

A romantic close-up photograph of a man with a beard kissing a woman on the cheek. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. The background is a bright, hazy sky, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is intimate and affectionate.

a Falls Creek novel

**WHAT
HEALS
US**

MAGGIE GATES

WHAT HEALS US

AN AGE GAP ROMANCE

MAGGIE GATES

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*To all the ones who needed an Austin Hale for their first time.
He's yours.*

To my dad, for fighting hard when you needed a kidney.

To my mom, for donating it to him.

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AUSTIN

A body pressed against my back as someone shuffled toward the bar. I tried to scoot my chair forward to make space but there was none. I felt like an elephant crammed in a clown car.

Holding a meeting in a bar at noon on a Monday was a great idea in theory, I thought, thumbing through the notes in front of me. It should have been just the five of us and crickets. But not in Beaufort, North Carolina.

And especially not at Jokers.

The summertimers packed up and hauled ass inland months ago, but the locals were out in full force, raising their drinks in celebration of surviving the late-season storm that had pounded the coast for the last three days.

The whole town had gone stir-crazy waiting out the storm surge and the winds. Half the county lost power, but Chase and Bridget, the new owners of the bar, had a generator working double time.

The Crystal Coast First Responders Charity Kickball Tournament wasn't until May, but the planning started early. Each department sent a representative to collaborate on organizing the event. I didn't mind being the gopher for the Beaufort Fire Department. I loved participating in community events. Still, I couldn't help the yawn that escaped my mouth.

I tried to focus on the meeting, but my eyes glazed over while the rep from the Coast Guard talked about their plans for promoting the charity tournament to their people.

Melissa Jacobsen, an ER nurse sitting to my left, nudged me awake.

Steve Pelham, a detective with the Beaufort Police Department, cleared his throat. “If we want to rent the bounce houses for the kids’ area, we’ll need to bring on a few more sponsors to cover the costs.”

“Can I get anyone another round?” Bridget asked as she waltzed by.

I had just finished twenty-four hours on duty with the fire department and hadn’t seen the inside of my eyelids since I clocked in.

Storms created a special kind of chaos. We had responded to a handful of medical emergencies, some downed trees, and drivers who got stuck because they refused to heed the *turn around, don’t drown* mantra.

I just wanted to get home and sleep for a solid forty-eight hours before I had to return to the fire station.

A paramedic from the station in Morehead City lifted a finger and asked for another beer. I drained the rest of my coffee.

Bridget eyed my cup. “What about you, Hale?”

I sighed. “Probably should.” There was at least another hour left of this meeting. An email would’ve sufficed. Chances were, I could pop espresso beans like they were TicTacs and not get even the slightest energy boost.

Bridget took in my response and frowned. “You doing okay?”

I smiled through the exhaustion. “Just tired. Long night.”

“I hear that. Sounds like your night was the same as Chase’s.”

“Yeah, we ran into each other at a few calls.”

Chase Brannan—Bridget’s boyfriend—was a police officer. We had a tenuous history, but things seemed less tense since he and Bridget finally got together.

“How’re you doing?” I asked, keeping my tone just between us as the meeting continued.

She gave a warped smile. “I’m alright.”

I raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“The arraignment was last week,” she said with a sigh. “He pleaded not guilty.”

My nostrils flared. *That asshole.* Bridget’s ex-fiancé was an abuser who nearly killed her more than once. I hated that he was dragging this shit into a trial. “You know he’s gonna wish he had taken the plea bargain, right?”

She let out a wavering breath. “Yeah. Fingers crossed for a guilty verdict and the longest sentence the judge can come up with.”

I reached out and touched her elbow. She flinched a little, so I pulled back.

“I know you’ve got Chase,” I said. “But I’m here if you need anything.”

“I know,” she said with a smile as she touched my shoulder. “You’re just a call away. Now, how about I go get you that coffee?”

I nodded and watched out of the corner of my eye as she hurried back to the bar and started pouring beers, filling water glasses, and hammering away at a decades-old coffee maker.

Just a call away.

It’s what I had said to her almost twenty years ago when I took her to prom. *If he doesn’t ask you, I’m just a call away.* It’s what I told the aforementioned *he* when Bridget was burning her wedding dress in his yard after she finally got away from her ex.

I was happy for them. Why wouldn’t I be?

As if I had conjured a physical manifestation of the friendzone, Erica Pelham and her two kids walked in with Hannah Jane Hayes—now Lawson.

Steve paused from whatever he was talking about—something about an expanded concession stand—and grinned from ear to ear when he saw his wife and two kids in tow.

Bridget swung by and swapped my empty mug for a piping hot cup of coffee.

Just fantastic.

Nothing like being surrounded by a handful of could-have-beens.

They weren't exes, per se.

I harbored a crush on Bridget for years, but it went nowhere. She found her person in her childhood best friend. I was happy for them.

Years ago, I asked Erica out on a date. She shot me down quickly, having already fallen for the bearded cop sitting across from me.

I went on a date with Hannah Jane to help her rebound after a breakup. She ended up with a billionaire.

How nice.

“Mr. Austin!” Aly, Steve and Erica’s daughter, squeaked as she peeled away from her mom and bolted for me. Her eyes widened when she saw me still in my Beaufort FD t-shirt and cargo pants. “Did you drive here in the big twuck?” she gasped in awe.

I remembered seeing Erica at the station’s open house over the fall. Aly had been enamored with the rig and went through three tour groups just so she could see it again and again.

She looked at me and reached up with gimme-grabby hands. I turned in my seat and popped her up onto my leg. “How’s it going, munchkin? You come by to see your dad?” I gave Steve a chin tip across the table.

She nodded. “Uh-huh.” Her button nose wrinkled up as she stared me down. “Where’s your.... the ... bunk bed gear?”

The collection of first responders around the tables shared quiet laughs.

“You mean my *bunker* gear?” I gently corrected with a grin. I was damn impressed. Aly was sharp as a tack. Few three-year-olds would have remembered what our uniform gear was called.

Aly nodded ferociously. “Where is it?”

“Well,” I said with a chuckle. “It’s at the station, all ready for when I go back to work.”

She frowned. “You’re not being a helper right now?”

Everyone snickered at the inquisition. I wasn’t used to kids paying attention during our community events. Usually, they got jacked up on snow cones, begged to play with the axes, and skipped away wearing the complimentary plastic fire helmets.

“Remember what I said when you were at the firehouse? You can always be a helper even if you’re not a firefighter like me or a police officer like your dad.” I pointed to Bridget. “See there? Miss Bridget and Mr. Chase have a box here for people to bring coats they don’t wear anymore so that others can have one if they need it. They’re being helpers, too.”

Aly eyed the box with excitement. “Momma!” she shrieked as she tried to shimmy out of her winter jacket. “I wanna put my coat in the box so I can be a helper!”

Erica laughed as Aly rocketed off my lap and made a beeline for the donation box. She snatched the little one up with practiced efficiency and popped her onto her hip. “This coat still fits you, but how about we go through your closet when we get home and see what we can bring in.”

Aly liked that idea. She especially liked when Bridget waved to her from the bar and lured her with a plate of chicken fingers.

“You’re so good with kids,” Mel said from beside me.

I looked down at her and shrugged sheepishly. “Grew up with a younger sister. Kinda comes with the territory, I guess.”

It was the truth. There were seven years between my baby sister and me. I remembered every bit of her childhood. Some

of the kids I grew up with detested their younger siblings, but from the moment I saw Bethany screaming her tiny head off, I was wrapped around her finger.

Bethany had moved away to finish her Master's, and was now working on her doctorate at a university in Chapel Hill. I missed her like hell and worried constantly.

It didn't matter that she was only a few years shy of thirty and could probably take care of herself. To me, she'd always be my kid sister who chased me around, sporting skinned knees and grass stains on her jeans.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. *Speak of the devil.*

"Scuse me," I said as I pushed back from the table and flashed my phone to let the group know I had to step out. I grabbed my coffee and slipped out the rickety front door.

"Hey, kiddo," I said as I pressed my phone to my ear and took a sip of coffee. "How's my favorite professor?"

I was waiting to hear Beth's annoyed "*Austin*" and her argument that she was far from being a professor. It was our perfunctory greeting these days.

But it never came.

My tone grew more concerned. "Beth?"

There was a snuffle on the other end of the line. "*Austin,*" she whimpered. "*I messed up.*"

My blood ran cold, turning into icy rivers of adrenaline. "Beth, what's wrong?"

"I..." She stuttered and paused for a long while. "*I'm pregnant.*"

Warring flashes of anger and concern battled in my mind. "Are you okay?"

Of course she's not okay, you dumbass. She fucking crying on the phone. But I didn't know what else to say.

I could invoke an otherworldly calm in tense situations. I could run into a burning building without a second thought. I could give CPR and perform life-saving measures if needed.

More than once, I had pulled swimmers out of riptides on my days off.

But not now. Not when it involved my sister.

“Sit down,” I said. “Try to stay calm. Where are you? How do you feel? Is the father there with you?”

Beth had been seeing some guy she worked with, but she always stayed tight-lipped about her boyfriends.

Probably because she knew the thought of a man touching her would turn me into a raging lunatic.

Kind of like now.

She sobbed. “I tried to tell him. I went to his house.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I needed to get to Falls Creek and fast. “Are you safe?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she whimpered. “I’m at home.”

I was already heading inside for my coat and keys. “Do you need medical attention?”

She sniffed. “No, I-I think I’m okay ... just—” Beth let out a tear-filled breath “—I don’t know what to do. I’m scared.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Austin, no. It’s a four-hour drive, and you just got off.”

“I’m on my way,” I snapped. I trapped my phone between my ear and shoulder as I pushed my way back into the crowded bar. “What happened when you tried to tell the father?”

There was something Beth was skirting around. I just knew it.

Apparently, that question was enough to make her cry again. My heart shattered.

“His wife answered the door,” she whispered between gasps for air.

“Bethany—”

“I didn’t know he was married!” she sobbed. “I had the pregnancy test in my hand!”

Shit.

“Have you told anyone else?”

The “no” she responded with was pitiful.

“Are you alone?”

“Yeah.”

I grabbed my things from the group table, left enough cash to cover my bill, and nudged Melissa. “I need Layla Mousavi’s number.”

Mel looked at me curiously, then scrolled through her phone for her former coworker’s number. I grabbed one of the spare note-taking pens on the table and scrawled Layla’s information on a paper napkin before stuffing it in my pocket and bolting for the door. I’d text her at a red light.

I knew Layla Mousavi from her short stint as a travel nurse in Beaufort, and now she was friends with my sister. When I visited Beth in Falls Creek after she moved, I was surprised to have run into Layla. She had taken a job as a flight nurse at a little base outside Falls Creek, and had since gotten engaged to a cop.

“I’m sending Layla and Callum to your house,” I said as I hopped into my truck and gave myself a pat on the back for having filled up the gas tank before the storm.

“I’m okay,” she blubbered. “Really. I-I’m fine.”

She was anything but, and I knew it.

“Bethany Hale, don’t argue with me,” I said as I pulled onto Highway 101 and gunned it through Havelock to jump on 70. After a few miles, I slowed to a stop at the red light outside the Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station. I fished my phone out of my pocket and fired off a text to Layla to see if she could go over to Beth’s house until I got to Falls Creek.

I hoped her fiancé was off duty and the two of them could stay with her. But even if it was just Layla, I trusted her. She

was a badass with a capital ‘B.’

“I’m on my way. We’ll figure this out, but I don’t want you to be alone.”

I didn’t say it, but I was worried that the run-in with the baby daddy’s wife would escalate into a domestic situation involving Beth. A husband who cheated on his wife and got his mistress pregnant was a recipe for disaster.

I saw red when the thought floated through my mind that my baby sister was his mistress.

I wasn’t mad at her. Beth didn’t know she was the other woman from how it sounded.

I could figure all that out when I got to Falls Creek.

For now, I just needed to get there.

AUSTIN

The landscape outside the car window passed by in a blur, transitioning from the rugged shoreline to flat coastal plains and then rolling hills as I traveled further inland. My four-hour drive hadn't been enough to calm the turmoil in my stomach. Around the time I reached New Bern, Layla and her fiancé had arrived at Beth's doorstep. Beth abruptly ended our phone call and left me to stew on the situation for the rest of the trip.

It took everything in me to keep from flooring it through the little downtown that served as the main artery of Falls Creek. Not even a month had passed since I last visited. I thought back to the time Beth and I commandeered a table on the patio of The Copper Mule to grab a bite and catch up on life. I had spent most of that time talking to a charming young lady named Caroline Tyree. It had been a few weeks, but thoughts of Caroline still crossed my mind. I let the memories of an hour spent with her float through my memory during the long shifts when it seemed like morning would never come.

Beth had probably been pregnant then, and didn't know it...

Things change in the blink of an eye.

I blew through town, heading to Beth's duplex on the south side of Falls Creek. Her neighborhood was a quaint community of townhouses and apartments that were shrouded by towering oak trees. The branches were on the cusp of being completely bare in preparation of the winter chill.

I pulled into the parking lot that Beth shared with her neighbor—an eighty-year-old man and his bulldog, Arthur.

A Harley and a sleek little car were parked in the empty spaces. I eased my truck around the side of the duplex and jumped out.

I usually visited Beth every few weeks, taking the initiative to check on her since her schedule was packed and our parents couldn't get out here. It was easier than trying to convince Beth to come home. That was like trying to persuade a mule to perform in a circus.

I sat in the truck for a minute, closed my eyes, and let out a slow breath.

And then another.

Knuckles tapping on the glass startled me.

I looked up and found Callum Fletcher on the other side of the door, decked out in his Falls Creek PD uniform.

“Hey,” he grunted when I stepped out.

He and I had interacted a handful of times, usually running into each other when I was in town, hanging out with Beth. I looked at the vinyl-sided duplex. The manners my mother drilled in my head waved their arms to get my attention before I opened my mouth, but the exhaustion won out. I was nearing the edge of thirty-six hours without sleep, and I fucking felt it.

“How is she?” I asked.

His head stayed on a swivel. “Layla’s inside. I thought it best to maintain a visual presence out here in case anyone came by to start trouble.”

“Beth told you what happened?”

He nodded. “Didn’t take much coaxing on Layla’s part, but she spilled.”

I swore under my breath as I scrubbed my hands down my face. I’d been awake for so long that thick stubble abraded my palms. I’d have to shave before I went back on duty.

Callum's voice was firm. "Be gentle with her." He seemed about as gentle as a thorn bush. But I supposed if he managed to successfully court a woman like Layla, there was something more human deep down.

I certainly wasn't one to talk. My success with long-term relationships was nil.

I pushed the selfish thought out of my mind and focused on Beth.

This was about her.

Over the course of the drive, I came up with the best plan of action for her situation.

I'd help her pack and, when I had more than forty-eight hours off, I'd help her move. Easy-peasy.

Gravel crunched under my black station boots as I trudged up the sidewalk. Beth's door sported one of the festive wreaths that our mom made. It was fashioned with billowing green netting and red ribbon with ornaments tucked in all around. I had a similar one on my door back home. Beth's doormat read, *It's like ... really Christmassy in here.*

I didn't bother knocking. I let myself in and looked around.

Christmas explosion.

If anyone loved holiday decorating more than my mom, it was my sister.

The tree was three sizes too big for the space, and no branches were visible. It was a cone of twinkling lights and multicolored ornaments. Garland trimmed the stairs. A trio of extension cords plugged into each other trailed around the perimeter to the overloaded outlet. Throw pillows and blankets, in shades of cranberry and pine, were piled up in a basket by the gas fireplace. Candles that smelled like sugar cookies flickered on every flat surface.

The little townhouse was one festive fire hazard.

And in the middle of all the Christmas cheer was my little sister, curled up on the couch, cradling a box of tissues.

Layla sat beside her, calm and collected. “Hey,” she said softly, forcing a faint smile. A magazine was in her hand, but she wasn’t reading it. Two mugs of tea and a small plate of what looked like rock candy sat on the coffee table, untouched.

I blew out each candle I passed as I crept in. “Hey.”

Beth’s eyes lifted from the tissue box. “You didn’t have to come.”

I forced a smile even though I wasn’t feeling it. “I did. It’s what family does, kiddo.”

“I’ll let y’all catch up,” Layla said as she peeled off the couch and excused herself.

“Thanks for coming by,” Beth sniffed as she sat up.

“Let me know if you need anything.” Layla’s eyes flicked to me and she offered a tight smile. “Good to see you, Hale.”

“Thank you,” I said as we passed each other.

The front door closed and I heard the ambient rumble of Callum’s motorcycle growling to life. The minute the engine faded into the distance, Beth burst into tears.

I dropped onto the couch and pulled her into a hug. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“It’s not,” she sobbed.

I sat there, gently rubbing her back the way I had when we were kids. After a few minutes of letting Beth get it all out of her system, I spoke up again. “Have you thought about what you wanna do?”

‘Uncle Austin’ had a nice ring to it, but it wasn’t my place to decide for her.

She shook her head. “I ... I was gonna tell him,” she whispered. “And hoped that maybe he’d be excited after the shock wore off, you know?” She grabbed a tissue and blew her nose. “But now...” Beth dropped her head into her hands. “I’m so stupid. I should have known.”

“You’re not at fault here,” I said as firmly as I could without making it seem like I was mad at her. I didn’t want to

make her cry even more. “If he hid his entire life from you, you’re not at fault. You didn’t wreck his marriage. He did.”

“We only had sex without a condom *once*,” she said. “His idea.”

The coffee I guzzled at Jokers threatened to make a reappearance. I did not want to hear a damn thing about her having ... relations.

I stifled the urge to vomit and handed her a mug of tea. “Start from the beginning.”

Beth took a sip. “He was ... *is* ... the professor I TA’ed for during my graduate program. We kept things going when I finished the program and started my doctorate.” Her voice grew quiet. “It all happened so fast. We flirted. Started spending extra time together in his office. We hooked up before we ever went out on a date. And now that I look back on it, we never really dated. It was just sexting and dinners out before sex.” She stared blankly at the tree that was simply too jolly for the current circumstance. “I’m so stupid...”

Before I could get a word in edgewise, she kept going.

“He would book us hotel rooms in Raleigh or Greensboro and tell me it was because he didn’t want anyone in the department finding out.” Her lip trembled. “When really it was because he’s married.” Tears streamed down her face. “He has kids, Austin. Kids *plural*. They’re not much younger than me. One of them was in a 100-level class I taught this year! I taught his kid and now I’m pregnant with one!”

“What happened this morning?” I asked gently.

She dabbed her eyes. “The cliché, ‘I threw up and realized I missed my period and took a test.’”

“And then you went to his house?”

There was a guilty look on her face. “I didn’t have his address. That should have been a red flag,” she grumbled. “I had to text one of the other professors and lied about why I needed it.”

“And his wife answered the door?”

Beth nodded. “She reacted . . . as expected.”

“Did she threaten you?”

Beth nodded. “Told me to leave or she’d call the cops. She was pretty hysterical. Their daughter was standing right behind her and saw the whole thing.”

I tightened my arm around her.

“God, I feel like shi—” Her face morphed into the color of the Grinch mug that was on the coffee table right before she bolted for the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

I fired off a text about having a family emergency to my chief while I waited.

The waiting was making me stir crazy.

I piddled around Beth’s kitchen, assessing the few groceries she had, and determined that a trip to the store was in order before dinner.

Or maybe I’d just go out to the Copper Mule and pick something up. That was, if Beth even felt like eating.

Finally, I heard the vomiting stop, the sink turn on, and the sound of her brushing her teeth. She emerged, pausing in the doorway.

“You need to eat something,” I said as I fished a box of crackers out of her cabinets.

She shook her head. “I don’t wanna throw up again.”

I shuffled a few crackers onto a paper towel. “Try to eat. Trust me.”

“Don’t do that,” she said, a stern edge to her voice. “I’m not helpless, I’m just...” She looked down at her feet. “I fucked up.”

“You were pressured into a relationship by your superior,” I clipped through gritted teeth.

Beth shook her head. “I wasn’t some eighteen-year-old freshman, crushing on her teacher. I’m twenty-eight. I knew full well what I was doing.” There was a sadness in her eyes as

she sighed. “Except that he’s married.” A long pause passed before she spoke again. “I just want what mom and dad have and I feel like it’s never gonna happen for me.”

I understood that feeling more than she realized.

She looked down at her stomach. Though nothing was different, everything was. “And now this.”

I squeezed my too-big body into one of her too-small kitchen chairs. “It’s winter break. You’re done for the semester. You’ve got your degree, now come home and we’ll figure it out.”

“I can’t go home.”

“Of course you can.”

“Granddad lives in my old room,” she said. “Besides, Mom’s so busy taking care of him, she doesn’t need me to worry about, too.”

“Have you told them yet?”

She shook her head. “You know she’ll run herself ragged trying to take care of granddad and me.”

Our granddad had a stroke earlier this year. Since they had two children out of the house, our parents converted what used to be the two bedrooms Beth and I occupied into a little apartment for him. He needed round-the-clock care on top of every variety of therapy known to man.

“Besides,” Beth said, a little steadier on her feet. “I’ve already accepted a teaching position that has health insurance.” She threw her hands in the air. “*Health insurance!* I’m not coming home. There’s nothing for me there.”

“Your family is there,” I countered. “You know better than that.”

She hit me with puppy eyes the color of the rolling hills that surrounded the town. “If I go home, I won’t have a job. There are no open teaching positions at the *one* community college in the whole county. I’ll lose my health insurance—something I *have to have* if I’m going to have this baby. I

won't have any income. I'll be one more burden on mom and dad, and that will double if there's a baby."

"Okay..." I said cautiously. So maybe now wasn't the best time to make a highly stressed person make massive life decisions. I pulled out the chair for her to sit, but she paced instead. I stayed calm and kept my ass seated. "How far along do you think you are?"

She aimlessly wiped the already clean countertops. "A little over four weeks."

"So, you'd be due in what—" I did the math "—August?"

Beth nodded.

"Okay. You start your new job in January. Teach through the spring semester, and a summer course—"

"And then what?" she said, pitching the rag into the sink. Beth braced her hands against the edge of the counter and stared out the kitchen window. "I know how much you love Beaufort, but it's not my home anymore. I'm not emotionally tied to it like you are."

Before I could get another word out, a heavy fist pounded on the door.

Beth rolled her eyes. "How many other people did you tell about my *situation*?"

The aggravated knocking sounded again.

"No one," I said.

She skirted past me and cut through the Christmas explosion of a living room.

"Beth," I warned, jumping out of my seat to cut her off.

Something didn't feel right. People didn't just pop by and bang on a door so hard it rattled the window panes.

But she was already at the door, twisting the knob. She didn't yank it open. Instead, the person on the other side pounded on it so hard that it flew open, nearly knocking Beth into the entryway wall.

Beth gasped. “Bradley—”

I had a feeling this was “the professor” and that I would lose my job when I got arrested for killing that son of a bitch.

But *Bradley* paid Beth no mind. His beady eyes locked on me and a sick, twisted grin curled up on his silver-stubbed jaw as he spat out a laugh. “Already opening her legs for someone else, huh?” He pointed a finger at me. “Watch out, buddy. She’ll ruin your life. Might be a half-decent lay, but she’s not worth the trouble.”

He was drunk. I could smell the booze clouding in his breath.

Beth was teary-eyed and trembling. “You should go.”

Bradley sneered. “Go?” He grabbed the edge of the door and slammed it shut behind him, sending ornaments rolling off the Christmas tree. “I’m not going fucking *anywhere*.” He towered over Beth. “You ruined *everything*. You had no business talking to my wife!”

“You never told me you were *married!*” she screeched, looking like she was about to claw his eyes out. “You lying, sociopathic, narcissistic—”

I stepped between them, shuffling Beth to safety behind me. “Get. Out.”

He teetered backward, then lurched forward. “I already knocked her up. Enjoy sloppy seconds, Gigantor.”

Before he could blink, I had him pinned against the wall with my hand around his throat.

“Austin!” Beth shrieked.

“*That’s my sister,*” I said in a tone that should have made him wet his pants. “And if you ever think about even looking in her direction again, I will make you wish you hadn’t.”

I ripped the door open and tossed him out like rotting garbage. Bradley tripped down the steps but landed on his feet. He lazily smoothed his tie down, glaring daggers at the two of us.

Beth was sobbing beside me, but I was impenetrable.

“That’s my baby,” he slurred, pointing at Beth’s stomach. “I’ll come around whenever I goddamn please.”

“No,” she bellowed with utter defiance in her voice. She crossed her arms, hugging her stomach protectively. “It’s *mine*.”

That made him take pause for a moment, but the vitriol returned. “This isn’t over, Beth.” He stumbled across the gravel lot to the shiny Prius idling a few feet away. “You hear me?” He ripped the door open. “You’ll fucking pay for ruining my goddamn life!”

“Go inside,” I said to Beth. I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture of the car he was driving, sending it to Layla to forward to Cal, adding a note about a possible DUI.

When he disappeared from the neighborhood, I jogged out to my truck and grabbed the duffel I kept packed with a few changes of clothes, a stick of deodorant, and a toothbrush. It wasn’t an overnight bag—just a few things I kept on hand for the shifts that brought on the unexpected. The clothes were dirty from working in the storm, but they would do for now. I’d commandeer Beth’s washing machine when things settled.

I let myself back inside and locked the door for good measure. A moment later, Beth exited the bathroom again, wiping the corner of her mouth with her sleeve.

“Did you get sick again?” I asked.

She nodded and carefully lowered herself onto the couch, then eyed the bag in my hand. “What are you doing?”

I dropped it by my feet. “I’m staying.”

Beth was stubborn, but so was I. This whole situation was a powder keg waiting to go off. There was a certain level of unhingedness in that man’s eyes that told me he’d be trouble eventually.

“Austin Scott. I don’t need you babysitt—”

“If you’re staying, so am I.”

Her words were argumentative, but her eyes were pleading. “But your job. Your house—everything you love is in Beaufort.”

“You’re my sister,” I said as I grabbed my bag and tossed it over my shoulder. “You matter more.”

CAROLINE*Three Weeks Later*

The Ballentine House Bed and Breakfast glowed from the inside as Creekers milled about the property. The late December chill snapped at my cheeks. I paused on the sidewalk and pulled up the collar of my coat, then reached back to yank my thick curls free.

“Are you sure you wanna be out in this weather?” my mother asked as she shuffled up the walk. “It’s so cold, and so many people will be in there. It’s flu season, you know. With your health—”

My mother, the perpetual worrier.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, undeterred as I took the frozen wrought-iron handrail and scaled the stairs that led up from the sidewalk.

The bed and breakfast stood on a hill, like a beacon for weary travelers. I had always loved this old house. It looked like it was right out of a story book. There was a wide wraparound porch with a turret. French doors gleamed with sparkling glass. There were picturesque cottages sprinkled throughout the property, and flower gardens that looked like a paint palette in the spring.

Sepideh Nazari, the owner and operator, restored it to its former glory after her husband passed years ago. Now, it was

the home of weekend stays, engagement parties, weddings, and town-wide celebrations.

“Well, you probably shouldn’t stay too long. Midnight is so far away, and you need your rest. I just... It’s not a good idea, Carrie.”

I gripped the rail so hard I was surprised it didn’t crack. I brushed off the annoyance and said, “I took a nap this afternoon. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, I know, but you spent all morning packing and that ___”

Before she could get the rest of her thought out, a tornado of pink sequins slammed into me, nearly knocking me back down the cement stairs.

Brandie Jean Palmer, in a sparkling mini dress the color of Pepto Bismol, threw her arms around me and squeezed. “You came!”

I gave her a tentative hug back. “You invited me.”

Blonde hair that was teased to skyscraper heights smacked me in the face. “Well, of course I did, silly!” She giggled and grabbed my hand. “Come on! The party’s just starting!” As she dragged me up the stairs with surprising ease given the height of her platform heels, she turned and gave a little wave to my mother. “Hi, Mrs. Tyree!”

Brandie Jean Palmer was, by my guess, ten years older than me, but I didn’t think she cared about that. *Especially considering all of her boyfriends were older than my grandparents.* She had a larger-than-life penchant for all things pink and shiny. Some Creekers thought she was too much—too ostentatious—but I had always thought she was pretty cool. BJ had a way of latching onto people and dragging them into her circle whether they liked it or not.

Case in point, she was manhandling me—*woman-handling me?*—into a New Year’s Eve party.

Bodies filled the foyer of the house, all dressed in shades of black, silver, and gold.

But not Brandie Jean. She was in Barbie pink, looking like a young Dolly Parton that had survived a glitter factory explosion.

I spotted Layla Mousavi and her fiancé, Callum Fletcher, swaying under glimmering lights. Tuxedoed servers floated around carrying trays of champagne, deftly avoiding the couples dancing.

This was by far the fanciest party Falls Creek had ever seen.

“You need one of these,” BJ said, plucking a champagne flute from a passing tray.

I studied the glass. Something shimmery floated among the bubbles. My mother’s warning about random strangers trying to drug me in college popped up in my mind.

The thought was almost comical. I would have had to leave the house for that to happen.

“Is there glitter in the champagne?” I asked.

“Of course!” she squeaked.

Okay, apparently glitter champagne is a thing. Pretend like you knew this already and Google it later.

“I love it!” It was a lie. I hated champagne, but twenty-two-year-olds were supposed to like to drink, right? I raised the glass to my lips and faked a polite sip.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted my mother making her way through the crowd. Brandie Jean found a new guest to greet and left me to my sparkly champagne.

“Caroline!” Ms. Sepideh said as she sashayed through the crowd, arms open, looking fabulous in a shimmering black dress. Her hijab was made of pale gold fabric. It tucked tight around her chin and spilled in graceful waves around her neck. Compared to everyone here, I felt rather underdressed in my brown dress, leggings, cardigan, and coat. She gave me a gentle hug. “How are you? Enjoying your winter break?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, discreetly setting my champagne onto a tray of empties. “I’ll be glad to get back into the swing

of things, though. I miss my kids.”

“You can’t have all work and no play,” she said, aghast. “Did you bring a date tonight?”

I blushed. It didn’t matter if it was at a party like tonight, at the Falls Creek Filling Station, or in the grocery store—Ms. Sepideh and Gran Fletcher were always asking if I had a date.

And speaking of Gran Fletcher...

“Well, look at you!” she crooned as she elbowed her way through the masses, her silver caftan flowing behind her. “Caroline Tyree, I was waiting for you to show your pretty face ‘round here.”

I pulled my coat around me a little tighter.

“How ya doing, sweetheart?”

My smile was slowly fusing itself to my face. I enjoyed getting out of the house, but I hated answering the same question repeatedly.

I’m fine.

“Great!” I said chipper as a chipmunk, shifting from foot to foot.

“Word has it you’re moving into your own place at the beginning of the month,” Gran said.

“Yeah,” I said bashfully. “I’m excited. I’ve been packing.”

“Are you having a housewarming party?” Ms. Sepideh chimed in.

“Ooh, a party!” Gran exclaimed, liking the idea. “You let us know when you’re all settled and we’ll let everyone know when and where.”

The simple thought of the entire town and all their germs squeezed into my tiny one-bedroom apartment would send my parents into immediate cardiac arrest.

“That sounds nice,” I said, frantically searching for a way out of the inquisition.

“*Layla joon!*” Ms. Sepideh shouted when she spotted Layla and Callum leaving the dance floor.

A server passed by with a tray labeled *sparkling cider*, and I grabbed a glass. I wasn’t thirsty, but it gave me something to do with my hands.

Layla, looking like a warrior in a tight leather dress, pulled Callum behind her as they wove toward us.

“Hey, girl!” Layla chirped.

Callum sided up to his fiancé and looped his arm around her waist. “Miss Tyree,” he said, tipping his chin to me.

And cue the butterflies.

Callum Fletcher was the very definition of sin. Every time I saw him, whether he was on duty as a cop or not, I couldn’t help but blush.

He gave me one of his rare kind smiles. “Good to see you out and about. You here with anyone?”

I shook my head. “No, Officer Fletcher.”

He gave me a stern look. “What have I told you damn near a hundred times?”

“Callum,” I corrected.

He winked and I had to keep my knees from wobbling.

Layla was so lucky. Callum looked at her like she hung the moon and stars. I wished someone would look at me that way—the way I read about in books where a single glance makes the world stop on a dime.

But, for now, those wishes had to stay in the pages of the Whitney West novels I treasured.

A cold gust from the open doors swirled in, making everyone shiver. Layla spotted the newcomers, reached up and waved them over.

I looked over my shoulder to see who it was.

Beth Hale, in a velvet dress the color of plums, stood in the doorway. She found Layla and smiled.

I hadn't seen Beth in a while. She had been holed up, finishing her graduate degree, then went home to spend Christmas with her family. I hadn't even seen her grabbing a bite at The Copper Mule.

Everyone—and I mean *everyone*—hung out there.

Beth gave me a bright smile. She looked over her shoulder and, in that moment, the world stopped on a dime.

Austin, Beth's older brother, filled the doorway.

His broad chest and shoulders took up the entire space. The crown of his neatly trimmed hair almost grazed the top of the doorframe.

Beth and Layla snickered about something, but all I heard was blood rushing in my ears.

My cheeks turned candy apple red as my mind flashed back to the first time I met Austin Hale.

I had been getting a bite at the Copper Mule after work. Callum and Layla were there with the rest of the first responders who liked to hang out on the patio, and called me over to join them.

I felt like a schoolgirl sitting next to him. He was so much older and ruggedly handsome. Every time he looked at me, my stomach flip-flopped.

I remembered staring into the bottle of my untouched beer while he talked to me. Not once had he said, "It's good to see you out and about."

Without realizing it, my hand had dropped to my abdomen. The subconscious motion I had picked up after the transplant always happened when I was nervous. For once, the tremble in my hand wasn't from my medication.

Talking to Austin that afternoon felt like a fairytale. It was a daydream I held on to during the bad days.

"Caroline?" Something poked me in the back.

I blinked, snapping out of the haze. Gran Fletcher and Ms. Sepideh were disappearing into the throng of Brandie Jean's

partygoers, leaving me with the crew of first responders. Of which, I was not.

I looked over at Layla. “What did you say?”

She laughed and pointed up. “Not me. Him.”

I looked over my shoulder and stared right into a wall of gray fabric. My neck cracked when I looked up and saw Austin looking down at me.

I swear to Bob Ross, my heart stopped.

“Hey, Sugar,” he said with a lazy smile. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Callum reached across the little group and shook Austin’s hand. “I heard the news. Congrats.”

Layla looked at her fiancé. “What news?”

“I, uh, I accepted a job with the fire department here,” Austin said. He was all casual about it, too. Like it was no big deal that he ran into burning buildings to save strangers.

Layla’s jaw practically rolled across the floor. “*You’re kidding!*”

“I’m not,” he said.

“You’re actually leaving Beaufort?”

He gave a little shrug of his massive shoulders. It was hard for a man as large as he was to play coy, but he tried. “Worked my last shift with the BFD the day before yesterday.”

I melted into the chaos, sipping on sparkling cider and observing the conversation. I turned my head and gave little nods and hums of acknowledgement to whoever was speaking so they thought I was engaged. With any luck, no one would ask me questions.

When Shane Hutchins showed up, rocking all kinds of tattooed, bad-boy energy, Beth disappeared, leaving him to take her place.

The conversation shifted to a call that Layla, Callum, and Shane had all responded to. I smiled at the inside jokes while I

mentally calculated what time it was.

Maybe I wouldn't stay until midnight. I was kind of tired...

Socializing was always better in my head, anyway. Actually, doing it sucked.

Under his breath, Austin had been humming a tune that pricked at my memory. I couldn't quite place it, though.

"Wanna dance?"

The question was so out of place that I didn't register the fact that Austin was actually speaking to me.

"What?"

He tipped his head to the floor. "Wanna dance?"

Was he speaking English? Was I having a stroke?

My cheeks burned from the attention, but mostly from embarrassment. "Oh, no thanks. I'm a terrible dancer."

But he wasn't perturbed. "You'll never get better if you don't do it."

"I..." The single syllable came out as a squeak. "I should go find my mom. Wouldn't want her to worry."

"I see her," Callum, pointing across the room to where my mother was chatting with Maybelle VanThorten. "She's fine."

Darn him!

Austin offered his hand. "How 'bout it, Sugar?"

I stammered and looked down at the glass in my hand. "I, um..."

"I'll hold on to it," Layla said, plucking it right from between my fingers.

And there went my last excuse.

Austin's palm was firm and warm against my back as he led me to an open space to the side of the dancers. "How 'bout this," he said as he pulled me into frame. Our height difference was almost comical. I felt like I should have been standing on

the toes of his shoes as we performed a wobbly box waltz. “I’ll dance with you just long enough to make your date jealous.”

My date was my mother. How pathetic.

“Oh, I’m not... I’m not here with anyone.”

“Really?” he said as he rocked back and forth.

It felt like every eye in the Ballentine House was on us. Gran and Ms. Sepideh had a sniper’s gaze on us from their perch on the staircase. Beth was returning from the bathroom and stopped in her tracks when she saw us. At least three sets of my students’ parents gawked at us.

I wanted *out* of this fishbowl.

But then he pulled me closer, and I caught a whiff of his cologne. Or maybe it was his soap. Or aftershave? What even was aftershave, and did it really smell *that good*?

More things to Google...

The DJ switched to a popular Neil Diamond song that had the whole crowd singing along.

Austin smiled. “It’s fitting,” he said as he released me and spun me under his arm, picking up the tempo of the dance.

I did a clumsy job of returning to the proper position and we stumbled. “Why’s that?”

The song he had been humming... “Sweet Caroline,” he said, giving my hand a little squeeze.

After an enthusiastic round of *bah-bah-bahs*, he spoke again.

“So. No date. I’m assuming you don’t have anyone to kiss at midnight?”

“I don’t think I’ll stay that long,” I blurted out.

“Well, here’s to hoping you get lucky in the new year anyway.”

I paled, and he laughed.

“Shit—sorry, Sugar. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I figured,” I said as we swayed. It wasn’t an intimate dance. His large palm covered most of my waist, and the other swallowed my hand.

Austin Hale moved with a confidence that was easy to admire. Even though I tripped over my own two feet, he never made me feel stupid for being bad at dancing.

He had a natural peace about him. Maybe it came from the fact that he was so massive that he knew he could dominate everyone in the room if he wanted to. But he didn’t. He wasn’t showy about his size or his flawless physique. There was a humility about him.

He was sweet and charming. His laugh was deep. The sound of it reminded me of colors used to paint royalty. Conquerors. Kings.

There was something about him that made my heart flutter. Every time I got the courage to look up at him as we moved to the music, I thought about how invigorating it felt to have his attention, even for a moment. Every minuscule smile that I thought maybe he intended for me, made my heart explode.

His attention was warm. It made me feel like sitting in the summer sunshine.

“Any resolutions?”

Sure. Plenty. But not a single one that I’d say out loud.

“A few,” I answered evasively. “Isn’t talking about resolutions like saying a birthday wish out loud? If you say it, it won’t come true.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think it works exactly the same.”

“I wouldn’t want to jinx myself.”

He didn’t press the topic. When the song faded, I let go of his hand and took a wide step back.

Austin’s mouth turned down at the corners. “I’m not done dancing with you.”

I tipped my head toward the doors. “I should head home.” All I would have to do is tell my mother that I was a little tired

and she'd run out of the party like she was on fire.

He didn't argue—just offered a little nod. “I guess I'll be seeing you around, then. Thanks for the dance.”

“Yeah.” I turned to leave, but his voice stopped me.

“Hey, Sweets—”

I lifted my eyebrows.

His grin nearly turned me into a puddle. “I hope your resolutions come true.”

CAROLINE

Resolution #1 - Socialize with people my age.

In the middle of the wine aisle, I stared at the note in my phone that detailed all the ways I was going to better myself this year.

Why did I do this to myself? On one hand, I'd feel guilty if I didn't at least attempt the list. On the other hand, I really didn't want to attempt the list. Especially if it meant going over to someone's house to hang out without a clear objective or schedule.

Why weren't lesson plans required for social gatherings?

When Layla texted me, inviting me over to Beth's house for a girl's night, it was as if the universe saw my resolution list and was dead set on making me tick them off one by one.

Then again, Layla Mousavi, Beth Hale, and Brandie Jean Palmer weren't exactly "my age."

That was a resolution loophole, right? I was ten years younger than Brandie Jean and Layla. Beth was closest to my age, but she was still at least five or six years older.

Nothing like feeling like the little sister that gets added to every activity just because.

But I couldn't really complain. Beggars weren't supposed to be choosers.

I took a fortifying breath and exited the wine aisle empty-handed. I didn't know a thing about what kind of wine made a

good hostess present. Baked goods were a safer bet.

I grabbed a bakery box chock full of chocolate chip cookies and headed to the register. I could do this.

I can socialize. I can make small talk. I can have adult friendships that aren't coworkers. Not that I was actually friends with the other faculty at school. I mostly kept to myself.

“Well, hey there, Caroline!” the checkout lady, Patty Wu, said as she lifted her pearl-chained bifocals and perched them on the tip of her nose. Patty was a retired nurse and had taken a job at the grocery store to keep up on the gossip and stave off the boredom. “It’s good to see you out and about! How you feeling?”

“Just fine, Mrs. Wu,” I said with a tight smile. “Thanks.”

She picked up the box of cookies and scanned the barcode. “Gettin’ a little treat to take home?”

I hated when cashiers commented on purchases. At least it was just a box of cookies and not something like stool softener or a bulk pack of toilet paper. I pulled out my debit card and swiped it through the machine, punching in my PIN with a little more force than necessary.

“No, I’m getting together with some friends. Thought it best not to show up empty-handed.”

“Such a sweet girl,” she said as she snatched my receipt out of the printer. “See? This is why your kiddos are lucky to have you.”

That eked a genuine smile out of me. “Thanks, Mrs. Wu.” I grabbed the bag and gave her a little wave. “See you around.”

I hurried out into the freezing January rain and jumped into my car, cranking the heat. Across the street, the Falls Creek Fire Department was a flurry of activity. Firefighters, in their heavy gear, jumped into the truck as the lights and sirens blared. The driver poked the nose out into the street before turning and racing down the road.

I didn't know much about Austin Hale from the two brief conversations we shared, but the image of him wearing those thick pants held up by suspenders did something funny to me. I let myself giggle about it all the way to Beth's house. Maybe I'd bow out early, go home, and finally get around to watching *Magic Mike*.

I shouldn't be crushing on my friend's *much older* brother, but it was so hard not to. He was tall, and as big as a mountain.

And then there was my unhealthy obsession with his hands.

And he was a firefighter? I squeezed my thighs together and thought back to the New Year's Eve party.

Hey, Sugar. Fancy meeting you here.

He remembered meeting me before—that time at The Copper Mule.

I had been obsessing over that one statement for a week.

Has he thought about me since then?

We didn't really talk about much of anything—just general observations about Falls Creek and life here. Had I missed something in that conversation? Was there more I hadn't dissected yet?

When it came to understanding the male sector of the population, my knowledge was less than stellar. Was there a continuing education course for interacting with men? Because my skills stopped at about middle school.

There was a resolution about that too, but we were taking baby steps today.

Figuring out men was more of a February resolution that would die a slow, painful death. You know—after I bailed on the whole 'new year, new me' thing.

But today is a day for trying, I told myself as I pulled into Beth's townhouse complex.

Layla's car was parked next to Beth's. Brandie Jean's pink Volkswagen Beetle, with its curled plastic eyelashes, was in the line of spaces on the other side of a large oak tree.

I grabbed the box of cookies out of the grocery bag, took a fortifying breath, and left the safety of my car.

Beth's townhouse was still decked out in gobs of Christmas decor. Voices carried through the door. Before I could reach for the doorbell, Brandie Jean flung it open and yanked me inside.

"Am I being kidnapped?" I squeaked when I finally found my feet again.

"No, silly!" she exclaimed. "But you're late!"

Brandie Jean, in her pink velour tracksuit, stepped away and I took in the scene. Beth and Layla were on the couch. A tray of fruit, nuts, and little desserts were arranged neatly on the coffee table. A movie was on the TV, but the sound was muted. Candles that smelled like lemons were situated across the fireplace mantle.

"Sorry," I said. "I had bus duty and then a parent tracked me down before I could escape."

Layla grimaced. "That sucks. People are the worst."

Beth rolled her eyes while she nibbled on a cracker "Most of the people you see are sedated."

"Yeah," Layla said wistfully. "It's pretty great."

"I, um..." I lifted the box pathetically. "I brought cookies."

"What kind?" Brandie Jean asked as she pranced back in from the kitchen.

"Chocolate chip."

Layla nearly bolted off the couch. "Ooh! Gimme!" She took the box from my hands, popped the top, and pulled the cookies out, arranging them beside the rest of the snacks.

"Why are you still standing up?" Brandie Jean asked. "Sit your cute tush down!"

I picked a tufted chair and sat across from the couch, clutching my purse like a lifeline. "So, what's all this for?" I asked, reaching across the coffee table and snagging a grape.

“Well,” Layla began. “Cal and I set a date for the wedding.”

Brandie Jean’s shriek pierced my ear drums. “Shut the front door!” she squealed. “When is it? Spring? Summer? Fall? Next winter?”

Layla laughed. “Next spring. We figured since we got engaged so fast...”

Beth snorted, then hid it by stuffing the rest of the cracker in her mouth.

“...That we’d take our time with the engagement,” Layla finished. “It’s next spring, so we have a little over a year to plan all the details.”

While Brandie Jean’s mouth ran a mile a minute, I just smiled and nodded.

Beth shared an unsteady look with Layla. “I have a little news of my own.”

Layla squeezed her hand.

She took a fortifying breath, then said, “I’m pregnant.” There was a heavy pause before she added, “And I decided to keep the baby.”

Brandie Jean was the first to crack. She screamed at the top of her lungs, startling the rest of us.

I shouldn’t be here.

Callum was always nice to me in a pitying sort of way. When he introduced me to Layla a few months ago, she was friendly and I felt like she had taken me under her wing.

I ate with their little crew at The Copper Mule sometimes but never added much to the conversation. But Beth including me in her pregnancy news seemed a little ... personal.

Beth sniffed and reached for her glass of, what I realized was probably ginger ale. “The dad isn’t in the picture, and I don’t want him to be,” she said after a fortifying sip. “So, yeah. I’m having a baby.”

“Is that why your Adonis of a brother moved to town?” Brandie Jean asked. She was practically salivating.

