



*The Edge of
Forgiveness*

THE EDGE SERIES BOOK FOUR
KRISTIN TURNAGE

The Edge of Forgiveness

The Edge Series, Book 4

By Kristin Turnage

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Dedication

This is for the ones that struggle with forgiveness.

Forgive the person that stares back at you in the mirror, they definitely need it. Tell them they're human, they most likely don't hear it enough. Tell them that who they are now isn't who they'll be tomorrow and that everyone is a work in progress, they could use the support.

And above all, they are loved and deserve a happy ending.

Prologue

Courtney

Dread and fear keep me still, I wasn't expecting to see half of his body hanging out from under my sink as I walked into the kitchen. His tools clank against the metal pipes and his soft grunts echo throughout my heart, creating a raging storm inside me. This has gone too far. "What are you doing?" My sharp tone causes him to jerk and curse as I hear his tools fall. The overwhelming need to apologize sits in my throat, as I squeeze every muscle in my body stopping it. My pivoting emotions turn to anger fast. Crossing my arms over my chest, my body tenses as Hunter slowly pulls himself out from under the counter. The energy shifts as he comes out and I fix my stance. I'm ready for this battle.

He doesn't look at me first, he just slowly takes his time standing up, dragging on for what feels like an eternity. Suddenly his piercing blue eyes strike me, and a shock runs through my chest as I try to ignore it. His calm demeanor radiating outward as he wipes his hands off with an old shop rag. Why is he so calm? He should be shooting fire right back at me, that is what we do, this is what we've always done. "Your garbage disposal wasn't working right, so I fixed it. You do know that you aren't supposed to put plastic in there, right?" He lightheartedly laughs. I double blink, seeing what he's trying to do. This game, his charm, he's trying to fool me, trying to pull me into his labyrinth of lies and submission. I

see now what he's been doing, fixing all the broken things in my apartment, like some goddamn saint coming to my rescue.

When he came here a year ago and just needed somewhere to crash, I was okay with him here. And when he said he didn't want to spend money on a hotel while in town to look at a horse, I was okay with that too. I was even okay when he moved from my couch to my bed, giving me his charming smile, and promising me this was just for fun, nothing serious. But then, by the fourth trip, he's fixed my squeaky door and changed all my burnt-out lights, even fixed my old window that was losing its seal. The balance is shifting, and I've been teetering on the edge for a while. And now, here he is fixing my goddamn garbage disposal, stepping over the boundaries that I had clearly laid out. I am not okay with this anymore. Who does he think he is?

"Why are you doing all this Hunter?" I ask, the camel's back is now broken.

"Because it needed to be fixed." He jabs back, leaning against the cabinets.

"I don't need you to fix anything." I argue, he's getting too comfortable and the lines I've drawn in the sand are getting washed away.

"I know," he shrugs, "but I've had some free time and I know how to fix it, so I just thought I'd make your life a little easier."

That's the fucking problem, he just thought he'd help me and make things easier. "Well, it doesn't make things easier, you can't just keep going around and fixing shit when I've never asked you to. I already called my landlord and he said he was going to come and look at it. Goddamnit."

Hunter furrows his brows and scoffs, "Right, like the last time? When you called him to come and fix the thermostat and he came three weeks later. What's the big deal, Court?"

"The big deal, Hunter, is I don't need you to come into my life and fix anything. My life is fine the way it is. Stop acting like you're my boyfriend." I shout. I'm done, he needs to

understand that I'm not what he thinks I am. The twinge of guilt hits my stomach and I tense, focusing my rage as I ignore it. I'm used to being a bitch, because I am that bitch, but something feels different this time. I don't give a fuck about him or anyone else.

Hunter stares back at me as I wait for him to yell, to fight back, to stir the pot of tension that we have between us. That's what I want, his eyes change, and I see them darken. His jaw, once slack is now tight. I watch as his eyes fill with anger, and I tighten my body waiting for him to unleash.

Hunter tosses his rag down, his voice is low and with no emotion. "I know I'm not your boyfriend, you've made that perfectly clear multiple times. I've been fixing things, not because I think you're my girlfriend, but because you are my friend. If I know how to do it, you better bet that I'll get it done. It'll save you money, money that I know you need. But hey," he stops, holding his hands up, "I guess I should have asked first. My bad." He turns and gathers his tools before walking towards the door.

I blink, my legs carrying me stride for stride, "Where are you going?" Why am I asking, why do I care?

Hunter grabs his bag, his bag that's been packed for days. "Home, Courtney." He stops and looks me in the eye, "That's where I belong, right?" He turns and opens the door, stopping before he walked out, "There's supposed to be thunderstorms tonight." And with that the door shuts behind him.

My eyes move to my feet. *Move damn it.* They're stuck, yielding to the floors hold. His truck roars to life and suddenly, I'm alone. Not the alone I've felt my whole life, the alone that hollows you, the alone that pulls you down into the dark, cold, lifeless abyss. The feeling of knowing there will be no return for what I've caused. My knees give out as the sound of his truck fades into the distance, and I realize the error I just made. I realize how badly I loved having Hunter in my life. My body remembers the warmth he gave me, and my mind reminds me of the nights where his touch caused the dark thoughts to flee.

My throat aches as the screams come out, tears rolling down my face. I become aware of how much I need him, a thought that terrifies me. I've never needed anyone, ever. And yet, I want him, I need him. He isn't coming back though, I can feel it in my gut. That fine thread that was holding us together has snapped and my lifeline has disappeared.

After crying like a little bitch, I stand up, count to ten, pick up the mess he left and go to bed. It isn't dark yet but if there are thunderstorms coming, I'll need the comfort of my weighted blanket. "I'm good, it'll be fine. It is what it is." I repeat my sacred mantra over and over again until I hear the crackle of thunder. It's not a huge deal, I know that Cassie wouldn't like this, but she'll understand. I fall asleep to that thought, that this is the bed that I made and now I must lie in it. Knowing that the only way I can gain my own strength was to send Hunter back to North Carolina and leave it at that.

My phone rings and it jolts me from my mild sleep. "Hello?"

"Hey!" Cassie cheers in the phone. "Sorry to wake you but I have something important to tell you."

"Hang on, hang on." I grumble, blinking my eyes and trying to focus. "Okay, go ahead."

"I'm getting married!" She squeals.

I force my voice to an excited level. "That's awesome. I knew it was going to happen, sooner or later."

"So, I just have one question," she mutters.

"Sure," I say, hesitantly.

"Will you be my maid of honor? I know it's not the traditional way of asking and I know that you don't like this kind of stuff," she explains.

My heart sinks, I'm going to have to see him again. I close my eyes and put back on my mask. "Of course! I can't wait!" My stomach tightens as I listen to her start in on how Ryan proposed, and all the plans and ideas she has been coming up with. All the while dreading the inevitable meeting that is bound to her every word.

Fuck.

I

Hunter

One year later

You can do this.

That's what I keep repeating to myself. The more times I hear it, the more I might believe it, right? I guess that's what I'm hoping for. I look up and lock eyes with Chanel, I ended up asking her to this wedding since she was the safest choice. I don't even like Chanel in a romantic way but I needed someone around to keep my mind occupied. She's nice, nicer than a lot of the girls in this town and with the wedding date getting closer and closer, I needed to make a choice. I knew Courtney was going to be here for the wedding and that shit scared me. Seeing her again was going to send shivers down my spine. When she came up for the engagement party, I got so fucked up that I lost two days to the alcohol. Thankfully, Noah was there and he was able to help. He's the only one who really knows how all this shit with Courtney has played out, the history we've created, and the storms that have come and gone. We were two people who wanted to fuck. That's how it all started. It was supposed to be fast and fun and when my skin touched hers, I turned to molten lava. The sex was never awkward, it was exotic and always fucking addicting.

I didn't realize how deep I had fallen until she made it known that I was overstepping and that we weren't a couple. Being honest, I was doing all those things because I had become comfortable and safe where I had landed, but the more she pushed back the more I fought, the more I lied. She was right, and I didn't see it. So, when I left, I came home and licked my wounds, content to never see her again. The rejection still stews inside me and I don't like how much it has affected me.

But here we all are, my dumb ass little brother marrying the love of his life as I stare at mine.

"May we have the rings?" The priest asks.

"Fuck," I hiss, snapping back to reality. Ryan looks at me, the anger in his eyes growing, and Cassie smiles. "Sorry," I mumble. Fumbling into my pocket, I hand Ryan the ring. We make eye contact again and if this wasn't his wedding, he'd be beating the shit out of me.

My eyes find hers again as Ryan turns back. The light from the large window making her eyes gleam, the hazel sparkling against her face. I've always thought it was funny how her eyes reflected her precious soul. She tries to act all dark and bitchy, but once you see her light, everything changes.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride." I blink and clap along with everyone as Ryan kisses Cassie. They turn and walk down the aisle together, hand in hand, as I step forward, taking a breath in and holding out my arm to Courtney.

She hesitates slightly, stepping up to me. The spicy warmth of her perfume forcing me to tighten my muscles. She grasps my arm and my dam of emotions is about to break. Her pastel pink dress looks amazing against her tanned skin and her raven-colored hair is perfectly curled with pieces of daisies strategically placed throughout. I feel it on the tip of my tongue, the need to tell her how beautiful she is, but that isn't a good idea. So, I try to keep my eyes forward as we walk down the aisle.

“Why do you keep looking at me?” She hisses out of the side of her mouth, smiling to my grandma as we walk by.

“Because it’s hilarious to see someone with a heart of stone wearing pink. I thought that dress would have burned your skin or something.” I say once we walk outside, dropping her arm, and letting go of the act. I grab my sunglasses to shield myself from the sun and her stupid face.

“Oh, I have the heart of stone, you literally just said fuck in the middle of the ceremony. Who has the heart of stone again?” Her tone’s changed, it was light and hopeful, now it’s sharp and annoyed. Leaning her body towards me, I feel the challenge.

Not letting her get too close, I push her back a little. “Can you please not get in my fucking bubble.” I say with a smile. The more space between her and me, the better my life will be.

She lets out a groan, “I can’t wait to get the fuck away from here.”

“Me too, you need a ride? I can take you to the airport now, maybe you can catch the red eye back.” I snap back.

“Can you two stop it,” Joss walks up next to me, slapping my arm with her ungodly strength. “Hunter, this is your brother’s wedding, stop acting like a fucking child.” Her green eyes narrowing at me as my butt puckers in fear.

“Courtney, Heather needs you for a minute,” AJ walks over interrupting the tension. Courtney sighs, turning to look for Heather, her friend who’s tagged along this weekend to take pictures. Without another word she takes off and I watch her stroll away as her body sways in the flowy dress.

“You know Ryan’s going to kill you, right?” Mac laughs.

“I know.” I say, looking out to the field where the newly married couple is standing as Heather snaps picture after picture. Heather snaps a few more pictures, until Courtney comes over and takes over.

“What was that about?” Jace walks up next to Mac.

I shrug, not really knowing the answer. My head has been spinning, my stomach in knots, and my emotions have been up and down like a damn rollercoaster all week since the moment she walked into Ryan's house with her suitcase in tow. I've never felt this before so I don't really know what to do with any of it. I let out a slight breath, because on top of my mind swirling in chaos, I can't seem to breathe right. "I need a drink," I mutter, walking into the reception area, weaving through the crowd, until I reach the bar. "One Jack and Coke, make it a double," I say to the bartender as Chanel walks up.

Fuck, I forgot I invited her.

"Hey," she smiles brightly. I almost wince because I haven't thought about her since the wedding started, I've only worried about myself.

"Hey," I say, dropping my voice into a smooth baritone, her eyes softening. "Sorry, can I be honest?"

"Sure," she hesitates.

"I forgot about you," I state, no need in digging my grave any deeper.

Her smile falls fast, and I instantly regret my stupid choice. "Oh," she mutters.

"Yeah, I know. It's terrible. I've focused on other things and I feel bad that I haven't been the best date for you at a wedding."

She gives me a little smile. "Well, it is your brother's wedding, and you're in the wedding party. It's okay. Thank you for being honest." She shifts her weight as her eyes look to the bartender, "Can I have a rosé, please?" The bartender nods and hands me my Jack and Coke as she turns back to me, "Can I be honest with you too?"

I nod, "Yeah, sure, please."

"I only said yes to coming here with you because I wanted to make my ex-boyfriend jealous." She blinks as I try to digest the new information, the look on my face making her laugh. "Come on Hunter, I've known you since the sixth grade. So, why did you really invite me?"

I stare down at my drink for a few seconds, the thoughts of what I want to say, the thought of lying, everything rushing through my mind at once. I have to tell her something, but nothing wants to come out.

“Wow that bad, eh?” She lets out a snort, taking the wine glass from the bartender. “You don’t have to tell me, but if you did then maybe I could help you.”

I stare at her hard for a minute, “Are you sure about that?”

“Hunter, stop trying to make me feel better. I already told you, this.” She stops, waving her hand between us, “is nothing but a business traction. You don’t have to tell me who it is. But whoever it is, let’s make them wish they were me.” She shrugs as I let out a short laugh.

This will not work because a certain someone would have to be in love with another certain someone for the jealousy to flow. Hell will have to freeze over before she has any real feelings for me, the thought striking me in the heart and I need to take a few breaths to make sure I’m still alive.

You know, maybe this will distract me from what my mind won’t seem to let go of. “Okay, deal, let’s do it.” I push off the bar, smiling.

I hold out my arm to her and Chanel smiles with pride, placing her arm into mine as we turn to make our way outside. Coming out the doors, I see Courtney standing next to Cassie and our eyes lock. Checkmate Courtney, your move.

2

Courtney

“Hey Court, are you okay?” Cassie asks, my eyes speed to hers as I stand here watching that fucking asshole walk out here with his date.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I just wish he would be more considerate of everyone else’s time.” I huff, looking down at my phone. Letting out a growl, I shout towards them, “Hey, Asshole, hurry the fuck up.” Hunter’s laissez-faire personality drives me insane. The dumbass smiles as he stands there with his *date*, who happens to laugh at something. She pushes her chest into him and whispers something as his eyes dart down and he starts to walk away, fucking stumbling. Jesus Christ. “I swear to God if you don’t hurry up, I’m going to take off my heel and shove it up your ass.”

His date walks over to a bench and waits for him, sipping her bitch ass wine, as he walks over to the wedding party. “Did you need me, Princess? You should have said something.”

Ryan and Noah stop me before I can get my heels off, he would’ve needed a quick trip to the kitchen for some ice for his bruised ass. He knows I hate it when he calls me fucking princess. “Stop it!” Cassie shouts, “both of you.”

“Sorry Cassie,” we say in unison. We might hate each other, but this is Cassie’s day, and we shouldn’t ruin it.

“Now, where are we standing.” Cassie moves her hair out of her face, looking around at the ground. Motioning her to stand by the oak tree, Josslyn fans out her white dress at the bottom. Her dress is beautiful, a white lace cover with white silk underneath, and her hair hangs long down her back, curled and falling like a waterfall. Small braids start on both sides of her head and wrap around to tie in the back with a small bouquet of white daisies holding it all together.

I snap some pictures, getting the right light as she moves and flawlessly flows across the landscape. The rock on her hand shining in the light, clear and glamorous. I go through the lineup, the groomsmen, and the bridesmaids, and when needed, I let Heather take back over. I don't know how many times I've thanked her for flying out here to help me, but it could never be enough. There was no way I would've been able to capture Cassie's wedding and be the maid of honor at the same time.

Once we all finish, I sit back and smile at how good the pictures are turning out. I notice another opportunity for some more cuteness when I spot Madison's little baby Beau sitting in the grass with his wedding clothes on, pulling at the grass and playing with the leaves. He has the cutest little chubby baby cheeks and is wearing adorable suspenders. I squat down and snap a few pictures of Beau as he sits in his own little world before Madison walks over and takes some grass out of his mouth, wiping off his clothes and face. I make some noise with my mouth and play peek a boo behind my camera until he smiles, and two little dimples poke out on each side, his blue eyes lighting up as he watches me disappear then reappear. His brown hair has reddish tones to it in the sun, giving him a dark strawberry swirl on his head. I get a few pictures of him before he spots Tyler behind me and is done with me, reaching, and fighting his way over to his dad, babbling the whole way.

Standing up I look over the pictures, deleting the ones I don't like while Madison looks over my shoulder. A smile fills my face as I feel how much she appreciates my work. “I'll send these to you once I get home.”

Madison smiles wide, “I’d love that. I was going to ask before you left if you would snap some photos of him, but I didn’t want to intrude. I don’t have any recent ones, just his newborn pictures.”

“Sure.” I smile, nodding my head. “I’ll be here for a few more days then I’ll be heading back, just let me know when and where.” I continue going through the pictures, deleting this one or that one, and the ones that don’t have good light. “Okay, I want a few more of the group.” I shout, handing over my camera to Heather, before going to stand with everyone else. Everyone hustles, trying to stand where I point so we can all finish, the only resistance coming from the eight-year-old flower girl, Belle, who is so hungry that she can barely stand. She ends up on the ground with Beau as Heather snaps the last of the pictures.

“Okay, all done,” Heather announces.

Cassie starts instructing people on when to walk in and queueing up the DJ for introductions, even at her own wedding she can’t let anybody else be the coordinator. I lean into Ryan and whisper, “Do you think she’ll ever get her head out of her ass and realize that this is what she is supposed to be doing?”

Ryan chuckles, draping his arm around my shoulder. “A guy can hope, can’t he.”

Ryan’s become like a brother to me, and his playful gestures trigger a memory. Looking at Ryan’s suit, I realize he’s wearing exactly what Cassie had envisioned, the exact thing she said when we made that stupid pact about starting a wedding business with our friend Brandie years ago. His tan suit with white daisies on his lapel mirrors my memories of Cassie’s perfect wedding, with the groomsmen wearing carbon copies of his attire. The bridesmaid’s dresses are variants of the rainbow, pastels instead of vibrant colors. My dress is pink, which I’m not a fan of but I will gladly suffer for Cassie, she deserves to have her dream wedding. Everyone coordinating perfectly and matching each other just like her old pictures.

My happy mood is soured in an instant as I turn and face Hunter, who’s standing next to me, I had forgotten about him,

and his stupid date. “Why is it that when I’m in a happy mood, you show up and spoil it.” I grin as Cassie looks at me and I wink, letting her know I’m just giving him shit. Hunter clears his throat and holds out his arm, thankfully he has a suit on, and I won’t be able to feel his warm skin on me, because I don’t know if I could keep up the charade if that happens.

“Okay, Heather, make sure you get everyone as they walk in,” I holler as she nods and gets inside the doorway. “Ryan, make sure you’re smiling.” I look back at him giving him a stern look. “If you’re frowning, I’ll make you do it all again. Don’t fuck this up.”

“I won’t, I won’t, geez,” he says defensively, turning his resting bitch face into something more pleasant.

“Well, you do have a track record of fucking shit up.” I smirk as Hunter chuckles next to me, his deep rumbles sending electricity through my body.

“You ever going to let that go?” he jokes from behind. Two years ago, he almost messed everything up with Cassie. He didn’t cheat on her, technically, but still, it was fucked up.

“Maybe give it another ten years or so,” I joke.

The DJ announces us all as we make our way into the venue, anxiety hitting me like a ton of bricks. My nerves shake as the excitement of walking into the reception washes over me, my legs wobbling so deep that I stumble, and Hunter catches me, casually pulling me back up to him, our eyes locking as my world spins.

“You, okay?” his voice tears through my heart, the warmth of his tone so tender, cuddling me like a blanket.

“Oh, yeah, thanks.” I nod. We walk through the doors, and I put a smile on my face as Heather snaps the pictures. Once we make it to the tables, I try to let go of him to get to my chair, but Hunter holds onto me, pulling out my chair for me. His hand slides over mine as I hold my breath trying to stop the tingling feeling that’s racing through me. “Thank you,” I rasp out.

“You’re welcome.” He nods giving me a genuine smile. And for a split second I see him, I see the man that I remembered, and my eyes begin to burn.

Cassie sits down next to me, “Are you okay? You’re crying,” she whispers, wiping away a tear before it falls.

My eyes shoot to Hunter then back to Cassie. “Yeah, of course.” I smile, taking a breath, “I’m great.”

3

Hunter

“Um, excuse me,” Courtney mumbles into the microphone, the light pink blush on her cheeks getting redder. She never gets nervous being the center of attention, but here, standing at the top of the dance floor, she tucks her head and smiles shyly. “Hi. A lot of you might not know me, but I’m Courtney, I’m Cassie’s best friend, and the maid of honor. I’ve known Cassie a good majority of my life and I felt honored when she asked me to be a part of her wedding.” She pauses, letting out a nervous sigh.

“I wasn’t asked to give a speech, and to be honest, I’m not a big speech type person, if that’s even a thing.” She looks around, “And I honestly don’t know what to say but I felt like I should share a little bit of the Cassie I know. So, I decided to tell you three little stories, three stories where Cassie has changed my life while also telling you about the person she really is.” She clears her throat and I bite my lip, trying to keep myself from yelling out encouragement.

“The first story is when Cassie was fourteen, and she got in-school suspension.” She smiles while everyone gasps, “I know, right, but it’s not what you think. Cassie got in-school suspension because she decided that she wanted to save a squirrel that got tied up in the soccer net during one of our PE classes, instead of playing soccer, she was our goalie, our team

lost.” Courtney pauses as the crowd laughs, “She’s always had a kinder soul than me, and I’ve envied that, and I still do.”

Looking over at Cassie she continues, “The second story is going to be a shocker for most of you, especially her dad.” She points to Paul, and smiles, “When Cassie was sixteen, she hit a wild streak, so she decided that she was going to start drinking. And boy did she, don’t worry Dad, the streak didn’t stick.”

“Well, that’s super comforting,” Paul smirks.

“I know,” Courtney shrugs, “What’s funny about this story is...”

“You’re not,” Cassie jerks up, making all our heads turn.

“Yes, I am!” Courtney nods, “Hey your husband’s supposed to know all your secrets, right? And well, everyone else here too I guess.” She waves her hand around the crowd and laughter kicks up. “Now like I was saying, what’s funny about this story is that Cassie got so drunk off some red wine that she decided to change her name to Maverick because it ‘*was the best name in the world.*’ And the next morning she made us vow that this story would be kept a secret until she got married. So, in a weird way I should probably be thanking Ryan.”

“You’re welcome,” Ryan shouts.

I find myself smiling as Courtney acts like she is tough with a stone-cold heart, but she’s just like everyone else here. “The last story is one she doesn’t know of, because it’s mostly my story but,” she pauses getting a serious look on her face, “when I first moved to North Carolina, I wasn’t happy, to say the least. I was twelve, and ah.” She smacks her lips together, shaking her head, “Anyway, I had been going to school and for the first week or so I was alone, no one talked to me, no one even realized I was there. Until one day, a shy little girl came up to me at lunch and shared her brownie with me.” Tears fill her eyes, and my heart burns as I watch. “This little girl told me that chocolate always puts a smile on her face, and she thought it might help me smile too.” Courtney looks to Cassie, and they are both crying. “Every day for a month Cassie

would bring a brownie to share at lunch and that was the first time in a very long time that I didn't feel alone." She stops, her tears taking over her voice. Cassie cries as she goes and hugs Courtney tight, whispering in her ear as the crowd silently cries along with them.

Courtney pulls back, "Cass, you've always been the most important person to me and I'm so happy for you. I love you and wish you years and years of happiness."

"And Ryan!" Courtney shouts without the mic, wiping the tears from her eyes, "Don't you fuck this up."

"Oh, yes ma'am." Ryan nods, as everybody laughs.

After her speech more people go around getting up to speak, and one by one they all talk about Ryan or Cassie or both. When it came to be my turn, I said my piece, of course mine wasn't as heartfelt as Paul's or as entertaining as Courtney's, but something about weddings makes everyone turn into sappy little monsters.

As the night goes on, and after everyone has eaten, the crowd starts mingling and I realize I haven't seen Chanel in a while. Damn it, I fucking forgot about her again. Scanning around, I don't see her anywhere. Pulling out my phone, I don't have a text or phone call or anything. Double damn it. Walking out the front entrance, I stop short when I see Chanel pressed up against a truck, with none other than Briggs kissing her neck. Well, that's a surprising turn of events, and I can't help but laugh. Turning around, I head back inside to the ballroom, at least one of us is getting some action tonight.

Some people are dancing, Ryan and Tyler are drinking at the bar, and Cassie is sitting next to her aunt and new mother-in-law, talking about everything while Courtney whirls around taking pictures of everyone. Walking over to her I whisper in her ear, "Dance with me."

"Why?" She glares over her shoulder.

"Because I asked, and you've been working all night, and you need to enjoy yourself." I point out, but I also

conveniently left out the part where I just want to be near her because she'd kick me in my balls if I said that.

Courtney slowly drops her camera from her face, her eyes staring straight at me like she is trying to find a hidden clue. "You didn't ask though, you were ordering me." She smirks.

Rolling my eyes, I yield because she always finds something to fight about, "Look, I was just trying to be nice, we've been at each other's throats since you got here, and I wanted Cassie to have a moment of peace since she's been having to play referee this whole time. So, will you please stop being an ass and dance with me?"

Courtney blinks, her hardened eyes slowly softening, pulling her camera strap from around her neck she sets it on the table with Cassie. "Fine, but once this song is over, we go straight back to hating each other."

"Sure," I hum.

Courtney and I walk out to the dance floor, and I twirl her around like a ballerina. She lets out a surprising squeal, and my heart swells as I pull her to me. Placing my hand on the small of her back, we sway back and forth, her eyes sparkling in the lights. "How are you doing, Court?"

"I'm fine." She shrugs, and I give her a pointed look before she rolls her eyes. "I'm okay, geez," I hear the drop in her voice, she's a dirty little liar. She always lies. "Now stop talking." She looks away from me, and I know it's because she feels it. She knows what she feels and she's too stubborn to admit it. But I give her what she wants and stay silent, my cheek pressed against her temple as we sway, her smell engulfing me and bringing me back to a time where nothing else mattered, to where it felt like two universes where colliding together and all of time and space never existed.

"Am I allowed to say one thing," I whisper against her hair.

"If you must." She sighs.

"You look absolutely beautiful," I whisper back, her body trembling with every word.

“Thank you,” she mumbles before clearing her throat, “um, you look beautiful too.”

“Thanks” I say, flustered.

Courtney leans back looking me in my eyes, a soft smile on her face, content like she doesn't want to murder me. Her eyes scan my face, from my eyes to my lips, and then back again. I tighten my grip on her, if this is what she wants to do then we'll fucking do it. “Hunter?” she whispers softly.

My ears ring as she speaks my name, “Yes.”

“I have to get back to work.” Her eyes blink rapidly, the mist is clearing, the song ended, and our magic died with it. “Thank you, for the dance.” She nods, pulling away from me before grabbing her camera and walking away. I felt it and I know she felt it too, she just keeps pretending, pretending that she doesn't feel the same way, pretending that she hates me. But that's where we met, the crossroad of hate and pretending.

If it was any other way, it'd probably be weird.

4

Courtney

Waking up, I gasp, sitting straight up in my bed as I feel air shoot into my lungs. Placing my hand over my heart, I take a few deep breaths, my heart beating like a kick drum in my chest. I look to my packed bag sitting in the corner, the urge to get up and run racing through me. I told myself that I'd be out of here by the end of the week, never even unpacking my clothes. The thought of leaving dampening my already clouded spirit. Lying back down and rolling to my side, I pull my knees up to my chest and stare out the window. The sky here is different. Big white clouds scatter the sky, the blue blanket playing peekaboo behind them as the sun paints the sky with its light. Sliding my legs off the bed, I sit back up and grab my camera. Turning to the window, I snap a few pictures for memories, the universe telling me to cherish this moment.

A faint knock raps on the door behind me, and I snap out of my thoughts. "Come in," I mumble, as I hold up my camera again towards the open curtains, staying behind my lens as I try to get the right lighting angle.

"Morning," Cassie's voice echoes behind me as I pull down my camera.

"Well, hey." I shift my body as I see she's brought me a coffee cup, my heart singing with happiness. The moment of

the sadness sweeps away like sand in the wind, and I can't help but smile. "What'd you bring me?"

"Oh, just a little something for you." She walks over to meet me, sitting on the wooden chest under the window and handing me a freshly made matcha latte.

"Thank you!" I grin, holding it close to my face to breathe in its delicious smell. Taking a small sip, I let out a small, satisfied moan. "This is good, did you make this just for me?" I don't know where I found my love for matcha lattes but I would almost sell my soul for one. I'd been craving one ever since I got to Oaks but nowhere here has one on the menu, and I've tried to make them myself but they always taste terrible.

"Yeah, well, I know you love them. I ordered a whole case before you got here but I forgot about it because of the wedding." She informs me.

Narrowing my eyes, a little, I feel something sneaky coming, "Why'd you buy a whole case?"

Her eyes widen, "What? What are you talking about?"

"Uh huh." I wave my finger at her. "I know what you're doing woman. Why are you trying to butter me up?"

"I'm not tryin to butter you up." She shakes her head.

"Ryan!" I stand up fast and walk towards the open door.

"What?" He shouts from the kitchen, the smell bacon and eggs hitting me as I turn the corner.

I gasp, stopping in my tracks and looking at her. "Do I smell bacon and eggs? My dear sweet child, you are trying to butter me up." Cassie opens her mouth but nothing comes out, her lips sticking to her ribs. I walk into the kitchen, "Ryan, what's your wife hiding?"

Ryan pauses and looks over his shoulder, "What? I don't know."

Standing in the kitchen, I point to him. "Lair!" Cassie walks in after me, stone-faced. "Both of you are hiding something, eggs, bacon, and now matcha. What is it? Am I dying? Are you dying?" Their silence confirms it. She's trying to butter

me up and she got her *husband* to help. “Lies! Lies! I can’t breathe with all the lies in this house! What else are you hiding?” I holler, dramatically pointing from one to the other.

“Calm down, Courtney,” Cassie sighs.

“Just tell her babe,” Ryan cuts off the stove and turns around with the skillet, dumping out a pile of scrambled eggs onto the plate.

“Hey.” Hunter walks in through the back door, stopping the conversation before it could get going. Goddamnit. Why does this asshole keep ruining things.

“Ryan, I think you have a rodent problem,” I snap, giving Ryan a look, “You might need to go get some bug spray.”

“Well, aren’t you just a fucking ray of sunshine in the morning.” Hunter jabs back as Ryan lets out a sigh.

“I *am* a fucking ray of sunshine, so you can fuck right off.” I say, sipping my matcha and giving him a shit-eating grin.

Hunter let’s out a snort but before he can say anything else Cassie speaks up, shaking her head, defeated. “This is a bad idea.”

“Hunter, outside,” Ryan snaps, dropping the skillet in the kitchen sink. Regret instantly fills me. I had to poke the bear and I felt Ryan’s straw break.

“What? I didn’t do anything,” he says defensively.

Ryan pushes him out the back door, walking out with him, stopping to look back at Cassie, whose head is resting in her hands. “Sunshine,” he calls to her, the love in his voice making my heart warm. He really is good for her. Cassie looks up, and he finishes, “Talk to her baby.”

Cassie nods as Ryan walks out, shutting the door behind him. I look over to Cassie and she taps to counter wanting me to take a seat next to her. Slowly walking over, my anxiety races wondering what she could want to talk about. “You’re right, I did do all this to butter you up.” She sips her coffee, I can feel her leg bounce under the table and I place my hand on her knee.

“Hey, what is it?” I use my softer voice, the voice that I can only seem to muster up when it comes to Cassie. She’s my best friend, and I’d give her the world if she needed it. It’s always been like this. Well, not always. The guilt is resurfacing as I push it back down.

“I know that you have been working a lot, from bartending, and your photography, and your special things,” she starts as I laugh. Sending nudes to strangers online has never sat right with Cassie but hey it pays the bills. I don’t have a problem showing off my body for money. I make good money doing it, and when you live in one of the most expensive cities in Texas, you have to do what you have to do. I don’t feel any shame doing it but I do think it’s funny that Cassie has a hard time talking about it. “Anyway,” she continues, “you’re always working, and I know that you have to get back to your life in Texas, but I wanted to offer you a deal.”

“And what is that?” I stare back, puzzled at where this is going.

“Well, as you know, Ryan and I are about to go on our honeymoon for two weeks.” I nod as she continues. Paul, her dad, gifted them an all-inclusive cruise, sailing the blue seas for two weeks, and feeling the warmth of the sun in multiple countries. She gives me an uneasy look as she starts again, “I wanted to ask you if you’d want to stay here for two weeks, and housesit?”

“But why?” I ask.

“Because you deserve to have some time off.” She shrugs, and I feel a pang in my chest, a forceful one. “I know you’re living your dream.” I wouldn’t say that, though. “But wouldn’t you like to just, you know, chill for a while? Not having to worry about things. Like a vacation but you get to stay here.”

I narrow my eyes. “What’s the catch?”

“There isn’t one. You wouldn’t even have to come out of the house. You just get to stay here and watch the house.” Cassie shrugs.

“So, I can stay here, with free food, free beer, and a case of matcha lattes? And I don’t have to see dumbass?”

Cassie rolls her eyes, “Yes, yes, yes and yes.”

Could I stay here for a few weeks? I stop to think it over. I mean, I can always get someone else to cover my shifts at the bar, and I don’t have any client photo sessions on the books until later next month. I could use a break, come to think of it. My anxiety has been getting a little worse lately and that normally means I need a break. But two weeks? I could do that as long as I don’t have to see or interact with Hunter. “Sure. I’ll do it.” I nod, smiling about all the shows I’m about to binge.

I can see Cassie trying to hide her excitement with a simple smile. “Great. I’ll go tell Ryan.”

I’m not sure why they waited so long to ask, but if it makes Cassie happy and I get to be a bum for two weeks then I’ll take it. Now I just have to reschedule my flight. Fuck.

5

Hunter

“Woah,” I say in a calm voice, keeping my distance from the unbroken horse. He’s strong and unpredictable. Raising up on his hindquarters, I drop the guide and step back to the side of the round pen. I want to break him in, but I don’t want him to kill me in the process.

I watch his stiff body resist the stress of being forced under control. Sensing he needs a break, I walk over and climb out of the pen, stopping and sitting on the top bar as I stare back at him running, neighing, and bucking. The bronco’s named Felix, and he’s more stubborn than the rest of the horses, making it known that he doesn’t like to listen to any of us. Climbing down from the fence, I turn to walk into the barn where Ryan is, mother-henning all the horses. Pulling out some hay, I walk back to where Felix is and hook up a slow feeder, trying to coax him out of his rage a little. “Come on, boy,” I hum out, laying my voice down low, soft, and deep to where he can feel the low vibrations. Felix stops and slowly comes over to grab some hay. “There you go,” I say, encouraging him. Slowly he takes more and more, and I see him relax again. Turning to go back to the barn, I give up for now, we’ll have to try again another day.

