



The **WEDDING**
WITNESS

A Secret Pregnancy Romance

SOFIA T SUMMERS

THE WEDDING WITNESS

A SECRET PREGNANCY ROMANCE

SOFIA T SUMMERS

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OTHER BOOKS BY SOFIA T SUMMERS

Forbidden Promises (this series)

Maid Without Honour

The Wedding Witness

Forbidden Temptations Series

Daddy's Best Friend

My Best Friend's Daddy.

Daddy's Business Partner

Doctor Daddy.

Secret Baby with Daddy's Best Friend

Knocked Up by Daddy's Best Friend

Pretend Wife to Daddy's Best Friend

SEAL Daddy.

Fake Married to My Best Friend's Daddy.

Accidental Daddy.

The Grump's Girl Friday.

The Vegas Accident

My Beastly Boss

My Millionaire Marine

The Wedding Dare

The Summer Getaway.

The Love Edit

The Husband Lottery

Christmas in the Cabin

A Very Naughty Christmas

Forbidden Doctors Series

Doctors Surprise Twins

Written in the Charts

Rendezvous with My Resident

Forbidden Fantasies (Reverse Harem Series)

My Irish Billionaires

Toy for the Teachers

Three Grumpy Bosses

Feasting on Her Curves

DELILAH AND OWEN: THE PLAYLIST

“Oh My God” by Adele

“Bette Davis Eyes” by Kim Carnes

“Chemtrails Over the Country Club” by Lana Del Rey

“Are You Gonna Be My Girl” by Jet

“Super Soaker” by Kings of Leon

“A World Alone” by Lorde

“I’m Kissing You” by Des’re

“Mistakes” by Sharon Van Etten

“And I Love Her” by The Beatles

“Claire de Lune” by London Philharmonic Orchestra

“Love Vigilantes” by Iron & Wine

“Only Love” by Mumford & Sons

“Right on Time” by Brandi Carlile

“The Great War” by Taylor Swift

“Dying Breed” by The Killers

DESCRIPTION

The gorgeous groomsman had all my attention when my best friend's ex was allegedly killed.

Fun fact? I hated the man.

Another fun fact? I was the last one to see him alive.

There may not be anyone on my side except that groomsman I can't stop thinking about since the wedding.

Owen is a rugged, red-blooded military man.

I'm not even his type.

And yet, I fell into his arms like I belonged there.

His dark eyes have the depth of an intense lover.

But there are secrets hiding behind them.

Owen is trying to uncover *my* secrets.

And he's about to find one that has nothing to do with the murder.

I'm not the only one running out of time.

My baby bump is growing, and he needs to find a way to save my life . . . and that of his unborn child.

PROLOGUE

Delilah

An ink stain smudged the flesh of my hand. It must have come from signing as a witness on Cassidy's marriage certificate. I had seen her down the aisle, toasted to her happiness, and after all the madness, she could ride off into the summer night with the boy she'd always loved. I had done my job as a co-maid of honor and earned myself a glass of something red, rich, and intoxicating.

My long skirt swished around my legs with its sheer layers of 'French blue' fabric. I would have called it cornflower, but who was I to argue with the designer? The scene of the dwindling party offered too good of a mood. Family members sipped coffee as they caught up with one another. The ivory candles' wax sank lower into their pillars, and the blue summer flowers became pretty pops of color against the beige and gold ballroom.

There was no reason to fuss or to worry. Everyone I loved had their happy ending.

Heading to the bar, I ordered myself a faintly chilled glass of Pinot Noir. The dark cherry notes hit my tongue before the smell of something like chicory coffee hit my nose. It smelled like something to go with chocolate desserts or a Mexican mole dish.

"Can I see that bottle?" I asked the bartender.

He didn't hesitate to hand it over. After all, I worked with the hospitality group that employed him. My business supplied the wine. Memorizing the label, my mind didn't acknowledge a silent figure striding up beside me. I didn't know how such a tall, broad frame could move like a shadow.

"Is that what you're drinkin'?" he wondered, traces of a Low-Country childhood in his tone.

My eyes flicked up and to the right. Owen Braun's green gaze flickered with curiosity. His chiseled features remained composed. He gave away nothing.

"For now," I agreed. "I'll probably have something else later."

A smile twitched at the corner of his mouth.

"Let me get it for you, then."

"It's an open bar."

"Call it the principle of the thing."

We had been circling each other at every event. I'd polished my bride. He'd proven to be the best man in every room. We were each caught up in responsibilities . . . but not anymore.

For days, I'd wondered what it must be like to take one of those strong, tanned hands in mine. I imagined how it might be to hear his gentle Southern baritone in my ear before our lips echoed everything we left in our passing glances. I dreamed it in the spaces between every breath and each careful heartbeat. My fantasies of Owen lived in all the places between time itself.

"Can I get something for you, then?" I asked.

I brushed back my sprayed and styled bangs out of habit. My brown mop of hair had been braided and frozen in place. The hair pins pushed into my scalp. The shapewear gripped my stomach, but for a chance with Owen, I could keep the costume on for a few moments longer.

If I played my cards right, I imagined he might help me out of it.

He would unzip my dress. I'd undo the buttons of his light summer suit.

"How about a cider?" Owen decided. "From what I hear, you're the expert around here."

"You're right. I know just the thing."

We took our drinks and took up residence at an abandoned table in the far corner of the massive room. Languid love songs continued to play as waiters collected plates. Nobody kicked us out, and nobody cared when I kicked off my heels. Owen didn't bat an eye as we talked about the day and ourselves.

"Cassidy and Tucker looked so happy," I mused.

"I'm sure they're looking forward to the rest of their lives."

"And what about you?" I wondered. "Someone told me you're stepping back from the military. Are you looking forward to being a civilian like the rest of us?"

"I wish," he muttered, swirling his half-finished glass.

"What do you mean?"

He leaned closer. His green eyes looked like two peridot stones in the evening's light. I read once that green eyes had once been the mark of witch, and without a doubt, Owen Braun was bewitching me. Every subtle move he made, I mirrored. I tried to pay attention, but I got lost wondering what it would be like to have his rugged hands wrapped around my waist and my hands in his near-black hair, all neatly combed for the wedding. I would have killed to ruin every part of him.

"I'm leaving in a week, actually," he confessed.

"I thought you're going into the reserves."

"It's the Air Force," he explained before his attention scanned the ballroom. "I was supposed to be moving into reserves, but I've been convinced to do one last tour by extending my contract for a year. They're . . . well, the country's withdrawing from war. They need people to help organize the nation's military and assist in the exit. I'll be

deployed overseas to work with allied nations in the withdrawal.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Better part of a year.”

“That’s a shame,” I remarked, feigning a small sigh. “Maybe you can call me when you get back.”

Taking a sip of my wine, I turned slowly, waiting to see what might happen next. My foot hesitated to move. The moment became measured by heartbeats. His fingers curled around my wrist, and I knew I had him. As he leaned closer, his dulcet voice dipped even lower.

“Maybe you could stay here for tonight,” he suggested. “We could pick up where we left off when I get back.”

My lips twitched, itching to grin. Looking back over my shoulder, I didn’t dare turn around.

“You expect me to wait a whole year for a man I don’t know?”

“I’ve seen you watching me. Honestly, Delilah, you must know something by now.”

He wasn’t wrong. Through every party and dinner, I took the opportunity to study this man among men. Owen didn’t feel a need to fill silence with idle chatter. He didn’t hunch over to make up for his height, and he never bothered to put on airs, resolute and reserved. It fascinated me to feel his grip tightening ever so slightly. His dark eyes glinted with wild determination to get exactly what he wanted.

One night.

One stolen moment.

A memory with me.

I twisted around then, meeting his gaze. I took a step closer. We both knew what was happening.

“If you knew I was watching, you must’ve been watching me too.”

“I was, but I’m not too proud or stubborn to admit it.”

“Are you calling me stubborn?”

Owen cracked a small smile. “No, never.”

I found myself laughing. More intoxicated by Owen than the drink, I abandoned the last of my wine. Nothing could taste as good as his hand felt. It left my wrist to take hold of my waist. When his fingertips pressed into the small of my back, my heart skipped a beat.

“You are if you won’t even give me a chance,” he murmured.

“Is that all you want, Mr. Braun?” I taunted. “One chance?”

A chuckle rumbled through his chest. With only a veil of hot air between us, I felt it reverberate through me. I was seconds from being in his lap. My arms would be draped over his strong shoulders and our chests pressed together.

Every fantasy flashing across my vision flourished into electricity. Every unspoken promise made me ache to know whether Owen could be a man of his word. It was all written right there in his expression and echoed in my bated breath.

“I want a lot of things, Miss Kaplan,” he countered. “I’m trying not to be greedy here.”

My answer barely made it out of my mouth.

“Not greedy . . . just honest.”

The pretense of my foolish game crumbled at our feet. Slowly and then all at once, Owen’s lips met mine. The kiss had me melting. My eyelids fluttered shut. I longed to become water and pour myself over him, but we were still in the ballroom. Prying eyes didn’t deserve to share our moment.

“I have a room for the night,” Owen told me, breaking the kiss but not his promises.

“Is the bed big enough for the both of us?”

His wolfish grin thrilled me to no end.

“We can certainly find out.”

I took his hand and matched his steady stride toward the elevator. Even in my heels, I only came up to his nose. He made my fuller figure seem almost petite. It was nothing for his body to cover mine. In the empty elevator, I found my back pressed against the mirrored wall. One of Owen’s arms braced itself over my head. His free hand grabbed fistfuls of my skirt.

If someone had stepped into the elevator with us, I would never have known. I could only see him. Hustling down the hotel hallways, the world emptied until it was only us. Nobody knew how we stumbled together into his suite. The streetlights of downtown Charleston shining through the windows lit our path to the downy white bed. Our clothes became the breadcrumb trail. When my dress hit the floor, Owen’s low growl couldn’t be mistaken.

“How long have you wanted this?” I had to know. “How long have you been planning this moment?”

We fell back onto the bed. Twisting and turning together, we each vied for control and a taste of each other. I nipped at his ear as he answered.

“I wanted to follow you home five minutes after we met. You?”

“About five minutes longer.”

Owen lured me from the first moment I ever caught his glance. He stood tall as a man among men. His strength couldn’t be questioned. His words were nothing but polite. With his schooled, chiseled features and vivid eyes, I longed to know what lay hidden underneath it all. Behind the composed exterior, who was the real Owen Braun?

He seemed to be a different kind of creature altogether in the shadows. That noble man gave over to wolfish, stalking desires. Winning out, Owen pinned me back against the bed. He hovered over my body on all fours, peeling away my underthings with ease.

“You’re even better than I imagined, you know,” he told me, tugging my satin underwear down my legs. “I don’t think

anything can beat the genuine article.”

“I was gonna say the same about you.” I laughed under my breath, but the sound got lost in a sigh of pleasure.

Owen’s hand slid up my inner thigh, pressing into the soft flesh and heading toward the inevitable. Traces of my lipstick were already smeared across his jaw. His expression verged on feral as the fervor built between us, but I refused to stop him. I’d promised one night to last him an entire year. Though I never said it aloud, I needed to see how far he could go.

His long, confident fingers didn’t hesitate to coax the gentle moans from within me. Owen traced along my slick entrance before slipping one finger inside and then another. He ravaged my breasts as my body writhed against the overwhelming feelings. My nails scratched against his shoulder and scalp, but Owen never relented.

“I want you,” I breathed on the brink of release.

I couldn’t let this be the end of it. I needed to give him more.

“What do you want?” he urged me to admit, still massaging me from within. “Tell me.”

“I need you inside me,” I admitted. “I want to feel every inch of you.”

Cursing under his breath, his desires took control. His moment of weakness became my chance. Owen was on his back before he knew it. His massive frame sprawled over the mattress, and it was all mine to enjoy.

I grinned. “That’s much better.”

I straddled his legs and worked Owen over, stroking him from base to tip. He took in a sharp, sudden breath. Eager for more, his tip dripped with desire. I selfishly craved to discover the pleasure of having Owen inside me. My body couldn’t wait a minute longer.

“Hold on,” he muttered, freezing me in place.

“For what?”

“You think I didn’t come prepared?”

His long arm stretched out toward the bedside table. For a second, he searched while I waited with bated breath. This military man had come with a mission and a plan. The metallic wrapper glinted in the light. As soon as I took it from him, I tore it apart with my teeth, and Owen’s low laugh echoed through the room.

“Call me impatient,” I joked lightly, but the teasing was short-lived.

The sheath rolled down Owen’s length with little effort. Truth be told, I’d done it more than once before, but I had never felt my body nearly shaking in anticipation. My legs straddled his waist. My lips found his one more time.

Savoring the sensation, I lowered myself onto him inch by inch, but my hips were more than ready to rock against him. My grip anchored itself among his fine layer of dark chest hair. My clit brushed against his skin. Each thrust took me higher and higher, and Owen encouraged me to keep the rhythm. He gripped my backside and let his strength push me farther.

“Don’t give up, angel,” he insisted, the rasp of desire heavy in every syllable.

I didn’t have the air to answer. Every nerve in my body came alive, and my spine arched against the pleasure. It killed me to think I couldn’t come back to him next weekend or even next month. Owen would be a world away from me, but that didn’t mean I had to let him go.

We were leaving our marks on one another. I’d tattoo his name next to the magnolias on my hip and leave tiny scars on his skin. Even as time passed, Owen wouldn’t be able to forget this . . . or us.

On the edge of euphoria, I rode him into oblivion as I saw stars light up my vision. Earth flipped on its axis, and an undeniable truth shouted from the back of my reeling mind. With a gasping breath, I collapsed, but Owen caught me. He kept holding on.

I knew why the French called it ‘the little death’. Little by little, I died and came alive in Owen’s embrace. My body shuddered into self-consciousness. My eyes fluttered shut, and in that moment, I remembered the first thought I’d ever had about Owen. I felt his lips lazily press against my throat, and I heard that quiet truth again.

It would be so easy to love you, Owen Braun.

The thought rippled through me with every good feeling. Happily ruined, I let reality come back as my heartbeat slowed.

“I need to take a shower,” I remarked, finding the strength to speak. “It’s big enough for two.”

He didn’t need to answer. Only when necessary, I stepped away from him, losing sight of his watchful gaze. Once to use the claustrophobic toilet closet. Twice to figure out where the maids left the fresh towels. Owen remained patient each time, but he knew how to make up for it.

His hands ran over me like the hot water. It felt like forever as I unpinned my hair and rinsed it all clean. The bobby pins became a tiny hill on the shower’s shelf. My traces of makeup washed down the drain.

Owen’s smile grew teasing. “There you are.”

“Did you not like the makeup? Are you one of those guys?”

He chuckled at the challenge. The sound warmed me more than the water.

“I haven’t seen anything on you I didn’t like, but don’t tell me you’re not relieved.”

“I do feel better,” I had to admit.

“And I can tell.”

How closely had he been watching me? What had he learned from his careful distance?

I was too tired to ask. Damp and smelling of hotel soap, we settled together like we had been there a thousand times

before. Perhaps in another life, I had known him. Maybe the stardust inside us had been together back when time itself began, or maybe we were both just too tired to keep up any pretense.

My body felt heavy. Owen's shoulder seemed so comfortable. The hotel pillows didn't compare, and in the darkness, sleep claimed me through the small hours of the morning. My eyes opened to see Owen lying awake just as sunlight snuck through the cracks in our curtains.

"Don't wake up for me," he mumbled.

"I . . ." I yawned. "I'm not. What are you thinking about?"

"Everything I'll need to do."

Curling toward Owen, I urged him, "Forget it for now. Think about something else."

His hand curled around my wrist. Loitering between dreams and reality, I didn't know what to make of his holding up my arm at first. The roughened pad of his thumb traced over each little tattooed star, connecting the lines that weren't there.

"What's this one?" he asked, lingering close to my left wrist.

"Those are the Pleiades, the Seven Sisters."

Next to them, I'd put a sprig of flowering Rosemary for my cousin who had always been like a sister to me. If there were such an easy symbol for my best friends, Cassidy and Sam, I would've inked them there too, but Owen's eyes were already wandering to my right arm.

"And that one?"

"Andromeda."

"She's the one tied to the rock, right? One of those heroes had to save her."

I nodded. "Perseus had to come rescue Andromeda from the sea monster after her parents angered the gods. Her

constellation is between Perseus and her mother, Cassiopeia, who tried sacrificing her.”

“That must make for an awkward eternity.”

We laughed together. Then, the darkness became quiet again.

“I wish I could waste my last few days here with you,” he remarked. “It would definitely be more interesting than selling my car or packing up my place.”

“You and me both.”

I would have to remember how his near-black hair was neat around his ears with enough length to create soft waves on the top. I committed to memory the Roman bridge of his nose and the slow, steady pace of his breath. Watching him carefully, I wondered how vividly I would remember that hotel room and the silhouette of his handsome face. How quickly could a year pass by?

“I guess you can’t call me once you’ve left, either,” I mused.

“It’ll be difficult,” he agreed, taking in a deep breath. “I will have access to my email from time to time.”

“Write me, then.”

Rolling over, I reached for the hotel notepad and pen. I scratched down my email address before ripping off the top page.

“Write me here,” I told him. “I don’t care when. Whenever you get the chance or want to pass the time.”

Owen stared at the paper. He held it up to the crack of light coming through our curtains.

“I won’t be able to tell you much about what I’m doing.”

“That’s fine,” I assured him. “Tell me about, I don’t know, the color of the sky or the teacher you hated the most. Write whatever crosses your mind.”

“Only if you promise that when I get back, we can try this again.”

“I promise, cross my heart and hope to die.”

I kissed his smile then, feeling the curling corners of his mouth. A year would pass before we knew it, and when he came back to me, Owen and I would fall back together just like this. It would all be so easy, and with every star as my witness, I wouldn't waste the chance to love him.

Owen - One Year Later

I never imagined missing humidity. It clung to me like a second skin, but after months of rocky desert terrain and nights in tents, I welcomed the forewarning of warm summer rain. I savored the cool air conditioning of Tucker's SUV and breathed a sigh of relief.

Three months of training on base.

Eight months on the other side of the world.

One month of debriefing in Washington.

As soon as I made it back stateside, I itched to get back to the city, but my brother was leaving to study abroad in Australia. I sold my car before leaving town. Even when I got back to South Carolina, there was plenty still keeping me from getting back to the life I'd left behind . . . and back to her.

My best friend turned down the radio as he asked, "So, how much do you actually have in this storage unit?"

"Not much. Mostly small stuff in boxes, plus a few things my mom gave me that I didn't have the heart to let go."

"That's not so bad, then."

"Thanks again for helping me with this," I told him. "The damn car rental place only gave me a little sedan for the two weeks. I could only fit a few boxes in the backseat."

“I’m shocked you could even fit yourself.”

Tucker had seen me pulling up to his place, hunched over and making the best of it. Since I’d seen him last, his brown hair had only seemed to get floppier. His skin looked tanned from his first anniversary trip with his wife, and he wore an earnest smile more reliable than the sunrise. It seemed to always be there, even when we were college roommates struggling through finals.

He showed no stress turning onto the off-ramp and merging into traffic. One left turn later, we were at the storage center and walking into the first floor. Tucker and I passed door after orange door until we made it to my number. I reached into the side pocket of my cargo pants for the key.

“Wow.” Tucker examined the remains of my life packed away. “I was still expecting more than this.”

Except for an armchair covered in a bedsheet, the remains of my old apartment sat packed away in cardboard boxes and plastic tubs stacked up high. The forty-square-foot unit had been just enough for me, but in my memory, it was somehow bigger. Tucker’s remark echoed in my head.

I reached for the first box. “Well, at least we can get it all in one trip.”

He grabbed a dolly from down the hall. We stacked up the boxes as much as we could, talking as we went. Tucker asked about my mother and brother. I asked about his wife. Apparently, Cassidy had started house hunting.

“She’s researching schools and neighborhoods,” he said, opening his trunk. “We’re thinking about out here in West Ashley. Cassidy likes the older neighborhoods with all the big houses from the twenties, but she admits they’re out of our price range. Her dad says we shouldn’t let money be an issue.”

“He wants to chip in?”

“He wants Cassie to be happy, and with all his cash to burn, Jude doesn’t think much of giving us some. Cassie’s got too much pride for that, though. We’re looking at getting a

fixer upper instead—something in a better neighborhood where we can put in a little sweat equity.”

We began shoving the boxes into the trunk. I lifted. Tucker sorted. Around the parking lot, everything felt almost too quiet.

“You know I’m happy to help. I don’t need to tell you my grandparents had a contractor business. I spent plenty of summers painting and laying down floors.”

Tucker grinned. “When we were out with Delilah for her birthday, she made a similar offer too, so it sounds like we’ll have plenty of spare hands.”

“Delilah?” My grip tightened on a box.

“She also told Cassie you sent her flowers for her birthday . . . which Cass told me about before bed.”

“Is that all?”

Tucker rolled his eyes. “Clearly, you know Delilah. She doesn’t talk about her life outside a few very specific people. I just happen to be married to one, and well, we all noticed how you two looked at each other last year.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

I lied right through my teeth, and Tucker knew it. He chuckled to himself. Stacking an old printer paper box onto a blue tub, he shook his head. The sun glared overhead. It forced me to squint as I looked over my shoulder. Instinctively, I scanned the perimeter.

“It’s you and me here,” Tucker went on. “Come on, you’ve seen me make an ass of myself over Cassie. Did something not happen between you and Delilah last summer?”

I handed him the last box. “If something happened, wouldn’t Cassidy have told you?”

“Not if Delilah kept it a secret.”

He tugged down the back of his T-shirt, waiting for an answer. According to the expression on his face, Delilah had. All the emails she’d sent me, the night in the hotel, and the

promises we'd made had stayed ours alone. I planned to keep it that way.

"Let's go get the rest of my stuff," I told him instead, taking the dolly with me.

I didn't have many regrets in life, but I kicked myself a million times for not asking Delilah out the first night I met her. We could've been together and known each other far better before I left. It would have given me the chance to memorize the lines in her palm and the soft curves of her feminine frame.

She had been a lifeline all those oceans away. Part of me wondered if her interest would fade, but it never did. Her messages said nothing in particular but held everything while I clung to an image of her.

I shut my eyes each night and saw her there in the rocky desert.

Deep within her ink pool eyes, I glimpsed the constellations living inside Delilah like the ones etched onto her skin. Light lived within the dark. I only had to look closely to see it and commit it all to memory. I only needed to hear her name to be thrown back through time.

"Delilah's gonna be at Sam's party next weekend." Tucker followed a half-step behind me. "Her godmother's throwing it at her house. She's got one of those big houses off Broad Street. Delilah's shop is supplying the wine. You should come."

"I wasn't invited."

"I'm inviting you." He matched my stride. "You know you're like family to me, Owen."

I glanced over. His smile was still so earnest.

"This party is for Samantha and Jude?"

"It's to celebrate their elopement, and well, probably to make up for the fact that they eloped."

I forced myself not to crack a smile. "How does it feel to have a step-mother-in-law who's your age?"

“Oh, let’s not go there,” Tucker insisted, but he took it all in good fun. “Sam’s still a friend. She’s always been part of Cassie’s family.”

“Especially now that she’s married into it.”

My friend let out a little huff. Grabbing the second round of stuff, I watched my chances to deflect disappear. Tucker refused to surrender.

“Don’t tell me you don’t want to come to the party,” he said, bringing us back to the question I wanted to avoid. “Delilah will be there, and I know you want to see her.”

“All you know is that I sent her flowers on her birthday.”

Tucker rolled his eyes. “It didn’t take a private detective to figure out you were into her. Quit being cagey and say yes, man.”

“Fine.”

“Fine as in yes, you’ll come?”

I picked up my grandfather’s old leather armchair. “You can tell whoever you want that I’ll try my best to make it.”

He beamed. Standing taller, Tucker looked like a boy with a prize, even if he was a grown and very-married man. At least someone was happy here.

My stomach flipped at the prospect of the party. In some crowded room, I would have to face a year of waiting and wondering. Would her smile be like I remembered? Did she get any more of those tattoos? When I reached out, would her hands feel the same in mine?

I needed to buy myself a new car, get settled into my new apartment, and start my new job, but more than any of that, I needed to answer all those questions burning in my brain. I had to see her. Even though I gave Tucker a hard time, there was no doubt in my mind.

I’d wasted one chance to know Delilah better before one last military tour took that away. I refused to lose my second shot. Time became too precious to be wasted. This time

around, Delilah was going to have me for as long as she liked.
Nothing would take me away.

Delilah

“Two margarita specials and some guacamole,” the mumbling waiter said, setting it all down. “Are you, uh, you guys ready to order?”

The beanpole stood tall over the Mexican cantina booth wearing the same black T-shirt as everyone else. All the waiters looked antsy as they hustled around the shotgun-style space which was busier than I expected. The burritos were on special, and the stranger sitting across from me looked optimistic.

“Yeah, I think we are,” he agreed with his school-picture smile. “Delilah, do you want to go first?”

Well, he could be courteous. I gave the stranger named Jake a brownie point for that.

“I’ll have the burrito California with chicken,” I told the beanpole waiter and handed him my menu. “And I’ll have the rice as my side, thanks.”

“Sure.” The waiter scratched down the order with a furious intensity. “And what can I get for you, sir?”

Sir? How precious.

Smiling to myself, I hid my smirk behind a sip from my jelly jar rimmed with salt.

The glassware choice was intended to be photogenic but not comfortable. The wooden backs of the booths were cold and hard, and Jake felt stiffer than the boards. With his coiffed bronze hair and starched white shirt, Jake should have been named Brad. He had the personality and boat shoes for it. Everything about him looked impeccable on the surface, yet he offered all the comfort of a corset.

We'd spent the last ten minutes trying to make conversation. When I offered a new topic, Jake never took the bait, even when I tried to get him to talk about the deep sea fishing trip that I noticed on his social media pages.

I dove into the dip then. I couldn't think of anything else to ask him. Already at the end of my rope, we still had the whole freaking dinner to get through.

"So, Bridget told me y'all met in college?" Jake finally asked. "What made you go up to Bryn Mawr like she did?"

"At first, the idea of it," I answered honestly, swallowing down my corn chip. "I went to a girls' school here in the city, and I liked it enough that I only applied to women's colleges. I decided to major in English because I liked reading and storytelling. I loved going to school there. I got to meet people like your sister, Bridget."

"*Stepsister*," he amended.

"Okay. Well, anyway, I loved the community there and the chance to experience winter, but the most my college degree did for me was to give me a chance to take a summer wine course. Comparative literature doesn't have much use at my store."

I gave him so many options. We could've talked books. He could've asked about the wine class or my hint about the novelty of snow and cold. Jake only needed to pick one measly morsel of a thought and reply, but what did he say?

"That's cool, I guess."

I wanted to call this my worst blind date ever, but it was only the third or maybe fourth-worst dinner. Mondays were my only free days, though. I refused to give up the ghost.

Getting Jake to talk about Jake was the only way to get the conversation going. As the burritos arrived, we were elbow deep in a conversation about golf courses and the nuances of keeping the terrain in a structured but natural state. His Georgian drawl droned on and on.

I didn't know half of what Jake talked about. Waving his hands, Jake begged me to keep my eyes on him. He longed for validation and to stroke his ego before stroking, well, *something else*.

Bridget meant well. Everyone always meant well, but my personal road to hell was paved with such good intentions. I took another swig of my margarita.

“So, what got you into landscape management?” I asked. “Did you play golf as a kid?”

Jake sat taller in his seat. His smile brightened with pride.

“My dad manages a golf club down in Atlanta,” he began, still cutting into his steak burrito. “I spent a lot of time there, working snack carts and stuff, but I learned how much care when into the course itself when I got older. Dad had me working with the mowers, which is a lot harder than most people realize. Do you like golf?”

I shrugged. “I'm pretty good at mini golf. Does that count?”

Jake chuckled. “I guess, but you know, I . . .”

Bite after bite of burrito, I watched his mouth move. Jake tried to hide his nerves pretty well. He kept talking with his hands and made little jokes, but I saw the twitch of his mouth. His brown eyes pleaded with mine. Between sips of water, Jake silently cried out.

Please, don't notice how hard I'm trying. Don't let me be a fool.

Most men seemed to have that look as they tried to shove down everything under a veneer of false bravado. We all had our masks and our secrets. Besides, it didn't matter what Jake thought of me. I met him for dinner as a favor to my old college friend, but my heart wasn't in it. My eyes kept drifting

away as if *he* might walk through the restaurant doors. Bored with boys, I let my mind wander to the memory of the man I hadn't seen in months.

The thought of Owen entertained me more than talk of golf tournaments and hedge trimming. When the plates were cleared away, I let Jake get the meal while I covered the tip. We were so close to being done. Heading out of the cantina, I already envisioned getting out of my black lace blouse, and even better, my bra. The stupid underwire had started to chafe.

Forcing myself not to scratch, I felt the August air blow through the shopping center's parking lot. The streetlights flickered alive against the violet sky. Jake scratched the back of his moussed hair before sliding his hands into his khakis. That pleading desperation within him seemed to be at a loss.

"Tonight was fun," he declared too absently to be true. "I know you're busy with work and all, but maybe we can get dinner some other time. I'm fine with meeting up on another Monday. We could even go mini golfing."

Even though he laughed, the idea put me on edge. I just wanted to find the keys to my Jeep and go, but Jake started looking optimistic again. He rocked back on his heels. My eyebrows went up.

"Really?" I blurted out before thinking twice.

"Yeah, why not?"

"Because that dinner was about as easy as pulling teeth."

"But you're cute," he decided to say. "I'm new to town, and I don't know, maybe if we—"

I shook my head. "I'm seeing someone."

Jake's shoulders slumped in sudden defeat. I cut the poor guy off and hit him right at the knees. With other cantina patrons moving around us, there was no easy way to walk away from this conversation, and the sweat pearly on my neck begged me to tie back my hair. I rummaged through my bucket bag as Jake spoke.

"So . . . your boyfriend let you come out with me?"

“No,” I insisted in a huff. “He’s not my boyfriend. He’s . . . well, it doesn’t matter. The point is that we have the spark of a wet match.”

Jake frowned. “I mean, I wouldn’t put it like that.”

“Do you like wine?” I asked, delighted to find a hair tie in my purse pocket.

“Not really.”

I pulled my hair up. “Do you like books or television shows about ghosts?”

“I mean . . . I don’t dislike ’em.”

“So, if I wanted to tell you about the book I’m reading by Simone de Beauvoir or the jade plants I’m propagating, you’d be interested?”

“Who’s Simon Beauvoir?”

I didn’t correct his mistake.

“She’s a French philosopher—well, she wasn’t considered one at the time, but . . .” I realized we were losing the thread of the conversation. “If you need something or someone, like a recommendation for a dentist or a mechanic, feel free to call. I’m fine being a friend.”

Jake winced. His ego had to be a little more than bruised.

“Bridget said you could be very *straightforward*.”

Internally, a groan echoed through my head. My bones grew heavy from the guilt. I hated to leave him strung out and lonely, even if there were literally apps for his exact problem.

Damn me.

“Look, you don’t seem like a bad guy.” I brushed the stray hair from my face. “I help host events with a hospitality group that I’m partnered with. They’re wine nights, but it’ll be like a wine and board games kinda thing. There’s a good number of regulars. I think there’s a few who might, um, like to meet you.”

His eyebrows peaked with curiosity. “Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

There was that one nurse who’d divorced young and never quite found her footing in the love department ever again. Another pair of friends always seemed to show up trying to be each other’s wing-women. Loitering around women and wine, I got the privilege to learn a lot about them, and I knew at least one or two of them would be into . . . whatever Jake was.

I didn’t care to label it. I already knew it wasn’t for me.

“Yeah, uh . . .” Jake cleared his throat. “I could be into that.”

“I’ll text you some event dates. Thanks for dinner, by the way.”

He gave the most earnest smile of the night. “Same. Have a good night, Delilah.”

“You too, Jake.”

My old beater Jeep felt like salvation. The Wrangler had been my father’s once upon a time. He took it out while training for triathlons and day hikes, never minding the dirt collecting in the floorboards. Even with a million miles on it, the Jeep carried me back over the Ashley river and into the city. The streets narrowed into small paths designed for walking and one-horse carriages, but my car managed to pull up through a side street behind a row of shops.

Both my store and my apartment sat among them along with my store’s van. *Firefly Bottle Shop* gilded the black van door in golden, scrolling letters. It warmed my heart every time I parked by it, knowing that as long as my beater kept going, I could comfortably afford the van’s payments.

Short-term compromises led to long-term success, and for that reason alone, I forced myself to take on another job as superintendent of the building. For a steep discount on my rent, my landlord made me the one who managed the vacation rental apartments and coordinated repairs, and of course, one of the other few long-term renters was taking out his garbage.

“Delilah!” he called out over the groan of the dumpster door. “Hey, I was looking for you! I knocked on your door, but

you weren't there!"

The side job never ended. Grabbing my purse, I sucked in a sharp breath and made myself into Delilah, the super-duper superintendent. I tried to remember his name. I kept forgetting, but that was because in my head, I called him Trust Fund.

He hustled over in his gray cashmere sweats. Who wore cashmere during a South Carolina summer? His parents' bottomless bank account and tech startup didn't help, either. I struggled not to roll my eyes any time I saw him, but only the likes of Trust Fund could afford a downtown Charleston apartment on his own.

"What can I do for you?" I tried to ask nicely.

Thomas Feng—that was his name.

"The light over my oven went out tonight," he explained, following me as gravel crunched under our feet. "I've got one of those LED ones, so the light can't be changed."

"I understand. I'll call a guy in the morning and make sure it's taken care of."

His dark eyes narrowed. His pale lips pursed.

"Not tonight?"

I took in a slow breath. The trick was to stay calm, but it wasn't one I had fully mastered. Unlike Jake, Thomas didn't default to common courtesy.

"I don't know many handymen who come out at nine o'clock for a lightbulb," I answered with a small laugh. "Don't worry, Thomas. I'll make sure it's fixed."

Thomas finally noticed that I was dressed up in heels and lipstick. He gave me a double-take as I keyed in the code to the back door. Out of the corner of my eyes, I watched the realization hit him.

"Were you on a date or something?" he wondered.

"Or something . . ." I replied. "Good night, Thomas."

My right to find reprieve was an uphill battle, but I made it. I hauled myself up to the second floor and peeled off my

bra the second the door was shut. I didn't even make it to the bedroom.

Dropping my purse on the kitchen counter, I began to unbutton my jeans in the middle of my little corner kitchen. The marigold cabinets caught the streetlights from outside, but my attention drifted elsewhere again. My thoughts always went back to him. Even in the strangest of times, Owen's voice whispered from the far corners of my brain.

Arbitrary things reminded me of the emails he'd sent or the promise he made, but one resounding memory shouted over the others. It turned my head toward the small dining table only big enough for two. There, my glass vase held a generous bouquet of tulips, all flushing hot pink and scarlet red. They caught the city lights more than any other color in the room.

I'd never had a man send me flowers before, especially not one a world away. The note had been short and simple. Picking it up for about the dozenth time, my eyes scanned the words, even if the gesture said more than enough.

I'm coming home. Happy Birthday - Owen

My thumb ran over the words, feeling the full weight of their meaning. After all those months apart, Owen was coming back, and he intended to be a man of his word. I grinned at the thought.

The lie I told after dinner was about to be true. No unsuspecting fool like Jake or even Thomas could rain on my proverbial parade. Counting down the hours, I would be seeing someone, and his name was Owen Braun.

Owen

My name decorated the double glass doors. Standing there, I remembered the days with dust on my boots. I'd dreamed of offices and cold air conditioning, but like a square peg in a round hole, I wasn't certain I'd fit.

The week's worth of new collared shirts and slacks didn't make me any different. Back when I wanted part-time work at eighteen, I fell into private investigation by happenstance. I helped with background checks and serving court papers. It was easy to do in between college courses and helping my mother. When I wanted out of the military life, private investigation became a lifeline.

I gathered information and intel for my country for over eight years. Now, I could do the same thing on my own terms, even if I had to keep the confidence of clients. I didn't have to be a world away from my family. My career wouldn't have to drag me in a different direction from every other desire. I wouldn't regret my service, but I was ready for a change.

Charlie had it all laid out. He opened the door and welcomed me in, both figuratively and literally. Unlocking the door, he showed off one of his lopsided smiles.

"Hey, Owen, what are you doing out here?"

"Taking it all in," I replied.

He laughed. "You can take in more inside. Come on."

With his golden crew cut and golden-boy demeanor, Charlie Prince led me through the bare, beige waiting room and into the office. There wasn't much to the place, but it smelled of new carpet and furniture polish. A year ago, we were making plans to begin this journey together. Charlie finished his contract with the military, and I was supposed to be shifting into the reserves.

The armchair generals made their decisions. Everyone's plans changed, and life moved on without me.

Charlie found this office for us and signed off on the annual lease. With his training in cyber crime, it was easy for him to start a client list. We both could survive on our own, but we would be stronger together. The two desks and one nice office at the far end of Meeting Street offered us a chance to build something worthwhile.

"Welcome to your first Monday," he joked, heading over to his desk. "Do you already hate it?"

"You say that like I haven't been working since I was fourteen." I set down my briefcase and took in a deep breath. "I don't know why people dump on Mondays. I've always liked a new week."

They were a chance to start fresh and proof I'd survived the seven days before.

Clicking on his dual computer screens, Charlie remarked from across the room, "I figured you'd take the week to familiarize yourself with the system and start taking on investigations. Once you're set, I thought we'd talk about hiring a secretary."

"Let's make sure we can afford it first."

The office, even half-empty, had been an expense. Charlie hired painters and bought the commercial-grade furniture. Each of us now had a hutch flanked by bookcases and a large wood desk facing the center of the room. In front of the window, two chairs sat for guests that could be easily moved by Charlie or me, but the view took hold of my attention.

The pair of windows looked out into a corporate courtyard. An empty picnic bench sat under a young dogwood tree. A squirrel skittered through the mulch.

It was all so . . . *refreshing*.

Over the course of my first morning, I discovered the patterns of this second-calling career. I welcomed the order of documentation and writing up emails. Where rules didn't exist, I made them. My new laptop became more organized and efficient, and by the time lunch rolled around, I started sending out emails to the law firms who were past customers.

An electric bell chimed in from the front room. All silvery and bright, the sound jolted me upright at my desk. I knew how to change direction faster than the wind, but I couldn't be ready for the couple who burst into the office five seconds later.

"Excuse me?" a female voice called out.

It sounded familiar. I recognized it, but I couldn't place from where.

"Sorry!" Charlie answered loudly. "We're in here!"

That was really professional. Charlie's secretary suggestion had sudden merit, but the woman in question didn't look fazed at all.

She came striding in with her platinum hair and tennis whites. A half-step behind her, her husband existed in muddled shades of gray. His salt and pepper hair was thin, like his patience for anything. He looked exhausted and exasperated by life itself.

"Mr. and Mrs. Drayton." I stepped around the desk. "What can I do for you?"

We met in passing time and again. They were the type of people who liked to see and be seen, and in all honesty, I wished I'd never seen them at all. They turned good nature into a mirage.

"I know we don't have an appointment, but I hoped you'd make an exception for us," Mrs. Drayton replied, not that she

hesitated to impose herself. “Our family friends recommended reaching out to you.”

“For what, exactly?”

The Draytons turned their heads back toward Charlie. Mr. Drayton sniffed like he had allergies. His wife sniffed out of displeasure.

“Is there somewhere private we can speak?” she wondered. “It’s a . . . *delicate* matter.”

We didn’t have another spare room. I opened my mouth to assure her of Charlie’s confidence and trust, but he beat me to the punch.

“I’ve got an errand to run,” he insisted. “Casework. I’ll see you, Owen.”

“Sure, see you.”

Charlie let the office door click shut behind him. Settling in the chair in front of my desk, Mrs. Drayton made her husband hover behind her. Her giant designer handbag needed the other chair.

Maribelle Drayton was a severe sort of woman. She had one of those sharp chin-length haircuts that demanded constant attention from a stylist. Her skin stretched tight over her face and made her blue eyes look even sharper. I recalled her son telling me once about his mother’s days as an Olympic hopeful. She wanted a gold medal for tennis strung around her neck, but she got a husband and son instead.

“Mr. and Mrs. Drayton, you have my attention.”

“Call me Eddie,” he said.

“We won’t make this long,” she insisted while crossing her legs. “Eddie needs to get back to the office, and I have a court time I don’t want to miss.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“My . . . *our* son passed away over Memorial Day weekend.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” She took in a sharp little breath. “He was driving home from an event one evening. It started to rain, and he drove over one of those country bridges. I won’t bore you with the details, but the police deemed it an accident.”

“Forgive me for asking, but had he been drinking? You say he was at an event.”

Behind his wife, Eddie nodded. His expression looked absent. His muddled eyes seemed elsewhere, but his snug suit didn’t seem to be the cause of his discomfort.

“A wine bottle was found in the car, and there had been an open bar at this, um, charity event,” he explained. “It was for disabled veterans.”

“Eddie’s law firm does a lot with the veteran community,” Maribelle bragged. “One of the partners, Vivian Rutledge, she partnered with my women’s league to offer free legal work to groups like local veterans. They help them set up and grow small businesses. You’ve met the Rutledge family, right? Their daughter’s Samantha.”

“Yes, I’ve met her.”

“We used to see a lot of her, but now, she’s off who knows where. Our Thaddeus dated Samantha.”

“Sorry, but how is this relevant?”

Maribelle leaned toward me. Her eyes narrowed, and her voice sharpened with the razor edge of a subtle hiss.

“That friend of hers, Delilah, *Delilah Kaplan*, we think she might’ve had something to do with it.”

Eddie sighed. “We don’t know that, darling.”

“She was at that party too!” His wife’s voice pitched into a shrill exclamation. “Witnesses said she had an altercation with Thaddeus. There was something about another guest, and words were exchanged. Delilah was interviewed, but nobody cared how much she hated Thaddeus. Those detectives decided it was irrelevant, but she was the reason Samantha Rutledge decided to break things off with my son. She openly hated him, and well, nobody wants to believe that there could

have been something suspicious about his death. You knew Thaddeus.”

I chose not to answer. From what little I knew of Thad Drayton, I remembered him being a liar, a cad, and an alcoholic in denial. It was wrong to speak ill of the dead, though, especially in front of the dead man’s mother.

I didn’t know why she’d insisted on telling me more about Delilah and their petty feuds. Maribelle said herself that she had tennis to play, and it didn’t seem relevant. Scratching down the notes, I listened for her to get to the point.

“Mr. Braun, we know you can be trusted, and frankly, those police detectives have lost all my respect,” she finally said. “We want you to review the case, and we will pay you for the trouble. If you agree with those original findings, well, I’ll learn to accept it. If you prove us right, we’ll pay you handsomely to solve the case.”

Handsomely? How much did that mean?

As if he heard the question, Eddie Drayton pulled a folded piece of orange paper from his jacket pocket. He handed it over before scratching the side of his thinning hair.

“These are the terms we’ve discussed with our accountant. As soon as you agree, a check with the top amount will be sent over immediately. The other will follow depending upon your initial findings.”

I forced my eyes not to bulge. Only a cartoon’s eyes could grow as wide as mine wanted to go. Staring at the paper, I thought of my mother’s kitchen needing repairs, a down payment on a real home, and the security the agency would have for the next year or even decade. I set it aside with the numbers facing down.

I refused to be bribed or baited. No matter what they offered me, the case was personal. I knew Delilah too well, even if she had nothing to do with the accident or Thaddeus’s death. Everything about the case toed the hard lines I drew for myself.

What did I have but my word? If I compromised here, where else would I falter?

Still, everything Maribelle said about Delilah had been gossip and far-fetched. It felt more like the clucking of old hens rather than holding any merit. I sucked in a deep breath and forced the torn pieces of myself back together.

“I’ll have to take time to consider taking this on,” I answered. “It’s not a common case for any private investigator, and if I discover what you believe is true, it will be a serious endeavor. I can’t take it on lightly.”

“We don’t expect you to,” Maribelle replied before rising from the chair. “Consider it carefully, and get back to us once you have. Here’s where you can reach me.”

Reaching into her patent leather bag, Maribelle pulled out an actual card for me to take. It said she was the founder and president of the women’s charity league. I let the silver letters glint under the fluorescent light before setting it down. I had to see them out before I could process the news.

The office fell silent when I slumped back down into my desk chair.

I wanted to refuse. I’d never lose sleep from disappointing people like the Draytons, but more than that, I felt the nagging guilt of professional code and rules of conduct. I learned them when I got the first taste of this business.

Investigators needed to stay unbiased. No personal feelings could get in the way of a case, but already, tension had my back aching. My gut churned with indecision and frustration. I hated the way Mrs. Drayton talked about Delilah. From the second she mentioned that name, I felt my thoughts edge toward the defensive.

But how was I going to tell a woman like her that I couldn’t do what she wanted? Did she even understand the meaning of “no”?

“You said you’d consider the case,” I reminded myself aloud.

No matter what I decided, I had a feeling the answer wouldn't come easily. I'd left behind battlefields for a new kind of war zone. I had to start gathering information for clients instead of my country, but for these people, I didn't know if I could manage it.

I'd give it time. I would look into the case to remain a man of my word, but I was ready to send Maribelle Drayton on her way. In the end, everyone would be far better off if I forgot that obscene payout for what sounded like an open-and-shut case.

I'd held onto hope for too long. There had been too much pining and too many silent prayers as I lay alone in the dark. Somebody else could tell the Draytons their son was an alcoholic. Even if it was easy money, my chances with Delilah just weren't worth the risk.

Delilah

“Are you willing to risk getting beaten by me for a fifth time, Tucker Williams?” I teased, flashing a tipsy grin. “Cassidy might divorce you from the shame of it.”

We had been playing round after round of corn hole, and Tucker lost every single time. He had a reprieve when I caught up with Sam and Cassidy. When other party guests weren't pulling Sam elsewhere, it felt like old times again, even if she looked radiant in her white cocktail dress.

She'd worn it on a beach in Mexico a few months back. In the photographs, Mrs. Samantha Harlow smiled the widest I'd ever seen. Every wave of her beach-blonde hair had been perfect, and the crystal-blue waters behind them made the wedding look like a dream.

Of course, her exchange of vows with Jude Harlow had been a long time coming. That Californian surfer-boy-at-heart had charmed the pants off my childhood friend, and they were perfect for one another, without a doubt. The only hurdle in their relationship had been that Jude was none other than Cassidy's mythical father.

If Sam had met him when we were kids, if the couple hadn't crossed paths in New York, and if and if and if . . .

All those little moments brought us to that night in the garden. Under constant watch of the historic mansion, a hundred of us gathered to eat from food stations, dance, and celebrate the newlyweds, but my eyes kept searching for one man.

Cassidy had gone off to get herself some gelato from the cart. For a second, Tucker and I were left alone. I bit my lip, tossing another bean bag straight into the hole. Tucker overshot his by a mile. It launched into the manicured gardenia bushes growing tall behind me.

“Sorry!” he called.

Heading to grab it, I took a second to smell the ivory blossoms. I thought it might calm my thrumming heartbeat.

“So, Tucker, have you seen Owen yet?” I wondered while heading back toward the game. “I thought he was supposed to be getting back soon.”

“Sure, I mentioned the party to him last Sunday,” Tucker remarked before tossing another bean bag my way. “I told Owen he should come.”

Sunday? Six days in town, and he hasn't called even once?

A pang of dread coursed through me, but I painted a smile over it. Putting on my favorite sunflower dress, I wondered what it might be like for Owen to take fistfuls of the flowing skirt. My leg would be hitched up against his while my back pressed against a wall.