Beth nodded. “When I tried to tell the father I was pregnant, it didn’t go well and he threatened me a little. So, yeah—that’s why Austin moved in.”

Brandie Jean swooned, melting into a pile of Juicy Couture. “What a dreamboat! I love a family man!”

“Aren’t you seeing someone?” Layla prodded.

“Amos Johnston. Two months of pure bliss,” she sighed happily. Amos Johnston was forty years her senior and used a cane after a double hip replacement. She pointed a French-tipped nail at me. “Get you an older man, Caroline.” Her voice was stern. “They know what they’re doing. Don’t waste your time with boys. They probably don’t know that they’re supposed to wash their own ass.”

Layla and Beth contemplated the bedazzled wisdom Brandie Jean doled out, then nodded in agreement.

“She’s not wrong,” Layla said.

“I’m not looking to date anyone right now,” I said sheepishly.

“How’d the apartment move-in go?” Layla asked.

“Good,” I said. “I’m swimming in boxes, but it feels nice to finally have my own space.” *Much to my parents’ dismay.*

“I bet,” Layla said.

Beth reached over and grabbed a cookie with a ‘might as well’ look on her face. “If you need someone to fix anything or build anything for you, I have a Rent-a-Brother.” She took a bite and huffed. “He’s driving me up the friggin’ wall.”

I snickered.

“Hale is a good guy,” Layla said. “Have you met *mine*? They’re polar opposites. Compared to Karim, Austin is such a boy scout.”

Yeah, I thought to myself. I could definitely see Austin wearing one of those thick canvas coats with the white wool

around the collar, braving the elements.

“You alright over there?” Layla said with a smirk.

“Huh? What?” I snapped out of the daze.

She was biting back a thought. I just knew it.

It was nothing more than an innocent little crush that I was sure would go away in no time. As long as no one said his name, I'd be fine.

Outside, an engine cut off. It was followed by thumping boots and the plop of a bag on the porch.

The door opened, and there he was.

Just great.

The thick black shoes on his feet gave his six-and-a-half-foot frame at least another inch. The FCFD pullover he wore was stretched tight across his chest.

Brandie Jean let out a near-feral growl. “Well, hey there, tall, tanned, and yummy.” She chewed on her thumb nail as she assessed him. There was a hungry look in her eye. “It’s like looking at a young John Cena.”

“Ladies,” Austin said with a tip of his chin before blowing out the first candle he saw.

Beth groaned. “Seriously?”

“Candles cause over fifteen thousand residential structure fires a year,” he said without a hint of humor. Still, there was nothing malicious in his tone. He was just stating facts.

“How’s it going?” Layla asked, stretching her feet out onto the coffee table. “Have they made you fill out a bingo card yet?”

Austin’s brow furrowed. “A what?”

She snickered. “Nevermind. How are things at the station?”

“I was just there to fill out paperwork and do some orientation, but apparently it was a normal day,” he said, moving through the narrow entryway. “They got sent out to a

grease fire at a tire shop that also has a catering company in the back.” He muttered something about the absurd business concept under his breath.

I touched my fingers to my pursed smile. That sounded like the Falls Creek I knew.

Austin blew out another candle.

“Seriously?” Beth hissed as she made a move for her lighter. But Austin was faster.

He grabbed it out of her hand and flipped it in the air before catching it and shoving it in one of his many pockets. “Residential structure fires,” he said, pointing a finger at Beth.

“Morning sickness,” she snapped back at him. “Leave my lemon candles alone or deal with me hurling from the smell of everything else.”

He paused and looked around the room. Finally, his eyes landed on me.

I offered a small smile to counter his stern assessment. The man in front of me now was distinctly different from the friendly guy who had danced with me on New Year’s Eve.

Without a word, his eyes left me and his attention returned to Beth. “Spilled the beans, huh?”

She nodded.

“Have you eaten today?” he asked.

Beth rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

“Taken your vitamins?”

She gritted her teeth. “Yes. *Dad.*”

“How much water have you had?”

“Jesus,” she muttered. “I’m fine.” Beth looked at Layla with pleading eyes. “Will you tell him I’m not going to spontaneously combust?”

Layla laughed. “She’s fine, Hale.”

There was a coy smile flickering at the corner of his mouth, and I realized he was just messing with her.

“Did the OB office confirm your appointment?” he asked.

I swear Beth growled. “Why? You planning to go with me and be in the room when the doctor smears goop over my stomach?”

“Won’t be on your belly,” Layla said through a mouthful of chocolate chip cookie. She lifted a finger. “It’s gonna be transvaginal.”

“Just frickin’ fantastic!” Beth shrieked. “They’re gonna shove a dildo up my hoo-hah!”

“Transducer,” Layla mumbled.

“What?” Beth said, horrified.

Layla shrugged as she swallowed her bite. “Not a dildo. It’s called a transducer.”

“You’re not helping,” Beth grumbled.

Austin chuckled. “I will drive you and sit in the waiting room.”

“I’m pregnant, not on my deathbed. I can drive.” Beth crossed her arms and glared at her brother. “Now, are you done pestering the living daylights out of me?”

I had gotten so comfortable with observing that I didn’t even realize his blue eyes were fixed on me. “Keep an eye on her, will you, Sweets?” he asked.

I stared back, wide-eyed, and pointed to myself as if to say, “Who? Me?”

“She’s a troublemaker. Probably worse than a four-year-old hyped up on Sugar.”

Beth grabbed a throw pillow and flung it at him, nailing him square in the bicep.

Austin laughed as he made a swift exit.

“You looking for a roommate, Caroline?” Beth asked.

My brows furrowed. “Are you getting rid of your place?”

“No,” she grumbled. “Just trying to get rid of that overbearing ogre.”

“I heard that!” Austin called out.

I laughed. “No, but I might get a cat.”

“I should have gotten a cat,” Beth sighed as she grabbed the TV remote and turned up the volume to the movie.

MY BACK HURT from sitting up straight in the chair for an hour and a half, and still there was no end in sight to the movie.

Layla had bowed out after about fifteen minutes, saying she had to get home and get to bed before her shift at the AirCare base started in the morning. Brandie Jean took her place on the couch beside Beth and the two of them promptly fell asleep before the first act was over.

I couldn't really blame Beth. She looked exhausted. I'm sure the mental toil was just as tiring as the physical side of pregnancy.

Brandie Jean was probably just used to a six-thirty bedtime with her lover.

I didn't want to wake them, but I really wanted to go home. Slowly, I eased out of the chair my butt was fused to and stood. I collected my dirty dishes—just a cup and saucer—and quietly tiptoed into the darkened kitchen.

“Sneaking out?” a deep voice said from behind me.

The plate dropped into the sink with a clatter. I clutched my chest and gasped. “Holy Frida Kahlo!” I whispered. “You scared me!”

Austin's smile flashed, illuminated by the light filtering in from the window over the sink. “Sorry, Sugar.”

I set the cup in the sink and brushed my hands across the front of my skirt. Austin took a step back, the dim light dancing over a *very* bare, *very* sculpted chest.

Yeah, I was definitely falling asleep to *Magic Mike*.

AUSTIN

Caroline looked like a deer in headlights. Thick, billowing curls the color of vanilla frosting danced of their own accord. She was in a long skirt, layered with leggings, a thick sweater, and a cardigan. Even in the dim kitchen light, her eyes sliced through me like bright blue ice picks.

Those piercing eyes looked me up and down. Her parted lips were shaped like a little “o,” and her eyebrows were still raised in surprise.

I looked over my shoulder and peered into the living room. Beth was fast asleep on the couch. The fact that she was sleeping brought me the slightest bit of peace. Nothing was going wrong right now.

I let out a breath, fixed my face, and asked, “You sneaking out?”

Caroline blushed. “Oh, I—” Her hands were clasped in front of her, slim fingers twined around as they shook nervously.

Dammit. Why did I ask her that? Now she was probably going to leave even if she hadn't been planning to.

“Going to work on those resolutions?”

That made her pause. Caroline cocked her head. “My resolutions?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You know, the ones you wouldn't tell me about when we were dancing.”

She stared at me, shocked that I had remembered what she mentioned.

I couldn't help myself, and God—I tried. My mind raced to all the dirty places it shouldn't have. I studied the layers and textures she was bundled up in. I wondered about what hid underneath.

When we danced, I held her at a respectable distance. She had been layered up then, too. Underneath all that fabric, she felt tiny as a toothpick. So fragile.

Caroline's skin was like porcelain. She looked like the china dolls Beth collected as a child.

"Oh. Right. The resolutions..." She snapped out of the shocked daze and let her eyes travel down my abdomen. The thoughts floating through her mind were painted all over her face. Thinly veiled lust was laced in every breath she exhaled.

A slow smile drew up on my mouth. "Caroline..."

Once again, she met my eyes with a "Who? Me?" kind of look.

So. Fucking. Cute.

"Sorry. I should have put a shirt on," I said as I rested my palm on the edge of the counter. I looked down at my bare chest and feet. Droplets of water still clung to my skin from the shower. At least I had put gym shorts on rather than walking out with a towel around my hips. Truth be told, it had been so quiet that I thought the girls had gone home. "I didn't realize you and Brandie Jean were still here." I looked in on my sister again. "Beth's been real tired lately. I'm surprised she lasted this long tonight."

"I bet," Caroline said with a sigh as soft as a floating feather. "What she said ... being pregnant ... that ... that has to be quite a shock."

"That's an understatement," I admitted.

"Is that why you moved to Falls Creek?"

Holy shit. Caroline had actually asked me a question. I wanted to make a little joke about her coming out of her shell,

but I didn't want to spook her, so I just nodded. "She wouldn't move back to Beaufort, so I came here."

"That's really great of you. Picking up and moving like that. She's lucky to have you."

"Do you have siblings?"

Caroline shook her head. "Just me. I was a handful, so I think my parents decided one was enough." Her laugh was breezy, and her eyes twinkled like the lights on Beth's Christmas tree.

"Nah." I shifted closer to her. "You don't seem like a handful."

She smiled at the tiny pair of boots covering her feet. "Trust me, I am."

"So, how do you know my sister?"

"Mutual friends, I guess," she said, looking toward the living room. "The day you and I met, actually. At the Copper Mule? Callum and Layla invited me to sit with them, and they just keep inviting me to stuff." The panic was instant as if she thought she had put her foot in her mouth. "Beth is super nice, though. I just ... I don't know everyone super well."

"I guess that makes two of us."

I remembered the day we met for the first time. I was just in town for a quick visit with Beth and got pulled into that group lunch the same way she had. Caroline and I sat beside each other and chatted as much as we could, but there was food to be consumed. The conversation stayed light—only delving into topics like the best thing on the menu and the weather.

"Did you grow up here or are you a transplant?" I asked.

"Born and raised." There was something wistful, yet still unsatisfied in the way she said it.

"What do you do?"

That question earned me the first genuine smile I got from her. "I'm a teacher."

“Don’t tell me which grade,” I blurted out. “Let me guess.”

She laughed again.

I braced my fist against my chin and pressed my index finger to my lips. “Fourth grade. You’re giving me some serious Ms. Frizzle energy.”

Caroline giggled, then cupped her hand over her mouth, her eyes darting to the living room where the movie had ended, and the credits were rolling. “Nope.”

“Music teacher?” I guessed again. “You have the hands of a pianist.”

She shook her head. “I sing like a walrus with laryngitis and have no talents on instruments whatsoever.”

“High school English. Do you torture innocent teenagers by making them read *The Scarlet Letter*?”

“High schoolers scare the bejeezus out of me,” she said as she laughed. Her thick curls fell from her shoulder and a beam of light danced across her throat, revealing a blue speck on her lily-white skin.

“Art teacher?” I asked. “No, that can’t be it. You said high schoolers scare you.” I considered the options for another moment. “First grade?”

“Close,” she said. “I teach Kindergarten.”

I should have known. Truthfully, it was on the tip of my tongue when she said she was a teacher, but I didn’t want the conversation to be over.

“It suits you.”

Her cheeks turned pink.

It felt like dancing all over again. The hesitancy. The nerves. The innate desire to pull her close and feel her warmth against me.

I realized that the two of us were staring at each other, not saying anything at all.

“What’s going on?”

Both Caroline and I snapped to attention.

Beth stood in the doorway, rubbing her eyes. “Sorry,” she yawned. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

Caroline’s smile was soft and compassionate. “I get that. Don’t worry about it.”

The jingle-jangle of Brandie Jean’s jewelry played like a marching band as she got up from the couch.

“I should get going,” Caroline said, looking at Beth. “Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

Beth nodded and gave her a quick hug.

“I’ll walk you out.”

Caroline’s eyes lifted to meet mine. “I’m fine.”

Beth’s laundry room was within arm’s reach of the kitchen. While Caroline gathered her things, I pawed through the dryer and found a clean Beaufort FD shirt.

I missed my old crew like crazy. I had worked a few shifts in Falls Creek, and they were a great department, but there was nothing like working at the station I had dreamed of being a part of my whole life.

Maybe it’s why I hadn’t sold my house yet.

I made a nice chunk of change by listing it on a handful of short-term rental sites. It covered the mortgage and let me pocket some rainy-day money.

While Brandie Jean peppered Beth with baby questions, I slid on a pair of flip-flops.

“You know it’s January, right?” Caroline teased. “You’re going to freeze.”

I looked down at my t-shirt, athletic shorts, and flip-flops. “It’ll take me a while to stop dressing like a beach boy.”

She laughed. “You don’t have the floppy beach boy hair.”

I ran my hand over the short buzz of blond that made rolling out of bed in the morning easier. “Occupational necessity,” I said.

“Right.” Caroline shouldered her purse. “Fire department.”

I opened the door for her.

“I really don’t need you to walk me out,” she said, pointing to a little car parked beneath a bare-branched tree. “I’m parked right there.”

I put my hand on her back and closed the door behind us. “I’m walking you out, Sweets.”

She shivered and our breath clouded around us. “It smells like snow.”

I tested the brick steps for ice before offering her my hand to walk down. “What exactly does snow smell like?”

Her fingertips felt like ice against my palm. I wanted to wrap her up in my arms and hold her until she got warm. My hand swallowed hers as she took each step with great care.

When she got to the bottom, she looked up at me. Her blue eyes were curious. “You’ve never smelled snow?”

“I’ve lived by the beach my whole life. I smell salt water and sea air.”

“That’s so cool,” she said quietly to herself.

“You like the beach?”

She shrugged. “I’ve never been.” Like she was the poster child for road safety, Caroline looked both ways, and then looked both ways again before crossing the little strip of asphalt to her car. I kept my hand on her back as we walked.

The top of her head barely came up to my chest. Her curls of buttercream hair tickled my bare arm as it blew in the frigid breeze. Once I had safely escorted her across ten feet of parking lot, we stopped at her car.

I put my hands on her arms and turned her to face me. “You’re telling me you grew up here and you’ve never been to the beach? Not even in the summer?”

Caroline just looked at her feet. “I guess I’ll have to add that to my resolutions this year.”

“Let me know if you need a tour guide,” I said without thinking it through.

And then on second thought, I was glad I said it.

She crossed her arms over her middle, trying to stave off the biting chill. “I should get home.”

And there it was—Cinderella, leaving the ball with both glass slippers securely on her feet.

I decided not to press my luck.

Caroline was quiet, but there was life inside her. Faint sparks of it appeared when she laughed and opened up. She was like a puzzle to be solved. A problem I wanted to fix.

If I was being honest with myself, I wanted to shove her up against her car and let our breath cloud as one while I slid my hand under all those layers and toyed with her.

I wanted to make her gasp and moan. I wanted to make her shiver, and it wouldn't be from the cold. I wanted her hair wrapped up in my hand.

But not tonight.

I conceded and opened her car door. “Drive safe, Sweets.”

“I will,” she said bashfully as she slid in.

I wanted to tell her she should text me when she got home. Was that too much?

I held on to the top of the door as she started it up and immediately cranked the heat. “Text Beth when you get home, alright?” Quickly, I added, “Just so I know you made it back okay.”

Caroline hesitated, then nodded. “I will.”

I raised a stern eyebrow. “Promise me.”

She laughed. “I promise.”

“Alright. Goodnight, Sugar.”

She clicked her seatbelt into place. *Good girl.*

“Goodnight, Austin.”

I passed Brandie Jean on her way out. She was bundled up in a fur-lined coat the color of cotton candy. “Night, Ms. Palmer,” I said, tipping my chin to her.

She gave me a cheery wave and skipped away.

I locked the door behind me and turned to find Beth back on the couch. The candles were out, thank God.

I grabbed one out of the hundreds of lemon candles she had sitting around. Reluctantly, I lit it and set it in the middle of the coffee table.

“How’re you feeling?” I asked as I lowered onto the other side of the couch.

“Tired,” she mumbled into a throw pillow.

“Did you have fun?”

She nodded.

“Good. That’s good.”

We sat in silence. It had been a few weeks since Beth’s first teary phone call that had plucked me out of my hometown. If I was being honest, it hadn’t quite sunk in yet that my sister was going to be a mother by the end of the summer.

It was going to be hard. No doubt about that. Parenthood brought on a certain set of challenges that you could never really prepare for until you were in the thick of it.

Things were going to change for her. It’s why I uprooted my life without a second thought.

It’s what family did for one another.

“What were you and Caroline talking about?” she mumbled as a yawn fought its way out.

I kicked my feet up on the coffee table and pulled my phone out of my pocket. Our mom had sent me four back-to-back texts. She didn’t want to pester Beth, so she pestered me instead.

“Nothing important,” I said as I typed out a response to my mother.

“You like her.”

I was closer to forty than thirty. Having a crush at this age just felt weird, but I wasn’t denying it. “She’s a nice girl, but she’s—”

“Young?” Beth guessed.

I scrubbed my hand down my mouth. “She’s what—twenty-five? Twenty-six?”

“Twenty-two, I think. She just graduated college not too long ago. I think this is her second year teaching.”

Jesus. Even younger than I thought. I felt guilty for all those dirty thoughts I was having about her earlier.

“You should ask her out,” Beth said.

I scoffed. “I’m not doing that.”

Beth peeled an eye open and gave me a judgmental once-over. “Because you don’t want to or because you’re going to sit here for the next nine months and wait for me to explode?”

“Bethany—”

But she was looking at her phone. “Oh look. Caroline texted me and said she got home just fine. I wonder who put her up to that?” She smirked. “Nice of you to walk her out and tell her to text me like *I’m* the one questioning her ability to drive a few miles.” Beth set her phone on the coffee table. “Grow a pair and give her your number if you’re interested.”

“I’m not—”

“You wear your heart on your sleeve,” she said, cutting me off. “It’s easy to see and it’s why I love you so much. Don’t even try to hide it.”

CAROLINE

I loved the smell of warm paper fresh out of the printer. It was one of those little joys in life. The coffee maker gurgled as Rita, a fifth-grade teacher, topped off her mug. I plucked another stack of worksheets out of the printer tray and added them to my growing pile. Hazel Prewitt, the lady who had held the school secretary position since I was in kindergarten, stood at the wall of faculty boxes, delivering mail and other paperwork.

The teacher's lounge was blissfully quiet compared to the hallway buzz as students loaded up on buses and waited in the pick-up line to go home.

The printer beeped, angry at me for daring to request that it print on both sides of the page. I yanked open the front with a clatter, and squatted down to peer inside, looking for the jam.

“Need a hand, Miss Tyree?”

I looked up and saw Adam Kipler hovering over me. He was still decked out in his sweatpants and moisture-wicking polo shirt. It must have been a dreary day of indoor activities for his P.E. classes.

The weather was abysmal. My joints ached and throbbed. I had resorted to sitting in my desk chair for story time because getting down onto the rug with my students was out of the question.

I bit back a groan as my knees sang while I reached into the printer and yanked on a mangled sheet of paper. “I’ve got it. Thanks, though.”

“Another one bites the dust, huh?” he quipped as he offered his hand. Reluctantly, I took it and eased back to my feet.

I let out a nervous laugh. “One must always be sacrificed to appease the printer gods.”

Adam grinned. “And what a noble sacrifice it was.” He took the destroyed sheet from my hand and studied it, then clicked his tongue. “Sad day. One Flat Stanley goes to his grave.” He balled up the page and shot it over my head, making a neat basket into the trash can. He smirked, satisfied with himself. “Baller!”

I forced my lips into a tight smile and keyed in my printer code to get the batch going again. That was the one downside about the printer. You were chained to the machine like a prisoner, subject to conversation with anyone who walked by.

Adam turned on the laminator and organized sheets of rainbow cardstock that were printed to look like board game pieces. “New gym activity,” he said without me asking. “It’s like life-sized *Monopoly*. But instead of the kids paying the bank with play money, they have to do exercises to earn each property.”

“How fun.” Thankfully, the last of my worksheets printed. I scooped them up and jostled them against the communal work table to get them all nice and neat.

“You know, your class is one of the most well-behaved kindergarten classes I’ve had in years,” he said.

I was about to accept the compliment and chalk it up to the classroom management method I gleaned from the grizzled, veteran third grade teacher I did my student teaching with, but he kept going.

“It’s surprising how well they mind you since you’re a newbie.”

And there it was. The dig that was disguised as a compliment.

I picked up the rest of my copies and my originals and situated them on my hip. “Have a nice afternoon, Mr. Kipler.”

“You know you don’t have to call me that unless there are kids around,” he said with a chuckle as he looked around the teacher’s lounge. “Just Adam is fine.”

Before I could get a word in, he kept going.

“Say—do you have plans tonight? We could grab a bite and swap war stories.”

“Oh—I’ve got papers to grade.”

“Another time, then.”

“Have a good afternoon, Mr. Kipler,” I said before making my escape out of the teacher’s lounge.

Truth be told, I didn’t have papers to grade. I just didn’t know what to say.

Was he asking me out or was it a completely professional post-work meetup? Did such a thing exist? But he said, “another time, then.” Was I on the hook for this hypothetical date or non-date?

By the time I made it back to my classroom, my head was spinning and I was kicking myself. That one coworker meetup could have counted for two of my resolutions. *Three if it had been a date.*

That darn resolution list was looking more and more insurmountable. Ten little goals that I would fail to meet in three hundred and sixty-some days.

I hadn’t completed a single one yet. Sure, Beth had invited me over with Layla and Brandie Jean, but did it really count as socializing if the most talking I did was with her brother?

The brother I couldn’t stop thinking about.

When I closed my eyes, I could still feel the way Austin’s hand wrapped around mine when he escorted me out to my car. He was so big—so masculine. It took my breath away.

Austin Hale’s eyes were blue like a bright sky. When they were on me, I felt like the only person on earth. His undivided attention was intimidating and addictive at the same time.

I loaded my tote bag with my overflowing lesson plan binder, my personal planner, and the papers my kids turned in that demanded my attention. Poking my head out of my classroom door to check if the coast was clear, I snuck through the halls and trudged through the parking lot to freedom.

“Good day?” Margie Roberts asked as she dumped her rolling cart of ungraded papers in the truck of her hatchback.

“Not bad,” I said as I unlocked the car and slid my bag into the backseat. “You?”

“Same ol’, same ol’. I tell you what—if we can get these kids to wash their hands and stop sneezing in each other’s faces, it’ll be a damn miracle.”

Margie had been wrangling second graders for thirty years. She chalked her teaching longevity up to a “walk softly” approach to kids and a “carry a big stick” approach to parents.

I snickered. “I hear that.”

“At least we get a break at the end of the week.”

I paused as I opened my car door. “What’s that now?”

“Principal Bowen said she’s gonna send an email out about it tomorrow morning. We were supposed to have that fire safety demonstration outside, but with the craptastic weather all week, she doesn’t want to have everyone standing out on the playground in twenty-degree rain. Especially since we’re already on the verge of the common cold wiping out attendance.”

Thank Manet. At least we wouldn’t be outside. The fire safety demonstration was necessary, but it interrupted a perfectly good day and made getting the kids to focus afterwards a nightmare.

“So, she’s gonna have it done in the gym instead.”

“How nice,” I said as my mind raced with the possibilities of a certain firefighter showing up. I mused on that thought nugget all the way home.

Frigid rain trickled down my neck as I scurried through the parking lot. Lugging my tote bag up three flights of stairs was

miserable. By the time I made it to the third floor landing and fished out my keys, I was wiped.

It was only four o' clock, and I was aiming to be in bed by six.

I dropped my tote on the tiny kitchen table. Papers spilled out across the wood. I pawed around in my fridge, pulling out one of the identical dinners I had prepped over the weekend. The warm aroma of quinoa, chicken, peppers, onions, and broccoli floated through the apartment. I grabbed the bottle of balsamic glaze out of the fridge door and popped the top right as the microwave beeped.

I went through the dance of garnishing my meal with a drizzle of glaze, and grabbed a bottle of green tea out of the fridge.

The chair squeaked when I sat down at the kitchen table, dug into my dinner for one, and skimmed through the stack of papers I'd brought home.

There was a canvas on the easel I had positioned by the window. It needed a few more details before I could list it for sale online, but the winter light was fleeting, and I was exhausted.

I downed half of the quinoa and chicken before snapping the top back on and putting it back in the fridge for tomorrow.

The apartment was quiet, and I loved it.

My work days were full of squealing, screaming children. Every day prior to moving into the apartment had been one with zero privacy.

And as if I had conjured it, my phone lit up with my mother's name. *Great.*

"Hello?" I said as I put the call on speaker and carried it into the bathroom.

"Hey, sweetie pie. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," I clipped as I stripped out of my thick sweater and let my hair out of the clip holding half of it back. "Just finished eating. I'm getting ready for bed." I ran an oversized

comb through it and loosened the tangles. I loaded my hand with product and worked it through the ringlets before looping it into a loose knot on top of my head. I spotted a stray scrunchie and secured the bun.

“So soon?” she asked with panic in her voice. “Sweetheart, if you’re feeling bad you should—”

“Manage my symptoms like I do every day,” I said, cutting her off. It was as if she forgot I had been present for every doctor’s appointment. Every hospital stay. Every dialysis appointment. Every early morning blood work panel after the transplant. Every telemedicine call. “I’m fine, mom. It was just a long day.”

“You really need to be careful, Caroline. All the germs in the school...” She sighed. “You could make just as much, if not more, doing private tutoring or teaching virtually.”

I turned on the tap and let a washcloth soak in the warm water before I started scrubbing my face. “Dr. Moore doesn’t see a problem with me teaching in person.”

Dr. Rashaad Moore was the brilliant nephrologist I visited every few months. Appointments with him summed up my time spent with the male sector of the population, and they were strictly professional.

Except for Adam the P.E. teacher, all of my coworkers were women.

She sighed. “I think you moved out too soon, dear. You know your father and I didn’t want you to move. And you live in the same town. It just doesn’t make sense that you’re paying rent when we have plenty of space here.”

“Plenty of space” being the bedroom where I spent twelve out of my twenty-two years on this earth being inexplicably ill.

I was acutely aware that my mother hadn’t wanted me to move out. She cried when I told her I signed a lease without telling her about it first.

“You should come back. You know we won’t charge you rent. You can take a break from teaching and go back to selling your paintings—”

“Hey, I gotta go. I’m getting another call,” I lied, completely interrupting her without a shred of guilt. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I stabbed the button that ended the call and slumped against the sink.

If I wasn’t exhausted before, I was now.

I went through the motions of getting ready for bed and laying out my clothes for the morning. As I was peeling back the covers, I looked down at my flannel pajama pants.

It was what I always wore to bed. I got cold so easily that I preemptively wore warm clothes.

But the resolution list tucked away in my journal floated through my mind.

Resolution #8 - Wear Lingerie.

I had a few nice bras, but I didn’t own anything *really* sexy. I had no need for it. *Especially living in my parents’ house.*

Still, I could take baby steps.

I pawed through my drawer and found the satin camisole and matching shorts I had bought on a whim. The tags were still on.

I kicked off my pajama pants and slid on the shorts. The fabric was buttery soft against my skin. The hem barely covered my butt.

The tiny spaghetti straps of the camisole were so delicate, kissing the top of my shoulders. White lace edged the pale gold satin.

For a moment, I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a woman standing on her own two feet. I didn’t see the perpetually sick girl I had been.

I liked that woman.

I dug through the closet until I found two more blankets and added them on top of the bed. Satisfied that I was halfway through a resolution, I slipped under the covers, set my alarm, and drifted off to sleep.

THE SOUND that woke me was *not* my alarm. I groaned and rubbed my eyes as the shrill ringing pierced my ear drums.

Wait...

I jolted awake. Footsteps thundered in the unit above me. Outside my door, panicked voices echoed in the stairwell.

The alarm squealed again.

Fire.

I threw the covers back and bolted for the door, pausing to test the handle with the back of my hand. *Not hot.* I yanked it open and darted into the living room.

The faint aroma of smoke filtered in from somewhere, but I couldn't place it. It wasn't strong enough to have been coming from inside my apartment.

I paused and looked down at my fancy pajamas, then back at my room.

It was going to be freezing outside, and I didn't have shoes on.

The wail of a fire engine cut through my racing thoughts.

Don't wait. Don't worry about your things. Stay calm and get out.

All those elementary-level fire drills were paying off, I decided as I bolted for the door and sprinted down the first flight of stairs.

The smoke was a little thicker, but I couldn't tell where it was coming from. Wind blasted through the stairwell, chilling me to the bone as me and every other tenant made a beeline for the parking lot.

A Falls Creek fire engine roared into the lot. Men and women jumped off the rig in full gear, sprinting toward the building. I huddled under a rain-drenched pine tree, knees knocking and teeth chattering.

Sexy sleepwear was the stupidest thing I had ever done.

I would have been cold in my flannel, but not *this* cold and not *this* naked.

“I need everyone to stay behind the cones,” a booming voice ordered.

I jumped immediately, scurrying behind the partition that was being set up.

“Stay off of the sidewalk and move away from the building.”

I recognized that voice.

Sure, I knew just about everyone in Falls Creek, but that voice had been in my dreams for weeks.

Radios crackled as the firefighters talked to each other. I didn't swear often, but *fuck it was cold*. I crossed my arms over my middle and tried not to make eye contact with any of my new neighbors.

I hadn't talked to many of them yet, and I certainly didn't want those first conversations to be like this.

“*Caroline?*”

Crap.

The bulky, firefighter-shaped mountain who had been overseeing crowd control pushed his way to the edge of the trees where I was trying not to turn into a popsicle.

“Sugar, what the hell are you doing out here?” Austin yanked off his helmet and tucked it under his arm.

For a moment, I felt the same fury that Beth must experience daily. He looked at the crowd of people who were dressed relatively normally. They all had long sleeves, pants, and shoes on.

Austin set his helmet on the ground and tugged his gloves off. “Why the hell aren’t you in something warm?”

People were staring now.

“I was asleep,” I said quietly.

“At seven-thirty in the evening?”

“I was tired.”

He shucked off his heavy turnout coat and draped it over my shoulders. I buckled under the weight of it.

“Sit down on the grass and wrap it all the way around you,” he ordered, keeping one hand on my elbow and lowering me down. “Trap all your body heat inside.”

“Shouldn’t you be worrying about whatever’s on fire and not on me?”

The glare he shot my way as he grabbed his radio and spoke into it was dominating. When he was done, Austin rested his hands on his hips and looked at me.

That was the fantasy that was going to be burned into my memory until the end of time. *Austin Hale in boots, turnout pants, red suspenders, and a navy FCFD shirt that was practically painted onto his muscles, looking at me with pale blue flames in his eyes.*

AUSTIN

Fuck. Damn. Shit. Fuck.

This wasn't the time for me to get a hard-on. Not while we were on a call, with Caroline at my feet, wrapped in my turnout coat, wearing next to nothing underneath.

I exhaled sharply, my breath clouding around me as I radioed the boots inside to coordinate what resources they needed.

The situation didn't seem all that serious—just a grease fire someone tried to extinguish with water. Of course, that made the grease splash and ignite into a culinary flamethrower. At least the resident had the sense to toss a lid on whatever they'd been cooking before they high-tailed it out of there.

Getting called out here wasn't the inconvenient part of my night. No, the inconvenience was the sight of Caroline shivering in the crowd with her gangly legs wobbling in the freezing temperatures.

If I hadn't been on duty, I would have fixated on the way her nipples nearly poked through the silky material she wore. The curve of her ass in those loose shorts would have mesmerized me. I would have fantasized about how quickly I could strip her naked.

Kind of like I'm doing right now. *Shit.*

I broke my gaze from Caroline and moved to the other side of the crowd as the rest of the crew spilled out of the building.

Elijah Fisher, my new captain, looked me up and down. “Where’d your coat go? Get a little toasty while you were babysitting the rig?”

Resentment stirred in me at the condescension of his words—*babysitting the rig*. As if I’d been hanging around like a lazy ass rather than simply following orders. I resisted the urge to clap back, and cocked my head to where Caroline huddled under the tree.

“A resident evacuated in her pajamas,” I said. “Didn’t want her freezing to death.”

His dismissive expression fell away when he spotted her. “Oh shit, that’s Caroline Tyree.”

He abandoned me and made a beeline for the little lump of tan fabric shivering in the wind.

The sight of him kneeling beside her caused a protective impulse to flare inside me. Or maybe it was jealousy. I balled my fists by my side and stood at the corner of the engine.

The remaining firefighters exited the building and gave an “all clear.” Residents slowly migrated back into their apartments, grumbling among themselves about the inconvenience.

Elijah helped Caroline to her feet. My coat weighed heavily on her narrow shoulders.

“I’ll be back in a second,” Elijah said, turning away from me. “I’m just going to walk her up.”

I put my hand on Caroline’s back and stared my captain down. “I’ll walk her up.”

Caroline’s jaw hung open.

Elijah eyed me sharply for a moment before finally conceding. He shuffled back, wearing a cocky smirk. “Fine. Make it fast.”

I planted my hand on Caroline’s shoulder and looked down at her. Wide eyes met mine.

“Let’s go, Sugar.”

She danced over the frozen asphalt, her pink-painted toes curling in. I was half-tempted to scoop her up and carry her inside. She hung back, letting everyone else trudge back to their apartment units while her little feet turned to ice cubes.

When we made it to the bottom of the stairs, she started to shrug off my coat. “Um, thanks—”

I planted my hands on her shoulders, keeping it on her. “What floor are you on?”

“Third,” she squeaked.

“Let’s go,” I clipped. It came out a little gruffer than I intended. It was all I could do to keep my mind focused on my duty, not the girl.

She just stared at me.

“Do you need help making it up the stairs?” I asked softly.

Caroline shook her head.

I cocked my head toward the first set of steps. “Then get a move on.”

Slim fingers wrapped around the metal handrail as she started making her way up. “Am I in trouble or something?” she asked in a near-whisper.

I stopped. “What?”

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I was asleep and the fire alarm woke me up. I tried to get out as fast as possible, and I didn’t want to dawdle and—”

“Whoa, Caroline—you’re not in trouble,” I said with a relieved sort of laugh, stopping her on the third-floor landing. I put my hands on her arms and rubbed the outside of the heavy fabric. I cracked a smile. “You did the right thing. If it had been worse and you wasted time looking for clothes, you might’ve been trapped.” I tipped my head to the unit with a doormat that had a floral motif painted over the brown fibers. “Is this you?”

She nodded and shirked off my coat, her pale shoulders coming into view again.

I reached for the handle and opened the door, ushering her through. “In you go. It’s freezing.”

Caroline complied and didn’t argue when I followed her inside. The lights were still off, but the clock on the stove said that it was a little after eight in the evening.

“You not feeling well?” I asked as I assessed the pharmacy’s worth of orange prescription bottles and supplements. Maybe that’s why she had gone to bed so early.

Her eyes were quick to scan how much I had seen. “I’m fine,” she said.

But that wasn’t good enough for me. I cupped her round cheek, then pressed the back of my hand to her forehead. “You sure?” I fingered one of the loose coils that spilled out of her bun.

Her reply was breathless. “I’m sure.”

“Uh-huh,” I said suspiciously and cradled the back of her neck, gently pressing my thumb against her carotid artery. “Your pulse is racing, and your cheeks are flushed.”

“Probably just the, uh, adrenaline,” Caroline stammered, taking a step back into a stream of light filtering in through the window.

My hand fell away from her silk skin and my breath caught.

Goddamn.

She looked like a statue carved out of marble. Curls of wispy platinum hair were piled high on top of her head. Her delicate features made her look angelic. The graceful lines of her throat and shoulders were regal. Pert nipples poked at the satin camisole that covered her torso.

Her hand trembled. As soon as I spotted it, she twined her fingers together and held them behind her back.

“Do you have something warmer to sleep in?” I asked, thankful that bunker pants did a pretty good job at hiding hard-ons. Not that I got them on the job. Frankly, this was a first.

Caroline nodded.

I tipped my head in the direction I assumed her room to be. “Go on, then.” I slapped the sides of my turnout coat together and made sure it was secure. The chirp from my radio let me know that my time was up.

But damn... I didn't want to leave her alone.

“Lock the door behind me,” I said as I grabbed the pen and notepad stuck to the front of her fridge.

“What are you—”

Before she could finish her sentence, I stuck the notepad back to the front of the fridge. “You can call me if you need anything.”

Her eyebrows winged up. “What?”

I pointed to where I had scrawled my number. “I want you to call me if you need anything. Right away.”

Her lips pursed in a tight frown. “Shouldn't I just call 911?”

Well, yeah. She could. But for some reason that didn't sit right with me. What if there were no units available? What if the fire department was out on another call? It was a small town. There was only one station. What if EMS couldn't get here in time?

The radio chirped again, and I sighed. “I have to go.”

Caroline nodded.

As soon as I heard the *schnick* of the deadbolt sliding into the lock, I jogged down the stairs, knowing full-well I wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight.

No one said anything on the ride back to the station. As soon as Paul eased the rig back into the bay, the Band-Aid box pulled in, too. Shane and Missy had gotten called out to check on some lady named Estelle Gould. From the haul of muffins they were carrying in, I'd say it wasn't anything too serious.

We went through the motions of gear checks, getting everything reset and stocked for the next call, before dragging

our asses inside.

“How’d it go?” Shane asked as he sided up to me at the coffee maker. He was shotgunning what looked to be a pumpkin muffin.

Shane was a paramedic—had been since leaving the military. He didn’t talk much about that, but I had only worked with him for a few shifts. He was a friendly enough guy.

“Nothing too crazy,” I said. “Little grease fire.”

“Falls Creek is probably boring compared to the coast.”

I chuckled as I sprinkled a little sugar into my coffee. “Winter on the coast is pretty slow. A lot more medical calls. Summer is where it gets nuts out there.”

Shane nodded, but it didn’t seem genuine. It was the kind of nod that a person did when they weren’t listening.

“Hey—how’s Beth doing?” he asked out of the blue.

My sister’s pregnancy hadn’t stayed secret for long. She blamed it on some volunteer group called the Ladies Auxiliary. Now, we had casseroles showing up on our doorstep, muffins and fresh baked bread being brought to the station for me to take to her, and random Creekers popping in just because.

It drove her nuts.

“Doing alright,” I said. “Still in her first trimester, so not much is going on except her feeling like shit all the time.”

Shane stirred his coffee with a strange aggression.

“Say, what do you know about a girl named Caroline T—”

Before I could get the rest of her name out, Shane cut me off. “Caroline Tyree?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Friends with Beth. I’ve had a few run-ins with her. It was her apartment building that we were called out to.”

Shane picked up his coffee and down a gulp. “I know about as much as everyone else does,” he clipped with thinly

veiled disdain, then stalked out of the kitchen.

Elijah Fisher appeared in the door as Shane left. “Hale. My office.”

Great.

If moving towns wasn't hard enough, moving departments sucked ass. I had been with the Beaufort FD since I was a volunteer. Nearly fifteen years in the same station. On top of the stress of worrying about Beth, figuring out a new hierarchy and how I fit into it was the fucking worst.

I trudged into the chief's office and sat across from Elijah.

Chief Evans wasn't on duty tonight, so Elijah was running the show. He took a pull from a bottle of water and leaned back in the desk chair.

“Probation sucks, doesn't it?”

Even though I had been a firefighter longer than a lot of the other men and women in the station, I was still the new guy. It wasn't hazing so much as giving me time to integrate into a new workplace dynamic. Still, it meant I got stuck with the shitty jobs and the extra tasks on the chore wheel.

Yeah. There was a chore wheel.

And a sticker chart.

And Falls Creek Bingo. Because this town was fucking weird.

“Can't say I'll miss it when my time is done,” I retorted.

Elijah tapped his pen on the paper calendar that stretched across the metal desk. “You haven't sold your house in Beaufort, have you?”

I frowned and dipped into my quickly depleting reserve of self-control. “No.”

The pen-tapping ceased. “I know you moved out here for your sister,” he began. “And I applaud that. You got glowing recommendations from your old command. Every reference was over the top about how much you're made for this line of work. Every test score is exceptional...”

I pulled my mug of coffee to my lips. “Is there a problem?”

“You were in line to make captain at your old station. Between you and me, your old chief said he had no doubt you would’ve been in his position someday.”

A pang in my gut nearly made me spit out my coffee.

I had worked so hard at my old station. I poured everything I had into it. I loved that town and served it with everything in me.

Leaving fucking hurt. And truth be told, I was miserable here.

“Yes, sir. I’m aware of that.” *I was acutely aware of everything I gave up.*

Elijah didn’t show even a flicker of surprise at my response; just tapped his pen in a steady roll.

I played the waiting game while he sat in stoic thought. Finally, he spoke up again. “I’ll be straight with you. Chief cleared you to begin regular duty. You’re finished with your probationary period.”

Thank fuck.

“But,” he added on.

I raised my eyebrows.

Elijah sat forward and laced his hands together on the desk. “I think you can do great work here.”

“Why do I have the feeling there’s another ‘but’ coming?”

He cracked a grin. “*But* ... Chief Evans and I want to know that you’re committed to this town. So—” he shuffled a stack of papers, rattling them against the desk to get the edges straight “—when *you’re* ready to begin your regular duty, let me know why you *want* to be here. Not why you *have to* be here.” He took a swig from the travel mug filled to the brim with coffee. “Because trust me, being a first responder in this town will push you to the edge of your sanity. Ain’t nothin’

worse than Falls Creek during a full moon or when Mercury is in retrograde.”

And with that, the tones dropped again.

CAROLINE

“One, two, three! Eyes on me!” I stood at the front of my classroom, pointing at my nose.

Sixteen pairs of eyes locked on me. I didn’t flinch.

“Liam,” I called out. “Eyes on me.”

A little boy with a mop of dirty blonde hair slowly looked up from his spot on the reading rug, a book clutched in his hands.

I waited for the shuffling and tittering to die down before I continued.

“Okay, kids. Today we’re going to have a very special visitor.”

“Who is it?” Zuri shrieked with the excitement of a hummingbird.

I laughed and clapped my hands together. “Before we go to the gym for the school assembly, a firefighter is going to come by our classroom to say hello!”

Principal Bowen had arranged for the firefighters to pop into the lower grades and introduce themselves before the chaos of a school-wide assembly.

“So,” I continued. “Everyone needs to clean up their station before our guest gets here.”

They jumped into action, putting away books and toys. My skirt swished around my ankles as I grabbed the eraser and cleared my whiteboard. While the other teachers wore pants

all winter, I stuck with my long skirts and layered them with fleece-lined leggings to stay warm. I made it work in a quirky, zany teacher sort of way.

A knock at the door had the class freezing in place.

“All set?” I asked.

“You bet!” they said in unison as seventeen bodies dropped into their seats.

I waved the yellow-clad firefighter into the room.

Gasps of shock and awe rippled over my students as the firefighter’s heavy boots clomped across the tile floor.

His face was completely covered in a helmet and mask, but I would have recognized those blue eyes anywhere. Those obnoxious stomach butterflies returned with a vengeance.

“Good morning!” he said as he waved a gloved hand at the kids. Austin’s voice was slightly muffled as he spoke through the mask. “Are you kids excited to learn about fire safety today?”

The squeal was deafening.

He chuckled as he pulled the mask off his face, then reached up and lifted his helmet off of his head. With a flick of his eyes, he looked me up and down and cracked a smile. It lasted less than a millisecond, but it was enough to steal my breath. “Miss Tyree.”

I kept my teacher face calm and poised, but inside I was a squealing schoolgirl.

“Kids, this is Mr. Hale from the Falls Creek Fire Department. I want you to put your listening ears and your watching eyes on and give him your full attention.”

Austin grinned from ear to ear as the kids acted like a slew of Mr. Potato Heads and mimed putting on their facial features.

When they were still and quiet, I sat behind my desk and let Austin take the floor. Truthfully, I should have slipped out and taken the opportunity to use the bathroom, but I was just

glad to be off my feet. My knees and ankles sang, irritated by the frigid, damp weather.

“Alright,” Austin said, completely at ease as he addressed my class. “How fast did you get dressed this morning?”

“Lightning fast!” Mason shouted.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Raise your hands. No shouting.”

Nearly every hand instantly shot up.

Austin pointed to Nisha. Today, her silky black hair was pulled back in space buns. “Yes—” he studied the name plate on the front of her desk “—Nisha. How fast did you get dressed this morning?”

She giggled sheepishly. “Amma said I was moving slow like a turtle this morning.”

Austin gave a good-natured chuckle. “How long do you think it took me to get dressed this morning?”

Mason’s hand shot into the air, and Austin pointed to him. “Firefighters get dressed *super* fast!”

“That’s right!” Austin said. “Did you know I put all this on in less than a minute?”

Their jaws hit their desks as they looked on, watching with rapt fascination as Austin talked about why firefighters are quick to get ready.

He spread his arms wide and turned in a slow circle. “This makes me look pretty scary, doesn’t it?” He lifted his oxygen mask up and held it over his face. “Especially when I have this on.”

Heads bobbed in agreement.

“That’s why I wanted to come visit you all before we all go to the fire safety assembly in a little bit,” he said as he shucked off his gear.

Sweet Banksy, yes. Keep going, the devil inside me cheered.

I quickly quelled that little intrusive thought with a sip of water from the oversized cup on my desk.

Austin had gotten down to his t-shirt and turnout pants. My eyes wandered to where he had laid his heavy coat. I could still feel the phantom sensations of it surrounding me like a shield. The weight of it was comforting and overwhelming all at the same time.

Kind of like Austin.

“Under all this gear, I’m just a normal person. So if you see us out and about, you don’t have to be afraid. At the assembly, you’ll see a bunch of us in our gear. We want to show you what we do so that if you ever need our help, you won’t be afraid to ask.”

“Do you really use axes?” a squeak of a voice called from the back.

“Yes,” Austin said.