“I’m going to take Murph out,” I huff, walking pass Ryan.

“Alright,” he answers as he sweeps out one of the stalls.

Opening Murph's stall, I lead him out and get him saddled up to ride down the trails past the open field. It's the only place I can go right now, since Courtney has taken up all my safe spaces. Thank fucking God she's leaving in a few days and will finally be out of my life. I wince as the pain in my gut comes back and adjust myself as Murph trots to the place where we normally go to clear our heads. The sound of the water becomes clearer as we get closer. There're very few places I will go to clear my head and this one is probably the safest.

I hop off Murph and tie him up to a broken tree and take a seat on the rock bed. Picking up a few pebbles, I start tossing them into the creek, watching them disappear into the water. Taking a deep breath, I try to calm the anxious energy that's inside me. I shouldn't care but whenever my mind wonders to her, I do. I do care and I hate when this happens to me. I've done everything I can possibly think of to get myself out of this dark place but nothing's working.

To my left, I hear Howie running full speed as he barrels his way through the low brush and jumps head first into the creek. Knowing who's right behind him, I shift my weight and sit up straighter, trying to give some semblance of sanity as I watch Ryan's dog splash around.

Ryan's horse, Indy, comes up behind me and I let out a small groan, wishing I could be alone for a while. I throw a stone into the water, and Howie looks down at the slow-moving water before diving his head in. Popping up, he has a larger rock hanging out of his mouth and he trots over to bring it to me, wanting me to play fetch. I take the rock from him and chuck a pebble into the water as he runs off after it.

After Ryan ties up Indy he comes and sits next to me. "Hey." He lets out a breath. I look over to him, my eyes catching the new shiny silver band on his left hand. It's been almost a week since my little brother got married, almost a week since I danced with the princess of darkness herself. Her presence plaguing me more and more, her wicked smiles and soft heart making laps in my mind. "You, okay?" Ryan asks

looking over to me. “Mom was saying you’ve been having stomach pains again.”

Oh, leave it to our mother to tell everyone everything. “Yeah, I’m good.” I lie through my teeth. “But, you look exhausted.”

“You try having two women in your home and see if you get any sleep. This is the first time I’ve gotten any peace and quiet since before the wedding.” He waves his hand around.

I laugh at the thought. “You have a big enough house and Cassie’s pretty quiet.” I refuse to speak of the other one.

“Yeah, she’s usually super quiet,” he says as he looks out over the creek as Howie splashes around trying to find the pebble I threw. “But when you have two women in your home, it’s like the house becomes a meeting place for all the others. Then, when everything was starting to slow down, Madison brought over Beau and then it all started again.”

“He is pretty cute, though,” I say smiling.

Ryan nods. “Yeah, and he looks just like Tyler too.”

“Spitting image.” I laugh.

“It’s funny to watch Courtney.” He chuckles as he shakes his head. “Joss went to hand Beau to her and she had a damn panic attack. She held him straight out in front of her like he was poisonous.” Ryan stretches out his arms and we laugh. Ryan continues and starts filling me in on their honeymoon plans, a cruise somewhere down south. He stops and turns to me. “So, Mac said if you need any help with the horses, he would come.”

“It shouldn’t be that bad,” I say, struggling.

Ryan raises his brows. “You say that, but you’re going to have to do all the barns and the stalls. Also, don’t forget that Dr. Tigs is supposed to come over and give the horses a checkup.”

It can’t be that hard. “That’s fine, I can handle it.”

“Hunter.” Ryan gives me a warning, and I hold my hands up. Ryan’s OCD about the horses can be a little creepy but

he's always been that way, he's got a schedule for everything and nothing is out of place.

"Ryan," I mock him. "Chill out dude. You wrote everything down, literally. I'm not the only one going to be here either. Mom said she'd help and Ollie." I pause, smirking as Ryan's face turns into something awful.

"No, I'd rather you call Dad, than Ollie." He barks.

"Oh, come on, Ollie ain't that bad." I joke.

"No, he's not, but his dumbass only cares about one thing, chasing the girls." He stops and looks at me, and I nod in agreement. Ollie just graduated from high school is tasting his own version of freedom for the first time. And, with him being the baby, he's always gotten out of having to work. Something me and Ryan are a little sour about.

Getting up I wipe my hands off and grab Murph's reins. "I'll make sure everything is just like you like it." I sigh, knowing that if it was me, I'd be panicking too. No one trains horses besides me, and I like it that way and if Ollie came in, he'd just fuck it up or get hurt. It's a control thing that both me and Ryan can relate to. "I'm just giving you shit." I untie Indy as well, handing Ryan the reins.

We get back on our horses and head back to the house, but I feel like Ryan still has something else on his mind. "Spit it out, man," I say with a little harsher tone but it doesn't faze him.

"You always know when there's more." Ryan laughs.

"Because I know your ass. You can't keep a secret to save your life."

"Well, there's one more thing that you might want to be aware of." He stops and looks over at me. "You know, while we are gone." I wave my hand, hating that he's keeping me waiting. "Courtney's going to be here for those two weeks, she's going to housesit." He gives me a surprised look and gallops off before I can yell at him.

"What! Ryan!" I shout, gripping the reins and taking off after him. Once I get back to the stalls Ryan is already there,

pulling Indy into the barn. “What the fuck do you mean by housesit?”

Ryan sighs, looking at me. “Cassie asked if she’d stay while we’re gone, you know, and housesit.”

I furrow my brows. “You don’t need someone to housesit. The house will be perfectly fine.”

Ryan holds up his hands. “I don’t know, but it’s what she wants. Look, I don’t know what happened between you two. One minute you were fine and the next, you were literally throwing knives at each other.”

“Don’t be dramatic, they were just spoons.” I roll my eyes.

“I don’t care, and I’m not the one asking her. I know you Hunter and I know you’re going through something.” He waves his hands over me, and I slap them away.

“Don’t start that shit,” I snap

“What?” He coughs.

“That.” I mimic him. “There’s something wrong with you and I just want to talk bullshit.” I take a breath and exhale. “There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m fine. Why didn’t you just say no when Cassie brought it up?”

“Because, Hunter, she’s my wife and I’ll do whatever I have to to make her happy. If having Courtney here makes her happy, then we’re going to have Courtney here. That’s the end of it.” He pushes my shoulder.

“What’s Cassie hoping for?” I fuss.

“She’s hoping that Courtney will want to move here,” he mumbles as he throws some hay in Indy’s stall, turning back to face me.

“Gross.” I wrinkle up my face as my stomach drops. She cannot live here.

“Hunter, please,” Cassie’s voice scares me and my stupid cold heart rumbles.

“What’s this, you’re going to sic your wife on me now.” I look to Ryan and he just smiles. “I really want to punch you in

the face.”

Cassie walks up, her blue eyes sparkling, all innocent and shit. “Please, Hunter, just be nice.”

I scowl, wanting to say no, but it’s Cassie. Letting out a mumbled string of curse words, I stop. “Fine. I’ll be nice to Courtney. Uh, it burns. It physically burned my throat to say her name.” I point at Cassie. “If I’m going to be nice, I’ll need some of that lasagna, oh, and some of those chicken wings, and maybe some of those little chocolate candies.”

Cassie squeals and hugs me and turns to run back to the house.

Ryan slaps my shoulder, pushing me out the barn door, subtly telling me to get back to work. I go back out to the only place where I can feel alive while the rage builds inside me. My problem, the darkness, staying for what now feels like an eternity.

6

Courtney

I fight back another eye roll as Cassie goes over her list for the one hundredth time. I know she means well, but I think she forgot that I've lived on my own for years now and have had my own responsibilities. "Cassie," I call out, waiting until her eyes meet mine, "I've got it." Trying to be as gentle as I can, I reassure her that I've been through this before. Good God, I love her, but my patience is running thin. It might not all be from her, but something has rocked me to my core, something else I've felt since the moment I stepped foot into North Carolina. Every time I come here, I feel it, like an itch that I can't scratch, or something out there ominously waiting for me.

I shake the thoughts from my head as Cassie sighs, then frowns. "Sorry, I know you can take care of yourself. I'm just anxious."

My eyes catch her hands moving back and forth against her jeans. "It's okay." I grin. "I know you are nervous about going on your trip." She nods and pulls her bag to her shoulder. Howie walks back and forth through the house, picking up on Cassie's anxious energy. I usher her to the door, trying to get her to leave, "I got it. Everything's going to be fine, right Howie?" I look over to Howie who has his face pressed against the window, whining at Ryan while he loads up the

truck. “Don’t listen to him, he has separation anxiety.” I wave Howie off, walking out the door with Cassie.

Once we’re outside, Howie starts whining in a high-pitched tone, his paws scratching at the window. Ryan gives me an uneasy face, “You might have to take him to Mac’s, he’s never been this long without me or Cass around.”

Cassie gets in the car, still mentally running through her checklists. “Well, call me if you need anything.”

“You’re going to be on a ship, Cass,” I state.

Ryan leans over from the driver’s seat, “We’ll still have wi-fi, you can just text us.”

“Alright Mom and Dad, we’ll be fine.” I roll my eyes. “Now hurry up and leave so I can invite all my friends over.” I say, smiling as I wave my finger at them. Stepping back from the truck, I watch them leave down the street. “Okay, now what,” I say to myself as I turn to walk back into the house, Howie jumping all over the place.

Remembering he likes to go to the creek; I go to change my clothes. When I get back, the once crazed, energetic Howie is now laying in the middle of the living room, sad. “Hey, buddy, you want to go to the creek?” I try to make it sound fun and exciting, but I think he can sense the lies. Instead of jumping up, he huffs out a breath and stares at the door. I fall to the floor next to him and stare at the door with him. “They’ll be back. I promise,” I say as I lean over and kiss his head. Growing up, I never had animals, but I always wanted a dog, and with Howie it’s so easy to fall in love, my animal heart blooming as I lie next to him. “Do you want to go...” I trail off lightly, watching his ear twitch, “for a walk?”

His big brown eyes look over at me, but I’m not getting the response I had hoped for. I hate to have to say this, but, “Do you want to go to the barn?” A surprised sound escapes me as his head pops up. “Yeah?” I ask again, his body jumping up.

“Okay, let’s go.” I giggle as I feel my stomach flip. I’m not particularly fond of the barn but I’ll take him if it makes him feel better. Sliding on my Birkenstocks I walk out the back

door. Ryan told me he has a leash, just in case, in the closet, but since I've been here Howie's began to listen to me. Walking out the back door, he runs straight for the barn, leaving me in the dust. It takes me a few minutes to catch up, the smell of horsehair and manure hitting my nose and I scrunch it up, the smell sickening me. Once I get inside, I let out a breath when I see all the horses are locked up. Howie paces the barn, his nose down and then up, searching out something. "What are you doing, boy?" I ask. "Howie?" I call for him, but he ignores me as he continues to search the barn.

"Oh, shit." I let out a sigh, feeling his loneliness. "Ryan's not in here." He perks up looking at me. "Your daddy isn't here, right now."

"What are you doing?" Hunter's voice comes from behind me, and I let out a yelp. Turning around, his deep blue eyes pierce into mine. With him being so close, my mind races and I have visions of pulling him in close and kissing him deep. I miss the way he feels, a mix between soft and assertive. The way his energy flows between masculine and feminine, always opposing mine. The way we were so hot together, why our sex was so magnetic.

Caught up in the memories of him, I don't realize how close he's come to me. He touches my chin, breaking me from my thoughts and pulling my eyes up to meet his. I am fucking aching for him. "Courtney," his graveled voice sends butterflies through my stomach.

"Hmm," I try to focus on his eyes, but everything's blurry and my heart beats in my ears.

"Stop looking at me like that." The sharpness of his voice almost makes me submit, any other woman would've jerked back. But I'm not like other women, and he knows it. Letting out a curse from under his breath, he pulls his hand away fast, stepping back from me, the fire in his eyes ablaze with anger.

Blinking my eyes, I take a deep breath, and the air hits my brain, pulling me back to reality. Oh shit. My eyes finally clear up Hunter's face, and I know I fucked up again. "Hunter, I," I stammer as he storms off past me, cutting me off. Turning

around to face him, he doesn't expect a sorry from my lips. I've never apologized for anything, and he knows that because of the reputation I've weaved.

"Just go," his voice clips at me. "I'll bring Howie back home when I'm done." He walks over and pulls out a bale of hay, before turning away from me again. I let out a sigh and turn on my heel, heading back to the house. I hurt him months ago, but I never got to see the torment I caused.

But what he doesn't know is the reason I'm so stone-cold. I'm broken, the one with the softest soul, the one who didn't get put back together and this is what's left of me.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I stare into my eyes, letting out a shutter.

You don't deserve happiness.

You're a fucking disgrace.

Get over it and move on.

7

Hunter

Slinging the hay bale down with too much force, the old twine breaks free and the hay spreads across the ground. “What the fuck,” I let out a soft curse. I place my hands on the waistband of my jeans, and close my eyes, taking a few deep breaths. I try to let the anger inside me go away, pushing it down until I forget it’s even there. That’s how it all works, at least, that’s how I’ve started doing it. I can’t let out my anger the way I want, so pushing it down is the only option I have.

Opening my eyes, I see Howie laying down in the middle of the hay. “Alright, get up,” I say in a light tone as Howie jumps up. I grab a broom and decide that this is going to be a tomorrow problem, and sweep it into a vacant stall. My mind jumps to Courtney, forgetfully bouncing back to her face, and my frustration hits a low simmer.

“God, she pisses me off.” I talk out loud. Turning on my heel, Howie stands at the opening of the barn, his tail thumping against the ground. “Why are women so goddamn infuriating? One minute they’re hot, the next they’re cold.” I fuss, waving my hands around. “Well, I’ll tell you what, I’m not playing the game anymore, I did that before and that shit came back and bit me on the ass.”

I lean on the broom, staring down at him as he sits there watching me. “How am I supposed to *be nice*?” I ask,

mimicking Ryan's voice. "She fuckin does shit like this all the time, and she knows..." I trail off, the pain of our history burning a hole in me. I rub my sternum as the pain comes back. "Great! Now I got indigestion."

I try to let go of the thoughts, because holding onto them only makes it worse, but when it comes to Courtney it's like I'm always toeing that line. I can't tell if I love it or hate it. Sometimes I do hate it, I want to rid my memories of her, forget about the times we shared and move on. Then other times I bask in the light that was us, the ever-glowing radiance of our passion. The thoughts tormenting me every day. It never feels good, the constant back and forth of emotions toying with my soul.

The line she drew was not in sand, it was cement. She's the one that shattered everything that could have been, and I should stop falling for her every time I see her. I never wanted a girlfriend in the first place, at least that's what I keep telling myself. She isn't good for me. And I'm no good for her.

"Enough." I lash out at myself, letting out a groan. This isn't happening. She isn't happening. I refuse to be a puppet in her own personal show. End of story.

Turning to the radio in the barn, I set it to rock music and turn it up loud enough to drown out my thoughts.

"Come on, Jagger." I sigh, opening the stall, letting him go out to the pasture first. One by one, I let all the horses out, calling out their names as I work my way down the stalls like the song Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Ryan has always kept a strict list of things that need to get done, and now I'm not even fazed by it. Ever since we were kids, Ryan's always took more care of them than me, always being a little more particular in the way things were done. I always loved the training, the teaching, the bonding, and the trusting part of raising them. It gave me the semi-alpha role I needed while growing up.

Ollie finally shows up mid-morning, coming around to help me with the barn chores. Pausing, I look over at him as he knocks over stuff while cleaning. He has no perception of his

own body, reminding me of one of those wacky waving inflatable tube men that they place in front of car dealerships.

“Ollie,” I holler over to him. I know I’m going to regret this so bad, but I have my own work that I need to do. “Can you finish up here while I go get meet the new client?” I look at my watch, the new client Ryan booked should be coming shortly.

“Ah, yeah, sure.” He nods.

“Okay, do exactly what Ryan has on that sheet.” I point to it. “I’ll be out in the new pen.” I point out to the pen that I built after getting back from Texas.

Ollie nods, and I walk off, praying to God that he doesn’t fuck anything up. Once I get out to the new training pen, I stop and look it over again. The pen is probably the only good thing to come out of my time in Texas.

The main reason I went there was to learn more about horse training. Mom knows the wife of the Reed family, a Texas Ranch known for its high quality, fully trained horses. And when we decided that the family was going to be horse ranchers here in North Carolina, Mom started networking out to other ranches in hopes that someone would help us get on the right track. The cattle business ain’t bad, we’re just horse ranchers through and through. It did take a long time for us to convince Dad to change over, his stubborn ass kept some cattle that he and Ollie tend to. We finally had to give up and let him do whatever he wanted, while both me and Ryan’s shares of the land were built out for horse ranching.

Bringing my attention up, I see a woman standing by the front of her truck with her horse trailer positioned in the driveway talking to Mom. “Oh, there he is.” Mom smiles.

“Sorry about that, I had some chores in the barn.” I smile at the woman, dusting my hands off before heading their way. “Hi, I’m Hunter.”

“Hello, I’m Clara.” She takes my hand.

“Clara has brought her horse Chance to us as a sort of last resort.” Mom nods to Clara, wanting her to finish the story.

“Yes, well.” She sighs. “Long story short, this horse was my ex-husbands, he didn’t want her anymore and now I have no idea what I need to do. I’ve taken her to every trainer I can find, and they’ve all said that some horses are just meant to be wild.”

I nod, giving her a perplexed look.

She nods back. “I’d like to keep her, because she makes me feel better. She even helped me get through my divorce, you know?”

“Well, let’s open up the trailer and see what we’re working with,” I say, walking over to the trailer.

I do know what Clara’s talking about, because that’s how I feel when I’m with horses, like I can breathe again, like the pressure of the world has been lifted away. I feel a wave of hope and peace wash over me as Clara opens the trailer, the beautiful chestnut-colored Arabian neighing as the sunlight hits her skin.

“Hello, beautiful.”

8

Courtney

Two knocks come from the front door, and I pause the TV. It's only been a day since Cassie and Ryan left, and I've seen Hunter more than I care for. Yesterday, I almost lost myself in his stupid eyes and I realized it's probably best if I stay inside and never go out. I'll eat take-out until they come back, that way I don't have to be around him. Sliding off the couch, I walk over to the door and look out the window to see Miss Cora, Hunter's mother, standing at the door. "Oh, great." I sigh, mothers and I never get along.

Putting a smile on my face, I open the door. Cora stands there with a wide smile, her medium length light brown hair has pieces of gray highlighting it, curled into soft waves. She has the same color eyes as her oldest son, and my chest twinges at the thought. "Hey, Courtney," her soft southern voice calms me and makes me feel safe. "How are you, shug?"

"I, I'm okay. Would you like to come in?" I ask, stepping aside. My palms begin to sweat, and I clench the doorknob to keep myself from shaking.

"Thank you." She walks in, her perfume follows her past me. Howie comes over, wagging his tail as his nose goes directly to her purse, digging his head in hard. "Oh, you silly boy," she says laughing, "you always know, huh?" She talks to him and pulls out a biscuit rolled up in a napkin. She looks up

at me. “I did this once, and now he expects a treat every time.” Once Howie gets the biscuit, he walks over to his bed and plops down. Cora looks up at me as she stands back up, “So, I came over to ask if you’d like to go to lunch with me?”

I blink, not sure if I should go or not. “Ah, yeah, sure.” The overwhelming need to satisfy people wins this round. I don’t want to go, but I also can’t be rude to this woman who’s done nothing bad to me. “I’ll just get my shoes.” I turn, forcing my body down the hallway to the bedroom, feeling a swarm of emotions tossing inside, like a tidal wave of ice and dread. Mother’s and I do not go together well. I either come off too strong or too weak. I’m not like Cassie, who everyone seems to love even with her anxiety, she still gets love and tenderness. But with me, I become angry and aggressive when things start to turn a certain way. Sliding on my shoes, I grab my crystal necklace. “Alright Universe, I’m going to need your help today.”

Walking down the hallway, I hear Cora making noise in the kitchen. As I turn the corner, I see her putting something in the fridge. Turning around, she smiles at me as she shuts the door, “I made chicken spaghetti last night, and brought some of it over for you.”

“Thank you, that’s so nice of you,” I nod as I shove my hands into my pockets. We stand in silence for a good part of a minute before Cora exhales and starts gathering her stuff.

“Well, I thought we could go to town. There’s a sandwich shop on Main Street that’s really good. Do you like sandwiches?”

I sigh. “Are you kidding me, I love them.” I mentally smack the shit out of myself for sounding too eager. Who loves sandwiches that much?

“Great, Hunter loves this place too. He always goes there,” she exclaims.

Of fucking course, he does.

Grabbing my bag, I walk out to her car, and we head off. The drive is quiet, and I mentally thank the Universe for

giving me all the silence I can handle. I don't know much about Cora, the only thing I really know is that she's the mother of the man I was casually sleeping with. Well, until he took it too far and we ended up basically never seeing each other again. I hate him.

Why is she even doing all this.

Parking down the street, we make our way to the sandwich shop. The whole way in Cora continues to talk about all the news from around town, pointing out different shops as we walk. Walking into the shop, my discomfort makes it hard to focus on food right now. I order a small turkey sandwich, and once we're sitting at the table Cora clears her throat, "So, I saw some of the pictures you've done."

"Yeah?" I nod, not knowing what to say.

"They're good and I was hoping I could ask you of a favor." She pauses.

"Sure, I guess." I hesitate.

"Well," she says as she inhales and sighs, leaning her elbows on the table, looking more relaxed, "you know that we are slowly becoming a horse ranch, right?"

"I thought you were already a horse ranch?"

"Yes, well technically, but Caleb has a problem with change, and he can be an old stick in the mud, sometimes." She rolls her eyes and continues. "I love him to death but he's like a mule when things need to change. Anyway, he still has some cattle that he just can't let go of." She moves her index finger and thumb together. Ah, because of money. I nod my head and she keeps going. "Oliver has been begging for us to get on social media and promote the ranch. But, just for context, Caleb just got a smart phone last year. We're a little behind the curve so to speak." I giggle. "And Hunter and Ryan, they already take care of most of the other things. And, Ollie, well, he hasn't found where he fits into it all. So, this is something he could possibly explore."

"I can understand that," I say, taking a bite of my sandwich as I feel my shoulders relax, "what would you need my help

for?”

“Well, you see, we need some good pictures” she raises her brows.

“Oh,” I said, the thought of stepping outside of normal people photography excites me.

“I’ve talked to AJ, you know Jace’s girlfriend, right?” I nod as she continues. “She used to do all that social media stuff in California before she moved here, and she said that she’d get us started and help with ideas, we just need photos.”

“Sure, I can take some photos for you. What are you thinking?”

“That’s something we’d need to ask Ollie. He’s good at the idea parts, bringing things together isn’t his strong suit, though, and...” she leans into me, whispering, “I think he feels a little bit left out because his brothers are happier with all the physical labor, while he’s more,” she pauses pointing to her head, “stuck up here. He can do the things that they do, but it doesn’t make him excited. I think he’s become a little depressed since graduating, all his friends went off to college or started jobs and he’s stuck on the ranch. His words, not mine.”

“Did he ever think about going to college?” I never wanted to, but if he’s more book smart then he should have tried to go.

“I think he did, but.” She shrugs. “He probably would’ve felt like even more of an outsider. He’s a farm boy through and through, and he would’ve ended up coming back and doing the same things.” I don’t know Ollie that well. I don’t really know anyone here that well except for Cassie, Ryan, and Hunter. And Hunter was just an unforeseeable coincidence.

“I would love to help him,” I don’t know why I always get excited about helping other people, it always ends up happening though.

Cora smiles. “Great, thank you so much. I really appreciate it!”

We continue eating our lunch and the conversation dies down. She might have wanted to take me to lunch to butter me

up for the favor, but I don't mind.

All this will keep me busy while I stay here, and I also get to stay away from Hunter.

I don't think this could get any better.

9

Hunter

“Hey,” Noah calls to me, throwing his hand up at the end of the bar. It’s been two days. I’ve kept track, I have to. It feels weird with her here. She doesn’t belong here, like a piece from a different puzzle, somehow finding its way into my box. The aggravation of trying to find where she fits, all the while not knowing she doesn’t belong, that’s what it feels like when she’s here.

Be nice please, Cassie’s words echo in my head and I let out a grunt. I’ve only seen her once since she decided to stay, and she threw my world into a frenzy in a matter of seconds. Taking a seat next to Noah, the bartender hands me a beer, the same beer I get every time I come here. Both Noah and I start in about our week, we haven’t seen each other since Ryan and Cassie’s wedding. Noah tells me about the cattle and how Belle, AJ’s adoptive niece, is naming all of them, and how he nor Jace have the heart to tell her that they’re not going to be here forever.

I tell him about the new horse I got, and how Ollie is masterfully fucking everything up. I leave out the part where I ran into Courtney, and how I almost ripped her clothes off, because who needs to talk about that.

Not me.

We fall into silence as we both watch the TV above the bar. Noah's phone lights up, and he hides it from me. I narrow my eyes, and watch him as he just covers it up and pushes it down. I stare back at the TV, only to be distracted by Noah's phone lighting back up two seconds later.

Instead of blowing it off, I lean over and see *her* name in big bright letters. I gasp like a damn school girl. "No, the fuck, you're not."

"Hunter." He sighs.

I snatch his phone to get a better look. "Hanna, I know this doesn't say fucking *Hanna*."

He opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out, and I want to punch him in the face. Not because I'm mad at him, I just need him to start thinking straight. Noah's always had a heart for the love and romantics, but a tendency to fall back into the same old traps. He's the guy you want to sweep you off your feet, like those old school cowboys, but he gets caught up trying to save the same *mistakes* over and over again. I'd punch Hanna right in her stupid compulsive face if I could.

"Noah, please." I pitch my brows. "Please tell me you aren't going down this road."

"I'm not." He shakes his head, holding out his hand and I hand his phone back. My eyes stay on him, waiting for him to try and convince me he's telling the truth. This is how our friendship works, he falls head over heels in love, and floats off and I'm the one having to plant his feet back on the ground. But most of the time I'm unsuccessful. "I swear I'm not. I was just cleaning out my closet, and I found a few things of hers and I texted her asking if she wanted them back. And she did."

I stare at him in complete silence, trying to decide if I believe him. Jace and AJ come up from behind me and I turn to Jace and ask, "Did you know he's been talking to Hanna, again?" Jace was about to start talking, but he stops in his tracks, his eyes moving from me to Noah and then back again.

“Hell no, what the fuck man?” Jace furrows his brows.

“Can you both just calm down.” Noah sighs, “I’m not seeing her, it’s not like that. I’m just giving back her stuff.”

“Are you gonna be home when he ‘just gives back her stuff’?” I ask, turning back to Jace.

“Can you, fucking, stop!” Noah raises his voice, catching us both off guard. He doesn’t yell. Noah is the soft one, always the level-headed one. He takes a deep breath. “I’m not getting back together with Hanna, I’m not getting together with anyone. I’m just giving her the crap I found, give me some credit.”

“Okay, geez, calm your tits,” I say and nod, turning back to the bar. “It’s hard to believe you sometimes. You’ve got a shaky track record.”

“I know.” He sips his beer and I put my hand on his shoulder, shaking it twice.

I have another beer before I head out. Since Ryan is gone, I’ll have to work the weekend. I hate having to work on my weekends, which reminds me that I need to talk to Mom and Dad about hiring some help. Ryan’s had some help in the past but, since we’ve moved everything out to the new farm, the other farm hands had different paths. So, we don’t have help anymore.

As I head down the road, I see someone up ahead of me running, their reflective clothing causing me to slow down. Who the hell would be out running at this hour? As I get closer, I roll my eyes. “What the fuck is she doing?” I say out loud as I sigh, pulling up next to her, matching her speed. “Courtney!” I bark out the window. She stops, startled by me and reflexively pulls up her taser. Why am I not surprised. “Why are you out running at ten o’clock at night?”

She pulls her headphones out of her ears and argues back, giving me her same old tone. “Because I couldn’t fucking sleep, duh.” She puts in her headphones and takes off running.

Sighing, who does this? And, why does it bother me so much? Gripping the steering wheel, I pull up next to her again.

“Get in,” I yell out.

“No.” She furrows her brows.

“Cortney, I swear to God if you don’t get into this goddamn truck.” I say roughly, my anger starting to rage.

She looks back at me, tilting her head. “What? What are you going to do, Hunter? You don’t have to protect me. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can,” I growl out, getting more irritated. “There’re wild animals out here, feral dogs and shit. And they *will* kill you. Goddamnit.”

“You’re a fucking asshole,” she yells back.

“And you’re a-fucking-annoying. No one here gives a shit about how independent you are. So, you can call me whatever name you want, I don’t give a flying fuck. Get in this fucking truck or I’ll fucking make you.” I threaten her, but she just stares at me, in typical Courtney fashion, challenging me.

Putting the truck in park, I unbuckle my seatbelt and swing the door open. Walking up to her, she takes a small step back, her head staying strong and her eyes burning with eagerness and strength. Fuck. I tighten my jaw and in one quick movement I swing her over my shoulder. I anticipated her kicking and screaming, the calling for help, and I roll my eyes at her dramatics.

“You really think people are going to hear you out here?” I let out a small laugh, and Courtney responds with a fist to my back. It hurts and I almost buckle from the force. I dump her into the bed of my truck and stop, pointing my finger at her, “Don’t fucking move.” She freezes, the depth of my voice catching her off guard.

“Why are you doing this?” she hisses as I close the tailgate.

“Because someone asked me to watch over you, and this is me, doing my job.” I walk to the driver’s side, jumping in the truck and roll my window down.

“You can’t leave me back here?” she yells.

“Fucking watch me.” I chuckle as I start my truck and put it in drive.

“I hate you,” she hollers, scooting up against the front of the truck bed.

“Okay.” I chuckle, even though I feel her words sit deep in my stomach. As I drive back to the house, I keep my eyes on her hair blowing in the wind, making sure she doesn’t get hurt. My fists tighten around the steering wheel, my knuckles white, trying to keep myself from stopping the truck and telling her to get in. If I did that it’d show her that I care, but I don’t care. She needs to know that I don’t give a shit about her anymore.

Pulling up to Ryan’s house, I get out of the truck and drop the tailgate. Courtney leans back on her hands, her knees up as she stares at me. I hold out my hand to help her, but she kicks my hand away, refusing to get out now. So, I just stand there watching her. My mind plays images of us, together, laughing, fucking, and telling each other stories, how we molded each other’s lives. And now, this is us. My eyes catch the bracelet on her ankle as I stand at the tailgate, a small beaded one with black and turquoise wooden beads alternating.

I gave her that.

It was a bracelet I got at a gas station on my way to Texas, because it was her birthday and she was letting me stay at her place. It meant nothing, just a gesture of thanks. But now when I look at it, I feel the invisible weight.

“Get out,” I grit out.

“You’re an asshole.” She starts again and I’m done. I grab her ankle with the bracelet and pull her to the end of the truck bed. She yelps and starts to scream, but I place my hand around her throat. My hand’s stiff, and firm, just enough pressure to shock her and make her shut the fuck up.

And it works.

Leaning in, I’m almost unable to resist her energy. “I don’t care what you think,” I whisper close to her face as the space between us heats up. I try to keep myself under control as the smell of her fruity breath makes me want to slam my face into

hers. “I’m not doing this for you, I don’t give a fuck about you.” Her eyes widen as my words sink in. “This is what you wanted, you wanted me to not care. Well, your wish is my fucking command. Now get the fuck out of my truck and get inside.” I move my hand and step away from her, walking to the side of my truck as I wait for her to get out. My hand tingles from her touch and I rub my fingers across my palm, forcing the blood back into them. Once her feet hit the ground, I open the driver’s door and get in. Placing the truck in drive and taking off, I ignore the tears I saw running down her face as she went inside.

“I don’t care,” I whisper, repeating it to myself as I fight back every urge to go back and tell her the truth.

I don’t fucking care.

IO

Courtney

I wake up to the thumping sound of a tail hitting the floor and a squeaker toy being pushed in my face. Pulling my eyes open, I can feel the crustiness from crying myself to sleep pulling at my lashes. The culprit, Howie, sits on the floor, patiently waiting for me to wake up. His big brown eyes stare at me, with a dirty stuffed toy sticking out of his mouth.

“You know,” I mumble, and the sound of his tail picks up, “you’re quite needy in the morning.”

Turning over, I look at the clock on the nightstand. “Well, that tracks, you couldn’t wait any longer could you. Thanks for waiting until ten o’clock,” I say, rubbing my eyes and pulling at my lashes to clean them off enough to see clearly. “Sorry, buddy,” I say, looking down at him. “You’re used to getting fed in the morning, and here I am basically starving you.” Howie jumps up on the bed, laying down on his belly and stares at me. “I’m not use to having to care for an animal.” I reach out to pet his soft black fur and he play fights my hand. “Can I tell you a secret? You can’t tell anyone. I wasn’t allowed to have any pets when I was a kid, but I wanted one so bad. But.” I sigh, rubbing behind his ear. “My mom, she didn’t want another mouth in the house that she’d have to feed. My neighbors had a golden retriever, though, and I would play with him until my mom would come out and threaten me with

a belt. And she'd beat the shit out of me if I didn't get home fast enough."

Howie turns his head, his tail stopping for a second.

"I know." I lean down, and kiss the top of his head. Just then the backdoor opens and closes, and Howie looks to the door, my fear spiking. The image of someone coming in to kill me plays vividly in my mind. Howie jumps down and takes off to the back door. "No, Howie, this is how you get killed," I whisper sliding off the bed, grabbing the taser from the nightstand. Holding it in one hand, I look around for a weapon but only find a hairbrush to defend myself. Walking to the door, I tiptoe and my body shakes as the images of all the murder mysteries I've watched race through my mind. Pushing my body against the wall, I peek around the corner and scream, "Hunter!" He's standing at the kitchen island with Howie at his feet, playing tug of war with him and his ragged toy. God that's adorable. "What the hell?"

Hunter looks up at me, and then at my hands, furrowing his brows. "What were you going to do with the hairbrush? Give me a new hairstyle." He chuckles as he throws the toy and Howie takes off after it.

"I don't have anything besides my taser," I shake my head. "No, what are you," I stop short of my question as I see his eyes roam my body, looking over the old t-shirt I'm wearing. It's his old t-shirt, one that he left at my house. My skin tingles and heats up from the shame and embarrassment, but I force myself to keep my head high. "I know this is your brother's house, but I don't feel comfortable with you just walking in here without being invited."

Hunter takes a deep breath, but his eyes don't move from my t-shirt. I cross my arms over my chest to break his concentration and bring him back to reality. Hunter blinks and within a second his eyes find mine, his armor back in place. "I came over to apologize."

"Apologize?" I echo him. I hear him, but I don't believe it. I've never heard Hunter apologize for anything.

“Yes.” He clenches his jaw. “For the way I treated you last night. It was... a little aggressive, and I’m sorry.”

