

A *Swanson
Ridge* NOVEL

The
Marriage
Pact

JACOB PARKER

THE MARRIAGE PACT

A SWANSON RIDGE NOVEL

JACOB PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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FIND JACOB PARKER

Jacob Parker

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DESCRIPTION



He's the one that got away.

Now that I'm back in town, the jerk wants to offer me a job.

This isn't good for either of us. He feels like he's got to make up for what happened when we were kids.

And I have to restrain my hormones from doing the tango in front of him.

Never a good working relationship. Or is it?

See, here's the deal. We made a pact when we were kids.

If by some crazy reason we weren't married by the time we were thirty, we'd marry each other.

Well, time's up. And the pact was never broken.

Now what? Do I forgive the guy that ripped my heart out as a lovesick teenage girl?

He wants a second chance, and honestly, no one is rooting harder for him than me.

In our small town, this handsome, rich boy and I couldn't have been more different, but they say opposites attract.

Either way, our Marriage Pact is an interesting thought.

Feels more like forever than a simple agreement, and with this boy?

Forever is exactly what I've wished for.

Introduction



Hey! I'm missing you over here in my Insiders Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot and let's connect.

Also, you get a FREE novel for joining. Trust me, you DON'T want to miss it!

See you on the inside...

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PROLOGUE

LANDON

The hot June sun beat down on the back of my neck as I waited for Joshua to throw me the ball. Other kids playing on the swings nearby or sailing down the slides laughed, several of them running right past us as they chased each other through the park. This was our favorite hangout. All of the kids in the neighborhood came here almost every day in the summer, especially on Saturdays when our folks were home and likely to give us chores if we were sitting around the house.

Slamming my fist into my baseball glove, I impatiently egged my best friend Joshua on. “Come on, man. You’re never going to get your grip perfect. Just throw the damn ball.”

“What did your mom say to you about cursing?” he asked, laughing at me. The ball flew out of his hand but went sailing over my head. Even leaping into the air I couldn’t catch it.

“Damn it, Joshua,” I muttered. “You throw like a girl!” Turning around to go retrieve the ball, my eyes landed on a girl approaching on her pink bicycle, her wavy red hair swinging back and forth from her ponytail as she pedaled up the street. Beside her, I spotted her younger sister, Rose, rushing to keep up with her. My heart started pounding in my chest as Poppy Briar brought her bike to a stop right in front of the wayward baseball.

Putting down the kickstand, she got off and picked up the baseball. “This yours, Landon Johnson?”

Immediately, I reminded myself that I couldn't let her know how pretty she was, or how she always made my palms sweaty and my heart start to thump in my chest. The Briars were a bunch of weirdos. Everyone knew that. They lived across the street from us in a big house like ours, but my dad called them hobos, saying they let their overgrown yard look like a forest in the making.

Not to mention Poppy was three years younger than me. The other guys in my high school would never let me hear the end of it if they knew I thought a middle school baby was cute.

"Yeah, that's mine," I told her with a shrug. She was still a good twenty yards away. "Dumbass Joshua doesn't know how to throw straight."

"Hey, you're the one who can't catch," Joshua shouted back.

"Throw it here if you think you've got the arm for it," I taunted. "I bet you can't."

Poppy's eyebrows raised over her sapphire eyes. "You don't think I can?" she repeated.

Seeing her get all worked up just made me laugh. "I mean, you can try."

With that, Poppy reared back and heaved the ball at me so fast and hard, I could barely get my glove up in time. Thankfully, I did catch it, but only when it was half an inch from colliding with my nose.

Behind her, Rose, who had finally caught up, burst out laughing. "You suck at baseball, Landon," she told me.

"Shut up, Rose." Shaking my head, I told Poppy, "You're okay at throwing a ball, I guess. For a girl."

"You're okay at catching, I guess, for a boy," she shot back. "Is your sister around?"

Ignoring what was clearly meant to be a snide remark, I glanced across the park. I saw my sister, who was Poppy's age, running around the teetertotter with some other kids from school, and pointed. "She's over there."

“Thanks,” Poppy said, always polite.

About that time, Liberty spotted Poppy and took off running in our direction. For some reason I didn’t quite understand, I hated to see Poppy smile at seeing my sister. Why didn’t she look at me that way?

“There you are!” Liberty exclaimed. “Sam’s here.” She grabbed Poppy by both hands and jumped up and down. “He was asking about you.”

Poppy’s cheeks turned pink, and my gut twisted into a knot. Sam Henderson? Was she really interested in that eighth-grade dope? He was such a nerd, always walking around with his pants hitched up to his chest.

“Gross,” I muttered, getting both of them to turn around and stare at me.

“Sam’s the hottest guy in our school,” Liberty told me. “You wouldn’t know because you don’t go to our school.”

“That’s right. I’m not a baby,” I shot back at her.

“We’re not babies.” Poppy sounded very matter of fact with her response. “You know, one of these days a three-year age gap isn’t going to seem that big, Landon. When you’re thirty and we’re twenty-seven, everyone is just going to assume we’re the same age.”

“People make a lot of assumptions about you, Poppy Briar, but your age isn’t one of them,” I replied, hoping to hurt her feelings. After all, she’d offended me by making eyes at Sam Henderson.

It did hurt her. She knew exactly what I was getting at. Her face fell, and her once pink cheeks turned pale white.

“Don’t be a jerk, Landon!” Liberty shouted at me. “Her family has a lot of money or else they wouldn’t live in our neighborhood. They just choose to do different things with it, like better the environment.”

“Not the environment in their yard,” I said snidely. “You’ve got a natural habitat that matches the rainforest growing there.”

“Landon!” Liberty yelled at me.

“No, it’s all right.” Poppy actually didn’t look angry at me for saying such mean things to her. She just looked hurt. “He’s not wrong. My dad doesn’t mow as much as he did before his promotion, and he tells me not to do it because he doesn’t want me to get blisters.”

“Maybe if you’re so rich, you can pay someone to do it. Or get a riding lawnmower.” My suggestion sounded cruel coming out of my mouth, as it was meant to.

“I’ll suggest that,” Poppy said, still being nice to me for some reason.

“Come on.” Liberty yanked on her arm again, and the two of them headed over to where Sam and the others were playing, Rose following behind.

“See you later,” Poppy said, her blue eyes cutting to my soul.

“Huh?” What did she mean by that?

“The neighborhood street party is tonight,” she reminded me, walking backward as my sister continued to try and tug her away.

“Right.” Damn. I would see her later.

As soon as they walked away, Joshua said, “Your sister never says hi to me.”

Spinning to face him, I said, “Why do you care?”

He only shrugged.

Handing him the ball, I told him, “Let’s toss this thing around some more. I know how much you love sports, man, but damn if your aim isn’t the worst I’ve ever seen. Coach is going to sit you on the bench if you don’t get better.”

Joshua nodded. “I know. Thanks for practicing with me. Sports are my life. Someday, I wanna play in the major league.”

“Shit. We’ve got a lot of work to do.” I got back into position, and he backed up, giving it another shot. This time, I

was able to catch his throw at least, which was surprising because the sound of familiar laughter from the teeter totter was very distracting. Poppy Briar. Always in my head.

Later that evening, I found myself sitting on Joshua's back porch, the scent of grilling meat wafting from the BBQ where his dad stood flipping things every few minutes. The annual Swanson Ridge neighborhood party was underway, with the Smiths doing the majority of the hosting this year, though some people were utilizing the pool next door, too.

I sipped my lemonade, my mind on other things while Joshua tossed a baseball in the yard with one of the other kids from down the street. He was getting better. The Smiths were all so athletic. If his father knew how bad Joshua was at throwing the ball, he'd be so embarrassed. Thank goodness the practice was paying off.

Music from some band my parents used to like in college blared over the outside speakers. Finishing off my drink, I got up, deciding to go play with the other kids. At fifteen, I was almost too old for most of these kids, too old to play, but I figured this might be the last summer I was around for this. By next year, I wanted to have a job and my own car so I could get a little bit of freedom. My parents, Remington and Elizabeth, could be overbearing at times. I liked the idea of putting some space between me and them.

Approaching bikes had me slowing up, making sure I wasn't about to get run over. Once again, I found myself mesmerized by the swinging red ponytail on the back of Poppy's head as she approached me, riding her bike alongside my sister, Liberty, with a bunch of other kids. They rushed over and dropped their bikes, switching them out for hula hoops. I watched my sister struggle to get the hoop to stay around her scrawny hips, but Poppy knew how to move just right. I really shouldn't be watching this. She was practically a little girl, after all.

Yet, I found myself walking in that direction, my mind searching endlessly for an insult, something that would really sting. After all, the only way I knew how to talk to her without letting her know I thought she was cute was to be mean.

I found myself saying, “I didn’t know stick figures could hula hoop.”

“Shut up, Landon,” Liberty growled as her hoop fell to the ground again. “You should go away before you say something else really mean.”

“It’s okay,” Poppy offered, looking at me with one eyebrow raised. “I’m used to it by now. Your brother doesn’t know how to open his mouth without sounding like a real jerk.”

“I’m a jerk, huh?” Her words felt like a blow to my heart, but I couldn’t let her know that.

“Yeah, you are. You know, you’re never going to find a girlfriend if you keep talking to people that way. What’s the matter, Landon? Don’t you ever wanna grow up and get married? Maybe leave Franklin behind you?”

I snickered at her. “Don’t worry about me, Poppy. I’ll be married before you know it.”

“Oh, yeah? You think a jerk like you is gonna find true love?”

“You’re twelve years old,” I reminded her. “You don’t even know what that word means.” Hearing her speak of love made my heart long for her, though. I had to keep reminding myself she was just a kid. Even if she didn’t look like the other twelve-year-olds.

“Well, I feel bad for you, Landon,” she went on. “No girl is gonna want to be with someone who is always so mean. I think you can be nice, but you don’t like to show it.”

Shaking my head, I told her. “Nah, being nice is overrated. Tell you what, Poppy Briar. If I’m not married by the time I’m thirty, I’ll take the worst punishment the universe could ever give me.”

“What’s that?” She stopped moving the hoop around and stared into my eyes.

Swallowing hard, I told her, “I’ll marry *you*.”

“Gross,” Liberty proclaimed. “Poppy would never marry a jerk like you.”

A grin spread across Poppy’s face. I didn’t know what to make of it. “You think marrying me would be the worst thing ever?”

I nodded, even though it was all a lie.

“All right, Landon Johnson. I think you deserve that, then. If marrying me is the worst, then if you’re not married to someone else by the time you turn thirty, you have to marry me. Serves you right.”

Shocked to hear her say such a thing, I just stared at her. Then, she stuck out her pinky, and I knew exactly what she wanted me to do.

Fully confident that I would have fallen in love with a beautiful woman my own age by then, I had no qualms about it, though. Electricity shot up my arm as our fingers wrapped around one another.

“Pinky promise.”

15 Years Later

Loud banging on my apartment door had my head spinning as I struggled to open my eyes. Grabbing for my phone to check the time, I knocked it on the floor and then realized it was making a soft dinging sound, which meant my alarm had been going off, but I hadn't heard it. Damn me for not checking the volume.

"Shit," I muttered, finally getting it into my hands. When the time registered, I cursed again. "What the fuck?" It was already nine. The movers were here, and I wasn't even dressed.

Getting out of bed, I shouted, "Be right there!" and threw on some clothes. So much for taking a shower before they arrived.

When I opened the door, I found five large men standing there, the one in front with a friendly smile on his face. "Good morning, Miss Briar," he said, clipboard in hand. "We're from Sonny's Moving Company. How are you today?"

He was way too chipper considering I hadn't had my coffee, but I wasn't one to growl at people. "Good. Good. Sorry—I didn't hear my alarm."

"No problem, miss. I'm Theo, and I'll be in charge of the team today. If you just want to show us around the apartment,

we'll get started, and we can do the bedroom and bathroom last so that you can get ready for the day.”

His kindness snapped me out of any grouchiness I was holding on to. “Come on in.”

I showed them around the apartment, which wasn't huge. I'd downsized a couple of years ago when Liberty had given up on her photography business for a while and headed back to Tennessee to help her parents with their business. At the time, I'd done everything I could to talk her into staying, but she'd said it wasn't meant to be at the moment, and she'd try again some other time. Besides, the Johnsons' business had taken off, and Liberty was really good at marketing, so they'd needed her.

Now, here I was, following her back home, not because I was needed but because I had to save money.

After nine years in California, I was packing up, too. But I wasn't giving up on my dream of becoming an artist. No, I would try again. For now, I just needed to move back in with Mama and Dad for a little while until I had enough saved up to give it another whirl. One day, I would have my own art studio. I didn't care anymore whether it was in California, Tennessee, or on the moon. It was going to happen.

But right now, I needed Theo and his crew to box up my shit, put it on a moving truck, and haul it away. When I'd finished showing them everything, I asked, “Do you have any questions?”

“No, Miss Briar,” he assured me, shaking his head. “Everything looks pretty straightforward. It shouldn't take us more than a couple of hours to get everything boxed up and loaded.”

“Good. Thank you so much.” I left him to go take my shower and get ready. I had to catch my Uber to the airport in three hours, so if what he said was true, the truck should be loaded up by then. I'd called a maid service to come in after them and clean up. No matter how hard I tried to keep the place clean, there was bound to be some yuckiness under the

furniture and inside of the cabinets. The last time I'd moved, there sure was.

By the time the maids finished up, I'd be on a plane back to Franklin.

Standing beneath the warm water of the shower, I thought about how different things would be back home. Out here, I rode a bike to get around and never went more than a few miles. But in Franklin, everything was more spread out. Only kids rode their bikes in my hometown.

The weather would certainly be different, too. At least it was springtime, so I wouldn't have to worry about the snow and ice. I hadn't missed that at all. My parents always wanted me to come home for Christmas, but I tried to avoid it if I could because it was so stinking cold.

At least I'd get to see Liberty again. I'd missed her so much since she moved back. Sure, we did video calling and sent texts, but that wasn't the same. Liberty had been my best friend since elementary school. Being without her was kind of like missing a limb.

Thinking about her made my mind wander over the rest of her family. The image of Landon Johnson's face flashed before my eyes. But I pushed it aside. I didn't even want to see him. We'd been at odds our entire lives, except for a brief period around my high school graduation when things had gotten complicated and ugly. I hadn't really seen him much at all since I graduated from high school, and that was fine with me.

At least, that was what I told myself.

Pushing his image out of my mind, I got out of the shower, dried off, and got dressed. I needed to hurry up and get ready so the movers could get into this room. It had been kind of them to wait on me after I'd overslept.

Two hours later, Theo's men were putting the last box on the truck. The cleaners had arrived a bit earlier and had already gotten started. I'd arranged for the landlord to pick up my keys from them, so I was done.

It was surreal, waiting on the sidewalk with a couple of bags, seeing everything else I'd collected in nine years headed down the street with strangers. When my Uber driver pulled up, I took one last look at my apartment and then climbed inside. I hated goodbyes, but I had to focus on the aspects of this that felt like starting over rather than failing at my dreams. I would get that studio one day—I swore it.

The airport was crowded, but I had plenty of time to get through security and onto my flight. From the air, I waved goodbye to California, to the ocean, to the sun, and took some deep breaths, reminding myself I had always been a Tennessee girl at heart.

When the plane touched down, I gathered up my carry-ons and made my way down the narrow aisle, thanking the flight attendants. Baggage claim took forever, but once I had my other luggage, I went outside to look for my ride.

Then I saw her. Liberty, standing there with a huge grin on her face, holding a white piece of paper that said, "Briar," on it. Breaking into a giggle, I rushed over to meet her, abandoning my bags at her feet so I could throw my arms around her neck. She squeezed me tight as we stood there for several minutes, just jumping up and down and hugging.

Eventually, we had to let go. People were beginning to stare, and I was out of breath.

"Girl, I've missed you so much!" Liberty said as she helped me gather up my bags.

"I missed you, too. It's been way too long since I saw your face in person." With my bags looped over my arm and trailing behind me, I followed Liberty out to the parking area.

"Same," she said. "You look great, by the way. You're so tan. Here, everyone still looks like they haven't made it out of the dead of winter."

"I'm sure my tan will fade quickly enough," I assured her as she popped the trunk on her car. I tossed my suitcases in there and held on to my purse as I got into the passenger side.

“So, tell me about everyone back in Cali,” Liberty insisted as she started to drive. “How are those hot guys who live across the hall from you?”

“*Lived,*” I reminded her. “I live here now. They’re fine. They were disappointed when I told them I was moving, and you weren’t coming back to visit again before I left.”

“Ahh! Zach was so cute. He reminded me of that movie star we met in the bar that one time. That’s the thing about Tennessee. You’re never going to meet anyone famous here.” She hit her blinker to pull out into traffic, and I agreed with her.

On the way across town, we chatted about anything and everything, catching up on what was going on with her, and she asked about my family. Talking about my parents was always a bit nerve-racking since most of the other people in our neighborhood thought they were so weird, but Liberty was cool with them.

My stomach began to rumble loudly enough for her to hear. “Are you starving or what?”

“Oh, yeah. I haven’t had much time to eat today.” Had I eaten anything at all, other than the snack on the plane?

“Girl, why didn’t you say so? We’re making a pit stop!” Without waiting for me to concur, she turned left onto a familiar street, and I knew exactly where she was going. A couple of minutes later, Liberty pulled into a parking spot at Mojos, our favorite Mexican joint.

Over tacos, we continued to catch up on things. We spoke on the phone so frequently, nothing we had to say to one another was too surprising, but it was just great to discuss everything in person. After about an hour, my phone buzzed in my pocket. Pulling it out, I saw it was my mom. I let her know I’d be home soon.

“Shit, I bet your folks are excited to see you,” Liberty said, polishing off the last of her third taco. “I should’ve thought about that. I’ll get you home.”

“Nah, it’s okay. Mama just wanted to make sure my flight wasn’t delayed or anything. I actually need you to take me to Jeffrey’s. That’s where my van is,” I reminded her.

“Oh, right. The Peace, Love, and Flowers Van.” She giggled, reviving the name my automobile had been given in high school. It really was the spitting image of something a hippy might’ve driven around in the 1960s. A Volkswagen, it had been painted bright yellow when I first got it, but I’d added my own decorations, including a mural of a colorful garden with lots of bright daises and sunflowers, as well as rainbows and puffy clouds and lots of hearts. While my artistry had changed since I was a seventeen-year-old with her first—and so far only—vehicle to use as a canvas, I was still proud of it, and I didn’t mind the looks and questions I got when driving it either.

“I miss my ride,” I told Liberty as we walked out to get into her much more practical Audi. “It certainly matches the image everyone seems to have of my parents.”

“Which makes it a bit ironic that they won’t let you park it in the drive.” Liberty got into the driver’s seat as I slid in beside her.

“Well, you know, certain neighbors have a tendency to call the homeowners’ association on them anyway. No reason to make it worse.” I gave her a pointed look, as if she wouldn’t know who I was talking about.

“Yep. Every time your dad lets one blade of grass creep over the HOA guidelines cut-off point, my dad has his phone in his hand. But since they’re in Hawaii right now, it probably won’t be a problem.” Grabbing my arm, she said, “Sorry, Poppy. I don’t know why he has to be that way.”

“It’s all right,” I said with a shrug. “He’s not going to change now. They’re in Hawaii?” I hadn’t realized that.

“Yeah.” Liberty was vague, so I decided not to ask anything else about it.

A few minutes later, we arrived at Jeffrey’s garage, the mechanic who’d kept my van driving for all of these years,

and I thanked Liberty, telling her I'd see her later.

Jeffrey had my van pulled up out front for me so I wouldn't have to go back to the parking area where he let me keep it. A smile fell into place the moment I saw it. Seeing my best friend, eating the best tacos, and being reunited with my vehicle made me think that maybe being back home wouldn't be so bad after all.

Opening an email I'd meant to respond to three hours ago, I began to type a response just as my phone began to ring again. I let out a loud sigh and pondered the idea of ignoring it. After all, it would go to my voicemail, and I could answer it later. But the ringing didn't stop, so I quit typing and picked up the receiver, trying not to let my frustration seem obvious in my voice.

"Thank you for calling Just Ship It. This is Landon. How can I help you?" I sounded like a fucking secretary—something I desperately needed but couldn't seem to find. Everyone I'd interviewed when I'd first taken over running the business from my dad sucked, and since I'd tripled business in the last year, I hadn't had time to blink, let alone hire someone.

"Hi, Landon. This is Gary at Oh, Shirt. I left you a voicemail last week about setting up shipping for our new line of T-shirts, but no one ever called me back." Gary sounded a little frustrated.

"I'm so sorry about that, Gary. We've been having a slight issue with our phones, but that's fixed now." Lies—all lies. It wasn't the phone. It was the person who was supposed to be answering it. Had I even heard his voicemail? Not that I recalled. Well, he had me now. "How can I help you, Gary?"

Running a hand through my dark hair, I listened to Gary describe how we could help him. Just Ship It was a drop shipping company, so we helped connect sellers with buyers and made sure the goods exchanged hands. It wasn't that

complicated a business, and more and more drop shippers were coming into existence all the time. But ours had been around from the very beginning, and because of the Johnson name my father had established as being reliable and trustworthy, Liberty's marketing ability, and my skills at negotiating and getting to know the people we worked with, Just Ship It had made a name for itself.

Gary explained exactly how we could help him. I took notes on my laptop and let him know how much it would be. He seemed happy with our prices, so I emailed him a contract. The entire conversation took less than fifteen minutes, but it was also something a secretary could've done.

When I'd taken the call, I had seventy-three unanswered emails in my inbox. When I'd hung up, I had eighty-six. Sighing, I tried not to pull my hair out and went back to what I'd been doing before.

Most evenings, I worked well past seven before calling it quits and heading home. Sometimes, I'd get back on my laptop later, after dinner, and knock some more work out before going to bed. But today, I'd had enough. It was past five, which meant the traffic from where my office was in Nashville back to Franklin would be a nightmare. Deciding I may as well hang out in the big city for a bit longer before driving home, I picked up the phone and called my best friend, Joshua.

He answered pretty quickly. "What's going on, man?"

Smiling at the sound of his enthusiastic voice, I said, "You wanna go to the gym?"

Joshua chuckled. "Dude, I work in a sports complex. I've been playing games all day long. Batting cages, basketball, I even threw a pass to a ten-year-old down the hallway outside of my office earlier today."

I had to laugh. "Could he catch it?"

"Hey, I'm way better at throwing than I was when I was younger. Don't you forget I pitched in high school," he reminded me.

“I remember. Thanks to me playing catch with you every day. Still, I seem to recall our senior year that freshman—what’s his name—Sam Henderson? He beat you out for quarterback.”

“Ooh, that stings, man,” Joshua croaked. “Why you gotta bring that up?”

“You made a better wide receiver anyway.” We both laughed at our short jaunt down memory lane. It wasn’t a place I liked to dwell. High school had been a complicated time for both of us. I’d been so happy to graduate and move on with my life. “Anyway, I figure you own the joint. We can use the employee gym, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, come on over. I’m at a restaurant on Twenty-First Street, but I’ll be there soon. I’ll meet you there.”

“Awesome. See you in about fifteen minutes.” I hung up my cell phone just as my desk phone started to ring, but I ignored it. I was done working for the day.

Grabbing my stuff, I headed out, thankful I always had a spare bag of gym clothes with me. As much as Joshua liked to pretend like this was the first time I’d ever mentioned working out, we did it fairly often, at least a few times a month. He owned a sports complex that had all sorts of offerings for youth and adult athletes. Sports had always been his life, and he’d ended up being a really good athlete in high school.

Less than half an hour later, I found myself running on the treadmill next to Joshua, trying not to be so competitive that we couldn’t talk to one another. Whenever we were around each other, we always felt like we had to prove to the other one who was the fastest, strongest, essentially the best.

“So, how’s work?” Joshua asked me. “You getting caught up with all of that backlog?”

“Not even a little bit,” I told him. “Every time I answer an email, forty-seven more pop up.” Wiping sweat from my forehead on a towel, I considered how much further I was going to be behind tomorrow.

We worked with people in all different time zones, and most of them didn't consider the fact that I also had to sleep a few hours at night. Which meant, by tomorrow morning, I'd be right back in the same hole I'd been in this morning—with even more work to do and not enough time to do it in.

“You need an assistant so bad,” Joshua said, running his hand through his blond hair. With it being so damp, it just stood up for a moment before slowly falling back down.

“Yeah, I know I do, but I don't even have time to hire someone,” I complained.

“Can you just ask Liberty to do all of this busywork? You run the company now. It seems kind of weird that you'd be the one answering the phones and the emails.” He nonchalantly pushed a button to make his treadmill go faster, like I wouldn't notice.

Giving him a look, I sped mine up as well, not to be outdone. “No, I can't ask Liberty to do it,” I told him. “She already hates working for the company and is only there because she knows how desperately we need her. If I ask her to do that, it'll just push her out the door.” My sister was a talented marketer, but her first love would always be photography. If I pushed her too hard, she'd be gone in a heartbeat, and then I'd be even more shit out of luck.

“You think she's planning on quitting?” Joshua asked. Something about his tone had my forehead crinkling. Why was he talking about Liberty so much?

“I don't know,” I admitted. “I hope not.” My sister was reliable, smart, and got her job done. I wished I could clone her. Then, I'd just make a second version of Liberty to answer the phone and all of the never-ending emails that poured in at all hours, day and night.

Thinking of cloning her reminded me of something Liberty had mentioned a few days ago. She had a friend from California moving to Franklin. Maybe she'd want the job? I had no idea who the girl was—whether she already had a job or was looking for one—but that might solve things.

“Has Liberty said anything to you about this friend of hers that’s moving to town?” I asked.

“No, but we don’t talk that much.” Again, his tone sounded odd. “Usually only when you’re around.”

“Hmm. I wonder if she might be a proper fit for the job. If she’s available and would fit the role, I might offer it to her.”

“Sight unseen?” Joshua asked me.

“Well, if Liberty recommends her for the position, that would be enough for me. I’ll need to ask her.” Making a mental note to do that when I got home, I pressed the button on the treadmill to crank it up again. I was almost to the point where running and speaking weren’t going to mix, which was kind of what I needed at the moment. If Joshua and I could talk, we would. But the idea of being left alone with my thoughts was appealing.

“You get that new couch you were talking about?” Joshua asked me, still managing just fine though he was now running as fast as I was.

“Yeah. Last week.” My sentences were going to become choppy than before at this rate.

He laughed. “Good. The old one still had that juice stain from when you made Peter Wright throw up in fifth grade.”

Thinking of our mutual friend throwing up grape juice all over my mother’s beige couch had me laughing despite the run. We’d tried flipping over the couch cushion, but we’d discovered Liberty’s puppy had peed on the other side, making it so my mom would find out her couch was ruined either way. Nothing we’d tried had gotten the stain out. All of these years, that couch had sat there, looking like a mess. My mom refused to get rid of it, though, because it was the first piece of furniture my parents had bought together when they first got married. They’d come from food stamps growing up, just getting by, to starting their own multimillion-dollar company.

Now, the house was mine. My parents had decided to retire to Hawaii, and I’d bought the place from them. While Swanson Ridge wasn’t exactly what it used to be, with the

houses aging and new families moving in, it was still in a nice part of town with no crime, good schools, and friendly faces. I hadn't wanted to see the house I grew up in be sold off.

Thinking back to growing up on Swanson Ridge made the haunting image of a red ponytail come to mind, along with a pair of sapphire eyes that sparkled like stars.

"You all right, man?" Joshua asked, giving me a nudge in the arm.

Blinking, I pushed the image of Poppy Briar out of my head. Why bother to think about a girl I'd probably never see again? "Yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking about that old couch."

Joshua chuckled again. "Good old Pete. Still see him from time to time. That's the thing about living in the town where we grew up. Familiar faces are everywhere."

"You've got that right," I replied, my mind immediately wanting to go back to Poppy.

But I wouldn't let it. No, I refused to be haunted.

The treadmill beeped a few times before it went into cool-down mode. Both of us had finished the number of miles we'd decided to run that day. My legs and lungs were burning, but it was a good burn, a burn that told me I was still alive.

"Are you making the drive back to Franklin now?" Joshua asked me as we both finished cooling off, dripping sweat.

"Yeah. I'm definitely not going back to the office tonight." The thought of even opening my laptop when I got home was unnerving. Too much to do.

"Well, maybe you're onto something with that friend of Liberty's. I hope it works out for you, man."

"Thanks." I gave him a fist bump as we headed into the showers. I hoped it worked out, too. Whoever she was, if she needed a job and Liberty gave her a positive recommendation, she'd be my new secretary, which would make my life so much easier. Fingers crossed.

POPPY

Pulling into the driveway of my childhood home, I took a deep breath and tried to wrap my head around what I was doing. I was home. Not for a visit, but for the long haul.

My parents were digging in the flowerbed, which didn't surprise me at all. Despite the complaints from Mr. Johnson throughout the years, my parents actually did a lot of work in their yard. They just preferred a wilder, more natural look than what he liked—perfectly manicured, short grass, bushes trimmed, sometimes into topiaries, and flowers all in nice neat rows.

In contrast, the flowerbeds in front of my parents' house looked like they would in the meadow. Bushes and flowers sprouted all over the place, the rich colors bringing the yard to life in ways the other neighbors' yards couldn't compare to.

My mother heard the van engine and turned around, waving her hand with a huge grin on her face. Dressed in a long floral-print dress with a shawl over her shoulders, she looked so much like me, though her hair was curlier and tied up on top of her head, locks springing free and flowing around her pretty face. Dad was wearing khaki shorts, a floral-print shirt, socks, and sandals because it was a bit cool here in the spring. His smile warmed my heart. I'd missed them both so much.

Getting out of the van, I left my belongings for now, rushing over to hug them both. "Poppy!" Mama called,

wrapping me up and kissing my cheek. “Oh, my! We’ve missed you. You look so tan!”

“Hey, Mama.” I kissed her back. “I’m glad to be home. The flowers are so pretty.”

Dad wrapped me up in a hug and kissed the top of my head. “We’re so glad you’re here, baby,” he said. “Your room is clean and ready for you.”

“Smells like Lemon Pledge!” Mama added.

“Did you clean it yourself?” I asked her. My parents had a housekeeper who came once a week since the house was so large, but Mama loved to clean.

She grinned at me sheepishly. “Oh, a bit.”

“That’s sweet, Mama. Thank you. I need to go get my luggage out of the van.” I patted her arm and turned to go get my suitcases.

“I’ll help you,” Dad offered, walking along with me. “You know, now that you’re going to be staying here, maybe you should go back to riding your bike around, like you did in California. It’s so much better for the environment.”

Turning to look at him, I arched an eyebrow. “Dad, I just got home and you’re already trying to get me to sell the van?” He preferred to ride his bike or walk when he could, but it wasn’t very practical in Franklin. It wasn’t as if he didn’t own a car, though his was a Prius.

“Leave her be, Johnny,” Mama called, going back to her flowers. “She just got here.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to nag.” Dad wiped his brow, leaving a smear of dirt there, which I promptly wiped away, and then he opened the van door and got out my heaviest suitcases.

“It’s okay. I know how you feel about the van.” It seemed like no one in the neighborhood liked my flower van, but it made me happy, so I didn’t intend to get rid of it. If it fit in the garage, I’d park it there to make things less conspicuous, but my parents had all kinds of stuff stored in the garage, as well as their two vehicles, so it wasn’t going to work.

The two of us walked inside as Mama asked my dad to bring her some lemonade. Vaguely, I heard him say, “Yes, Lilian, dear.”

A wave of nostalgia hit me right in the gut. This place was exactly like it was when I was a kid, and it was almost too much to handle.

“I’ll take these up for you,” Dad said. I muttered a thank you, but my eyes were tracing over every surface of the furniture in the living room, foyer, and the formal dining room.

It was all the same. The same green couches, walnut end table and coffee table, the same pictures on the wall—including the owl my grandmother had had hanging in her living room that my mom hung up there after Grandma passed away.

In the dining room, our oval cherrywood table with eight chairs looked worn, but other than that, it was exactly as it had been when I was so short, I could barely reach the table. Behind it, my mother’s China and crystal collection sat in the cabinet, each piece right where it had always been.

Shaking my head, I tried to break free of the feelings of nostalgia that continued to wash over me, but it was hard. When I’d come back for holidays or other visits, I’d vaguely registered how nothing ever changed here, but I didn’t let it sink in because it didn’t matter. This wasn’t my home. It was my parents’ house, and I was just visiting. Now, I’d have to get used to being back here. In some ways, it made me feel like a child again.

Dad was heading back down the stairs by the time I snapped out of it enough to start moving that way. “You okay, sweetheart?” he asked, his eyebrows wrinkled with concern.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just remembering a few things.” I managed a smile.

“Good things, I hope.” He patted me on the head like I was still seven.

“Yep. All good things.” No need to let my father know it might be easier for me to stay here if we got a new couch or updated the dining-room furniture. My parents rarely bought new anything if the old would still work.

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m heading back outside if you need anything.” He turned to head for the door when I reminded him about Mama’s request.

“Lemonade, Dad.” Giggling, I watched my prompt click. He mumbled under his breath about how he couldn’t remember anything these days, but I knew he would’ve forgotten it twenty years ago, too. Mama was always asking him to do stuff, and he was so in his head, it never really sank in.

Walking up the stairs, I noticed how much the house smelled the same. Mama’s love for Lemon Pledge wafted along with me as I climbed the stairs. Clearly, she’d been polishing the banisters earlier. Her favorite environmentally friendly incense lingered in the air as well. In the kitchen, I knew I’d smell fresh lemons, herbs, and drying flowers.

Upstairs, I walked past my siblings’ bedrooms, their doors all closed. Only Aurora and August lived here now. In their twenties, they were both in college and had jobs to find a bit of independence. They’d be home in a bit. The others were all gone now, off living their own lives. I missed Rose. We had always been so close. Autumn and Arlo had both left Tennessee years ago. They had successful careers, significant others, and only visited around the holidays.

Again, I was hit with memories of all six of us running downstairs to open Christmas presents or coming in dripping wet from swimming, fighting over the three showers upstairs. Even our big house wasn’t always big enough for the eight of us.

My bedroom door was open. Coming to a stop in the doorway, I took it in.

In high school, my parents had finally given in and let me get rid of my little girl furniture, so at least the white bedroom set didn’t have flowers carved into it as it had when I was

much smaller. I still had a pink comforter on my bed, though, with matching cotton-candy-colored curtains. I'd need to change that out, I supposed. August and Aurora had both updated their rooms recently, from what I understood, and while Mama wasn't sure about it at the time, they at least looked like the kinds of places twenty-year-olds would hang out.

Putting my stuff away and trying not to dwell on my new digs, I decided to go downstairs and help Mama with dinner. She'd never been one to hire a cook, so I was certain I'd find her in the kitchen.

Standing over the stove, stirring a pot, she looked up and smiled at me when I entered the room. "Hello, dear. Did you get all settled in?"

"Yeah, for the most part." Forcing a smile to my lips, I took a deep breath, trying to guess what she was making. "Vegetable soup?"

"Yes, well, we had some early tomatoes this year. Figured I'd use them. You love vegetable soup." Mama reached over and patted my cheek.

"I love *your* vegetable soup," I told her. "How can I help?"

"You can peel the carrots."

Seeing a few on the table behind us, along with the peeler, I stepped over and started working on that as we made conversation about my flight, how things had been packing up my life in California, and all kinds of things I didn't want to talk about.

Parents were so good at asking questions no one wanted to answer.

"So, did you leave a fellow back in California that will be pining for you?" Mama asked, batting her eyelashes at me.

I almost laughed. I knew she was trying to be silly, asking it that way, like she was an old granny or something. "No, Mama. Nothing like that." I'd dated a few guys over the time that I was in Cali, but no one that made my heart stop beating.

A flash of a face flickered before my eyes, but I pushed it away.

“Well, maybe you’ll meet someone here, now that you’re home.” She smiled encouragingly at me. Mama was more than ready for one of us to start working on grandkids for her.

“Maybe so.” That should be enough to get her to change the subject. “How are your friends from the gardening club?” Mama could talk about that for hours.

“Oh, they’re great. You’ll never believe what Emily got for Christmas!”

I listened to her talk, trying to keep up with all of the people I hadn’t ever met before. We finished preparing dinner and called Dad in. Over dinner, we visited mostly about people in the neighborhood. Dad mentioned how glad he was that the Johnsons had moved to Hawaii. I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. Liberty had just mentioned a visit or something. Rather than asking Dad, I decided to just wait and talk to her about it later.

After dinner, I helped clean up and then headed upstairs, exhausted. The change in time zones was messing with me, not to mention it had just been an exhausting day of travel.

I finished putting away the things I’d brought with me. The rest would all be put in storage until I had a place of my own, which made me sad. I’d get used to it, though. If there was one character trait I prided myself on, it was adaptability.

Flexing my toes, I sat down on the bed, glad to be in a shoe-free zone. My parents, like myself, preferred to be barefoot whenever possible.

My eyes landed on the house across the street. So if Remington and Elizabeth had gone to Hawaii, that didn’t mean Landon had, right? For a moment, I was that young woman who used to long for the boy across the street, wishing he would look at me as anything other than his sister’s best friend.

Sighing, I fell backward onto my bed. There was a time when I would’ve done anything to be with him, but that was a

long time ago.

The sound of my phone dinging startled me. Fishing it out of my pocket, I read a text from Liberty. “Hey, want a job?”

She had my interest. “What are you talking about?”

“I know someone who’s looking for an assistant. If you’re interested meet me at the following address in the morning at nine.” She included an address in Nashville.

“Sounds good,” I replied.

I needed a job, so I may as well check it out. If it was something Liberty thought would work for me, it had to be pretty good. I hoped the people there were free-spirited, open-minded, and didn’t require their workers to wear shoes.

The Fainting Goat was crowded as usual, even though I'd gotten up early to try to get to the office in time to get some emails answered before Liberty brought her friend in. She'd sat down at the kitchen table the night before to let me know the girl was willing to come in at nine. She'd spoken highly of the woman, though she hadn't mentioned many details. I was excited to meet her, hoping she would be a hard worker who could plow through some of the work that had been piling up. Of course, at this point, I'd be happy to take anyone with a pulse who knew how to type.

The blonde barista behind the counter was familiar to me. The moment she saw me standing in line, her smile widened, and she began to bat her eyelashes. Every time I came in to find her working, she flirted with me. I tried not to sigh. The girl was cute, but I didn't have time to date at the moment. Work was the only thing in my life right now.

"Good morning, Landon," she chirped when it was my turn to order. "What can we get you today?"

"I'll have my usual, please." My eyes went to her name tag. I could never remember what it was. "Charity."

"Sure thing. Regular coffee, large, with two creams coming up." Her voice was a purr as she gave the order to one of her coworkers and rang me up.

I didn't linger, which seemed to disappoint her, but at the moment, that wasn't my concern.

Coffee in hand, I made my way back to my truck and headed to the office, thinking about all of the work I had to do. If this morning was anything like most days, I'd have at least a hundred new emails that hadn't been there the night before when I'd closed my laptop and gone to sleep.

Despite promising myself I wasn't going to work at home last night, I'd done it anyway.

The office was already busy when I walked in, even though it was barely past eight, and most of these people didn't have to be here until nine. They were just as busy as I was, and though the staff was small, they were all hard workers who always did their best to help out however they could.

Greeting them all with a positive smile, I headed to my office, leaving the door open. They all knew I was always around if they needed help with something, even though I was the busiest of all. For the most part, no one interrupted me with anything during the day since we had weekly meetings where we discussed things, but if there was a problem with a carrier or a client, they could come in, and we'd work it out together.

A wave of terror washed over me as I powered up my laptop. It was silly to be afraid of success, but I was only one man, and I had so much to do, a tsunami of emails wasn't going to help me any.

Once my laptop connected to the Internet, I braced myself and opened my email. I had a hundred and fourteen new, unopened emails staring at me.

"Fuck," I mumbled, running both hands through my hair.

Whoever Liberty was bringing in, she'd better be capable of opening and responding to emails. At this point, I was willing to pay her handsomely just to do those two things, let alone answering the phone.

I couldn't wait until she got here and I'd finished the interview process to start responding to these emails, though. With a deep breath, I got to it, starting with the oldest and

hoping to work my way through them as quickly as possible. After I'd answered five or six of them, I checked my calendar. The only meeting I had today was the interview coming up in about twenty minutes, which I'd added last night after Liberty had talked to me about her friend.

"She's highly reliable," Liberty had told me. "She takes her work very seriously, although she's never been an assistant before. She has run her own business, though."

"What kind of business was it?" I'd asked my sister.

She'd shrugged. "It was an unrelated field, but she still knows how to do all of the things you need. She's very professional when it comes to emails and interacting with clients. I think you'll really be happy with her work ethic."

I would hire a rock at this point if it had some people skills and knew how to use Gmail.

"Well, I'm happy to discuss things with her," I'd told my sister. "What time is she available?"

"I told her to be there at nine," Liberty had replied. "I thought it would be best if she could come in early, and you could get the interview done before you started really getting into the workday."

At the time she'd made that statement, I'd been buried up to my eyeballs in unanswered emails. The idea that I could hire someone today and ask them to start right away was tempting, but it was a Friday, and no one wanted to start working on a Friday. No, even if the applicant ended up being the very best assistant in the history of assisting, I'd wait until Monday to have her begin.

Getting back to answering emails, I was in the middle of formulating a response to a potential client we really didn't want to work with based on the shady statements made in their email when there was a knock on the open door.

One of my best employees, an older man named Brock, was standing there with a puzzled look on his face. "Hey, sorry to interrupt, Landon, but can we talk about this Reddick account? The invoices aren't matching up with the payments."

Brock handled a lot of the accounting work for us, though we had an accountant on staff. He was more of a clerk than an actual accountant, but he made Maria's life easier. He did some other clerical work as well. "Of course," I told him. "Bring it in."

He sat down at my desk, and we went over everything. Within a few minutes, we figured out that he was missing a statement. Using my laptop, I was able to pull up the paperwork he didn't have and printed it off for him. Again, this was something a talented assistant could do, but I was glad we got it all sorted out.

"Thanks a lot, Landon," he told me before gathering up the paperwork.

"Any time, Brock," I assured him with a friendly smile.

His eyebrows raised slightly. "I know you're super busy."

I shrugged. "Aren't we all? Nothing wrong with that. Being busy means we are making money."

He snickered. "That's true." Since all of my employees received a share of the profits, they appreciated being busy.

Once he was gone, I got back to it, seeing that plenty new emails had come in while I wasn't paying attention. My head was beginning to spin already, and it wasn't quite nine yet.

Frustrated, I spent a minute looking at an app on my phone that Liberty had suggested. She said one of her friends in Cali had suggested it. A calming app that showed short little nature videos that helped slow a person's heartrate and remind them to breathe, I'd thought the Quiet Time app was silly when I'd first installed it. But more and more, I found myself using it for a moment here and there, trying to calm the fuck down.

After spending sixty seconds staring at rain falling over a flower with open petals, I felt a bit more relaxed and was able to get back to work. I'd always wondered which of my sister's friends had suggested this app to her. Liberty didn't discuss her life much with me, so I didn't know a lot of her friends from Cali.

But I knew one.

I'd always wondered if the person who'd told her about the app was her old roommate, Poppy Briar. It seemed like the sort of thing Poppy would like. Full of nature, all about self-improvement, with a touch of art. Why wouldn't she use an app like that?

I couldn't let thoughts of Poppy continue to distract me. Over the years, I'd lost almost as much time thinking about her as I had answering pointless emails. Right before she moved away, things had finally heated up between us, but I'd shut it down. Poppy Briar was not the sort of girl a guy like me would ever be able to contain. Holding her was like hugging the wind. Slipping through my fingers like a ghost, she was never really mine. And she never would be. So, it didn't matter what the girl in California did to calm down.

With my mind refocused, I went back to work, answering another few emails before I realized I needed a binder that was behind me on the shelf. Spinning around to grab it, I looked over the labels until I saw the one I needed. I was just about to pull it off of the shelf when I heard Liberty's voice behind me.

"Hey, Landon. Good morning. My friend who is interested in the assistant position is here to meet with you."

"Come on in," I called over my shoulder.

"Hi, I'm—"

At the sound of her voice, I turned around so fast, I almost gave myself whiplash. A whisper of the words, "No fucking way," choked in my throat.