If the night hadn't been so hot, someone might've noticed the flush on my cheeks.

“I made it!” Tucker cheered.

Sure enough, his first yellow bean bag made it into the hole of the board. He looked so freaking ecstatic that I chose to throw my hand short. Winning one game put him over the moon.

“On that note,” Cassidy declared, finishing off the last of her wine, “I think you should take me home, Mr. Williams.”

Cassidy tossed her long, silky blonde hair over her shoulder and grinned. With her baby blues half-closed, I knew the bubbles of champagne had floated right up to her head, and she loved the feeling. It didn't matter if they missed the fireworks in fifteen minutes. Cassidy didn't need explosions to make her night come alive.

"Whatever you say, Mrs. Williams," Tucker agreed without hesitating, and after two hugs, they headed off toward their car.

I found myself alone again. The party was nearly over. Owen hadn't come.

A dozen excuses came to mind. Perhaps he was sick or something had dragged him from the city. In the morning, I could email him again, but part of me didn't want to know. I wasn't ready for an unfortunate reality to ruin my fantasy. Wine easily washed away ghosts. With real-live men, it had a much harder time.

I wove through the tables and lounge chairs cluttered with people I did my best to avoid. For them, high school had never ended, but I'd moved on. I'd learned to love the silvering stretchmarks on my hips. I decorated them with flowers while becoming unapologetic in my interests, even if they went against tradition.

Traditions could be damned.

"She really hasn't changed, has she? Stubborn and wild as ever, I bet."

The remark echoed behind me. Without my name, I knew they meant me. The three sitting at a nearby table sipped the wine my store had provided and went on just like we were teenagers again. They had been on the swim team with Cassidy and Sam. That earned their invite, but time hadn't changed them.

Even after all these years later, the women really needed to learn how to whisper.

"Did you hear what happened in May, though? Maribelle told my mom that she let Thaddeus drive off drunk," one of

them hissed. “She got him all riled up, probably to teach him a lesson.”

Another snickered. “Maybe she cursed him. I mean, do you remember when she gave that report on tarot cards in high school? She’s always been kind of, like, *witchy*. All her black clothes as a teenager . . . her weird hobbies. I never got why Sam liked her.”

“I heard from one of her exes that she’s one letter shy of a witch,” the third declared in a nasally tone. “Swap that W for a B, and you’ve got Delilah Kaplan.”

“Which one?” the first, a fake blonde, wondered.

The nasally girl waved her hand. “Oh, one of those guys from the boys’ school. He took her to our senior spring formal.”

His name was Davis. I didn’t want to have sex with him, so he dumped me in an Olive Garden parking lot.

I sucked a sharp breath and whipped my head around. It was true what some said. In some ways, high school never ends, but I couldn’t get detention anymore for storming up to them. Their overconfident smiles fell in an instant.

“When did my so-called ex tell you that?” I fired back. “When you were down on your knees for him? God, it must suck to be sloppy seconds after me.”

The first one tried to hide her laugh behind her wine glass, but she wasn’t out of the firing range. My blood simmered right under my skin. These skinny little twigs, their friends, and their families were unfortunately my better clientele. They were the ones who could afford fine wine and to throw parties that demanded vendors like me, but business aside, I had my limits.

“And next time you snots have one of your little lunches and Maribelle Drayton starts harping on me again, you can remind her that Thad was a grown man,” I hissed her way. “I didn’t have any control over him, but based on the way he treated people, he deserved to be on a damn leash.”

The snickering one sneered. “You don’t need to get so worked up. We were just—”

“Just what? Dragging me at *my* best friend’s party to feel stupidly superior? If you three don’t have to check yourselves, I certainly don’t need to make myself digestible for anyone’s benefit, so go ahead and choke.”

I wasn’t waiting for a retort.

Heading off, I made a beeline through the party. People started talking about fireworks. They were happening in ten minutes before the newlyweds’ faux farewell. From what Sam told me, they were taking off in a golf cart, but that didn’t mean the party shouldn’t go out with a literal bang.

Every step I took allowed my anger to subside. The smell of sugar drifted through the summer air, and it took me back to the wedding just over a year ago. Owen found me then. He picked me out of a crowd and lured me away.

I knew nothing happened the same way twice, but was he coming to find me again?

Tucker said he’d invited Owen. All night long, I’d been peeking around corners and checking the time. The party was nearly over, yet I saw no signs of him.

I let out a huff. “I need a drink.”

Time began to slip away between sips of wine. From the wine bar, I watched the couple of the hour slowly sway together. Cassidy could have her feelings about Sam and Jude, but even through the crowd of dressed-up bodies and under the dimmed light, I saw how they suited each other as clear as day.

Whether it took a bit of serendipity or a twist of fate, Sam and Jude had found something in each other that no amount of money could buy, and they were ready to dance off into the sunset. Between her champagne giggles and growing yawns, Tucker had coaxed his wife toward their car.

That just left, well, *me*.

I raised my Chardonnay to a toast nobody noticed before throwing back the last swig.

“Hey, Harry, can I get another?” I asked the bartender.

“Sure, Boss.”

The lanky twenty-something knew to give me a big girl pour. It wasn't every day I got the chance to drink my wines. Usually, I set up the bar, gave the staff directions, and stashed the spare cases in some hidden corner. Paying customers rarely asked me to enjoy the event too.

Taking the fresh glass, I let the floral and fruity notes hit my palette, but something richer and deeper washed over me from behind. He moved like a thief in the night. He never stepped into the spotlight or put on any kind of show, yet I always sensed him. Even after all these months, Owen's presence still struck me like an invisible arrow through the chest.

“I had a feeling this is where I'd find you,” he remarked in his resonant Southern baritone. “I guess my gamble was a good one.”

Turning on my heels, I caught the unearthly flash of his green eyes and a smile hidden at the corners of his mouth. His clean-shaved jaw twitched, but he continued to give nothing away. Owen wasn't the one who knew this game, though.

“I didn't expect to see you here tonight,” I said, letting my eyes sweep over the party before coming back to him. “I didn't realize you were such good friends with Sam and Jude.”

“I think they wanted to be polite.”

I leaned against the bar top. “You weren't supposed to be getting in until tomorrow.”

That's what his last email said, anyway.

“I caught an earlier flight.”

“And the first thing you did was put on a suit and come find me?”

Gesturing to the bartender, Owen smirked. “Among other things, yes.”

“Sir?” Harry asked.

“One mineral water, please,” he told the guy. “Thank you.”

Owen held the conversation captive and me on tenterhooks. Waiting for his water, he made me wonder what stayed hidden behind his composed features. Everything about him was so at ease for a man who’d spent the last year sneaking through the wilds of the Middle East. Only his olive-toned skin seemed a shade darker. If he hadn’t sent me messages at all hours of the night, I might have assumed Owen had spent the last year hiding from me.

He sipped his water and smiled my way. Not hesitating, Owen inched closer to me. His quiet words pulled me down from my tenterhooks and left me with bated breath.

“I heard a rumor when I got back,” he confessed.

My hands reached for my long ponytail. Its ends tickled against my exposed back. Every one of my nerves seemed alive and on a toe-curling edge.

“Rumor?”

“That Thaddeus Drayton passed away,” he murmured, watching me intently, “and you were likely the last person to see him alive.”

“And so what if I did?”

“I heard you might know something. That’s what people assume, anyway.”

I took a long, purposeful sip of my wine. For a man who made information his business, I couldn’t be surprised. These questions had become old hat for me. Even at my friend’s elopement party surrounded by all that finery, I had no chance of outrunning the whispers.

“What do you think?” I countered. “Do you believe what some stupid, snobbish people are saying about me?”

Owen chuckled. The sound was richly sweet like dark caramel and worn like well-loved leather. It was awful how many times I’d heard that laugh in my sleep, but when Owen reached for my hand, I knew I had a new fantasy to replace it.

“All I know for sure is that I missed you, Delilah.”

I hated to say it. Men weren't supposed to make a mess of me like this, but Owen Braun existed as a man among men. He didn't shy away from me or the tension building between us. As the tip of my tongue brushed against my lower lip, I sucked in a breath, hoping it might help me keep my cool.

It didn't.

"I missed you too," I confessed.

I had missed every callus on his strong hands and that knowing look in his eyes. Messages scattered across the night could never replace him. Thanks to one surreal night, the months had passed with frustration and secret pining, but Owen was back now.

Fireflies flickered in the far shadows as the evening waned into night. The party started losing its novelty. I felt history repeating itself between Owen and me, not that I minded. I had been waiting for this moment. I'd imagined a dozen different ways our reunion might go, but one thing remained clear.

After holding onto a mere memory for so long, there would be no holding back.

"How much have you had to drink?" he asked me then.

"A few glasses of wine."

"Definitely not safe to drive," he decided. "Can you leave your Jeep here?"

"I didn't bring it. I walked."

Owen shook his head like it had been worse than a fifteen-minute stroll. Who cared if the city was well-lit and I could still follow my feet? He wasn't having it. Taking my free hand, he pointed me toward the direction of the parked cars.

"Let me drive you," he insisted.

"We'll miss the fireworks."

"Do you want to see 'em?"

I shook my head and smiled up at him. "Not really, no."

I only longed to see the brilliant color of his eyes shining down at me like peridot stones or the northern lights. They were grounded in the earth, yet they looked too lovely to be real. Everything about Owen seemed too perfect. I expected a second shoe to drop, but it didn't.

Instead, Owen linked my arm with his, and I leaned against his shoulder. We offered no goodbyes. The couple of the hour were already surrounded with well-wishers, and Sam knew how I felt. She had a wonderful man in her life.

I wondered if I had one too.

"I would have been back sooner, but my brother left for his study abroad program this morning. I was gone for a year, and now, he'll be in Australia for six months. Mom wanted to see us both at the same table again."

We wandered through the darkness. The sounds of celebration faded away.

"I guess I can't be mad at you for that," I remarked.

"Were you mad?"

I shrugged. "You came in the end. That's all that matters to me."

We made it to a sedan with a Florida plate. Compared to Owen, it looked like a clown car, but it was easy for me to lean against the passenger door. My back pressed against the glass. Owen's arms pinned me there, and without anyone watching, nothing stopped his forehead from falling against mine.

One inch more, and we'd be together again. His heat washed over me. My palms pressed against his cheeks.

"I really did miss you," he murmured for my ears only.

Somewhere nearby, a shot went off, but I hardly heard it. My ragged gasp and pounding heartbeat filled my ears. Owen's lips grazed over mine, testing the waters, and then, I dove in and never looked back.

A crowd cheered as we kissed against his car. It made me feel young and reckless again. I wondered if we'd make it back to my apartment. Tongues against teeth, the kiss took

hold of us. It became a struggle to let go, even with the promise of more.

Breaking away, I looked up and grinned in elation. Fireworks shot up over the trees. Sparkling, crackling colors splashed across the night. The technicolor show haloed Owen's handsome face, and squinting hard, I had to admire him through my eyelashes.

"All right, Owen," I whispered. "I think it's time for you to take me home."

Owen

She unpinned her hair in the passenger's seat and let her dark hair fall in a curtain over her shoulders. It was longer than I remembered. Her olive skin seemed a shade darker, and there were definitely a few more tattoos on her forearms. Delilah's sleeveless summer dress made it obvious.

Still, her smile seemed the same, maybe even better, and constellations sparkled in her eyes with that constant, beguiling light. I didn't need fireworks. I had Delilah.

"It's right around here," she said. "Just make a left down that alley."

My pulsed raced, even while I tried to ignore the obvious. I'd never seen her building before. I didn't get a chance to see her apartment or even the bottle shop. In the shadows and stray lamplight, my focus hunted for one thing only.

Where could I take her? How would Delilah look out of that colorful dress? I was ready to drop my guard and my clothes onto her floor. I only needed her blessing.

"Feel free to get some water from the kitchen, and give me one minute," she said.

Down a short hall, Delilah disappeared. I heard sirens race down the city street. I took the chance to focus my breathing. She already had me falling apart. When bombs went off

around me, I was more level-headed than when Delilah came back from the bathroom.

We lingered in the hallway, a place between time and worlds. Time crystallized around me. Until Delilah lured me into her sanctuary, I had to stand there helpless and holding my breath.

“What now?” I asked like I didn’t know, and she saw right through it.

“Oh, Owen, I know how smart you are. You’re a military man who always has a plan.” She closed the distance between us with three measured steps. “You knew what you were doing when you showed up. You went to that party hoping it would lead right here.”

“Can you blame me?”

Biting her lower lip, she grinned. “I can do whatever I want.”

“And what do you want now?”

Her fingers ran under my waistband. Her dark eyes grew intense with determination and intent. Whatever it was, I didn’t stand a chance of fighting against it. I only had to give up and give in.

“I want you out of this suit. I want you to keep your promises. You know I’ve been waiting for months now. I think I’ve been patient enough.”

“You definitely deserve a reward.”

“Can you give it to me, then, or will I have to wait another year?”

Delilah wasn’t delicate with any man’s ego, but her touch felt like a balm. I didn’t question my back pressing into the wall. I couldn’t think of anything but my hands slipping around her full, feminine curves. Undoing the buttons of my shirt, her lips had me in a haze, but I got hold of the zipper hidden at her side.

Impatience got the better of us both. As we danced through the bedroom doorway, all our pretense was left behind. The

heat grew between us. Our clothes became too much. I tried to let Delilah lead, but my needs were too selfish.

“Lie back on the bed,” I urged her, desire already making my throat grow dry.

She didn’t hesitate. She slipped off her lace thong and slid back onto her bed. Delilah never shied away. Laid bare before me, she waited eagerly for her prize. She held out her arms and welcomed me back the second I finished stripping down.

As her lips parted, my tongue plunged into her mouth, but Delilah kept guiding me. We tangled together until our teeth touched and her quiet moan was consumed by the kiss. I stole her pleasure and the very air from her lungs. After so many nights apart, I had grown greedy, yet Delilah didn’t seem to mind.

“I hardly know where to start,” I mumbled without thinking.

Delilah laughed. “Wherever you’d like.”

Moving away from her mouth, I peppered kisses down the hollow of her throat toward her breasts. I couldn’t say which tasted better. Her hands ran through my hair, and as I gently nipped at her skin, her grip tightened. A gasp escaped through her grin.

I didn’t just like her feminine frame. I was addicted to Delilah’s reactions. Proud and too pleased with myself, I reveled in what I could do to her and what I earned in return.

It took no effort for my hands to spread her legs wider. Anchoring her hips in place, I had Delilah right where I needed her to taste the salt of her skin and feel her unrelenting heat. My tongue trailed up her slick folds, and Delilah came alive.

“*Owen*,” she gasped as her spine arched.

Delilah couldn’t squirm away. With my grip on her sides, she had to receive her reward.

“Just tell me when you can’t take it anymore,” I said before making a meal of her body.

Every lick and stroke sent her closer to the edge. I felt her thighs tightening around me. With one hand tangled in my hair, Delilah snatched at fistfuls of her blankets, but I didn't relent. I listened to the whimpers she tried to bite back as they flourished into moans.

She was nearly there. Her entire body trembled on the brink.

"Let me have you." She surrendered, raising her white flag for a reprieve.

Delilah might have been pinned against the bed, but I was the helpless one at her beck and call. When she called, I had to concede. I relaxed my grip to let our bodies twist around, and somehow, I found my head falling against the pillows before rising up to meet her hungry kiss.

"I . . . I've got a condom in my pocket," I hazily recalled.

"You don't really need one," she swore between kisses. "I do know how to take my pills."

"Do you?"

"After ten whole years, I think I have it figured out."

Delilah needed to put me out of my misery, but she was having too much fun. She beamed and lit up the shadowed bedroom. As she shifted her weight over mine, I started playing along.

"Well, aren't you just a good girl?" I joked to see her reaction.

Her fingers clenched against my neck, but the playful smile stayed on her face.

"How would you feel if I called you baby boy?"

I grinned up at her. My hands slid up her spine.

"Coming from you," I confessed, "I don't mind it one bit."

I didn't give a damn what she called me. She could curse my name or use every endearment in the book. As long as I could belong to her, I was satisfied. I had Delilah straddling my body and her lips brushing against my ear.

“Owen Braun, *my baby*,” she teased. “What will people think?”

“Oh, screw ’em.”

It must have been the right answer. A laugh bubbled out of Delilah sweeter than any sparkling wine. Her lips moved over my jaw, and to our mutual delight, Delilah lowered herself onto me with ease. I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Dammit,” I cursed through clenched teeth.

Chest against chest, mouth against mouth, we moved together, rediscovering our rhythm. Delilah’s hips bucked and rolled against mine. She didn’t dare hurry the pace. Pleasure rose inside my chest, higher and higher. The dam was on the verge of breaking. Her spine shivered and twisted, but Delilah kept time.

I held on for dear life until our kiss broke. A wave of satisfaction coursed through Delilah’s body, and as it rippled through me, I had to let go.

My release met hers. Our moans gave way to gasps of cool air. With ambient light illuminating the way, Delilah brought me back down to the bed and let our bodies relax even as we remained tangled together.

“Stay the night,” she said after a minute of comfortable silence. “You don’t need to go anywhere.”

I couldn’t deny her, even if I wanted. Every muscle in my body had already relaxed into the mattress. I struggled to get up only to wash my face and use the spare toothbrush Delilah had from her dentist. She left it in the mug beside hers, and in the night, her body curled against me.

When my eyelids closed, time became irrelevant. There was only Delilah with her hand on my chest and her soft exhales tingling against my skin. It all melted into the darkness. I didn’t dream that night. My mind couldn’t make up anything better.

It took me all of two seconds to remember where I was when I woke up. With my eyelids shut, my head told me I was

on a bunk bed. The presence of another had to be my squadron, but it wasn't.

I saw a veil of thick eyelashes and a mess of ruffled brown hair. Her body looked like rolling hills under the blankets. Everything came into focus. Neither the sun nor Delilah were up, but my body refused to relax. The mistaken memory got me all riled up and ready to go.

Endless days and nights of constant stress made it a struggle to be still. I was hardwired to move, to stay vigilant and never miss anything. It would take time for my mind to unlearn those habits and realize everything here was safe. The days of collecting intel in gray zones and behind enemy lines were behind me.

I needed to look ahead . . . and look for my underwear.

If we were about to make a habit of this, I was going to need a corner of her closet or a drawer of spare clothes, but I had only intended on taking her home. Drive her home and see Delilah to her door, that had been the plan, but her bedroom eyes and knowing smile knew my weakness.

She wore a self-satisfied smile as she slept. As her face nuzzled deeper into the pillow, I hated to wake her. I found my shirt on the floor and headed toward the kitchen, treading carefully across the minefield of squeaking floorboards as I went.

I hadn't seen much of Delilah's place in the dark. The bathroom was just outside the bedroom with its checkerboard tile and ivory walls. Beyond that, I found a home office in varying shades of blue. Delilah seemed to like color, plants, and books, if her living room was any indication. She had a long, low row of metal and glass shelves sitting under her living room windows which looked out onto the city street.

Philodendron vines drifted down toward the floor next to a purplish plant I remembered as a Wandering Jew. Underneath them, books were piled up and shoved together between half-burned candles, geodes, and framed photos. She had biographies, romances, and even a book on Buddhism. Her tastes didn't seem to lie anywhere in particular.

My stomach grumbled then.

“Let’s see what her tastes in food are,” I muttered to nobody.

The kitchen was a short galley of yellow cabinets open to the main room. A skinny window sat in between the two rows of cabinets with even more plants on the sill—herbs in ceramic planters shaped like houses. They welcomed the first rays of morning light.

I stayed quiet while the world grew brighter. Unsurprised, I found a can of ground French roast just over the coffee maker. It sat next to a bag of five-minute grits. I didn’t anticipate when Delilah might get up, but like many self-respecting Southerners, I’d been eating grits since before I had teeth. I could manage just fine with this.

I searched silently for the pots and pans. In no time, I had milk close to simmering over the blue gas flames. Coffee percolated through the machine, and it began to smell like morning. It became easy to see the apartment as a home. With its table for two and old art likely salvaged from a thrift store, I began imagining what it might be like to have these actions become commonplace. I’d wake up and do this time after time, and my year away would fade into the distance.

I heard the sound of a door opening. Water ran. Then, footsteps came down the hall.

Tying up her long hair, Delilah emerged in a charcoal T-shirt emblazoned with a tarot card. It was labeled *The Empress*. The shirt suited her well, especially without any pants to go with it.

“You’re cooking,” she realized, stopping in the middle of her kitchen. “You don’t have to be cooking.”

“Are you gonna stop me?” I wondered.

“Well . . .” Delilah reached up for a coffee mug. “No.”

“I found the quick grits and figured I could manage those on my own.”

“You might be shamed out of Charleston if you couldn’t.”

Giggling at the line, she poured herself some of the coffee. She took one spoonful of sugar from the jar sitting beside the machine. Then, she added a quick splash of creamer.

Her lips tasted of coffee when she finally kissed me.

“Now, tell me,” I said, enjoying how her fingers trailed down my hair to the back of my neck. “Where the hell did you even get that shirt?”

A laugh bubbled out of her. “It was a gift from my assistant manager last Christmas. He knows I have an affinity for spooky nonsense.”

“*Spooky nonsense?*” I repeated, chuckling.

“You know—tarot, haunted ghost tours, and astrology.” She began pulling things from her fridge. “It doesn’t have any real validity, but it’s weird and fun. It’s also why people used to think I was a witch in high school.”

Taking the pot off the burner, I split the grits between two bowls. Delilah went over to her herb houses. She already had most of the toppings laid out on the table. Between the grated cheese, fresh chives, and olive oil butter, it all made a simple breakfast decadent.

I’d grown too used to eating whatever was on hand whenever I got the chance. Delilah propped her elbows on the square wooden table. Her foot brushed against mine. With her, the most mundane things felt indulgent . . . and maybe even illicit.

“When I was in high school, everyone thought I was somebody’s dad,” I admitted, sprinkling pepper over my bowl.

“Why?” She snorted. “Because you’re built like Wolverine?”

“And because I could grow a beard by sixteen.”

Delilah grinned over her coffee cup. “I bet you looked like a cute baby lumberjack.”

“It wasn’t a good beard, mind. I had a couple of patches that didn’t quite grow in until college.”

“Oh, been there, baby. I’m still waiting for my mustache to fill out.”

Though she enjoyed her own joke, the laughter faded as quickly as it came. Her phone hummed on the table, and though she didn’t like it, Delilah began to type. Her burgundy nails tapped against the glass.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“I’ve got to book some cleaners for another weekend stay,” she mumbled before letting out a small yawn. “It feels like somebody always wants something from me. I can’t have one day of peace.”

Standing, I realized I’d left my half-finished coffee by the stove. I decided to top it off.

“I don’t want something from you,” I pointed out. “I only want *you*.”

“You want my time and my attention, and those are my scarcest commodities.”

“But I’m willing to pay handsomely for both.”

Even through the haze of a lazy morning, she knew full well what my words implied. I didn’t shy away from it or Delilah’s eyes sweeping me up and down. She tried to hide her smile behind her coffee cup.

“Oh, yes, you are,” she agreed.

“Have I earned a real date, then?”

“You earned that forever ago, but . . .”

Looking over, I opened the sugar jar. “But what?”

She froze for a moment. Delilah chose her words.

“You should know that I don’t really do casual-type relationships,” she told me. “I know most people want to come off as all blasé or unaffected, but I don’t. It’s one of the many stubborn parts of me.”

“Okay.”

Her eyebrows popped up. “*Okay?*”

I let the sugar dissolve into my coffee first. Even though my pulse quickened just so, I didn't give in to the feeling. I kept my breath even and my features schooled.

“Did you think I was gonna make breakfast and disappear?”

“Honestly, I didn't know what you were gonna do.” She stirred her grits, refusing to look back at me. “I've never had a guy make me breakfast, especially not in my own apartment.”

“Do you imagine I'm only gonna call when I want something?”

“Most people do.”

“Well, I don't. I promised that I'd give this a chance, Delilah, and I'm going to be a man of my word.”

“So, we're dating now. We're together, you and me.”

It sounded more like a statement than a question.

“I think it's safe to say we're both attracted to one another.” I sipped my coffee. “And you've waited all this time too.”

“But that doesn't . . . scare you?”

Delilah's eyes flicked my way. This was her version of a pop quiz, but shaking my head, I chuckled at the thought. It took three steps for me to get back to the table.

“I've had a grenade thrown at me and been shot. It would be pretty damn stupid if I was afraid of my emotions, don't you think?”

She sat up taller in surprise.

“Where were you shot?”

“Well, it was more of a graze, but there's a scar.”

“Where?”

I set the mug down on the table and pulled up the left side of my shirt right below my last rib. Delilah saw it instantly. It had softened over the years, but the grazing blow and the subsequent stitches left a pale pink mark about the same width

as Delilah's two fingers. She traced over it, studying the fading memory of a wound.

"That had to hurt," she mused in a quieter tone. "Did it happen recently?"

"No, years ago, back when I was first deployed."

When her hand left, the mark hurt more than it had in years. The dull ache spread over my chest and into my lungs. My skin was learning the absence of her touch. Already, I knew the quiet torment of sitting across from her and forcing myself to behave. A year couldn't be made up for in a day, and that bed down the hall wasn't going anywhere. We didn't need to rush.

Delilah drew her spoon to her lips, drawing it out slowly. Her mind lingered on a thought.

"I was worried about you, you know," she said, her voice still soft.

"I know. You told me, remember?"

She wrote it at least a dozen times. With the words in different orders, the sentiment was always the same.

I know you can't say where you are or exactly what you're doing, she wrote at the end of one email. Just, when you get the chance, promise me that you're safe.

Delilah smiled again. "But you're back now."

"I am, and we're . . ."

I didn't know what to call us. Was she my girlfriend now? Were we dating?

Had I been gone long enough that they invented some new word?

Unconcerned, she shrugged. "We don't need to define it. We're keeping our promises, and I trust you. That's all I need."

"All right, then."

I had her trust, her affection, and the promise of an actual date. Now, it was my turn to grin into my coffee. Delilah could

call me whatever she liked, but in my eyes, well, she was something else entirely.

Delilah

My eyes weren't ready for light. I kept the blinds closed and my lamps all off. In the dark, I peeled off my pink slip and fumbled through my drawers through a sea of dark underwear, all little bits of cotton or lace. I slipped into a black pair and rekindled the magic hugging my wide-set, dimpled hips and settling just over my waist.

They felt like a favorite old T-shirt *but for my ass*.

If possible, I would spend all day lazing around in nothing but those cheeky high-waisted panties. I'd read books and sip iced tea, but I had these nagging little things called bills that never seemed to go away. No matter how many times I wished it, my bank never emailed me saying, "*Don't worry about your credit card, Delilah. We'll cover the statement this month, and you keep those reward points.*"

It offended me how casual they were about our relationship. Hadn't I been good to them?

As long as they wanted their money back, I had to pull on my paper bag skirt and tuck the bottle shop's T-shirt into its waistband. I put on a professional face that was, as the internet called it, the 'my-skin-but-better' look. It mitigated the permanent lilac shades under my eyes and gave my olive-toned cheeks a gentle apricot flush. The lip balm tasted like mangoes, but it got lost in my morning coffee.

My shop sat just downstairs, and I was still scrambling to make it to work on time. I shoved a baked oatmeal bar and a banana into my bucket bag. Those were healthy choices. I wasn't failing my body completely, and I wasn't failing my employees either.

I peeled back my banana as the first arrival walked in. Curtis always smelled of the clean, wet earth, which I assumed came part and parcel with being a potter. With his worn, callused hands, he made figurines and whimsical vases, yet his hands were the only worn thing about him. His brown eyes were set in a baby face full of freckles. His ginger curls always seemed to be boyishly unkempt, and his black ensemble didn't make him look any older.

Still, it didn't matter if he wore a clown suit to work. He was an excellent unofficial assistant manager. I'd given him the raise and responsibility, but I kept forgetting to update the website. While I made a mental note to get it done, Curtis, hanging up his messenger bag and keys, appraised me.

"Shoes," he said.

I swallowed some more banana. "What about shoes?"

"You're not wearing any."

Crap. He was right.

I came back in two minutes with my banana peel upstairs in my garbage and pointed toe flats. They made me look professional, poised, and ready for the first gaggle of tourists wandering through the front door. The pair of couples were staying at the boutique hotel down the street, and they were heading out to the beach for the day.

"If you're looking for wine, amber is the new trend right now," I told them. "The skins aren't removed from the grapes like they would be in a traditional white wine, so you get this amber color. The flavor's got a lovely bite and stone-fruit appeal. Think about having a cold peach on a warm afternoon. It's kind of like that."

The two wives *oohed* and *ahhed* over the suggestions. Their husbands' credit cards screamed to be swiped. Behind

the register, Curtis played the game too. He talked up which wines were best with grilled food, which encouraged the reluctant men. As far as we knew, there wasn't anyone able to resist the idea of charcoal and char marks. Even the vegetarians got wide-eyed over their eggplant.

For this store and future ambitions, we all did our part to keep the lights on in our long, skinny shop with its navy walls and knotty pine floors. The shop was squeezed between another dozen boutique shops like ours, all hustling to keep their dreams alive and their rent paid. We all knew how to amuse the tourists and sidewalk wanderers.

I had an open corner by the window for local musicians to play during wine tastings while a beer and cider fridge sat boldly by the front counter. Behind it, Curtis changed the weekly wine specials with his chalkboard markers.

“Should I get Lana to make some posts online when she gets in?” he asked me.

I nodded. “Sure, she should be here soon. A dentist appointment can only take so long.”

It left me to tend to the beautiful bottles, each a work of art in its own right. Happy revivals and memorable evenings were all tucked away under wax, cork, and metal screw tops. They held echoes of the earth and stories of past seasons. So much was hidden among the glass bottles, and I got to share it with the city.

When my parents gave me birthday money to go to a kibbutz, they had no clue that I would run off to Argentina instead of Israel. It was under the guise of a summer college program. I was going to learn about wine making and history, though I'd imagined drinking through the afternoon and meeting some handsome South American man. I caught myself off guard when I actually enjoyed the class. By the end, I was rattling off the differences between the major grapes and unafraid of tasting dirt.

This was what one summer had made me, and it only grew from there.

The wine scene was changing. Clubs up in New York hosted wine parties where tickets got you entry into the club and its all-you-could-drink wines. Natural wines took over a younger, trendier crowd while sommelier snobs and the old guards of wine-making turned up their noses at the new age of, well, *not-aged* wines. It poked holes in the pretension of the craft and the industry, and that was probably why I liked it so much.

No, there was no *probably* about it. Kicking dirt in the face of pretension was one of my favorite pastimes, but raging against the machine had to wait. The front doorbell chimed. With her beaming look and a spring in her step, Cassidy strode into the shop.

“Hey, Curtis, Lana!” she chimed with a wave. “Where’s Delilah?”

Stepping out, I moved to meet her open arms. “I’m here, hiding with the hard cider. I can’t believe you’re skipping school, Cassie. This is so unlike you.”

“Oh, it’s just workday stuff! Classes haven’t started yet.” She squeezed me tightly. “I cut out after my morning meetings to get some shopping done before tonight. I’m cooking roast chicken tonight. Do you have a good wine for that?”

“That depends. What are you putting on it?”

“Oh, it’s a new recipe! I’ll show you.”

Pulling up the ingredients on her phone, Cassidy followed me to the back of the store. We sorted through her white wine options, settling on one from South America that would go well with the herbs and lemon. She slipped one bottle into a basket before grabbing a sparkling wine for good measure.

“So . . .” Cassidy eyed me up and down. “What’s got you in a good mood?”

“Oh, nothing special. The weather’s nice. Business is up.”

“A tall, dark, and handsome Airman doesn’t have anything to do with it? Come on, Delilah, Tucker said Owen asked about you. What gives?”

“Me. I’m not one to kiss and tell, and I’m not giving you an inch. You’re cute, Cass, but not that cute.”

“Aw, darn.” She let out a joking sigh. “My charm must be wearing off.”

“What are you and Tucker even celebrating tonight?” I wondered, straightening out some stray bottles on the shelves.

“It’s date night for us. With school starting soon, we’re trying to make the most of my free time, and well, it’s going to be even better with Sam’s news.”

“News?”

“The pregnancy, of course,” she remarked, grinning until her eyes met mine. “Oh . . . no, had she not . . .?”

I nearly dropped the Chardonnay in my hand.

“Sam’s *pregnant*?”

“No! She told me she was going to call you! Oh, God, I assumed she already had!”

Cassidy fretted all the way to the register. Regret and shame clouded her baby blue eyes. It was like seeing a puppy cry, and though I didn’t want her hurting, her pouting was not good for business. The two white-haired ladies strolling in got pitiful looks on their faces instantly.

“She’s okay!” I swore to them and then to Cassidy, quickly reaching for her shoulder. “Seriously, it’s okay! I’m not going to be crying in my pillow tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

She hugged me like she could squeeze the forgiveness from my body. It seemed those strength-training courses were still doing wonders for her arms. I spat a lock of her light blonde hair from my mouth.

“Of course I’m sure,” I swore. “If anything, I can practice my reaction now and be stupidly dramatic about it.”

Setting me free, Cassidy let Curtis ring her up. It didn’t take long for my phone to hum in my skirt pocket. Sure enough, it was Sam.

Are you free to talk? Sam's text read.

"See?" I showed Cassidy the phone. "It's no worries."

My two best friends were married. One had a bun in her proverbial oven. Just as I'd promised Cassidy, I would be nothing but excited about the news because I was nothing but ecstatic for them. Samantha and Cassidy were two of the best people I knew.

Still, my smile felt wistful as I sent Cassidy on her way. A twinge of feeling lingered in my heart. As she disappeared beyond the shop windows, it felt like watching my friend follow my path not taken, one with marriage, babies, and love. Compromise after compromise, each choice had led me further away from that kind of life, but I refused to regret it.

I had my family, my friends, and my fun. As long as I kept following my dreams, life couldn't be so bad, and when the going got rough, I would always have my wine.

Going to the back, I unlocked my phone to call Sam, but another number flashed over the screen. A dulcet Southern baritone echoed through my head. All at once, a shiver rose up my spine. One small line shouldn't have been so damning, but I went on admiring it like it was his handsome face staring right back at me.

Don't think I've forgotten about our date.

Owen

I waited for Delilah's answer with bated breath. With God as my witness, the person who invented those three flashing dots was a real bastard. I watched them once, twice, and then again.

IT'S DEALER'S CHOICE, she messaged back. *Get as creative as you like. As long as I get my night with you, I don't care what we do.*

My thumbs had never moved faster.

But what night works best?

The shop's only open for a half a day on Sundays and closed Mondays. Do Sundays work for you?

Sunday night is perfect.

I VOWED to make all this patience worth Delilah's time. After months of waiting, our date had to be perfect, but dates demanded money. I couldn't imagine a worse embarrassment than a man who couldn't take care of himself. Plus, I'd already put an offer down on a car.

I was more than ready to devise the date night to make Delilah forget every bad date she had ever suffered through,

but there was business to attend first. I turned my phone over. My eyes darted over to Charlie.

“Is this everything?” I asked him.

“Yep.” He nodded. “This is all the reports for our very first quarter, and remember, you weren’t here yet.”

We called it a working lunch to write the sandwiches off on our taxes. Setting up camp at my desk, Charlie and I looked over the quarterly reports before sending off our tax payments to good ol’ Uncle Sam. I knew those taxes mattered. I told myself they paid for roads, clean water, and public education, but looking at the numbers still felt like a slap in the face.

“I hoped our profit margin would be a little better than this,” I remarked, chewing the last bite of my turkey on rye. “We’ve earned two new contracts with a family and a divorce law firm in the last quarter.”

Charlie took a swig from his water bottle. “The client database is getting better, especially since you’re back to help carry the workload, but we need to take on bigger cases. These smaller jobs were more than enough when we first got started.”

“But it’s not enough to keep these lights on forever.”

The fluorescent light flickered overhead as if it heard me and knew. After days of background checks and domestic investigations, I figured the invoices would add up to more than what my laptop showed. The sleeves of our collared shirts stayed rolled up to our elbows. My foot tapped under the desk. We pored over the expenses until our eyes threatened to cross. The decimals didn’t shift on the screen. Try as I might, there was nothing to be missed.

Charlie slumped back into his chair. Balling up his empty sandwich wrapper, he tried shooting it into the wastebasket nearby. It hit the rim and dropped to the floor like another omen.

“At least we’re getting by for now,” he tried to offer as some small consolation.

Standing, he walked over to pick up the trash.

“Barely,” I muttered. “If the rent goes up next year or if we don’t maintain this caseload, we’ll be in the red in no time.”

We didn’t have enough cushion in the bank to sit idly by. Too much had gone toward setting up this office and not enough had come in to warrant the change. It couldn’t be that fewer people filed for divorce or not as many wills were being contested. Charlie and I must’ve hit a slump. It wasn’t even a bad one, but the numbers added up to one clear conclusion—we needed more work.

Charlie sucked on his teeth for a second. His eyes flicked to the gurgling water cooler before cutting back to me. Coming back, he leaned against the edge of the desk.

“You know what I’m gonna say.”

“Then, don’t.”

He went on anyway. I wished Charlie feared me more, but in his eyes, I was all bark and no bite. Nothing stopped him from saying what I didn’t want to hear.

“You should take on the Drayton case,” he insisted. “It’ll solve the profit problems.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s unethical. I’ve got a rule against taking cases with personal connections. An investigator needs to be completely impartial. I can’t know people in the case.”

He frowned. “Says *who*?”

Grumbling, I shut the laptop harder than I intended. Charlie let out a long sigh before crossing his arms. We were at an impasse. Neither he nor I intended to surrender, and the silence felt like it might last longer than a Russian winter. There was a chance we wouldn’t survive it.

We needed money to cover the annual office rent. Charlie had bills to pay, and my military checks only went so far. Bullheadedness couldn’t carry us to an early grave.

“They specifically sought you out,” Charlie persisted. “The money’s good, great even, and it won’t hurt anyone to say that the guy really did drive off the bridge drunk.”

I shook my head. “And what if they’re right? I knew Thad.”

“Hardly, so who else are you close with?”

“You were listening in, weren’t you?”

Charlie showed off a lopsided grin. “That woman kicked me out of the office, but she didn’t say I couldn’t stand outside the door. Don’t change the subject now. Who do you know?”

I sucked in a deep breath. I almost hated to tell him and his dumb smirk.

“I know Delilah Kaplan.”

“Oh, because she’s friends with Tucker’s wife?”

“No. I . . . *know her.*”

Charlie stared for a long, silent moment. His brown eyes bore into me. Then, as the jolt of an epiphany struck him, those two blonde eyebrows popped up in realization.

“Oh!” he exclaimed. “You and Delilah hooked up, didn’t you? Was it at that wedding? You boned, bumped uglies, did the dance with no pants—”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

Charlie chuckled and sang out, “*Owen likes a girl.*”

“Charlie, cool it.”

“Did she get her cooties all over you?”

“*Charles Prince.*”

My tone stopped him short. He raised the white flag and held up both hands in surrender, but the stupid shit-eating grin stayed on his face. I told myself not to grumble about it.

“Okay, sorry, Dad,” he relented, even if he was the older one between us. “It’s just I don’t think I’ve ever seen you hung up over a girl.”

“She’s not a girl. We’re not twelve.”

“A woman, then.” Charlie shrugged it off. “It’s not something you do.”

“When have I had the time?”

Where would I have met someone? When I was working part-time after my father got sick and helping Mom around the house? Should a girl have popped up in the woods where I ran drills on weekends in college? Perhaps they should have been in the Middle Eastern desert where I gathered intel?

I could have gotten information on radical rebels and restaurant recommendations at the same time.

Mulling over the question, Charlie chewed on the inside of his cheek. He couldn’t deny that for as long as we’d known one another, I hadn’t had the time of day to agonize over anyone but the people most important to me. My family and my work kept me plenty busy over the years.

“Look,” he began again, “I know you’re trying to do the right thing, but if our caseload doesn’t pick up, we won’t have the funds to renew our lease next year. We’ll be forced to work out of our apartments. It’s your call, though. I can’t force you to take the case. Maybe . . . maybe something else will come up. We can catch another break.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Looking down at his phone, Charlie hopped up from his seat and stretched.

“Speaking of which, I’ve got an appointment with another divorce lawyer, and hey, if it goes well, maybe we’ll get another long-term priority contract. Divorcing couples can be the bread and butter of private investigating. That’s something, right?”

“Right.” I nodded, but my mind was already elsewhere.

Charlie and I held very different perspectives on the importance of rules and regulations. For me, they brought order and a quiet sense of comfort. For Charlie, they served a purpose only to a certain point. He wouldn’t understand the

unsettled feelings in my chest. He couldn't know why the thought of taking on this case had my leg bouncing under the desk.

We decided to go into business together to be a balance to one another. After years of rigid military life, we each wanted a chance to define our careers ourselves, so if Charlie thought it would be okay, I needed to trust that he was right.

Delilah hadn't done anything wrong. Nobody was perfect, but recalling her sleeping face, she was as angelic as any woman might be. She held stars in her ink-black eyes and painted constellations over her skin. Perhaps she could be vengeful, filled with ardor for everyone she loved most, and she was beautiful for it. After all her messages and our time together, no evidence could tell me otherwise.

She would be safe from guilt. Putting myself on the case, I had the opportunity to make sure of it, so I reached for my cell phone sitting across the desk. My thumb tapped the number. Outside, a bird chirped while the phone rang on the other end twice. A rustling echoed through my ear.

"Hello?" Maribelle answered with an edge of annoyance.

"Mrs. Drayton, it's Owen Braun."

Her tone softened. "Thank you for getting back to me. I'm assuming you have an answer?"

I didn't really. The twinge in my chest hadn't faded. Pieces of my conscience felt like ripped up paper, but I needed to make a choice. I had to, or else the choice would be made for me.

"I'm going to look into your case," I decided then and there. "Based on my initial findings, I'll recommend how we move forward."

"How long will that take?"

"It depends on how cooperative the cold case detectives are, but I'll give you more information the moment I have it."

"Thank you, Owen," she gushed, pleased to be getting exactly what she wanted. "And please, call me Maribelle."

Maribelle didn't ask whether I had any concerns with the case. As promised, the first check would be sent over the next morning and a draft of our contract would be expected. I only needed to figure out how Thaddeus died, proving the man's death was nothing more than a senseless tragedy.

The case would likely be open and shut. It could offer his grieving parents some sense of closure and possibly even peace. Ending the conversation, I heard every excuse play like a chorus in the back of my head, hoping it would overwhelm the fear growing in my gut.

Delilah could never know about this. It was part of the confidentiality clause in the contract I was already writing up. Throughout my entire life, I'd drawn hard lines between professional and personal. My mother couldn't know where I was or exactly what I was doing. National security and the safety of my team depended upon it.

This didn't have to feel any differently. When dealing in secrets, such omissions were just part of the job, and Delilah accepted that long ago. I told myself not to feel guilty.

I said it again and again. Still, the worry nagged me.

"She didn't do anything wrong," I finally insisted aloud. "Delilah's got nothing to do with this case."

I saw the look in her eyes at the party. I knew she spoke the truth. The rumors from bored women didn't constitute as real evidence, and I intended to remind myself of that fact until I actually believed it. Otherwise, I would never stand a chance of surviving this case. Thad Drayton couldn't be the death of me because come hell or high water, I refused to miss my date with Delilah.

I had waited too long for that moment. I'd spent too many long days and tense nights holding onto the hope of one damn dinner. For the sake of our date, the worry could wait.

Delilah

“Is he the guy I caught you emailing?” Lana asked we closed up. “You had the same giddy little grin on your face then, too.”

With bold scarlet hair and a large Italian family, Lana had never learned the meaning of “privacy”. She bugged me about him all summer, but Owen wasn’t someone I wanted to share. I still kept all his emails in a hidden file. I wrote to him when I thought nobody was looking, but Lana had caught me during a similar Sunday closing.

We were alone. I trusted her with my marketing schemes and my keys. Perhaps I should have trusted her with news of my date too. Instead, though, I shrugged.

“Maybe,” I half-lied. “I get a lot of emails.”

Lana groaned. Her dramatic poet’s soul couldn’t take such a vague answer.

“I need details!” she lamented. “Let me live vicariously through you! Where’s he taking you? What’s he like?”

Flicking off the store’s lights, I told her, “He’s a man with a body and a personality.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Yes, one his parents gave him.”

Behind her cat-eye glasses, Lana rolled her eyes. “Delilah, if you don’t give me a real answer, I’ll cover our socials with pictures of my grandpa’s colonoscopy.”

“If you did that, I’d have to fire you, you know.”

“And you’d then have to replace me,” she countered. “Let’s spare ourselves both the trouble, and tell me just a little about this date you’re going on!”

“I can’t tell you much. He planned it and left it a surprise,” I admitted honestly. “All I know is that he’s taking me to dinner before the main event, and he’s picking me up at half past five.”

It only left me an hour to get upstairs and get ready. Even though it was entertaining, I didn’t have time to watch my friend and employee fret. I needed to shower, shave, and blow dry my hair. Wearing nothing but underwear and my makeup, I hunted through all my dresses to decide which would be best.

How could any woman dress for a mystery date? Was a little black dress too obvious? Was a scarlet dress with a thigh-high slit too much?

Oh, screw it. I needed to go big or stay the hell home.

HE DEVASTATED me in his gray suit. It didn’t seem legal for a man to look so good. Seeing the top shirt button undone, I started calculating how many ways I could get the rest ripped apart.

He brought me orange lilies to decorate my coffee table. His cologne filled my hallway with the scents of cedar and spice. My skin tingled as I took in a deep breath. Bit by bit, Owen consumed all my senses and my every thought.

“Let me just grab my purse,” I told him as I put my bouquet in water. “Give me a few minutes.”

A calm smile settled over his face. “No rush.”

I was ready in two minutes. The Sunday evening air blew over my bare shoulders, but Owen kept me close. The breeze hardly touched me. Besides, we didn’t have far to walk.

“That’s my new car,” Owen declared.

Gesturing down the row of parallel parked cars, he led us down the sidewalk as downtown Charleston came alive for the evening. A sleek charcoal Crossover sat idly on the curb. The sight of it made my footsteps falter, but Owen’s hand steadied me without trouble.

“I didn’t expect you to be a Jaguar man.”

Following me around, Owen reached for my passenger door. “I didn’t either, but it drove the best, was well-priced, and got better gas mileage.”

“Practical—that’s the man I know.”

I couldn’t remember the last time a guy had picked me up for a date. Leaning against the tan leather seat, I savored the feeling of being a passenger and watching the city pass us by. The whole date could have been Owen driving me around, but he looked too good in his sport coat not to be shown off.

“You haven’t told me what we’re doing tonight,” I remarked.

“I told you we’re having dinner and going to a show after.”

“But what kind of dinner and what kind of show?”

Owen shook his head, chuckling to himself. “Have you heard of patience?”

“I’ve heard of it, but nobody can explain to me what it is. I don’t get it.”

He laughed more audibly. His growing grin showed off his wolfish side, both subdued and tempting. I wanted to hold onto that look. In my own selfish way, I hoped to make it mine, so I played along. I didn’t fuss as Owen drove us across town to a place I knew well. As we parked and walked up to the building, the sight of it alone put a smile on my face.

“You wrote me a whole email about a dinner you had here.” He reached for the front door. “I guessed it was one of your favorites.”

“It is.”