“Wow,” I say, raising my brows, “felt weird, didn’t it?”

“Yup,” He sighs and I laugh softly at his confession. “I also wanted to talk to you about something. Ryan and Cassie asked me to watch over you. Now, let me finish before you start playing the independent woman role.” I close my mouth not realizing how ready I was to lay into him. “I know you can take care of yourself, Court. And, I’m not saying you can’t. But what you did last night was stupid, and you know it.” I swallow hard in hopes that the words that want to come out might be forced back down. I want to deny it. I want to tell him he’s wrong. But he won’t stop talking long enough for me to get a word in. “I don’t care what you fucking do while you’re here, you’re not my problem. But if you do something stupid like that again, I won’t hesitate to do it all over again.”

“But you just apologized for being aggressive,” I point out.

“Yep, and I’ll apologize again. I’m not your friend, Court.” The pain hits me in my chest, and my memory flashes to the wedding and how he was so kind to me. Part of me wants to know what happened to that cordial man? But I keep my mouth shut, because the other part doesn’t want to know the answer.

“Well, what are you then?” I blurt out. Why? Fuck my mouth and my inquisitive mind.

His eyes look down at the t-shirt, then back up, and I feel it. The pain, and energy shift in the air. The tension of things left unsaid fills the room. My muted screams of how much I miss him, and my apologies for my fucked-up issues are left in the space between us.

Hunter’s eyes pierce my soul. “I’m no one.”

“Wait. Hunter,” I call out, the tension of his voice pulled me deep into him.

“What Courtney? What do you want from me? Huh?” he shouts and I recoil, his anger is building. “You had my

friendship, you had my warmth next to you, you had my dick, what else do you want to take from me?"

I'm speechless, I've heard stories about Hunter's rage. How when he gets mad you get the hell out of the way. I've heard the story Ryan told about the time he beat the shit out of him when he fucked up with Cassie. And the stories of how he would fight kids at school who would pick on his family, but I've never seen it in person. When he was with me, he was always soft, yet assertive.

"I'm sorry too," my voice shakes as I feel tears start to build.

Hunter looks away, breathing through his anger, trying to calm the storm. "Let's just make a deal, stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours."

"Just plain ol' enemies, right?" I try joking it off as he turns to open the door, but it doesn't land.

"Right," He says softly, slamming the door behind him.

I jerk at the sound of the door, the force rattling the house. My phone rings and I walk back to my room to grab it.

"Hello?" I answer it, nervous about my tone.

"Hey, Courtney," Cassie's voice rings in my ear, "how's everything going?"

"Great." I look towards the door. "Never better."

II

Hunter

“Hey, now,” I say, making a clicking sound with my mouth as I wave my flag stick below Chance. She pulls away from me as I hold onto her reins, trying to get her used to my way of doing things. Softly, she relaxes and we start moving and walking around. “Good girl,” I say, lowering the stick and rubbing her nose, “are you going to let me try and saddle you?”

I rub my hands down her powerful neck, her muscles tensing under my touch. She’s still unsure being around me. Bringing up the stick, I try again, getting her comfortable. I let her take a break and pull her out to the large pen, letting her get some alfalfa. My phone rings as I close the gate.

“Hello?” I pull out a small bit of hay as Jagger neighs behind me.

“Hey, how’s everything going?” Ryan asks, most likely worried to death about the horses.

“Fine now, it was rough when all the horses got out, though.” I confess.

“What?” His voice raises up.

“I’m kidding.” I laugh into the phone. Walking back to the barn, I take a seat outside for a minute. I watch the horses graze as the morning sun lights everything up, the silence of

the ranch bringing some needed peace. “Nah, everything’s fine Mom. All horses and people are accounted for. We did get an Arabian this week, though.”

“How?” Ryan’s voice calms to his normal tone.

“A woman Mom knows came by saying she needed someone to help her train her horse.” I inform him.

“Have you talked to Dad?” he asks timidly.

I roll my eyes. “Not yet, but I will. I honestly don’t think he’ll budge.”

Ryan sighs. “I know. Mom told me to just let it go and let him have his cattle.”

“The man doesn’t like change.” I laugh.

“I don’t think its change, I think it’s the money.” Ryan sighs again and my eyes catch Courtney walking down the field. I watch her walk, towel in hand, most likely on her way to the creek, but she turns and walks into the woods. Why’s she walking into the woods?

“Yeah, hey, can I call you back?” He says yes, and I get up, walking behind her. “Why does she have to be so goddamn annoying.” I say to myself as I follow her. “She’s not actually annoying, you actually find her stubbornness quite attractive.” I mock myself, hating every part of this. When I saw her in my old shirt this morning, it brought back memories I had buried.

“Keep it,” I say as I lace up my boots, sitting in the chair next to her bed. I look up at Courtney who’s still lying in bed, her breathing is evening out some, but her cheeks are still red from our morning. I replay the morning in my head and I start to get hard again.

“No, I can’t. It’s yours.” She moves to sit up, using the shirt to cover her breasts.

I laugh. “Courtney, do you know why I always bring that shirt with me when I come here?” I lean up resting my elbows on my knees. It’s an old

plain dark gray shirt with the Jack Daniels logo on it. I don't remember where it came from, or how I came to have it, but it means nothing to me. "Because you always like to wear it. You wear it every time I'm here, walking around the house and getting coffee, just keep it. I don't care. It's just a shirt."

"Okay." She smiles, holding it close.

I really didn't care about the shirt. It was just a shirt, no meaning. But now when she wears it around the house and I see her in it, it brings back every fucking memory.

Once I get to the creek, I see Courtney swimming, wearing a dark blue swim suit. I can't help but watch her as she goes in and out of the water, droplets falling down her goddess like body. My mouth waters as I watch her, the need inside me growing. "Hey, what are you doing?" I call to her.

She screams, hitting the water, "Fuck, Hunter, can you stop scaring me?" She places her hands over her chest, trying to catch her breath. "Jesus Christ."

Ignoring her, I walk closer to the water, "Again, what are you doing?"

"Swimming, Hunter. What does it look like I'm doing? Am I supposed to ask you every time I want to do something? Is that what your version of babysitting is?" She crosses her arms, pulling her breasts slightly together. I suck my bottom lip in and wet my lips, her soul radiating fierceness. "Can you stop creeping up on me? How am I supposed to stay out of your way if you keep following me everywhere?"

"You done?" I call to her, realizing my voice is a little deeper. I'm turned on and I hate that she still has this effect on me.

"What?" She sighs, walking closer to me. "Can you just leave me alone?"

I nod. "Okay," I turn halfway before stopping. "I was only asking because there's leeches in these waters, and you walked

through the woods, there's ticks everywhere. But you keep swimming, Princess. Have fun." I finish, turning and start to walk away.

"Wait." I hear her call for me but I smirk as I keep walking. "Hunter." Are there leeches in these waters? No. But she doesn't need to know that. And she most likely doesn't have any ticks because she wasn't in the woods very long. But she doesn't need to know that either. "Please Hunter," her voice calls to me, "I'll do whatever you want."

I stop and look back at the creek. "Goddamnit," I groan, walking back towards the water only to see Courtney standing there in her bikini, her eyes closed tight with her arms straight out. I walk up to her, "What are you doing?"

"Are they on me?" She sounds panicked, and my head tilts at the weird sound. I wanted to mess with her but this shit's gone crazy, and I can't admit it was a joke now.

"Are you, scared?" I ask, hesitating.

"No," she hisses, opening her eyes, "I just don't like bugs on me. Hunter, please help me."

"Fine." I let out a tired sigh, I look over her body quick to justify my teasing. "You're all good." I turn around and start walking away. I need to get away from her before I let my assertive side come out and rip her clothes off with my teeth.

"Are you sure?" She walks behind me, still worried.

"Yes," I say over my shoulder, never breaking stride. Courtney walks around me fast, making me stop. Her hands reach out and press against my chest, my body tingling at her touch.

"Look, I know we're supposed to be hating each other. But for one second can you just help me. Then we can go back. Please." Her pleas make my iron heart melt and I don't like it.

"I said you're fine Courtney, I mean it." That last part comes out a little more forceful than I intended.

"I know, but I have this." She shakes her arms like she's trying to rid herself of something, and I furrow my brows at

her. She's acting weird. She sticks her arms out in front of me. "Please just look again." There something in her voice that has me hesitating.

I lick my lips again, giving in, "Head to the house, and I'll take a better look."

Turning around, she walks in front of me towards the house. I give myself a pep talk as I get closer to Ryan's house. Walking inside, Courtney stands in the kitchen, still in her wet bathing suit. "Okay, strip down," I command, not realizing that those words would excite me as much as they did.

"Excuse me?" She shakes her head, wide eyed.

"Take off your bathing suit," I explain more, "If you want me to check you, thoroughly, then you need to take your clothes off."

Her mouth opens and closes as she exhales, reluctantly. "Okay, close your eyes."

"How the fuck am I supposed to check you if my eyes are closed," I answer.

"I don't know, but it feels weird with you staring at me." Her voice gets louder.

"Courtney, you realize I've seen you naked, right? You've actually stripped for me, and you must have forgotten, but I've licked almost every inch of your body." Her body shudders at my words. God, I'd do anything to taste her again.

"Yes, I remember," the words come out slowly, "but, this is different."

I want to argue that it isn't different, but whatever, I need to get this over with. This has gone too far. "Close your eyes then." I wave my hand, and she agrees, undressing fast as she keeps her eyes closed. I want to tell her that this was some fucked up joke but I'm too damn distracted by her nipples as they come out. Glorious as the first time I saw them. Then her bottoms slide off and she's standing there. So, vulnerable. So, beautiful. I grip the edge of the counter as she bites her bottom lip.

“Well?” She stutters, holding her arms out, naked as the day she was born.

Taking a step closer, I notice her sucking in a shuddered breath. Looking at her skin, I focus on her neck, her heart beating hard. I need this to be over with, or I might bend her over the counter. “Don’t fucking move.” My lustful need coming through my voice as I act like it doesn’t matter. Kneeling down, I push her knee outward, the smell of her pussy is intoxicating. Slowly I shift to the other leg, every touch making her body shake.

Standing back up, her eyes are still closed, and I think I just unlocked a new kink for myself. Putting my fingertips on her waist, I pull her body to me slowly, and she lets out a soft controlled moan as she moves with my firm direction. “Turn around, please,” I whisper and she slowly spins around. I close my eyes for a minute, her ass pressing back gently against my cock. Forcing my eyes open, the ache turns to hurt as my heart begs me to hurry the fuck up. Looking at her, I run my hands down her back and kneel down, her ass cheeks at eye level. Running my fingertips down over her hips, I gently caress each cheek. She lets out a whimper, and her breathing settles into a rhythm. I stand back up behind her, and grip her shoulder with one hand, moving her hair to one side as she presses back into me slowly.

“I still hate you,” I whisper.

“I know,” she whispers back.

Her hand reaches back between us, unbuttoning my jeans before she starts to lean forward. I pull her back, my arm wrapping around her, my hand firmly grasping her throat. “Nah, Princess, we aren’t doing it your way. You want my dick?” I wait a beat, my jaw tense. A mixture of anger and lust surging through my veins. “Answer me.” I gently squeeze her throat, her heart beating against my fingers.

“Yes,” she breathes out, “please.”

I spin her around hard, catching her before she falls. Fuck, I need to dial this shit back a few steps. Placing my hand around the back of her neck, I take a deep look into her eyes and the

tenderness I see hits me in a place deep within my chest, a place I wasn't expecting. "Fuck," I take a step back, resting against the kitchen island. I look over her naked, wet body, then to the heavens. "We can't do this," I say out loud. My rage fucking her isn't going to make me or her feel any better. I blow out a shaky breath, looking back at her. Her eyes widen as I hand her the towel from the floor, "You should probably go take a shower." I reach down and button my jeans before walking to the back door.

"Hunter?" her voice calls to me and it feels like a songbird singing to my heart. Looking at her, her eyes are soft, "I..." her lip trembles and I can see what she's trying to say is hard. "Thank you, for everything."

"You're welcome." I turn and walk out the door, heading home to take my own shower.

I2

Courtney

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I say, surprised, smiling as I see his beautiful face walk into the bar. Hunter leans on the bar and holds out his hand for a beer. I sigh, handing him his favorite. Our quick fling has ended up becoming a more frequent reoccurrence, with him coming to Texas more and more.

I blame the Universe.

“We just got done. Court, this is Chase and Silas. Guys, this is Courtney, she’s the girl I’ve been talking about all day.” Hunter introduces me to them and I realize that he’s been going around talking about ‘us.’ It’s not really a big deal. I’m not hiding him from anyone. I just don’t like how comfortable he’s becoming. I stand here for a second, wondering if I like him telling all my business to the world, but from the look on his face and his playful laugh, he could not care less. Every night plays in my head, every moment in my bed, has he told them everything?

Red flags and sirens go off in my head, have I let him get too close. Did we somehow cross the line I’ve been drawing in the sand. We need to

talk about how this is supposed to be just a casual thing, and I don't plan on starting a relationship with him. All my thoughts swirl and I get lost until Hunter clears his throat, bringing me back to the bar.

Pushing the thoughts from my head, I give them a subtle smile. "Hi, you guys are the ones that own the horse ranch, right?"

"Yes ma'am," Chase nods, his deep Texas accent is thick but soft. I look between the two men, who are most likely brothers, and my mind races back to what they've heard from Hunter.

"Are you all hungry?" I ask as I pull my hair back to keep it out of my face, trying to refocus on my set-up routine. "I think Jay is about to turn on the grill." I hand them some menu's as they drink their beers. I pause again, remembering that I wanted to tell Hunter thank you for fixing my tire this morning, but the thought of him doing that now makes me uncomfortable. Looking up, Hunter smirks at me and I watch his eyes roam over my body, my pussy aching to sit on his beautiful face. I swear this man could get whatever he wants by just fucking breathing.

"Courtney! Get your ass back here!" Jay shouts from the backroom. Hunter's eyes slide from me to the kitchen door, his shoulders tensing up, wanting to go back there and confront Jay for yelling at me. I wave him off, letting him know its fine.

Turning around I shout to the back room, "Yell at me like that again, and I'm going to take one of these beer bottles and shove it up your ass." I walk away, leaving the three of them at the bar, to the back where Jay is sitting at his desk. Jay smiles as I come into the doorway, and I flip him off.

“Courtney, if you keep breathing into the phone like that then I’m going to ask you to send me a video.” Jay jokes over the phone. I blink, flashing back to reality, not realizing I just drifted off to la-la land.

I lower my voice so no one can hear me as I sit at The Honey Tree with my laptop. “Babe, you wouldn’t be able to handle that kind of video from me.” I joke. It was one time. Me and Jay fucked just one time and he won’t let it go. It wasn’t even that good, just a messy, stoned, quicky. I grew up with Jay and when you grow up with someone it’s, I don’t know how to explain it, less than ideal. I smirk. “But if we were talking about Cade,” I trail off. Jay grumbles into the phone and I almost laugh out loud. No matter what Jay says, he has a jealous bone the size of Mount Everest. “I’m just playing, stop being a little bitch.” I’m technically not joking about Cade, Jay’s little brother, but if Jay knew about all the times me and Cade had drunken sex all over his house, he’d probably lose his damn mind.

“How’s everything there?” I clear my throat, wanting to focus on something other than sex for a minute.

“Fine, nothing I can’t handle.” he lets out a breath, and I can tell he’s relaxing at home. “Townes is getting out of prison.” I gasp at that. “Yeah, he did some school thing, and now he can get out early but he’s going to be on probation for like two years. And, Cade will be home too.”

I pout. “I wish I were there.” The three Greene boys all together again. They were the ones who kept me safe when I was young, and my heart calls out, wanting to be surrounded by their safety again.

“They should still be here when you get back. Speaking of that, when are you coming back?” he asks.

“Ah,” I pull up my calendar, “About another week and a half.”

“Damn, you aren’t going to call back and tell me you’re staying forever, are you?” he asks, lightheartedly.

I scoff. “Ew, no.” Looking up I see AJ walking by. “Hey Jay, I need to go. I have a client. Love you.”

“Oh, okay, love you.” He hangs up as I walk out the door. “AJ” I call out. Her bright pink hair is curled, bouncing and swaying as she walks. I walk to catch up with her, “Hey, Miss Cora said something about you helping Ollie with some social media thing?”

AJ nods. “Oh yeah, sorry, it’s been busy and I keep forgetting.”

“That’s alright, I haven’t seen Ollie but I planned on trying to find him today. Then I saw you, do you want to set something up so we can get on the same page?” I want to get this done and ride out the rest of my time here. I like AJ, she’s kind of like a transplant, like me. Only difference is I don’t like being here and I want to go back home.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Here, let me look at my calendar,” she trails off looking through her phone, “Where is it?” She lets out a laugh. “I hate calendars, but Jace made me download this stupid organizer thing. Fuck it.” She discards her phone into her purse. “I don’t have any plans tonight. You want to meet at the steakhouse? We can grab dinner and go over ideas.”

“Sure.” I blink, liking that idea.

“Great, six-ish?” She asks.

I nod. “Sounds good.” We wave bye and I walk back inside The Honey Tree. Mac is leaning on the counter talking to his girlfriend Josslyn, both giggling and flirting. “Y’all are just too fucking cute,” I say, when they both look at me. “Can I have some more of that yummy latte back there?” I ask Josslyn, stepping up next to Mac.

“So, how’s everything going?” Mac asks, making small talk.

“Good. Better, actually.” I shrug. “I’m not used to caring for a dog. So, the first two days were a little hard, but now me and Howie are best friends.” I leave out all the Hunter drama because who wants to talk about his dumbass? Not me. “The

first day, I swear he was going to break out of the house and run after Ryan's truck." I laugh as I tell him how mopey Howie's been.

"If you like, I can stop by tomorrow morning and he can go to work with me. Koe comes with me every day so it'll be something familiar for him."

"Yes, that would be great. Thanks." I put my hand on his arm, feeling his powerful muscles underneath his shirt.

Josslyn walks back over and hands me the latte and gives Mac a cup of coffee. I watch as Mac pulls her into a kiss and whispers, "I love you." I let out an audible sigh as they look over at me, and I wave my finger between them. "This, is so cute. I bet your sex is great, isn't it?" Josslyn's cheeks burn red. "I can always tell." I nod, taking a sip of my latte. "Don't be embarrassed. Sex is a great thing, it's all natural." I wave my hand at Josslyn, trying to break her out of her embarrassment. I don't understand why people always feel like they have to hide their sexuality.

"Now I understand what Ryan was talking about." Mac chuckles, connecting some invisible dots. "I got to go. Thanks for the coffee, Shortcake." He walks off as I give them both a puzzled look.

I turn to Josslyn. "What was that? Did Ryan say something about me?"

Josslyn waves her hand. "Only that you say what's on your mind. Nothing bad. I envy it." I return a smile, taking pride in my lack of filter. "And yes," she says as she looks around and leans over to the counter to whisper, "we have great sex."

"I could feel it." I sip my coffee.

"I... I just don't have much experience in that department, though," she reveals.

I scrunch up my face and laugh. "Just call it sex, it's part of your life, not a section in a store with a manager."

"Anyway, Mac, he's," she stutters, and I understand what she's saying.

“He’s more experienced than you.” I finish her thought for her, and she nods. “Do you want me to give you some advice?” I pause, waiting for permission. “I helped Cassie!”

“You did? I’m not a real girly-girl, and every time I try to be sexy it comes off as awkward.” She stands there, vulnerable and ready for all the notes.

“Why do you think Ryan proposed so fast? I mean, yes, he probably loves her, but,” I roll my eyes, “love can only go so far. You want him to beg, to propose, you got to work that pussy.” An old lady clears her throat next to me, her eyes wide and her face pale. Right. Forgot we’re in the deep south. “Sorry,” I whisper to her, “vagina.” She gasps and walks away. “Huh, I thought that would’ve been better. Anyway, I’ll gather some info and give it to you. But what you can do in the meantime, is just be you. Don’t try to be *sexy* because that’s not you’re thing. No lingerie. No romantic bullshit. Just visualize what a confident Josslyn would look like. One that’s relaxed and knows what she wants from her man. After that, everything else will come to you.”

Josslyn nods. “It’s just hard because I’m tall, and I have a huge ass, and...”

“Nice boobs too.” I wave my finger at her chest. “Use all that. You know how many girls wish they had your natural body. Trust me, men love a thick woman.” I look down at my phone. “Sorry, I got to go.” I grab my things and make my way to the door. Stopping short, I smile at Josslyn, giving her a devilish grin and winking at her. “Don’t worry, we’ll talk later, Shortcake.”

13

Hunter

“Roger,” I whisper as I open his stall, the five-year-old stallion patiently waits for me to usher him out. Grabbing his harness, I give it a light pull to get him moving, his feet cackling against the floor as we make our way through the big barn, on our way out to the large pen. Indy neighs as we pass her, and I stop, opening her stall door to let her follow me out. “Indy,” I say her name in a soft tone, “come on girl.” A horse neighs behind me and without turning I know it’s Honey. “Honey, it’s not your turn.” I call out to her as I start walking to the end of the barn again, with both horses in tow. “You can’t go out yet,” I answer her increasingly louder neighs, with the occasional hoof tap against the stall door. “Don’t yell at me. Your name isn’t on the schedule right now. You need to take up your complaints with the person who makes your schedule.”

“Are you talking to the horses?” A voice comes from behind, startling me. I thought I was alone. It’s Clara, the owner of the Arabian, Chance. She slowly walks into the barn, looking around at all the horses in their stalls. “Wow, this place is huge.” She laughs, the number of horses catching her off guard.

“Yeah, we tried to build the barn big enough for expansion but we filled it right up as soon as we were done. Anyway, you never talk to Chance?” I say closing the gate behind me. I

didn't really pay much attention to Clara the first time we met, mostly due to a particular someone taking up space in my mind, but she looks to be around my age, maybe early thirties. An average woman, blonde hair, brown eyes, about five-foot-four, built sturdy and surprisingly pretty.

She sucks in air through her teeth, shaking her head. "No, not really." To be honest, I had actually forgotten Clara was still around, my mind hasn't been really focused lately. "Your mom told me you were out here, and I just wanted to check on Chance, to see how she's doing. It's weird not having her at home." she laughs lightly, nervousness radiating from her with every word.

"Sure, she's in the other barn, though. This one is for our regular boarders," I say, wiping my hands and pointing to the barn next door. I turn and start walking to the white barn where Chance is.

"What does that mean." She falls in step behind me.

"A lot of people around town have horses that they board here with us. They pay for food and anything else the horses will need, from medical needs to reshoeing, and we just give them a place to stay and take care of everything."

Clara laughs a little, a small snort escaping which is awkwardly adorable. "Like an Airbnb? For horses?"

"Yeah, exactly." I nod, "I haven't thought of it like that. Anyway, we have a few horses in the white barn. The special ones that need a little extra care and work." I wave my hand forward pointing to the end of our path, and she smiles. "They're the ones I work with mostly."

"So, are you the only one who works all this?" she asks, looking around at the different buildings.

"No, I have two younger brothers who work it too. One's on his honeymoon, he's the one who takes care of the horses back in the big barn. And, I'm the one that mostly trains these," I stop at the entrance of the white barn.

"And your other brother?" She raises her brow, tilting her head.

“Oh, Ollie. He does a little bit of this and that, mostly whatever needs to get done,” I shrug. “If you want to see Chance’s progress, I’ll bring her out.” Clara nods and walks ahead of me to the round pen outside as I grab Chance. I pull her out slowly and bring her to the round pen, opening the gate as she walks through, trotting around once before stopping.

“Wow, she looks so different, calm and confident.” Clara says.

“Yeah, it’s amazing how they fall right into the groove once we start training. She’s been doing really well. The first day was rough, but she’s good now.” I walk over, through the pen, right up next to Chance and rub her neck. Her head turns to Clara, seeing her owner on the outside of the pen, she walks over to her and Clara smiles. Chance blows out of her nose and Clara rubs her up and down her powerful neck.

“So,” I say, walking over to the fence, leaning on the top rail, “how’d you get Chance?”

Clara grins, looking up at the majestic beast. “Before I tell you that story, I have to tell you another one. When I was little, I lived out in Wyoming. That’s where I’m from. It seemed like everyone I knew had a horse. But I didn’t. My parents were from a bigger city and new in the town, so it wasn’t on their radar. But I had this neighbor who lived across the street, and they had an Arabian like Chance. I never met the horse, because I was afraid of it, but I would watch it graze and run through their pasture almost every day.” I chuckle and she smiles, dropping her hand from the horse’s neck. “Now flash forward to seven years ago. I met my ex-husband. It was a bad relationship, abusive, physically and mentally, and to take my mind off things, he bought me stuff to keep me occupied.” She looks over at me. I would’ve never guessed that she was in that kind of relationship, she doesn’t show any signs of trauma or pain, talking about it from a healed place like some normal story from her past. “The day I served my ex-husband with divorce papers, he bought me Chance.”

“Wow.” I did not see that coming.

“Yeah, he remembered that story I told you and he thought it’d make me change my mind and stay. I told him to take the horse back because I’d never had a horse and didn’t want a horse. No offence, Chance.” She laughs, turning to face Chance before continuing the story. “But he couldn’t take her back and I didn’t want to leave her with him because I was afraid of what he’d do. So, I reluctantly kept her, taking her in the divorce. Four years of me trying to figure out how to care for a horse has been, difficult.”

“Wow, that’s crazy.” I lean into her story. “Have you ever ridden her before?”

“No.” She lets out a laugh. “Never. I’d just feed her, brush her, take her out to pasture, and when I got lonely, I’d just sit next to her stall and read. For the longest time I was trying to figure out what to do with her, but now I’m in love with her and could never get rid of her.” She scrunches up her face, rubbing Chance’s nose as she neighs in return.

I understand the feeling, horses have this way of walking into your soul and healing everything they touch. Clara’s story touches my heart and I feel like it’s only right that I help her and her relationship with Chance only blossom more. “I’m going to teach you how to ride.” I pull Chance with me into her stall. Calling out for Clara to follow me, we walk back to the big barn which is where all the regular horses are.

Walking up to the first stall inside, I stop. “This is Murph. My horse,” I say. “He’s a really gentle horse, and he’s a really good teacher horse. My friend’s little niece comes out here and rides him all the time.” I furrow my brows. “That sounded a lot better in my head.” Clara lets out a big laugh as we stand there rubbing Murph’s neck.

“Hunter?” Someone calls out, and turning around I see Courtney standing at the entrance. She has this strange look on her face and I wonder if something is wrong.

“Hey, what’s up, Courtney.” I smile. Why am I smiling? I chalk it up to me being in a good mood for once.

Her eyes go from me to Clara, and I realize they’ve never met, “Clara, this is Courtney, she’s friends with my sister-in-

law. Courtney, this is Clara.”

“Hi, Courtney.” Clara waves at her, and Courtney slowly raises her hand with a silent hi.

Why is she being so weird. I open Murph’s stall and grab his saddle off the mount. “Is there something you need?” I ask, starting to saddle up Murph.

“Ah, yeah, sorry, have you seen Ollie? I need to talk to him.” She stutters and I can hear some hesitation in her voice.

“Yeah, I think he’s down at the south end with the cattle. Here, let me check,” I say, pulling out my walkie from my back pocket. “Hey, Ollie, you there?”

A few seconds later, Ollie hops on. “Hey Hunter, what’s up?”

“Where are you?” I talk into the mic.

“At the Main house.” He responds.

“Okay, Courtney will be up in a few. She’s looking for you.” I place the walkie down, turning to Courtney for a second. “He’s at my parents’ house.” I turn and keep saddling up Murph for Clara, and look back to see Courtney is gone. Huh, whatever. I wonder why she’s acting so weird. While out with Clara, I see Courtney and Ollie walking around the property, and the thoughts of why she’s being so weird creep back in. But I shake the thoughts from my head as I focus on Clara, helping her learn how to ride, enjoying myself for the first time in a long time.

I4

Courtney

“That’s good,” I say, directing Ollie as he feeds Walter, the family goat. Never in my photography career did I think I’d be taking pictures of a goat. But here we are. I look down at my camera to see the pictures, all one hundred thirty-five of them. Taking picture of animals is hard.

Ollie smiles as he looks too, pointing out some of the funny ones. “I like this one.” As we start packing up, we head to one of the barns, “So, how’d you start doing this?”

“Ah, in high school, my grandma let me have an old camera that I found when I was rummaging through her stuff.” I explain, no cool back story here, just a spur of the moment life choice.

“That’s cool.” He nods, small talk is so awkward.

“So, how come you never went off to college, like your friends?” I ask, shooting straight.

“Oh.” he blows out a breath through his mouth, shrugging. “I don’t know, I guess I don’t really see the need in going to college.” I smell a lie, but nod anyway. I don’t know Ollie enough to tell him I can smell his bullshit. It might scare him off before we finish.

“Well, you seem to be good at the whole digital thing, you know, the website and social media stuff.” I offer up a segue.

“Yeah, it’s easy for me, I guess.” He takes in a breath looking up from our walk. “I got to go help my dad with the cattle now. I’ll catch up with you later? Maybe lunch or something?”

I raise my brow and tilt my head at him, but he just rolls his eyes, “Not like that, I know you have a thing with my brother.”

“I do not, I...” I start sputtering my words out as he cuts me off.

“Save your breath.” he holds up his hand. “I was asking as a friend. All of my friends are gone, and you’re the closest thing I have to a friend right now. Plus, I’m a little lonely.” He forces out the last word, and the heaviness hits me.

I blink. “Ollie, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He perks up.

I want to ask him about why he feels the need to pretend as though he doesn’t miss his friends. I can hear the hurt in his voice when he talks about them. I can also see the regret and fear in his eyes when he talks about college. But I decide to just smile and wave it off. “Never mind.”

“You sure? Because I can tell you all my brothers secrets,” his voice lightens and the playful kid I know is back. “He loves Shania Twain. He will deny it but every guy has a guilty pleasure that he gets down with.”

I laugh and put that little piece of knowledge in my back pocket. “No, I’m good. I’ll see you later. And yes, we can go to lunch one day.”

“Okay.” He smiles, turning and walking off to the other pastures. I decide to do more work to keep myself busy. AJ suggested that I take pictures of all of the horses and we can put them up on all the social media platforms to help gain some traction. To try and let people see the different breeds and styles of care they offer. I slow my pace as I walk towards the barn. I don’t like being in there, I’m not a farm girl. I don’t like getting sweaty and dirty, not unless I’m getting some pleasure out of it. Walking into the barn, I see Hunter over on the side mumbling to what I thought was himself but it turns

out to be an older white horse. “She’ll be back soon, I promise,” he hums, the white horse nodding its head and blowing out huge breaths. “I know, I know.” he rubs its nose, gently trying to calm it.

It’s very endearing and there’s something about the way he speaks to it that makes my eyes get teary. “You’re okay.” He leans into it, slowly hugging its head, and I hold up my camera, snapping a few pictures. “You’re safe.”

My body jerks, and my camera bag makes a sudden noise, making my presence known. Hunter turns around to look, and for a second, I thought I’d see the same look he used to give me. Looking at me the way he used to, the way he looked at that girl Clara. But instead, I get nothing. His eyes are cold, and his face is expressionless. I don’t affect him the way I used to. But isn’t that what I wanted? Yes and no. I wanted him to be like this but also the same as before. Now, the rejection and the hurt come my way, the feeling of love lost pressing into my soul. My heart dropping.

“Hey, do you need something?” he asks in a natural tone, like I’m just another client on the farm.

What the fuck is happening to me.

“No, well maybe,” I stutter.

Hunter shifts his weight but doesn’t move any closer. He raises his brows, waiting for me to continue. “Ollie wants me to take pictures of the horses.” Why is my voice so meek? What the hell is wrong with you, Courtney? Get your shit together, you’re a badass bitch. “I was wondering if any are out in the fenced in thingy.”

“The pen,” he says, pointing behind me, “it’s out there. Three of them are grazing.”

“Oh.” I turn to look. “I must have walked right past them.” I say in a lighter tone.

“Yup, happens when you’re not paying attention.” He turns, grabbing some rope from the wall. “You need anything else?”

“No. Thank you.” I say, timidly.

“Yup,” he says, not looking at me. I turn to walk away, and my body goes on autopilot as my mind tries to decipher what’s happening. Has Hunter really moved on? Shouldn’t I be happy if he did? Why do I always do this to myself? I play this stupid game of tug of war, and pull and push until the person just stops, leaving nothing but loneliness and rejection.

Fuck, I’m not opening that door.

No, this is a good thing. This is the right thing. I hope he did move on with that Clara bitch, I mean that very nice new girl named Clara. She looks like she has her head on straight. That’s what he needs, not someone like me.

I go to bed at night, crying, still thinking about him, full heartedly believing that the door between us has fully shut. That he must have found his closure, and maybe I will too. It doesn’t really matter at this point because I’m only reaping what I’ve sown. My feelings don’t matter, and I don’t deserve a happily ever after like the fairytales.

15

Courtney

He didn't show again. I hold back the tears as I look left and right. I will not cry. Mom says that crying never helps. I hold my pink backpack close to me as I sit on the steps of my house. The screen door opens and I wish she'd leave me alone. Mom always tries to make it worse when Dad doesn't show.

"See, I told you." She lets out a sad breath, and I wonder if she really cares or if she just wants to see me sad. My mom takes a seat next to me, puffing away at the cigarette she came out with. "He doesn't care about us."

No, he doesn't care about you, but I'm still his little girl.

She nudges me. "Look at it this way, at least you have me. I won't ever leave you, or abandon you like he does." She doesn't look for my response, as she puffs away. She thinks I'm the same as her. Just because she hates Dad, she thinks I have to hate him too.

Would she do this on purpose? I look over at her.

“Did you tell him to come today? It’s Thursday, right?” I question her.

Her brown eyes look down at me, “Yes, Sweetpea. I told him.” She shakes her head, “He knows Thursdays are your days. But to be honest, he lasted a lot longer than I thought he would.”

“What do you mean?” I look at her and back to the road, in hopes his blue truck would come around the corner any minute.

“Your dad gets bored easy. Jobs, women, and even his kids.” She takes a long drag of her cigarette and exhales slow.

I tighten my jaw. I don’t like it when she talks about him like that. My daddy loves me, he tells me all the time. I blink my eyes rapidly. I want to prove her wrong. I want him to show up ready for his weekend with me. I love my daddy more than my mom. He plays with me, we watch movies together, and I feel happy when I’m with him. But this is the second time he hasn’t shown up for our time together.

Last time, I made Mom call him to make sure he knew, and he said he was sorry, but something came up with work, and he needed to work all weekend. I was sad but he promised he would be here this time and he’d make it up to me.

“Can you call him, please.” I look at her. I know I have tears running down my face, but I don’t care.