It was her. My eyes landed on gleaming sapphire ones. With a startled expression on her face, Poppy Briar stood right inside my office, dressed very professionally in a black skirt and white shirt with her red hair pulled up in a clip on top of her head.

Stunningly beautiful as always, her skin was a soft tan, glowing, with just a touch of makeup. She didn't need it. The woman was lovely in every way, even when she was confused and grasping for words like she was at the moment.

"Hi, Poppy."

I wasn't sure what else to say. My gaze fell on my sister's face. Liberty was never very good at pulling the wool over my eyes, but I could tell by her expression now that she knew exactly what she had done. A mischievous twinkle danced in her green eyes, and her smile pulled up one side of her mouth slightly higher than the other.

"Hi, Landon Johnson," Poppy said, looking from me to her so-called friend. Returning her gaze to my face, she continued. "Long time no see."

"It has been a while, Poppy Briar," I agreed. Now, both of us were staring at Liberty.

"What?" my sister asked, trying to sound innocent. "You needed a job, Poppy. And you needed an assistant, Landon." Once again, her shoulders raised and lowered quickly. "I was simply solving a problem for two people that I care very much about."

Clearing my throat, I said, "Thanks a lot, sister dear. Why don't you go ahead and see what you can do about the Lawrence account needing new pictures for their spatulas?"

"Taking pictures of spatulas is one of my favorite things to do," she deadpanned.

I could only shake my head at her.

Liberty squeezed Poppy's shoulder. "Good luck," she said before she headed out the door, closing it behind her with a loud *thud* that made us both jump.

With a deep breath, I found a smile somewhere deep within me. "Well, Poppy, come on in," I offered. "Why don't you explain to me why in the world you'd want to work for Just Ship It?"

With all of the grace I remembered from our youth, she glided over to the chair across from me and sat down.

POPPY

Landon Johnson.

He looked as amazing as ever, though a bit disheveled, which was strange for him, especially this early in the morning. His dark locks were standing up straight in places, evidence that he'd been dragging his hands through them, as he had a tendency to do when he was frustrated and busy.

Green eyes bored into my soul as I sat across from him, trying to figure out what to say. I cleared my throat. "Liberty said she knew a company that needed an assistant, but she didn't tell me it was the family business. I didn't even realize that you were in charge here now."

He shrugged. "Well, maybe if you hadn't disappeared from my life all of those years ago, you'd have some idea of what it is I've been up to." His tone wasn't rude or accusatory. In fact, it was oddly chipper, which made it difficult to interpret, though I noted a bit of tension in each word.

"Well, I'm here now," I told him, a nervous laugh spilling from my lips. Could this be any more awkward? "I hope I'm not imposing on your perfect life." I also managed to keep my tone lighthearted, though the words were loaded with implications that he wouldn't miss.

Landon's bright white teeth sank down into his bottom lip. For a moment, I was reminded of how soft his mouth was, how warm. How he tasted like fresh mint and knew exactly how to move his tongue to make me moan into his mouth.

“Poppy?”

I hadn't heard what he'd said. I'd been lost in a moment from my senior year of high school, one I'd refused to let enter my mind since he'd said those ominous words to me only a few days after our encounter at a party that left him kissing me breathless during a game of spin the bottle—even though it wasn't his turn.

I could never be with someone like you.

“I'm sorry. Could you rephrase that?” I asked, hoping he wouldn't realize I hadn't heard him at all.

One eyebrow arched. Obviously, the question had been a simple one. “Sure. What about this job interests you?”

Again, I was laughing nervously. He had probably asked me why I was interested in the job. “I just moved back from California to stay with my parents for a while and save up some money. I want to open my own art studio someday. That has always been my goal. I did in Cali, but it didn't last long, and I ended up going to work for someone else. Still, that's the dream. So, if you need an assistant, I'm sure it's something I can handle while I'm here. That'll give you a chance to look for someone permanent.”

Landon listened to every word I had to say. “How long do you think you'll be staying in town?”

“I'm not exactly sure. I'd planned on less than a year. Is it true that your parents moved to Hawaii?” I blurted out the question, finally putting the pieces together. So Mr. and Mrs. Johnson must've retired, leaving Landon in charge of the business. They were in Hawaii now, so maybe my dad wasn't worried about me parking in the driveway because of the neighbors after all. Maybe he just really hated my gas-guzzling van.

“That's right.” His words were clipped. It seemed like he wanted to stick to discussing the job.

I could hardly blame him. Early on, when I'd first moved away, he'd reached out to me plenty of times, trying to apologize for his harsh words, but I'd ignored him. The

moment he'd insulted my family, he was dead to me, like he'd never existed. Especially when he'd made it clear he didn't want to be with me anyway.

I'd been ready to change everything for this man, to stay here in Tennessee and give up my dreams of opening my studio in California, the place I'd always wanted to live. But when he'd said that to me, I'd realized he'd never been the man I thought he was. The Landon I'd thought I'd known my whole life could never be so cruel.

Sure, he'd been rude to me when we were younger. As children, he would say mean things to me all the time, like lots of boys do. But by the time I was a senior in high school, we were so close, I'd really thought we had a chance of being together. That one statement had ruined that for me. He'd said later it was a flippant remark he hadn't meant, but I knew better. People spoke the truth in instances like that and only tried to take the words back later when they realized they'd acted like an asshole.

That had been the moment I realized—when Landon was an asshole, he wasn't acting.

But I could work for him for a while. Liberty had told me a lot about what the job entailed. Answering emails and phone calls, that sort of thing. It sounded easy enough, and I had a feeling I wouldn't be seeing a lot of the boss.

Besides, assuming Landon hadn't changed any at all in nine years wasn't fair to either one of us. People tended to grow up, after all. He likely had, too. If he was running this highly successful business, he had to have made some changes.

“Well, I need someone, like, yesterday,” Landon said, his eyes focused on the table. I noticed he was breathing deeply, trying to stay calm. “If you think you're interested, I'll pay you well.”

Those words had me perking up. I didn't want to take money from my parents to start my studio. I wanted to earn it. I'd be taking money from the Johnsons this way, but only

because I was earning it, not because they were giving away handouts.

“Is it mostly answering calls and emails?” I asked for clarification.

“Yes, essentially. How familiar are you with drop shipping?” he asked me, the tone of the interview shifting to something much more professional than it had been before when we were just sort of chatting.

“Not that familiar,” I admitted. “Liberty has told me a bit about what you do, but I have absolutely no experience with drop shipping.”

“That’s okay,” he assured me. “You really don’t have to know that much about the business to answer the kinds of emails you’ll be responding to, at least at first. I mean, if you stay here long enough, there’s a good chance you could take on more responsibility, but I just need someone to interact with clients, take their information, set up their accounts, and redirect correspondence to the right department if there’s a problem.”

“I can do that,” I assured him.

“Cool.” Relief washed over his face as he went into a brief explanation of exactly what drop shipping entailed, what they did here, what the different departments did, and who the people who worked in each of them was. I would only have to keep about eight people straight, so it wouldn’t be that difficult.

“That’s just in this office, of course. We have a few other locations across the country, but all of those are fairly self-managed. From time to time, you might need to email another branch and let them know a client that has contacted us actually needs to be handled in their offices.”

“You have more than one location?” I was surprised to hear that. I didn’t even realize they had a real office. When Landon’s dad had first started the company, it had operated out of his garage. Now it had multiple locations? Part of the reason I didn’t even consider the fact that this address in

Nashville was where Liberty worked was because I assumed she worked from home.

“Yeah, the new locations are something we’ve expanded to in the last couple of years.” He gave a shrug that let me know this was all him, that he’d been the one to expand the company, but he was being nonchalant about it because he was never one to brag about something like that.

“Well, that’s all quite impressive.” I smiled at him, meaning it. “You should be really proud of what you’ve done here.”

“Thank you, Poppy. Do you have any other questions about the company or the position?” Landon was attempting to change the subject from his accomplishments, so I let him.

“No, I think you’ve covered everything. It all sounds good to me.” Working for Landon wasn’t what I’d had in mind when I’d gotten up this morning and put on my classiest work outfit to drive the thirty minutes to Nashville, but I needed the job, and he needed my help. If things between us got too awkward, I could always try someplace else.

“Perfect. And how does this salary sound?” He wrote something on a piece of paper and slid it over to me.

Red flooded my cheeks before I even looked at it. These types of discussions always embarrassed me, though they were necessary. Quickly, I glanced down at the paper. It took everything within me to keep my mouth from dropping open. Man, Landon really was desperate for help if he was willing to pay an assistant that much.

“Uh, yeah. Sure. That works,” I stammered. “I think that will be just fine.” Holy cow! That was more than I was making in California at a similar job, and the price of living out there was astronomical compared to here. It was no wonder Liberty had decided to stay here and work for her family even though it had nothing to do with photography.

“All right then,” Landon said, withdrawing the paper with a nod. “I’ll let our HR manager know, and he’ll have all of the

paperwork ready for you when you come in on Monday.” Pausing, he asked, “Does Monday work for you?”

“Of course.” I’d actually been willing to start right then since it was clear he was so swamped, but I also didn’t mind having the day off. It’d give me some more time to get settled and make sure my work wardrobe would work for this sort of job.

“Sounds good. See you then.” He stood, offering his hand, and I shook it before thanking him.

My hand had just grazed the doorknob when he said, “Oh, and Poppy?”

Turning around, my eyes met his, and a flutter pulsed through my chest. “Yes?”

“It really is nice to see you again.”

“Yep,” I managed to squeak out. “You, too.”

Throwing open the door, I shot into the hallway, nearly colliding with a figure standing there.

Liberty leaped back just in time, and my hands flew up to my heart. “Jesus! You scared the crap out of me, Lib.”

“Sorry, sorry.” She was laughing, though.

The urge to smack her was overwhelming. Stepping away from Landon’s door so he wouldn’t overhear, I asked her, “So, you didn’t think it was pertinent to tell me that I’d be working for the guy who broke my poor little naïve heart all those years ago?”

“Hey, I can’t help it that my brother’s a loser,” she replied snidely. “You needed a job, and he desperately needed someone like you who will work hard and do the job right. If I would’ve told you who it was, you wouldn’t have come.”

She had a point. Folding my arms, I made grumbling noises at her.

Liberty giggled again. Wrapping me up in a hug, she melted my cold exterior. “Besides, now you get to work with your bestie.”

She had a point. It would be nice to work with my best friend. “Fine,” I said. “I guess I won’t murder you.”

Liberty kissed my cheek. “No, you won’t. You love me too much.”

“I do love you,” I admitted. But I wasn’t happy with her. She’d opened up the deepest wound my heart had ever felt. Scars from deep knife cuts began to ooze from my soul, all of them pouring out raw emotion in the form of a name—Landon.

Poppy Briar. I couldn't believe my sister had actually brought Poppy here without warning me. Thinking back over the conversations I'd had with my sister recently, I tried to remember if she'd said anything at all that should've clued me into the fact that Poppy was moving back home. Nothing came to mind.

She certainly hadn't told me her name last night when she'd suggested the interview. Damn me for not asking the woman's name.

But then, if I'd known who it was, I might've shut it down. No matter how hard it was for me to admit it, I was glad I got to see Poppy. She'd looked as amazing as ever, and it was great to know she was back in town.

That didn't mean I was looking forward to being her boss. Having her in the office every day could end up being a huge distraction. My mind went back to the way we'd left things after she'd graduated from high school. God, I'd been such a jerk. We could've really had something if I hadn't panicked and sabotaged everything.

Pulling my mind off of Poppy, I got back to work. While I did my best throughout the day to cut down on the amount of work Poppy would have to do when she started on Monday, I simply didn't have time to do my job and all of the things that would fall under her responsibilities. She'd just have to catch up on Monday the best she could.

When the workday was finally over, I headed out, much later than everyone else in the office. Traffic wasn't much better than it would've been if I'd left right at five, which made me curse from behind the steering wheel.

Deciding I needed something to keep myself busy while I drove, I pressed a few buttons on my dashboard until my car said, "Calling Grandma at home." A smile automatically went to my face just thinking about my grandmother. She'd always been my safe place to fall, never making me feel like I had to be perfect or that anything I did wasn't quite good enough.

"Landon!" Her voice warmed my heart. "How are you, dear? I'm so glad you called. Are you caught in traffic?"

"I am in traffic, Grandma, but I've been wanting to call you anyway. I'm all right. How are you doing? You and your girlies still having fun with your classes?" Grandma participated in a variety of activities to keep herself busy and often liked to talk about all of her friends with me. I was glad she was so spry at her age.

"Oh, I'm doing all right. Nothing major going on. Just old lady stuff." She laughed, making me grin. Grandma never complained about anything. "Tell me how things are at work."

"Funny you should ask. I hired an assistant today." Turning on my blinker, I changed lanes, speeding up, my heartrate doing the same just thinking about Poppy.

"Good for you! That's something you've needed for a while. Who is she?"

Taking a deep breath, I held it for a moment before saying, "Um, it's Poppy."

Grandma was quiet for a few seconds. She knew all about my feelings for Poppy and probably always had, even before I'd been willing to admit them to myself. That was just how Grandma was, always in tune with me. "Poppy Briar?"

The name wasn't quite a question, more like a statement of fact. "Yeah," I said anyway. "She's moved back to Tennessee for a while to save up money to start an art studio. Liberty

brought her in. I had no idea that Poppy was her ‘friend’ who was looking for a job. Poppy didn’t know either.”

“And you hired her? Well, that’s good. She’s a hard worker. I have no doubt you’ll be happy with her work.” Grandma was always the voice of reason.

“True. She is a hard worker.” I knew that from high school where she’d always gotten good grades. Grandma likely knew all about her from conversations with Liberty, though I didn’t know if they’d ever met in person. “Still, it’s going to be hard working with her, Grandma.”

Poppy was the only girl I’d ever loved, and now here she was, deposited right back into my life.

“You should make the most of this, Landon,” Grandma encouraged me. “You never know when a chance like this is going to come along. The girl you used to know and care for is right back in your life.”

Shaking my head, though she couldn’t see me, I said, “No, Grandma. I think the girl I used to know and care for has been gone for a really long time.” Poppy had changed after everything had happened between us.

“Maybe not, Landon. You never know. Of course, people grow and change. I should hope in nine years she wouldn’t be exactly the same young woman she was in high school. But different doesn’t necessarily mean bad. It could be a good thing.”

Grandma was the eternal optimist. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. For now, I’ll just try to get through the awkwardness of the situation and make sure she knows how to do her job.”

“That should help you quite a bit,” Grandma noted.

Sure it would, if I wasn’t so distracted by her being there that I still couldn’t get any work done.

We chatted until I got home. Then I told Grandma goodbye and that I loved her before hanging up and going inside.

Liberty wasn't there yet, which I thought was strange at first until I remembered she'd said she was going by her new house to check on the progress before she came home. I considered cooking for her, since she almost always cooked dinner for me if she was home, but I hated cooking and wasn't very good at it. So, instead, I ordered delivery from our favorite Chinese restaurant and sent my sister a text that dinner would be ready in thirty minutes.

She came breezing in right as the delivery arrived. Leaving the driver a big tip, I took the food and carried it to the dining room where Liberty was setting the table. I grabbed us some drinks, and we both dug in. I had no idea just how hungry I was until the first bite of orange chicken hit my mouth.

Once I'd had a few minutes of chowing down, I felt better about asking the burning question I'd managed to avoid at work all day. "So... why did you not mention that it was Poppy who you wanted me to interview?"

My sister looked at me wide-eyed, trying to seem all innocent. "Oh? Was that a problem, brother dear?"

I snickered. "I can't believe you were able to keep your mouth shut about something for the first time in your life. It had to have been killing you not to blurt it out."

"Oh, it was awful," Liberty agreed, scooping some noodles up with her chopsticks. "But I managed. It was totally worth it to be able to pull a fast one over on you."

"Well, I hope things work out and she can get some of this work off of my plate."

"You know Poppy. She's a workhorse. She'll be able to help you out," Liberty replied. "I wouldn't have recommended her if I didn't know that."

"I do appreciate it, even if it did shock the hell out of me."

She smiled and gave a little shrug. "You're welcome."

"Anything else I need to know about this situation?" Like was Poppy married now with six kids?

“No, I don’t think so. Pretty much just that she’s willing to work for you, since the price was right,” Liberty replied.

“And where will she be living?” I held my breath for a moment, anticipating the answer.

“Oh, right across the street. With her parents.” Liberty’s smile widened, and I felt my insides twist into a knot once more. That was exactly what I was afraid she might say.

“It’s like we’re little kids again,” I muttered.

Liberty’s hand came down on my wrist. “Sort of. Only this time, don’t worry. Poppy isn’t in love with you like she used to be.” She chuckled, and I forced myself to laugh, too, but it wasn’t funny. Not even a little bit.

I decided to change the subject. “How’s the house coming along?”

Groaning, Liberty dragged both hands through her hair. “Don’t even get me started. They started the drywall this week, like they said they would, but they’re going so slow, I don’t see how they’ll be done in a few days, which will delay the next step. The house isn’t even that big!”

“I’m sorry, Liberty.” I meant it. Even though I’d never built a house before, I’d heard plenty of friends complain about what a pain in the ass it was, start to finish, especially since the pandemic had caused all kinds of shortages of supplies and workers. “You know you can stay here as long as you need to.”

“Aww, my big brother allowing me to stay in my childhood home. How heartwarming.” Liberty winked at me and then squeezed my arm again. “Seriously, though, thanks, Landon. I appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem,” I assured her. “I know building your dream house is going to take some time.”

“Yep, just like turning this place into your dream home is going to take some time.” Liberty reached for a fortune cookie, choosing one and leaving the other for me. “One of these days, I won’t be reminded of all the stupid things we did

when we were younger when I walk into this house. Maybe. At least you got rid of the puke-stained couch.”

I laughed. “Yep. Don’t forget your dog left its mark on that fabric, too.”

Liberty chuckled along with me. “How could I forget?”

She got up to clear the dishes, munching on her fortune cookie. Liberty never even bothered to read the little slips of paper stuck inside.

I usually didn’t either, but today, I was curious. Breaking my cookie open, I chewed on one half before I unfolded the tiny piece of parchment. “Don’t let past mistakes ruin future happiness.”

“Huh,” I muttered. “Interesting.” For once, the fortune actually made sense. Usually, it just said something about me being tall or having two arms or something fairly obvious that applied to a lot of people. I tucked it into my pocket.

Heading upstairs after dinner, I lay down on my bed, propping my hands behind my head, and stared out the window. From here, I could see a light on in Poppy’s bedroom window showing through the closed blinds. Funny, I hadn’t noticed it the night before, but she was likely home then, too, wasn’t she?

With a sigh, I stared up at the ceiling and let my mind wander over the years. Poppy and I had gone from pestering each other to death when we were younger, to friends, to something I couldn’t quite describe. I’d wanted more from her, always, and when I’d almost had it, I’d fucked it up. For a long time, I tried to blame her for not letting me apologize, but I knew in my heart, I’d been the one to push her away.

Without giving it too much thought, I got up and walked over to my closet. This had been my room growing up, and while I’d changed out the furniture and décor, some things were still the same. On the top shelf in my closet, I found a shoebox that had sat essentially in the same spot for fifteen years.

Dusting it off, I carried it over to the bed and opened it. Inside, a barrage of memories fluttered up to me. Pictures of Poppy and me together, making silly faces, hugging, taunting one another. I found an invitation to a party we'd both attended, the one where I'd kissed her. A movie stub from a show she'd wanted to see but her parents had said was too mature for her—so I'd taken her—was also there, as well as dried flowers she'd picked when she was younger. Even a carton from some French fries she'd eaten when I'd taken her to a local fast food restaurant was tucked inside.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the fortune and dropped it into the box, not knowing if the statement on the piece of paper had to do with Poppy or not. But if there was a chance it did, this was the place to keep it.

One thing was clear to me, holding that box of memories. I'd never really gotten over Poppy Briar.

POPPY

The day before I was supposed to start working for Landon, my moving truck arrived from Cali. It took a few days longer than promised. The guy on the phone told me something about snow in the mountains or something. It sounded like an excuse to me. It wasn't like this was the Oregon Trail. But I told him that was fine. As long as all of my stuff arrived without anything being broken, that was all that mattered. I wasn't going to be able to use it any time soon anyway.

Saturday evening, I'd asked Liberty to meet me at the storage unit the next morning so that we could unload the truck together. "You're going to need more than just me," she said.

"I know. Aurora and August are going to be there. I figure between the four of us—"

She'd cut me off. "You need at least one more dude. I'll see what I can do."

That comment made me nervous, but I figured she was probably right. My younger brother was a strong guy, and Aurora could get a lot done, too, but it would be nice to have a couple of guys to carry the heavy stuff.

When I arrived at the storage unit, I spoke to Mr. Scott, the owner. He told me, "You can just have the moving truck back right up into spot number four."

I thanked him and went to wait for the truck. The movers would unload everything for me, but they wouldn't be able to

organize it the way that I wanted it done. That was what I'd need my siblings and Liberty for.

August and Aurora hadn't been able to ride over with me because they were still eating breakfast. My brother ate like he'd never seen food before. He promised me he'd be there in a few minutes, but when the truck got there, I was alone.

"We can just unload it for you," the driver said.

"It's fine," I told him. "I have friends coming. Just get it off the truck, and we'll move it into the unit."

He nodded politely. I was sure he was ready to get rid of my stuff so that they could get back home. If they truly hadn't planned on being away from their families for this many days, then they'd be anxious to get back to California, no doubt.

About fifteen minutes after the truck arrived, Liberty's car pulled into the parking lot. She wasn't alone, though. My stomach tightened when I saw who she'd brought along.

Landon was with her.

I was already worked up about seeing him the next day at work, but seeing him here now caught me off guard. When Liberty said that she was bringing guys, I was afraid this might happen. I plastered a smile on my face and pretended like I was absolutely fine seeing him.

Joshua was with them, too. It had been a long time since I'd seen him, and I was excited to reunite with our old friend. At least I had something to distract me from seeing Landon.

"Joshua!" I exclaimed, rushing over to hug him. "Hi, it's so nice to see you."

Joshua wrapped me up in a tight hug. "Hi, Poppy. It's great to see you, too. Wow, you're so tan. You must be missing that California weather, huh?"

"Oh, I'll get used to being back in Tennessee eventually," I told him. "You look great." He did, too. Like Landon, Joshua was tall and lean, with bulging biceps and runner's legs. Unlike Landon, Joshua and I had only ever been friends, though, so when I complimented him, it didn't make my pulse

race like one glance in Landon's direction. He was wearing shorts and a tight red T-shirt that made him look even more amazing than usual.

"Thanks, so do you," Joshua said. "I hope we can catch up now that you're back. Hope you don't mind that Landon asked me to come along."

"Absolutely, we can catch up," I told him with a nod. "I'm so glad you came. I asked the movers to just unload everything so we can organize it when we put it into the storage unit in a way that will allow me to find things if I need them. Hope that's all right with you guys."

"Sounds good." It was the first thing Landon had said. All I could do was turn and smile at him, not sure what else to say.

We walked over to where the movers were diligently taking items off the truck and stacking them in front of the open unit. They already had about half of the truck unloaded since they didn't have to think about where to put things.

"I thought your brother and sister were coming," Liberty commented as we started to move the large furniture items first. I didn't have a whole lot, just a couple of couches, a dining-room table and chairs, and my bedroom set. I wished I had room in my current bedroom for my queen-sized bed, but the full-size I had barely fit with the rest of the furniture that I'd had for all of these years. Looking at my bedframe now, I knew there was no way I could squeeze it in there with everything else.

"Poppy? Are you all right? You look lost."

Aurora's voice behind me had me turning around, my thoughts about the bedroom furniture dissolving. "Hey, look who's here," I teased, hugging my sister.

"Sorry. Someone needed to have a second plate of waffles." She turned and looked at our brother, rolling her eyes. He tried to look innocent, but it was clear he'd been the holdup, which didn't surprise me.

"Well, you're here now, and I appreciate it. August, can you give me a hand with these bigger boxes?" I asked as

Aurora picked up one of the smaller ones. “They’re all labeled. We just need to keep them organized by room.”

“Why?” my brother asked. “If you’re going to leave it all in here until you move out, who cares where it’s at?”

I was about to explain to him when Liberty jumped in. “You never know when you might need something that’s in storage. Trust me. Between moving back here from Cali and having my house built, I know a lot about living out of boxes.”

Liberty and I hadn’t gotten a chance to talk much about the progress on her house, so now was as good a time as any to have her fill me in. That way, I’d have less chance of having to speak to Landon. As she was explaining about the drywall delays, the movers finished unloading the truck and were ready to take off. I paused to thank them and sign some documents, and they drove away leaving us with about half of the stuff to finish loading into the storage unit.

Grabbing one of the smaller boxes from my kitchen, I turned around and almost collided with Landon as he was picking up another box. “Whoa.” He took hold of my arm to steady me.

“Sorry,” I murmured, feeling electricity shoot up my arm from his touch.

“No problem.” He smiled at me and promptly let me go.

“At least it’s not raining,” Joshua said, getting a laugh out of Liberty. “Remember when we all helped Sam pack up his truck to go to college in that downpour?”

Liberty was laughing so hard, she put her hand on Joshua’s shoulder to keep from falling over. I thought I saw him react to that, his expression changing slightly, but I couldn’t be sure.

Besides, I was distracted as the subject quickly turned to that last summer, the one after I’d graduated from high school.

The one where I thought I’d have a chance to be with Landon. The one full of lies and disappointment.

“That was the worst!” Liberty said, once she could speak again. “That box of his papers got so wet, it just disintegrated

into a pile of mush.”

Feeling Landon’s eyes on the side of my face, I glanced at him quickly, but we both looked away. “Hey, when we’re done here, let’s go grab some lunch,” I suggested. It had been my plan to feed them all anyway, but now was the perfect time to change the subject. “My treat.”

“Hell yeah,” August said, picking up speed. “I’m starving.”

“You literally just ate six waffles,” Aurora pointed out, shaking her head.

“I’m a growing boy,” August said with a shrug.

“Yeah, growing *out*, if you don’t slow down,” our sister teased him. He yanked her ponytail, and they both went at it for a few minutes. I was just glad to have the topic of discussion off that last summer.

It didn’t take too long for us to finish up with the packing, and then we all headed over to our favorite pizza place, Mellow Mushroom. We chose a large booth with a round seat so we could all sit together. Somehow, I found myself wedged in between Landon and Liberty and had to wonder how that had happened.

“We’ve got to get the Mushroom Mountain,” August said without even looking at the menu. “If we can finish it in thirty minutes, we’ll get our picture on the Golden Mushroom Wall of Fame.”

“Oh, well, that’s certainly worth stuffing our faces over,” Landon said, shaking his head.

“What do you think, Liberty?” I asked, turning in the other direction. My friend didn’t even hear me, though. She was busy talking to Joshua about something, the two of them making eyes at one another and giggling.

My eyes widened. I turned to Landon, giving him a little nudge with my elbow. Did he know about this? Had he even noticed? I needed to discuss this with Liberty. I knew she’d always thought Joshua was cute, but if she’d been seeing him or something, she hadn’t mentioned it.

Landon looked across me at his sister and best friend and then laughed under his breath, rolling his eyes. “I think we can order without them. They might notice when the food gets here.”

I wanted to ask him more, but I didn’t. This was the most intimate discussion I’d had with Landon in years, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“All right, August.” I turned back to my brother. “Challenge accepted. What toppings do we want? You know part of it has to be veggies only, though. That’s how I prefer my pizza.”

“I swear you may as well just go ahead and become a vegetarian,” my little brother said, like he couldn’t believe anyone would willingly give up meat.

I wasn’t quite there, but I didn’t eat a lot of meat. “I just like my veggies,” I said with a shrug. Since the pizza was so big, we were all able to get the toppings that we wanted. August, Landon, and Joshua wanted theirs loaded with all kinds of pig parts whereas us girls wanted more from the garden. In the end, when the pizza arrived, it looked and smelled delicious. Digging in, I was happy with my choice. It had been a long time since I’d had Mellow Mushroom pizza, and I’d forgotten why it was so good.

“Bet this is a ton better than the broccoli pizza you have in Cali,” August teased me.

“It’s not broccoli pizza in Cali,” I teased him right back. “It’s Cali-flower.”

“Ooh, that was lame,” Liberty said. I was surprised she even heard me. She’d been talking to Joshua about his business since we sat down.

We finished our pizza, just in the nick of time for us to get the prize. In the picture the waitress took of us, Landon had his arm around me, which made my pulse speed up again.

It was fun hanging out with my friends, and I’d missed this all so much. Sitting this close to Landon, spending time with

him, talking to him, made me wonder what I was getting myself into coming back here.

Later that evening, in my room, I lay on my bed, staring up at the ceiling. I'd missed my friends and siblings, and I was glad I had a chance to spend more time with them. But it was Landon's face that continued to dance before my eyes. The man still had a hold on me, even though I didn't want to admit it.

Last time, I'd laid my heart on the line for him. Well, this time, I would do whatever it took to protect myself. No one was going to know I was beginning to have feelings for Landon again. No one but me.

Poppy's bright eyes were glowing as she took my dick between her lips, sliding her tongue around its length, her hand working, pumping against my balls. Gasping for air, I thrust my hips into her, wanting her to take me all the way down her throat.

She was naked, her perky breasts bouncing as she moaned against my cock. I was so close to coming, I could feel myself tightening up, ready to fill her mouth with my load.

But I didn't want to come yet. I wanted her to ride me. Seeing her breasts bounce even more while I sucked on a flawless tit would be the perfect way to get my release.

"Stop, baby," I grunted, pulling out. I took her by the elbows and lay back on the bed, pulling her up on top of me. She came down on me, her wet pussy encompassing my dick in one swallow. Poppy threw her head back, letting out an ethereal cry as she began to bounce up and down harder. Pulling her breast into my mouth, I sucked her tit while I caressed her other breast. She was already fully gone in an orgasm, moaning and crying as she continued to ride me hard.

"Oh, God, Landon. This is the best sex I've ever had in my life," she cried out. "I love you so much. I'm so glad we're finally having sex. Your cock is huge, and it feels so good in my wet pussy."

I couldn't say anything in response, only continue to worship her body. My brain went all fuzzy as I finally let myself go, jerking several times as we came at the same time.

Poppy's bright eyes were locked on mine as she panted, her luscious lips parted. I thought she was leaning in for a kiss, but instead of placing her lips on mine, she began to make an annoying sound I couldn't quite comprehend.

“Beep, beep, beep!”

“Wh-what?” I asked, but the question faded away as quickly as Poppy did.

My eyes flew open. Dim morning light greeted me. The sound of my alarm going off had me jerking in the direction of my nightstand to turn it off. “Son of a bitch,” I mumbled under my breath.

Not only did my mind have to accept the fact that it had all been a dream, that I hadn't been fucking Poppy, but my dick was still hard as a rock. Like most guys, I was used to a little morning glory, but this took the cake. I didn't even know how I'd manage to take a piss with this going on.

“Poppy, you've left me no choice.”

With her beautiful face still on my mind, it didn't take long at all for me to relieve the tension. Cupping my balls with one hand, I slid the other up and down my dick just a few times. Pretending it was Poppy, I let my hands take care of what she'd been doing to me in the dream. It was nothing compared to the way I'd felt in my dream, but it did the job. A few minutes later, I hauled my ass into the shower to get ready for work.

The idea that Poppy was going to be there today had me both excited and bothered. I'd literally just dreamed that I was fucking her and masturbated thinking about her, but now I was going to have to sit in the same office as her all day. Perfect.

By the time I arrived in the office, I wasn't sure what to think about anything. Clearly, Poppy and I were not meant to be together. She'd left me without even saying goodbye, moving away to California, refusing to let me explain why I'd said what I'd said. My words had hurt her. I recognized that, but if she'd given me the chance to explain, I thought I could've made the last nine years more bearable for us both.

Yesterday had been nice, sitting with her at the restaurant, chatting, pretending like we didn't have anything between us to push us apart. But ultimately, the problems we had before were still there.

We weren't compatible. She wanted different things out of life than I did. She'd told me herself she was only here temporarily. I had no doubt she'd go back to California as soon as she could, and when she left, chances were, I wouldn't even get a goodbye. Besides, my father detested her family and would never approve of me dating her. Not that I truly cared what he thought, but why create problems when they weren't necessary?

As usual, I was the first one in the office. Remembering that I didn't have to respond to the emails Poppy would now be responsible for once she got trained took a load off my shoulders. I still had several messages I'd need to answer myself, but I didn't feel the intense pressure I normally did.

Hearing people beginning to arrive, I made my way out of my office to make the morning rounds and make sure everyone had what they needed to get their week started off right.

"Hey bossman, how's it hanging?" Paul, one of our salespeople, asked me when I came over to his desk. He was a couple of years older than me and sometimes seemed to resent the fact that I was his boss. But he was a good worker, and even though half of the stuff that came out of his mouth was either annoying or inappropriate, I kept him around. If I heard anything about him bothering the other employees, that would be a different story.

"I'm good, Paul," I said, forcing myself to be nice. It was too early in the morning to already be in a foul mood. "How are you? Did you have a good weekend?"

"Yeah, it was great. I went to that club I've been telling you about, Solar, and picked up a really hot chick. You really should come with me sometime, man. You can't miss. It's full of babes who are looking for a good time, if you know what I mean." He elbowed me in the side and chuckled.

I forced a smile, but I didn't want to encourage him. "Maybe someday." I had no intention of ever being Paul's wingman, that was for damn sure. "Don't forget about the meeting later."

"I'll be there," Paul said. We had a meeting every Monday to go over what we were all working on. Liberty also liked to lead a session called, "Weekly Wins" where everyone said something positive that happened to them that week at work and at home. It was a little cheesy for my taste, but she said it helped with morale, so I found a way to tolerate it and even participate. My only hope was that Paul wouldn't mention the woman he picked up over the weekend as his something good that had happened at home.

Once I'd greeted everyone, including my enthusiastic sister who was in an even better mood than usual for reasons she couldn't explain, I headed to the break room for some coffee. Poppy's desk was empty, which alarmed me slightly. Was she running late on her first day? That didn't seem like her. In the back of my mind, I feared she might've changed her mind. Maybe spending so much time with me the day before had made her realize she wouldn't be able to work here. Could I blame her? I'd thought she seemed happy about the job, but maybe she'd just needed the money before, and now, she thought that wasn't even worth it.

Approaching the break room, an odor hit me in the face that I simply couldn't identify. Strong, pungent, stomach-turning, my nose instantly wrinkled as I followed the scent to the room where most of us ate lunch, wondering what the hell that could possibly be.

Pushing through the door, I asked, "Is someone in here burning turds for breakfast?"

Poppy turned to look at me, stirring a mug of something with a spoon. Her eyes were wide as she attempted to comprehend what was wrong with me.

It was then that I realized whatever the hell I was smelling was coming from her mug. Taking a sip, Poppy said, "Well,

good morning to you, too. Are you referring to my mushroom coffee?”

Not sure how to answer since that was clearly what I was inhaling and I'd just insulted her and her drink of choice, I only stared at her, nodding.

Poppy cracked a smile. “You shouldn't knock it until you try it. It's really good.”

“Really? Does it taste like it smells?” I asked her, not really wanting to offend her, but I couldn't even imagine consuming something that smelled like it belonged in a toilet.

Poppy shook her head at me. “I heard what you said you think it smells like, and I have to tell you, I disagree.” She inhaled the steam coming out of her cup. Ordinarily, watching someone intentionally breathe in something that smelled so repulsive might make me sick, but seeing the expression on Poppy's face actually made me smile. “It's good for me, and for the planet, so why wouldn't I drink it?”

Shrugging, I moved to the Keurig machine. “I can think of a few reasons, but I guess it doesn't matter what I think as long as you're happy.” Already reaching for a mug, I paused. Perhaps if I'd thought about what made her happy a few years back, things would be different. Shaking my head, I tried my best to knock that out of my head, hoping she didn't think about what I'd said that way at all.

The machine whirred to life, making my coffee with my choice of K-cup, which did not smell like raw sewage. Turning to Poppy, I asked, “Are you ready to get started?”

“Yeah, I'm excited.” She smiled at me over her cup.

“Great. I've asked Liberty to go through everything with you. She'll get you situated and let you know when you're ready to start doing things yourself.”

Her eyebrows arched, and the smile faltered just slightly, but then she nodded. “Perfect.”

“She's obviously in a different department than you, as you know, but she knows what it is we need for you to do here.”

“Sounds... great.” Poppy was still smiling, but it seemed like something was off. I had no idea what it was. Chances were, she wouldn’t tell me.

“All right. Well, we have a meeting this afternoon. I’ll introduce you to everyone then. Shout at me if you need anything. Enjoy your coffee.” I raised my full cup to her and headed back to my office.

Sitting down, I couldn’t help but consider how much of a hippie Poppy really was. Chuckling, I thought about how her free spirit had always been so different from my stuffy upbringing. My parents had always been trying to prove they belonged with the rich people in our neighborhood whereas her family didn’t give a fuck what anyone else thought about them. Poppy had embraced that way of thinking, which had allowed her to be more herself than I had ever permitted myself to be.

With a sip of my coffee, I threw myself into my work, knowing it would be meeting time before much longer.

Surprisingly, the day went really well. Without having to stop to do all of the busy work Liberty was currently training Poppy how to do, I had so much more time to focus on the important aspects of running the business.

I was so busy with my work, I almost arrived late for the meeting. When I walked into the conference room, the rest of the staff was already there, except for Paul, who walked in right behind me.

My eyes automatically went to Poppy. She was sitting next to Liberty, the two of them giggling about something. Poppy looked so pretty—and happy. I hoped that meant she was having a good day here and might stay. For a while.

“All right. Let’s get started,” I said, taking my seat at the front of the table while Paul sat in his normal seat next to me. “Everyone, in case you haven’t met her yet, this is my new personal assistant, Poppy Briar.”

“Damn,” Paul muttered under his breath before adding loud enough for all to hear, “Welcome to the team, gorgeous.”

Poppy's eyes widened slightly at the inappropriate comment, and she looked at me.

Turning my attention to Paul, I said his name and then bit back the rest of what I wanted to say. Not only was it completely uncalled for, but it also made me mad. Poppy was off-limits. Period. Sure, she might not belong to me, and she probably wouldn't be sticking around long either. But I wouldn't sit here and watch her date someone else either.

Especially not someone like Paul.

“That’s pretty much it,” Liberty said, leaning back in the chair she’d pulled over to my desk earlier that morning to show me how to go through the emails. “It’s really not that difficult.”

It was late afternoon, almost time to go home, and she’d spent about six hours teaching me how to do everything. She was right. It wasn’t difficult. But it was a lot. Liberty had told me that Landon had been doing most of what I would be doing, on top of running the company, so a lot of what I would be responsible for had piled up. The sheer number of emails waiting to be answered was unbelievable.

I’d also quickly discovered that the company’s process for responding to potential clients who hadn’t actually taken all of the steps to begin their partnership was way more time-consuming than it had to be. Likewise, a lot of the emails in this particular inbox were from workers in other offices sending in forms and reports.

Landon had been responding individually to each report that came in, downloading it, and saving it to a folder. All of this could take way less time if some basic tools were created and the system was automated so that reports would automatically go where they were supposed to go, and the workers would receive an email to let them know that the reports had been received—without me having to type the same thing over and over again.

A form letter would do for the potential clients, too. Once they followed through with the information we needed from them to begin a partnership, I would be more than happy to take the time to correspond with each of them individually, but a lot of these people were just curious and hadn't even gotten to a point where they could use our services. So it made no sense to type out a response to each one when a form could be utilized to make them think they were getting a personal response that would only take seconds to deploy.

I went over all of my suggestions with Liberty, asking her if it would be okay for me to create these tools and put them in place, as well as some others I'd need for organization.

She thought they were all great ideas. "What this position really needs is for someone to care about it, make it their own. For the longest time, before Landon started doing it, the work just got done by whoever had a few spare moments, which means everything is unorganized and messy. But if you can actually take the time to make it what it could be, you'll be saving the company a lot of time, hassle, and ultimately money."

I agreed with her. "Yes, that's what I was thinking. That way, I'll be freed up to give the clients who need my time and attention what they deserve, instead of always struggling to keep up."

"I can't tell you how many clients we've had complain about our customer service. We've even had a few quit using us because they can never get a prompt reply. We make up for it in other departments, most of them say, but ultimately, we need to get back to them in a timely fashion."

"Leave that to me," I told her, and we both giggled.

"I'm so glad you're here," Liberty said, genuinely smiling at me. "By the way, I meant to mention, sorry about that jerk in the meeting earlier."

"Oh, I didn't think he was being that bad. He didn't insult my coffee this time," I muttered, not even looking at her.

“Huh? No, I meant Paul.” She laughed loudly. I’d told her what Landon had said earlier about my coffee. “Landon wasn’t a jerk in the meeting.”

I shrugged. “Maybe not specifically, but I’m kind of used to ‘Landon’ and ‘jerk’ being synonymous.” I had to keep my voice down since he was my boss now, but she laughed even louder this time. We’d been laughing most of the day. It was so nice to work with my best friend.

“Seriously, though. Paul is an asshole, but he’s harmless. He’s always talking about all of the women he’s fucking, how he goes out to clubs and picks up all of these horny women with giant breasts. Most of us just ignore him, but if it gets to be a problem, we can let Landon know. He’s said more than once that he will fire the jackass if he makes anyone truly uncomfortable.”

“His comment was inappropriate this morning, but it didn’t make me uncomfortable.” Paul had essentially said I was attractive, which would’ve been considered a compliment, even in the workplace, not that long ago. He didn’t seem so old that he shouldn’t have known it wasn’t okay to say stuff like that anymore, but he hadn’t said anything that amounted to sexual harassment, and Landon had snapped at him pretty quickly, getting him to pipe down. I wasn’t afraid of the guy, but I wanted to steer clear of him, too. Thankfully, he was in a different department.

Briefly, I thought of Landon. I’d hardly seen him at all today, which wasn’t what I’d been expecting. Since I was meant to be his personal assistant, I expected him to train me. Hearing him say it would be Liberty had been disappointing, but I thought I’d managed to hide my reaction well. Not even being called into his office once today seemed odd. It was more like I was the company assistant—or secretary or something—than someone who worked directly for Landon.

At least I’d had a fun day with him the day before.

“All right. Let’s look at that email I told you about earlier,” Liberty said, leaning up so that she could reach the mouse.

“Remember this one I told you about where the client had some specific questions we need to answer?”

“Yes, I took notes.” Opening the notes I’d typed up in another document on my second screen, I showed Liberty what I’d written when she was telling me about this specific client. It seemed like we needed to be pretty careful with this one since the client was already irritated that it was taking so long to receive a response. The case itself wasn’t too complex, but I wanted to make sure I did everything right.

Liberty read over what I’d written. “That’s great, Poppy. I’d just change the wording here a little.” She went into the document, taking over my keyboard, and made the changes. “There. I think that sounds good. So you can go ahead and send that to Mr. Ashley. Copy Landon on it. You know the email address to use?”

“Yep.” Taking the mouse back, I went into the email account we’d been working in all day and located the email the company had originally received from Stephen Ashley. “Here it is.”

“That’s the one. While you work on that, I’m going to go upload a couple of pics I need for a campaign, and I’ll come to check on you in a minute. You’ve got this,” Liberty assured me.

“No problem.”

We smiled at one another as she moved back to her desk, which was across from mine. Our work areas were outside of Landon’s office, whereas the main office area was on the other side of the hallway that contained the conference room and the break room. It was nice to be able to work so close to Liberty, and it was quieter over here. Earlier, Liberty had walked me through the main office area so I could meet some people, and I’d sat down in the head of HR’s office for a few minutes, which was on the far side of the building. The buzz of other employees talking on the phone and typing had been distracting to me. I’d always found it a bit hard to focus in a crowd, which was probably why I preferred the solace of working on my art alone. I did love to talk, though, so owning

an art studio would give me the opportunity to do that. Office jobs just weren't my forte most of the time, but I was learning to make it work.

While Liberty worked at her desk, I typed up the email, essentially just copying and pasting everything we'd already come up with into a new response. Reading over it to myself, I noticed one typo, which I fixed. "Liberty? Do you want to look this over and see if it sounds right to you?"

"Is it what you and I already came up with?" she replied, looking at her computer screen pretty intently.