I loved the regal blue high-back booths and white tablecloths. I loved the candlelight and the restaurant's choice of light piano music. The chic Italian restaurant never disappointed me. Whenever I needed to pick a place for a special occasion, I always recommended it, but sitting there with Owen somehow made it better.

I finally got to share my experience with him. I didn't have to write Owen about my plate of pasta and a slice of coconut cake, but even if we hadn't come here, if we had gone to some burger joint or rundown diner, I would have adored being with Owen just as much.

"The house-made limoncello is really good," I remarked in front of the waiter. "I had it with dessert once."

"Then, we should try it when we have dessert too," Owen insisted. "For now, though, is there a wine you like?"

"There's a French Syrah I enjoyed when I was here with my parents last, but we don't—"

He stared me down from across our menus. "Which one was it, Delilah?"

For the skinny middle-aged waiter, I pointed to the name on the wine list. He nodded and disappeared with our drink orders. He popped back with two glasses of ruby-red wine and a plate of warm focaccia.

Piano music floated over our heads. The low light made everything feel soft and delicate, but in our booth, Owen and I made our own little world. His green eyes brought color to the table. All those conversations over months of writing came flooding back.

"You said you came here for your birthday last month," he remarked. "Did you always come to places like this?"

"No, not really. I think I mostly had sleepovers with Cassidy and Sam. I remember for my thirteenth birthday, we tried camping in my back yard. We were in the living room by midnight."

"Nobody else came?"

“I didn’t really want anyone else,” I admitted. “Besides, our living room was only so big. I wasn’t like Cassidy having her Bat Mitzvah at Charleston’s aquarium. My parents had a dinner party at the house after my ceremony, and my friends stayed over to camp out and make s’mores.”

“I figured you might have done a little more than that?”

“Why? Did you assume I came from money?” I wondered teasingly, propping my cheek on my chin. “Just because I went to a hoity-toity girls’ school and grew up with friends like Cassidy, Sam, and Tucker?”

In truth, my dad managed a post office, and my mom worked as a speech pathologist traveling around to schools, daycares, and the like. That’s how Mom knew about my private school’s subsidy lottery, the historic Leigh Hall. For randomly selected families who applied, the tuition for the all-girls’ school was subsidized based on the family’s annual income. It meant girls like me could attend, but it never meant I fit in.

All those subtle signs of money kept me set apart from my classmates. My parents didn’t have a nanny dropping me off or buy me the best winter coats. I had hand-me-downs from cousins and Hebrew school instead of horseback riding lessons.

“I don’t assume anything about you,” Owen assured me. “From what you wrote in your emails, I only know that you grew up comfortably with parents who loved you.”

“They did,” I agreed. “I think after spending years trying to have a child, my parents verged on being overenthusiastic at times, but I know they only wanted me to feel, well, *wanted*. A lot of kids like me can end up wondering why we were given up in the first place.”

Owen sat up in his seat.

“You mean with your adoption?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s not something you can really make a little kid understand.”

As our dinners arrived, I recalled the story as it was once explained to me. My biological mother was sixteen when she got pregnant by a boy who delivered pizza and snuck beer out after his shift. She grew up in a conservative Christian household, and the guy, Jay, was everything her parents hated.

She didn't remember his last name. Jay's parents were either Guatemalan or Greek. When I met her for the first time in my life, I was eighteen years old. I flew out to Seattle to meet her, her husband, and my half-brother who was only a toddler hoisted on our mother's hip. Going out to dinner with them all, I realized that our separation had been the best for us both.

"She's a massage therapist," I explained. "Her husband sells cars, and in their last Christmas card, they said my brother is becoming quite the saxophone player. He plays in his school's jazz band."

Owen listened intently, cutting into his fish. His eyes watched me like there would be a pop quiz later. Every detail seemed to be filed away for safekeeping.

"You keep in touch with them?" he asked.

"We only exchange cards." I shrugged. "It's not much of a relationship. I mean, I only wanted to meet her to see where I came from. When I was small, I made up all kinds of stories about my birth family. I read fairytales and myths, imagining myself as those orphans. After all the romanticizing, I wanted to know the truth."

"And how did it measure up?"

"It wasn't bad, but it'll never change who I am. My interests, my desires, and my loved ones all made me. She, *Kathleen*, is a sweet person, and she cared enough to send me to my parents. That was all Kathleen ever needed to do."

"You made peace with your past."

I nodded, twirling my fork into my pasta. All at once, the room felt warmer. My cheeks flushed, and in the ambience, I found myself reaching for Owen's hand as it rested on the table.

“What about you, though? Have you made peace with your past?”

Owen made it known to me in his letters. On the tenth anniversary of his father’s passing, he wrote down the story of his smoking, his lung cancer, and his slow, miserable decline. Owen might never have gone into the military if his father hadn’t died.

“I did a long time ago,” Owen assured me. “I figured something out, though. When I was training for my last deployment, it popped into my head.”

“What?”

He smiled then. His focus held me captive.

“I went to college on a military scholarship,” he explained. “Without that, I never would have met Tucker and Cassidy, and without them, I never would have found you.”

“And what a shame that would be.”

Out of every date, counting every guy who’d ever looked my way, there was nobody quite like Owen. No man took me by the hand so readily or escorted me down city sidewalks. With dinner done, he drove us a few blocks over to an old church where small clusters of people filed in through the arched front doors.

“Is this where we’re going?” I asked, only half-joking.

“Yes, I promised you a show.”

Owen pulled his phone from his pocket. At the door, the attendant scanned us two barcodes before letting us through. Everyone spoke softly out of reverent habit. Leaving the warm evening behind, I felt the chill of the air conditioning blow over my neck. I huddled closer to Owen.

“You remember I’m Jewish, right?”

He chuckled. “I haven’t forgotten.”

“I just didn’t expect our show to be a church service.”

“It’s not,” he promised, leading me through the lobby. “Trust me.”

It certainly didn't look like any service I'd ever seen. There was a temporary drink and snack bar set up near the bathrooms. Cocktail tables were scattered around, but Owen kept us moving along. At a pair of double doors, one pink-haired girl handed us programs. A bearded man led us into the worship space, but it wasn't that anymore . . . not exactly.

Candlelight Concerts: Love Stories for the Ages, our program title read.

The venue was an old chapel re-sanctified by the arts. High stained-glass windows glowed in rainbows of color set against a lofty white wall, but as the usher led us down the aisle toward the middle of the room, I felt my jaw go slack. Candles glowed everywhere. They flickered on stage and lined the outer walkways.

We were surrounded by light and embraced by the moment. My eyes couldn't stop looking. Even as we settled down into our pew, my head tilted up to the high ceilings and swept over the scene.

"How did you find out about this?" I asked Owen in a whisper.

He leaned closer. His breath tingled against my ear.

"I did some research online," he admitted. "After waiting for so long, I wanted tonight to be memorable."

"It definitely is."

I only hated that I couldn't kiss him for all he was worth. As the seats filled up, I had to be good. Owen's hand in my lap had to suffice, but when the string quartet came out, when the notes of the first love song poured out into the air, every piece of me longed to fall apart.

I knew the song well. I'd watched the *Romeo and Juliet* movie one too many times as a teenage girl and had the soundtrack memorized. The scene unfolded in my head as two pairs of eyes met across a crowded room. Curiosity mingled with desire. Even if it couldn't last, the two had that one shining moment and all the hope in the world. They turned a passing glance into a lifetime's worth of happiness.

Trying not to stare or be obvious, I turned my head just enough to catch Owen's expression. Did he feel it too? Did he know how my heartbeat quickened as the melody took hold of me? I saw a quick flash of gemstone green and the smallest of smiles.

My head turned back toward the stage. One second more might have ruined me.

Still, Owen's lips pressed against my temple. My eyes fluttered shut. The music swelled in my chest as the air left my lungs. I held onto the promise lingering in such a tender touch.

It was unlike anything I'd ever known. In a minute, would I wake up on the couch with Owen still off in some distant desert? It couldn't have been a dream.

Owen's hand squeezed mine. His thumb ran over my knuckles, and in our hands, we had every possibility right there at our fingertips. We only needed to claim it.

Owen

Everything to gain and to prove, I agonized over making the night perfect for Delilah. The strings played their music, but I watched her more. I needed to know that she was happy there beside me. After all her patience and promises, I had to be a man of my word. I wanted to be worthy of all her divine beauty wrapped in scarlet red.

Had I made it worth her while?

“That was beautiful,” she gushed as we made it back to the car. “I would never have known about that event.”

I turned the keys in the ignition and let the car rumble to life. “It’s a company that does ’em all over the country with different themes. They also do immersive art shows in empty business buildings, some kind of projection on the walls. I saw that one for Van Gogh was happening in town.”

Leaning back against her seat, Delilah grinned. “That sounds like fun.”

“Should I get it us tickets sometime?”

Her smile faltered. “It would depend on work and whether I have an event to manage. I know I’ve got one next Saturday night.”

“That’s okay. I’m fine just being wherever you are.”

“Making dinner and watching TV?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, why not?”

Delilah had no clue how indulgent it felt to hold her hand over the console. I’d never considered myself a romantic type. My words weren’t eloquent or special, but for her, I felt prepared to do anything and be anyone. She could lead me up the stairs and toward another kind of life.

“I could make some coffee for us,” she remarked, already laughing off the thought, “or maybe a little *digestif*?”

Chuckling, I shut the door behind us. “I don’t know what that is, but we both know what we’d prefer.”

“Oh, do we now?”

Her arms draped over my shoulders and lured me down to meet her lips. They still tasted of limoncello and sugar. With her curtains thrown back, the streetlights outside cast her silhouette across the hallway pointing toward the bedroom.

I didn’t know if we would even make it that far.

My tongue was already darting into her mouth. I felt the hum of a quiet moan and her hands gripping the nape of my neck. On the edge of shaking, my hand pushed past the thigh-high slit of her dress and between her legs where her bits of sheer lace were soaking through.

It tempted me to drop down on my knees and have her right there in the hall. After a full dinner, I still felt starved for her body and salivated at the memory of how good she tasted. The thoughts had me unhinged and caught up in the delirium of wanting her desperately.

“Don’t you wanna be somewhere more comfortable?” she asked with half-moon eyes and a teasing smile.

I had never been so happy to feel so weak. I followed her to the bed without hesitation. We peeled off our clothes together piece by piece, and in nothing but her underwear, Delilah reached for a tiny remote on the dresser. A cluster of pillar candles came alive.

“I got them off the internet,” she remarked. “Aren’t they nice?”

“Very.”

I didn't know what they looked like. I only saw how their light haloed around Delilah's gorgeous face and curves. It lit her from behind while she lit herself from within.

Losing my legs, I fell backward with Delilah and caught her against the bed. Every second of our evening had led to this moment. I saw it happening before we ever left her apartment, but I hated for the night to end. No matter how I had Delilah, having her sparked something inside me that became overwhelming and indescribable. She fed the flames burning me up, giving them air to grow and consume me.

“Come on,” she purred, luring me to the center of her bed. “You know what you want, and you've definitely earned it.”

There was beauty in her brazen nature. It gave me permission and offered us both freedom. I didn't hesitate to claim what I wanted so badly.

When I dropped my guard, Delilah dropped herself back against the quilt-covered bed. She let my hands outline her curves before inevitably moving between her legs. Her hair became a halo around her shining face as she reveled in my ministrations. With one finger and then another, I felt her palpable desire. It echoed in every pounding pulse of my heart and the wild grin on her face.

Grabbing her breast, Delilah let her head fall back into the pillows. Her spine twisted and arched against the pleasure. Her hips pushed up and into the feeling. Though she bit her lip, the whimpers of delight were unmistakable.

“Is this how you wanted the night to end?” I had to know, even as my throat dried out. “Us on the bed . . . me touching you like this . . .”

Taking in a quick gasp, Delilah took control of her senses, if only for a moment.

“A girl can hope,” she bantered back. “Can't she, baby?”

“Yes, she can.”

The sight of her had my own body reacting. There was so much more I craved. When it came to Delilah, nothing felt like enough, but I kept up the pace. My fingers curled against her inner walls until Delilah's thighs quivered at the slightest touch. Her body begged for me, even if she wouldn't.

"Don't you want more?" She goaded me into losing control.

My mouth found hers again, stealing her moans that came from my thumb rolling over her clit. The pink bud swelled in excitement, and I couldn't get any harder.

Stealing another kiss, I swore, "*Always.*"

"Then, take it. It's all yours."

I let go and licked my two fingers clean. The salt of her body tasted addicting, and as she beamed up at me with her dreamy expression, I prayed she would never stop. I begged all the stars to never fade from her dark eyes. With her leg tangling around me, I wished we could twist together until we spun out of control.

My hand gripped her thigh and hitched it up against mine. Side by side on the bed, I entered her with ease, pushing deeper until I couldn't go any farther. Her walls clenched around me. She held me there and anchored herself against my shoulders and neck. When she relaxed again, I found our rhythm.

It was becoming familiar to me now.

"*Yes, baby,*" she pleaded for me. "Just like that. Don't fucking stop. Don't . . ."

Her entire body shivered and shook. Her hips bucked into me, and her nails scratched down my chest. I kept kissing Delilah even when she had no strength to kiss me back. As the climax rolled through her twice over, I never let go.

I wished we could stay like that forever, like life didn't exist beyond her bed. Sprawled over her rose-covered quilt, we let the silence grow comfortable. I watched the flickering shadows on her ceiling dance for us while my heartbeat slowed.

“God, you’re something else,” Delilah mumbled then.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Delilah rolled toward me then. Her lips pressed against my shoulder.

“You damn well better.”

The joking remark carried me into a dreamless sleep with a smile on my face. In the morning, I was slow to wake up. Delilah looked so beautiful with her face all nuzzled into the pillow. My body felt heavier than stone, but it was Monday. Even if Delilah had the freedom of her one day off, I needed to make an attempt to work.

I went and grabbed the clean work clothes from my car. Delilah cooked.

“Coffee’s just finished,” she called when I came from the bathroom.

Two eggs cracked against the counter. As they sizzled among the butter, pepper, and salt, I stepped into the kitchen, letting Delilah look me over.

“Well, don’t you look handsome?” she teased. “No tie?”

The khakis and checked, collared shirt were new to me, but I had to meet with some clients at their law firm that afternoon. I needed to visit the court of clerk’s office for the public records on Thad Drayton’s death too. A pair of jeans just wouldn’t cut it.

Grabbing a mug, I shook my head. “Nope, no tie. I’m not trying to choke all day.”

She pushed around the scrambled eggs before piling them onto a plate. Beside her, toast popped up and the machine chimed. Delilah didn’t pry, knowing my profession meant secrets I couldn’t always share.

If I could, she would know.

“Don’t choke, baby,” she replied instead. “I need you coming back to me in good condition. Can you grab those strawberries from the sink?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She giggled under her breath, letting the sound follow us all the way to the table. I adored Delilah in all her forms, but there was something special about seeing her in a cotton camisole with tangled hair and her eyes holding onto the final traces of sleep. She looked ruffled. She looked beautiful, and even if it made me selfish, the sight was for my eyes alone.

I sat across from her at the kitchen table and admired the sight between bites of breakfast. If Delilah noticed, she didn’t let me know. She only sat taller when her phone chimed.

I set down my coffee mug. “Is that guy across the hall asking for something again?”

“No, it’s not Trust Fund or any vacation renter on the block. It’s my cousin, Rosemary,” she explained, her thumbs tapping away. “She’s coming to visit me Labor Day weekend. She’s asking how I’ve been.”

“Good, I hope.”

Delilah grinned. “After last night, I think it’s safe to say we’re better than good.”

I fought back my smile and the overwhelming swell of pride. I didn’t need to go and get a big head after one damn date. My eyes focused on the eggs on my plate, piling them up onto the buttered bread, but I had to ask.

“Will you tell her about last night?”

“The sex?” Her eyebrows went up. “You know I’m not one to kiss and tell.”

“I meant about the date or even about . . .”

I didn’t need to finish the line. We both knew what it implied.

“That depends. I mean, we’re in uncharted territory here,” she remarked. “I’m about to kiss you off to work and start a load of laundry. Do you want me to tell her?”

“I want you to do whatever feels right.”

I would survive not shouting it from the rooftops. In some ways, I appreciated the privacy. Those selfish parts of me still liked having Delilah all to myself.

We could enjoy these fading days of summer without everyone knowing. There would be other times for us to answer questions and make public declarations. The clock wasn't running against us, and for Delilah, I had all the time in the world.

Delilah

The ballroom wedding was packed to the brim with guilty pleasures. The bride's large Italian family had their Venetian hour of desserts and a coffee service. Over our heads, the crystal chandeliers sparkled in dim amber light. Two hundred bodies packed the room, and they all looked so pleased.

It seemed impossible not to be happy in a place like this. The cute newlyweds were smitten with each other, and the food was divine. During my five-minute break, I tasted a plate from the roast beef station. The meat practically melted in my mouth.

When I first wanted to sell wine, I never intended to serve events like this, but the money was too good to pass up. Guests enjoyed the chance to learn more about the drinks and hear stories of vineyards all over the country and the world. To them, I offered entertainment and something to sip on, and the interest never stopped growing.

The couple who managed Eaton Events were mentioning partnership. The wife had her eye on these old horse trailers and Airstreams being turned into mobile bars. If I could help supply them, the opportunity could take Firefly Bottle Shop to new heights.

I had come so far from a tiny stall in an artisan's market. After scrimping and saving for years, all my hard work was finally paying off, and it tasted better than the roast beef.

"Feel free to take five," I told the bartender Eaton Events provided me. "I can hold down the fort for a while."

Handing me her bar towel, the blonde grinned with relief. "Thanks, Delilah."

"Sure, no worries."

It was just like being in the shop, only it was ten o'clock on a Saturday night and all the customers wore evening wear. My black dress helped me blend into the crowd, but the curious ones always spotted me. Pouring another drink for the groom's grandfather, I noticed a bearded man approaching.

"I beg your pardon, but Giana Colombo told me you're the one who runs this wine shop," he asked before letting the old man step away. "Is that correct?"

"Giana hired me, so she would know."

The man reached over the little temporary bar. "Hector Matthews, it's a pleasure to meet you . . .?"

"Delilah," I finished for him, accepting his handshake. "How may I help you? Do you have any questions about that cider you're drinking?"

"It's great, but no. I serve on the board for the local arts council," Hector explained. "We're hosting an art show next month. Having a wine bar like this could be a wonderful addition. Do you do catering too?"

"Not exactly. I host events through the hospitality group, Eaton Events, and they do some wonderful hors d'oeuvres. I can give you their card right now."

I kept dual-sided business cards in my back pocket for moments just like these. Though I never tried to market myself at private parties, I couldn't keep people from asking for my information. On the card, one side showed the couple's names. The other showed mine, but when he read it, his smile faltered. A spark of recognition flashed in his eyes.

“*Delilah Kaplan?*” he read aloud, almost like he couldn’t believe it.

“It’s just . . .” He paused, but he didn’t know how to lie. “A Miss Maribelle Drayton is an active member of the council. She helped us with the planning of this art show.”

“Oh?”

“I believe she mentioned you once. Nothing terrible! You just were, um, *acquainted* with her late son.”

I felt the full weight of what the man implied. Even when his hand dropped mine and he took a long sip of his wine, I heard the honest answer in his silence. The remarks might not have been terrible, but that didn’t make them good ones, either.

Without a paid job, that woman made socializing her business. People continued wearing their guarding smiles, trying too hard to make the comments appear casual, but Hector wasn’t the first. The girls at Sam’s party made their petty comments. Others had given me funny looks with hands hiding their mouths.

After years of railing against Thad Drayton’s behavior, perhaps this was the consequence of saying what others never did, and who dared to speak ill of the dead? I held my head high, smiling despite it all. The rumors would go away in time. I only needed to tough it out.

“It’s unfortunate what happened to Thaddeus,” I remarked. “It’s even more regretful to see how it’s affecting his family. I hope Maribelle finds her peace soon.”

Hector smiled more honestly then. The tension in his posture relaxed.

“Of course,” he agreed. “Thank you for the card, Delilah. I’ll be sure to call your partners.”

They weren’t my partners yet, but I didn’t correct him. My mind had already gone back to his remarks. Besides that, Hector looked ready to make his escape.

It was like my grandma Esther used to remind me—sticks and stones could break my bones, but words would never hurt me. As long as I didn't give the whispering rumors power, I didn't have to be affected. My life kept going, so I went on, one step at a time. Every lie fell on my deaf ears as I cast my eyes back over the party.

The music changed to a love song, slow and sweet. Friends went to get something to eat while couples lingered on the parquet dance floor. Each breath smelled of lilies and sugar, and I watched the world slow down. Like an impossible gift, time matched pace with the happy couple, even if only for a moment.

The bride looked like a chiffon dream in her ivory dress. Bright-eyed and beaming, she was living her ultimate dream. Her high school sweetheart admired her as if they were still fifteen. She had been randomly assigned to be his project partner in French class, and by God, he felt so lucky to have her.

She gushed over the story when we first met with her mother, but it was still alive right there in her groom's grin. It was the way all women wanted to be admired. Even as a teenager growing into my hips, I never knew if I wanted to be a mother or a wife, but I wished on every lost penny for a man who would adore me with such indescribable devotion.

Words might fail him. He could be foolish and tongue-tied, but when he looked at me, I'd know.

“Can we get four glasses of Prosecco?”

Some bridesmaids with smudged makeup and bare feet had popped over to the bar. They were all gratitude and giggles.

“Thanks!” they chimed for me, one by one.

That was me—not the bride but the bridesmaid delighted with the glass of wine and the groomsman glancing her way.

I had toasted a hundred happy endings. I'd waved off so many couples like the night's newlyweds, but I couldn't imagine being like my brides. Guys had wanted me plenty of

times. They liked me, sure, but they never quite loved me . . . not like how I longed for love to be.

Still, I didn't regret my choices. I loved my family, my friends, and my life. The store gave me independence, even if it ate up my time. Stupid rumors from some society snob couldn't ruin it for me. As long as I held onto my resolve, everything would be all right.

"It's about time for the sparkler send-off!" the band's front man announced. "In just a few minutes, the new Mr. and Mrs. Lancaster will be heading out onto the terrace, so go ahead, finish your drink, and meet 'em out there!"

As beautiful as the new Mrs. Lancaster was, I couldn't see myself in her, not when she kissed her husband or thanked guests so graciously across the room. I wasn't meant to have that kind of happily ever after. It just wasn't me, but I saw why women craved it so badly.

If I weren't the loudmouth with a size-sixteen ass and flower tattoos, I might have stood a chance at looking so picturesque and elegant. I could have been a vision in some delicate shade of white.

I felt it when Owen kissed me in that concert. For a fraction of a second, time slowed, and I had everything right in the palm of my hand. My wildest dream became real. A man who loved me sat right there, but the feelings were easily contrived by candlelight. A little music and a little more wine made any couple seem made for one another.

Owen wasn't the man of my dreams. He couldn't be, no matter how good it felt to have him and have him around.

That man just didn't exist.

"Everything okay, Delilah?" the bartender asked when she returned, or maybe she had stood there even longer.

I nodded quickly. "Yeah, it's all good. Let's go ahead and start wrapping up here."

Once the bride and groom made their last goodbyes, the dream and the wedding would be over.

Owen

The Drayton case began like any other. Going through the motions, I examined every public record I found. I read news clippings and looked over public information about the late Thad Drayton. Relatives and co-workers answered questions and filled in the blanks of who he was.

It didn't seem safe to say that Thad had any real friends. All his dealings appeared transactional. Even in photographs of him out and about, he was there to see and be seen, glad-handing another pretentious suit like himself. Thad had burned his bridges with Tucker, and when he did, it seemed Thad had lost his last real confidante.

What was it like to have strings attached to every relationship or to treat every interaction as a business deal? It sounded like a sad life, pathetic even. Perhaps that was why he drank or never seemed to keep a girlfriend. His perceptions of the world around him had poisoned his chance to be happy.

I didn't know what to make of it, but for me, it didn't matter. I only had to decide what had been the cause of his death. All that emotional baggage went with him into the grave, and I didn't need to unpack it. Instead, I drove through town toward a brown-brick police station just as nondescript as any other government building. I parked and stared at it for a long moment.

It was my last chance to give up and turn around. Once I stepped inside, there was no turning back. I cut down hallways and past offices to look for the man who ran the original investigation regarding Thad Drayton's car accident, good ol' boy Detective Douglas Fry. I'd seen him before on other cases, back when I was new to town and working as an investigator's assistant on the side.

"Can I help you?" one young uniform asked with all the eagerness Fry no longer possessed.

I told him where I was going. The officer gestured down the hall.

"It's just past the pen," he answered. "Fry's office is the one in the smack middle of them all. You'll see it as soon as you get in there."

"Great, thanks."

The guy wasn't kidding, either.

The bull pen had few real dividers. The large monitors propped on desks made enough barricades between the uniformed cops. All around them, the detectives and administrators kept their offices behind closed doors and glass walls, allowing light to filter through their windows and into the main room. Behind one of those glass walls was the man I needed.

I knocked on his open door and waited for him to look up from his half-eaten bagel.

"Yes?" He greeted me as if the conversation was already taxing. "Oh, it's you, Braun."

"You say that like I didn't email you ahead of time."

"I thought you might be joking." Doug slowly rose up from his desk chair. "Dammit, I really hoped you were jokin' me."

"I'm afraid not. My clients didn't think the initial findings . . . told the whole story."

His scruffy eyebrows went up. "You're telling me that the Draytons want to re-open their son's case because the cops

didn't do a good enough job for them?"

"Don't make me answer that."

Exasperation aged his face. Doug Fry had the salt-and-pepper beard, the grumble, and the paunch of an understandably tired man. His replying email had been curt enough to try and ward me off the case. He didn't like me stepping on his toes like this. Hell, who would?

"I've got half a mind to tell you where to shove it," he grumbled. "Coming in here, asking to see the case files . . ."

"I'm only here to assure the family that I did what I could. Trust me, I don't want to crack this case open, but I've been asked to do a job. Even if I've looked over the public records, I gotta do it right, and you know if it does need to be reopened, you can put me on it as a consultant or whatever it's called these days. I'll do as much of the heavy lifting as I can."

"Yeah, you wanna show me up, and the rest of the officers here," he grumbled more, but by the twitch of his lips, I realized the joke.

"Come on, you don't wanna deal with red tape or jumping through hoops. I've got the paperwork here in my bag, and the family's hired me. Let's not make this more difficult than it has to be, and I don't want to be the asshole going over your head."

Doug was one of those detectives who had sat in the same desk at the same office doing the same job for a few years too long. The drive to be better got snuffed out of him, but he kept going because it was familiar and because the pay was good enough. Like many things in his life, he'd resigned himself to this fate with a quiet, begrudging acceptance. He'd resigned himself to dealing with me similarly.

He scratched his beard and grumbled, "All right, fine. What do you wanna know?"

"The Draytons said their son's case was decided to be an accident. Thad Drayton was intoxicated and crashed through the bridge's concrete barrier."

“Those last two things are true, but the case was never closed,” Doug explained. “The evidence we had was inconclusive.”

“Like what?”

Doug grumbled again. “Come on.”

He parked me in what felt like an old broom closet with a dusty window. I waited, tapping my foot against the linoleum floor. After a while, Doug returned with a handful of papers showing witness statements, crime scene reports, and photographs from the scene. It became impossible not to cringe at the sight of the demolished sports car.

“As you can see, going through a concrete barricade and landing in marsh scrub did a number on the vehicle.” The detective pointed to the crumpled front of the car. “Water got in through the undercarriage and contaminated a lot of possible evidence. However, there was a question of tampering with the brake fluid line.”

“Had it been cut?”

He shook his head. “It didn’t look like it, and nobody was around to see what happened at the exact moment. We do know from a red light camera that the car was flying like a bat out of hell, but he had a good handle on the car ten minutes prior.”

Scanning the photographs, I noticed an image of a half-shattered wine bottle. The bottom had busted off, yet the cork remained in the green glass neck. It sparked something in me.

“Had he been drinking and driving?” I wondered. “This bottle . . .”

“We found that in the front seat near him. We can’t be sure where it was in the car before the accident.”

“I met Thaddeus before his death during a wedding,” I admitted, sucking in a quick breath and letting go of regret. “We had a mutual friend, and well, it didn’t take a genius to see he had a drinking problem.”

Testimony from character witnesses told me it was an inherited trait. Nobody said it outright, but Maribelle herself frequented her country club bar before and after most of her tennis games. She seemed to be self-medicating with vodka tonics.

“We figured that out for ourselves when we inspected Drayton’s residence,” Doug remarked.

“Did you find anything there?”

“You can see for yourself in these documents. If you need me, I’ll be at my desk.”

It was his way of ending the conversation. Tired of answering questions, he threw open the door and let it shut hard behind him, leaving me to examine the reports for myself. The officers went through the typical suspicious death routine. At first glance, I saw why they called it an accident while never formally closing the case.

Too many questions had been left unanswered. Sorting through testimony, I caught sight of Delilah’s name.

DELILAH KAPLAN REPORTED ARGUING with the victim, Drayton, before watching him leave the premises and head toward the parking lot. Kaplan said Drayton had been harassing an unknown female guest. Kaplan could not supply a name.

THE MORE I READ, the more I realized this case didn’t boil down to a simple drunk driving incident. The reports Doug offered up proved that leads hadn’t been prioritized. Without much to go on, questions hung in the hazy air all around Thad’s death.

It made me want to kick myself.

Deep down, I hoped the reports proved nothing. Telling the Draytons that their son had died in a mere accident would have been a weight off my chest, but I couldn’t. Every passing minute in that cramped room only confirmed what I didn’t

want to hear or see. My moral compass and professional ethics wouldn't let me play dumb.

Thaddeus Drayton's death might have been at his own hands. He might have driven that car himself, but it wasn't his fault alone. The story was too weak and obviously incomplete. Another hidden figure shielded themselves behind the holes in the investigation. Someone had given Thad his fatal push, and before anything else happened, I needed to figure out *who*.

Delilah

Labor Day was one of those few weekends where going out on a Sunday night didn't strike anyone as odd. With Sam back in Charleston and Rosemary visiting, it became the perfect time for a girls' night. I had seen Cassidy about once a week over the summer as we headed off to ballet barre classes together, but with school back in session, even my sweetheart school teacher would be hard to reach.

Life kept pulling us apart, but we made the most of it. We agreed to meet up at a tapas bar hosting a local band. Sam got her pregnancy-friendly mocktail while the rest of us split a pitcher of sangria. That night, our glasses clinked together as a final toast to summer.

"I'm glad I got to see you all," Cassidy remarked. "I was worried I wouldn't be able to make it."

Sam waved her hand. "Save those spelling tests to grade another day! It's not every day I'm in town."

She had returned sans husband for her mother's birthday. Sam's relationship with her mom had always been . . . *fraught*. I didn't have a good way to describe it. The two weren't oil and water, but the two were far from close. Armed with a restaurant gift certificate, Sam flew across the country for a baby step toward peace.

"Did the dinner go well?" I asked.

Running a hand through her beach-blonde waves, Sam shrugged. “It went well enough. I think it was easier not having Jude here. Mom’s still not used to our being married . . . or my living in California . . . or any change, really.”

Rosemary piped up. “Weren’t you traveling, though? Delilah told me you worked all over the world.”

“I did. Mom didn’t take well to that either, but enough about me! I’m just happy to see y’all, including you, Rosemary.”

My cousin grinned, showing off the doll-faced dimples on her freckled cheeks.

“Yeah, how’s your senior year started at Vanderbilt?” Cassidy asked.

“Great,” she gushed. “My boyfriend, Noah, he’s doing really well with the start of football season and got an apartment with some teammates, so it’s easier for us to hang out than when we were both in dorms. I’m excited about all my classes. I’ll have my senior recital next March, and I’m already practicing!”

“She’s the most amazing piano player,” I assured them. “The whole family is planning to be there. People will be flying from all over.”

Sam smiled. “God, I hope they’ve got a concert hall big enough.”

Rosemary perked up then. “Oh! The thing’s buzzing in my pocket! The snacks must be ready!”

“Give it to me.” I reached for the buzzer. “I’ll go get ’em.”

“And I’ll go order another round of sangria,” Rosemary agreed.

With the band tuning up onstage, the crowd around us started to thicken and spill out onto the bar’s patio. Bodies pressed together. Conversation grew louder. Weaving my way across the concrete floors, I felt a guy’s hand on my arm when

I brushed past him. Another tried to say hello, but I wasn't interested.

I hadn't dressed up for them. When I zipped up the back, I wondered what it would be like to have Owen take it off, even if he wasn't coming over. Rosemary didn't know I was seeing anyone.

None of them did. As I grabbed the tapas plates, the only relationship my friends knew about was my deep, abiding love of cheesy empanadas and Iberico ham.

"You know, Delilah, you kinda look like a black widow," Sam commented as she took one of the empanadas for herself.

Her gaze quickly swept over the little black dress. Its defiantly short hem didn't give her eyes far to go. Hopping up onto the stool, I grinned and ignored how the skirt rode up.

As the drummer started, I called over the music, "Thank you! I like your heels, by the way!"

"Thanks!" She flashed the butterfly wings on the pastel stilettos. "I got them in Paris this summer."

Coming back with a fresh pitcher, Rosemary piped up, adding, "I've always wanted to go there! Did you go on vacation?"

"She lived there for three months," I answered for Sam. "She spent about six months traveling and the other six months in Malibu. We're all jealous."

"Don't be," she insisted. "I'm still working remotely. I spend plenty of hours sitting at a desk in meetings and coding."

"It's still so amazing," Cassidy gushed, tossing her long cornsilk hair over her shoulder. "Your life is so amazing, and now, you'll be a mom of twins too!"

She was already toasted, excited, and eager to get dancing. We all were. As the band ramped up and the dancing started, we seized the chance to feel young and free. I spun Rosemary out and in until she burst into a fit of giggles. We laughed through the bridge and sang along to the final chorus. It didn't

matter who watched us in the crowded room. We were having a little too much to drink and an obscenely good time.

“We should do this again!” Cassidy exclaimed when we spilled out onto the sidewalk. “It was *sooo* much fun!”

Looking for their shared ride, Sam joked, “You won’t be saying that when you wake up in the morning.”

Faces flushed with delight, we hugged goodbye before putting ourselves in our respective cars. Rosemary slid into the backseat beside me, and somewhere between the red lights, she dozed off on my shoulder.

“I’m glad I came to visit,” she mumbled. “It wouldn’t have been nearly as fun being with my parents.”

“Yeah, it’s great seeing you, babes,” I agreed softly. “Is Uncle Max still hitting the campaign trail hard?”

“Yep.” She let out a disappointed sigh. “He never stops.”

In the back of our cab, I threw my arm around her shoulder. “Well, I’m not mad.”

The world felt so quiet when we made it back. My little piece of downtown wasn’t for the night owls. Most of the shops were closed up for the night. The apartment windows glowed above. Pulling off my heels, I took my cousin by the hand and led her up the building’s stairs. Making it to my door was a Herculean feat.

I told Rosemary, “You can use the bathroom first.”

“Are you sure?” Rosemary asked, already peeling off her sequined dress. “I promise I’ll be quick.”

“Go ahead. I’m good.”

I needed a tall glass of water and a second look out the window. Determined to get Rosemary upstairs, I didn’t give myself a chance to make an inspection, but I thought I knew the sleek SUV parked against the curb. Heading over to the window, I peeked through the blinds. A tall, broad silhouette leaned against the driver’s door.

My feet couldn’t get back down the stairs fast enough.

“Don’t tell me you went out tonight looking like that,” he offered instead of a hello.

The golden glint in Owen’s eyes flashed at the sight of me. Stepping into the streetlight, I smiled innocently.

“Of course not,” I replied. “I wore shoes too.”

“That’s not . . .” Owen started to say, but he only shook his head and chuckled. “You do look great, though. You must’ve broken plenty of hearts in that bar.”

“Is that why you came over?”

“I was already downtown.”

My eyebrows went up. “Were you really?”

“For a case.” He doubled-down on his logic. “It’s surveillance work.”

“And making sure I got home safely had nothing to do with it?”

“Maybe.”

“When I told you I was going out with Rosemary, seeing me in my little black dress never once crossed your mind?”

Owen flashed a wolfish grin, revealing his obvious ulterior motive. He was a hunter chasing after something he saw in me. Across time and space, he tracked me down, and now that he had his hold on me, I wasn’t ever letting go.

“I might have thought about it,” he relented, but I was far from finished with him.

I was too buzzed to second-guess myself. The sangria let my ears and cheeks flush from the giddiness of it all. Rosemary would be fast asleep in a few minutes. If I snuck Owen upstairs, nobody would ever know.

My body leaned into his propped against the car. His hands pressed into the small of my back. With one slow and measured kiss, I lured Owen into playing along. I made sure that when I asked, he wouldn’t say no.

“Would you rather see this dress on the floor, baby?”

Thunder rumbled through his chest. Underneath me, his body began to react. The city streetlamp highlighted how his jaw clenched back the groan of frustration.

“Your cousin’s upstairs in your office,” he pointed out. “She’s sleeping on your daybed.”

It was why Owen hadn’t been around. Once Rosemary arrived, he’d made himself scarce without asking, only saying that we deserved our quality time. That didn’t keep me from missing Owen, though. It didn’t stop my bed from feeling almost too big.

“She’s got her boyfriend back in Tennessee. She’s not a kid, but honestly, Rosie doesn’t even need to know. I’m taking her to the airport first thing. She won’t even need to see you.”

“You drive a hard bargain, angel.”

His resolve waned. Impulse was getting the better of him.

I ran my fingers through his hair and whispered, “That’s kind of the point.”

Sneaking was too strong of a word for what we did next. The office door was already shut, and no light glowed from the crack under the door. With little effort, I brought Owen into my bedroom and locked the door behind us.

I finally had him all to myself. He was free to undo my dress and pull my weight onto his. There on the bed, my legs laced around his waist. A veil of heat lingered between us wherever our bodies didn’t touch. It didn’t matter where Owen’s hands moved. He was all around me, consuming me with the unrelenting look in his eyes. I had him right where I wanted him.

Leaning closer, I made sure my lips barely brushed against his ear. My voice only needed to be a whisper, and with that one warm breath, all the dominoes I set up finally began to fall.

“I want your fingers inside me and your mouth on my throat,” I declared, the words too breathy and soft for all the weight they carried. “Does that scare you?”

His grip tightened against my back. I heard the wicked grin in his answer.

“Should it?”

Owen

Delilah had me by the throat. Her fingers curled and tightened around the sides of my neck, letting her thumbs graze against my jaw. I didn't give a damn if she choked me. Delilah could ruin me all she liked. She could scream until I was deaf or burn the city down to keep her hands warm.

With her, every torment felt like a triumph. I sensed every fraction of the inch between us. It seemed to be a conquest I didn't deserve, having her hands against my chest and her legs straddling my waist. Delilah's dark brown waves of hair fell around our faces like a curtain, making her sinful smile and starry eyes all I could see.

I gave her everything she asked for. Laying her down on the bed, I kissed Delilah from her forehead all the way down to the tops of her feet. Not a single piece of skin went untouched, and in the flickering candlelight, I watched her relish every second.

It would be a lie to say that I only came for the sake of her safety. Like the selfish bastard I was, I'd spent my evening fantasizing about those full hips of hers. I couldn't forget the warmth of her inner thighs of the black and white magnolias inked over her skin. I wanted to see them again, to make a home for myself between her legs, and give her the best kind of satisfaction.

My fingers tracing over her slick, swollen entrance, I muttered, "It should be criminal for you to feel this good."

Delilah laughed quietly, not free to be as loud as she liked anymore. It was the price we had to pay for creeping upstairs, but after my first taste of her body, I knew the price would be worth it.

I licked and sucked as my thumb circled her little pink bud. All the while, Delilah knew how to stifle her cries of her delight. She turned her head and buried her face in the pillow. Her fingers dug into the back of my hair. The more I worked, the more her body shivered and writhed.

When she couldn't bear it anymore, Delilah cried out in a pleading whisper, "*Baby.*"

My pace slowed. My grip relaxed as I shifted and searched for her half-moon eyes.

"Let me have you," she breathed. "I want you."

"How?"

A mischievous smile spread over her face. With every rise and fall of her chest, I imagined all the possible ways I could have Delilah right then and there, but I needed to hear the answer from her. I waited with bated breath.

"You could tie me up, tie me down, or take me from behind," she tempted me. "It's dealer's choice."

"You should be careful what you wish for."

"Why?" Her self-satisfied grin stretched even wider. "I know you'll take care of me."

My eyes scanned the room. Through the fragile darkness, I caught sight of a satin bandana piled up with hair ties and jewelry on Delilah's bedside table. The realization ignited a thrill of desire.

Already reaching, I muttered, "Don't say I didn't warn you, angel."

She only smiled. With little effort, I pulled her higher onto the bed. The black metal headboard became the perfect way to

tether Delilah down. I tied a loose bow around her wrists. The ends were fastened to the bed, and as I pulled away, she looked nothing but pleased.

Delilah could only watch as I stripped down for her, tossing my T-shirt toward the wall and letting my jeans drop to the floor. She struggled to keep her breathing even. Even then, her toes curled and squirmed with excitement.

“It’s killing me not to touch you,” she confessed.

I crept back over her, feeling the anticipation coming off her like static. Her entire body tingled, and her gaze became electrified. With my hands roving over her sides, I muffled her moan with a kiss.

“But it’s like you said,” I reminded her. “You know I’m gonna take care of you.”

Two pumps of my hand, and my body was ready to be sheathed inside her. Delilah’s walls held onto me when she couldn’t. Her legs tangled around mine like honeysuckle vines. As I slowly pumped into her, finding her favorite pace, I kept my lips against hers to muffle the moans.

Delilah had already been on the brink, and with her entire body moving under me, I quickly got lost in a delirium of pleasure. My head grew light as I gave Delilah all my air and my strength. It was hers for the taking. Everything that I had was inked with her name.

When a gasp of air forced me to break the kiss, I felt myself on the brink of release. Heat rose up through my body. A fine mist of sweat pearly over my back. My body raced past the point of no return faster and faster, and my heart could hardly take it.

“*Fuck,*” I cursed through clenched teeth, seeing how Delilah held back her scream.

My hand over her mouth, I watched her eyes shut tight and felt the vibration of her deep moan. It was more than enough to send me over the edge. My whole body shuddered as the climax hit me, and as I collapsed, the bed whined and creaked underneath me.

It was a reminder to set Delilah free.

Her arms draped over me the second I did. Curling against me, Delilah kissed my cheek and smiled. We each studied the other catching their breath.

“Now,” I finally had to ask, “am I allowed to go use the bathroom?”

“As long as you put on some underwear first.”

We took our turns creeping to the bathroom. With clean faces and peppermint breath, Delilah and I found ourselves under the covers and quickly passing out. It was the longest and hardest I had slept in a long, long time.

After a year of sudden wake-up calls and falling asleep to the hum of artillery practice, my body never knew how to settle or forget the timer ticking down in my head. Anxiety kept its claws in me for so long, but it was Delilah’s arms over me now. Tucked against my side, her body heat warmed me instead of the glaring Middle Eastern sun. She roused just enough to get her dark eyes half-open.

“I’ve gotta go take Rosemary to the airport,” Delilah muttered, not that she moved.

Her arm stayed draped over my chest. I felt the tip of her nose brush against my jaw. My body heavier than stone, I couldn’t imagine moving for years. I’d spent too long moving like dust in the desert winds, never settling or slowing down.

“Do you want me to go with you two? My car’s bigger.”

“You can stay right here,” she whispered before kissing my cheek. “I’ll be back in an hour at the most, and one of us deserves some extra sleep.”

Mustering the energy, I half-smiled. “If you insist.”

I listened to her laugh as she slipped out from under my arm and the covers. Tiptoeing around, Delilah squirmed into her jeans and some old Bryn Mawr T-shirt, almost making a show of it. My eyes shut when the bedroom door did. The sound of the women’s voices faded away, and when the place grew quiet again, I started dozing.

It was so easy to be comfortable in her place. In my T-shirt and underwear, I could shuffle to the bathroom when it suited me and start a pot of coffee. Traffic had to be easy so early on Sunday morning. Delilah got back in record time, wrapping herself around me from behind.

“I hope your cousin had a good time this weekend,” I remarked.

“She did. It was at least better than spending her holiday weekend at home,” she replied. “How would you feel about fried eggs and grits for breakfast?”

“I think I’d feel pretty damn good.”

Delilah needed to head down to the store in an hour. Bending over in front of the fridge, she kept talking while giving me a full view. I tried not to enjoy it too much.

It didn’t work at all.

“I’ll need to make a delivery to a dinner party at a bed and breakfast down the road, but I was thinking we could have dinner. We could stay in and maybe watch a movie or something. Are you free?”

“Oh, I’m always free for you.”

Though she fought it, I caught the smile toying at the corners of her lips. Her gas stove clicked to life and the grits got started. Butter melted into the pot.

“Speaking of your being here,” she said, “I think you should have something.”

Moving around me with ease, Delilah reached for the junk drawer that everyone had. She fished through a second. Then, her smile turned my way as she bumped it shut with her hip.

Holding out a key on a carabiner keychain, she nodded toward my hand. Was I still half-asleep? What did a little bronze key have to do with me?

“What’s it for?” I asked.

“It’s a key to my apartment, you know, *this apartment*,” she explained. “It’ll save you the trouble of looking like a

stalker next time you stop by.”

“I can just call you beforehand. I—”

Delilah shook her head. “Nope, this is the painless option. There’s no telling where I might leave my phone or what I’m doing.”

“I can’t take the only spare.”

“New keys can be made. Just take it, Owen.”

She dangled it out like a carrot. Delilah smiled the second I took her bait, but it felt heavy in my palm. The key was more than a carved piece of metal. Though she moved around the kitchen like nothing had changed, I sensed the full weight of the moment and its implication.

“Thank you,” I said, not having any other words.

Delilah waved her hand. “Don’t mention it. Now, do you want one egg or two?”

“Do you want to talk about this, though? Shouldn’t there be ground rules?”

“Do you need some?”

Back to the fridge, she grabbed the egg carton. She set three eggs down on the counter and chucked the empty container. It felt so easy. It began to seem surreal.

“Cassie’s got a key to my place. My aunt’s got a key too,” she continued. “I didn’t make them sign a contract.”

“I wasn’t saying we needed a contract, but does this make us . . . something else?”

“Like what, a new species? Can I be a panda bear? Everyone loves ’em.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “No, that’s not what I meant.”

Delilah already knew that, though. Her answers danced around the obvious just as she sashayed around her kitchen. I had been so used to defining everything. In the military, everything and everyone had its place. I always knew where I

stood with direct orders, but with Delilah, hard lines didn't exist.

Her boundaries twisted and turned to make space in her life for what *she* wanted. It was never done for anyone else, but . . . where did that leave us?

“Owen, seriously, it's no big deal.” Her hand reached for my cheek, and her eyes took hold of mine. “I trust you. I know how I feel about you, and you know how you feel about me. Labels . . . they're for other people's benefit. We don't need them, and a key can just be a key.”

“Sure,” I agreed.

But with her hand slipping away, I stood there wondering. How did Delilah feel about me? How did I feel about her? Never forced to describe it, I became dumbstruck at the dining table. Eggs cracked on the counter. Butter sizzled in the pan. Life went on, even when I froze.

It was time for breakfast. Delilah needed plates from the cabinet, so my ruminations had to wait. I put them in my back pocket for another time.

“I've got it,” I told her, crossing the kitchen in three easy strides.

She trusted me. She'd made space in her home and her life to invite me in. For now, that could be enough.