Mom, surprisingly, nods. “Sure, but it’s not going to change anything. This is just how men are, baby.” She pulls out her phone, dialing his number before she gets up from the steps, and tosses her cigarette on the ground. “Steven, where are you?” She yells into the phone as she walks back inside. I want to go to the door and hear what he has to say but my legs are too heavy to

move. It feels like I have a house sitting on top of me and my throat hiccups as tears fall down my face.

Through the blurriness, a blue butterfly lands on my backpack and slowly flaps its wings. I've never seen a real blue butterfly before. I wipe my tears and sniff as I stare at it. "Hello, little butterfly," I say in a soft tone. I know it can't understand me, but I can't help it. I watch as the butterfly gently moves its wings back and forth. Wondering if it will let me hold it, I stick out my hand. "Don't be scared. I won't hurt you."

"Courtney!" My mother's voice booms from behind me and the butterfly flies off into the warmth of the Texas sun. "He ain't coming. Piece of shit, that's what he is. You know what, I'm never letting that man back into my life. I'm done."

I roll my eyes, not believing a word she says.

"Come on inside, we can watch a movie, and I'll let you have a coke," she says to me.

I turn to look at her, my long black hair matches hers and I wonder if I'll be like her when I grow up? Sometimes at night, I can hear her cry in her bed, asking God why he took away the only thing that made her feel whole. The last time I heard her, I walked into her room and hugged her as she sobbed into her pillow. She cried saying my dad's name over and over until she passed out.

"Well?" She sighs, and I realize I was staring at her, not answering.

"Sure." I nod, getting up and pulling my backpack with me, remembering the butterfly. Wondering why it came to me today.

I watched the sun stretch across the grey blue sky as I prop my feet up on the porch. Pulling up my camera, I take a couple of shots of the sky, like I've done a million times before. Looking through my lens, I see Howie running through the yard with Walter right behind him. I laugh to myself as I watch both of them play, like two dogs. Taking a few pictures, I decide that I should walk around. I didn't know how big the Freeman property was until Ollie showed me around. The two huge barns, one white and the other red, stick out against the scenery and a white wooden fence lines the property. Over on the far side of the barn, there's a pavilion, the one where Hunter trains.

Stopping, I hold my hand over my eyes to take a look around. The summer sun is coming down with force, so much heat and humidity that I'll have to take another shower when I'm done. I enjoy the silence, though. Sundays are like that, there's no hustle, just people taking things easy. Dropping my hand, I step out of my shoes, closing my eyes as I feel the earth beneath my feet. Wiggling my toes back and forth, I feel the grass between them. A cool breeze slowly winds up, blowing the sweat from my forehead, and I smile to the sun, basking in the purity of the moment.

Taking in a breath, I fill my lungs with fresh air. "Thank you, Universe," I whisper into the breeze.

"Universe?" A voice comes from the left of me. Of course, Hunter would show up. He seems to always catch me in my most peaceful moments. I've always been able to brush it off, but this time, I feel my heart kick up, and my stomach burns with embarrassment. He caught me doing something sacred and secret, something I've never let anyone else see. The screaming demons from my past try to rear their ugly heads, trying to set each other free and let someone into my holy place. Whipping around, a shooting pain runs up my neck and I wince, grabbing my neck. Looking over, I notice Hunter is sitting under a tree with a piece of wood in his hand, and a knife in the other. What is he, a carpenter, now? And, of course, he's wearing his old gym shorts and a torn shirt, looking way too comfortable.

“What?” I say, knowing good and well what he said.

Hunter pulls his right leg up, propping his forearm on his knee. The knife dangles from his hand as he sits there. “You just said, ‘Thank you, Universe.’ What does that mean?”

“Nothing,” I shake my head, picking up my shoes, trying to find the best way back to safety.

“Of-fucking-course,” he mumbles.

Furrowing my brows, I turn back to him. “Was there a problem with my fucking answer?” I snap.

Hunter lets out a big dramatic breath, “Naw, no problem.”

“I don’t get you. One minute you’re nice to me and the next you’re a fucking asshole.” I huff out.

Hunter blinks his eyes back to his emotionless self, and I want to strangle him. “Welcome to my world, Princess.” He waves his knife in a small circle then turns back to whatever the hell he’s doing. “Sucks when it’s directed towards you, doesn’t it?” He doesn’t look up, shaving off a large piece of wood.

“I hate you,” I grind out. I don’t really, but I hate that he knows exactly how to get under my skin. I don’t like that.

Hunter laughs it off like it’s no big deal, and it stings. I don’t know why, but I can feel the rejection in his laugh, like I’m the problem, like everything’s my fault. Maybe it is. His laugh turns into my mother’s in my ears, which in turn, turns into my grandmother’s, and the tears start to form. A chaotic storm brewing in my head. I normally have a tighter lid on my childhood trauma, but lately, it seems as if the lid doesn’t fit the container that I’m shoving everything into. “You ruin everything,” I shout. It wasn’t the first time I’ve yelled at Hunter, but this was the first time I’ve yelled out of pain. Hunter looks up at me as if he finally sees what I’ve been hiding.

I freeze, like time splits and I’m stuck, unable to move. It feels like my feet are in concrete, and the more I try to move the stronger the Earth holds on. I don’t want to be still. I need to run, to run to my hideaway. Slowly, the sun that once shone

on me is now darkening as I breathe. I try to wiggle my feet, to feel the ground, but my mind is releasing the demons from the archives of my own darkness.

Hunter pulls my face to meet his eyes. How did he get next to me that fast? I push him away, trying to lock everything down before he sees it all. If I don't get a hold of myself, he'll see my truth, my burden, my pain. Hunter fights me, trying to get me to look him in the eyes, but my knees buckle. Everything inside me is shaking, crumbling under the pressure. Every fucking word that's been said to me, every fucking thing that's been done to me, and every single motherfucking thing that's made me turn to stone over the years, crumbles to the ground. "No," I scream. My throat collapses and I blink, my vision changes and everything morphs into darkness. A darkness where I'll never be able to forgive myself. "No. I need the ground, I need the ground," I whisper, fighting to free myself from his grasp, trying to get down to my safety.

The sounds of Hunter yelling are muffled, my soul being crushed under the avalanche of stone. I push him hard enough that he stumbles back and my camera falls as he pulls the strap out of my hand. My eyes focus on my camera, the only thing that mattered to me, scattered across the ground. My constant, my safety net, shattered. I sob uncontrollably at the pieces in the grass. "No, no, no!"

"Courtney," Hunter speaks, but I can barely hear him. It's too late.

"I hope you learned your fucking lesson." My grandmother takes my camera, the camera she gave me, and smashes it into a thousand pieces. Everything that I've worked for, my heart, my escape, lays on the ground in a million pieces. "And don't start crying, this is all your fault."

"No... I... everything," I stutter, trying to pick up the pieces.

“Courtney, we can fix it,” Hunter’s voice breaks through.

“No, we can’t!” I yell, “It’s broken. Everything’s broken.”

16

Hunter

What the fuck just happened? I look around the field hoping an answer will pop out and slap me. Howie and Walter come running up and I stare at them, “Did y’all see that? I mean, what the hell just happened?” I run my hands through my hair, taking a deep breath as I try to settle my nerves.

Bending down, I pick up the broken bits of Courtney’s camera, its shattered into a few pieces and I don’t think I’ll be able to fix this. I look up to the house where Courtney ran off too and stare. I’ve been standing here for what feels like an eternity, finding it hard to move. What do I do?

Walking to the barn, I lay the broken pieces out and turn on the camera to see if it will still power up, thankfully it does. The lens of the camera is snapped off and I try to put it back together, realizing that the small pieces that hold it on are broken off. The screens cracked and it’s hard to see but the memory card is still okay. I look at the last few pictures she took, a lot of them are of the ranch, the sunrise, and sunset. I chuckle at the pictures of Walter and Howie playing. Then one of me with Hope, Cassie’s older white horse.

Hope is an older horse that Cassie and Ryan rescued, and she gets restless often. I find it therapeutic to talk to her. I didn’t know she took pictures of me yesterday. Regret washes over me, I’ve been an asshole these last couple days. I’m just

tired of feeling the way I do. I can't seem to get over her. But none of that matters right now. I've never seen Courtney have a panic attack like that before, it caught me off guard. I mean, I know she has some things that she's trapping inside, but I never thought about how much she might be actually holding on to. I blow out a breath, wondering what I should do. "I have no fucking idea what to do," I say, staring down the big barn walkway. Without thinking, I pull out my phone and call the one person who might be able to help me.

"Yello," Noah's cheerful voice rings in my ear, and fear creeps into my mind. I let out a breath, not knowing how to explain the situation. God, I feel like I'm in high school again, and my nerves are all over the place. "Hey, hold on, let me turn off the TV," Noah says, stopping me before I can start. "Okay, what's wrong, Buttercup."

"Don't call me Buttercup," I say with discomfort.

"Okay, Sugar Dumpling," he jests.

"Noah," I let out an aggravated sigh, "Can you fucking stop, I need your help."

"Alright, alright, don't get your panties all twisted," He huffs.

I lean against the barn, and tell Noah about Courtney. Everything from how she was talking to herself to how she flipped out on me, and how she ended up having a panic attack with it ending with the camera breaking. "I've never seen her act like that," I confess, totally confused.

"Well, of course not," Noah chirps, "she suppresses everything and keeps it all away from you. Basically, hiding her real feelings from everyone. You know, Courtney acts like a badass and that nothing bothers her, but in reality, I bet a lot of things do. You can only hold onto so much before it all falls apart."

I furrow my brows, confused. "How do you know all this stuff?"

Noah snorts. "Because I paid attention in high school, dumbass. Now, can you tell me the truth so I can help."

“What are you talking about?” I shake my head.

Noah lets out an exhausted noise. “I know you hooked up with Courtney when you were in Texas.”

“How’d you—” I stammer as he cuts me off again.

“Because. I. Pay. Attention. And Jace knows too,” he adds at the end.

“What, how does Jace know?” I ask. I don’t like people talking about me and my business.

“Because we talk about it all the time. AJ knows too, because well, whenever I talk to Jace she’s usually there, oh and Belle knows too. But don’t worry, we always use code words for your dirty time. She thinks you guys are just ‘really good friends’ that like to have sleepovers. Oh, and that all led to Jace and AJ having to have a conversation with Belle about ‘inappropriate public conversations.’ She kept asking if she could have a sleepover with her friend Levi from school because they’re also really good friends. You should have heard that conversation, it was funny as fuck.”

“Stop,” I yell, a little louder than I mean too. My heart jumps into my throat, and it feels like it’s going to explode any second if we keep talking about her. “Can we get back to you actually helping me?” Noah’s silence meets my irritation, and I know he’s not going to break, waiting for me to admit he’s right. “Fuck. Fine. Yes, we had ‘sleepovers’ and I stayed with her at her apartment when I was in Texas, you happy?”

“Wait, hold up, you stayed at her apartment?” Noah echoes my confession.

“Yes. It was just easier that way,” I confess. “Can you please just help me? I don’t know what to do, and I feel like shit. I just want to, you know,” I trail off, looking up to the sky as my eyes get watery. “Why is this so uncomfortable?”

“Because you’ve never tapped into your emotions.” Noah answers me, his confidence aggravating me more.

“I’m hanging up,” I grump, pulling the phone away from my ear.

“Wait, I’m just fucking with you.” Noah laughs. “I have nothing else going on in my life, let me have some fun.”

“At my expense?” I yell.

“Yes, that’s why we’re best friends.” Noah clears his throat. “So, what’s the plan?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m calling you. There’re too many lines when it comes to me and Courtney.” My voice lowers, and I worry I’ve pushed her too far away.

“But the lines are drawn in the sand, dude,” he says, “just pretend they aren’t there for a minute. What would the Hunter I know do if this was anyone else?”

I roll my eyes and mutter, “I’d get the camera fixed, because it’s important and...”

“And what?” Noah encourages me to finish.

“And I like it when she’s happy,” I say in a grumpy tone.

“Aw, my little Sugar Dumpling does have feelings. Hey Jace!” Noah shouts away from the phone, “Hunter does have feelings.”

“I’m hanging up, now,” I say before Jace starts. Getting up, I go up to the main house and get help. “Hey Mom, can you get Ollie and Gentry to take the horses out. I need to run to town for a minute.”

Mom looks up from her laptop, sitting at the table. “Sure, is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” I nod, trying to hold onto my cheerful tone, but she always knows when something is up. “I just forgot. I have some things I need to get done.”

“What things? Are you okay?” Her tone changes and I can hear her start to worry.

“Yes, Mom I’m fine.” I sigh.

Mom looks over to dad, who’s sitting in his recliner. “You might need to get out there with Ollie. I’ll call Gentry and see if he can work today.” She grabs her phone and I tap the doorframe as I turn to leave. “Thanks Mom, love you.” I walk

over to my truck, trying to figure out how the hell I'm going to get her camera fixed.

The whole drive to town I worry about how she'll respond to me trying to help. Tapping the steering wheel as I drive, I say out loud, "With her, you never know."

I7

Courtney

Howie lays in bed with me as I stare out the window, the clouds in the sky dancing, reminding me that my camera is gone. After my freak out with Hunter this morning, I hid in the closet until I calmed down, not wanting him to see me like that anymore. Coming out of the closet I heard Howie scratching at the back door and we've laid in bed ever since. I'll admit it, he's pretty good at getting me out of my head.

Getting up, I decide I'm done being upset about my camera. I'll just have to work hard and get a new one. I put on my workout clothes and go for a run. I need something to do and it's nice getting away from everything. It's helping me clear my head. I've already come up with a plan for buying a new camera. And once I leave North Carolina, I've decided I won't be coming back. Every horrible memory of this awful place will stay here and die. I don't know how I'm going to tell Cassie. Maybe I could tell her the truth, but then that'd open the can of worms that needs to stay shut. It'll be easier if she doesn't know about some things. There're reasons why I don't want to live here anymore, reasons why I moved halfway across the United States, back to the place that terrifies me more than almost anything. But these are the cards I decided to play, and as my grandmother used to always say, you reap what you sow.

Getting home, I change and cozy up in the bed with Howie again. If I can't take pictures right now then I'll have to find something else to keep my mind busy. Pulling my glasses up on my nose, I open my computer and remember my conversation with Josslyn. I laugh to myself as I search 'how to give a good blowjob.' I make a list on my piece of paper for Josslyn, trying to give her the pointers I wish someone would've given me when I was starting out. As I work, I feel my spirits lifting. I like Josslyn and if I can help her be confident in the bedroom, why wouldn't I.

The time slips and my phone rings, knocking me out of my dick drunk trance, the sun setting in the window. Pulling my glasses off, I give my eyes a break, and answer the phone with a yawn, "Hello?"

"Hey!" Cassie says cheerfully into the phone, "how's it going?"

"Good," I say, pushing my laptop off to the side, standing to stretch. I head to the kitchen for something to drink, my mouth dry as a desert. Behind me, the sound of little paws tap on the floor as I walk. "You know, I wasn't expecting to like having a Howie around this much," I say, laughing at how he's been glued to my hip since I got here.

"Yeah, he's the best. Hold on, let me FaceTime you. I miss your face," she says as I pull my phone away from my ear. I walk back to the bedroom, waiting for the call to connect, and Howie jumps up on the bed, laying at the foot. Cassie's beautiful face comes on the screen and tears spring up in my eyes, a moment of realization hitting me and I feel how much I've actually missed her. How she's the only true friend I have now.

Swallowing hard, I push down the loneliness and despair, cementing them in the depths of my heart. "Hey there, Sugar Tits," I say, smiling through the pain. She's used to me calling her weird and outlandish names now. It was something I started years ago to get her off my back, and it's worked. Cassie smiles at me, pulling her sunglasses up and placing them on her head. She's sitting under an umbrella, and the

sounds of the ocean are flooding through the speaker. "Where's Ryan?" I ask.

Cassie turns the camera to Ryan, sitting next to her in a beach chair, leaned back with a Corona in his hand and shades on, living his best life. "Wow, I don't think I've ever seen Ryan relax before." I stare as he tilts his head to the camera, smiling.

Cassie turns back to me, "Don't let his face fool you. Today is the first day he didn't wake up talking about the horses."

I laugh. "Aw, his babies are okay. Only one got out, but we found it before dark." I smile as Cassie's eyes get big.

"She's joking, babe," Cassie turns to him, reassuring him that I was just fucking around.

Ryan mumbles something under his breath, and I laugh out loud. "Anyway, how's your trip going?"

"It's good. We're at Turks and Caicos now. We'll be here for three more days, right Ryan?" She looks over at him for confirmation. "Yeah, we took a scuba diving lesson, which was fun. Ryan and the instructor went pretty deep. And I stayed closer to the surface and watched them. What about you?" She sighs. "What are you doing? Kill anyone yet?"

"Nope, I still have some time before you get back." I joke. "No, I've just been doing some research."

"Oh, what kind?" Cassie leans in, interested.

"How to give a good blowjob." I stare back, and Ryan barks out a laugh.

Cassie narrows her eyes, losing interest, "I can't tell if you're serious or if you're joking."

I hold up my papers, "It's real, my love. Josslyn needs some help. So, she came to the best in town."

"I don't think I wanted to know that." Cassie looks up from the phone. "Wait are Joss and Mac, okay?"

"Oh yeah, they're fine, I think." I shrug it off. "She doesn't feel, how should I put this." I stop, trying to think of an

appropriate term but I draw a blank. “She doesn’t think she’s good at having sex. Which is very strange because everyone is at least average.”

“Why did I get on FaceTime with you?” Cassie sighs, blushing. Looking over to Ryan, she laughs. “I should’ve known better.”

“Yeah, this is your fault. You can’t have me out in the open on FaceTime,” I state. “Anyway, I tried to tell her that it literally doesn’t matter.”

“Why?” Cassie asks.

“Because men just want to get their dicks wet,” Ryan says laughing.

“Bingo bango, but there always comes a time, in every relationship, where at least one person doesn’t feel adequate enough.” I sigh. “And it sucks to say, but it’s mostly the women, because we have stupid hormones and shit. So, she’s feeling like she isn’t good enough right now.”

“I think you missed your calling,” Cassie says in a heartfelt way.

“I was thinking the same thing.” I smile. “I’m just writing out some tips and tricks on how to give a good blowjob. That way Josslyn can get her mojo back in the bedroom.” A notification interrupts our banter and I see it’s from Cora, asking if I’d like to go to dinner with her and a few other people. “Oh no,” I say, the blood runs out of my face.

“What happened?” Cassie perks up.

“Miss Cora wants me to go to dinner with her,” I say as I check my pulse, it sped up way too fast as I read the message.

“Just her?” Cassie asks.

“No, with some other people. But she’s been asking me to lunch dates and stuff, and I’ve been stalling.” I stare wide eyed at the screen and Cassie looks back.

“Why have you been stalling?” Cassie squints her eyes.

“Because I’m not like you Cassie. I don’t have your bubbly contagious personality. I don’t love everyone and everyone doesn’t love me back.” I grunt.

“Hey, that’s not me. I don’t like everyone,” she protests.

I smile at her. “Okay, true but everyone likes you. You have a likable personality. I just scare people when I talk because I have no filter.”

“And I love that about you.” Cassie smiles.

“Ryan, help me, please!” I call for a sane person to enter the conversation.

Cassie hands the phone to Ryan, and he starts explaining his mom. “My mom’s just nosey. She probably just wants to know what you’ve been doing. Oh, and also, what your plans are. Like how long you’re going to be staying and stuff. Maybe how long you’re going to be gone before you come back. Just normal very personal stuff that you don’t want to tell anyone. Oh, and definitely tell the truth, because she’ll know when you’re lying. And if you have to, use Madison or Josslyn as a buffer.”

“Let’s hope Madison brings Beau.” I cross my fingers. I hear Cassie mumble something, and Howie literally jumps on top of me, his patience wearing thin.

“Has he been, okay?” Ryan asks.

“Yeah.” I hiccup. “He’s been outside a lot with Hunter and Walter. Mac came by one day and took him for the day. I think he liked that. He definitely doesn’t like that I sleep in, though. He keeps trying to wake me up at the ass crack of dawn,” I laugh. Ryan laughs and I realize I need these two in my life. Where are all these emotions coming from? Maybe I’m about to start my period.

“Hey Court?” Ryan breaks my daze.

“Yeah.” I refocus on the phone.

“You, okay?” he asks, his tone turning more serious. Why is it when someone asks that with good intentions, my walls always want to crumble and fall.

“Yeah,” my voice falters, but I stick to my answer.

“I know you’re lying. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter. But I ain’t gonna push you.” He stops, smiling at me through the phone.

“But why?” I challenge him.

“It’s called having healthy boundaries,” he states, handing the phone back to Cassie.

Fucking men, and they’re stupid growth.

18

Courtney

It's dark and late by the time I get back to Ryan's house. I'm surprised I made it back in one piece, driving those country roads at night can be dangerous. Dragging my feet to the front door, I kick something hard at the door and I turn on my phone flashlight to see what it is. A cardboard box sits at the front door, centered on the doormat and I frown down at it. Ryan and Cassie never told me they were getting a package. Bending down, I pick it up and juggle it on my hip as I try to unlock the front door.

Once inside, I set all my stuff down and take the box to the kitchen island. Looking at the box, I see my name written on the top in marker. Confused, and a little freaked out, because I've watched enough of the ID channel to know that this could be from a stalker, I push it away and have a quick look around. This fits, I'm alone, in a small town that I don't call home. You know, these small towns are where these stalkers are bred. Ryan's parents are a mile up the road, and Hunter lives about two miles the opposite way, I'd be screwed if I needed help. And the box was delivered at night. Who delivers a box at night? A stalker that's who. Thinking on my feet, I call Ryan. I don't know what time it is there but I know he has one of those video camera doorbells so he can tell me if it's indeed a stalker or just a box.

"Hello?" A sleep deprived Ryan answers the phone.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” I speak as I start sweating. “Can you look on your phone and tell me if a stalker left me a box?”

“What?” he asks, dazed, and confused.

“I went to dinner with your mom, and I came back to a box on the front porch with my name on it. Now I need to know if the fictional stalker in my head is real or not. I feel like I’m about to have a stroke.”

“I think you mean heart attack but hold on.” Ryan sighs.

I listen to his breathing and the tension has me almost scratching my own skin off. “Anything?”

“Hold on,” Ryan huffs.

“What’s taking so long?” I snap back.

“Well for one, you called me late as fuck, and I had just gone to sleep. And two, I’m a thousand miles away from home. And three, you sound crazy,” he explains.

“Don’t ever call a woman crazy, Ryan. Especially when there’s a stalker on the loose,” I shout.

“Stop watching the ID channel before bed, how ‘bout that?” he snaps.

“It’s informative. Now have you found anything?” I question him for the hundredth time.

I hear a commotion from his end of the line, and Ryan whispers softly, “It’s nothing baby, go back to sleep.”

“Nothing my ass, I could die,” I gasp, “I think I’m having a hot flash.”

Ryan’s sighs. “It’s Courtney, she’s just being *insane*.”

“I’m offended.” I huff.

“You could’ve just gone to Hunter’s house.” Ryan’s voice fades.

“Why would I do that?” I scrunch my face in disgust, I don’t need him protecting me.

There’s silence over the phone, but before I can say anything Ryan speaks up, “He has access to the cameras too.”

“Oh.” I stop. “Well, that would’ve made more sense. Why didn’t you tell me that first?”

“Again. I had just gone to sleep.” His voice is gritty, but his tone doesn’t bother me.

“Well, since we’re here. Can you just tell me if my story is going to end in a passion-filled blood bath, where someone kills me because they love me too much.”

“Alright, it looks like Hunter was your *mysterious stalker*.” Ryan pipes up, breaking me from my murder mystery fantasy.

“What?” I ask, trying to focus.

“Hunter. My brother. Put something at the front door,” he says slowly. “Are you a little let down?”

“Sadly, yes.” I exhale, my nightmare will have to wait for another day.

“You’re insane. Goodnight, Courtney.” And, with that Ryan hangs up the phone. I blink, staring at the medium sized box sitting under the recessed lighting on the kitchen island. Why would Hunter drop something off at the house and not say anything? I pick up the box, suspiciously, narrowing my eyes as I examine it. It’s just a plain box.

“I swear, if he’s playing some kind of practical joke on me, I’ll slice him from top to bottom,” I mumble to myself. Grabbing the scissors, I open the box carefully and think my eyes are playing tricks on me. There’s no way I’m seeing this right, in the box is a brand-new camera, better than the one I would’ve bought with my own money. My mouth hangs open as I pull the camera out, a note hanging onto it.

‘Don’t be mad, and don’t kill me in my sleep.’

I let out a snort and laugh as I look at the camera he bought me. I want to be mad. I want to call him and yell about how I am an independent woman, and I don’t need handouts. But all I can do is smile as the tears slide down my face. I cradle this new joy in my life, a spark of happiness lighting my dark world. He bought me a brand-new camera, I’ve never had a brand-new one, always hand-me-downs, or pawn shop finds. They would always last me long enough to get by until I could

afford a little bit better one, maybe a few months, maybe a year. But now? This one could last me years, decades if I don't have another panic attack and break it.

“Why did he do this?” I ask the silence, looking around, still stunned. Howie jumps up to smell the box, and I turn my eyes to him, begging him for an answer. “I... I don't understand.”

Staring down at the camera, I hold it in my hands, squeezing it close to my chest. Once I get to my room, I place it on the bed as I change, not taking my eyes off it. Should I text him? Call him? I have to thank him. I turn to the mirror as I see my brows furrow in the reflection, the all too familiar feeling of anger rising up inside me.

Why am I like this? Why do I hate it when someone does something nice for me? Why do I prefer to live with the hate and anger? One side of me wants to tell him how grateful I am, while the other wants to yell and scream that I never asked him to fix my problems. I don't want him to feel like he owes me anything. Maybe that's it. Maybe he feels guilty because of my panic attack, he saw a glimpse of my internal war and it made him feel guilty. I blink and take a few deep breaths, deciding that has to be the answer for his generosity. Hunter doesn't do nice things, and especially not for me. That ship sailed when I pushed him away.

“Okay, that's enough deep thoughts for tonight,” I declare, pushing everything out of my mind. “I'll just ask him tomorrow morning. Simple. Then I'll pay him back for it.” Turning to look at Howie, who has made a permanent spot at the end of the bed, I nod. My anxiety around everything slips away as I close my eyes.

Waking up in a pool of my own sweat, I still hear Brandie's voice as she screams for me to never tell. My burdens making tally marks across my soul, chaining me back against my own wall, never letting me forget.

19

Hunter

The sweat runs down my temple as I sling the bales of hay into the barn. No one's here this early in the morning so I turn on some music and start singing as I work.

"I don't think Ryan will like that," Courtney's voice startles me.

"Fuck." I place my hand over my heart, making sure it's still in my chest. "You scared the shit out of me."

Courtney smiles softly. "Didn't think that was possible." Her voice is soft and smooth, and my senses are on high alert. Who is this and what has she done with Courtney? "But I guess any man would say that if they got caught singing, 'Man! I feel like a woman!'" she says coyly, spinning and kicking a foot out.

I straighten my back, not sure how I'm supposed to be responding right now. This isn't the normal banter, she hasn't threatened me with a weapon, and I haven't called her a bitch. I clear my throat, "It's a good song." Courtney's smile hasn't left her face and my heartbeat is speeding up fast. It's doing things to me that I can't control, and I don't know if that's good or bad anymore. Brushing my hands off, I can't help but smile back. "Is there something I can do for you?" Courtney's smile fades a little and I regret asking. She looks down and I

realize she has the new camera around her neck. Oh no, she's here to kill me.

“Um, why did you do this?” She looks up, making eye contact with me, confused. The number one thing I've learned about her, is to never underestimate her.

Taking a step back, I put my hands in my pockets. “Didn't you break yours?”

“Are you asking me?” she questions, pulling the camera off her neck and sitting it down on the hay bales.

“What's happening right now? I'm confused. You're acting very strange. Yes, I bought you a camera. Why? Because I was a dick. And, because your other one broke. Honestly, I tried to get it fixed but the guy at the store said they don't even make that model of camera anymore. It was something to do with the parts or lens or something. So, I just bought you a new one. I don't know anything about cameras so I asked the guy and he pointed that one out, and told me...” She cuts me off as she hurls her body into mine. I tighten up, thinking she's going to hurt me, but she wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight.

Slowly, I pull my hands out of my pockets and wrap my arms around her, firmly holding her against me. Fresh air fills my lungs and I hold onto her as time stands still, her arms tightening around me and tears roll down my neck. “Hey, it's not a big deal,” I mumble. This is not us. These big emotions are making me peel back the layers of my hard shell and I don't like what I'm feeling.

“Hunter, shut up and just hug me,” she snaps through the tears.

“Are you secretly trying to stab me?” I ask.

Courtney's chest vibrates, and a laugh escapes. She pulls back, wiping her tears away. “I do give off that vibe, don't I?”

“That, and you've tried to stab me before,” I note.

She narrows her eyes. “And whose fault was that? You shouldn't have told me I belong in the kitchen.”

“It was a joke.” I roll my eyes.

“And so was me trying to stab you. You see, I can make jokes too,” She mocks.

I laugh, and she picks up her camera. “Thank you,” she offers, holding it close to her. “I’ve never had a new one before, so,” she says, “thank you, you didn’t have to do this. Everything was my fault yesterday.” I blink at her openness, this Courtney, the one she’s showing me right now, is strange to see. I like it, she seems human. And she does really have other feelings inside, not just anger and resentment.

“I know I didn’t have to, but it was kind of my fault for how I treated you. And I know that taking photos is where your heart is. Basically, how this place makes me feel.” I wave my hand out. I want to play this off, to tell her it’s nothing, because if I tell her how I really feel then the rejection will follow.

“I want to repay you.” She perks up.

“No.” I shake my head. “I didn’t do this expecting something in return, Courtney. Sometimes people just do nice things.”

“But I thought you weren’t going to do nice things for me anymore. You know, because of what I said before.” She stops.

“You mean when you yelled at me, because I kept doing nice thing for you?” I raise my brows. Her cheeks turn rosy and I suck in my bottom lip, turning to look out towards the fields. My eyes catch a few horses out in the field, and work jumps back to my mind. I have so much to do and I’m just standing here talking. Turning my head back to her, an idea strikes me. “Okay, you want to pay me back?”

She nods, her eyes getting big. “Yes, please.”

“Help me with the horses today.” I nod to the few out in the pen. “Ollie ain’t here, Ryan’s still gone, and Mom’s out running errands. So, I could really use an extra pair of hands.” Never mind the fact that I could easily call one of the guys to come and help, but getting her to help will be fun. Courtney’s face turns a little pale, and she looks over to the horses.

“So, something I’ve never told anyone.” She looks back at me. “I’m terrified of horses.”

Staring at her, I squint, my brain wants to prove that statement wrong, but every time I remember seeing her out on the ranch, she’s always stayed a good distance from the horses. “Well, today’s the perfect day to face our fears, isn’t it?”

“Why’d you say that?” She squints back at me, tilting her head.

“Because I have a fear that since you’re being nice to me, that you’re really just trying to get close so you can slowly poison me,” I say back, monotone.

She laughs at the confession, but I don’t, sometimes she really does scare me.

She looks out to the horses again. “I don’t do well with not being in control. So, I don’t know how this is going to work.”

“One step at a time,” I say, winking as I start to walk to the field where the horses are, “come on, Princess.”

“I might just stab you. I don’t have time for the poison,” she calls out to me.

I laugh, turning on my heels, walking backwards as I watch her hair blow in the wind as she follows me. She might be the devil in disguise, but damn she’s gorgeous.

This day maybe just got a little bit better.

20

Hunter

Okay, in all fairness, I didn't think Courtney's fear was immobilizing, but I watch her become stiff as a board as I pull Hank, our oldest most laid-back horse, out of his stall. I might have given her too much credit. "Courtney, he's not going to bite you." I grab her by the arm and pull her close to me. Holding her by her waist, I pull her in between me and Hank, her lovely ass pushing back against my crotch.

"But what if he kicks? Then I'll have to go to the hospital and probably bleed out or... What if I die from sepsis?" She pushes back against me harder, jumping from one crazed story to another.

"Wow, you've got an overactive imagination," I say jokingly, the look on her face screaming she's one hundred percent serious. "Look, Hank is the easiest horse here, he's too old to give a shit about anyone."

"I don't know about this. Are you sure you can't ask Noah or Mac to come. I feel like I'll end up making you work ten times as hard." She stands stiff as a board as I press into her, her scent engulfing my senses as I try to focus.

Furrowing my brows. "Oh, ye of little faith. It's simple, have you every washed an animal?"

Courtney's eyes stay glued to Hanks massive shoulder as he blows out of a breath harmlessly. "Ah, maybe. I don't know. I can't really remember at this point."

Wow this is going to be harder than I thought. "Look, just pretend he's a big dog, like an oversized version of Howie. You can bathe Howie, right?" Lightening my tone like you'd do with a child. I step away from her and stand at her side. Picking up the hose, I run it down his back, showing her how to start. She doesn't move, or even breathe, and I notice her hands are shaking, totally frozen. "Okay, talk me through it," I say gently, placing the hose in her hand, curling her fingers around it as it sprays against his broad shoulder.

"What... what do you mean?" she asks, breaking her trance.

"Just tell me what's going on, right now," I say, pulling her hand up to run the water across his back again.

"I'm scared," her voice falters, a whisper, then gone. It breaks me, it's the first time Courtney's ever let me see what she's feeling.

Taking a deep breath, I ground myself. "That wasn't hard, was it?" I jest as I catch her eyes glancing to me. She just nods, and I hold her hand as we wash Hank together. Not wanting to overstimulate her, we slowly move from one side to the other, silence filling the space around us. And to be honest, I appreciate the silence, it helps me understand her in a better way. Courtney isn't used to having silence, she's used to speaking her mind and getting things over with. But what's happening now is out of her comfort zone, yet she stays and embraces it. I catch myself staring at her sometimes, but she seems lost in her own wave of thoughts, and I honestly don't know what to do.

This shit is all new to me. I've only ever been with women who are loud and a little obnoxious, the ones who are all brass and no filter. The fighters, not lovers. It's one of the reasons why I was attracted to Courtney when we first met. She didn't give a fuck who was around, she was who she was. But now, that girl is melting away, and this other one stands in front of me.

Damn I wish I had something to say.

We finish Hank and I step away, her hand coming out and holding onto my arm. “Please don’t leave me.” Her voice is shaky, and I feel every word in my bones. The way her eyes look so helpless, it does something to me. It makes me feel invincible, like I’m willing to protect her from everything, like I’m able to conquer the entire world for her. My heart beats like little bombs going off in my chest and I pull her hand to my lips, kissing her knuckles. “I’m not leaving. I’m right here,” I say, letting her hand fall.