"Yes," I assured her.

"Then no, I'm good. I already read it. You can just copy Landon on it and then hit send. Mr. Ashley will probably respond by the end of the day, so we can talk about what to do next, depending upon what he has to say."

"Sounds good." I'd already copied Landon on the email, so I went ahead and pressed send and then went to the next task on my list, creating some of the tools Liberty and I had talked about earlier.

It was mindless work, really, just plugging formulas into the spreadsheet. I wished that Liberty was still sitting with me so we could chat. I hadn't had the chance to say anything to her about Joshua yet, and I really wanted to. They'd been so chummy the day before. I wondered what was going on.

She looked busy, though, and I didn't want to annoy her, so I went back to what I was doing, losing my train of thought in the monotonous task.

Until someone shouted my name from behind me, and every hair on the back of my neck stood up.

"Poppy! What in the hell are you doing?"

Landon's voice was more than perturbed. He sounded angry. I looked up and saw Liberty's confused face before turning around, wondering what I had done now. I hadn't stunk up the break room in hours.

“What’s that?” I asked, seeing him approaching swiftly, red in the face.

“This is your first day on the job, and Mr. Ashley is one of our most important clients. Why in the world would you think it would be okay for you to respond to his email already? You don’t know what the hell you’re doing yet! I thought I made it clear, at least to Liberty, that I didn’t want you sending any correspondence to anyone until you were fully trained and knew the business better. Every email you send out reflects on this company, so you can’t just start firing things off without thinking!”

My eyes felt like they were about to bulge out of my head as I tried to control my tongue. What the hell did he think I’d done? Just sent some thoughtless email to one of his most important clients?

Before I could even open my mouth to respond, Liberty came flying over to my desk, her face almost as red as her brother’s. “First of all,” she began, “did you even read the email? Or are you just making assumptions, as usual?”

Landon’s mouth began to move but no words came out before his sister interrupted him.

“That’s what I thought. You didn’t even read it! Secondly, I’ve been sitting with her all day, and it’s past four o’clock now. She knows what she’s doing, Landon. Thirdly, I told her exactly what to say in that email. I even typed some of it myself. So if you want to do all of this shit yourself, then the two of us will go home for the day and maybe not ever come back, but if you want to trust other people to do their fucking jobs, then back the hell off!”

Again, Landon looked like a fish out of water as he tried to formulate what to say. I was offended that he’d just assumed that I didn’t know what I was doing, but it was hilarious watching Liberty put him in his place.

“I’m sorry.” I had no idea if Landon was talking to Liberty, to me, or to both of us, but he turned around and walked back to his office without another word.

Liberty shook her head at me, folding her arms across her chest. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.” I didn’t actually think it was, but at least she’d straightened him out.

“He’s just mad the two of you aren’t together. It has nothing to do with the email. You did exactly what you were supposed to.” With that, she headed back to her desk, leaving me wondering if what she’d just said was true.

Did Landon still care about me? Did he *ever* care about me? If his actions and the words he’d just shouted at me were any indication, I was going to have to go with *no*.

LANDON

I was an asshole.

As much as I'd wanted to pound Paul into the ground for what he'd said to Poppy earlier, I'd just said something even worse to her. I wish I had at least read through the email before I panicked and thought that she'd fucked everything up, but I should've known better. It wasn't as if Poppy was the type of person who would send an email out without thinking about what she was doing. I'd just freaked out and started yelling without thinking.

It wasn't as if this was the first time I'd shouted at someone in the office. Hell, this wasn't even the first time I'd yelled at someone for an unwarranted reason. But this was the first time I felt truly bad about it. I'd apologized to employees a few times before for being too passionate about the work, but this was different.

I was wrong. I overreacted. And it might've been enough to make Poppy want to quit.

Man, I was an idiot.

Sitting at my desk, I read over the email, and everything she'd said was correct. The email was worded politely and professionally, and it was informative as well. If I had done it myself, I couldn't have done a better job. So what the fuck was I complaining about? Man, I was stupid.

Putting all of that aside, I finished up the few things I needed to get done that day, trying not to think about it. I'd gotten a lot more done today than I'd expected, thanks to not

having to worry about all of the mindless emails I didn't have to answer. With any luck, Poppy wouldn't quit and those emails wouldn't become my work again.

Just as I was getting ready to shut down my computer for the night, I got a text from Joshua. "You wanna come over to my folks' house tonight and watch the game? I'm gonna grill some steaks and have some bros over. They're out of town."

For once, I could leave work on time, and I wasn't mentally and physically exhausted. "Sure thing," I told him.

Joshua's parents traveled a lot now that they'd retired, so he spent a lot of time at their house, rather than staying in his apartment in Nashville. It was a nice place, but he liked the idea of having a yard and a pool. One of these days, he was going to buy a house of his own, I guaranteed it, but I secretly thought he was waiting until he got married for that so that his wife would have some input. Not that he was even dating anyone. I thought about how friendly he'd been with my sister the day before. Poppy had pointed it out to me. Was something going on there that I hadn't been told? I had no idea.

A few hours later, I found myself in the backyard, sipping on a beer, watching baseball on the giant projector television Joshua's dad had put in a few years back. This was the life right here. I needed one of these in my backyard.

"How's the burger?" Joshua asked me, biting into his steak.

"Great," I told him. "You've always been the grill master."

"This steak is sick," our friend Luke said from my other side. "Goes great with the beer, man. Thanks for asking me to come over."

"Of course. I figured, it's the first time the Braves have played the champs this season, so why not have a party?" Joshua and Luke clinked their beer bottles together, just in time for the Braves to score a run, which had us all cheering.

I finished my drink, so I set my plate aside and got up to get another one. Joshua walked over to the outdoor fridge with me, which was the first time I'd even had a few seconds alone

with my best friend since arriving. Behind us, the other guys cheered at the television.

“How’s it going?” Joshua asked me. “Poppy work out all right?”

Immediately, a bitterness settled over me, thinking about the mistake I’d made this afternoon, but I didn’t want to get into that now. “Yeah, I think so. She seems to be doing a good job.”

“Of course she is,” he said, handing me a beer. “It’s Poppy. She always does everything well.”

He had a point. Poppy was one of those people who always worked really hard to make sure she did her best, even when the task in question was something she didn’t particularly like or wasn’t naturally inclined to do.

Joshua handed me a beer out of the fridge. “Thanks. By the way, how are things with you and Liberty?”

My friend’s face turned red. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, the two of you were awfully chatty yesterday,” I said with a shrug. “I was just wondering if there was anything you wanted to tell me.”

He shook his head adamantly. “Nope. Just your sister. Just talking. We’ve been friends for a while. I just don’t see her outside of whatever you’re doing. So we had a lot to catch up on.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t sure if what he was saying was true. It seemed like more than that to me.

With my beer in hand, I headed back to my seat to finish my burger, watching the Braves score a few more times. Tennessee didn’t have a professional baseball team, but Atlanta wasn’t that far away, so most of us cheered for the Braves. We could’ve chosen the Reds or even the Cardinals as teams close by, but my dad had been a Braves fan, so they were my team, too. Joshua, being the owner of a sports complex, was crazy about sports in general. The Braves, the Titans, the Grizzlies, he cheered for all of them like he was a member of the team.

Feeling eyes on the side of my face, again, I turned my head and saw that August Briar was staring at me—again. This wasn't the first time that I'd noticed Poppy's younger brother looking at me since I'd arrived. I'd been surprised he was there at all. Granted, Joshua and August had just worked together the day before to unload Poppy's moving truck, so it sort of made sense that Joshua would invite him, but he was a lot younger than us, and it wasn't as if we were really friends.

Now, he was looking at me like he had something he wanted to say, but when I opened my mouth to ask if everything was okay, he turned away.

It was strange, so I tried to ignore it. Finishing my burger, I got up to go throw the plate in the trash. When I turned around to go back to my seat, I almost ran right into August.

"Hey, Landon. Can I speak to you for a moment?" he asked me, keeping his voice low, though his tone sounded a bit ominous.

"Sure," I told him with a shrug. "What's up?"

August moved away from the area of the backyard where everyone was sitting, cheering for the Braves. We went around the corner, closer to Joshua's mom's garden. "How was Poppy's first day at work?" August asked, his hands pushed deep down in his pockets.

"Oh, it was pretty good, I think." I rubbed the back of my neck, knowing that most of what I was saying was misleading. Before I'd yelled at her, Poppy seemed to have been having a good day.

"Well, she came home pretty upset today. I tried to talk to her. So did Aurora, but she just went to her room. I don't like seeing her that way, man." August's voice was full of concern.

Feeling a stabbing pain in my heart, I told him, "I think I know why she's acting that way. It was a bit of a misunderstanding, but I'll be apologizing to her tomorrow."

"Good," he said, and suddenly I felt like he was the older, more mature adult in the conversation. "Because I don't like seeing my sister so upset. Poppy has such a kind heart. She

always goes out of her way to help others, and it just irritates me that some people either take advantage of that or don't appreciate it."

His words were chosen carefully, but I understood what he was getting at. He knew that something had happened between us years ago, even though he was just a kid in school at the time. He must have assumed that the problems between Poppy and me were my fault. For the most part, he wouldn't be wrong, but she had her influence as well.

"I understand, man," I told him, but he didn't seem to be completely buying it.

"The last time the two of you couldn't work things out, she left. For a long time. I don't want that to happen again. If you guys can't get along, she'll go running off with a broken heart, and I might only see her once a year. You've gotta treat her right, man."

His words stung, but I couldn't tell him that he was wrong. "Got it," I said with a sharp nod. "I'm sorry for upsetting her today. I'll talk to her about it tomorrow. Believe me, August. I don't want her leaving either."

August seemed to understand that I meant those words. He wrapped his arms around me in a bro hug, making me chuckle a bit. He was more like Poppy than I'd realized, a free spirit, but that was a good thing.

The two of us walked back over to watch the end of the baseball game. Once the Braves secured the win, I told everyone goodnight, thanked Joshua for inviting me, and then walked the short distance home.

It was a nice spring night, a little chilly, but the air was fresh and clear. Only the sound of bugs chirping in the bushes and the occasional sound of a car passing by a few streets over interrupted my thoughts, which naturally went to Poppy. It seemed like she was always on my mind these days, now that she lived just across the street from me.

Not that I'd spent a whole lot of time in the last nine years not thinking about her. She was like a ghost that had haunted

me for most of my life. Having her close in proximity hadn't actually brought her within my grasp. It was all just an illusion.

Once I reached my house, I went upstairs and got ready for bed, rehearsing what I'd say to Poppy the next day the whole time. I tried to turn the thoughts off as I lay there, staring at the ceiling, begging sleep to come, but I couldn't.

My mind was stuck on that summer all those years ago. It had been my father's stern voice that had caused me to say what I had to Poppy.

"What are you doing, son?" my dad had asked me. "We have a real chance here to take the business to the next level, but your work has fallen off drastically since you started running around with the neighborhood hooligan. Do you want our company to be successful? Do you want to take over when I retire?"

Of course, I'd wanted those things. Letting my dad down had meant failure for me, and I wasn't ready to fail.

So I'd told Poppy the one thing I knew she would never forgive me for. That was it. After that, she'd left, and she wouldn't answer any of my messages, no matter how apologetic I was. It didn't matter that I hadn't meant the words. I'd said them. She'd heard them, and she couldn't unhear them.

I'd made a huge mistake, and even after all of these years, I wasn't sure I knew how to fix it. For that matter, I wasn't sure I even deserved to fix it. Poppy was a special girl who deserved to be with someone who would treat her like the amazing, free-spirited, fairy that she was. Someone who would never break her heart.

Clearly, that person wasn't me because I already had.

POPPY

Landon's words continued to sting for hours after I left work. Even though Liberty had completely put him in his place and there was nothing else I could've added to her explanation for what had happened, the more I thought about it, the more upset I became.

Why did he think I was so incompetent that I would've just shot off an email without even thinking about my words? Why would he even hire me for the job if he thought I'd be careless or say something to embarrass the company? It wasn't even so much that he'd thought I'd sent the email without being prepared that stung. It was his "reminder" that I represented his company now.

It all tied back to what he'd told me all of those years ago, that I wasn't good enough for him. That my family wasn't good enough for his family. That was what stung the most. Why couldn't he just accept that we were different, but being different didn't make me or my family less than his?

My family had been excited to talk to me about my first day on the job, but I'd basically gone straight upstairs when I'd gotten home, flopping onto my bed to wallow in my misery. They were worried about me, though. Mama had knocked on my door about an hour later, asking if I wanted some tea or something to soothe me. I'd assured her I was fine, but I wasn't. Even August, who often seemed clueless as to what was going on around him, had seen that I was upset and asked if I wanted to talk about it.

I didn't. Talking about it to my family wasn't going to do me any good. The only person I even remotely thought about confiding in when it came to the situation with Landon was Liberty, but her comment had thrown me for a loop as well. Why would she say that Landon was upset that we weren't together?

He certainly wasn't acting like he wanted to date me today. Yesterday, we'd been a little chummy, but it hadn't been anything romantic. No, I seriously doubted he would've hired me at all if he had any romantic intentions toward me. After all, working in the same office as someone one was interested in was just asking for trouble.

Deciding that I'd wallowed enough, I pulled out my phone to check the yoga schedule downtown. I kept my membership so I could go when I was back in town. Myra, the owner, gave me a pretty cheap rate since I hardly got a chance to attend classes, but now that I was back and my pay was so great, I would definitely be attending more and could pay the usual rates.

Scrolling through the schedule, I was delighted to see that she was offering a hot Pilates class that started in about an hour. It was getting late, so I doubted many people would be there, which was a good thing. I didn't want to chat or be friendly. I just wanted to work this tension out of my body, and Pilates was a great way to do that, especially when the heat was turned up.

Quickly, I signed up for the class and got dressed in yoga pants and a fitted top that would make the movements easier to perform. Then, grabbing my gym bag, I headed out the door, telling my mom I'd be back in a bit.

"Have fun, dear," she called, probably just happy to see I was back in the world of the living.

The class was only a ten-minute drive from my house. I was right in thinking it wouldn't be too crowded. The parking lot only had a few other cars in it, which allowed me to find a great spot by the door. With only a couple of minutes to spare, I grabbed my bag and headed inside.

“Poppy! It’s so nice to see you!” Myra came in for a hug. I didn’t mind embracing the woman, who was about my mom’s age and nearly as free a spirit as Mama was, even though she was a bit sweaty. “I hear you’ve moved back home.” Myra held my shoulders, smiling at me as we talked.

“Yes, that’s right. So I’m going to need you to change my enrollment back to how it was before I moved.” I returned the smile, glad to see her familiar face, despite my grumpiness from earlier.

“Perfect! Well, we are glad you’re here, and if you ever want to take me up on that offer to teach some classes, let me know.” Myra patted my shoulder longingly.

“Thank you. I’ll think about it.” She’d asked me to teach classes when I was still in high school, and while I’d thought about it then, I didn’t know how good of a teacher I’d be. When I was doing Pilates, I tended to get lost in my head, which made it hard to discuss what the students were supposed to be doing and how.

Only a few classes were being held at this late hour, so when I wandered down the hallway, it wasn’t difficult to find the right class. I didn’t recognize the instructor, but he welcomed me in and introduced himself as Daryl. I smiled and found a spot in the middle of the room to drop my mat. Taking off my shoes, I grabbed my water bottle and filled it up from the fountain before setting my bag and shoes against the wall and taking my spot.

A few moments later, the class began. Daryl’s tone was soothing and quiet as he guided us through the different stretches and moves. The heat in the room intensified the longer the class went on until I was covered in sweat. With my eyes closed, I concentrated on how my body felt, imagining that each drop of perspiration carried with it a drop of hurt with Landon’s name on it. At this rate, I’d have no anxiety left inside of me by the time the class was over. The sweat began to pour down my face, taking the disdain with it.

An hour later, Daryl’s calm voice said, “All right, class. One last exhale, and we are finished. Thank you all for

coming, and I hope to see you here again next time.”

Draining what was left of my water, I wiped my forehead on a towel from my bag and gathered up my mat. My body felt so relaxed and loose, I felt like I could do anything at the moment.

The other participants were also getting ready to depart, some of them gathering to talk. It seemed like a lot of people in this class knew one another well. Maybe they always attended together. I smiled politely at them and went to have a seat in one of the chairs against the wall to slide my shoes on. It was getting late, and I knew my family was concerned about me, so I should get home so they wouldn't worry.

“Hello there, dear,” a friendly female voice said as an elderly woman sat down next to me. I had noticed her earlier, when the class first started, and thought she looked familiar. “That was quite the workout, wasn't it?”

“Yes, it was,” I replied, working my shoe on. “Do you come to these classes a lot?” Maybe I'd seen her here before, on one of my trips home.

“I try to,” she said, dabbing at her forehead with a pink towel. “Keeps me active and healthy in my old age.”

We both chuckled. “I guess you're only as old as you feel.”

“That's true, and at my age, a lot of folks begin to feel old. But not me. I've decided I'm never going to be old.” She laughed again, and I laughed along with her. She seemed sweet. “I'm Ellie.”

“Poppy.” The name didn't help. I still couldn't place her.

“You all right, dear? When you first came in, I thought you looked a little upset, though you look relaxed now. Of course, Pilates will do that to a soul.” Ellie slid her feet into a pair of sandals, a much more practical choice than my sneakers.

“Pilates is very therapeutic,” I agreed with her. “I was a little upset before, but I'm good now.”

“Glad to hear it,” Ellie said, her smile even warmer. “Boy trouble?”

“Why do you ask that?” I felt my cheeks reddening at the question.

“Oh, I don’t know. Something about your tone,” she said with a shrug.

“Yeah, well, I guess you could say that.” The last thing I wanted to do was get into the whole situation with Landon to a stranger. But something about Ellie made me feel like I could speak to her. It might’ve been her age, which touted her wisdom, or perhaps it was her kindness, but she seemed like the sort of person I could sit and talk to for ages.

“Well, whatever the problem is, sweetie, try to keep in mind that all things happen for a reason. That’s what I’ve learned over the years. Sometimes, things truly are meant to be, but the timing just isn’t right. Other times, we find ourselves trying to force a square peg into a round hole.”

Nodding, I considered what she was saying. Maybe that was what I had been doing with Landon. I could see myself being described as a square peg.

“Don’t worry though, honey. That doesn’t mean it isn’t going to work out for you and your significant other.” She gently laid her hand on my arm. “Sometimes when one of us falls in love, the other just isn’t prepared to catch us yet. Give it some time, and perhaps you’ll have the soft landing you’ve been looking for after all.”

Her words really spoke to me in a way no one else had been able to reach me. “Yeah, okay,” I said with a nod. “Thank you, Ellie. That makes sense.”

Her smile widened. “I’m so glad to hear it. Now, you have a nice evening, dear. Maybe I’ll see you at class again sometime soon?”

“I hope so,” I told her enthusiastically. “See you later.”

Gathering up my belongings, I headed out the door, climbing into my van, my thoughts still lingering on Ellie’s words. While it was true Landon hadn’t caught me yet, that didn’t mean I wasn’t still falling. There was still a chance he’d figure out how to keep me from hitting the ground.

At home, I went inside, smiling at Mama as she sat at the dining-room table working on a puzzle. “You seem happier,” she said.

“I am. Pilates works wonders. I’m going to go take a shower.” If I wasn’t all sweaty, I would’ve gone over and kissed the top of her head.

“Was your first day all right?” she called after me.

“Yeah, mostly.” That was the truth. She seemed satisfied with that response, so I headed upstairs.

The sound of dramatic music coming from my youngest sister’s room had me pausing in the hallway. Aurora’s door was ajar, so I stuck my head in. “What are you doing?”

My sister was sitting on her bed with a laptop. “Have you seen this new show on Netflix? It’s called *Don’t Murder the Marigolds*.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Nope. Never heard of it.”

“You’ve gotta watch it with me! I just started the first episode, and I’m a little nervous to watch it alone.”

Giggling at her, I found myself saying, “Sure, Roar. Let me go take a quick shower, though. I stink.”

“Okay, but hurry,” she urged. “I’ll go make some popcorn.”

“Sounds good.” With a smile on my face, I headed to the bathroom, glad to find the one I generally shared with Autumn empty. Rushing through my shower to go watch the show with Aurora kept me from losing myself in my thoughts.

Twenty minutes later, dressed in comfy pajamas, I snuggled in next to my sister, the dramatic music filling our ears as we lost ourselves in the show. I’d missed this, spending quality time with my family. Munching on popcorn, the two of us screamed and laughed together for far too long, watching episode after episode. I was going to be tired in the morning, but it was so worth it.

LANDON

It was difficult to get myself out of bed the morning after the incident with Poppy. I knew she was mad at me, and I couldn't blame her. How was I going to face her after I'd yelled at her for something stupid she hadn't even done?

Deciding the only thing I could truly do was apologize, I hauled myself to the shower and got myself ready for work. Ordinarily, I left the house well before Liberty did, but this morning, her car was already out of the garage before I dragged myself to the car.

When I was running late, I never stopped for coffee, but today, a plan formulated in my mind, and I found myself pulling into the lot at my favorite coffee shop, hoping that my apology might be punctuated with a drink.

The flirty barista was there, but I was in no mood. Keeping it polite, I ordered my coffee and also asked for a matcha.

"Oooh, someone must be on a health kick, huh?" Charity asked, ringing me up.

"Yep. It's for my girlfriend," I explained.

The girl's smile fell for a moment before she pulled it back into place. "Oh. I didn't realize you had one, Landon. How nice." The way she said that last part told me she didn't actually think it was nice at all.

"Thank you." Since it was a lie meant to let her down gently, I didn't elaborate. At least she wasn't the one fixing my

drink, so I wouldn't have to worry about her spitting in the cup.

A few minutes later, my name was called. I gathered the drinks and headed to my car, still thinking about what I would say to Poppy when I apologized. Her brother had seemed understanding when I told him the situation, but Poppy was unpredictable to me. Most of the time, she was very forgiving, but sometimes, she was angry for reasons I didn't even understand.

The office was buzzing when I made my way inside.

"Look who decided to show up!" Paul shouted with a laugh as I made my way past his desk.

"Yep, well, I'm the boss, so I get to have more flexible hours. Trust me. My ass will still be in my chair by the time you're home, my friend." I said it with a chuckle to my tone, but we both knew I worked longer and harder than anyone else.

Paul laughed, but the look in his eye told me that he didn't think it was funny and was just humoring his boss.

"Who's the other drink for?" another one of the workers, Nicole, asked.

"Oh, my assistant," I said. "I owe her one after yesterday. First days can be rough."

"I heard she was doing an awesome job," Carla chimed in from her desk.

"Absolutely she is," I clarified. "But you guys all know working for me can be challenging."

"Nah, we love you, Landon," Carla said. "Your good ideas will make us all rich." That got a chuckle out of everyone. Smiling at them all, I headed down the hallway to the area of the office where Liberty and Poppy's desks were located.

Both of them were already there, sitting at Poppy's desk while Liberty showed her how to do something. I wasn't sure what they were talking about, and when they saw me, they both stopped talking. My sister made a noise in the back of her

throat and walked away. Since I'd gone to Joshua's the night before, I hadn't had a chance to speak to her, but clearly, she still thought I was being a jerk the day before. She wasn't wrong.

"Hi, Poppy." My voice had a quiver in it, even to my own ear. "How are you this morning?"

"Hi, Landon. I'm fine." Her tone was polite but short. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yeah, uh, I just wanted to tell you I'm really sorry about yesterday. I've got a lot going on at the moment, and I overreacted. I apologize for jumping to conclusions, and I promise it won't happen again."

Poppy's eyes stayed focused on mine for a long moment before she nodded. "Apology accepted."

"Thank you," I said. "Also, I thought that the email you sent was professional and polite. Nice work."

Poppy's smile widened. "Thank you. Liberty was a big help."

I turned to look at my sister, but she was already working on her own project, which I was glad for. I'd just assumed she would eavesdrop. "Good. I knew I picked the right person to get you settled. As soon as Liberty thinks you're ready to start replying to emails without her assistance, go for it. I trust her judgment. And yours."

"I appreciate that." Poppy's tone was still overly professional but had a teasing lilt to it. "Looks like you're awfully thirsty today." She nodded at my two cups.

"Oh, this one is for you." I'd been so worked up about talking to her, I'd forgotten about the matcha. "Here you go."

"For me?" She took the cup and sniffed it before smiling. "Matcha?"

Shrugging, I felt heat flooding my face. "Well, I wasn't sure if you'd accept my apology if I didn't come to you with a peace offering."

That made her genuinely laugh. “You’re a wise man, Landon Johnson.” She took a sip and gave it a thumbs-up. “Are you sure you didn’t buy this for me so that you wouldn’t have to smell burnt turds today?”

Her comment had me bursting out in laughter. I shook my head. “No, no. You can make your mushroom coffee whenever you like. I was stopping for coffee anyway and thought you could use a morning pick-me-up.”

“Could’ve brought your sister something,” Liberty said from behind me. “It is almost my birthday after all.”

My eyes widened in surprise. Shit. She was right. It was almost her birthday.

Poppy laughed. “No one ever forgets your birthday, Lib.” She winked at me, letting me know that she noticed I’d forgotten. “Thanks again, boss.”

“No problem. Thank you for your hard work.” Now, I sounded like a typical upper management sleazeball. As much as I wanted to linger at her desk, I realized it would be in my best interest to get out of there before I asked for a TPS report or something stupid like that.

In my office, I got to work on the important matters I needed to attend to first, relieved that I could trust Poppy to do all of the menial, time-consuming tasks I’d been doing before.

A few minutes after I settled into work, I heard Liberty and Poppy laughing at their desks. I hoped that they weren’t laughing at me, but there was no way to know for sure. All I could do was ignore it and stay focused on my work.

The first thing I always did in the morning was check my calendar. Though I had no meetings scheduled for the day, I did have a luncheon planned for the staff. I’d thought about making it a surprise, but since a lot of them liked to go grab a sandwich for lunch, I decided to send a quick email to let them know. “Today, we’ll be having a luncheon in the break room. Hope you all like chicken sandwiches from that awesome place up the street, but if you prefer a salad or something else, please let me know in the next few minutes.”

Email sent, I got back to work, but it was only a couple of minutes later when I heard a soft knock on my office door. “Yes?” Looking up from my screen, I saw Poppy standing there. “Hey, what’s up?” Suddenly, I realized she probably didn’t even like chicken. She was practically a vegan, after all. “Did you want me to order you something else for lunch?”

“No, no, it’s fine. I do eat chicken. I wanted to tell you that, if you want me to, I can handle all of that for you. That’s kind of why I’m here, right?”

Realization sank in, and I nodded. “Oh, yeah. I guess that’s right. Sorry. I’m not used to having someone to do that kind of stuff. I’ll forward you a list of what I was going to order, and Liberty can let you know how to access the account you’ll need to pay for it. They’ll deliver, so you won’t have to go get it, but if you could make sure it’s all set up in the break room, that would be amazing.”

“Of course.” Poppy’s smile was bright, which didn’t surprise me. After all, she was truly in her element when she was helping others.

With that, she left, and I went back to work, still smiling.

I got so busy that I might’ve worked right through lunch if the delicious scent of breaded chicken didn’t waft through the air vents to me. Stomach rumbling I headed to the break room where everyone was grabbing chicken sandwiches, fries, and side salads while Poppy poured everyone who wanted one a cup of tea—sweetened or unsweetened. Everyone was grinning, chatting, and laughing with one another. It made me stand back, take a moment, and smile at what my family had created. These were amazing people, and I was very blessed to have such a talented staff to work with.

“There he is! Hey, bossman, don’t miss out on the chicken!” Paul joked.

“I see you’re not the last one here this time,” I jabbed with a good-natured smile.

“Hell, no. Serve food at all the meetings, and I’ll be there.” Most of the rest of our colleagues laughed at that. I did, too,

because I was trying to be polite, but Paul was beginning to irritate me these days.

“Now that everyone is here,” Liberty began, holding up her hands, despite having a chicken sandwich in one and a cup of sweet tea in the other, “I have an important announcement to make.”

“Oh my god! You’re getting married!” Carla proclaimed, covering her mouth with both hands.

Liberty froze, her eyes wide as saucers. “What? No! I don’t even have a boyfriend.”

“You’re pregnant?” Carla guessed again, fanning herself this time.

Biting down on my bottom lip, I did my best not to laugh at the horror etched on my younger sister’s face. Poppy was clearly trying not to laugh, too, but she couldn’t hold it back. When it finally left her, it did so in the form of a snort.

After that, I could no longer control myself. I started laughing as well.

“No!” Liberty exclaimed. “If I don’t have a boyfriend, why would I be pregnant?”

“Do you need a refresher on how it works?” Paul asked, his tone way too creepy for me. I stopped laughing. “I can explain it to you.”

“Gross.” Liberty shook her head and took a deep breath. “I’m having a birthday party on Friday!” she blurted out before anyone else could make a guess. “You are all invited!”

The group broke into cheers, but I didn’t know what to think of that. Where was she having this party? Her house wasn’t finished yet.

“We’ll have lots of food, dancing, and drinks! So bring your significant other if you have one, and come on over.” Liberty turned and flashed me a smile. “What? All I want from my awesome big brother for my birthday is a party.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I haven’t bought you anything else yet then,” I said, shaking my head. But I joined in the

laughter. She could have a party at my house—our house.

I was about to say something else, something about how she'd better be ready to clean up the mess, but what I saw across the room had every lick of happiness burning out of my body in a heat the same temperature as the sun.

Poppy had taken a seat at one of the tables in the corner, and Paul had just sidled right up to her, sitting down next to her and striking up a conversation.

I didn't like it. Not one bit.

POPPY

Putting the finishing touches on my new spreadsheet, I clapped my hands quietly with enthusiasm, not wanting to bother Liberty but also so happy that I finally had a tool that would be useful, I could hardly hold it in.

“Are you done with your spreadsheet?” My best friend knew me so well.

“Yes! You want to see?” I grinned at her from behind my computer screen.

“Of course!” In a flash, she was at my side, looking over my shoulder.

“Okay, so here you go. When I get a new email that fits into one of these categories, I just click here, and then all of the information populates here. See?”

I showed her what I was talking about, and when the correct information populated into the cells of the spreadsheet, we both enthusiastically cheered again. I raised my hand up into the air, and she slapped her palm against it in a loud high-five.

“That’s amazing,” Liberty told me. “And I guess I shouldn’t be surprised at how color-coordinated it is, since you are an artist.”

“Well, you know I had to do something to make it artistic. There aren’t too many opportunities for that in this office, but I do my best.” I forced a smile to my lips, trying not to focus on the fact that I wasn’t living my best life at the moment. The

work here was fun so far, and I loved that Liberty and I got to sit across from one another and chat throughout the day, but I missed my art. I hadn't even gotten a chance to unpack my paints from the special suitcase I'd brought them in.

"This will save you so much time—and headaches," she said, patting my shoulder. "I love it. But you do know it's time to go home, right?"

Glancing at the clock in the corner of my screen, I saw that she was right. "Oh, shoot. I guess I'll have to load the rest of the emails tomorrow."

"Hey, do you wanna come over this evening?" she asked, and immediately, my heart lurched into my throat. "I was thinking we should start planning my birthday party. We only have a few days, and you know I need your help."

"Oh, yeah, sure," I stammered. "That will be fun." All I could think about was the fact that Landon would likely be there. It was his house, after all. "I promised Mama I'd eat dinner with the family tonight, though, since I ducked out on it last night. But after that, I can come over." Aurora would just have to wait a few hours for me to watch our new show together. She wouldn't be happy, but Liberty was right. We were running out of time to plan her party, and I definitely wanted to help. "We've thrown some pretty dope parties over the years."

"I know, right?" Liberty agreed, going back to her desk. "I just hope Paul doesn't come. Or if he does come, he doesn't bring one of his sleazy girlfriends with him." She stuck out her tongue, making me laugh.

Paul and I had actually had an interesting conversation at lunch. I didn't think he was as bad as everyone else seemed to think he was, but then, maybe I just didn't know him that well yet. Maybe the sleaze would come out later.

"At lunch, he told me he already had plans," I told her.

"Thank god," Liberty exclaimed, pulling her purse from her desk drawer.

“But then he said he might change them after I said I was going.” I shrugged, not sure if that meant anything or not.

Liberty stuck her tongue out. “Gag. God, what if he likes you?”

I shook my head. “I’m not interested.” I pulled my stuff from the drawer and shut down my computer. At the moment, I was only interested in one guy, and he seemed to have forgotten anything had ever happened between us. Maybe that was for the best.

We walked together to the elevator, took it down, and discussed the possibility of carpooling the next day. Liberty said she didn’t like to ride with Landon because he usually got there so early, but she wouldn’t have that problem with me, so we decided to try it out later in the week. “See you around seven,” I told her, hopping into my van.

Traffic wasn’t too bad, so I was home well before six. Mama had dinner ready. The scent of baked zucchini and mixed vegetables filled the air. That and her famous noodles made for an awesome dinner. By the time we finished, I was stuffed.

“I’m going to Lib’s for a little while to help her plan her birthday party,” I announced as I helped Mama and Aurora clear the table.

Aurora heard me from the living room. “But what about our show?”

“I’ll be back soon,” I promised her. “Then we can murder some more flowers.” I winked at her. Mama just looked at us, confused.

“Have fun,” my mother finally said with a smile.

As soon as the dishwasher was loaded, I headed upstairs to change into a pair of jeans and my favorite purple sweater. At least moving back to Tennessee allowed me to wear more cool-weather clothing.

Making my way across the street, I breathed in the crisp spring air, seeing the final streaks of gold disappear behind the trees in the distance. This neighborhood really was beautiful. I

was lucky that my parents could afford a house in such a nice area of town. I wondered if I'd ever be as successful as they were.

Standing on Landon's front porch, I took a deep breath and raised my hand to knock. What if he opened the door? I shook my head to clear it and then lowered it.

Liberty answered almost immediately. "Hey! Come on in! You look cute."

Glancing down at my outfit, which was nothing special, I muttered, "Thanks," and followed her into the dining room where she had her laptop set up, along with a printer and a bunch of pictures of ideas she'd gotten from Pinterest and other sites.

"Do you want a drink?" she asked. "I have some of that wine you like."

"Yes, please." I hadn't intended to drink anything since we had work the next day and wine usually went straight to my head, but I loved the kind she was talking about and figured one glass wouldn't hurt.

Liberty came back with two glasses and the bottle, and I knew I was in trouble. It would be hard to say no to a second or third glass with the full bottle sitting right there. She poured us each a glass, and I took a sip, savoring it.

"I love this stuff," Liberty said on a sigh.

"Yep, me, too." I took a look at the pictures on the table. "It looks like you've gotten off to a great start."

"Let me show you what I was thinking!" Setting her glass aside, she picked up a few of the pictures. "I'm so excited, Poppy! I wish I would've decided to do this a while back."

"I wish I would've thought about it myself," I told her, a pang of guilt hitting me in the heart. "I'm sorry! I knew your birthday was coming up, but I've just been so busy with the moving and everything."

"No worries," she told me, waving her hand. "I know you're busy. A girl could dream that her brother might throw a

party for her, but I swear Landon forgot it was my birthday at all.”

I smirked at her, remembering his face when she’d brought it up that morning. “Maybe.”

Lowering her voice, Liberty leaned closer to me, grabbing my arm. “Listen, I invited someone, and I’m a little nervous about it—but excited.”

Butterflies bubbled up inside me as her nervous energy traveled over to me. “Who is it?”

She glanced over her shoulder toward the back door. I wasn’t sure why. “Joshua.”

After she spoke his name, she squealed, and I squealed along with her.

“So you do like him then?” I asked, so happy for her. It had been a while since Liberty had really liked anyone. And Joshua was a great guy. The two of us had only ever been friends since I’d been interested in his best friend, but I still thought he was amazing—and very attractive.

The apples of Liberty’s cheeks pinked. “The last few years, every time I see him, I feel like I’m being tugged in his direction. It’s hard to describe. I actually haven’t been hanging around him much recently because he just makes me feel kind of giddy. I thought, if Landon finds out, well, he’ll put a stop to that right away.” She rolled her eyes.

“Why is that?” I asked. “Landon is the last person on earth who should be putting any kind of expectations on anyone else’s relationships. It’s not like he can handle them himself.”

“True,” Liberty agreed. “But Joshua is his best friend, and I’m his little sister. I’m fairly certain this is a huge violation of the bro code.” She rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion, making me laugh.

“While that might be true, I wouldn’t worry about it. Your brother wouldn’t ask you what you thought if he started dating your best friend.” As soon as the sentence was out of my mouth, I realized that *I* was her best friend. Now, *my* cheeks were turning red.

And Liberty was laughing at me. “That’s true. He definitely wouldn’t care what I thought. But if he ever did anything to hurt my best friend again, I swear to god, I’d rip his throat out.”

I could tell she was being serious—about hurting him, not about actually ripping his throat out. “Thanks,” I told her, meaning it.

She nodded. “Anything for you, girl.”

Before I could respond, the back door opened, and Landon walked in. My mouth dropped open at the sight of him. Wearing an old pair of denim jeans that hugged him in all the right places and a green and blue flannel that made his eyes glow, he looked unbelievable. The grease streaked across his clothes and coating his hands didn’t hurt either.

I found myself staring at him, thinking about how hot he used to be working on his bike in the garage located toward the back of their property. I’d go out there and watch him fine tune it, pretending to help by handing him tools. Damn, he was fine then, and he was still fine now.

If his father had found out back then that he’d been working on fixing up that old motorcycle, he would’ve been furious. He thought that manual labor was beneath his son. But Landon had always been good with his hands. When it came to engines and stuff like that anyway. Unfortunately, I had never gotten to find out about how he used his hands in other ways.

“Oh, hey, Poppy.” His tone was casual, but it seemed like he hadn’t realized I was coming over. “How are you?”

“Good, good,” I mumbled. “How are you?”

A crooked smile lit his face. “Fine. Are you guys working on the party planning?”

“We were until you interrupted,” Liberty said, giving him a death glare. “Now, as I was saying, Poppy—since I’m pretty sure you didn’t hear a damn word I said—let’s look at these balloon options.”

“Right. Balloon options.” I shook my head and turned around, filling my lungs with oxygen for the first time since Landon had walked in. I must’ve forgotten how to breathe.

Landon went over to the sink to wash his hands, and I gave Liberty as much of my attention as I could gather, but the distraction was real.

“Is anyone even listening to me?” she asked, right to doubt my focus.

Nope. Not even a little bit.

LANDON

Poppy looked amazing. When she came to the office each day, she was always dressed professionally, and I enjoyed checking her out in different skirts and dresses. But this? This was the Poppy I remembered from before, back when we were just dumb kids who had the whole world in front of us and had no idea I was about to fuck everything up. The jeans she wore hugged her in all of the right places, and the sweater made her eyes twinkle while simultaneously giving her that innocent look I was always drawn to.

“You okay, Landon?” Liberty asked me, making me jump. I’d been standing by the kitchen sink for several seconds, my hands dripping but not drying them off because I’d been lost in my thoughts of Poppy.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” I dried my hands and then opened up the utility drawer beside the sink, trying to remember what gauge wire I’d come in looking for. The drawer was a mess, which meant it would take me forever to find it. I rifled around, hoping I wouldn’t have to go back to the garage and the part I was working on to remember.

“So, I am definitely thinking it needs to be a movie theme,” Liberty was saying, her eyes wide and a big grin on her face. I stifled a laugh. I’d never seen anyone get so worked up about their birthday party before. When she was little, she would be vibrating, bouncing off the walls for weeks before her party date. Now that she was a grownup, in theory anyway, it was the same thing.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Poppy agreed. “We can all come dressed as our favorite movie characters.”

“Yeah, and we can get one of those big outside projectors, like Joshua has in the backyard over at his parents’ house,” Liberty noted. “We can play all of my favorite movies! And we’ve gotta have lots of popcorn.”

“How long is this party going to be if we’re going to play all of your favorite movies?” Poppy asked, laughing.

I laughed, too, which had Liberty turning to look at me again with one eyebrow raised. “Um, did you need some help finding something, big brother? Or are you just lingering to be a pain in the ass?”

The temptation to stick my tongue out at her was overwhelming, but I fought it. I was done looking in the drawer. I couldn’t manage to pull my eyes off Poppy to save my life. It seemed pretty clear to my sister that I was hanging out in the kitchen for a reason, too.

“Actually, I was just thinking, I should be helping you plan.” I doubted I would be fooling her, or anyone, but it did make sense if I worded it the right way.

“Excuse me?” Liberty gawked at me. “Landon, are you feeling all right? Do you have a fever or something? Should I go get that old thermometer Mom used to shove under our tongues and see if you’ve caught some kind of virus that invades your brain? You never volunteer to help with anything.”

With every single one of her jabs, Poppy giggled. I smirked at my sister and shook my head. “I’m feeling fine, Lib. I just thought, since I am paying for the party and apparently hosting it, I should probably help out with the planning, even if I am well aware that any suggestions I make will be shot down immediately.”

“Well, as I recall, the last time you made a suggestion for one of my parties, I was fifteen, and you told Mom you thought I still liked My Little Pony.” Liberty gave me a death glare.

“I thought that you did. You had that one stuffed pony in your room forever,” I replied in self-defense.

“That wasn’t a pony! It was a Pokémon character, you dufus! I told you that a hundred times.” With Liberty’s latest slam, Poppy laughed so loud she snorted and quickly covered her mouth with both hands.

Damn, she was adorable.

“Maybe I won’t be paying for this party after all.” I squinted one eye at Liberty, but she could tell I was joking, as was she.

“Thank goodness your mother asked you first,” Poppy chimed in, referring to Lib’s fifteenth birthday. “All of the kids from school would’ve made so much fun of you if you’d had a My Little Pony party.”

“No shit.” Poppy shook her head for a second. “Okay, Landon. If you want to help, can you go grab Mom’s catering notebook? I can’t decide what kind of food I want, and it’s easier than searching for everything online. Besides, I need my laptop to look for projector rentals.”

“Sure thing,” I told her, heading into Mom’s office. She hadn’t packed everything up in there, especially the sort of thing that was “local” as she called it, which included a lot of her entertainment binders. Mom was the queen of throwing parties and loved to wow her guests with her food and decorations. The woman had all kinds of resources, all of them organized and easy to use. I could probably actually plan this party myself if I wanted to.

But I definitely didn’t want to. I just knew I couldn’t hang out in the kitchen for no reason without making myself look suspicious.

When I came back into the kitchen with what I thought had to be the right binder, they were both laughing, and Poppy was mimicking some dance steps I automatically recognized. A thought popped into my head, and a grin formed on my face.

“Don’t laugh at her,” Liberty scolded. “You don’t even know what we were talking about.”

“I’m not,” I assured her, plopping the binder down on the table. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” Liberty’s grouchiness toward me disappeared for a moment. “You really are helping, huh?”

Shrugging, I reminded her, “People change. Over time.”

“You change? Hmm.” With that, she slid the laptop over to me. “See if you can find a projector rental place.”

“I don’t mind asking Joshua if we can borrow his,” I told her. “Unless you’re not planning on inviting him to the party.”

For some reason I didn’t understand, Liberty’s cheeks changed colors. She was growing slightly red. Did she dislike Joshua that much? I thought they were getting along. They were talking a lot at lunch the other day.

“Oh, I guess I could invite him,” Liberty said. Poppy chuckled, and Liberty turned her glare onto her friend.

“Cool. I’ll ask him if we can borrow it so we don’t have to mess with a rental.” I pulled my phone out and sent Joshua a quick text while Poppy and Liberty looked at the catering binder.

“Oh! Tacos Locos caters! Why did I not know that?” Liberty exclaimed. “I love their food. And that would be so cool to have a taco bar. People could build their own tacos or burritos.”

“Or nachos,” Poppy added, pointing to the binder.

“Right! Oh, we’ve got to do that.” Liberty clapped her hands a couple of times. She was definitely happy again now.

“Works for me,” Poppy said. “Should I give them a call tomorrow and book it?”

“I’ll do it,” I offered. “That way I can pay for it.”

Poppy’s eyes met mine for a long second before she nodded and looked away. I dropped my gaze as well, feeling my heartrate increase. A text came through, literally making me jump. Quickly looking down at my phone, I saw that the text was from Joshua saying that he wouldn’t mind bringing

the equipment over on the day of the party and getting it all set up for us.