“Can I hold the ax?” another kid called.

Austin grinned. “Absolutely not, Lucas.”

Lucas, a scrawny little thing with coke-bottle glasses, looked both terrified and elated that Austin knew his name.

Austin glanced at me and winked, and I swear to Georgia O’Keefe, I melted.

His biceps rippled as he began to dress in the full get-up again, fielding questions from the kids.

“Well, Molly,” Austin said. “We fight fewer fires these days. Do you know why?”

The kids shook their heads.

He pointed to the fire alarm that was mounted on the wall. “When construction workers build the buildings, they follow a fire code. It’s a set of rules they follow to make the buildings safer so that if there’s an emergency it’s not as bad. Buildings and homes have smoke alarms and fire alarms. There are sprinklers in the ceiling to put fires out before we even arrive.

We didn't always have that information or those safety measures."

Jackson raised his hand, and Austin pointed to him. "So, what do you do all day if you don't fight that many fires?"

Austin gave him a nod of approval. "Good question. We respond if someone is in an accident in their car or in their house. We can help people if they're having a medical emergency and can't get to a doctor. We teach moms and dads how to put car seats in the right way so that you're as safe as you can be. And like Miss Tyree—" he glanced at me "—we teach. We don't just fight fires, we help prevent them."

He was so good with them. The way he lit up with each minor interaction couldn't have been faked. I spent day in and day out with these kids. I knew what it looked like to fake a smile when you didn't feel up to it.

But he was genuine to the core as he let them come up, two at a time, to check out his helmet and the breathing apparatus on his back. He let them try on his helmet and gloves, and stood stock still as they tried to stomp on his toes through his steel-toed boots.

"Alright, kiddos," he said, clapping his hands together. "One last thing. What do you think is the most important thing you can do in an emergency?"

Crickets.

Austin smirked as he walked over to me and placed his helmet on top of my head. "You have to listen to whoever's in charge. They're gonna keep you safe. The most important thing you can do is stay calm and be a good listener." He looked down at me as I brushed my curls out of my face. "Miss Tyree needs you to be calm and be good listeners when we head down to the assembly."

"Who do firefighters listen to, Mr. Hale?" Olivia, a freckle-faced kid with pigtails, asked.

"I have to listen to my captain and my chief. They're making sure we're all doing our jobs when we go to put out a

fire. If I don't listen to them, I could get hurt. Safety first, right?"

"Right," they all agreed.

I felt his hand press against my back. It was warm and firm. The simple touch stirred up a host of feelings that, frankly, I had never really explored before.

"Alright, class," I said. "Can we thank Mr. Hale for coming to visit us?"

A chorus of *thank yous* rose from the desks.

I reached up to lift the helmet off my head when gloved hands beat me to it. "Let me get that for you, Sweets," he said softly, keeping the moniker just between us.

Goosebumps prickled at my skin.

But just like that, the moment was shattered. Austin plopped the helmet back on his head and lifted a hand to the class. "Alright. I'll see you all in a little bit."

Not even my outward chills could temper the heat I felt inside.



THE GYMNASIUM WAS abuzz as kindergarteners through fifth graders piled into the chairs that had been set up in front of the stage. I ushered my kids into the front row, counting heads as they took their seats to make sure everyone was accounted for.

Half of the Falls Creek fire department milled about on stage, moving dividers and furniture to create a fake house. There was a partition complete with a twin bed, dresser, and nightstand. In the middle, there was a fake kitchen with a plexiglass window over the sink. To the far left was a living room set up—a couch, TV, and a faux fireplace.

Doors on wheels were positioned to give the effect of exterior and room-to-room entrances.

Austin and Elijah Fisher were positioning the couch. He stepped over a long extension cord, then fiddled with a black box tucked behind the couch. When he stood up straight and turned, his eyes landed on me. The slow-as-molasses smirk that drew up on his lips was incinerating.

“I *love* fire safety day,” Sloan Li, one of the first grade teachers, craned forward and whispered from the row behind me.

I snickered behind my clipboard. “No arguments here.”

“And that new fella’s a real hunk of man candy. I’d hold his fire hose.”

“Sloan!” I hissed with laughter laced through my voice. My kids stared curiously at my outburst. I cleared my throat and glanced over my shoulder. “I mean, Ms. Li.”

She snorted. “Oh please. Like you weren’t thinking the same thing.”

Sloan wasn’t wrong.

Before I could respond, Principal Bowen stepped on stage and grabbed a microphone.

While she went through the perfunctory introductions and talked about the importance of preparedness, Sloan’s comment floated through my mind.

Not that I’d ever say it out loud, but the night that I ran out of my apartment in my skimpiest pajamas had been on a constant replay in my mind. Sure, seeing Austin being all macho in action was hot. But more than that, it was the way he looked at me. The way he spoke with such authority and resolve.

Every time I thought about it, I had to clench my thighs together.

Austin was basically a walking firefighter calendar. I had no idea how he wasn’t married and a father of twelve. It was a disservice to humanity to not continue those genetics.

Captain Fisher took over for Principal Bowen, walking the gym-full of students through the house they had staged for the

demonstration.

“Who sees a fire hazard?” he asked.

“The blankets!” a fifth grader shouted.

Captain Fisher pointed to the basket of blankets that was arranged by the fireplace. “These?”

“Yeah!” the crowd yelled.

“What else?” he asked.

A third grader with braids nearly jumped out of her seat. “The candle by the window!”

He pointed to the LED candle. “This?”

“Yeah!” she said. “It’s too close to the curtains!”

“Excellent!”

Austin was standing in the wings, clapping with each correct answer. Heat wrapped around my neck like a scarf. Slowly, as if he knew I was looking at him, his gaze turned to me and a smile curled up his mouth.

“Alright, kids,” Captain Fisher said, “Now that we’ve identified what can cause a house fire, my crew is going to show you what happens when we enter a house fire and rescue the people who live there. We’re going to demonstrate a few different scenarios. So—” he eyed the crowd “—who wants to be our first rescue?”

Hands all over the room went up. My kids squealed with glee as they wiggled their little fingers high in the air. The volume pierced my eardrums.

“How about a teacher?” Captain Fisher called out. “Which teacher should we rescue?”

“*Miss Tyree!*” my kids screeched. “Miss Tyree! Miss Tyree!”

“No!” I laughed, trying to calm them down.

“Miss Tyree!” Sloan yelled from behind me.

That got Rita, the fifth-grade teacher in on it. She stood up and pointed straight at me. “Miss Tyree!” With her traitorous

declaration, all the kids chimed in.

My cheeks burned an unnatural shade of crimson. I don't know why I did it, but I looked at Austin for help.

But that man was laughing. Damn him.

"How 'bout it, Miss Tyree?" Captain Fisher said into the microphone.

My limbs prickled like I stuck my finger in a light socket. Hands pushed at my back—probably Sloan—urging me out of my seat.

I moved on numb legs up to the stage. Austin met me at the set of three shallow stairs and offered a gloved hand. "Hey, Sweets," he said quietly.

"Oh, don't 'hey, Sweets' me," I hissed under my breath as I gingerly lifted the hem of my skirt so I wouldn't trip.

Austin smirked. "At least when there's a fire this time, it's fake and you're in more than a scrap of fabric." He paused, blue eyes flicking up and down my body. "Not that I minded."

My lips gaped open.

"Everyone give Miss Tyree a hand!" Captain Fisher boomed.

Austin led me across the stage, pointing out the drop cords that had been taped down. I made it to the fake bedroom without face planting and counted that as a win.

Austin pulled the covers to the little twin bed back and held them up.

"You are *not* tucking me in, Hale," I whispered.

He chuckled. "Just get in."

With a few hundred eyes on me, I couldn't make a fuss. I reluctantly climbed under the musty display sheets and pretended to sleep while Captain Fisher talked about what the firefighters were going to do.

Smoke machines started as the lights went dim, clouding the stage in gray plumes. I peered through my lashes as orange

lights flickered, simulating fire. Boots clobbered across the stage. Flashlights danced around. The wheeled door dividers squeaked as firefighters entered each room.

Captain Fisher narrated the scene, describing who was doing what and why.

“As our crew makes their way to the bedroom, they’re taking their time, looking for anyone who may be trapped. Right now, our victim is fast asleep. Fire can be quiet. That’s why it’s important to have smoke detectors in every room.”

A heavy *thunk* echoed across the stage as the bedroom door was kicked open. “Falls Creek Fire Department,” one of the firefighters hollered as she entered the room.

“We’ve got a female victim in the first-floor bedroom,” Austin said into his radio with complete seriousness. “She looks like Ms. Frizzle.”

All the students giggled.

I felt the covers be pulled back. I looked up and saw Austin hovering over me. His blue eyes locked on mine. With calm resolve, he said, “Ma’am, I’m with the Falls Creek Fire Department. We’re gonna get you out. You’re safe.”

Goosebumps flooded my skin. Those three little sentences made me feel something funny inside.

And Austin smiled like he knew it.

Without hesitating, he slid his forearms under my armpits and dragged me out of the bed, walking backward through the smoke-filled stage. Captain Fisher talked through all the reasons firefighters drag people rather than carrying them.

It was all in one ear and out the other to me. Austin had me out of the staged house and was kneeling in front of me as the rest of the crew came out. The orange lights had been dimmed and the smoke machines turned off.

“Sit here for a minute,” Austin said.

My brows furrowed. “I’m fine.”

Austin chuckled. “I know you’re fine.” He tipped his head toward Captain Fisher. “But right now, I have to pretend to make sure you’re okay.”

“Oh.”

His gloved hand blanketed mine. “Thanks for being a good sport, Sugar.” There was a weight to his words that stole my breath.

“Let’s give Miss Tyree a hand!” Captain Fisher called out.

Applause rose, but it quickly changed to shouts of “me, me, me” from the crowd of students as Captain Fisher chose the next victim.

“Up you go,” Austin said as he stood and offered his hand. He looked me up and down. His gaze was sharp and assessing. “Watch your step, alright?”

It was such a simple phrase, but it rooted me in place. His voice was like distant thunder—soft but powerful. He towered over me, cloaking me in his shadow. Austin was so big. So strong. He made me nervous. He made me blush. He made me weak in the knees.

I should have been afraid of him.

But I wasn’t.

AUSTIN

Her doe eyes were going to damn me straight to hell.

The way Caroline looked up at me, all wide-eyed and innocent like she depended on me to guide her, made my breath catch.

Fuck. I shouldn't want her.

But I do.

I didn't really give a shit that she was Beth's friend, but Caroline Tyree was way too young for me to be having the thoughts I was having about her.

I rolled over in my station bunk and tried to get her out of my head.

Those lips like that look soft like clouds. That smile that looks like pure sugar. Those eyes that gut me as they glimmer like sapphires.

Of fucking course she had to be the most adorable fucking kindergarten teacher, too; sashaying around her classroom of tiny humans like a fairy princess.

From the ten minutes I spent in her classroom, it was clear as day how much those kids idolized her and how much she loved them back.

There was no faking the compassion that radiated from her very being.

And it was a fucking turn on.

Someone snored, shattering my thoughts. The foghorn breathing came from the direction of Randle, a fifty-something father of three who had been part of the station for almost as long as I had been alive.

Is that what I wanted my life to be? Work, sleep, repeat?

Back home I worked part time at a gym to fill the mandatory time off between shifts. When I first made the move to Falls Creek, Brenna—the gym’s owner—texted me multiple times a day asking when I’d be back.

After a few weeks, she had things under control and I barely heard from her.

Nothing like being completely replaceable.

The melancholy setting in probably had more to do with the fact that I was nearing forty and felt as though the life I wanted would never happen for me.

I was the man who was trusted to rescue people, only to pull them out and watch them run into the arms of someone else. Having my work life mirrored in my personal life sucked ass.

Part of me didn’t even want to make an effort with Caroline. She’d probably do what every other woman did.

Banish me to the fucking friend zone.

It wasn’t for lack of trying either. On more than one occasion, I let myself be used as a rebound. I let myself be perpetually friend zoned.

Beth’s hints about asking Caroline out were overshadowed by the notion that she’d use me for whatever she needed, then turn her back and run into the arms of another man.

With every other woman, each rejection stung because I always saw potential for a future. At least with Caroline, I had already decided she was way too young for me.

Somehow, I grabbed an hour of shut eye before I was up and at ‘em, running through gear checks, finishing company chores, and clocking out at morning shift change.

As I was sliding into my truck to head home, my phone vibrated.

Beth: Are you still in town?

Me: Yeah.

Beth: Wanna meet me at the Copper Mule? I want onion rings and a chocolate shake.

Me: At eight in the morning?

Beth: Don't question the cravings.

Me: Be there in ten.

THE PATIO at The Copper Mule was packed to the brim as Creekers crawled out of their homes, soaking in the warm January day.

Temperatures were in the upper sixties, which meant we'd probably get hit with an apocalyptic storm in a week. So went the insanity of North Carolina winters.

"Hey! Over here!" Beth called, waving from a wrought iron table. She already had a milkshake in front of her and was happily slurping away.

I wove through the narrow tables, trying to suck in my frame as much as possible. Most days, I felt like a bull in a china shop trying to tiptoe through aisles of breakables.

I didn't want to disturb the peace. I just wanted what everyone else had.

A reminder of that desire was shoved in my face when I spotted Callum and Layla hunched over a high-top table, sharing breakfast. From the looks of it, they were catching up over chicken biscuits; Callum preparing to go into work at the police department while Layla had just gotten off her shift at the AirCare base.

How nice for them.

It hadn't taken long for me to adjust to life in Falls Creek. The structure of the fire department helped. I had a place to belong; a community that immediately made me one of their own.

If I was being honest with myself, it was slowly becoming a great gig. Seeing my sister more often made it even better.

"I didn't know they made milkshakes for breakfast," I said as I eased down into the chair across from Beth.

"They don't," she said through a mouthful of chocolate ice cream. "Tiffany made it special for me."

I picked up the laminated menu that was wedged between a little dish of sugar packets and the condiment caddy. "You should really focus on lean protein and vegetables that are high in iron, fiber, and folate."

Tiffany, a pretty woman with dark skin and long braids—*and a wedding ring*—slid a basket piled high with sizzling onion rings in front of Beth. "Here ya go, Mama. Anything else sound good?"

Beth looked at the onion rings like Tiffany had just presented her with a basket full of diamonds. "Will you marry me?"

Tiffany laughed. "If my husband leaves his shirt on while we have sex one more time, I might take you up on that."

I cocked an eyebrow. "That's what you're eating for breakfast?"

Beth grabbed an onion ring and dipped it in her milkshake.

I dry heaved.

"And what are you having, oh perfect brother of mine?" Beth asked drolly as she munched on fried root vegetables covered in chocolate sludge.

I looked up at Tiffany. "Egg white wrap, extra spinach and avocado in a whole wheat tortilla. Side of turkey sausage, side of home fries, and a cup of coffee. Black."

“You got it, hotshot,” Tiffany said with a smile.

Beth rolled her eyes. “Enjoy your abs,” she grumbled.

“You should come work out with me,” I said as I picked up her discarded straw wrapper and folded it into an accordion. “Get out of the house. It’ll make you feel better.”

“I feel fine,” she said airily after a sip of milkshake.

“You know you don’t have to pretend around me.”

She stared into her basket of onion rings and didn’t say another word.

More than a few nights had passed where I had been off duty and heard Beth crying in her room. I wasn’t sure if it was just hormones mixed with something she saw on TV or the current circumstances weighing on her.

I’d gone with her to every appointment, sitting in the waiting room until she was done. I tried my best. I honestly didn’t know what else I could do.

“I just wanted to get breakfast,” she clipped as she scrolled through her phone to avoid eye contact with me. “I didn’t invite you to psychoanalyze me.”

I sighed. “Talk to Mom lately?”

“She texted me this morning and asked how I was feeling.”

“And how are you feeling?” I asked, already knowing good and well that our mother had texted her. She texted me right after to see if Beth’s “I’m feeling fine” was truthful or not.

Beth looked up at me with an unamused stare. “I feel like shit. I’m tired all the time. I have to pee constantly, which is really freaking inconvenient when I’m trying to teach. Everything makes me nauseous. Everything feels weird. Who knew that a baby the size of a lemon could wreak havoc on my body so much?”

Before she could get another word out, Shane, Missy, Elijah, and Jake rolled up to the patio and commandeered the table beside us, pushing it up to meet ours.

“Hey, Beth,” Jake said. He was a probie, working through his first six months as a firefighter.

“Hi!” Missy chirped as she took the seat beside me.

Shane loomed over Beth, looking down at her like—*aw, hell*. I knew that look.

“Dr. Hale,” he said. His hand was resting on the back of her chair. I wanted to snap it clean off his arm.

Beth froze, cheeks flushed at the moniker. Her entire body tensed up at the sound of his voice. “I’m not Dr. Hale yet,” she said meekly as he lowered into the seat beside her. “Not even close.”

He grinned. “Then it’s aspirational.”

Elijah and Jake drew me into a conversation about some event the Ladies Auxiliary was putting on, but it was all in one ear and out the other.

“I haven’t seen you around in a while,” Shane said, prodding at Beth again.

Beth’s eyes didn’t leave the basket of onion rings. “Yeah. I’ve just been lying low and working.”

Shane tilted his head to steal a peek at her face. His voice turned soft. “I’ve tried texting you...”

Her chair scraped as she pushed away from the table. “You know I’m actually not hungry anymore.” She fished out her debit card and handed it to me. “Will you have Tiffany run this whenever she comes back?”

What the fuck just happened?

Before Beth could turn around, she froze. Her face went pale, and her mouth was paralyzed in an “O.”

I turned to see what had scared her.

A boy, probably eighteen or nineteen, was on the sidewalk. His hand was planted on the gate that led to the Copper Mule’s patio. The curl of his lip apparently communicated a level of disgust that only my sister understood.

A man appeared, and the tension immediately made sense.

Bradley Childers, looking significantly more sober than he had the last time I saw his sorry face, stood behind a younger version of himself. *The professor's kid that Beth had taught in one of her classes.*

Holy shit.

I rocketed out of my seat as Callum did the same. Layla sided up to him in solidarity. The rest of the fire and EMS crew slowly rose from their seats, sensing the shift in the mood.

Out of the corner of my eye, Shane had positioned his body so that he could quickly step in front of Beth.

Bradley's expression went from confused at the sudden mob, to downright malefic. He snarled, nostrils flaring as he took her in. "You've been ignoring my calls, Bethany," he spat.

Beth's lip trembled, but her voice was strong. "Yes, that happens when a number gets blocked."

"Bitch—" he hissed.

His son looked up at his father, surprised at the outburst. "Dad—"

My hands were balled into fists. "I think you need a reminder of what I said would happen if you so much as looked at my sister ever again. Because it's pretty damn clear you have the memory of a walnut."

A hand planted onto my shoulder and dug in. When I cut my eyes to see who it was, Elijah gave me a subtle shake of his head. "It's your job to be calm right now."

Fuck that shit. I wanted to rip his damn head off and have the cooks throw it in the deep fryer.

Callum cut through the tables, keeping one hand on the side of his belt and one hand outstretched. "Let's get your son seated inside, and then you and I are gonna have a chat."

Bradley didn't budge.

Callum spoke with authority. “Mr. Childers, let’s not make a scene.”

I could see it in his eyes. He wanted to make a scene. And I, for one, wanted him to.

I wanted an excuse to rip him limb-from-limb. I’d probably lose the job I just landed, but it would be worth it.

Somehow, Cal coaxed Bradley down the sidewalk and out of sight.

We all stood in a shared, stunned silence for a moment. When I turned around, Beth’s hands were protectively crossed over her stomach.

Shane had his big, tattooed arm around her shoulders. He looked like a scary motherfucker, but the guy could only be so intimidating when not eight hours ago, he had been singing “Hakuna Matata” and doing all the character voices to go along with it.

“Sit down before you head out,” Shane said, speaking gently to Beth.

She didn’t budge.

He looked at me. “Did y’all drive together or separate?”

“Separate,” I said. “I’ll take her home and come back for her car later.”

“I’m *fine*,” Beth gritted out, snapping from her haze, stabbing a finger at me. “I already have one overbearing brother. I don’t need a second.” She looked at the time on her phone. “And I have to get to work.”

There was something Shane wasn’t saying. “Beth—”

Her eyes flicked to him before she grabbed her purse. “I’ll see you around, Hutch.” And with that, she left.

I DRUG my feet through the townhouse door, soaked with sweat from my run. I had stripped off my t-shirt on the last

half mile and tucked it into the waistband of my gym shorts.

By my guess, Beth was holding her office hours right now before she had to teach a night class.

I hadn't heard from her all day, even though I'd texted her every few hours to check on her.

If I had to guess, I'd say she was ignoring me *because* I had been checking on her. My sister could be stubborn as a mule when she wanted to be.

I jumped in the shower and scrubbed the salt off my skin before throwing a chicken breast into a skillet and a bag of frozen sweet potatoes into the microwave.

My phone dinged as I was elbowing the microwave closed.

Unknown: Hi, I'm sorry if this is really weird and out of the blue, but you did leave your number and said to call you if I needed anything. Also, I'm sorry if you're one of those people who prefer phone calls to texting. But I figured if you're unavailable, you could ignore the message this way rather than having to do conversation gymnastics to get out of it. P.S. This is Caroline.

I grinned at the message, reading it a second time before adding her to my contacts.

Me: I was hoping you'd call because I enjoy talking to you, but I'll take a text. Also, you never told me what you needed. The answer is yes, regardless of what it is. P.S. This is Austin.

Sweet Caroline: Wow, I'm seriously scatterbrained today. I'm sorry for bothering you. I'm trying to text between parent-teacher conference appointments and, apparently, I'm not doing a very good job of it.

I laughed, then it hit me.

Caroline was at the elementary school which meant she put my number in her phone when I'd left it at her apartment. Something about that made me want to puff out my chest.

Me: The answer's yes. Whatcha need, Sweets?

Sweet Caroline: You have a truck, right?

CAROLINE

I whipped open the door and blew an unruly curl out of my face. “Hi.”

Austin’s eyebrow rose as he took in the sight of me.

“Thank you again for this,” I said, slumping against the door frame, breathless and completely aware of how disheveled I looked.

Two days prior, I had swallowed my pride and texted Austin, asking him to move something for me. My car was too small. The painting I dreamed up had become the victim of my ambition, turning out just a little bigger than I planned.

He reached out and looped one of my curls around his thick index finger. My breath caught in my throat as his knuckle barely grazed my cheek.

“Is that sawdust in your hair?”

Moment shattered. “Uh, yeah.” I stepped back and sifted my fingers through my hair to try and get rid of any lingering shavings.

His smile flashed bright and fast. “You are full of surprises, Miss Tyree.” Austin let himself into my apartment and looked around. “So, are we moving furniture or something?”

I came up behind him and pointed to the thin, but oversized wood crate in the corner. “A painting, actually.”

The shock was palpable. “*That’s* a painting?”

“Well, the painting is inside the crate,” I said as I hustled to the kitchen sink and started scrubbing away the little dots of yellow and green that speckled my hands.

Austin moved to the corner of my living room, which was more art studio than living space. He smoothed his hand over the top of the plywood crate I had fashioned to protect the canvas. The crate was only about two inches thick, but the painting spanned over four feet wide.

She was a big ‘un.

My car didn’t have the space to move it. Usually, I would have had my dad take the painting wherever I needed it to go, but I was on my own. As much as I wanted to do everything myself, part of the independence I had worked so hard for meant recognizing when I couldn’t do something myself.

I had done pretty good so far. Asking for one little favor from a friend didn’t make me weak.

I was a delegator.

At least that’s what I told myself.

Typing out one absurdly rambling text to Beth’s brother had taken all the courage I had to spare, but I freaking did it.

“Can I see it?” he called from the window where my easel was set up. Two unfinished oil paintings and a small watercolor piece that I had been messing around with were set up where the light was best.

I laughed. “You can when I unpack it. No way am I sweating through pulling that beast out of the crate until I have to.”

“Fair,” he said with a chuckle as he studied the piece hanging over my TV.

“Sorry, I’ll just need a second to change clothes, and then we can go.”

Austin glanced over his shoulder. “Take your time.”

I ran to my bedroom and swapped my paint-splattered sweatshirt and leggings for a long skirt in sage green and a

tank top the color of chantilly cream. It was warm today, but I still grabbed a cardigan for good measure.

“I had no idea you were an artist,” Austin said when I reappeared in the living room.

I chuckled under my breath. “I guess most people around here know. It’s not something I usually lead with.”

“You should. You’re incredible.”

My cheeks flushed. Small doses of his attention made me downright giddy, but a no-holds-barred compliment was something else entirely.

“Thanks,” I said and fixed my gaze on my ballet flats. When I looked up, I found Austin towering over me.

His blue eyes studied me carefully. A tiny frown tugged at his lips.

“Wha—”

“You’ve got a little—” he cupped my jaw with his wide hand and gently stroked my cheek with his thumb “—paint.”

He was standing close enough that I felt his warmth radiating between us. Austin didn’t move his hand away from my face. Instead, his fingers slid to the back of my neck, tangling in my hair.

Holy Rembrandt. Is he going to—

“There.” He stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Good to go.”

I touched where his palm had enveloped my cheek. A feverish chill ran across my skin and my heart raced. I couldn’t breathe.

“Sweets?” Austin’s tone turned serious, as if I’d just sprouted a third ear smack dab in the middle of my forehead. His concerned gaze burned hot like a flare.

My chest rose and fell with each heavy breath. “Yeah?”

His brows knitted together. “You alright?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You sure?”

I nodded.

“Sorry,” he said. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

I pressed my hands to my flushed cheeks. “It’s okay.”

And it really was. Austin Hale had touched me as if he was going to kiss me.

Now I was just being silly. I pushed the thought from my mind.

He was so much older than me in a ridiculously hot kind of way. He wasn’t a silver fox. It just seemed like he knew things.

Things I had yet to gain any firsthand experience in.

“So.” Austin strolled back to the crated painting. “Where’s this one going?”

I shouldered my purse. “The high school. Will it fit in the back of your truck lying down?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He reached around the crate and lifted it. “Ready to go?”

“I can help you carry it down.”

“I’ve got it, Sugar. You just lock up behind me.”

I held my breath as Austin eased down my apartment stairs. So much time and effort had gone into that painting. It was my baby.

“Question,” he said as he slowly pivoted around the last stairwell.

“What’s that?”

“How the hell did you get this thing into your apartment all by yourself?”

I laughed because it did seem a little ridiculous to need help getting a painting out, but not in. “I built it inside my apartment.”

He stopped. “What do you mean, ‘you built it?’”

“Whenever I need a custom size canvas, I build the frame and wrap it myself rather than ordering one. It’s cheaper.”

He arched an eyebrow. “And the wood crate?”

I hopped off the last step. “Built that, too. Just a little plywood, some studs, and a saw.”

His head whipped around, and he froze on the sidewalk. “You have a *saw* in your apartment?”

“Yeah?”

Austin looked up at the clear blue sky and muttered something about women sending him to an early grave. He crossed the parking lot with smooth strides, straight to a shiny truck in gunmetal gray. It looked old but there wasn’t a speck of dirt on it. He gently set the painting against the tire before lowering the tailgate.

“You brought moving blankets?” I asked.

Austin grinned and unfurled a thick piece of fabric across the truck bed. “You told me we’d be moving somethin’ fragile. Safety first, right?”

I laughed under my breath. While I watched him load the painting and cushion it with the other blanket, I kept my hands laced behind my back to stop them from trembling. “My kids haven’t stopped talking about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I kicked at a piece of gravel. “You were the highlight of their month.”

Austin slammed the tailgate and turned to face me. “And what about yours?”

“Mine?”

“Your month. What’s been the highlight of it?”

You. But I didn’t say it out loud.

I craved his attention like a drug. It was potent and addictive. But I had noticed he was the same kind of overprotective with me that he was with Beth, which meant he

would never see me as anything other than a kid. I guess I couldn't blame him. By my rudimentary estimate, he had been in middle school when I was born.

“The painting,” I lied.

Austin paused and studied me for a moment. The thin stubble on his cheeks glimmered in the early evening light as he worked his jaw from side-to-side in thought. But he never called my bluff. Instead, he circled the truck and opened the passenger's door.

I lifted my keys pathetically. “Oh, I was going to drive so you didn't have to stay. Unless you were planning to or something.”

“What's the event?”

“The Ladies Auxiliary Winter Warm-Up.”

He stared at me blankly.

“Beth didn't tell you? She'll be there. It's an annual Falls Creek thing...” When nothing I said clued him in, I continued. “It's this fundraiser that the Ladies Auxiliary does. There's a silent auction, too.” I pointed to the painting. “That's what I painted it for. They're raising money for Grace Barnes.”

“Who's that?”

“Did you hear about what happened to Layla when she was on a call?”

Something clicked in his mind. “Yeah. She was responding to a domestic—a stabbing vic. The assailant tried to hold Layla hostage.”

I nodded. “Grace Barnes was the victim. She's doing better now, but she still has a ton of expenses and doesn't have a place of her own. So, Gran Fletcher and Ms. Sepideh decided that the proceeds from the Winter Warm-Up would go to her. She's drowning in medical bills and needs help furnishing an apartment, covering the security deposit, and a few months of rent.”

“So, what exactly is the Winter Warm-Up?”

I couldn't help but grin. "Fun."

Austin stroked his chin dramatically. "Fun, you say? That must be high praise coming from a wallflower like you."

I blushed. "It's kind of like a carnival. They started doing it a few years ago to raise money for different things and give people something to do once the holidays are over. It helps with the gloomy winter blues. It's a twenty-one and up kind of thing, so I just got to go for the first time last year. They set it up in the high school gym and sell tickets. There's food and *a lot* of alcohol, and everyone plays childhood games."

"Childhood games?"

"Imagine duck-duck-goose, but you have to do shots if you're the one picking the goose. Rideshare drivers make a killing getting everyone home after."

He let out a loud crack of laughter. "You do shots?"

"No, but I like to watch, and it all goes to a good cause," I said defensively.

Austin tilted his head to the open truck door. "Up you go, Sugar. Let's go have us a good time."

I was a little reluctant. I preferred driving myself places so I could leave when I got tired, without dragging someone along with me. But Austin Hale was opening his door for me like a proper gentleman. Maybe this would be good practice for that date resolution that was burning a hole in my journal.

I was attempting to scale the running board like I was climbing Everest when I heard Austin's soft laugh. His hands wound around my waist and lifted me like I was light as a feather. "Up you go."

Before I could make sense of what was happening, my rear landed in the seat and Austin was pulling the seatbelt across my lap, buckling me in.

While he shut my door and hopped behind the wheel, I took the vehicle in. "It's so clean in here."

He laughed. "Is that surprising?"

“My car’s a rolling graveyard of receipts and straw wrappers.”

Austin did that move where he held on to the back of my seat and looked over his shoulder to back out of the space. Why did such a little thing like that make me clench my thighs together?

“Well,” he began with a smile as he slowly navigated out of my apartment complex. “When a man has the opportunity to take a woman as pretty as you to a town fundraiser, he makes sure his truck is clean.”

I melted.

THE HIGH SCHOOL parking lot was already packed to the brim when Austin pulled in. He eased around the building to the gym and slowed to a stop next to a side entrance, putting on his emergency flashers for good measure.

“Hold on right there, Sugar,” Austin said as he jumped out. A second later, he appeared, opening my door for me and offering his hand to help me down.

I had touched his hand a few times now, but every single instance of skin-on-skin contact had feelings coming to life that had been repressed for the majority of my twenty-two years on this earth.

His hand was three times as big as mine and was covered in rough callouses that scraped my palm every time I touched them.

New fantasies bloomed in my mind. As I hopped out of the truck, that big hand of his wrapped around mine protectively. Like it had since I was a child, my imagination raced with a million threads of make-believe possibilities.

But these weren’t the innocent daydreams of a girl. They were illicit fairytales.

I was thankful for the bite of wind that cooled my cheeks. I hadn't even realized that Austin had shut the door and was already pulling the painting out of the back of the truck.

"Lead the way, Sweets," he said as he hefted the painting between his arms. It wasn't heavy so much as it was bulky.

As we made our way into the gym, I caught him humming. Of course, it was that Neil Diamond song again. I almost chimed in with my own "bah, bah, bah" when Sepideh Nazari appeared and waved us in.

"Caroline!"

"Hi, Ms. Sepideh," I said.

She immediately looked Austin up and down. "You brought a helper. And a handsome one at that! Let's get your piece set up at the auction tables."

Austin followed dutifully as she led us across the gym that was cordoned off with safety cones and caution tape to create a grid of games.

There was a corner for competitive musical chairs, and a cluster of desks for Heads Up Seven-Up. *Tequila made sneaking around way harder.*

Half of the court was used for Red Rover. *Nothing like getting clotheslined at full speed by grown adults.*

The bleachers had been pushed back into the wall to gain a few more feet of perimeter. It's where they had life-sized skeet shooting set up. Of course, no one was actually shooting people. The "hunter" had a rubber ball, and the person pretending to be the clay pigeon had a trampoline to launch themselves into the air before crashing onto a pile of padded mats. The idea was to nail the jumper with the ball in mid-air to score points.

The finale of the night would be a fight to the death through a cutthroat game of dodgeball. The faculty and staff at the elementary school had been tittering among themselves, strategizing on how to inflict payback on a few select administrators.

Up on the stage, there was a maze of folding tables packed to the brim with cellophane-wrapped gift baskets, weekend getaways, beauty treatments, and domestic services.

Sepideh had an easel brought down from a classroom for me. I stood to the side as Austin carefully lowered the crate to the floor.

“Here you go, dear,” Sepideh said as she handed me a clipboard. “I’ve got the piece information you sent me—the painting’s name and description and all that. All you have to do is write in the amount that the bidding should start at.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you,” I said as I dug a pen out of my purse and scribbled in a lowball number.

Austin was looking over my shoulder. “Pretty sure it should be way more than that, Sweets,” he said when Sepideh walked away.

“You haven’t even seen it yet,” I retorted.

“If the other paintings in your apartment are anything to go by...”

I smiled to myself because this one blew those out of the water.

I had intentionally left the top of the crate unsealed. Austin would have had a conniption if I pulled a crowbar out of my purse.

“Ready to see it?” I asked as I wedged my fingers between the plywood case and the wood edge of the canvas.

Austin took a few steps back and crossed his arms over his zip code-wide chest. “Wow me, Sugar.”

AUSTIN

Caroline's plump lower lip was trapped between her teeth as she slowly lifted the painting out of the crate. When her arms were nearly over her head, I pulled the crate out from under the painting and moved it aside so she could perch the piece on the easel.

I stood behind her head of wispy curls as she centered it. "Wow."

"I've been doing this thing with silhouettes lately," she said as she brushed some non-existent lint off the ridges of paint. "I still need to practice some more, but—"

"No," I said, in awe. "It's incredible." My palms found her shoulders. "What's it called?"

"Widow's Watch."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. It was a sad sort of painting, but there was so much joy in it, too.

If I had to guess, it looked like she had painted the inside of the Ballentine House. A woman's weathered hand graced the curving banister rail. Thin fingers daintily caressed the beam. It was the only part of the subject apparent to the viewer. The rest of the painting was told through unseen eyes.

A party was in full swing. Laughter and champagne bubbled up from the faceless crowd. It was a swirling flurry of motion everywhere, but in the middle of the ballroom were two youngsters, staring at each other with utter adoration as they danced.

Clutched in the woman's hand on the banister was a man's thick wedding ring.

I knelt in front of the painting to get a better look. "Was this on purpose?" I asked, studying the lines etched into the gold band.

Caroline lowered to her knees, huddling in beside me like we were sharing a secret. "Yeah." She was smiling from ear to ear. The life in her eyes was infectious. "I've always loved my granddad's wedding ring. Is that weird?" She laughed. "I like the lines on it. The scratches. There's even a little divot in it where he was jumping a car battery one time and accidentally touched his ring to the battery terminals while the cables were attached. It zapped him and blew out a little piece of metal from the ring." She let her fingertips trail along the hairline scratches she had put into the ring. There were still flecks of paint plastered beneath her nails. "I used a palette knife to make those lines. I think the texture gives the ring its own story. There are years of work and love in those lines."

Something caught my eye. The couple in the middle of the painting—the man had a ring, but it was bright gold, not like the dull ring clutched on the banister.

It hit me like a shot to the heart. "The widow is remembering her own love story."

I looked down at Caroline. Her eyes were soft and dreamy. "Yeah."

"Is this the Ballentine House?"

She nodded. "I've always loved it. It's my favorite place in Falls Creek. I remember when Ms. Sepideh bought it and started fixing it up after her husband died. I was young, but it was like watching her come to life again with the house. I got the idea at Brandie Jean's New Year's Eve party."

It was as if the painting came to life before my very eyes. But instead of a young Sepideh Nazari and her love, it was Caroline and me.

"What are *you* doing here?"

The voice behind me scared the shit out of me, and it came from none other than my baby sister.

Caroline and I jumped to our feet and spun, coming face-to-face with Beth and Layla. Brandie Jean joined the entourage, wearing flamingo pink bell-bottoms and a *Good Vibes* t-shirt. The *V* in *Vibes* was formed with two screen-printed vibrators.

Beth stood with her arms crossed, scowling at me. “If you say that you followed me here because you were worried that I’d do something stupid like drink while I’m pregnant...”

Is that what she thought? That I was trying to parent her? Beth and I were raised under the adage of *family first*. The minute she called me in tears, I dropped everything for her because that’s what the Hales do.

“Actually, I asked Austin to help me bring my painting,” Caroline said, speaking up with more gumption than I had ever heard her possess.

Layla’s eyebrows shot up, but she kept her mouth shut.

Brandie Jean smiled from ear to ear like a devious unicorn. Apparently, Caroline’s interjection quelled Beth’s temper and sparked her curiosity.

Before the three of them could further the inquisition, Layla gasped. “Oh, Caroline—it’s beautiful.” She broke away from the group and studied the painting, pressing her fingertips to her lips. “I’m definitely bidding on that.”

“That’s morbid,” Beth said. “You’re getting married, and you’re already thinking about how it ends?”

Layla shook her head. “For *Khale joon*. As a thank you for letting Cal and I use the bed and breakfast for the wedding.”

“It’s *gorgeous*,” Brandie Jean cooed. “Almost as perfect as the portrait you did for me.”

I leaned down and kept my voice soft enough that my words stayed between the two of us. “You did a portrait of Brandie Jean?”

Caroline cut her eyes to me. “That’s not the bad part.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna need all the details, Sweets.”

When all three girls were distracted, Caroline turned to face me and whispered. “She wanted me to paint her dressed as Princess Leia in the gold bikini. Her ancient boyfriend was already wrinkly enough to pass for the giant slug. She was sitting on his lap. At least her body covered most of his ... bits.”

“You’re fucking with me,” I snickered in feathery breaths.

“I’m not kidding!” she hissed, covering her mouth to keep quiet.

“I need proof.”

She giggled. “Trust me. You don’t want proof.”

“What are you two doing over there, being all sneaky and whispery,” Layla said.

Luckily, we were saved by Gran Fletcher shooin’ us off stage before making a raucous announcement to let the games begin.

“Where to first?” I asked Caroline as we found a square foot of empty floor space next to a sign that pointed down the hallway outside of the gym. It read, *Life-sized Candy Land Cake Walk*. I tilted my head in the direction of the cake walk. “Wanna give it a go?”

She followed my line of sight and laughed. “Absolutely not. Do you know how competitive Falls Creek women are? Last year Doc Mathers had to open up his office after hours because Mavis Taylor and Christie Spellman got into a tussle over Gran Fletcher’s caramel cake. Mrs. Taylor got a concussion and Christie Spellman twisted an ankle and broke a finger.”

“Jesus,” I muttered. “Well, we could—”

“I really appreciate you helping me get the painting over here, but you don’t have to stay just because I am. I can catch a ride home.” She looked around. “I just have to stick around to get the painting back in the crate when the silent auction is over.”

I stood in front of her and crossed my arms. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“She looked down at her toes, a little sheepish. “No, I’m just ... it’s really fun to watch, but participating isn’t really my thing. I don’t want to be a downer.”

She motioned to the chaos erupting in the gym as the games got started. I watched as Bea Walker bent at the waist to tie her muumuu in a knot at the hem for a competitive edge in Red Rover. She took a shot of something clear, ran at the line, and then fell back on her rear when she couldn’t get through.

“Someone’s gonna break a hip,” I muttered.

Just then, I heard Gran Fletcher yell, “Fucking wreck him, Sep!”

Ms. Sepideh, in a long green dress and cream-colored hijab, spun around with her forehead on the end of a baseball bat, then tried to run to the other end of the gym to beat Lester O’Malley.

The dizziness made the two of them run like drunken pirates, but Ms. Sepideh smoked the old farmer and won a gift card to the Falls Creek Filling Station.

“This is...”

Caroline laughed as Sepideh was awarded her prize. “Fuckin’ Creekers.”

“Well damn, Sugar.” I ruffled her hair. “I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you swear.”

“I try not to make a habit of it,” she said rather slyly. “Being around my students and their parents all day and all that.”

“Why do I sense there’s a caveat to that?”

She smiled at the floor. “What plays in my head is another story.”

“Ah, there she is,” I teased.

Caroline looked up at me, frowning. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “It’s always the quiet ones that have the dirtiest minds.”

And with that, I left her to stew while I perused the silent auction.

“HEY, KID,” I said, nudging my sister when I sided up to her in front of a table that featured a spa basket, a Griffith Brothers steak subscription box, and a weekend stay at the Ballentine House.

Instead of the funnel cake I knew she was salivating over, Beth had a bottle of water in her hand. “Hey.”

I tossed my arm around her shoulders. “What’s the matter? Did something else happen with Professor Douche Canoe? He hasn’t stopped by when I’m not there, right?”

She didn’t even crack a smile.

“I’m gonna be a single mom,” she said quietly after a long stretch of silence.

“It’s better to go at it alone than with an unhinged narcissist.” I tightened my hold around her. “But you’re not alone. You know that, right? I’ll do whatever I can. You’ve got your friends here. Mom and dad are excited.”

“Having help isn’t the same thing as having a partner.”

“I know, kid.”

“And eventually you’ll get married and have kids of your own, and I’ll be Aunt Beth, and spoil the shit out of them—”

“It won’t matter. We’re still family.”

“Family first means that when you have a family, they come first.”

I sighed and snagged a pen from the table to scribble my name on the clipboard attached to the spa day gift basket. It was full of the fru-fru bath goodies women seemed to like.

Tucked in the middle was a gift certificate for a massage, facial, and nail service.

“Who knows, Bethany?” I said with a huff. “That ship may have sailed for me. Even if I met someone today, I’d probably be in my forties by the time we got married. Do things just the two of us for a few years. That’d put us having our first kid with me being nearly fifty.” I shook my head as I dropped the pen. “Pretty late in life to just be starting out. You still have time.”

“First off, that’s bullshit. Second—” she looked down at her stomach. She was barely showing in tight shirts, but the chunky sweater she had on tonight completely concealed her tiny bump. “—I’m not trying to sound dramatic, but no one’s gonna want all the crazy that comes along with this.”

“You never know.”

She bumped my shoulder with hers. “I could say the same about you.” Immediately changing the subject, Beth looked at the bid I’d put on the spa basket. “You planning on getting your nails buffed and polished?”

I had left a generous enough bid that I didn’t think I’d have much competition. Still, I made a mental note to stop back by the table and make sure I won.

“Nope. I’m getting it for you,” I said as I studied the steak subscription box for a moment before glancing at Caroline’s painting.

The clipboard was full of bids, and one of the Ladies Auxiliary members had added a second sheet to keep the war going. Falls Creek was nothing if not competitive.

Proof of that was in the way Shane Hutchins and Callum Fletcher were battling it out in life-sized skeet shooting. Police Chief Farnby was the target. Shane hit her in the stomach with a dodgeball, and she crashed into the padding in a fit of laughter. He took the win and became the target himself.

“I don’t need a spa day.”

“I didn’t say you needed a spa day. I said I’m getting you a spa day.”

“Well, fine, then.” She grabbed a pen and scrawled something across the clipboard at the end of the table.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you out of my house for a weekend so I can throw myself a pity party that’s free of your reasonable logic,” she muttered before looking up at me with a sarcastic smile. “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m giving to a good cause. Besides, a weekend at the Ballentine House seems like something you would like since the weather’s gonna be crap next week and I’ll be recording lectures from home.”

I eyed her suspiciously, but Beth’s poker face was ironclad. “You’re up to something. I just can’t put my finger on what it is.”

“Beth! Austin!” Layla shouted from the corner of the gym. “Get your asses over here! We need two more for musical chairs!”

“Fuck it,” I said, tossing my arm around Beth and steering her off the stage. “Let’s have some fun.”

The game of musical chairs was set up the same as one would expect, with the addition of optional shots for maximum amusement. Beth took a pass on the liquor and found a seat next to Estelle Gould, but Callum talked me into a shot of moonshine before we took our spots. Caroline had been dragged into the game by Layla, and was sitting, ankles crossed and pretty as a picture, on the opposite side of the circle.

Someone started the music and we were off. It was a strange combination of early 2000s club music mixed with 90s country and 80s hair bands.

One-by-one, Creekers were eliminated. The moonshine taste still burned on my tongue, but I took another shot with Maribel Gonzales, the town’s ancient librarian, between Flo Rida’s “Low” and Travis Tritt crooning out, “T-R-O-U-B-L-E.”

The moonshine sucked, but the trash talking was entertaining. Gran Fletcher got in a shouting match with

Callum when he stole her seat during “Pour Some Sugar On Me.” Callum cussed her out six ways from Sunday, and she cussed him out right back. Layla protected Gran’s honor by eliminating Callum in the next round. She was ousted next by sneaky little Caroline.

“Hey, Sweets. Fancy meeting you here,” I said as I took the seat next to Caroline. It was down to five of us. Me and Caroline, Kate—an administrative assistant at the police department—Bill McMann, and Marilyn Dreese.

Sepideh took out two chairs, leaving only three spaces to be had.

“Don’t think I’m gonna go easy on you, Sugar,” I said as Shakira played on the decades-old boom box.

“Don’t think I’m going easy on you,” Caroline said with a smirk.

Sepideh stopped the music right before the singer waxed poetic about untruthful hips. I dropped into a chair with Marilyn Dreese landing on my lap.

She cackled, throwing her silver beehive back. “Well, I’ll be damned. I’ve always wanted to be held by a sexy firefighter.”