Putting Hank back in his stall, I bring in the next horse and we slowly work our way through all fourteen of the rest. The last one’s Jagger and I let Courtney sit out, he’s a little finnick. She sits off to the side, never leaving my side, taking pictures as I finish.

The sun has started to go down and my fingers are wrinkled and pruned. I clench my fist as the stiffness and soreness sets in. My hands are going to hurt tomorrow, but I don’t care. I’ll get Ollie to do most of the barn chores anyway. “Are you hungry?” I ask, washing down the stall.

“Yeah, I haven’t eaten all day.” She laughs.

“Yeah, me either. I got carried away.” I laugh. “Do you want to get something with me? I need some red meat.” I can feel the weakness in my joints as I stand.

“That actually sounds really nice.” She smiles.

“Cool.” I nod, the awkwardness between us is radiating. It’s never been awkward before, but things feel different now. “I still need to get the horses their dinner and then I should be done.”

“Let me help. I’m not sure how much help I’ll be,” she says as she starts to stand, “but I can try.”

I smile softly at her. Her confidence is a thing to witness. “Sure, if you can fill the buckets up over there for me.” I point to the side of the tack station. “Each one has the horse’s name on it and a list of who gets what is on the wall. Everything’s labeled.”

“Wow, Ryan’s really OCD.” She laughs.

I bark out a laugh. “Yeah, I already feel sorry for his kids.”

Courtney laughs out loud, and I remember how much I love the sound of it. My chest tightens as I look over my shoulder at her, her deep brown hair is piled on top of her head, small pieces falling out. She normally keeps her hair down, rarely off her neck and I catch myself staring.

I find myself wanting to know every single detail of her life. From the big moments, to why she always tries to hide her face. Seems stupid I know. I can hear the backlash in my thoughts, the voice of my younger self screaming out, because this ain’t the first time this shit’s happened to me.

21

Hunter

I haven't been this happy since Dad took me to the auction and let me pick out my first horse. I see her, Rebecca Jennings, standing there, her blonde hair and rose-colored lips glistening in the sun. Her scent almost overpowers me, the sweet vanilla wrapping my heart in layers. I grew up around Rebecca, and even though she's three years older than me, we've spent a lot of time together. Our moms are friends, and she works out on the farm helping me with the horses. She's perfect.

"Hey Hunter," she says as I walk up, a frown is placed hard on her face, and I'd do anything to fix it.

"Hey, are you okay?" I say, standing up a little taller. She's short for her age but still taller than me.

"Yeah." She sighs, sitting down on the hay covered cement. "Josh and I broke up."

I try to look sad, but when she looks down at her lap, I smile wide and give thanks to the Lord. "Oh no." I sigh, sitting down next to her. I don't want to come on too strong, but this is like the

third or fourth time. Maybe fifth, I've lost count. Rebecca leans her head on my shoulder and lets out a deep breath. I know that breath, it's the same one I hear every time.

"What'd he do this time?" I ask, knowing he always does something.

Her head shoots up. "He had the nerve to text Jessica, saying he had fun at the prep rally!" She turns to me, her face full of animation. "Then when I asked him about it, he said I was overreacting." Rebecca rolls her eyes and huffs.

"How'd you find out?" I ask, wanting to get all the details. She flipped her phone open to show me a text message that Josh meant to text Jessica but instead he texted her. Idiot.

"I'm done with him." She tosses her phone to the side, leaning her head back on my shoulder.

Josh is out. This could be good for me.

"Well, what do you want to do?" I ask.

"Just stay here." She reaches over and plays with a frayed string on my jeans. I blink my eyes rapidly, looking around, needing something else to think about besides her hand on my leg.

Rebecca looks up at me, her rose lips inches from my face. "You'd never leave me, right Hunter?"

"Never." I shake my head, how could she even think that. I love her.

She smiles softly, happy with that answer. "Can I ask you a question? Have you ever been with a girl, Hunter?"

I swallow hard, looking away from her, out to the fields, my hands sweating as I try to answer. I can't admit that I've been waiting for her. "Oh yeah, tons of times," my voice cracks.

She laughs softly, and her breath sends a shiver down my spine. Placing her hand on the side of my face, she pulls it to hers, kissing me. Holy shit. Rebecca Jennings is kissing me! I close my eyes, embracing the moment. This is how it's supposed to be.

Slowly she pulls back, "Okay, I'm a little jealous." she bites her lip. "You're a good kisser."

"Th... thanks." I stutter, my mind whirling.

She giggles and stands up, taking my hand and pulling me into the barn, to a stall that no one comes in. Is this really happening? My nerves are shot, but I force myself to focus on the moment. "I've never done this," I say, barely a whisper as it comes out.

Rebecca smiles, wild-eyed, in return. "Don't worry." She runs her fingers through my hair, "I'll teach you everything you need to know about a woman."

I've definitely found my dream girl.

Walking into the steakhouse, Rebecca stands behind the hostess podium with a smile on her face. A large board sits next to her with a list of duties scribbled on it and I see her blush, not wanting to make eye contact. It's not every day you run into the girl who taught you how rejection is the silent killer, even if it's a small town.

"Hunter," she says my name with a cheer in her voice.

"Rebecca." I nod, letting her name slip out in a calm voice.

"How've you been?" she asks as I notice her slightly puff out her chest. I roll my eyes, looking away, because I'm not fourteen years old anymore, and her manipulation tactics won't work on me.

“Good.” I nod. “And you?” Trying to be polite is so mentally exhausting.

“Great. I moved back to town a few months ago. Josh and I got a divorce.” Shocking. Didn’t see that coming at all. “Anyway, it’s just me and the kids, now. I have two now. Mosley, and Krissy.”

“That’s great.” I turn to Courtney who is standing next to me, awkwardly smiling. “We’d like a table for two, please.”

Rebecca looks between me and Courtney, staring at us as her sense of power over me deflates. Looking down at her laminated seating chart, she studies it. “It’ll be about five to ten minutes, or you can eat at the bar.” She waves her hand behind her, and I look to Courtney.

“That’s fine with me, I could use a drink.” She shrugs, nodding towards the bar. “And maybe some popcorn for the show,” she whispers, nudging me.

I smirk and playfully nudge her back. “Shut up.” Courtney giggles as we walk to the bar finding a seat quickly. Once our asses hit the seat, the twenty one questions start.

“Who is she? How do you know her? Was she one of your flings? Was she one of your babysitters? Wait.” She stops, placing her fingers on her chin as Justin, the bartender, comes over.

“Hey man.” I clap his hand in a handshake as Justin looks at Courtney, still talking to herself without taking a breath. “Beer, whatever’s on tap. And a merlot.” I point to Courtney.

“Aw, you remembered.” She blinks her Bambi eyes at me, and I roll my eyes in response. I don’t want to tell her that I remember what she drinks, or how she hates mashed potatoes but loves baked potatoes, or how she hates goddamn thunderstorms and has panic attacks when they’re coming. I remember everything and that is the problem. “Anyway, tell. Me. Everything.” She smiles, leaning on the bar to face me, her eyes glistening in the excitement of fresh gossip.

Inhaling deep, I let out a sigh. “She’s just someone I used to hook up with in high school.”

Courtney narrows her eyes, sipping her wine. “Lets unpack all that.”

“Sure, but you go first.” I nod, taking a sip of beer as I turn back to the TVs behind the bar.

“What are you talking about?” She frowns, scoffing at my dismissal.

Giving her the side-eye, I knew she’d fight back. “There’s a lot that I would like you to unpack yourself, but you always blow me off. So, this box is staying closed tight until you air out some of your own dirty laundry.” I knew turning the tables on her would shut her up, though. If there’s one thing I know about Courtney for sure it’s that she doesn’t like talking about herself.

She talks about surface level stuff, like cars, clothes, and gossip, but never things that live close to her heart. Slowly I watch her sip her wine, her jaw tightening from its dryness. She hasn’t looked over at me since I shut her down. This used to not bother me. I never really cared about her feelings, all I cared about was the next time we’d fuck. But now, now that I’ve seen behind the veil, I want to know more and more. The shallowness of my past actions shake me to my core, snaking their way through my veins as I sit here in silence.

Here we go again.

22

Courtney

“So, what’re you getting to eat?” I smile over at Hunter as I struggle to push down my dangerous thoughts.

“I’m going to start with the fried pickles. They’re really good. I’ve tried to recreate them, but the breading always ends up falling apart.” He looks down at the menu, blowing out a slow breath.

Turning my head to the menu, I wonder if this was a mistake. Can we be civil with one another? Is it possible that we can start an actual conversation and it not end in sex? Justin walks back over and leans on the bar, starting his conversation with Hunter back where he left it. Slowly looking up, I watch the two of them as I pretend to read my menu. Justin flexes as he wipes down a few glasses and I see a tattoo on the back of his hand that looks like Mother Mary. “Is that Mother Mary?” I say out loud, not realizing the words inside were going to fly out.

Justin looks down at his hand and laughs. “Yes.”

“Why do you have a tattoo of Mother Mary on the back of your hand?” I ask, too interested.

Hunter snorts out a laugh and Justin flips him off with the same hand Mother Mary is on. “I was young and dumb, and

too chicken shit to ask someone on a date. So, this fuck wad over here.” he pauses glaring at Hunter.

“What? I had the best intentions.” Hunter confesses, breaking his laughter for a moment.

“The fuck you did. See, this asshole told me that if I didn’t ask this particular person out by the end of my senior year, I’d have to get a tattoo and he’d get to pick it.” He shrugs as we fall into silence, and I realize I’m just as lost as when the conversation began. Staring at them both, I sit wondering if I missed something. “I’m gay,” Justin explains.

“Oh.” A lightbulb goes off and I furrow my brows. “But, how did Mother Mary come into play?”

“Well, we know that Hunter possesses the great gift of *humor*,” he finishes sarcastically. I look over at Hunter and he winks at me as Justin continues. “Well, I wanted to ask this guy out, and the town, the times, hell, the whole environment that we lived in didn’t like men liking other men. So, I just watched this guy for ages, never taking the leap, like a fucking loser.”

Hunter makes a noise and reaches up, smacking him in the shoulder. “I fucking told you about that,” Hunter’s tone changes, no longer light and airy, sharp and much more serious. I watch his face change and it makes me pause. He stares at Justin and I can see how much he cares for the wellbeing of his friend.

“Yeah, I know,” Justin says, his cheeks a little red with blush.

“You’re good, brother.” Hunter nods, taking a sip from his beer, and lowering his voice, “You just got to stop all that self-deprecating shit.” Tears spring up in my eyes as I watch Hunter turn into some kinder spirit. Hunter stands up, leaning over the bar, and wraps his hand around the back of Justin’s neck, pulling him into a hug, the two of them sharing a heart-to-heart. Hunter’s low voice hums and I know he is speaking softly to him, the tears in my eyes trying their best to escape. Justin nods his head into his shoulder and I could see he’s listening to him, like how a little brother would listen.

A second goes by and they pull apart, Justin takes a few deep breaths and he wipes his eyes, “Anyway, he picked out Mother Mary and I got it on the back of my hand.”

“But why didn’t you ask the guy out?” I ask.

“I did.” He nods and turns away as someone calls his name.

Turning to Hunter, I gasp. “I need to know the story. It’s driving me insane.”

Hunter smirks, sipping his beer as I narrow my eyes at him. I could see him debating on telling me or not but, as we sit in the ever-growing silence, he gives in. With an eye roll and a deep sigh, Hunter flips his forearm over and shows me the same depiction of Mother Mary, and I’m ashamed that I’ve never noticed it. It’s shocking, I’ve stared at his tattoos before, even traced some of them out with my finger as we laid in bed, but I guess I forgot about this one. “Yeah, he did ask that guy out before he graduated, but we got tattoos anyway. Noah included.”

“Why though?” I don’t understand.

“You know, just because,” Hunter starts, rolling his arm back over as he stares straight. “Justin is younger than me and Noah by about two years, so we never hung out in school or anything. We knew of him and we’d see him get picked on but it wasn’t ever anything serious. And he didn’t look like he looks now. He was scrawny, wore Harry Potter-like glasses, and always carried around a book. He never played sports, and all of his friends were girls.” He nods, turning his body to me. “When people don’t know who you really are, like what’s on the inside, they end up assuming things based only on what they can perceive.”

“True.” I mumble.

“Anyway, it was one random day and Noah called me to come help him move something out on the farm and I saw Justin walking down the road. He had a busted bloody lip, and a black eye, and to this day, I still don’t know why I stopped. But I did, and I asked if he needed a lift. He was scared and nervous, and it took me a minute to convince him to just get in

my truck.” He pauses for a minute, giving space for the heaviness to breathe. “His family doesn’t like that he chooses to live his life, *differently*.” He rolls his eyes.

I smirk. “And that’s why you got the tattoos?”

He smiles. “It’s not the only reason we got them.” He shifts and reaches out grabbing my knee, and I suck in a deep breath. The rough texture of his hand mixed with the coolness from his beer sends shivers up my spine. My body warms, and I lean into this intimate moment as he whispers to me, “Who is Mother Mary?”

I hesitate, trying to see if this is a trick question. “Jesus’s mother.”

“Right, and what does everyone associate with Jesus with?” He raises his brow.

“That he’s the only way to God,” I say, trying to think back to my grandmother’s ramblings.

“No.” he points out and I stare back, completely lost. “Love. Jesus is love.”

My eyes widen at the revelation, the answer right in front of me. Hunter doesn’t wait for me to catch up. “Mother Mary birthed the essence of Love. Justin needed to know that even though his family didn’t love him for who he was, someone did.”

“Hunter,” I let out an airy sigh, “you do have a heart in there after all.”

“Tell anyone and I’ll deny it.” Hunter flicks his drink condensation at me, and I laugh.

Maybe we can just have an actual conversation.

23

Courtney

Leaning back in my chair, I smile, full and satisfied from packing in a days' worth of food in one sitting. "Wow, that was surprisingly good."

Hunter scoffs at my comment., "Yeah, it would've been better if you hadn't burnt it to a crisp. Who gets their steak well done?"

"Hey." I point at him. "Anything that's bleeding," I make a gagging noise, "is raw."

"I've literally seen you eat sushi." He fights back.

I open my mouth and my fight fades. "Well, that's different." The feistiness in me fizzles as I see the way he looks at me. His eyes are different, they sparkle, like moonlight on the ocean. The blue in his eyes mixing with the green makes them look teal. The bar lights illuminate his features, making them bolder, stronger, and more powerful.

I begin searching his eyes for the reason, and why they are having such a hold on me. It wasn't just sexual, and it wasn't his lustful look that I've grown to see, it was more. The intensity in his eyes makes my chest hurt, the weight of our relationship weighing heavy on my heart. "Why are you looking at me like that?" I need the answer. Does he know

something I don't? Is he waiting for me to fall in love with him just so he can rip the rug out from under me?

That'd be karma.

That has to be it, he wants me to feel what he felt when I pushed him away. Taking a deep breath, I sit up straighter and raise my brows, waiting for him to answer me.

Hunter takes in a deep breath, shrugging as he takes a sip of his beer. "No reason."

That dirty fucking liar. I can feel it, it's like a sixth sense. I see right through your bullshit Mr. I'm-going-to-make-you-fall-in-love-with-me-and-dump-you-by-the-side-of-the-road. Justin walks over, stopping me from escalating. His smile falls slightly when he sees my face and he takes a deep breath, exhaling as he leans on the bar. "Separate checks?" He holds up two fingers as he looks to Hunter first.

"Yes," I say, interjecting.

"No," Hunter says, turning to me.

"Yes, Justin, please and thank you," I say in a serious tone.

Hunter blinks slowly, turning back to Justin. "Can you give us a minute." His voice is soft and controlled, and a shiver runs down my spine as I stare at his lips. I don't like the affect he has on me, but I also do. Goddamnit. I shift my weight and clear my throat, giving myself a peptalk as he looks over at me.

"Not a chance, Hunter," I start, no fucking way he's getting the first word. "I don't need you to do anything for me. Stop acting,"

"Like I'm your boyfriend?" He finishes my sentence, his tone sending goosebumps across my skin. "Is that what you were going to say? Cause you made that perfectly clear the last time we had this conversation." He inhales deep and exhales hard, looking away behind the bar. He turns to talk, but stops, the fight in him vanishing as fast as it appeared. Shaking his head, he looks up and motions for Justin to bring two checks.

I had tightened my jaw, I was ready for a fight, but nothing came. My balloon that was filling up with pressure, getting bigger and bigger, now has a hole in it. Justin comes over with the separate checks and lays them down in front of us, looking at Hunter then turning away. My body shakes, and I don't understand why I feel so defeated. I got my way, and yet somehow, I feel like I still lost. I wanted him to fight, to hit back with his words, to spit venom in my face, but he caved. He doesn't care anymore.

Pulling out one of my many credit cards to pay for my meal, I pray that it goes through as Justin takes it to the register. Shame fills my veins, making its way straight to my heart. The truth is, I don't actually know if I can afford this meal. I've been here, living off what people have given me, and haven't made any money in a while. The thought of having to go back home with not a lot in the bank terrifies me, I've licked the line of homelessness, and it's not something I want to experience ever again.

I watch in slow motion as Justin swipes my card, my sweat and anxiety mixing together in a frenzy as I breathe out. Justin walks back over handing me the receipt to sign and I butcher my signature, the panic inside me still holding onto my ability to keep my hand from shaking.

Hunter slams his pen down, and I almost jump out of my skin. He said his goodbyes to Justin, and we get up and walk to the car in silence. Climbing into the truck, I turn to the window staring out into the darkness as Hunter backs out. The whole drive home is quiet, the only sound is the low country music playing on the radio.

What if he was just trying to be nice? Do I want him to be nice? I shake my head to knock the thoughts free. I don't want the answer to that question.

Hunter pulls up to Ryan's house, and I reach into the back seat to grab my camera and bag. Slowly, I turn around, my body falling into the seat as I stare down at the camera in my hands. "I don't know how to accept people being nice to me," I blurt out, my thoughts rushing to the forefront of my mind. "It's not something I'm used to." I look over at Hunter, he's

still staring straight. The awkwardness of this conversation is suffocating me, “I’ll see you later. Thanks for inviting me to eat.” Opening the door, I hop out as fast as I can. I’m afraid if I give him time, he’ll say something I’ll regret, but to my relief he doesn’t, and I make it inside without another word being spoken. The lights from his truck back away from the house, fading as he turns and heads down the road. I walk over and fall onto the couch, my mind racing as I try to keep the questions and feelings pushed down.

Breathing out, I stare up at the dark ceiling, “What’s my problem?”

24

Hunter

“That’s good,” I holler out to Clara as she smiles bright, finally getting to ride the horse she’s owned for over four years now. I sit on top of the fence as I watch Chance trot about, all the training paying off as they both move about. Her hands grip the reins tight and I see her tense up, her fear still churning inside. “Loosen up, just let the reins sit in your hands,” I instruct her, watching as she relaxes a little bit, “that’s better. Remember she can feel everything you feel. Horses work off your energy. If you’re scared and jumpy, she’s not going to trust you.”

“This is a lot harder that I thought it was going to be.” she laughs out loud.

“Yeah, it’s easier when you’ve been around horses your whole life,” I push off the fence and walk over to her, as I continue. “Well, you were just given this girl out of the blue and never really knew how to work horses. I’m not expecting you to know everything. That’s why we’re training together.” I reach out and rub my hand down Chance’s nose, and she lets out a deep breath. Taking Chance’s reins from Clara, I hold onto them as she starts to climb down. She moves to the side, pulling away from her as she stumbles and hits the ground. “Hey now, woah,” I say, stopping Chance from bucking away. Clara gets up and brushes herself off and I make her get back up on Chance. Even if she’s rideable, she still needs training.

She's not been ridden for so long that the years have unbroke her. Giving her instruction, I watch as she guides her, commanding Chance just as good as any of the rest of us on the farm.

After a few rounds of training, I call out to her, "Do one more go around, and we'll let her go graze for a while." I watch as she turns her left and I climb back over the fence, never taking my eyes off the pair. Stepping back, my heel lands on something and I stumble as Courtney hisses out. Looking down, I see her bare toes sticking out of a flip flop. This damn girl is wearing flip flops out here at the barn. "What are you doing? And why are you wearing flip flops? That's fucking dangerous."

Courtney looks down at her dirt smeared toes, and then back up to me. "Well, Ollie wanted me to get some pictures of you working, but I didn't think I was going to get trampled."

"Why are you sneaking up on me?" I bark, the shock of getting scared still coursing through me.

Her eyes are wide. "I like to be the fly on the wall. That's how I get the real stuff, not the fake look-at-me stuff."

My face falls, and I sigh, giving her a bored look. "Right. Well, you don't need to be wearing open-toed shoes around the barn. That could've been a horse, and not my foot."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry." She holds her hands up in defense. "I just finished a session for Madison and Ollie asked if I'd get a few more pictures for the website? I didn't think about going home and changing my shoes. Geez," she says with annoyance in her voice.

Clara calls my name, and I remember she's here, the chaotic moment distracting me from what we were doing. "Right, hold on." I say jogging over to Clara, taking Chance from her. "If you want you can just hang around with her for a while. I got some other horses to attend to."

"That's okay, I have some things to do. I'm just going to go ahead and head out. Thanks again, Hunter." She places her hand on my arm, giving it a light squeeze. "You have no idea

how many trainers I've been to and no one has helped me like you have."

I smile in response, the hard work I've put in coming full circle. "Thank you. That means a lot."

Clara smiles and leans in, giving me a quick hug before turning around and walking off. I watch as she gets in her truck and starts it up, pulling away as I hold onto Chance. Turning around, I almost trip again. "Jesus, fucking shit!" I say, coming face to face with Courtney who was standing right behind me. "Can you *not* do that? Why are you all up in my shit today?" I turn, walking away from her.

Courtney follows, hot on my heels. "Because I have to, Ollie asked me to take some more pictures of you and the barn today. Trust me, I don't want to be here, but I honestly have nothing else to do. And I'm bored."

I stop, turning around, and she slams into my chest, "And why's that my problem?" She doesn't move back, instead stays still, looking up at me. I look down at her, the softness in her eyes sends a lightning bolt of desire up my spine. "Grab a broom." I smirk and her smile falls as I pull away.

"Excuse me?" She tilts her head.

"Nothing's free. You, of all people, should know that." I smile, continuing to walk Chance into the barn and chuckle as I hear nothing but silence behind me. Turning my head, I shout back over my shoulder, "Come on now, we ain't got all day, Princess."

25

Courtney

Wiping the sweat from my face, I turn up my nose as I sweep the last bit of dirt out the side door. “I don’t think I’ve sweat this much in my entire life. This is disgusting.”

Hunter stabs his pitch forks into a bale of hay and turns to me, pulling off his gloves. “Ah, I think I remember you sweating that much at least a few times.” He laughs, winking at me as he drinks some water.

My heart hits my stomach and a full-on wash of lust runs through my veins. Hunter isn’t wearing a shirt, he took it off an hour ago because he was sweating through it, and his glistening muscles are not helping me focus. I should be grossed out and disgusted but for some reason it is turning me on so goddamn bad. “Don’t say that.” I stop, throwing my glove at him.

“Why? Are you embarrassed?” he asks, looking about, “No one’s out here.”

“I’m not embarrassed, it’s just inappropriate.” I say, resting my hands on my hips.

Hunter snickers, nodding his head, his stupid sex appeal on full display. I hate him. “You know what’s inappropriate? Having sex in your boss’s office while he’s out running errands.”

“That, that’s,” I stutter, unable to speak as the memory of us flashes through my head. It was inappropriate but also really hot. I can still feel how strong his arms were as he held me up against the wall, his rough hands gripping my ass as he kept his rhythm, pounding into me.

Fuck this dude.

Hunter walks towards me, and I still struggle to find words. “I’ll let you think about that one for a minute,” he whispers as he pulls off his hat, turning it around.

Goddamn, I’d fuck this dude right here, right now, if he’d ask.

I’ve never followed a guy. I’ve never begged for a man’s attention. Why the fuck would I? But here the fuck I am. Following this dude around like he’s the damn line leader. “God, I hate you sometimes.”

“Not all the time?” he questions, grinning at me.

“No, I don’t hate you *all* of the time.” The truth of the words hurt as they leave my mouth. I want to suck them back in and shove them deep in the pit in my stomach. Hunter stops and looks up, and I pray that he doesn’t say anything else about my real feelings.

“What’s that?” he says, listening to the air, a faint noise growing louder as we both stand there looking around. We both look at the other end of the barn as Ollie comes stumbling in with a girl who I’ve never seen before, kissing her like he’s desperately in love.

Hunter grabs my arm and pulls me into the tack room, closing the door behind him, darkness surrounding us. “Oh, I fucking knew it. Ryan owes me so much money,” he whispers.

“What? Who was that?” I whisper back to him.

“That’s Haley,” he says, holding me against the wall, peeking out the crack in the door to see where they’re going.

I shift trying to get space and my elbow hits a wood shelf, and Hunter covers my mouth. “Shhhhh,” he whispers, positioning himself in front of me in a flash. His bare muscles

press against me and his hand is hot against my cold cheek. He moves his hand and slowly leans back over to look out the door.

“How long are we going to stay here.” I clear my throat softly, trying to blink away my lust.

“I don’t know, I haven’t thought that far yet,” he says, my eyes adjusting to the dark. Reaching up, my hands meet his waist and I feel the calmness under his skin. Ollie and Haley are across the way in an empty stall, her lustful moans echoing softly through the darkness and I dig my fingers into Hunter’s skin, needing to hold on to something. This has never happened to me before. My eyes close and I press my palms against his warm skin. All the memories of us flood my brain, every hot, rough, messy time we used to fuck, flashes up from my memory.

My head jerks back and I let out a light whimper. “Don’t do that,” his voice is sharp and deep. The thought of us slamming our bodies together mixes through my mind and an ocean of emotion crashes down on me. I lick my lips, the desire to have him inside me has never been this strong. The word please dances at the tip of my tongue as I try to resist. I could stop, I could tell myself that I’m independent, that I don’t need him. But that’s tomorrow’s problem. If I don’t get his cock inside me, I will go motherfucking insane.

“Hunter,” I rasp out, my body aching for him.

“No. We can’t,” his sharp tone drives me crazy.

“Why not?” My hands grab his muscular waist slowly pulling against him.

“For one, my brother’s right there. And two...” He stops, letting out a deep groan as I run my hand against his jeans, his hard cock screaming to be released. That’s all I need to fucking hear. He’s mine. “And two,” he stutters, letting out a low curse as his body shivers. His hand snakes through my hair and he grabs the back of my neck firmly, pulling my head into his slowly, and our lips slightly touch. Fire courses through my veins as the black and white memories of us flash full of color, every lustful memory now filled with passion.

My eyes flutter closed as his lips graze across my cheek, and I let out the breath that I didn't know I was holding. "Please," I whisper as I unbuckle his belt. A slight chuckle leaves his lips and I can feel his smile as our lips graze each other. Sliding my hand into his pants, I find him fast and he inhales deep as I wrap my hand around his throbbing cock. Setting it free from its prison, we both moan in pleasure. The tension between us is thick, and I breathe heavy with anticipation as I get on my knees. Sliding his cock in my mouth, he lets out a deep groan as he grasps the side of my head, his fingers running through my hair as he moves his hand to the back of my head.

"Fuck." He breathes out, reaching out and bracing himself above me. Sliding all the way down his thick shaft, I relax my throat and take as much of him as I can. "Holy Shit, I forgot how good you were at this," he huffs out, and a smile finds my face. Reaching up, I massage his rock-hard legs as I continue to swallow his cock deep. Without warning, Hunter stops, pulling away from me and I snap back to reality, realizing I had become blinded by passion. "Get up," he snaps, and I almost come, the submissive side of me wanting him to bend me over and break me. The way he commands me, the forcefulness of his voice, makes me feel weak. It feels so good when he takes charge. "Turn around," he whispers through the dark and I shiver. I unbutton my shorts, sliding them off as Hunter pulls my body back, his cock pressing against my ass. He leans in, whispering into my ear, "You want my cock?"

"Yes," I say plainly, starting to melt.

"Tell me. Tell me how much you want my cock inside you? Tell me how long you've been thinking about me?" He runs his lips down my neck, stopping on my shoulder as he kisses it lightly.

My knees lock to keep me from falling, I'm bottoming out. I can't speak. The words are stuck in my throat, and I'm unable to force them out. I love his dominance but I usually have a limit. And I wait for my fire to come out, to bite back, but nothing comes. Reaching deep, I find the strength to answer, the softest tone as I whisper, "A long time" I blink

fast as the honesty of the words tingles as it leaves my lips. That sounded a lot better in my head. My chest expands with fear, my armors getting stripped away and I don't know how to stop it.

Hunter lets out a chuckle. "That's all I need to know." What does that mean? Does he know what I meant? Does he see the truth? This is not just a sexual thing, it's a...

Fuck. I can't do this. This is more real than I wanted. Everything's all fucked up now. I can't pretend anymore.

"Courtney?" Hunter calls to me, and I realize I'm panicking. Another panic attack is steamrolling its way through my heart. Goddamnit! Why does this keep happening?

"I'm fine. I'm fine." I take a deep breath, my eyes getting blurry as tears fill my eyes. "I'm fine." I force myself to say it again and again, the more times I say it the more I might believe it. Fuck. My brain goes on auto pilot and I push away from Hunter, the walls closing in.

This is all your fault!

"Hey," Hunter's voice is soft, but fading. I can see him talking but I can't hear him anymore. The only voice I hear is my own in my head, telling me I'm nothing but shit, telling me that I always fuck things up. The army of demons inside line up, waiting for me to fall so they can point and laugh, waiting to tell me that they told me so.

"I... I'm," I stutter, everything crashing down. "I'm... I'm so sorry," I rush out as the tears start to fall. Grabbing my shorts as I stumble out the door, I run back to my safe place with them in my hand.

I need to get away. Far, far away.

26

Hunter

“What the fuck.” Irritation floods my veins. Pulling my pants up with anger, I huff out, “Fuck this shit.” Bursting out of the barn, I stomp in the direction she ran off to. I make it two steps, then stop, realizing what I’m fucking doing. Tightening my fist, I look to Ryan’s house and back to the barn. I’m teetering on the line, the line between caring for her, and knowing what’s good for my own damn self. I can’t do this. I hate that she’s making me into this person I swore I’d never be again. She’s turning me into that sappy, lost puppy, love drunk, stupid man that I hate.

Wait.

My whole-body freezes as the dread of losing her forever washes over me. “Goddamnit!” I shout to the sky, kicking the dirt from under my feet. The internal struggle tossing me from side to side as I walk around, fighting with my emotions. Coming down, I take a deep breath and look over to my left to see my dad staring at me, sitting on the fence. Great.

“You done?” he asks, a grin on his face from watching my entire tantrum outside the barn.

I pant, shrugging my shoulders like a teenager. “I think so.”

“Good.” He nods, hopping off the fence. “Now go on.” He points to Ryan’s house, “I’ll finish up out here. Go clean up

the mess you made.”

“I didn’t cause this, she did. This is her fault.” I shake my head. I’m not the one who keeps running away from my problems.

“Hmm. Not from where I’m standing,” he says, walking over to me.

I turn my body to him and give him a sideways look. “Dad, I’m not chasing after her anymore. All she does is run, and I don’t have time for these childish games.”

My dad lets out a laugh. “Yeah, says the guy who just had a temper tantrum like a four-year-old.” He’s right, but I hate that he is. “You want to be a grown up, then you’re going to have a grown-up conversation without letting your anger get in the way.”

“But she just pisses me off.” I tense up my arms, my anger flooding back in.

“Yeah, she seems to be pretty challenging, and you don’t like it. But you care about her. So, stop being a damn child, and go up there and just talk to her.” He slaps my shoulder, talking as he walks away. “Go on, go handle your shit. I’ll close up tonight.”

I mumble under my breath as I walk up to Ryan’s house. I’m grumpy and I don’t want to fucking do this. Opening the back door, I listen for her, but I’m met with nothing but silence. I continue to grumble and moan as I slip off my shoes. Walking through the house, I quietly search each room until I get to her bedroom. But it’s empty. “Courtney?” I call out, but nothing. Walking over to the closet, I open it and see her huddled up, and every piece of me that is annoyed, angered, and frustrated slips away. The effect of finding her like this for the first time destroys my world. I become vastly aware of how much she suffers in the dark, the dots connecting as I finally see. “Hey Court?” I call to her, and her head snaps up. There’s a pain in her eyes that I’m not used to.

“What are you doing here?” She stumbles out of the closet, wiping her face, trying to hide the evidence of her emotions.

“Get out,” she snaps at me, “get the fuck out.”

“No,” I say, standing my ground.

Her face turns to something dark, but it doesn't scare me or push me away. It makes everything feel so real, so familiar. We're more alike than I want to admit. She pushes me in the chest, but her body is weak. “Get out, Hunter!” she screams.

Grabbing her waist, I pull her to me, and she gasps from the force. “No. If you need to fall apart, just fall into me. Got it? I'm not going anywhere.” I grip her head, resting my head on hers. “I got you.”

“I can't.” She hiccups, the tears beginning to fall again.

I blink slowly. “It's okay, baby. I'll help you. There's no more hiding in the darkness.”

“I... I don't know how,” her voice fades, her chin trembling. How long has she been suffering alone? How much pain is she holding onto? I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. And I'm not the emotionally available type. I look into her eyes and see she doesn't need someone to tell her it's going to be okay. Words don't mean shit to her. She needs a rock, somewhere to weather the storm. And I can be that rock.

Placing my finger under her chin, I tilt her head up and kiss her, her lips are soft and salty from her tears. Courtney's body shakes in my arms and she pushes against me. She places her hands on my chest and fights the temptation to let go of everything, but never breaks the lock of our lips. Moving her hands to my hair, I move down to her neck and kiss it as a moan escapes her lips. I missed the way she tastes. I want to be slow, and intentional, but the moment my tongue feels her heartbeat, the raging animal inside me breaks free.

Grabbing her legs, I lift her up, and it's like night and day. Her energy matches mine. The string between us that we were trying to cut is now being pulled tighter and tighter, wrapping itself around us in a flurry of emotion. The anger, the hatred between us is stripped away. Her lips find my shoulder and I'm in the fucking clouds.

I feel it. This isn't the ending, this is the fucking beginning. The creation of us.

Dropping her on the bed, I'm not gentle, and the fire in her eyes lets me know that soft won't work for her. Courtney pushes up on her hands, and I stop. "Did I say get up?" I tilt my head. She's entered my playground, and we're going to play by my fucking rules. "Lie down, and don't move a fucking inch, understand?"

Her body trembles, and the sunset shines through the window perfectly on her skin. "Yes," she answers as she falls to the bed. I smirk as my hands run up her body, slowly moving up her thighs, my rough fingertips gliding across her smooth skin. Her body twitches, wanting to move, wanting to lean into my touch but she stays still, following my lead.

