gear for everyone to wear to the games. T-shirts, long-sleeved T-shirts, hoodies, sweatpants, and rally towels, he made everyone a pile of things to test out and make sure the vinyl decals didn’t come off when they were washed. Parents and fans at the games immediately went nuts for them the first time we went to a Friday night football game, and Shepherd has taken so many orders in the last few weeks that he’s decided to run a small business out of his new craft room, donating all of the profits right back into the school’s sports programs.

He’s so perfect I almost want to puke. But I won’t. Because he’s mine and I love him.

And exactly one week after Kevin ran away from Summersweet Island with his tail tucked between his legs, an envelope from a law office in North Carolina was delivered, filled with the paperwork Kevin had already signed,

denouncing all rights to Owen. It broke my heart for exactly three seconds, until I looked out the window of my cottage to my front yard and saw Owen and Shepherd playing catch. Owen already had a father, and it definitely wasn't Kevin Stratford.

There's only one thing missing from this perfect life of mine. Well, one *person*. But she's living her dream on the other side of the world, and no matter how much I miss her, I just have to continue being happy for her.

My phone rings from the pocket of my hoodie, and I quickly pull it out just in case it's Owen with an emergency. Shepherd saw him talking to a... *girl* by the concession stand during halftime when he went to the bathroom, and I keep hoping my baby will call me and tell me she's gross and I need to come save him. Even though it's not Owen calling me for an emergency out from an icky girl trying to take my baby away from me, I can't keep the huge smile off my face when it's like my best friend just knew I was thinking about her.

"Hey, Em, how's—"

"Wrennyyy! I love you so much!"

I wince and pull the phone away from my ear for a second she screams so loudly. The crowd goes wild when our wide receiver makes an interception, and I press the phone closer to my ear when I hear Emily shouting a bunch of stuff I can't understand, plugging my other ear with my finger.

"I can barely hear you! I'm at the football game!" I shout, mouthing to Shepherd who's on the phone when he sits back down beside me after cheering with everyone else.

"I said I quit, bitch!" she shouts again, this time without so much ear-piercing screaming and with a whole bunch of giggles. Emily never, ever giggles unless...

"Oh no... how much tequila have you had? Is there bread near you? Eat some bread. Fucking carb up! Are you alone? You better not be alone or—"

“Wrenny, baby!” Emily cuts me off with more giggling. “I love how you alwayssh... Alwaysshhhhh.... How you *all the time* make sure I’m okay. I miss you sooo much, but I’ll be home soon! I quit, bitch! I’m not gonna cheer anymore! I’m moving back home tomorrow, baby!”

Her slurred words finally register in my brain, my eyes widen in shock, and my heart starts pounding with nervous excitement, hoping this isn’t just some drunk rambling and she’s really saying what I think she’s saying.

“You didn’t try out again?”

“Fuck no, I won’t go!” she shouts, and then giggles more before sobering. But you know, not *actually* sobering, sadly. Just moving on to the sniffing and crying portion of her night. “Nope. Emily Flanagan is officially an old, dried-up, has-been cheerleader. Tryouts started two weeks ago, and I just realized I don’t have the heart for it anymore. And I’m too old for this shit, Wrenny. My knees locked up when I was sitting on the toilet peeing last month after a four-hour practice; did I tell you that? I was stuck on the fucking toilet, sad and alone with cramped knees. I don’t want to be sad and alone on the toilet anymore, Wren!”

“Okay, sweetie, calm down,” I tell her as gently as possible at a high school football game when I have to talk so loudly just so she can hear me over the noise.

“Anyway, I handed in my resignation. I’ve already packed up my apartment, and I wanted to surprise you once it was all finalized, and now it is, and now I’m celebrating that I’m finally moving back home with some of the girls at... fuck, I don’t even know whose house, but I think we’re in the Valley. It’s a really pretty house. Anyway, guess who just walked in who is no longer off-limits and I’m going to kiss the shit out of?” Emily rattles almost faster than I can keep up. But keep up I do.

Oh, good God, no...

“Emily, do *not* make out with the quarterback of the Vipers when you’re shitfaced!” I scream, right when the crowd goes quiet during a timeout.

Murphy glares at me, Shepherd laughs and wraps his arm around my shoulder, and I just smile and wave at everyone around me and go back to my best friend in her time of drunk need.

“Goddamn, that man is hot,” Emily says through the line.

“Emily Jean Flanagan, no!” I scold, but I already know it’s too late.

“Dude, I’m moving back home to Summersweet Island tomorrow. This is my one shot to show him everything he’s been missing the last four years. *YOLO*, motherfucker! See you bitches tomorrow!”

“Emily, you are going to regret—”

The line goes dead before I can finish telling her she’s going to regret kissing the guy she’s had a massive crush on all four years she’s cheered for the Vipers, when she probably won’t even remember it tomorrow.

Holy shit, Emily will be back home tomorrow!

“You okay?” Shepherd asks as I slide my phone back into my hoodie, and he pulls me tighter into his side as a cool breeze blows through and I shiver.

“I’m more than okay. I’ll tell you about it later.”

“You can tell me about it while we discuss interviewing a cleaning person for the house,” he tells me, giving me a quick kiss while I scowl at him as the players take the field when the timeout ends.

“We are *not* hiring a cleaning person, Shepherd. That’s taking the spoiling thing a bit too far.”

“Whatever you say, my queen,” Shepherd says with a wink and a smirk, and I just shake my head at him, knowing I’m

going to put my foot down about this. Because I have a voice, and a backbone, and we don't need a damn cleaning person.

Narrator: Wren did, in fact, hire a cleaning person, declaring after two days of cleaning that monstrosity and only making it through three rooms that “This is some *bullshit*. Hire whoever you want!” And they lived happily ever after surrounded by love, noise, unicorns, glitter, and Lisa Frank stickers.

The End

Stay tuned for Emily and her quarterback!

[First and Tension \(Summersweet Island #3\) coming soon!](#)

Did you miss Birdie and Palmer's story?

Check out [Kiss My Putt \(Summersweet Island #1\)!](#)

Check out all of Tara's books:

www.tarasivec.com

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Thank to my readers who continue to follow me on this crazy, word vomiting journey.

And a great big thank you to all the baseball moms out there. The ones who have more team T-shirts in their closets than regular clothes. The ones who never forget to pack the cooler with drinks and snacks, who are always vacuuming sunflower seed out of their trunk, who will throw down with any parent from the opposing team who even thinks about saying one negative word about their baby, who curses the person that decided on white baseball pants that never come clean while washing them at midnight the night before a game, who live in their cars driving back and forth to practices, and who eat

entirely too much take-out during the season because fuck cooking. And who never, ever complain because they know someday soon, there won't be coolers to pack, or sunflower seeds to vacuum, or a little boy with floppy hair swinging with all he's got behind the plate. You're amazing. Sleep is overrated anyway.