Delilah

It didn't take long for Owen to become a fixture in my apartment. He would arrive in his sweaty workout gear or his office clothes. Sometimes, he came with takeout for dinner. Other times, we fixed dinner together. I thought I liked living alone, but Owen was starting to prove me wrong.

His presence put a smile on my face. He made mornings more relaxing and my evenings more fun. Unfortunately, the shop's sales reports wiped it all away.

"I thought our wine sale would've brought in more customers," I complained to Lana. "You said we gained more followers during the promotion, right?"

Across the office, she sat at the dining table shoved up against the wall. The smell of her microwaved ramen filled the air. Lana swallowed.

"Yeah, we did. Social media engagements are up."

"Then, why didn't some of those convert to sales?"

According to the sales software, we had more unique customers, meaning more bodies were coming through the door. The problem lay in them not coming back. With tourists, it made sense, but why had some locals stopped coming back?

It was if the fates had heard me. Some angel from on high decided to answer my question with a phone call, but it wasn't

them calling. The number belonged to one of my brides.

“Hey, Rachel?” I greeted her, cautious already. “How can I help you today?”

I heard the sound of two voices in the background. Then, her silvery voice came through the other end of the line.

“Hi, Delilah, it’s Rachel Baker.” She began like she hadn’t heard me.

“Hey there.”

“I, um, I just wanted to call you about my wedding in November.”

“Yes?”

I sat up straighter at the desk. Lana disappeared with her half-eaten ramen. Maybe she sensed the coming storm. Lana knew to take cover.

“Sure, is there something you want to change about your order? I was planning to call in the orders next week, so if you’d like another wine—”

She cut me off with effusive apologies. “Sorry, no. No, that’s not it. It’s, um, well . . .”

“Yeah, Rachel?”

“We’ve decided to go in a different direction with the drinks for the reception,” she told me. “My mom’s friend has given us a recommendation for another supplier. They’ve worked with our yacht club before, and she got to talking about them at our last meeting.”

“Meeting?”

“For the Charleston Women’s Charity League,” she finished. “Mom’s hoping I’ll become a member too.”

“You don’t say.”

It was one thing when Maribelle sneered at me or condemned my appearance as a teenage girl. She could make up her lies and call me any name in the book, but when I heard Rachel mention that freaking group, I nearly screamed.

The anger might have broken my window. It definitely would hurt Rachel's ears.

“Look, I know this can't be convenient for you, but a lot of the ladies will be coming to the wedding. Maybe it's better for everyone, you know?”

I answered absently, “Yeah, maybe.”

Maribelle had done it for a second time. The woman wielded her connections as a weapon, but how many people had heard the poisonous rumors in one way or another? If she didn't know them personally, who did Maribelle get to spread the word? I told myself not to worry about the rumors. I forced myself to ignore those self-obsessed women and all their dramatics, but I was living in denial.

The Draytons were a blight on Charleston, and in the worst possible ways, Thad had to be the worst of them . . . the slave owners possibly excluded. He wasn't as awful when we were young. Going to private school meant that Thad and I ran in similar circles, but as we got older, I grew wiser. He grew selfish and arrogant.

He broke the heart of my closest friend.

Thad had been Sam's first boyfriend and her first heartbreak. I caught him cheating, lying, and trying to make Samantha feel like the crazy one. He contracted some kind of infection from a one-night-stand and tried to hide it from her. He abused alcohol, money, and women, but there were never any serious consequences. Thaddeus only failed upward.

Why had we ever taken up with Thaddeus? When we were all young, maybe he was still innocent. Perhaps we wanted him to be the boy riding his bicycle down the street with the rest of us, or as I feared, we were all victims of our own good manners and gentility.

Well, maybe the others were, but I definitely wasn't.

“Rachel,” I implored. “Please, just take the day to reconsider. I—I was very much looking forward to working with you. Eaton Events is excited to be catering your cocktail hour.”

“They still are.”

I fought back a sigh. The Eatons weren't in the line of fire. It was only me.

“You get to keep the deposit,” she replied like it was some consolation. “I know it's only twenty-five percent, but . . . I'm so sorry, Delilah.”

“It's okay. It's your wedding, and I hope the day is everything you want it to be.”

Fighting Rachel couldn't save the situation. Bowing out and saying goodbye, I remembered who the real problem was. Firefly Bottle Shop wouldn't survive if I wasted energy on the wrong target, but how was I going to fight back?

I started with doubling-down on my sales tactics that afternoon. That night, I trudged back up the apartment stairs with a headache and tired feet. My clothes started coming off the second I shut the door.

“Hard day at work?”

My head whipped toward the voice. My whole body jolted with a start. Owen sat there in my apartment, sprawled over my couch wearing his gray joggers and sipping a beer. He cracked a small but sly smile. The longer I looked, I realized Owen must have been fresh from a shower.

“I didn't give you a key to sneak around and startle me,” I countered, “and how did you decide that I had a hard day?”

“You took your bra off first. Whenever you're fed up, you take your bra off before you even get out of your shirt, and honestly, it's like watching a damn magic trick. I'm not really sure how you do it.”

“Years of practice.”

“And here I thought magicians weren't supposed to reveal their secrets.”

A smile toyed with me. I didn't want to laugh. I was angry, furious with those close-minded snobs and their stupid rumors, but Owen stretched his arm over the back of the sofa. I couldn't help myself anymore.

Crossing the living room, I flopped myself down beside Owen. His arm draped over my shoulders. I kicked off my shoes and jeans. As he let me steal a swig of his beer, my pulse finally began to slow. Owen was more than a fixture now.

It was as if he'd always belonged there.

“You remember that nonsense you heard at Sam’s wedding reception?” I began. “The rumors that have been going around about me and Thad? You remember him, right?”

Owen kept his face calm, and he nodded. “Sure. It’s not every day I throw the best man out of a rehearsal dinner. He never deserved Tucker’s friendship.”

“Well, I lost a contract today because of those stupid rumors. I was going to supply the beer and wine for a five-hundred-person wedding, but the bride and her mother are in that charity league with Maribelle Drayton. It seems that she’ll be at their wedding with a bunch of the other women, so they gave me some bull excuse about not wanting to offend her.”

“Did you get to keep the deposit?”

“Yes, but I know she got her claws into them. It’s like she’s determined to make me miserable. She hated me and my tattoos. One time, she told me they were ‘unbecoming’, even if I wasn’t much of a young lady to begin with.”

“And what did you say back?”

“I told Maribelle that the Civil War had ended, and women were allowed to wear pants.”

It hadn’t been my sharpest line, but the annoyance on her face had been priceless. It was nothing like Owen’s immovable expression. His mouth drew into a hard line. His green eyes flicked away, searching through something I couldn’t see.

“It doesn’t make sense why she’s so fixated on you,” he muttered.

“I know!” I huffed. “I mean, I know I can be difficult. Maybe I’m not her cup of tea, but this sabotage is a new low for her.”

Owen shifted beside me, adjusting his seat. The couch was old enough. I didn't think much of it.

"Are you sure it's her?" he asked then. "Could someone else be involved?"

"She's the only common thread, not that it matters. I can't touch her, but I need to make sure the store's safe. Lana and Curtis rely on those jobs. It would be one thing if she was only hurting me, but I care about them. I can't let them down."

"You won't." Owen's voice dipped lower as he kissed my temple. "Maybe it won't solve your problems, but do you think some Thai food might nurse your wounds? There's a new place around the corner."

"What? You don't want me going out like this?"

His gaze swept over my bare legs. Against my shoulder, Owen's grip gently tightened.

"Not if I want to keep you," he teased. "I'd have to beat the bastards off with a stick."

Before I knew what was happening, I felt three little words catching in my throat. They echoed in every pulsing heartbeat, but something in Owen's expression stopped me short. It was that same serious thought hiding behind his green eyes.

I knew not to ask him about it anymore. Nine times out of ten, it had something to do with work. I kissed him briefly instead.

"What should I get for you?" he asked.

"Pad Thai, please and thank you."

Part of me wondered if he already knew that too. Owen could have guessed what I wanted and liked. His meticulous nature and eagle-eyed attention picked me apart piece by piece, but it never felt uncomfortable. Every time he got closer, we were a little more bound together.

To be known was to be loved, and Owen had started to know me all too well. I needed to fight against this strange turn of events, to defend myself and the store, but that could be saved for another day. I wasn't going to be alone in this.

I had Owen on my side.

Chapter Fifteen: Owen

A wave of guilt chased me away from the apartment that evening. When Delilah said Maribelle's name, the shockwave hit me from behind. It was a chance to tell her, a way to warn Delilah of the reasons behind her shop's slump, but I had been sworn to silence. I'd made a promise to the Draytons to maintain my discretion. The contracts had been signed and sealed.

Besides, they were just rumors, and Delilah knew how to take care of herself. She didn't need me running in to save her.

"Delilah's got more balls than most of the guys we know," Tucker joked after I mentioned our dinner date. "Maybe that's crass, but it's true. You're never going to be bored dating her."

We each took another bite of our lunches from the pediatric hospital's cafeteria. It was funny seeing Tucker in his scrubs and white lab coat, but it felt even funnier to be having lunch with him. My brain still wasn't used to this new normalcy.

Delilah made it easier. She gave me a pattern to follow and a security badge to park my car behind her building. When I first made use of her apartment key, she almost seemed surprised, but it only took a few days for her to grow familiar with my footsteps up the stairs and the sound of my key ring jingling against the door.

"How's that new studio of yours?" Tucker asked then.

I shrugged. "It's fine, but I doubt I'll renew the lease."

"And work? The investigating going well?"

"That's actually why I asked to meet up." I set down my chicken salad sandwich. "Thad Drayton's parents, well, they asked me to look into the circumstances of his death."

Tucker nearly dropped his fork. He swallowed hard at the sound of Thad's name, not that it surprised me. They had been best friends as boys. Thad was the brother Tucker never had,

but when Tucker saw Thad's cruelest side and realized how the bastard treated women, their friendship imploded.

I stepped into Thad's role as Tucker's oldest friend, but all the history was never erased, not really. Old memories weighed down Tucker's smile. They turned his breathing into a long, heavy sigh. A group of nurses passed by our table, filling up our silence with the sound of their small talk.

"Have you found anything?" Tucker asked, stabbing into his salad.

I shook my head. "I can't say. You knew him better than anyone else, though. Even if you weren't close by the end, do you remember anything about Thad?"

Back then, the police never interviewed Tucker. He hadn't been at the party. Tucker didn't have it in him to hurt anyone, but if there was some secret Thad carried around, Tucker was my best chance of learning about it.

"He . . . he was working on a lot of business deals back then," he recalled slowly. "I mean, he was a corporate lawyer, so that's not really surprising. I just remember him mentioning some work on the side too—moonlighting, I guess."

"Did his law firm approve of it?"

Scratching his nose, Tucker chuckled at the thought. "You know his dad's a senior partner there. Even if they didn't, do you think it mattered?"

"No, probably not."

"He used the money for the down payment on a place, one of the luxury lofts they built in a warehouse on Meeting Street. I think that's how he got that car too. One of the last times we talked was around when I married Cassidy. I remember him saying something about a bigger deal. He told me to invest in some corporation or another."

"Did you?"

He grimaced. "No, and I didn't regret it when their stock shot up. They made most of their money making weapons for the military . . . no offense, Owen."

“None taken.”

“I’ll always support the soldiers who defend our country and democracy,” he insisted, “but I can’t find it in me to support actual war.”

“As someone who’s been there, I can’t either.”

I’d seen too many corrupt foreign governments and ordinary people sacrificed. Their homes were turned to rubble. Their peaceful lives got destroyed. When power games were played, too many innocents suffered, but selfish assholes kept lining their pockets without a care in the world.

Considering men like Thaddeus Drayton, I couldn’t say America was that much better, but we had the children’s hospital where Tucker worked, the maintained roads that carried me back to my office, and the freedom from fearing our city might be bombed.

All was quiet when I settled down at my desk again. Charlie had to be out on a job, and the office smelled like the housekeepers had visited the night before. Trying not to remember the price paid for such comforts, I opened my laptop and got back to work.

An email confirmation sat in my inbox. The independent lab in Atlanta had received the evidence from Doug Fry. After some convincing, Doug agreed to send off the broken bottle from Thad’s car. They never tested those remains, but it was my job to follow those loose ends. Even if it came to nothing, I needed the paper trail for my clients. I just had to wait some weeks to get it back.

Until then, I would keep looking elsewhere.

I hated to admit it, but the wine had come from Delilah’s stockpile at the party. Out of the whole of Charleston, Firefly Bottle Shop was the lone retailer of this Australian vineyard. To get it anywhere else, a buyer would have to look to New Orleans, Austin, or Washington D.C. It wasn’t widely sold stateside.

Maybe there was a way to get it online? I ate dinner most nights with the one woman in South Carolina who might

actually know. If I could ask her myself, perhaps the case would be settled, but that also meant breaching my contract. I refused to deceive her with lies and round-about questions. I didn't want to make her uncomfortable by pressing the issue, either.

I felt myself stuck between a rock and a hard place, and I only had myself to blame. The nagging guilt that I felt during Delilah's venting came back to me. Deep down, I knew she was innocent. I felt it in the very core of my bones, but the case files told a different story.

Conflicting reports described a woman who loved and lashed out fiercely. In her original testimony, she admitted to the police that she openly hated Thad. She told them about his alcoholism and womanizing when nobody else would.

HE HAD BEEN HARASSING a party guest, she offered as testimony. I didn't know her name, but the girl was small and sparkly. She was the exact kind of person a predator like him would target. When I saw the look on her face, I had to intervene. That's why we were fighting. It wasn't any old grudge or personal matter. It was about keeping a young woman safe from a rich asshole, pardon my French.

NOBODY FOUND THIS ALLEGED GUEST, but there was video evidence to prove it. In the corner of grayscale security footage, Delilah had been caught hustling toward some magnolia trees with a wine bottle in hand. A short young woman could be seen making a sudden escape. A man in a suit shouted, throwing up his hands before snatching the wine from Delilah's grip.

Even in that grainy image, I saw the resolve in Delilah's stance. She never backed down or showed any fear. Her choice of words felt sharp, even on the page, but when I got back to her apartment that night, she looked so soft in the kitchen.

Delilah was an angel not wearing any pants. Her long, dark hair stayed braided down her back, and the sounds of a vinyl

record filled the apartment.

“Hey!” she called out the minute I opened the door. “Do you like broccoli and cheese soup?”

“I like any food someone makes for me.”

“Well, we got in a few new beers for the shop. I decided to test their ability to make beer bread, and what goes better with bread than soup?”

“I dunno.” I shrugged. “Butter?”

Delilah laughed lightly. “We’ve got that too.”

I kicked off my shoes and set down my messenger bag. My work never needed to come home with me. After we ate, my body relaxed beside Delilah’s on the old blue couch. Her thigh pressed against mine, and my arm settled over her shoulders.

We sat there watching some ghost hunting show Delilah enjoyed. The four grown men huddled together in the darkness of some cowboy ghost town. They caught a voice on a recorder and went insane with excitement over a few garbled words.

“They’re always so pumped up!” Delilah giggled. “It’s so wild.”

“Do you think the ghost voice is real?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but it’s interesting to consider. I mean, what would hell be but being stuck here on earth even after you’ve died? No seeing the spirits of your loved ones. No resting in peace. Sure sounds like hell to me.”

“You know, I never thought about it like that.”

Delilah smiled then like her philosophical remarks were no big deal. A clever mind shone behind those starry eyes. If anyone could open and shut this Drayton business . . . if I just told her about the wine bottle found in Thad’s car . . . After all, I told Tucker I was looking into the case, and he didn’t think much of it. Why would Delilah’s reaction be so different?

The nagging guilt came back to haunt me.

“Do you want some more water?” I asked then, seeing Delilah finish her glass.

“Oh, sure.” She handed me the glass. “Thanks.”

Delilah would tell me rules were made to be broken. She was that kind of person, but my throat dried out. My pulse quickened. The urge to come clean tore me in two. Half of me stayed tethered to the couch. The other wanted to run for the door.

I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't stay there by her side and feign denial.

“Delilah . . .”

“Yeah, Owen?”

I glanced over to the bookshelves lining the wall. There, sitting on the top shelf between her two jade plants, something long and pink caught my eye. Twisting spirals had been carved into the stone.

“What is *that*?”

Chapter Sixteen: Delilah

Owen set his water glass down on the coffee table. Tearing them away from the screen, my eyes followed where he dared to reach. I wondered how long he might take to notice it or when I might have forgotten to hide it away.

The immature child in me wanted to snicker and smirk. The grown me had her interest piqued. Pulling the scrunchie from my wrist, I tied my hair back while the two battled for control.

I smiled like anything. “It’s a rose quartz.”

“I can tell it’s quartz,” he replied. “Why’s it shaped like this?”

Owen seemed to know by the way he held it and turned it over in his hand. He only wanted to hear me admit it. Rising from my seat, I tugged down the back of my camisole and chose to be coy. He was supposed to get our drinks, but Owen’s mind took too long of a detour.

“It’s a yoni wand.”

His nose scrunched up, and his eyebrows furrowed.

“A yo–what?”

“*A yoni wand*,” I repeated slowly, enunciating every syllable while pouring coconut water into the glass. “It’s for conscious massage.”

“What does that even mean?”

My grin stretched wider than a Cheshire cat’s. My cheeks got close to breaking.

“Can’t you tell?”

In truth, I had won it as a fundraiser door prize. No trades were allowed. My hairdresser did a lot with the local AIDS group that offered educational courses and free testing. I wanted to support the cause. I balked at the comically false

claims New-Age babes made about their stone eggs and healing wands.

It was like if I used one of these stones, then karma would offer me a winning lottery ticket. Every problem in my life would be solved if I shoved a piece of quartz into my lady bits. It became the new apple-a-day cliché for vagina owners all over, and thinking about it right then, even with Owen holding it in his hand, part of me wanted to cackle.

I talked to the store owner who sponsored the event. I learned how to keep it clean and gave it an honest chance, and as much as I enjoyed my time with Owen, I liked keeping pieces of my pleasure to myself—mine to claim and to control like a gliding extension of my hand.

On bright days, I threw open the window and let the wand bathe in the light. I fell impulsively in love with the idea of this sun-soaked thing inside me, and once I was done, I washed it off and let the stone “recharge its energy”, or whatever they called it. It felt like a quiet ritual.

The secret was out now. Owen’s eyes weren’t leaving mine, and though I could have easily explained everything, I enjoyed the expression on his face too much. The flash of realization and bemusement turned into smoldering embers of jealousy. The burning echoed in his questions.

On the surface, Owen deadpanned, “You mean it’s a fake crystal penis.”

“No, it’s a real quartz.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, urgency simmering underneath. “Where’d you get it?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Was it a gift from someone?”

I sipped my drink. “Yeah, kinda.”

With measured steps, Owen crossed the living room and closed the distance between us. He leaned toward me. I leaned back against the kitchen cabinets. As my attention swept over him, I caught how the gray striped sleeves of his work shirt

were rolled up to his elbows. The top buttons were undone so that I glimpsed his fine layer of chest hair.

How long will it take for that shirt to hit the floor?

“Did you get it from a friend?” he pressed.

“In a way.”

“Was this friend a guy friend?”

“He’s male.”

“Someone you dated?”

“We’ve been out together a few times,” I replied, thinking of the shows I attended.

“Delilah.”

Growling frustration rumbled from deep within Owen’s chest. Intensity flashed over his chiseled face. I was getting the better of him, and the further I went, the weaker I became. The pretense verged on being too much for both of us. Inching closer, I felt the body heat coming off Owen in waves.

“Why do you care so much, anyway?” I dared to reach for his waistband. “The real question is . . . what are you going to do with it?”

Just like that, the heat creeping up my spine overwhelmed me. Owen’s mouth met mine, and the apartment became a haze. I’d made it easy on him, taking off my jeans as soon as I got home. His free hand was already sliding up under the back of my oversized T-shirt. His thumb grazed along the lace trim of my underwear.

The second we crossed the bedroom’s threshold, he begged the question, “How do you use it?”

“I could show you,” I replied, letting my teeth tug against his lower lip, “or I could talk you through it.”

Both options thrilled me. With his kiss roving over my neck, I went weak at his answer. The back of my knees hit the bed, and helpless as I was, I might have careened backward if not for Owen’s tight grip on me.

“You want to tell me what to do?” he muttered against my throat.

“I don’t think I need to, really. You’re so smart, baby. I bet you can figure it out.”

“How much do you wanna bet?”

Without speaking, we each bargained our satisfaction. My shirt went over my head, and Owen’s buttons came undone. I was chomping at the bit and verging on feral. My body begged to know what would happen next, even if I could see the wand in his hand. Half-naked and sprawling across the bed, I waited with bated breath and was already wet.

“You’re gonna need to lick it,” I told him, working to keep my voice even. “It won’t lubricate itself.”

Owen smirked and played dumb.

“What do you mean?”

I grabbed his wrist. Leading his hand, I took the quartz wand into my mouth. My head twisted down and around it while Owen watched. Distant thunder rumbled through his chest and reverberated into me.

“There,” I murmured the second I let go.

The heat of his palm warmed the stone, but it still felt cooler than my insides. As Owen pushed it into me, I felt it move against every muscle and grow warm. It became like an exploration for Owen, boldly going where no man had gone before.

Hovering over my body, he studied how my lips parted and my eyes longed to flutter shut. Owen was lit from within. His green eyes glowed like the Aurora Borealis, and every shade came alive for me. I had to reciprocate. Holding onto his gaze through a half-moon stare, I spread my hips wider. I welcomed the wand like an extension of his confident hand.

“I knew you’d get it,” I teased, even as my breath caught with a gasp.

The wand moved distinctly inside me. It massaged my walls and relaxed my body from within. My legs were about

as useful as marshmallows, and I couldn't stop smiling. Owen's kiss consumed me. Still, the pleasure had my head spiraling and growing light.

"When I was gone, did you use this and think of me?" he asked.

I was too weak to lie. Nodding, I came clean.

"More than a few times."

"Oh, *fuck it.*"

Our world turned on a dime. He reveled in studying me, but there was nothing like Owen's grip on my curves and his dick within me. We both knew what we needed. We didn't have to pretend.

I TUGGED down his underwear and tossed the last scrap of clothing keeping us apart. A seam on his boxer briefs popped against the sudden force, but that didn't stop us. Reaching, my hands were nearly shaking as they took hold of his rock-hard erection.

Honestly, who needed a pink stone when I had a man like Owen Braun?

My thumb circled his tip before tracing down his rigid shaft. He dripped with desire for more. Both our bodies trembled in excitement, and when we connected, it couldn't compare to anything else.

Owen's chest brushed against mine with every rocking thrust. My grip dug into his broad shoulders and back. Primed for the pleasure, I writhed against the ecstasy.

"Which is better—me or the fucking crystal?" Owen had to know.

I laughed through the delirium. "You, baby. Always you."

A mere toy couldn't hold onto my breast for dear life. A piece of quartz had never mirrored my rising pleasure. Through a sharp hiss of breath, Owen kept our rhythm and

refused to surrender. The satisfaction rose up inside my center. It had my hips bucking and my teeth biting back my moans.

I wanted to scream and let all of Charleston know.

“Yes,” I pleaded on instinct. “Yes, don’t stop.”

Owen couldn’t. He wouldn’t, not until the climax claimed me. Throwing back my head, I felt Owen’s mouth against the hollow of my throat. Euphoria rippled through my body three times over as Owen found his release.

“Damn, angel,” he cursed and then collapsed.

Until the dust settled, I didn’t realize how erratic my heartbeat had become. My moans made the world seem so much louder. I felt a shivering chill thanks to the fine layer of sweat, but Owen was still so warm. I only had to curl against him and shut out the world.

“Ghost shows and crystal wands,” he mumbled while catching his breath. “What a night.”

“I told you I liked spooky nonsense.”

Although, the only spooky thing about that sex was how it good it felt. Marvin Gaye hadn’t been kidding about the power of sexual healing. My mind felt absolutely light, and my muscles forgot the meaning of pain.

“He’s a drag queen,” I confessed then. “He’s also my hairdresser.”

“Who?”

I gestured to the wand abandoned on the bed. “The guy I got it from. You asked earlier. It was a door prize at one of his charity shows.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No,” I promised. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

When Owen cracked a grin, his laughter warmed me from within. Owen wrapped me up in his arms, chuckling as I made a home for myself. My fingertips brushed over the fine curls on his chest, and my face nestled against his neck.

There was no safer place for me to be. No other man would ever make me feel so good, and I wanted to tell him. My mouth opened for a second, but it closed just as quickly.

We hadn't been together long. Nobody knew the depth of our relationship, and as my thoughts returned to reality, I worried about ruining the moment. Owen's laughter was too lovely to hear. We were too intoxicated in the moment to have a serious talk.

I decided to keep quiet then, saving the declarations for another day. We would have other nights. Owen wasn't running out the door. Even if I made it my new secret, that didn't mean my silence would last forever. The emotions were too strong, and Owen made me too weak.

Without a doubt, I was going to love Owen for a long, long time.

Owen

“**Y**ou’re wearing that cologne I got for your birthday last year,” my mother remarked from across the table. “Do you like it?”

“The people around me seem to like it.”

Her eyebrows went up. “And would those people happen to be female?”

I couldn’t ignore that I wore it more often these days. Delilah liked it, and I enjoyed the excuse of inviting her closer. It became part of the new patterns of my life. As far as my mother knew, those small changes didn’t exist. I wasn’t certain Delilah and I had crossed that boundary from private to public.

Part of me wanted to tell everyone about her, but the other part forced me to be silent. Selfishly, I kept her to myself. I held onto Delilah like an unspoken promise, but secrets only made Wendy Braun even more brazen.

Short and softened by age, Mom still claimed the title my dad gave her as “the family spitfire”. She didn’t think to back down or keep quiet. Even with silver running through her long, dark braid and the laugh lines deepening around her smile, my mom couldn’t be told she was over forty. She couldn’t be told anything except what her mind made up.

“Perhaps,” I replied. “I don’t know what everyone around me is thinking, but speaking of birthday gifts, why don’t you

open yours?”

I had taken the day off to be with her. With my brother off studying in Australia, it was only me and mom this year. I wanted to make it special, and after driving down from Florence, she couldn't leave feeling deprived.

“You're already taking me out to lunch!” she gushed, her hands still digging into the confetti bag with its yellow tissue paper. “I don't need so much.”

“You want me to take it back, then?”

“Oh, heavens! No!”

She pulled out a little brown box and instantly recognized the logo. Her gap-toothed smile widened as she took off the top. Inside, she found a silver pendant necklace with a round wampum shell charm. The shades of purple and silvery white swirled together and caught the light coming through the restaurant's wall of French doors.

“Oh, Owen, it's lovely! Thank you.”

“Happy Birthday.”

“First, Alex had my favorite caramel cake delivered to the house, and now, I have this beautiful necklace. It even goes with my silver hoops!”

“Well, you didn't raise stupid sons.”

She didn't hesitate to fasten the latch around the back of her neck. Fussing with the pendant, she ran her fingers over the smooth surface.

“Here's your fried green tomatoes!” the bubbly waitress chimed, setting the appetizer on our table. “Oh, ma'am is it your birthday?”

“It is.” Mom beamed. “My son's showing me around town for the day.”

The girl flipped her ponytail over her shoulder. “It would be our pleasure to offer you a complimentary dessert as well. Today, we have pecan pie, banana pudding, and hummingbird cake. Which might you like?”

“Oh, I don’t know. What do you think of the pecan pie?”

“It’s one of the best I’ve ever had, but it’ll never beat my mama’s.”

“No, of course not,” Mom played along. “Let’s try that.”

“I’ll be sure to bring it out toward the end of your meal.”

Places like this were a dime a dozen around the city. The old Victorian townhouse had been renovated into a stylish restaurant serving Southern fare. Fresh green walls met ornate crown molding. Soft jazz music covered up the creaking of old wood floors, and on the porches, more diners sat under circling fans.

I didn’t care about their aesthetics or the extra cost that came with it. Over shrimp and grits and then the pie, I listened to Mom detail the video call she had with my little brother. His semester abroad couldn’t be going better, and he was all set to graduate in May before heading off to pharmacy school. She talked of the girls’ trip she took with her church friends up to Washington DC.

Between her social life and her part-time work as a math tutor, she rarely found herself sitting at home alone. My shoulders could relax. I didn’t need to worry.

“I’m going to have to walk off this meal!” she teased as we left the restaurant. “Can we walk around and look at the shops? I probably won’t want to buy anything, but it never hurts to look?”

“Whatever you want. It’s your day.”

A breeze came through off the waterfront as we left the French Quarter. Mom stopped to admire the historic markers and had a polite traffic cop take our picture in front of the famous Rainbow Row. The technicolor rowhouses looked even more vivid on the cloudless afternoon. Strolling in and out of places, we circled back to head in the direction of our parking lot.

“Ooh, look at this bottle shop up ahead!” Mom pointed down the shopping street.

I thought about taking her into the place. Part of me wanted to tell her about Delilah so she could rest easier too. Although, I didn't expect her to hurry ahead, shuffling off in her colorful capris. She forced me to jog just to catch up.

"Firefly Bottle Shop," she read, staring up at the sign. "Oh, and it blinks! How cute!"

I swallowed hard. Reaching for the door handle, my palms began to clam up. It didn't make sense.

Is this a bad idea?

Behind the register, a young woman with burgundy hair waved. "Welcome to Firefly! Let me know if you have any questions."

"Is the owner in?" I asked.

"Delilah?" The cashier pushed up her glasses. "Oh, yeah, she went to the cellar to check some stock, but I can go grab her."

I held up a hand. "Oh, no, I—"

It was too late, anyway. Emerging from the back of the store, Delilah eyes caught mine with a flash of recognition. Her red lips stretched into a smile right before the second realization hit her. I was here, but I wasn't alone.

I had been curious what Mom might think of her or this place. Though I debated their meeting, it felt perhaps too soon or something Delilah might not want, but my subconscious and a twist of fate collided to force the situation. There was no looking back without looking guilty.

"Hi there," Delilah greeted us. "I'm Delilah. How can I help you?"

Mom smiled. "You must be the owner, then. This place of yours is precious!"

"Yes, ma'am." Delilah stretched out her hand. "That's kind of you to say. We've worked hard making it special. All the beer and wine here have been hand selected and come directly from their makers."

“Have you tried them all?”

Smoothing the sides of her denim dress, Delilah laughed. “At least a few sips, yes.”

“Well, I’m having a game night with my girlfriends this weekend. Which wines should I serve?”

“That depends. What’ll you be eating?”

Delilah led my mother through the shelves talking about specialty cheeses, homemade popcorn, and wines light enough to sip through a warm Saturday evening. I followed a half-step behind, watching the scene unfold.

I knew Delilah had to be good at her job. She never did anything halfway, but Delilah made each bottle a chance for conversation. She put the flavor profiles in terms that even I understood. Picking up a wine, she never forced it onto my mother or urged her to buy anything. It felt more like two people getting to know one another.

Some might assume that Delilah put on a show, but I had a feeling she did this for everyone. This was her through and through. With her big smile and bigger personality, she met each person exactly where they were.

“This is technically a cider, but they use honeycomb in the process that really sets it apart,” she explained, animated and alive. “It makes it a little sweet with this bite of fresh, tart apple. When it’s chilled, it’s so crisp that it could make you think of summer days even in a snowstorm.”

Mom lit up too. “That sounds delightful! By the way, this boy hovering behind me is my son, Owen. He does speak, even if he has gone quiet.”

Delilah tried hiding her smirk behind her hand. Even though Mom’s head didn’t get past my shoulder, I was still her boy, and she didn’t hesitate to nudge my side.

“She knows, Mom,” I assured her. “Actually, Delilah and I know each other. We met at Tucker Williams’s wedding.”

Did that give too much away? Was it not enough? I fought the urge to run a finger under my starched collar. My heart

thrummed like a hummingbird's wings, but I had been in far worse scenarios than this. Still, a war zone felt safer than this.

I knew what to expect there. I had protection and a plan.

"Oh, Tucker?" Mom recalled the name. "He's such a polite young man, one of the nicest boys I've ever met."

Delilah's attention flitted my way. "Yes, but your son does give Tucker a run for his money."

"Well, maybe my Owen can be nice enough to take you out sometime."

"He already has," she admitted readily, her eyes still on me. "We've gone out a few times since he's been back to town."

My mother whipped her head around. Her smile said she was pleased, but her glare questioned whether or not she should hit me. Mom hadn't popped me on the bottom since I was eleven. I doubted age would stop her.

"Owen, you should have invited her out with us!" she insisted. "We ate lunch only a few minutes from here!"

Delilah slipped back into the conversation to offer some saving grace. She reached to adjust a pair of wine bottles on one of the wooden shelves. The clinking glass brought the attention back to her.

"It's not always easy for me to leave in the middle of store hours," she explained. "Next time you're coming to town, I'll be sure to take the afternoon off. I'm sure my boss will agree, Mrs. . . .?"

"Wendy," Mom told her. "Wendy Braun."

"Now that we've met, I think it's only right to give y'all the friends and family discount. Isn't that right, Lana?"

I turned to realize the cashier had been watching us like television. Chin propped on her fist, Lana ate every second up until Delilah said her name. She shot upright with an eager grin.

"Sure, I can get that squared away," Lana agreed.

“You don’t need to do that,” I began, but Delilah shook her head.

“No, don’t fight me,” she teased. “My store, my rules.”

Patting my shoulder, Delilah breezed past to help wrap up our four bottles. Two bottles each in two brown bags rang up at twenty percent off. I handed over my credit card.

“Thanks for your help,” I told her.

Delilah nimbly rolled up the bottles in the paper. She stayed focused on her work.

“Just be sure to come back soon.”

Another private joke offered in a crowded room.

She said it like I wasn’t already planning to come back for dinner. In all those in-between moments, I felt everything she didn’t say. I saw the smile which never strayed from the corners of her mouth and how she never kept her eyes on me for too long.

Delilah gladly told the world she was taken, but the depth of what we had, of who we were becoming, remained ours alone.

I forgot what the sun was until Mom and I stepped outside. Just like I expected, my mother swatted me on the arm, being careful not to hurt the son carrying her shopping.

“How could you not tell me about her?” she chided me. “Delilah’s absolutely delightful.”

I shrugged. “It’s new. We met right before I left.”

“What a shame, but she’ll be the perfect excuse to come visit again.”

“Am I not enough of a reason?”

Mom laughed, throwing back her head as she stopped by the curb. Cars passed by us down the narrowed streets. To her, I was a comic, and the question didn’t need an answer.

Our visit to Firefly answered a question for me, though. It had lived on the tip of my tongue for days and even more

nights. Though Delilah danced around defining what we were to each other, I didn't need a label to name the feelings rooting deep within me.

Delilah captivated me. Little by little, the feelings grew over my heart until I was all but consumed. She became like wisteria in spring, making life beautiful and holding onto me with an inescapable grip.

I wanted Delilah to meet my mom. I longed to hold onto her and prove this was more than a casual affair. I was ready to have more than silent vows and stolen nights.

I had fallen for Delilah, and with God as my witness, I hoped I never stopped.

Delilah

Owen didn't need to offer an explanation over dinner that night. I asked no questions during the movie we watched, nor as we climbed into bed. The interaction had been simple enough.

I met his mother. I mentioned we had been on a few dates. What more needed to be said?

Then again, when I woke sometime in the early hours of the morning, Owen's grip on me felt more secure. His faint snoring became like white noise lulling me back to sleep. Nothing looked different on the surface, but something had changed.

Had the ground shifted under our feet or was it the phase of the moon?

I couldn't be sure. When my eyelids crept open again, I glanced at the clock on my nightstand. The store needed to be opened in an hour. My bank accounts couldn't wait for me to sort out my relationship, but Owen's oversized frame felt so freaking warm.

"Tell me it's Monday," he grumbled.

"I could, but I'd be lying."

"Dammit."

It seemed I wasn't the only one struggling to get out of bed. Rolling onto his side, Owen's glazed-over eyes found mine. His near-black hair was all mussed, sticking out in every direction. It killed me not to have that image of Owen framed.

"I have to go to work," I said before kissing him. "It's a bad look for the boss to be late."

"Sure," Owen agreed. "I guess I've got to head out myself soon."

He didn't need to rush out, though. Owen lay there, watching me as I dressed. He never said a word. He never commented or complimented. Running in and out of the bedroom, I felt him staring every time I returned. The constant gaze said more than enough.

I glimpsed his sleepy-eyed smile and immediately went back. I cupped his face with my hand and let the weight of my chest fall over his. My sneaker-clad feet floated off the edge of the bed, but I wanted to pull them back. I longed to kick off my shoes and bury myself in the warm bedsheets. His lips tempted me to claim so much more.

"Okay, last one," I insisted softly.

"Last one," he repeated.

Five minutes later, we actually meant it. I dragged myself off the bed, hunting down any pair of earrings abandoned on my dresser. My little silver hoops would have to do.

Owen and I were just seeing one another. We didn't need to label it for his mom or anyone else. There was no need to fix what wasn't even broken.

The store's accounts were another story.

"In-store sales have been consistently growing," Curtis remarked, flipping through the last month's reports. "We've seen more bulk orders too, but these event cancellations . . ."

I groaned into my water. "Trust me, I know."

Sitting in the back office, I wanted to see another way beyond the shades of red. The loan I took out to expand Firefly still demanded its monthly dues, whether or not the bottle shop

was being hired for events. Selling to women like Owen's sweet little mother was all well and good, but selling a hundred bottles to a debutante's wedding proved to be much more profitable.

The only trouble was that another bride had called in to cancel. Her mother-in-law's status as treasurer of the local arts council didn't go unnoticed. Last I heard, the Draytons remained one of their biggest patrons. Maribelle turned altruism into a tool, and now, she was using it against me.

I just didn't get *why*.

"Lana's going to put out the word that we have some free weekends for event bookings," Curtis explained, scratching under his black knit beanie. "Maybe if we did a special wine sale during the city's restaurant week, it could help with foot traffic. The city would have to mention us in their advertising."

"That could be good," I had to admit. "Do you think those extra summer hires were worth the investment?"

Curtis scrolled across the tablet in his lap. His freckled nose scrunched up with indecision.

"It's hard to tell. I mean, I definitely liked having a few spare hands during the busy season, but if we don't see an increase in numbers, I don't know if it's something we can afford long-term. You're the boss here, Delilah. What do you think?"

"I think I'd like to not be here sixty hours a week. I think you and Lana feel the same."

He shook his head. "We're not here nearly as much as you. I only clocked in forty-two hours on my last paycheck."

"Really?" I looked back at the timesheets. "Dang, you're right."

"Maybe we should get an intern for you or Lana? A business or marketing major might appreciate the experience?"

"And take advantage of unpaid labor? Polite pass."

“I was gonna say offer them a monthly stipend,” Curtis corrected me, “but with the way these bills are looking . . .”

Still frustrated, I shook my head as any petulant child would. “No, I don’t want to look at them anymore. I’ll shut my eyes, and you press *Send Payment*. How about that?”

Curtis chuckled. “I think it’s time for Lana to take her lunch break. I’m gonna go man the register.”

Being left alone with the signs of trying times wasn’t a good idea. I doled out payment after payment. The money in my pockets grew scarce. When I first decided to open my own business, I knew how the majority of small businesses ultimately failed, and if I’d been ignorant, plenty of well-meaning folks had given me their warning. I just knew I’d never been cut out for a nine-to-five life in a cubicle. I needed to find my own way, even if that made my career more of a struggle.

It just wouldn’t have been so bad if there weren’t people out there gunning for me to fail. Not everyone had to love me. I didn’t expect the world to be forgiving and gentle.

THADDEUS ALWAYS HAD the good looks of a knight in shining armor. He wanted women to believe he’d come charging in on his white horse and be their everything, but death rode a pale horse too. According to some street-corner preachers, Lucifer had been the most beautiful and clever of all the angels, which inevitably led to his downfall. Thad Drayton wasn’t much different.

He wanted to claim every throne and kill the goodness in every woman he pursued for his own selfish gratification. In his arrogance, he tried to claim it all for himself, but I refused to sit idly by. I could never turn a blind eye knowing what kind of selfish creature Thad was.

I didn’t need to save anyone, either. I only had to give this prey the chance to save herself. She only needed time to make her escape, and after what happened next, I would never be able to forget her.

On that hot May night, the chilled white and rosé wine went faster than any others. The alcohol loosened the party guests' lips and their purse strings. I didn't get to see much of the festivities. Busy in the wine and beer garden, I answered questions and made polite conversation. Some of the people even wanted my business card.

I felt so hopeful, even if I was getting sweaty. I had to walk back to the wine storage to grab the last bottle of my favorite Riesling. Some Northern-sounding couple wanted to buy a few cases of it to take home.

"Come on, one kiss won't kill you," I heard him say before I saw him. *"You might even like it."*

Between two magnolia trees, I caught the look on the short girl's face first. She glittered even in the shadows. Her champagne sequins made her charming, but her folded arms showed her fear. She tried shrinking away from Thaddeus. Reaching for her necklace, she took a small, wobbly step back.

"I-I'm seeing someone," she mumbled, her words a tad slurred.

Thad laughed. *"Well, I'm not gonna tell him, am I? This can be our little secret, and it's not like anyone's around to see us. I would hate to think I wasted those drink tickets. Didn't you like that drink?"*

"Sure, but . . ."

His arm reached out, but I had heard enough.

"Damn, Thaddeus Drayton!" I shouted, forcing him to whip around. *"I should've known you would be lurking in the shadows."*

He growled my name. *"Delilah."*

"Did you hear about your ex getting married? I just got the pictures from their elopement in Mexico. Wanna see 'em?"

Goading Thad was low-hanging fruit. He took the bait easily, picking a fight with me and letting the girl get away. I had seen one too many like her get chewed up and spit out by that piece of garbage. They had been my classmates, my co-

workers, and even my best friend. Somebody needed to teach Thad a lesson.

“Delilah?”

Blinking twice, I snapped out of the memory. Lana stood in the office doorway with her purse in hand and a nervous look on her face. She chewed on her lower lip.

“I thought you were heading off to lunch,” I remembered.

She nodded, fussing with her red ponytail. “I am, but you’ve got a visitor.”

“Who?”

She mouthed the answer, “*Maribelle Drayton.*”

Was the woman Bloody Mary? If I said her name one time too many, did she just magically materialize to terrorize me? The accounts quickly became the least of my problems.

“Thanks for letting me know,” I told Lana. “Now, go and get something to eat.”

If the bottle shop was about to become a bloodbath, Lana didn’t need to witness it. Maribelle did look ready to kill in her tailored capris and white silk blouse. Everything about her always looked so bright, crisp, and clean, but when she turned to greet me, I saw the black heart her son had inherited.

“Maribelle, what can I do for you?” I greeted her, plastering a smile on my face. “Are you here for some wine?”

Curtis stayed behind the register for safety, but I noticed his eyes darting between us. We were lucky no other customers were coming into the store. Maribelle’s blue eyes were throwing frozen daggers, even though she appeared so calm.

“No, no wine for me,” she insisted. “I’ve been told natural wines are . . . well, they’re not up to the tried and true standards of wine making, are they? You’re the expert here, Delilah, but a sommelier I know told me about the controversy of these new, young wines.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy them.”

Her blonde eyebrows almost moved, but they couldn't go far.

“Of course, and you've always courted controversy, haven't you? It must've been so taxing on your guardians' health. I hear that's why they moved to Arizona.”

“Dad has allergies. Mom prefers the dry heat,” I replied, knowing her backhanded comments didn't have anything to do with her visit. “So, how can I help you?”

“Is there anywhere we can talk in private? It's so uncouth to speak so openly like this. You never know you might step in the store . . .” she insisted before smirking. “Well, maybe that isn't a problem here.”

“I've got plenty of customers,” I insisted flatly. “In fact, I'm writing up invoices for bulk orders now, so if you don't need me, I can get back to—”

Maribelle cut me off. “I don't need you, Miss Kaplan. I need answers.”

“About what?”

“The police told me that you were the last to see my boy alive. You were the one who agitated and provoked him, and you were the main wine supplier for the party. Between all that, I can't believe that you don't know anything about what happened to Thaddeus.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I really don't.”

I knew he was an ass and an alcoholic, not that you could tell the truth to Maribelle. After all, she was the role model who'd nursed vodka martinis all of Thaddeus's life, and who knew what kinds of anxiety pills she kept in that designer purse of hers?

Her heels clicked as she came closer to me. As Maribelle sharpened her words, I felt an eerie chill in the air. I might've been excited if it had been a ghost. I feared the ice was in Maribelle's glare.

“Then, I'll be sorry to tell others of their mistake in hiring you,” she retorted. “You must know how many friends I have,

friends in all kinds of places. Why, I might even know some people in the licensing department. It might not be so easy for you when you go to reapply for your seller's license. That would be an awful shame, wouldn't it?"

My jaw clenched. Behind my back, my fists tightened together to keep from smacking the arrogant smile off that woman's plastic face. It was one thing to talk some friends out of using me as their bar vendor. This was another matter entirely, perhaps even a new low.

"You're screwing around with my job and my life. I have people who depend on this store for a paycheck. I have bills to pay and needs myself."

Her glare bore into me. "Then, you should take that into account when you come clean with me and the police."

"What the hell do you want me to tell them?"

"Tell the truth!" she shrieked. "Maybe then, you can get your little wedding jobs back!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Curtis waving his hands. He wanted me to stop. We both knew I needed to bite my tongue, but I couldn't. I saw only red while shouting right back.

"The truth?" I scoffed before letting out a cackle. "The truth is that your son was a predator and a piece of trash! The truth is that you're trying to be angry at me because I didn't let him get away with it. I didn't let him treat my best friend like garbage when they were dating, and I don't give a damn that he's dead! If anything, the women of Charleston can sleep easier knowing that he's six feet underground!"

It was a step too far, but I never regretted it. The gagged look on Maribelle's face offered more than enough to make my brutal honesty worthwhile. Screw the consequences. I knew somebody had to say it, even if it was against all good Southern graces. I was done caring.

Her threats hurt more than me. They would harm people I cared about, and that was where I drew the line. Maribelle was never going to scare me into submission.

“You’re gonna regret this,” she seethed. “A fat little nobody like you, you’re just jealous my son wasn’t interested in you. He knew you were just the girl of some, some cheap whore. It’s like puttin’ lipstick on a pig.”

“Call me whatever you want. This is my store, and it’s within my rights to insist that you leave.”

“But I’m not done with—”

“Do you want me to talk with the police?” I whipped out my cellphone from my back pocket. “I can tell them the same old story about what happened with Thad and me, but I’ll also have to mention an older intoxicated woman is harassing the staff of my store. I’m sure that would be a fun police report for them. Hell, it might even make a good feature in the newspapers. Curtis, do people still read papers anymore?”

“I, um, well,” he mumbled, but it didn’t matter.

“I’m going,” Maribelle declared.

She said nothing. Turning on her pointed heels, Maribelle strode toward the door as other customers came in. The group of young women giggled and talked among each other, filling the shop with their excitement. Still, the chill lingered around me. Maribelle looked over her shoulder at me one final time to get the final word in. Her remark was loud and clear.

“This isn’t over.”

Owen

Another case complete, I sent off the invoices to the law firm's accountant with my thanks for their business.

Three more unhappy couples were one step closer to concluding their divorces. It didn't give me much hope for marriage, but their lawyers' money would keep gas in my tank and food on my plate. For that, I wished them all well in their newly single lives.