My hands glide over her underwear and her stomach sinks in as I push her shirt up. I softly kiss her as I make my way down her body. Stopping at her hip bone, I kiss it as I grip her thigh in my hand. I want her to fucking melt. Everything about her heightens my senses, and I begin to get dizzy. I hook my fingers into her underwear and the sound of the fabric breaking surprises me. She gasps as I toss them to the floor, and I position myself between her legs. "Hunter," she whispers, and my eyes roll back. It fucks me up every time she says my name.

Pulling up, I can see it in her eyes, she wants to touch me, grab me, take control, and fuck me until I bust. I smirk as I stand over her, watching her lie on the bed, squirming as she tries to control herself. "Come here," I growl, grabbing her legs as I pull her to the edge of the bed.

My heart pounds as I kneel between her legs. Inhaling her scent, I melt with her. Grasping her lips with my thumbs, I spread her open, taking in her beauty. Leaning in, I lick her and her taste goes straight to my cock. She lets out a surprised moan as I swirl my tongue across her opening and her thighs wrap around my head. My tongue travels up then back down her again, and I give her clit a quick flick with my tongue. "Oh fuck," she curses loud, squeezing my head as her back arches. I hold onto her legs tight, pulling her into me as I eat her like

my last meal, savoring every bit of my time. A wave of pleasure crests as she moans out, and I can feel her resist a little, trying to hold on.

Her sounds of pleasure bounce off the walls and my cock aches, silently begging to be buried inside her. Her legs tighten around my head, and I feel the final wave of pleasure crashing down on top of her. I look up and our eyes meet right before she closes them tightly, arching her back again. "Hunter," she moans out, her voice picking up as her orgasm flows. I tighten my grip on her hips as she jerks, grinding her pussy into my face. Fuck, I'm in heaven. Slowly, she comes down from her high, her legs shaking as I kiss her one more time. Tapping her leg, she rolls to her side, curled up in a ball as she tries to catch her breath, her body releasing its tension. I can tell it's been a long time since she's let go.

Quickly, I walk to the bathroom and grab a towel to wipe my face. Walking back into the bedroom, I see she hasn't moved, and I chuckle as she looks up at me. She smiles and sits up on the edge of the bed and I run my hand through her hair. My fingers glide down her cheek, and I pull her chin up for our eyes to meet, my thumb rubbing her bottom lip as I wink at her. "You want another taste?"

"Yes, please," she breathes out.

"Then tell me, Princess." I hold her chin, staring into her eyes. "Tell me the truth."

She lets out a breath and relaxes as the words leave her lips, "I love it when your cock's inside me."

My brows raise up slightly and my heart pounds hard at her admission. "Show me how much you love it." My teeth rake over my bottom lip as she grasps my cock, and I watch her slowly slide it into her mouth. My head falls back, and I let out a deep moan as she grabs my hips, my cock touching the back of her throat as I live in the bliss of her sucking me off. "That's it, baby," I moan. "Fuck yes." I breathe out as I let myself fall into the pleasure. I ride it out as long as I can, toeing the line of busting deep down her throat. Stepping back, the ache hits

and I pull her shirt off, her breasts bouncing free as she unclasps her bra.

Ripping a condom open, I secure it as she watches me, smiling. Leaning down, I push her back on the bed. I get between her legs and rub my cock up and down her lips, teasing her outsides as I enjoy the moment. Her body shifts and she tries to force me in, but I pull away, smiling as I look back at her. “Hunter, I swear to God if you don’t—” she starts, and I cut her off.

“What?” I mock her. “Please tell me what you’re going to do?”

Her jaw tightens and her nose flares, and I can see she’s getting pissed, eagerly wanting me to be inside her. I chuckle as she doesn’t have anything to say in response. Sliding into her, the memories of us flood back into my thoughts. I bottom out and we both let out a moan, the familiarity of her warmth and tightness feels like coming home. She squirms and lashes out, “Hunter, fucking move.”

“Give me a goddamn minute,” I snap, opening my eyes to her staring up at me, her beauty making my heart flip inside.

Her smile turns to a smirk, and she holds me inside her with her legs. “So, tell me...” She runs her fingers up my chest, her touch electrifying me as I try to keep still. “The truth, sir.”

“You call me sir again and this shit will be over in two seconds.” I snort, making a joke of the new kink level that I’ve unlocked. She giggles, and I smile tenderly at her.

She twitches and purrs, squeezing me from within as she leans up and pulls me down to her. “Can you move please, *sir*.” I start to grind my hips into her, and she arches her back. “Yes,” she hisses out, pulling my head to her shoulder.

Turning my head into her, I nip her neck, “Is that what you want?”

“Yes, sir.” She hums out and I grind into her hard.

Opening her legs wider, I go deeper. The way she feels around my cock, the way her skin tastes on my lips, and her moans of pleasure are too much for me to process. I’ve missed

everything about her. My rhythm speeds up and her moans get stronger and louder, and I find myself racing to the top of my mountain. I pull her in close to me, making sure I hold onto her tight, my balls smacking against her ass as we breathe heavy. She tenses up and I bury my face into her neck as she holds on, squeezing me with every part of her. Her orgasm hits and I come with her as our bodies give out. I stay inside her as we slowly come down from our high together, and I roll off her, both of us trying to catch our breath. We lie on the bed in the growing darkness, breathing together for what feels like an eternity, and I wonder, “What the fuck do we do now?”

“We eat,” Courtney answers, and I blink wide-eyed, not knowing I said the last part out loud.

“Yeah, sure, I could eat.” I agree and take a deep breath, letting it out slow.

But that’s not what I meant.

27

Courtney

I run my fingers through my hair, raking out the tangles as Hunter walks back to the bedroom with a pizza box in his hand. I'm wrapped up in the blankets, partially naked, and I'm not putting on clothes. I lick my lips and hold out my hands for the pizza box, like a baby wanting its mother.

"Ah." Hunter shuts me out, withholding the box. "You want to eat? You'll have to talk." He sits on the edge of the bed, holding the pizza box away as he forces me to wait.

"Talk about what?" I ask, completely confused.

"You have to stop shutting me out, Court," he says and I roll my eyes.

"What are you, my therapist? I don't need to talk about shit." I huff.

"Why not?" He stops.

"Because it doesn't fucking matter. Everything's done and gone. Why bring up shit if it's not going to change anything." I'm irritated he's bringing this shit up. "We don't talk about this shit, Hunter."

"You're right, we don't." He drops the pizza box on the bed. "I've known you for two years now, and I know nothing about you. Why is that?"

“Because.” I jerk towards him, like a teenager. “I like it that way. You don’t ask for shit. You don’t care about shit. You’re just here. That’s all I need.”

He raises his brows at me, and tilts his head, “Okay, so, you’ve just been using me? You just want me around, for what? My dick. Then what?” He waves his hands around.

“Why are you being like this? This is what we agreed to in the beginning.” I shout.

“Yeah, in the beginning, Courtney.” His voice gets louder as he stands up. “The beginning was fun. We didn’t give a shit about what was happening, or each other. But now? You’ve had three panic attacks in front of me, fucking three. The Courtney I knew before didn’t give a shit about anything. The one I see now has some issues and we need to talk about them.” He stops, staring at me.

Sliding off the bed, I face him and shout, “Oh my God, Hunter! Just because you’ve seen me have a panic attack doesn’t mean you get to know all my secrets. I’m only human. Sorry, I can’t be carefree all the time.”

“The thing is, you are.” He gets in close, and I try to step back. Hunter grabs my arm and pulls me close to him. “You act like all this shit just rolls off your back. It’s just you against the world. That nothing ever bothers Courtney Marie.”

“Stop.” I gasp, wanting him to stop. To stop talking, to stop trying to pry into the world I’ve kept hidden. I struggle to get free, but he locks down on me, not letting me pull away.

“No, I’m not going to stop. I’m not going to stop until you’re honest and real with me. For once in your life, can’t you just let me in?” He begs, his tone turning softer.

“I can’t,” I scream, as a sob escape. “Don’t you fucking get it? I can’t. If I do, then I’ll feel the blame, the guilt, the fucking everything that makes me a terrible human being. I ruin everything, Hunter. Is that what you want to hear? That I fuck everything up. I’m meant to be alone because the real me is disgusting. The real me is... the worst.” I sob, falling into him. My head lands against his chest and something breaks,

something inside me bursts as I let out a scream so deep it burns my throat.

Hunter lets go of my hands, wrapping his arms around me. “It’s okay, I’ve got you,” he whispers.

I try to stop the words from coming out, but they flow out of me like a river, my dam finally breaking. I push against him, struggling to get free, struggling to hold everything back, “I keep everything inside because no one wants to listen. No one wants to hear how I was blamed for my father leaving when I was little. That I should’ve tried harder, that he would’ve come around more if I was a better daughter. No one cares about how my grandmother would beat me senseless for not saying please or thank you. That she’d yell at me for countless hours, blaming me for my mother killing herself. Or, how it’s my fault I had to have an abortion at fifteen, because.” I hiccup, crying as the words won’t stop. “No one cares that Brandie died because of me.” I become dizzy, and flashes of light swarm my eyes. My body tries to pull in air, but my lungs resist, the boulder sitting on my chest not allowing me to breathe. Everything fades as my memories latch onto Brandie, my body slipping down as my legs give out from under me.

I pour a drink as the laughter of my friends surrounds me. Looking up, I smile at the chaos and breathe in the scent of another wild party. “Court!” Marcus calls my name and I turn, watching him as he walks over. A contagious smile is placed on his face, and I smile back in return. He’s an attractive guy, and his golden skin shines, reminding me of a god.

“Hey Marcus.” I bite my lip as he comes up next to me.

“You look sexy as always.” He stops, looking me up and down.

“Thank you.” I smirk, turning to him, placing my hand on his arm. I lean into him, and the smell of his cologne is rich. “You with someone?” Was I

going to be a whore, like my grandmother says? Yes. Do I care? No. This is who I am, and I don't give a fuck what anybody says about it. I haven't been with every guy in school, I just have a select group of guys I hang out with, and we all trade. His eyes light up as I stare at him with a lustful look. Let's add him to the list.

He lets out a hesitant breath. "Nope."

"Great." I grab his hand, pulling him with me. I ignore his girlish giggle as we rush to the bathroom, these guys are always too excited. I drop down to my knees, needing to get this show on the road, I have other plans tonight.

"Oh shit," he snickers.

I roll my eyes and unbutton his jeans. Hmm. I've had bigger, but it'll still satisfy. Not wasting any time, I start deep-throating him, blocking out all the ridiculous things he's saying. I push him close to the edge and stop, standing up as I pull off my jeans and stare at him as he looks at me like a lost puppy. Snapping my fingers, I sigh. "Come on Marcus, we don't have all night." Moving some stuff out of the way, I hop on the counter as Marcus stumbles with the condom. I'm slowly losing interest. He manages to finally get it on and with too much effort he grinds into me.

I pull his head into my neck so he doesn't see the disdain in my face. It's not his fault that I'm not easily satisfied, but it's not mine either. Just the luck of the draw, I guess. I hear him build up and finish, and I fake my own. And, before we get to have the dreaded awkward talk, I hear yelling coming from the other side of the wall. I know that voice.

Pushing Marcus off, I pull on my jeans. "Sorry, but I hear my friend. Catch you later," I heave. Marcus waves, unable to speak, and I shut the

door behind me. Walking around the corner, I see Brandie with her disgusting boyfriend and his friends.

“Courtney!” She giggles. Her blonde hair is straightened like Cassie’s, and I want to roll my eyes at how annoyingly jealous she is of Cassie.

“What the fuck are you guys doing?” I say, taking a seat next to her.

“Oh, we’re just talking. I was telling them about Cassie.” She smiles in a drunken stupor, raising her brows quick.

I tighten my jaw as I stare at her boyfriend and he stares back, daring me to say something. “Is that right?” I say, not taking my eyes off him. He doesn’t intimidate me.

“Yeah, we were joking about how that girl needs to experience life a little. You know, be like us,” she mumbles.

I furrow my brows, glancing over to her. “What does that have to do with Cassie?”

Brandie drunkenly giggles and I can hear her menacing tone, the true person that lives behind the veil is showing her face. If Cassie ever knew how Brandie really felt about her, it’d be the end of her. I’ll never tell, but Brandie acts like she cares about Cassie, but in reality, Brandie’s just keeping her enemy close. The jealousy of the situation wreaking throughout every conversation. And I get stuck in the middle because I want to protect Cassie, even if I have to sleep with the devil to do it. Brandie stands up, getting between me and her boyfriend, “I told Cassie to come tonight, it’s time she stops being such a goody-goody all the time.”

The blood drains from my face. “Brandie, what did you do?”

“Nothing. Cassie just needs to let loose, we’re just going to have a little fun.” She chugs the rest of her drink and stumbles a bit. I look over to her boyfriend and his friends, and they’re devilishly grinning. I’ve never been more scared in my life.

Her boyfriend pushes Brandie out of the way, and leans over in my face. “We’re going to have a little fun with that pretty little princess. And if you say anything, we’ll do the same thing to you.”

“Ha, she might like it,” one of the guys behind him scoffs, and they all laugh.

“That’s right.” Her boyfriend looks back to me. “Tell you what, if you say anything, or try to stop us, then Ronnie here will beat the shit out of you. And I can guarantee it’ll be worse than your little old grandma.”

Note to self: never tell Brandie anything, ever again.

I can feel myself starting to panic, my nerves firing and freezing at the same time, wanting to run and to fight. What am I going to do? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My shoulders shake viciously, and I open my eyes. “Courtney!” Hunter yells my name, and my heart pounds in my chest. I take a deep breath and blink, trying to figure out what’s happening. Looking up at Hunter, he’s leaning over me, his eyes wide and frightened. “Fucking shit,” he whispers, letting his shoulders relax as he sees me coming to.

“I passed out?” I mumble, my throat sore and dry.

“Yes.” Hunter sits back against the wall, his eyes searching mine, “Are you okay?”

“I think so.” I move to lean against the bed, my body sore and tense. “Are you okay?”

“No.” he lets out another labored breath. “You scared the fucking shit out of me.”

Looking up at Hunter, his head is leaned back against the wall, eyes closed and he’s trying to regulate his breathing. I begin to shiver and look down to see the top half of my body is exposed. Pulling the blanket from the bed, I wrap it around my body and slowly crawl into his lap. This thing that holds us together pulls me to him and I don’t have the strength to resist it anymore. He opens up and wraps me in his arms, the heat from his breath warming my heart. I swallow hard as he gently holds me tight, and squeeze my eyes closed, resting my cheek on his shoulder. The smell of his hair makes me smile, and it makes me feel safe. I’ve never known this kind of safety before.

My face wrinkles in discomfort, the feeling of peace washing over me. The truth flashing in front of my face, when I’m with Hunter, I don’t have to be the person I’m scared of being.

I just have to be me.

28

Hunter

My head pounds from the stress of everything. The guilt of pushing her to talk about herself sits on my chest. I didn't know she was going to unleash on me. And I've never seen anyone faint like that. At least not sober, anyway.

Slowly I pull away from her warmth and wonder if I'll ever feel this way again after she's gone. I have no doubt that she plans on leaving. Courtney's like a wild horse, taming her has to be on her terms. And I don't think it'd be fair for me to ask her to stay.

I stop, frozen by my own thoughts, do I want her to stay? Yes. Well, no. Fuck.

"I didn't mean to scare you," her soft voice breaks the silence, and her fingers run through my hair. There's something in her eyes, something I can't decipher. Or maybe I can, but I don't want to. The tracks of love and rejection run side by side in me. And part of me doesn't want to take the risk of finding out which track I'm on.

I blow out a breath, pushing away my own selfish needs, trying to help her understand her own. I've always had my own problems but there's always been someone in my corner. No matter what, I always knew that someone was there for me. Either Noah, Jace, or Ryan, shit, even my parents. But as I look into her dark brown eyes, I can feel her pain and

loneliness, and it doesn't sit well with me. "I deserve it." I swallow the lump in my throat, closing my eyes. I hate admitting I'm wrong, but she's not the only one here who needs growth. "I shouldn't have forced you to talk about something that you weren't ready to talk about. It was selfish of me." I look back into her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Courtney smiles softly, resting her hand on my chest. "Thank you, but I'm as much to blame here as you." I furrow my brows, not liking that she thinks this is her fault. Her self-blame is only a product of her environment. It seems wrong to me. Opening my mouth to speak, she places her finger over my lips, silencing me. "Let me say this, please." I nod and she slides off my lap, taking a seat next to me. "Honestly, and I'm being..." she lets out a shaky breath and I can see her awkward and fearful emotions coming up. "I'm being as transparent as I can. I don't think that would've ever happened unless someone pushed me. I'm kind of stubborn." We laugh softly together as she continues. "And I don't really know what to do now. This..." she looks down at her hands, clamping them shut and then opening them. "This anger, it's always been easy for me, you know? But now?" She throws her hands up in the air. "What do I do with my hands?" Being open and vulnerable is a rarity for her, and I can feel how uncomfortable it is.

My mind opens and my heart aches. I reach for her hand, lacing our fingers together. "Just let me hold them."

She keeps her head down, looking at our hands interlocked. "I'm sorry Hunter," she mumbles, looking up at me, tears forming in her eyes, "I've been a really big asshole to you."

"Nah, you?" I brush it off with a little laugh. "I can take that. Lord knows I've done my fair share of assholery."

She snorts out a laugh and I let go of her hand, grabbing the pizza box, "Food feeds the soul." I flip it open and hand her a piece, then take one for myself. Silence squeezes itself between us, filling the room as we sit and eat, helping us gather our thoughts. Silence can tell you a lot about yourself, what you've been avoiding, and right now, the silence is screaming in my ears. "So, tell me," I start, needing to keep

that voice inside quiet, “about Brandie.” Ryan has mentioned Cassie and her friend Brandie before, how Cassie felt responsible for her death, but hearing Courtney talk about Brandie, she sounds different.

She picks apart her pizza, taking small bites and shaking her head softly. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Just start at the beginning, I’ve heard a little bit about her from Cassie,” I trail off as her eyes meet mine.

“Cassie only knows the web of lies that Brandie spun around her. Brandie,” she says, tossing her pizza crust into the box, “she was just as fucked up as me. I guess that’s why we became friends.” She laughs it off, not happy at her honesty. “Well, were we really friends? I don’t know. You’re supposed to keep your enemies closer, right?” She stops, looking up at the ceiling. “I’ve thought about it so many times, before and after her death. I’d assume more now than ever. In the beginning, we were the best of friends. We did everything together. I never had girlfriends, they just never liked me, but when I moved to Charlotte, Cassie was like my saving grace.” Her brows furrow deep, and the pain shows on her face, “I just wanted to keep her safe, to keep her as innocent as possible, because I know that the world would tear her to pieces in an instant, and I never wanted her to end up like me.”

“What happened?” I ask, getting another piece of pizza.

Courtney’s face wrinkles in pain and she shakes her head, finally mustering. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?” I push.

“Because,” she whimpers, “I don’t want you to know what I did.”

I tighten my jaw, confused. “What’d you do?”

Courtney shakes her head, trying to hold back the tears, silently crying as she relives what happened. “Courtney,” I call her name, but she’s already shutting down. Pulling her knees up to her chest, she puts a protective barrier around herself. Her shame is evident and my chest aches like someone’s stabbing me. I take in a slow breath, collecting myself as I try

to get her to open up. I can tell her pain runs deep, the guilt she feels is something that she lives with every day, carrying it for more than just herself, everyone else's pain mixing with her own.

An idea comes to mind and I get up, walking out to the hallway closet. I pull out one of my grandmothers' old blankets, it's not weighted but it'll do. Walking back in, Courtney hasn't moved from where she was. Draping the blanket around her, it swallows her whole. I take my seat and wait for her to unfold herself and let the barrier back down.

"I'm scared," she whispers.

"Of what?" I ask in a soft tone.

She wipes her tears. "I'm scared that if I tell the truth, if I set it free, that I'll lose everyone."

I see it now, the strong, don't give a shit Courtney, actually does give a shit. So much so that she's willing to isolate herself from everyone to keep this secret. All while trying to keep herself above water, but she's drowning in her feelings. "But aren't you losing yourself by keeping everything inside?"

"I don't care about myself." She sighs.

"Well, I do," I grunt.

"What?" Her eyes catch mine, fear swirling inside.

"I care about you, and your pain," I explain.

"Why?" Her brows wrinkle, fear turning to confusion.

I let out a lifeless laugh, the realization hitting me at the same time. "I don't know, but I do. I wouldn't be here if I didn't care."

Courtney wipes her face, and I slowly see it turn serious. "Hunter, I've been so mean to you."

"Oh, I know." I raise my brows. "But I don't think it's fair that you get all the credit. I played the game too."

Courtney hangs her head, then shakes it and takes a quick breath. "The night that Cassie got drugged, the night that Brandie got raped, there's more to the story. More than what

Cassie knows, because Brandie didn't want me to tell her what actually happened."

"Okay." I listen.

"I'd say it was all karmic, but that's probably talking ill of the dead." She straightens her back, pulling the blanket around her, snuggling in as she starts the story of what really happened that night, and why the truth has her afraid of losing everyone she loves.

29

Courtney

I don't know how I want to tell this story. My stomach's in knots and my brain's screaming for me to shut up, to keep everything in. The fear of him knowing and seeing the deepest darkest part of me scares me. But when I look at him, his eyes shimmering in the mix of low lighting and the moon, my heart feels safe.

So, I pray to the universe, opening my mouth to speak the truth that's been clinging to me for years. "That night wasn't supposed to happen the way it did. I've replayed the story over and over again trying to find the balance of what was right and wrong, and..." I stop, looking at him to see the reality of where I stand. "I know now what I should have done. And I know now what I did was wrong. Cassie came to the party that night and what happened to Brandie, was meant for Cassie." I lick the saltiness of my tears off my lips, and continue. "Brandie was jealous of Cassie, she never admitted it, but I know how jealousy works. Cassie was the golden girl, the good one of the mix, everybody's favorite. Brandie's mom, Charlotte, adored Cassie and since Cassie never really had a mom, she clung to her. Charlotte was the top tier of what you'd want from your mother. And she'd always compare Brandie to Cassie, saying 'you should do this like Cassie, you should ask Cassie, just be like Cassie.' And Brandie was taking it rough, she was still trying to figure out who she was,

and coming in second in the eyes of your own mother? I always knew that had to hurt. But when Brandie started dating Zac, things started to change, he was a terrible person.” I raise my brows. “He’d abuse her, call her a piece of shit, smack her around when he thought people weren’t looking. But Cassie never knew anything about it. And I think Brandie was kind of lost, just trying to survive.”

I pause, glancing around the room, lining up my thoughts as they try to escape. “And I was too wrapped up in my own problems to really care about it all. But now, I can see how bad she was suffering. That night, Zac and his friends were making jokes about Cassie, talking about showing her a good time, and being really aggressive. One of his dumb friends had a crush on her, and it wasn’t that sweet romantic type, it was pretty intense. Huh.” I stop. Something comes to me, a missing piece that I’ve never seen before. Brandie never invited Cassie to parties, especially not when her boyfriend and his friends were there. Was she protecting her too? Blinking my eyes, I snap back to Hunter. “Brandie started talking about Cassie that night, and I guess she let it slip that she was still a virgin. And Zac and his friends convinced Brandie to call her and say that we all wanted to be picked up, knowing that Cassie would be the good friend and come get us.” The tears come back as I relive the memory in real time. I need to move, the words and emotions becoming too uncomfortable. I stand up, slip on a night shirt and pace the room as I try to find the courage to keep talking, “I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t have a plan, but I knew,” I pause, “I knew that I couldn’t let it happen.”

“What’d you do?” Hunter asks, pulling himself up on the bed.

I turn away, pacing as my body physically is trying to stop me from letting out the truth. “Please don’t hate me,” I whimper, needing him to assure me that I won’t be alone.

“I won’t.” He exhales, patiently waiting for me to continue.

A sob escapes, and I let everything out for the first time. “I don’t know how I did it but I made Brandie realize what she’d done. She came out of her drunken haze long enough to realize

her mistake and she was begging me to help her fix her fuck up. If it was anybody else, I probably would've left Brandie out to dry, but it was Cassie. She means the world to me. I had to help her clean up her mess." I wipe my face, clearing my emotions. "Brandie came up with an idea to stall them while I got Cassie and left. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I had no choice." Hunter nods his head encouraging me as I speak. "Brandie did her part and was distracting her boyfriend when I saw Cassie, I tried to convince her to leave, but she wasn't falling for it, she wanted to find Brandie." I wrinkle my face, the shame making me feel sick. "I looked around quick and saw the creepy friend on the front porch. He walked inside when he saw her and I panicked. I walked with her and did the only thing I could think of at the time. I grabbed a water bottle that I knew was spiked and I handed it to her, maybe if she was a little woozy, I could get her in the car and get out of there. I tried to pull her through the crowd so she'd get lost, but that's when the chaos started. We got separated and when I saw her again, she was next to one of Brandie's boyfriend's friends. I grabbed her by the arm as he turned away and pushed her into a hall closet. Everything happened so fast, I knew if they couldn't find her then she'd be safe. Then I stood in front of the door, leaning against it and holding the handle so she couldn't get out." My body shakes as I cry out, "I heard her screaming. I could feel the fear in her voice as it faded, the drugs making her slowly pass out. I waited there for what felt like an eternity, until I couldn't hear her anymore. Then I went to find Brandie, but..." my eyes focus on the moonlight through the window. "It was too late. They knew we got Cassie away. And I don't remember much after that because they beat me up pretty bad."

Hunter gets up and wraps his arms around me. "It's not your fault Courtney. You were just a kid."

I don't move. I can't move. It feels like I'm stuck, stuck somewhere in the past. "Then why does it feel like it is?"

"You need someone to blame, and you're just blaming yourself." He pulls back lifting my face up so my eyes focus on him, "This is why you distanced yourself from everyone? From Cassie?"

“If she found out what I did, she’d never forgive me. I can’t even forgive myself. Before Brandie died, she made me promise to never tell Cassie, to never tell her why she invited her there. And why everything happened the way it did.” I hiccup as the words hurt coming out. “I can’t lose her. Hunter. I can’t.”

“So, you’re just okay with losing yourself?” His eyes search mine. “What you did was wrong, but it came from a place of love.” I push him away, but he holds onto me. “Listen to me, you did what you had to do to save her.”

“But I didn’t have to drug her.” I push him away again, and he lets go of me. “I didn’t have to shove her in a closet. I didn’t have to keep this secret from her for so long, letting her blame herself for everything that happened to Brandie.” I let my anger come out. “I’m the reason she blames herself, I’m the reason she hurt herself. Me. I fucking did that!”

“Yeah, but you also saved her from being raped Courtney!” he shouts back at me. “I’m not saying what you did was smart or right but don’t blame yourself for every single thing that happened that night. You’re sitting here thinking you’re the problem, taking everyone’s burdens, all their pain and heartbreak. Those guys were bad people, but your bad choices saved Cassie that night.”

“She’ll never forgive me,” I cry out, the little girl inside me breaking, the loneliness cutting deep. “She’ll never want to see me again.”

Hunter walks over, catching me as I pace and runs his fingers through my hair. Pulling my head to his, he centers me. “You need to forgive yourself, Princess.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” I whisper, pulling him into a hug.

“It’s okay, we can figure it out together,” he whispers back, squeezing me.

A smile comes to my face and for the first time in forever, I don’t feel completely alone. Having him here makes me feel like everything will be alright. Like no matter what happens,

I'll be okay. "I'm exhausted, can you stay with me tonight, please?" I blow out a breath, forcing myself to relax as I snuggle into his warmth.

"Sure, Princess." Hunter leans down and kisses my head.

"Stop calling me that," I tease.

Hunter pulls my face to his and kisses it three times, giving me butterflies in my stomach, then smiles. "Never."

30

Hunter

“Hunter!” Someone calls my name. Pulling the last bit of hay around, I lug it onto the pile. Clara comes running over with a smile on her face.

“Hey.” I dust my hands off, turning my attention to her.

“Hi, hey.” She gives an awkward smile and her cheeks blush as she looks around. “I was wondering if you could help me?” She continues, raising her brows. “Your mom gave me homework to do with Chance, but she’s not doing anything that I say, and I asked your mom for some help and she told me to come find you, that she has her hands full today.”

“Ah, yeah, sure. I can help. What did my mom want you to work on?” I smile as I walk with her to the open pen where Chance is. This is what my mom does, she helps the owner and the horse bond after they go through the basic training with me. Clara gives me the rundown of what she needs to work on, and I spot Courtney standing next to the pen, looking at Chance. She’s deep in thought and doesn’t see us coming up.

My anxiety springs up as I get closer to her. I didn’t want to leave her this morning. After what happened last night, I fought myself, fighting to stay and to go. But I have a job to do, and for the last couple of days I’ve been behind. I don’t

call out to her, I just watch as she stares at Chance, mesmerized by her.

“So, is she your girlfriend?” Clara asks, walking next to me.

I blink, looking over to her. “What? No.” I laugh a little, the awkwardness of the situation catches me off guard. Courtney’s voice rings in my ears as I capture my thoughts, *You’re not my boyfriend*. “No,” I exhale, clearing my throat, “she’s just a friend.”

“Then why’d you tense up when I asked?” Clara laughs, nudging me with her elbow.

“We’re just friends,” I state, controlling my voice as we get closer to her.

She’s wearing one of Cassie’s snapback hats and her dark hair is blowing in the late spring breeze. I can’t see her eyes but she turns as we come up beside her. “Hi,” she speaks, her voice soft as silk and I fight off the shiver in my bones as I hear it.

“Hi,” I say back, clearing my throat as the word comes out a little too pre-teeny for me.

Clara laughs next to me. “Hi, I’m Clara.”

“Yeah, I remember you. This is your horse, right?” Courtney’s voice sharpens, along with her attitude. I smirk as I watch her try to stand a little taller, puffing out her chest. She’s jealous. Courtney doesn’t get jealous. I feel like I’m in some kind of alternate universe because jealousy is something I’d never associate with her. She’s never cared enough to be jealous. Does that mean she cares?

“Yes. That’s Chance. She’s my wonderfully stubborn little girl. Why?” Clara shifts, leaning closer to me as her shoulder comes up next to my arm. What the fuck is happening right now?

Courtney tenses up but she keeps her cool. “It’s nothing, Cora wanted me to take pictures of some of your training, if that’s okay with you and Hunter?”

“It’s okay with me,” Clara says, smiling wide.

The earth shakes underneath me as the world feels like it's going to rip apart under the tension between them. I've had women show dominance around me before but this feels different. Both try to win my attention, and nine times out of ten, it gets old. Does it boost my ego? Yes. Do I get bored by their childish ways? Also, yes. But am I loving the intensity of what's happening right now? Maybe.

"Hunter?" Courtney says my name, sharper and more forceful than I anticipated.

I mask my face, showing my aloofness. "Sure, that's fine." I walk with Clara to the side of the pen and help her climb up the fence, blocking Courtney. "What are you doing?" I whisper to her as she climbs. I know where Courtney's head is, but Clara? I don't know her well enough to tell if this is going to be a problem. I might have to respectfully tell her our training is done and move on. You never get your nookie where you make your cookies. And this ain't just my kitchen, it's my life.

"Easy, I don't have feelings for you." She lightly grabs my shoulder as she makes it over the top of the fence and I follow. We stop next to Chance, and she turns towards me. "I mean, I'm not going to lie, you're good looking. But mentally, I'm just not ready for anything. But I know what I see when I see it, and sometimes a good, swift kick in the ass gets things going in the right direction."

"Thanks?" I narrow my eyes, "But this all seems like child's play to me. It's not real appealing."

"It's not about what's happening now, it's about the results of my actions." She touches my bicep again and looks me in the eyes. "Look, she likes you and I can see you like her. And don't roll your eyes, I can see it from a mile away. It's not about the fighting or the tension, it's all about the attention. You give me a little attention, and she'll want some too. Trust me, I'm not going to throw myself all over you. I have a little dignity. Plus, I'm here for Chance, she's the only thing that matters to me," she explains, turning to grab the saddle. "Now help me up, please, sir."

I let out a sigh, shaking my head. These fucking women. I help her up on Chance, and we start working with her. An hour later, we finish up and Clara nods to where Courtney was standing before and I turn to find an empty space. To be honest, I forgot about Courtney and what Clara was trying to do because she wasn't acting like she was into me, she was just focusing on the training. So, by the end of it, Clara was smiling and laughing to herself and Chance was loosening up, everyone was creating a bond.

"I'll catch you later." Clara giggles as she leads Chance into the stables. Turning on my heels, I find myself looking for Courtney. She's sitting out front of the barn, looking at her phone.

"Hey," I say as I walk up.

"Hey," she responds, not looking up, still looking at her phone.

I ignore her charade and continue talking, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She scrolls down more photos on her timeline and then stands up, walking past me.

I reach out and stop her, raising my brow as she slaps my hand away. "What is it? Can you stop blowing me off. Tell me what's wrong. You've been acting weird this whole day." I don't know what's wrong so I start guessing, "Is this about last night?"

Courtney turns and faces me standing a little taller. "No, I just thought I'd be taking pictures of you training today."

I tilt my head, confused. "But that's what you did." She rolls her eyes and starts to walk off and I stop her again. "Stop acting like a child Courtney and say what the fuck you want to say."

"I don't like that it was her," she shouts. "I..." She stops, tightening her lips together. Running her hand through her hair as she lets out a breath. "I don't know why okay? I just didn't like it."

"You were jealous." I step closer to her and she lets out a small growl, turning from me. Spinning her back around, I pull

her to me, her camera sitting between us and our eyes meet.
“Say it.”

“No,” she hisses out.

The tension between us is rising, and I back her up around the edge of the barn into a darkened corner where no one can see us. “I think you’re jealous, and I think you know why you’re jealous. You just don’t want to say.”

“Your ego is suffocating me,” she snaps.

“And your dominance is endearing.” I mumble.

Her fingers grasp my shirt and she tightens her fist. “I wasn’t expecting it, that’s all.”

Pressing her against the side of the barn, I lean into her, parting her legs with my knee. “Oh, so you wouldn’t mind if I walked over to her, pulled her into a dark stall and pressed up against her like this.” I slowly get close to her as she takes a labored breath. “And bury my cock deep into her.” I jerk my hip letting her feel how turned on I am.

“Stop it,” she whispers, her eyes closed as she flashes her bare neck in my face.

“Why? If I tell you now then you’ll be expecting it, right? It wouldn’t bother you if you were expecting it?” I know I’m playing with the devil, but she’s intoxicating. My hand moves up her side and I move her camera out of the way. My hand moves to her waist, unbuttoning her shorts as my hand slips inside them, one finger touching her where she wants to be touched. I pull my hand out, gripping her shorts and pulling her hips against mine as I take in her beautiful scent.