“Joshua is in,” I told Liberty.

Her eyebrows lifted, and a confused expression crossed her face as she twirled her hair. “In what?”

Now, I was confused. “He’s in—he’ll let us borrow his projector.”

“Oh, right.” She nodded and looked away from me quickly, her face turning red again. I wondered if they had had some kind of a disagreement or something. “Cool.”

I looked at Poppy, but she wasn’t looking at me now. She did have a slight smile pulling up one side of her mouth, though. Clearly, I was missing something, but I had no idea what it could be.

“Okay—so we’ve got tacos, we’ve got movies, we’ve got popcorn and beer, obviously.” Poppy read off a list she’d been making while we were talking. “And we’ve got everyone coming to the party dressed in a costume based on their favorite character. What else?”

“What are you going to be, Lib?” I asked my sister. “You have so many favorite characters.”

“Yeah, I haven’t decided yet.” She tapped a pen against the side of her face. “I was thinking maybe Wednesday Addams or Elle Woods.”

“Those are two very different characters,” Poppy noted.

“No doubt,” I agreed.

“Who are you going to dress as, Landon?” Poppy asked me.

I knew exactly what my answer should be, but I didn’t want to tell her. “I don’t know. I’ll have to give it some thought.” I didn’t bother to ask her what she’d wear because I had a feeling I already knew.

“Maybe I should look for a costume store near us,” Liberty muttered, clearly still thinking about her own costume. “I

doubt I'll have time to order one in time. Damn, I should've thought about this before."

"I'm sure my mom can help you with a costume. You know how crafty she is, and she's great on the sewing machine," Poppy offered.

"That's right! Mama Briar to the rescue. Do you think she'd mind?" Liberty tipped her head to the side and batted her eyelashes.

"She won't mind at all," Poppy assured her. "She loves you." Her quick glance in my direction told me I shouldn't bother to ask. Mama Briar probably wasn't my biggest fan. It didn't matter. I wouldn't need help with what I had in mind.

Poppy hung out a little longer while they finalized their plans, and then she left, waving goodbye to me as Liberty walked her to the door. I said goodbye and then considered crashing my head down into the table, but I refrained.

When my sister came back, she stood in the doorway with her arms folded for a long second, clearly thinking of saying something.

"What?" I asked.

Liberty shook her head. "Why can't you just admit that you fucked up and apologize?"

"What are you talking about?" I tried to sound innocent, but even to my own ear, it came across as fake.

"Poppy is a very forgiving person. I bet if you talked to her about it, she would accept your apology, and then the two of you could stop being so weird around one another. Hell, she'd probably be willing to give you another chance." She walked to the fridge, pulled out a beer, and cracked it open. Then she took a long drink and I shook my head at her.

"It's more complicated than you're letting on, Liberty," I said, my tone sympathetic because I wanted it to be as easy as she was suggesting it could be.

"Well, I hate seeing the two of you together and knowing it could be so much more. You could both be the one to make the

other one happy.”

The little sister in her was showing, which was rare. Most of the time, she acted like she didn't care about me at all, but I could tell that she did. “I'll think about it, Lib.”

“That's all I can ask for,” she said. Taking another drink of her beer, she sighed and headed out of the room, leaving all of her planning materials spread out all over my kitchen table, which didn't surprise me at all.

Closing her laptop, I thought about what she'd said. Maybe I should apologize. It couldn't hurt anything except for my pride, and I wasn't sure I even had any of that anymore anyway.

POPPY

The rest of the week went by in a blur. I had so many meetings, trainings, and lunches with various staff members that by the time Friday rolled around, I was exhausted. Liberty's party was the only thing keeping me moving.

"We're still on for lunch, right?" Liberty asked me almost first thing that morning as I got my desk situated for the day.

I'd taken to bringing my coffee from home in a thermos so I wouldn't have to make it in the office and stink it up. And I was in the middle of refilling my cup when she asked.

"Absolutely! I can't wait to take out the birthday girl." Winking at her, I screwed the lid back onto my thermos and stashed it away.

Landon had made me self-conscious about what I was drinking, which I hated, but that was how I felt. Why did Landon always have to mess with my emotions?

"Cool. I'm dying for a burger," Liberty said, flipping open her laptop. "Oh, but you don't like those."

"Your birthday, your choice," I reminded her. "Besides, I like impossible burgers or whatever the place is calling their plant-based selection."

"Awesome. Burgers for the win!" Liberty flashed me a big smile and then started working on her project, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

All week, I'd been planning my costume. As soon as Liberty had said that the theme was going to be movies, I'd known who I would be going as. Since I was a young girl, *13 Going On 30* had been one of my favorite movies. I absolutely loved Jennifer Garner's character, Jenna Rink. Growing up, I must've watched that movie a thousand times.

The fact that the first official date I'd gone on with Landon had been to see that movie at the local drive-in wouldn't spoil my fun.

Mama had been helping me get everything together, even recreating the dress from the iconic "Thriller" dance scene in the movie. I couldn't wait to get home and put the finishing touches on it.

An email popped up on my computer screen, forcing me to concentrate on my work. I got busy opening emails and responding to them, but I'd only gotten through a handful of them when a familiar voice had me looking up again.

"Hey there, gorgeous, how's it going?" Paul sauntered over to my desk, sipping a steaming cup of coffee I assumed he'd just poured. Since my desk was so close to the break room, he often came over to say hello when he refilled his drink. He must've come and visited at least a dozen times this week.

Paul was harmless, and I thought he might actually be a decent guy, though I certainly wasn't interested in him. Having him constantly interrupt my work was a little irritating.

"Hi, Paul." I forced myself to be polite and cheerful. After all, it was a Friday. "How are you this morning?"

"Great. You going to Liberty's party this evening?" He leaned against the corner of my desk, his coffee cup still raised to his lips.

"She'd better be." Liberty answered his question before I got a chance. "She is my best friend, you know."

"Yeah, so I've heard," Paul said with a crooked smile. "I hear it helps to know someone around here to get a job." He laughed like he'd actually just said something funny.

I stared at him for a moment. “You don’t think I’m good at my job?”

“No, no, of course, I do, Pops. I was just joking.” Paul laughed again and punched me lightly in the shoulder.

“Pops?” Liberty wrinkled her nose. “Gross.”

“What? It’s just a fun nickname.” Paul seemed to think he was hilarious.

“You know, Paul, I’ve got a lot of work to do, so unless there’s something I can help you with?” I raised my eyebrows and waited, trying to remain polite, but his jokes were borderline offensive most of the time. I usually didn’t like confrontation, so I tried to ignore him, but that last crack was one too many.

“No, no. Just wanted to come say good morning.” Paul slurped on his coffee and didn’t appear to be going anywhere.

Plastering my friendliest smile onto my face, I said, “Good morning, Paul. Hope you have a great one.” Then, I promptly returned my attention to my computer.

Yet, he continued to linger for a moment until Landon’s office door opened. Whether he thought that Landon would be pissed that he wasn’t working or he didn’t want the boss to see him talking to me, he turned around and headed back to his side of the office.

“Good morning.” Landon waved at me and then walked over to his sister’s desk. “Lunch today?”

“Oh, uh, Poppy is taking me.” Liberty looked from her brother to me and back again. “Do you want to come with us?”

“No, no, that’s fine. I didn’t want you to spend your birthday lunch by yourself, but that’s cool. You guys have fun. Be back before two though.” Again, Landon glanced over at me, but his eyes didn’t linger.

“What’s at two?” I asked him.

“A very important meeting.” Landon’s smile let me know that it wasn’t really a meeting at all.

“You mean my office birthday party!” Liberty exclaimed. “I sure hope you didn’t make the mint chocolate chip ice cream mistake again, though, brother.”

“No, no I did not.” Landon pressed his hands down deep into the pockets of his jeans.

“Good.” Liberty gave him a narrowed look, and then Landon turned and walked away, a smile on his face.

“Sorry!” Liberty whisper-shouted at me. “I didn’t know what else to say!”

Laughing, I waved a hand at her. “You’re fine.”

“What if he would’ve said yes?”

Part of me wished he had. “Then we would’ve all had a nice lunch together.” I shrugged and went back to my work, hoping no one else interrupted between now and lunch.

Thankfully, most of my work was done for the day before we even went to lunch. When Liberty popped up and shouted, “It’s time!” my stomach rumbled in response.

“Yes it is!”

She drove us to the restaurant she had in mind, which wasn’t far away. While Liberty ate a monster burger with everything on it, I ate one made out of plants with nothing but veggies piled on top of it. Liberty talked about her party between bites, shoving fries into her face as well.

“I just hope Joshua comes,” she said. “I mean, I think he will because he has to bring the projector. But what if he doesn’t stay?”

“He’ll stay.” I felt confident in my answer. I’d seen the two of them together, after all. “Mama said she’d take your costume over and leave it on the back porch so you’d have it as soon as you got home.”

“She’s so awesome! I wish I knew how to sew like her. I’m going to be the best Elle Woods ever. I can’t believe she even knew how to make that pink pillbox hat.”

“Yeah, Mama’s pretty great.” I had definitely hit the jackpot when it came to my mother. “What is Landon wearing?” I tried to sound casual, but Liberty knew me too well.

“I can’t tell you.” She raised and lowered her eyebrows at me. “Mostly because I don’t know. But he was a mess last night, running around trying to get everything together. I think I might have an idea what it is, and you’re going to love it.”

Unsure as to what I should say to her, I decided to let it go and changed the subject. “We need more binder clips.”

“Huh?” Liberty took a drink of her soda. “Oh, at the office? Right. I’ll show you how to order that stuff when we get back.”

“Sounds good.”

As soon as we got back to the office, we were ushered into the break room where Landon had a cake and ice cream waiting. The entire staff was there, and the moment Liberty walked in, they all broke into a loud, cheerful rendition of “Happy Birthday.”

I smiled and sang along, wrapping my arm around her as soon as the song was over. Everyone came and hugged her, and then Liberty went over to cut the cake. Thanks to fire codes, there were no candles for her to blow out, but it didn’t matter. Liberty was still thrilled, taking a huge slice and scooping out a bunch of vanilla ice cream to go with her chocolate cake.

Once Liberty had her piece, one of the other women took over cutting the cake. I hung back, not in any hurry to get my piece. Feeling eyes on the side of my face, I assumed it was Paul, but when I turned, Landon quickly looked away. Immediately, I felt heat rise to color my cheeks, and my heart started beating faster. It could’ve been an innocent glance in my direction, but then, why would he look away so quickly?

After the birthday party, Landon let us all go a couple of hours early since it was Friday and most of the staff planned to attend Liberty’s birthday party.

“Here, take a piece of cake to your mother,” Liberty said, wrapping a piece of her birthday cake on a plate in a napkin. “She totally deserves it after helping me with the costume.”

Not bothering to mention that my mother was vegan, I took the cake from her. “That’s so sweet. Thank you.” I figured August would scarf it down. Hugging Liberty goodbye, I said, “See you in a bit.” Then I headed out the door.

The entire drive home, I busied my mind making plans for getting ready. My outfit was all laid out already, but I wanted it to be perfect. What would Landon say when he saw me wearing the costume of the lead character from the movie we saw on our first date?

Or would he even remember?

A frown formed on my face as I considered how disappointed I would be if he didn’t even recognize my clothes. If someone told him I was Jenna Rink, would he remember?

Determined not to think about that, I pulled into the driveway and rushed inside. Thanks to us getting off early, traffic was light, so I had no reason to be in a hurry, but excitement prevented me from slowing down.

“Is that cake?” August asked, appearing out of nowhere as soon as I walked in.

Laughing, I handed it to him. “It’s supposed to be for Mama, but you know she won’t eat it.”

He picked it up with his hand and took a bite. “Yum.”

“Silly boy.” Taking the stairs quickly, I headed to my room to make sure everything was still laid out. It was—my dress, accessories, and heels. I hated wearing anything but sandals, but it had to be done.

In the bathroom, I took a shower, shaved—because I was wearing a skirt, no other reason—and worked on my makeup and hair. By the time I slid on my dress and accessories, I was really feeling the part.

With my heels on, I took the stairs cautiously. Mama was waiting for me at the bottom and took a picture, like I was still in high school. I hugged her. “Thanks for your help.”

“I hope you have the best time, dear.” Kissing my cheek, she lovingly patted my shoulder as Dad came in to hug me goodbye.

I would probably be a few minutes early, but that way, I could help set up if Liberty needed me to.

A moment later, I was standing on the front porch of the Johnson house, taking deep breaths. Nerves bubbled up inside of me, but I forced myself to knock on the door anyway. It took a moment, but then, Landon pulled the door open, and my breath caught in my throat.

He was wearing a gray button-down shirt and jeans, his hair slightly messy, his eyes wide with anticipation.

All I could say was, “You remembered.”

LANDON

My heart stopped beating for a few seconds as I looked at Poppy standing on my front porch dressed as Jenna Rink from *13 Going On 30*. Suddenly, we were a couple of kids again, on our first date, seeing a movie I had pretended to think was lame so I'd seem cool to her, even though I knew that it was her favorite movie.

“You remembered,” she said.

Glancing down at my outfit, I shrugged. “Well, it was an easy outfit to put together. Matt Flamhaff. I’m not sure I look that much like Mark Ruffalo, but hey, I guess we match, huh? Jenna? You look amazing. Really beautiful.”

Color washed over her cheeks as she smiled up at me. Maybe I’d said too much, but I couldn’t help myself. My sister’s advice to apologize stuck in the back of my throat, though. I couldn’t just blurt out that I was sorry about everything that had happened all those years ago at the beginning of a party. Besides, I’d already tried to apologize several times, and Poppy wasn’t hearing any of it.

Moving aside so that she could come in, I heard her soft, “Thank you.” She took a look around to see what we’d done with the place. I was pretty proud of our hard work. All of the movie-themed decorations and posters, the snacks set up in the living room and outside, with the caterers setting up in the kitchen right now—it had all come together. “Do you need any help with anything?”

“No, I think we’ve got it. Joshua and Lib are putting the projector up right now in the backyard. I was going to go help with that, if you wanna come.”

“Sure.” She smiled at me, and I followed her to the back door. I figured the other guests wouldn’t start arriving for at least a few more minutes, but I definitely didn’t mind that Poppy was early.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked her as we passed through the kitchen.

“That would be great.” Poppy waited for me to pour her favorite beer into a cup, and then we proceeded, just as Liberty and Joshua were coming inside. Taking one look at him, Poppy said, “Are you Zorro?”

Liberty laughed, placing her hand on Joshua’s shoulder. “That’s what I asked!”

Wearing all black, including a piece of black cloth tied around his eyes, he looked like Zorro to me, but his face fell. “No! Zorro wears a hat and a black mask. I’m Westley from *The Princess Bride*!”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense.” Poppy took a drink of her beer while Liberty and Joshua argued over why people weren’t getting his costume.

I shrugged. “I’ve never seen it.”

All three of them turned to look at me. “What the hell is the matter with you?” Poppy asked. “It’s iconic. You’ve got to watch it.”

“I thought *13 Going On 30* was your jam,” I reminded her.

“I can like more than one movie.” She made a face at me that had me laughing as I grabbed myself a beer.

“I guess you’re all done outside?” I asked the other two, thinking it odd that Liberty still had her hand on Joshua’s arm from when she’d playfully smacked him a second ago, but then, he was my best friend and she was my sister. Maybe they felt like siblings, too, sometimes.

“Yep, all set,” Joshua assured me.

“This is going to be the best birthday ever!” Liberty jumped up and down until her pink hat fell off, which Joshua caught and resituated on her head. All I could do was smile.

They hurried off at the sound of the doorbell, leaving me alone with Poppy, besides the caterers.

“They sure are cute,” Poppy noted.

“Uh, yeah. They’re cute friends,” I mumbled, my forehead crinkling in confusion.

Poppy laughed at me. “Friends?”

“Yeah, nothing more than that. He’s my best friend, and she’s my sister. He wouldn’t go there.”

Poppy only stared at me, making me wonder what I was missing, but then a bunch of people began pouring through the front door, and whatever she was asking me to accept as fact got lost in the shuffle.

The more people that arrived, the more distracted I became, making sure everyone had drinks. Then, we all dug into the tacos, and it became clear to me that my sister was drinking way too fast. I knew better than to try to take a drink from her hand, though, so I let her be. At least she wouldn’t have to drive.

I’d already lined up a bunch of drivers to take everyone home that needed a ride anyway. It might’ve been easier to just make sure they each called an Uber, but I wanted to be proactive. The last thing I wanted was for someone to get hurt when we were supposed to be having fun, celebrating my sister.

With a full belly and another beer in my hand, I wandered outside. At the moment, *Something About Mary* was playing on the projector, and a bunch of guests were sitting around, watching while drinking beers, nibbling on snacks, and chatting.

My eyes immediately went to Poppy. She was sitting on a seat big enough for two toward the back, alone. For most of the evening, I’d seen her talking to some of our friends from

high school, but this was the first time I'd looked over to see her unoccupied.

Immediately, I walked over in her direction, grabbing a couple of beers from a cooler as I went. When her face lit up to see me, a warmth spread across my chest. She was the most beautiful girl here by far, and that smile always made me happy.

"Hey." I handed her a beer, and she scooted over a bit to let me sit down. "How are you?"

"This is so much fun." She seemed slightly tipsy but not drunk. "Just needed a breather."

"Did you want to be alone?" Maybe she was just being polite in scooting over.

"No, no, please, join me." She took a sip of her beer. "Are you having fun?"

"I am, though most of these people see me fairly often. They all probably want to hear how life has been for you the past few years." I sipped my beer, too, but I had started feeling it going to my head a couple of drinks ago, so I knew I needed to slow down.

"There's been a lot of questions." She nodded. "But it's cool. I like catching up with everyone."

I realized then that I didn't know most of what she'd been up to the past few years, not since Liberty had come home anyway. "What ended up happening with your studio?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound like I was prying.

She groaned. "It just wasn't the right time. I got impatient and tried to force it, and things just didn't go as planned. I ran out of capital far too quickly, and then an opportunity to do something else came along, something I thought would help me make enough money to try again in a few years, but that didn't quite work out either, and the next thing I knew, I was caught in a dead-end job, and all of my dreams of starting a studio had gotten swallowed up in the day-to-day."

Nodding, I empathized with her. "I know what you mean. It's so easy to get lost in what's going on from one day to the

next that the weeks and months just fly by, and the next thing you know, it's been years, and you're not sure what you've accomplished." It sort of made me sad to say that. All those years ago, I thought there was a chance Poppy and I could be spending our lives together. But then I'd fucked up, and now, we'd been apart for nine years. It seemed like an astronomical amount of time. Almost a decade.

We continued to chat about various events that had transpired over the last few years. The more we talked, the more it seemed like this was the Poppy I'd known before, the one I'd dated, not the one whose soul I'd crushed with my ugly comments.

The scent of popcorn wafted toward us, and my stomach began to rumble. "I'm going to grab some popcorn," I said during a lull in the conversation.

"That sounds great." Poppy smiled at me, and I knew I'd need a bucket big enough for two.

A moment later, I was back at her side with a big bucket of popcorn. We both reached in at the same time, our hands grazing, electricity shooting up to my elbow. Laughing, we locked eyes for a second. The same thing had happened on our first date. And that was when I realized *13 Going On 30* was playing on the big screen right now.

We settled in to watch it together, munching on popcorn and laughing at our favorite parts. Sometimes, Poppy would whisper the lines right along with the actors, always making me laugh aloud. *This* was what I'd been missing.

Right before the scene where Jenna and Matt dance to "Thriller" came on, my sister came outside, swaying a bit. "Hey! When are we singing 'Happy Birthday'?" she asked. "I need some cake."

Clearly too drunk to remember we'd already cut the cake, Liberty leaned against Joshua. He didn't exactly seem sober, but he was in better shape than her.

She was right about the song, though. We hadn't sung that. Walking over to her, I put an arm around her, and then with a

count of three, we all began to sing “Happy Birthday.” Liberty swayed back and forth, and at the very end of the song, she dismissed herself and went running back into the house with her hand over her mouth.

“And... I think it might be time to call it a night.” I shook my head as the crowd cheered for Liberty.

Poppy went in after her, so I knew my sister was in good hands. It was time for me to call in drivers to get the others home safely. Joshua stuck around to help me with that while the staff I’d hired to clean up quickly set about doing just that. As fast as they were moving, my house would be back to normal in no time.

Once everyone else had gone, Joshua clasped my hand. “Thanks for throwing an awesome party, man. It was great.”

“Sure thing. You sure you’re safe to get home?”

Laughing, he said, “I’m only walking down the street to my parents’ place. I’ll come back for the projector later.”

I bid him goodbye and went to check on my sister. Poppy was in the process of getting her up the stairs, so I quickly put my arm around Liberty’s other side and helped her along.

“I’m fine,” my sister insisted, but the way she spoke, it sounded like there were three I’s in the word “fine.”

“Okay. We’ll just help you get upstairs, and I’ll make sure you get to bed,” Poppy said in a sing-song voice that sounded like she was speaking to a small child.

“I don’t need any help,” Liberty murmured. Poppy didn’t bother to argue with her.

Once I got her to her room, I left her in Poppy’s capable hands, knowing my sister would be more comfortable with her best friend helping her into bed than me. Downstairs, I saw that the house was clean, and the help was packing up. I thanked them, gave them a tip, and then went back to stand at the bottom of the stairs.

Poppy had a smile on her face when she came back down, but I could tell she was irritated, likely at my sister. “That

girl,” she said, dragging a hand down her face.

“She’s something else,” I agreed, smiling right back at Poppy.

She cleared her throat. “I guess... I should get home.” Poppy looked around, stalling.

I took a chance. “Unless you don’t want to go.”

POPPY

I shouldn't have told Landon I'd stay. Being a bit tipsy, I felt uninhibited, but I still had my wits about me. I knew exactly what I was doing.

This was the man who had hurt me, and yet, I wanted nothing more than to be with him. We'd had a nice time together tonight. I couldn't help but think perhaps he'd changed.

Landon grabbed us each another beer and led me outside to the fire, which was beginning to smolder. He tossed another small log into it, and the two of us sat down on the couch, warm and cozy in the cool spring night.

Slowly, I sipped my beer, not wanting to make myself any less clear-headed than I already was. Landon wasn't going slow, though. He tossed back half the bottle before setting it aside and turning toward me. "Listen, Poppy, I have something I need to say to you."

Immediately, panic welled up inside of me. Whatever he wanted to say, it could change the way I was feeling right now. I might not be one hundred percent happy, but I wasn't devastated either. That might be about to change.

"You don't have to," I told him.

"I want to." He turned toward me, taking a deep breath. "I owe you an apology. I tried to say I was sorry years ago, but never in person, and I can't blame you for not wanting to hear me out. What I said was awful. I'm not even sure why I said it

because it wasn't true. But I wanted you to know I never meant to hurt you. I've regretted it every day since I said it."

Shocked, I stared at him for a long moment, not sure how to respond. He blinked at me, waiting, and I realized I needed to say something. "It's okay," I told him, and I actually meant it. "I should've said something to you. Leaving without talking to you wasn't nice of me, and if I would've heard you out all of those years ago, maybe I could've saved us both some trouble."

He shook his head. "It's definitely not your fault, Poppy."

Landon scooted closer to me, his hand trailing down my cheek. I leaned into it. I'd been craving his touch for all of these years. Now, his hands were on me at last. I didn't know exactly how to respond, so I just followed my instinct, letting the desires I held deep inside me come to the surface.

When Landon began to close the distance between his lips and mine, I gave in to my craving, closing my eyes and leaning in. His mouth was warm and soft, just as I remembered it from the last time he'd kissed me, all those years ago. Tracing my bottom lip with his tongue, he prompted me to part my lips, which I did, allowing him inside. The taste of beer mixed with peppermint filled my mouth as his tongue tangled with mine. Sliding one hand up into his hair, I coaxed him closer to me, my knees bumping against his as we both tried to get even closer to one another on the couch.

The kiss took my breath away. When he pulled back, his eyes were wide, as were mine. "Are you sober?" he asked me.

A crooked smile formed on my face. "Not after that."

Landon chuckled at me. "Yeah, me neither. But it's not from the beer. Do you... want to go upstairs?"

My heart lurched into my throat as I considered what he was asking me. Was this really happening? He wanted me to go upstairs with him—to his bedroom? After all of these years of dreaming about him, of wondering what it would be like to find myself in his arms, I was finally about to find out—if I could get my lips moving well enough to tell him yes.

Instead, I just nodded—a girl staring at her crush, her words stolen away by his kiss.

Landon's face brightened. Taking my hand, he pulled me up from the couch, and the two of us made our way up to his bedroom. All the way, my heart was pounding in my chest. We tried to be quiet so as not to disturb Liberty, but she was probably dead to the world at this point.

Once inside Landon's bedroom, with the door closed, we turned toward one another. An awkward moment passed between us, but once his hands were back on the sides of my face, his eyes locked on mine, all of my inhibitions went right out the window, as well as thoughts of what would happen after this—what with him being my boss, my best friend's brother, and my neighbor. No, I wasn't going to think about the consequences right now. I was just going to be in the moment.

Our mouths pressed together in kiss after sultry kiss. Landon unzipped my dress while I managed to wiggle my way free from the impossible heels I'd been wearing all night. I fumbled with his buttons, my dress slipping down to my elbows before I let go to shrug out of it, leaving me in only my bra and panties. Thankfully, I'd worn some nice ones, though I never dreamed this might happen tonight.

Landon ran his thumb along my bra, my nipple hardening even through the fabric. Moaning into my mouth, he pulled me closer to him just as I got the last button on his shirt undone. I pushed the shirt back over his shoulders, and he did the rest. His chest was smooth and muscular, as were his shoulders and arms. Flat abs reminded me of just how often the man went for a run. I needed to get these pants off him. My hands went for the zipper, wondering what other secrets his clothes were about to reveal to me.

A few moments later, both of us were in our underwear, and Landon was leading me to his bed. I hadn't paid any attention to his room when I'd first come in, but when I lay down on top of his soft comforter, I realized he had a grown-up room, unlike myself.

He was an adult, and I was about to let him do adult things to me.

Landon lay next to me, running his hand along the curve of my side, his mouth never straying from mine. The brush of his fingers ignited my skin, setting my body on fire. He dipped his mouth to my neck, licking, sucking, nipping at my skin, and my core began to ache. When his fingers slid along my thigh, instinctively I spread my legs, wanting him to touch me where the ache began to radiate throughout my core.

Pressing his fingers against my panties, he could feel how wet I was. He chuckled a bit under his breath and kissed my mouth again, then ran his hand up my stomach to my bra, finding the front clasp and unhooking it. He flung the fabric away, baring my breasts as the straps slipped down off my shoulders. I quickly worked my way out of it, but Landon didn't wait. He took one of my nipples between his thumb and finger, working it delicately at first and then a bit more roughly as he lowered his head to take my other nipple between his lips.

The feel of his mouth on my body had my eyes closed, my head tilted backward. Not only did it feel heavenly, the way he worked my sensitive peak between his lips, but just knowing it was Landon whose mouth was on me made it all the more exciting. He switched breasts, causing me to moan, my fingers intertwined in his hair again as I pressed him for more.

I needed him inside me now. Kissing him, feeling his touch, all of that was amazing, but my body ached with longing for him. He must've felt the same way because he lifted his face to kiss me once more, extending a hand over to his nightstand at the same time.

Landon pushed his boxers out of the way and slid on a condom before he spread my legs. Feeling his massive cock against my thigh had me crying out impatiently.

"You ready for me, beautiful?" he whispered.

"I've been ready," I mumbled, making him laugh. He took hold of my panties and worked them over my hips, tossing them on the floor. He let out a groan of approval. Even though

it was dark, I knew he could see enough to know exactly what I looked like naked, but I didn't feel self-conscious.

I just wanted him inside me.

Positioning himself at my entryway, Landon hovered over me. He caressed my cheek, his thumb running along my jawline. He pushed inside me gently, and I spread my legs wide for him. Laying a sweet kiss on my lips, he enticed me to lift my hips, his cock finally buried inside me.

We began to move together, keeping up a nice slow pace at first, but with each thrust of our hips, the pace increased until we were moving at a furious speed, grinding against one another, fingers twisting in each other's hair, trying to get more of one another. Landon took my breath away, he felt so good. My eyes remained closed as I moaned and groaned in excitement, lifting myself up off the bed each time he plunged inside me.

When my body finally began to come undone, I felt myself slipping away, muscles tightening, before a full spasm sent shivers down my spine. Landon came at the same time, grunting several times before he tensed up completely and gave one final groan.

Even after he stopped, my body continued to feel like electric pulses were shooting through my lower extremities. I wrapped my arms around Landon, not wanting to let him go.

We had done it—we'd had sex. After all of these years. And it had been just as amazing as I'd always dreamt it would be, maybe even more so.

I would never be able to describe the feeling to anyone—all I could think about was the Zen I sought while meditating and how this bliss was a million times more pleasurable than that had ever been.

Landon brushed my hair away from my face and pressed his lips to mine. "Are you okay?"

"I'm amazing," I muttered, still out of it.

He chuckled. "Yeah, you are. Thank you, Poppy. That was... incredible."

He could say that again. I didn't know what else to say. My mind was still floating in the clouds somewhere. Landon rolled off me but pulled me against his side. My hand went to his chest, my head on his shoulder as one leg flopped over his. All I wanted was to enjoy this moment for as long as possible.

I didn't want to think about what any of this meant, if there'd be ramifications, how it would be working with him, if this meant we were a couple now, or any of those important details we'd left out when we'd finally acted on our instincts.

For now, all I wanted to do was lie in Landon Johnson's arms and be one with the universe. He pressed his lips to the top of my head, not caring that I was sweaty and my hair was stuck to my forehead.

I could hear the faint sound of his heart beating and slid my head down off his shoulder so that my ear was directly over his chest. His pulse began to slow the longer we lay there, taking on a soothing cadence. I could lie there in his arms forever.

That was all I wanted—to lie there in Landon's arms and not have to think about the past or the future, to just be.

LANDON

I couldn't believe that I'd just had sex with Poppy—or had we been making love? It certainly seemed like more than just a quick fuck. I'd connected with Poppy on a deeper level than I'd ever connected with anyone before. Even ten minutes after we'd finished, all I could do was lie there and bask in the afterglow, holding her against my chest.

In the back of my mind, consequences began to bubble to the surface. What if this didn't work out? What if she ran away like she had last time? What if she stayed but didn't have feelings for me, but we still had to work together? No, I couldn't let any of that bother me at the moment. It was silly. For now, we were together, and that was all that mattered.

Poppy sat up, pressing her cool palm against my chest. "I should go. If I don't come home, my mom is going to wonder where I'm at, and the last thing we need is for her to come looking for me."

I grinned up at her, imagining her mom with her hair in rollers knocking on my door. I didn't want her to go, but I understood what she meant. After all, Liberty might not be cool with this. I didn't know for certain. It was one thing for her to tell me I should apologize to her best friend for the mean things I'd said but something else entirely for her to actually want the two of us to get together.

"Okay," I said, leaning up to kiss her again. Poppy's mouth lingered on mine. I could've almost initiated another round, but I wanted to respect what she'd just said, so I released her,

eventually. “I’m going to go to the bathroom, and then I’ll walk you home.”

“You don’t have to walk me,” Poppy said.

“Of course, I do.” Dragging my thumb across her cheek, I smiled at her.

She grinned back at me. Reluctantly, I pulled myself out from under her and went into the bathroom to give her some privacy so that she could get dressed. I figured she didn’t want me to watch her do that.

I took my time so that she wouldn’t feel rushed, and went into my closet to find something to throw on to walk her across the street. Grabbing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, I got dressed and then shoved my feet into some sneakers.

When I came back out, Poppy stood in front of my mirror, working her hair into a neater ponytail. “Are you ready to go?” I asked her when she’d finished.

“Yep. But really, you don’t have to walk me, Landon.” She turned and looked at me, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

“I want to.” Offering her my hand, I waited for her by the door. She took it, and we headed out together.

It only took a few moments to walk her to her home across the street. The night had grown quite chilly. I wished I’d thought to offer her a jacket, but she didn’t complain as we made our way across the deserted street to her front porch. Her parents’ plants were wild as usual, but they smelled nice. I understood this was just their way of staying connected to the earth, and I could appreciate that.

The porchlight had been left on, which didn’t surprise me considering what Poppy had said about her mother worrying. With a soft laugh, I said, “I hope your mother’s not watching out the window.”

“I doubt she is,” Poppy assured me. “Thanks again, Landon. For everything.” She pushed up onto her tiptoes, and I lowered my mouth to meet her, giving her a sweet kiss, just in case Mama Briar was keeping watch.

“Thank you, Poppy. I’ll see you later.” It was difficult to turn around and walk away from her, but I told myself it was just for a little while. I’d see her again soon.

I took my time walking back home, thinking about how incredible it was that we’d finally ended up together. Poppy was so amazing in so many ways. I hoped this meant we could actually be a couple finally and that I didn’t do anything to screw it up. Otherwise, work would be quite difficult as long as she continued to work for me.

Of course, she had said that she wasn’t going to stay long. The thought of her packing her things and going back to California in the morning, before I even had a chance to say goodbye, had an intense bolt of trepidation shooting through me. But no, Poppy wouldn’t do that. Hopefully, I’d find a way to convince her to stay here this time, if we did end up in a relationship.

I couldn’t do anything stupid this time—I couldn’t push her away. My parents didn’t live here now, so they couldn’t get on me about dating the girl from the family that embarrassed everyone else in the neighborhood. And I was an adult. I’d shown my father what I could do as a leader of the company. He’d have to respect that and give me some room.

Back inside the house, I closed and locked the door before heading upstairs. It’d been a long night. I could still feel the alcohol in my system, but I wasn’t drunk, not from the booze anyway. Poppy had a way of making me feel drunk on life.

Upstairs, I stripped out of my clothes and climbed back into bed, noting that the bedding still smelled like her. I inhaled deeply and wrapped myself up in her fragrance, not letting my mind run crazy with possibilities at the moment. All I wanted was to go to sleep, dream about Poppy, and see her again tomorrow.

The next morning, I woke up fairly late in the morning for me. It wasn’t anywhere close to noon, but it definitely wasn’t dawn. My head aching, I dragged myself out of bed to take a semi-cold shower, trying to put all of my thoughts about what happened the night before behind me, but that was nearly

impossible. It seemed like a dream at first, like there was no way that Poppy and I had actually had sex, but I could still smell her on my bed when I woke up this morning, so I knew it was real.

Downstairs, I fixed myself a cup of black coffee and some greasy bacon and eggs, hoping to kill off the small hangover I did have. I hadn't been so drunk the night before that I didn't know what I was doing, but I wasn't completely sober either. I'd hoped that Poppy was also sober. She seemed to be. I didn't think I would've had enough courage to approach her the way I had if we hadn't been drinking, but at the same time, we both needed to be capable of making the right decision. I thought we had been.

At the table, I sipped my coffee and cut into my eggs, little memories from the night before coming back to me. I'd had a lot of fun sitting next to Poppy watching *13 Going On 30* while we ate popcorn out of the same container. For a few moments, I could pretend like I hadn't lost almost a decade of time with her and we were kids again.

I couldn't help but smile just thinking about her. As always, she'd been beautiful the night before, and I knew my costume had surprised and delighted her. That was what I'd been hoping for, that she'd see me dressed as Matt and know I'd been thinking of her.

"Why are you sitting there with a big goofy grin on your face?" Liberty asked as she dragged herself into the room, squinting, looking like the walking dead. Her hair was sticking up all over her head, her makeup was smudged, and the pajamas I assumed Poppy had helped her get into the night before were crooked, like she'd been sleeping pretty restlessly and hadn't bothered to fix them.

"Well, good morning to you, too," I said, infusing my voice with extra cheer just to annoy her. By the looks of it, Liberty was definitely hungover, and she would be for a while.

"Can you make me a cheeseburger?" She made herself a cup of coffee and walked over to the breakfast nook before

flopping down into a chair and dropping her head on the table. “Extra grease?”

I was about to remind her that cheeseburgers were not breakfast food when I glanced at the clock and saw it was past noon now. “Sure thing, even though you’re no longer the birthday girl.”

Finishing up my breakfast, I carried my dishes to the sink and rinsed them off before putting them away and heading to the fridge to get the items I’d need to make her requested burger. “I guess you feel like shit then?”

Liberty groaned. “Physically, yes, but mentally I’m psyched. That was the best party ever! Everyone had fun, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, definitely.” Feeling my cheeks heat, I glanced over at her to see if she was looking in my direction. Thankfully, her head was still on the table, so she shouldn’t be able to see how I was blushing just thinking about what had happened the night before.

I needed to tell her, though. Poppy would tell her if I didn’t, and then Lib would get mad at me for keeping secrets from her. Once her burger was ready, I carried it over to the table, making sure I had the right amount of mayo and pickles on it.

“Thank you, brother.” She could barely lift her head off the table. “You’re a good person.”

“I know. Do you want a soda?” Drinking coffee with a burger sounded gross.

“Please.” I got her that and a napkin, realizing I was stalling. By the time I had them over to her, she’d already taken three big bites out of the burger. Liberty was a tiny woman, but man could she eat.

“Did you have fun last night?” she asked around a big bite.

Nodding, I braced myself for what I was about to say. “Uh, yeah. I had a lot of fun.”

Liberty froze, the sandwich inches from her mouth. “I know that look. What happened?”

My first instinct was to tell her, “Nothing,” but then I’d have to backtrack, so I put a brave face on. “Well, after everyone else left, Poppy stuck around for a little while.”

Liberty set her cheeseburger back on her plate, picked up her napkin, and daintily wiped the corners of her mouth, making me chuckle under my breath. “How long is a little while?”

Again, I felt heat rush to my face. “Um, a couple of hours. We talked for a little while. I apologized to her, and she accepted my apology. Then some other things happened. And I walked her home.”

Liberty’s eyes stayed trained on my face for quite some time. “Thank you for skipping over that part. You’re my brother. Barf.”

Grinning at her, I said, “I know. And she’s your best friend. Is that weird for you?”

“Are you kidding? No way!” She playfully punched me in the shoulder. “I’m happy for you. Both of you. Just be careful this time, please? I don’t want to see either one of you get hurt.”

“Neither do I.” Glad that she was all right with it, I went to take a look around the house and make sure everything was cleaned up and the help hadn’t missed anything. After all, our parents were flying in tomorrow, and even though this was my house now, if my parents thought we’d had a wild party, they’d probably still raise a big stink about it.

Some things never changed.

POPPY

Over breakfast, Mama had asked a ton of questions about the party. I'd answered her the best I could, trying not to give away my secret about Landon, but it had always been difficult for me to keep information from my mother, so as soon as I could, I escaped back upstairs.

Now, sitting in front of my dresser on the floor, I took some clothes out of one of the boxes I'd grabbed from the storage unit and folded them up neatly, placing them inside. My mind was on other things, but getting a few more things situated in my room was a nice distraction for a while.

I'd only been back a little over a week, and I'd only been working for Landon a week, but I'd already slept with him. My, how things had escalated quickly.

I hadn't expected the situation to move along at such a rapid pace, but here I was, gushing over Landon—who happened to be my boss now—wondering what in the world I was going to do about all of this.

Every time I started to think about Landon and what had happened the night before, I pushed those thoughts aside. Nothing good could come from it. I'd just have to take my mom's advice and go with the flow. That was what she always said about everything.

After I had a box or two unpacked, I decided I needed to get out of the house. I could hear August and Aurora arguing about something in the game room, and I didn't need any stress in my life. It sounded like they were playing a video

game and couldn't agree on the best way to attack. Since Aurora wasn't available for the day, we couldn't watch our show. I may as well go do something constructive.

Checking my phone, I saw there was a Pilates class starting in about thirty minutes. If I changed quickly, I could be there in time for the start. Just thinking about it brought a smile to my face. My body could definitely use some movement about now. Getting those endorphins flowing would put me in a better mood.

I'd already showered that morning, washing away the last of Landon's scent, which made me a little sad, but at least I wouldn't have to do that now. Changing into some yoga pants and a tank top over my sports bra, I slipped my feet into my sandals and grabbed my bag, shouting goodbye to my parents as I walked past them. They were in the front flower beds doing whatever it was they did there. I knew they loved to work with the plants, but it was such a wild area, it was hard for me to tell what exactly they accomplished at the end of each gardening session.

"Where are you going?" Mama asked with a smile.

"Pilates!" I shouted over my shoulder. "Gonna be late."

"Have fun!" Mama yelled back.

"Don't throw your back out!" Dad teased.

I laughed and hopped into the van, hearing Mama tell him that I wasn't old like him. She swatted at him, and they both laughed. I loved my parents so much. Someday, I hoped to have a relationship like they did.

With Landon? I pushed that thought aside as silly. We'd slept together one time. It wasn't like he was slipping a ring on my finger. Still, I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I'd thought about the possibility of marrying Landon Johnson many times.

There was that so-called pact we'd made when we were younger, after all. Surely, he didn't still remember that. How silly. Well, he wasn't thirty. Not yet.

Pushing the thought aside, I pulled into a spot near the gym and grabbed my bag. I had about five minutes to spare.

Once inside, I quickly removed my shoes and got my mat out, getting into position a few seconds before the instructor started. A quick glance around told me this class was pretty full, which shouldn't have been surprising for a Saturday afternoon.

My eyes landed on a familiar face. The little old woman from the other day was here. Smiling, she waved at me, and I waved back, returning the smile. She'd been so sweet. I really did feel happy to see her again, though I wouldn't have time to even say hello right now.

For the next ninety minutes, I lost myself to movement, listening to the instructor's voice and focusing on every group of muscles in my body. My mind always drifted when I did Pilates, but usually not to the everyday living concerns I focused on at other times. No, when I was exercising, stretching and moving my body, I tried to feel in tune with myself and the world around me, attempting to elevate to a higher power. Mama said it was being one with the universe, and it made me feel better on a spiritual level, even if I never did quite reach the level of Zen I had the night before, when I'd been with Landon.

The thought of him brought heat to my face. Thankfully, I was already sweating and probably already looking like a mess or else someone might've noticed and wondered what in the world I'd been thinking about. I only had a minor slip-up in allowing myself to think about that man. Then I got back to work, concentrating on feeling my body stretch and my mind reach out to the world around me.

When class was over, I sat on the floor for a moment, drying my face with a towel and sipping my water. I felt good, like every fiber of my being was alive. Most of the other participants left class relatively quickly, probably having plans since it was a Saturday, but I took my time.

Eventually, I got up to go put on my shoes. The older woman was sitting in a chair, pushing her heel into her sneaker. "Hello there, dear," she said as I sat down next to her.

“Hi, how are you?” I could hear an increase in cheerfulness in my tone. I guessed I really did feel better.

“Good, good. How are you? We got quite a workout today, huh?” She chuckled and finished putting on her shoe. Lifting a towel that had been draped around her shoulders, she patted her forehead.

“Yeah, that was great,” I agreed, my sandals on now. I wasn’t in any hurry to leave, though. I’d enjoyed speaking with her the other day, and I figured she might be a little lonely as some older people were, so I might as well continue the conversation.

“How are your guy troubles now, dear? Have you gotten anything worked out?” She gave me a knowing glance, a hint of mischief in her eyes.

Stunned, I stared at her for a moment. While I did remember mentioning in passing that I was having guy issues, I certainly didn’t expect her to remember. Laughing, I shook my head. “I’m shocked you remember me telling you that.”

She shrugged. “I remember a lot of things, sweetie.”

“Well, things have changed, but I think they might be a little more complicated now than they were before.” I looked at the door to see if another class was coming in, but the instructor had walked out, so I thought we were fine to sit there and chat for a bit.

“Men are more complex than they’d like for us to believe.” She looked off into the distance.

“Yes, that’s true.” I sucked in a deep breath and blew it out a little louder than I’d intended. “I had a crush on this guy growing up, and we’d tried to make things work right around the time I graduated from high school. But then, things got messy, and I ended up moving away. Now, he’s back, and I’m starting to feel things for him again.” Love? Was that what I was feeling? No, it was too soon for that. Though, I had loved him before, hadn’t I?

“That sounds like a familiar story,” she noted, nodding along with every word I said. “In fact, it’s the same story I tell

about my husband.”

I was shocked to hear that. “Really? You and your husband were high school sweethearts who broke up and got back together again?”