It left me to deal with the one case I couldn't easily crack.

Charlie was out dealing with a case of his own. Eating lunch only bought me so much time. With my sandwich gone and the office quiet, I sat down with a dread-filled grumble and rolled up the sleeves of my checkered shirt. All the evidence I had offered more questions than answers, but the work needed to be done.

Fate dropped me a line when I opened my laptop. There, in my inbox, an unread email sat from an unfamiliar address, but I knew the name instantly. Jude Harlow had written me from California. Until I read further down, I didn't know why.

SAM MENTIONED to me that you were hired to investigate the circumstances of Thad Drayton's death. Maribelle Drayton told her mother. I don't know what's become of it. Sam's not interested in dwelling on him or the past, but last summer, an

investigation firm based out of New York did a background check for me. I wanted to know what he was hiding under that veneer of his, and I'm guessing you do too. If you want the exact details of their findings, I've told my friend, Cassius King, to anticipate your reaching out. The contact information is listed below.

SURE ENOUGH, an email and phone number sat right above Jude's digital signature. I never knew the reach of wealth. It never ceased to fascinate me what money could do or how those with it might behave. Out of some protective instinct, Jude dug into the past of his new wife's notorious ex, but I couldn't imagine him finding anything I didn't already know.

File after file piled up on the computer screen. Copies of documents spread themselves out across my desk. Between sips of water, I tried piecing together the puzzle of the days before Thaddeus's death, and of course, the blurry image of the harassed girl was left untouched. The grainy grayscale security footage made it impossible for anyone to identify who she was.

The snippet of her blurred face nagged me. She had me going through old messages on dating app accounts that Thaddeus used to keep. I'd heard plenty of crass language in college and in military bunks. I'd learned to pick my battles against the so-called "locker room talk", but for Christ's sake, some of the lines Thad tried on women made even my skin crawl.

He was arrogant and heavy-handed. He never understood when a woman turned him down. When someone died, my granny used to say, "let the dead bury the dead", but I doubted even the dead wanted to claim a man like Drayton.

"Someone only a mother could love," I muttered to myself.

I spoke of the devil, and the electric doorbell chimed.

Through the tight sheen of fresh injections, her blue eyes pierced me from across the room. No other part of her face

showed her annoyance. She hoisted her handbag higher up on her arm before strutting up to loom over my desk.

“Hello, Maribelle, what can I do for you?” I asked, pretending she wasn’t alarming at all.

“I must say, Owen, I’m getting a little frustrated with the lack of progress in my case,” she replied through a thinning veil of good manners. “I was just having lunch with Angela Beaumont, the wife of our state’s *senior* senator, and when she asked about my son’s case, I realized I had nothing to tell her.”

“How about I get you some water, then? If you’d like to have a seat—”

She cut me off. “No, I would not like water, nor do I want to sit down. I want answers about my son’s case.”

“I’m collaborating with local law enforcement. With the complications of the case, it does take time to cover every possible avenue while going over previous evidence.”

“But I heard that you’d received witness evidence testifying that Delilah Kaplan confronted Thaddeus that night.”

My shoulders tensed. “Yes, that’s true. They had a verbal altercation.”

“Well, don’t you know she’s from, well, nobody knows where she came from. From all we know, her real parents were sociopaths.”

“I heard her parents live in Arizona.”

She laughed like I was cute, but her cheeks hardly moved. A Southern accent began slipping out through her carefully chosen words. As she sat down, Maribelle seemed to drop a veil. It was a sign of trust.

It was also a mistake.

“No, no, I mean her biological mother,” she went on. “From what I hear, the girl dabbles in satanic things, and she’s always been, well, what we called back in my day, *loose*. I guess you can’t be too picky when you look like she does. She’s by no means a good Christian girl.”

My jaw clenched tighter. “No, she’s Jewish.”

“Not by their rules, since she’s adopted and all. Her mama’s gotta be Jewish, you know.”

If tension hadn’t coursed through my body, I might have cackled or howled. The woman grasped at straws. She wanted me to hate Delilah as much as she did, but regardless of who Delilah was to me, I would never be a bigoted ass. I refused to indulge her petty prejudice.

“Mrs. Drayton, Delilah Kaplan’s heritage has nothing to do with your case. Why are you bringing it up?”

Her smile twitched then. Around her purse handles, her grip tightened.

“Delilah was there the night of the party. Your recent update said the bottle of wine found in his car came from her.”

“It came from the wine she provided for the charity event,” I corrected.

“She had it! It was her responsibility!”

“To some extent, but—”

Maribelle slammed her hand down the desk. “Then, why hasn’t she been arrested? You have evidence against her!”

I swallowed back the urge to yell. It wasn’t going to do me any good, and it went against professional standards. Even when a client revolted, that never gave me the right to react.

“I do not have any authority to make an arrest of any kind. I am keeping in contact with local authorities. If they find any of the information I provide worthy of an arrest, it will be for them to decide.”

“She always wanted him dead, though! She’ll admit if you go ask her! Just recently, I went into her store, and she harassed me right there in front of her staff!”

“When did you approach her?”

Maribelle cracked my façade. Without thinking, I let my body lean forward. The edge in my voice sharpened, and the

woman recoiled. It was the first time I saw her blue eyes hold an ounce of fear.

“I—I stopped in recently,” she explained. “I don’t remember the exact day.”

“Mrs. Drayton, do not by any means make contact with anyone regarding this case. It can jeopardize the investigation.”

“I’m not even supposed to talk about it with my friends or family?”

“*No.*”

That shut her up, but I saw the lingering resentment under all her Southern diplomacy. Her lips drew into a thin line. Even if she refused to admit it, the woman wasn’t pleased with my answer. She wanted me to play along with her cruel game.

“Fine,” she conceded. “I wouldn’t want to mess up the chance of catching my son’s killer. My boy deserves better.”

“As you say,” I forced myself to agree.

I let that be the end of it. Silently, I hoped that my demand would put a stop to her rampage against Delilah. The rumors would die down, and she could go on in peace. Without all these fake allegations muddying the waters, my work would become easier.

This new information from Jude Harlow sent the case in a new direction. A whole new line of questioning opened up, and alone once again, I sent off an email to the New York investigator. Only time would tell what might come. I had to lie in wait, but if my gut was right, the Drayton case was about to crack wide open.

Delilah

No good deed ever went unpunished. The backs of my thighs screamed with the uncomfortable burn of exercising, but I'd be better for it. That's what I told myself every time I made it to the ballet workout class. Making more time for Owen, I'd fallen out of my usual twice-a-month pattern, but I still needed to fit in my clothes.

"Great work, everyone!" the instructor chimed. "If you'd like, we have some review sheets. Filling one out can get you a discount on your next class."

All twelve women in the room grabbed one as well as the one flamboyant man. We sprawled back out across the wood floors looking like sweaty lumps in the wall of mirrors.

"So, Delilah," Rhett, the one guy in our class said, "my boyfriend and I are going to be having an anniversary-slash-housewarming thing at our new place. Firefly does parties, right?"

"Sure, I help host wine tastings and provide beer and wine for events," I agreed. "I do it through one of the hospitality groups in town. Do you want their email address?"

He nodded and smiled. "Yeah, that'll be great."

Endorphins flooding my brain, it began to feel like plenty of other Monday nights. I pulled my phone from my workout bag and sent him the information. I hoped his party would

make up for losing the others. When the country clubbers let me down, maybe the gay couples of Charleston could start lifting me up.

I liked them far better, after all, and there were plenty of snobs around South Carolina rooting for men like Rhett to fail. Too many people thrived on stepping on others. I could be better, though. I'd let my success be my revenge, despite what those hoity-toity women wanted me to do.

Leaving the barre studio, my breath plumed like dragon's breath. The night grew cold so quickly. Rain had washed away the summer heat. There were still shades of violet and orange in the sky, yet I shuddered in the shadows. Come next week, I'd wear warmer clothes or drive, but right then, I could only follow my feet.

Every step down that stretch of King Street had been memorized. I knew the restaurants by their smell and sound. Even if I shut my eyes, I would have known where to cross the road and head right. My mind was free to wander over what to have for dinner, forgetting that my legs were tired and I had paperwork to go over.

My stomach growled as I waited for the crosswalk light to flash. The little white man lit up. I stepped out. My first thought to pull out a microwave meal reminded me of the vegetable lasagna I'd bought the week before. It wouldn't be better than homemade, but it would be good enough . . .

Good enough to distract me from the giant black vehicle barreling down the road.

In the smack middle of the street, I didn't know which way to turn. It was lucky I was in sneakers instead of some awful pair of heels. My legs bolted in the first direction my feet flew. My heartbeat raced as a horn blared. Only inches kept me from being clipped by the black beast. Falling onto a parked car's hood, I caught my breath for a second, but fear urged me not to linger. Something about it felt too intentional.

Parts of me protested as I jogged down the sidewalk. Chilled air filled my lungs. Moving, hustling, hurrying, I only thought of the safety of my apartment. A car couldn't hit me

up there. I'd lock myself in and be safe, but hustling toward the nearest alley, I heard the sound of a growling motor coming around the bend.

Tires squealed. Horns blared. My body couldn't move fast enough.

Shaking even as I ran, adrenaline fought against me. My tunnel vision made ten feet look like a mile. A bright white light washed over the scene, and my heart plummeted.

I was dead. This had to be it.

Did I really have to die all sweaty and without dinner?

"Delilah!"

A strong arm forced me down. It didn't stop as I yelped, fighting against the sudden jolt. Fight or flight had me ready to claw at anyone within reach, but I didn't have the strength to fight this iron wall throwing me into the hedge.

I'd made it to the alley.

Spindly branches scratched my skin, pricking my cheeks and scalp. They tugged at my ponytail. It took me a long minute to understand that my eyes were still shut tight for impact, but the only impact I felt was Owen's chest pressed against mine. When I forced myself to look, Owen was all around me, covering me in his protective embrace. The air started smelling like him.

The motor growled again before growing distant. The mysterious car peeled off into the darkness. Once again, the world became quiet and cold, and I was left panting.

"Are you hurt?" he asked with a low, muttering rasp.

"No," I answered. "But this boxwood isn't exactly a feather bed."

"This is no time to joke. Someone just tried to run you down."

"Really? When?"

The grumble from Owen's chest shut me up. I swallowed hard and remembered feeling sore once. I had been hungry and

a little parched. Pinned there, I couldn't figure out where those feelings went.

I wanted them back.

"Come on," Owen said, nearly growling. "Let's get inside. We'll need to call the police."

"Why?"

His green eyes cut down at me. For a split second, I became a moron.

"I—I know what you mean now," I mumbled. "I . . . I think I need to sit down."

Blinking a few times, I began to make out that Owen wore a bomber jacket. His dark hair was pressed down over his eyes by a baseball cap. He looked so nondescript that he might have been working on some case or another, and now, he had to make a phone call to some detective friend.

I heard it all. I couldn't listen, though.

I mechanically took sip after sip of water. Sitting on the couch, Owen called someone. He bypassed the emergency hotlines and had two uniformed officers knocking on my door in ten minutes. They took my statement and Owen's. As the police left, the stove alarm went off.

When did I set that? Was I going crazy now?

Owen rose from his chair. "Dinner's ready. I pulled out a vegetable lasagna from the freezer . . . I hope—"

"That's fine," I piped up. "I'll come, um, help with the drinks."

Getting up from my seat, I didn't expect for my head to feel so light. My knees almost gave way, but Owen caught me. He stood there, half-guiding me back down onto the couch.

"I'll take care of it." All the anger vanished from his voice. "Just . . . sit here, Delilah."

He took my glass and filled it with more water. When he came back again, he carried two steaming bowls, one in each

hand. I took the one he offered me. My hands wrapped around it while my nose took in the smells of basil and tomatoes.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He didn’t force me to talk. At the opposite end of the couch, Owen ate quietly. I felt his eyes glancing my way. He watched to make sure I ate. He kept himself alert to my needs.

“I’m gonna take a shower now,” I said when the bowl was empty. “I meant to when I got home.”

Tense at first, his shoulders relaxed. His expression settled in understanding.

“I guess I’ll take one when you’re done.”

“You’re staying the night?”

Owen stared back at me. If I had not known any better, I’d say I was growing a second head. It had become such an unspoken thing between us. It shouldn’t have caught me off guard.

“Honestly, you think I’m gonna leave you alone after this happened?”

How would I even sleep by myself? The warm water washed away my shock. As it circled the drain, the reality of what happened weighed upon me. I finally knew why my legs got so weak. Each question felt like another brick on my back.

Why had that car attacked me?

How did they know I’d be walking home?

Who wanted me hurt?

The thoughts didn’t settle until I climbed into bed that night. The smell of sandalwood soap filled the space beside me where Owen lay. His eyes followed me around the room as I went through the motions of my nightly routine, but under the covers, my mind grew quiet.

“Since the hurricane’s started to grow, the shop’ll have to be closed for the next few days,” I remarked. “I’ll probably be

stuck here.”

I pulled the covers over my shoulders and waited one heartbeat of a moment.

“I won’t have anywhere else to be, either,” he muttered.

“No cheaters to chase down?”

Owen shook his head and curled toward me. “Not in the rain.”

“I guess you’d better stay here, then. As long as you’re here, I won’t have to wonder if you’re getting washed away.”

“No . . . you won’t need to worry.”

A different intent lived behind his answer, but I suddenly felt too tired to consider it. Muscles all over me ached. My thoughts grew muddled by a fog. All I had to was sleep. With my eyes falling shut, I believed Owen would keep me safe. Even with a hurricane barreling up the coast, there was no better place for me than right there with him.

Damn the rain and thunder or any storm coming our way. His shoulders were broad enough to bear it all. Nothing would ever stop the infallible Owen Braun.

Owen

The night slipped into morning. As the clock struck midnight, I heard Delilah take in a deep breath and mumble something in her sleep. She squirmed under the covers. Her lower lip pouted.

A flicker of jealousy twinged in my chest. Part of me wished to be dreaming like her. I urged my eyes to shut and my body to sleep, but they didn't listen. Anxiety coursed through me like a heavy dose of caffeine. Facing it triggered a tiny surge of adrenaline.

I was the one fighting to survive the raging black SUV. Caught in its headlights, my heart beat like a drum, but it had never been my life at risk. It was Delilah hustling onto the sidewalk, scaring me to death. The sight of her in danger nearly killed me.

Now, she slept soundly beside me, and I was the one watching the time tick by.

"Drink this," Delilah murmured in her sleep.

Her arm stretched my way, letting her fingertips brush against my shoulder. She smiled to herself. My hand over hers, I watched her body sink deeper into the mattress.

"Owen?"

For a second, I thought she might have woken up, but her eyelids stayed shut. Her lashes fluttered just so.

“*Shh, angel,*” I whispered back. “Just sleep.”

“I love you too.”

My lungs lurched at the mumbled line. Maybe it wasn't for me. It might have meant nothing, but watching her dream, listening to Delilah whisper like that, I found myself imagining it was all for me. I let myself pretend and tattooed the thought onto my brain like the flowers and stars on Delilah.

If I had her love, I needed to become worthy of it.

I slipped out from under the bedsheets and into Delilah's office. The blue desktop became consumed with my laptop and paperwork. From the moment it happened, I knew the night's incident was connected to the case.

A murderer was being tracked down. A key witness had her life threatened. Even if I didn't mention it to Delilah herself, it couldn't be more obvious. I pulled up the case files and began hunting down anything written between the lines filling up the laptop screen.

“How about account records?” I whispered as I clicked them.

Getting access to every bank statement that belonged to Thaddeus Drayton hadn't been easy. It began with the obvious records, but combing through the files, I began to see recurring payments to different account numbers that were unrecognizable. I thought they were someone else's at first, but then I went back through and saw deposits from the same place.

Money had been moved back and forth between known and unknown accounts. As his beneficiary, Maribelle gave me blanket approval to access whatever statements I needed. Her cooperation never faltered, but this time around, instinct told me to keep quiet.

I went spelunking through files for the missing accounts. Digging through saved records on old hard drives, I found

them and compiled it all into digestible files. The paperwork took me back in time.

When Thad first got his job at the firm, he took out a sizeable loan to the tune of twenty grand. I shouldn't have been surprised. His condo, his German sports car, and his lifestyle all greedily demanded money, and a peacock would be nothing without its feathers. At first glance, I guessed the money had been to establish himself and to show off. He held a small pile of debt from school, and the loan payments blended in with all the others . . . until I looked again.

How had he paid off the twenty grand in two years' time?

And why had his mother been added to the account as well?

Thunder rumbled in the far off distance, or maybe in the back of my mind. I quickly began typing, looking at public records of the Draytons' usual donations and dealings. Surprisingly, the name was largely absent from news articles. I found other years and reports with comparative ease.

Drayton Family Donates Wing to Local History Museum.

Mayor Thanks Women's League and President at Conservation Silent Auction.

Ancestors of Drayton Plantation Host Hallmark Annual Fundraiser

Titles and images filled in the blanks, but to a trained eye, the gap gaped wider and wider. It became glaringly obvious that *something* had happened. The Draytons had stopped being so publicly generous, and their son took out a massive personal loan.

I couldn't decide which was more of a mystery—how they lost it or how it suddenly came back.

My reach remained limited. I had no way of getting into the Draytons' finances without a court order, and no judge in their right mind would offer me one on a whim. I only had public record on my side. Where could I look besides money so publicly spent?

“Properties,” I answered aloud.

The family had two, or rather, they *used* to have two. At the beginning of that same year, a multi-million-dollar home on Hilton Head Island had been sold. One quick search of the street address told me it had been put on the market and shifted quickly. Nobody could call me a housing expert, but the selling price seemed low.

The couple had financial troubles. Their son helped.

That couldn't be the end of the story.

Though it felt important, the road quickly ran out. I reached a dead end faster than I expected, with no way of connecting it back to the case. I needed to find a new trail, something to make me feel like I'd covered some kind of ground. Otherwise, the only solid argument was one woman who had cursed Thad's name, and she slept just down the hall.

“It's not her,” I kept whispering to myself. “There's gotta be something missing.”

By the end of his life, Thad treated everything and everyone like a business transaction, and knowing his finances, I began to wonder . . . what if they were?

I clicked out of the accounts and records to pull up the security footage files. Flashes of Thad showed him speaking with a well-known politician, a few bigwigs, and several self-important types like himself. They clinked glasses and glad handed one another. It was only when Thad walked away that the suits dropped their smiling masks. One whispered to another before scowling at Thad's retreating figure.

“A bunch of two-faced bastards,” I muttered.

It was no surprise to watch it unfold through the grayscale fuzz. Out of all the footage, the only interesting video was the final showdown between Delilah and Thad. The camera focused on the wine store. For a second, Delilah became clear as day, but as she retreated into the top corner, her voice became audible. The voices sounded garbled and unintelligible. Delilah looked like she'd shouted at a tree, and

then, a smaller female figure slipped past her. Thad's tall frame loomed over her like a threat.

She never flinched.

An inch tall and barely in focus, Delilah was no doubt fearless and bold. I didn't have to guess the unflinching look in her eyes or how her heels dug into the dirt. He snatched a bottle from her hand and stormed off, but her fury never faded. Delilah watched him storm off before disappearing herself.

It all took less than five minutes, but lives hung in the balance over this one moment. Out of the three people shown, one was dead, and another was, for all intents and purposes, missing. Only one woman remained.

I couldn't decide which would be the greater sin—breaching my contract with the Draytons or watching this footage in secrecy. Guilt cornered me in, but if I could just solve this case, everything might smooth over into irrelevance like it never even happened.

That girl might be missing from the initial investigation. She had no name or testimony, but a private investigator had the power to change that. If I could track the girl down, I had the chance to get the answers I so desperately craved and needed. It might even prove Delilah's innocence.

Rumors swirled around her like a dark cloud, and there were already enough clouds in the sky. Through the quiet stillness, I heard the first taps of rain on the windows and roof. The outer bands of the storm served as a prelude for the main event. A countdown clock started in my head.

Delilah was running out of time. Somebody had it out for her. Someone out there was keeping secrets from the world, and I needed to find them before anyone actually got hurt. Fearing the worst, I kept searching for answers until the small hours of the morning.

My bloodshot eyes began to cross. They begged to shut. That's when I gave up.

As I went back to Delilah, rain tapped against the roof. It would have been easy to wake her and be honest, but one of us

needed to rest easy. Sheer exhaustion already had my body sinking into the mattress. Still, I needed to tell her.

“I love you, Delilah,” I muttered, even if she wouldn’t know. “I’m gonna keep you safe.”

The evidence offered more questions than answers, but I would find the truth. It was the one vow I had to keep if I ever wanted to find peace of mind. For that, I intended to protect Delilah at all costs, no matter what became of me.

Delilah

Somewhere in the morning, the power went out for the entire city block. The hurricane finally made landfall. I listened to the storm through the open windows, feeling the breeze over my half-naked frame. The gas stove still worked, but I couldn't will myself to get there. Sleeping hadn't done much for me. Another gust of wind rushed through my apartment, brushing over the backs of my bare legs.

The couch felt so long without Owen around. Why did I feel so tired all of a sudden?

After the almost-hit-and-run, I tried to be forgiving to myself. Owen insisted it would be handled by the police. He knew people. He'd make sure it was taken seriously, and on that note, he went out into the storm for sustenance. According to the weather reports, Owen and I would be hunkered together for quite some time.

"The storm is slowing over the city, losing momentum," the weather girl explained through the radio speakers. "Hurricane Lincoln is now moving at about three miles per hour. We expect for it to stay over South Carolina well into tonight and tomorrow. Though the cyclone itself is breaking up, Charleston can expect to up to eight inches of rain."

I reached for the radio and clicked it off. The weather was wet. What else was new?

Minutes passed, or maybe an hour, before I heard footsteps coming to the front door. Everything felt so quiet in the apartments. Trust Fund had gone off to visit his parents' home in Austin or Aspen. I didn't fully understand when he called me. I only had to promise to reach out if something happened to his rental, and with him gone, there could be just one pair of footsteps coming inside my home.

The keys jingled as he pulled them from the lock. Even with my eyes shut, I saw in my mind's eye how Owen followed the patterns he'd created for himself. He dropped his keys beside mine and shrugged out of his coat. His heavy footsteps made that one pine plank creak as he stepped into the living room, and then, he was there. I felt his presence beside me before his hand brushed back my hair. It let a cool breeze blow over the exposed crook of my neck.

"I know you're awake, Delilah."

His voice was low and rich with a humming that began deep in his chest and sent a tingling shiver through me. I tried not to smile. After all, I was exhausted. I was trying to take a nap.

"You're going to ignore me, then?" Owen asked, pressing his lips gently against my temple. "You're just gonna keep pretending you don't snore when you sleep."

I do not.

Still, I stayed silent. I let Owen leave kisses along my jawline and down to my neck. A smile toyed at the corners of my mouth, and dammit, if Owen didn't notice.

"I guess I don't need to play fair, either," he muttered in my ear.

A heartbeat later, Owen's teeth nipped my ear. My entire body jolted, twisting as I laughed under my breath and Owen chuckled along.

"I knew you weren't sleeping. Now, come on, give me your eyes."

My eyelids were two petulant children, but Owen refused to relent. Slowly, I let my right eye open to his handsome face

inches from mine.

“Now, the other,” he murmured, and I surrendered.

With both eyes taking him in, I whispered, “Hey, baby.”

My hand reached out and felt what my vision wouldn't focus on. A fine layer of stubble shadowed his jaw like the shades of lavender under his eyes. The curls of his hair needed a good combing.

With a faint rasp, I asked, “How bad is it out there?”

“It's getting worse,” he told me. “They're gonna be boarding up the grocery store soon. Have you eaten yet?”

I shook my head. “I got up with you and got as far as this couch.”

“Then, how would you feel about some breakfast?”

“I'd feel good about it, if you let me help.”

When his lips found mine, I took it as an agreement. I dragged my body from the couch and followed him into the kitchen. I didn't understand why my body felt so heavy. Perhaps I'd been overworking myself. Maybe making up for all these lost profits was overwhelming my system. Whatever it was, the burden of existing felt easier when I had Owen to lean against.

The sound of butter sizzling in the pan filled the small kitchen. As Owen cracked two eggs into the pan, my cheek pressed into his back and my arms fastened around his chest. He felt so warm, even with rain water dampening his hair. It made my eyes want to close again.

“What are we going to do today?” I wondered. “The television's out.”

“Read? Play a game?”

I forced myself off his back. Shuffling toward the fridge, I pulled out the coffee creamer as fast as I could. The cold air needed to be conserved.

“Do you like board games?” I reached for my French Press and a pot in the cabinet. “I've got Scrabble and a deck of cards

somewhere.”

“I can’t remember the last time I played Scrabble. It must’ve been with Alex.”

Over coffee and eggs, Owen talked more about his brother, almost like a father describing his son, tending to him and entertaining Alex when his mother could not. Even if it was a bittersweet epiphany, I imagined that one day, Owen might be a wonderful father. He had plenty of practice after his dad got sick. He seemed to get even more practice with me.

I tried to picture Owen at seventeen making his brother’s breakfast and driving him to school. The overgrown boy had to grow up so fast, but with me, he could lighten his load. We cleared off the table and found my games in the coat closet.

We both deserved to forget the day before and have some fun.

The battery operated radio played classical music from a public station, one of the few not taken over by news of the storm. With my legs crossed under me, I stared at the game board. Owen sat on the couch watching and waiting for my next move.

“I’ll use your P and add E, N, I, S, and make *penis*.”

“*Delilah*,” Owen grumbled and drew his mouth into a hard line.

“Double word score,” I went on. “That gives me six, seven . . . fourteen points.”

He made the same face when I got a triple word score on *quim*. At a certain point, I figured he would get used to it, but after two card games and a generous glass of rosé wine, I decided Scrabble deserved a little spice.

“I don’t think you care about your points. You just want to see how many crude words you can fit on this board.”

“The penis is only anatomy,” I insisted. “It’s not crude. If remember correctly, you’ve got one yourself.”

“I’d be worried if you’d forgotten.”

He smirked, handing me the letter bag. Just my luck, I got an X in my handful.

“Are you feeling okay today?” he asked, sorting his letter tiles. “I mean, after yesterday . . .”

“I’m trying not to think about it too much.”

“Does talking about it upset you?”

I shrugged. “I’ve got you here, so it’s not like I’m sitting alone. For all I know, it was some drunk moron trying to scare a stranger for kicks.”

“Is that what you think happened? Have you ever heard of that happening anywhere in the history of time?”

“I’m not a textbook. I don’t know. I’m just not sure why anyone would do that intentionally.”

Owen said nothing for a long moment. The symphony playing on the radio reached its final measures. Then, he picked up his letters.

“S-N-O-B,” he read out while putting down the last three tiles. “Snob makes six points.”

“I hope that’s not a dig at me,” I joked, letting my legs stretch out over the rug.

“No. Never.”

The radio announcer continued in her dulcet monotone explaining the selections of Debussy. The next performance had been recorded in England a decade earlier.

“Performed in front of the Duke and Duchess of Kendal, this had been noted as one of the best performances in the conductor’s storied career,” she finished. *“Please enjoy, and thank you for listening.”*

Claire de Lune hummed through the speakers. Flecks of white noise dusted over the dulcet melody coming alive. As it went on, I smiled again. The terror of the day before felt so small as the notes floated up and through the air. My worries washed down the city’s storm drains. No matter what happened to me, I never needed to feel alone.

“What did they say it was?” Owen asked then.

“*Claire de Lune*,” I answered. “It’s one of my favorites.”

“I didn’t know you liked classical music enough to have favorites.”

I chuckled at the thought. “I thought you’d know by now that I’ve got a wide variety of interests and an opinion on everything.”

“You know what I’ve been interested in for a while now?”

I propped my elbow on the table and my chin in my hand.

“No,” I played along. “What, Owen?”

“What it would be like to dance with you.”

I sat up taller, letting my hand fall away from my face. It surprised me time and again. Owen concealed a romantic side under all those stoic expressions. Taking his hand, I followed his box step around the rug. Owen pulled me closer, and his smile grew. Our game became quickly forgotten.

“I’ve never slow danced in my underwear before,” I teased. “At least, I haven’t done it *with* anyone before.”

Still in my camisole, I felt silly, not that I minded it. I welcomed the distraction. I savored his right hand resting on the small of my back and the sensation of his warm voice by my ear.

“That night, when you came outside in your little black dress and no heels, I wished I’d seen you dancing,” he murmured, letting his baritone send shivers across my skin. “We’ve been to so many parties, but like the fool I am, I never asked you to dance.”

“You could’ve asked me anytime,” I answered. “You don’t even need music to dance.”

“Don’t you?”

I shook my head, grinning. “You only need to count to four.”

Mouthing each number, I kept time for our shared steps. Every rise and fall of my chest began to fall in line, until it didn't. Holding me close, Owen had a power over me I didn't understand. Part of me hoped to never figure it out.

The mystique made it all the more thrilling when he inched closer. My heart leapt at the promise of more surprises. Even then, I never imagined these small moments getting old, only us.

My dark hair would turn silver and white. Laugh lines might settle around my face, but the flash of light in Owen's colorful eyes would always be ageless. I'd never have enough time to explain how he made me feel, so I let my eyes fall shut. I said nothing.

What even was forever? When Owen's lips met mine, it felt like a lifetime. An entire world got wrapped up in one touch, and it became my everything.

Without thinking, I allowed my feet to slow. My fingers laced around the back of his neck, while our kiss became another kind of dance. Our lips parted to invite each other closer. Owen's tongue dipped into my mouth as I lured him down toward me and rose up onto my toes.

It was all too much. It wasn't enough.

Another rush of delight coursed through me, and I felt his steady grip against my backside. My feet left the floor. Spinning, floating, I didn't know exactly where I was. I kept my eyes shut tight as my lips trailed over his jaw, feeling its scruff and shadow. The radio grew distant.

"The song isn't over," I taunted him. "We're supposed to be dancing."

"I remembered."

"Remembered what, baby?"

I heard the wicked grin in his voice as he replied, "How I've always danced with you."

He knew. Owen always knew. Letting his hands relax, he lowered me onto the bed. I only let go of him to tug off his T-

shirt and cast aside my camisole. The lazy afternoon burned up between us. As thunder rumbled overhead, my entire body became electrified by friction and heat. Sweat pearled at the nape of my neck, even as the wind blew in through the open window.

The hurricane could have been a blizzard. It didn't matter. Owen and I made our own kind of music. Underneath him, I got lost in the eye of his storm that rumbled as my hands ruined his hair. It was only fair.

Owen took pleasure in ruining every other part of me. He outlined my curves before settling around the curves of my breasts. His lips took hold of mine, muffling my whimpering sigh of excitement. As his thumb rolled over my nipple, I melted.

"I think I've learned how to make you move . . ." he mumbled, kissing the hollow of my throat. "I know how you dance for me."

"Prove it, then."

Even while becoming breathless, I goaded him, getting a rise out of Owen and his hardening length. It compelled his hands to trail down my sides and settle between my legs. His two fingers gave me my answer.

I didn't hesitate to spread my legs wider. Inside me, his fingers curled, coaxing out every panting breath from my body. He brought me to the brink. Kissing my shoulders and neck, he begged another question like a challenge to see how far I might go.

"Is this enough proof for you?"

"No," I insisted through a shit-eating grin. "I need more."

"How much more?"

Sliding down his chest, my hand wrapped around the answer. Our eyes connected. My hips wiggled in anticipation, already sensing what would happen next.

"Everything you've got," I declared.

I teased his tip and felt how eager Owen was. Dripping with desire, he entered me with slow, sure purpose. Every inch made my muscles tremble until they were taken by the feeling. Fully sheathed inside me, Owen didn't give up.

"You're shaking," he murmured in my ear, "and when I kiss you here, you'll gasp."

His lips pressed against the pulse point behind my ear, and I couldn't stop myself. Owen showed how well he'd studied me. Keeping time for us, he set a pace that had me coming out of my skin. Pleasure reverberated through every nerve until it had nowhere else to go.

It settled at my center and rose up like the tide and my hips. Each time Owen rocked into me, my hips met his, but when I reached for him, he stopped me short. He took both of my wrists in one hand and gathered them over my head. It was as if he tied them together with an invisible string and tugged at a dozen others.

He led the dance. I followed the steps, inviting him to show me the way. He was the only man I wanted to take me to such great heights. As my head grew light, I let out a soft moan.

It was coming so quickly and so fast. I hardly knew what to do with myself.

"Yes," I pleaded on instinct. "Yes, baby. I . . . I'm . . ."

All my words got away from me. It took all my focus not to fall apart.

"It's like you said," he swore then, sensing how my shivers grew into shakes. "You only have to count to four. Count and let go."

"*One*," I breathed.

My spine arched.

Swallowing back a cry, I whispered, "*Two*."

My toes curled. Every time Owen thrust into me, my walls clenched around him, begging to hold onto him and come undone.

“Three,” I counted, despite it all.

I was so close. As my breath caught, I didn't know if I could make it. My lungs struggled to find enough air to make the sound. I forced myself to find it. With one small word, I gave us both the freedom to let go.

“Four.”

It hit me like a tidal wave. Rising up and over, the euphoria washed over my body. Owen's release coursed through me twice over, and I took it all. Damp with sweat and reeling, I threw all my weight onto Owen as he rolled back. His arms wrapped around me then.

For a long minute, I didn't know where he ended and I began. The dance had turned into delirium. Every certain feeling echoed in our gasping breaths.

Owen must have known how I felt then. With his hand stroking the length of my spine, it seemed so certain. Every act became our confession.

I loved Owen with every fiber of my being. I couldn't imagine loving anyone else. It would always be him.

“Angel,” he mumbled through the haze.

The air cooled. Normality settled back down over us.

Relaxing, I pulled away from Owen and flopped back onto the bed. My head hit a pillow. Something changed underneath me, and time slowed for a second time.

I heard a creak first and then a metallic groan. Fast as I yelped, the bed tilted underneath us. The mattress slid half off its platform. A broad arm flew to my waist. My heartbeat never got a chance to calm down.

“I—I think we broke the bed,” I mumbled between deep breaths.

A second of silence passed, and then, a laugh came. I watched the wide grin spread over Owen's face. The low chuckle swelled into something louder that warmed my skin like afternoon sunshine. Warm tingling swept over my skin. A

giggle escaped me, growing louder as my muscles relaxed. Even as our laughter faded, the smile stayed.

“I’ll get you a new one,” he promised then. “Just tell me what you want.”

Owen

With the last turn of the wrench, Delilah's new bed frame finally came together. It was black wrought iron—something on sale and not easily bent. The cheap metal frame had been tossed out the second this one had been ordered, and for the last five business days, Delilah and I had slept with the memory foam mattress directly on the floor.

I lingered around her like a shadow, not that she seemed bothered by it. I learned how she moved across the bed while reading. When she started, she started at the top of the bed as expected. Her head propped itself on the pillows until she slowly started rolling down. Halfway through, she was on her belly and lying diagonally across the bed. By the end of her session, she was at the foot with her legs draped over the side. She put her bookmark back only when she had nowhere else to roll.

I learned how she layered her little bottles of serums like mixing a potion for her face before sealing it all under a white cream moisturizer. A spray went into her hair that smelled like sweet coconut. In the afternoon, she came up for lunch breaks, pleasantly surprised on the days she found me.

“You're still here?” she asked, curious and never critical.

“I went over to the office and picked up a case file,” I answered the first time. “The job's nearby.”

She fixed lunch for us both, ate, and kissed me goodbye. If it hadn't been for my odd hours and cryptic conversations about work, Delilah might have been bothered by my presence. My need to be around her might have made her stop.

Delilah didn't need to worry, and for the first time, computer work felt like a blessing. I could do documentation and online research from her home office. When necessary, I went out. I'd done it just that morning. I got some groceries and tailed an adulterous husband for two hours. Although, sitting in my Jaguar, I felt the tension in my chest again.

The panic rose. Adrenaline coursed through my bloodstream. I had grown used to it, like an old friend. I knew how to breathe and slowly ease it down. When I stopped by the office again, I focused on what I could do.

The rain cleared away, and with Detective Fry's help, I found Delilah's attacking SUV through a red-light traffic camera. The driver made an illegal U-turn and got their rear end caught heading back around to face Delilah again. There was no face, but the license plate was a start . . . a head start straight to a dead end.

I refused to give up.

"Listen, I need you to look into the rental of a black Cadillac SUV," I explained to Charlie, saying he could give the name and number of Detective Fry if necessary. "It was rented online through a prepaid card, and the check-in process was done remotely. I can't find any immediate information on the renter."

"We could contact the rental office," he suggested. "Even if the driver didn't meet anyone, there's likely security footage of the lot."

"I called them yesterday. They haven't gotten back to me yet."

The independent lab hadn't reached out either. When I sent over the wine bottle remains from Thad's car, I knew it would take weeks. I had to wait in line. Testing requests were constantly backed up because the facility was known as the

best. If I couldn't get results from them, I needed an answer from somewhere, *anywhere*.

"All right, I'll look into what I can, but you know, I've got cases of my own to deal with," Charlie reminded me. "My insurance fraud case had been giving me headaches all week."

"But you're the one who talked me into the Drayton contract."

"I know. I know." He sighed loudly so I couldn't miss it. "Don't get your underwear in a damn bunch. I'll reach out if I find something."

"Thank you."

Between waiting for the rental company, for those lab results, and for Charlie, I needed to do something productive. I had to feel like I'd accomplished anything other than watching the Charleston rivers crest and drain away.

I assembled the bed and put on fresh sheets. I let a pot roast cook in the oven and dealt with business around the apartment. It made me feel normal again, in a way. Fixing up Delilah's new bed and the toilet for Trust Fund when he came around, I began to get a small sense of promise like my feet could keep moving forward.

One step at a time was all I needed to worry about.

Delilah didn't need to worry over anything else. She had a business to run and friends to see. The more I imagined her fearful or anxious, the more uneasy I became. Her peace was my peace. Her safety became all that mattered. When I was younger, I remembered feeling something like that for Alex and Mom, but it had never been like this. Delilah had me diving into depths of fixating madness.

"Honey, I'm home!" she called.

Her shoes thumped against the floor, one after the other. She arrived in the kitchen wearing her blue linen dress and barefoot. Rising up on her tiptoes, Delilah kissed my cheek.

"Good day?"

“Better for being here,” she replied. “Don’t tell me you haven’t eaten.”

It was nearly nine o’clock, but the roast took four hours to cook. Delilah didn’t close up until eight. Eating some carrots as I prepped, I never risked starving.

“I’d rather have dinner with you,” I told her.

Delilah rolled her eyes and smiled. She teased me all she liked, but it was a beautiful distraction to cook dinner for us and have her coming home. Through all the insanity, being at home with Delilah had become the best silver lining. Seeing her laughing grin was like watching sunlight break through clouds.

“How can I be mad at that?” she bantered back.

“If you are, I’m hoping your new bed can make up for it.”

Her eyebrows went up. “You put it together?”

I walked her down the hall. Seeing her new iron bed frame, Delilah smiled and ran her hand over the fresh quilt. Her fingertip circled one of its yellow roses.

“I don’t know how I’m going to get by on my own anymore,” she tried to tease, but I caught the sincerity of her casual glance.

“I think you can manage fine without anyone else, especially me. You’re not Trust Fund.”

Delilah turned back. “He didn’t come over, did he?”

“Broken toilet flap. I made him go buy a new one at the hardware store, and I showed him how to install it.”

“You bullied him into being useful?”

I chuckled. “I didn’t do anything.”

“I think your presence was enough.”

Delilah took a step closer. Her hand reached for mine, giving me the chance to pull her toward me in the doorway. The final traces of her perfume mingled with the scents of wine and herbs in the air. It was intoxicating on its own, and in

the back of my mind, I started seeing a life centered around moments like this.

It would be heaven on earth to have a small life with her. The world felt too big most of the time. Everyone expected too much, but when we locked the apartment door, my worst fears stayed on the other side. I only needed to be the man who adored Delilah, keeping her safe and content.

I leaned against the door frame. Delilah leaned against my chest.

“That guy might be scared because I’m tall or whatever.” I brushed back her curtain of bangs. “Just remember you’re still the terrifying one here.”

It was Helen who brought about the Trojan War. Joan of Arc served as the divine savior of France, and it was sirens luring men to their deaths. In all the world, there was nothing more fearsome than a determined woman, and mine remained defiant. She refused to let anyone tear her down.

“And don’t you forget it, baby.”

Delilah never let me. Through dinner and the football game after, her presence existed as a constant reminder. She curled up on the couch, a book in her hands and her feet in my lap. Her nighttime shower made the bedroom smell like her lavender cream.

“You worked so hard today,” she remarked while getting dressed. “This bed is so nice.”

“You picked it out.”

“You put it together. I didn’t expect you to do it all on your own.”

I shrugged it off. “Honestly, I didn’t mind.”

Sitting down on her side of the bed, Delilah smiled so beautifully. Her damp waves fell around her face, and her cheeks were still a tad pink. She was a vision in the golden lamplight.

Was she finally going to tell me? I heard her say “I love you” so many times in her sleep. I lost count of them all, but

as she inched closer, I thought this might be the moment. This apartment didn't have to be hers alone. We could be happy.

"Thanks for this," she offered. "It was great to come home to a new bed . . . and to you."

"You're welcome. I hope you enjoy it."

Delilah's expression softened. "I will in a bit."

"What do you mean?"

Part of me knew. We had played this game enough times, and if I told her everything I longed to admit, the moment might be lost.

With a gleam in her eye, Delilah insisted, "Owen, baby, I think you've earned a reward."

Delilah

Owen deserved the world. I wanted to feel nothing but safe and loved. He gave me so much. I loved him so much, and even if I couldn't muster up the courage to confess, I needed Owen to know.

After my near hit-and-run, I thought I would be more terrified, looking over my shoulder and afraid to step out onto the street, but it became impossible to be afraid with Owen around. I only worried about him. His smile had started fading like leaves on the oak trees. As the weather cooled, it seemed every piece of Owen began wintering, and he was damn determined to hibernate in my home.

He became like a church grim, lingering around to ward off demons. His dark features became shadowed with sobering moods. I didn't mind the extra warmth or the watchful companionship. If it offered him some strange comfort, I didn't mind his worrying, either.

He paced around the kitchen without the pads of his feet making much sound. Owen was more of a shadow guard than he had ever been. I wondered when he'd take to prowling around the block.

Even lying there on his side of the bed, he looked ready to jump at any given moment. He stayed tense and on guard. The lamplight from my nightstand illuminated the lavender shades

around his eyes, and they were only getting worse. He ensured our safety at the expense of his sanity.

“I don’t know how you do it,” I mused. “You always know how to take care of people, how to step up and be the leader, but who’s taking care of you?”

Crawling closer, I let my lips linger an inch from his. Only a veil of hot air stayed between us, but Owen felt miles away even when reaching out. He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. His palm pressed against my cheek. Still, the chasm remained.

I was right there for him to have and to hold. He didn’t need to worry.

“Won’t you let me take care of you, baby?” I pleaded. “Can’t I make you happy?”

Owen’s answer became husky and pitched low.

“You always do,” he assured me.

“You won’t fight me?”

“How could I?”

Like all those times before, he surrendered. My tongue dipped into his mouth while my hands wandered down his bare chest, tracing over every softly sculpted edge. His faint scars roughened the surface, yet they were all familiar to me now. They were a part of the landscape, part of the mountain that sheltered me each night.

“It’s just you and me,” I murmured. “There’s nobody else.”

We were safe there in a world of our making. I licked the length of my hand and grinned like the cat who got the cream. Owen’s green eyes flickered alive. He held my gaze as I took him in hand. I tugged down his underwear and let it get lost somewhere at the foot of the bed. Slowly twisting, my hand stroked from base to tip, and Owen relaxed into a long, slow exhale.

Kissing him one more time, my lips wandered down his chest to meet where my hand kept its steady pace. They moved over his stubbled jawline, the crook of his neck, and

down his breastbone. I took my time kissing each place with purpose. Anticipation heightened around us.

“Just relax,” I whispered before letting my hand and mouth meet.

My lips enveloped Owen’s tip, and his entire body shuddered. When my fingers traced down the base of his rigid length, the tension escaped from his chest. I welcomed the chance to be his distraction and his obsession. With every bob of my head, I let time and every possible worry become irrelevant.

After being so patient, devoted, and damn noble, this was the pleasure he deserved.

Owen had seen so much of me, yet he never shied away. He didn’t run. He didn’t scoff or sneer. I always swore that I was fine taking care of myself, but life became less of a burden with someone else. With Owen around, I didn’t need to be alone.

“Holy shit,” he muttered between subtle groans. “Don’t stop.”

He grabbed fistfuls of my hair, holding it back and encouraging me with a gentle push. He never caused any pain even as he began losing control. A groan rumbled through him. Above me, I caught the sudden clench of his jaw, and I savored every second.

I took pleasure in knowing what I could do to him. I wasn’t the only one falling apart time after time. We both needed this. When Owen found his release, we each had our satisfaction.

“*Delilah,*” I heard him mutter so quietly that I might have imagined it.

I swallowed everything he offered, not letting a drop escape. Wiping the corners of my mouth, I watched Owen’s entire body sink deeper into the bed. Honeysuckles could have grown over his naked body. He never would have known, and lying down beside him, I wished it would.

Whatever I needed to make Owen happy and keep him there with me, I welcomed. Three small words offered to do the job, but they caught it in my throat. They were too big and carried too much weight.

Was I too scared to say them? Was I too paranoid of being proven wrong?

I studied the massive frame consuming the other side of the bed. He sank deeper into the pillows and mattress. His hand reached for me under the covers. If the reminder of a touch helped him rest easier, I was happy to give it. I wiggled closer and let my face press into his pillow. Each breath he took stayed slow, steady, and even. For the first time in a long while, Owen appeared to relax.

“Sweet dreams, angel,” he bade me, and with him, I always had them.

It was the early hours of the morning before the sun woke up. With a sharp breath and a churning in my stomach, I came alive. It felt like I’d been not quite asleep for hours, like my body never settled, and something inside me felt off.

I’d never tiptoed so quickly in all my life. Covering my mouth, I slipped out of bed and down the hall. The bathroom light burned against my eyes, and I decided to shut it off only a second after clicking it on. I didn’t need the sink light. The nightlight over the toilet pointed me where I needed to go. On my knees, I waited and waited. Each dry heave felt like an announcement of what was coming. The bile rose in my throat.

Then, it happened.

I slumped back onto the cool tiles while the contents of my stomach got flushed away. Taking in intentional gasps of air, I tried to remember the last time I’d been sick. Had it been something I’d eaten? Did a customer come in and leave some stomach flu behind? With all the hands I shook, there was no telling, but my mind and muscles were too tired to sleuth out the culprit.

I dragged myself to my feet once the feeling passed. In my cabinets, I found my emergency sleeve of saltines and a can of ginger ale that washed down some stomach medicine. Owen didn't need to wake up. Everything settled as quickly as it came. The bland crackers gave my body something to hold onto while I lay back down, and in the first faint morning light, I felt Owen's arm shift over me.

"You okay?" he mumbled, though he didn't sound awake.

He wasn't going to remember this, and tucking myself into his chest, I knew Owen worried enough already.

"I'm fine," I whispered back. "We're okay."

He seemed to accept the answer. Owen settled around me with a half-asleep sigh, and I tried to get another hour of sleep. It didn't do me much good. By the time my alarm went off, the churning feelings returned. The saltines were easily overpowered, but I managed to stave it off. As Owen showered, I veered away from coffee and toward a nice piece of boring buttered toast. I made a second as Owen returned from the bedroom wearing one of his crisp, nondescript collared shirts.