I laughed as I politely scooped her off me and put her on her feet. “I hope that makes the loss a little better for you, Ms. Marilyn.”

She snorted. “We need to work on your trash talking, handsome. You’re not a Creeker until you can look at your elders and say, ‘Ha! Suck a duck!’”

Sepideh shooed the eliminated players out of the circle, leaving Caroline, me, and Bill McMann.

The old guy didn’t stand a chance. He stumbled around, three sheets to the wind, while the music played.

Now it was just me and Caroline, circling a single chair. I didn’t know what the prize was, all I knew was that I was going to kick her ass.

Sepideh let one song fade into the next, building the anticipation. A crowd had gathered to watch the two of us fight to the death.

Caroline had her hand trailing along the back of the seat as we walked.

“That’s cheating, Sweets,” I said.

She smiled and clasped behind her back, innocent as a baby lamb. “Fine. I could do this blindfolded and still kick your rear.”

I grinned, because I liked this side of Caroline. She was feisty. “You can have a seat,” I said. “But it’ll have to be in my lap because I’m definitely going to win.”

A chorus of “oooohs” rose from the spectators.

Sepideh waved her hand over the boom box, making us both flinch, but the music never stopped as it moved into a Rihanna hit.

“It’s gonna be really embarrassing for you when you end up in *my* lap, Hale.”

“You ever had a firefighter straddle you?” I retorted. I meant it as a teasing remark, but her face turned bright red.

Smack talking must have been taught in the Falls Creek public schools, because her embarrassment quickly shifted to a smirk. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Austin Hale: always the firefighter, never the fire.”

The music stopped.

In a single fluid movement, Caroline’s hand darted out and grabbed the back of the chair. She spun the seat around to face her and sat down as my ass slammed into the gym floor.

She sat backward in the chair, smiling down at me with her arms crossed over the back of it. The crowd roared as Sepideh declared her the winner.

Caroline’s satisfied smile was feline. “Word of advice to you, Hale.” She hunched over the back of the chair and

whispered, “Don’t go up against a kindergarten teacher. I have *years* of Musical Chairs strategy under my belt.”

As Sepideh gave Caroline a white envelope with her winnings, Beth clapped me on the shoulder. “I know that look.”

“What look?”

She tipped her head toward Caroline. “You know exactly what I mean.”

I did, but I didn’t want to admit it. The thoughts I had about Caroline Tyree were messed up at best. She was thirteen years younger than me. Just starting out in life. And she seemed ... inexperienced. It shouldn’t have been a fucking turn-on, but it was.

Goddamn, it was.

“I’m not going to let it go anywhere,” I said as I walked with Beth back to the silent auction tables to check our bids.

“So, what if it does?”

I looked down at her, and she met my gaze.

“Have I told you how thankful I am that you’re here?” she said quietly, almost embarrassed. “Because I am. I know I’ve been bitchy lately. I’m just...” she sighed. “Trying to come to terms with the fact that my life is going to change completely and that the plan I had for my future got lit on fire and put through a shredder. And I’m hormonal on top of that.” She nudged me with her elbow. “I know I’ve been complaining about you hovering, but honestly, I don’t know what I’d do with you as my brother.”

I pulled her into a hug. “Love you, Bethany.”

She sighed. “But for heaven’s sake, just because you left Beaufort for me doesn’t mean your life has to stop, too. Make friends. Date. Find a new gym to work at.” She looked up at me. “Please keep living. One day I’ll catch up to you and I need to know what it looks like to not give up.”

CAROLINE

“Someone’s in a good mood.”

I looked up to find Sloan lingering in my classroom door with a stack of papers perched on her hip and an oversized travel mug of coffee in the other.

“Why do you say that?” I asked with a laugh.

“You’re humming,” she said before taking a swig from the mug. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you hum before.”

“I hum,” I countered. I didn’t want to tell her I was humming the same tune that Austin always did. The one we danced to on New Year’s Eve.

“So, you wanna tell me what’s got you all hummy?”

I peeked out of the windows that lined the top of the cinder block walls. The skies were a soft gray. “Early dismissal on a Friday for snow? I’m surprised you’re not humming.”

She grinned and wiggled her tumbler. “In an hour, this won’t be just coffee.”

I grabbed my oversized tote bag and loaded up my lesson plan binder and a stack of papers I needed to collate. I snagged an armful of supplies for an example of a craft that I needed to make over the weekend so that I had an example to show the kids on Monday.

“Oh, hey.”

I looked up to see who Sloan was talking to, and found Adam Kipler crammed in my doorway as well. He had on a

heavy coat and a toboggan that was speckled with precipitation.

“Hey,” he said, yanking off his hat and ruffling his fingers through his hair. “Be thankful you didn’t have bus duty today. You would have turned into a popsicle.”

It reminded me that I needed to turn off the little space heater I had hidden under my desk. I reached down and flipped the switch, thinking about Austin and his mother-henning of Beth and her candles. He would probably have a conniption about space heaters too.

“There’s that look again,” Sloan teased. “You sure it’s just the snow you’re happy about?”

“You got plans this weekend, Miss Tyree?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” I grabbed my coat and scarf, bundling up for the trek to the parking lot.

“You know, a few of us were planning to go into Hillsborough when the storm passes,” Adam said, completely ignoring what I had just said. “We’re gonna get drinks at the Tippy Goat. I could pick you up if you don’t feel comfortable driving in the weather.”

I knew exactly who “a few of us” was. Adam, the elementary PE teacher, Mitch, the high school football coach who half-assed his way through being a social studies teacher, and the middle school science teacher, Brett Walsh.

“You know, I prefer to keep my personal and professional lives separate,” I said.

“Another time then,” Adam said, not at all taking the hint I had so bluntly shoved in his face.

Sloan covered her mouth to hide her laugh. “What are you up to this weekend?”

I shouldered my tote bag and headed for the door. “I won a weekend stay at the Ballentine House at the Winter Warm-Up.”

“I saw you hand Austin Hale his ass,” Sloan snickered. “That man is all kinds of fine.”

“Aren’t you married?” I teased as I turned the lights off and pulled the door closed. The three of us made our way down the hall, toward the door to freedom.

“Happily,” she chirped. “But I’m not blind. I bet it felt so good stealing that weekend stay out from under his well-toned rear end.”

I laughed. “I didn’t even know what the prize was. Gran Fletcher and Brandie Jean pulled me in to play because they needed more bodies. I didn’t find out it was a stay at the B&B until Ms. Sepideh handed me the envelope.”

“Lucky you,” she gushed.

“Offer stands if you wanna have a good time,” Adam said. “You have my number, right?”

Sloan rolled her eyes.

“I have the staff directory,” I said.

We stepped outside and were immediately assaulted by freezing rain and whipping wind. Salt crunched underfoot as we trudged down the sidewalk as a pack. Sloan peeled off to head to her car. Luckily, Adam was parked in the same direction and had to follow.

“Thank goodness,” I said through clouded breaths as I unlocked my car and immediately cranked the heat.

Anticipating the weather, I had packed everything I needed for my weekend at the Ballentine House before I left for school this morning.

Bringing my full-sized easel was a little unrealistic for a one-roomed stay at a B&B, but I did pack my art bag with a tabletop set-up. There were so many hidden nooks and crannies in the house. I wanted to find something new to put on the canvas.

I had probably painted the Ballentine House more than any other Falls Creek locale, but I couldn’t help it. There was something simply magical about it.

The luggage in the backseat shifted as I slowed to a stop at a red light. I had probably overpacked. I was just one person,

and it was a weekend—not a ‘round-the-world trek.

My tires skidded ever so slightly on the sleet-slicked street, and my heart rocketed into my throat.

Maybe I shouldn't go...

Fat flakes of snow coated my windshield. I flipped on the wipers, clearing them away as I eased through the light. The turn to go to my apartment complex was coming up. Maybe I'd just...

No, Caroline.

I sat firm in my resolution to do more spontaneous things.

Sure, it wasn't completely out of the blue. There were a few days between when I had won the weekend stay at the Winter Warm-Up and when it was scheduled. I had time to pack and make sure I had everything I needed.

Still, it was the most spontaneous I'd been since texting Austin to see if he could help me move the painting.

When a man has the opportunity to take a woman as pretty as you to a town fundraiser, he makes sure his truck is clean.

That single sentence had been on repeat in my mind for days. Just the thought of it made me squeal and shimmy in the driver's seat.

I may have had a tiny little crush on the hot mammoth of a firefighter. Could anyone really blame me?

Besides, it wasn't like a crush was actually doing any harm.

Since I didn't exactly know how one was supposed to go about dating for the first time in their twenties, a crush seemed like a natural place to start.

Most kids got to experience the growth of childhood crushes turning into adolescent flings that grew into more serious relationships in college and early adulthood.

Well, I was out of college and had about as much experience with the concept of dating as the fifth graders at the elementary school.

But even that thought didn't kill my mood. As I pulled into the side lot at the Ballentine House, bathed in the warm glow seeping from the windows, nothing could bring me down.

“Oh, Caroline. I'm glad you're here. I was just about to call you. There's a problem with your reservation.”

Nothing could bring me down except that.

Sepideh Nazari met me in the entryway, holding a tablet and wearing a grim look on her face. “It seems the water heater and gas fireplace are out in the cottage I had reserved for you. Henry's been working on it for some time, but with the storm I don't know how much luck he'll have.”

The Ballentine House Bed & Breakfast consisted of ten guest rooms in the main house, a cottage, and two cabins. Henry Calhoun, the groundskeeper, lived in the cabin furthest from the main house.

My prize from the Winter Warm-Up was for a weekend stay in the cottage. But from the sound of it, that wasn't happening. Not if my only option was ice-cold showers in freezing temperatures.

The door opened behind us, a blast of snowy air bringing fat flakes and wet speckles of sleet inside the foyer.

Sepideh muttered in rapid Farsi as the temperature in the house dropped at least twenty degrees with the gust. “Come in. Come in,” she said, waving the new guest inside. “Make yourself right at home, Mr. Hale. I'll be with you in just a moment.”

At the mention of his name, I spun on my heels, coming face-to-face with a mile-wide chest covered in a heavy coat. “What—what are you doing here?”

He lifted a white envelope that looked exactly like mine. “Winter Warm-Up. Beth won me a weekend stay in the silent auction.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You're actually leaving her unsupervised in the worst snowstorm Falls Creek has seen in a decade?”

He flashed me a devious grin. “Callum’s on duty tonight, so I asked Layla if she could talk Beth into hanging out. Apparently, Brandie Jean got in on it, and now they’re having some kind of themed slumber party.”

I forced a smile. “Sounds like something Brandie Jean would do.”

Austin’s face fell as he took in Sepideh’s distress and my uncertainty. “What’s going on?”

“Caroline won a stay at the fundraiser, but the gas in the cottage isn’t working,” Sepideh said.

“Is there a room in the house I could switch to instead?” I asked.

She shook her head sadly. “All the other rooms are taken and the guests have checked in.”

The door opened and closed again as Henry shuffled in and shook off the cold. His salt-and-pepper beard was flecked white with snow. He had that burly lumberjack thing going for him and it made him a total silver fox.

Henry tugged off his gloves and stuffed them in his pocket.

“Any luck?” she asked.

Henry shook his head. “Might be able to fix it if I can get to the hardware store when the storm breaks tomorrow.”

Sepideh looked at him with absolute adoration in her eyes. “Thank you, Henry.”

He nodded humbly. “Yes, ma’am. Of course.”

My shoulders slumped. “Maybe another weekend, then.”

Austin looked over his shoulder, and peered at the frost-covered window. “You drive yourself out here, Sweets?”

I nodded.

Austin scraped his thumb over the bottom of his lip. “You shouldn’t be driving in this. The roads are already covered and there’s a layer of ice underneath.”

He was doing that overprotective, older brother-ing thing, but he wasn't exactly wrong. The Ballentine House was fifteen minutes outside of the Falls Creek town limits. To get to my apartment, it was another ten. In this weather, it would probably take me an hour, white-knuckling it all the way.

He handed me the envelope. "Take mine."

I looked up at him. "What?"

"Take mine. I can drive back. My truck'll be just fine."

Henry cringed and stroked his beard. "I don't know about that, Son. It's a mess out there. Wouldn't want you getting stuck or worse."

I shook my head and pushed the envelope back into his hand. "I can't take it from you. You actually paid for yours. Or Beth did." I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. I just won mine in Musical Chairs. It's not a big deal."

"Well—"

We all looked at Sepideh.

She looked suspiciously conspiratorial as her eyes cut to Henry. "The cabin is big enough for two."

Austin's hand warmed my back. "You okay with that, Sugar?"

"There's a pull-out couch," Henry supplied.

Sepideh cut her eyes to him, giving a terse shake of her head and a click of her tongue.

I looked up at Austin. "Are *you* okay with it? I can always call someone to come get me."

"I want you to be safe." The corner of his mouth tugged upward. "So yeah. I'm more than okay with it, Sweets."

Sepideh clapped her hands together. "Excellent. You two help yourselves to tea and snacks in the library. Henry, dear—" she peered around Austin "—would you mind taking their bags to the cabin?"

Austin lifted his duffle. "I got it. I packed light."

“I didn’t,” I said sheepishly.

Henry chuckled. “That’s alright, sweetheart. Best to be prepared. I’ll unload your things and take them over to the cabin.”

“I’d hate for you to do that in the weather. I can wait until morning. I’ll just run out and get my toothbrush.”

Henry shook his head with a fatherly glint in his eye. “Absolutely not. I don’t want you catching a cold on my watch.” He shared a look with Austin, as if passing off the responsibility of keeping me well. Nodding toward the library, he said, “Get you a bite to eat. I’ll leave your keys in the cabin.”

I relented. “Yes, sir.”

Sepideh looked at him with a soft, dreamy look in her eyes. “Thank you, Henry.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded, as if the simple bow of his head communicated far more than what their words did. Henry took my keys and disappeared. I heard the rumble of some kind of all-terrain vehicle as he pulled away from the house.

“You sure you’re alright with this?” Austin asked softly as he plucked a paper cup from a stack and filled it to the brim with piping hot water.

I did the same with mine, opting for a green tea bag, while he went with chai. “Yeah. I’ll be fine on the couch.”

Austin chuckled as he steeped his tea. “You’re not sleeping on the couch, Sweets.”

I propped my hand on my hip. “We’ll see about that. It’s your cabin. You should get the bed.”

His gaze was heated as he brought the paper cup to his mouth and sipped. Austin let out a little hiss when it was hotter than expected.

I couldn’t help the devious little thought that popped up in my brain. “I thought firefighters could handle things that are hot.”

Austin's ocean eyes turned stormy. "Sugar, you have no idea."

AUSTIN

“**W**atch your step,” I said as I guided Caroline down the plowed path that was quickly being covered in drifts of snow again. I kept one hand on her elbow and the other wrapped around her hand. “It’s slippery.”

Her little form was trembling in the chill as we made the short trek from the main house to the cabin.

The lights inside the tiny guest house glowed like a beacon in the night. By the time we finished our snacks, it was just after three in the afternoon, but the sky was already a dark steel gray.

Ms. Sepideh had seen to it that we filled ourselves with tea and pastries and promised a hot breakfast in the morning.

Since all of Falls Creek had entered apocalypse-preparation-mode at the single threat of a few inches of snow, restaurants were closed and grocery stores were wiped out. When Henry returned to the house after moving Caroline’s things, he let us know that there was a box of provisions so that we could make dinner if we didn’t feel like trudging through the snow to eat in the main house with the rest of the guests.

Part of me felt guilty for indulging in a weekend away from responsibilities, especially since the fire department would be swamped with stranded and disabled vehicles, medical emergencies, and space heater fires. Then again, I had just finished a twenty-four-hour shift that turned into a thirty-hour shift.

I was exhausted.

Maybe it was the cold air energizing me or holding Caroline as her boots squished through the snow, but I was getting a second wind.

I fucking missed the beach.

Sure, Beaufort got a little snow some years, and it got cold as fuck during the winters. A flurry here or there didn't bother me, and it usually melted off when the sun came out. This amount of devil dust was asinine.

Ever since the day I had been sitting at Jokers and got the call from Beth, I had been moving full steam ahead. I was actually looking forward to a weekend of solace to catch my breath.

But a weekend with Caroline? I didn't want to like it as much as I did.

I liked her. *A lot.* And heaven help me, I knew I shouldn't.

But who was I to argue with fate and a snowstorm?

I was just watching out for her, I told myself. It would have been repugnantly irresponsible to have her drive in the storm. It had nothing to do with the fact that I was about to get a weekend of her all to myself.

"Sweets, I don't know if a skirt is proper winter weather attire," I said as I stepped onto the cabin's shallow porch landing and stomped the snow off my boots.

"I have leggings on, too," she said. "They're fleece-lined. And I came straight from school."

I gave her a stern look as I opened the front door to the cabin. Cedar and cinnamon surrounded us as we took it in.

The interior was warm and inviting. A gray stone fireplace was bracketed with leather armchairs and a couch. Off to the side was a generous kitchenette. There was a narrow hallway just off the kitchen that had two more doors—the bedroom and bathroom, I assumed.

An L-shaped island jutted out from the wall beside the kitchenette, cordoning it off from the rest of the cabin's living space.

A wicker basket sat on the counter. A bag of dried pasta, jarred red sauce, a loaf of bread, and wine were neatly arranged. Beside it was a glass-domed pedestal of sweets. A wide-rimmed bowl, packed full of fruit, was arranged on the squat coffee table in the living room. I spotted a coffee maker with all the fixings in the corner, and sent up a prayer of thanks.

Caroline's mountain of luggage and my single duffel had been placed on the plush rug by the couch.

"We should probably get a fire started," I said, nodding toward the fireplace. There was a small cord of split wood next to a tidy box of kindling. Before we left the main house, Henry told me where I could find extra wood, just in case.

Caroline arched a judgmental eyebrow, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. "Mr. Fire Safety is starting a fire?"

I crooked a finger beneath her chin and tipped it up. "The keyword there is *safety*, Sugar."

She bit her lip, and my cock thickened.

I tipped my head toward the bedroom. "Go get comfortable. Looks like we're gonna be snowed in for a bit. Maybe in the morning we can get out and explore a little."

"I'm not taking the bedroom from you," she argued before pointing to the couch. "I'll fit on there just fine. You're..."

"I'm what?"

Caroline amused me. She had these brief moments where the feisty girl hiding inside got the better of her well-mannered nature. She was like a pile of smoldering coals, and I was a kid with a stick, poking around to see how much I could make her flare.

"You're bigger than the entire couch," she said.

"It pulls out into a bed."

She huffed. “Take the bedroom, Austin.”

Huh. I liked that. She didn’t say my name often, but damn... I loved hearing it come off her lips in that breathless sort of way.

I trapped her chin between my thumb and index finger. “No.”

Her lips parted, but no argument came. It was almost as if...

No. She didn’t think of me like that.

I took a step back, giving myself room to breathe before I did something rash. “Go on.”

Caroline stared at me for a moment. Maybe she felt it—that pulsing energy radiating between us. It was a living, breathing magic that had us connected at soul-level.

Without a word, she turned and disappeared down the hallway.

WHEN CAROLINE RETURNED, I had the fireplace roaring.

“That feels good,” she said, rubbing her hands together as she came up behind me while I knelt in front of the hearth, adjusting the logs with the iron poker to make sure they were perched just right.

Every possible dirty response to “that feels good” floated through my head.

“Is it hard to get the wood set up like that?” she asked.

I curled my lips between my teeth to keep from laughing. “Not too hard.”

“Oh. Maybe you could show me how to—you know—”

I risked a glance over my shoulder. “How to do what?”

“How to put the wood in there. You know, so I can do it myself.”

I couldn't help it. I laughed as I rose to my feet and wiped my hands on the front of my jeans.

Caroline, in her black leggings, oversized sweatshirt, and thick hiking socks, looked positively peeved. "What?"

I scrubbed my hand down my face, trying to get rid of the smile. "Nothing, Sugar. You just got me thinking about..." My eyes lowered to her mouth as I towered over her, nearly chest-to-chest. "Wood."

Her cheeks turned fire engine red.

We kept to our respective corners of the living room for most of the afternoon. Caroline curled up in front of the fire in an armchair. She had a sketch book in her lap and pencils strewn across the coffee table. Every so often, I would look up from my book—a recommendation from my old chief about leadership—to study her.

"Boring read?" she asked just as I was about to turn the page that I'd been staring at for the better part of ten minutes without actually reading it.

"What?"

Caroline smiled as she shaded in a portion of her drawing. "You should have that page memorized given how long you've been looking at it." She laughed under her breath as she reached for a little tool that seemed to smudge everything together. "Maybe try something different."

I wasn't about to admit that I had been distracted by the way she bit her tongue when she was concentrating. *So fucking adorable.*

"It's not bad," I said, dogearing the page. "Do you read?"

"When I have time," she said casually. "Which isn't often between work and the commissions I take for paintings."

"What do you read?"

Her cheeks turned pink. "Have you ever heard of Whitney West?"

I shook my head.

She shrugged. “Sometimes I listen to her audiobooks when I’m painting.”

I made a mental note to look it up when she wasn’t around.

The rambling chapter on team building I was trying to drag myself through wasn’t all that interesting anymore. Not when Caroline was chatty.

I tossed my book on the coffee table and sent her pencils rolling to the rug below. “Shit—”

I pushed out of the chair at the same time she jumped out of hers. But instead of going for the pencils, Caroline reached for a spiral bound notebook that had gotten pushed over the edge.

But I was faster.

“I’ve got it.” There was a sketch on the first page, and I was itching to see more. “Does this have more drawings?” I asked as I turned to the second page. Caroline was crazy talented.

Panic painted her face as my eyes locked on the next page. “Please don’t—”

But I had already seen the list.

“What’s this?”

“Nothing,” Caroline said as she tried to snatch it out of my hand.

I held it out of reach. “It didn’t look like nothing, Sweets.”

She glared at me—a petulant look that had me grinning. It was hard for her to look menacing when she was so fucking cute. It was like standing in front of an annoyed puppy.

“Austin, just give it back,” she pleaded.

Damn. I liked hearing her say my name.

“I’m curious,” I said as I scanned the page.

Caroline huffed. “Curious about what?”

“You.”

She put her hand out like I was a toddler who had just snuck a cookie from the cookie jar.

“Number one: socialize with people my age,” I began.

“*Austin...*” It was more of a growl this time, so I kept going.

“Number two: Don’t hate my body.” I looked her up and down. She had absolutely nothing to worry about there. All afternoon I had been mentally willing away erections.

“Please!” she begged. “Just give it back!”

Number three through seven were fairly standard as far as bucket lists went, but it was the last few resolutions that caught my attention.

8. Go on a date.

9. Wear lingerie.

10. Have my first kiss.

I looked up at her as I closed the journal and handed it back. Sure, reading it was an asshole move, but I learned more about Caroline Tyree in that one list than I had in all of the previous moments we shared.

I also had more questions.

“You’ve never been kissed, Sugar?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and huffed. “No. Can I go die of embarrassment now or do you have some other humiliating inquisition you’d like me to suffer through first?”

Instead of picking at her, I stepped forward, slid my hand to rest on her waif-life waist, and pecked her cheek. “Now you have.”

Caroline turned beet red. Her momentary shock was palpable before morphing into annoyance. “Gee, thanks,” she deadpanned.

I offered a kind smile as I sat back down on the couch and patted the spot beside me. “It’s not that big of a deal, Sweets.”

“Maybe for you,” she sniped.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Caroline waved her hand in my general direction. “You’re... I mean ... look at you!”

This woman...

I raised my eyebrows in amusement. “Sorry, you’re gonna have to spell it out for me.”

She popped her hip out and rested her hand on it. “You could probably walk in a room and make underwear spontaneously combust.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep my expression neutral.

It didn’t work.

Caroline huffed. “You’re, you know ... old.”

I raised my eyebrows but said nothing.

“Older,” she added.

I figured the longer I kept my mouth shut, the more she’d talk. I liked seeing her flustered.

“*Experienced,*” she tacked on.

Now, she was spiraling.

“Is that a bucket list or something?” I asked.

Caroline tipped her head back, blond coils spilling down her back as she stood in front of me and stared at the wood-paneled ceiling. “Those are my New Year’s resolutions.”

It all clicked.

“Ah—the resolutions you wouldn’t talk about because you were afraid they wouldn’t come true?”

“No,” she clipped, scooping up her drawing pencils and putting them back where they belonged. “The resolutions I was politely keeping to myself because they’re humiliating.”

“Hey—” I reached out, my hand circling her wrist to stop her from running off on me. “I’m sorry.”

The corner of her mouth trembled, so I gave her wrist a little tug until, finally, she sat down beside me.

Her sapphire eyes were glassy, but undeniably alluring. I reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I thought I knew who you were, and now I’m realizing that I have no idea.”

“You and the rest of this town,” she said under her breath.

“Can I ask you about one of them?”

She shrugged. “Might as well. You’ve already seen them all.”

“Why do you hate your body?”

Caroline gave me a look like I was being intentionally daft. “You... You don’t know?”

I chuckled. “I guess not.”

“The whole town knows.” She sighed and turned, sitting sideways on the couch to face me. “I have lupus.”

I tried to keep my tone even. “Oh.”

“I was the kid who was always sick. I don’t fit the typical profile of a lupus diagnosis, so it took forever for doctors to look into it. By the time I made it into my teens, both of my kidneys were failing and I needed a transplant. The doctors finally took my case seriously when I was going through dialysis and sitting on a kidney transplant wait list.”

So, that explained all the medication that I had seen in her apartment and the pill organizer she had slipped out of her bag earlier.

“It took the Ladies Auxiliary canvassing all of Falls Creek until a stranger got tested and donated a kidney to me.”

Holy shit. “Wow. Who was it?”

She just shook her head. “I don’t know. I guess it’s not that unusual. Most live donors and recipients stay anonymous because they don’t want the other person coming at them if there’s a problem years down the road or looking for some kind of financial compensation. It’s just weird that they know who I am, but I don’t know who they are. All I know is that whoever it was lived in Falls Creek at the time.” She stared at

the blanket covering us. “I wish I knew,” she said softly. “Sometimes I see people in the grocery store or at the Copper Mule and wonder if I’m looking at the person who gave me a piece of them.”

“I can’t even imagine going through that now, much less as a kid.” I reached across the back of the couch to put my hand on her shoulder. “How are you now?”

“I live with it.” She gave a little shrug. “I take a lot of pills and I have a lot of doctor appointments. I get exhausted easily. And cold. I’m always cold. I have to be really careful about germs, which isn’t easy given that I teach in an elementary school.”

I reached down into a wire basket tucked beside the couch and pulled out a knitted blanket, unfurling it and draping it over the two of us. I used the blanket distraction to sit a little closer to her and wrap my arm around her shoulders.

She rested her head on my arm and closed her eyes. “Sometimes I have flares and I feel like I want to die.” Her lithe fingers trembled as she trailed the tips along the floral design on the cover of the journal. “So yeah, I think I’ve earned the right to hate my body. It’s literally tried to kill me. I get these weird rashes. My hands shake. My legs swell. I have a scar on my abdomen from the transplant. Some of the medication makes me gain weight no matter what I do to try to lose it. My body made me miss out on over half of my life. I basically grew up in doctor offices and hospitals. I had to be homeschooled after fourth grade because I was never well enough to attend normal school. I did college online because I wasn’t that far removed from the transplant, and my parents were so worried I would go into rejection or catch something that my immune system couldn’t handle. I’m so far behind where everyone my age is and I don’t know how to catch up.”

My heart shattered for her.

“I don’t want your sympathy. I just figured you already knew. Everyone in town knows. I’m surprised Beth or Layla didn’t tell you.”

“I’m glad you’re the one who told me.”

She sniffed, dabbing at the glistening diamonds in the corners of her eyes.

“Are you okay now?” I asked.

“As okay as I can be.”

I scooted closer and tucked the top of her head under my chin. “What can I do to make you feel safe?”

CAROLINE

“**W**hat can I do to make you feel safe?”

I looked up at Austin, surprised at what had just come out of his mouth.

“Wha—what?”

“I get that you just shared a lot of stuff that you probably weren’t planning to share today.” The lines around his eyes crinkled as he looked around the little cabin. “I just want you to feel safe. If you want some space, I can start on dinner and give you some breathing room.”

Austin gently combed his fingers through my hair. *Had a single touch ever felt so good?*

He tilted his head to the side. There was a thin layer of golden stubble on his cheeks. His lips looked strong and soft. There was kindness in his eyes, but no pity.

“Or if there’s something on your mind that you want to talk about, I’m right here.”

I looked down at the journal in my hands. I didn’t really want him to move. I was sitting straight as a pencil, barely breathing with him so close.

I was severely lacking in the boy-experience department, but this felt ... big.

His arm was thick and muscular around my shoulders. When he rested his chin on top of my head, I caught a whiff of

warm cologne. The blanket spread over our legs pooled our collective warmth.

“Have you ever been around those people that say, ‘*I’m not like other girls?*’”

He chuckled, his chest rumbling beneath me. “Sure. You know, back in my high school days. Not so much in the fire department.”

I cracked a small smile. “All I ever wanted was to be like other girls. To have the same experiences that they did. But now I’m twenty-two and I missed out on half of my life. I never got to have my first kiss in middle school or go on dates when I got my driver’s license. I never went to prom or had a boyfriend.” I lifted the journal before setting it on the coffee table. “You’ve seen my list.”

I was getting more and more frustrated with myself the longer I kept talking, and all I wished for was for Austin to tell me to shut up.

But he didn’t. Instead, he flexed his muscles, giving me a little more comfort.

I stared at the crackling fire, watching as embers sizzled and popped. “I feel like everyone else got a crash course in adulthood and I’m trying to play catch-up with CliffsNotes.”

“Wanna know a secret, Sugar?” he said, craning his neck down. His mouth brushed against my ear. “We’re all just making it up as we go. No one really knows what they’re doing.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But you’re more capable than you think you are.”

“So, what happens when I make a dating profile and find some nice, unassuming guy to go out to dinner with. Then at the end of the date, he tries to kiss me. What then?”

Austin laughed. “You kiss him back if you want to and tell him you’re not interested if you don’t.”

I turned and looked up at him. “And how many times has a date shot *you* down? There are only so many eligible men in this town! I can’t risk messing up and losing any potential candidates!”

He scrubbed his palm down the side of his cheek. “Uh, none that I can think of.”

“Great,” I muttered.

His chest shook as he chuckled under his breath.

“What’s so funny?” I snapped. “I’m sure you think it’s amusing that I’m still a virgin—kissing and otherwise—while you’re out there loving ‘em and leaving ‘em. You seem like the kind of guy who would break up with a girl and she’d say, ‘thank you,’ and walk away with a smile on her face. You’d probably get raving letters of reference from your exes if you asked.”

“I am friends with most of my exes, actually,” he said casually.

I threw my hands into the air. “See? You’re no help! Guys don’t want a girl who has no idea what she’s doing. It’s too much effort.”

Austin laughed.

I narrowed my eyes on him. “Will you stop laughing at me?”

He held up a hand in surrender, turning it down to a snicker. “I’m sorry, Sugar.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Caroline,” he said, switching to that stern, commanding voice he had used when he rolled up to my apartment to put out a measly little grease fire. “There are plenty of men who would jump at the chance to be with you. Trust me.”

“You’re just saying that. It’s weird that I’m in my twenties and I’ve never gone on a date or done ... anything else.”

Austin sputtered for a moment before regaining his composure. “First off, there’s plenty of people your age and

older who are virgins. You're only twenty-two. Just because you feel you're behind, doesn't mean you are. People grow and experience life at their own pace. It's not a race."

Said like someone who had never once felt out of place.

"Listen to me, Sweets." He shifted, putting a little space between us so we could turn and face each other. "Getting more experience in dating or exploring your sexuality is just like getting your driver's license. Sure, it's momentous. It's a turning point, and it's pretty cool the first time, but then you realize that it's just a thing that people do a lot, and you're gonna be doing it a lot more." He wrapped his hand around mine and gave it a squeeze. "There's no point system involved. There's no plus or minus on a scorecard for how far you've gone. How many people you have or haven't been with doesn't make you a good person or a bad person. It just makes you a person."

I sighed. He was right. But just because he gave sage wisdom in a way that also gave me heart palpitations, didn't mean I had to like it.

Austin's state-sized hand cradled the back of my head as he listlessly played with my hair. "I'm gonna go out on a limb and guess that you only hate your body because you've never experienced how good you can feel in it. You've only experienced what it feels like for your body to fail you."

The fireworks between my legs weren't failing me in the least right now.

I chewed on my thumbnail for a moment. "Can I ask you a kind of ... personal question?"

"Go for it, Sugar." He cracked a smile. "What happens at the cabin stays at the cabin."

I gathered my courage and let out a deep breath. "What was your first time like?"

If Austin was fazed, he did a darn good job of not showing it. He was cool, calm, and collected like always. "I was seventeen and it was prom night." Under his breath, he muttered, "A whole adult ago."

It was a stark reminder that when he was in his senior year of high school, I was four.

“Cliché, Hale.” I clicked my tongue, teasing him. “I did not expect that from you.”

He chuckled. “It gets better—er—more interesting. It was actually pretty embarrassing.”

I brazenly looked him up and down. “I highly doubt that.”

Austin leaned in. “Are you saying that you find me attractive?”

Heat flashed across my cheeks.

“It’s alright, Sweets.” He shrugged like it was no big deal. “I think you’re pretty damn attractive yourself.”

He winked at me, and I knew then and there that I was going to simultaneously die of happiness and sheer mortification.

“Anyway,” he said, sparing me the need to respond. “Back in high school, let’s just say I hadn’t filled out yet. I was six-foot-five and weighed about a third of what I do now. My nickname was ‘beanstalk.’”

That was quite the picture.

“Bridget—the girl I took to prom—went with me because her best friend didn’t ask her. He had just broken up with his girlfriend, and she was bummed that he never asked her. When the dance ended, we skipped the after party and went back to her house. Her parents weren’t there, so we ended up putting a movie on and fooling around.”

“Was it ... I dunno ... awkward?”

He smiled. “Yeah. It was my first time, but it wasn’t hers. It was over almost as soon as it started.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked a little sheepish as he rubbed the back of his neck. Even through his long-sleeved shirt, I could see the boulders of muscle flexing on his bicep. “I came within about twenty seconds of us getting our clothes off.” Quickly, he

interjected, “Just to be clear, I have a lot more experience under my belt now. I can keep things under control.”

I laughed.

His fingers traced little circles on my back. “Who’s laughing at who now?”

Giggling, I cupped my hand over my mouth. “I’m sorry.” I took a deep breath to regain a shred of composure, and said, “Sorry. Continue with your story. Did you two end up dating or anything?”

He shook his head. “Nah. I liked her a lot, but she didn’t really share those feelings. I held out for a while, hoping she’d come around, but it wasn’t meant to be. She’s with her best friend now, so I guess it all worked out in the end. He’s a cop back in my hometown. We used to run into each other all the time. When we were in high school, he and I were pretty good friends until I took her to prom. Then things got tense. We’ve, uh ... mended fences over the years, I guess.”

“You really weren’t kidding when you said you’re friends with all your exes.”

“Nope.” Smirking, he leaned back and crossed his arms. “What can I say? I’m a nice guy.”

I COULD ASK HIM, I thought to myself as I ran a serrated knife through the crusty loaf of French bread that Ms. Sepideh had thoughtfully sent over with dinner provisions.

If he can still be friends with the girl he lost his virginity to, I can ask him for a measly little kiss.

In the grand scheme of things, it’s really not that big.

Austin stopped humming “Sweet Caroline” and grabbed the tiny strainer, pouring the boiling pasta and water into it. “You alright over there, Sweets?”

I looked up from the bread. “Huh?”

After our heart-to-heart on the couch, we decided that dinner was a foregone conclusion to the most awkward conversation of my life. Besides, if I had food in my mouth, I couldn't keep blabbing.

"You're mauling that bread," Austin said, cool as a cucumber as he put the strained pasta back into the pot and set it on the cool side of the miniature stove. He loomed behind me and stared at the side of the loaf that I was strangling. His hand, thick and wide, covered mine as he gently removed it from the bread. Sparks skittered up my arm from the touch. "I've got it, Sugar."

"I can make garlic bread," I muttered. "I'm not completely inept at everything."

"Never said you were inept," he clipped before giving me a grave raised eyebrow. "But you are guilty of assaulting an innocent loaf of bread."

I wiped the crumbs from my hands. "Sorry."

The curtains were pulled back, giving us a picturesque view of the hills covered in a white blanket of snow as the gray skies turned black. I stared out at the sea of white. Maybe I'd just pull out my paints and dive into a project. Painting always got me out of my head.

"You're thinking awfully loud over there," Austin said as he slathered butter on thick slices of bread.

"Sorry."

Austin let out a quiet laugh. *Probably of annoyance.* "Stop apologizing, Caroline."

"Sorry," I said again. "I just—"

He shot me a glare. "If you say sorry one more time..."

I really wanted him to finish that sentence.

"Just tell me what's on your mind. You'll feel better if you get it out of your system."

"It's nothing. I don't want to bother you."

“You won’t bother me.” He popped the top on a teeny jar of minced garlic and started spooning it over the buttered bread. “I enjoy talking to you.”

I debated the request for a few minutes while he slid the garlic bread into the toaster oven, keeping a watchful eye on it.

Austin Hale was big. Enormous even. He was the size of a mountain, but moved with the precision, dexterity, and silence of a ninja. It was as if he had years of practice trying to make himself squeeze into a small world. I watched as he wiped his hands with a tea towel, then slung it over his shoulder.

Holy Warhol, that was sexy.

Austin popped the top on a jar of red sauce and added it to the pasta. “Food’s almost ready—”

“Will you kiss me?” I blurted out.

The jar fell out of his hand and shattered on the countertop. Austin’s eyes went wide. “What?”

I tried to find the courage to ask again, but it was gone. And, like a fucking child, I ran.

KNUCKLES KNOCKED on the closed bedroom door. “Caroline?”

My stomach roiled again, and I contemplated hopping in the bathtub and snuggling up to the toaster.

Humiliating. That was humiliating. Why did I fucking do that?

Austin knocked again. “Sugar, I’m gonna come in unless you tell me no.”

I lay on top of the bed with my eyes closed. Maybe he’d just think I was asleep and leave me alone.

The door creaked open, and I felt his presence. The warm aroma of basil and garlic wafted in as the mattress sank. “You should eat something.”

Reluctantly, I peeled an eye open and studied him. He was holding a deep bowled plate piled high with spaghetti and two slices of bread.

I sighed and closed my eyes. “I would like to die of abject humiliation in peace, thank you very much. It’ll take me before starvation does.”

He chuckled. Porcelain scraped against wood as he slid the dish onto the bedside table. “No one’s dying of abject humiliation today. You just caught me off guard is all. I, uh, I wasn’t expecting you to say what you said.”

“Well, that’s very nice.” I rolled over and shoved my head into a pillow. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to smother myself into a very long nap.”

“Fine then, take your nap. Just remember, CPR isn’t as nice and neat as it looks on TV, and I will resuscitate you.”

“Fine,” I grumbled as I sat up.

Austin crossed his arms over his chest, looking rather pleased with himself. “Eat,” he said, nodding toward the plate.

I glowered. “You’re gonna make me talk about this, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.” Satisfied when I grabbed a piece of bread and took a bite, he spoke up again. “Just to be clear—yeah, I want to kiss you.”

I paused with the garlic bread hanging halfway between my mouth and the plate. “Just like that?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. Just like that.”

“Why do I feel like there’s a catch?”

“No catch,” he said, wrapping his hand around my ankle and running his thumb over my ankle bone. Nerves whooshed inside me like a rollercoaster.

I raised an eyebrow. “What happens at the cabin stays at the cabin?”

He raised three fingers in a scout’s salute. “On my honor, Miss Tyree.”

“And things won’t be weird when we leave? We can stay ... friends?”

Something akin to frustration crossed his face. “I promise.”

I chewed on my lip. “And you ... you won’t tell anyone. Right?”

“Sugar, hear me when I say this—I’m honored that you trust me like this, but it’s not something I’m gonna brag about. People aren’t prizes. Kisses and virginity and any other vulnerable milestones—they shouldn’t be treated as trophies to be won.”

The bread sat heavy in my stomach. “Thank you,” I whispered.

He tapped his finger on the rim of the deep plate. “Eat up.”

CAROLINE

I tiptoed down the hallway, an empty bowl in my hand. I could hear the sink running and dishes clattering. Austin hummed that song again as he rinsed and dried.

He must have changed into a pair of soft gray sweatpants after leaving the bedroom. His back was bare, lines of muscle flexing and relaxing as he moved with ease and confidence. I had never seen someone so calm and sure of themselves.

Maybe that skepticism resulted from growing up in hospital rooms. Even if my medical team looked calm, I could always see the worry and stress in their eyes.

But Austin was calm and steady like a gentle breeze.

“Wanna bring that over here, Sugar?” he said without turning around. “I’ll wash it before I drain the water.”

How did he...

He peered over his shoulder. “Teachers aren’t the only ones with eyes in the back of their heads.”

I blushed and walked the bowl over to the sink. “I could have cleaned up.”

Austin took the bowl from my hand. “No, ma’am.”

Without the dish acting like a life preserver, I didn’t know what to do with my hands. Before I knew it, Austin had the last of the dishes washed, the sink drained, and wiped down.

“Wow,” I said, nodding toward his handiwork. “You’re a natural.”

He folded the tea towel and draped it over the oven handle. “When I was a rookie, I got put on dish duty often. I got pretty good at it.”

“You guys have chores at the fire station?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I mean, we’re there for twenty-four hours at a time. If we’re not doing training sessions, classes, or working out, we’re doing gear checks, chores, or sleeping. It’s pretty much a second home when you spend so much time there. Everyone has to do their part and we take pride in it.”

I twisted my fingers nervously. I wished he would just go on and get this stupid kiss over with already. “Makes sense.”

His smile was half amused and half compassionate. Austin plucked the bottle of wine out of the basket. “Do you like wine?”

I shrugged. “Not really.” Then, deciding that I was going to revisit my first resolution and be a little more spontaneous, I said, “Actually, I’d like a glass if you don’t mind. Just a little one, though.”

Austin dipped his head politely as he found a corkscrew. “Yes, ma’am.”

I watched as he manhandled the bottle, twisting until the cork eased out of the neck.

He tilted his head toward the couches. “I’ll bring the wine over. Go get comfortable.”

Comfortable was the last thing I was. It was like reliving the moment before taking the Praxis. But I sat anyway, hugging a throw pillow for safety.

Austin appeared, carrying two crystal glasses by the stems. One was filled a little higher than the other. He gave me the smaller pour, setting his on the coffee table before moving the rest of the blankets and throw pillows out of the way. When he sat down, he was so close that our hips were touching.

Wine? Yes, please.

I took a drink and didn’t completely hate the way it tasted. A few mildly unpleasant sips would make this situation

slightly more survivable.

Austin swirled his wine around the glass, watched it for a moment, then smelled it and took a sip. “Good bottle,” he noted before setting the glass aside.

I hummed noncommittally into my glass before taking another reluctant sip. Nerves bubbled up in my stomach. *Was he just going to go for it? Were we going to talk about it first? Was it just going to be a peck? Was I supposed to know what to do with my tongue? French kissing seemed kind of gross. Where was I supposed to put my hands?*

The second I set my glass aside, he reached over. I felt his hand touch my waist first. His eyelids were heavy as he studied my mouth. The soft brush of fabric on fabric rustled between us as he shifted on the couch to face me. Austin’s hand caressed my thigh before drawing it up to drape across his legs. We were nearly chest to chest, and I was pretty sure he could feel my heart ramming against my ribcage.

I panicked. “This is... We’re really close.”

He looked down, his forehead resting on mine as he let out a whispered laugh. “Kissing is kind of intimate, Sugar. You’re supposed to be close.”

“Yeah, well, I thought you were just gonna ... you know. Lean in or something.”

His voice never wavered, and the thumb that had moved up to stroke my waist never stilled. “Does being touched make you uncomfortable?”

I paused, then shook my head. “No.”

His hands left my body. Slowly, he took my clasped hands out of my lap and unfurled my fingers. He guided my wrists until my palms were resting square on his chest.

His very bare, very sculpted chest.

“Is ... is this where I’m supposed to touch you?”

A slow grin worked its way up his mouth. “Sweets, you can touch me anywhere you want.”

I couldn't help myself. I giggled when he moved my hand down to his abs.

"Sugar, you're not supposed to laugh!" he said with an explosive chuckle, leaning away from me.

"I'm sorry!" I snickered. "This would be so much easier if you'd just do it when I'm not expecting it or—I don't know—give me a quick little peck and we can be done with it!"

"That's not kissing, Sugar. That's what your weird family members do when they have no sense of boundaries." He tucked my hair behind my ear and cupped my cheek and stared deep into my eyes, his voice full of conviction. "Kissing is a full-contact sport." His voice softened. "And you have to work as a team."

Sensing my hesitancy, and maybe a little of my curiosity, he pivoted and grabbed the TV remote. "How 'bout this." He spread his legs wide and patted the triangle of couch between them. "Sit here."

I raised my eyebrows. "Excuse me?" *Was he asking me to sit on his lap?*

"Sit," he commanded, a little more stern the second time.

Austin's dominating tone made my heart skip.

When I didn't move fast enough, he scooped me up and plopped me onto the swatch of couch in front of him, and pushed the TV remote into my hand. "Find something for us to watch."

"What do you wan—"

"Just pick something you like."

My posture was ramrod straight as I scrolled through the channels. I had stalled on a cooking competition being judged by Chef Luca DeRossi when I felt his touch on my shoulders.

"You're tense," he murmured as his thumbs started working the knots down the sides of my shoulder blades. His other fingers draped over my shoulders, warming my collar bone.

I clicked to another channel when his hands started working down the sides of my arms, squeezing the stress out of my biceps. I bit my lip to keep from moaning, because it felt *really fucking good*.

“I think you just need to get used to being touched in a way that feels good, first,” he said gently as he moved onto my hips. He slid his hands underneath the hem of sweatshirt and started working on my lower back. “Does that feel good, Sugar?”

I nodded as a relaxed haze took over. Everything felt all tingly and zen—like I was floating.

“Good,” he said, his deep bass doing something funny inside of me.

I clicked to another channel.

Cool air swirled around my neck as my thick clouds of curls were lifted. Slowly, Austin twisted my hair into a loop around his palm. His other hand went back to massaging my shoulder. Warm breath whispered against my skin before a soft kiss dotted the back of my neck.