“We were,” she said with a wide smile. “Oh, yes. He was the apple of my eye for years. I watched him from afar, just wishing he’d ask me on a date. Took him forever to ask, but when he finally did, we had the most fun together. But then, we had a little misunderstanding. For years, I thought of him as the one that got away. Thankfully, things had a way of working out for us. We ended up being reunited and worked out our misunderstanding. I’m so glad I gave him another chance because it turns out he really was the one for me.”

The sting of tears against the back of my eyes had me blinking as I tried not to cry. “That’s beautiful,” I told her. “And how long have you been married?”

“Forty-five years this June,” she said with a solid nod of her head.

“That’s amazing.” In my soul, I wished for a love story like hers. But my problems with Landon were complex. “Do you mind if I ask what it was that made you break up?”

She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Well, you see, my husband and I came from very different backgrounds. His family wanted me to be something I couldn’t be. You know, a sunflower can never be a rose, and a rose can never be a sunflower. But each of them is lovely in their own way.”

“I love that.”

She reached over and patted my hand. I was definitely a sunflower—a wild thing that couldn’t be tamed and made to grow in a garden. No, my seeds were sown in the fields, along the rambling paths, and on the mountainsides, not in nice neat rows and hedges.

“Thank you, Ellie. It is Ellie, isn’t it?”

“Oh, good! You remembered. And you’re Poppy, right?”

“That’s right.” I couldn’t remember if I’d told her my name before or not, but it was embroidered on my gym bag, thanks to Mama Briar, so it didn’t surprise me that someone as sharp as Ellie knew my name.

“Well, dear, my best advice is not to give up. If you really have feelings for this young man, give him another chance. Make sure he knows he’s missing out if he doesn’t give you every bit of the opportunity you deserve to share your heart with him. You seem like a lovely young woman. Any man who can’t see that is blind and needs his eyes opened.”

By the time she’d finished speaking, I felt myself tearing up again. “Thank you so much, Ellie.”

She nodded and patted my hand again before she got up. “I’ve got to go. I’m playing tennis with a friend this afternoon. Don’t want to be late. I’ll be good and limber now.” Chuckling under her breath, she said, “Louis doesn’t have a chance.”

I laughed, too, watching her leave before I gathered my belongings and headed out to the van. Landon weighed heavily on my mind. I’d never intended to stay here for that long—maybe six months or a year at most. But now, well, maybe I should consider staying longer.

But I’d already done what Ellie said, offered myself to Landon, and he’d denied me. What if he did that again? Sure, he’d said he was sorry, and I’d forgiven him, but how did I know for sure that things would be different this time? Did I? Not really.

Driving home, I felt nervous energy bubble up inside of me. I really wanted things to work with Landon this time, but in order for that to happen, he’d have to know that I was a sunflower—and I could never be a rose.

LANDON

Sunday brought nothing but anxiety as I pattered around the house, making sure everything was in place. The cleaners had done a great job of making sure it looked like the party had never taken place, and outside, the gardeners were mowing the lawn, trimming the hedges, and putting every stick, stone, and pebble in place. Still, with only a couple of hours left on the clock before I had to go to the airport to pick up my parents, I was nervous.

And I was busy. It seemed like there were a thousand things to be fixed, even though we had cleaners come every week. What was this weird stain on the coffee table, and how had chocolate sauce gotten on the bottom of the kitchen counter?

“Will you relax?” Liberty asked, sitting at the breakfast nook munching on a bowl of cereal, even though it was well past noon. “That stain on the couch was there for years, and Mom never said anything about it—after the initial punishment, of course.”

“But that was different. We were kids then. She expected us to fuck up. Now, we’re grownups. At least, I’m a grownup. We should be able to keep the house clean.”

“Well, I don’t want to be a grownup anyway.” Liberty gave me a mischievous grin. “It’s overrated.”

I could only shake my head at her. Then, I went back to scrubbing the stain, wondering if it was chocolate or the blood of a demon that simply refused to come off. Finally, the stain

disappeared. Sighing in relief, I moved on to the next task, dusting the light fixtures.

“You’re always going to have something else that could be cleaner, you know?” she said, watching me work without lifting a finger.

“Remind me again why I let you live in my house for free?” I gave her a narrow-eyed glance, but all she did was laugh.

The doorbell rang. For a moment, I thought perhaps my parents had taken an Uber and were here already, but then I remembered they didn’t know how to do that, and their plane wouldn’t land for another hour.

“Is that the groceries you ordered?” Liberty asked.

“Oh, yeah. Probably so.” I relaxed, thinking she had to be right.

“I’ll get it.” She laughed at me and headed toward the front door. “You probably thought it was Mom and Dad. Can you imagine them trying to Uber?”

Calling after her, I said, “They could’ve taken a cab!”

She didn’t answer. It was just as well. With the light fixtures clean, I took a long drink of my water and tried to calm down. Liberty was right. The house was never going to be perfect, no matter how badly I tried.

It wasn’t even that I thought my parents were going to judge me. They just deserved to come home to a nice, clean house. My parents had worked hard for what they had. Unlike Liberty, I was born before my father’s business took off. I remembered what it had been like to live in a tiny apartment and scrape by. Sure, my parents were very well off now, as were both Liberty and me, but they’d worked so hard to put us in this position. I didn’t want them to think I didn’t appreciate their hard work or that I was just sitting around, living off their wealth.

Liberty came back in with her arms completely loaded down with groceries. I shook my head at her. “Have you ever heard of making two trips?”

She slammed everything down on the counter closest to the refrigerator. “Making trips is for the weak,” she announced and then began to shake her arms out.

All I could do was scoff at her as I began to unload the bags and put everything away. With every new item I pulled out, Liberty made some sort of noise in the back of her throat. “What?” I finally asked her.

“What the hell did you buy this shit for?” she asked me. “Do you think Mom and Dad are really going to think we sit around eating asparagus and artichoke hearts?”

“No, but I thought they might need them if Mom wanted to cook something nice for dinner,” I explained, trying my best not to be offended.

“Mom and Dad will go out to eat. They’re only here for this evening before that meeting tomorrow in Nashville, and then they fly right back to Hawaii because Dad can’t miss his golf date on Tuesday.”

She was right. I should’ve thought about that before. Our parents had a favorite restaurant in town, and they visited it every time they came to Franklin. “Well, I guess you’ll have to learn to cook so this stuff doesn’t go to waste,” I teased.

Liberty laughed louder. “Nope. What is that meeting about tomorrow anyway, do you know?”

“Dad’s got another idea for how to make the company more money,” I explained. “That’s really all I know at this point. He said he’d explain it when he got here.”

“Well, I hope he isn’t planning on coming back full-time. You’re a pain in the ass, but I’d rather work for you than him any day. Dad was like a perfectionist on steroids.”

“I know. That’s why you left to begin with, right?” I asked her, putting the last of the groceries away.

Nodding, Liberty turned away from me. I knew she didn’t like to think or talk about that. She’d never quite convinced our parents that being a photographer was a legitimate way to earn a living, and that was too bad because Liberty was an amazing photographer.

“Anyway, Poppy and I have plans tonight, so I won’t be here. I’ll stay and say hi, but I’m not going to listen to them try to convince me not to go back to photography one day.”

“I understand, sis.” I did, too. Liberty and our younger sister, Sophia, who was twenty and away at college, had really only seen the uptight, snobby version of our parents, but I knew the other version was still in there or else I wouldn’t have been plagued to live with a stained sofa all of those years. At the end of the day, my parents were both scared that something would happen and everything they’d worked so hard for would be taken away from them, that they’d end up back where they were and that us kids wouldn’t have the life they’d worked so hard to give us. Thus, they still made do when they needed to.

I went outside to make sure the yard was immaculate. Satisfied that the landscapers had everything exactly as it should be so Dad wouldn’t be disappointed, I decided to go ahead and head to the airport. If I got caught in traffic and they had to hang around, they’d both be upset, and I didn’t need that in my life.

The drive to Nashville was uneventful. I pulled into a parking space in the short-term parking, close to the walkway, and headed over to meet them. I had to wait a little while, but their plane was on time, and they didn’t have any checked bags since they were only going to be here for one night. As soon as I saw my parents coming down the escalator, I waved, a huge smile forming on my face.

Both of them grinned back at me. For a moment, I was a little kid again, looking out at the bleachers during a baseball game and seeing my parents in the front row. Rushing toward them, I had a hop in my step.

“There’s my boy!” Dad exclaimed, wrapping me up in a huge hug. “My goodness, how could you have gotten taller?”

“No, Remington, you’re shrinking,” Mom teased him. Before Dad even let me go, Mom’s arms wrapped around me. “You might not be getting taller, son, but I believe you’re getting thinner! Have you been eating?”

“Yes, Mom, I’ve been eating,” I assured her, kissing her cheek. “I get all of my protein in every day.” I took her carry-on for her so she wouldn’t have to carry it to the car.

“Protein is good, dear, but you have to get your fruits and veggies in, too. And calcium. If you don’t get enough calcium, you’ll start to shrink like your father.” Mom continued to remind me about good eating habits as we made our way to the car.

“I’m not shrinking, Elizabeth,” my father insisted. “He must have on some of those platform shoes all the kids are wearing.”

I bit back a laugh. My father made it sound like it was 1965. “Tell me about your meeting tomorrow, Dad,” I insisted, hoping to change the subject.

“Oh, well, it’s an interesting concept. What do you think about drop shipping home décor, huh?” We reached the car, and he helped me load their bags into the back before opening the door for my mother. She slid into the back, where she preferred to sit, and Dad climbed into the passenger seat.

“Home décor? We already do that,” I said, thinking of all of the home décor items we dealt with.

“Not like this. This is revolutionary. This guy brings on talented artists to create paintings and other home décor items. They’re not those mass-produced knockoffs everyone else is dealing with. I think it will be great. Anyway, if I can make this deal work, it’ll mean a lot more money for the company.”

“Where will the buyers come from?” I asked, pulling out of the parking lot.

“Oh, well, he’ll help bring those as well. We may need to find some artists, and of course, Liberty will need to help with the marketing, but I think it could be huge.” Dad had a twinkle in his eye as he explained it.

“Honey,” Mom said, resting her hand on my shoulder. “I was thinking, perhaps I should cook tonight, just to make sure you’re getting a homecooked meal.”

“Don’t you want to go to your favorite restaurant?” I asked, glancing back at her in the rearview mirror.

“Well, we do love Albert’s, but I think I’d like to make that dish you like with the artichoke hearts. We’ll need to pick up some asparagus, too.”

A crooked grin spread across my face as I realized I had everything Mom would need to cook up her fancy meal. “I’ve got you covered, Mom.”

Her eyes widened. “You do?”

“Yep. Believe me, Mom. I’m a grownup now. I have all the ingredients you need to cook up that dish and make dessert.”

We locked eyes in the mirror for a second, and I could see pride radiating off her.

We continued to talk about what life was like for them in Honolulu until we pulled into the neighborhood. Mom was in the middle of telling me about a whale she’d seen when my father made a noise like a dying walrus.

“What is it?” I asked, wondering if I should slam on the brakes. Had he seen a weed growing in the lawn? But no, he was looking in the other direction, towards Poppy’s parents’ house.

“Will you look at that mess?” Dad exclaimed. “How can anyone live in such a jungle?”

“Remington, dear, don’t get all worked up about it,” Mom cautioned him.

“I’m not all worked up, but this is a travesty.” Dad pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“Who are you calling?” I asked, pulling into the driveway.

“Why, the president of the HOA, of course. Son, you really should be reporting those weirdos for this sort of thing. If you don’t, the property values are going to go way down.”

“Dad, don’t be ridiculous. The Briars are good people.” I chuckled, but he was already on the phone. I couldn’t convince my dad that Poppy’s parents just needed to be left alone, so I

didn't bother to try. I knew the HOA president wouldn't do anything anyway, so I helped Mom out of the car and grabbed their bags, ready to enjoy some time with my parents inside the house, where they couldn't see the enchanted forest across the street.

POPPY

One lock of hair refused to be tamed. Standing in front of the mirror at the end of the upstairs hallway, I twisted it and tried to shove it back into place, but it refused. With a sigh, I took the clip out of my hair and tried pushing it in there. Now that piece was tamed, but I didn't like the style.

"Aren't you going to be late?" August asked me, coming out of his room with his backpack slung over his shoulder.

"Maybe." He was right. I needed to let it go. But the idea of seeing Landon at work and not looking perfect had me paralyzed, staring at myself in the mirror.

"You look fine," he muttered, passing me and heading downstairs. That was my brother's attempt at giving me a compliment, so I decided to take it. He was right—I was worrying over nothing.

Checking the time on my phone, I saw that I was already five minutes past the time I usually left. I needed to hurry and get to the office. Heading downstairs, I intended to go into the kitchen and grab something to take with me to eat on the drive when voices at the front door had me stopping in my tracks.

"Herbert, this is ridiculous," Dad was saying. "You know I mow the yard. But the plants in the flower beds are meant to grow that way. Laila and I are out there tending to the plants all the time."

"I know, Johnny," Herbert, the man who'd been the president of the homeowner's association for as long as I could remember, was saying, standing on the front porch.

“You know I’m not worried about it. But it’s part of my obligation as president of the board to come and tell you about the complaint. Just... cut something back so I can say you took care of it, okay?”

I could tell my father was agitated, and I couldn’t blame him. I was irritated, too. He still managed to chuckle under his breath as he replied, “Fine, fine. I’ll do a little trimming. Was it the same neighbor as usual? The Johnsons?”

Only half of Herbert’s face was visible to me from where I was standing, but his verbal explanation was enough for me to gather it had to be. “Listen, you know I can’t tell you who filed the complaint. I can only tell you it was no surprise to hear the voice on the other end of the line telling me about how your yard is a jungle. I believe the word he used was ‘travesty.’”

Dad laughed at that, and the two of them continued their conversation, but anger began to boil up inside me. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It wasn’t funny at all. As much as my dad liked to pretend like it didn’t bother him, I knew that it did. He cared so much about his yard, about nature in general, having someone judge him because his approach was different than theirs was aggravating.

Needing to go, I excused myself and slipped out the door, forgetting all about breakfast. Driving angry probably wasn’t the best idea, but the more I thought about the situation, the more my feelings surfaced.

What was Landon pulling now? His parents weren’t in town—they were in Hawaii. So that meant it had to be Landon who called. Liberty would never, and their younger sister was away at college.

Landon had done a pretty convincing job of making me believe that he was sorry about the way he’d treated me before, how he’d made me feel less than him because my parents were different. Now, he’d pulled a stunt like this? Was he kidding me?

Anger turned to disappointment as this information left me with only one conclusion—Landon had just been using me. He

wasn't interested in me again. He just wanted to have sex with someone who he thought he could convince with little effort. Boy, had I been a sucker, letting him fool me into thinking he might actually care about me, that he meant what he said when he apologized. I may as well have the word "fool" tattooed on my forehead.

The bottom line was, Landon clearly still thought he was better than me. He was of the opinion that his father's methods were better than my father's, that his family was better than mine.

Calling the HOA was a clear way of attempting to break free from me. Well, he'd done a pretty damn good job of enlightening me. How stupid was I to actually sleep with him? I should've known better.

Arriving at the office, I pulled into my usual parking spot, noting Landon's car in his reserved spot, and headed inside. I didn't even want to see him, but it was inevitable that I would. I should probably keep in mind that he was my boss while I was at work, so it would be for the best for me to keep my mouth shut during business hours. But I also didn't care. It wasn't as if this was my dream job. I'd taken this job to help him, not the other way around. If he said something to me, I wouldn't be able to control myself.

Walking in, I tried to smile, but I was certain my coworkers could tell something was bothering me. None of the people I passed on the way to the break room to make my coffee knew me well, but some of them gave me tight-lipped concerned smiles.

In the breakroom, I went about making my mushroom coffee, trying not to think about the situation with Landon. Taking deep breaths, I felt myself calm slightly, the scent of the coffee enticing to me, even if some people thought it smelled like shit.

The door opened behind me, and all of that calmness went flying out the window. Tightening, I spun around, praying it wasn't Landon. Thankfully, it wasn't. Still, I wasn't sure I was in the mood for Paul today either.

“Hey, there she is!” He flashed me a cocky smile as he headed over to the Keurig. “Damn, that shit is strong. You really drink that?”

“Yep.” I bit my tongue. Paul might be annoying, but I wasn’t actually angry at him, even if I didn’t appreciate his description of my beverage.

“Oh, no. Sounds like someone’s got a case of the Mondays.” He touched my shoulder briefly before I spun away to finish making my drink. “Bad weekend?”

I remembered then that he hadn’t been at Liberty’s party. He had no idea what had gone on. If anyone else from the office had seen Landon and me together, I doubted they’d tell Paul. No one really seemed to seek him out to chat, though he obviously thought they were all best friends.

“I just had a long weekend,” I told him. With my drink done, I could’ve just walked away. I just wanted to be left alone.

“I hear you,” he said. “I got so drunk Friday night, I didn’t wake up until Saturday evening. Shit, I missed Liberty’s birthday party. Was it fun? I intended to go, but then my friend Sal called and said I had to get to this club ASAP because these really hot strippers were there. So I went, met a stripper, and took her back to my place. Well, I’m guessing you don’t want to hear the rest.”

“I’m not sure I wanted to hear the first part,” I told him.

Paul laughed, but I was serious. I couldn’t figure this guy out. Sometimes, he seemed interested in dating me, but at other times, he acted like we were just pals. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t interested in Paul in any capacity. He was just an annoying coworker that I put up with because I was a polite person.

“I think I’ll go see if Liberty is here yet,” I told him.

“She’s here, but she’s swamped. I saw her at her desk a minute ago, hunkered down over her computer working away. That girl gets tunnel vision when she’s got a deadline coming

up.” He took his cup of coffee off the Keurig machine and added some cream.

I wanted to tell him I was pretty sure that was just Liberty’s way of ignoring him. Feeling no need to explain that, I took a few steps toward the door. Before I got there, it came flying open. “Paul? Mr. Anderson’s on the phone for you,” one of the other people who worked in Paul’s department said. “He’s not happy.”

“Shit. See you later, Poppy.” Paul gave me a small wave and headed out the door, giving me the break room to myself again to catch my breath. I really just wanted to be left alone, but that was a lot to ask when one worked in an office with other human beings.

The door opened again, and I froze. Landon strolled in, his eyes widening slightly when he saw me. A smile fell into place. “Hey. Long time no see.”

He sounded like everything was okay, which was confusing to me. Did he think I hadn’t been there to hear the discussion between my dad and the HOA president? Maybe Landon felt like he needed to be nice to me for now, until I found out the truth, that he was an asshole.

Well, I already knew that.

Still, I managed to bite my tongue for the moment. Walking to the coffee machine, he yawned. “It sure was a long weekend, although Friday night went by way too quickly.” His eyes met mine, and my stomach flipped over.

Was he really going there? Why was he trying to flatter me, to make me think Friday night actually meant something to him?

Shaking my head, I said the only thing halfway civil I could think of. “Well, maybe you’re tired because you had such a busy morning.” What time had he called Herbert to get him over to our house before I even left for work?

“What’s that now?” Landon’s forehead crinkled as he turned to look at me, no longer concerned about the coffee.

Knowing if I opened my mouth again, I'd say something I couldn't take back, I took my mug and headed out the door, practically stomping to my desk. I set my mug down, pulled out my chair, sat down, and slung my bag into the bottom desk drawer.

"Oh, no," Liberty muttered. "Everything okay?"

Looking over at her, I could tell she really was super busy. "Um, yeah. I'm fine." I didn't want to draw her away from whatever she was working on, and I also didn't want her to have to get into the middle of things between Landon and me.

"You don't seem fine." Liberty closed her laptop, a sign that she seriously wanted to give me her attention to make sure I was okay.

Now wasn't the time or place, though, to get into the situation with Landon. I didn't want to embarrass her by talking about sleeping with her brother and then realizing he didn't even like me. "We can talk about it later?"

"Are you sure? I know it seems like I'm busy, but I can take some time," Liberty offered.

I shook my head. "I'm fine. What are you working on?"

"Oh, I've got a campaign I have to finish up right away because I need to leave a little early this afternoon."

I was about to ask her why she was leaving early when my phone rang. It had to be a client, which took priority over anything else. With a deep breath, I picked up the receiver, forcing myself to let the situation with Landon go and focus on my work. Even if I didn't love this job or even want to do it at the moment, I'd taken on the obligation of working for Landon and the company, and I had too much respect for myself to just walk away—even if I really wanted to.

LANDON

Watching Poppy storm out of the break room, I couldn't help but feel confused. What in the world had that been about? It was clear she was upset with me, but I had no idea why. I hadn't even seen her since I'd walked her home Friday. Since Mom and Dad were in town, I'd been busy getting the place ready for them and then spending time with them.

Shaking my head, I carried my coffee back to my office, only glancing in Poppy's direction as I passed her desk. She was on the phone with a client from the sound of it.

With lots of calls and meetings scheduled for the day, I didn't have time to think about it at the moment. I'd have to find out what was going on with her later. Whatever it was, I hoped it was just a misunderstanding. We'd finally gotten things on the right track after all of these years. I wasn't about to let it all dissolve again.

Thinking of Poppy was a huge distraction as I went about my morning meetings. I hoped that I would have a chance to talk to her at lunch, so I kept putting my thoughts off as to what might've gone wrong until then. One of my phone calls went long, so by the time I made it to the break room to grab my sandwich out of the fridge, Liberty and Poppy were already there, sitting at a table across the way.

And Paul was with them.

Irritated, I tried to ignore them, but it was difficult. I took my sandwich and the other meager items I'd grabbed this

morning out of the fridge and sat down at a table with a couple of other people I often sat with. Liberty usually went out to eat, so it was surprising to see her in the break room but then I realized she'd ordered in. Both Poppy and Liberty had Chinese takeout while Paul was eating what appeared to be cold pizza.

"How's it going, boss?" Joe, one of the accountants, asked me.

"Good. Just got a lot on my mind." I gave him a tight-lipped smile and then went back to eating my sandwich. The sound of Poppy's quiet laughter had my head turning in that direction.

Paul was leaning in, saying something near Poppy's ear. She didn't look uncomfortable with this at all, nor did she seem to be scooting away. Was something going on between them? Was that the reason she'd been so agitated this morning? Perhaps she realized she'd messed up her situation with Paul by sleeping with me.

With a sigh, I ripped my eyes away from the table, but within seconds, I was staring over there again. Was I about to back down? To let another man take what I wanted because it was difficult to fight for her?

Movement next to Poppy had my eyes twitching in that direction. It was then that I realized my sister was trying to get my attention. Her eyes wide, she gestured for me to come over, as if she thought it would be a good idea for me to come to speak to Poppy right now.

Anger boiled up inside of me. I shouldn't have to fight for this woman in my own office. While Poppy's body language didn't tell me she was already in a relationship with Paul, I couldn't be sure that she didn't have feelings for him at all.

Growling, I turned away. I just wanted to shove my food down my throat and get out of there.

"You all right?" Kayla, another worker who was sitting next to me, asked.

"Yeah, yeah, fine. Just thinking of a call I need to make this afternoon," I lied.

“Oh, well, I can understand that. Sometimes it’s difficult not to get wrapped up in our work, but you should try to enjoy your lunch, Landon.” She smiled at me, and I nodded, trying to agree with her—she wasn’t wrong.

I managed to finish my lunch in record time and then headed out of there, going back to my office. Drawn to the movement of the city outside, I stood in front of the large pane of glass, staring out at the city, wondering if those people out there ever felt as confused and lost as I felt at the moment.

My phone rang, jarring me back to reality. I could’ve ignored it since I still had thirty minutes or so of my lunchtime, but it was my cell, so I decided to see who it was. I’d left it on my desk earlier, I’d been in such a rush to get to lunch to see Poppy—which turned out to be a bad idea.

Picking it up, I saw my dad’s picture looking up at me and immediately answered. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hi, son. Sorry if I’m interrupting your lunch,” he began.

“No, you’re fine. How was your meeting?” I sat down on the corner of my desk, still staring out the window.

“Great. In fact, we’ve got a deal.” I could hear the pride in his voice. “The client is very excited about what we can bring to the table.”

“That’s awesome, Dad.” I hadn’t been sure this was the route we needed to take, but my father was the genius who’d gotten this business off the ground to begin with, so I wasn’t about to try to talk him out of it. Now that things seemed to be moving in the right direction, I’d do whatever I could to make it work. “What’s the next step?”

“We need to find an independent artist,” he explained, “someone who can fill the orders.”

“Okay.” Turning around, I picked up a pen and made a note. With so much on my mind, I was sure I’d forget what he said if I didn’t jot it down. I had no idea where to even start with that. Maybe there was something on LinkedIn or another social site that could point me in the right direction.

Dad and I chatted for a few more minutes, and then he handed the phone to my mother so I could tell her goodbye before they headed to the airport. The trip had been a short one, but they'd gotten a lot accomplished, so we all felt it had been worth it.

Once I got off the phone with my parents, I sat down at my desk and considered the situation with Poppy. What in the world was going on? If she really was interested in Paul, I needed to know. It wouldn't be easy for me to hear, but at least I'd have the truth before me and wouldn't continue to waste time and energy trying to figure out what was happening.

With a deep breath, I pushed up out of my chair and headed out to where Poppy was working. Hanging up the phone, she looked up at me, nostrils flaring with annoyance. "Hey, Poppy, can you come into my office for a moment?" I asked.

"Is it work related, Mr. Johnson? I'm quite busy today." Her tone was clipped as she folded her hands in front of her and batted her eyelashes at me. Liberty let out a small giggle beneath her breath, which made me want to toss something at my sister. Luckily for her, I was empty-handed.

"Yes, it's about a client," I lied. I'd think of something to ask her about a client while we walked to my office.

Poppy sighed and closed her laptop, pushing her chair back with irritation. She followed me into the office, and I closed the door behind her, gesturing for her to have a seat. I didn't go around my desk, though, choosing instead to lean against it right next to her.

"What's this about?" she asked.

"Did you get a chance to call Mr. Madison this morning?" It was an unimportant task I was certain she'd taken care of, but it was the first work-related item that popped into my head.

"Yes, he's sending the documents in the morning. Is that all?" She uncrossed her legs like she was going to get up.

“No.” My work façade melted away as I thought about how amazing it had been to be with her the other night, and not even in a sexual fashion. “Poppy, what’s going on? Are you interested in Paul or something?”

The laugh that escaped her lips immediately answered that question. She wasn’t.

“Oh, no,” she began, shaking her head. “What’s the matter? Are you jealous, Landon? I guess envy is a big deal to you and you expect everyone else to have it, but not everyone wants to be like you with your perfect yard, so you probably shouldn’t spend so much time being jealous of other people either.”

My eyes widened as I deciphered what she was shouting about. “Perfect yard? That’s what this was about? Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, that’s right, Landon Johnson.” She stood up, glaring at me. “I was there this morning when Herbert came over to speak to my father. He might be able to let that go, but I know this wasn’t just about his yard.”

“Okay, hold on, Poppy.” With both hands up between us in a defensive stance, I cut her off. My tone was much more relaxed now that I realized what the problem was. She thought I’d done this. “Poppy, did Liberty mention to you that my parents were in town for a visit this weekend?”

Poppy’s expression shifted, her mouth opening and closing as she blinked a few times. “Uh, maybe.”

“Yeah, it was my dad, Poppy. I told him not to, but you know how he is. He’s not going to change just because he doesn’t live there anymore. I’m really sorry if it bothered your father. I’ll be sure to reach out to him and apologize.”

Poppy’s knees seemed to weaken as she sank back into her chair. Shaking her head, she held a hand to her forehead. I felt like I was still missing something, something important. “I’m such an idiot,” she muttered.

“Poppy, what’s going on?” I asked, sitting down in the chair next to her and putting a hand on her arm. She was no

longer angry at me, which was great, but it seemed pretty clear that she was upset about something else.

“I just thought that this was your way of telling me you weren’t interested in me, of dredging up matters from the past that you knew would hurt me, so this was your way of letting me know you regretted what happened the other night.” Lowering her hand, she looked into my eyes, and I could see the tears glistening on her cheeks.

Not knowing what to say right away, I took a moment, reaching out to her and resting my hand on her arm. “Poppy, I would never do something like that. I can understand why you might think I would be capable, but trust me, I wouldn’t. And I’d never do anything to hurt your family, either. If your parents want to start a zoo in their front yard, that’s cool. Hell, I’ll help your dad build the tiger enclosure.”

Laughing, Poppy said, “I’m pretty sure my dad wouldn’t want to enclose animals.”

“Right. Well, whatever he wants to do with his yard, I don’t care. I’m really sorry that you felt that way, but trust me, Poppy, I’m not going to push you away. I promise.”

Poppy’s face brightened. I wanted to grab her and kiss her, but I remembered we were at work, and I was her boss. I had to maintain my composure. If she made the first move, that might be something else entirely.

“There is something you should know about Paul and me, though,” Poppy said, pursing her lips together.

Bracing myself, I asked her, “What is it?”

“We got married. Last night.”

I stared at her unblinking, my mind racing, until her face broke, and I knew she was yanking my chain. Shaking my head, I said, “Don’t do that to me, please. I was about to have a heart attack.”

Poppy laughed. “Sorry. Couldn’t help it. There’s nothing going on between Paul and me.” It seemed like her face was suddenly a lot closer to mine now. Had I moved? I didn’t think so.

All I could say was, “Good.”

POPPY

We were at work. I shouldn't be letting my emotions run away with me. But knowing that I had misunderstood the situation with Landon was such a relief. Breathing in his scent and looking into his bright eyes, I found myself leaning closer and closer to him until our lips met.

After that, I lost control.

Reaching around him, I pulled him closer to me, my fingers tangling in his hair as I opened wide, my tongue enticing him to kiss me deeper, which he did. A soft moan escaped my lips. Closing my eyes, I was back in his bed, the feel of his hands on my body making me quiver. Why were the arms of the chairs so wide? I felt like I couldn't get close enough to him.

Landon pressed away from me, taking a deep breath. A smile crested his lips as he muttered, "Fuck."

"Sorry." The idea that we were still at work—and he was my boss—came crashing down on me. I'd done something very inappropriate, and any of the other employees could've walked in and seen us. They may have misinterpreted the situation. Or maybe they would've gotten it completely right. Either way, it could spell trouble for the boss if they thought that he was sleeping with one of his employees.

Still, I found myself smiling at him like I was still the same goofy high school girl with an enormous crush on my best friend's older brother.

“Don’t apologize,” Landon assured me. “Do you want to come over for dinner tonight?”

A vibration deep within my core said I absolutely wanted to. If we had dinner, would we have sex again? Could a girl dream? Either way, I wanted to spend time with him. I also wanted to make it up to him that I’d just assumed he’d been trying to be a jerk and get my dad in trouble with the HOA in order to break things off with me.

I did not, however, want to see his father. I hadn’t forgotten that Mr. Johnson had been the one to call Herbert over in an attempt to get my family in trouble. “Are your parents still in town?”

“No,” Landon said quickly. “They are leaving in a couple of hours to go back to Hawaii. I already told them goodbye.”

I nodded, still thinking. “What about Liberty?”

“Didn’t she tell you? She’s got something going on in the city tonight. She’s not even going home.”

“Oh.” She had mentioned that she needed to leave work early today, but she hadn’t told me why. Absently wondering what that might be, I shook my head, not sure. But it didn’t matter. All of the stumbling blocks I could think of to keep Landon and me apart were gone, at least for the time being. “Yeah, sure. I’d love to come over for dinner.”

“Awesome. I’ll make one of your favorites. You still love eggplant, right?” He grinned at me, making that vibration I felt earlier flare up again.

“Yes, that would be great.” Leaning slightly closer to him, I embraced my boldness. “I hope there will be dessert.”

“I can guarantee there will be.” Landon’s smile was smoldering. I needed to get out of there before I burst into flames.

Pulling myself up out of the chair, I backed away from him, not wanting to put myself in a situation where I might kiss him again. The urge to fan myself was overwhelming, but I fought it off. “See you later.”

The moment I was out of his office, I lifted my hand to my face and moved it back and forth rapidly, trying to stir the air. My skin was on fire, and perspiration was beginning to dot my brow. This man sure knew how to light my fire.

Breathing deeply through my nose to calm my pulse, I headed to my desk, trying to remind myself I still had a few hours of work left. Noting that Liberty wasn't at her desk, I vaguely wondered where she was going again but then got back to the tasks I'd been working on earlier.

Until I felt a tap on my shoulder and heard a sharp, "Boo!"

Jumping, I spun around to see Liberty standing next to my desk, laughing. "Girl, I almost backhanded you. How did you sneak up on me?"

She shrugged, still giggling. "I don't know. I went to the bathroom, and you looked like you were concentrating so intently, I wondered if I'd be able to do it. Turns out, I could."

I shook my head at her and turned around to face her, not sure what to say. I settled on, "Great joke."

"You seem a little on edge," Liberty noted.

Quickly, I shook my head. "No, just concentrating." If anything, I was relaxed now compared to earlier.

"M'kay. Hey, I wanted to ask you, do you want to come hang out with me tonight at this girls' night? I'm meeting some friends, people who used to work here who don't anymore, and we're going to go to a club and then stay at the Backstage Inn."

"That does sound fun." I finally knew where she was going tonight. On any other night, I might've taken her up on the offer but not tonight. "No, thank you. I have plans tonight."

One eyebrow arched as Liberty considered how I suddenly had plans. "Oh, okay. Maybe next time."

"Yep." Giving her a smile I hoped she'd find genuine and not at all forced, I turned back to my computer and got back to work. If Liberty asked me what was going on, I'd have to tell her, and I just didn't want to. For some reason, making too

much of a big deal out of the situation with Landon seemed like bad luck to me, and I did not want to jinx it.

Both of us got back to work, and before I knew it, Liberty was leaving early. I told her to have fun and wished I could also duck out before five. I'd have plenty of time to get home, shower, and pick out a nice outfit before walking across the street for dinner, but at the same time, the closer it got to closing time, the harder it was for me to concentrate.

Finally, it was time to go home. I sent Landon a quick text to let him know I'd see him later and then headed out, afraid that if I went back into his office, I'd never want to leave.

The drive home was full of me singing along with every song on the radio, dreaming about what might happen later. I thought a little bit about what I should wear, too, but mostly, my mind was on Landon. Damn, that man was hot.

I felt bad about how I'd jumped to the conclusion that it had been him who had called the HOA on my father, but in my defense, Landon had used a similar tactic the last time to let me know he wasn't interested. He'd said I wasn't good enough for him, essentially, because my family was different. Why should I assume things would be different this time?

He had changed, though, hadn't he? It seemed like it. I wanted to hope that he had. The way I'd felt about him before was so intense. I'd been ready to spend the rest of my life with him. The word "love" had come to mind time and again whenever I thought of him.

When he'd broken my heart, he'd done it hard. The pain had been real. Intense. I never wanted to go through that again. Involving myself with the same man who'd crushed me the first time was a huge risk. Nothing I said or did made me less aware of that fact.

But at the same time, my heart was acting independently of my head, and I couldn't stop myself from wanting to be with him—to give him another chance. Getting to know him all over again was thrilling for reasons I couldn't put into words.

Before I knew it, I was home. Pulling into the drive, I practically leaped out of the van to hurry inside and get ready. Mama was in the kitchen, so I stopped to kiss her cheek before heading for the stairs.

“I guess you had a good day?” she called after me.

Already a few steps up, I paused and turned around, skipping back to her. “Yeah. I’m going across the street to have dinner at the Johnsons’ house.”

“Oh, okay. How’s Liberty?” Mama smiled at me, wiping the counters off with a damp dishtowel.

It was a good thing she assumed I was having dinner with Liberty. “She’s good.” Seeing no reason to say more, I smiled. “I’m going to get ready.”

“All right, sweetie. Have fun.” Mama didn’t question me further, thank goodness, so I headed off again.

Upstairs, I pulled a couple of dresses out of my closet and stood in front of the mirror, holding them up in front of me. Most of my dresses were similar—floral prints that reached my ankles. I’d given up on wearing things that weren’t comfortable and didn’t speak to me when I was in Cali because I wasn’t dating seriously anyway. Nothing in my closet quite sent the message I wanted to send.

“That one says librarian,” Aurora said, sticking her head in.

“Thanks.” I shook my head and gave her a narrow-eyed stare.

Laughing, my sister said, “Where are you going?”

Immediately, my guard went up. “Just to Liberty’s house for dinner.”

Aurora studied my face for a second. “Okay. Well, I have a new dress you can borrow if you want to. It’ll look good on you, though it’s not casual if that’s what you were going for.”

“Can I see it?”

Aurora’s taste in clothing was so much better than mine.

“Sure. I’ll go get it.” She disappeared while I hung the clothes back in my closet, thinking I should spend some of my first paycheck on a few new outfits.

A few minutes later, Aurora was back with a cute red body con dress. It was far more daring than what I usually wore, but the skirt wasn’t quite as micro as many of the other body con dresses I’d seen.

“Try it,” she said, rolling her eyes at me as if she could tell I was uncomfortable.

“Fine.” Stepping into my closet, I put the dress on, realizing I still needed to take a shower and put on some sexier underwear. But I knew my sister wanted to see the fit.

When I came back out and saw myself in the mirror, I knew this was the dress.

“You look hot,” Aurora said with a smirk on her face. “Is that what you’re going for?”

Feeling my cheeks flame, I said, “No. I don’t know. Thanks. Now get out.”

She laughed and headed out the door, leaving me alone with my new image. Yeah, Landon was going to like this dress. “Hope he doesn’t rip it,” I muttered.

About an hour later, after a shower, my hair styled and my makeup on point, I packed an overnight bag—just in case—and headed across the street.

The spring air felt cool against my heated cheeks. I hoped he didn’t think I was throwing myself at him, showing up dressed like this, with a bag slung over my shoulder. But at the same time, I wanted him to know, when I’d asked about dessert, I wasn’t talking about cake.

With a deep breath, I knocked on the door. Landon answered it immediately. Wearing a pair of black slacks and a gray button-down shirt, the man looked like he’d just stepped out of a magazine.

“Holy hell,” I muttered at the same time as he said, “Fuck me,” with a big grin on his face.

Yeah, this is going to be a fun night.

LANDON

“**Y**ou look amazing, Poppy,” I told her after my initial mumbling of how fucking hot she was.

“Thank you.” She looked down at the tight red dress she was wearing. “It’s a little different than how I usually dress, but Aurora suggested it. Seemed like fun.”

“It, uh, definitely seems fun.” I ran my hand through my hair, not sure what else to say.

Poppy cleared her throat, making me realize we were still standing in the doorway. “Oh, come in,” I told her.

“Thanks. You look nice, too, by the way.” We walked into the kitchen, and I noticed she dropped what appeared to be an overnight bag by the couch as we went by.

It had taken me a long time to figure out what to wear, so I thanked her and said, “Unfortunately, I didn’t get too far with dinner. I had a call at the last minute at work that made me leave a little late.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I can help,” she volunteered. “It’ll be fun.”

“Awesome. Thanks, Poppy.” I couldn’t help but grin at her, she was so sweet and thoughtful.

“No problem. Looks like you just need to get the eggplant coated, and we can get that in the oven.” She went about finishing the eggplant parmesan while I worked on the sauce.

“Would you like some wine?” I asked, grabbing a couple of glasses out of the cabinet.

“That sounds amazing.” Poppy smiled at me over her shoulder as she finished getting the eggplant into the oven.

I handed her a glass of wine and then turned some music on softly in the background, making sure I had the right Spotify station ready to go. I’d already made a playlist for Poppy a few days back. Thoughts of her had begun to consume me before we’d even slept together.

Visions of her naked in my bed flooded my mind. I had to push them away or we would never get through dinner.

I tried my best to focus on dessert, even though I didn’t think it was the dish of brownies I was currently putting together she’d been talking about when she’d asked earlier if there would be more after dinner.

“So,” Poppy began once we had the food in the oven. “How was the visit with your parents?”

“Fine.” Trying not to grumble, I shrugged my shoulders. For work purposes, it had turned out to be a good thing that Dad had come, but I hated the way he treated her family. “How are you liking work?”

She noticed I’d abruptly changed the subject. “I like it.” The two of us sat down on barstools near the stove so I could stir every few minutes. She took another sip of her wine. “It’s way different than what I thought I’d be doing.”

“Oh, yeah?” She nodded, so I continued. “I thought Liberty said you’d been working in an office.”

“Yeah, I had been. I have off and on. But if it were up to me, I’d always have a paintbrush in my hand, you know? I’d be wearing a dress with bright sunflowers on it, standing in front of an easel, not answering emails or talking to people on the phone.” She seemed nonchalant about it, like she understood this was just temporary.

“How did you become an artist to begin with, Poppy?” She’d loved art for as long as I could remember, but I never knew what sparked that interest.

“Well, when I was little, Mama and Dad always encouraged all of us to use our imagination. We didn’t watch TV or anything digital like today’s kids. We were either out running around in the yard or inside with paints and markers. Mama didn’t believe in coloring books. She said we shouldn’t be tied down by lines, so she encouraged all of us to make our own drawings to color. I did that a lot. Drawing was always fun for me, and then I’d color my own art.”

Smiling at her, I nodded along with what she was saying. Dinner was ready now, so I fixed our plates, and the two of us moved to the nook to eat, rather than heading into the formal dining room.

We ate for a few minutes as I mulled over what she’d just said about her parents encouraging her to be artistic. In a way, I was jealous of the way Poppy had been brought up. “I wish I’d had more encouragement to be creative when I was a kid.” That might’ve been the first time I’d ever admitted that aloud.

“Oh, yeah? I remember playing in the park and stuff when we were younger. You played some of our fantasy games then.”

“Sure, but it was never my idea. I mean, I was always a follower in those situations. Mom and Dad wanted us to be part of polite society—in their eyes. Not kids. We were supposed to be clean and presentable at all times. Mind our manners. Be seen not heard, all of that stuff.”

“Was it always that way?” Poppy’s voice had a tinge of sadness in it.

The last thing I wanted to do was have her pity me, but at the same time, I felt like I could be honest with her as well. “I think so. Even before Liberty was born, when it was just me and my parents in that little apartment, I felt like they wanted me to pretend to be something we weren’t yet—some kind of a preppy kid who thought he was better than everyone else.”

That made Poppy laugh. “I’m sorry you felt that way. I always thought you fit in really well.” She took a bite of her eggplant and washed it down with more wine.

“Thanks.” I shrugged. “I guess I shouldn’t expect anything different from a man named Remington.”

“Do you think your grandparents put that kind of expectation on your father?” Poppy asked me, wiping her mouth on her napkin. “Maybe that’s where he got the idea that he needed to be a part of high society. It’s not like he chose his own first name.”

“I don’t know.” I’d honestly never thought about it before. But that made sense. Maybe Dad had always felt the need to live up to his fancy first name. “Anyway, in my house, getting good grades, wearing ironed clothes, and always being polite were the main focus.”

“Well, you did a good job on all of those things.” Poppy grinned at me. I appreciated the vote of confidence but realized I now wanted to change the subject.

“Have you seen any good movies lately?” I couldn’t think of anything else to say, but I wasn’t expecting my question to make her laugh.

“I mean, not new ones, but I liked the one we watched together the other night.” Her smile always dazzled me, especially when she was talking about something she loved—like *13 Going On 30*.

“I was bummed out that we didn’t get to see the *Thriller* scene,” I admitted.

“Me, too! I wanted to yell at Liberty about it later, but she was too wasted to know what she was doing.” We both laughed at that.

For the rest of dinner, we talked about various topics, nothing too intense or personal, just television, our siblings, whether or not we liked the song that was on, things of that nature. It was a great reminder to me of why I liked Poppy so much to begin with. She was so genuine, so down to earth, and always had something interesting to say. She was also really smart.

When we were finished with dinner, I cut us each a brownie, and we sat next to one another on the barstools to eat

them.

“Do you have any vanilla ice cream?” Poppy asked me.

“Oh, that sounds so good.” I dug around in the freezer for a moment and found some. Topping the warm brownies with the ice cream made them even better. “I guess you’re getting your dessert, huh?” I teased.

Poppy’s cheeks pinked, which was exactly what I was hoping for. “Definitely.” She winked at me and took another bite of her dessert, letting the spoon slip through her lips. She licked her mouth, and I immediately felt my dick harden, straining against my jeans.