"Heading out early?" I asked.

"I've got a case to look over, and the client's coming in for their initial interview first thing," he explained, reaching for the coffee I'd made solely for him. "Delilah?"

"Yes?"

"It's not like you to get out of the bed in the middle of the night."

I watched him pour the coffee into the travel mug that was basically his now. He secured the steel top before taking his first sip. As my second piece of toast popped up, I reached for the marmalade.

"You shouldn't go without breakfast," I replied instead.

"*Delilah.*"

Still, Owen took the marmalade toast on my Blue Willow saucer. He folded it over and took a bite as if that might earn

an honest answer. I turned away instead, placing the dirty knife in the sink.

“It’s no big deal, really.”

“You were gone for over fifteen minutes.”

“I came and had a glass of water. My mouth felt dry.”

“Is that all?”

Turning, I felt the small of my back press into the sink’s ledge. Owen had me cornered with his green eyes bright. I couldn’t hide from them for long, not with the worry settling into the fine lines on his forehead where his laugh lines should be.

“Oh, such a February face,” I mused teasingly. “You’ve got crumbs on you.”

He didn’t stop me from wiping them away with my thumb. I let the silence stand between us as I tried to bide my time. Combing my fingers through his hair, I smiled for him.

“You’d tell me if something was wrong.”

It sounded more like a declaration than a question.

“If my place is on fire, I’ll tell you,” I replied. “I’ll even count on you to bring the water bucket.”

When Owen kissed me, his mouth continued to beg the question. He pleaded for the secrets I kept tucked away, but he wasn’t the only one wondering. With his fingertips gripping the nape of my neck, my bones twisted under the weight of my own worry.

I had been too tired to think about it, but the sun rose. The wheels of my mind turned. With a cup of green tea in hand, I went to the bathroom to confirm my suspicions.

One last placebo pill sat in my birth control pack. Forcing myself into only four periods a year, my body usually jumped at the chance to torment me, but the seven days were up. It never came.

Should I have told Owen before he left for work? He worried so much already that I didn’t want to set off a false

alarm. I needed to get ready as quickly as possible, throwing on a work polo and forgoing the usual makeup. I had more pressing concerns than concealing the lilac shadows around my eyes.

The pharmacy at the corner of Market and King had to be the closest one.

Hustling, I felt the pressure of needing to open up and be at the store, but I couldn't wait. A cryptic text to Curtis bought me enough time to blast down to the drug store and hurry back. I didn't even bother going back upstairs. The second I had a test in hand, I drove like a bat out of hell and hurried into the shop's bathroom.

"Delilah?" Curtis asked.

"Lady problems," I answered while blasting past him.

He kept moving. In the isolation of the powder room, I ripped open the two-pack box and used both. My eyes bore into them as I waited. How was I supposed to breathe? How would I ever peel my free hand from its white-knuckled grip on the handicap bar?

Two minutes passed like an eternity. The control lines were perfect, and the two plus signs looked just as bold and blue as a cloudless summer sky. I couldn't believe it. Some part of me knew, yet my jaw went slack.

Unless those tests lied, I was one hundred percent pregnant.

Owen

The office felt foreign now. I had to learn my way around for a second time, remaking the patterns I'd never committed to memory. Sitting at my desk, I noticed its weight and size compared to Delilah's. My ears perked at the forgotten sound of the air conditioner blasting overhead, but I forced myself to stay put.

An electric twitch jolted my pinky finger. I shifted in my seat for the third time. No amount of willpower calmed me down, not after seeing Delilah that morning.

It didn't help that the Drayton case had been so dragged out. I wanted it over with and finished, but it refused to shut, unlike Delilah. Her half-asleep pouting and her dreamy-eyed excitement were familiar. I knew what it was like for Delilah to smile with sleep still in her eyes, but after she disappeared long enough for the bed to get cold, something changed.

She turned inward. Neither her answers nor her expression made sense, but we both had work. I saved my prying for another time.

A vital message waited for me in my inbox. The private investigators in New York City wrote back in the early hours of the morning, sending over a background check they had done on Thaddeus Drayton well over a year ago. The investigator known as Cassius King had put together a hell of

a dossier. I almost couldn't believe it when I started unpacking everything he found.

MOST OF THIS stuff is long gone now, Cassius wrote me. I doubt you would have found it on your own. My cyber teams had a hell of a time uncovering this much, and if I am being honest, I suspect there's more out there somewhere. Maybe you will know where to look.

HE WASN'T WRONG. In the files, there were names of corporate entities now wiped from the face of the internet. Email addresses proved to be no longer valid. I looked at the names of these business contracts and their strange locations. They all had one thing in common.

On every contract, Thaddeus had signed his name. He was the lawyer drafting these papers, but even a blind man would see that they were fakes. They reminded me of what Tucker told me ages back. He mentioned companies that developed weapons and stocks on the rise.

"He was working on a lot of business deals back then," Tucker told me over lunch that day in September. "I mean, he was a corporate lawyer, so that's not really surprising. I just remember him mentioning some work on the side too—moonlighting, I guess."

My mind played through the conversation when another email popped up in my inbox. The lab based out of Atlanta finally had their report, and though that damn wine bottle gave them nothing, the cork told another story.

It was porous and perfect for a needle to stab through. Eagle-eyed photographs showed the fine hole, and lab toxicology reports explained the tiny dot of a hole. Traces of ketamine, a date rape and alcohol soluble drug, had been found.

I didn't need to research its affects. Ketamine caused vision trouble, slurred speech, sedation, and much more. For all intents and purposes, the one who took the Ketamine would

appear extremely drunk. He or she would even seem drunk enough that driving off a bridge into a marsh wouldn't be surprising at all.

My eyes didn't know where to look. Darting back and forth, my eyes went back to the old findings from New York. Thaddeus Drayton's moonlighting had undoubtedly been corrupt. He drafted up paperwork for businesses that didn't exist. He legitimized millions of dollars being funneled through these shells. The realization sent me reeling. Leaning back for a minute, I took a moment to breathe.

This was why he died.

If he had been leaking those secrets to Tucker, who else had he told? How badly did someone need to shut Thaddeus up? The puzzle had finally come together. I started to see the full picture with my own two eyes.

It began with those accounts Thad added his mother onto. Right around that time, Thaddeus had been photographed more and more around town. He was out promoting himself, meeting people, and making the necessary connections. I opened up some of the articles I had bookmarked for safekeeping. Each of the events coincided with deposits into Thad's accounts.

Clicking through the photographs, I noticed a particular title. My mental image sharpened.

Local Businesses Support South Carolina Historic Preservation Society, it read.

Maribelle Drayton sat on the charity's board, and sure enough, her son was right there in the photograph of modern-day hucksters posing as if it were a fraternity picture—a beer in one hand and a cocksure smile spread over his face.

It was never what you knew. It was always *who* you knew, and the Draytons seemed to know everyone. If it wasn't the husbands and their business dealings, it was the wives and their social circles. They used altruism like self-promotion. Their parties became an excuse to see and be seen. Thaddeus

saw plenty of businessmen and millionaires who regularly made headlines.

One of them had been arrested for insider trading. As a patron of the veterans' charity that the Drayton family supported, the man in question had also been a client of the corporate law firm where Thad had once worked. The criminal had been caught last winter trying to send his company's funds into some offshore accounts.

He hadn't given up his sources . . . *yet*. Still, I wondered who he might name if I brought up the signatures at the bottom of every falsified document. Thaddeus's oversized scrawl sat there as clear as day. On every document Cassius King sent over, the signature couldn't be missed.

I had been overlooking the obvious—Thad Drayton was never an innocent man.

Poring through the documents, I saw phone call records and emails from other criminal cases. None of it could implicate Thaddeus when seen separately, but I had every piece of the story laid out before my eyes. If Thad hadn't already been dead, he would have been facing decades in prison for these kinds of white-collar crimes.

I jumped up from the desk. I needed to go talk with Doug. I had to gather answers to all the new questions popping up in my head. Out of habit, I hurried to check the time on my phone. Delilah had texted me an hour earlier, and I missed it.

You'll be here for dinner tonight, right? I was thinking of making pasta, she wrote as if I was eating dinner anywhere else. If you've got a case to work, I think there's some stuff we should talk through. I can wait up for you.

Shaking my head, I didn't take two seconds to consider the weight behind her words. I never looked for the message underneath. I was too caught up in the new information. Already grabbing my things, I replied to her in haste.

Don't worry. I'll be there by eight.

I rushed off the text conversation and pulled up my contacts. I couldn't press the name fast enough. Hustling

toward my car, I heard the phone ring four times before heading to voicemail.

“Douglas, it’s Owen,” I began. “We’ve been looking at the Drayton case from the wrong angle. I thought this had something to do with the missing party guests, but it’s not. I think this is bigger than we expected. Call me when you get this.”

This was about more than a selfish man who didn’t know the meaning of the word “no”. This had nothing to do with a woman who’d dared to defend an innocent person. That scene had been so small, so miniscule against the bigger picture, and now, I realized it was only ever a distraction.

I hung up the phone and headed toward the car. I needed bank records and to see filings from Drayton’s old law firm. If my suspicions proved to be right, the reality of Thad’s death, the reason and the culprit, was bigger than anyone had ever imagined.

Delilah

The promise of dinner kept my hands moving. All afternoon, I couldn't sit still. The store kept my body occupied, but half of my mind stayed on that sudden turn of events.

"Look, I learned how to make a GIF in my marketing course," Lana told me over lunch. "I can use wine bottles around the store to make more content for our channels."

She pushed her phone across the table. Sure enough, she had a wine bottle wiggling over a pastel background. I tried to smile.

"Looks great, Lana."

"I can schedule some posts this afternoon for our wines on special," she suggested.

I nodded. "Whatever you think is best."

Her red eyebrows scrunched together. Setting her phone down, she forgot the rest of her sandwich.

"Are you okay, Delilah? You seem . . ."

"What?"

"To be elsewhere," she replied. "You've hardly touched your lunch."

I glanced at my bowl of potato soup. Most of it was growing cold in my glass container, and with my stomach in knots, I didn't have much space for anything else.

"I'm just feeling a little preoccupied, that's all," I said.

"Something you wanna talk about?"

I shook my head. "Not right now. Like you said, we've got new wines on special, and I need to re-shelve them. The GIF idea is great, Lana, seriously."

She smiled. "Thanks."

Tugging down my T-shirt, I put the rest of my soup back in the mini-fridge. Perhaps by dinner, I'd get more of an appetite. I could make some pasta for Owen and me, and over some salad and a plate of baby-sized tortellini, I could tell him about . . .

"Hey, Delilah?" Curtis called from the open doorway. "There's a guy here who wants to talk with you. He's a detective."

Feeling a jolt of anxiety, I rubbed my palms against my jeans. What did a detective want with me? I tried to find an answer in my head, but there was only one way to find out.

"Did he give a name?" I asked Curtis.

"Fry," he replied. "Doug Fry, I think."

Detective Fry loitered around the red wine. A bottle of Australian Dolcetto rested in his grip.

"That's an excellent natural red, very accessible for those who are new to young wines," I remarked. "Great expression of terroir."

The paunchy man looked like a good ol' boy growing old. Lines of disappointment had settled over his aging face. His mustache looked like a broom, but he did his best to be polite. In a way, he almost sounded friendly.

"You must be Miss Kaplan," he said, extending his free hand to shake. "Tell me, how long have you stocked this wine?"

“A few years now. It’s become a popular choice, and you can’t get it anywhere else in Charleston.”

“Is that correct?”

I nodded. “I had to personally seek out the vintners to get it here. They’re two brothers from Victoria.”

“Is that a county somewhere?”

“Australian state,” I explained. “You can read all about it on the back label.”

He turned it over. His scraggly eyebrows went up as he read.

“Bottled in Melbourne,” he muttered to himself. “And you sell this at parties too?”

“I serve it at wine-tasting and private events, yes.”

“Anyone else have access to it?”

I folded my hands in front of me. I wanted somebody to hold onto. As a nagging sense of dread crept over my shoulder, the room began to feel both too big and too small.

“You’re not interested in buying the wine, are you, Detective?”

“A bottle of this wine was found in the wrecked vehicle. We suspect foul play.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry to hear that. Of course, there are bartenders who work events with me. I’m partnered with a hospitality group based here in Charleston, Eaton Events, but I’m the one who oversees every delivery and wine sale. If there’s an order you need to see, I . . .”

The doorbell chimed. A pair of uniformed officers stepped through the door, and I began to see what was happening here. Fry had only been buying time with his small smile and talk.

Curtis stood taller behind the counter, trying not to look nervous.

“Can I help you two?” he asked, but they didn’t answer.

Everyone's eyes were trained on me. The room wasn't too big. It was small, definitely small. The walls closed in around me as my emotions flourished into everything I couldn't find the words to describe.

It all happened too quickly.

My life shattered like a red wine over a white tablecloth. Glass went everywhere and cut into me. As time crystallized, the shocking shrapnel tore into my heart and sliced open my back. It was all I could do to breathe. I had to keep breathing.

"I think I've heard enough. Delilah Kaplan, you're under arrest for the murder of Thaddeus Drayton," Detective Fry declared, his voice going in and out. "You have a right to remain silent . . . to have an attorney during questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer . . ."

What the hell was happening?

Struck numb from shock, I let the uniformed officer lead me through the back door of my own shop. His car was parked on the curb, blocking Trust Fund from getting into the alley. Hanging his head out the window, my neighbor gawked.

"I'll call your parents!" I heard Curtis shouting. "I'll take care of the store!"

"Don't tell 'em anything!" Lana screamed after him.

My vision was too blurred to know what was going on. Like a puppet, I moved from place to place at everyone else's will until a paper cup was set down in front of me. It was a cool drink of water sitting on an old Formica table. The light flickered above us. Focusing, I noticed no windows but only a large mirror behind the two men across from me.

It had to be two-way. Staring into it, I tried to will my eyes to see past the trick, but I only saw my best impression of a deer caught in headlights. Detective Fry cleared his throat.

"I don't think you remember me," he began.

Under the table, I tightened my hands together. "From when?"

“From May, when I was first assigned to Mr. Drayton’s case,” he replied and tapped the papers in his hands against the table.

It felt like a way to unnerve me. He slurped his hot coffee slowly before twisting around the brown paper collar. It served as a reminder that my lips and tongue had grown dry. With my mouth turning to sand, I reached for my water cup, and it brought me back down to earth.

“You interviewed me,” I finally remembered. “I told you I argued with Thad before he left the event.”

“And you said it was over . . . a girl?”

“Another guest,” I amended. “He was harassing her, trying to corner her and being, well, an asshole. It was all typical behavior for him, really.”

“And you didn’t like that, did you?”

Detective Fry scratched at his beard. Studying him, I began to see the faded yellow spot on his white polo shirt and the sun spots on his furrowed forehead. The world came into view slowly but surely, and I began to take stock of my situation.

“When will I be getting my lawyer?” I asked him instead of answering.

His scruffy eyebrows went up. “Are you refusing to speak without one, Miss Kaplan?”

My focus flitted over to the young man with his back pressed against the wall and his arms folded. He looked so young and green. I wondered if this was all new to him and if he was only here to watch and learn.

“Miss Kaplan?”

I had gone too long without answering.

“Tell me where your last question was leading,” I told him. “No offense, sir, but you look a little too tired and old for games, and this isn’t some crime drama.”

Under all that hair, Fry drew his mouth into a hard line.

“All right,” he finally agreed. “The point is that you have a pattern of instigation around Mr. Drayton. Throughout the years you knew him, you imploded his relationships, got into shouting matches, and openly hated him.”

“Like I said, he was a harasser and a jerk.”

“So . . . you decided to play vigilante one last time.” Fry laid out two folders. “That night, you had gone to gather more wine bottles, correct? The first time we met, you said you had grabbed a bottle and started walking back toward the garden when you heard arguing.”

“Yeah, it was a white wine . . . one of my favorites.”

I remembered for that exact reason. A little effervescent and not too dry, the white blend held notes of almond and a memory of dried apricots. I often recommended it to people making charcuterie boards. Talking about it always reminded me of dried summer sausage and the healthy snacks my mother once put in my lunch box.

It was the last bottle of the night, and Thad snatched it from me. I had gone off to where the extra wine sat tucked away from view. That was how I spotted them.

“You admitted that you had seen Thad getting too familiar with the other guest. She looked uncomfortable.”

I nodded. “As a woman, I know the signs.”

“Which is why you had enough of Mr. Drayton, and when you saw the chance to stop him for good, you took it. You wanted to teach him a lethal lesson he’d never be able to forget.”

I shook my head. “I’m not indulging that remark.”

Tempted to demand a lawyer, I felt curiosity gnawing and clamoring to understand. They still hadn’t explained the grounds of my arrest. After trying so hard to avoid the rumors, I never even knew the case was still being investigated, and the detective picked up on my piqued interest.

“You can stop this at any time, Miss Kaplan, but we have enough to build a case against you. A private team has seen to

that.”

“A team?” I echoed, more confused than before.

It didn’t make sense. How could a grudge and an argument make me a murderer?

“We found a partial print on the neck of the bottle that matched with yours,” he insisted. “At first, it was believed the bottle was beyond use, but an independent lab examined the bottle found in Mr. Drayton’s car.”

“So? I supplied the wine. The cases had been in my store’s cellar. I helped deliver the wine too. That’s why I was there.”

“Not to spike the wine bottle you handed to Thaddeus Drayton?”

Opening the left manila folder, he tapped on a page of results I couldn’t process. My hands went back in my lap. I didn’t want to touch anything. I needed to wake up.

“Traces of the drug were found inside the cork,” he went on. “Now, perhaps you didn’t mean to kill him outright. Maybe you expected him to learn a lesson, some kind of karmic fate, if you will. Regardless, we have your print on the cork, a bottle in your hand, and evidence that you were the last person at that party Mr. Drayton spoke with before leaving.”

The right folder got unfolded before my eyes. In shades of gray, screenshots of blurred video footage showed me with a bottle in my hand, the back of that girl, and Thad hovering over me. Fry moved the top photo to show another with Thad holding the bottle and me watching him go. The last showed his old sports car leaving through a gate not even ten minutes later. The time stamp in the corner proved it.

I swallowed hard. This wasn’t a dream at all.

“We’ll be handing over the case to our prosecutors,” he insisted. “A jury of your peers will have to decide whether you’re guilty or not. As it stands, this is out of my hands, Miss Kaplan.”

I scoffed. “You’re kidding, right? The files are literally *in your hands*.”

Groaning as he rose to his feet, Detective Fry didn't seem to care. He gathered his things as if he were leaving some boring conference call. My fate was too weightless and pointless to affect the likes of him.

"Have someone escort her to a holding cell," he told the silent boy behind him. "Then, call a bus to come pick her up. Her legal representation can speak with her there."

A bus? He didn't mean . . .

The two stepped out, and a middle-aged woman in a uniform stepped into the room. The sight triggered a mirage I hated to see. Saying something to me, the woman had to guide me by the elbow.

Visions raced wildly through my mind. I saw a prison guard outside my delivery room. I imagined trading out my hospital gown for an orange prison jumpsuit the second the doctors released me. Even if they let me go, I wasn't free. My parents would have to come from Arizona to take the baby into their care, or would Owen demand custody?

Which was better? Which was worse?

The last shred of logic inside my brain screamed that the fear didn't do any good, but I couldn't stop the frightening fantasy. As a female guard came and led me toward a cell, I felt dread crushing me from behind. Everything became inescapable.

I swallowed back the bile in my throat.

"I don't know if it matters," I croaked out, "but I'm pregnant. If you see me getting sick, it's because of that."

The guard half-turned her head and nodded. The trained indifference felt like another wound in my chest. I didn't expect warm congratulations. I doubted they would bring me crackers and ginger ale on demand, but realization hit me hard.

She was the first person I told about the pregnancy. Nobody else knew. I hadn't called my mother or sat down with Owen. All my quiet hopes had been ruined, and without any clear escape from this nightmare, I didn't know how to get them back.

Owen

My eyes went to the clock on the wall. I needed to leave for Delilah's in an hour, but after running around all afternoon, I needed to get my notes documented and the record straight. The gaps in the original report were starting to be filled . . . but not all of them.

Delilah said in her first witness statement that the girl had dark hair, a short sequined dress, and had been wearing a gold necklace with some sorority letters. Follow-up notes showed nobody on the guest list matched that description.

Had people been allowed to bring guests?

Outside, the afternoon grew darker, but my laptop screen lit up with the spreadsheet of an old guest list. There were little marks beside certain names. Numbers superscripted names without much of a pattern, and that's when I realized the obvious.

The list only showed names of the paying guests. Some had purchased one spare ticket or even five. The names the police had first used were only a fraction of the guests. This list was literally useless, but I knew one place that always gave better answers.

"Memorial Day Charity event," I mumbled as I typed into the image search bar.

A list of search results popped up. Marketing images of the venue filled the top row, but I scrolled further down the page. A local magazine had gone and photographed the event for a summer feature. The forty photos appeared like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

Holding my breath, I clicked one after the other. There were several local celebrities, a senator, and a congressman. Plenty of wealthy, beautiful people showed off their whitened teeth, and then, it came up.

A long row of young women was photographed on an ivory lounge. Among them, a girl matching Delilah's description smiled eagerly for the camera. My brain wanted to read the photo's description faster than my eyes could see. I blinked twice, focused, and found her.

Her name was Hailey Clarke. When I searched her, several social media pages popped up, including articles from a college newspaper. I clicked one of her socials and looked at the bio written under her name.

"Alpha Beta Omega. Sisterhood first, second, and forever," I read aloud.

On my desk, my fingers tightened into my palms. Each knuckle grew white. The more I saw, the angrier I became.

Thad had been nearly twenty-seven years old, while she was *nineteen*. Looking at her page, nobody could have been fooled into thinking she was older. Nobody would miss the pixie-like stature or her willowy limbs. If anything, Hailey looked younger, but the post from her nineteenth birthday that spring proved her age.

Her latest post proved she had been at the Memorial Day event too.

In a birthday post to her so-called "big" sister, Hailey used a photo from that same night. She wore the same shimmery dress with those three Greek letters strung around her neck. I wrote her instantly.

There was no good way to say a man had been murdered. I couldn't sugar coat the situation, but time didn't give me a

chance to regret anything. I began typing up a new case analysis—one that would finally show the full picture.

I had ten minutes before I needed to leave. Pushing it, I kept on typing.

Thaddeus Drayton had been using nefarious connections for insider trading schemes. That much was obvious. To know what happened there, I needed someone like Charlie to look through Drayton's old bank records, but instinct told me to follow the lead. Sending Charlie a message, I heard another chime on my phone.

Hailey Clarke messaged me back. I quickly forgot my text to Charlie, abandoning my computer for my phone. The girl had already gone back to college for the fall semester. Way up in Ohio, she had never known anyone was looking for her or who Thad was.

WHEN HE INTRODUCED HIMSELF, I didn't understand his name, she wrote. I'd never heard of the name Thad before, so I thought it must have been Brad or Chad. Honestly, I had also been drinking some sparkling wine. It was only supposed to be one glass before he offered me another, and since I was drinking underage, I didn't want to make any trouble. I only wanted him to leave me alone.

One of the event staff looked out for me, and I hope she knows I'm grateful. I was so caught up in finding my sister that I never looked back. I decided to put it all out of my head. Nobody ever came to me about the incident.

THE PHONE BEGAN to ring before I could type anything back. Doug was calling me.

"Hey, did you get the email I sent?" I asked the second my ear touched the phone.

"Yeah," he replied. "We've got her here at the station."

My heart stopped. "*Her?*"

“Miss Kaplan,” he told me, sounding more annoyed than confused. “The report you sent said ketamine was found on the bottle with her thumbprint.”

“So?”

“The partial print was on the cork you had tested.”

My heart pounded. The booming sound filled my ears as blood rushed to my head. I’d never lost my cool so quickly. Even under fire, I’d never felt such panic racing through my veins. It consumed every inch of me as I jumped from my seat.

“They all had her prints! She was serving the damn wine!”

The clock turned, and I realized I would be late for dinner with Delilah. Dread dropped me back into my desk chair. Our evening wasn’t happening. Somewhere, somehow, everything started going horribly wrong.

Clenching and unclenching my jaw, I told Doug, “I’m coming to the station.”

“When?”

“*Now.*”

I’d never blasted through so many yellow lights and cut off so many people. If a cop tried to pull me over, they could follow me to the station. They could write my ticket while I figured out what the hell was going on.

“Fry!” I called out the second I saw him.

Hustling across the station floor, I caught the detective in his office doorway. He held a coffee cup and a handful of files. His grimace never faltered.

“When are you gonna quit yellin’ at me, boy?” he demanded to know. “I’m supposed to be going home. My youngest has a home football game tonight, and my wife wants me to feed the dog.”

“I’ll calm down when you tell me how the hell my lab results turned into you arresting Delilah Kaplan this afternoon,” I insisted, my words edging into a growl.

I wanted to drag her out of there. If I ripped the keys from one of the uniforms working the late shift, I could get her out of South Carolina before anyone noticed. Keeping state secrets had been my job for years. Hiding Delilah would be no problem for the likes of me.

He grabbed me by the sleeve and dragged me into his office. Behind us, the door slammed shut. Doug audibly groaned.

“You don’t get it,” he fussed. “I’ve got the DA up my ass about this. For whatever reason, he’s insisting I need to push this case forward, and I’m not wasting the last five years of my career in deep shit because of some girl. A jury can throw this case out of court.”

“And what if they don’t?” I pressed him. “Are you willing to send an innocent woman to prison?”

“How do you know?”

“Because this is clearly circumstantial, and don’t tell me you don’t know the DA’s wife is in that same stupid charity group as Maribelle Drayton. This isn’t justice. It’s turning into a fucking witch hunt, and *you* are letting it happen.”

He didn’t answer for a long, tense minute. Grumbling, Doug turned away from me, scratching the bald spot on his head. Every inch of his body screamed that he didn’t want to be there. He only wanted to go home, see his kid’s game, and forget the office existed.

“I’ll tell you what,” he surrendered. “You get until the preliminary hearing to give the court a better option and prove that Miss Kaplan didn’t do it. If it’s so outrageous that she’s the culprit, I don’t know why you’d want to bother, but I’m not making it my business.”

“Because I know her, Doug. I know she wouldn’t do this.”

And I love her.

I loved her more than the stars in the night sky. I loved her more than my pride. Even if I ruined myself in the process, I needed to see Delilah safe and sound.

Running a hand through my hair, I urged Doug, “Let me talk with her. If you just give me a few minutes with her and a couple of days, I know I can sort this out.”

He grumbled again but relented.

“I’ll give you five minutes.”

Doug led me down a series of hallways that started feeling like catacombs. A fluorescent bulb flickered. The world seemed farther and farther away. Leaving me in a cramped room for a few minutes, Doug returned with Delilah still wearing her Firefly T-shirt and jeans. Her eyes had never looked so dim.

“Owen?” she realized in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Doug eyed us both. “I’ll be right outside. Remember, Braun—*five minutes*.”

The door clicked shut, and in a flash, I wrapped my arms around her. Delilah’s cheek pressed against my chest. She’d never felt so cold.

“Have you eaten?” I asked first.

“They brought me a sandwich about an hour ago with some water,” she replied, her face still burying into me. “How are you even here? Did Curtis call you or something?”

I shook my head. “No, nothing like that. I know people here.”

“Of course, you do.”

A card table and two metal folding chairs sat in the corner. We each took one. With her hand holding mine over the table, I ached to keep Delilah close, but the camera in the upper corner served as a constant reminder. Time was already slipping away from us.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” she began. “I don’t know how this happened, but I really need to get out of here.”

I squeezed her hand tighter. “Don’t worry, Delilah. I’m going to get you out of here. This case is bullshit, and even if it would get thrown out at the preliminary hearing, I’m going to make sure it doesn’t get that far.”

“How?”

Her eyes searched mine for answers. Her voice remained soft and quiet, but I felt her crying out. It wounded me to see her like this. She never should have been backed into this corner.

“I’m going to examine the reports again and make a full analysis that will throw any argument the district attorney’s office makes null and void. It’s all circumstantial. They can’t pin this on you, Delilah.”

Her forehead furrowed. Her grip on me began to relax.

“How do you know that?” she murmured. “They didn’t just tell you, did they?”

I couldn’t keep it from her anymore. Professional conduct be damned, I knew it had gone on for too long. I sucked in a deep breath and came clean.

“I was hired by the Drayton family to look into the circumstances around their son’s accident. I realized it wasn’t an accident, but I never expected it might lead to anyone suspecting you. It’s insane. It’s—”

Her gaze tore away from me. The atmosphere in the room suddenly changed like a storm cloud letting everything go. The dark shades filled Delilah’s frowning face.

“I . . . I didn’t realize you were looking into Thaddeus’s death.” Her fingers curled into her palms. “Since when?”

“His parents approached me when I got back. They wanted someone they could trust after losing faith in the police.”

“When?”

“Back in August.”

“August?” She paused. “You mean, you’ve been investigating me this entire time, while we . . .”

Her voice faded away. With her eyebrows knitting together, she sat taller in her seat. The storm wasn't around Delilah. No, it came alive *inside* her.

I watched thunder roll over her expression. Her anger eclipsed any affection she held for me. Blood-red fury filled her eyes while the pleading hope faded from her face.

She went on, "You lied to me, Owen. All this time, you've been leading me on."

"It wasn't like that," I insisted. "I figured when I got the lab results done, it wouldn't show anything. I was only trying to fill gaps in the first story."

"You're the one who found that drug in the wine bottle?" Her eyebrows went up. "You're the one gathering this evidence for the police?"

"I've been exchanging information with the detective, but they jumped to the wrong conclusion. It'll only take a few days. I promise I'm making it right."

"Sure."

"Delilah, I—"

She cut me off. "It's not like we were ever in a real relationship. I mean, what do you owe me?"

Shaking my head, I didn't understand what she meant. She folded her arms over her chest. Her head didn't turn my way. As our final seconds got lost, I saw her anger, but something else simmered underneath.

The door opened.

"Time's up," Doug announced.

My five minutes couldn't have been up, but I had no right to argue. I'd pushed his limits enough. Rising to my feet, I remembered what Delilah had said.

"You wanted to tell me something."

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter now."

"Is it about the case?"

“No, it’s nothing like that. Detective, I’m ready to go back now.”

Delilah offered no goodbye. Staring at the floor, she followed her feet down the hall and away from me. I couldn’t blame her for being upset, and once I solved the case, it would all be a moot point.

The answers sat right out of reach. I felt them there just beyond my fingertips, dancing around me and taunting as they went. Once I got them, though, Delilah wouldn’t be forced into this cruel gambit any longer.

I was going to make sure of it.

Delilah

Living like a murderer wasn't as bad as I imagined. In the county jail, they gave me a firm twin bed, a shelf, and an opaque window that let in some hazy dust-filled light. The steel toilet and sink sat in the corner without a mirror, and it made me realize how much I looked at myself. One night locked up in darkness had forced a thousand little things into the light.

The lights clicked on around dawn.

When my parents made it from Arizona, they put money in my canteen fund and promised to stay in town until the whole ordeal ended. I didn't tell them about my pregnancy. Besides it being the worst time and place, my mom's mouth ran a mile a minute. She struggled to keep her tongue untangled.

"Everything's taken care of," she insisted at the speed of an auctioneer. "We've called Sam's mother and got the best recommendation for a defense lawyer. Yours should be here this afternoon."

She told me Cassidy was beside herself with worry. Sam had been calling for answers, but nobody seemed to know Owen's involvement except me. His name never came up, yet I kept getting promise after promise that it would all be made right.

My father shook his head. In the dull light of the visitation room, I saw the lavender bags under his eyes. His thin features verged on gaunt. The shoulders of his lanky runner's frame stayed hunched over with worry.

"I have a mind to sue these detectives once your name is cleared," he fussed under his breath. "This is false imprisonment, lies, and . . . and . . ."

I tried smiling. "Come on, Dad. We both know you're not the type."

"I would be for you," he swore. "You deserve the world, pumpkin, not . . . *this*."

Staying hopeful, Mom reached for my hand. "It'll be over before you know it. I stopped by Firefly. Curtis is doing everything he can to keep the store ship-shape for you. Pretty soon, you'll be back in your old bed and running your wonderful store. This will be like a bad dream that never happened."

"That's right. It shouldn't have happened," Dad grumbled. "It doesn't even add up."

I couldn't understand it either. Lying under my one beige blanket, I stared into the darkness wondering where I had gone wrong. No good deeds went unpunished. No good man was ever real.

Owen had put me here. Whether he meant it or not, this was his fault.

He made a fool out of me and out of everything we almost had. His stupid rules and professional code kept him silent. If he had only told me the truth, I would have helped him. I could have told him everything I knew, but then again, hindsight was always twenty-twenty. I'd never learned how to go gracefully or forgive with ease. If Owen told me that he'd taken the Draytons' case, I probably would have kicked him out of my life for good.

I always look for excuses, I thought to myself. That would have been the perfect one.

From the very beginning, I longed to feel what it would be like to have Owen Braun as the man in my life, but those desires built themselves on a dream. They lived in fantasy and refused to face a man who was, after all, only human. I didn't want to think about it anymore.

I couldn't stop.

My eyes shut tight as the lights went out that night. After one night there, I thought it might get easier. It didn't, though. The lumps in the mattress didn't change. My screaming thoughts refused to quiet down. Feeling ill after my measly dinner, I begged for a minute of peace. It came somewhere in the middle of the night.

Through my dreams, I left my cell. I found myself back in my living room with my head on Owen's chest. My body hadn't changed, but something told me I was pregnant. Our baby would be coming soon.

He's gonna be wonderful, Owen mused. Everything you make is wonderful, even your dinners.

I found myself laughing at the line.

Ten fingers, ten toes, and two sweet eyes were all I cared about. Owen looked so happy, though. His bright-eyed gaze wouldn't leave mine. I had never felt so adored. I'd never felt so wanted, and I wanted more than anything for the moment to be real.

It hurt to think that it only existed in my head. Even if this pregnancy came as a surprise, even if our relationship hadn't been traditional or even expected, it didn't change what I desired so deeply with Owen.

I loved him with every fiber of my being.

The scene began to shift. Through a haze, I felt us moving together. One dream changed into another, but the yearning remained.

I love you, Delilah.

It was all I ever wanted to hear.

His hands slid up my legs again, gripping me like they did the very first time. They moved over my magnolia tattoo before sliding in between my thighs. Owen held me in his palm. Like no man before him, his touch had me coming undone.

Two fingers slipped inside me. He craved me as much as I craved him. As I moaned for Owen, his mouth moved over my neck. I knew it with every fiber of my being, but I couldn't feel it. No matter what I did, I gave too much of myself and got back so little.

It wasn't really happening. Owen wasn't there.

My fingers combed through his hair, but I couldn't feel the familiar curling ends or small tangles. The heat of his skin didn't warm me. I only knew the weight of his chest hovering over me . . . crushing me . . .

I love you, Delilah, he murmured again, but it wounded me like any other lie.

It all began to feel like a prison. I had to get out from under him. If I didn't, I wasn't sure what would become of me. I couldn't trust Owen to keep me safe, so I willed the scene away. All those burning desires gave way to unrelenting fears.

Under the harsh light of a hospital room, my baby arrived, and I was in an orange jumpsuit. Owen couldn't be seen. My parents weren't there, nor any of my friends. After everything, I found myself more alone than ever before. The satisfaction I begged for wouldn't come. Nobody offered me any peace.

With a sharp, sudden gasp, I jolted awake.

The dream vanished. The pain lingered.

I tried curling away from it, rolling onto my side and balling up. I wanted to be small again. I wanted to be the little girl who could call out for her parents right down the hall, but my mother wasn't coming. Nobody was. The man I'd once trusted with my whole world made his hollow promises, but they only made the echo of my isolation louder.

I loved him so much that it hurt me deep within my bones. I couldn't turn away from it either. No matter how I tossed

about in bed, my heartbreak was its own prison sentence, and it made my agony that much worse.

Owen

No moon illuminated the dark hours of the morning. Alone at the office, I scoured the evidence and threw back cup after paper cup of coffee. I couldn't go to Delilah's place without her. I couldn't sleep or even sit. My hands tingled from the caffeine, but I wouldn't stop until I found my final answers. Her first court appearance had been scheduled.

Time wasn't just working against me. It had become the bane of my existence.

There was no time to explain things to Doug, no time for him to subdue the district attorney's office, and no time for Delilah to waste away in a cell. Thinking her name, my mind tore away from the cluttered screens and papers covering my desk.

I let out a long, shuddering breath. Frustrated with myself, I stared at the image of the cork. It nagged me, taunted me, and made me feel a fool. Something obvious about it hid in plain sight.

Right then, realization struck. I messaged the sorority girl back in an instant, and Hailey didn't take long to answer. She must have been on her phone.

Hailey, there was a wine bottle the female staff member was holding, I wrote. Do you remember what it was?

Not five minutes later, she replied, *It was a white wine with a big yellow flower on the bottle.*

And would you be willing to submit written testimony on that, if necessary?

Yes, I could.

Delilah said in her interview that the bottle Thad took had been a white wine. I sorted back through the photos on my computer. The lab had sent over photographs with their results, and on the bottom of the analyzed cork, there was a stain of deep, burgundy red. It made me slump against the desk and lose my breath.

The bottle in his car wasn't the one from Delilah's hand. Without that piece to the story, their entire case unraveled. Delilah had to be innocent, but that didn't tell me who the real culprit was.

Excited and electrified, I searched back through the evidence. My eyes had been forced on that lone damn scene for so long, but it didn't mean a thing. Thaddeus's killer had been somewhere else on those grounds . . . but who?

I racked my brain for a memory, a random piece of knowledge that had appeared to be a dead end. I fought against a migraine, clicking through document after document on my computer.

"No," I grumbled, casting aside one file after another. "No, not it either."

It was back to the drawing board—my report notes. If Charlie had been in the office, I might have asked for his fresh eyes. Mine grew bleary and dry from staring at screens for so long, but I wouldn't give up. I had felt worse while gathering top secret intel.

Delilah was worth more than any stupid information.

Intel . . . intel . . .

I remarked to the empty room, "It's not about what you know. It's about who you know."

The Draytons prided themselves on being connected, rubbing elbows with the best of the best. If Maribelle dined with millionaires and politicians' wives, if Thad glad-handed senators and C-level executives, what kind of information did they gather?

More importantly, how much were people willing to pay for it?

One investigator had already gathered evidence of Thad's crimes, but nobody ever asked if he acted alone. Thaddeus and his mother shared a single bank account. Thousands went in and out in the blink of an eye.

Scrolling again, I found the account records I had on file. One tiny detail stuck out over all the others—everything stopped when Thad died. His mother never touched another penny, although I doubted Thad had spent hundreds on salon and spa treatments the week before.

She didn't stop using the account out of respect for her son. Their jig had been up. Knowing so little about Thaddeus Drayton, I knew his arrogance and how recklessness had fooled him into making grave mistakes.

One of those mistakes must have put him in his grave, and somebody tried to cover it up. I clicked *Print* on all of it and downloaded it onto a cloud drive. Doug needed to see this.

Just then, my cell phone vibrated on the desk top. My hands trembled as I picked it up. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten. My blood sugar had to be dropping.

"Hello?" I greeted the stranger.

"Hey, is this Owen Braun?" the man asked.

"Yes, who's calling?"

It was the car rental company, the one from Delilah's attack. The gruff man wanted to show me video of the night in question.

"Can you come in this afternoon?" he wondered.

I jumped up from my desk. "I'm coming right now."

The Jaguar blasted through yellow lights and whipped around turns. I ignored the honking horns. Following the GPS, I made it to the rental shop out on the airport's edge. I shoveled the last of an energy bar into my mouth before throwing open the door.

I didn't care about the man's startled look. Leading me to a back room smelling of cigarettes, I focused the last of my strength on watching the video he pulled up for me on an old desktop computer. The SUV sat parked and waiting for its renter.

She might have tried to cover her face in oversized sunglasses and a ball cap, but I knew that platinum bob anywhere. The tight sheen of her skin couldn't be missed. I started shaking again.

"I've got a zip drive here," I spat out. "Can you download this for me? I need to take it to the police."

The man nodded, his double chin pressing into his chest. I asked him about anything he might know while he worked slower than I wanted. He couldn't say anything. Neither could the sullen boy working the desk, but their security footage was more than enough.

Planes took off overhead as I flew back across town to Doug's station. If a traffic cop caught me, they could follow me there, but nobody did. Time still raced against me. Delilah still needed to be set free, even if I held the truth in my hands.

"Doug!" I barreled through the station shouting. "Doug! I've figured it out!"

Bagel in hand, Douglas Fry stared at me with wide, shocked eyes.

"Can I at least finish my breakfast?" he grumbled. "Of all the ways to act . . . God, Owen, you look like hell."

"Delilah Kaplan is sitting in hell, but we can both get her out of it." I slapped down the print-outs and showed him the evidence. "The wine in Drayton's car was red, damn dark wine, but the bottle he snatched from Delilah was white. The girl Thad was harassing can attest to it."

Doug nearly choked on his mouthful of food.

“You found her?”

“She’d been a plus one of a fellow sorority sister. I’ve tracked her down online. Now, I’m gonna need you, a uniformed officer, and a police car. You’re gonna be making an arrest.”

For that, Doug’s bagel could wait.

I explained everything to him over the sound of flashing sirens. His unmarked car whipped through the city streets and headed out into the wealthiest suburbs. We drove through elegant neighborhood streets that made the police car smell of fresh-cut grass. A lawn service cleaned up their clippings across the street. Each yard must’ve taken hours to get so pristine.

“Looks like some kind of Stepford nightmare,” I remarked, scanning the cul-de-sac of mini mansions.

I saw no sign of life except for the few workers. If the Draytons’ name hadn’t been pressed in silver letters onto their mailbox, I might have wondered if the home had anyone living there. Oversized and blinding white, the giant house reeked of stately Southern propriety from its booming doorbell to its lofty ceilings.

No speck of dust stayed on the antique furniture. No petal fell from the fresh flowers decorating the front hall. Under the crystal chandelier, the whole house sprawled out over the property with one picturesque room after another.

My foot tapped on the marble floor as we waited for the housekeeper to fetch her employers. Doug loitered behind me, staring at the family portrait hanging on the wall.

“I wonder how much that cost,” he mumbled to himself.

Then, the clicking of heels echoed through the air. My attention whipped toward the sound.

“Owen?” Maribelle descended her sweeping staircase. “I’m sorry, but this isn’t a good time. My husband and I are heading to a friend’s retirement lunch. Can’t this wait?”

I called back, “I didn’t think you’d want me to wait, Mrs. Drayton. I’ve figured out how your son was murdered.”

She froze on the last step. Her blue eyes grew round and wide. They nearly matched her cocktail dress.

“Oh?” she breathed.

Eddie Drayton sauntered into the foyer wearing a black suit and a sullen expression. He looked more fit for a funeral than anything else. Throwing back the last of his drink, he grumbled at the sight of me.

“What is all this about?” He shifted toward his wife. “Maribelle, what’s the boy doin’ here?”

“He’s come to tell us about Thaddeus.”

I shook my head. “No, not exactly.”

“Then, I think you can come back another time,” Mrs. Drayton insisted. “We already know that Miss Kaplan’s been apprehended. I—”

I stopped her short, holding up a hand. The couple exchanged a look.

“Trust me, Mrs. Drayton. You’ll wanna hear this.”

It had been right there before my eyes, and now, Maribelle would be forced to acknowledge it too. I held up the folder of documents nobody could ignore.

“I’ve compiled my report for you, as stated by our contract,” I began. “It’s true that your son, Thaddeus Drayton, was murdered, or well, he was given enough Ketamine to do the deed himself.”

“We know that,” Eddie commented, gesturing to Doug. “He told us that yesterday when he called about arresting that Dinah girl.”

“Delilah,” I corrected.

He shrugged. “Oh, whatever.”

Maribelle stayed in place on the stairs. That masterful smile became her poker face. She had turned masquerading

into an art, and if any of this bothered her, she refused to show it.

“The thing is that Delilah Kaplan didn’t have anything to do with Thaddeus’s death. She was framed for it.”

“By who?” Maribelle demanded.

“By you, Mrs. Drayton.”

Stunned silence chilled the air. Her icy demeanor started to crack as sunlight cut through her windows. Down the hall, I saw a group of cleaning ladies huddled together listening to the commotion.

Throwing back her head, Maribelle cackled. “That’s absurd! Lord knows, why would I need to frame anyone? I’m the one paying you, Mr. Braun. I’m the one who knew my son’s death wasn’t some accident.”

“Of course, you knew,” I answered as plain as day. “You were his co-conspirator.”

Her laughter stopped short. Doug stepped away from their portrait.

“I’ve been in contact with an investigation firm based out of New York City,” he explained to the Draytons. “Over a year ago, they had been asked to do a background check on your son by one of their clients. The investigators found your son had been colluding with arms dealers, warhawk politicians, and some, well, let’s call ’em *dubious* business owners.”

“White-collar criminals at their finest,” I added.

Eddie Drayton frowned harder. “How does that apply to Maribelle? I mean, all she does is charity work and lunch with those friends of hers.”

“What better way to get to a man than through his wife?” Doug suggested before chuckling to himself. “I know my wife’s gotten me into plenty of nonsense. I never would have run my son’s tee ball team if it weren’t for her.”

“But Delilah Kaplan gave Thaddeus the wine bottle,” Eddie insisted. “That’s where y’all found that poison, right?”

Maribelle rolled her eyes. “Don’t start using your brain now, Eddie.”

“It’s funny you bring that up,” I said, ignoring her. “The bottle Miss Kaplan had in her hand was a white wine, and the bottle that held the drug was an *unmistakable* red.”

The couple shared a look as I laid out the printed photographs on their foyer table. The heady smell of the white lilies wafted up to me. For such a beautiful place, their house hid so much cruelty, violence, and deceit. Eddie lived in perfect ignorance, shocked to see the images, but Maribelle didn’t move.

I continued, “The nearest place to buy this wine would be in Washington DC, but it would be easy for a politician to pick up a bottle on the way back home . . . or even his wife. You’re friends with a senator’s wife, correct, Mrs. Drayton? She was one of the co-hosts of that charity event, and she’s served with you on the Board for Historic Preservation.”

“Well, t–that’s possible,” Maribelle stammered, her grip getting white on the banister.

Doug piped up. “I got one of our uniforms to check. It’s all right there online, Mrs. Drayton. You don’t need to deny it.”

Eddie Drayton scowled at his wife. In shock and confusion, he shook his head.

“Maribelle, what the hell have you done?”

“She committed insider trading and tried to cover up someone else’s crimes,” I answered for her. “And when I didn’t take the bait, she even tried to silence Delilah herself. It’s not like a dead woman could defend herself, even if I was able to find the young woman your son harassed that night.”

Eddie’s jaw went slack. For the first time, his vision cleared and his eyes widened.

“I can’t believe you. How could you do this . . . to our son?”

Her sharp eyes shot his way, but her bitter laugh cut through us all.

“Oh, spare me!” she shouted. “You’re the one who couldn’t win a damn poker game! You couldn’t make a good bet or a good stock purchase to save your life! Time after time, you’re the one who wasted our money! Do you know how hard it was for me to keep up appearances and give Thaddeus what he deserved? You stupid, stupid man, I could have been something if I didn’t have you dragging me down!”