“Fine. Fuck.” She grits her teeth. “I’m jealous. Are you happy now? I didn’t like it and I don’t know why. I don’t understand why it bothers me so much, but it does. Okay?”

“You care about me, don’t you, Princess,” I whisper, letting our noses touch. I expect her to fire back, to give me back what I’m dishing out, but what I get in return is her lips pressed into mine. My body jolts and electricity run through me. I push away, not sure what the hell I’m feeling, a little scared about the path we’ve found ourselves on. But I find

myself craving it, wanting more and more of her. Leaning back into her lips, she melts into me. I really wish this wasn't outside but I'm not stopping this rollercoaster. Her lips are like fire on mine and her tongue explores my mouth with fury. This is a whole new level of intimacy that I've never experienced. Pulling her wrists above her head, I'm greedy and want to kiss every inch of her.

"Hunter," she whispers in my ear, "I need you."

Something shifts in me, the primal thing that lives deep inside me wants to claim what's his, what's never going to be taken away again. Letting go of her hands, I unbutton my jeans and Courtney slides her shorts off. I pick her up and she wraps her legs around me as I slide into her. My unconscious brain kicks in as I kiss her lips, moaning together as I slide in and out of her. This feeling, this uncharted territory, makes me feel drunk and high, soaring above the clouds.

I don't understand what's happening, but I never want it to stop. My temperature rises as my name leaves her lips, a praise for conquering her desire, and I feel myself coasting high. I moan out, and she drops down quick, taking everything from me, swallowing me in one swift move and sucking my very soul out. Her whimpers are soft and pure as gold and something's changed. I'm not sure what it is.

All I know is I feel like we've royally fucked up.

31

Courtney

We shouldn't have done that, guilt washes over me as my brain spins. I shouldn't have gotten jealous. I shouldn't have let my blind lust take over, but the more I'm around him, the more I want to be with him. Standing up, I almost fall over, my legs weak as I try to balance myself. Hunter reaches down and grabs my arm, letting out a short laugh. "Here, hold onto me," he mumbles and I blink, taking a few breaths, trying to bring myself back to reality.

Hunter bends down, helping me into my shorts, and it feels like he's basically dressing me. And I just sit here like a fucking rag doll, letting him. I want to be angry at myself, I want to yell and fuss, but he felt so warm and safe. It felt like my heart had its first beat when we were together. I don't want to be soft, because that gets you in trouble. It leaves you open and vulnerable and I learned that the hard way, but here I am.

Hunter stands up, his deep ocean-like eyes stare into me and I realize just how deep I've drifted out.

Motherfucker.

I'm falling for him. and I can't even be angry. I don't want to be angry because all I feel is peace when I think of him, just still, calm seas. I feel like the weight I've been carrying is finally light enough that I can breathe.

“You, okay?” Hunter asks as he wipes my cheek, a tear falling before I even realized I was crying.

“Yeah.” I nod, wiping my face as I stand up, gathering my emotions. “I’m good.”

Hunter stares at me and I see no malice, no hatred, and no resentment. I feel a change, and I know he feels it too. “Please don’t look at me like that,” I whisper. I’m scared, scared of what just happened, scared of what could happen if we don’t stop all this. The unknown path of love I’ve found myself on scares me more than anything.

“I just…” Hunter’s eyes search mine and I hear the love in his voice. And even though I want to tell him no, I find myself nodding yes with every word he speaks. Leaning in, we kiss and something in me breaks. The tears that I’ve been holding back, the ones that I’ve tried to bury come back to life, and they fall freely from my face. His lips are soft, and my heart bursts wide open. I cling to him, wrapping my arms around him as he holds me, his lips healing a part of me that I wasn’t prepared for.

“Hunter?” Ollie calls out for him from the other side of the barn but Hunter doesn’t move. He pulls back slowly, our lips lingering, drawn to each other like a moth to a flame, and he breathes in deep. I let my arms fall and his eyes clear, his love drunk haze leaving.

“Yeah,” he calls out in a breathless voice.

“Hey, Ryan and Cassie are back. There up at the house if you want to go say hey.” He pauses as I look up at Hunter. “Have you seen Courtney?”

Hunter’s eyes lock onto mine as he smiles, his eyes lighting with fire. I knew what he was going to say because his fear is gone. He doesn’t want to hide it anymore. Staring at him, I don’t know what to think. My whole world just got tilted on its axis and I’m fucking terrified. Staring at him, his smile fades as he sees my face and I shake my head for him to say no. Letting him know I need things to stay the way they are. “Ah, no. I haven’t seen her,” he says, his shoulders falling as he lets go of me. The shame and guilt bury me alive. I’ve rejected

him once again and this time hurts the most. He looks down at his feet, and then reaches up and wipes his mouth clean. My heart aches and the pain rushes back, once again, I've fucked everything up. It's like living in constant déjà vu, the worst day of my life playing on repeat.

Hunter turns away, walking towards the front of the barn and I reach out for him. "Hunter," I stutter out, but he holds up his hand, stopping me as I see the pain I've caused flash across his face. I see how much he wanted this to be, how much he wanted me to choose him. He always talks a big game, never wanting a relationship but now I see it was a mask. A mask he wore to keep people from getting in and breaking his heart.

And I've done just that. I've broken his heart into a thousand pieces.

Twice.

Hunter walks away and I lean against the barn, unable to move from my spot. My knees give out, and I fall to the ground, leaning back against the barn as everything crashes down around me. People like me don't know how to love. I was born to spit hate and mistrust, but now I'm teetering. What's right? What's wrong? Everything's blurring in my mind now and I don't know what I want anymore.

Ollie walks around the edge of the barn, and stumbles as he sees me sitting on the ground. "Oh fuck," he hisses, witnessing my internal meltdown. "What the..." he looks around, running his fingers through his hair as I cry, breathing out heavy fast breaths. "I fucking knew you were here. Wait, did Hunter hurt you?"

I shake my head. I have no clue how to respond to that. I'm the reason I'm here crying. I'm the person who hurt me. My chest hurts and the pounding of my heart is getting louder in my ears. I reach out to Ollie and he pulls me up and I wrap my arms around him in a hug. They have always made me feel weird and uncomfortable, but I'm out of ideas. Maybe it'll take my mind off the growing chaos inside.

"Was, uh, Hunter out here with you? Uh, I don't really know what's happening right now. Oh, did you hear that Ryan

and Cassie got back?” He takes a breath in and stays tense, barely hugging me back. “Uh, I’m sorry, I’m not good at all this emotional stuff. Oh, do I need to stop talking? I feel like I’m talking too much.”

I sniff, closing my eyes as I lean my head onto his shoulder. “Just keep talking.”

“Oh, okay, um, it’s a nice day out, ain’t it?” He continues, and I sniff, the tears still falling. “Oh, I know, I got a tattoo. But don’t tell Mom, she’ll flip out. I mean Hunter has a bunch but, you know, I’m her little baby boy, so…” I feel him roll his eyes. His admission makes me focus on something other than myself, and I pull away.

“You got a tattoo, where?” I ask, sniffing as I stop the tears.

Ollie pulls up his shirt and I see a hexagon with a tree in the middle on his ribcage. It’s a single needle tattoo that goes down and the roots of the tree spread out and seem to mold into him. “I like it,” I state, “why’d you get that?”

Ollie lets go of his shirt. “For my sister. She was buried under a willow tree and…” he pauses, “I don’t know, I’ve always kind of felt close to her and this is what I settled on.” I furrow my brows and stare at him, feeling like I’ve misunderstood him this whole time. “Don’t tell anyone, okay?” He nods. “My family, they’ll worry about me and shit. And I don’t want them to.”

“Should I be worried?” I raise my brow. I haven’t known Ollie a long time, but he’s starting to feel like a little brother to me and I can’t not worry about him.

“No. no. I’m okay. Just going through my own shit.” He steps back. “Come on, we should get out of here.”

I follow him as we head towards the house, still thinking about his dismissal. “I’ll keep your secret, but you have to promise me one thing,” I say. “If you ever get sad or find yourself needing to talk to someone, just text me. You can’t show me that kind of vulnerability and expect me not to worry about you.” He nods as we walk, the stereotypical Freeman boy’s silent treatment following after showing an ounce of

emotion. I grin as I think about how similar he is to the rest of the family, finding it funny that all these emotional people hate talking about emotions.

Walking up the steps, I smile as I open the door, seeing Cassie sitting at the kitchen island. She smiles wide and runs over, giving me a hug. Her familiar smell makes me feel nostalgic. “I’ve missed you,” I say.

“I’ve missed you too. Did you have fun?” She pulls back. “I see no one got hurt while we were gone.”

Um, define hurt.

“Don’t worry, we were on our best behaviors.” Hunter says and I swallow hard, looking over to see him standing at the edge of the kitchen. His smile is strained and I can see through the mask he’s wearing.

“Yup, just kept the calm,” I shake under my words. Looking over to Ryan, I narrow my eyes, hiding behind my own mask. “How is it that you’re tan and shit, and she still looks like a ghost.” I point to Cassie who’s still standing next to me, her skin looking like it’s never seen the sun.

Everyone laughs and Ryan shakes his head, he starts talking about the trip and how she almost burned up the first day there, and we all start joking and laughing. It’s hard for me to keep up with the conversation because my brain focuses on Hunter at the other end of the kitchen island. I stare at him and wonder what he’s thinking about.

Fuck. Can this get any worse?

“Courtney,” Cassie’s innocent voice breaks me from my trance, “I know you must be dying to get out of here. When’s your plane leaving?”

Fuck. Fuck. Double fuck. Right. “Yeah, I’ll have to look again, but, uh, since y’all are back, that means tomorrow sometime.” I look over at Hunter and his eyes are hardened and his jaw is set. I definitely pictured this going differently when I rescheduled my flight two weeks ago.

“Well, I’d go make sure. You don’t want to miss it or you might be trapped here with us forever.” Ryan chuckles.

“Well, we don’t want that to happen, do we?” I feel sick to my stomach as I walk to my room. My hands shake as I grab my laptop and check my email. This is what I’m supposed to do. This is what I’ve planned. I was only supposed to be here for two weeks and then I was going back home. Back to *my* home, with *my* friends, *my* bed, and *my* life. I sit here on the bed, staring out the same window I’ve looked out for the past two weeks, and I can’t help but feel like I’m going to miss this place. Could I stay?

Huffing out, I set my mind. I have to be realistic.

This is not *my* life.

32

Hunter

She's leaving. I fucking knew she was going to but damn it. I kept holding onto that sliver of hope, wishing that she wouldn't. It's fucking happening all over again. Why am I doomed to repeat this bullshit over and over again. My anger flashes me back to my first rejection, the time that's forced me into this bullshit roundabout of emotion.

I hold the ring in my hand. This is the moment I've been waiting for. I saved up all my money to get this ring. This is for the girl that I'm going to end up marrying. The girl I've planned my life out with. This is Rebecca. I feel it. This is it. I look down at the ring, a silver band with a blue gemstone. It's her favorite. My heart is beating fast and my hands are beginning to sweat. The school bell rings and I walk out to the parking lot where she always hangs out with her friends.

"Hey Rebecca." I say her name.

Her eyes look over to me, and I try not to stare. She's wearing a cut off shirt that's showing off her belly button, and her jeans are sitting low on her hips. She smiles as our eyes meet, "Hey Hunter. Are you okay?"

We've never really talked to each other at school because Rebecca always said that it would cause a lot of drama if we did. Plus, she liked that what we had was like a secret, something for just us. It's nice, but I want something more. I want to scream from the rooftop that she's mine. I know I'm younger than her, but I can give her everything she needs, she just needs to let me.

"Yeah, I'm great. Can I talk to you for a second." My eyes look to her then to her friends, all of them staring at each other, wondering what's going on.

"Okay, sure." She turns quickly smiling at her friends, then walks towards me. I start to talk as she comes closer but she walks past me, turning around and motioning for me to follow. "Come on."

Her friends laugh, and my cheeks get heated. "Ah, yeah." I look back at her friends then turn and walk fast after her. We walk a few feet away and she stops quick, looking me right in the eyes.

"Alright, what is it?" She looks annoyed, cutting me off before I can start.

I hold out my hand, the ring sitting between my fingers, glistening in the sun. "I want to give you this."

She looks down at it, wrinkling her brows as she tilts her head. "A ring? You want to give me a ring?"

"Yeah," I stutter, "and I want to ask if we could maybe not be a secret anymore. I don't like that we hide our relationship."

"Shhh." She glares, pushing my hand down and looking over to her friends. "We've talked about this. That wouldn't be a good idea."

“But why not?” My heart aches as I can’t comprehend why she’s pushing me away.

“Because it would just complicate things, Hunter. You know that?” she whispers.

I furrow my brows, anger starting to bubble up inside, “You mean, it would complicate things for you, not for me. I know what I want, Rebecca. I want you.”

She lets out a scoff. “You’re just a kid, Hunter. Look, what we’ve been doing has been fun. But this was never going to be forever. Plus, look on the bright side, you’ve experienced way more than any other kid in your grade.”

“What, what are you talking about?” I say a little louder.

She grits her teeth, ripping off the Band-Aid in one pull. “I’m sorry Hunter. I don’t know what you thought this was but you were just a plaything for me, nothing more. And now, I see I made a mistake. So, take your stupid ass fucking ring and go give it to someone else.”

I stare at her in silence as I try to process everything she said. From the distance I hear her friends laugh, and someone calls out, “Aw, did your little heart just break? Does poor baby need to go home and cry.”

Rebecca smirks, and looks back at me like I’m dirt on the bottom of her shoe. “You really thought this was something? You were just a distraction, Hunter.” She laughs/ “I thought you were smarter than that.” She turns, walking off to her friends as my world starts to crumble.

The shame and embarrassment crash down on me and I feel my eyes filling with tears, the heartbreak making my heart literally rip in two.

Turning on my heels, I run away as Rebecca and her friends laugh and point at me.

I promise, I'll never let someone do this to me ever again.

“Hey,” Cassie’s voice breaks me from my memory and I see the sun setting fast. The day has slipped away as I forced myself to work all afternoon. Wiping the sweat from my brow, I realize I’m drenched, my shirt’s completely soaked.

Turning to her, I blink, clearing my mental fog. “Hey Cass.”

“Hey, we’re all telling Courtney bye and going to get a bite to eat. Do you want to come?” she asks, shoving her hands in her pockets.

I take a deep breath in, looking out to the setting sun. “Nah.” I look back at her. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You know, Ryan told me,” she says, walking over to sit across from me on one of the hay bales, “about you and her.”

Of course, he did, he just had to tell his wife about me and her best friend. But neither of them knows the whole story, no one does. I want to tell the truth, to tell her everything, but it doesn’t seem worth it. What’s the point, nothing seems to matter anymore. I’m either angry or sad when I think of her now. Mostly sad though. I exhale, continuing to brush the dirt out of the barn. “So, you couldn’t convince her to stay?”

Cassie becomes quiet and I look back, seeing her stare at her feet as she moves some small pieces of hay around. “Nope,” she mumbles and I see two tears run down her cheek. Ah, hell. I look at her now, knowing what I know, the secret Courtney will take to her grave, and I drop my broom and walk over. Sitting down next to her, I put my arm around her shoulders and squeeze her gently. I wince knowing I’m soaked but she doesn’t seem to mind. “I wish there were something I could say to make her stay,” she whispers.

Yeah, me too.

I hold her for a minute, letting her feel secure. Cassie's a delicate person, and I never thought I'd be able to be around someone like her but, in all honesty, I'm glad she's my sister-in-law. Ryan walks around the corner and skids to a stop. He sees me hugging her and I nod to him that she needs some attention and stand up. Walking away, I pat him on the shoulder and without hesitation he takes my previous spot and hugs Cassie.

Rounding the corner of the barn, I walk out to the driveway. I've finished up all the chores for the night, and I walk around the edge of the field as I make my way to my truck. My drive and energy have all but vanished and I think to myself, what do I do now?

33

Courtney

My anxiety churns in the pit of my stomach, it's been like this since I woke up this morning. I'm going home today and I don't understand why I feel so sad about leaving. There's nothing here for me. I shake away the thoughts and focus on the mental list of people I want to say goodbye to. Walking into the little office they recently built on the ranch, I see Ollie sitting at a desk in the back. "Wow," I say, looking around. "I can't believe I've never been in here," I say and Ollie looks up. It still weirds me out how much he looks like his brothers. Except Hunter and Ryan have their mother's eyes.

"Hey." He smiles. "Yeah, this is where Mom makes all the appointments and helps keep Dad on track. If not, he'd probably be out in the middle of the field digging it up." I furrow my brows and tilt my head, confused, but he just laughs, waving me off. "Never mind. So, you leaving?"

"Yeah, well, this afternoon, but I wanted to give you something." I say, pulling out a flash drive with all the pictures I've taken of the ranch these last two weeks. "These are all the pictures I've taken. You can have them, and this." I hand him a piece of paper with some info on it. "Is a friend I have in Texas, her name is Sophie, she's around your age. She's going to college for web design and stuff. So, if you need any help with things, you can reach out to her." He takes the paper, looking over her info and I see he's excited. "You're really

good at this stuff, Oliver,” I use his real name to know I’m serious, “and I know how hard it can be when you’re misunderstood. Trust me.”

His eyes look up at me, and the appreciation I see in them almost brings me to tears. I feel like a big sister, giving out life lessons, and I thought that would scare me but it doesn’t. “Thank you, Courtney.” He stands up, walking over to me and wrapping me in a big hug, filled with gratitude.

The tears try to come back, and I close them tight to keep them from spilling out. I’m going to miss him, and that’s strange for me. I never really miss anyone. “You don’t need approval from anyone, you’re talented, just keep doing the things you love,” I whisper, and pull back to see his eyes are glazed over too. Ollie opens his mouth but closes it, leaning in for another hug.

“I hate that my brother’s an asshole,” he whispers.

I snort out a laugh, “I’m the asshole, Ollie. Not him.”

Ollie lets out a relaxed sigh, pulling back again. “Well, either way, doesn’t matter. Do you think you’ll come back?”

A lump in my throat swells up. “No, I don’t think so.”

The door opens behind me and we turn to see Ryan walking in and his eyes widen with surprise as he sees me. “Oh hey.”

“Hey,” I say back, and an awkward silence sinks between us all. “Well, where’s your wife? I need her to drive me around so I can say goodbye to everyone.”

Ryan smiles, and points out the window. “She’s out with Hope in the turnaround.”

I nod and walk around him, heading out to find her. The smell of horse and earth mix together as I open the door, and a piece of me feels nostalgic as the smell hits my nose. Even though this place has been hard to deal with, I’ll never forget it. Maybe one day, when I can deal with my own problems, I’ll be able to say thank you to him, but right now I can barely stand the sight of myself in the mirror.

Walking over, I look and see Cassie standing with Hunter at the round pen. I walk quietly and watch them as he points at the horse and talks to her, it's mesmerizing to see him work. Coming up beside them I close my eyes, accepting that this is not where I belong. "Universe, if you're listening, please give him the life he's always wanted. Make sure he finds peace, and can share his life with the one that will change his life forever."

"Are you talking to yourself again?" his voice is rough and I'm scared to open my eyes.

"She talks to her spirit guides," Cassie says in a loving tone, and I peek over. She's still staring at the big horse, never taking her eyes off it, "or it could've been the Universe."

Opening my eyes, I smile and the breeze kicks up around us, "It was the Universe this time."

"Yeah, what's all that about? I haven't heard about that before." Hunter stands a good distance from me, staying on the other side of Cassie as I turn towards them.

I normally don't talk about my spiritual side around people, mostly because they won't believe me when I say I'm spiritual. "I believe in the Universe, just like some people believe in God. And I believe in spirit guides, like beings who aren't from this world that help guide us in our life."

Hunter grunts and shifts. "Well, that explains a lot. Anyway, I've got some other work I need to do. I'll see you later." He turns to walk away and Cassie looks at me, widening her eyes and nodding her head in his direction.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Aren't you going to tell him bye?" she says in a way that tells me I should've known what she meant.

"No, I'm not." I huff. "I was going to ask if you could drive me around really quick, I want to go see Josslyn. And I want to tell Madison I'm sorry. I feel like a terrible person for forgetting to take pictures of Beau for her."

"Oh, okay sure." She turns with me and we walk towards her car. "But you're not a terrible person."

“Thanks.” I cringe a little.

The drive to Josslyn’s house felt like forever, but it didn’t bother me. Cassie likes silence and I’m too far gone in my head to even care or notice. The pit of my stomach feels like it’s filling with rocks, getting heavier and heavier as I breathe. My eyes catch all the white fences surrounding the houses, kids playing in the fields, and families just being together and building their lives as one. I’ve never seen myself in this life, living the cookie cutter life with kids and a white picket fence. I’ve actually never experienced anything other than blame and resentment, that’s all I was born into. So, I probably wouldn’t even know where to start if my life went any other way. My father resented my mother because I was born. My mother resented me because he would want to spend time with me and not her. As I got older, blame and shame was the root of my teenage years. And my grandmother, she blamed me and shamed me for every breath I took, never holding back.

This dream life is for the people who have light in their life, for the ones that can see their future. I can’t. And I don’t think I’ll ever be able to. This isn’t my reality. It’s the nightmare that taunts me.

“You, okay?” Cassie asks as we pull into the gravel driveaway, and I look up and see Mac and Josslyn sitting outside in the garage. I blink my eyes and try to force myself to be strong but all I feel is sadness.

“Yeah,” I answer, sliding out of the car as we park. This weight will be gone sooner rather than later if I can stick it out for a little while longer. I’ll be on the plane and leaving here for good.

I just need to get through this, and everything will be okay.

34

Courtney

I load my bags into the back of the Uber, telling the driver it might be a minute as I say goodbye to Caleb and Cora. Caleb stands next to her, resting his arm on her shoulder as she holds herself tight and cries. I don't know how to deal with all these women crying all the time.

Cora sucks in a breath, holding her arms out as I walk over to them, pulling me into a hug with no invitation. "I know we didn't get to spend a lot of time together, but it was really nice to have you here." She pulls back tucking my hair behind my ear. "You're an amazing person, Courtney."

I force a smile, because no woman has ever given me so much praise. And honestly, I don't know how to take it. "I'm sorry, I don't know what to say to that," I say bluntly.

Cora laughs jokingly. "I know." she turns her head to look at Caleb. "Can you give us a minute please."

Caleb smiles and leans over, kissing my head, and the hole my father left starts to fill up. "See you around, kiddo," he says as he walks off. The tears slide down my face as I watch him walk away. How is it that some people can say so few words and yet have the biggest impact on you?

"He has a gift," Cora says, pulling my attention back to her. "He has this way about him that just." She smiles, looking off

in his direction, “Makes you feel better.” Her lips tremble, and she turns back to me. “It’s one reason I married him.” I’m speechless, I’ve never had a man treat me that way. Well except for... Hunter. “I wish we could’ve spent more time together,” Cora says. And I try to understand why, it wouldn’t have mattered.

My stomach tightens as she pulls me into another hug and the blood drains from my face. I don’t know why I feel the way I do. Everything this place has, everything that’s here for me, is uncomfortable. I try to figure out why I keep having these feelings, it’s like fingernails scraping down my entire body, and I feel like I’m going to throw up. “You know, I never had a mom or dad,” Cora says pulling back to look me in the eyes, the same eyes her son has. “My mom didn’t want me, and my dad skipped town before I was born. My aunts raised me, and loved me the only way they knew how to love, which was not at all.”

“Um, I’m sorry, I don’t know why you are telling me all this,” I stumble out, the awkwardness of the conversation makes me want to run.

“Because I know what it’s like to not have a family. To be born into a world that seems to never want you, to feel like a burden. It’s hard.” She looks at me and I can see the care in her eyes. Cora’s the most amazing person I’ve ever met. She’s always smiled, always given hugs, and always makes you feel like you are important. How can someone that never experienced love, give it so openly, so plainly.

“How do you do it?” I don’t understand.

“It doesn’t matter where you go, shutting everything out means that you also shut out the love and happiness. If you don’t heal your pain it’s going to follow you and keep you from moving forward. It took me a while to be able to open up but I love what we’ve created here.” She smiles wide, her face turning into something more serious. “You’re going to have to dig up those bones you buried and get rid of them. Metaphorically speaking, you know.” She laughs. “The hardest thing for people like us to do is to build ourselves up, because we don’t have a blueprint.”

“I...” tears fall down my cheek, the words getting stuck in my throat, “I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Of course, you can.” She grabs my hand. “You’re not a mistake or a burden, Courtney.”

“How long did it take you to fall in love with Caleb?” I ask.

She drops my hand, smiling at me for a second. “Do you mean how long did it take for me to let him in?” I nod, sucking my bottom lip into my mouth as I hold back the tears. Cora looks at me, her eyes turning sad, because she knows what I’m feeling. “When I finally looked in the mirror and saw that he loved me for who I was, that I didn’t have to change, that I didn’t have to become the thing I disliked.” Cora sighs, grinning at me, her eyes full of joy and hope. “It’s okay to feel the way you do.”

Looking over her shoulder, I see Hunter working at the edge of the field. He isn’t coming, he won’t say goodbye. I don’t blame him. Turning from Cora, I see Ryan and Cassie walking over. Cassie wipes her eyes and I pout. “Aw, Maverick, I’ll be back soon.” The lie rolls off my tongue with confidence.

“I know,” she says exhaling a long-held breath, not believing me one bit.

“I’m sorry your little plan failed,” I say and her eyes get big. I roll mine in response and smirk back. “I know what you were trying to do.” Even though it didn’t technically work, it warms my heart knowing she was trying to get me to stay. I just wish I didn’t feel this guilt every time she looks at me. Looking down at her arms and legs, her self-harm marks are barely noticeable anymore, but I still feel it in my chest like they happened yesterday.

Turning to Ryan, I hug him, and choke up as I almost can’t get the words out. “Please take care of her.”

“Always.” he kisses my cheek as I pull away. I wipe my tears and open the car door, stopping to look at him one more time. “You know, you’re not as bad as I thought you were going to be.”

“Hey.” Ryan smiles, pulling Cassie into him. “Did you hear that, I got a compliment.”

I laugh as I slide into the seat, closing the door, and wave bye to everyone as the driver pulls off. I watch the fence pass by and stare at the horses grazing. Then my eyes find him, he’s by the barn, chopping away at some wood. My body trembles and I place my hand on the window, thinking he’ll look up and wave. One last gesture, before I ride off into the sunset. I stare as we go up the gravel drive and turn onto the road, but he never looks up.

And he doesn’t wave.

35

Hunter

The Sun's beating down today, but I don't care. Nothing really matters anymore. I'm pouty and I don't care what anyone thinks. The emotions course through my body like a wave, but I've become numb to the pain. I know I'm spiraling. I've been here before. It's all the same bullshit, all the same feelings, but I still don't know what to do about it. So here I am, chopping wood like a damn lumberjack, because what the fuck else can I do?

Nothing.

I raise the axe high, and curse, "Stupid woman." Thud, the axe head cuts through the piece of firewood, slamming against the stump.

Raising it up again. "Making me feel stupid emotions." Thud, it cuts through another, vibrating me to my core.

Again. "Making me miss her angelic face." Thud, my shoulders give out as the next piece of wood flies off, and I breathe heavy.

Why does this happen to me? What is it about me that makes people choose to leave? I stop the thoughts running through my brain, making me realize how much I wish someone would love me. I let out a growl, and swing the axe with all I have. But no matter how hard I hit the stump, the

pain never leaves. Everything's numb and fucking heavy. I don't know whether to keep chopping wood or fucking cry.

My heart pounds in my chest, throbbing in my head as the sweat pours off me. Pulling the axe up, I slam it down through the small log on the stump, and it breaks into a thousand little pieces. My mind takes me to a place where our memories were made. Where I felt whole and wanted for the first time in a long time. To the place where her laugh caused me to laugh, and her smile made me fall in love with her even more.

My stomach turns and I feel nauseous as I think about her. I'm living in my own personal version of Hell. Feeling the heaviness of the axe, I drop it to the ground and my body feels weak and tired, fear running up my spine as I stand here. Good, at least I can feel something. "Hunter," someone calls my name. Everything slows down, and I squint my eyes, the sun blazing against my body. Turning, I see Ryan staring at me, I can see his lips moving but I can't hear him. He looks concerned but I can't figure out why.

"I'm fine," I say, my body stuck on slo-mo. My head hurts and I turn back to the wood, all my energy gone in a blink of an eye.

Ryan walks over and grabs me. "You need to sit down." The stars start to flash in my eyes, and the world starts to slip out from under my feet. I stumble and hit the ground hard. My alert system goes off and I know I'm in danger, but it came on so fast I didn't have time to prepare myself for the fall.

Ryan slaps my cheeks and yells, "I swear to fucking God if you're playing around again, I'm going to call Mom."

"The fuck, man." I push him back and he stumbles. "Fucking stop." I rub my cheek, the sting of his hand lingering.

"You want me to stop? The fuck is wrong with you?" Ryan challenges me. I get up, looking at the wood strown across the ground, broken into pieces. Thanking God, the axe was away from me. "Are you even listening to me?" Ryan shoves me. "What the fuck is wrong?"

“I’m fine.” I turn around, looking at him.

“No, you’re not. Stop saying that, Hunter. You’re not fine, you just passed out. This isn’t my first rodeo, bro.” He squares up to me.

“Fine, I’m not *fine!*” I shout dramatically. “There, you fucking happy? Did that make you feel better?”

Silence slices through the air, cutting everything in two. I listen to the words I just said echo inside me, realizing I haven’t been okay in a long time, that I’ve been Band-Aiding everything. Ryan looks down and then back up. “Go home, Hunter.” His voice is tired, yet relieved that I’ve finally let out what I’ve been holding on to. But why do I still feel this weight? Why do I still feel the heaviness in my bones? He breaks me from my trance, “Go get some food and rest. You’re dehydrated and need...”

“I know, I know.” I nod, holding up my hand, surrendering. He doesn’t have to give me a play by play of what to do after you get heat exhaustion. Turning on my heels, I walk home, defeated.

What the fuck am I doing?



I’m watching Game of Thrones, sitting on my couch, when a bang comes from the front door and startles me. But before I can get my feet on the ground, the door opens and in spins Mac carrying food. “Hey,” he shouts, not looking where he’s going.

“Hey,” I shout back, my body still feeling heavy. Ryan follows him in with chips and drinks, and I shake my head. “What’s going on?” I ask as Mac places a giant bag of cheeseburgers on my coffee table.

“For you my dear,” Mac says, presenting me with a burger as he bats his eyes at me and bows.

I snatch it out of his hand. “Don’t do that.” Leaning back on the couch, my stomach growls deep into my back. I haven’t eaten anything since yesterday. Ryan starts messing with the fireplace and I huff, “What are you doing?”

“Building a fire, duh,” he jabs, arranging the logs as he lights it.

Staring at him like he’s lost his damn mind, confusion sets in. “You know it’s hot as shit out there still, right?”

Ryan pivots on his toes, squinting back at me slowly. “Yes, but do you know it’s hot as shit?”

“Don’t be a jackass.” I roll my eyes. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“This is Church, my guy,” Mac says, taking a bite of his burger as he sits down on the other side of the couch. Ah, Church, our own version of ritualistic self-healing with an intervention baseline. Our moment to come clean, judgement free, and let out our troubles.

Fuck.

“Well, why are we doing it inside?” I ask.

Ryan stands up, dusting his hands off and hands me a water, shrugging me off. “Because you can’t take care of yourself right now.”

“What does that mean?” I furrow my brows.

Ryan pulls a chair from the kitchen table and sits across from me. “Let’s wait until everyone is here.” And that was their cue, as Ryan’s butt hit the seat the door opened and in came Jace and Noah, beer and grocery bags in both hands.

“Oh, look, dumb and dumber finally arrived.” Mac laughs, shoving his burger in his mouth.

Noah hands out beers and skips my hand as I hold it out, handing my beer to Mac. I reach out again and Jace hands me a small white cardboard carton and I look at it then over to him. “Coconut water? What the hell is this?”

“It’s water, from a coconut.” Jace stares back, intentionally talking slow. “You drink it for hydration.”

My face falls as they all smile and laugh, and I twist the top off, smelling it quick before I take a giant swig. Pulling it away, my face wrinkles from the taste. “Ugh, that’s disgusting, it tastes like I just licked a tree.”

“Oh yeah, it doesn’t taste like coconuts. I don’t know why it doesn’t but whatever.” Jace chuckles, and I put the carton down. He stands up and pulls a small bundle of grass sticks and we all stare at him like he’s insane.

“Did you get into AJ’s stuff again.” Noah smiles. “You know she doesn’t like you playing with her stuff.”

Jace lights the bundle, and snaps back, “I asked permission.” Blowing out the flame, he starts walking around and smoking up the house.

“I’ve asked this way too many times already, but what are you doing?” I stop, pointing at him with all my fingers.

“Got to cleanse the area, get rid of any bad energies,” he answers, waving the bundle around, floating through my house like goddamn Cinderella.

“What bad energy? What the hell is bad energy?” I ask, holding up my hands and looking at everyone else in the room as they shake their heads. I look up to see Jace bringing the smoke stick to my face, wafting it at me as I choke. Waving the smoke away, I fight to breathe. “Can you stop that. I don’t have no ghosts in here.”

“It’s not for ghosts, it’s for bad energy.” Jace reappears in the kitchen.

“Still don’t know what the fuck that means, man,” I shout over my shoulder.

“I can’t stop now until the whole house is cleansed,” he yells, making his way to my room.

“Just, fuck, whatever,” I mumble, defeated.

A few moments pass and Jace comes walking back in, sighing to himself as he sits down with us. “Okay, I think

we're good."

"Wonderful," I mutter.

"Eat your food, and shut up Princess." Jace taps my shoulder and my mood goes even more south.

"Wow, AJ's really turning you into a woo-woo hippie." Noah laughs.

Jace relaxes on the couch next to Mac. "I'm not into a lot of the other stuff she does, but some of it actually works." He smiles. "It helps with my anxiety."

"That's cool, man." Mac taps him with his elbow with encouragement in his voice.

"Cassie makes me do these breathing exercises that she learned from her therapist, and they fucking work, man. Have you tried those?" Ryan interjects.

"Oh, cool, you'll have to show me so I can try them too." Jace nods, eagerly.

Before I can even respond, Ryan starts giving step by step instructions on how to do *'breathwork'*. I lean over, pushing the heel of my hands into my eye sockets, not sure what dimension I fell into. They're all acting so weird. The front door opens as I try to focus, and Tyler walks in with Beau. And without missing a beat, Mac jumps up, holding out his arms, requesting Beau and making baby noises.

"What's happening?" I blurt out, everyone looking at me, wide-eyed. Looking over to Noah, he's lying on the ground and staring at the ceiling, probably the only one that is acting somewhat sane.

"It's love, man," Noah groans out like he's some middle-aged hippie guy from the seventies.

I shake my head. "Breathwork? Grass sticks?"