We’d had a little wine, but neither one of us was drunk. Anything that happened between us tonight would definitely be because we chose for it to happen. Not that I thought either one of us had been influenced by alcohol the other night, but it was easy to say, “I’d had a drink or two. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Tonight, we both knew what we were doing—without a doubt.

“I love all of this music,” Poppy noted. “I think we got super lucky on the songs on this station.”

Had she not figured out that I’d made this list for her? “Glad you like it.” I didn’t want to give myself away.

We finished our dessert, and I took both of our bowls, rinsing them out and putting them into the dishwasher. When I turned around, Poppy was swaying back and forth to the song that was on. “This one is my favorite,” she reminded me.

It was her favorite. I could remember her dancing to this at a party once, the same party where I kissed her during a game of spin the bottle, even though it wasn’t our turn. With a grin, I walked over to her. “May I have this dance?”

Her hand was warm as she slipped her fingers into mine. “I’d love that.”

Pulling her across the room to the open space between the living room and kitchen, I wrapped my arms around her,

holding her close against my chest. The floral scent that always embraced her was light and airy. Poppy rested her head against my shoulder. Her narrow waist beneath my hand reminded me of how small and delicate she truly was, despite what could often be a big personality.

“I can hear your heartbeat,” she noted, a soft giggle escaping her lips.

I wondered what she could feel. Holding her this close, I couldn't help the way my body reacted to hers. She had to know how much she drove me crazy. My dick continued to strain against my pants, longing to get out, but I did my best to stay focused on this tender moment with this woman I'd longed to hold in my arms for all of these years.

“Do you remember that party?” Poppy asked, her voice just above a whisper, her cheek still pressed to my chest. “Back in high school?”

“Yes, of course, I do.” I stopped myself from saying more, from telling her I'd thought about it every day since it happened, that I often dreamed of kissing her. “You looked just as beautiful that night as you do right now, Poppy.”

With a soft sigh, she lifted her head, looking up at me, her eyes twinkling. Her lips were pursed, the smile on her face enchanting. It was clear to me that she wanted me to kiss her. Who was I to deny her?

Leaning down, I pressed my mouth to hers, gently at first, savoring the feel of her warm lips against mine. No longer aware of the rest of the world, Poppy's existence encompassed me. My tongue tapped against her bottom lip, begging to be let in. She obliged, parting her lips for me. The taste of our dessert mingled with her own unique taste that I loved so well. I kissed her softly, sweetly. She kissed me back, her hand sliding up my chest to rest on the side of my face.

How long had I dreamt of spending this sort of special time with this amazing woman? For years, I'd wanted her. Now, she was here, and she wanted me, too. It seemed like a beautiful dream. But if it was, I wouldn't be pinching myself. I didn't want to wake up.

POPPY

Landon's soft, full lips enveloped mine, my hand pressed to the back of his head as I melded my body into his.

Being with him tonight had been so much fun. It had rekindled all of the emotions I'd been holding in my heart for him for all of those years. Now, I wanted to show him just exactly how much he meant to me.

A familiar song filled my ears, one that I remembered dancing with him to at that party, the first night that he kissed me all those years ago. Listening to it made my heart stir in ways it never had before. It was time to invite Landon to explore my body. The other night when we'd been together, it had been magical. This time, I wanted to take it slow and really concentrate on pleasing one another in ways no one else ever had before.

Releasing my lips, Landon asked, "Poppy, do you want to go upstairs?"

Without hesitation, I blew out a deep breath and nodded. "Yes."

His hand slid around my hips and then up to take my hand. I kept a hand on his chest as we glided to the stairs and then ascended them at a fast pace, smiling at one another and kissing as we went.

In his room, the speakers continued to play the same song, though it was quieter in here. Landon spun me around in a circle, making us both laugh, and then he pulled me to his

chest. My hand slipped up to his cheek as his lips descended upon mine again, stealing my breath away.

The burning ache I'd felt deep inside me for years began to hum again. Knowing that longing would be satiated soon, I began to unbutton his shirt. His hands slid down my body, taking their time, feeling me through the thin fabric of my borrowed dress. When he got to the bottom, he slowly slid his fingers beneath the hem, tracing circles on my upper thighs. A moan stirred from deep within me. I wanted to take my time and enjoy this, but the more he touched me like that, the more I wanted him inside me now.

With his shirt unbuttoned, I pushed it down off his shoulders. Landon wiggled free out of it. Moonlight glistened off his smooth, chiseled chest. Running my palms along his skin, I trailed lower and lower until my fingertips caressed his abdomen. Then, I found the waistband of his pants and unbuttoned them, pulling the zipper down carefully while he worked his way out of his shoes and socks. I was able to step out of my heels fairly easily while pushing his pants down over his hips. They slid down to the floor, and he kicked them aside, leaving him in black boxer briefs.

“You are wearing entirely too much clothing,” he murmured, leaning in to press his lips to my neck. I half-moaned and half-giggled as he fumbled with the zipper in the back of my dress. It was tricky, what with the dress being so tight, but he managed. I slipped my arms through the straps, revealing I had decided not to wear a bra. Landon groaned, his hands immediately coming up to cup my breasts.

While he played with my nipples, I walked him backward toward the bed. He didn't hesitate to scoop me up and drop me down on the mattress before falling next to me. His mouth met mine while his hands continued to explore my body. After another passionate kiss, he leaned down to take a nipple between his lips. Moaning, I let the intense feeling wash over me, my fingers threading through his hair to pull him closer.

His erection was evident as he leaned against me. I could feel his hard cock against my hip, which only made me want him more. Already soaking wet with need, I reached for him,

but Landon wasn't ready for that yet. He lifted my hand and smiled down at me. "Someone is being a bit impatient."

"I can't help it," I moaned. "I want you so badly."

"Well, let's see if we can find something else you'll like." He kissed me and then trailed a line of kisses between my breasts and down my stomach.

I didn't have to ask where he was headed. Ordinarily, I didn't like for men to eat me out. It was just too intimate, and I never enjoyed it. But this was different. This was Landon. Something told me he would know exactly what to do.

Landon hooked his thumbs through the top of my panties and pulled them off me, tossing them aside. Then, he spread my legs wide, admiring the view for a moment. The urge to close my legs was overwhelming, but I fought it. This was Landon, and I wanted him to enjoy my body. I wanted him to feel free to explore and do whatever felt right and natural to him with no inhibitions.

His tongue was rough and warm as it darted out to lick me. Slowly, he dragged his tongue across my most sensitive areas, working between all of my folds, taking his time to lap up my juices. A loud moan escaped my lips. It felt so good, so right. When he began to penetrate me, I couldn't help but lift my hips up off the mattress, grinding against him. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Landon moved his lips up to my clit, flicking it with his tongue a few times at first. But then he began to suck and pull me deeper inside of his mouth. I couldn't hold back then. Feeling my body begin to spasm, I pushed down hard with my hands against the mattress, trying to hold on for dear life, but it was no use. I fell over the edge, losing all control, my eyes rolling back, and my mouth dropping open in cries of sheer bliss.

He didn't let up. Landon continued to keep me there until I couldn't breathe, until I thought I might completely come undone. Then, finally, he sat up, a crooked grin on his face as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Did you like that?"

Still unable to speak, I grabbed hold of him and tugged him to me, wrapping my arms around him and kissing him deeply. The taste of my own slick juices filled my mouth, but I didn't care. I wanted him to know just how much I appreciated what he'd just done for me.

Now, it was time to show him just how much I liked it. Taking him by the shoulders, I flipped him over so that he was on his back. Landon let out a surprised laugh and looked up at me. "What are you doing, baby?"

"I like it when you call me that," I told him. Then, taking hold of his briefs, I yanked them down and off, tossing them aside. He let out a sigh but didn't interrupt my process.

I mounted him quickly, straddling him at first as I took his thick cock in my hand. Sliding up and down, I spread my folds around him, shimmying up and down, my bare flesh on his. Landon closed his eyes, a grunt and a groan coming out of his mouth, like he was about to come already.

Before I impaled myself on him, I let him fish a condom out of the top of his nightstand and get that on. Then, I lifted myself up, slowly coming down on top of him and taking him in.

"God, baby. Fuck," he muttered as I continued to ease my way down. "You feel so fucking good."

Unable to speak because of the pleasure that continued to course through me, I simply began to move. I took my time at first, moving my hips slowly up and down while Landon braced himself with his hands on my hips. The longer we continued to move, the quicker the pace until we were humming along together, grinding against one another. Cries of pleasure filled the room as he brought me to my peak again, his finger sliding between us to find my most sensitive area and rub it hard enough to send me over the edge once more.

Just when I thought he was about to join me and reach his release, Landon flipped me over onto my back. Surprised, I lay there for a moment with him on top of me, my knees still bent as I stared into his eyes. He took control, kissing me quickly before he began to fuck me hard and deep. It felt so good, I

had to close my eyes as the bed shook with every one of his powerful thrusts.

I couldn't handle such a rapid rate for too long. Within a few minutes, I let go again. This time, all I could do was pant and say his name, feeling wave after wave of euphoria wash over me. When Landon finally joined me, he grunted a few times, and then a loud groan spilled out of him along with his seed.

Both of us lay there, sweaty and breathing hard, trying to regain our composure. My heart pounded against my rib cage, perspiration stung my eyes, and every inch of my body felt like it was on fire. That had been amazing, and I was sad that it was over. After the other night, I'd had no idea if Landon and I would ever have sex again. Part of me thought he might say it was a mistake and never want to see me outside of work again. Now, I had a feeling he was beginning to have feelings for me again, like he had before.

Landon moved off me, falling onto the bed next to me. He took my hand, which was comforting enough. At the moment, we were too sticky to lie on top of one another and needed to regain our ability to breathe.

"Will you stay?" he finally eked out.

Shocked at first, I didn't know what to say. Of course, I wanted to stay. I had brought a bag, after all, but I still hadn't been prepared for the question. "Okay. I need to text my mom, though. Or else she'll worry."

"Where's your phone?" he asked me, sitting up.

Impressed with how sweet he was being, I said, "I believe it's on the counter in the kitchen. Could you bring up the bag I left in the living room, too?"

"Sure." He leaned down and kissed me one more time before he slid out of bed, put on his boxers, and headed downstairs.

As soon as he was gone, I moved so that I was under the blankets, making myself more comfortable. If I was going to be spending the night, I may as well choose a side. I had no

idea which one he preferred, though his phone charger being on the other side of the bed was a good clue that it wasn't this one.

I lay there, listening to him walk down the stairs, and smiled. Landon Johnson. I was in his bed. We'd just had sex—again. And it was great. Was it possible that all of my dreams from so many years ago were finally coming true?

I hoped so. Granted, everything wouldn't be perfect. We still had our challenges. But if Landon really wanted me, I'd do whatever I could to be the girl he wanted and deserved—as long as he didn't ask me to change who I was. “A sunflower can never be a rose.” I remembered what that sweet old woman at the yoga studio had told me.

A few minutes later, Landon came back with my phone. I thanked him and sent my mom a quick text that I was staying over at Liberty's. It wasn't quite a lie. Then, when Landon slid into bed and turned out the light, I snuggled up next to him. This felt good. It felt right. I never wanted it to end.

LANDON

Poppy's head was on my shoulder. I could tell by the even breathing that she was sound asleep. Leaning over, I brushed a kiss against her forehead and then closed my eyes, but I knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep. Not yet anyway.

Poppy was here with me. The sex had been amazing again—earth-shattering for sure—but beyond that, there'd been the time we'd spent together. The talking, laughing, and sharing. I felt more like my old self than I had in years. I could say whatever I felt to her. I didn't have to hide behind being the boss or the guy in charge. It was incredible.

I loved the way being with Poppy made me feel. I loved everything about Poppy.

I loved Poppy.

Was this a new revelation? No, I didn't think so. Hadn't I known for a very long time that I was in love with Poppy Briar?

After all, I'd been in love with her since we were both kids. I shouldn't be shocked at all to finally make that realization, and it didn't scare me. But it was alarming because the thing about loving someone was, if you lost them, it was like losing a piece of your own soul. And the only reason I knew this was because I'd already lost Poppy once. I didn't ever want to go through that again.

Eventually, I felt my eyelids grow heavy and surrendered to sleep, wondering what the next day would bring. Whatever

it was, I had a feeling it was going to be amazing—because I'd get to spend it with Poppy.

The next morning, I immediately remembered that Poppy should be there with me. I woke up facing the wall, and my stomach lurched as I imagined what it might be like to turn around and see that she wasn't there, that she either disappeared in the middle of the night or I'd made it all up to begin with. But when I rolled over, she was lying there, a wide smile on her face.

Both of us had woken before our alarms, so the sun was just barely coming up over the horizon. A new day was beginning, and we'd get to enjoy it together—even if we did have to go to work.

“Hey.” She smiled at me, and I smiled right back. “How did you sleep?”

“Great,” I said. “How about you?”

“Wonderful.” I could tell by her smile that she meant it. “I've got to get up and get home, though, so I can get ready for work.”

“You can get ready here,” I offered. “Liberty won't be using her bathroom. That way, I can cook you breakfast.”

The apples of her cheeks pinked. “Okay, that sounds great.”

I was afraid if I saw her naked again, I wouldn't be able to control myself. We had some time before we had to go but not that much time.

Poppy looked at me a little strangely and then asked, “Do you have a shirt I could throw on?”

Smirking at her, I got up and went to my closet, grabbing a shirt and tossing it in her direction. I still had my briefs on from when I'd gone to get her bag the night before, so I wasn't totally naked.

“Thanks.” She slid it on and then got out of bed, coming over to kiss me before taking her bag and her dirty clothes with her to Liberty's room.

I hurried to take a shower and get dressed and then went downstairs to make breakfast. I whipped up a vegetarian omelet and had that waiting when Poppy came downstairs. She looked amazing, as usual, in a long flowing skirt with bright red flowers on it and a white top.

“Why don’t we ride to work together?” I suggested.

“Sure, as long as you don’t think the other employees will be jealous that I caught a ride with the boss,” she noted.

Laughing, I said, “Some of them might be a little jealous if they know you’re sleeping with the boss, but I wouldn’t worry about it.”

I loved to make her smile. She grinned at me and went about eating her breakfast. After we finished, we headed to the garage and climbed into my car. The ride into Nashville wasn’t nearly as boring with Poppy next to me. Traffic didn’t bother me at all, not even when we got stuck behind a wreck that added an extra fifteen minutes to the commute.

We walked in together, Poppy ahead of me. The moment she walked through the door, I heard Paul’s voice say, “Hey, there you are gorgeous. We were wondering where—” Seeing me behind her, he stopped, his smile fading. “Good morning, boss.”

“Good morning.” I couldn’t help but smirk at him. Had he put two and two together, or did he just think he needed to be careful what he said to female employees in front of me? Either way, it got him to shut up.

I walked with Poppy through the office to her desk. Liberty was already there, typing away. She looked up, a puzzled expression on her face. “Hey, there you guys are. Did you come in together?”

“Traffic was terrible,” I told her, not even in answer to her question. Then, I turned to Poppy. The urge to kiss her, at least on the cheek, was overwhelming, but I didn’t. “Have a great day. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.” She grinned at me, twisting back and forth slightly. God, she was beautiful.

I left them and went into my office, certain my sister would start asking questions. I didn't know exactly what Poppy would be willing to tell her, but I couldn't imagine Liberty would want any sort of details, considering we were siblings, after all.

Once I was in my office, I sat down at my desk and took a few deep breaths. It was going to be hard to concentrate on work today, but I would find a way. Turning on my computer, I began to go through my emails. One of the first ones I saw was from my dad.

It was an email he'd forwarded to me yesterday, after I'd left the office. "Need your help on this one, son," it read. "Can you be here next week? I'll need a couple of employees, and bring Joshua."

A bit confused about what he was talking about, I read the other emails in the chain and saw that he was talking about the office we were opening in Honolulu. He wanted us to help get it set up. It seemed strange that he wouldn't call me about this, but maybe he wanted me to see it in the context of the previous emails.

Rather than emailing him back right away, I took a few moments to consider who I should take. Calling him wouldn't do any good right now because of the time difference. I'd get it all worked out and then call him back later.

Reading through the emails, I saw that they needed someone to start responding to clients right away and someone to get a few initial promotions going. It seemed clear to me that I should take Poppy and Liberty. Poppy had been doing fantastic with the phone calls and replying to emails, and Liberty knew how to get the other parts of the business, the marketing and all of that, set up. They wouldn't be much help with moving the office furniture, which was what Dad wanted Joshua for, but the two of us could handle that. Joshua was like a brother to me, so it didn't surprise me at all that Dad wanted him to come along.

My father had no idea that I'd hired Poppy as my assistant, so when I did let him know who was coming, I would just tell

him Liberty and my new assistant. I'd need to check with Joshua, though. It wasn't like I could just tell him to drop everything and come with me the way I could my own employees. I wanted to talk to him about it in person, though, so I'd wait until I could pay him a visit after work.

Satisfied that we had a good team, I got started on another task, making a mental note to call my father later and let him know the plan. Thank goodness Paul didn't need to come with us. That guy was such an obnoxious bastard. Why did he have to flirt with everyone all the time? It had to get old, especially for the women. Liberty had put him in his place a long time ago, but Poppy was just too nice to smart off to him.

She was nice—in every way possible. The idea that I might be able to take her to Hawaii with me sent a smile to my face and made my heart begin to race. Sure, we'd have work to do, but there should be some time for fun as well. Images of Poppy in a tiny bikini on the beach with the sun going down in the distance made it impossible for me to get any sort of work done. Damn, I could only imagine what it would be like to take her in one of those cabanas at sunset.

My mind began to run away with me, and if I wasn't careful, not only was I not going to get any work done, but I'd end up going outside to her office to pick her up and carry her in here caveman style and have my way with her on my desk. That would certainly add to the rumors that were likely already circulating.

Laughing at myself, I finally pushed thoughts of Poppy far enough out of my mind to return my attention to the task at hand—work. I got through the messages I needed to and was about to move on to some reports I needed to take a look at when my cell phone rang.

Glancing down, I saw that it was my father. It shouldn't have surprised me that he was awake, even though it was still really early there, since it wasn't even lunchtime in Nashville yet. He had always been the type to get up early when he had work to do, which was almost all the time, even though he was supposed to be at least semi-retired.

“Hey, Dad,” I said. “Shouldn’t you still be sawing logs?”

He laughed. “Couldn’t sleep. Did you get my email? Sorry I didn’t get a chance to call you about it yesterday, but Mom had some dinner party, and I had to get home.”

“No problem. Yeah, I got it. Sounds like a good plan. I’m sure Lib will want to come. I’ll talk to Joshua later this evening and make sure he can get free from his own job. If he can’t for some reason, I’ll pick up some more muscles.”

“Perfect. We’ll need someone to handle the email and phone calls for a bit, too, while we’re getting all of the vacancies filled,” he reminded me.

“Yes, my assistant can handle that for sure. She’s working out quite well.” I prayed that he didn’t ask me her name since I didn’t want to straight up lie to him.

“Splendid,” Dad said. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. Just wanted to make sure you knew the plan. Call me back once you’ve gotten a chance to speak to Joshua.”

“Will do. Bye, Dad.” I hung up and let out a sigh of relief that he hadn’t asked who my assistant was or even what her name might be. I couldn’t wait to tell Liberty and Poppy the good news, that we were going to Hawaii. Before I could do so, however, my phone rang. Recognizing that it was an important client, I put the announcement on hold and answered the phone. The boss’s work was never finished.

POPPY

Concentrating on my work wasn't the easiest thing to do considering how my morning had started. The first thing I did when I sat down at my desk was send my mom a text to let her know I'd ridden to work with a coworker. She didn't need to know which one. I had a feeling she'd ask, but so far, she hadn't. It only made sense that I would catch a ride with the Johnsons now anyway. It was definitely better for the environment if we carpooled whenever we could.

"Psst!" Liberty said from across the small space between our desks. "What's going on?"

My mouth opened and closed again. Now really wasn't the time to get into it with her regarding the situation between her brother and me. If other people from the office overheard, Landon might get upset. After all, we'd walked in together, but we hadn't been holding hands or anything.

Shrugging, I said, "Oh, uh, we just rode in together."

Liberty shook her head. "Not buying it."

"I'll tell you later, okay?" I felt my cheeks heating up just thinking about it. I knew I wouldn't be able to go into any details with Liberty because Landon was her brother, but I still couldn't wait to spill the beans and tell her as much as I could.

"You'd better," she insisted, giving me a sharp look.

Changing the subject, I asked her, "How was your girls' night out?"

A groan escaped her lips as she dropped her head to her desk. “So lame. Man, I wish you would’ve come with me. You and I always have the best time together. These ladies just weren’t what I was used to, that’s all. I mean, it was fine, but one of them—Brenda—invited her mother. Can you imagine? Her mother!”

A laugh escaped my lips as I imagined Liberty at a club trying to get her drink on, loud music with a thumping bass vibrating the entire room and someone akin to my own mother standing on the sidelines, a shocked look on her face. “Wow. That does sound lame.”

“Yep, her mother—and I swear to God her name was actually Karen—kept complaining about everything.” In a loud Brooklyn accent, Liberty said, “*This music is so loud, I can’t even hear myself think! Brenda, go tell them to turn it down. Tell them to turn it down, it’s too loud! This drink tastes like urine. Really, when did they start adding urine to the drinks at bars? Who knew? That dress is too revealing, Veronica. Seriously, you’re gonna sneeze and your boobs are just going to pop right out the top.*” Liberty finished with her impression and rolled her eyes.

By the time she was done, so was I. My side hurt so bad from laughing at her impression of Karen, Brenda’s mom, two people I’d never met and didn’t wish to know, that I thought I might have to take some pain medication. “That sounds awful,” I told her.

“Anyway, you and I need a girls’ night ASAP.”

“Can I invite my mom?” I teased.

Liberty laughed. “Yeah, sure. I’d love to have Mama Briar there. She’s not loud and obnoxious.”

Shrugging, I said, “Not loud, but she can be obnoxious, like all mothers.” I loved my mom, but she was not invited to hang out with me and my friend. “How about we do a girls’ night tonight? Take out and rom-coms?”

Liberty’s face lit up. “Definitely! We can kick Landon out and you can spill everything.”

I grinned at her, thinking he would be slightly pissed to be asked to leave his own home, but I knew Liberty would find a way to get Landon to go without me having to get involved at all.

I'd just started to get back to work when Landon walked into our area. He had a strange look on his face as he stood there for a few moments, his hands clasped together in front of him. "Liberty, Poppy, can I see you both in my office for a moment?"

His tone was so serious, it made a chill shoot down my spine. Immediately, I looked at Liberty to see if she was scared.

Her eyes were wide. "It wasn't me," Liberty blurted. "It had to have been someone else because I was here the whole time."

Stunned, I didn't know what to say or do. What was happening?

Landon shook his head. "Stop it, Lib. You're scaring Poppy. Come on." He gestured for us to follow him, but I was still confused. When I stood, my legs were shaking slightly. I'd just gotten everything ironed out with Landon, or so I thought, and now he wanted us to come into his office? I imagined this must be what it felt like to get called into the principal's office as a child, though that never happened to me, so I wouldn't know.

Liberty didn't seem scared at all now as she bounded down the hallway. I had to hurry to keep up with her, which was difficult since I was uncertain as to what fate I was walking into. When we got inside, she plopped down in one of the chairs across from his desk and asked, "What's up, boss man?"

I sat down next to her, relieved to see that Landon was smiling at me.

"Well, I spoke to Dad a little while ago, and he needs some muscle and some know-how in the newest office, so he's asked me to take a couple of employees who are good at marketing and customer relations with me, as well as Joshua.

We'll leave Monday morning—if that works for you both.” The last bit was almost phrased as a question.

I looked from Landon to Liberty and back again. Already, she was celebrating. I had a feeling that might be because Landon had mentioned Joshua's name. Liberty elbowed me and giggled, which confused Landon, I could see.

“Sounds amazing,” Liberty said. “How long will we be there?”

“About three days. Be sure to pack more than work clothes, though. We should have some time for sightseeing and visiting the beach.” Landon's grin spread even wider.

“Beach?” Maybe I was supposed to know where this new location was, but I had no idea. “Wait—where are we going?”

Rather than answering me, Liberty bounced out of her chair and immediately started waving her arms to the side of her body as her hips swayed from side to side. “Hawaii!”

I realized then that she was supposed to be doing a hula dance of some sort. But then, my eyes locked onto Landon's. He was telling me I was going to Hawaii—with him? For three days? And it wouldn't be just work? No way!

“All right.” I couldn't help the huge grin that spread across my face. Hawaii was one of the most romantic places on the planet, and I was going to get to spend some time there with the man I cared so very much for? Yes, please.

“Where are we staying?” Liberty resumed her seat, crossing her legs and swinging her foot back and forth. She had a tendency to do that when she was excited.

“Mom and Dad's extra condo is vacant right now, so we can stay there. It has four bedrooms,” Landon explained.

“Four bedrooms and an amazing ocean-front view. Man, this is going to be good! We haven't been to Honolulu in way too long.” Liberty's smile was almost as wide as my own.

“Weren't you just there a few months ago?” Landon asked her, his head cocked to the side. “For Mom's birthday? I had to

stay here because of that big client we were working with at the time.”

Liberty shrugged. “Even if I was, it still seems like way too long to be away from the islands.”

“Maybe you should just move there,” Landon said, giving her a mischievous grin.

“Alas, I cannot afford it and have chosen to build a home here, in Tennessee, instead.” Liberty let out a loud sigh and then stood. “Anything else, boss-brother?”

I giggled, having never heard her call him that before.

“No, that will do it. Let me know if you guys have any questions. Poppy, you’re able to go?” Landon had a hopeful look in his eyes.

I nodded. “Definitely.”

For the rest of the day, I felt like I was floating on a cloud. Not only were Liberty and I going to have an awesome girls’ night in a bit, but I was also going to Hawaii with Landon. I’d definitely have to fill Liberty in on the situation with her brother before we got there because otherwise, it might make it super awkward to be locked in a condo with the two of them.

Liberty turned on some Hawaiian music and continued to do her little dance for the rest of the day. It was clear she was stoked, too. I knew how much she liked Joshua, even if she hadn’t told me everything, so I was certain she was very excited about that.

About ten minutes before it was time to go home, Landon came out of his office. “Poppy, I hate to do this to you, but I have a late call with a client who had to reschedule from earlier in the afternoon last minute. Would it be okay if you caught a ride home with Liberty?”

Doing my best not to let him see how disappointed I was, I said, “Sure. No problem.” I’d been looking forward to the drive home with him, but maybe I could catch a ride in the morning.

On the way back to Franklin, Liberty and I discussed what we wanted to eat and what movie we'd watch. The ride went pretty quickly, and even though I had a good time talking to her, it was nothing like spending time with Landon that morning.

She dropped me off at my house, which worked since that made my mother, who was working in the flowerbeds, assume I'd been with her the whole time. I quickly explained I'd be going over there. "Oh, I made your favorite for dinner." Mama sounded slightly disappointed.

"Sorry. You can save it for me, and I'll take it for lunch tomorrow." I smiled at her, really feeling bad that I hadn't given her any notice, but she needed to remember I was an adult and had my own life. She nodded, and I headed inside.

I quickly changed into jeans and a sweater and grabbed my copy of the movie we'd decided to watch, *Something Borrowed*. Then, I made my way across the street.

"I just ordered the food!" Liberty announced as she flung the door open. "Come on in and pour the wine while I run to the restroom."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I headed into the living room and popped the disc into the machine, getting it ready to go, before I moved to the coffee table to pour us both some wine. Liberty was out in a few minutes, snuggling beneath a blanket, ready to start the show.

The front door opened, and Landon walked in. His eyes locked with mine, and we smiled at one another.

Before I could even open my mouth, Liberty was up off the couch. "Nope. Girls only," she announced, walking over to him.

"But this is my house," Landon reminded her.

"Sorry, not sorry." Liberty physically pushed him back toward the door.

"You're literally kicking me out of my own house?" He had an amused expression on his face, but I did feel bad for

him. She could at least let him change clothes and grab something to eat.

“That’s right,” Liberty told him. “You can come back in about three hours. Now, go.” With that, she worked him onto the front porch and then closed the door in his face before spinning around and giving me an evil look.

We both laughed.

LANDON

I couldn't believe I'd been kicked out of my own house. Actually, knowing Liberty, I could believe it. As I walked along, enjoying the spring evening air, breathing in the different scents of flowers from the neighbors' yards, I laughed to myself, thinking this was just the sort of thing my sister always did. And it was nice to see Poppy for a few seconds, even if I didn't get to enjoy her company long.

On the way home, I'd been thinking about coming in and having a nice dinner, maybe even calling her to see if she wanted to join me. It would've been nice to spend another evening with her. But then, I remembered that my sister would be there, and I wasn't sure if she was aware of everything going on between us yet. If we all went to Hawaii together, my sister would figure it out. She wasn't an idiot. Anyone with eyes had to see that Poppy and I had feelings for one another.

I had a feeling Poppy was going to tell her anyway. Wasn't that what girls did when they got together? I'd given up the notion long ago that they stripped down to their underwear and hit each other with pillows so that feathers cascaded down around them as they bounced up and down on the bed. Not that I'd want to imagine that about my sister anyway. A chill went down my spine just thinking about it. Poppy, yes. *Maybe with an attractive brunette.* Nah, Poppy was the only girl I wanted to think about in her underwear at the moment.

Seeing Joshua's car in his parents' driveway, I headed up to the house, glad to see I'd have someone to spend the

evening with. At least, I hoped he wasn't busy. I needed to talk to him about the trip anyway. May as well be now.

Knocking on the door, I rocked back and forth on my heels, trying to decide just how much to tell my best friend. I didn't see his parents' vehicle in the drive. I wondered if they were gone for the evening. Like my parents used to, Joshua's folks liked to go out to fancy restaurants with other couples from the neighborhood or go to dinner parties. So it wouldn't be a surprise to me if they weren't home.

Joshua opened the door, wiping his mouth on a napkin. "Oh, hey." He motioned for me to come inside. "What are you doing here?" He was still chewing what smelled like spaghetti.

"Sorry to just drop in on you, man," I said as I stepped through the door. "But my house has been overtaken by women."

"And you left?" Joshua asked, his eyes wide. We both laughed.

"Liberty kicked me out." I shrugged. "Mind if I hang out here for a little while?"

"No, of course not. I just fixed myself a big pot of spaghetti. You hungry?" My stomach growled in response to the question, making us both laugh again. I followed Joshua into the dining room where he'd set up dinner for one. "I'll go get you a plate." He clapped me on the shoulder before disappearing into the kitchen.

A moment later he was back with a plate, fork, and glass. A bottle of wine sat on the table. "Thanks, man."

"Sure. Help yourself." He sat back down and started eating again, so I fixed myself a plate and dug in, glad that Joshua was a better cook than I was. I could make a few dishes, and the eggplant parmesan I'd made for Poppy wasn't bad at all, but I was no chef.

"So, what are they doing over there?" Joshua asked me between bites. "Hitting each other in the head with pillows while wearing nothing but sexy lingerie?" He chuckled but I immediately shook my head.

“Dude, that’s my sister.”

His face turned red. “Oh, yeah. I know. Sorry. I guess that is kinda gross for you, but hey, Poppy in her underwear has to make up for it, right?”

Now, it was my turn to feel my cheeks turn pink. “Yeah, sure.”

He jabbed me playfully in the arm. “You gonna spill, bro, or what?”

“Sure, I’ll tell you what’s going on, but first, I have a question for you.” I told him about the conversation I’d had with my father earlier and how I could use his help with the furniture moving.

“No problem.” Joshua’s smile was wide. “I’d love to come to Hawaii for any reason. If a little manual labor is required, I’m down with that. Just got to find someone to cover for me at work. But that shouldn’t be too much of a problem. Let me ask the boss—yeah, the boss says it’s fine.” He laughed hysterically, like his joke was so funny.

I chuckled and nodded my head. Joshua loved to joke about asking the boss since he was the boss. “Thanks a lot, man. I really appreciate it, and so will my dad.”

“I’m happy to help,” Joshua said. We were both finished with dinner now, so I helped him clear the table.

“Where are your parents tonight?” I asked as I carried my plate and the spaghetti pot into the kitchen.

“Oh, one of the neighbors was having a dinner party. Mom was running late, as usual, and Dad had to practically haul her out the door.” He laughed. It was a known fact that Joshua’s mother always took way longer to get ready than she allotted herself. His dad was always complaining about it.

“Your dad cracks me up. ‘We may as well not even go at all if we’re going to be late!’” I did my best impression of Mr. Smith, which had us both cracking up.

“Yeah, our dads have a lot in common,” he reminded me.

“I guess I can kind of see that. They both like to point out things that disappoint them, but my mom doesn’t take that long to get ready.”

“True, but your dad does like to complain. Want a beer?” Joshua offered me a can out of the fridge, and I took it, even though I had had a glass of wine with dinner. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t mix those two beverages, but I figured one of each wouldn’t hurt.

We headed out to the back porch to drink our beers, relaxing after a hard day of work. I thought about what he’d said about my dad and just couldn’t let it go. “What do you mean my dad likes to complain?”

“Well, he’s always complaining about Poppy’s parents’ yard, for example. I remember how many times he blew up about it at get-togethers. No one else seemed to think it was a big deal, but your old man sure did. And then there’s Poppy herself.” He shrugged. “You two are getting close again, huh?”

I nodded. “Yeah, we are.” Once again, I felt my face heating up. “I think this might be it, bro.”

Joshua’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I feel like I used to about her. All of this time, I’ve been thinking about her, not able to think about anyone else or give my heart to another woman because I missed Poppy so much. Now, she’s back. She’s right here, and she is just as into me as I am to her. At least, I’m pretty sure she is.”

A grin spread across Joshua’s face. “Dude. That’s awesome. I’m so glad to hear that.”

“Yeah, thanks. I just hope I don’t fuck it up again.” It was hard for me to admit aloud that I was afraid of that happening, but I was. If I said something that made Poppy leave me this time, there was a good chance that she wouldn’t want to be with me at all—ever.

“You want some advice?” Joshua asked, taking another sip of his beer.

Ordinarily, I wouldn’t care for another single guy’s advice about dating, but Joshua was my best friend and the only one

I'd ever told that I was in love with Poppy. Well, other than my grandmother, but she didn't count. "Sure."

"You need to tell her how you feel, man. If you love her, tell her. Otherwise, she's going to think that you're just messing around. Or something's going to happen again, and she's going to get the wrong impression and cut you out of her life."

That had already almost happened. I thought about how upset Poppy had been when she thought I'd been the one to call the HOA on her father. If another incident like that happened, I could be totally screwed.

"You're right," I told him. "I'm nervous about going to Hawaii with her. What if my dad says something stupid? Or what if I do?"

Joshua snickered. "Chances are that *you* will," he teased me. I narrowed my gaze at him. "Yeah, it's definitely something to think about. You can't let her slip through your fingers again, dude."

"I've got to stop worrying about what my parents think. I don't care if they think she's not good enough for me. Hell, they've never even given her a chance, so they have no idea what an amazing person she is. I've proven myself at the business, so Dad can hardly threaten to take it away from me if I go out with Poppy. I have to start doing whatever it takes to make myself happy and not worry about anyone else."

"I think you've hit the nail on the head, man." Joshua tipped his head back to finish chugging down his beer.

"I mean, what good is all the money in the world or a successful business if I only have my little sister to share it with?" I thought aloud.

"Exactly. Your little sister is pretty great, but I get what you're saying."

I turned and looked at him, arching an eyebrow, but Joshua just laughed. "Um, she's my sister, man. Bro code—right?"

Joshua laughed even louder and promptly changed the subject. "You're doing the right thing with Poppy. She's

awesome. You've had a crush on her since you were, like, ten years old."

"I don't know if I was quite that young," I interjected, but he only stared at me. I couldn't remember when I had first fallen for Poppy because it seemed like I'd always had feelings for her. "I'm crazy about her, man. I can't think about anything else."

"Do you love her?" Joshua asked me point blank.

I didn't even hesitate to answer him. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I do."

Joshua's smile widened. "Cool. Then you need to tell her."

He was right. I did need to tell her. I needed to seal this deal before she got away from me forever.

Whenever I thought about blurting those words out, my heart started to race, my palms got sweaty, and I couldn't breathe. I needed to do it in a memorable way. Perhaps the opportunity would present itself when we were in Hawaii. That was a romantic place, after all. "All right," I told him. "I'll find a way to tell her."

"Awesome. Want another beer?" Joshua stood, moving toward the fridge on the back porch that was always fully stocked for parties and entertaining.

I'd told myself I was only drinking one beer after the glass of wine, but I definitely felt like I needed one now. "Yes, please."

Joshua stepped over and got a couple more cold ones out of the fridge. I cracked mine open and swallowed it down, thinking about Poppy. I was in love with her. I had been for most of my life. Now, I needed to tell her. It really shouldn't be that hard. After all, she had feelings for me, too, didn't she?

What if I said, *I love you*, and she said anything other than, *I love you, too*?

I thought it just might kill me.

POPPY

“Twice?” Liberty exclaimed, staring at me with her mouth hanging open. “You’ve only been in town a couple of weeks and you’ve already boinked my brother twice?”

“Boinked?” I had to cover my mouth to keep from spitting wine all over her. We’d clearly had a few glasses too many already, judging by the way this conversation was going. “Who says that?”

“I’m sorry—made passionate love.” Liberty’s nose crinkled up. “Ooh, gross. This is my brother we’re talking about.”

“I know. That’s why it’s kind of weird to even be talking to you about him, but you’re my best friend, and I’ve always told you everything.” I let out a sigh. This conversation was getting a little strange, and I wasn’t sure what else to say.

So far, I’d told her that we had sex the night of her birthday party, when she was passed out drunk, and then that I’d come over the night before for dinner. I focused on the romance aspects, but she’d immediately asked if we’d slept together again. I couldn’t lie to her.

“Okay, let’s not focus on the sex and talk about what’s going on with the two of you,” Liberty suggested.

My attention went to the movie we were supposed to be watching but only briefly. We’d both seen it a million times, so there was no need to hit pause while we chatted. Empty Chinese containers sat scattered all over the coffee table.

Landon was going to be pissed if he came home to see his house like this.

“Poppy? Did you hear me?” Liberty asked, tugging on my arm.

“Yeah, sorry.” It wasn’t that I hadn’t heard her, I just wasn’t sure what to say. “I mean, I definitely have feelings for him again.”

Clapping her hands a few times, Liberty beamed at me. “That’s great. I know how much he cares about you.”

Out of habit, I gave her a cynical look. “You know, huh? Didn’t you tell me the same thing all those years ago? That you were sure he really liked me?”

“Yes, and I was sure. He did really like you. Landon just let some stupid notion get in his head that he wasn’t supposed to be happy or some bullshit. I don’t even know what his deal was, honestly. One day, he was happy as a clam, walking around here with a huge grin on his face, and the next day he was like a puppy who’d just been dropped off at an animal shelter.”

The image of Landon with big puppy dog eyes, a tear slipping down his cheek, came to mind, and my heart instantly melted. “That’s awful.”

“I know. I asked him what happened, but he didn’t want to talk about it. He said he had broken things off with you. I told him he was a colossal dumbass, and he didn’t even disagree with me. Then, you told me what he’d said to you, and I couldn’t even believe it. When I asked him why, he said because it was true. So I socked him in the arm as hard as I could and told him he’d better apologize and never say or think anything like that again. By then, it was too late.” She hung her head, shaking it back and forth slowly.

I didn’t need a recap of the worst time in my life. It was all vividly clear to me, just like it had been on the day that it had happened.

“But then, he spent months moping around. I’d catch him looking at pictures of the two of you together, and he’d

quickly put them away. It's not like Landon to have absolutely nothing to say, but sometimes I wouldn't hear his voice for days at a time. It was obvious to me that he still had feelings for you. I just couldn't figure out why the hell he'd broken up with you to begin with."

"That is the million-dollar question, I suppose." Letting out a sigh, I took a sip of my wine. "I'm afraid he's going to do it again."

"I can't blame you for thinking that way, Poppy, but he won't. He's learned a lot in the last nine years. He's a lot more mature, and he knows what he wants from this life. You're it." She shrugged, like it was all just that simple.

But it wasn't. I still had every reason to think he might do something like what he'd done last time again. After all, I'd had no idea he'd been that upset when he'd broken things off with me. Liberty made it sound like he'd really cared a lot about me back then. I figured it was just a fling, one he'd flung and didn't want to retrieve, so the apologies had been because he realized I was his sister's best friend and he shouldn't have been such an asshole. Now, I wasn't so sure.

Liberty took a big gulp of her wine and set the almost empty glass aside. "He's under a lot of pressure, being the oldest child in this family, you know. My father's son. It's not easy."

I considered what she was saying. I'd never been a huge fan of Remington Johnson, but mostly because of the way he treated my family. He thought he was better than us and always treated us like we weren't as important as he was. Growing up with those kinds of high expectations must have been tough on all of them, but it was probably hardest of all on Landon.

"He's worked so hard over the last several years to make the company everything it's become. Sure, Dad did a lot of work to get it there, and he still does, but Landon has made a lot of improvements. Dad still watches everything he does to make sure he doesn't screw it up. That's a lot of pressure."

I totally understood what she was saying. It made me want to work even harder to help Landon's company, the business I worked for, to be more successful, just to show Remington Johnson his son knew what he was doing. "Your dad needs to calm down." It was the nicest way I could say what was on my mind. Liberty loved her parents, but I knew her dad got to her, too.

"You can say that again. Despite everything that Landon has poured into the family business, I know he'd leave it all to be with you, Poppy. He just has to realize that you're what he really wants out of life, and the more time the two of you spend together, I think he sees that more and more."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. I wanted to think that she was right, that he *did* realize that I could make him happy. The more time we spent together, the more I knew that I wanted to be with him. But Landon wasn't always as quick to accept change as I was. He was guarded, afraid to let others in.

"I know the two of us are different," I began, fidgeting with my wine glass. "But I want him to embrace those differences, to celebrate them, not to ridicule me or think that I'm less than he is because my family has a different perspective on things like nature and high society than your family does."

"I know." She reached over and placed her hand on top of mine. "The more he breaks away from our father's influence, the easier it will be for Landon to show you he appreciates those things about you, that they're part of the reason he loves you."

"Loves me?" I scoffed at the words, but Liberty nodded. "I don't think your brother loves me."

"I think he does," she replied quickly, shrugging. "He might not even know it yet, but I think he will realize it soon."

I couldn't help the hopeful smile that spread across my face. It would be amazing to hear Landon say that he loved me. After all of these years, knowing we could finally be together—forever—would make my heart sing.

Feeling as though this conversation had gone on long enough, I cleared my throat and changed the subject. “So, what’s up with you and Joshua?”

Immediately, her face turned bright pink, and a goofy grin took over her countenance. “Joshua? Joshua who?” She winked at me. “Seriously, though, I’m not sure how to answer that question.”

“You like him—and he likes you. That’s obvious to anyone with eyes. Well, anyone but your brother,” I told her.

“Yeah, well, that’s because he’s my brother’s best friend. You know the bro code rules. No dating your best friend’s sister.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m forbidden fruit.”

The way she said the phrase, like she was revealing a legend from an ancient fable, had me laughing. “Oh, well then. I’m pretty sure that’s what got the world in trouble to begin with.”

“Yep.” Liberty sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “I mean, I absolutely love him, Poppy. I do. Everything about him makes me happy. But he’s entirely off limits.”

Hearing her say that made my heart fall. “Maybe something will change.”

“Like what? My brother will decide he’s not his best friend all of a sudden? I don’t think that would be good for either one of them, and even then, I think there’s like a ten-year statute of limitations or something.”

“Well, Joshua is going with us to Hawaii, right? Maybe something will happen between the two of you there, something so romantic that neither one of you will let this ridiculous bro code get in the way. It doesn’t even make sense. Why would Landon rather have his little sister dating a stranger or some guy who is such an asshole that he doesn’t consider him a friend rather than the guy he likes most in the world?”

“I have no fucking clue,” she admitted. “But that’s how it goes. Guys are stupid. I think the quicker women learn that, the better off they are.”

That made us both laugh. But Landon wasn't stupid. Surely, he could be made to see how important this was to Liberty, and he would find a way to forget these stupid rules.