“That’s why you set up those accounts,” I added. “Thaddeus used his job as a corporate lawyer to help create shell corporations, legitimize trade deals, and the like. You offered him the connections to do it, but he got greedy, didn’t he? He went out of his way to make a quick buck on insider trading, using conversations with businessmen and your political friends. He got sloppy, and he risked exposing the entire operation.”

Maribelle swallowed hard. It didn’t matter to me who actually injected the wine with Ketamine. I wasn’t contractually obligated to answer that question, and by the look of fear in Maribelle’s eyes, I got the sense she already knew. She could save herself and come clean down at Fry’s police station.

“Did they threaten you?” I asked her then. “Did they say that if you didn’t help cover up their murder of your only child, you would be killed too?”

“I’m not saying anything without my lawyer present,” she insisted, but I saw the answer in her trembling hands.

She had been terrified. All this time, she’d acted out of panic and self-preservation, and in her grief, she needed a scapegoat. She wanted a witch to burn.

“That’s probably a good idea, Mrs. Drayton, but that won’t change that we’ve got footage of you picking up the exact rental SUV which tried to run down Delilah Kaplan the same day you harassed her. We’ve already got it down at the station.”

“You can’t prove that was me, I . . .” she started but stopped herself.

I dared to take two steps forward. Taking in a deep breath, I stared down the woman who'd tried to ruin Delilah's life. Part of me wanted to throttle her. The other part saw how pathetic she was. Trying so hard to be above everyone else, Maribelle had only made herself small and petty.

"You got sloppy, Maribelle. Trying to go back and hit her again cost you," I said in a quiet tone. "Although, your biggest mistake was pinning everything on Delilah Kaplan so specifically. If you cast doubt elsewhere, it might not have become so obvious. If you picked literally anyone else . . ."

Hatred burned blue in her unfeeling eyes.

"I wanted someone to pay for it!" Maribelle screeched, slamming her palm flat onto the foyer table and rattling her bouquet. "*My boy is dead!* Who cares about that girl, anyway? She's nobody, a fat little Jewish nobody! Even her own mother didn't want her! Why couldn't she take the blame?"

My volume stayed low. Shouting over her tirade would only make me hoarse.

"Because she did nothing wrong. She stood up for an innocent young woman, and she does matter. Delilah matters to her family, her friends, and to me."

Maribelle flinched at my unflinching declaration. Her face twitched, but she didn't back down. The woman orchestrated a witch hunt and lit the fire for an innocent woman she wouldn't mind seeing burn. Grief blinded her to the chaos and collateral damage.

She regretted none of her crimes. She only missed her son.

Beside me, Douglas watched the young uniformed officer come through the front doors and take Maribelle toward their car. We each stared through the window as staff members whispered down the hall. Shock rippled through the air, and Eddie Drayton agreed to follow them all to the station. As for Douglas, he scratched his chest and grumbled.

"Like I said, the wine found in Drayton's car can be bought in DC. I can send you the shop information," I made sure to tell him. "When you open up the case, I'd look into one

of Maribelle's close friends, a senator's wife. She helped arrange that charity party, and she would've known what wines Delilah brought for her tasting station."

Doug huffed. "Damn, that's some friend."

"I think friendship has a very different definition for people like them."

"It's gonna be a hell of a thing arresting a senator and his wife," he mused. "I guess they'll be lettin' Miss Kaplan go."

"How soon?"

"Tomorrow."

"Today." I turned to stare him down.

"But I . . ." he began but stopped himself. "Yeah, all right, today. I'll make a couple calls."

I sighed a long, slow breath of relief. I didn't know if the Draytons would ever pay me for my work. It didn't matter anymore. The money had become pointless to me. I needed to shower, shave, and maybe grab a burger first, but I found myself smiling again.

Delilah was coming home.

Delilah

When the guard showed up at my cell, I figured it was for my hearing. The police told me about it. They said the district attorney's office had to prove their evidence against me warranted a trial. My lawyer hoped this would be our chance to buy some time or even set me free from this nightmare.

"You're gettin' out of here, Miss Kaplan," the woman said in a thick drawl. "Come on, we've gotta arrange a ride for you."

I didn't expect that at all.

My parents promised to be there the minute I told them the news. Over the phone, I heard Mom telling Dad to find his socks and an umbrella. She wanted to take me out to eat, feeding me like all good Southern mamas did in a crisis. I needed to think of a place to go.

They were so happy for me, elated that I was getting my freedom back, but somehow, I couldn't join in on the celebration. I was given back my T-shirt and jeans. My cell phone came alive in my hand. Walking through the gates of the county jail, I felt chains still wrapped around my chest.

"Delilah!"

With gray skies overhead, Owen's eyes had never looked greener. They flashed with that familiar bewitching quality.

His mouth toyed with a smile, looking almost hopeful.

He must've known I had been let out.

I thought he would keep me safe, I thought to myself. I thought he might be the one.

The gate crawled shut behind me. Now that I wasn't a criminal, the jailers didn't care what I did. I could shuffle my feet on the sidewalk until the rain washed me into a gutter. I wished slipping away from Owen was that easy.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, tugging down the back of my shirt.

Nobody had bothered to give my clothes a good ironing while they held them. It didn't make me feel any more confident to wear an outfit that smelled like a musty yesterday. Although, I began to think a warm shower wouldn't be enough to get me clean.

"I came to get you," Owen explained and took a step closer. "After I knew you were gonna be released, I—"

I cut him off. "I already have my parents coming to pick me up. They'll be here soon."

"Your parents?"

"They flew in early yesterday morning after Cassidy called them."

On instinct, Owen began to smooth the front of his shirt. He had the privilege of showering and shaving in his own bathroom. Even if fatigue shadowed his eyes, Owen had no idea what it meant to lose sleep while already feeling ill. He didn't understand how paranoia started to feel like my oldest friend. His Jaguar was parked across the lot, ready to take him anywhere he wanted, but it wasn't going to be anywhere with me.

"I guess there's worse ways to meet your parents," he mumbled.

I scoffed. There wasn't patience enough in the world for me anymore. Reality wrenched and twisted my body like an old, wet rag.

“You aren’t meeting my parents. Honestly, you can go.”

He didn’t understand. Shaking his head, Owen took another step forward. I stepped back.

“Delilah, I get that you were surprised by the news. I never meant to let it go this far, but you have to understand my hands were tied. When I took the case, I didn’t expect for it to lead us here. I never imagined you would be implicated at all.”

“You knew what people were saying about me,” I fired back.

“Yes, but it was all stupid rumors. No matter what Maribelle did, I knew you hadn’t done anything wrong.”

“But you did, Owen. You screwed up.”

He let out a hard, sharp exhale. “I followed protocol. I obeyed my contract with a client. You can’t be mad about that. Didn’t you trust that I’d fix this? I—I killed myself getting you out of there.”

“Even though you put me in there.”

“Not intentionally.”

“Well, you know what they say about good intentions—they lead straight to hell!”

“I don’t get why you’re so angry,” he went on anyway. “I only ever worked to clear your name, but I had to follow the evidence. It was out of my hands when the police arrested you, but I got you out!”

“So you screwed me over and tried to cover your ass.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s like every girl’s dream.”

Owen had never looked so visibly frustrated. His hands clenched and unclenched. His old masks wore thin. After all our time together, I knew how much anxiety and stress lived right under his skin, but I’d become his breaking point. I was the one pushing him closer and closer to the edge. His frown curled over the lip of that cliff, trying so hard to hold on, but I had already careened down to rock bottom.

Owen pushed me first.

“I don’t get you right now,” he muttered, and I gave up.

“Because I’m pregnant!” I blurted out. “I’ve spent the last few nights wondering if I was going to give birth while serving time, and you were the one who put that nail in my coffin. You were the reason I’ve been lying awake, terrified and confused. Right now . . . I don’t even want to look at you anymore.”

The truth struck Owen dumb and blind. He looked like a deer caught in headlights, and I was the car barreling down the highway. I’d ripped the rug out from under his feet and pushed Owen down into the dirt. The chance for redemption slipped away faster than he could grasp it. My parents’ car had pulled up. I saw it across the way.

“That’s not what I was trying to do—”

“I don’t care!” I fumed over a distant roll of thunder.

Continuing quickly down the sidewalk, I stormed toward my parents’ rental car. I could see my Dad making space in the hatchback’s trunk. The closer I got, the faster Owen followed. He chased me down the sidewalk calling my name.

“Delilah! Delilah, stop! You’re not listening to me!”

It was the wrong answer, but right then, nothing would have been good enough to save the situation. All the numbness began to fade away from me, letting my fears, paranoia, and resentment bubble up to the surface. I wanted to scream until my voice gave out. I wanted to run down the highway. In that fraction of a second, I would have done anything and everything to get those awful, all-consuming feelings out of my body.

“No, I’m not!” I screamed back, turning on my heels to glare back at him. “How many nights did I listen to you, and you said nothing? I trusted you, and you abused it! And now, what? You want me to be patient and polite and accept whatever bullshit line you’re about to tell me? If that’s what you wanted in a woman, you should’ve picked literally anyone else! Just . . . just damn you, Owen! Damn you and your stupid rules and contracts! I don’t want to hear your excuses!”

At his wit's end, Owen called out, "Then, what's your excuse for not telling me you're pregnant? How long have you known and said nothing?"

My footsteps faltered, slowing to a halt, but I didn't turn around. I couldn't keep looking back. If I did, I feared I'd give in to all his hollow promises. I'd look at those bright eyes and be trapped again. Refusing to look back, I let my words come out sharper than razor blades.

"I guess we both had our secrets."

Thunder rumbled in the distance. There was nothing more to say or do. My shoulders slumped under the weight of it all, yet my feet couldn't move fast enough.

I left Owen to stand there in the storm. He didn't say anything else. The only answer was the fat drop of rain falling on my head. One, two, and then a dozen more, I raced toward my ride toward freedom. Mom hopped to kiss my cheek, but the weather hurried us back into the car.

"Who's that over there, honey?" she asked me.

They must not have seen my tirade. The coming storm drowned out my useless noise.

"Nobody important," I lied. "Just someone I knew. He helped work my case."

"Was he the one who helped get you out?"

Dad looked back in the rearview mirror. "Who? That young man back there?"

"Delilah says he helped with her case," Mom explained. "The detective told me a private investigator gathered the evidence that cleared her name. I asked if it was him."

"So, was it, pumpkin?"

Inside, the air conditioning felt cold against my face as I deflated. The rain started washing over the windows, but I was safe with my mom and dad. Dad was putting the keys back into the ignition, and my mom turned down the music.

“I don’t know,” I said while buckling up. “Maybe he did, but right now, I just want to go home.”

Owen

The rain washed away the first of the fall leaves and brought a new chill to the air, but winter had already come for me. As morning came, the bright, clear sky mocked me. Everything beautiful about the morning became a cruel, sadistic joke. I tried to ignore it, putting on my clothes and heading to work, but my mind kept wandering back through ancient history.

Staring at a black computer screen, I remembered a time when I was ten. A kid from my class had a birthday pool party in his family's backyard pool—a mammoth kidney bean with a diving board attached to one end. Our entire fifth grade class had been invited because it was May, the school year was about to be over, and no parent ever wanted to appear rude. That kid, though, he lived it up like a rock star. He decided to goad everyone into a splash contest.

The line formed. The antics began.

With my baby fat and green swim trunks, I went first and set a half-decent mark. I didn't care about the jumping, but I was curious to watch how others did it. Some dropped it like pencils and buoyed up with scissor kicks. Others made a show of their fear, and a few, like the birthday boy, made a show of their fearlessness.

There was one girl, though, who didn't seem to think anything of it. In her pink one-piece, she walked up to the board, pinched her nose, and sprang off with all her chubby legs could muster. The birthday boy didn't like declaring her the winner.

Her name was Ebony. She was the first girl I'd ever liked, not that I told her.

Delilah loved liked Ebony jumped. She approached it head on, not hesitating because consequences or critics were looking her way. Delilah gave me all of herself with bated breath, but when she got caught up in the chaos, where had I been? What had I done?

I acted like I knew everything when I never understood anything at all. I hid behind my damn rules and codes. They didn't risk anything, and in the end, I wasn't any better than that pompous birthday boy. I masked myself in pride. When walking down the street, people gave me pause because of my height and size, but Delilah was the one to be feared and admired.

She deserved to be loved with all the passion that she gave to love itself.

"I thought you would've been happy today," Charlie remarked. "At least, I thought a night back in her bed might make you look a little more, I dunno, alive?"

My eyelids crept open in time to see Charlie setting a box of doughnut holes on my desk. Clearly, they were meant to be celebratory. The office was secure, after all. The crime had been solved, and Delilah had returned home all safe and sound.

I imagined her in the apartment alone and going about the order of her day, but she wasn't alone. She had a baby on the way, *our baby*, and where was I again? What had I honestly done to keep either of them safe? I didn't blame Delilah if she never dared to love me again.

"You've got some mail here," he added, shoving it aside to put down his coffee. "It looks like paychecks."

“Okay.”

“Aren’t you gonna open it?”

I shrugged. “Eventually.”

Cocking his head to one side, Charlie leaned against the edge of my desk. I felt his intent, studying stare until his patience ran out. He folded his arms and let out a huff.

“Okay, what the hell happened?”

I reached for the doughnut box. “What do you mean?”

Charlie smacked my hand away. I grumbled while my stomach growled. The smell of sugar reminded my body of how I forgot to feed it. All night long, my stomach had been in knots with no space for food. I didn’t have any answers or careful plans to calm my anxiety. Everything I’d done for her went to hell in a damn handbasket, so what good would I do now?

Uselessness had to be the worst feeling alive.

“You can’t have any until you give me an answer,” Charlie insisted. “I thought you’d be over the moon today. Delilah’s back. She’s free, and—”

“She’s pregnant.”

He stopped short. Caught off guard by the sudden news, Charlie blinked and shook his head, trying to shake off the shock.

“Wait, what?”

“She’s pregnant,” I repeated. “She knows that it was my work on the case that led to her arrest. She thought she might have to spend her life in prison because of me.”

“*Oh.*”

Charlie didn’t have a wry answer for me. Who would? There was no good reply or way to lighten the mood.

“At least open your mail,” he suggested instead. “Maybe something in there will help fix your face. You certainly can’t go back to Delilah looking like . . . whatever the hell this is.”

“Who says I’m going back to her?”

Opening up the manila envelope, I found a check and a folded piece of crisp, white paper. There were only two words written under the Draytons’ signature.

As agreed.

Eddie Drayton signed his check, and sure enough, paid me for completing our contract. His son’s killer would be put behind bars in time. Although, it didn’t matter much to me anymore. The office was secure, but my chance for a family and a future with Delilah . . . it all had been ruined.

I almost missed Charlie getting all bug-eyed.

The second I looked up, he blurted out, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“She doesn’t want to see me, Charlie. She made that pretty damn clear.”

Her screaming pierced into me, even there in the office. The memory of Delilah on the sidewalk had been seared into my brain. The wounds refused to heal, or perhaps I wasn’t letting them. After putting that look on her face, after scaring her half to death, it was what I deserved.

“Be stubborn, then,” he insisted. “Don’t let that be her final answer.”

“Says the man who’s single.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. He wasn’t having any of my pathetic brooding. For maybe the first time in our friendship, he acted like the responsible adult in the room.

“You love her, don’t you?” he pressed me.

I swallowed back my pride and said, “Yes.”

“Don’t you want to be with her?”

“Yes.”

“Then, go talk to her, for Christ’s sake! It’s not healthy to sit here wallowing in your own misery. Son of a bitch, you’re

already making me feel depressed just looking at you, and you're not one to back down from a fight."

"Was it worth it, though?"

Charlie stopped fussing. His shoulders relaxed.

"Was what worth it?"

"This money." I dropped Drayton's check onto the desk. "We're gonna be set up for years once that clears, but I don't know if that's worth it."

Charlie pursed his lips. Neither of us could celebrate the case closing. We weren't breaking open any bottles of bourbon or beer. The security which the money offered came at a price I hadn't been ready to pay.

After a beat, Charlie sighed. "Let's put it this way—if you've got a baby on the way, this will definitely help. You're not gonna win Delilah back by being jobless or broke, and besides, it's not in you to give up so easily."

"No, I wouldn't."

A baby on the way. I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

Part of me wanted to call my mom, my brother, or even Tucker. I wished the news had come at any other time. I wanted to tell Delilah that I loved her and everything she made was perfect. Her baby was going to be no exception, but when my fingers inched toward my phone, I paused. The sight of her icy stare came back to haunt me.

Dodging bullets and homemade grenades felt less daunting than this, but I couldn't let the white flag of surrender be the end of everything. I stood slowly from my desk. Plans started formulating in my head. Something sparked in me, trying to ignite the fire in me again.

It only needed a little air and time. I could make it happen.

"I need to go get cleaned up," I realized. "Charlie, I'm taking a sick day."

"Good. I hope you feel better soon."

"You and me both."

As he patted my back, Charlie gave me one last encouraging look. He knew how to hold down the fort, and until I had Delilah back, I wasn't much use to our business, anyway.

Shower. Shave. Work out the nervous energy, and go talk to her in person. Phone calls and text messages are last resorts.

That became my mission. I fought an uphill battle of my own making, but I refused to shy away. The only chance I had was to move forward one step at a time. Even if it took months for me to win Delilah over, I needed to keep working and trying my damn hardest, and until I did, surrender would never be an option.

Whether Delilah was ready or not, I was coming back to her.

Delilah

Epsom salt soaks were supposed to relieve pain, but the pains inside my body lived where salt water couldn't reach. Even as the lukewarm bath turned my fingers to prunes, I felt the dull hurt go untouched. It settled deeper into the silence. Wallowing wasn't doing me any good, yet it was all I could do.

All my energy had been spent during store hours. Trudging upstairs, the mask fell away. I hoped a warm bath might help. I needed to make plans for the coming baby no matter how I felt.

There were appointments to be made and family to tell. Before my parents flew back to Arizona, I never had the heart to tell them. The words got caught in my throat. My stomach turned. With everything going on, my ill feelings of misery only added to the morning sickness, but I tried saying it aloud as I ran a razor over my legs.

"I know it's a surprise," I practiced aloud, "but Owen and I . . ."

The words fell away again. I didn't know what to tell anyone, not when I didn't know what to tell myself. Every passing day without Owen turned into another brick in the wall between us. Part of me wanted to tear it down. The other

parts, the places where his actions left wounds, shouted for me to keep it up.

Walls meant safety. Behind them, my broken heart couldn't be crushed.

Every hair from my legs circled down the drain with the cold water. Drying myself off, I told myself to stop indulging the bad feelings. I believed self-care might chase them away. I brushed my wet hair clean. My fingers rubbed in creams from my face down to the tips of my toes. Soft as a baby's bottom, my body still begged to be touched. My quiet torment was more than skin deep.

"I'm gonna have to move, aren't I?" I told the fan.

On the nightstand, my phone vibrated. It was him again.

Don't shut me out, Owen wrote, but it joined all the other ignored messages and voicemails.

It felt better to stay angry with him. My selfish, childish parts preferred staying blameless. They wanted to let Owen be the problem and the only one at fault, and when I considered forgiving him, I had to admit that I had never been the angel he proclaimed me to be.

Perhaps I'd overlooked the obvious signs of his choices. Maybe I was punishing him too cruelly for too long, letting him suffer in the dread of not knowing. I didn't want to think about any of it, but every time I read his words, Owen's voice echoed through my mind.

I heard him. I felt him. He permeated my being so deeply that even his memory became inescapable, and it wasn't like I could have a glass of wine to drown him out.

I sprawled over the bed naked. Staring up at the ceiling, I felt the ghost of his hand against my back. I breathed in the traces of his soap on the pillows, and as my mind drifted away, the warm, woody scents of sandalwood and cedar took me back to when Owen and I were still happy.

Every deep breath drew in a comfort I didn't want. In too many ways, I'd offered Owen too much of myself. I made him into my fallible God, and lying there, I felt faithless. All our

consecrated places were darkened with a black shroud. The bed became too big.

I hated seeing the iron frame and traces of Owen still lingering around the room. Wrapped up in the towel, I dragged myself into the office and buried myself in the twin daybed. It felt safer there. It couldn't be shared, but my emotions crept in anyway. Left alone with them, I felt the aching of need between my legs, the need for release and resolve.

I only had the strength to satisfy one of those needs.

Taking in a deep breath, I convinced my body to relax and to leave my worries elsewhere. Memories of Owen's face danced behind my closed eyes, but I didn't will them away. I offered us both forgiveness and compassion. I let myself imagine what it might feel like to forgive Owen and welcome him back home.

I traced down along my breastbone and stomach, inevitably reaching down between my thighs. My fingers traced up the slick folds and circled over my swelling bud. Every inch of my skin craved to be ravaged, to be tasted and adored, but I only had myself. A phantom of what once was couldn't hold onto me or kiss my inclining neck.

Delilah, I heard Owen murmur from another time and place.

My name, spoken like an oath, echoed through the caverns of my chest. The pleasure pooled there. It rose higher and higher inside me, and not holding back, I felt the threatening sting of tears at the corners of my eyes. I only shut them tighter.

Even when my spine arched, I refused to surrender. I kept my pace. I heard my sudden, gasping breaths as if they weren't my own. Coming out of my skin, I felt my hips buck toward a man who wasn't there, but I called his name anyway. He kept saying mine so relentlessly that I had to respond.

"*Owen*," I breathed somewhere between a prayer and a curse, and just like that, I got my release.

The climax washed over me. It gave my body the freedom to rest, but when my eyes opened, the tears I'd fought back trailed down my cheek like warm autumn rain. I wiped away one drop and then another. My lungs took in a shaky breath.

I wanted him back. I wanted Owen so badly that it hurt, but I feared that forgiving him would give Owen permission to wound me again. It terrified me to be so vulnerable. Staying selfish and cruel kept me safe. Even as I felt my guarding walls crumbling, I fought to keep them up, but no battle lasted forever.

I had to face Owen sooner rather than later. Stubborn as I was, my baby would force my hand with his or her arrival. Our child needed their father as much as they needed me, and I couldn't be so cruel that I'd deny my baby the chance to have two loving parents. It almost made me want to laugh and cry some more.

Our kid wasn't even born yet, and already, they were making me into a better person. I felt the urge to be selfless and surrender, if only for the sake of my child. Still, I could hold onto my resentment for one night longer. I pulled the blankets over my bare body and let my pettiness stew for one more day.

Owen couldn't go back to what we were. My stupid bleeding heart wouldn't survive another blow. With too much love to give, there was a reason I never had casual relationships. I always fought against defining those loves as doomed to fail, the ones I saw paling in comparison to everything I'd dreamed up as a star-chasing girl.

No monster was coming up from the sea, nor could I be made into stars to escape this heartache. At the end of the day, those stories I cherished were all fantasies and fiction, but Owen could be touched. He was real and right there. I only needed to reach out.

Glancing at the door, I remembered my phone in the next room and the message Owen sent. I saved it for another day. All my emotions drained my body, now begging for rest. The

night and the quiet invited me to sleep, but when that new day came, I would drop my guard and surrender.

Owen

I took a few days after my talk with Charlie. No matter how badly I wanted to see Delilah, she deserved some time to think things over and to breathe. My foolish hopes convinced me that the space would help her find a way to forgive me, but I couldn't hold out forever.

That morning, I put on a starched shirt and shaved. I bought sunflowers from a nearby shop. Delilah's dress had been scattered with flowers the first time I saw her. She stood in the middle of her friends under the roof of a holy temple, but in my eyes, she was the sacred one.

The doorbell chimed when I pushed open the door. Two sets of eyes grew wide, but neither of them belonged to Delilah. Behind the register, the two shared a look.

"You're Owen," the young woman said, adjusting her glasses.

"You're Lana," I realized. "I guess that makes you Curtis?"

"I guess that makes you right," he replied. "You brought her flowers."

"Where is she?"

Lana waved toward the back. "In the office, she . . ."

Whatever she had been doing, it didn't matter. Delilah walked into the shop wearing her hip-hugging jeans and a sullen look. She looked so exhausted.

Had she been sleeping at night? Had she been getting enough to eat? Was there something I could get her?

I fought against the urge to tend to Delilah and swallowed down the questions. If I dared to ask, Delilah would only shut me down. She frowned harder the second she noticed me.

"What are you doing here?" she asked point-blank. "It had better be for some wine."

"No, I came to see you, Delilah. I thought maybe we could talk?"

"We're talking right now, and it's not doing much, is it? What's the point of talking more?"

Ignoring me, she started adjusting wine bottles on shelves. Delilah was prepared to do anything and everything to maintain her cold shoulder, but it disappeared when a customer came in behind me. The middle-aged woman had come to pick up some online order.

Lana took my flowers. Curtis rang her up. All the while, I loitered like around like a fool.

"You can go now," Delilah insisted the second the woman left.

She tied up her hair and got back to ignoring me. Even as I followed her around the shop shelves, she refused to look my way. My plan quickly unraveled. Once more, I'd assumed and made an ass of myself in the process.

"Delilah, we need to talk. You know we should."

"How the hell should I know? I thought I knew how you felt about me," she countered. "I thought I knew you."

"You did," I swore. "You do."

Delilah shook her head. "No, I don't."

"You knew me well enough to give me a key to your apartment. You know me well enough that you're pregnant."

A pair of gasps echoed around us. According to their shock and Delilah's angry eyes turning on me, she hadn't told them.

"I knew something was weird about you," Lana swore from the hallway. "Delilah?"

"Great, thanks for telling them!" Delilah huffed at me.

"I didn't realize it was a secret. If you just came upstairs and sat down with me, I could explain what happened. I can help you understand, and . . . and we can get past all this."

"You say that like you live upstairs."

Grumbling, I felt my patience wearing thin. I refused to be dragged along. Delilah wasn't the only one who knew this game. Storming across the shop again, I turned over the open sign of the bottle shop to say Firefly was temporarily closed.

"No, you don't have the right to do that!" she swore, already firing off her cannons. "Turn it back around."

I took the blow. "Do you really want customers to witness this?"

"No."

"Well, since you're not willing to talk anywhere else, we're talking here."

"It's not like we want to watch," Curtis remarked from the register. "Parents shouldn't fight in front of their kids, you know."

Delilah only rolled her eyes. Turning on her heels, she snatched up an empty wine case from behind the register and headed toward the back. I didn't hesitate to follow. My feet stayed three steps behind hers as we walked out the back. Down in the cellar, lights flickered overhead. The glow illuminated the metal shelves overflowing with alcohol and Delilah's defiant contempt.

She continued to storm around. Her fury grew, but the pleading urge to help her only came flooding back. When she reached for a full case of wine, my heart clenched.

“Should you even be moving those?” I asked, my hands already moving to take the wooden crate from her grasp.

Delilah pulled back and scowled. “Don’t coddle me. I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t. Nothing is.”

Delilah stopped firing off from a distance and turned to close combat. She pulled out her hidden switchblades and turned on a dime. Her indifference became her poison.

“Oh, is that what you think? You think there’s a problem, so you barge into my business and declare that you’re going to fix it here and now. That’s exactly what I’ve been waiting for, right? I must be sitting around every waking moment and waiting *for you*.”

She spat out her last two words before moving to restock some dark red wine. Reaching for a box cutter, Delilah slashed through the seal and began moving the bottles from their shipping containers. Cutting me open with the blade would have been kinder.

“One of us has to make an effort,” I persisted. “If you’re . . .”

“Pregnant?” she finished for me.

I wasn’t sure why I struggled to say the word. It caught in my throat and choked me where I stood.

“We can’t be like this,” I continued, forcing out the words. “I have rights, Delilah. My . . . our child deserves two parents.”

She didn’t stop working. If anything, her hands moved faster.

“Don’t worry, Owen. I’m not going to keep you from your kid. If we can’t agree on a schedule, I have about a dozen lawyer cousins. They can help or find us someone who can mediate. It’ll all be just as orderly as you always like it. We can make a million rules to follow, and besides, it’s not like you were ever my boyfriend. We weren’t in a real relationship. Why change that now?”

Another knife, jagged and covered in rust, twisted in my chest. She made me want to kiss her and heal whatever heartbreak caused her to be so casually cruel. The other half longed to break every glass bottle in the whole damn cellar, but I had to keep going.

“Is that your insurance, then?” I demanded to know. “You refuse to call it anything, so if it doesn’t work out with a man, you can just . . . write it off? You tell yourself it wasn’t special?”

Delilah’s eyes reflected the yellow overhead light as she stared me down. Just out of arm’s reach, she remained defiant, but I saw the pain in her eyes. She didn’t try to hide her wounds as she answered me.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

Her focus narrowed, and though her voice softened, it grew colder. Delilah felt farther away from me than ever before. Blood seeped out of her open wounds, yet there was no stopping it. I couldn’t mend her broken heart or keep the color from draining from her expression. No smile crossed her pale lips.

“What do you want me to tell you?” she asked. “Would you prefer for me to lie like you did? We can keep going in circles all day, but that won’t change what you did. It won’t change who I am. Nothing can, so just quit trying.”

“Are we not worth the effort?”

Battered and bruised, I wasn’t sure where the words came from. My mind was too tired to give anything else careful consideration. All my thoughts began to pour out of me, and my self-preservation dwindled into nothing. I didn’t have any thought to keep away from her. Like a hundred times before, I closed the distance between us and reached for the crook of her neck. My thumb felt the softness of her cooled cheek as my voice filled with rasp of desperate wanting.

“I heard you, Delilah,” I confessed. “You only ever said it when you thought I couldn’t hear, but I heard you say that you

loved me. You muttered it your sleep. You said it with your eyes. Don't deny it. I have them all branded into my memory."

"And what if I did?"

Her mouth was only inches from mine. The veil of hot air between us seemed like a stone wall, but there wasn't anything I wouldn't overcome for her. If I could taste her kiss again, I'd endure every one of her war zones and take the brunt of her vindictive blows. She could even cut into me with the razor blade still held tight in her fist.

Whatever she wanted . . . if I could only have a second chance . . .

"Am I not worth it to you?" I pleaded, the question barely there. "Can you honestly love me and say I'm not worth trying to make things right between us?"

The rise and fall of her chest grew ragged. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. With her eyelids half-closed, my arrogance told me I was winning her over. Delilah was about to fold right there in my grasp. The wall began to crumble until . . .

"I think you should leave," she whispered.

A hot tear rolled around my thumb. Its trail marred Delilah's cheek. As she slipped away from me, I had no strength to fight for her to stay there. She took two steps back, and my hand dropped to my side. My shoulders slumped. Delilah let her wall crumble, only to put a fortress in its place.

"Fine," I agreed half-heartedly. "If that's what you want, I'll go."

Turning around, I headed back up the stairs and away from the only woman I ever wanted to make my haven. I told myself Delilah was allowed whatever she wanted. I needed to remain a man of my word, even if it pained me.

Each one of my footsteps trudged heavily up toward the offensive daylight. Through the dust and away from the bombshells of conversation, I knew this battle was over. I'd lost another chance, but holding onto any resemblance of hope, I silently promised the war wasn't over. I refused to raise

a white flag. If Delilah kept any scrap of love for me, we could still find our way back to each other.

My survival depended on it.

Delilah

He only needed to say three little words.
I am sorry.

Forgive me, please.

I would have taken a variety of combinations. Owen could have said just two words or two hundred. The length didn't matter to me, but until I heard it, I couldn't find the strength to forgive him or believe he knew my heartbreak. If he didn't realize his mistake, what would keep him from making it again?

One day passed and then another. Owen didn't reach out again. My melancholy continued to be misunderstood and left sight unseen.

By then, I'd started falling into a bad pattern. Work dragged me toward a quiet dinner and a long bath. The silence let in the painful thoughts, and Owen's sudden visit only added to the cacophony in my head.

Running the last stroke of the razor along my shins, I imagined in a few months I wouldn't be able to shave. My pregnant stomach would get in my way before I knew it. I'd have to go to get my legs waxed or let my legs get scruffy, but that was the least of my problems.

Owen had been right about me not picking up those boxes. I talked it over with my nurse practitioner when she recommended me a local obstetrician. My typical physical activity was fine as long as I felt comfortable, but that was the trouble. For days, I woke up worn out from fighting ghosts in my sleep, and I continued aching in places I hadn't known before.

Only God knew how badly I wanted to surrender that afternoon. With Owen's palm warming my skin, my bones grew weak. I longed to exhale into his embrace and give up the ghost, but something in me couldn't. His punishment offered me no real peace. His quiet declarations haunted me even in the tub.

"I heard you say that you loved me . . . I have them all branded into my memory."

Still, he didn't say he loved me back. He didn't apologize for the mess he'd made, no matter how unintentional it was. Perhaps that made it so much worse for me.

I needed to mean more to him than his rule of law.

I submerged my head under the water to rinse out my conditioner. Even as I rubbed at my scalp, it didn't wash the worries away. The memories flashed across my vision again and again.

He saw my weaknesses, laying them bare right there in the cellar. How could I lie? How could we go on? Stuck in the aftermath, I still couldn't see a clear end. It all lingered like a haze in my head.

I shut my eyes and tried to will myself to wake up. Maybe this was the nightmare. Perhaps I wasn't taking a bath. When my eyelids shot open, I pretended Owen might be there leaning against the open bathroom door, arms folded and a smirk on his face. He was at the edge of the bed when I slipped into my pajamas. When my phone chimed, I almost took it for another mirage, yet the weight of it dropped me down onto the bed.

His name sat at the top of the email. It had been so long since he had written, and daring to open it, I found myself falling back through time to old habits I nearly forgot.

It's night where I am, the email began like the ones from the other side of the world. The air is getting cold enough now that the heat's turned on in my apartment at night, and I don't like it. The unit is loud. It groans whenever it kicks on, but to be fair, I don't like much of anything these days.

Food is either too salty, too spicy, or too tasteless. No chair feels right. I'm fidgeting again and close to forgetting what it's like to be comfortable.

I read between the lines. In my head, I heard his discontent. I listened to his disembodied voice as my thumb scrolled down the screen and my head flopped back into the pillows still faintly smelling of him.

I've never considered myself an eloquent person. When I was young, my dad always said that actions spoke louder than words, so now, when I can't find the right thing to say, I let my actions say it for me. I think they told you wrong, Delilah. All that time, I let my choices lead you to a lie, so I think it's time I spoke for myself.

I love you, Delilah Kaplan. It struck me the first time I ever laid eyes on you, and through every message you sent, I fell in love with you a little more. You made a home for me, a place to come back to, and now, I feel almost homeless. I don't know where I belong if I can't be by your side, and I regret not telling you this the first second I could. Like I said, words and I don't always get along.

My free hand reached for the phone as if it were Owen himself. The screen didn't feel like his five o'clock shadow or a scar on his tanned skin. Still, I felt him there. Owen was around me again, embracing me even when his arms couldn't.

He went on, *I find myself filling up every spare second with memories of you and thoughts of how you're doing. This morning, I went to work out and ended up listening to an album I remembered you had on vinyl. It wasn't the same as*

having you around, but it was something. It helps with the waiting because I am.

You waited a year for me. I can wait a lifetime for you. After finding you, I'm not just going to give you up. I'm not going to let this be the end, so whenever you are ready to give me another chance, I will be here waiting with everything that keeps you alive in my mind.

I hope this finds you well. I love you, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner.

Yours, Owen

Had he heard me from across town? Had he known all this time and just never had the right words? I read the email over again and again until sleep claimed me.

In my dreams, a warm mug of mint tea rested on my oversized stomach. My tired feet were in his lap. Somewhere in the background, a forgotten melody played, but I knew we had contentedly surrendered to one another. Owen and I didn't have a reason to fight in this reality.

Love prevailed.

I fought my consciousness to keep the scene alive, but when dawn cut through the blinds, I lost it again. The ache returned with the nausea. I rolled toward the nightstand and reached for the bag of crackers. It was another day of enduring, so I made my own tea and combed the tangles from my hair. Rain sprinkled the sidewalks as I headed downstairs.

Going through the motions of work made things easier and helped me set aside the emotions of the night before. I sipped ginger ale and looked over the large orders. Some anniversary party had ordered a dozen cases—four red, four white, and four sparkling.

“Fifty years,” I muttered as I read over the contract. “Good for them.”

Sitting there in the office, I opened my mouth to call Curtis into the room, but he was already there and beating me to the punch. His face looked too eager for my liking.

“Why don’t you go deliver the order?” he suggested. “Lana and I can cover the store.”

“Sure, you can mind the shop, but—”

Lana was in the hallway, ready to cut me off. “You could use the chance to get out. When was the last time you left this city block?”

I pursed my lips. Of course, they had seen me getting my groceries delivered and only getting takeout from the closest restaurants. I hadn’t been more than a mile away from the building since I got out of jail.

“All right,” I relented. “Where are the keys to the van?”

Through the obnoxious sprinkling of rain, I drove to a small boutique inn along the waterfront. It was a dime a dozen in this city. All over town, historic houses had been refashioned into bed and breakfasts, but this one, I had to admit, had a beautiful library.

The owners used it as a social space for private events and afternoon teas. One of the staff members helped me with my handcart, heading up the wide porch steps and through the library’s side door. She animatedly told me all about it.

“The house was a wedding gift from the young bride’s father in 1890,” she explained, her grin brighter than her peachy rain slicker. “He knew how much she loved to read, so when they designed the house, he took particular care in this room with its stained-glass windows.”

“How nice,” I offered absently. “Where will the bar be set up?”

“Oh, over here.”

The bubbly girl led me over to the front hall where a wide mahogany staircase climbed up the wall toward a grand landing. The coat closet hidden by a wooden panel now served as storage.

“We’ll be putting the bar and appetizers in the main hall here,” she explained. “This will be easy access for the bartender.”

I nodded. "Great. Can you sign off on the delivery?"

With the deal done, I tugged my hood back over my head. The rain picked up outside. It dripped through the ancient trees down to the sleeping azalea bushes. Standing at the rounded corner of the inn's porch, I wondered if I should wait it out. My bones felt heavy, and the rocking chairs did look inviting. I figured a few minutes of sitting and watching the rain might do me good.

"Delilah?"

I turned my head to see a face I knew without a name. He was Owen's friend, his business partner. For the life of me, I should have been able to recall his name.

"Charlie," he filled in for me. I work with . . ."

"Yeah," I replied. "I know."

"Your shop's staff told me you were here, and the hotel's girl told me you had just walked out. I almost got worried I'd missed you again. Look, I'm not really here to talk."

"Then . . . why are you here?"

A crack of thunder could be heard far, far off in the distance. My eyes flitted in the direction of the sound. When Charlie pulled a manila envelope from his blue raincoat, my attention snapped back.

He offered it to me, saying, "This is off the record, and well, Owen doesn't know I'm doing this. He might've murdered me before I got the chance, but I think you should know."

"Know what?"

"The truth."

Charlie stretched out his arm as far as it could go, letting the thick envelope float between us. His expression seemed earnest, but Charlie was one of those people. His polite smile always looked trusting. His ruffled red hair endeared him to the world. Still, I hesitated.

A wounded animal was always reluctant yet desperate for some comforting hope. My fingers curled and clenched before finally relenting. I accepted the offering with the best smile I could muster.

“Is this a burn after reading scenario?” I tried to joke.

Charlie chuckled. “No, but it wouldn’t hurt. These are only copies of the paperwork. The originals are safe and sound back at the office. You can read these whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay.”

Glancing toward the rain, Charlie hinted a frown, but the weather didn’t get him down. He pulled up his hood like I had, tugging it to keep his face away from the worst of it. Charlie smiled again. This time, it had a certain bittersweetness.

“I have to go tail a bastard having an affair,” he remarked cheekily. “You should know, though, that he misses you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Charlie nodded in understanding. “Take care, Delilah.”

“You too, Charlie.”

As quickly as he came, he took off into the storm. I saw headlights and a black sedan roll out of the gravel lot. My feet didn’t move. Nobody came out to tell me to leave or move my van. The rocking chairs still sat empty, and with each passing second, the weight of this bizarre gift grew heavier in my hands.

Curiosity got the better of me.

I plopped down into one of the white rocking chairs and unraveled the twine tie. It went around and around until, at last, the envelope unfolded. Pages of investigation notes spread out over my lap. My eyes didn’t know where to look first until they caught sight of three words titling one piece of paper.

INITIAL CLIENT TESTIMONY

Owen

If only courtrooms were more like the ones on television, the afternoon might have been more exciting. The lawyers droned on. Evidence was presented to the judge. In that bland, big room, I sat in the pew-like seats waiting for my turn and read a book.

I remembered it from Delilah's bedside, a novel by Delia Owens that I heard was now a movie. I filled all those empty spaces with Delilah's things. I read her books, listened to her music during my workouts, and worked to make myself better. When I earned her love again, I wanted to be a man who deserved it.

Looking up from my book, I saw the woman of the hour right where she wanted Delilah to be. Maribelle Drayton wore a pale tweed suit and a resigned expression. Her mask didn't falter when the prosecution started mounting their case against her. I marked my place in the book and began to listen for my cue.

He rattled off the overwhelming evidence against Maribelle.

"Your honor, I'd like to present the findings of the investigation firm, Prince and Braun. Mr. Braun was contracted to examine the case regarding the death of Thaddeus Edward Drayton the Third. I have his report here

showing the summary and evidence of his investigation which highlights the cover-up of voluntary manslaughter connected to her charges.”

The balding judge gave the papers a cursory glance. “And she’s not being charged with manslaughter, correct?”

“No, your honor.”

Maribelle only had to fight three counts of insider trading, five counts of bribery and corruption fraud, and one instance of aiding and abetting. The senator and his wife had been arrested in Washington DC. The CEO and his CFO had been arrested up in New York. All over the country, these people were being caught and detained, and if they’d never tried to hurt Delilah, they might have gotten away with it all.

More were expected to be arrested in due course. As the wealthy entered their plea bargains, their pawns would be forced to take the fall, but I couldn’t change that. I only had to stand up, walk to the podium, and confirm that everything in the report could be corroborated and proven true.

“I will be willing to testify in trial, Your Honor,” I stated into the microphone.

They went through the rest of the hearing. The trial date was set, and Maribelle would have a chance for her husband to post a million-dollar bail. The charges were court-approved and would be going forward.

If Maribelle knew what was good for her, she’d plead guilty. Leniency only came with cooperation, and from what had been found, it wasn’t like she owed any loyalty to her so-called friends. Doug told me of the threatening messages Maribelle received over the course of the summer. They had encouraged Maribelle to find another to take the fall and ensure the circumstances of the death never came back to haunt them.

Paranoia got the better of them all. They had been soulless money-grabbing bastards, but the culprits never meant to get into the business of murder. They tried using fear to keep

Maribelle in line, but it was my heart dropping when I stepped out of the courthouse.

There, on a metal bench, Delilah watched me from behind a pair of round sunglasses. Her loose clothes blew in the autumn breeze, and I smoothed down my tie. It had been my father's once. Without Delilah's kiss goodbye, I took another kind of support when I left my studio that morning.

"Hey, Owen," she greeted me. "Um, Charlie told me you were here."

Standing, she met me halfway on the front sidewalk. People passed us by, heading in and out of the municipal buildings, but I only saw her. Everything else blurred out. Time stopped with my breath, even if my heart kept racing. Her burgundy sweater brought out the color of her cheeks.

"Did you go looking for me at the office?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, I did."

Every movement felt like inching through a minefield. If I reached out for the hair blowing against her cheeks, would we implode? I had never held my breath for so long, but I waited. I prepared to wait for a lifetime.

"I . . . I may or may not have read your case file about Thaddeus and, well, me," she went on. "I know what happened, and I think I understand a little better why you did what you did."

I opened my mouth to ask where she got it, but there was only one option. Charlie had been a sneak. One day, I needed to thank him.

"It's good to see you," I told her instead.

She smiled softly. Her eyes drifted up to mine, still lovely and dark like a clear, starry night.

"It's good to see you too. Do you have time to talk?"

I almost smiled. The feeling toyed at the corners of my mouth, but I didn't dare hope too soon. Delilah and I weren't standing on firm enough ground.

“I always have time for you,” I assured her.

Her eyes darted around. Our conversation wasn't the kind anyone wanted to have in front of others. Coffee shops felt far too public.

“My apartment's not too far from here,” she said then. “We can go there, if you want.”

I had only been dreaming about it. I missed the creaks in her floorboards like an old friend, but something in me feared going back there. Tension rose up inside me. It simmered just underneath my skin. I couldn't sit still.

“What if we walked?” I suggested.

“Where?”

I scanned the scene and noticed, “There's a pedestrian path by the waterfront.”

Across the street, tourists lined up for their Friday afternoon tiki boat tour. Bells chimed on bikes, and walking along the Ashley riverfront, I struggled with the urge to reach for Delilah's hand.

“Have you been feeling okay?” I asked once we set our pace.

She nodded. “Okay enough.”

“I . . . I remember when Mom was pregnant with Alex, she couldn't stand the smell of anything too sweet. She took antacids like breath mints.”

“It's mostly saltines and ginger ale for me.”

An older couple on bikes passed on our left. A beat of silence followed. For ten steps, I tried to keep my cool. I let the movement ease my restless mind, but it could only do so much.

“I read your email,” Delilah said then. “I read it about ten times, actually. It might've been twenty.”

“You did?”

“Why didn't you say you loved me?”

We stopped. Delilah stared at me. Her ink-pool eyes were no match for the daylight, and standing there by the water, I drowned in her gaze.

“Why didn’t you?” I countered. “You said it in your sleep.”

She inched closer, letting her voice soften. “You know why, Owen. You called me out in the wine cellar, remember?”

“I guess I don’t want to put words in your mouth.”

Delilah sucked in a long, slow breath. Her eyes tore away from me. She could make her confession or look me in the eyes, but she couldn’t do both at the same time.

“I’m not used to being wanted this much,” she admitted. “When I first started dating, I only ever wanted someone who could be patient with me, be loyal, and actually care. It started to feel impossible, though, so I guess I chalked it up to being something I wasn’t meant to have. If I said how I really felt, it would burst the bubble.”

“You once told me you don’t do casual relationships.”

She shrugged. “I don’t. That’s why I . . . I went out with guys, sure, but I never really dated anyone before . . .”

Before you.

My head finished what she couldn’t say. Her answer struck me like an arrow in the chest. Even in her pauses, I felt the ache of unmet devotion. It made me want to drop onto my knees and promise to be everything she’d once dreamed about. For her, for our family, I would do anything.

The words began to pour out of me. Tension turned to electricity, jolting each and every nerve. I swallowed.

“I love you,” I blurted out. “That won’t change. That *can’t* change. I don’t think I could stop loving you, even if I wanted to. You’ve given me so much. When I think about what we could have or about the baby you’re going to have, I . . .”

My throat dried out then. Something stung my eyes. Delilah looked so patient and calm, and I was the one five seconds from falling apart. This wasn’t how I wanted to be,

yet I couldn't hide it. All those nights of silent emotions and words left unsaid came back in full force. They refused to be held back any longer.

"I know I said that I'm not easily scared," I confessed, already panting. "I told you I wasn't afraid of dying, but dammit, Delilah, I am terrified of losing you because it would kill me."

"I won't live forever, Owen."

Her voice sounded so quiet. Her wide-eyed gaze shouted everything she'd swallowed down so hard.

"I—I know," I said. "I'm not saying that, but if you're out there and I can't be there for you . . . I wouldn't know what to do with myself. I don't know what to do with myself at all right now."

The world taught me how to survive. I could knock the dust off my boots and keep walking, but it wasn't living. It wasn't Delilah.

Studying me, she reached for my face, pressing her palms against my cheeks. She chewed on her lower lip as my breathing grew even again. The world kept passing us by, but I didn't care. I struggled to care about anything but her these days.