I couldn't keep my eyes open.

His chest pressed against my back like the most luxurious weighted blanket in the world.

Austin held my hair in a firm grip, keeping my head still as he left feather-light kisses up and down the side of my neck. “How's that feel?” His quiet words vibrated against my skin. My muscles had fallen into a paralyzed state of relaxation, but my skin was electrified.

My answer came out in a breath. “Good.”

I gasped when he released my hair and gripped the back of my neck. Austin turned my head and left another warm kiss beneath my jaw. My fingers dug into the remote control. He sucked gently, lingering on the spot where my pulse was racing.

I bit my lip, but it wasn't good enough. A whimper escaped my mouth.

His thumb caressed my cheek, his palm spanning the entire side of my head. Slowly, he pulled away from my jaw, turned my head, and kissed me.

I froze.

The kiss was soft and thoughtful. His nose bumped into mine as he tilted his head the other way, deepening the connection for a split second before slowly pulling away.

Austin rested his forehead on mine. I peered through my lashes and caught him licking his lips.

His voice was rough and restrained. “How was that?”

My breath came in quick beats. The cabin glowed in a haze of gold. I felt intoxicated and knew it had nothing to do with the wine. “I think I like kissing.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded, tipping my chin up. Our lips grazed again. His were so sure, so steady and strong. It stole my breath. “I think I want to do it again.”

Austin didn't have to be told twice. He swore under his breath before ripping the remote out of my hand and latching his lips onto mine.

Then, I was in the air.

Austin flipped me onto the couch. I landed on my back, squeaking as my head bounced on a throw pillow. His knee dug into the cushion crease beside my hip, while he braced his foot on the ground. His chest pressed against mine, giving me no other option than to wrap my arms around his neck.

Pressure pulled at my lower lip as Austin sucked it between his teeth and nibbled. I gasped as sparks exploded across my skin. I felt like the fuse on a firecracker, fizzling before the explosion.

Austin tugged on my lip with his teeth once more before releasing it. “You like that, Sugar?” he asked as he left my mouth and started kissing down my throat.

“Uh-huh,” I whimpered.

“You are so fuckin’ sexy,” he growled into the crook of my neck as he nipped at my skin. He hooked his hand behind my knee and drew it up, hitching it around his hip. “All doe-eyed and innocent. You make me want to ruin you. The way you’ve been dancing around me, like you don’t know exactly what being around you does to me, makes me want you that much more.”

I clapped my hands over my mouth to stifle the moan that escaped when he rolled his hips over mine. His sweatpants and my tights were no match for the thick weight between his legs.

Hands shackled my wrists and peeled them away from my mouth. There was no way on Bob Ross’s happy little earth that I could have escaped.

And I didn’t want to.

“Don’t you dare keep quiet, Caroline,” Austin growled as he ground his erection against the apex of my thighs again. “I want to hear you. I want to know what makes you feel good.” He kissed me again, teasing the seal of my lips with his tongue. “I want to know what makes you desperate. What makes you feel like you’ll die if you don’t have it.”

I took a chance and wrapped my other leg around him, loving the pressure he kept there.

“Atta girl,” he soothed as he rolled his hips with slow intention. He released my wrists and guided my hands down his ribs. “How do you feel about your body now?”

“I don’t hate it as much as I used to,” I choked out before his lips returned to mine.

He groaned when I dug my fingers into his skin, and I panicked.

I yanked my arms back reflexively and squeaked, “I’m sorry!”

Austin’s blue eyes were shades of stormy twilight. His gaze was sharp and unforgiving, and his words were demanding. “Touch me, Caroline.”

“I thought I hurt you.”

He grinned. “Trust me, Sugar. You can’t hurt me.” He left a path of sloppy kisses down my throat.

Hesitantly, I traced my fingers down his chest, over rippling mountains and valleys of hard-earned muscle. The swooping V-shape that disappeared into his sweatpants was enamoring.

If I was being honest, I didn’t think those muscles actually existed. *But holy Thomas Kinkade. I was so glad they did.*

“There you go. Try again. Just relax and explore.” He hooked his finger in the neck of my sweatshirt, pulling it down as he swirled his tongue around the dip in my collarbone, leaving me breathless. “Find what you like.”

“I like that.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded. “Do it again?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I tipped my head back as he nuzzled into my throat, nipping at the sensitive skin, then soothing the sting away with his tongue. Hands spanned my stomach as he slid them beneath my sweatshirt. I arched my back as goosebumps raced up and down my spine.

“Austin—” I was panting and didn’t quite know what I was asking for. All I knew was that his name was the first thing on the tip of my tongue.

“Tell me what you want, Sugar.” He buried his nose into the crook of my neck.

All that escaped was a desperate whimper as I tightened my legs around him, addicted to the feel of him teasing me with his erection.

He tugged on my sweatshirt. “Do you have something on under this?”

I nodded.

“Arms up.”

I obeyed.

He ripped it over my head and tossed it onto the floor before taking in my thin little sports bra. “That’s better,” he said as his hands worked me over, touching my waist and stomach. The feel of his skin pressed against mine was heaven.

Austin readjusted his position, his chest scraping against mine.

I couldn’t help the way I whined when the motion teased my nipples. I pressed into him, desperate for more, but too chicken to ask for it. I ran my nails down his abdomen, aroused by the sandy hair that stretched across his pectorals, and trailed them down from his navel to the waist of his sweats.

His hand cradled my hip while we made out, before slowly sliding around to my butt. He squeezed, and I gasped.

“Like that?”

I nodded.

Austin did it again. My body moved without my brain telling it to. I pushed my hips into his and arched my back, pressing my breasts into his chest.

“See?” he murmured against the corner of my mouth. “Your body knows what to do.” His hand skated up my exposed ribs and grazed the side of my breast. “Your body knows how to feel good. You just have to let it.”

He cupped my breast over the thin spandex bra and rolled his thumb over my pointed nipple. I nearly rocketed off the couch, pressing my mouth into the corner of his neck and shoulder as I moaned.

“Remember when—when you—said you wanted to know what ... made me feel like I...” *I couldn’t catch my breath.* “What made me feel like I would die if I didn’t have it?”

He pressed against the tight bud a little harder and rocked his thumb over it. “Yeah.”

“That,” I gasped. “Please.”

He teased my breast a little more, scratching his nails over the fabric. “You sure?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Please, Austin.”

Callouses scraped against soft skin as he slid his hand under the band of my bra and cupped my breast. I whimpered in delight. The feeling of need and desire was new, but not all too unfamiliar.

I occasionally got myself off, but it never felt like...

Like I would die if I didn't have him.

“Austin,” I begged. I didn't get the rest of the sentence out.

He pushed my sports bra up, exposing my breasts for a split second before his mouth was on my nipple.

Everything went white-hot. I swore colorfully as he stirred endless pools of pleasure from deep within me. His tongue swirled around the bud, teasing it relentlessly before switching to my other breast.

“Are you wet for me, Caroline?” His hands were on my breasts as he kissed his way back up my throat before finding my lips. I could do nothing but lay there, writhing as I experienced it.

Every touch was euphoric. I was desperate and sedated all at once.

He ground his erection into me, pressing hard. “I bet if I pulled your leggings down, I'd find soaked panties.” He cupped my breasts and pinched both nipples in tandem. The bite of pain was unexpected. I cried out as his mouth covered mine. He swallowed down the shock. I gasped as it melted down into simmering pleasure.

Austin was breathing heavily. If I had to guess, he was just as ready to explode as I was.

But he was slowing down. His touches were less harsh, less frantic. His lips lingered over mine as he caught his breath. “How was that for a first kiss?”

It couldn't be over. I needed ... just ... a little ... more.

“Austin,” I begged.

He teased my nipple again, sending heady waves of pleasure rippling through my body. It kept me on edge, but it wasn't enough to finish. “Right here, Sweets. I've got you.”

“Will you...” I couldn't do it. Then, his lips were on mine again. When he pulled away, I whispered, “Will you have sex with me? Please?”

To my surprise, he didn't deny his desire. “I want to,” he said. “But I won't push you into it. You're... You're young, Caroline. And you should be sure you're ready.”

“I'm a grown woman,” I countered with a slight air of annoyance. “And if I don't do it now, I think I'll chicken out.” I tucked my head into the crook of his shoulder and closed my eyes. “I'm safe with you, right? I'm... I'm not scared when I'm with you.”

AUSTIN

I *'m safe with you.*

I was barely holding it together, and then she went and said that.

I wanted her to feel safe. To feel like she could explore womanhood without judgment or risk.

But she was so fucking young. Just twenty-two...

I wanted to tell her to wait a little longer, but the darker part of me was winning out.

I wanted her more than I wanted to be the good guy.

“Please, Austin,” she whispered again.

“Are you on birth control?” I asked. If she wasn’t, I’d let her down easy. Condoms weren’t foolproof, and I didn’t want to derail her life from one night snowed in together.

She nodded. “Yeah. I have an IUD.”

Fuck. I didn’t want to be as ecstatic as I was.

“Ask me when the last time I got tested was.”

It wasn’t the sexiest question to ask, and I think Caroline knew that. She looked up at me with surprised eyes. “What?”

I cupped her cheek and gave her a soft kiss, hoping to ease the awkward conversation.

“Ask me when I got tested and what the results were,” I said. “You should always ask.”

Her hands never stopped roaming my back and chest. “Are you teaching me how to have sex?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I am.”

Excitement and anxiety warred across her pretty face. “And then?”

I studied her face as I ran my thumb across the soft pillow of her lower lip. “And then I’m going to fuck you, sweetheart.” I punctuated the promise with a little thrust against her covered pussy. “Now ask,” I demanded.

She gasped as I ground my erection between her legs. “W-When were you tested last?”

“Had a full physical last month when I got my job with the fire department here. I haven’t been with anyone since.” I nipped at her earlobe. “What else?”

“What—” she moaned again when I reached between us and cupped the apex of her thighs. “The results?”

“Negative across the board,” I said as I rolled my thumb across her pussy. “I can pull it up on my phone if you want.”

“Still use a condom?” she rasped.

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. “Good girl. I’ve got one.” I grabbed my wallet off the coffee table, pulled the foil packet out of the fold, and handed it to her. “Check the expiration date.”

Caroline looked like I had just handed her an atomic bomb and told her to defuse it with three seconds left on the timer. “Condoms expire?”

I nodded, and did my best to keep my voice calm. “Yes they do, Sugar. Look at the date.”

“It’s not expired,” she said.

“That’s because I’m careful and I respect the women that I’m with.” I took the condom packet from her and set it back on the coffee table. “Not every guy who wants to get in your pants will be that considerate. If he’s not willing to show you

test results on the spot and wrap it up, you put your clothes on and walk away.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, hiding those rosy nipples I couldn't wait to get my mouth on again. “Acting like my dad is not a turn-on.”

I grinned as I ripped her leggings down and threw them off. “Sugar, I'm not your dad, but I can sure as hell be your daddy.”

Caroline gasped as I hooked two fingers around the gusset of her panties and slid my knuckles through the entrance of her soaked pussy.

“That's my girl,” I groaned as I felt her wetness coating my fingers. “Fuck, Sugar—look at you.” I leaned over and pulled her tit into my mouth again while I teased her clit with little circles.

Her toes curled, and her breath hitched. I pulled my hand away from her pussy and licked my fingers.

“What?!” Caroline's eyes shot open. “I was so close!”

“I know,” I said as I stripped off my sweatpants. “I need you to trust me. I want you right on the edge. I want your tight little pussy so wet that it's crying for my cock.” I leaned forward and kissed up the graceful edge of her jaw before nipping her earlobe. “I want this to be good for you. I don't want to rush it. Sex isn't something that you should do just to get it over with.”

“Should we go to the bedroom?”

I shook my head. “Right here.”

“Here?” she squeaked. “On the couch?”

I eased off her, pulling her panties down. “I'm not going to lay you down on a bed and ram myself into you. You're in control here.” I slid a single finger into her tightness and felt her clench around me. *Goddamn...*

I took a deep breath to temper my baser instincts.

Caroline whimpered when I curled my finger up and stroked her walls, keeping my movements slow and intentional.

“You like that, Sugar?”

She nodded.

I eased a second finger into her. “What about that?”

She choked on her breath. “I feel.... So full.” She tossed her head back, hair spilling everywhere when I started steadily pumping my fingers in and out of her center. “Oh my god—”

“Just relax and keep breathing,” I murmured as I thumbed her clit. Stripping off my boxers, I hovered over her and peppered her breasts with light kisses while I toyed with her pussy. “You are so fucking beautiful, Sweets.” I kissed her lips again. “So fucking beautiful. I can’t wait to be inside you. You’re gonna feel like heaven.”

Her eyes opened ever so slightly. “You’re excited?”

I chuckled against her throat as I pressed down on her clit with the heel of my palm and made her ride my hand. “Fuck yeah, I’m excited, Sugar. It’s a fucking honor.”

Her pussy fluttered around my fingers.

I withdrew them, feeling the slick coating of her arousal all over them. I held my hand up. “Is all this for me, sweetheart?”

Her cheeks were bright red.

I stuck my index finger in my mouth and sucked it clean before sliding it back inside of her. She cried out in ecstasy.

“I want you to squeeze my fingers,” I said as I stroked her.

Caroline bit her lip, eyes screwed shut as she tried to stave off the orgasm.

“Come on, Sugar. You can do it. Squeeze my fingers. I want to feel you.”

She let out the breath she was choked up on and nodded, whimpering as I played with her body.

Fuck me she was tight.

Her hips moved in tandem with my motions.

“You like that?” I asked as the walls of her pussy gripped my fingers.

Caroline nodded.

“Good girl. That’s what I want you to do to my cock.” I pressed my thumb to her clit. “Think you can do that for me?”

“Yes,” she said in a gasp.

“Sit up and straddle me,” I said as I sat down on the couch and pulled my fingers from her pussy.

Caroline was dazed as she sat up, then her eyes locked on my cock. “It’s not going to fit.”

I stifled a laugh and patted my thigh. “You’re gonna take it slow. It’ll fit.” I grabbed the condom and tore into the packet. “Now, come here, beautiful.”

“I’m nervous,” she whispered as she crawled onto my lap to face me, her knees sinking into the cushion.

I trapped her chin between my thumb and index finger. “We can stop at any time.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to stop. I just ... I’m sorry if it’s not good for you.”

“Trust me, you don’t have to worry about that.” I cupped her cheek. “You’re safe with me. Always.”

Caroline nodded, and I rolled the condom on. When I looked up, her eyes were squeezed shut.

“Sugar, look at me.”

“Can you just ... can you just take it? Please?”

She gasped when I slid my fingers back inside of her. “I’m not going to take your virginity, Caroline. You’re gonna give it to me.” I pressed my thumb to her clit and rocked it back and forth. “Arms around my neck.”

I stroked my cock as she leaned forward. Not that I needed to. Caroline had me rock hard long before the clothes started coming off.

“You’re so fucking wet, Sweets.” I toyed with her breast, loving the little sounds I could pull from her with each touch. “I can’t wait to make you come. You’re going to look extraordinary.”

When I slid the head of my cock through her open folds, she whimpered. “That ... That feels good.”

“Good. Keep telling me what feels good. That’s all I want. To make you feel better than you could have ever imagined.”

Her hips rocked, seeking my cock again.

I crooked my fingers, slowly dragging them down her G-spot as I pulled them out of her. “Take it when you’re ready.”

She lowered down slightly, the head of my dick notching in her entrance.

“There you go,” I murmured, cradling the back of her head with my left hand while I gently stroked her clit with the other.

Her thighs trembled as she took another inch. Caroline dropped her head onto my shoulder, breathing heavily as her body stretched to accommodate my size.

“Austin,” she whimpered.

“What do you need, sweetheart?”

“*More.*”

I pushed my hips up, pushing into her further. Caroline sunk her teeth into my shoulder and tightened her arms around my neck, whimpering at the invasion.

“Breathe, Sugar.” I slid my hands down her waist to guide her. “Rock your hips. I know it’s tight, but it’s gonna feel so fucking good.”

Her breath was hot against my skin, coming in staccato bursts as she tried to breathe through it. “Too tight. *Too big—*”

I kissed her temple. “You can take it.” I was ready to come and she wasn’t even all the way down. “You feel fucking incredible,” I groaned, choking on a breath.

She whimpered again, nerves radiating off her like waves of energy. “Austin,” she whispered. “It’s too big.”

“Deep breath and relax your body.” I nipped at her ear. “Now, take me like a good girl.”

Caroline slowly inhaled and moved with my hands, cautiously lowering the rest of the way onto my dick. “Oh my god—”

Fuck me. The fit was excruciatingly glorious. She was a tiny little thing with a tight little pussy. I closed my eyes and breathed through the need to pin her down and jackhammer into her.

When I was certain I could control myself, I said, “There you go, Sweets.” I captured her lips in a kiss. “How does that feel?”

She shifted, trying to reposition her knees, then found that she quite liked the pressure against her clit from this position. *Exactly why I picked it.* “Different. Good.”

I brushed her hair out of her face. “You ready for a little more?”

“Uh-huh.”

I pulled my hips down and slid back into her, grinding against her clit.

“Yes,” she whispered.

I pulled out again and drove in harder.

Caroline bit her lip, whimpering as she squeezed her eyes shut.

“Too hard?” I asked.

She nodded. “Mhmm.”

“That’s what I need you to tell me. Okay, sweetheart?”

The next thrust was somewhere in the middle of the first and last one. She gave me a nod and a lazy smile. I was transfixed by the way her tits bounced inches from my face. I pulled one into my mouth as we fell into a pleasurable rhythm.

Caroline arched her back, hair spilling down her spine as I teased her nipple and clit simultaneously.

“Goddamn you feel like heaven,” I said as I released her nipple. It was taking everything in me to keep from exploding. I wanted to slam her up against the wall, pin her to the bed, or bend her over the coffee table and *take*.

But that’s not what this was about.

This was all about her.

Caroline widened her legs and took me deeper. Sliding in and out of her was silken. Arousal coated my cock. She was tight, but there was no resistance. Each thrust made her slick core seal around my dick with perfect pressure.

The next time I pushed into her, I grabbed her hips and held her down on my cock, grinding against her clit until I felt her tremble from the inside out.

“I can feel how close you are,” I murmured against her neck. “Come for me, beautiful. Let go.”

Caroline buried her nose in the crook of my neck as I strummed her clit and pumped into her with shallow thrusts. “I—I think—”

She didn’t get the rest of the words out before her body seized, tightening around me like a vice.

I pulled out and thrust back inside hard enough to detonate my orgasm. My release pulsed into the condom as she shattered in my arms. I caught her against my chest, holding her tight as she rode out wave after wave of ecstasy. She muttered nonsensical things as she came down from the high, and then she was pushing away from me.

“Hey,” I trapped her against my chest. “Are you okay?”

Caroline nodded. “Yeah. I just... I don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

She trapped her lip between her teeth. “What I’m supposed to do now. I just figured I should go—”

“*Breathe*,” I soothed. “That’s all you have to do right now. Just breathe and enjoy it. There’s no rush.”

After a split second of hesitancy, she relaxed on my chest again.

I kissed the top of her head. “How was that?”

“Really good,” she whispered. “I feel all ... I don’t know. Rosy?”

I chuckled into her hair. “Rosy?”

She closed her eyes. “Mhmm. Soft and bright.”

I kissed her cheek, letting my lips linger on her velvet skin. I snagged a discarded blanket with my fingertips and pulled it around her. I wasn’t about to let her go, but I wanted to offer her a little bit of modesty. “You are incredible.”

Caroline blushed and turned away, a little embarrassed.

“Don’t look away from me.” I pinched her chin between my fingers and brought her attention back to me. “You fit around me so perfectly.” I tipped my head to the side and bathed her glowing skin in soft, wet kisses. “You’re irresistible. So sweet. So delicate.” I licked around the shell of her ear, drawing a breathy gasp from her lips. “You please me.”

She softened, letting out a quiet hum of satisfaction and pride.

I pressed my lips to her forehead. “I’m gonna get up and toss the condom. Just lay here and relax. I’ll be right back. Okay?”

She nodded as I slid out from under her and strode to the bathroom.

When I returned, she was curled up under the blanket. I skipped my boxers and quickly tugged on my sweatpants before kneeling down in front of her.

“Hey, Sugar,” I said as I tipped her chin up and kissed her. “Let me help you.”

She reached for the washcloth in my hand, but I held it away from her.

“I can take care of myself,” Caroline argued. She had the words, but she didn’t have the music. The little thing was spent and exhausted.

“I know you can,” I said as I parted her knees and gently cleaned the wetness from between her legs. “But that doesn’t mean you should have to.” I found her hand, laced our fingers together, and kissed the back of it.

Caroline slipped into the bathroom, and by the time she came out, she was in pajamas, her hair was up, her face was washed, and she looked ready to crash.

“Tired?” I asked as I made sure the front door was locked. I stole a peek through the blinds and saw thick white drifts of snow illuminated by the moon.

Caroline hugged her toiletry bag. “Yeah. I, um... I think I’m gonna head to bed.”

“I’m gonna throw a few more pieces of wood in the fireplace and then I’ll get the lights.”

She gave me a little nod and turned, disappearing down the hallway.

When the fire was stoked and everything was set for the night, I grabbed my duffle and walked down the hall.

The lights in the bedroom were off, but the door was unlocked. I heard Caroline shift under the covers. “Austin?” her meek voice called out softly through the darkness.

“Yeah, Sweets?”

“What are you doing in here?”

I dropped my duffle on the right side of the bed. “Sleeping with you.”

“I can take the couch if you want the bed.”

“I’m not making you sleep alone tonight, sweetheart,” I said as I peeled the covers back to find her shivering.

“I’m fine,” she sniffed. “You don’t have to come in here and snuggle with me after what we did. I’m okay. I’m not going to freak out on you and—”

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her into my chest. “You’re not gonna sleep alone tonight, *and that’s final.*”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” she whispered, sniffing again.

I knew damn well Caroline was trying to put on a brave face. She was trying to do all the things she thought she was supposed to. *Be indifferent. Be independent. Be unaffected.* But that’s not what I wanted.

I just wanted her in my arms. Safe.

“There are infinitely more things than just sex that make your body feel good,” I said and pressed my lips to the top of her head. “More things that help you love the way it can make you feel rather than resenting everything it’s put you through.”

“Like what?”

Caroline knew. She knew it in the way she instinctively curled into my chest. I felt it in the way the tension left her body when I pulled her into my arms. It was the way she stopped shivering and shared my body heat. It was intrinsic.

“Like this.”

CAROLINE

I woke to a cold bed and soft light filtering through the curtains.

For a moment, I thought it had all been a dream. And then I moved. The ache between my legs was unmistakable.

Holy Kandinsky.

I lost my virginity to Austin Hale.

Or he took it.

Or I gave it to him.

Whatever.

I blinked at the ceiling once, then twice. Nothing was different, but everything *felt different*—like as soon as I left the cabin, everyone would stare at me and *know*.

I looked at the spot where I thought he had fallen asleep with me.

The pillow had a head-shaped divot in it, and the sheets were pulled back like he had slipped out without warning.

Had he come in here to hold me while I fell asleep because he thought he had to, and then left because he didn't really want to?

I was startled by muffled footsteps echoing down the hallway. It sounded like he had shoes on.

Was he leaving?

My heart dropped.

The knob on the bedroom door turned and slowly creaked open. “Morning, Sweets,” he said with a Hollywood smile on his face.

Austin slipped in, already dressed in jeans, boots, a heavy coat, and hat. He carried a covered tray in one hand and a mug in the other.

I rubbed the sleep and delusion from my eyes because there was no way that a hunky, older firefighter was bringing me breakfast in bed.

He set the tray on the bedside table, reached around to his back pocket, and produced a calla lily.

My heart did a little pitter pat that had me pressing my fingertips to my lips. “Where did you find that?”

Austin chuckled as he handed me the flower and shucked out of his coat. The dark blue Henley he wore was stretched over his muscles like a second skin.

I had touched those muscles.

And I wanted to do it again.

“Don’t tell Ms. Sepideh, but I stole it from the flower arrangement she has in the foyer of the main house.”

“Crap!” I whipped around and grabbed my phone. *Ten-thirty*. My heart sank. “We missed breakfast over there.”

“Nope,” he said as he uncovered dish after dish. “I turned your alarms off so you’d sleep in. Ms. Sepideh put this together so we could eat over here.”

I studied the spread. Thick slices of French toast were piled high next to mini bottles of syrup and pats of butter. A bowl held enough scrambled eggs and turkey bacon to feed an army. There was a container of fresh fruit and another of assorted pastries and breads.

The bed groaned as Austin sat on the edge. He cupped my cheek, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. “How’re you feeling?”

“Fine.”

He tilted my head up and studied my eyes for deception.

“A little sore,” I added sheepishly. “And I definitely don’t have the leg muscles I thought I had.”

Austin chuckled and grabbed a strip of bacon. “Uh-huh. That’s what I thought.”

“Not my fault you’re so frickin’ big,” I muttered.

Austin raised an eyebrow. “You got something you wanna share with the class, Sweets?”

I snagged a croissant and took a bite. “Nope.” I wolfed it down before rummaging through my bag for my pill box. I opened the cube labeled *morning*, dumped the contents into my hand, tossed them all back at once, and dry-swallowed them down.

Austin stared at me like I had just shot up with meth.

“What?” I asked as I reached for the carafe of orange juice and poured myself a cup.

He blinked. “You just took a baseball-sized handful of pills.”

“So?”

“Without water?”

I shrugged. “You get used to it after a while.”

“I can barely swallow Tylenol,” he admitted.

I smirked. “Child’s play.”

Austin and I fell into companionable silence as we munched on breakfast. He inhaled the bacon while I took control of the pastry basket. When all that was left was a pile of crumbs, he spoke up again.

“So, uh... What all do you have to take? Is it like that every day?”

I wiped my hands. “A bunch of anti-rejection drugs from the transplant. An immunosuppressant that helps with lupus that doubles as an anti-rejection drug. An antirheumatic to help with the side effects of lupus. A crap ton of vitamins and

supplements. I have to test my blood sugar and blood pressure every so often because there's about a twenty percent chance that I could have new onset diabetes since I went through a kidney transplant. I'm basically a walking pharmacy."

He swore under his breath.

"I've said it once and I'll say it again," I clipped. "I don't want your pity. You asked, I answered."

Austin seemed unfazed. "Can I ask you something? Personal?"

I shrugged. "Go for it."

"Why did you get an IUD if you weren't sexually active? Isn't that pretty invasive?"

It cracked me up how professional he made things sound. Then again, I guess firefighters did respond to medical calls. He probably had EMS training.

"I can't be on the pill. It has too many interactions with everything else I take."

He nodded understandingly.

"But I'm still supposed to use condoms because one of the medications I take can weaken the effectiveness of the IUD." I sighed. "Getting on birth control was like an act of Congress."

Austin frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Most girls just go to a gynecologist. I had to have multiple doctors trying to figure out the best option for me. Nothing quite like being treated like a case study, rather than a woman who just wants to get on with her life."

His hand spanned my knee as he gently caressed it. "If it counts for anything, I think your tenacity, your drive, your determination—it's really impressive."

In the sanctity of the cabin, I said, "Sometimes I wish I could move and start over where no one knows every intimate detail of my life. A place where I can go to the grocery store and the cashier doesn't know my entire medical history." I let

out a sigh. “I’m tired of being defined by things that were out of my control.”

Austin took the tray and set it on the floor before taking my hand in his. “You are more than the sum of your past and present. The future is an unknown variable, and that’s the best part.” He kissed my forehead. “Don’t give up.”

AFTER BREAKFAST, Austin walked the dishes back to the main house while I freshened up. The ache between my legs was a constant reminder of how good sex with him had been. I was grateful for the hidden stash of liners I always kept in my bag, just in case. There was no horrifying bloody carnage, just a pale reminder that my life had pivoted irreversibly.

And I felt better for it.

I felt more in control of my life, my body, and my decisions.

For once, I did something simply because it made me feel good. *And boy, did it feel good.*

The front door opened, and Austin appeared with a stack of logs in his arms. “It’s fuckin’ cold,” he said, shivering as he shook flakes of snow off his shoulders.

I set my sketchbook aside and hopped off the couch. “Do you need help?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got this. Do you mind shutting the door so we don’t let all the heat out?”

I tiptoed around the clumps of snow that fell off his coat and boots as he trudged through the cabin and stacked the split wood beside the fireplace. Stealing a peek out of the window, I asked, “How bad is it out there?”

“Frozen.” He shivered. “Henry said the snowplows will get out to these parts later today and the roads should be clear enough for us to check out tomorrow.”

“So pretty,” I said to myself as I took in the scenery. Ice coated the bare tree branches like a blanket of diamonds. Pristine snow covered the rolling landscape in drifts and bluffs.

“Yeah,” Austin said as he appeared behind me, frigid fingers slipping under my sweater and finding my skin. “You are.”

It felt like icicles were pressed against my waist. I squeaked and jumped back. “What in the—”

Before I could make sense of what was happening, Austin had my back flat against the wall. “I’ve been wanting to kiss you all morning, Sugar.” His hands roamed my body as he worked his lips over mine. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think with the way he was touching me.

I melted, turning into putty against him as he warmed his hands on my skin before sliding them up my sweatshirt and under my bralette. I whimpered into his mouth when he cupped my breasts. Flashes of lightning danced through my extremities.

I was scrambling to undo his belt when he grabbed my wrists and pinned them down to my sides. “Sweets, you’re sore. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” I begged. Just one little kiss and I was desperate to feel him again.

I was starting to think that he was some sort of magic.

Great. You had sex once, and now your lady bits think they’re going to see regular action.

Austin squeezed my thigh as he slid his hand up. The pajama shorts I had on were loose, giving him easy access anywhere he wanted to touch.

He took the opening, pushed the fabric between my legs to the side, and slid a single finger into my pussy.

I gasped into his mouth, then bit my lip to keep from startling him. I wanted him so badly, but...

“See?” he said in that infuriatingly sexy, I-know-better-than-you kind of way. Austin kissed me softly as he withdrew his finger. “I’m not going to fuck you again. Because, for one, we used my only condom.” He pecked my lips again. “And I don’t want you to have bad memories of this because it was uncomfortable.”

I couldn’t help the annoyed little grunt of frustration that came out of my mouth.

But Austin just grinned. “Tell you what, Sweets.” He sucked my lower lip between his teeth and gave it a little nip. “Rest this afternoon and I promise that I’ll make you come later.”

“HOW FAR DID YOU GO?” I asked.

For him being such a beach boy, Austin seemed to have very few qualms about the snow. Apparently, twenty degrees was perfect running weather to him.

He chuckled, his face pink from the sting of the cold. “Not far, actually. A driver ended up in the ditch in front of the bed and breakfast. Henry and I pushed the car out. After we got him back on the road, we split and stacked a little more wood.” He tipped his head toward the little shelter that shielded the wood from the elements. “The cabins should be good for a few more days at least.”

“Henry’s so sweet,” I said as I dabbed my brush into a little titanium white and stippled flecks of white over the layer of gray I had put down to give the wintery scene a little more depth. I was sitting in front of the window that faced Henry’s picturesque little cabin. The light was excellent, and I didn’t need to pull out too many tubes of paint to do a quaint snowy scene. I was lacking the drop cloths that covered most of my apartment, and the last thing I wanted was to leave the cabin paint splattered. “I love seeing him and Ms. Sepideh together.”

I listened to the clack of the coffee maker as Austin filled it with water and set it to brew again. “What do you mean?”

“You haven’t noticed?”

Austin raised an eyebrow. “What? That they’re definitely into each other?” He cracked a smile. “I asked Henry about it a little bit ago. I thought they were together.”

I shook my head and turned back to the painting, adding a little more snow to my pine trees. “As far as I know they’ve never been a thing. Henry came to work for Ms. Sepideh when she first bought the bed and breakfast. He helped her fix it up, and stayed on as the groundskeeper.”

“Must just like it here,” Austin said.

“I don’t think he stayed because of the work,” I said as I fluffed out the clouds on the painting. “I think he likes her. Have you noticed when he says, ‘yes ma’am,’ after Ms. Sepideh says, ‘thank you, Henry?’ It’s like *The Princess Bride* when Wesley says, ‘as you wish.’”

The coffee maker gurgled as he grabbed a mug. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re a romantic, Miss Tyree.”

I smiled to myself as I found a thin brush and added a little detail to the cabin. “I had a lot of time to daydream growing up.”

Austin meandered over to the window I was working at. Soon, the daylight would be gone, and I’d have to pack up my brushes and work from memory when I got back to my apartment tomorrow. The weekend had flown by impossibly fast, and I chalked it up to the man standing behind me.

I didn’t want to go back to real life.

“Looks great, sweetheart,” he said.

There were moments when I remembered just how much older he was. Moments like this where the rumble of his voice had decades of age in it. Little things like the way his hands looked when he rested them on top of my shoulders. Austin was a flawless specimen of a man, but I was obsessed with his hands.

They were so strong, yet soft and gentle.

He brushed my hair to one side and leaned down to press a kiss onto my shoulder. "I'm gonna miss you after this weekend," he said.

My stomach turned to stone, sitting heavy inside of me, but I tried not to let it show. "What happens at the cabin, stays at the cabin ... right?"

He paused, contemplative over his answer. "Yeah. Of course, Sugar." And without skipping a beat, his demeanor shifted. "You ready for dinner?"

Not really, but I didn't say that out loud.

"Caroline?"

I looked up from the painting. "Huh?"

He knelt beside me and cupped my cheek. "You okay, Sweets?"

My smile was tight. "Yeah. Just fine."

And for the first time in a long time, it was a lie.

AUSTIN

Caroline's breath was warm on my chest. Her eyes were relaxed in a way that I had only seen from her a few times before. She was angelic, but she wasn't mine.

We had fallen asleep to a movie—some black and white classic that she had been way too excited to find tucked near an ancient DVD player. My plan had been to see if I could distract her from the movie and give her a little more *education*, but she had fallen asleep ten minutes in. Around midnight, I carried her to bed.

Dawn was minutes away and I wished I could find the dial that turned back time.

I didn't want to leave.

Caroline stirred in my arms as she shifted under the covers. Her legs were laced with mine. She clung to me with her arms around my waist, holding on for dear life. Something must have startled her because she murmured, "Wha time'zit?"

I pressed a kiss to her forehead, letting my lips linger on her skin. "Go back to sleep, Sweets."

She mumbled incoherently, lingering in the space between consciousness and her dreams.

I cradled her temple to my sternum and nuzzled my nose into the crown of her head. "Sleep. I've got you."

Caroline's breathing steadied as she slipped back into a deep sleep. I forced myself to stop staring at her as she slept. But instead of getting a little more rest, I closed my eyes and

replayed every moment of the weekend. My cock jumped at the thought of being inside her again.

But it was more than that.

It was the way she clung to me as she slid down my shaft. It was the way she looked at me, trusting me to give her pleasure and keep her safe. It was the way she looked at me all innocent one minute, and then turned into a vixen in the next.

I let out a slow breath and held on to the last few moments I'd have like this with Caroline Tyree.

It would be selfish of me to ask her to continue this outside of these four walls.

What happens at the cabin stays at the cabin.

Caroline was young. I was her first, but I wasn't her end. She had so much life left ahead of her to experience. It would be unfair of me to try to hold on to her when I had no right to hold her back anymore than she already had been.

Night broke into a bright blue dawn. Sunlight sparkled over the white plains as warmer temperatures crept up. Slush dripped off the pine trees in a gentle pitter-pat.

Caroline had rolled over and was spooning a pillow. *Fucking lucky-ass pillow.*

I closed the space between us and tugged her back into my chest. She could snuggle that fucking pillow all she wanted.

I enveloped Caroline in my arms, keeping her close as long as I could. She let out a quiet huff, letting go of the pillow and rolling over to face me. Her fingertips smoothed down my chest and teased the waistband of my boxers.

"Are we in bed?" Caroline mumbled from between my pecs.

I chuckled, trying not to catch a snag while I ran my fingers through her curls. "Mhmm."

"I..." She yawned. "I thought we were watching a movie."

"Sugar, it's morning."

Her eyes blinked open, bright blue like a Carolina sky. “What?” She looked around. “How did I get in here and—” she looked down at the shirt she was in “—am I wearing your shirt?”

“You fell asleep as soon as the movie started,” I said. “I carried you in here and put you in one of my shirts. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable by going through your things.”

She snickered. “You’ve seen me naked. I don’t think going through my bag is that big of a deal.” Caroline sniffed the neckline of the shirt I put her in, then smiled. “But thank you.”

I kissed her forehead. “Sleep good?”

“Yeah. I guess I was exhausted.”

“I bet.” I couldn’t stop touching her. Cuddling wasn’t enough. I had to be running my hands through her hair. Kissing her head. Rubbing her back. I needed every piece of her as often as possible.

She let out a dejected sort of sigh. “We have to leave today.”

My tone was morose. “Yeah.”

On that note, she closed her eyes and curled closer. It was like she was soaking up the last of me, and I did the same with her.

Without thinking, I tipped her chin up and kissed her. I didn’t give a rat’s ass about morning breath. I just wanted her.

Just like this.

Soft and pliant in my hands as I deepened the kiss.

Nervous but excited.

Innocent, trusting me to lead her.

The breathless moans that escaped her mouth were an aphrodisiac. Her hips pressed into mine as I slid my fingers into her hair and cradled the back of her head. I trailed my tongue along the seam of her lips, pressing in deeper.

Caroline pulled away and looked up at me with wide eyes. “What do I do?” she whispered.

My cock throbbed as I fisted the front of the undershirt she was in. I took advantage of her parted lips and slid my tongue into her mouth, slowly massaging hers for a moment before pulling away.

Caroline was paralyzed.

“Whatever feels good, Sugar,” I rasped before yanking on her hair, tipping her head back so I could kiss up and down her throat.

Her breath was ragged as she clawed at me. I caught the back of her knee and hooked it around my hip. She inched closer to me, looping her ankle around my leg to keep us twined as one.

“There you go, Sweets,” I murmured.

She gasped when I ground my erection against her pussy. “You’re—”

I pressed my lips to the corner of her mouth. “Yeah. I am.” I thrust into her panties again. “You make me his way.”

“Austin—” she whimpered.

I was addicted to the way my name sounded as it danced off her tongue. I found her hand under the covers and unfurled her fingers, bringing her palm to my cock. I wrapped her hand around my shaft and watched the way her lips parted and fingers flexed.

“Do you feel what being close to you does to me?” I said in a low rumble, squeezing her hand, tightening her grip on my dick. I turned her chin, bringing her ear to my lips. “What am I going to find when I slide my fingers into your panties?”

All she did was whimper as her fingers flexed around my cock, hesitant but curious.

I slid my hands up the bottom of the oversized shirt she was in and hooked my fingers in the waistband of her panties. “I think there’s a promise I need to make good on, Sugar.”

“What’s tha—”

Her words disappeared when I yanked her panties down. I pulled the covers back and dove between her legs. Caroline tried to squeeze her legs shut, but I held them open as she squirmed. Her pussy lay before me, pink and absolutely soaked.

“Um...” She tried to sit up, her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

I braced my arms on either side of her hips and kissed across her pelvis. She shivered in pleasure, momentarily forgetting that she was exposed.

A curved scar sliced across her lower abdomen, and I kissed it, too. Caroline immediately blocked it with her hands.

“Don’t,” I said, scolding her as I peeled her hands away and kissed her scar again. “I have scars from saving other people. You got yours from fighting for yourself. And that takes a hell of a lot more strength.”

She relaxed into the bed as I moved lower and settled between her legs, keeping her thighs spread as I gave her one slow lick up her slit, pausing with the flat of my tongue on her clit.

Caroline shrieked in delight, clapping her hands over her mouth as she arched her back.

“Keep your ass on the bed, Sugar,” I growled before pleasuring her clit with deep pulls from my mouth.

Her breath was erratic, nearly hyperventilating as I ate her sweet little pussy. Her fingers scratched my scalp as she tried to find purchase with my short hair to keep me in place.

Atta girl. Take what you want.

I parted her entrance with my tongue, teasing her for a moment before sliding two fingers inside of her. I kept my tongue on her clit, slowly flicking it back and forth as I curled my fingers, finding her G-spot and stroking.

Caroline nearly rocketed off the mattress, and I pulled away.

“Ass on the bed!” I shouted. I didn’t mean to snap at her like that, and panicked that maybe I had been too harsh. But when I looked up, she was lying flat, lips parted in silent reverence. I lapped at her clit again, rewarding her. “Good girl. Just enjoy it.”

I held my fingers deep inside of her while I sucked on her clit, stroking and massaging her tight walls. Her thighs tightened around my ears as she edged closer and closer to orgasm.

Caroline came, her body shaking and trembling as echoes of ecstasy reverberated over her. Her tight limbs relaxed, collapsing into the bed as she caught her breath.

I pulled my fingers from her body, locking eyes with her as I sucked them dry. “So sweet,” I murmured as I went back for seconds, devouring her hypersensitive center and licking her clean.

She hadn’t stopped breathing like she had just finished a marathon. I found her panties in the mess of sheets and blankets, threading them up her legs, putting them back in place. I hovered over her as I cupped her sex in my palm and squeezed possessively.

My girl. Mine.

“How was that, Sweets?”

She looked at me through a haze of sheer, stupid happiness. “What just happened?”

I chuckled, “You came, sweetheart.”

She snorted. “Yeah, I know that.” Finally, catching her breath, Caroline said, “That felt...”

I raised my eyebrows in anticipation.

“I think it’s my new favorite thing.”

I laughed, loud and long, before pecking her lips. I didn’t miss the way her tongue darted out and licked her lips with interest. She could probably taste herself.

“I’m glad,” I said, rolling onto my side to face her. I cupped her cheek, smoothing my thumb over her supple skin. “I want you to feel good. You deserve it.”

“We could sixty-nine,” she said out of the blue.

I didn’t know whether I was laughing because those words had come out of the most innocent mouth I had ever known, or because attempting that position with our size difference was hysterical.

“What?” she clipped defensively. “Isn’t that ... isn’t it a thing people do?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to settle my amusement. “Let me tell you something, Sweets. Going down on your partner isn’t about mutual satisfaction. Not in the physical sense, anyway.”

Her brows knitted together. “What do you mean?”

I stroked her hip, keeping her close. “It means that I gave you oral because I wanted you to feel good. Not to take anything for myself. But did I enjoy eating your pussy? Fuck yeah.”

She turned four shades of strawberry. Did I abhor the thought of some other prick ever touching my Caroline? Absolutely. As much as I wanted her to be, she wasn’t mine. I knew that in just a little while I would have to let her go.

Caroline would sign up for that dating app, go out to dinner and be swept off her feet by someone closer to her age. She deserved the space to find herself and cruise through her newfound independence without an anchor holding her back.

“I did it because I wanted to give you pleasure simply for the sake of making you happy. It has nothing to do with reciprocation or getting something for myself in the moment. Besides—” I smirked. “I’m not actually sure we could reach each other that way.” I leaned forward, letting my lips graze her mouth. “And I wouldn’t want you to choke.”

An alarm sounded from Caroline’s phone, shattering the moment and bringing us both back to earth.

It was time to leave. What had happened between us would stay here as a fond memory and nothing more.

Caroline took over the bathroom to get ready while I packed my sparse belongings and tidied up the cabin.

I was working a half-shift today to cover for one of the other guys. The slight improvement in weather would lull Creekers into a false sense of security, which meant it would be busy and the tones would be nonstop. While Caroline packed her paint and brushes, I changed into my station wear, mentally preparing for the next eighteen hours.

By the time we lugged our things back to the Ballentine House's gravel lot and loaded our vehicles, green grass was peeking through melted snow. The roads were mostly clear, though shoulders of gray slush didn't bode well for distracted motorists.

"I guess it's time to go back to real life," Caroline said morosely. She tried to hide the melancholy with a smile while she shut the trunk to her tin-can car.

My breath clouded between us in the cold air. "Guess so."

She looked down at the gravel underfoot, twisting her shaking fingers together. "I guess I should say thank you..."

"No need." I pulled her into a hug. "I hope you find what you're looking for, sweetheart."

Caroline closed her eyes as she slid between the open sides of my coat to rest against my chest. "Thank you anyway, Austin. For everything."

I knew I was a glutton for punishment, but I tipped her chin up and kissed her anyway. "You got to mark something off your resolution list."

"A few things, actually," she said. Her eyes were glassy like the water around Beaufort first thing in the morning. She looked away from me and back in the cabin's direction. "What happens here ... stays here?"

I pressed my hand over my heart. "It's safe with me."

Caroline's smile was tight. "Thank you."

“Keep living, Sugar. You deserve it,” I said as I released her and opened the door to her car.

Caroline slid in, fastened her seatbelt like a star pupil, and cranked up the car.

“Drive safe, Miss Tyree,” I said before shutting the door and walking around to my truck, stifling the urge to vomit up the pit in my stomach.

“HALE,” Shane said, tipping his chin toward me as he sat in the rec room at the station, studying a textbook.

I gave him a nod as I sank into a recliner and pulled my phone out. “Hutch.”

“Good weekend?”

“Fine. You?”

Shane closed the textbook—some continuing education course on EMS procedure—and fell into the recliner next to mine. “Busy. Creekers seem to think ambulances are a taxi service to the hospital for stubbed toes and the sniffles.” He scrubbed his palms down his face. “Fuckin’ hate the snow.”

I looked out one of the second-floor windows that peered over downtown Falls Creek. “I don’t mind it so much.”

“That’s because you had seventy-two hours off while the rest of us were running on two hours of sleep and energy drinks.”

I smirked. “Lady Luck must have smiled on me.”

But Shane wasn’t paying attention. I caught a glimpse at the screen of his phone and saw my sister’s name at the top of a thread of texts. *Mostly blue bubbled messages that had gone unanswered.*

I almost jumped down his throat, accusing him of preying on her, when I read the most recent in the stream of messages.

Shane: Just checking in to see how you're feeling. Need anything?

Beth: I'm fine.

Shane: Need someone to talk to?

Beth: If I do I'll let you know.

And that was that. Shane didn't push it any further. He pocketed his phone and closed his eyes.

"Hale." Elijah Fisher appeared in the doorway and tipped his head toward the offices. "Let's chat."

Shane peered through lowered eyes as I got up and followed Elijah. I didn't know what he wanted, and I didn't think I was in trouble, but it always felt like getting called to the principal's office.