The two of us settled back in to watch the movie some more. It was getting to the good part, where the friends fight over the man. While I watched Ginnifer Goodwin and Kate Hudson fight over Collin Egglesfield, my mind drifted back to the conversation Liberty and I had had about her brother.

Could it be true that Landon really did love me all those years ago? Had he said those things to me for some reason other than the fact that he really felt that way?

Ever since that day when he'd told me I wasn't good enough for him, I'd struggled to figure out what had made him act that way. Sure, when we were younger, he'd acted a bit snobby toward me, but I thought it was just because he was older and trying to be cool.

Now, I had no idea what might've been the reason for that hurtful statement that kept us apart for the last nine years. I did know if he ever said anything like that to me again, I'd never recover. I hoped his sister was right and Landon had matured in the time that we'd been apart.

Trying to let those depressing thoughts go, I focused on our upcoming trip. We were going to Hawaii. I could hardly believe it.

I'd never been before, but I'd always dreamed of going. Living in Cali had given me a taste of what the tropical life could be like, but it was nothing like Hawaii. I imagined Landon and me on the beach at sunset, our arms around one another, sharing a kiss under the palm trees with the scent of hibiscus filling the air. I couldn't wait.

What could possibly go wrong in paradise?

LANDON

The week flew by so quickly, I could hardly believe it was Friday afternoon already. Driving home from work, my mind went over everything that had happened that week, how Poppy and I had spent the night together, how we were getting closer by the day, and how she made my heart race every time I saw her smiling face.

I also couldn't help but feel excited about our trip to Hawaii. In just a few days, I'd be on the beach with this beautiful woman. I hoped we'd get a chance to share a magical sunset together. A smile crested my face thinking about how it would feel to kiss her with the sun fading over the ocean.

Traffic was terrible, but I didn't care. Even though I had plans that night, I was content to just sit there and think about Poppy, listening to love songs on the radio. It might seem silly to some, but just the thought of her made me happier than I'd felt in a long time.

When I finally got home, I only had about half an hour before I was supposed to be at Luke Robertson's house down the street. I decided to change into shorts and a T-shirt, something more relaxing, and I popped my first beer open before making my way over. Liberty wasn't home yet, so it seemed I'd be heading out on my own. I knew she was going, too.

I hadn't gotten around to asking Poppy if she was going, but I hoped she was. Since this was a neighborhood chili cookoff, it made sense that she would be there. It was a

neighborhood tradition, something we had been doing at least a few times a year for as long as I could remember. Now that our parents had gotten older, many of them had moved away or spent the majority of their time in second homes. It was left to the next generation to continue the tradition.

The sun was beginning to fade over the horizon as I made my way down to the Robertsons' house. A few other people were outside, working in their yards or sitting on their porches, enjoying the fresh air. I waved and greeted them, and they returned the gesture. We really did live in a great neighborhood. Buying my parents' house had been the right decision for me. I couldn't imagine raising my own children anywhere else.

Children? Now I was thinking about having children? "Poppy, what have you done to me?" I muttered under my breath. I'd always wanted kids, but without the woman, it seemed trivial to think about. Now, I found myself imagining Poppy with a baby bump or a toddler on her hip. She would make an incredible mother.

The sounds of laughter poured from the backyard as I approached my destination. I could hear Luke's deep voice shouting across the yard before he burst into laughter. Knowing him, he was probably harassing his younger sister Clara. They were a tight-knit family, like mine, but they also liked to torment one another.

"Hey, look who's here!" Joshua greeted me as I approached the open fence gate. "You look spiffy."

Glancing down at my outfit, I wondered if maybe he'd already had a few too many beers. "Thanks?" I was just wearing khaki shorts, tennis shoes, and a blue polo.

"Get the man a beer!" Luke stood behind the huge open fire pit, stirring an enormous pot of chili. This was the tradition, how we always cooked the chili. Before long, the entire neighborhood would smell incredible.

William, Joshua's brother, brought me a can and shook my hand. "How's it going, man?" It'd been a while since I'd seen him. He'd been away at school. "You home for the weekend?"

“Yeah, couldn’t miss this.” William laughed as Joshua gave him a noogie. The younger brother squirmed away, and Joshua led me over to the porch where we took a seat. A crowd had gathered, sitting around and watching the baseball game that was playing on the TV above the fireplace, which wasn’t lit. The blaze from the fire pit was enough to warm anyone who was a little chilly in the spring air.

I said hello to the other guests, including Luke’s younger sister, Clara, who was busy playing hostess, making sure everyone was comfortable. I sat down next to Joshua, facing the fence. My fingers were itching to text Poppy to make sure she was coming, but I didn’t dare. The idea that I might seem too needy was ever present in my mind.

“Liberty home from work yet?” Joshua’s tone sounded casual but also a bit like he was forcing it to sound that way.

“Not yet. She rode with Poppy today. I had an early meeting, so I went by myself. I would’ve thought they’d be home by now.” Hadn’t they left the office at the same time I did?

He nodded. “Poppy’s coming tonight, right?”

“I think so, but I honestly didn’t ask her.” Joshua looked surprised at my response. Shrugging, I said, “It didn’t come up.”

“You’re so weird,” he mumbled. “You did remember to ask her about Hawaii, right?”

Before I could answer, Clara said, “Hawaii? Who’s going to Hawaii?” Her eyes were bright with curiosity.

“Oh, it’s a work thing,” I told her.

“I want to go.” She grinned at me. “I’ve never gotten to visit Hawaii before.”

“Are you kidding?” her brother asked her. “If you went to Hawaii, the entire island would have a rush on sunglasses the moment you stepped off the plane.”

“What are you talking about?” Clara stood and folded her arms beneath her chest.

“The glare from your bright white legs would blind everyone.” Luke smirked at her, and Clara took off across the yard to smack him. The two chased each other around for a few minutes, leaving the rest of us shaking our heads and laughing.

“Guess some things never change,” Joshua noted.

“Not those two.” Clara was wearing shorts at the moment, and while she wasn’t exactly tan, her brother had been clearly trying to get a rise out of her, which had worked. She was fair skinned by nature.

Thoughts of the sibling conflict and whatever it was Joshua was saying to me faded away as I saw Poppy glide through the door. She was with her family—Aurora and August—as well as my sister, but I didn’t see any of those people, only her.

I headed over to her, drawn to her. Our eyes met, and her face lit up, radiating a brightness more illuminating than the fire. “Hey,” she said as I approached.

“Hello there.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek without giving it a second thought.

Poppy drew in a deep, stuttering breath, and when I pulled back, I saw her face turning pink.

“Oh, shit,” I muttered. I’d just kissed her in front of the entire neighborhood. These guys were going to razz us to death.

“No, it’s okay. I liked it,” she assured me. “Just took my breath away a little.”

“Hey, there’s a Marriott down the street,” August said, walking away from us. “You know, a place where you two can *get a room!*” He shouted the final words over his shoulder, getting a laugh out of everyone. Poppy slipped her fingers into mine, and despite the other jokes that were sure to come our way, I didn’t mind one bit.

“I didn’t know you two were an item.” Clara bounced over to us, giving Poppy a hug. They were all about the same age

and pretty good friends. “What’s the matter, Poppy? You hit your head too hard on the plane back from California?”

“Very funny,” I said as Clara chuckled and grabbed Aurora by the arm as they took off somewhere else in the yard. “Kids these days.”

Poppy smiled at me. “They’re just surprised, that’s all. It’s not like we told a bunch of people last time.”

“True. You want a beer?” I didn’t even know where I’d left mine, I’d been in such a hurry to go say hello to her.

“That would be great.” She smiled at me, and I forgot what I was doing for a few seconds.

Shaking my head to clear it, I led her over to where I’d been sitting with Joshua. He was gone now, so she took his spot, and I headed over to the outdoor fridge to grab her a beer.

I hadn’t even said hello to my sister, I realized, but I didn’t see her now, so I decided to sit down by Poppy and see how she was doing. Handing her the beer, I reclaimed my seat. “How was your day?”

“Busy,” she said with a nod. “My new boss is a real monster.”

A chuckle escaped my lips. “Oh, yeah? I’ve heard a thing or two about that guy.” I took another swig of my beer, hoping she was just joking around and not secretly trying to tell me something.

“Actually, I hardly even saw him today. Which is too bad.” She cracked open her beer and took a sip.

“Why is that? Did you want to give him a piece of your mind?” Grinning at her, I waited for what she had to say, hoping it was positive.

“Nah, it’s just he’s really hot, that’s all. I like gawking at him at work.” She winked at me, and I felt a jolt of electricity shoot down my spine.

Damn, this woman was sexy.

I was going to have to focus my attention elsewhere, or else everyone was going to see how excited she made me.

Looking around the yard, I noticed Joshua and Liberty over on the other side of the pool, sitting in a secluded area talking. My forehead crinkled. What was that all about?

The feel of Poppy's hand on my arm had me forgetting my sister even existed. "So who's winning the game?"

"Oh, uh, the Cardinals," I told her. "But the Braves will come back. They always do."

"Not always," William chimed in from his seat not far from us. "Their pitching core has sucked this year." That got us started on a conversation about the game, which was exactly what I needed to distract me from the beautiful woman sitting next to me.

Before too long, the chili was done. We all had huge, steaming bowls with crackers and lots of other fixings. Not long after that, the fart jokes began. I stayed out of it because I wanted Poppy to think I was slightly more sophisticated than the other guys, but there was no way a bunch of guys could eat loaded bowls of chili and not comment on the gas. Luke teased Clara about burning a hole through her pants, and she hit him hard enough to leave a mark.

"Wow, so not a lot has changed," Poppy noted.

"Nope. Same ol' gang as before." I shook my head and she laughed. Her hand was back in mine, so I didn't really care about anyone else.

After the game, William grabbed his guitar and started strumming. "Any requests?"

"Oh, play 'Take Me Home, Country Roads,' so I can sing it," Clara pleaded.

"We don't have an alley," Luke began. "So the neighbors will be surprised to hear we have alley cats."

"Don't make me hit you again," the little sister warned. Immediately, Luke cringed away from her.

As Clara began to sing, her melodic voice filled the air, and all of us clapped or tapped our feet along to the music. My eyes went to Poppy, though. She had her eyes closed, moving her head along to the beat. She was absolutely beautiful. I hoped we'd have many more nights like this in our future. Friends, family, and fun. That was what I wanted my life to be like, and with Poppy's hand in mine, I could see all of it being amazing.

POPPY

Seeing everyone from the neighborhood at the chili cookoff was a lot of fun. I hadn't seen some of these faces for years. Not that I spent too much time catching up with everyone, not when Landon was there.

After we sang to William's guitar playing, I was beginning to feel tired. Some of the others were talking about jumping in the pool, but I was ready to head home. Thoughts of the flight I'd be on in a few days came to mind. I had so much to do to get ready for that. I needed to rest.

But the way Landon had been looking at me all night didn't make me want to go home and go straight to bed. "So," I began, scooting closer to him, resting my chin on my fist, my elbow tucked into my knee. "I was thinking of going home."

He nodded. "That's too bad. Tired already? I hear your boss works everyone pretty hard during the week."

I grinned at him. "Yes, he's like one of those rude personal trainers on a reality show for weight loss." We both laughed at the image. "August is spending the night with William, and the girls are going to be with Clara this evening."

At first, Landon just nodded along. "Just you and your parents then?"

"My parents are out of town," I reminded him.

"Oh." He nodded again, but then his expression changed. "Oh."

My smile widened as I asked him, “Do you want to come over?”

He understood me now. “Yeah, yeah, sure.”

The urge to lean over and kiss him was overwhelming, but I made myself wait, not because I cared if anyone else saw but because the satisfaction of kissing him would be so much greater if I made myself wait.

The two of us got up and said a quick goodbye to the others. A few people had already left a little while ago, but most of our friends were still hanging out. No one said anything about us leaving together, but Liberty gave me a big, goofy smile.

Landon and I walked out of Luke’s yard together, and as soon as we were on the sidewalk, he took my hand. It was nice, just the two of us, strolling along the sidewalk at night, with the spring air blowing our hair and stirring our souls.

I’d left on the porch light and the light in the foyer, so our house wasn’t completely dark. From the street, it looked so large and imposing, but inside, it always felt quaint and cozy to me. Landon had been inside my house before when we were younger, but mostly just in the living room, on an errand to bring Liberty home for dinner or something like that. It would be nice to have him in my house because he was my guest. It would be better to have him in my room, though I was a little embarrassed about the fact it hadn’t changed much at all since I was in high school.

The moment we walked in the front door, I turned to him, expecting to say something like, “Welcome to my humble abode,” but I couldn’t get a single word out before his mouth was on mine. He grabbed hold of my waist and pulled me against him, and all ability to speak was lost.

Landon’s tongue twisted with mine. Raising up on my tiptoes didn’t do much good. I wanted as much of him as I could get. He lifted me slightly to deepen the kiss, but we really just needed to get horizontal as quickly as possible.

A buzzing in his back pocket ruined the moment, though. I stepped away, unable to ignore his phone.

Landon swore under his breath. “Sorry. I have no idea who would be calling me this time of night when all of my friends are at Luke’s.”

“It’s okay.” I gave him a reassuring smile, hoping this didn’t completely kill the mood.

Landon pulled his phone out, and I got a quick glimpse at the screen. It said, “Grandma.” That made me smile. “Ah, you guys are close?”

“Yeah, we are, but I don’t want to talk to her right now. I’ll call her back later.”

“Won’t she be in bed?” I asked. Didn’t most old people go to bed early? But then, it was already getting pretty late.

“I’ll call her back tomorrow,” he modified, making me giggle.

Landon came in for another kiss, but rather than standing in the doorway, making out with him, I made sure the door was locked for the night, flipped off the lights, and took his hand. “This way, please.”

He laughed at my forced formality and headed up the stairs with me. I didn’t bother to turn the lights on in my bedroom because I didn’t want him to see how silly everything was, and we wouldn’t need lights for what we were about to do.

The moment we passed through my bedroom door, I kicked the door closed behind him and stepped out of my sandals and his hands came flying back to my body. We stripped out of our clothes in a tangle of tongues and limbs, coming together as much as possible and only separating when sleeves and neck holes made it a necessity. Within a few minutes, Landon was naked in my bed, slipping on one of the condoms I’d purchased with my fingers crossed I might need them.

I slid my panties down my hips and crawled on top of him, the ache between my legs not allowing me to be coy or teasing. He took my hips and guided me, and as I descended

upon him, I took him in, sinking down so that his entire shaft was buried deep within me. With a sigh, I threw my head back. Damn, he felt so good.

With his hands on my hips, I continued to ride Landon, swinging my body down and pressing against him hard to build up the friction. His hands traced up my stomach to tease my nipples, rubbing against their hardened peaks before he leaned up and took one of my breasts in his mouth, his tongue lashing around my nipple as he sucked hard enough to get me to cry out.

Releasing me, Landon gave me a mischievous glint before he flipped me onto my back. A cry of surprise left my lips, but then, as he lifted my legs and dove deep inside me, my cries turned to moans of pleasure. He was hitting me in all of the right places. My head began to spin, and I could no longer hold back. I felt my body break into spasms, and all I could do was shout his name as he plunged deeper and deeper inside me.

When my orgasm finally broke, I opened my eyes and looked into his. I could tell he was close, but he was holding back. “Do you want to flip over?” he asked me.

I was confused at first because I’d just done that, but then I realized what he was asking. I hadn’t ever had sex in that position before, but I’d do anything for Landon. “Will you help me?” I asked.

He smiled reassuringly at me. “Of course.”

My body was still quaking from the pleasure he’d just sent shooting through me, but I managed to get up on my knees and turn over. He grabbed a pillow and slid it beneath my chest, directing me into the position he preferred. From here, he could reach me in all the right places.

Landon used his hand at first to make sure I was still wet and ready, which I was. Having him touch me from behind like that was a huge turn-on I wasn’t expecting. When he finally slid his dick back inside me, an animalistic groan escaped my lips.

“You like that, baby?” he asked me.

“So much.” My voice was a hoarse whisper, my ability to speak leaving me with every perfect thrust of his hips.

In this position, I could feel him going deeper than before. It didn't take long at all for both of us to start crying out, shouting each other's names, and cursing. When Landon finally reached his tipping point, I felt him tighten up. He grunted loudly a few times and then his body shuddered against mine before he finally collapsed over my back, kissing my neck and breathing heavily.

We toppled to the mattress together at the same time, both spent, but feeling amazing. All I could do at first was grin at him. He pulled me against his chest, and I wrapped my arm around him, my leg tossed over his.

Kissing the top of my head, Landon asked, “How are you feeling, baby?”

“Great,” I told him without hesitation. “That was amazing.”

“Yeah, it was.” He grabbed the blanket and maneuvered so that we were under it, still intertwined.

As our eyes adjusted to the dim light coming through the curtains, more of my room was revealed to him. I tried not to be too hard on myself, but it did look like the same room I'd spent many nights dreaming about him in. I sort of hoped he wouldn't notice how childish it seemed and would just go to sleep.

“So this is your bedroom,” he remarked, letting me know that I wasn't going to get away without discussing it.

“This is it. Hasn't changed much over the years.” Thank goodness both of us had.

“I always wondered what it looked like,” he admitted. “Sometimes, if your curtains were open, I could see in from my room.”

“What?” I lifted my head and looked at him, wide-eyed.

“Not in a creepy way,” he assured me, but I didn’t know how that could be the case. “Just like the light on or the top of your dresser. I wasn’t staring in your window or anything.”

I arched an eyebrow and laid my head back down, not sure whether I believed that or not, but I guessed it didn’t matter now.

“That painting over there is incredible,” he muttered.

“Which one?” I couldn’t tell what he was looking at.

“Well, they’re all amazing, but the one of the woman in front of the lighthouse. That’s beautiful.”

The painting he was talking about was very special to me. I’d painted a depiction of myself, though with different hair so I wouldn’t be so recognizable, standing on a beach with a lighthouse in the distance. At the time, I’d envisioned Landon as my lighthouse, my beacon, leading me home. I just didn’t know if I’d ever get there. Now, here he was, in my bed, discussing that very painting with me.

“Thank you.” I wasn’t sure what else to say.

“You painted it.”

It wasn’t a question. More of a realization. “I painted them all.”

His head shifted slightly as he looked around my room. I had about fifteen paintings of various sizes set out. I loved them too much to put them away. “You’re so talented, Poppy.” I could hear in his voice he was truly seeing my art for the first time. I thought he’d seen some of my earlier work when we were younger, but I didn’t know for sure. “Really. That new client of ours needs to see this.”

My heart skipped a beat. I wasn’t exactly sure what he was talking about, but was he trying to say he thought we might have a buyer for my art? If so, I was interested. But I was also exhausted. We’d have to save that discussion for another day.

I was about to doze off when he said, “It’s almost my thirtieth birthday.”

Again, my ears perked up, but I didn't know for sure why he'd mentioned that. I didn't say anything.

“Do you remember that promise we made when we were kids?”

I lifted my face toward his again. Of course, I remembered. “You still have time to fall in love, get married, all of that.”

“In less than two weeks?” He smiled at me. “Maybe I can do one of those things.”

Warmth spread throughout my chest. Was he saying he could fall in love with me? I couldn't handle it. “Well, you'd better get on with it, or you'll be forced to marry me.”

He leaned down and kissed me gently on the lips, and I lowered my head, sleep calling my name.

As I fell asleep, I couldn't help but wonder. *What would it be like to marry Landon Johnson? To have a life with this amazing man?*

I didn't know, but I wanted to.

LANDON

“Don’t forget your earbuds!” Liberty shouted at me from her room down the hall. “They don’t like it when people listen to porn on the plane without them.”

“Shut up, Liberty!” I yelled back at her. She thought she was so funny. “I already packed them anyway.” I did make a final inspection of my bag before zipping it closed. I’d managed to cram everything into my carry-on so I wouldn’t have to check anything. With my bag slung over my shoulder, I headed down the hall to see that Liberty had not done the same. She was wheeling a large suitcase as well as a smaller one, with her purse hanging over her arm.

“What?” Her tone was defensive as she stared at me.

“We aren’t moving in with Mom and Dad, you know.”

“I know, but you never know what the weather is going to be like and—”

“Hot. Humid. It’s Hawaii, not the Midwest. Seriously, you’re going to check a bag?” I shook my head at her. She knew how much I hated baggage claim.

“You don’t think your new girlfriend is going to check a bag or two?” My sister narrowed her eyes at me.

Immediately, my face flushed. “She’s not my girlfriend.” Spinning around, I decided to just go downstairs and forget this conversation ever took place. Of course, the sound of Liberty giggling accompanied me down the stairs.

We decided to Uber to the airport so that we wouldn't have to worry about parking. Thankfully, the car was there when we walked out the door. Liberty chatted away in excitement the entire ride while I pretended to listen, but really, my thoughts were on Poppy. I was so excited to see her in a bathing suit on the beach under the tropical sun.

At the airport, I thanked the driver, helping Liberty with her bags. We checked her monster suitcase and made it through security about twenty minutes before our plane was scheduled to leave. The moment I saw Poppy's face, all the stress of the airport melted away. She was sitting next to Joshua in the seating area at our gate.

Any attempt to play it cool disappeared as I hurried to her. She stood, and I wrapped my arms around her, kissing her cheek. We should've all come to the airport together. That way, I would've been able to spend more time with her. The weekend had flown by, so it seemed like I'd just woken up next to her a few hours ago, but any time away from her was too quick.

"Good morning." Her cheeks were flushed as she stepped away from me.

"Good morning. How are you?" I grinned at her, noting just how beautiful she looked in a floral print dress.

With a sly smile, she said, "Better now."

Not wanting to be rude, I said hello to Joshua, too, and the four of us had a few minutes to sit before they called our boarding group. I'd splurged and gotten us first-class tickets since it was such a long flight. I didn't want anyone to be cramped. I hoped Liberty wouldn't mind sitting by Joshua all the way there, but she was chatting with him as we boarded the plane, so I doubted she would mind too much.

I took my seat next to Poppy, who was sitting by the window. Both of us stowed our bags and made ourselves comfortable. It was going to be about a twelve-hour flight which would've been frustrating to me, but I was looking forward to spending time with her.

“Did you pick out some good movies to watch?” she asked me as we both buckled our seatbelts.

“Yeah, I have a few on my laptop I thought we could watch together if you want,” I told her. I had made sure *13 Going On 30* was one of them, since the last time we watched it together we’d gotten interrupted. She smiled at me, and we began a conversation about how her Sunday had gone as the plane got ready to depart.

Once the flight was underway, it wasn’t nearly as long and boring as I remembered it being the last time I’d flown out to see my parents. Poppy and I talked about all sorts of things, watched a few movies, listened to music, and then she took a nap—on my shoulder. That might’ve been the nicest part of all, having her snuggled up close to me.

When we landed, she was bright-eyed and ready to go. “I have to get my checked bag,” she told me as we stood up to exit the plane. I almost laughed, thinking about how Liberty had shouted at me that she would have a checked bag, too. Score one point for my little sister.

The sun was setting as we walked out of the airport and over to the car rental place. I pulled Poppy’s checked bag along behind me, and Joshua helped Liberty. In my mind, it was already about ten at night, since Honolulu was four hours behind Franklin, but we’d made it just in time to grab some dinner. Poppy and I’d had tons of snacks on the plane, as well as the meal they served first-class passengers, but my stomach was still growling. I was all kinds of mixed up.

We rented an SUV large enough for all of our bags and the four of us and then headed to the condo. I took my time, driving down some back roads and more scenic areas. Poppy had never been to the islands before, and I wanted to give her the opportunity to soak it in.

“The sky is so beautiful!” she exclaimed, looking at the golden sunset. Streaks of pink and orange brushed against the sky with inky blue setting in as well. When we drove past a rolling emerald hillside, the wide expanse of turquoise water behind it, the landscape was as beautiful as a painting. I

wanted to engrave the image of Poppy's gorgeous smiling face with that background into my mind forever.

"We should go to Ohana for dinner," Liberty said from the back seat. "I love their poke bowls."

"Let's go to the condo first, drop the bags, and then maybe we can grab some bowls and head to the beach to eat them," I suggested. There should be just enough light left for that.

"I love that idea," Poppy exclaimed. "Is the condo on the beach?"

"It's within walking distance," I told her. "In Hawaii, the beach is public, so no one can own it, but our parents' condos are really close to the water."

It only took about twenty minutes to get to the condo. Seeing it made me feel at home, even though I'd only stayed here a few times. It was a sort of home away from home.

The building itself was fifteen stories tall, so not as imposing as some of the bigger towers on the island, but since my parents' condo was on the twelfth floor, we had a great view of the ocean. They owned several units, which they rented out mostly to vacationers. One had a nice older couple who lived there year round. The condo we'd be staying in was one of the nicer units, with four bedrooms, so we'd have our own space. I was looking forward to showing it to Poppy. I thought she'd love the way my mother decorated it. Lots of flowers and plants adorned the interior, as well as the balcony, which overlooked the beach.

We made it to the elevator only to find a particularly cheesy song playing over the speakers. Liberty filled in the missing lyrics to the eighties tune about not worrying and always being happy, which had us all laughing. My sister could be annoying at times, but she could also be really funny.

Fishing the keys out of my pocket, I unlocked the door, glad that there was no musty odor. My parents worked hard to make sure their guests always felt at home, especially when those guests were their own children.

“Wow!” Poppy walked in and immediately went to the window overlooking the ocean. “This is amazing.” The sun hadn’t fully descended yet, so streaks of gold illuminated the ocean, making it shimmer. Lights along the shoreline winked like tiny stars. The city was beginning to come alive with the pageantry of night.

“Are you taking the best room?” Liberty asked me, folding her arms.

“I thought you’d want the blue room.” I wasn’t sure which room she thought was the best.

Her face lit up. “Awesome.” Apparently that one. She grabbed her bags and headed that way.

“Joshua, you’ll be in the green room again, if that’s cool.” Joshua had stayed here before.

“Works for me.” He followed Liberty down the hall.

“I’ll take your bags to your room for you,” I said to Poppy, snapping her out of her daze.

“Oh, right.” She followed along behind me as I managed to get her bags and mine down the hall. Her room was right next to mine and on the other side of the condo from our friends. Every bedroom had an ocean view, but I made sure Poppy had an amazing view to wake up to in the morning—assuming she slept in her room and not mine.

I could hear Poppy exclaiming about how beautiful her room was from my own. It brought a smile to my face to hear her so happy. I didn’t want to pull her away from the view, but I was starving. Besides, the views were just as spectacular actually on the beach.

“Let’s wear our suits under our clothes so we can swim!” Liberty shouted down the hallway.

That worked for me. We all got dressed in swimwear and put our clothes back on top, and I grabbed some towels before we ordered a delivery from Liberty’s favorite poke bowl restaurant. About half an hour later, the four of us were settled on the beach, bowls in hand, watching the sun disappear beyond the horizon.

A gentle breeze blew Poppy's hair as she sat next to me on a towel, eating her tuna poke bowl. Liberty and Joshua practically inhaled theirs so they could run out to the water. Watching my sister douse my best friend with a barrage of splashes was hilarious. The sound of Poppy's laughter fluttering on the wind warmed my heart.

Turning to look at her, I couldn't help but smile. She was amazing, so beautiful, smart, funny—everything I could ever want. I loved her, and I wanted to tell her just that.

“What are you looking at?” Poppy asked in a sweet voice, her eyelashes fanning her cheeks.

“A beautiful woman,” I replied. Leaning down, I pressed my lips to hers in a soft kiss. Poppy murmured quietly against my mouth, causing a shudder to go down my spine.

I didn't want to pull away, but I knew she wanted to finish eating so she could go stick her toes into the water. Smiling, I leaned away and took a few more bites before she was done. I stood and pulled her up, kissing her again before we shed our outer layer of clothing and headed down to the water.

The waves were warmer than expected for spring, and as we waded into the water, hand in hand, I couldn't help but think I was the luckiest man alive. I'd had to wait for this woman, for this moment, but even if it had taken a thousand years, it would've been worth it. Poppy was here with me now. Life couldn't be more perfect.

I just had to find a way not to mess it up.

My thoughts were interrupted when a torrent of water hit me in the side of the face, followed by a cackle of laughter from my witch of a sister hitting me in the ear.

Dripping wet, I turned to glare at her. “You're going down, Liberty Johnson!”

She screeched, and I abandoned my beautiful woman in pursuit of a sister who needed to learn payback was a bitch.

POPPY

I'd never seen anything as breathtakingly gorgeous as the Hawaiian beach at sunset. The only view I'd rather have was of the muscular shirtless man next to me. After Landon and Liberty's little splashing battle, which I swam away from, Joshua pulled her off in another direction, telling her they should go explore the cove. By then, I felt it was safe to go back to Landon.

Taking him by the wrist, I pulled him out to deeper water, where he could touch but I couldn't. I figured that was a good excuse for wrapping my legs around him. Seeing Liberty and Joshua disappear in the distance, I figured it was my duty as a best friend to keep the big brother occupied.

"What in the world has gotten into her?" Landon asked, still brushing water out of his hair.

All I could do was giggle. "She's your sister. She's got to mess with you."

He shook his head, but when he realized I'd wrapped my entire body around him, his countenance changed. Landon's hands settled on my bottom, making all kinds of warm sensations shoot through me. I wanted him so badly, but we weren't alone. Not only were Liberty and Joshua not that far away, but we were also on a public beach with other people swimming in the water and sitting on the sand nearby.

"Hi," Landon said, staring down at me.

"Hey. How's it going?" I grinned at him, welcoming the soft kiss he pressed to my lips.

“This is pretty good,” he admitted, despite his irritation at Liberty. “I can’t really remember many things that have been better.”

That also made me giggle. I leaned up and wrapped my hand around the back of his head, urging him to kiss me again, which he did. This time, the kiss was deeper. He tasted salty from all of that splashing, but I didn’t mind. Kissing him thoroughly, I felt my body begin to quake from the closeness, and he was beginning to harden beneath me.

Determined not to make a scene at the beach, I rested my head on his chest and peered off at the point where the last of the sun’s rays were slowly vanishing beneath the horizon. In its place, a thousand stars filled the night sky. Pollution from the lights of the city still reached us here, but it was mesmerizingly beautiful nonetheless. He was right. I couldn’t think of much that was better either.

The four-hour time change was messing with me. As much as I would’ve enjoyed staying there, wrapped in Landon’s arms for another hour or two, I couldn’t stop yawning. “You wanna call it a night?” he asked me, his voice a soft whisper that tickled my ear. “We can get to the showers before those other two yahoos.”

His use of the term “yahoo” had me grinning up at him. “Knuckleheads?” I asked.

“Exactly.” He kissed me again and then waded in closer to shore so that I could touch. With my feet on the sand, I took his hand and let the waves gently guide us back to the beach.

Knowing Joshua and Liberty were still out there, I tugged on Landon’s hand and pulled him back to where our towels and clothes were waiting. “They’ll see that we got dressed and our towels are gone,” I reminded him before he could go looking for his sister. “Joshua won’t let her drown.”

“True, but she might start messing with him like she was messing with me and hold him under,” Landon said.

“I doubt it. Come on.” I gave him another pull on the arm, and he came with me.

We headed inside the condo, towels wrapped around our wet bodies, our clothing in our hands. Thankfully, people who lived here were used to this sort of scene, and no one said anything, only smiled at us stepping on and off the elevator.

Back in the condo, I took a shower and put on my pajamas. As tempting as it would be to try and be with Landon before Liberty and Joshua returned, I didn't want to put anyone in an embarrassing situation. By the time I got out of the bathroom, Liberty and Joshua were back. I spotted Landon talking to his friend in the kitchen and blew him a kiss before I went to my room.

Another wave of exhaustion washed over me, feeling much like the waves from the beach. When I closed my eyes, I could still feel the rocking of the ocean, which made me smile. Lying in bed, I could see the stars out the window, see the distant palm trees swaying in the breeze.

This was amazing. I still couldn't believe I was in paradise—and it was for work, for that matter. But what was even more incredible than the island we were visiting was the man who'd stolen my heart.

I was in love with Landon. I had no doubt in my mind that I loved him. Closing my eyes, I pictured his face, and my smile grew wider. He was incredible in every way. I wanted to tell him how much I cared about him, to let him know that I wanted a life with him.

But fear held me back. What if I messed it up? Or what if he remembered that I was different than him? His parents were here on the island. I hadn't seen them in years. What if his father reminded him that my family wasn't good enough for him?

With those thoughts circling in my mind, I drifted off to sleep, hoping my dreams would solidify around my love for Landon, leaving my fear behind.

The next morning, I was up bright and early, the time difference suddenly making me even more of a morning person. I wasn't the only one. After I had finished getting ready for the day, I walked out to find Landon pouring a cup

of coffee. Dressed in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, he looked like he belonged right here on the island. I'd thrown on some jean shorts and a tank top, figuring we'd be moving stuff into the new office today. Even though Joshua and Landon were the muscle of the group, I didn't mind pitching in.

"Aloha," I said as Landon poured me a cup, too. I wouldn't be looking for any of my special mushroom drinks here.

"Coffee all right?" he asked me. "Sorry we don't have that much to choose from."

"That's great," I assured him before adding some creamer and taking a sip. "How did you sleep?"

"Like a baby," he replied. "You?"

Images from vivid dreams about Landon came back to me, making me blush. "I slept well."

He raised an eyebrow at me, but before he could ask what had me turning red, our friends walked in. Liberty was wide awake, which would've been a miracle in our time zone.

We had a quick breakfast and then headed to the office. Landon introduced us to the employees who would be working in the Honolulu office. They were all nice and excited to be getting started.

While the guys got the office set up—moving desks and chairs around, setting up the computers, all of that fun stuff—Liberty and I went over how to use the drop shipping software with everyone in the conference room, which was already set up. The software was really user friendly, so it didn't take all that long, but then the employees started asking other questions, which carried us right through our working lunch into the afternoon.

I had a lot of fun explaining the best practices I'd learned so far on the job to them. A woman named Kalani would be doing my job for this branch. She was a couple of years younger than me and absolutely gorgeous with black, wavy hair and big brown eyes. I figured the two of us could be great friends if she lived a little closer to me.

“What if you have to talk to a rude customer?” she asked me. “Doesn’t that make it hard to do your job?”

I stopped myself from laughing even though her question brought up some not-so-distant memories of a few people who’d been irritating. I could laugh at it now, but at the time, I’d been frustrated. “Sometimes, you just have to take a deep breath and remind yourself that they’re not really mad at you. As long as you are polite and helpful, they’ll usually come around.” I gave her a reassuring nod, and she smiled at me.

The employees stayed until well past their usual quitting time to make sure all of their questions were answered and that their offices and cubicles were set up so that they could get started the next day. By the time we left, it was beginning to get dark outside again.

“I guess we won’t be spending any time on the beach today,” Liberty lamented.

We headed back to the condo, feeling every minute of that time change. After we all collapsed in the living room, Landon asked, “What about dinner?”

“Damnit,” Liberty swore under her breath. “I’m so tired, I didn’t even think about that. We should’ve grabbed something while we were out.”

“I could cook that fish dish you guys like, the one I made the last time we were here,” Joshua offered. “Well, everyone but Poppy.” He smiled at me. “You like fish, though, right?”

“Of course.” I returned the smile. “Landon and I could go to the grocery store and get whatever you need.”

“That would be awesome. I can text you a list of ingredients.” Joshua pulled out his phone and began to do just that.

As much as I didn’t want to get up again, I pulled myself off the couch and offered Landon my hand. He grunted a little, but he took it. When we were both standing, he leaned down and kissed me quickly, causing his sister to make gagging noises. Grabbing a throw pillow from the couch, he chucked it at her, and we started to walk toward the door.

Landon picked up the keys from a little bowl on a table in the entryway where he kept them. “Are you sure we can leave the two of you alone in here for a little bit?” He sounded like he was Liberty’s father, not her big brother.

“What are you talking about?” his sister asked, hugging the pillow he’d thrown at her against her chest. “We are perfect angels.” She grinned at Joshua, but he was still texting—and probably purposely avoiding looking his best friend in the eyes at the moment.

“Uh huh. Just make sure you don’t get into any funny business.” Landon gave them a stern look and then led me out into the hallway.

Laughing, I closed the door behind me, but I secretly hoped they would get into some funny business. One of these days, Landon was going to realize that his sister was in love with his best friend, and just maybe his best friend was in love with his sister. While that might not be the easiest thing in the world for him to accept, it was the truth. He was going to have to find a way to consent to them seeing one another because Liberty wasn’t the type of girl to take no for an answer.

But that wasn’t my secret to disclose at this point, so I decided to stay out of it. Holding Landon’s hand, I got back on the elevator, forcing myself to wake up so we could get the right groceries at the store. I could tell he was still frustrated at Liberty, but when the song she’d been singing the day before when we came in started playing in the elevator, I decided I could make him laugh by singing along, like she had.

It worked, and by the time we reached the ground floor, we were both laughing. Giggling like kids, we made our way to the car, happy to be in paradise. Happy to be together.

LANDON

Liberty knew how to irritate me sometimes, even in paradise, but by the time I was sitting in the SUV next to Poppy, holding her hand, on our way to the grocery store to pick up items for dinner, all of that frustration was gone. I was still a little nervous about leaving Liberty and Joshua alone together, though I couldn't quite explain why. They had been acting awfully chummy recently.

Deciding not to let it bother me, I focused on the beautiful woman next to me. We'd had a great day today, getting the new office set up. I hadn't seen as much of her as I would've liked, but being with her now made up for it.

I imagined this was what we would do if we were a couple. We'd go buy groceries together and then take them back home to cook together. Of course, when I was imagining our future together, I didn't usually think about Joshua and Liberty being at home waiting for us. The thought made me chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Poppy asked, smiling at me.

"Oh, nothing." I couldn't really tell her what had made me laugh. "Just thinking of your singing in the elevator." That had also been funny as she attempted to mimic what Liberty had been doing the day before, so it wasn't a complete lie.

"Well, you needed some cheering up," she said with a simple shrug.

"Yes, that's true, I did." I gave her hand a squeeze, but the mention of cheering someone up made me think of something

else, something I needed to tell her that I'd been avoiding because I knew it would have the opposite effect on her.

“By the way,” I began, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “We’ve all been invited to have dinner at my parents’ house tomorrow, as a thank you for taking care of things today.”

Poppy was quiet for a few seconds. I held my breath, bracing myself for what she might say. Knowing Poppy, she'd just roll with the punches, but I hated that she was having to do that. It wasn't a mystery that my father wasn't fond of her family, and that included Poppy, though I had no idea why. She'd never been anything but polite to him, and he couldn't blame her for her parents' yard or whatever else he thought was against the HOA rules. He simply thought she was some sort of a wild Bohemian girl who never learned to grow up or be responsible, and it couldn't be further from the truth.

“Oh, okay,” Poppy finally said. “That should be nice.”

“Yeah, well, you know. It will be a nice meal, and I'll be there with you the whole time.” I smiled at her as I pulled into the grocery store parking lot, but I felt bad. She was clearly upset, and I didn't like that. Also, I hadn't told my parents we were dating or anything because I wasn't sure exactly what we were doing. All I knew was that I loved her, still, after all of these years, and I wanted to be there with her.

While it was true I'd be there with her the whole time, it wasn't as if I'd be holding her hand like I was now. I needed to tell my parents slowly, give them the opportunity to warm up to the idea, rather than just dropping it on them all at once. My mom would likely be fine with it, but my dad could be a stubborn, opinionated man.

Shaking my head to clear it for now, I got out and went around to open the door for Poppy, reclaiming her hand. She was quiet as we walked inside. Perhaps my timing had been off. But I wanted her to have enough time to prepare for the inevitable. If I'd waited until tomorrow, that would've made it worse.

We headed inside, Joshua's list on my phone so we knew what we were getting. Poppy grabbed the shopping cart, and we made our way down the aisles, grabbing the items he needed, which also included some beer. That made me laugh, but Poppy only flashed a weak smile.

Feeling awful for ruining the night, I kissed her hand, kissed the side of her head, and doted on her as much as I could. I even picked out a beautiful bouquet of native flowers for her. She thanked me, but I then realized she preferred her flowers still in the ground. Yet another mistake. She sniffed them and admired their beauty, so maybe it helped a little.

After we bought the groceries, we loaded them into the back of the SUV, and I walked Poppy to her door, holding it open for her as she climbed in, still holding the flowers. Walking around to get in the other side, I let out a loud sigh, wondering what I could say to make things better.

Climbing in, I waited to start the car. "Listen, Poppy, I know you're not excited about dinner with my parents, but you really should know you have nothing to worry about." Taking her hand, I stroked it with my thumb as I continued. "I'm feeling things for you I've never felt for anyone in my life. You and I are a team. You don't have to feel like you're walking into a lion's den alone, okay?"

Poppy's smile brightened slightly, looking less forced than before. "Okay," she said with a nod. "I will try to focus on the positive."

I nodded and grinned at her. "We are still in paradise together, right?"

"Yes, that is true," she admitted. "Everything is beautiful here."

"Not as beautiful as you." I leaned down and kissed her, hoping she could feel the intensity in my touch. When I released her, she looked more content than before.

Satisfied that I'd made a difference, I pulled out of the parking lot and headed back to the condo. We laughed and talked, and when we arrived, we unloaded the groceries

together. Thankfully, we were able to get everything in one trip.

Back in the condo, Joshua took over the cooking, though the rest of us pitched in however we could. When we were done, we all sat down to a nice dinner of fish, rice, and vegetables, with beer and wine. Soft music played in the background as we chatted and carried on like any group of friends would. Even my sister was polite to me, not giving me a hard time like she usually did.

“This might just be the best fish I’ve ever eaten,” Liberty told Joshua. “You’re a talented chef, Josh.”

He beamed at her, which made my stomach tighten up. What was going on? “Thanks, Lib. Y’all pitched in.”

“That’s true. I did stir the rice,” Poppy said, making us all laugh.

After dinner, we cleaned up the plates, and Liberty pulled out a deck of cards. The weariness I felt from a long hard day of moving furniture, not to mention the time change, didn’t prevent me from staying up and playing several hands of poker. None of us were very good, but I ended up winning a few pennies, which was all we were betting. Poppy was terrible, quickly losing everything and having to sit and watch the rest of the hands, but she seemed more content as a spectator.

When we were finished with the fifth or sixth hand, we were all yawning. “I’m beat,” Joshua announced. “I think I’ll call it a night.”

“Me, too.” Liberty agreed too quickly for my liking, but I knew that she would be going to her own room. I was acting like a psycho, overly protective brother and just needed to chill out.

After they left, Poppy stood and started clearing away the dishes from the snacks we’d eaten while playing cards. She threw away a few empty beer cans that hadn’t made it to the trash. I wanted to get up and help her, but I was mesmerized, watching her move around the room, doing mundane chores.

She was so beautiful, so graceful. I just wanted to scoop her into my arms and carry her off into the sunset.

“What are you doing?” she asked with a small chuckle. “These empties aren’t going to climb into the trash can themselves.”

Realizing I should get up and help, I shook my head, thinking that might clear it. But all I could think about was her. Standing, I pulled her to my chest. “You’re so beautiful, Poppy.”

She looked up at me, wide-eyed. “Thank you.” I’d caught her off guard, and she didn’t know what to say. I leaned down and kissed her, softly at first, but then more passionately, pulling her to me.

“Spend the night in my room,” I whispered, my mouth right next to her ear. “I just want to hold you.”

She blinked a few times. “It’s a small condo, Landon. I don’t want to make your sister and Joshua uncomfortable.”

“No, I know. I promise. As difficult as it may seem, I will just hold you in my arms.” Brushing her hair back off her shoulder, I did my best to convince myself I could do just that.

“It’s not you that I’m worried about.” She chuckled under her breath.

“Well, then, I will fight you off with a stick should you even attempt to take advantage of me.” I did my best to use a silly voice, to make her laugh, which worked.

“What stick are you talking about?” Poppy had a gleam of mischief in her eyes with the question.

Immediately, I felt myself harden. This would be more difficult than I had thought. But I was determined. More than anything, I just wanted to fall asleep with her in my arms and wake up holding her against my chest.

“All right,” she finally agreed. “Let me go get ready for bed.” She pushed up onto her tiptoes and caught my lips again before releasing me and going into her bedroom.