"It's not grass, man. Its herbs, like Sage and Palo Santo." He stops, leaning towards Mac. "You'd like it."

"Okay fine, herb smoking." I correct myself.

“It’s called smudging.” He raises his brows and tilts his head towards me.

“I swear to God, Jace, I’ll fucking kill you.” I tighten my fist as I grit my teeth.

Jace widens his eyes, and lets out a low breath. “Someone needs a time out.”

“Noah’s right,” Tyler interrupts, bringing the tension down. “We aren’t kids anymore. We all got lives starting up. Mac and Joss are looking for property, Jace is building a family, and Ryan just got married. Shit, I’ve got a baby.”

I shake my head. “I guess I just never saw everyone changing.”

“It’s good to change.” Ryan looks around at everyone. “It feels good. Hell, I can talk to Jace now and not get annoyed.”

“Thank you?” Jace tilts his head.

“The point is, life keeps moving forward and you can’t be a stick in the mud.” Noah sits up, surprisingly fast, making everyone take notice.

“Yeah, and we still have problems, but they’re just different now. Like Mads and I had to take Beau to the Emergency Room a few days ago,” He confesses, and a shock runs through my body. I look at Beau who’s gumming a French fry, and Tyler smiles, continuing, “I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

“What happened?” Mac asks, spinning the toddler around as he looks him over.

“He had a really high fever, and before I knew it, we were at the Emergency Room. You know how hard it is to stay calm when all you want to do is freak out and scream.” I watch as Tyler swallows hard, the trauma still fresh. “It ended up being a stomach bug and everyone’s fine,” Tyler reaches for Beau, needing the warmth of his son in his arms. “But at the time, it was just terrifying.”

We all stare at Tyler, no one knowing what to say. We aren’t fathers and no one knows his pain. “I’m sorry, man,” I say, the

thought of us all changing floods my mind and I stop.

Where's my life going?

36

Hunter

Tyler clears his throat and looks at me. “What happened today?”

I take a deep breath, leaning over to place my head in my hands, trying to focus on something other than the pain in my chest, but nothing’s helping. I don’t know what to fucking think anymore. There are no more tricks up my sleeve, no more slick moves to get me out of these conversations. “I don’t know.” I let out the breath I’m holding, needing its calmness to surround me. “Life just sucks.”

“Hunter,” Ryan stares at me, his voice low and soft, “just tell us the truth.”

“Alright, alright.” I bring my hands up, stopping them before they all start. Fuck. Leaning back, I tell them the story of how it all started and how our lives weaved together.

“I fucking knew it.” Mac smiles wide as I finish.

I let out a frustrated growl. “Everything’s just got so messed up. And now I don’t know what the fuck to do. I’m either pissed off, or fucking sad.”

“Do you love her?” Tyler asks, addressing the elephant in the room.

I blink slowly, staring at the fire, focusing in as his question echoes inside. I don't want to answer, because that'd mean I'll have to admit my pain, the end of it all, the rejection. My head falls back against the couch cushion, and I look up at the ceiling, a storm of emotions running through my veins. Opening my mouth, the only words that don't stick to my throat come flying out, "I don't want to." Silence smothers me and I know what that means, they're speechless.

"Rejection is just another form of protection," Noah says, looking off to the kitchen.

Furrowing my brows, I lean up. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Noah shrugs and points over to Jace, who rolls his eyes. "You only half-listen to me, don't you?" He doesn't wait for him to answer, turning his focus back to me. "You don't want to say you love her because then the rejection you'll feel will be real." He looks around the room, and everyone nods in agreement, these fucking traitors. "You admitting you're in love doesn't mean anything other than you're human, with feelings and emotions, just like us."

"That's gross." I close my eyes, waving away the sentiment.

"I know." He chuckles, smiling. The way he's talking makes me feel like I'm not alone, but it also hurts. "Listen man, I know what it feels like to not tell someone that you love them, to hold it all in for fear they aren't going to choose you." He stops, pointing to his chest, getting serious.

"But AJ ended up staying. She never even left. Courtney's gone, she's on a plane right now, flying half-way across the country. What the hell am I going to do? She'd rather go home and sit in her own pain instead of choosing me. How am I supposed to let that shit go, when I know she won't come back?" The lid starts to pry open and I quickly close it back, my feelings wanting air, wanting to be set free.

"You don't," Mac says and I look over at him with tired eyes. "You're missing the point, Hunter. The rejection protects her."

“Yeah, that’s good.” Jace opens his eyes to him.

“We all know the reason why you can’t keep a relationship. Your bar is too high.” Mac exhales. “Your pain is valid, man. And we all know how it feels. But you also walk around wanting people to jump through hoops for you. And if they don’t succeed then you don’t waste your time.” He nods, “It worked for a while, but then Courtney showed up.”

I take another deep breath, exhaling out of my nose hard. I understand what he’s saying, I just don’t like that my feelings are so transparent. Looking over to Ryan, I start in on them. “I remember what Kayla did to you, the mental battle you faced every single day.” Then I shift my focus to Noah. “And, I saw how you felt when Alexis left.” His eyes shift to me, and the easy-going guy sitting on the floor is replaced with a man who still loves the woman that walked out on him. “I’ve never wanted that for myself, because I don’t think I can deal with it. It scared me when I was close to it with Rebecca, and even though I was young and stupid, the wound is still fresh.” Taking a moment to collect my thoughts, I look around the room at the men I call family. “I’m angry. I’m angry I’ve failed, and I don’t know how to deal with that.”

“I know what it feels like to hold onto a wound and project it,” Ryan says. “And technically, I thought I lost too. And if you learned anything from me, don’t do what I did. I fucked up, because I let my own pain drown me. The truth, Hunter, is we don’t know if Courtney will come back, we have no idea if she’ll ever love you. But I love you.” He smiles and I roll my eyes.

“Oh yeah, me too!” Jace says slapping my knee.

“Stop.” I hold my hands up, trying to get them to stop being weird.

“Hey! We love Hunter too,” a group of women behind me yell and suffocate me with hugs.

Breaking free, I gasp for air and Jace holds out some crystals for me. AJ leans me back and starts tapping my face, telling me about the energies and tensions I’ve been holding on to, and surprisingly I start to relax. Josslyn heads to the

kitchen and lays out all the baked goodies she's made for me, and Cassie mother-hens over me, shoving water and food down my throat. Sitting here, I realize as the shuffle of chaos shifts off me, that I've never stopped to look at the family I was born into and how its grown and changed.

"You know, she's never had this," Cassie says, snapping me from my thoughts as I look over to her, sitting next to me. "I don't know if that makes you feel any better." She looks back to the chaos as everyone laughs and jokes. "Family is something she never had, and I think it scares her. She's always had to fight, just her against the world. I know she's gone, and I wish to God she would've stayed, but I know her coming here changed her. Whether she wants to admit it or not."

"So, what do you think I should do?" I ask, maybe she has the answer.

"Nothing." She shrugs and smiles. "Just be the version of you that makes you happy, not the one that everyone else wants you to be." She smiles again, leaning over and squeezing my arm as she rests her head on my shoulder.

Cassie lets go and walks off to the kitchen, and the smell of fresh baked cookies fills my senses. A warmth from inside starts to grow, and I look around at my family surrounding me when I needed them.

Everything's going to be alright.

37

Courtney

My leg bounces at the speed of light as the guy in the seat next to me gives me the side eye. I'd normally stare back at him, and make him feel uncomfortable, but I can't focus right now. My mind is wondering off, racing to thoughts of Oaks, to thoughts of Hunter, wondering if I've made a mistake. No, that's not smart. I have to stop thinking about them. I have to sever my emotions and focus on what's right for me. My life isn't some fictional story, it's not a happily-ever-after fairytale. I have real problems, and real issues, things that've made me start to believe that I need help. Uhhh. I can't keep living the way I've been living. This fucking place has really messed me up.

Pulling out my phone, I turn on some music and lean my head over against the window of the plane. It's dark outside and rainy, my ideal version of travel, blah. Hopefully I'll fall asleep and stop this madness in my head, and when I open my eyes, I'll be in Texas, far enough away to avoid the ache.

It is what it is. Nothing more, nothing less.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes, letting the soft meditative music lull me to sleep as we take off. Suddenly, something shakes me, waking me from my dreams. I don't know how long it's been but we're still in the air, and the darkness outside tells me we aren't landing yet. I look over to

the aisle and the flight attendant motions for me to take out my earbuds. The fasten seatbelt light flashes and the cabin lights come to a dim glow as the captain's staticky voice comes over the intercom, "I'm sorry folks but it seems like we're going to have to turn around and head back. We're experiencing some mechanical issues up here in the flight deck that arose during takeoff, and we've now determined that it'll be safer for us to return to our departure point, instead of proceeding onto our final destination. Once we land, we'll taxi up to the gate and determine if we'll be able to proceed with the flight. Everything should be fine, and we'll be able to proceed to our original destination without any further delay. Thank you."

Well, that's just great. I let out an annoyed sigh as we turn back towards the place that's been giving me so much grief. Why can't I get away from this place?

Thirty minutes go by, and I stare out the window as we get closer and closer to landing. Once the plane touches down everyone starts frantically talking as the flight attendants walk from one end to the other as we taxi to the terminal. Pulling up to the gate, the fasten seatbelt light goes off and everyone starts jumping up from their seats, standing in the aisle and causing all kinds of chaos. The pilot comes back over the intercom and mumbles something and the crowd around my row starts to mumble, then starts grabbing their luggage. Great, we have to get off.

Making my way off the plane, I find a seat in an empty row and sit back. I'm not worried about what's going to happen next, I've been here before, we'll probably get a new plane, and have to walk to a new gate. These things seem to always happen. I'll get home eventually. Once I relax for a minute, I take out my phone and see it blowing up with messages from Jay telling me he's excited to see me. I tap my thumb on the edge of my phone, and for the first time ever, I'm not excited to see a text from him. I love Jay, he's one of my closest friends but, something's wrong. I just don't feel the excitement anymore.

Swiping away the notifications, I see the time and it's gotten late. I'll probably be here for a while and decide to call Cassie

to let her know what's happened. But my call goes to voicemail. That's weird, but not uncommon, she's probably spending time with Ryan and they aren't expecting anything from me for quite a while anyway. Putting my phone back in my purse I stare out the large windows at the plane, looking past it as the rain comes down steadily. "Flight 3204 to Houston, has been delayed. Our new departure time will be eleven-forty p.m." The gate agent looks around at everyone and then turns, heading towards the plane as we all grumble. Fucking fantastic, two hours of boredom coming right up.

My heart beats slow and steady as I stare out the window, the thunderstorm gently flashing in the distance, completely silent from inside the airport. I sit watching the storm as my feelings churn, my stomach jumping up into my throat as a flash of lightning brightens everything around me, and a feeling of dread settles in my chest.

Hunter flashes to the forefront of my mind, it isn't his face that strikes me, it's the way I feel when he's around, safe, and secure. I feel myself panicking and I can't find an answer as to why, but I know that if he was here, I'd feel better. How did this all happen? How did my life start to revolve around one man? I've never needed one in the past. What makes Hunter so goddamn special?

Turning away from the window, I pull out my phone again to call Cassie, my nerves getting the best of me and she normally knows how to make me feel better. But again, no answer, her voicemail catching me off guard, that's weird. That's never happened before. She usually calls or texts back saying she's busy now, or that she'll call me back when she gets a chance. But she always says something.

I call again, no answer.

I'm getting angry, and selfish. I call Ryan, no answer. Okay, now I'm really panicking. My body shivers and my fingers start to sweat as I fall back into the seat.

I call him again, voicemail. Fuck. What's wrong with them? Why haven't they texted or called back.

I call again, and again, switching between Cassie and Ryan, but neither answer, and neither call back. My mind races to dark thoughts. What if something's happened? What if they've been hurt? I'm not thinking straight, and I know it, the fear inside taking hold of my consciousness.

I heave as sweat pours down my brow, and I try to call Ryan and Cassie again, but still no answer. It's ten o'clock at night. I mean they could be sleeping but they definitely would've been woken up by my thousand missed calls. "Oh, you fucking dummy," I grunt, the person next to me leaning away and making eye contact as I smile. "No, not you, me, I'm the dummy."

The guy turns back away, wide-eyed, as he looks down at his book, probably thinking I'm a basket case. I should've called Josslyn. She's got to be with them or at least know where they are. "Hello?" Her voice sings a hallelujah in my ear.

"Josslyn!" I scream out, and she grunts.

"Yes?" She asks, softly.

"Is everything okay?" I breathe into the phone.

"Oh yeah, everything's fine now." She casually hints and my nerves flutter.

"Now? What about before?" I say hastily, needing her to tell me everyone is okay. My stomach fills with the ever so constant dread, the pain hurting deep as the seconds turn to hours. "Is Cassie, okay?"

"What? No, she's fine." She exhales.

"Ryan and Cassie aren't answering their phones," I yell.

"Oh." She pauses and I close my eyes, my irritation snaking its way up my spine. "Well, they might still be busy, because of what happened to Hunter today."

"What," I stutter, the dread, the guilt, everything floods my soul. It feels like my body has collapsed in on itself and I'm hanging on for dear life. "What happened to hunter?" I rasp out, my throat closing up. There's silence on the other end of

the phone as my mind listens for any little sound. “Josslyn, what happened to Hunter?” I ask louder, causing people to look up from their chairs. I don’t care if they think I’m crazy, I need to know if he’s okay.

“Well, he just had a little accident today. I mean, it was kinda scary at first, but everything’s fine now. No need to worry, you can go back to living your life in Texas.” Her snarky attitude hits me the wrong way and my eyes start to blur from the tears coming up.

“What is that supposed to mean?” My anger swirls inside. How could she joke about all these things?

“You know what it means Courtney, don’t play dumb. Look, I know you have your own shit but either you care about Hunter or you don’t. That’s it. So, stop jumping in and saying it’s too hot or too cold and then jumping back out.” She huffs and the tears roll down my cheeks.

“What happened to him?” I beg, needing to know.

“Nothing, but if you’re so worried about him, then just come back and see for yourself.” She challenges me, hanging up.

I start to panic, itching to call him, to make sure he’s okay. But Josslyn’s right. Either I’m in or I’m out. And I don’t know what’s going to happen or what alternate universe I just found myself in, but my brain is asleep, and my heart is wide open.

There’re so many questions and the only answer I have is, I’m in love with Hunter Freeman.

38

Courtney

“Here, stop here,” I reach up, tapping the Uber driver as he slams on the brakes hard. He lets out a string of curses as I tip him the last few dollars in my purse and a handful of change. Jumping out of the car, I run up the drive to Hunters door, big fat tears rolling down my face as it gently rains. I sob uncontrollably as I bang on the door, my legs nearly giving out as I hold myself up. “Please,” I hiccup as the door swings open.

“What the fuck?” Hunter stops, standing shirtless in the doorway, eyes wide with surprise. He looks me up and down, wet, crying, and out of breath, his expression unreadable as he blinks slowly.

“You’re, okay?” I cry out, still trying to catch my breath, my nerves shook.

His brows slant down, looking out the door as the Uber pulls away into the darkness. “Yes? Are you okay? What are you doing here?”

“I...” the words hang as I try to figure out what’s happening. I don’t know what the hell to say. Reaching for answers, I blink and look behind him to see it. My answer. My sign.

I panic, walking towards the exit, the airport announcements rattling off behind me as I turn into the bathroom, needing a moment to catch myself. Busting into the first stall, I sit on the toilet, leaning my head into my hands as my mind fights itself. Running my hands through my hair, I whisper out, talking to the Universe, needing help, "I'm scared. I don't know what to do." Sitting up, I stare at the walls surrounding me, "I don't know if this is right. I don't know what's going to happen. But I do know I need a sign, something that'll tell me that everything is going to be okay. You know what to do, if I'm making the right decision, then show me a butterfly, like when I was little."

I blink my eyes as a picture of butterflies hangs behind him on the wall, not just one, but multiple ones, in every color imaginable. "Where did you get that?" I ask, pointing to the picture behind him, the world standing still.

Hunter looks behind him. "Uh, I've had that for like forever. It's something we got from a flea market when I was little, my mom bought it because I kept saying how cool it was." He turns back to me, squinting as he studies my face. "Courtney, what are you doing here?"

"I don't know. I..." I run my fingers through my hair, and inhale deep, letting it out as I stare into his eyes. This is it, my heart bursts as the words flow out of me like my last breath, "I love you."

Hunter's eyes widen, and he steps back like I cursed him. "What?"

"Please listen, I don't know what to do, and I have no idea how any of this works. But I love you. And that scares me to the point I want to push you away because love has always come at a price. But I don't care anymore. I don't care about how much this is going to cost me, because all I want is you."

My eyes fill again with years of emotion as I stare at him, waiting for him to let me in.

Hunter steps up to me, his eyes full of intensity. “Are you serious?”

My defenses start to come up, the dreaded rejection’s coming around the bend, but this time it’s okay. Quietly, I answer, holding back, waiting for the door to slam in my face, “Yes.”

“You love me?” He repeats the words, tilting his head, confused.

“Yes, I love you, Hunter Freeman,” I laugh out the awkwardness.

Hunter reaches out, grabbing my shirt as he pulls me inside, kissing me hard as my heart melts for him. This is what I’ve always wanted, what I’ve always needed, his warm lips engulfing my soul. Pulling away, he holds me in his arms, “I love you too.”

My face wrinkles as the words scratch the inside of my ears. The pain of countless years begging for those words makes me feel uneasy. “Yeah?” my voice shakes as I sit in his warmth.

“Yeah,” he mimics me.

Hunter pulls me into the house, closing the door behind him. Backing me down the hallway to his room, his lips never leave mine. His warm hands run over my cold skin, and I lean into them. My head falls back as his lips trace little paths down my neck. Pulling back, he pulls off my wet clothes, discarding them on the floor and I lie back on the bed. I let him see me, the scared me, the me that wants to be his everything, and in return I feel the true love he has been waiting to give.

“There you are,” he whispers in my ear as he slowly slides into me. Using one hand to hold himself steady, he wipes my tears with the other. His blue eyes stare into mine, and I feel it again, safe, and secure. I cry as we make love, grunting and holding onto him, never wanting to leave. This feels right, it feels like breathing in the summer sun for the first time.

My orgasm's coming, and I dig my nails into his back, pulling him into me, squeezing hard as his orgasm floods too. We kiss as we ride down the mountain together, the intimacy between us still making us twitch. Curling up next to him, I feel the heat radiating from his skin and I never want to move. I never want to leave this place. "What do we do now?" I ask, the anticipation of what's next for us hangs onto me like tar.

"We sleep." Hunter brushes the hair out of my face, nonchalantly kissing my forehead as we stare into the darkness.

I push against him, looking into his eyes. "Hunter... I... what the hell am I supposed to do now?" My panic sets in, the rose-colored glasses melting away as the reality of what's happening now clears. Sliding off the bed, I grab one of his shirts from the floor and pace as my mind spins. My thoughts are chaotic, and I don't know how to stop them. "I don't know what to do, or how to do any of this."

Hunter slides to the edge of the bed, and I see panic in his eyes. He tilts his head, his shoulders dropping. "Courtney?"

"No, I still love you," I shudder, I know I do, I can feel it in my bones. The love I have for Hunter is unstoppable and full of passion. I watch his face relax, knowing that he's still scared of his own uncertainty. Walking to him, I force myself to relax, running my fingers through his hair as I watch his eyes close, and he lays his head against my chest.

"What are you scared of?" He mumbles into my shirt.

I let out a deep frustrated sigh, taking a seat next to him, "I've never depended on someone like this before. I've never let my heart decide on things, I've always stopped when my brain told me to. I've never," I stop, the words mixing with every crazed thought in my head.

"Not been in chaos?" His brows wrinkle up as he gives me a soft smile.

"Yeah." I laugh, licking my lips. I turn to him, wanting to actually talk for once, "I want to be here, with you. You and your stupid lovey-dovey family." I take a deep breath as

Hunter still waits for the hammer to drop. “They all make me feel things that I never thought were possible, especially.” I stop, trembling at the thought of a true family. “Especially your mom.”

“I know.” Hunter pulls my legs over his lap, kissing my hands. “You deserve the world,” he hums out, his voice sturdy, like it’s a matter of fact. He wipes my cheeks, letting the silence wrap us in its warmth. “You have always been in survival mode, and I don’t fault you for it. But right now, with me, you don’t have to live like that. You can just be you.”

“This is going to sound so stupid, but can you help me? To just, be?” I ask, my vulnerability coming to life.

“I got you, Princess,” he kisses my hand again, looking up and winking as he smirks.

“I’m going to need my own place,” I blurt out. “I feel like moving into your house will be too much for me.”

“Sure.” he nods, smiling.

“That’s it? You’re okay with me not living with you?” I raise my brows.

He nods. “Sure, whatever you want, baby.” And just like that, my heart feels a little lighter. I think I can do this, to have this life and not fuck it up. “But...” He catches me off guard. “I’m going to need you to do one thing for me.”

I freeze, smirking. “And, what would that be?”

“You’re going to have to talk to Cassie and tell her the truth.” He lowers his head and I feel myself curling into a ball, my emotions trying to drag me back down. Hunter holds me close, whispering as I hold onto him tight, “Listen.” he tilts my chin up to look him in the eyes. “You can do this, Court.”

“But what if she...” I stumble over the words as they flush out.

“What if she loves you anyway.” He raises his brows, cutting me off. “You know Cassie better than anyone and talking to her about what you’ve been holding onto is only going to make you feel better. It will give you the closure that

your pain needs, to let go of the burden. And if worse comes to worst, you always got me, and I'll always be here for you.”

I kiss his lips and accept my fate. He's right, I've been living in the fear of rejection for so long that I need to give myself a little forgiveness. I need to forgive myself for my past mistakes and just live. Because at this moment, I'm going to choose to live my life the way I want, no longer letting my past hold me down. I pray that she'll forgive me, but if she doesn't, I just want her to know that I did the best I could with what I had, and that I know better now.

I am who the Universe has guided me to be and hopefully I can be so much more.

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Courtney

“Hunter!” I call out as I rummage through a box, getting nothing in response. “Hunter!” I shout louder.

“What!” he yells back, walking into the kitchen, beads of sweat scattered across his forehead.

“Why are you out of breath?” I ask, confused, stepping out of the way as all the other guy’s whirl by, panting as they bring boxes into my new apartment.

“Because your bed is like a thousand pounds.” He waves his hand towards the bedroom, trying to catch his breath. I let out a laugh as he wipes the sweat off on his t-shirt and rests his hands on his hips.

Walking up to him, I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him as he takes big breaths in between. “Can you move my couch?” I whisper, and he throws his head back, pouting like a schoolboy, “I don’t like it by the window, it messes with the aesthetic.”

“Oh, God forbid, can’t let anything mess with the aesthetic.” He sighs, mocking me as he stomps to the living room to move my couch.

Cassie peeks around the corner of the kitchen, walking in slowly and my stomach tightens. I haven’t seen her since I talked to her about what happened that fateful night. I went by

after Hunter and I made plans for me to move to Oaks, and explained my side of the story, and she took it the way I expected. She was upset and started crying, and told me that she loved me, that she was grateful that I told her, but she needed space to think over everything. The guilt of who Brandie was to her, the pedestal she placed her on, crumbling down.

I panicked and wanted to run away, but I didn't. I knew she wasn't going to take it well, no one would, no matter how much healing you've been through, because pain is pain. So, I cried in Hunter's arms, and gave her space, also accepting the space myself, breathing in Brandie's death and finally grieving as well.

And I took Cora's advice and started therapy. Ryan told Hunter that Cassie started to go back too. And even though she wasn't talking to me, I knew she still loved me, and I'm starting to love myself too. Accepting that I'm okay, and that I'll be okay, no matter what happens.

Cassie smiles, waving her hand and taking a breath as she walks into the kitchen. "Hey, can we talk?" Her cheeks turn red and I can feel her nervousness.

"Yeah, sure," I say, directing us to my new bedroom and closing the door behind us. We sit down on the bare mattress, boxes surrounding us as the room quiets.

"I forgive you," she blurts out. "I don't know if I ever said that before, but I do. And I don't want you to think that I don't, I just." She stops. "Let me start over." She laughs off her nerves, taking a minute to gather herself, before starting again. "I can see why you did what you did, and thank you for giving me space, I just needed time to process."

"I did kind of word vomit on you." I nod. I never knew how much I wanted to talk about it until I couldn't stop. It had to be overwhelming.

"It's okay." She nods. "I think, if I was holding on to it like that, I would have too. But I keep wondering, is that why you never wanted to come live here? And why you always left so fast when you visited?"

“Yeah, that, and Hunter. But that’s...” I shake my head, not wanting to get into all that. “It broke my heart to look at you, knowing what I did. And I feared that if I told you, it would ruin everything, and I didn’t want to lose you.” The tears start to come and I let them fall. “You’re my best friend, my sister, my only family. And I felt like if I took the burden, you wouldn’t have to. I was scared that if I lost you, I would have lost my whole world, even lost myself.”

Cassie wipes her eyes, pulling me into a hug. “I love you,” she whispers. I squeeze my eyes shut as I listen to her talk softly into my soul. “You’re my family, and I will always love you. I forgive you.” The tidal wave comes and a spring of tears flood, the relief that the worst mistake I’ve ever made has been forgiven. And I didn’t lose her. “I will never leave you. Remember?” Cassie pulls back, holding out her pinky and the memory of us, the young, naïve, twelve-year-old girls who bonded over silly things comes back. Clasp pinky’s together, she smiles. “Together.”

“Forever.” I repeat our mantra. Our life flashing through my memory, every time she has been there for me, every time I worried about her, the journey we made to get here, and how life threw us a curve ball but always reminded us who we are.

We’re family.

Cassie reaches behind her and hands me a small gift box, waiting for me to open it. Inside is a picture of the three of us, it was Cassie’s thirteenth birthday party and we were having a sleepover at her house. It’s me, Cassie in the middle, and Brandie on the other side, our hair is braided in a mess and our pajamas are mismatched. It feels like it was just yesterday and I smile, looking at little me, living in the moment. This was where I found my light, where I found myself. Placing the picture on the nightstand, we both look at it as Cassie reaches out, grabbing my hand. “She loved you,” I whisper, turning to her, “Brandie was just lost.”

Cassie smiles, “I know.”

Looking down, there’s something else in the box, a small black and white square picture. “What’s this for?” I turn to her,

confused.

“Courtney, that’s my ultrasound, I’m pregnant.” She smiles wide.

“What?” I scream, knocking the box off my lap, jumping up. “This, you, now, what?” I mumble, every question trying to come out at once, the shock of the moment freezing my tongue.

There’s a knock at the door and Ryan pops his head in. “Hey.” His smile is genuine. “You all good?” I stare at him, wide-eyed as Cassie turns and nods. “Okay, I didn’t mean to interrupt, but we got to head out for the party.”

“Right.” She nods, standing up and giving me a hug, “I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Yeah, and you can tell me everything.” I smile as she walks out, Ryan kissing her head as he wraps his arm around her shoulder, holding her close. I sit back on the bed as I hear everyone getting their things together and leaving, and I stare at my bare walls, placing the ultrasound picture next to the picture of the three of us.

“Hey.” Hunter walks in, taking a deep breath, sitting down next to me. “So?”

I smile. “Everything’s great.” He smiles back and I look around the room, coming back to him, the love we have and our future growing between us. “Thank you.”

“For what?” He gently laughs.

“For everything. I don’t think I would’ve been able to do any of this without you.” More tears come up as my emotions fly all over the place.

“Of course, you would’ve.” He shrugs, smiling. “It just would’ve taken you a lot longer.”

Laughing, I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Give yourself some credit, baby.” He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. “You’re an amazing person, and I’m so lucky to get to love someone like you.”

Wrinkling up my nose, I give him a disgusted look, because all this fluffy, romantic shit is still gross. “When did you turn into Noah?”

He laughs out loud, and fake attacks me, grabbing me and falling back on the bed, kissing me all over and causing an uproar of giggles as I let him love me. “I love you, Hunter.”

“I love you too, Princess.” He smiles, nudging me with his nose as he squeezes me tight.



“I’m so happy you stayed, it’s so nice to see all the boys finally finding someone.” Madison says as I sit down at the table at the restaurant.

“Well, not everyone,” Josslyn says, leaning over, nodding towards Noah who’s drinking a beer, sitting back away from all the conversation.

“He doesn’t look the same,” I comment as he seems to sink deeper and deeper into his shell.

Josslyn sighs. “Bless his heart, he’s always falling in love with the wrong woman.”

“Well, that depends on who we’re talking about.” Madison grins, raising her brows.

“Well, who are we talking about?” I lean in, the nosiness inside me fluttering at the small-town gossip. The feeling of belonging to something bigger than me radiates through my bones. I wait for them to answer, but Hunter interrupts, handing me a merlot from the bar, winking as he sits across from me.

“No rush, I’ll tell you later,” Madison says, patting my arm.

“Okay.” I shrug. Looking up, I meet Hunter’s eyes and the love between us is almost palpable. Sighing, I worry about him. “Why does Noah look so sad?”

Hunter's eyes look over to his friend, sitting at the end of the table, segregating himself more by the minute. Leaning over, he whispers, "This is the first time Noah hasn't had someone, if you know what I mean, and he doesn't know how to feel about it."

"I thought you told me that he doesn't want a relationship?" I ask, confused.

"He doesn't, but Noah has a hard time being alone. He's always had a girl, and now he doesn't. He just doesn't know how to deal with it, it's complicated," he says, explaining away the awkwardness.

I look over to Noah again, watching him struggle, remembering the all too familiar feelings of being alone, and not belonging to something. The family around him, trying to cheer him up and him still withdrawing from it all. Suddenly, he perks up, wiping his eyes and sitting up straight in his chair. I follow his eyes across the sea of tables and see a beautiful blonde woman walking in with her family. Looking to Hunter quick, I motion in her direction trying to figure out what makes this girl special.

Hunter takes in a deep breath, his eyes widening as he turns back to me, "Oh my God, it's Alexis."

The End.

Epilogue

Courtney

Eleven years later

Rocking back and forth, I sit in the wooden rocker as my precious baby boy nurses. I watch his face as he slowly flutters his eyes, fighting sleep as hard as he can. “You need to sleep,” I whisper softly to him, smiling as he wiggles his little toes in the air. Letting my head fall back, I hum a soft tune to help him drift asleep.

The golden hour is shining through the window, giving me the inspiration that I’ve been waiting for. Ever since Henry was born, I haven’t had any interest in photography. To be honest, I haven’t been interested in a lot of things. But there’s something about the sun, and how it fades into the night that moves me in a way that my heart kicks into gear. So, as slowly as I can, I reach for my phone on the dresser, opening up the camera as I take a picture, one turning to many.

Little snores come and it brings me back to the moment, and I slowly stand up, placing him down softly in his crib. “Good night, my love,” I whisper, kissing my fingers then running them through his soft little hair.

Turning to walk downstairs, Hunter’s cooking hits my nose and my stomach growls. Food hasn’t been my friend either,

this postpartum depression is an ugly beast and it came out of nowhere. The guilt I feel inside smothers me. Some days I'm not even able to get out of bed, and he does everything, without complaining.

"Daddy, look." My little angel giggles. "Do you think Momma's gonna like it." My heart melts as I walk in the kitchen, Hunter cooking and caring for our first born, Tate.

"Oh yeah." He looks over her to see me coming in. "I think she's going to love it, and you spelled your name right. Good job."

Tears start to fall down my cheek as I watch from the distance, my husband being a father to our little girl, and setting the example. I cry, knowing that she never has to go through what I went through, her future shining bright.

Hunter chuckles as he kisses her head, continuing to cook. Wiping my eyes, I walk into the kitchen. "What smells so good?" Tate turns around, her smile as wide as her face and it's completely covered in chocolate. There's nothing like the happiness of a child to brighten your dark days.

"Momma, look." She points to her creation. Walking over I see a cake on the counter with *'Happy Birthday Momma, Love Tate and Daddy.'*

I forgot it was my birthday.

"Oh, it's beautiful. Thank you, baby." I kiss her cheek.

"Yeah, me and Daddy made it, and..." she pauses, thinking as the excitement takes over. Gathering her thoughts, her bright eyes look up to me and I run my fingers through her hair. "And it's chocolate. And it's, it's..." She stops again, turning to Hunter. "I forgot," she whispers.

"A castle," he whispers, helping her along the way as he cooks.

"Yeah, it's a castle, but we didn't have any sprinkles." She nods. "Can I play my tablet?"

"Sure, just go wash your hands," I say as she jumps down and I turn to Hunter, a full-on sob starting as I hug his side.

“Okay, okay, hold on.” He moves the pan from the hot burner, turning himself around and hugging me tight, letting me ball up like a baby in his arms. I’m ashamed to say he’s used to it. I wasn’t this emotional with Tate but I think it was because I was more focused on having a baby than anything else. But with Henry, everything’s been so hard.

“Thank you,” I mumble through my tears.

“You’re welcome,” he says, pulling my head back, wiping my cheeks. “Aw, baby, your soft little heart.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been myself,” I say as more tears fall down my face.

Hunter rocks me back and forth. “I know you haven’t felt great, but I still love you.”

“I love you too. I just feel bad that you’ve had to do everything lately.” I huff out, another sob escaping as I try to settle my free-flowing emotions.

“So, what.” He shrugs. “You had a baby. You created a whole other person inside your body, the least I can do is make dinner for you. Don’t apologize for being yourself.”

I nod, calming my tears, understanding his sentiment. “I guess it just scares me because how I feel sometimes,” I confess, opening up and talking about the inner demons I still battle every day.

Hunter sucks in a breath, his warmth engulfing me. “Do you want to talk to Dr. Haley?”

“Maybe?” I nod, the love he gives me is still so pure.

“Okay, we can call her office tomorrow.” His eyes glisten as he stares into my soul.

“Thank you.” I sniff, laying my head on his chest.

“I got you, baby,” he mumbles into my hair. “It’s you and me against the world, remember?”

Before I can speak, a little body comes squeezing its way between us. Looking down, I see Tate smiling up, laughing as she wiggles back and forth. “Sandwich hug!”

The light shines throughout my soul, and basking me in warmth, care, and love. Looking up, I smirk with a confident smile. “You and me?”

“And me too.” Tate giggles.

“Yes, you too,” I say, picking her up as she hugs me tight.

Hunter smiles at us, and winks. This is us, working together, providing a loving and safe environment for every one of us to be our true self. I never in a thousand years would’ve thought this would be my life, and I wouldn’t change it for the world.

Looking over to the fireplace, the picture of the butterflies sits on the mantle, shining in the setting sun.

The answer the Universe provided me in my darkest hour, guiding me home.

About the Author

Kristin Turnage is an indie author that lives close to the beach in Florida with family.

If you want to find out more about the author, you can join her reader's group on Facebook (KT's Honey Pot) or catch her on Instagram (@authorkristinturnage).

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