Elijah sat across from me. "How was your weekend?"

"Fine." It was a little bit of a lie. Truthfully, it had been incredible. *And then awful.* Amazing. *And then gut wrenching.* Exhilarating. *And then crushing.* At least 'fine' fell somewhere in between falling hard for a woman I knew I shouldn't want and letting her drive away.

He tapped the paperwork in front of him that I had turned in as soon as I clocked in. "I see you signed off on starting regular duty with this crew. I take it you've decided whether you *want* to be here or if you just *have* to be here."

I thought back to everything I had left in my hometown. All the has-beens or should-have-beens. Everything I grew up loving and wanting to care for.

And then I thought about *her*:

"Yes, sir," I said. "I want to be here."

And then the tones went off.

SINCE I WAS JUST FILLING in, Elijah let me off the clock as soon as the new crew came in the next morning.

Just before seven-thirty, I pulled out of the fire station lot, heading back toward Beth's townhouse. After two motor vehicle accidents, a medical call, and three escaped goats and a pig, I was wiped.

Even through the tiredness, flashes of happiness glowed in my mind like watercolors splashing on a page. I hadn't stopped thinking about Caroline since I said goodbye to her in the parking lot at the Ballentine House.

Sure, we lived in the same town. We would see each other around. She was friends with my sister. I'm sure Beth would keep us in proximity to one another.

But that wasn't good enough.

It wasn't fucking good enough.

Something came over me that I didn't quite understand. It was as if some unseen force was pulling me away from the townhouse. I did a U-turn smack dab in the middle of Main Street and changed my heading, driving on muscle memory alone.

When I arrived, I didn't even pull the keys out of the ignition. I left my truck running as I hauled ass up two flights of stairs and pounded on Caroline's door, praying she hadn't left for school yet.

The door opened, and Caroline stood in front of me with her bag on her shoulder. She was wearing one of those long skirts with the leggings underneath, and a sweater keeping her warm. Her cream-colored curls were pulled to the side in a long braid.

"Austin—" she took in my FCFD pullover and station pants "—what are you—"

I cut her off, cupping her cheeks as I kissed her and backed her into her apartment.

"Let's do the rest of them," I said on a heavy breath.

Caroline blinked, as if the kiss had intoxicated her with some of my stupor. “What?”

“Your list.” I kissed her again. “I started it with you. I want to finish it with you.”

Her lips were bright and swollen like ripe cherries. They tasted just as sweet. “You want to do my resolutions with me?”

“I meant what I said, Sugar.”

She touched her fingertips to her mouth. “What happened to keeping it at the cabin?”

I didn’t know. I really didn’t fucking know.

“Friends,” I said desperately. “You wanted to be friends. No awkwardness. Friends can do this.”

“Yeah?” She blinked, like it was all making sense to her.

That made one of us.

“So—friends with *benefits*?” she said in a sort of half-statement, half-question. It wasn’t a far leap considering what we had already done. I could give her some more experience in that department, too.

I kissed her again. “I’ll take it.”

The two of us stood there, breathing deeply as everything we had tried to leave behind came to the surface. It seemed easier to go with it than fight it.

I could help her test the waters before throwing her into the deep end on her own.

At least that was the lie I told myself.

Caroline looked backward and glanced at the clock on the stove. “I have to get to school.”

“Forgetting this?” I picked up the travel mug of hot tea that was still sitting on the kitchen counter and handed it to her.

Caroline laughed under her breath. “Thanks.”

I winked as I pulled the door behind her and walked her down the stairs. “What are friends for?”

CAROLINE

I hadn't stopped smiling for a week.

Every time someone popped into my classroom or stopped me in town, I thought they'd make me slap a letter 'A' on my shirt and have me stand in the middle of the park. Surely losing your virginity to a firefighter in a cabin getaway that was won at a charity fundraiser had to be against some fine-print bylaw in the town charter.

But I hadn't seen Austin since he showed up at my door when I was leaving for school on Monday morning. Part of me wondered if I had hallucinated the whole thing.

My libido sure hadn't hallucinated it. She remembered everything in *great detail*. Our weekend was now my favorite fantasy to replay over and over again in my head.

Austin was so much bigger than me. So much older. So much more confident and so darn sexy.

Even the miserable temperatures couldn't bring me down. I turned my hand-held radio down as I yanked on the glass door and let myself back inside, shaking off the cold. *Thank heavens I didn't have bus duty every day*. I couldn't wait for it to be spring.

I artfully dodged a cluster of PTA moms and dipped into the teacher's lounge, emptying my mailbox before sneaking off to my classroom. I didn't want to get caught in a conversation. Not when it was Friday Eve and I was caught up on getting papers graded and organized into the kids' folders

while my class was with the music teacher. I had a hot date with a Whitney West audiobook and a brand-new canvas.

I packed my tote bag in record time and was almost home free when a knock sounded on my classroom door.

So help me, if it was Sloan coming to gossip or—heaven forbid—Adam coming to ask me out again, I was going to flip my lid.

“Scuse me, ma’am.” I looked up and found Austin lingering in my doorway. He was in running shoes, gym shorts, and a Falls Creek Fire Department pullover that strained at rock-solid muscles.

I instantly blushed at the sight of him.

“I was looking for a beautiful kindergarten teacher. Any idea where I might find her?”

I pursed my lips, rolling them to fight my smile as he pushed out of the doorway and strode toward me with a grin on his face. From behind his back, Austin produced a rose.

“You know, if you come into this school, bringing me flowers, people are gonna talk.”

“I didn’t bring you flowers, Sweets.”

I looked down pointedly at the rose, then back up at him.

“Flower—*singular*,” he said.

“They’re still gonna talk,” I said with a bashful smile as I took the flower from him and gave it a sniff. “Probably would talk even without the flower.”

“Then it’s a good thing I don’t care if they talk,” he said with a wink.

I finished loading up my bag and set my radio in the charging station. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your presence in my classroom?”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Well, considering you’re not a five-year-old or the parent of a five-year-old, I’d say that’s a

stretch.” I paused, then added, “You *aren’t* a parent of one of my kids, right?”

He chuckled and raised his hands in defense. “No ma’am.”

I let out a breath. “That’s a relief. After we had such a nice time, it would be awkward if you came in here and yelled at me during a parent-teacher conference.”

Austin pinched the bridge of his nose. “First of all, why are parents yelling at you? It’s kindergarten.”

I snorted. “I’ve had parents tell me I’m ruining their kid’s shot at going Ivy League because I follow an age-appropriate curriculum and believe in recess.”

He cursed under his breath. “And second ... nice time? We had a *nice time*?”

“What?” I grabbed the rest of my things and went to shoulder my bag when Austin stole it from me. “I can carry it.”

“I know you can. But I’m going to walk you out and carry your bag because my momma raised me right.”

With a begrudging huff and whisper of a smile, I conceded and carried the rose.

“Caroline—”

We were almost to the door when a voice I had been dreading called out from behind me. I grumbled under my breath, then turned to see Adam.

“Mr. Kipler,” I said in lieu of a cordial greeting. “Something I can help you with? I was just on my way out for the day.”

I didn’t miss the way he assessed Austin or the rose in my hand. “Actually, I was just about to head up to your room to see if you wanted to hit up Hillsborough with me for dinner.” His eyes narrowed at Austin. “But I see you already have plans.”

Austin stepped forward and extended his hand. “Austin Hale. I don’t think we’ve met.”

Adam was a gym rat and probably got off on being a blasé, generically good-looking guy in a workplace dominated by women. I always thought he was cute, but never really had interest in going out with him.

But seeing 'cute' compared to Austin Hale?

It was like looking at a country club frat boy next to a Norse god.

Adam shook Austin's hand, squeezing as hard as he could. "Adam Kipler. Phys. Ed."

"Nice to meet you, man." Austin never flinched, and it looked like it pissed Adam off. Austin's gaze turned to me. "Anything else you need to take care of before we go to the Mule, Sweets?"

I blushed, a little embarrassed that Austin had called me that in front of one of my coworkers, no matter how incessant that coworker was.

I gritted my teeth. "Nope."

Austin waved at Adam. "Have a good one."

I offered a polite smile. "See you tomorrow."

When we got out to the parking lot and out of earshot of gossiping busybodies, I turned on him. "What the hell was that, Hale?"

Austin had the audacity to look amused.

"That was my coworker. I could have handled it just like I handle it every other time he asks me out and I say no."

Austin's expression turned lethal. "You've told him no and he keeps asking you out?"

"It's not a big deal. He probably just thinks he'll wear me down. But the point is, I can handle it. I don't need you stepping in to big-brother me like you do to Beth."

Austin looked like I'd slapped him. But he didn't deny intervening when I didn't need him to. "Sugar, I don't want you to think I'm acting like a brother toward you ever again."

I couldn't breathe. Not with the way he was staring at me with ocean blue eyes sharp and true like an arrow.

I swallowed thickly, trying to regain a modicum of composure. "Why did you actually stop by?"

Austin's expression softened. "I worked out with Callum and Shane and stopped by the Falls Creek Filling Station for a drink after. Saw some roses, and thought it'd make you smile."

I couldn't help myself. Because darn it—it did make me smile. "You found roses at a gas station?"

He chuckled. "I'm gonna let you in on a secret. I'm a fan of gas station roses. You know why?"

I shook my head.

"Florists are for anniversaries and apologies. Gas station roses aren't planned. It's something that says, 'I saw this and thought of you.' Gas station roses die in, like, five minutes. A gas station rose means I thought of you and I had to see you before I did anything else because I've been thinking about you all week and couldn't go another minute without seeing your pretty face."

My heart exploded like a supernova. It was wildly embarrassing and completely exhilarating all at once.

I wasn't sure if he realized it or not, but Austin Hale was setting a standard that would be hard for any other man to meet. *And he wasn't even mine.*

I brought the bloom to my nose and inhaled the fragrant sweetness. "Thank you."

"And I was hoping I could convince you to hit up the Copper Mule with me."

"Ah, there it is. So, you weren't lying to Adam just to get him off my back?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I may have intentionally made it seem like we already had plans. But yes, I was coming to see if you'd like to go out to eat."

I lifted my phone. "You could have just texted me."

“That’s true.” He opened the backseat of my car and loaded my things inside. “But it’s easier for you to shoot me down over a text, and I haven’t seen you all week. Figured it would be better to ask you in person.”

“Yeah,” I began softly. “You went kind of radio silent on me after you showed up at my doorstep...” I didn’t want to admit how much the whiplash hurt.

He sighed, and I noticed the stress and exhaustion around his eyes. “Long week at work, and Beth was having a hard time. She’s been real sick and had a doctor’s appointment that was hard to do on her own. I usually sit in the waiting room or the parking lot, but she had me come back with her this time.”

My heart broke for Beth. Doing it alone would be hard enough, but the family she had unintentionally broken up must have been a cumbersome burden to bear.

I tilted my head, studying him for a minute. “You sure you have the energy for an early dinner? It won’t hurt my feelings if you decide you’re too tired.” *I certainly was tired.*

The melancholy broke instantly. “Nah, Sugar. Seeing you has been the best part of my day.”

“Okay,” I conceded. “I’ll meet you there.”

Austin waited until I was buckled in to give me a quick peck. “Drive safe, Miss Tyree.”

It wasn’t until he had shut my door and turned to wave at someone that I realized Adam had been watching us.

Austin gave me a little wink as he jogged to his truck.

I laughed and shook my head. *That man...*

“HELLO?” I trapped my phone between my shoulder and ear as I rummaged around in my bag for my wallet. I had only just pulled into a space in front of the Copper Mule when my mother called.

“Hey, sweetie. My goodness, getting a hold of you is like trying to call the President. What’s got you so busy?”

“Oh, you know, just work.”

“How was your weekend at the Ballentine House? I texted you a few times, but you never answered. I had half a mind to get in the car and drive out there, I was so worried.”

I tried to keep my laughter light. “I was fine. The weekend was ... relaxing. Henry and Ms. Sepideh had everything up and running. The cabin never even lost power. It was cozy.”

Thanks to a Viking of a firefighter chopping wood and stoking a fire.

“I was probably more comfortable there than at my apartment,” I continued. “Did a little painting and just ... relaxed.”

Also, I had my first kiss and lost my virginity.

But she definitely didn’t need to know that.

“Well, I was calling because I was at the bank just a minute ago. Hazel Prewitt was in line ahead of me, talking about how that new firefighter stopped by the school this afternoon. She said that he checked in with her at the office before going to *your* classroom.”

I swear to Degas...

“Yeah...”

I racked my brain for a reason Austin would just drop by the school. The old ladies in this town loved its gossip like Brandie Jean liked the color pink and men three times her age.

Some version of the truth was probably better than a bald-faced lie.

“Austin did a fire safety thing with my kids a while ago, and he was at the Ballentine House last weekend. He just dropped by to say hi.”

Knuckles rapped on my car window, and I looked up to see the man himself. I held up a ‘one-minute’ finger and pointed to my phone. Austin nodded and pointed to the restaurant

door. I gave him a nod and watched as he went inside to grab a table.

More like watched his ass as he went inside.

“You feel okay, Carrie?” she asked. “You haven’t been missing any of your medications, have you? You know I can always go to the pharmacy and pick them up for you if you don’t have time before they close.”

“Mom, I get out of work with plenty of time to run errands, and I can recite my pill schedule in my sleep. *I’m fine.*”

“I know, sweetie.” She sighed. “We just miss you is all.”

“I live ten minutes away, and we have plans for dinner this weekend.”

“I just worry. After everything we went through for years...”

And there she went again. I tuned it out as she rambled on about *her* suffering.

My parents had sacrificed everything for me. Their time. Their finances. I knew that there were times when they didn’t tell me the whole truth about my condition, deciding to carry the burden themselves. I couldn’t be angry at them for anything, but sometimes I felt like they forgot I was the one who *felt* all the pain. I *felt* all the bad days. I *felt* my body shutting down on me. I was the one who had to be hooked up to a dialysis machine for hours at a time.

Anger tended to flare on my good days, when I was trying to live my life and my mother reminded me of what they had gone through for me.

She was a walking guilt trip, and it had only gotten worse since I moved out.

“I know, Mom. But you did a good job teaching me to stay on top of things. I’m okay. I promise.”

That seemed to brighten her spirits.

I grabbed my wallet and yanked the keys out of the ignition. “But I’m about to grab a bite at the Copper Mule with —” I paused “—a friend.”

She rambled on for a moment before I finally got her to say goodbye. I opened the door and was greeted by the smell of kitchen grease and aromatics. The Copper Mule was fairly empty. It was halfway between lunch and dinner, so we were the only two in the joint. *At least that should keep the gossip to a minimum.*

Austin was seated in a corner booth, and smiled as soon as he spotted me.

I wove through tables and chairs before dropping into the bench seat across from him. “Sorry about that.”

He swallowed a sip of water and shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.”

Tiffany swung by and we put in our orders: a Caesar salad with grilled chicken for me, and a turkey melt for him.

“So, why’d you want to get together?” I asked as I stabbed my straw through the paper wrapper and stuck it in my water.

Austin leaned forward, lacing his fingers on top of the table. “I wanted to talk about your list.”

I choked on the sip I had just taken. “I am *not* discussing that in public.” I looked around. “This is Falls Creek. The walls have ears.”

He grinned, his smile reaching the corners of his eyes. “I think it’s better if we have this conversation in public, Sweets.”

“My list, my rules,” I sassed.

Austin arched an eyebrow, slightly amused that I had actually talked back to him. He leaned in closer, dropping his voice to a discreet bass. “Sugar, I’ve been thinking about you all week, and all the things I want to do to your body. All the things I want to show you. And if we get behind closed doors right now, we won’t talk about what we need to because I’ll

have you up against the wall with my cock inside of you the second the door closes.”

“Holy Picasso,” I muttered when Tiffany reappeared with our orders.

Austin waited until she was out of earshot to say, “That isn’t even half of it, Sugar. So—about that list.”

I rolled my eyes and pulled up the digital copy I kept in my phone, just in case I decided to spontaneously check any of them off.

1. *Socialize with people my age*
2. *Don't hate my body*
3. *Do something spontaneous*
4. *Stay up late*
5. *Go on a road trip*
6. *See the ocean*
7. *Go dancing*
8. *Go on a date*
9. *Wear lingerie*
10. *Have my first kiss*

“So, it looks like you can check off number ten.” Austin smirked before inhaling half of his sandwich. “And number two?”

It was more of a question than a statement.

I shrugged. “I’m getting there with number two.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Then I’ll take that as a challenge.” He assessed the list again. “What’s spontaneous to you?”

“I don’t know,” I said as I stabbed a few pieces of lettuce. “I feel like my life is so regimented. Work is work, but everything else happens on a schedule, too. Certain medicines at certain times. I don’t try new restaurants because I don’t know if I can eat on their menus.” I crunched on a crouton. “The drugs I have to be on after the transplant really screw with eating whatever I want.”

Austin wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Eating at a new restaurant isn’t spontaneous, Sugar. Spontaneous is taking someone up on plans in the moment and not giving yourself time to back out of it. Spontaneous is acting on the thought that something would be fun instead of talking yourself out of it because it’s not what you usually do.”

I leaned in. “I asked you to take my V-card, didn’t I?”

He smirked, rather satisfied with himself. “And look how great that turned out.” When he looked back at the list, I could see the wheels turning in his mind.

“If you want to back out...” I turned my phone face down and went back to my salad. “I get it—none of that stuff is that exciting for you.”

His head snapped up, and I could see the possibilities dancing in his eyes. “Absolutely not, Sweets.” Excitement was splashed across his face like paint splattered on a canvas. “We’re in this together now.”

AUSTIN

The parking lot in front of Beth's townhouse was packed. Brandie Jean's Volkswagen Beetle sat parked beside Beth's I-have-student-loans clunker, now sporting a holographic tint over the pink paint. Across the grassy median, I spotted Caroline's car.

I shouldn't have had the visceral reaction to seeing her car that I did. I knew she'd be here. But I couldn't help myself.

I liked Caroline. Talking to her was the best. She was sweet and grounded with a good head on her shoulders and miles more maturity than most women her age.

We had talked a little over the weekend, mostly texting. I was on duty, and she had spent her Saturday working on a painting.

It had been a quiet shift. *Not that I'd ever say the 'Q' word out loud.* But it had been about as slow as Falls Creek could be. In my twenty-four hours on shift, there had been only two livestock calls, and a car accident on a hairpin turn just outside the town limits. I spent the rest of my time working out in the warm February temperatures, talking to Caroline, and booking a cleaning crew to get my house in Beaufort ready for renters coming in this week.

I had decided to list it on one of those short-term rental sites. I felt settled in Falls Creek. I had a job, had a small community of acquaintances that were becoming friends, and had a routine. But for some reason, I still couldn't put my place on the market.

I couldn't let it go.

I jogged up the steps and unlocked the door. Coffee, bacon, and cinnamon mingled in the air as I let myself inside.

Layla's flight boots were kicked off in the foyer beside a pair of pink fur-lined boots and a doll-sized pair of flats. *Caroline's.*

"Well, hey there, handsome," Brandie Jean growled from the couch. She had a cup of coffee in one hand, a cinnamon roll in the other, and a hungry look in her eye. *And she was looking at me like I was a sequin-covered strawberry doughnut.*

I nodded politely. "Morning, Brandie Jean."

Layla lifted a mug from her perch in a chair. She looked wiped. "'Sup."

"Y'all ever slow down last night?"

Layla and I had run into each other at the motor vehicle-versus-tree the fire department had responded to.

She yawned and shook her head. "Nope. Back-to-back flights until dawn." Her eyes narrowed at me suspiciously. "You look well rested."

I chuckled, toeing off my station boots and dropping my duffle at the door. "Get some sleep, Mousavi."

She stretched her legs and nodded. "I'm about to head out."

"Your man on duty?" I asked.

"Yeah." She drained the rest of her mug. "If I'm gonna sleep for a solid week, I should probably do it in my bed and not in Beth's living room."

"Are you leaving?" Beth appeared in the entrance to the kitchen, holding a plate loaded up with brunch fixings. Caroline peeked out from behind her, clutching a muffin.

My mood shifted instantly. "Hey, Sweets."

Beth's eyebrows rose.

Caroline blushed. *I fucking loved it when she did that.*

Layla and BJ looked downright collusive.

Caroline held on to that muffin like a lifeline. “Hi.”

“Austin, how was your weekend at the B&B?” Layla asked as she turned in the chair. “My aunt said she barely saw you out and about on the property.”

Caroline’s cheeks were the color of the Valentine’s wreath Beth had put up on the door.

“It was nice,” I said casually. “The cabin was great. And thanks to the—” I glanced at Caroline “—*snow*, I didn’t *have to go anywhere.*”

Caroline looked like she wanted to dissolve into a puddle on the floor.

Layla had an ‘I know everything’ look on her face, but she didn’t say another peep about it. “That’s nice.”

Beth tipped her head toward the kitchen. “We made brunch. Plenty of leftovers.”

I excused myself to raid the spoils of their breakfast, discreetly squeezing Caroline’s ass when we passed each other. She curled up on the other side of the couch, tucking her feet under the long skirt she was in. No leggings today, and it was giving me all sorts of ideas.

“Spill, missy,” Beth clipped as she dove into the mountain on her plate.

“Spill what?” Caroline asked.

“Did you spend last weekend with my brother?”

I was almost back around the corner, ready to come to Caroline’s rescue, when I heard her speak up. “Yeah, we ended up staying in the same cabin. There was a problem with the one I was supposed to get, and the weather was too bad to drive home.”

Hearing Caroline state everything so calmly was surprising. I had expected her to clam up and act all bashful around Beth and her friends. I paused and listened.

“Austin Scott!” Beth shouted from her perch. “You’d better not have done anything to make my sweet little duckling feel weird!”

Layla and Brandie Jean snickered.

I popped around the corner. “I was a perfect gentleman.” I caught Caroline’s eye. “Isn’t that right, Sugar?”

She panicked and stuffed her mouth full of the muffin. “Uh-huh.”

Laughing to myself, I went back in the kitchen, humming as I finished making myself a plate.

The conversation quickly shifted to my future niece or nephew. As much as I hated that Beth was struggling, I was secretly excited. I loved kids and couldn’t wait for her to have one around that I could spoil the shit out of.

Layla got up and told the girls she was heading home. Coffee was no match for that kind of sleep deprivation. I offered to drive her, but she promised that she’d be fine.

“She can drive herself,” Beth clipped as she rested her hands on her stomach and closed her eyes.

“I didn’t say she couldn’t,” I countered.

“You have that look in your eye.”

“What look?”

Beth arched an eyebrow. “The look that says you’re about to go all big-brother.”

Caroline cupped her hand over her mouth to hide her laugh.

I gave Caroline the same arched eyebrow that Beth gave me. “You got something you want to share with the class, Sweets?”

She shook her head. Brandie Jean looked like she found Beth calling me out as amusing as Caroline did.

“I’m fine, Hales,” Layla said as she toed on her flight boots. “But I will group text you all when I get home with

proof of life.”

I conceded and went back to the kitchen to wolf down my food.

Brandie Jean appeared in the kitchen, a tornado of teased blonde hair, glitter, and—*oh fuck. Was that Love Spell?*

I had just taken a bite of bacon when nails clawed into my bicep. “What the—”

“Alright. Listen here, life-sized Ken doll,” she hissed. “Do you know how much scheming I’ve done since you blew into town?”

Brandi Jean could be downright terrifying when she wasn’t being a small-town Paris Hilton doppelganger.

Her eyes cut to the living room to make sure Beth and Caroline were distracted before continuing. “You think that weekend at the B&B just *happened?*” She crossed her arms. “Who do you think made sure Caroline actually showed up to the New Year’s Eve party you had RSVP’d to? Who do you think made sure you and Caroline won the same prizes at the Winter Warm-Up?” She inched closer, her sweet tea accent turning sour. “Who do you think kept coaxing Bill McMann into shot after shot of moonshine so he’d lose at Musical Chairs?” Her long acrylic nail jabbed into my pec. “*Who do you think booked every single room in the Ballentine House and filled it with people so that you and that sweet little sugar cube in there had to stay in the same cabin?*”

Well, shit. Was Brandie Jean secretly a genius?

I opened my mouth to respond, but Brandie Jean clapped her hand over my lips to shut me up. “So help me, GI Joe, if you screw this up after all my hard work, I will set you up with Estelle Gould. She’ll stuff you so full of muffins that you won’t be able to escape.” She pointed two fingers at her eyes, then pointed them at me. “Don’t be a waste of testosterone. Cut the gentleman act and show that girl what you’re made of.”

I studied her for a moment. “I can’t decide if I should thank you or fear you.”

Brandie Jean tossed her hair over her shoulder and smiled. “Both.”

She turned and breezed out just as Caroline walked in, carrying a stack of dishes. She paused, sniffed, wrinkled her nose, and looked at me. “You got Brandie Jean’d.”

I pinched the front of my FCFD polo and sniffed. “Is it that strong?”

Caroline patted my chest. “OxiClean will get Brandie Jean hugs out of your clothes. Might need to wash with dish soap to get it off your skin.”

I chuckled, keeping my voice quiet so Beth wouldn’t hear. “I take it you have some experience in that department?”

She grinned. “I swear that perfume she wears could be weaponized.”

“Haven’t been around Love Spell in a long time. It makes me think of high school and college.” I shuddered at the memory. Caroline’s brows furrowed, and I groaned. “Don’t say it, Sugar.”

“Don’t say what?”

“Don’t say whatever you were about to say that will make me feel really old.”

But she didn’t speak up. Instead, she pulled up a note on her phone and typed something out.

“What’s that?” I asked, craning my neck to try and peek. I scanned the note. “Things to Google ... glitter in champagne ... does aftershave actually smell good...” I read a little further, then spotted what she had just added. “Look up Love Spell perfume.” I groaned. “Sweets—”

“That list is none of your business,” she clipped as she slid her phone back into the pocket of her skirt.

Now I was more curious. I crossed my arms over my chest and widened my stance as I stared her down.

“Fine,” she huffed, her voice turning to a whisper. “Sometimes I have no clue what people are talking about, so I

nod along and pretend, then make a note so I can figure it out later.”

I pressed my fist to my mouth. “And how does that work out for you?”

Her eyes flitted to the other room where Beth and Brandie Jean were talking. “One time your sister started talking about BDSM. I needed to throw out my computer after that.”

“Sweet Jesus, I did not need to know that about her,” I muttered.

Caroline smirked. “Payback, Daddy Hale. That’s what you get for encroaching on my privacy. Want me to scar you some more?”

I leaned down. My voice was menacing as I whispered, “You’re awfully confident, Sugar.”

Her cotton candy lips drew up. “Your sister and Brandie Jean are ten feet away. You won’t do anything here.”

“Wanna test that theory?”

She crossed her arms. “What’s the worst you could do?”

Before she could say anything else, I had her pinned against the refrigerator with my hips, and the hem of her skirt in my hand. I reached over to the knife block on the counter and grabbed a paring knife. My lips grazed hers as I whispered, “*Don’t. Make. A. Sound.*”

Caroline shuddered as I reached under her skirt and found the edge of her panties. I was careful not to nick her, blocking the edge of the knife with my finger. I brought it against the fabric, then sliced through the side of her panties with one pull. She stopped breathing as I shifted and cut the other side of her underwear off. I tossed the knife onto the countertop before slowly dragging the shredded fabric from between her legs.

It was soaked.

I let the hem of her skirt fall to the floor. Her eyes, heavy with lust, barely opened. I threaded my fingers through the back of her hair, gently caressing her scalp before tugging

quickly, forcing her to look up at me. Her blue eyes flashed open like a spark of electricity.

“That’s not even close to the worst I could do, sweetheart.”

Beth and Brandie Jean’s raised voices carried in from the other room. I stepped back from Caroline and shoved her panties in the pocket of my station pants. “Do you have plans tonight?”

She shook her head.

“Good. Be ready by five. I’ll pick you up.”

Caroline stammered, trying to regain her bearings. She shifted between her feet, probably not used to walking around, wet with arousal, without panties on. “What are we doing?”

I grinned. “Something spontaneous.”

CAROLINE OPENED the door to her apartment in a flurry, grabbed the front of my shirt, and yanked. I tripped on the doormat as I careened inside.

“Hello to you too.”

“First of all, you ruined my favorite pair of underwear,” she said in the most authoritative voice I had ever heard.

I grinned. “And second?”

She jumped, wrapping her arms around my neck and legs around my waist as I caught her. “I have never been this turned on in my entire life.”

I shamelessly groped her ass while I gave her one deep, soul-stealing kiss to placate her for the time being, then promptly tossed her on her couch. “Good. Save that feeling for later.”

“*Austin!*” she shrieked.

I took in her outfit—leggings and long-sleeved shirt. “Good start.” I spotted a pair of sneakers by the door and

grabbed them. “You’ll need a coat. We’re gonna be outside.”

“I *hate* being outside,” she countered. “It’s cold.”

“Be spontaneous, Sweets. Coat. Shoes. Let’s get a move on.”

“You’re really bossy,” she grumbled as she found a pair of socks and put her tennis shoes on.

“So I’ve been told,” I said as I rummaged through a narrow closet by the door and found a coat that was heavy enough to keep her warm. “Let’s move.”

Caroline’s sass seemed to fizzle out once we stepped outside. The sun would set soon, and the temperatures would drop. I wanted to be set up before then.

“Up you go, Sugar,” I said as I opened the door to my truck and took her hand, giving her a little boost into the seat.

We cruised through Falls Creek, heading out of town. I kept one hand on the steering wheel, and the other on Caroline’s thigh. Her hair was pulled up in a knot on top of her head, and she wore knitted ear warmers like a headband.

The destination dot on my GPS grew closer and closer until I spotted the faded white lines marking the parking spaces on the wide shoulder of the road. I pulled off and did a quick little pivot to back my truck into the space.

Caroline looked around. “Did you bring me all the way to the Lookout just to chop me up into little pieces?”

“No, ma’am.” I cut the engine and popped my door. “Wait right there. I’ll come around.”

Caroline did as she was told, sitting pretty as a picture while I dropped the tailgate and rounded the side to her door.

“Alright, Hale,” she said, her breath clouding in front of her as she looked around. “What are we doing here?”

I opened the door to the backseat and grabbed a cooler. “Resolutions three and four.”

She racked her brain. “Being spontaneous and staying up late?”

“That’s right, Sweets. There’s some pillows in the back. Grab ‘em, will you?”

“I can’t be out too late. I have to work in the morning.” But she grabbed the pillows anyway. “And you still haven’t told me what we’re doing. If you brought me out here to pillow fight with bears, I’m done.”

I plucked the pillows out of her hands. “If I promise not to make you fight wildlife, will you just go with it?”

“Fine. But if you break my trust, I’ll make you do resolution number nine instead of me.”

Austin cackled. “Sugar, if you don’t have a good time tonight, I’ll wear any lingerie you want.”

CAROLINE

Austin wouldn't be wearing lingerie anytime soon. When he finally finished setting up and walked me around to the tailgate, I was floored.

Flummoxed.

Flabbergasted.

The truck bed was piled high with sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows. The cooler he packed held turkey wraps and a myriad of snacks.

"See?" Austin said as I set my shoes aside and burrowed under the layers of blankets. "The great thing about having a resolution buddy is that you can be spontaneous because I can do all the planning."

I took a bite of the turkey wrap. "I feel like that's cheating, but I don't care."

"You make the rules, Sugar."

We sat in comfortable silence through dinner, watching the sun sink lower and lower over the valley. After Austin put away all the food in the truck's backseat and hopped back up onto the tailgate, I asked, "So, how long are we going to be out here?"

"Midnight or one."

"In the *morning*?" I shrieked.

He let a quiet laugh slip as snuggled in beside me. "You're the one who wanted to try staying up late. It's not like we're

doing jumping jacks, Sweets.” He kissed me, soft and slow. “We’re just lying under the stars, watching a meteor shower.”

That was ... kind of perfect.

I took a chance and initiated the next kiss. “This feels like a crime,” I whispered as his hands skated down my arms. “Something that feels this good has to be illegal.”

His voice was thick and husky. “As long as the clothes stay on, we’re just two people out stargazing.”

I tucked my head into the crook of his neck and absorbed his body heat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why are you single?”

He let out a quiet grunt as he rolled onto his back and tucked an arm behind his head, his bicep bulging like a pillow. “Never quite found the right woman, I guess. Not for lack of trying. Had a few girlfriends that I thought would go the distance. Just never did.”

I stared at the expanse of the universe above us. Twilight turned to midnight skies full of stars. “You’re like ... a ready-made family man. Did moving here to be with Beth derail something?”

“No,” he said rather definitively. “I ... I think I needed it,” he admitted. “I don’t think I would have ever left Beaufort if it hadn’t been for her calling me in tears that day.”

I could hear the pain in his voice. The longing. Part of me felt guilty for taking up his time like this. Time he could spend looking for a partner better suited to be with him.

Not a girl thirteen years younger than him who had more issues than a magazine.

I looked up at him. “If it counts for anything, I’m really glad you’re here.”

Austin craned his neck down and kissed the top of my head. “Me too, Sugar.”

I listened to his breathing as we lay in silence. Neither of us was getting particularly frisky. But, to be honest, it was the quietest my soul had been in a long time. *And I lived alone.*

“You know, I always thought being spontaneous meant I had to go to parties or bars.”

“It can be that if you want it to be,” he said. “But I think sometimes being spontaneous just means doing something out of the ordinary. And if life is always hectic, then slowing down and breathing is spontaneous.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Clouds formed in front of me as I exhaled.

“How’s that feel, sweetheart?”

“So good.”

He found my hand under the blankets and laced our fingers together. “Good. Keep breathing.”

Passing cars and the rustle of barren trees were the soundtrack to our spontaneous stargazing. I dozed off in the crook of his arm and woke to him murmuring against my temple. “Wake up, Sweets. You don’t want to miss it.”

“Miss what?”

The corner of his mouth was pressed against my head, and I could feel the quirk of his smile. “How magical life can be when you look up from the mundane.”

I peered through bleary lids and stared at the sky. It took a moment before I spotted it—a streak of light bolting across the sky, then disappearing like a secret that only Austin and I shared.

I gasped as another one flashed just over a tree.

“Wow,” I whispered.

Austin elbowed his way out of the sea of blankets and pulled me up with him, setting me between his legs. I leaned back against his chest as he drew a quilt up to my chin.

“Worth staying up for?” he murmured into my hair.

I nodded as I gazed up at the sky. I couldn't stop watching the flash and glimmer of the meteor shower. "Yeah. I'm sorry I fell asleep for a bit there."

His chest rumbled as he stifled a laugh. "It's alright, Sweets. Just gave me some time to think."

"About what?" I asked, then quickly added, "Sorry, you don't have to tell me. It's probably none of my business. You'll just have to excuse me. I was raised in Falls Creek. Being nosey is kind of a habit."

"I don't mind," he said as he rested his chin on top of my head. "I dunno. I was just thinking about..."

I tipped my chin up and studied him. "Hey," I said. "What happens in the cabin—"

"Truck?"

"Same difference." I went out on a limb and pecked his cheek. "No judgment zone."

"For most of my life I've been friendzoned. And I skip to that zone with a damn smile on my face, set up camp and make myself at home. And I think it's bled into the rest of my life. I help people only to have them run into the arms of someone else. It fucking sucks. And I don't think I really realized how much I resented it until I took a step back to be here with Beth."

I squeezed his hand. It was a pathetic attempt since his was so much bigger than mine, but I wanted to offer some of the comfort that he constantly gave me. "Maybe you need to make some resolutions of your own." I smiled. "Maybe I can help you with your list."

"Ah, I don't know..." Austin stroked his chin dramatically. "A wise woman once told me that if you say your resolutions out loud, they won't come true."

"Ass," I muttered.

He trapped my chin between two fingers and tilted it up, softly kissing me. "Maybe I'll just wish on a star instead."

THE LIGHT from my phone screen pierced my eyes as another text came in. I had been ignoring it ever since I got home from work and immediately dropped into bed.

I rolled over. The ache in my joints was acute.

It was one of those days where it felt like getting up and going to the bathroom was like climbing Everest.

I had to grit my teeth through teaching and was grateful that I didn't have any after-school duties today. Walking up the flights of stairs to my apartment was excruciating.

I knew I needed to eat. I needed to be drinking water like a fish. I needed to sleep.

But none of that was possible when it felt like every bone in my body was going to explode.

Pounding against my front door echoed through the lunchbox-sized apartment.

So help me God, if the doofus next door is over here because he locked himself out again, I'll stab him with a palette knife. I padded to the front door, cursing under my breath the entire way.

"Hey, Sugar," Austin walked in as soon as I had the door cracked open. "Are you ready to—" He stopped dead in his tracks and took me in, his eyes turning from crisp aqua to moody slate as he studied me. The change was like mixing drops of paint on a palette. "You don't feel good, do you?"

"No," I said, running my hand back through my hair, trying to tame the spirals that pointed every which way.

Without so much as an invitation, Austin dropped his keys on the kitchen counter and cupped my jaw, gingerly turning my head to the side. His brows furrowed and his mouth tensed as he assessed the redness across my cheeks. "What's going on, Sweets?"

I pushed him away and turned to head to the sink. If I had to be standing, I might as well get a friggin' drink. "I'm fine. I'm just tired."

"Bullshit," he said and followed after me. Heavy hands thumped against the countertop as he caged me in between impenetrable arms. "Talk to me, Sweets," he said, having the good sense to temper his tone before I castrated him.

"I'm fine." I grabbed a glass from the drainer and stuck it under the tap. "I'm sorry if I missed a call or something. I haven't been looking at my phone since I got home. Is Beth okay?"

"She's fine," he said, though he didn't back off. "Right now I'm worried about you."

"Don't," I clipped after downing a glug of tepid water. Drinking made the urge to vomit bubble up.

"Too friggin' bad."

I dumped the rest of the water into the sink. "Austin."

He still didn't budge.

"I'm fine. I *will be* fine. I've just had a bad couple of days, and I need to keep things to a minimum." *Crap*. I rubbed my temples as the realization came to mind. "I'm sorry. I totally forgot we were going to do a resolution tonight."

Before I knew it, I was being scooped up and carried through the living room. A pathetic groan escaped my mouth as Austin carried me down the hallway.

"Put me down."

"In bed," he added.

"Please—" I let out a shaky breath. "Please just put me down. I—this doesn't feel good."

Austin stopped dead in his tracks and carefully lowered me down. His words were firm and serious as he said, "Caroline, I need you to tell me what's going on right now."

I didn't have it in me to beat around the bush like I usually did when people asked me why I didn't feel good. It was hard

to explain what it felt like when my body attacked itself. “Everything hurts.”

Austin dropped to his knee, putting us eye-to-eye. “What else?”

I sighed. “I started having a flare yesterday and it’s just gotten terrible today. My joints hurt. Everything hurts. I should have stayed home today, but I needed to save my days off. I overdid it and now I’m paying for it.”

He pressed his hand to my forehead. “You feel like you have a fever.”

“Yeah, it happens.”

“Have you taken anything?”

“I’ve taken what I can for now.”

He cupped my cheek with a feather-light touch. “What will help?”

“I just... I need to be alone.”

The lines around his eyes never flinched. He didn’t buy it. “Do you actually need to be alone or are you trying not to seem like a burden? Because I’ll tell you right now. You’re not a burden, sweetheart. I’m right here, and I want to help you if I can.”

Damn him.

I relented. “I need to sleep but I can’t relax.”

“What helps you relax?”

I looked longingly at the bathroom door. “I usually soak in the bath for a while.” I hesitated, but added, “I just don’t have the energy to do it.”

He inched up and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Give me just a minute.”

I waited in the short hallway, sitting against the wall as he made himself at home in my tiny little bathroom, running the water and pawing around all the junk that was sprawled across the countertop.

“Give me your hand, Sugar,” Austin said.

I peeled open my eyes and saw him hunched down in front of me. I slid my palm into his as he helped me up and into the bathroom. I could walk on my own, but it felt ... nice.

The lights were dim. I felt his fingers curl around the edge of my t-shirt and lift. “Arms up.”

I did as I was told and let him strip me down. It was a pity that I felt like crap and couldn’t take advantage of Austin undressing me. When he went for my pajama bottoms, I stopped him. “I’ve got it.”

“Caroline—”

I huffed. His compassion was blinding his ability to see that I was trying to keep him from being grossed out. “I have this ... rash on my leg.”

He didn’t even blink. “Do I need to be careful about touching it?”

“No.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “It’s just uncomfortable.”

Austin’s breath was warm against my stomach as he knelt in front of me. “Sugar, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: you’re safe with me. I promise you that. You are *always* safe with me.” He hooked his fingers in the waist of my pajama pants and cautiously worked them down my legs until I was standing in a pool of cotton.

He held my hand as I stepped over the lip of the tub and sunk into warm water. Bubbles enveloped me as I reclined.

Keeping my eyes open was nearly impossible. “Thank you,” I whispered.

Austin cut the water off, then kissed my head. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Where are your towels?”

“In the dryer.” At least I had washed them, but they’d been sitting in there for the better part of three days.

“Okay. Just relax.”

It was getting easier and easier.

I lost track of how long I had been soaking in the tub. All I knew was that when Austin came back as quiet as a ninja, the water had cooled off and my fingers had turned to raisins.

I flicked the drain stopper with my foot before taking his hand and easing out. "It's warm," I said as he wrapped a towel around my shoulders.

His smile was soft. "I ran it in the dryer for a minute to warm it up. Hope you don't mind."

"It feels good."

Austin kissed the top of my head. "Good. Because I put your pajamas in there, too."

The warm clothes were enough to melt my heart. When he led me out of the bathroom, I turned into a puddle.

Austin had cleaned my apartment.

The shoes tossed recklessly by the door were in a neat line. The dishes in the sink were now in the drainer. The counters were wiped down and everything was put away or neatly stacked and organized. The paint brushes that had been soaking in water were washed and laid out by my easel. The laundry basket of clothes that had been sitting on my loveseat was folded, along with the load that had been in the dryer.

I had been drowning this week. He didn't know it, but little things like putting away the mail and rinsing out paint brushes that had been in water since the weekend had been too much for me to handle.

And he just ... did it.

Before I could get out so much as a *thank you*, Austin nudged me toward the bedroom. "Come on, Sweets."

When I went into my room, the sheets on the bed had been remade and turned down. Clothes that had been on the floor were now in the hamper.

Even the chair of no return was empty.

"I'm really sorry," I said as I crawled into bed.

His laugh was soft and kind, a harsh contrast to his larger-than-life build and rock-hard muscles. “Why are you apologizing to me?”

“We were supposed to do something fun and you came over and did housework. Thank you for that.” I sighed. “It really means a lot to me. And when my head feels less foggy, I’ll thank you properly. I dunno. You can tell me how to give you a blowjob or something.”

I must have caught him off guard because he laughed loud enough to shake the windows. “Get in bed, Sugar.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice.

What I wasn’t expecting was for Austin to climb in with me. But instead of lying on a pillow, he sat up against the headboard, put a pillow across his lap, and patted it—silently telling me to curl up to him.

I obliged and snuggled in against his leg.

Austin brushed his hand over my head, moving damp curls out of my face.

“Sorry,” I mumbled into the pillow. “My hair’s kind of a nightmare right now.”

“You got a comb or a brush or something in here?”

“Maybe on the nightstand?”

I heard him rifling through the drawer for a second before closing it. “Got it.”

He scooped my thick head of hair into his hands before draping the length off of the pillow so it was out of my way.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed finally catching a momentary reprieve from the worst of the pain.

The feel of Austin’s hands tangled in my hair was better than any drug. He worked the comb through the ends first, slowly getting out the knots, before moving up toward my scalp. When my rat’s nest was untangled, he simply ran his fingers over my head and gently massaged the crown.

Every touch, every thoughtful gesture—I knew it was only leading to heartbreak. Austin wasn't mine. I was just a pet project. An amusing way for him to spend his time.

I had already survived organ failure. A heart could heal from a break, right?

At least that pain would be worth it if this is how good it felt before the fall.

AUSTIN

Me: How you feeling today?

Sweet Caroline: Fine

Me: Fine-fine or fine you just don't want to talk about it?

Sweet Caroline: Fine enough that I will see you after school to tackle resolution #9 against my better judgment.

Satisfied, I slid my phone into the pockets of my gym shorts and picked up my pace, catching up to Callum and Shane.

“Alright, Hale,” Callum wheezed as he slowed up and braced his hand against a tree, pausing to stretch out his leg. He still had a scar running up the side from a car accident involving a cow.

Fuckin' Creekers...

I came to a stop along the curb in front of Beth's townhouse and caught my breath. “What?”

“What's going on with you and Caroline Tyree?”

Shane sided up to Cal and crossed his arms. He hadn't even broken a sweat. Together, they were two, scary-ass tattooed motherfuckers.

“Nothing,” I said casually.

“Bullshit,” Callum clipped. “Rumor has it you were caught kissing her out in front of the school the other day.” He cracked his knuckles. “The only reason you’re still alive is because Layla was talking to some girls she knows in your hometown, and they all vouched for you.”

Thank fuck. Layla had probably gossiped to Melissa Jacobsen. She was an old gym buddy of mine and Layla’s former coworker. That also meant Mel had spread the word. Beaufort and Falls Creek were a lot alike in some ways.

“We’ve hung out a few times,” I conceded. I wasn’t about to spill our sexual history. Maybe I’d ‘fess up to it if it was some other girl, but not Caroline. I cared about her too much. She trusted me with her first time, and her vulnerability. No way would I disrespect that.

Shane didn’t say a peep, just stared me down with a cool assessment. He was probably worried that if he jumped down my throat about Caroline, I’d return the favor about my sister. *And he was right.*

“Look,” Callum said as we drug our feet up the steps to Beth’s door. “Whatever the fuck is going on with y’all is between you two, but she’s gone through enough. If you hurt her—”

I stopped dead in my tracks and stared him down. “Look, I get you don’t know me that well, but that’s not a worry you need to have about me.” And just because I knew Caroline didn’t talk back to most people the way she did with me, I added, “Caroline’s a grown woman. She deserves to be respected like one and should be able to make choices for herself without everyone questioning if it’s best for her. She’s capable of taking care of herself.”

Callum stared me down for a moment before conceding. “Alright.”

The door opened and Beth appeared, shouldering a bag full of papers. “Hey.” She froze when she saw Shane standing at the bottom of the steps. “Oh.”