I immediately headed to the bathroom down the hall so she could use the one closest to her room. I quickly brushed my teeth and freshened up a bit. Then, I hurried to my room and made my bed comfortable, kicking some clothes out of the way that I'd tossed on the floor earlier in the day. Giddy with joy that she'd be spending the night with me, even if we weren't having sex, I stripped down to my boxers, tossed those clothes aside, and made myself comfortable in bed—and waited.

It seemed to take forever before she finally opened the door, poking her head in. I smiled, and she came in, convinced I hadn't somehow changed my mind.

Poppy was wearing a pink nightgown that hit around her knees. She looked lovely, the pink bringing out the same shade in her cheeks. Her hair was piled on top of her head with only a few tendrils hanging down to frame her beautiful face.

She lay down next to me, and I pulled her against my chest, kissing her on the cheek. I was afraid if I kissed her lips we'd lose control, but she kissed me, and we were able to keep things fairly tame. It didn't hurt that we were both so very tired.

“You're so amazing, Poppy,” I murmured near her ear. “I can't tell you how happy I am to have you here. If you weren't on this trip, it would just be work. But having you here makes it fun. It makes it an adventure. You're turning it into a dream vacation.”

Poppy giggled. “I'm having a great time, Landon. I'm happy I've finally gotten to visit Hawaii, and I'm so glad I'm seeing all of this for the first time with you.”

I kissed the top of her head, thinking, if I had my way, we'd come back here a thousand times. I'd take her wherever she wanted to go. With Poppy, every day was an adventure, whether we were at home or out trekking across the globe.

Poppy's breathing evened out first, and soon enough, I fell asleep with her in my arms. It was the best way I knew how to fall asleep, and I wanted to do it every night for the rest of my life.

POPPY

The next day, we went back to the office to check in with the employees and see if there was anything else they needed us to do. Landon answered several questions while the rest of us answered some initial inquiries from clients. The entire time I was working, in the back of my mind, I was thinking about what might happen that night during our dinner with Landon's parents.

No matter how many times I attempted to tell myself Mr. Johnson was harmless, the fear I felt inside of me was real. He knew how to use his words to tear me down, to insult my family, and to make me feel like I wasn't even worthy of being in the same room with his family.

"Hey, Poppy, are you okay?" Liberty asked, coming up behind me.

"Oh, yeah. Just puzzling over this email," I lied, staring at the laptop screen in front of me.

She nodded, but something made me think she didn't believe me completely. Over the years, Liberty had always supported me and my family when it came to her father's harsh judgment, but she also shrugged it off, like it wasn't a big deal. That was better than what Landon had done, siding with his father. I couldn't even imagine what would happen if he did that again. I would be devastated.

The workday ended eventually, and I found myself back at the condo, getting ready to visit Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. I decided to wear my dress with the beautiful sunflower pattern

on it. I doubted that the symbolism would be apparent to him unless, of course, a discussion came up, and I hoped that wouldn't be the case. Still, it helped me to stay grounded in who I was. I might not be the sort of flower a person intentionally planted and pruned to look a specific way, but that didn't make me any less beautiful for all of my wild roots.

With some comfortable white sandals on my feet and my hair curled, I went out to meet the others. I didn't say much of anything to anyone as we went down to get into the SUV and make the trip over because of the nervous tension building inside of me. Landon asked me a few times if I was all right. I nodded and tried to smile, but he could tell I wasn't being completely honest with him.

The Johnsons' house was gorgeous. While it was a little more in line with the Hawaii vibe than their house back in Tennessee, it was large with a perfectly landscaped yard. We got out of the vehicle and moved toward the front door, my mind racing as I took it all in.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson greeted us at the door. "Son!" Remington exclaimed, hugging Landon. "How are you, my boy?"

"Good, Dad." Landon hugged him back and moved to his mom to embrace her as Liberty hugged her father.

When she moved aside, he shook Joshua's hand, welcoming him, and then his eyes were on me. "Poppy Briar?"

Clearing my throat, I stepped forward. "Good evening, Mr. Johnson. It's nice to see you."

His eyebrows lifted as he puzzled over what I was doing there. It would've been nice if either Landon or Liberty would've warned their father I was coming, but then, maybe they were hoping it wouldn't be a big deal.

Obviously, it was. He continued to stare at me for a long moment before he said. "Yes, of course. Lovely dress, Poppy. Though, I do prefer roses to sunflowers." He cleared his throat again and then gestured for us all to come in.

Landon's mother gave me a hug, which was kind of her considering her husband's behavior, and I followed everyone else inside, wondering why Mr. Johnson had to make an announcement about my dress. Yes, we all knew that he preferred orderly flowers that did what they were asked, standing neat and tidy in a row, not some wild bloom that might pop up just about anywhere.

As we walked into the dining room, Landon turned and looked at me, probably checking to see if I was okay. I wondered what his intentions were. Was he ever going to tell his parents the truth that we were together? Or was he too embarrassed by me? The urge to run back out the door was strong, but I didn't even know exactly where we were or where I might end up if I did that.

The dining room was elegantly decorated, with a lovely crystal chandelier over the table and the finest China plates set out. We all took our seats, and I was happy to be sitting as far away from Mr. Johnson as possible. Liberty sat by me while Landon sat by his father and Joshua. I could tell Landon was concerned about me, but not enough to say anything.

A full staff brought the meal in, like at a fancy restaurant, and all of our plates were revealed at once. It was going to be a multi-course meal, judging by the salad being served first, as well as the number of utensils set on either side of our plates. We were going to be here for a while. Great.

Landon and Mr. Johnson immediately broke into a discussion about the business. The rest of us didn't really have any reason to want to discuss that. Joshua didn't even work there, and Liberty only did so because she was helping her family out. Mrs. Johnson even looked bored with the topic. Turning to me, she asked, "How was your flight out, Poppy?"

"Great, thank you." I tried to focus on the fact that Landon's mother was being polite to me. That was something. Thinking about the flight to Hawaii did make me genuinely smile. Landon and I had had a fun time on the trip, watching movies and chatting. I hoped the trip home would be as much fun.

“I didn’t realize you were working for us now. How are you liking it?” She took a bite of her salad and gave me a reassuring smile.

“It’s interesting. Different than anything I’ve done before, but the rest of the staff is great. Very helpful and supportive.” I tried to concentrate on eating and not even look down the table at Mr. Johnson.

“That’s wonderful to hear. I’ve always thought we had some great people working for us.” When Mrs. Johnson moved her left hand, I noticed her wedding ring for the first time. It was gorgeous, with a large center diamond and two small stones on the side.

“What a beautiful ring,” I noted. “I don’t know why I’ve never noticed it before, but it’s dazzling.”

“Thank you.” She held it out for me to admire. “It’s a family tradition for all of the Johnson women to wear the same style of ring. I love it. Remington’s mother has the same one.”

“Really?” I hadn’t seen Landon’s grandmother for a very long time. I could barely remember what she even looked like, though I knew he was close to her. “Well, it’s beautiful.”

“Thank you so much.” Her smile was genuine as we moved on to another topic of conversation.

Eventually, we were brought the main course. I’d been hoping for fish or some other kind of seafood since we were on an island, but when my plate was uncovered to reveal a large steak with potatoes and mixed vegetables on the side, my stomach tangled. It wasn’t that I didn’t eat meat at all. I just didn’t prefer it.

“What’s the matter, Poppy?” Mr. Johnson asked, clearly noting my reaction. “Something wrong with your steak? It’s the best the island has to offer. These steaks cost over a hundred dollars apiece. Meat isn’t cheap out here in the islands, you know.”

I managed to force a smile to my lips. “No, it’s fine, thank you.”

He chuckled under his breath. “I guess those Californians got to you, huh? Turned you into even more of a free spirit than before. Are you a vegan now?”

“Dad,” Landon began, and for a second, I thought he was going to say something to stand up for me. Then, he cleared his throat and said, “We need to get that other program downloaded on the computers so the staff has everything they need.”

“Sure, sure,” Remington said dismissively, his eyes still on me. “Why did you leave California, anyway, Poppy? It couldn’t have been to come all the way back to Tennessee just to work for me.”

I hated the thought that I even worked for him. “No, sir,” I said, putting my fork down. “I came back for a lot of different reasons.”

“Well, it seems to me that you are better suited to California. I don’t think there’s much in Tennessee for you.” He glared at me then, and I would have to be pretty obtuse to miss his meaning.

He was talking about Landon. He didn’t want me near his son. When I was in California, he didn’t have to worry about his firstborn tangling with the likes of me. Now, well, I was right across the street. A temptation. A distraction.

“Dad!” It was Liberty who spoke up. “Stop it. You’re being a jerk.”

“You watch your mouth, Liberty,” Remington said. “I am not being a jerk. I’m just making it clear that I think certain types of people have their place in this world, and they need to know it.”

With that, my eyes widened. How could he say something so unbelievably hurtful? “Well, Mr. Johnson,” I began, standing and tossing my napkin on the table, “a rose can never be a sunflower, and a sunflower can never be a rose, but that doesn’t make one any less beautiful than the other.”

With that, I turned and walked out of the room, not even knowing where I was going.

Liberty was fast on my heels. “Asshole,” she said.

I couldn’t believe she’d say that to her own father, but he deserved it.

I heard her father gasp and ask, “What did she just say?” I didn’t know if he meant what Liberty had said or what I had, but if his skull was too thick to understand my meaning, I wasn’t going to stick around and explain it to him.

“Come on,” Liberty said, rushing me out the door. “We can take the SUV and the guys can get an Uber.” She got me inside of the vehicle, and I broke down in tears, covering my face with my hands.

This was all a horrible idea. I should’ve known better. I should’ve never expected Landon to stand up for me to his father. He was still the same scared little boy he had been all those years ago.

Liberty rubbed my back with one hand as she drove with the other. “It’ll be okay, Poppy.”

I couldn’t even speak. “I just want to go home,” I finally managed.

When we arrived at the condo, I threw all of my belongings into a suitcase while Liberty found us a flight home. I let her handle everything and did my best not to cry in front of the driver who dropped us off at the airport.

All the way home, I sat with my head in my hands, for nearly twelve hours, crying, while Liberty tried to make me feel better. Eventually, I dozed off, but even then, I dreamed of Landon. We were fighting, and he was telling me how worthless I was, just like his father had done.

Liberty woke me up just before the plane touched down. A sense of overwhelming grief permeated every fiber of my being. Nothing had changed. Mr. Johnson was still a judgmental asshole, and Landon was still too much of a chicken shit to stand up to him. It was the same thing playing out all over again. So this time, when I left, I would do so for good. Mr. Johnson was right about one thing—I needed to go

back to California. I needed to put some distance between myself and Landon.

This time, I needed to do it for good.

LANDON

An uncontrollable anger pulsed through me as I watched Poppy storm out of my parents' house.

“How in the world could you be so unbelievably rude?” I asked my father, who was still sitting there with his mouth hanging open.

Liberty had just called him an asshole, which was fitting, but I had a few other choice words for him, ones I never thought I'd be saying to my father.

“Landon—” he began, but I cut him off.

“No, it's time you started listening to me. I have stood by and let this go on for far too long. My entire life, I've known there's just one woman who can make me happy. I was idiotic enough to send her away all those years ago because you thought it was best. Well, I won't make the same damn mistake twice. I'm not going to sit here any longer and listen to you speak that way to or about Poppy or her family. You have no idea what kind of people they are. They are good people. Kind people. They sure the hell don't think they're better than everyone else the way that you do.”

“Landon, I never—” my father started again, but I wasn't finished.

“I don't understand how someone who came from nothing like you did could be so horrible to other people and make them feel like they're not good enough. Have you forgotten where you came from?”

“No, I haven’t,” he said. That was all I let him get out.

“Well, you can keep being a hypocritical snob if you think that’s what’s going to work best for you in this life, but I’m done with all of it. One of these days, you’re going to lose everything because of the way you treat other people. Mark my words. You can find someone else to run your damn company, too, because I don’t want any part of it.” My chair screeched as I pushed back from the table.

“Son, now wait!” my father insisted, but I was finished. I needed to get to Poppy. I needed to tell her how sorry I was and make sure she was okay.

Knowing my sister, she’d take advantage of the fact that I left the keys in the SUV. “Mom, can I borrow your car?”

“Of course, Landon.” My mom was still obviously dazed from the conversation. “Are you safe to drive?”

I didn’t answer her, only tore out of the dining room in a rush to get to the garage. I had no idea what Poppy might do, but if she got on a plane without me having the chance to speak to her, it would be an awfully long flight back home.

I was about halfway back to the condo when I realized I’d left Joshua sitting at the dining-room table. “Shit. Some kind of best friend I am.” My phone was ringing and buzzing nonstop, distracting the hell out of me. At a red light, I stopped to see who it was, praying it was Poppy, but it was only my dad. He was probably going to tell me I was making a huge mistake, and that I should come back. Well, he could go fuck himself. I was done playing his games.

Pulling into the parking lot of the condo complex, I couldn’t help but wonder how in the world Poppy had learned my grandmother’s motto. I knew my dad had to have been as shocked as the rest of us to hear those words come out of her mouth, but they were fitting. It was too bad my father never listened to a word his mother said to him.

The condo was deserted by the time I made it up to the room. Either I’d hit all of the lights wrong, or the girls had been so upset, they’d lit out of there without even folding their

clothing. I wondered if I could make it to the airport in time to catch them there. Just the thought that Poppy was gone, that I had messed this up again had me sinking down onto the couch, my head in my hands. I'd been forced to choose between my father and Poppy again. Well, this time, I wouldn't choose wrong.

"Hey, thanks for leaving me in the eye of the storm." Joshua's voice had me looking up as he strolled into the room, his hands buried deep in his pockets, a smug look on his face. "Now I know what it's like to be picked up by a tornado."

"Shit, man, I'm sorry." I meant it. I shouldn't have been so consumed by my own anger that I'd left my best friend there to fend for himself.

"It's okay. Met a pretty nice Uber driver." He sat down next to me, clapping me on the back. A thousand thoughts swirled through my head. What should I do next? "You've gotta go after her, man."

"Yeah, I know. Poppy means everything to me. But I just quit my job and pissed off my dad. I need to think things through before I fuck this up even worse."

"Your dad was being an asshole," Joshua pointed out. "He'll come around and realize that. If he doesn't, well, that's his problem. He's got a wife, his own life to live, and his own future to think about. Unlike you, his course is already charted in this life. You have decisions to make that will affect the rest of your life. Don't be a dumbass, bro."

"You're right. We need to get to the airport." As I stood to go pack, my phone continued to vibrate, but I knew it was my dad so I didn't bother to look.

"Oh, you're taking me with you this time?" Joshua joked. I turned and glared at him, and he laughed. Leave it to Joshua to crack jokes at my most desperate hour.

I left my mom's car in the lot so she could get it more easily and took a rideshare to the airport. The entire way, my father continued to call and text. I deleted voicemail after voicemail, unheard, and swiped away text after text without

reading them. Whatever he had to say to me could wait. Poppy was the most important thing now.

When we got to the airport, I saw a flight for Nashville just leaving and had a sinking feeling that Poppy and Liberty were on that flight. We booked the next available on another airline and sat down to wait the hour before we would be departing. With a heavy sigh, I pulled out my phone, but I had no intention of speaking to my father or hearing what he had to say. I needed to speak to someone else.

It was late back in Franklin, but I wasn't surprised at all when my grandmother answered on the second ring. "Landon? Is everything okay, dear?"

"Hi, Grandma. Um, no not exactly." With a heavy sigh, I told her what had happened, pouring my heart out to her. As usual, she listened to every word I had to say before she spoke at all. "What do you think of this situation, Grandma?"

"What I think is that you need to go get that girl," she said, chuckling. I laughed, too, because Grandma always had a way of making me feel better. "Listen, Landon, Poppy is a special girl. You know better than I do that she's one of a kind. You can't just let her walk out of your life again. You'll be miserable. You have to let her know that you stood up to your father for her. That Remington. I should've given him a humbler name. I bet he wouldn't act that way if his name was something more common. Like John or Mark."

"John Johnson?" I asked, both of us laughing again. "Yeah, you're probably right. Thank you, Grandma. Poppy is a great girl. I know it's been a long time since you've seen her, but you'll really like her."

"Oh? Has it been that long?" Something about the mischievous tone my grandmother took made me think I was missing something.

Then, I finally put two and two together. "Grandma? Have you been talking to Poppy?" She had to have been. Otherwise, Poppy wouldn't have known her motto.

“Possibly. Let’s just say there’s a cute young lady at my yoga studio from time to time, and I like visiting with her when I get a chance.” Grandma’s giggle sounded like a small child who was up to no good.

Shaking my head, I said, “Well, Grandma, I appreciate you sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. I wish I would’ve realized the two of you were in cahoots. Maybe I would’ve come to my senses about the way Dad was treating her sooner.”

“Oh, Poppy doesn’t even know, Landon. I didn’t really do anything other than tell her to go after what she wants. It’s time your father realized that there’s nothing wrong with being different. I wasn’t exactly his grandfather’s cup of tea when his father first started dating me, but we stuck it out.”

“I know, Grandma.” She’d told me long ago about why her favorite saying was so important to her. “Thank you. For everything.”

“I love you, Landon. Keep me posted.”

“I will. I love you, too.” With that, I hung up, not looking forward to twelve hours on a plane with nothing to do but miss Poppy and wonder how I was going to get her back.

The flight was horrendous. I tried to sleep, but I couldn’t. None of the movies or television shows held my attention. Joshua was no help because he passed out about an hour into the trip and didn’t wake up until we entered Tennessee airspace.

When I got off the plane, I had a message from my mom—and at least three dozen more from my dad. With a sigh, I listened to what my mother had to say. She suggested I call my father. Since she didn’t usually interfere in situations like this, I knew it must be important. On the way back home, I dialed my father’s number, wondering what he had to say.

“Landon. Thank you for calling me back,” he began.

“I’m calling because Mom asked me to. What do you want?” I could hear the bitterness in my tone, and I instinctively felt bad for speaking to my father that way. But I

fought that urge to be apologetic. He'd crossed a line, and he needed to remember that.

"I'm sorry, Landon. I have been a real jerk about this situation with Poppy, and it isn't fair to you or to her. Really, I apologize for my behavior. All I want in this world is for you and your sisters to be happy. If Poppy makes you happy, I can't stand in the way of that."

Shocked, I said nothing for a long moment. When I could finally speak again, all I could ask was, "What?"

"Your mother has stood by me through thick and thin. She was there when we had nothing and she's still with me now that we can buy whatever we want. That's because we truly love one another. If you've found that with Poppy, I'm not going to be the one to destroy it. I'm truly sorry, Landon. I really am, and I'd like to apologize to Poppy, too."

It was a lot to take in, hearing my father say that he wanted to apologize to Poppy. "Well, let me talk to her, and I'll get back to you." Before that could happen, I had to fix things with Poppy myself. "Oh, and I hope this means I can have my job back?"

Dad laughed. "It would be impossible to replace my oldest son."

Feeling relieved, I told my dad I loved him and hung up. Now, I needed to fix the situation with the most important person of all—Poppy.

POPPY

Back in my room, I stood staring out the window as the first rays of dawn's light touched the Johnson house across the street. Everything that had happened in the past few days seemed like a dream. Being in Hawaii with Landon, thinking that he actually had feelings for me, that maybe we truly were meant to be together, had been a lovely vision, one I'd clearly made up in my mind. The ending had turned out to be a nightmare of the worst variety. Now, looking at Landon's house across the street, recent memories tugged at my heartstrings, making me want to rush over there and either punch him or kiss him or both.

But I would do neither. He had called several times since my plane had landed. Now wasn't the time for us to discuss what had happened, though. I needed to get my mind in the right place, clear my thoughts. Once I was settled on the inside, it would be easier for me to determine what needed to be done with Landon.

The best place for me to go to clear my head would be a Pilates class. Even though I was cranky and my neck hurt from the airplane ride home, I decided it was the best thing for me. I got ready and headed down to the gym without even checking the schedule. If there wasn't a hot Pilates class available, a regular one would do. And if there weren't any yoga classes, I'd try something else. As long as it involved stretching and grounding myself, it wouldn't hurt.

Thankfully, when I arrived at the gym, I saw a hot Pilates class on the schedule about to start. I had time to refill my

water bottle and go to the restroom. When I walked back out, I saw Ellie across the room. She waved and smiled, and I returned the gesture. She did always have a way of making me feel better, despite the fact that I hardly knew the woman.

The instructor started the class, and within a few minutes, I felt myself melting away from the harsh reality I'd been facing when I walked into the class. I stretched and meditated, feeling my body and my mind loosen up. With every movement, I came closer to reaching serenity. By the time the class was over, not only was I drenched in sweat, but my mind was clear. I was no longer worried about the situation with Landon. Though I had no idea how it would end up, I did know that I trusted the universe to provide me with the resolution that was best for me. That might mean a broken heart or a few more tears, but I would end up where I needed to be.

Wiping my brow on a towel, I headed over to the chairs where I'd left my bag earlier. I folded up my mat and put it away and was slipping my shoes on when I heard a familiar voice.

"Hello, dear. It's been a while since I've seen you. How have you been?" Ellie sat down next to me, working on getting her foot into her sneaker.

My first instinct was to growl and say I'd been better, but if I did that, I wouldn't be embracing the message I'd just received from the world around me. "I'm okay. How are you?"

"Oh, fair to middling," she said with a little laugh. "Sometimes I'm not sure if these old bones are going to be able to pick themselves up off the mat when we're all done." We both chuckled, though I didn't think she was entirely joking. "No boy trouble then?"

I let out a deep sigh. "It's a complicated situation, if I'm honest."

Ellie nodded. "Yes, yes, it always is."

With a sigh, I turned in my seat so I was facing her. "It's really not him. It's his father. I mean, it's sort of him." I ran a hand through my hair, trying to slow down my train of thought

so I was making more sense. “You see, his father doesn’t approve of me. He thinks that I’m not good enough for his son.” She nodded, like she already knew that. Maybe I’d told her before. It had been so long since we spoke, I couldn’t remember exactly what I’d said, but I had to have told her something like that because she’d given me the advice about the flowers. “Anyway, I had dinner with his family, and his father was so unbelievably rude to me, I just got up and walked out.”

Ellie’s face turned into a deep frown as she slowly shook her head. “I’m so sorry to hear that, dear. But you can’t blame this young man for his father’s words and actions.”

“I know,” I said quickly. “I agree with that. I just don’t understand why he didn’t speak up, say something to defend me.”

“How do you know he didn’t?” she asked.

“He didn’t say anything before I left the room.” I shrugged. “He could have.”

“Maybe he wasn’t sure what to say. Maybe he was shocked.”

Ellie could have been right. Maybe Landon wasn’t as keen to jump to my defense as Liberty had been because he had more to lose. If Lib got fired from her job, she’d probably be happy. Landon had worked long and hard to build the business into what it was today, and walking away from that had to be difficult. That didn’t mean he didn’t want to stick up for me. It might just mean he wanted to be more cautious about how he did that. I could respect that.

“If I were you, dear, I’d give him another chance. Let him explain the situation to you from his own perspective. Perhaps then you’ll have a better understanding of whether or not he’s truly the man for you.” Ellie patted my hand with hers, and it was then that I noticed her ring.

A chill went down my back as I looked at it. One large diamond in the center, one smaller one on either side. Her ring

was exactly like Landon's mother's. My eyes met hers as my mouth fell open.

"Grandma Eleanor?" It was no wonder I'd thought she looked familiar when I'd first seen her. It had been years since I'd seen her, but I had fond memories of Landon and Liberty's sweet grandmother who was always so kind to me whenever she'd visit. "You're Eleanor Johnson."

She giggled. "I was wondering if you were ever going to remember me, Poppy." She patted my hand a few more times as I shook my head in disbelief. "What jarred your memory?"

"The ring," I replied. "I complimented Landon's mother's ring when we were at dinner, and she said it was a family tradition, that all of the Johnson women wore them."

Grandma Eleanor nodded. "That's right. We all do. We have a lot of traditions in our family, and one of them is not giving up on things we really want. Really, Poppy, you need to speak to Landon about this. He has been in love with you for his entire life, longer than I can remember. Even when he was a little boy and no one else was around, he'd talk to me about you. Poppy this and Poppy that. I wasn't sure he even knew what it was he was feeling for you at the time. But I knew. He loves you. And you love him. What in the world could possibly be strong enough to keep the two of you apart?"

Everything she said made perfect sense to me. I wanted to believe it, that our love could be strong enough to defeat any obstacle, but I found myself shaking my head. "He chose his father over me once before, remember? I'm sure he told you. What makes you think he won't do it again?"

"He won't, Poppy. Landon has been paying for that decision all these years, missing you, and wondering what might have been. He's not foolish enough to make the same mistake twice. Besides, my son might be stuck-up sometimes. He might be a bit prideful and tend to think he knows best, but he loves his children more than anything. When Remington sees that he's making his only son miserable, he'll take a step back. I guarantee it."

“Maybe you’re right.” I pursed my lips together, deep in thought. I had a lot to consider.

“Of course, I’m right,” she said with another laugh. “Grandmas are always right. Oh, come here, sweetie.” She pulled me into a hug, and I squeezed her right back, glad to have the comfort of a grandmotherly embrace. She smelled like flowers, despite our workout, and for a few moments, I felt at peace again.

Flowers. She smelled like flowers. No wonder Remington and everyone else had looked at me that way when I’d said that quote at the dinner table. They were probably wondering why in the world I was repeating what Grandma Eleanor always said.

A chuckle escaped my lips as she released me. “I think I should go,” I told her. “I have a lot to think about.”

“I guess you do, dear. But don’t think too hard. These things are never easy, but your heart knows what’s right.” She patted my hand again. “Give him another chance or else you’ll be spending the next nine years regretting it.”

“I’ll think about it.” That was the best I could do. She was probably right, but I couldn’t commit to anything at the moment, not until I’d had a chance to puzzle over all of these pieces and see exactly how they fit together.

I made my way out to my van, glad that there was a slight breeze to cool my sweaty skin. At least one mystery was solved and I now knew why that woman looked so familiar. But there was more for me to think about.

On the drive home, I couldn’t help but wonder why Landon hadn’t come after me if he was choosing me over his father. Liberty had hopped out of her chair and chased me down while Landon had just sat there. If he really needed to think about it, maybe I wasn’t the one for him after all. It should’ve been a gut response, despite how entangled he was in the company.

But his grandmother seemed to know for certain that he loved me. I’d thought there was a good chance that he did, too,

with everything that had happened leading up to the disastrous dinner.

Eleanor was right. I needed to speak to Landon, to hear his side of the situation. Then, and only then, could I make the best decision. As soon as I got home, I'd take a shower and hear him out.

With a nod of resolution, I pulled onto our street and took a few deep, cleansing breaths. I had a plan now, and that was what was important.

Of course, Landon would take my plans and rip them into tiny little pieces. As I pulled into the driveway, I saw him standing there at the front door. His hand was raised, as if he were about to knock, but when he heard my van, he turned around, his eyes wide, looking like hell. Well, as much like hell as a fine man like Landon Johnson could look. He had bags under his eyes, like he hadn't slept. His hair was messy, and his clothing was wrinkled.

But in his hand, he was holding a bouquet made entirely of sunflowers and red roses. So maybe the man could put two and two together after all.

My heart skipped a beat or two as I sat there, staring into his eyes, wondering how this conversation was going to go. Was he here to apologize and tell me he loved me, giving me those roses as a token of his affection? Or did he want to remain friends, tell me he was sorry, and let me decide that roses and sunflowers had no business being together? I was about to find out.

LANDON

The sound of Poppy's van pulling into the driveway behind me had my heart beating out of my chest. I turned around to see her staring at me from behind the driver's seat, not moving. I couldn't blame her for not leaping out the door to throw herself into my arms. From her perspective, I'd acted like a jerk, not standing up for her immediately. I had some explaining to do.

When she did get out, I could tell that she'd been to the gym. Her skin glistened in the soft morning light, her slightly damp hair curling up and framing her beautiful face. I loved her like this just as much as I did in a gown with heels on. Poppy was beautiful no matter what she wore.

She approached me cautiously, like a wild animal afraid to trust the wrong human. Taking a deep breath, I extended the flowers. All of the words I'd been practicing saying to her over and over in my mind tumbled together, refusing to come out in an orderly fashion. All I could manage was a weak, "Hi."

"Hi." Poppy didn't sound weak at all. In fact, she sounded stronger than I'd heard her in a long time. Determined. "What are you doing here, Landon? I thought you'd still be in Hawaii. With your father."

I let out the breath I'd drawn in as a sigh. "No, Poppy. I'm so sorry about that. I actually left a few minutes after you did. I shouldn't have just sat there, but I was stunned and didn't know what to say."

“Really?” She folded her arms beneath her chest. “Your sister didn’t seem to have any trouble sticking up for me. Besides, I would’ve thought that you’d have had enough time to prepare since the last time this happened. Or was that not actually your father’s fault?”

“No, it was. And this was, too. You’re right, I should’ve been better prepared. Poppy, I’m so sorry. I gave him the benefit of the doubt that he’d changed, and he hadn’t. But after he heard what you said, and after I chewed his ass out for being rude to you, he’s come around now, I promise. You won’t have to worry about my father anymore. And to top it off, I told him I’d quit if I had to choose between the company and you.”

Her eyes widened slightly then, as if she couldn’t believe I would say such a thing. “You did?”

I nodded. “I’d choose you over anyone or anything, Poppy. Over my job, my family, everything.”

Her mouth moved for a few moments without anything coming out, but then she smiled at me. “Thank you, Landon.”

Stepping closer to her, I extended the flowers further. “Poppy, I don’t care what kind of a flower you are. You can be a rose, a sunflower, a dandelion, or a poppy. None of that matters to me. You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever met in all my life. When I was with you, I was happier than I’ve ever been, and when I lost you, I was a shell of myself. I’d have to be an idiot to think that anyone else can take your place. No one can. Will you forgive me for being a dumbass and give me another chance?”

Tears began to glisten in her eyes. “Yes, Landon. I will forgive you for being a dumbass.”

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close, not caring that we were squishing the flowers between us. When my lips met hers, the kiss was soft, sweet, and perfect. I wanted to stand there and hold her for the rest of my life, but I had something else I needed to say to her.

“Listen, Poppy, I should’ve said this before, but I was a little scared and could never find the right time. But I don’t want another second to go by without telling you exactly how I feel. I love you. I’ve always loved you. And I will always love you, every day, for the rest of my life.”

Poppy rested her head on my shoulder, trying to compose herself as those tears broke free and began to cascade down her cheeks. “I love you, too, Landon.” She lifted her head to look into my eyes. “Ever since we were little kids, I’ve known I wanted to be with you and only you. When we are apart, I feel like I’m only a shell of myself. But when we are together, I am the very best version of myself I could ever be.”

Feeling tears beginning to sting the backs of my eyes, I pulled her close and kissed her again, forgetting that we were standing outside and anyone could be watching. I didn’t care. I wanted the whole world to know that I loved this woman. She was mine, and I was hers forever.

When we finally came up for air, I could see that she had something she wanted to say to me. Poppy had a mischievous glint in her eyes. “So, I guess I’ve been powwowing with your grandmother, and I didn’t even know it.”

A grin spread across my face. “Yeah, I guess you have. I spoke to her before I got on the plane, and she clued me into that fact.”

“I saw her at the gym today. She’s a wise woman, that Grandma Eleanor.” Poppy snuggled into my arms, holding the bouquet of slightly smooched flowers between us. “She told me that she had been in a similar situation with her husband’s family—which I guess would be your great-grandfather?”

“That’s right. Grandma has never been like everyone else—in the best way possible. I had forgotten that she’d had some issues fitting in with my grandpa’s side of the family when they first got married until I spoke to her at the airport. The moment you made that statement about the roses and the sunflowers, though, everyone realized you were quoting her. Did you see my father’s face before you left the room?”

“I saw what looked like confusion,” she said with a slight shrug. “But I thought he was just shocked that anyone would dare speak to him that way.”

“No, that was him realizing he was treating you the same way his own mother had been treated, and that was one of the reasons he promised to change.” I hoped she believed me. I knew it would be difficult for her to accept that my father really was going to change the way that he treated her. “But how did you not realize you were talking to Grandma? You’ve met her before.”

“It’s been a while,” she said, her face turning a tad red. “I knew this woman looked familiar, but I thought she might be someone from a previous class I’d taken at the gym.”

“That makes sense. Did she tell you her name?” I reached up and brushed her hair off her face, my fingers grazing her cheek. I wanted to touch more of her, but I also didn’t want to let her go at the moment to move to a more private location.

“She said her name was Ellie. I guess I just never put two and two together. She was so sweet, though, and she gave me some great advice about you. I really felt seen and heard when I was speaking to her. I guess she knew all along I was talking about her grandson?” The pink in her cheeks deepened even further.

“Knowing Grandma, I’d say yes.” We both shook our heads. Sneaky Grandma. “But other than Joshua, she’s the only person I’ve ever confided in about you, Poppy. So she’s known just how much you mean to me all along. Of course, she wanted to see us get together. She cares about both of us and wants us to be happy. I love her more than anyone else in the world—other than you.”

Her smile brightened thinking about it in that light and with my statement. “She is a sweet woman. Honestly, it’s hard to believe that she gave birth to your father.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. She wasn’t wrong. “Dad has always felt like he had something to prove. Being born into that particular family, he wanted to be successful but failed early on. His parents gave him an opportunity to make it

on his own, not giving him much help until he could figure out how to be successful. So he's always felt like he had something to prove. Now, he feels like he's made it, and he doesn't always understand that success might look different to different people. He tends to think that the traditional, stereotypical rich family is the one that sends the strongest message to others that a person or a family is worthy of respect. It's really kind of sad if you stop to think about it because he's spent all of this time trying to be something he isn't to prove to people who probably don't care that he's good enough for them." I hoped that I'd explained my father's thinking in a way that she could understand.

"Are you sure he's completely accepted me and my family now, though? I don't want this to be something that continues to come up year after year. And I definitely don't want you to feel like you have to choose between me and your parents. Or your job. You deserve to have everything you've worked for, Landon, and I don't want to be the reason you lose any of it."

"God, Poppy, you're so amazing." I wanted to kiss her again right then and there, but I could tell by her expression that we needed to finish our discussion first. "I'm confident in my father's ability to accept you and your family now. After the discussion we had, I think he's got it now. Besides, he's all the way in Hawaii now, and you won't have to worry about seeing him much at all."

"Still, I don't want your relationship to be strained," she said.

Thinking of the package my father was sending me, the contents of which I'd already figured out, I felt confident in telling her. "It won't be."

"Good. I know how important your father is to you and how much he loves you, too. I don't want to be the reason your family falls apart." I could tell by her expression that it was something she was truly concerned about.

"My dad said he wants to apologize to you. I can't tell you the last time I ever heard my father volunteer to apologize to anyone," I added.

That made her laugh, a sound I loved to hear. “Well, I wouldn’t even know what to say if he did, but I would like to smooth things over with him. It would be great if we could just have a fresh start.”

“I really do think that he could get along with your father if he gave him a chance.”

“I think that would be amazing,” Poppy agreed. “It would be awesome if our families were able to appreciate one another and spend their time together at the neighborhood get-togethers instead of avoiding one another. Especially if—” Poppy abruptly stopped talking, and her face flushed a bright red.

“If what?” I asked, grinning at her. I thought I had an idea about what she was about to say, but I could also understand why she wouldn’t want to say it just yet.

“Uh, if we continue to see one another for a while.” She smiled up at me shyly, and I grinned back at her.

“I think we will be continuing to see one another for a really, really long time, Poppy Briar.” With that, I drew her to me and kissed her again, deeply, ready to take her back to my place and show her just how much I cared about her.

EPILOGUE

POPPY

Two weeks after Landon and I made up, we had plans to go out to a fancy restaurant in downtown Franklin. It was a new place, one neither of us had gone to before, and I'd purchased a new dress just for the occasion. Sitting at my desk in the office, trying to concentrate on my work, I found myself daydreaming about rushing home to get all dressed up in my new red gown, heels, and some fancy earrings Liberty had helped me pick out. We were going to have an amazing time.

The last couple of weeks, Landon and I had been spending as much time together as possible. We were doing everything we could to make our relationship strong and get past the problems we'd had before. When I was with Landon, I was happier than I'd ever been in my life. I didn't ever want to be in a situation where I found myself without him again.

"You look like you're having trouble concentrating," Liberty noted. "Is your mind elsewhere?" She gave me a mischievous grin.

I couldn't hide anything from her. "Yeah. I was just thinking about my date tonight." I smiled at her and shrugged, knowing my face was likely turning bright pink.

"I'm so glad you guys are together now. Landon is such a nicer person, and I love to see you both so happy." Liberty batted her eyelashes at me, like a cartoon character, which made me giggle.

“Thanks. I think we’re both pretty happy with the current situation.” I wasn’t sure how I was going to manage my art business now. I still wanted to start my own studio, but I also liked getting to see Landon every day at work, so I’d have to figure it out. I didn’t want to leave him without an assistant either. He definitely needed one, especially with all the new clients we’d been getting lately.

The sound of Landon’s office door opening had my heart leaping into my throat. Just knowing he was about to walk past my desk, even if it wasn’t to see me, had me overheating to the point I thought I needed to fan myself.

Liberty must’ve seen me struggling because she started laughing. I glared at her, but when Landon stepped around the corner and said my name, I forgot Liberty was even in the room.

“Hey.” It was the smoothest word I could manage at the moment.

“Could you come into my office for a moment?” he asked, a slightly serious tone to his voice that might’ve made me nervous if the circumstances were different.

“Sure.” I hopped up from my desk and headed in that direction as Liberty shouted something to us about making sure we locked the door if anything was about to happen we didn’t want the whole office walking in on. She thought it was hilarious, but Landon only shook his head.

Once we stepped through the door and he’d closed it behind us, Landon pulled me to him and kissed me deeply. It was enough to make me lose the ability to think clearly. I could’ve pushed everything off his desk and climbed up there, spread eagle, but I found some restraint deep within me.

When Landon released me, he had a cooked grin on his face. “How’s it going?”

“Great,” I said with a nod, straightening my skirt and trying to get my pulse to slow. “I’m great. How are you?”

“Good, but I have some news for you. Can you have a seat please?” He’d suddenly switched modes and was my boss

again. I wasn't sure what to think about that as I took a few shaky steps to sit down in the chair he offered me.

"What's up?" I tried to act nonchalant, but in reality, he was making me nervous.

"Well, Poppy, in the last few weeks, you've done great work here for us, and we appreciate it. But I'm sad to say, we're going to have to let you go. I've hired someone else to take your place."

I waited for the punchline, holding my breath. But he was serious. "What? I'm fired?"

Landon nodded. "We've both known all along that this job was temporary, that it wasn't your passion, and I can't in good conscience let you continue to work here when you'd be happier doing something else."

Tears sprang up in my eyes. I'd never been fired before. I didn't know what to say. "But Landon—"

"That's why I've decided to give you a different job." That crooked grin was back, and I realized he wasn't firing me—not exactly. "Do you remember that artist we were looking for? For the home décor line?"

I nodded. "Yes, I remember hearing about it."

"Well, we feel that you would be a better fit for that particular position. So, starting Monday, you will no longer be my personal assistant. Instead, you will be our artist, and to make sure that you have everything you need to produce the high-quality art every member of the board, including my father, is certain you are capable of producing, we will be providing you with your own workspace." He pulled out his phone and handed it over to me.

Still stunned by his words, I could hardly process what I was looking at. It was a beautiful white building sandwiched between two other stunning stores in what appeared to be downtown Nashville. "You're getting me a studio space?"

He nodded. "That way, not only will you be able to work on the art we require, you'll have the space to start the gallery you've always wanted."

The tears I'd been about to shed over being fired flowed down my cheeks freely. "Landon! I can't let you do that. It's too much."

"No, it's exactly what you deserve, Poppy, and I'm so happy I can do it for you. What do you say? Will you accept the position?"

Rather than answering him with words, which would've been nearly impossible since I was so choked up, I sprang up from my chair and rushed over to him. Landon caught me in his arms and hugged me tightly. "Yes!" I finally managed to squeak out.

We hugged for several moments before his phone rang, and I knew I needed to get back to work. I had some projects I wanted to finish before handing the responsibility off to someone else.

As I was leaving, Landon called, "I'll see you at seven."

"I can't wait." Walking back to my desk, excited to tell Liberty, I realized this was the answer to all of my questions. I could stay in Tennessee and still have my studio. I could have Landon and all of the rest of my dreams.

Later that evening, I found myself sitting across from the most handsome man in the world, dressed in his best suit, with classical music playing as we sipped wine and ate an Italian feast. The restaurant was amazing, nicer than any other I'd ever gone to, and I knew this was a night I would never forget.

"That dress looks stunning on you," Landon noted, not for the first time. "God, I can't get over how beautiful you are."

Feeling my cheeks heating, I said, "Thank you," and had to look away. I was hoping we could at least make it through dinner before I felt the urge to pull him out of the restaurant by his tie and have my way with him in the backseat of his car.

"I saw a park while we were driving in," Landon said, looking out the window. It was dark, but the businesses outside were lit up with tiny white fairy lights, almost like it was Christmastime. "I thought we could go for a romantic stroll after dinner."

I felt a slight flicker of disappointment as I thought about the delay that would cause. I wanted to get back to his house as quickly as possible because the ache between my legs was beginning to grow. But if I focused on how romantic and sweet he was being, I knew I could make it through the walk. It would be an opportunity to make a memory with him. “Sure. That sounds great.”

“Do you have any ideas for the studio?” he asked as we continued with our meal.

“Yes, actually, I’ve been thinking about it basically nonstop since you mentioned it,” I told him. I explained to him the different ideas I had, and he gave me some good feedback about what he thought would work best for the location. By the time we were done eating, I felt even more excited about the prospect.

“I’m so glad I’m able to give this to you,” Landon said, emotion evident in his voice. “I’d give you the world if I could.” He reached across the table and took my hand, running his thumb along my knuckles.

“Thank you, Landon. You’re making all of my dreams come true. But all I really want is you.”

After he paid the bill, we walked out together, headed for the park he’d mentioned. It really was beautiful, and the weather couldn’t have been better. The spring air was refreshing, not too cool, and not at all hot. The sky above us was full of stars, and holding Landon’s hand, I felt all was right with the world.

We walked along for several moments without saying much. Landon led us over to a bridge that crossed a little babbling brook. The moonlight reflecting off the moving water was enchanting. I could’ve stood there and stared at it all night if I wasn’t still keenly aware of the handsome man standing next to me.

Turning to speak to him, I realized he had shifted, and rather than standing next to me as he was before, he was now on one knee. Gasping, I covered my mouth with both hands. Was this what it looked like? After Landon had faked me out

about being fired earlier in the day, I wasn't sure I could trust him.

But then, I saw the ring and knew for certain he was proposing to me. In the moonlight, I could see the ring he was holding out to me was exactly the same as the one his mother and grandmother wore.

“Poppy Briar,” Landon began, his voice cracking slightly. “I have loved you for my entire life. You are the kindest, sweetest, smartest, most beautiful woman in the world. I can't imagine my life without you, and I never want to know what that's like again. Will you do me the ultimate honor and become my wife?”

All I could do was stand there and nod my head, the tears choking any response that might've come through my lips. Landon continued to stare at me until I finally managed to get it out. “Yes! Yes, of course, I'll marry you.” He slid the gorgeous diamond ring on my finger and then stood up, pulling me to him. His lips met mine, and the feeling that I was floating on air nearly carried me away.

When Landon pulled away from me, his smile was even bigger than mine. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too. We're going to have to invite the entire neighborhood to our wedding.”

Laughing along with me, he said, “I wouldn't have it any other way.”

Landon's lips found mine again as he squeezed me against his chest. In his arms, I had finally found everything I'd ever wanted. All of my dreams were finally coming true. Here, I could be myself. I could be a beautiful sunflower who grew wherever I found myself planted. Here, I could be myself and never have to worry about being different or not fitting in.

With Landon's arms around me, there was nothing I couldn't do.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



After ten years of helping his wife, Ali Parker and brother-in-law, Weston Parker develop love stories of their own, Jacob Parker has decided to take the plunge with a new twist on the romance story.

He's a romantic guy in real life and wanted to bring the world of the Manhattan Men to life with his wife, Ali.

He lives in Tennessee with his family, loves to golf, also writes as J Stark, and can be found working in his wood shop when he's not writing.

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