"You've lost weight," she murmured like she could weigh me by holding my face.

Had she memorized me so well? Perhaps she had always seen me as more, and now, that veil of illusion was gone?

"Have I been too cruel?" she asked then, her voice still so quiet.

"Cruel?"

Anytime I came to her, Delilah welcomed me. She offered pleasure. She played her games, but they always came with a reward. Turning over every memory, I saw no trace of cruelty.

"It wasn't anything I couldn't handle," I assured her. "You're a lot of things, angel, but cruel isn't one of 'em."

That's when she smiled. It became a second kind of sunrise.

“Why don't we go home now?”

I nodded, my fingers curling gently around one of her wrists. It felt too good to have her there again. It seemed too good to be real, but I gave her a small nod.

“Yeah,” I agreed with barely a whisper. “I'd like that.”

Delilah

Owen looked so handsome in his court suit. The navy blue set off his green eyes, but his attentive gaze didn't reflect the man I knew. All those schooled features and calm expressions had disappeared. I saw a man who'd replaced sleep with caffeine. He wouldn't sit down. His entire being vibrated with a subtle, strange energy.

He wasn't quite manic, but Owen wasn't quite right.

"I'm drinking tea in the mornings now," I explained, fixing us both a cup.

I didn't trust him with coffee. Not complaining, he accepted the cool glass with a careful smile. He hesitated to look happy. This wolfish mass of a man had turned into a timid boy, but perhaps that was the price of vulnerability.

I still felt small beside him. Sitting down on the couch, I wanted to curl up against his weight, shut my eyes, and forget. We could convince ourselves that this had all been a bad dream. It would only take a kiss to heal any wounds.

"I've missed having you here, you know," I found myself saying. "I got used to having you around."

"I didn't know where anything was in that studio," he answered. "The lease is up in a month, but I can't even tell if I like it."

Owen wouldn't even call it his. The rental never belonged to him. Thinking through all the time he'd spent with me, I couldn't remember ever setting foot inside it myself.

Owen always came to me. We always wound up right there.

"But that was my choice," he added with a long, weighted breath. "I—I focused so much on being loyal and following the rules, but I forgot to be loyal to you, Delilah. I broke your trust. You don't know how much I regret it now."

"I think I do, but . . . I'm getting tired of thinking about it."

I was tired all the time now. Worn down by life itself, my tired body couldn't take much more of this. I saw more than enough chagrin on Owen's face. He wrote down his apologies and offered them in person. Now that I had them, I grew sick of looking back. I refused to lose Owen in these silent days. Shutting him out hurt worse than a bare-knuckled fight.

We both had become too beaten and bruised. The time for fighting was over.

"Tell me what you want, then," Owen said, setting down his drink on the coffee table. "Whatever you need, I'm listening."

"I want you to come back and be here."

It sounded so simple when the reply came out. In the beginning, I fell for him so easily. I never really stopped.

I took a sip of my tea and went on, "When I woke up that morning feeling bad, I knew something was off. I bought a pregnancy test after you left for work, and I spent the rest of the day thinking how I would tell you. I thought I'd make us dinner and tell you that evening before, well, it all fell apart. I hoped you'd be happy."

"I would've been. I am."

"Are you?"

Owen reached for my hand. It felt so warm that I began to sense our cold war ending. When his thumb ran over my

knuckles, the ache I'd grown so used to having finally melted away.

"Kid or no kid," he swore, "I promise that for me, any kind of life with you is a good one."

"I know I'm not always the easiest. I won't always be easy, but I promise I'll try to make loving me as easy as breathing."

"Do you know how hard it can be to breathe?" His grip tightened as if I might pull away. "I don't care how hard it is. I'll love you anyway. I need you as much as I need air."

My heart broke little by little. The hardened shell around it cracked into a thousand pieces, and my body began to melt.

He went on, "I'm gonna need you to forgive me. I'll need it tonight and plenty of times after this because, you know, I will make mistakes. I'll be thoughtless and foolish and . . ."

"A man?"

Owen cracked a small smile. "Yes, one who loves you, Delilah."

"And since I love you too, you think I'll accept all your apologies at the drop of a hat."

"I'm not that presumptuous."

"That's good because I only offer absolution on Saturday."

"I'd better not screw up on Mondays, then," he joked with a low, rich laugh. "It would ruin my whole damn week."

Owen inched me closer, holding me contentedly captive. With one simple line, he tethered me there forever.

"I'm sorry for what happened," he murmured. "Please forgive me."

"Even though it's Friday?"

"Make an exception."

"Just this once," I agreed, his lips already brushing against mine. "Only because it's you."

One kiss became our peace treaty. The second had it signed and sealed. Somehow, by some miracle or blessing of

the fates, Owen and I made it to the other side.

“Do you think you can kiss it all better?” I muttered before going in for a third time. “You didn’t hurt my lips, baby.”

His Southern baritone sounded sweeter than all my memories. My dreams never did him justice.

“Where does it hurt, then?”

I gave Owen my hand. With the smallest smirk, he kissed my knuckles before turning my wrist to press his lips into my palm and my inner wrist. He trailed over my arm, moving toward my shoulder and the crook of my neck. Each show of affection was intentional. He moved with slow, tempting purpose. It coaxed my lips apart with soft, ragged breaths, so when Owen’s kiss reached the corner of my mouth, I nearly came undone.

“Promise you won’t leave again,” I begged, “even if I toss you out the door.”

He took fistfuls of my sweater. The green of his eyes glowed brighter than the Northern Lights. They flashed with the desire he never forgot. Overwhelming the pain, Owen’s need became clear. He let his actions echo his answer.

“I’ll crawl in through the window,” he vowed, pulling my top over my head.

“I’ll leave it unlocked, then.”

When his tongue dipped into my mouth, I wasn’t sure we’d make it back to the bedroom. We had been starved of each other for too long and with so much uncertainty. Tension created by fear flourished, blossoming into a sigh of relief and elation.

Owen couldn’t get me close enough. His hands were at my waist, luring me into his lap with his gravitational pull. With his grip climbing up my back, I let my legs straddle his waist. My hips were eager to roll against the hardening bulge under his zipper.

So close, yet so far away.

Breaking away for only a moment, I told him, “Take me to bed, baby.”

I didn’t need to ask twice. Hoisting me into the air, Owen carried me off as only he could. My legs fastened around him. My arms laced around his neck. I floated through time and space, and together, we took shelter in our darkened room.

Lights weren’t needed. The sunshine sneaking through the blinds was more than enough for me to find the buttons of his shirt and for Owen to find the bed. He let me slide down to the floor, already peeling back the fabric getting in his way.

Our clothes littered the bedroom floor. His collared shirt got balled up beside my leggings. One of his socks became friends with my bra. Even if we ruined the whole apartment, I couldn’t be bothered to care. Impatience got the better of me.

I needed lips on my shoulders, my stomach, and my breasts, and Owen readily obliged. I crawled back into the center of the bed. He followed, rediscovering my curves with a grazing touch. With his mouth moving over my body, ravaging me without a second thought, my gentle, panting breaths grew into soft whimpers. When his tongue circled one nipple and then the other, I was instantly helpless.

“*Owen*,” I murmured, missing the feel of his name in my mouth.

Silently, I had pined for every part of him. I missed the taste of his lips and his lingering scent of cedar. I yearned for the feel of his dark hair against my fingertips as his head continued wandering down. Owen kissed my inner thigh before anchoring me against the bed. His grip had never felt so sure.

“God, I’ve missed you,” he groaned before taking his first taste.

I bit my lip, stifling back a sudden moan.

“I’ve missed you too,” I whimpered.

My legs spread wider on instinct as my head grew light. Blood rushed away from my head, even with my heart pounding. I grabbed my own chest just to keep it from

bursting out. Every fiber and nerve came alive, and Owen felt it all.

“Are you sure I can’t kiss it better?” he teased before sucking on my clit.

My spine twisted and arched against the feeling.

“You’re not playing fair.” I panted. “How can I give an honest answer?”

“Because you can’t lie, not like this.”

Laughter mingled with my moan of delight. We both had the strength that came from knowing. Without a trace of doubt, neither Owen nor I needed to worry. We would always belong to each other. Even when we were oceans apart, we could always be this close.

My toes curled on the edge of a climax. My nails dug into his scalp, but I didn’t want it to end like this. I wasn’t ready for the moment to end.

“Let me have you,” I urged him.

With the rasp of want in his answer, he asked, “Will it make you happy, angel?”

“Yes.” I swallowed back another cry of ecstasy. “Yes, it will.”

Owen shifted over me, but I was overcome. Reaching for his neck, we began rolling together. His fingers dug into my backside. We each fought for control, pushing and pulling the other until we settled side by side.

Every time Owen’s length brushed against me, it felt harder and longer than before. I fought myself to not buck against the feeling. I convinced my hand to leave his throat and trail down his chest. Guiding Owen into my body, I surrendered.

“I won’t let you go,” he promised while pushing deeper. “I’m yours, Delilah, all fucking yours.”

“I know. I always knew.”

He was at full hilt. I had to drape my leg over him, tangling our bodies together. As he rocked into me, Owen never stood a chance of pulling away. He felt the rhythm of my heart and hips as we moved together. The familiar dance began to feel new again. The euphoria growing inside me held all the promise of forever.

How many times could we be like this? How many nights would we fall asleep together? Once more on the edge of release, I let my forehead fall against Owen's. Sweat beaded at the small of my back. My breathing grew erratic and frenzied in the fervor, but I never thought to be afraid.

Everything I ever needed was right there in that iron bed. Our life would be glorious for as long as we both lived. Reveling in the possibility, I relished the climax that took hold of me. My head threw itself back against the feeling. Through my sharp, sudden gasp, I smiled.

The world became quiet again. Owen had his satisfaction. Still, he held on.

It had never been about the sex. As amazing as it was, our time together was about everything words couldn't describe. My face got buried in the crook of his neck. His fingers combed through the ends of my hair. The comfortable silence didn't need to be filled. Owen's affection offered more than enough.

"Have I told you lately that I love you?" he asked once he caught his breath.

The warmth of his words sent tingling shivers down my spine.

"I don't remember," I teased. "Why don't you tell me again?"

"I love you. I love you so much that I hope you'll marry me."

I grinned wildly. "No."

"*No*?"

Giggling at his confused face, I reached for him, letting my fingers savor the defined line of his jaw and the overgrown softness of his hair. He would be a wonderful husband someday. I couldn't wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

"I can't marry you yet," I insisted with that same delirious smile. "You have to be my boyfriend first."

His expression relaxed. Five seconds later, Owen laughed along.

"Well, damn, Delilah, what have we been doin' these last few months?"

"For starters, I haven't been introducing you as my boyfriend. You haven't been out to visit my parents or even spent a night of Hanukkah at my aunt's." I felt his hand wandering down my back. "I want the whole experience, Owen. Having a child won't change that, not for me."

"If that'll make you happy . . ."

"But don't worry, baby," I teased, my lips brushing against his. "I'll make it all worth your while."

"You always do."

Owen kissed me again with the promise of more. He would never give up on me or let me go. I had his endless devotion, and no bureaucratic certificate could prove anything so easily. Owen's vows lived in his actions and affections. I never needed to doubt.

Owen

The nights grew longer. The oak trees changed from green to gold to brown, but the warmth lingered. Even in November, I didn't need much of a coat walking into the Charleston airport. I heard the car keys jingle in my corduroy overshirt, shifting in my chest pocket as I bypassed a gaggle of teens. The sliding doors whooshed open for them and let me inside.

A female voiced echoed over the intercom. Searching the massive terminal, my eyes only cared about one woman. She texted me only minutes before that her plane landed by Concourse B. She only had to get her suitcase.

“Owen!”

My head whipped to the left. Delilah looked like a ruby beacon through the crowd. Nobody there knew what she concealed under that oversized sweater. It would be a few weeks before she had a chance of showing, but I felt it there as Delilah wrapped her arms around me. Her chest pressed against mine. Her soft stomach, like the seasons, was changing.

“It's good to see you,” I muttered into her hair. “Good flight?”

“A man behind me snored for a few hours, but other than that, it wasn't so bad,” she replied. “Did you survive the four

days without me?”

“Barely.”

Her laughter got lost in a kiss. Tilting her chin up to meet mine, Delilah rose up on her tiptoes and parted her lips. I wanted to brace her with my grip, but I hesitated.

Was it possible to squeeze her too tight? Would it make her uncomfortable?

“Thanks for coming,” she said, her lips still brushing against mine. “Are you ready to take me home?”

I kissed her one more time. “If you let me take the long way home. There’s something I want you to see.”

“Wherever you want to take me,” she agreed teasingly. “I’m just along for the ride.”

The ride included a stop off for lemonade, French fries, and a trip to the bathroom, but in our sweet time, we made it over the Ashley River, heading away from shopping centers and traffic to quieter streets. Their fanciful names stuck out on the signs— Robinhood and Prince John, Juniper and Mulberry. All the while, Delilah told me of her trip out west.

She had gone to see Sam as a belated birthday visit with Cassidy and Tucker. I’d been invited. The week before, Tucker even reached out to encourage me to come, but I already had appointments to keep.

I needed to speak with the loan officer at my bank, do some important shopping, and finish moving out of the studio rental I’d rarely touched. Delilah easily filled me in on everything that happened. It was as if I’d been there all along.

“She’s having a boy and a girl,” Delilah told me of Sam’s pregnancy. “Jude’s trying to be cool, but it’s so obvious how excited he is. He’s like a kid in a candy store. Tucker and Cassie are staying through Thanksgiving next week. It’ll be their first real Thanksgiving together as a family, so I’m sure it’s gonna be wild.”

“And did you tell them about our growing family?”

Without thinking, Delilah placed a hand over her stomach.

“We agreed to tell your mom at Thanksgiving next week and my parents when we go out to see them next month. I think they should know before I go blabbing it to our friends, and besides, I didn’t want to take away from Sam’s news. We were all out in Malibu to celebrate her, not me.”

“Did you enjoy it out there by the beach, though?”

The words could hardly come out fast enough. Slapping her thighs, Delilah sounded off like an auctioneer.

“*Ohmigod*, it’s so freaking gorgeous. I’m not taking no for an answer next time. You’re coming to see them. The Malibu Hills are so pretty. It was so glamorous and gorgeous! You can’t help but be happy!”

Finding my road, I laughed. “Maybe we should move out there, then.”

“No.” Delilah settled herself back into the passenger’s seat. “Our lives are right here where they belong.”

She was more right than she knew. After refusing my proposal, Delilah kicked my problem-solving mind into its highest gear. I wanted the whole world to see how much I belonged to her. I needed to prove my commitment and my devotion. Even if she wouldn’t take an engagement ring from me, I felt the urge to give Delilah *something*.

She had already given me so much. I felt almost lacking in comparison.

“Here we are.”

I parked the car in the driveway, and Delilah’s eyebrows went up.

“Uh, Owen, what exactly is here?”

The brick ranch house sat unassumingly along the curved residential street. It had a front yard of azalea bushes and a stone path leading up to the porch. In sight of my rearview mirror, a gray-haired couple walked by with their squat little dog. Another family was already hanging up their holiday decorations while Spanish moss hung in the old trees and high over the roofs.

Somehow, the neighborhood felt like a piece of quaint suburbia maintaining its integrity in a new century. Its charm hadn't been lost to house flippers or rental offices. The community still cared.

"I mean, what is this place?" Delilah asked, peering through the windshield. "It just looks like some old house for sale."

"It belonged to one of my clients, or well, a client of a lawyer I worked for," I explained. "Her stepson tried to contest his father's will and say the house was his."

"Should it have been?"

I snorted. "Hell, no. The woman had her name on the loans and deed. It was an easy report for me to give the legal teams, and now, she can sell this place and afford to move closer to her stepdaughter and sister. They both live up north somewhere."

"I thought you weren't supposed to tell me about your clients."

"I decided to make an exception this time. Do you want to come see the house that caused all the fuss?"

"Yeah, sure."

Hopping out of my car, we walked up the driveway toward a side door under the carport. The knob had no lock for a key, only a number code. I pressed the four digits and heard a deadbolt come undone.

I motioned to Delilah. "After you."

Greeted first by the aging linoleum in a laundry area, we moved from room to empty room while Delilah held fast to my hand. Inside, the house seemed even older than I remembered. I had looked it over two evenings before, but with light filtering through the blinds and Delilah's fresh eyes, I felt the sudden realization of reality.

Was I really doing this? Would this actually work?

The tub in the main bathroom was a vintage mint green. A few of the kitchen's cabinet doors hung crooked on their

hinges, and the wood-paneled den had bright orange shag carpet. It was a contrast of shades and a collision of decades. Delilah smiled.

“There’s a bookcase wall,” she remarked.

Across the den, a brown brick fireplace popped out from a floor-to-ceiling set of bookcases stained the same aging amber shade. They were dark, a tad dusty, and in need of a creative mind. The first time I saw them, I knew Delilah could be the one. She could make this tired house into a home.

“You told me once that you always wanted one,” I recalled. “Is it big enough?”

“Maybe, but it’s not mine.”

I shrugged. “But it could be.”

Delilah laughed like it was a joke. Her face lit up as the sun brightened through the sliding glass doors leading into the back yard. Outside, a squirrel skittered across the deck railing with a small pine cone in its teeth. It looked toward us as if it heard her.

“Yeah, okay, with what money for the down payment?” Delilah snorted. “All my money’s not just tied up in the store. It’s *hog tied*.”

“Mine’s not.”

Her wide grin faltered. Blinking twice, she began to notice this was no joke.

“Owen, you can’t buy a house,” she insisted at first. “Well, I mean, you’re allowed to do whatever you want with your money, but you can’t buy a house for, you know, *us*. That’s . . .”

“What? Sensible? Practical? A good idea?”

Delilah shook her head. Glancing out to the yard, her lips curled in between her teeth. Her thumb rubbed my hand for some unconscious comfort.

“I can’t expect you to do that,” she finally replied. “You can’t just let me move in with you like that. Even with the

baby coming, it's just . . .”

“Why not?” I cocked my head to the side. “How would it be much different from me moving into your apartment? I’ve been practically living there for the last three months, and I never paid a single bill.”

“But you cleaned and made meals for us.”

“And you’d do that here, right?”

Delilah nodded. “Yes.”

“And you would help me paint the walls and find something to replace this weird carpet?”

She rocked back on her heels and chuckled at the floor.

“It is bizarre,” she remarked. “It’s so ugly it’s almost cute.”

“No, it’s not, and you’d help me pick out something far better.”

“Well, sure.”

“And you would help pay the bills and the mortgage.”

“Of course.”

“So, it would be *ours*, Delilah.”

Why did it matter where the money came from? Someday, it would all be hers anyway, and even if she never gave me a dime, Delilah gave me a reason to have a house, a yard, and a whole life of beautiful normalcy. Coming home to her and our child would be payment enough.

Still, Delilah wasn’t buying it. I felt the hesitation in all her little movements and the flitting of her gaze. She wanted to say yes. I knew it in my gut.

“Let’s put it this way,” I offered instead. “Do you not like this house?”

“No, it’s perfectly awful. I’d love fixing it.”

“Do you not like the neighborhood?”

She shook her head. “It’s precious and not too far from the city.”

“Then, do something—shut your eyes for me and keep ’em closed.”

Delilah resisted for a second, but relenting, she squeezed her eyelids tight under the veil of her bangs. I envisioned everything Delilah offered me. All in my head, it looked too wonderful to be real.

“Imagine having a nursery and a guest room for when our parents come over,” I began. “We can put up a Christmas tree in the den and a Menorah in the kitchen. You’ll have space for all your books. We can open all the windows when it rains, put up a swing set for our kid, and in the summer, you can watch me mow the lawn.”

She grinned. “Oh, you look good mowing the lawn. All the neighbors are jealous.”

“Is that a life you want, Delilah? Do you like what you see?”

She tried to fight her smile, but she couldn’t anymore.

“Yes, Owen.”

I took a step closer, closing the small gap between us. My hand tightened around hers. My shoulders curled as my voice dipped into a murmur.

“Then, my sweet, stubborn angel, let me give it to you.”

“*But . . .*”

“You only need to agree.”

“Okay,” she whispered, taking in a deep breath. “I will.”

She let go. Finally, Delilah agreed.

My mouth struggled between the urge to kiss her and the need to grin like an idiot. Without the crowds of the airport, she let her lips part and her tongue graze over mine. The memory of four days without her became painfully clear, but I refused to rush her back to our old iron bed. The moment couldn’t get away from me.

“You wouldn’t let me buy you a ring,” I muttered against her lips, “but I did get something for you.”

Her eyes popped open. Reaching into my back pocket, I pulled out the velveteen bag that had been a weight on me all morning. Delilah refused the chance to make an honest man out of me, but it was hard to fight a half-carat diamond dangling before her eyes.

She had to reach out. She couldn't help but be held captive by it. On its delicate white gold chain, the simple pendant diamond sparkled like a promise, or rather, a million different promises of all the days to come.

“Delilah Kaplan, will you please take this necklace and promise that one day I can buy a pair of rings to match?”

Her dark eyes shimmered like a starry night. For me, that look felt far more precious than the colorless gem. I couldn't wait to spend my life tending that expression of hers, keeping it alive like a bonfire with all its smoldering embers.

“Yes, Owen Braun,” she agreed in a tender tone. “That's a promise I'll happily keep. Do you want to help put it on me?”

“Of course.”

Delilah turned around. Pulling back her hair, she waited with bated breath. I undid the clasp carefully. Delilah held the stone against her chest. As the claw hook fastened against the nape of her neck, I pressed my lips against the exposed skin.

It was our promise sealed with a kiss. I had everything I needed right there in that strange old den. Looking out through the glass doors, I basked in the delight of it all.

“I guess I should thank you,” she said, inclining her head to make space for me. “It's not every day a man offers to buy me a house.”

My teeth grazed over her ear. “Thank me when we're fussin' over paint samples in the hardware store.”

Laughter bubbled up around us. Settling into the feeling, Delilah leaned her head back against my shoulder. Her back pressed against my chest, and my arms wrapped around her waist.

She held me there for a long, quiet moment. A vivid cardinal flew into view, and watching him, we let time pass us by. It was easy in that ranch house. Traces of all the years gone by helped the present fade away.

“People will think it’s strange for us to move in together after only being together for a little while,” Delilah mused, not that she honestly cared. “They’ll probably think it’s just because of the baby. Some might say it’s too much, too soon.”

“Well, they’re wrong.”

“How?”

I took in a deep breath and smelled those final traces of her floral perfume. I let my eyes close and my mind go back to that night in the hotel room where I first fell head over heels for her. I placed Delilah in my heart and in the crook of my arm, but my heart never let go.

“I spent a year falling in love with you from the other side of the world,” I muttered into her ear. “I waited months to get back to you. For me, this is all a long time coming.”

“And it’s what you want?” she pressed, placing her hand over mine. “You want everything we talked about—the parents visiting and the lawn with all its weeds and the hodgepodge holidays? You’re not just doing it for my sake?”

“*Delilah.*” I kissed her temple. “I love you. Nothing would make me happier.”

It didn’t matter either way. For her sake, I was prepared to do anything and be anything. I could be the man she always adored. I could give her a house, children, and everything she needed to be content. As long as I got to hold onto her through it all, I would no doubt be a happy man.

I heard the soft smile in her voice as she answered, “I love you too.”

EPILOGUE

Delilah

It took tons of cleaning and re-cleaning to get the house ready for the party. Between naps, feedings, and life outside of being a mother, I managed to get it all done with the help of Owen, Cassidy, and even Rosemary. My cousin had arrived two days earlier than my parents, but I couldn't deny it was nice having family around who were eager to fawn over the man of the house.

He weighed twenty-two pounds, had a head of soft brown curls, and as of Wednesday, was one year old.

"There's our little guy!" Rosemary cooed as we entered the kitchen. "It looks like Julian had a wardrobe change."

Sure enough, his sailboats had been changed out for a onesie covered in safari animals.

I sighed, smiling regardless. "Diaper blowout, but we're all cleaned up now."

"Do you want me to hold him for a while?" she offered. "Owen just started serving up the cheeseburgers outside."

"Only if you fix me a drink first."

On first instinct, I never wanted to give Julian up. I didn't care how tired my arms became. Every piece of him was too perfect, from his wide, dark eyes to the little dimples over his baby bottom. From the first night I held my baby in my arms,

it felt like he was always meant to be there, but others deserved their chance too.

Rosemary scooped ice into one of the red cups and poured the iced tea. She excitedly made the trade, lighting up for my boy. Wiping her hands on her skirt, she tickled his underarms and got a peal of giggling in return.

“Come on, Julian!” she chimed for him. “Let’s see what everyone’s doing outside. I’ll bet we can find some berries your Grandma Mary chopped up this morning!”

It gave me ten seconds alone in the pale blue kitchen. Like the rest of the house, the style was a mixture of coastal pastels and Southern grandma, mostly because we raided our families’ attics when furnishing the house. The walnut dining table had once belonged to my mother’s parents. The rocking chair I used for Julian had been used by Wendy Braun for both Owen and his little brother. All the mismatched sentimental pieces came together like a story of everything that had led to this house, and with a little creativity, they now looked as if they had always been there.

When I walked through our house, it was like we were always meant to be there. Owen and I had been destined to make this place our home, even if it came with a few concessions. I couldn’t walk downstairs to the store anymore. Both Owen and I had to let others handle work while we managed our infant, but it was all worth it in the end.

Life with Julian already moved faster than I liked. He had just learned to say *Dada*. Before I blinked, he would be taking his first steps, heading off to school, and running out the door to be with his friends. It put a twinge in my chest, but I was beyond excited to see it all.

I just didn’t know why Owen insisted on having his first birthday party be a full-blown affair. For God’s sake, it wasn’t like Julian would remember any of it.

Folding tables were covered in checkered tablecloths. Flowers from the farmer’s market sat in blue glass jars, and folk music played through our wireless speakers. Out in the May sunshine, Owen chatted with our family and friends

while serving up burgers from his grill—a Christmas present getting more and more use as the weather warmed. It was becoming a bit of an obsession.

“I just saw this pizza attachment. It converts the grill top into a stone pizza oven,” he explained to my father.

My dad’s interest looked piqued.

“Is it just for pizza?” he wondered.

Owen shook his head. “It can bake bread, roast meat, and a lot more than that.”

“I’d like to see this thing,” Dad remarked.

“Maybe when you visit next time,” I interjected. “If Owen asks nicely, I think Julian would be willing to get him one for Father’s Day.”

Dad chuckled. “That would be something. For my first Father’s Day, I think you gave me a concrete paver of your handprints.”

“You say that like you don’t still keep it around your vegetable garden.”

“I wouldn’t part with it for anything,” he replied with pride. “Now, I promised your mom one of these cheeseburgers. I’d better go find her before she eats her sun hat.”

Giving me a smile, Dad went off down the deck steps and into the back yard full of guests. A strong arm slipped around my waist. The warm afternoon breeze ruffled my ponytail and my striped maxi dress. In all the world, there was no place I’d rather be.

“Can I interest you in something to eat?” Owen asked, his lips pressing against my temple.

“That depends. What have you got?”

He gestured with his metal spatula. “We’ve got black bean burgers, turkey burgers, and Angus beef burgers, and any of ’em can have cheese.”

“Ooh, tough choice.” I took a sip of my drink. “I guess you can give me a burger, then.”

“Which one?”

“Dealer’s choice.”

He already knew which one I wanted. Melting a cheese slice over one of the turkey patties, Owen grabbed a paper plate and one of the warmed buns. He knew how I liked my eggs and my favorite bakery for birthday cakes. It felt like he had every aspect of me memorized, but Owen swore there was more to learn and to love.

“Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves,” I remarked. “Especially Julian.”

Not too far away, Rosemary held him in her lap as he held a blueberry in his fist. His mouth was already tinged with purple.

Owen smiled. “He’s good at being the center of attention.”

“He gets it from me, you know.”

“Oh, I do.”

Laughing along with him, I nudged his side. “Come on, the burgers are done now. Turn off the grill and make a plate for yourself. Your mom brought five different kinds of salad, and I want to try them all.”

Pasta salad, potato salad, broccoli salad—the whole smorgasbord of sides were waiting to be tasted.

“In a second,” Owen said.

“But we’re the only ones not eating,” I pointed out. “Everyone else has a plate.”

“I know.”

Something about his change in tone confused me, and when he didn’t hand me my plate, my eyebrows knit themselves together. Owen had acted oddly all week long. I figured it had to do with family coming into town or maybe work, but I was starting to think that wasn’t right.

It had to be something else, and a nagging thought told me I was about to learn about *this something*.

Owen flashed a wide grin and took me by the wrist. With a nod from his older brother, Alex rang a small bell at his table, but for the life of me, I didn't know where it came from. Why was nobody else surprised by the silvery sound?

Even baby Julian seemed to expect it.

"While everyone's together like this," Owen began, stopping me on the last of the deck steps. "I wanted to take a minute to thank you all for coming. I'm not one for speeches, but it's been great to have our first party here. Between Julian's arrival and getting the house finished, Delilah and I have had plenty to celebrate but not much time to do it."

The party guests laughed. When had Owen become so enigmatic and charming? Had any other man made a white T-shirt and jeans look so damn good?

He continued, "It's been a crazy year for us, but thanks to each of you, we made it through. That's why I wanted you all here when Delilah finally made good on a promise to me."

"A promise?" I echoed in surprise.

The truth dawned on me, and my jaw went slack. Reaching into his pocket, Owen pulled out an ovular diamond cushioned against a white gold band. It refracted the sunlight and shone almost as much as Owen's bright eyes.

I never forgot the promise I'd made him. Ever since that day in the den, my diamond necklace rarely left my neck. I got earrings to match for Christmas and a tennis bracelet for my last birthday, but at long last, Owen had that inevitable ring to match.

"After all those months you waited for me, I realized it was more than fair to take our time getting here," he told me. "I never wanted to pressure you, but I think we've all been patient enough."

My head turned toward the rest of the party. Every smile looked knowing. Mom dabbed her tears away with a napkin.

All at once, it dawned on me that this party had been a setup from the beginning.

Why else would Owen be so eager to throw such a party? Julian couldn't remember any of it. This day, this party, had been for me. My parents came from Arizona. Sam and Jude flew in from Malibu. Everyone there had come to witness this exact moment.

Owen was getting down on one knee. I couldn't remember how to breathe.

"Delilah Eve Kaplan, I love you more than I can ever describe. You've given me the chance to be a father and a much better man. Will you give me the honor of being your husband too?"

I bit my lower lip. The answer was so simple, but it caught in my throat. Overwhelmed, I wanted to kick myself for not seeing the signs. I should have known this proposal was coming.

"I can't believe you," I mouthed.

"Everyone's waiting, angel. What do you say?"

I beamed. "Yes, Owen, I'd love to be your wife."

The whole yard erupted in applause, but I hardly heard it. My heart beat too loudly. My focus was too fixed on the ring sliding onto my finger and the arms fastening around my waist. Since the day Julian had been born, I'd never seen Owen look so happy.

"I love you too," I said, reaching for his gorgeous face. "I love you so, so much."

Owen kissed my grin and promised, "And I'm gonna spend the rest of our lives making it worth your while."

"Oh, baby," I murmured. "You already have."

I floated between reality and sheer delight. Had I found Cloud Nine? Had I died and gone to paradise?

I couldn't ask for a better man or partner than Owen. I saw it every day when I woke up beside him. It showed in his

devotion to our son and growing our lives together. Every day, Owen committed himself to loving us. I couldn't imagine a few vows or a marriage certificate making him any more perfect.

“A toast to the happy couple!” Cassidy declared, bouncing up out of her chair. “I think it's safe to say we're all looking forward to the wedding!”

Everyone raised their cups and cheered in agreement. For better or worse, I'd watched love unfold over the years in all its forms. I felt the love of family and friends. I discovered love of a child and what it could do to a mother, especially when that child was lost.

It never failed to shape me, change me, and help me grow, but right then, I held onto the absolute love of my life. I kissed him for all I was worth where everyone might see. I wanted the entire world to know, to see the ring on my finger, and bask in the smile Owen put on my face. I'd raised a glass and toasted so many happy endings, and finally, I had mine.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Rosemary

It felt bizarre to tell the other party guests I had just graduated. Come August, I wouldn't be heading back to the dorm rooms or my college friends. I was moving on to bigger and better things. The Manhattan School of Music had pulled me from the waitlist, and before I knew it, I'd be living a new kind of life.

It wouldn't look like what I'd imagined as a little girl in Tennessee. Sure, my dreams back then were based on the books and films set in the city. I knew most of those fantasies to be impractical now, but life was changing before my eyes could focus. The world seemed to spin faster than a top. Taking a sip of sweet tea, I explained the situation to Aunt Mary and some of her friends.

"I'll be studying piano performance and music education," I told the huddle of strangers. "The school waitlisted me at first, but they offered me a place a few weeks ago."

"I don't think I've heard of that school," one of them realized.

I explained, "Oh, it's connected to Columbia."

The gray-haired adults gushed in approval. Aunt Mary wrapped an arm around me and squeezed. She grinned so hard I wondered if her face might break.

“My Delilah’s getting married, and my sister’s girl is off to an amazing school!” she exclaimed. “I don’t know how my sister and I got so lucky! John and I can’t wait to visit New York and see one of Rosemary’s concerts. She’s such a wonderful performer.”

“And you know, if Delilah would like it, I could come play for her wedding,” I added. “It would be up to her, though.”

Aunt Mary’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that would be so beautiful! Let’s go tell her!”

My cousin loved the idea. Thanks to the afternoon she was having, Delilah seemed to be in love with everything. She had her chubby-cheeked baby and devoted husband-to-be. She had her dream job and all the freedom life could afford. Ever since we were little, I’d wanted to be like her. I longed for her charisma and courage. Delilah had everything dreams were made of.

“You know, I’m happy with your just being a guest,” she assured me, reaching for my hand. “You only have to play if it’s what you want.”

“It can be my wedding gift to you,” I replied. “Won’t that be better than something from a department store?”

Delilah grinned. “It’ll be perfect. Thank you, Rosie.”

Though I wanted to ask her more about song options and her ideal music, my body had different plans. My bladder pestered me more and more these days. It was like the iced tea ran right through me.

“If it’s okay, I’m gonna make a quick trip to the little girls’ room,” I told her.

“Oh, feel free to go use the bathroom in my bedroom,” Delilah insisted. “The other one might be occupied.”

Delilah was right. While the others ate birthday cake, somebody was holed up in the hallway bathroom. I didn’t wait around. I took refuge in Delilah’s room, enjoying the quiet and the geraniums printed all over the walls.

Noah and I could make a home together. We've got a chance to be this happy.

The thoughts haloed around me, one after the other. Delilah had done everything out of the traditional order, and it worked out just fine. As long as I was happy with my boyfriend, who cared what we were doing with our lives? I washed my hands and tried to wash away my worries too.

“Everything’s gonna be fine,” I told myself. “Noah and I will move to Brooklyn, and life will settle right into place.”

I felt a vibration in the back pocket of my denim skirt. My heart skipped. Naive and way too hopeful, I’d dared to think of the devil. It was like my anxious heart already knew the faster I dried my hands.

My father’s name flashed on the screen, and of all the things that annoyed him, being sent to voicemail was near the top of the list. I pressed the green button and braced myself.

“Hey, Dad,” I greeted him. “Everything okay?”

“Hi, Rosemary, I’ve called to tell you that we’ve booked a room at the club and your mother is meeting with the family pastor right now.”

“Wait, for . . . what?”

Had somebody died? Grandma wasn’t well, but being sore and a tad senile seemed pretty on par for a woman pushing ninety. While searching for a reason, Dad laughed like I’d missed the obvious.

“For your wedding, of course.”

“Excuse me?” I swallowed hard. “What are you saying?”

“Is the reception bad there?”

I shook my head. “No, no, it’s not that.”

He continued, “After the news you shared with me and your mother last week, it’s been decided that you and Noah will marry. Honestly, did you think you and your boyfriend could just move to New York as if this wasn’t a big deal? Did you consider the optics?”

“The optics? I—”

Dad strong-armed me into silence. Cutting me off, nothing stopped him from making a point.

“Rosemary, don’t be naive. You wanted to go off to graduate school and your big city experience, and your mother and I decided to support that. Now, if you want to keep that support, this is what you’ll need to do.”

I bit my lip, hearing the underlying threat laced through his reply. Scholarships covered my tuition and gave me a small stipend, but I had books to buy and fees to cover. I couldn’t do it all on my own. Like everything else in my life, the financial backing my parents extended became contractual. Unconditional love had never been in their vocabulary.

“You will be a good daughter, won’t you?” he persisted when I stayed quiet for too long. “You’ve always done what’s right for the good of our family. That won’t change now.”

Based on the edge in his gruff Tennessee drawl, I didn’t have much of an option.

“Of course,” I agreed, feeling something sink deep down inside me.

Mom needed the phone number for Noah’s parents. Before the summer’s end, he and I would be married. It would all be suitable and right. I’d still be my father’s golden child, polished and primed for the world to see.

After being that girl for so many years, why did the thought have my heart racing? A hummingbird seemed to be trapped in my chest. My ribs didn’t offer enough space for my lungs.

How had a brave face become the hardest thing to wear?

“You’ll start planning with your mother once you get back from your trip,” Dad declared. “It’ll be best if you have some ideas planned beforehand.”

Did it matter what I said? According to him, the chapel had already been reserved. I would have a mid-morning Saturday wedding with a luncheon reception after. The guest

lists were coming together. Appointments had been made with florists and a baker. Why should I waste my breath on anything my mother would ultimately change?

This wedding wouldn't be mine at all. Noah and I were meant to be props for the meticulously crafted scene. I only had to smile and nod, playing a part I'd been given as a teenager. The only silver lining was that this time around, Noah would be there too.

His hand could lace with mine. His ring would be on my finger.

Nothing would ever be as perfect as childhood dreams, not New York City nor my wedding to Noah. Still, he was the one I wanted more than anyone else. When I dreamed of looking as happy as Delilah, Noah was the only man I imagined putting such a wild grin on my face.

I loved him. He loved me. At the end of the day, did it matter how we got married?

That's what I tried to tell myself. Stepping out of the bathroom, I only made it a few steps before sinking down onto the foot of the bed. I couldn't look at the blank phone. My eyes glazed over until all I saw were sea-green walls closing in on me and the philodendron vines growing faster and faster.

Racing from the windowsill, the plant wanted to trap me. The world was trying to pin me down. I didn't have the freedom to follow my own path, not if my parents had anything to say about it.

"Hey, Rosie," Delilah said as she found me. "Everything all right?"

My face answered the question before my words could. Brushing back the hair from my face, she plopped down beside me. Delilah had always tended to me like an older sister. Her dark eyes flickered with concern while her posture became protective. In many ways, she was meant to be a mother.

"Where's Julian?" I asked first.

“Owen’s putting him down for a nap,” she explained. “He started getting a little fussy, but when I wanted to talk more about your offer, Mom said you hadn’t come back from the bathroom.”

“I got a phone call from Dad.”

Delilah understood my deep sigh. Everyone in the family knew my father to be tiresome on the best of days. All his good graces seemed to be saved for the public eye.

“And how is Uncle Max? Temperamental as usual?”

“Kind of.”

I didn’t know how to say it. I wanted to be happy about the sudden news. Gripping my knees, I plastered a smile on my face.

“I, um, didn’t want to upstage you today,” I decided to explain. “Dad called me about wedding plans, though. I . . . well, Noah and I are getting married.”

“Rosemary, congratulations!” Delilah threw her arms around my neck. “Oh, my God, it feels so nice telling someone else that today.”

Leaning into her embrace, I felt my breathing turn ragged. Tears misted in my eyes. Why couldn’t I just smile and be happy? Why did my body have to betray me?

“Sorry,” I apologized, seeing a tear stain on Delilah’s shoulder.

“You don’t need to feel bad, but you don’t seem like a very excited bride.”

“It’s just . . .” I wiped my cheeks clean. “It’s all happening sooner than I expected. I don’t even have a ring yet, but my parents want us to get married before we head up to New York. That is, well, there’s a chance Noah won’t even be able to come with me. He decided to become a free agent after the draft didn’t pan out last spring. For all I know, he’s going to be somewhere like Arizona or Florida this fall. We’ll be married, and we won’t even be together if I’m going to school.”

“I guess that’s not what you wanted for your first year of marriage, huh?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not.”

Delilah took my hand, covering it with her own. I didn’t know how she dared to look so hopeful. She always did, in spite of everything. She made optimism a kind of rebellion.

“No relationship is a cakewalk,” she said to me, “but you are the most resilient, kind, and clever person. Noah loves the snot out of you. Literally, the first night we met, he made you laugh so hard that soda came out of your nose.”

“That’s right,” I recalled, my smile becoming more earnest. “You came up for the homecoming game, and we had taken you out to our favorite diner.”

“And in that booth, I saw there was no guy in the world more perfect for you. I don’t know what’ll happen for you and Noah, but whatever comes your way, you can face it, Rosie. You two can survive anything.”

I nodded. “Thanks. I . . . I really needed to hear that.”

Still, as Delilah hugged me, I couldn’t deny the ill feelings in my stomach. The clock on the nearby nightstand ticked louder and louder. Weddings were supposed to be a happy end where love always won. Couples devoted themselves to one another for all the world to see, but my wedding already felt different.

It would be a test of faith, a proving ground, or possibly even a battlefield. For Delilah, she was going to kiss her groom and drive off into the sunset. She had her happily ever after, but for me, my wedding was only the beginning.

I knew how to survive the pomp and circumstance of a wedding day. I could put on a brave face to suit any occasion. Staring down my future, I only needed to hope for the strength to face everything afterward.

Rosemary and Noah’s story is going to be full of swoony surprises. I promise you are going to love every word of it.

While you wait for that one, *how about checking out Maid without Honour - Book One in this series here.*

Maid without Honor is Sam and Jude's story.



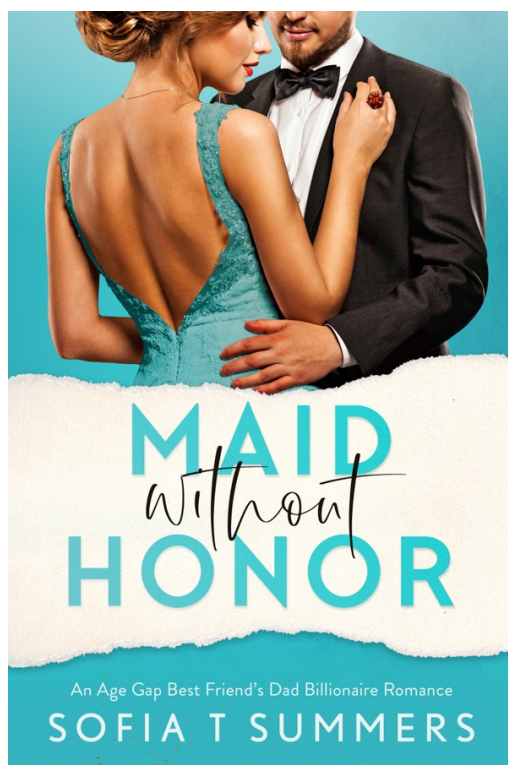
It isn't that hard to be a good maid of honor.

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

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

Get Maid without Honor NOW!

MAID WITHOUT HONOR (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

**It isn't that hard to be a good maid of honor.
Always support your bride-to-be, co-host a gorgeous bridal
shower,**

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

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

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

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

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

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

That's how I preferred it.

No strings. No rings. No heartbreak.

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

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

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

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

Sam

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

FLIGHT CANCELED

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

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

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

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

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

"Which one?"

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

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

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

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

How could it taste stale already?

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

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

I worried that he’d notice at some point.

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

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

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

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

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

“Um, yeah.”

We moved like we had done this all before. He handed me one of the packets to pour into my cup before dumping one

into his. The allegedly hot coffee didn't steam like I expected.

"They really should call this 'tepid black swill'," he mused.

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

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

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

"Who doesn't call you that?"

"My parole officer."

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

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

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

"Why not?" I agreed.

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

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

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

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

His eyebrows went up. “Portugal?”

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

“Are you a travel writer, then?”

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

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

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

Reality slapped me in the face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I can’t tell you what’s in this cup, but I won’t be a jerk and abandon you here. The airline’s going to have to reimburse you, so we might as well save ourselves from

this . . . this purgatory. You can get a room until the new flight's booked, and if they don't have one free, well, my suite does have two bedrooms."

My eyebrows went up. I swallowed hard.

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

"I doubt that."

"I might steal everything you have."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't even joke about that."

"Then, what should I joke about?"

"Why not tell me more about that beach in Portugal?"

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

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

“Not anymore?”

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

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

Every subtle flirtation became a small shock to my system.

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

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

A glass of water had to suffice.

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

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

“Yes, Sam.”

“Why did you bother with me today?”

He smirked at the line. “*Bother?*”

“You know what I mean.”

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

“I’d seen you at dinner.”

“When?”

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

“Why, then?”

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

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

His expression faltered for a fraction of a second.

“I don’t expect anything from you, Sam.”

“But expectation and desire aren’t the same thing.”

“No,” he had to admit. “They’re not.”

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

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

“I’d give you the chance to refuse,” Jude murmured.

The rasp of wanting filled every word.

“And what if I don’t want to?”

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

“There will be no going back.”

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

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

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

Slowly, and then all at once, we ignited.

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

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

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

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

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

Jude worked to memorize the outline of my curves, roving over my sides with his grip before stopping at my breasts. His mouth stole the very air from mine, but when he broke our kiss, I nearly whimpered in disappointment.

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

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

“We’re okay,” he echoed quietly.

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

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

“And what will I be?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Hell, Sam,” he cursed into my hair.

We left each other feverish and breathless on a white dream cloud until sleep claimed us both. Sweat pearled at my neck. My lungs struggled to calm, but I couldn’t remember the

last time I'd felt so content. Somewhere between dreams and reality, I heard Jude speak.

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

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

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

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

The airline finally rebooked our flight.

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

"And you'll come running?"

He grinned. "Probably."

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

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

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

"You too, Sam."

One hopeful smile. One small wave.

Just like that, I figured our time had come and gone. We woke up. We were heading back to reality, and as I stood there waiting, I imagined that Jude's fascination with me would melt faster than the snow outside.

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

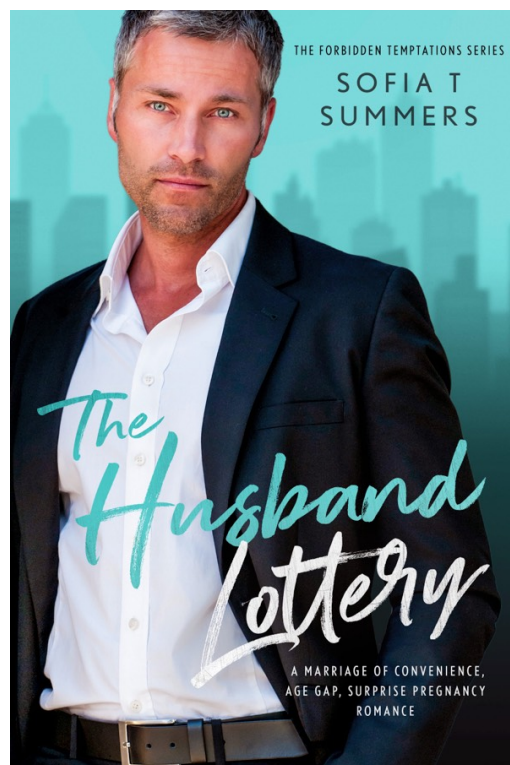
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