Callum stepped in before Shane could say anything. “Hey, how’re you feeling?”

She slid her hand over her stomach. “Fine.”

Her and Caroline were peas in a pod with their *fines*.

“You teaching today?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Her gaze drifted to Shane. “Two classes and then office hours. I’ll be back after dinner.”

I frowned, hating that she couldn’t teach remotely all the time. “Have you eaten?”

Beth rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

“Do you have water with you?”

“Yes, *dad*.”

I crossed my arms. “You have your phone with you? And a charger?”

“Oh my god!” she shrieked. “Yes, Austin, I have my phone. I have eaten today. Would you also like to know the pattern of my bowel movements and vaginal discharge?”

Callum and Shane took a wise step back.

“Beth, I’m just trying to make sure that you’re—”

“I’m *fine*,” she said through gritted teeth. “I’m not suddenly incapable of taking care of myself just because I’m in this ... situation.”

There was something she wasn’t telling me. “Did he try to contact you again?”

Her eyes widened, darted to Shane, and then back to me. *That was a yes*. “It’s none of your business.”

“It absolutely is my business, Bethany. Guys like that see you as a trophy. He lost his wife, and he’s looking for something to win. He doesn’t love you. He’s trying to *keep* you. Do you understand the difference?”

Her voice turned lethal. “I am perfectly aware of the difference, thank you very much. And contrary to popular

belief, I'm not stupid. Now get the hell out of my way before I'm late for work."

"Have a nice day, Dr. Hale," Shane muttered as Beth stormed by.

She tossed her middle finger at him as she threw her things into her car and peeled out of the lot.

I huffed. "Jesus Christ, that girl's hormonal."

"Maybe—and this is just a suggestion—she needs a little bit of space," Shane said.

I glared at him. "That's my little sister you're talking about. If I could hold her down long enough to put a tracking chip under her skin, I would. But she bites."

Callum and Shane finished their cooldown with a loop around the complex before heading their separate ways. Shane had a veteran support group to go to, and Callum was still doing a little rehab on his leg.

I fiddled around Beth's house, stewing for the rest of the day. By the time three o' clock rolled around, I was rearing to see Caroline. I needed to blow off some steam, and checking something off of her list was just the way to do it.

I pulled into Caroline's apartment complex right as she was getting out of her car.

"Hey, Sugar," I said as I plucked her heavy bag out of her hand.

She gave me a weary smile. "Hey."

I cupped her cheek, giving her a stern assessment. "You sure you feel up to going to Durham?"

Caroline swatted my hand away like it was a pesky fly. "I'm fine. I just need to freshen up."

"I'll walk you up."

She relented and let me escort her up the stairs. I waited patiently while she changed out of her school clothes and washed her face. When she reappeared ten minutes later, she was in another long skirt with a chunky sweater tucked into

the waist, leggings, and a pair of well-loved brown riding boots.

“Ready to go?”

She grabbed her purse. “Yep.”

“Serious question,” I said as I took her hand, locked her door, and led her out. “What’s with all the skirts? I swear I’ve never seen you wear pants. Just skirts or leggings. Don’t get me wrong—you look fucking adorable. I’m just curious.”

She let out a light laugh as we scaled the stairs. “They’re just comfortable. I guess I’m not that adventurous, so I don’t wear other things outside of school. Regular pants aren’t warm enough and it’s really uncomfortable to wear leggings under pants, so I do skirts and fleece-lined leggings in the winter and then lose the leggings in the summer. The dinosaur I student-taught for wore long skirts every day because, at the time, the school I did it at didn’t allow female teachers to wear pants. I guess I just kind of picked it up and now I don’t change.”

I opened the passenger door and took her hand to help her up. “You always look good enough to eat,” I murmured as I cupped her cheek and pressed my lips to hers.

Caught off guard, Caroline opened her mouth to say something, and I took the chance to slide my tongue between her lips. She whimpered as I moved closer, tipping my head to the side to taste more of her.

Finally, she relaxed and tentatively placed her hand on my cheek.

“There you go, Sweets,” I murmured before nipping at the pout of her lower lip. “Just like that.”

She let out a desperate little whimper. *Just what I wanted.* I pulled away and found her frowning.

Relenting, I leaned in and pecked her lips once more before circling the hood and jumping behind the wheel. “What’s the matter, Sugar?” I asked as I pulled out of my parking space and reached for her hand.

“Respectfully, I’d like you to take me back upstairs and fuck me until I can’t speak. Who needs to buy lingerie anyway? It just gets in the way.”

I just laughed and shook my head.

Caroline huffed. “What?”

“I just don’t think I’ve ever heard you say ‘fuck.’”

She glowered at me.

“Think of it as foreplay,” I said as I followed my GPS, navigating us out of Falls Creek and onto the highway. “I’m gonna sit and watch you try on some sexy little things and then when we get back to your place, I will take it all off of you.”

She looked at me warily. “Are you really sure you want to go *lingerie shopping* with me? I think this is one resolution that I should have done online. Not in person and definitely not *with* another person.”

“Fuck yeah I wanna go.” I lifted our twined hands and kissed her knuckles. “I plan on picking out some things for you.”

Her cheeks turned candy apple red. “That’s completely unnecessary.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

I spent the rest of the ride listening to Caroline fill me in about her day. Apparently, Adam—the PE teacher—had left her alone since my little show of affection in the parking lot. It had also sparked a whole host of rumors and an inquisition she had been forced to endure in a faculty meeting.

It begged the question: what the hell were we doing?

Friends with benefits, sure, but this thing also had a limit. When her list was done, we wouldn’t have an excuse to see each other anymore. Caroline would be ready to leave the nest and I’d go back to saving everyone else.

I swung by a drive-through and picked up a cup of coffee to keep me awake. When I pulled into a small shopping center, Caroline looked around, confused.

“I thought we were going to the mall.”

I tipped my coffee toward a small boutique with a quaint brick façade bracketed by potted plants. “We can if you want, but I found this place online. Has great reviews and it’s a little quieter. I leaned across the truck and pecked her lips. “And I can watch you try everything on.”

Caroline eyed the frosted store windows with curiosity as she chewed on her lip. I could see the arguments forming in her mind as she tried to give herself reasons not to go through with it. “Maybe we can just go to Target or something.”

“Listen to me, Sweets. I’m gonna go out on a limb and say that you put this on your resolution list because you want to explore a part of yourself that you haven’t before.”

“But what even is the point? I mean, everything I’ve ever heard is that guys want to bang women whether they’re dressed up or not.”

I laughed. “I, for one, love a woman in lingerie.” I slid my hand up her thigh. “It’s like unwrapping a present.” I tipped my head and slowly kissed up the side of her neck. “It’s the anticipation of what lies underneath that gets me going.” I fingered the soft knitted fabric of her sweater. “It’s why I fucking love seeing you all bundled up in your skirts and sweaters. All I imagine is taking it off of you.”

She gasped and shivered as I combed her hair back with my fingers and licked around the shell of her ear. “Really?”

“Really, Sugar.” I turned her chin and pecked her lips. “You deserve to know how good your body can make you feel, and you deserve to feel confident in that body.” I brazenly looked her up and down, then adjusted my dick. “Because you’re a fucking stunner.”

She bloomed like a flower in the springtime at the praise.

“You ready to go in?”

Caroline looked at the little shop, then nodded. “What the hell. Can’t hurt to look.”

She was going to be doing a lot more than looking.

I opened her door and took her hand as we stepped up onto the sidewalk. Bells chimed above the door, announcing us to the lady that ran the place.

“Hi there!” she chirped, easing out from behind the counter. “You must be Caroline.” She circumvented a mannequin decked out in a satin slip. “Nice to meet you! I’m Quinn.” She looked up at me. “And you must be Austin. I believe we spoke on the phone.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Caroline peeled her eyes away from the displays of practical undergarments, sexy lingerie, and comfortable sleepwear. “Hi,” she squeaked out. In a bout of nerves, she blurted out, “It smells fantastic in here.”

Quinn smiled as she rested her hands on her very obvious baby bump. “Jasmine and sandalwood. It’s said to promote feelings of sensuality.”

“I like it,” Caroline stammered.

“Follow me and I’ll show you around, and then leave you to it,” Quinn said as she turned and motioned for us to follow her.

She pointed out the different sections of the store and noted a few pieces she thought Caroline might be interested in. Caroline kept her hand in mine, squeezing the ever-loving daylights out of it as we followed Quinn.

The tour ended at the fitting rooms. A tufted chair was positioned outside of the changing area, facing the opening of the curtain.

“Austin, I’ve got the pieces pulled that you and I discussed,” Quinn said, motioning to garments hanging inside the dressing room. She gave Caroline a wink.

Caroline’s blonde curls whipped around as she turned on me. “What?”

With complete innocence, I crossed my arms and said, “I was looking online for the store’s number to set up the appointment and saw some stuff I wanted to see you in.”

She stammered before clamming up completely.

“Austin, there’s a mini fridge on the other side of the front counter. Why don’t you grab Caroline a drink?”

I hesitated, but accepted the dismissal, keeping an ear on the ladies.

“He made an appointment?” Caroline asked.

Quinn nodded. “It’s a specialty of mine. We have open shopping hours, but guests can schedule appointments and get the store to themselves. I have a lot of ladies who want to shop, but don’t feel comfortable having men in the space, whether it’s from trauma or for religious reasons or just personal preference. I get a lot of clients who have compromised immune systems and don’t like shopping in big-box stores. Besides, a private appointment means that you can bring your *very* handsome boyfriend in with you and tease him a little.”

She must have winked or something, because Caroline laughed.

“And trust me.” Quinn smoothed her hand over her pregnant belly. “These garments are *effective*. And the way he looks at you... Girl, I’d be careful.”

I found the mini fridge and snagged two bottles of water.

“These are the pieces he asked me to pull for you to try on. There’s a basket of liners in the fitting room if you want to try on bottoms. Use a new one with each piece. Anything you don’t want, just hang over there and I’ll clean it before it goes back on the floor.”

“This is...” I watched from a distance as Caroline fingered a swatch of sheer lace. “This is gorgeous. I didn’t know lingerie could be this pretty.”

“Thanks,” Quinn said, beaming from ear to ear. “Some of the designs are my own. I embroider a lot of the garments to customize them. If there’s something simple you like, we can always jazz it up and make it one-of-a-kind.” She plucked a hangar off the rack and showed it off. It was a little babydoll slip that was nearly completely sheer. Flowers in reds and

pinks had been embroidered all over the tulle. “He mentioned that you have a scar on your abdomen that you might not be ready to show off yet. Something like this won’t be too tight. It’s a great starter piece. It’ll highlight your assets and give you a little more coverage where you want it. Sexy and cute without being too far out of your comfort zone.” She lifted the tape measure draped over her shoulder. I think I have your size pulled, but if you need a bra fitting let me know. I’m more than happy to measure you.”

“Here you go, Sugar,” I said as I uncapped a bottle and handed it to Caroline.

She took it and looked up with a coy smile on her lips. “Thanks.”

“I’ll leave y’all to it,” Quinn said.

CAROLINE

“Come on, you’ve gotta show me at least one thing,” Austin coaxed from his chair outside the fitting room.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror as the cream-colored tulle swished around my legs. The rash from my recent flare had faded enough that I only felt mildly uncomfortable trying on clothes for Austin. Then again, there wasn’t much that could feel weird between us. Not after he’d been inside me, tasted me, and manhandled me in and out of a bath—even combing my hair when I couldn’t manage it myself.

I shook my head to clear the memory from my mind. It was so easy to get lost in thoughts about him.

The little slip he’d picked out for me barely covered my rear. Its sheer fabric hid nothing except the skin beneath a strategically placed floral pattern. Blooms and vines covered my breasts, but didn’t conceal the impression of my pebbled nipples. The tulle skirt flared from the bust line and swished around me as I turned left and right in front of the mirror.

Nerves plagued me. I drew in a deep breath to gather my courage and pulled back the curtain to give Austin a peek. The dressing room entrance offered some privacy from the rest shop, but I still felt exposed.

I crossed my arms over my stomach and stood before him.

Austin looked up and dropped his phone on the couch. A wicked smile crossed his gorgeous face. “Sugar, you look good enough to eat.”

He pushed himself out of the chair and stepped closer until he towered over me. His strong hands traced the lines of the boned bustier that lifted my breasts. A lustful haze clouded his eyes as his hands roamed down my sides to the hem of the slip. He slid his fingers beneath the fabric's thin edge and grazed the low curve of my butt.

"How does it make you feel?" he asked.

I looked down at the flowers, feeling a mix of excitement and nerves. "It's kind of ... fun?"

"Are you asking or telling me?" His eyes darkened as he studied me. The warmth of his expression filled me with confidence.

"It's fun," I said. "And flirty."

He tipped my chin up and rewarded me with a chaste kiss. "I think so too. You look adorable."

"That's it?"

Austin returned to his seat and perched an ankle on the opposite knee, a devious smirk curling up the corner of his lips. The ball cap he wore shielded his eyes, but it didn't hide the amusement on his face. He pointed at the dressing room and circled his finger. "You have more to try on."

I glanced down. "But I like this one."

"I like it too, but I want to see you in more."

"This is my resolution, thank you very much."

He grinned like a lunatic. "And what a fucking awesome resolution it is."

"And now I've checked it off. We can go."

"Not even close. Strip."

I rolled my eyes at the order and yanked the curtain closed.

After trying on a few sets that weren't really my style, I landed on a strapless sweetheart bra that covered my ribs. It was made of soft rose-colored lace. The matching panties were

high-cut on the leg and waist, leaving part of my rear peeking out.

“Austin?” I called out when I stuck my head out of the dressing room and found the chair empty.

“Right here, Sweets.” He handed something to Quinn and hurried back over. His devious eyes met mine as he spun his ball cap backward and rubbed his hands together greedily. “What’cha got for me?”

“I think you mean what I’m wearing *for me*.” I pulled the curtain back and propped my hand on my hip.

“Hell yeah.” He twirled his finger. “Spin for me, pretty girl.”

I gave him a quick little turn and reached for the curtain to move on to the next piece.

“Nuh-uh-uh,” he said. “Slower. Let me look at you.”

I huffed and turned again, this time at a snail’s pace, feeling his eyes on me the entire time.

Austin groaned. “Goddamn. Your ass is fucking phenomenal.”

I peeked over my shoulder to gauge whether he was telling the truth.

Austin walked over and turned me to face the dressing-room mirror. He stood behind me like a giant—all six and a half feet, two hundred pounds of sheer masculinity radiating lust like a furnace. His hands spanned the entirety of my hips and waist as he slid them up and down my body.

“I love seeing you like this,” he murmured as he lifted my hair into a makeshift bun.

“Barely clothed?”

“That too.” He smiled and kissed the back of my neck. “Confident. Carefree. Comfortable in your own skin. Like you should be. It’s an honor to be a part of it.” He palmed my ass. “And I fuckin’ love the way you look in this.”

I arched my back and pressed my rear into the front of his jeans. “You like it?”

His grip on my hair tightened and his free hand pressed against my collarbone. He slipped a finger into the bra cup and teased my nipple. “Sugar, if you don’t get out of it right now, I’ll end up tearing it off of you. We’ll get kicked out and probably arrested.”

I pressed my palms to my cheeks to cool the flames licking at my face. “Then you’d better get out and let me get dressed so we can go.”

After changing back into my clothes, I gathered the items that made the cut. The floral slip, a sweetheart set in lace, and a sexy bra and thong collection that I could wear beneath my work clothes without anyone noticing.

“I see you found a few things you liked,” Quinn said as she rang up my haul.

I looked at the mildly nauseating total and reminded myself that I had just sold two more paintings and could treat myself. As someone who typically bought her underwear at the same place she shopped for groceries, it was a splurge.

“I sure did,” I said and keyed in my PIN.

Quinn slid the pieces into a paper shopping bag stamped with the shop’s logo, added a few tufts of tissue paper to the top, and tucked my receipt inside. “Here you go. Enjoy.”

“Thanks so much,” I said with a polite smile.

She reached for a second bag and handed it to Austin. “And here’s yours.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Austin said, grabbing the bag without flinching. He ignored my inquisitive stare and headed outside to the truck.

“You get yourself some thongs?” I asked and buckled my seatbelt.

Austin smirked. “You keep running your mouth like that, and I’ll show you a better use for it.” He handed me the other bag. “While you were being strangled by that bodysuit you hated, I bought a few more pieces for you.”

I froze. “You did what?”

“To be clear,” he said as he backed out of the space, “it’s purely selfish. For my pleasure only.”

“Oh really,” I said with interest as I pulled out the tissue paper and let it fall to the floorboard. The first clump of fabric was actually three pieces—a matching silk camisole, shorts, and a robe that tied with a sash.

“I know you already have something like it, but I figured you might like another one.”

I fingered the fabric. “How do you know I already ... *oh*. The night of the fire up on the top floor. When I ran out in my pajamas.” I huffed. “That was embarrassing.”

He pulled out of the parking lot and placed a hand on my thigh. “Sugar, I got off shift, went home, and jacked off to the thought of you in those little shorts. Bending you over ... sliding them down.”

“Those pajamas aren’t even that sexy.”

He stopped at a red light and looked at me. “You’re what makes the clothes sexy.”

I pawed through the rest of the bag and found another slip in pale blue, a sage bra and panty set with Quinn’s custom embroidery, and a pair of panties without the—

Austin cut his eyes in my direction. “Use your imagination, Sugar. Like I said, those are for *my* pleasure.”

I gaped at him. “What?”

He cocked an eyebrow as he navigated us back toward the highway. “When we get back to your place, I want you to put those on, and that little flowery slip thing.”

My body lit up like a Christmas tree. Austin and I had agreed to a friends-with-benefits sort of situation, but apart

from a few heated kisses, we hadn't gotten frisky since the cabin.

And I was ready.

A little while later, he pulled into my apartment complex and reached across the truck interior, popping open the dash console. He grabbed a box and shook a few condom packets out.

"Oh, uh ... was I supposed to get those?"

"I've got it covered," he quipped with a smirk. Austin's voice dropped to a sort of morose tone. "In the future, it might be a good idea to have some on hand." He kissed my cheek. "But your partner shouldn't leave protection up to you. Having your own is for more of a one-night-stand sort of situation."

I tried to force a smile. "Better safe than sorry, I guess."

"Yeah." He kissed me, soft and slow. "Now here's what you're gonna do, Sugar. You're gonna get out of this truck and walk up those stairs. Then you're going to go into your room and put those wicked little garments on."

His kiss stole my breath. "And then?"

"And then you're going to lay on the bed and touch yourself while you wait for me."

Not that I wasn't familiar with self-service pleasure, but I wanted *him*. More specifically, I wanted that monster dick in his pants.

"This isn't about me. This isn't even about us. This is about you. You set this resolution before me, Sweets. I want you to keep finding pleasure in yourself. So, be obedient and get up those stairs and make yourself feel good."

The fire he had stoked deep inside of me at the lingerie shop was a full-on inferno by the time I made it into my bedroom. While I stripped out of my sweater, I peeked out the window. Austin was still sitting in his truck.

I dropped the negligée over my head and wiggled it over my boobs. The cups gave them a little more lift. I laughed and admired my cleavage in the full-length mirror propped up

between the windows. With my hair down, I felt like a Victorian woman in those ridiculous corset tops that lifted their breasts to their chins.

I dug through the bag and found the crotchless panties. Before I could talk myself out of it, I pulled the tags off and slid them on. The elastic holding tight to the crease of my thighs was arousing. The edges that snaked around my hips and butt cheeks were covered in appliqued flowers.

I peered out the window. Austin was leaning against his truck, arms crossed, staring up at my window from beneath the bill of his ball cap. He grinned and tapped an imaginary watch on his wrist.

Tick-tock.

I raced through the apartment as I checked that the door was unlocked, gave myself a fresh spritz of perfume, and made sure nothing embarrassing was left out before bounding into bed.

Don't think about it. Just do it. I tried to get out of my head enough to get wet for him as I teased my clit with one hand and stroked my breasts with the other.

Me. This was about me.

The nerves fizzled away as I thought about the way I felt in the dressing room. The way I liked controlling Austin's gaze with each garment I tried on. I liked the way I felt in them.

Feminine. Whimsical. Powerful.

The apartment door opened and shut, and I heard the *schnick* of a lock. I had barely slid my fingers down to my pussy when Austin appeared in the doorway.

"That's my girl," he murmured. I looked through bleary eyes as he prowled across the room and stood at the foot of the bed, eyes raking over me. "Don't stop now, Sugar."

I whimpered as I played with my clit. With my knees bent in the air, my heels dug into the mattress.

Austin circled the bed. “You look magical. Is that how you like to touch yourself?”

I nodded.

“Open your legs wider.”

I obliged.

“Left hand. Two fingers inside of you. Right hand on your clit.”

Holy Monet.

His directions made me arch my back as I shifted to follow them. It pushed my boobs into the air.

“Atta girl,” he groaned. I heard a zipper lower and realized that he was leaning against the wall, stroking himself.

“What are you thinking about, Sugar?”

“You,” I whispered.

“Wrong answer.” The slide of his palm over his cock was erotic. “You should be thinking about how your tits need to be touched. How you need lips on your throat. How it would feel to have my cheek against your thigh, scraping against your skin. This is about you, darling.”

I slid my fingers deeper and mimicked the thing that he did—slowly stroking the inside walls of my pussy, not just pumping in and out. Each one of his movements was intentional. There was nothing haphazard or hurried about any of it.

“Goddamn... You are so fuckin’ sexy.”

“I want you to touch me,” I blurted out. As cute as the negligée was, I wanted his skin on mine. “Get me naked. You can leave the panties on if you want.” I raised an eyebrow. “Since they’re for *your* pleasure.”

“Yes-fucking-ma’am,” he growled as he pulled a condom out of his pocket, kicked his jeans off, and shed his shirt.

The slip disappeared from my body as he positioned himself over me.

Austin spun his ball cap backward, then kissed me. He cupped my jaw and firmly turned my head. “I want you to watch yourself get fucked.” His fingers pressed into my cheeks until I caught our reflection in the mirror. His heavy cock jutted out, hanging over my stomach. “Watch what it looks like when you’re feeling on top of the world.”

He trapped the condom packet between his teeth and ripped it open. I watched with rapt fascination as he put all of his weight on one hand and rolled the condom down his shaft.

Austin’s voice was low and menacing. “Did I say you could stop touching yourself, sweetheart?” He continued stroking himself with the condom on. “I want those fingers dripping before I give you my cock.”

“Austin, please—”

“Begging won’t help you, Sugar. Be a good student for me, and do as you’re told.”

I was so close to coming, but I didn’t want it without him. I didn’t want it to be over. My fingers were frantic against my pussy.

“Slow down,” he coached gently. “Coming isn’t the goal. It’s a good end, but you need to let yourself enjoy the journey. That’s the best part.”

Warm lips met my chest. I let out a slow exhale.

“There you go.” He licked over the swell of my breast. “Just play with yourself.”

I gasped when he peeled the top of the bra cup down with his teeth and sucked my nipple into his mouth with deep, strong pulls. “Yes—yes—”

“Are you watching yourself?” he asked as he switched breasts.

I stared in the mirror. His form was flawless as he held his weight over me—like a statue sculpted by Michelangelo himself. I was so small beneath him. He was tanned to perfection, while I was porcelain.

Austin was strong—so strong.

Strong enough for the both of us.

I cried out as I felt my orgasm cresting. Austin snatched my hand away from my pussy and pinned it to the mattress.

“Breathe and let it go away.”

“But—”

He notched his cock in my entrance and replaced my hand with his, gently thumbing my clit. “Edging, Sugar. A little delayed gratification is never a bad idea. Touch your tits.”

I cursed him in my head, wrapped my hands around my boobs, and squeezed.

“Good girl.”

“Give me more,” I said, raising my hips to meet his.

“It might be uncomfortable like last time, Sweets.” The kiss was soul-stealing as his tongue danced with mine. To my surprise, he wasn’t trying to convince me out of it. Austin pushed a little further into me. “Tell me what feels good. Talk to me. Tell me what you want. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. Please. Just—”

I was willing to do just about anything to have him stick that magical dick inside of me again.

I briefly considered buying a dildo, but that seemed like a resolution for another year.

I rested my cheek on the pillow and stared in the mirror. “I want to see better.”

Austin grinned as he moved to his knees, grabbed my hips, and raised them off the bed. Only my shoulders and head remained on the mattress. “Yes ma’am.”

The new angle was exquisite as he slowly pushed inside of me. I breathed through the momentary discomfort and rolled my hips as he filled me up.

“There you go, beautiful. Just like that.”

I arched my back as he moved his hands down to the back of my thighs, keeping my ass suspended between us.

I was about to yell at him for teasing me by pulling out, but he slammed back in, knocking the breath out of my lungs.

Before I could speak, he did it again—withdrawing only enough to thrust in with hard, purposeful movements.

Watching our reflection in the mirror felt pornographic. It was like being outside of my body, but still feeling everything. Every touch. Every flex of his fingers. Every pounding thrust. My boobs bounced as he picked up his pace, never stopping to check in as he rutted deep inside of me.

The first time, he had guided me. This time, he was trusting me to tell him what I wanted.

“More,” I said, watching the mirror as his shaft slid into my entrance. Seeing it happen as I felt him stretch me from the inside was incredible. “I want more.”

“Fuck,” he swore through a labored breath. “Sugar, you feel fucking incredible, you know that?” *Thrust.* “Goddamn. I could live inside of you.”

I wrapped my legs around his hips, keeping him buried inside of me as I ground my clit against his pelvis. He grabbed my waist, guiding my movements so that I could get the pressure I wanted.

“You are so sexy, Caroline.”

Hearing my name whispered reverently from his lips in the throes of sex was enough to set me off.

My pussy clenched around his cock. I couldn’t keep my eyes on the mirror as I came.

“Austin,” I cried out, gasping for air. *No oxygen.*

“Right here, sweetheart.” He lowered me down and braced himself above me, pressing his lips to my temple. He grabbed my hand and pressed it to his heart. The touch grounded me. “In through your nose and slowly out.” His hand tightened. “Does it feel good?”

I nodded as I finally caught my breath, looking up to find eyes like crystals shining back at me. “Incredible.”

“Yeah.” He grinned. “You are.”

AUSTIN

“E ngine one, Medic one. Potential structure fire at Falls Creek Elementary. Alarm was pulled with no scheduled drill. Awaiting further information.”

Tones blared across the station, boots thundering as we hauled ass down to the garage bay. I grabbed my hood and yanked it over my head. My feet hit the smooth concrete. I was already out of my station shoes and into my boots, yanking my bunker pants up by the suspenders. I grabbed my turnout coat off the edge of the open engine door and slid it on.

My ass was in my seat before dispatch ever came back on the line.

Shane and the other EMT on duty squalled tires as they peeled out in the ambulance.

Paul jumped behind the wheel, slammed the door, and lit the rig up like a Christmas tree.

“You good, Hale?” Elijah was riding shotgun with Paul. He looked over his shoulder as we peeled out onto Main Street.

My mask hung from my neck while I adjusted the tension. “Just fine.”

Calls like this happened with every department. Maybe a kid thought a spontaneous fire drill would be funny. Maybe there was a short in the wiring and the alarm went off on its own.

But maybe there was an actual emergency.

We went into every call as if it was life and death. Even if it seemed innocuous, things could change in the blink of an eye.

“You sure?” He tugged his gloves on as we hung a left at the town hall. “Your girl is—”

“Not my girl,” I said.

Simply vocalizing it made me more sick to my stomach than worrying about Caroline. It was a dirty lie, though. *My girl* was exactly what I had called her at her apartment three nights ago while we were having sex.

That’s my girl.

“She’s just Beth’s friend,” I tacked on, adding to the roiling in my stomach. I was digging myself into a hole.

“Do you usually spend all of your time off with your little sister’s *friend*?” Kiara asked from my right as she shouldered the SCBA that was prepped and ready behind her.

“Do you always keep tabs on what people do in their free time?” I countered, doing the same with my breathing apparatus.

Kiara laughed. “Of course I do. This is Falls Creek. Haven’t you figured out that gossip is a way of life around here? I heard you were seen going up to her apartment the night before you went on duty, and then left in the morning to go to the station.”

Fuck me. I bit my tongue, tamping down what I really wanted to say. What I wouldn’t give to be back home right about now. Sure, Beaufort was small, but there were enough tourists that the locals mostly minded their own damn business.

We crested a hill, following Shane’s tail lights. The elementary school came into view. Rows of students lined the playground to the side of the building. Bodies filtered out the doors from every direction as we approached.

Elijah barked orders, detailing the game plan. Dispatch had relayed that it was believed to be faulty wiring that set off the alarm. Even though there was most likely no active fire, we still had to sweep the building to be certain.

Paul came to a screeching halt in front of the building, and we piled out, heading into the building in teams. Kiara and Jesse peeled off to the right, heading toward the library and gymnasium. Elijah and I hung a left to a hallway of classrooms. The rest of the crew took the stairs, heading deeper into the belly of the building.

There was an eerie emptiness to the school. Papers were still on desks. A documentary played in one of the fifth grade classrooms. Elijah found the remote on the teacher's desk and paused it while I moved to the other side of the hall and checked the classrooms.

Kiara's voice came on the radio, giving the all clear for the east wing. I moved down to the next classroom and took pause.

I could feel her presence in this room. It lived in the sign on the door—a star with “Miss Tyree's Superstars” in crisp yellow and blue. It was the little desks pushed together in clumps so the kids could work together. It was the wall of scribbled drawings and paint projects that each sported a smiley face sticker.

Little things that I hadn't noticed before when I dropped in for the safety demonstration.

Her classroom wasn't decorated in primary colors. It was decorated in fluorescent shades of pink, blue, yellow, purple, and green. Signs above the whiteboard said *You are Loved*, *I Believe in You*, and *Kindness Matters*.

Caroline had even fashioned an *affirmation station*—a mirror where the students could look at themselves surrounded by little cards that reminded them they are capable and enough.

I was in deep shit with this woman.

I did a quick sweep. No fire, but her cardigan was still draped over her desk chair. She was probably standing outside, freezing. I grabbed it and paused.

A dried rose lay across her computer keys.

She had saved it.

I wasn't sure what was going on with my gut—maybe heartburn. But whatever was boiling inside of me was because she had saved that gas station rose.

“All clear,” came over the radio. “Confirmed system malfunction. Chief and the administrators are on the line with the fire alarm company to get it reset and evaluated.”

Thank fuck. It was the lesser of the evils that could have been.

The midday sun was deceptively bright given the chill in the air. I exited the building with Elijah on my heels.

“You take a liking to women's jackets, Hale?” I knew exactly what he was getting at—trying to make me admit to something with Caroline.

And part of me wanted to admit to it. But maybe not verbally.

While the rest of the crew congregated around the rig, I crossed the blacktop and spotted Caroline standing in front of a line of tiny humans. I yanked my mask off, tucked my helmet under my arm, and pushed my hood back.

“Look!” one kid shrieked. It was a girl with jet black hair in pink-ribboned pigtails. “It's Mr. Hale!”

Caroline was the first to whip around, mouth open.

“Hey, Sweets.” I kept my voice low, not wanting the kids to think they could get away with calling her anything other than Miss Tyree.

Her eyebrows lifted. “What are you doing here?”

What the hell? I let a caustic laugh slip. “Uh, working.”

Her lips tightened in a tense line. “I meant *over here*.”

I extended the cardigan in a sort of peace offering. Why I needed a peace offering, I didn't know. "I didn't want you to be cold."

Her face softened for a moment before quickly hardening. "Thanks," she clipped as she shimmied it on.

"You okay?"

Her eyes cut to me, then to a gaggle of teachers snickering beside the monkey bars. "Fine."

"Caroline—"

"I'm fine. Thank you for grabbing my sweater." Before I could ask her why the hell she was blowing me off, Caroline turned to her class and said, "Kids, can you say thank you for keeping our school safe?"

"Thank you!" they shouted in a chorus.

Apparently, I was being dismissed.

I lifted a hand and waved goodbye to the kids, catching Caroline's blue eyes lingering on me as I turned and walked away.

I STEWED on that interaction for the better part of the rest of my shift. When I rested in my bunk between getting called to a car accident and restaurant kitchen fire, I closed my eyes and tried to pick apart the cool mistrust in her eyes.

Not once—even when we were strangers—had Caroline *ever* looked at me like that.

And I fucking hated it.

After our last call around five in the morning, I squeezed in a workout before I got off shift. Not even a full night of emergencies had quenched the adrenaline building inside of me.

Something about the call to the elementary school left me unsettled.

Shit like that happened all the time, but I hated that it had affected Caroline. *My Caroline.*

I couldn't shake the need to make sure she was safe.

After escorting Beth to an appointment with her obstetrician, she went to teach a class, leaving me with abso-fucking-lutely nothing to do.

The townhouse was clean. Beth was a tidy person and, between work and hanging out with Caroline, I was barely there.

This was why I had taken a second job back home. Working out at the CrossFit gym started as a hobby before Brenna asked me to come on staff to help her out.

I hated time off. Working at the gym in Beaufort gave me somewhere to be. A purpose. It put me in proximity to people I could serve.

I shook off the introspective thoughts as I raided Grady's Hardware before heading to Caroline's.

We didn't have any resolutions planned, but that didn't mean I didn't want to see her.

I liked hanging out with her.

Fuck it.

I just liked her.

A lot.

I lugged the bags from the hardware store up the steps to Caroline's building. Caroline kept a spare key to her apartment hidden behind a fake doorbell. I popped the backing off of the little box, shook the key out into my hand, unlocked the door, and then made sure the spare was back in its place before going inside.

The faint aroma of oil paint wrapped around me as I closed the door. I took a moment to steal a peek at her latest project. On the canvas was a little butter yellow cottage surrounded by tulips.

An order form was on a clipboard beside the easel. Callum Fletcher had paid her out the nose to paint his Gran's house in all its glory.

I put the bags from the hardware store on the kitchen counter and went to work.

Caroline's apartment was relatively safe, but it could be safer. I installed carbon monoxide detectors, changed the size of the screws in her door knob plate, and replaced the woefully out-of-date kitchen fire extinguisher.

A kitchen chair wobbled beneath me as I took down the standard apartment smoke detector and installed the much nicer one I had gotten at Grady's. It was the third in a bulk pack.

Instead of just one in the kitchen, she now had one in her bedroom, one in the living area, and one in the kitchen.

Around four o' clock, the doorknob twisted. My neck sang as I craned my head back to get the smoke alarm in place.

The door opened, and Caroline screamed.

"Shit—" I dropped the screwdriver and jumped off the chair. "Sugar, what's wrong?"

Caroline stared at me, clutching her chest. "What the fuck are *you* doing here?" she shouted. "You nearly gave me a heart attack! I thought I was being robbed!"

I held my hands up in surrender. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

She slumped against the doorframe as she caught her breath. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Not exactly the *thank you* I envisioned.

"Your smoke detector was nearly dead, so I went to pick up a new one when I got off work."

She looked down at her feet. "Why is there sawdust on my floor?"

"I replaced the manufacturer screws in the door knob plate with some three inch ones. It makes it way harder for someone

to kick your door in.”

Caroline stared at the little wood flecks before stepping over them and dumping her bags on the couch.

“I could have done all of that myself,” she said with that cool voice from yesterday.

I was taken aback.

I pushed the kitchen chair back under the table and picked up the trash and packaging strewn about. “I just figured—”

“That I needed you to do it for me?” she snapped. “Newsflash, Austin—I know how to replace screws and batteries.”

I scrubbed my hand down my mouth and resisted the urge to dish Caroline’s hellfire right back at her.

“And do I even want to know how you got in here?”

“I used your spare key.”

She clenched her fists. “Are you serious right now? Do you realize how completely over the line that is?”

No way was this about me replacing a fucking smoke detector.

I crossed my arms. “Sugar, what’s going on?”

Her eyes were glassy, but full of fire. “You’re treating me like your sister.”

I scoffed. “No, I’m not.”

The things I had done and wanted to do to Caroline would be illegal if she was my sister. Not in any lifetime had I ever thought of her that way.

“Then why—pray tell—are you breaking and entering my apartment?”

“There was no breaking,” I clarified. “Just entering. And fixing.”

Caroline didn’t find that the least bit amusing. She threw her hands up and turned to walk away when I grabbed her wrist.

“What’s really going on?”

“Nothing!” she shouted. “Everything was fine until you showed up here, unannounced, and decided that I needed you to do all of that for me. I’ve been smothered for my entire life—people checking up on me and doing things for me I can and should do for myself. The whole point of this—” she motioned between the two of us with her free hand “—was so that I could get my life back on track and be independent.”

Right. A glaring reminder that this thing between us had an end date.

The list.

I could see it on the tip of her tongue. Four words that were a surefire way to get me to walk out that door.

I don’t need you.

She was just like every other woman I had pined over. She needed saving but didn’t want me staying.

I had rocked her world and given her a nice half-dozen orgasms. Is that how this ended?

I wanted her to have everything she wanted out of life. I didn’t want to clip her wings; I wanted to fly with her.

A knock at the door startled us both.

“Caroline?” A woman’s voice called out from the stairwell.

Caroline tossed her head back and swore under her breath. She didn’t even have to open the door. The woman let herself in.

An older version of Caroline appeared—same long skirt, silver hair that was reminiscent of Caroline’s blonde, and soft blue eyes. “Hey, kiddo. I brought’cha some soup.”

“Mom, I don’t need soup. I just went grocery shopping.”

Her interest immediately turned to me—the unidentified looming giant in the corner. “Oh! Who’s your friend here?”

Caroline pinched the bridge of her nose. “Austin, this is my mom. Mom, this is Austin Hale.”

“That new firefighter.” A coy smile curled on her lips. “Yes, I’ve heard about you.”

I wiped my palm on the front of my t-shirt and shook her hand. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Tyree.”

She gave me a firm handshake. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No,” Caroline clipped.

I cut my eyes to her, then decided that a little white lie wasn’t that bad and turned back to her mom. “I was just stopping by to see if Caroline needed help with her smoke alarms.” I pointed to the freshly installed device. “But she beat me to it.”

Caroline’s mouth dropped open to correct me, but I shut her up with a sharp look.

“Well, my goodness, how thoughtful of you,” Mrs. Tyree said. She looked at Caroline. “A handsome firefighter in your kitchen—must be your lucky day!”

Caroline dropped her head into her hands.

“It makes me feel better about you living away from home, knowing that you’re on top of things like that.”

Caroline was on top of many things. Me in particular.

“You raised a lovely, capable daughter,” I said. I didn’t want to invalidate the things she had been through as a parent, but I could see Caroline’s frustration with being—as she put it—smothered. “I don’t think you have much to worry about.”

Mrs. Tyree sighed and looked at her daughter with a mother’s love. “Letting go is hard, but I’m sure you know that.”

What? I pointed to myself. “Me?”

“Well, I’m sure at your age you’ve got a family—spouse and children. It’ll be hard when your kids are ready to leave the nest.”

And that's when it really hit me.

I was actually closer to Caroline's mother's age than Caroline's.

"No ma'am. I don't have kids." I held up my empty left hand. "Not married either."

Caroline shifted, leaving a little of her anger behind, and stood beside me. "Austin is Beth Hale's brother. He moved up here to help her out."

"Oh. *Oh...*" Mrs. Tyree's tone shifted. Her eyes flicked warily between the two of us. "Welcome to Falls Creek, then." A devilish smile perked up her expression as she dropped the container of soup on the counter. "Well. I'll sleep a little easier knowing that you've got *Beth's brother* around to help if you need it. Call me later, honey?"

"Yes ma'am, Caroline agreed. "Love you."

"Love you, too, dear."

Neither of us spoke until the door shut and Mrs. Tyree's footsteps faded.

Caroline slumped against the countertop. "Great. I'm gonna get an earful about you being over here."

I chuckled and cleaned up the rest of my mess. "Why?"

"Probably about being seen with you. You being so much older than me. What other people would think... Same crap I had to listen to from the other teachers at school yesterday."

And that explained the simmering frustration she took out on me at the school.

"You're a grown woman. You live on your own. It's probably hard for her to accept that. Who you choose to spend your time with is your decision. And part of having other people respect your independence is owning the decisions that you make." I dropped a screwdriver in the bag I brought over. "No one's commentary on your life matters except your own."

She sighed and grabbed the soup, searching for a place to store it in the refrigerator. Every inch of space was taken up by

matching containers with labels in her mother's handwriting. I had an inkling that this wasn't the first pop-in with leftovers that weren't really leftovers.

I came up behind her and planted my hands on her hips. "And I'm sorry for crossing the line."

"I didn't mean to snap at you..." She paused, then added, "Well, I kind of did. But I'm sorry."

"There's a difference between being incapable of doing something for yourself and me doing something for you just because I want to do something nice for you." I kissed the top of her head. "And I'll let you in on a secret. Not once have I ever thought you were incapable."

Caroline leaned back into me. "Thanks for saying that." I waited while she played refrigerator Tetris and found a spot for the soup. "While you're here, we should figure out which resolution to tackle next."

I grinned from ear-to-ear. "I think I know just the one."

"Oh yeah? Which one?"

I pushed her up against the closed refrigerator door and kissed her until she was breathless. "I think it's time you go on your first date."

CAROLINE

Downtown Falls Creek was a flurry of Sunday afternoon activity as Creekers took advantage of the false-spring temperatures. My phone chimed as I sat outside of the hair salon, staring at the plate glass windows. I had been going a little stir-crazy in anticipation of my date with Austin tonight, and I felt that it was a sign from the universe that I needed to make a life-altering decision.

Beth: Want to hang out tonight? Layla and BJ are coming over.

My stomach turned as I thought about what the real answer was. *I'm going on a date with your brother.*

Not that I wasn't excited—I was downright giddy. But I couldn't tell Beth that. Austin and I had been keeping our adventures private.

Well, as private as one could be in Falls Creek, which wasn't all that private.

But to my knowledge, Beth didn't know. Her life was crazy enough, and I didn't want to add stress to that.

I especially didn't want to talk about how I was head over heels for her brother, who I wasn't actually dating.

I shot a quick text to Beth, telling her I had plans but maybe next time, when a message from the devil himself appeared.

Austin: You're sitting there, about to chicken out, aren't you?

Me: I'm not chickening out.

Austin: You realize that I can see you, right?

I hunched forward, gripping the steering wheel as I craned my head around the row of cars parallel parked along the shops on Main Street.

The fire department was one block down. Austin, Shane, and Callum stood outside, all three shirtless as they did wind sprints and burpees on their day off.

I wasn't sure if he could see me looking at him or if he just guessed on the timing, but Austin lifted a hand and waved.

I groaned and rested my forehead on the steering wheel as my phone chimed again.

Austin: No one's commentary on your life matters except your own. If you want to change your life, do it.

Me: It's just a haircut.

Austin: That's what they all say.

Me: Ah, I see. You and your buzz cut are well versed in life-altering hair decisions.

Austin: You're forgetting that I grew up with Beth.

Me: Fair. You win. I'm going in.

Austin: Good girl.

I stepped out into the February sunshine, shouldering my purse as the salon loomed in front of me. I tried my best not to steal a glance at Austin, shirtless and glistening with sweat. But darn it—it was hard to resist.

“Well, I'll be!” Louisa Mae smacked Christie Spellman in the shoulder when I walked inside. “Caroline Tyree!”

I gave them a small, nervous wave. “Hi Ms. Louisa. Ms. Christie.” The salon smelled incredible. Shampoos and sprays wafted around as stylists worked their magic.

“What brings you into my salon today?” Louisa Mae asked, circling the reception desk before digging her manicured nails into my plume of blonde curls. “Am I finally getting my hands on your gorgeous hair?”

“Um, yeah. I made an appointment online.”

Austin stuck around my apartment for a bit after breaking and entering. We didn’t have plans, so after I calmed down a little, we sat on the couch and just talked. Somehow I relaxed enough to spill that I hadn’t gotten my hair cut since I was eleven.

He prodded, trying to figure out if I just liked it long or if it was something else.

Truthfully, it was a little of both. I liked my curls, but they were a lot to manage since I had eleven years of growth and I was busier now.

In a way, I was lucky. Many people with lupus lost their hair, but a more prominent side effect of a drug I took because of the transplant was hair growth. I was thankful for that particular side effect on my head, but it was inconvenient on the rest of my body.

There were a few years before I was a teenager where I was too sick to be out in public often, so things like haircuts went out the window. It was too risky with my immune system. By the time I was a teenager, I was on dialysis and sitting on the transplant wait list.

I liked my hair, but it was a constant reminder of how much time I had lost. I could measure the years I never got to have in inches.

Louisa Mae ushered me to a chair smack dab in the middle of the row of mirrors. She plucked the claw clip holding half of my hair up out of the back of my head and handed it down to me.

“Uncross your legs for me and sit up straight so I can get a good look at how it’s hanging,” she said as she sifted her hands through my mile-long ringlets. “Sweet heavens you have a thick head of hair. It’s absolutely gorgeous, honey. What are we doing today?”

I pulled out my phone and opened the photo I had saved. It was drastic, but sometimes taking back control required some drastic measures. “Do you think I could pull off something like this?”

“Honey, you could pull off a blue mohawk.” She gave my shoulders a squeeze. “But I think that’ll look just darling on you. Very becoming.”

Louisa played with my hair for a moment, finding the right length for the cut, then holding the rest behind me so I could see where it would end up when it was all said and done. “Right there?”

I studied myself in the mirror. She was right. It was going to be drastic.

But I was ready.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Before I get you washed up and get my scissors out—we’re talking about taking off *a lot* of hair. It’s nearly down to your rear and we’re going up to your shoulders. It’ll take a lot of time to grow it back, especially with how curly your hair is. You sure you’re ready for this?”

I resisted the urge to text Beth, Layla, or Brandie Jean to make sure I wasn’t making a horrific mistake.

I would own it if I did.

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

There was excitement in Louisa’s eyes. “Alright. Let’s get going.”

I sat stock-still as she sectioned my hair and braided it at lightning speed. “You wanna donate it?” she asked as she reached for the shears.

I perked up. “I can do that?”

“Sure. It’s not been bleached or treated, and you’re taking off more than enough length. We’ll even ship it off for you so you don’t have to go through the hassle.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “Let’s do that.”

She lifted the shears and gave them a little snip snap in the air. “You ready?”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

Louisa Mae didn’t hesitate. She held the braid still and sliced through the bulk of my hair until it fanned out just below my shoulders. She held up the long braid, still tied off with the elastic. “You did it, honey! That’s the hard part!”

I would not cry in this chair. *Dammit. I was.*

“Wow. It’s so short.” I sniffed, smiling like a lunatic as I ran my fingers through the ends. “I love it!”

“You look good enough to eat. That handsome firefighter that’s been drooling over you won’t be able to keep his hands off of you.”

I clapped my hands over my mouth.

Christie popped her head out of the cordoned off waxing area and snickered. “Sneak around all you want, but that boy’s got dinner plates for eyes when it comes to you.”

Louisa Mae laughed. “Let’s get you shampooed, and then the fun can begin!”

I FELT ten pounds lighter when I left the salon. The breeze on my neck was glorious as I walked to my car. My stride was bouncy and light.

And then I stopped dead in my tracks.

A white box with a big red bow was perched on the hood of my car.

I looked around. It was just after three in the afternoon, but Main Street had become a ghost town.

I smelled meddling Creekers...

Approaching the box slowly, I gave it a thorough assessment. A tag on the top had my name scrawled in looping calligraphy, and the box was stamped with the logo of the boutique down the street.

The chance of it being a bomb was fairly small, I decided. Not zero, but small.

I grabbed the box and jumped into the driver's seat, pushing all the way back from the steering wheel so I had elbow room to open it up. The bow was expertly tied and fluffed, and I was sorry to see that handiwork go as I tore into it.

The top went flying and I shredded the tissue paper, trying to get into it.

Anyone who says they don't enjoy opening presents is a dirty liar.

"Holy shit," I muttered to absolutely no one as I lifted the garment. It was savage, sexy, and just my size.

A note had been fastened to the front with a pearl-headed pin.

Wear this.

I TUGGED at the hem of the dress, mentally willing it to magically grow a few more inches of fabric. I loved my new hair, but today was not a great body day.

And this dress showed a lot of body.

My face was a little puffier than usual, and my midsection, hands, and ankles were a little swollen. I closed my eyes and resisted the urge to grab something long-sleeved and floor-length.

Austin had been radio silent since waving at me mid-workout, and it was unnerving. The dress had to be from him, right? It had my name on it, and no one else knew we were even hanging out, much less going on a totally pretend first date.

It didn't really count toward my resolution list since we weren't going out with the intention of being romantically involved. It was practice.

But sweet Van Gogh, he was pulling out all the stops.

I didn't wear much makeup—Kindergarteners didn't really care if I rocked a full face or went bare—but I had put on a little mascara and pinked up my cheeks with blush. A truck pulled up outside, engine rumbling as I dabbed a little lipstick on and smudged it out.

There was a pair of high heels in the very back of my closet that I wore one time for my job interview at the school and never again. They would have to do. This wasn't exactly a 'sneakers' kind of dress.

I hobbled through the apartment right as Austin knocked on the door. "It's unlocked!" I hollered, rifling through my purse to move the necessities over into the clutch I had picked up for the occasion.

"It should be locked, Sugar," Austin chided as he let himself in.

Cellophane rustled behind me. I straightened and turned, nearly running smack dab into his stomach.

Hale yes.

Austin stood before me in charcoal slacks, a pale blue button-up, and slick dress shoes. The top buttons were undone, adding a note of confident recklessness. The blazer he wore made him look distinguished.

"Wow." His eyes raked me up and down. I shifted uncomfortably at the attention.

I felt sexy, but I didn't look like it.

He paid no mind to the flowers in his hand. “You look absolutely stunning, Caroline.” Almost timidly, he reached out and touched the short curls dancing over my shoulders. “I love this.” He tipped my chin up and gave me a careful kiss. “I can actually see you.”

I clutched my fingers, twisting them nervously. “What do you mean?”

Austin cupped my cheek. “You’re not hiding. Not behind the way you look. Not behind your paintings. Not behind your students. I like seeing you stand in your own light.”

I looked down at the high heels on my feet. “I feel like I’m playing dress-up.”

“C’mere.” Austin discarded the flowers on the kitchen counter and took my hand, leading me back to my bedroom.

Yes, please. We can skip dinner.

“Look at yourself.” He positioned me in front of the mirror, bringing my rear against his body. “Goddamn, look at you. You are perfection, Sweets.”

I stood a little taller while I studied the dress and the way it clung to my body. Red satin was painted over my chest and the tops of my thighs. Stiff sweetheart cups and spaghetti straps held up my breasts. The hem was no longer than a hand’s length below my butt.

“The shoes are kind of hard to walk in, but they’re the only ones I have that match.”

He wasn’t deterred in the slightest. “You’re looking like pure sin tonight. I don’t care if you can walk in them. I’ll carry you around all night if I have to just to see them on your feet.”

“Thank you for the dress. It’s... It’s really pretty.”

Austin’s hands hadn’t stopped roaming my arms and waist. “I need you to know something.”

“What’s that?”

“I didn’t get this for you just so I could see you in something skimpy. Although, that is definitely a plus.”

I looked at myself in the mirror again. “Then why?”

“Because I didn’t think you would give yourself permission to feel like a woman if I didn’t.” His hands spanned my hips before sliding over my butt. “You are breathtaking in anything you wear. It’s not about the dress. Which, by the way, I got a little help from Layla with.”

“Austin.”

“Listen to me, sweetheart. You’re not a girl anymore. You’re a woman. Allow yourself to be one. Dress however the hell makes you happy and comfortable in your own skin but carry yourself the way a woman should. Confident and powerful and unapologetic.” He let out a heavy breath. “And fuck me, your tits look amazing.”

I laughed and pressed my hands to my cheeks. “You ready to go?”

Austin shed his blazer and draped it over my shoulders. The weight and warmth were comforting. “It’s pretty warm out today, but I don’t want you getting cold.”

He turned and took my hand, leading me out of the bedroom.

Holy Pollock. His ass in those slacks was downright pornographic.

“These are for you,” he said, picking up the flowers he had so recklessly tossed aside and held them out to me. The bundle of wildflowers was colorful and chaotic. I loved it.

“They’re beautiful. Give me just a second to get them in water and then we can go.”

“Take your time, Sugar,” Austin said.

I caught a glimpse of him watching my ass as I pawed around a cabinet for a vase. I gave him a teasing wiggle, and smiled to myself, enjoying the heat of his gaze.

“Where are we going tonight?” I asked as I pulled the flowers out of the cellophane and put them in water before positioning them in the window.

“I made reservations at a place in downtown Raleigh. Figured the drive would give us a little extra time together.”

I picked up my clutch. “And after the date?”

Austin knocked the breath out of my lungs as he pushed me up against the refrigerator. I gasped helplessly as his hand slid up the short hem of the dress. Thick fingers curled around the edge of the thong I had on and yanked down. The little scrap of fabric fell to my feet.

His lips curled into a smile at the corners as he found my clit and pressed his thumb to it. “I’m going to be a perfect gentleman for your first date.”

“And then?” I whimpered.

His chuckle was dark and devious as he slipped a finger into my pussy. “And then I’m going to bring you back here and teach you a few more things.”

AUSTIN

Our forks clinked against each other as I fought Caroline for the last bite of cake. We were sitting at a high-top table at a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant in downtown Raleigh, stuffed after three rounds of reimagined diner food. I wasn't usually a macaroni and cheese kind of guy, but the Mac Au Gratin Caroline ordered could have triggered an orgasm.

We shared our plates, me sampling from her ramekin of toasted cheesy goodness and the accompanying beet salad, and her stealing from my short ribs and the mix of collards and black-eyed peas.

I had sweet-talked her into sharing a piece of cake simply because I wasn't ready to get back in the truck yet. Conversation was easy when the company was her.

Caroline relented and sat back in her chair. "You're going to have to squeeze me out of this dress like you're trying to get the last drop of toothpaste out of the tube. I'm stuffed."

I laughed and put the rest of the cake out of its delicious misery. "That good?"

She dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "I want to make love to that mac and cheese."

We shared coy smiles as the waiter dropped the check. Caroline reached for her wallet, but I beat her to it, sliding my card back in the waiter's hand before he could leave.

"You don't have to pay for me," she said.

“Of course I do. It’s a date, remember. And I’m a gentleman.”

She propped her chin on her hand. “I wish all dates could be like this.”

“What do you mean?”

She dropped her shoulders. “I’m not nervous around you. You tell me what to expect before it happens, so I’m not left trying to fake like I know what’s going on.” Without being prompted, Caroline reached across the table and laid her hand over mine. It was the simplest gesture, but it made my heart swell.

A swelling heart had to be a serious cardiac situation, right?

I flipped our hands so that I was holding hers. “What makes you think all dates can’t be like this?”

“Because they’re not with you.” It slipped out of her mouth so fast that it seemed to have surprised her too. Caroline cleared her throat. “I don’t know. When I go on a *real* date for the first time, I won’t know the guy as well as I’ve gotten to know you. I mean, we’ve been hanging out for almost two months now. It’s not exactly out of the blue.”

“First, this is a real date,” I clarified. “Second, dates don’t always have to be out of the blue.” I stared at a scratch in the table and worked at it with my thumb. “But you should be comfortable with whoever you’re going out with.”

The server returned with my card. I signed the receipt, tucking the spare in my pocket.

It had cooled down significantly from the sunny seventies that it had been when we left. I wrapped Caroline up in my suit jacket, and tried to calculate just how fast I could get the heat going in the truck so I could see her in that dress again.

“I get that,” she said, continuing our conversation as we strolled down the sidewalk. Caroline sighed. “I don’t know why I put so much stock in my first date changing my life or something. It’s not like Falls Creek is teeming with eligible bachelors. Well... Unless you’re Brandie Jean.”

Bile coated my throat. “Have you, uh ... have you been looking?”

Caroline laughed. “No. I was going to get on one of the dating apps, but between the school year and tackling my resolution list with you, I guess I haven’t thought about it as much as I had been.”

“Sorry to be a distraction, Sugar,” I said as I opened her door and took her hand, giving her a boost up onto the running board.

Caroline looked at me, all creamy skin and bright blue eyes. “Don’t be sorry.”

She was silent as we navigated out of the downtown grid and got back onto the highway.

After a minute, I felt her hand slide into mine. I laced our fingers together and gave her hand a squeeze.

“So, how’d I do?” she asked.

I laughed. “What?”

“You know... On the date. Give me a grade. I need to know so I can make adjustments for next time.”

“Sugar, it’s not a homework assignment.”

“I know, but I—”

“Caroline,” I clipped. Stealing a glance at her before putting my eyes back on the road, I said, “Dates aren’t a test. Nothing about being with someone should ever be a test. And if anyone ever makes you feel that way, tell him to fuck right off.”

She rested her head on my shoulder and said nothing else as I drove us home.

I thought maybe she had fallen asleep, but when I pulled into her apartment complex, I found Caroline staring aimlessly at the dashboard.

“You alright, Sweets?”

“Yeah,” she sighed contentedly. “Just happy.”

I kissed her head and cut the engine. “Good.”

“You have to work tomorrow, right?”

“Yep.” I shut the door and walked around to help her down. “Bright and early.”

She chewed on her lip for a moment, working it from pale pink to cherry red. “You wouldn’t have your station bag in the truck, would you?”

I smirked as I slid my hands onto her hips. “Why, Miss Tyree. Are you asking me to spend the night?”

She popped up on her tiptoes and gave me a kiss under the cover of darkness. “Yes.”

“Fucking hell, Sugar.” I trapped her against the truck with my body, hiding her from view as I cupped her cheeks and kissed her. It wouldn’t be the first time I had stayed over, but it was the first time she had asked explicitly.

Caroline laughed. “Is that a yes?”

“I’d be out of my mind to say no.” I kissed her again. “Give me a sec to call Beth and make sure she’s okay.”

“I’ll go up and get into something a little more comfortable.”

“Nah, Sweets.” I fingered the itty-bitty strap holding her dress up. “I bought this for you. I wanna take it off of you.”

I should have just texted Beth rather than risking her hormonal sisterly wrath. I got an earful as I grabbed my bag out of the back of the truck and shouldered it, keeping a snug grip on Caroline’s hand as we walked across the lot. While Beth yelled at me for being overbearing—*fine, I had also texted her before we left for Raleigh and during dinner when Caroline went to the restroom*—I kept stealing glances at Caroline.

Beth didn’t even ask where I was staying tonight or what was keeping me from going back to her place. At least I didn’t have to lie to her.

Half of me just wanted to tell her what I’d been up to.

But then I looked at Caroline again—comfortable and carefree—and didn't want to risk scaring her off or breaking her trust.

“How bad was it?” Caroline asked as she unlocked her door.

I pocketed my phone. “Pretty sure she hasn't called me some of those names since we were kids.”

Caroline's smile was compassionate. “She's having a rough time of it.”

Why did it seem like she knew something that I didn't?

I tamped down the irritation, because at least Beth was opening up to someone. “Has she said something to you? I thought things were getting better now that the morning sickness started going away.”

She toed off her high heels as soon as she had the door open. “It's not the pregnancy that's hard on her, Austin.” Caroline's voice was firm. For a moment, I felt like one of her students. “Apart from the dick-faced professor being unhinged, she's fine. It's knowing that her life is about to change irreversibly that's weighing on her.”

“Whatever you're holding back, just say it.”

Caroline took my hands in hers and looked me dead in the eye. “Your love for your sister cannot replace what she lost—or what she at least thought she had—which is a partner. She doesn't need a babysitter. She doesn't need you to fill a role that was never yours to fill. What she needs is her brother back.”

All I could do was stand there and take it like a shot to the heart.

“I'm sorry if I overstepped,” Caroline said, putting a little more space between us.

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her into my chest. “Never, sweetheart. I'm proud of you for speaking your mind.” I locked the door behind us and pushed my blazer off her shoulders. “Thank you.”

Caroline pressed her palms squarely against my chest. I held them there, letting her feel the intensity of my heartbeat.

It was all because of her, and she didn't have a fucking clue.

Her eyelids lowered into a heavy gaze. “What are you teaching me tonight?”

Caroline was the devil. That sweet voice of hers was pure evil, because she knew exactly what she was doing with it. *Especially when she reached between us and squeezed my cock through my pants.*

I found the zipper on her side and pulled it down, then pushed the straps off her shoulders. Caroline shimmied out of the dress that hugged her curves like a second skin. Given that I hadn't allowed her to put her panties back on before we left for dinner, Caroline was standing stark naked in the middle of her kitchen, waiting for me to tell her what to do.

If I died right here and now, I would die a happy man.

Curiosity danced in her eyes as she thumbed my belt buckle.

I cupped her cheek. “What's going on in that pretty little head of yours, gorgeous?”

“I want to try to... You know... Take you in my mouth.”

Fuck. Yes.

I grinned. “I'm not gonna say no to that, but are you sure?” I slid my hands around to her ass and groped it unabashedly. “I'm more than happy to make this all about you.”

Her usually pale blue eyes were nearly navy. “I want to. You do it for me. I want to return the favor.”

Caroline squealed as I picked her up and tossed her over my shoulder. “Oh God, this is not sexy,” she groaned.

I smacked her ass as I hauled her back to the bedroom. “You in any position is sexy.” I tossed her on the bed and stripped in record time. I had just pulled out my wallet to grab a condom for later when Caroline opened her bedside table.

“I’ve got it covered,” she said, giving me a peek at a brand-new box.

I tossed my wallet down on the pile of clothes I had left on the floor. “Good girl.” I smirked. “Gold star for you.”

She laughed, a bright bubbly sound that I wanted to hear for the rest of time.

I sat up on the bed, my back against the headboard, and stroked my cock. “C’mere,” I said, patting the space on the mattress beside my hip.

Her brows furrowed. “Shouldn’t I be between your legs?”

“Yeah, if you want your neck to hurt.” I patted the bed again. “This is more comfortable for the both of us.”

Caroline curled up beside me.

“Lay your head low on my stomach.”

She took in how close her face was to my dick, and gingerly laid down. “Now what?” she whispered. I could feel her warm breath on my shaft. Shivers flooded my spine.

“Hand around me,” I said, letting go of my cock so she could take over.

Her fingers wrapped around my shaft so delicately. Her curiosity took over and she grazed my balls.

Fuck.

I swallowed and breathed through the urge to come on her face.

Caroline cupped my balls in one hand, testing the weight and massaging them with a feather-light grip.

She tipped her head back and peered up at me. “What if I’m not good at it?”

I let out a dry laugh. Caroline had no idea how close to the edge she had me. She was simply exploring my body, and the sight of that was as hot as a five-alarm fire.

“Sugar, I guarantee that won’t be the case. Just having you like this is fucking hot as hell.”

“Austin—”

“Trust me, sweetheart. I’ll guide you.”

Her body relaxed, curling into the side of my leg as she pumped my cock. Tentatively, the tip of her tongue darted out and swiped across the head.

Fuck. One little touch nearly set me off.

I let out a shoddy breath. “There you go, Sweets.”

Caroline took it as a green light and tried again, swirling her tongue around the tip.

A groan escaped, completely out of my control. “*Fuck.* Just like that.”

She got a little bolder, sliding the first few inches of my shaft between her lips. Her brows knitted together as she tried to adjust to the size.

I tangled my fingers in the back of her short hair and gently guided her head up and down. “Little more, sweetheart. You can take it.”

Caroline draped her leg over mine as she shifted and adjusted her position. Her cheek was pressed against my abs, eyes closed and serene as she used one hand on the length of my shaft and her mouth on the head.

“Goddamn, that feels so good,” I rasped.

She pressed closer to me as she sucked hard.

My hand in her hair tightened. She whimpered at the scrape of my nails against her scalp. Goosebumps cropped up on her skin. I reached down and pulled the blanket over most of her body.

I slid my palm down her cheek and the side of her neck, coming back up to wrap my hand around her throat and cup her chin. “Relax your jaw, sweetheart.”

She whimpered around my dick.

I pressed my fingers along her jawbone, tightening the pressure on her throat. It was fucking erotic to feel those

graceful muscles constrict as she sucked on my cock.

Caroline let out a happy sigh, relaxing as she gave me the best fucking blowjob of my life.

It wasn't performative. The biggest turn-on was her simply offering me pleasure for pleasure's sake.

And when she reached down and cupped my balls, I nearly came on the spot.

"That's enough, sweetheart."

I could feel her frown against my shaft. She pulled back, only to take me further in her mouth as her tongue teased the head.

The mounting pressure was incredible. "Caroline."

Her hand squeezed as she sucked. I dropped my head back and swore so loud her neighbors probably heard me. "Sugar, you gotta stop. I'm gonna come."

Caroline pulled back. "But—"

I loved being able to manhandle her. I flipped her onto her back and braced myself above her before ripping her bedside table open for the condoms she had stashed. I grabbed one and tore into the packet.

"I love your enthusiasm—" I rolled the rubber on and knocked her legs open with my knee. "—but I would rather keep your relationship with my cock positive. I don't want to make you choke." I kissed the side of her throat. "Yet."

Before she could argue with me and make me want to fill her mouth with my come, I levered down and licked up her slit, making sure she was just as ready as I was.

Caroline arched her spine, eyes rolling back her head.

When I moved back up, she wrapped her arms around my neck and slammed her lips to mine. I hitched her legs around my hips and slid home.

Caroline keened when I bottomed out inside of her. "Move. Please move," she gasped.

Who was I to argue? I drove into her hard. Caroline clenched around me. “Shit, are you trying to strangle my dick?”

Whispers of *harder, faster* spurred me on. Gone was the innocent dove I had fucked for the first time. Caroline had learned just how to take me. How to move with me. She knew what she liked and didn’t hesitate to tell me. The two of us worked in tandem, chasing ecstasy like sparks licking up gasoline and igniting into a roaring inferno.

Her expression was dazed. “I need this.”

I held inside of her, and ground against her clit until she was on the edge. “Need what?”

Caroline never answered. She went silent and rigid as her orgasm crested and crashed. I wasn’t far behind.

When we came down from the high, we cleaned up and got ready to get a little sleep. I had my work bag on my side of the bed, ready for the morning.

Crawling under the covers with her was so natural. She curled up in my arms without a fraction of hesitation. I held her as we reached the juncture of consciousness and sleep.

“What was it that you needed, Sugar?” I asked quietly, unsure if she was still awake or not.

Caroline’s hand splayed across my chest. Her whisper was soft like a feather. “You.”

AUSTIN

“Austin, we have to get up,” Caroline whispered into my chest.

I wrapped my arms tighter around her shoulders, pinning her to me. “Says who?”

“The taxpayers who sign our paychecks,” she countered.

“Fine. Give me five more minutes,” I grumbled, turning her onto her side so that I could spoon her. I buried my face into the top of her hair and breathed her in.

Caroline tried to wiggle out of my grasp. “Five minutes will turn into ten. Up and at ‘em, Hale.”

“It’s funny that you think I won’t pin you to this bed, Sugar.” I tilted my head and nipped at her earlobe, pulling a squeak from her. “I’m bigger than you.”

She rolled in my arms and faced me. “Pick on someone your own size, then.”

I pressed my lips to her forehead. “I quite like picking on you.”

Her mouth turned up in a soft smile as she tucked her head into my chest again. “I like it too.”

She relaxed as I rubbed up and down her bare back. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Mhmm.”

“How you feeling this morning?”

Caroline cocked an eyebrow. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t treat me like I’m going to explode at any second. We went on a date, and we were up a little late when we got home. I’m gonna be a little tired today, but that’s just life.”

“Doesn’t mean I won’t worry about you.”

That’s when she shoved her way out of my arms. “I’ve gotta get ready and get to school,” she clipped.

“Sweets—”

But she had already shut the bathroom door.

I kept my cool while I dug through my station bag and threw my clothes on before neatly making her bed and propping her pillows up.

When Caroline slipped out, we traded—me using the bathroom and her getting dressed. By the time I came out, she was shouldering her bag at the door.

“I’m going to worry about you,” I said as I held her hand while we made our way down the stairs. “It’s just who I am.”

“I know that,” she said calmly, tossing her bag into her car. “But I spent the first twenty-one years of my life being coddled. So, if I say that I’m fine, I need you to trust that I know my own limits.”

I didn’t like that answer one bit, but I also didn’t hold a place in her life that granted me the ability to argue with her about it.

“Hey.” I grabbed her arm before she could slide into the driver’s seat. Caroline spun, smacking into my chest. I tipped her chin up and looked her dead in the eye. “I hope you have a good day at school, Sugar.”

“Thanks.” She popped up onto her tiptoes, craning her neck as she pecked my cheek.

“That’s not good enough for me.” I backed her up against the side of the car and kissed her square on the mouth. “That’s better.”

“We’re almost done with the list,” she said, looking dazed. “It didn’t take nearly as long as I thought it would.”

It was long enough for me to fall for her, I thought to myself. But I didn’t say it out loud. This whole arrangement was about Caroline seizing her independence.

I held her door open while she slid in. “Drive safe, Miss Tyree.”

Caroline rolled her window down and grabbed my hand. “Stay safe today.” Then, quietly, she added, “Please?”

I dipped my head inside and kissed her just because I wanted to. “I promise. Call me when you get home. I’ll call you back if we’re toned out.”

I watched as she pulled away, feeling like my heart was outside of my body.

I was so fucked.

I still had a little time before I needed to be at the station. With our schedules being fairly opposite, I rarely saw Beth.

Guilt snaked around me like vining morning glories, choking the life out of me.

I had been so preoccupied with Caroline that I was letting the reason I was here in the first place go unnoticed.

Shit.

I sped through town, picking up a few necessities on the way. These were the days I was happy that Falls Creek didn’t have the wonky road patterns of the coast. I could get around fairly quickly because I wasn’t going around my ass to get to my elbow.

The first thing I saw when I opened the door to Beth’s half of the duplex were candles burning by the dozen on the coffee table ... right next to a stack of papers. *Dear God, she was going to give me an aneurysm.*

I was halfway through blowing them all out when Beth wandered out of the bathroom and screamed in terror.

“Fuck!” She pressed one hand to her heart and the other to her stomach. “What the hell are you doing here? I thought you said you wouldn’t be home.”

I lifted the spoils I’d picked up at the bakery. “Brought you breakfast before I gotta be at the station. I felt bad for being MIA this weekend.”

She eyed the paper bag with suspicion before deciding to take it. “I just figured you went home for the weekend or something.”

Right. Because in Beth’s mind, Falls Creek was her home. Not mine.

She pulled out the slice of quiche and croissant I’d gotten for her and dropped it on a plate. “It was fine,” she continued. “I laid low.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Just didn’t feel like doing much.”

Alarms went off in my mind, an endless loop of possibilities of what could go wrong scrolled through my mind. “Do you need to see your OB before your next appointment?”

“No,” she said through a mouthful of quiche.

“You know, I was reading this article on depression and pregnancy, and it said that you can experience the same ‘baby blues’ before the baby is born as some women do during the postpartum phase.”

She paused with the croissant halfway to her mouth. “If you came by to interrogate me about why I felt like sleeping all weekend after a really stressful week, you can go. I’m fine. I’m sorry that I wasn’t out running marathons and flipping tires like you do.”

“Why was it stressful?”

“Nothing,” she clipped. “Forget I said it.”

Ha. Like that was about to happen.

“Bethany Marie Hale, tell me *exactly* what happened.”

“Nothing!” she shouted, throwing her head back and looking at the ceiling. “I’m fine.”

If one more woman in my life lied to me and said she was fine...

“Cut it out and talk to me. I can’t fix it if you don’t tell me what happened.”

“I don’t need you to fix anything, Austin!” Beth dropped the plate on the coffee table and stood. “I get that I’m your little sister, but I’m not a child. I’m about to have one. And I’m allowed to have bad days without you swooping in like mom and dad and smothering people to death. But you’re just like them.” She tossed her hand at me. “The never-made-a-mistake-in-his-life, golden-boy firstborn. Congratulations on being perfect, but I don’t need you to fix me to be like you.”

Since when was caring for people a bad thing? Growing up, it was the golden rule in our house.

Screw doing for others as they do to you. Do for them what they need whether they like it or not.

“I’m just trying to help.”

“I don’t need your help!” she shouted, eyes welling up with tears. “I don’t need you to fix me. I just need you to be here to tell me it’s going to be okay.”

I sat on the edge of the coffee table, bracing my elbows on my knees. “Have I gone about this all wrong?”

Beth plopped down in her chair. “Your guess is as good as mine. I’m just making it up as I go and pretending like I know what I’m doing.” She sniffed. “Bradley flipping on me the way he did when I found out I was pregnant... It scared me. And I’m still a little scared. I need you here, but we’ve gotta figure this out.”

“You’re my sister,” I began. “My *little* sister, no matter how old you get. And it will always be my first instinct to come to your rescue.”

Her exasperated expression softened. “I’m going to be a mother.”

“And I’m going to spoil the shit out of your kid.”

She frowned. “You absolutely will not.”

“Count on it,” I clipped.

She let out a soft sigh. “At least you didn’t sell your house back home.”

Without even a second thought, I said, “If you think for one minute I’m leaving Falls Creek, you’re sorely mistaken.”

Caroline’s reminder that I needed to be Beth’s brother first floated through my head.

“But maybe I’ll see about getting my own place in town. You’ll need the spare room here for a nursery anyway. I can’t stay in it forever.”

“I don’t want you to think that I’m cutting you out,” Beth said. “I just . . . I need to know that I can do this on my own—even if I don’t have to.”

“You can do it, kiddo.” I stood and shoved my hands in my pockets. “I’ve gotta get to work. Will I see you tomorrow?”

“I have a morning class and then I’m free after lunch,” she said. “But I saw this crib online. Wanna go with me in case the person selling it is an ax murderer?”

I laughed. “You got it.”

A SHARP WHISTLE carried across the patio of the Copper Mule. I looked over my shoulder as I opened the front door, ready for some grub after my shift. Callum was waving me over. He, Layla, and Shane had commandeered a table next to one of the outdoor heaters, and had a breakfast feast fit for an army spread between them.

“Mornin’,” I said.

Layla turned in her chair. “You gonna stand there or are you gonna join us?”

I put my hands up defensively. “I don’t wanna crash your party.”

“Nah,” Shane said, sipping his coffee. “That would be me. I crashed their breakfast. Three’s a crowd, four’s a party.”

I relented and left the front entrance, rounding the low wrought-iron fence that separated the patio from the sidewalk.

“Well, hey there, hot stuff,” Tiffany said as she danced around the outdoor tables, topping off coffees. “What can I getcha?”

Whatever was on Layla’s plate smelled divine. I pointed to it. “I’ll have that.”

“Pimiento cheese biscuits and home fries?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How do you want your eggs?”

“Sunny side up.”

“To drink?”

“Coffee.”

Her pen scratched at the ticket. “Coming right up.”

“You just getting off?” Layla asked.

“Yeah,” I groaned, scrubbing my hands down my face. “Long night. I’m gonna go crash and then go with Beth to get a crib. You going in or clocked out?”

Layla pointed to herself. “I just finished a twenty-four.” She pointed to Callum and Shane, the two men in their respective police officer and EMS uniforms. “They’re about to go in. Cal and I decided to meet up for breakfast since we’ve only seen each other in passing the last few days.”

“How’s Beth doing?” Callum asked as he stole a fried potato from Layla’s plate and popped it in his mouth.

I waited until Tiffany made her rounds again, dropping off my food and doling out checks to the handful of patrons meeting over biscuits and coffee.

I inhaled half of a pimiento cheese biscuit, then sighed. “I guess she’s as fine as can be. As much as I fuckin’ hate it, she doesn’t need me hovering around her for the next few months.”

Callum frowned. “You going back to Beaufort?”

“Nah.”

Caroline’s observations floated through my mind, mixing with the conversation I’d had with Beth before I started work yesterday.

“But I, uh... I’m trying to be more of a brother and less of a parent. Beth’s gonna be a momma herself, and she needs the space free so she can start getting ready for the baby. I’m gonna try and find a place close by so I can be there when she does need help.”

Layla’s fork scraped across her plate, gathering the crumbs. “Y’all are close, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “Hales are like that. Family first.”

“Sounds like the Mousavis,” Callum said, tipping his coffee toward Layla.

“You started looking for a place?” Shane asked.

“Nah.” I stabbed a home fry. “I need sleep first.”

“Good luck,” Callum clipped with a smug look. “Finding rentals is like finding a needle in a haystack in this town.”

Layla smirked like she and her fiancé were communicating telepathically.

I groaned. “Great.”

“If you don’t mind a roommate, I have a spare bedroom,” Shane said. He chuckled into his coffee. “And before you think this is a handout, you’d get half the rent and utilities and half of a cat that adopted me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “A cat adopted *you*?”

He shrugged. “Little fucker showed up when I was moving in, walked in the door like he owned the place, plopped his

furry ass on my couch, and hasn't left."

"Aww," Layla said, dropping her chin into her hand. "This little bromance is gonna be adorable."

Shane wiped his mouth and tossed his napkin down. "Offer stands. Shoot me a text if you wanna come by and see the place. I gotta head out."

"Me too," Callum said, pushing away from the table. He rounded the table and kissed Layla. "Get some sleep, *asal*."

Layla squeezed his hand. "Stay safe. I love you."

"Love you, too."

Shane raised a hand. "Catch y'all next shift."

Layla lingered until Shane and Callum disappeared around the corner. As soon as they were out of earshot, she asked, "How'd she like the dress?"

It didn't matter how tired I was. I smiled. "It, uh ... did the trick."

"Don't be coy with me. I know you two are sneaking around and hooking up."

"It's not like that," I said defensively. I didn't care if Layla knew I was involved, but I wasn't sure how Caroline felt about her extracurricular activities being public knowledge.

She snorted a laugh. "Right. Because you buy a dress like that for a woman who's *just a friend*."

"Fine," I conceded. "It's ... going."

"What do you mean?"

I poked at the remnants of my breakfast.

"Come on," Layla said, flagging down Tiffany for another round of coffee. "I know we weren't close back in Beaufort, but I saw you enough to know that this—" she pointed to me "—isn't you at your best. What's going on?"

We were both feeling the kind of post-shift exhaustion where heart-to-hearts happened. Layla knew it too. Those bags under her eyes were a dead giveaway.

“What am I doing wrong?” I asked as I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyeballs.

“The women in my life are driving me fucking crazy trying to do everything by themselves. I just—” I huffed in frustration. “I care about her. Okay? I care about both of them. A whole fucking lot.” Upon realizing how weird it sounded to throw Beth and Caroline in the same boat, I added, “Differently, of course. I care about them both, just differently. It’s hard to be hands off when I just want to ... fix everything.”

“Don’t worry. I get it.”

“I’m too fucking old for this, Layla.”

“I agree,” she said, catching me completely off guard. “Look, I don’t know exactly what you and Caroline are up to, but you are too old to pretend like you don’t know exactly what you want and who you want it with. You’re acting exactly like the immature douche canoes you’re probably telling yourself you’re protecting her from.”

I groaned. “Remind me to never get breakfast with you again unless I’ve had a full night of sleep.”

Layla laughed.

“Why won’t the women in my life just let me take care of them?”

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and say that Caroline sees how you treat Beth and is afraid that you’re not actually into her, and you’ll just be another parent. And Beth is worried that because you’re acting like a mother hen with her, she isn’t equipped to be a mother herself.” She sipped her coffee. “It seems like with you moving out of Beth’s place, you’re on the right track there. So, let’s focus on Caroline.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You seem way too prepared for this conversation.”

Layla grinned. “Who do you think schemed with Brandie Jean to make this all happen? We’ve been keeping an eye on you two ever since y’all ate here together after I almost got

stabbed. I even had the girls back in Beaufort keeping tabs on you.”

I shook my head. “Shoulda know. You nurses have that crazy streak.”

Layla finished her coffee and pulled her card out to pay her and Callum’s bill. “Look. You want my advice?”

“I’m all ears.”

“All she’s ever seen is the kind of man you are when you’re responding to a crisis. And I get it—separating those parts of your life can be hard, but you have to figure it out. You’re not alone in that. I have to remind Callum all the time that I’m not his job, and sometimes he has to do the same to me. Treat her like an equal. Not like a project. She’s not a call you have to respond to. The tones stop when you’re off the clock. Show Caroline who you are when you’re not trying to hover around Beth or get your footing here.”

CAROLINE

There was a boulder in my stomach as I stared at Beth's front door. Even the festive St. Patrick's Day wreath couldn't quell the dread in my gut. I knocked, then quickly tucked my hands in my pockets to keep the tremors at bay.

I had been summoned.

The door whipped open, and Beth appeared in leggings and a Beaufort Fire hoodie. It was far too small to be Austin's. It must have been her way of supporting him when they lived across the state from each other.

"Hey," she said, blowing her honey-colored hair out of her face. "You just gonna stand out here all day? It's freezing. Get your fine ass in here."

It wasn't just freezing. The cold penetrated my bones like a knife. What I wouldn't give for one of the sporadic warm days that made me think summer was right around the corner.

"Hey," I said, my breath clouding around me.

"You look cute," she said, wandering back inside. "New outfit?"

I looked down at the pieces I had picked up on a whim. The dress was a little more fitted than my flowy skirts, belted in at the waist with a cardigan over top. I was even in the heels I wore on my date with Austin. I hadn't taught in them—I wore my Keds for that and changed into the heels after school.

I had my hair pulled halfway back, still giddy over the short ends that danced along my shoulders.

“Yeah. I just thought I’d change it up a little.”

“You look great!” she said. “Want something to eat?”

The smorgasbord strewn across her kitchen counters was a five-year-old’s dream. I perused the spread. There were sour gummy worms, oreos, chips of every variety, and a whole sheet pan of tater tots fresh out of the oven. Every sauce and condiment had been pulled out of the fridge and arranged beside it.

I raised my eyebrows. “Morning sickness going away?”

Beth popped a tot in her mouth. “Yep. Thank God. Just in time for the cravings to hit. And Austin’s been fairly preoccupied, so he hasn’t been breathing down my neck as much.”

Yeah, because he’s been in my bed.

Actually, he had been working nearly back-to-back shifts. But in his downtime, he was *very, very* preoccupied.

And there was that guilt again...

“So, what have you been up to?” she asked. “I know you paint and all that, but I swear you’ve been radio silent lately. You’re not avoiding us, right? I mean, I know BJ can be a bit much, but you’ve known her longer than I have.”

“I haven’t been avoiding you,” I squeaked. *Sweet Kara Walker, I was a terrible liar.*

My phone chimed, and I fished it out of my pocket.

Austin: What’s your weekend like?

Crap.

Glee was splashed all over my face like I was a walking Jackson Pollock.

“Ooh,” she cooed. “Who is it? Is this why you’ve been so dodgy? You’re seeing someone, aren’t you?”

“It’s not like that!” I blurted out.

Beth cackled. “I think it’s exactly like that! Who is he?” She was downright giddy. And after all she had been through, I didn’t want to take that from her.

“Um ... just someone I met at the New Year’s Eve party at the B&B.” That was vague enough, right?

She gasped. “*Who!*”

“But we’re not dating,” I clarified. “Just ... hanging out.” Through a cracked door, I spotted a crib and a gallon of paint. “Are you starting on the nursery?”

That was enough to distract her from my not-so-love life.

“Just the basics.” She smoothed her hand over her belly. “I got a really nice crib for a steal online, and Austin said he’d put a coat of paint on the walls for me before he goes home.”

What?

I had just assumed that he was texting me to see if I wanted to do something from the list this weekend, not telling me he wouldn’t be around any longer. I tried to keep my voice as steady as possible. “He’s going back to Beaufort?”

She eyed me curiously. “Yeah. He has some time off coming up. I’d do it myself, but he insisted I shouldn’t be around the paint fumes. He’s probably right.”

My stomach dropped. “What color are you painting it?”

She motioned to the room as she stuck her hand in the bag of sour gummy worms. “Just beige. I’ll find out whether this little troublemaker is a boy or a girl next month and get some decorations.”

Visions of fairytale castles covered in snaking vines and flowers floated through my mind. Or maybe a magical forest full of woodland creatures. And then the ideas exploded. Mermaids or pirates, mountains or jungle animals. The possibilities were endless. “You know, I could do a mural for you.”

“Really?” Her eyebrows nearly jumped off of her face. “You’d do that?”

“Of course!”

And maybe it would be enough to absolve me of sneaking around with her brother.

Or maybe it would give me a little more time in his orbit when the list was done. Because as much as he was ready for it to be over, I wasn’t.

“HEY, SWEETS.” Austin let himself into my apartment. It was seven PM on a Friday and I was already in my pajamas. *The nice ones he had gotten me from the lingerie shop.*

I was curled up on the couch, a blanket over my lap as I sipped on a mug of tea. “Hey. Everything okay?”

Austin had texted me minutes before I got in bed, asking if he could come over.

He locked the door behind him. “Yeah. You have a long weekend, right?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Yes?” Monday was President’s Day, and the school was closed.

“Do you have plans?”

I glanced at the empty canvas that was waiting to be filled with paint. “No?”

Austin braced his hands on the arm of the couch. “So, if I said we could finish your list, we could.”

There was something that had been shaken inside of him. Something that wasn’t the cool, calm, collected man I had gotten to know. I sat up a little straighter. “What’s going on?”

“I want to finish the list.”

Those six words gutted me. When the list was done, so were we.

I took a fortifying sip of lukewarm tea to calm my nerves. “If you don’t want to do it anymore...”

“No—” he interjected, pressing his fingertips against his eyes. “No—fuck no, Sweets. That’s ... That’s not what’s going on at all. I want to finish it. I wanna go out with a bang.”

I eyed him warily. “Okay?” I yawned. “It’s a little late to start tonight. Do you wanna do something tomorrow? I don’t know anywhere around here where we could go dancing, but I can figure—”

“I’ve got it,” he said, rounding the couch and facing me. One knee was on the seat and one foot braced against the floor. It was like there was so much energy coming off him he couldn’t contain it.

I reached out and touched his cheek. “Did something happen at work last night?”

Austin had been doing nothing but sleeping and working all week. His schedule was insane, and the two of us had barely talked apart from a handful of stray texts. When he got off work this morning, I was at school.

“Long night,” he admitted.

It was a rare thing to see someone as unflappable as Austin Hale on the verge of crumbling.

Occasionally, Layla talked about how the things she and Callum saw in their lines of work affected their life at home, but Austin never had.

I scooted closer. “Tell me about it?”

His smile was sad. “I’d rather not.”

I didn’t push it. “Okay. Are you staying tonight?”

“If it’s okay.”

I wanted him to see me as someone strong and independent, but right now I think he needed someone to care for more than I needed to prove myself.

I set my mug aside and wrapped my hand around his bicep. “Take me to bed?”

I was expecting him to take my hand or something, but to my surprise, he scooped me up, cradling me against his chest as he walked back to the bedroom.

“You need anything?”

“No,” I said with a yawn. “I was about to go to sleep anyway.”

“Give me a minute to lock up,” he said as he pulled the covers over me and disappeared. A few minutes later, Austin emerged from the bathroom, having made sure the door was secure, and the lights were off. His arms were around me the second he squeezed into my bed, pulling me back against his chest.

He held me tighter than usual, his breath shoddy.

“What happened?” I whispered into the darkness.

Austin let out a heavy sigh. “Car accident this morning right before I got off. Head-on collision. We were first on the scene. I was already tired—we were going all night. They were newlyweds. Still had ‘just married’ written on the back of their car. The wife didn’t make it. She was DOA and the husband was trapped in the car beside her while she bled out.”

I turned in his arms and buried myself in his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

His biceps turned to stone as he held on to me like I was a buoy.

“How do you usually handle it?” I asked.

“Hit the gym. Push my body to hurt until I’ve distracted myself.”

“That sounds like a punishment, not a distraction.”

“It usually works.”

His flawless physique was suddenly a harsh awakening for how seriously he took his job. The toll it took on him was carved in deep ridges of muscle.

I rested my cheek on his pectoral and closed my eyes. “Does this work?”

For the first time since he had barreled in my door, he took an actual breath. “Yeah.” His breathing was thready, but his heartbeat slowed. “It’s working.”

“WAKE UP.”

I pulled the pillow I was spooning closer to my chest and groaned.

“Sweets, wake up.”

I huffed and peeled open an eyelid. “It’s still dark out and it’s Saturday.”

Hands gently shook me. “Come on, Sugar. Wake up.”

Grunting as I rolled over, I found his chest and snuggled into his warmth. “No.”

“Damn, you’re playing dirty,” Austin murmured into my ear as he held me. “If I promise you coffee, will you get up?”

“No,” I grumbled.

“Come on, Caroline.”

“What time is it anyway?”

“Just after two. We’ve gotta get a move on.”

“Two *in the morning*?”

“You got a solid seven hours of sleep. Up and at ‘em.”

“I’d like a solid thirteen or fourteen. Goodnight.”

“C’mon, Sweets.” He started kissing up the back of my neck. “Be spontaneous.”

An hour later, I was awake against my will with a bag that was recklessly packed without rhyme or reason.

“You still haven’t told me what we’re doing or where we’re going,” I said as I locked the door behind me. Austin had my bag over his shoulder and my hand in his.

“Resolution number five with a sprinkle of resolution number three.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’m too tired. Spell it out for me.”

He chuckled, a spring in his step as he pulled me down the stairs. Apparently, all he needed was someone to cuddle with for a few hours to break the mental funk. “You’re not a morning person, are you?”

“I’m a normal morning person. Being dragged out of bed at two AM isn’t normal. Go call Callum or something. If he’s on night shift, I’m sure he’d love some company while he keeps Muriel the pig from terrorizing the town.”

“We’re going on a spontaneous road trip,” he said as he tossed our things in the truck’s backseat and opened my door to help me up.

I was bundled up but, without a word, he took off his coat and draped it over me like a blanket.

“So,” he said as he pulled onto the highway without so much as a map. “Why was a road trip on your list?”

I shrugged. “I’ve never really been away from Falls Creek. The furthest I’ve gone is Raleigh and that’s like, less than an hour away from home. I just wanted to see somewhere different. Eat gas station snacks, listen to music, live outside of the ordinary.”

“No vacations or anything?”

I shook my head. “I spent most of my childhood in and out of hospitals. Medical bills took precedence over summer trips. Being home was the vacation.”

The coffee that Austin grabbed from a drive-through somewhere an hour down the road didn’t help keep me awake in the least bit.

It was pitch-black as he merged onto Highway 70, just east of Raleigh. The cab of the truck was warm, and his coat over me was the coziest blanket I’d ever been under.

Or maybe that was just him.

“You gonna tell me where we’re going?”

He grinned, more relaxed than when he had shown up at my apartment. “Nope.”

“It seems counterproductive since these are *my* resolutions.”

“Do you trust me?”

No hesitation. “Yes.”

I must have fallen asleep on the drive, because when I awoke, we were cresting a bridge. It was still dark outside, and the clock on the dashboard flashed 6 AM at me.

“Morning, Sweets,” Austin said as he smoothed my hair down with one hand. “Sleep good?”

“Sorry,” I yawned, wiping the drool from the corner of my mouth. “Didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

“That’s alright. I’ve just been eating all the gas station snacks and jamming out without you.”

“I don’t think people say ‘jam’ anymore.”

He laughed. “What’s wrong with calling a song a ‘jam’?”

“It makes you sound old.”

He leaned over and whispered, “Sugar, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I am old.”

I leaned into him and whispered back, “Yeah. And it’s kinda hot.” I shimmied up, sitting straight as he took a sharp right onto a two-lane road. “Still not telling me where we’re going?”

“Nah. But we’re almost there.”

Austin must have known exactly where we were going because the quick left he pulled scared the bejeezus out of me. I thought we were about to plow into a grove of trees, but he pulled the truck into a narrow entrance that opened into an abandoned parking lot.

“This is...” I looked around. “This is really something...” I yawned and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. “How long were

we on the road for?”

“Little over three hours. You’re a deep sleeper, you know that?” Austin glanced at the clock, then cut the ignition. “Come on, Sugar. Let’s get going. We don’t wanna miss it.”

Reluctantly, I followed him out of the truck and waited patiently as he grabbed the stack of blankets that had been in the back of the truck since our first spontaneous stargazing date.

Wait—that wasn’t a date. Was it?

Something akin to rushing wind roared in the distance.

I could smell it.

Salt air.

I stopped dead in my tracks and looked up at him. “Are we at the beach?”

His grin was brilliant in the predawn air. “Come on, Sweets. Don’t wanna miss the sunrise.”

Austin took my hand and led me down a curving wood-slatted bridge that was shrouded by thick mangroves and evergreen trees. The darkness was impenetrable. I stumbled on a raised board, but Austin’s reflexes were faster, keeping me upright as we broke through the thicket, onto a raised platform.

Dawn was breaking, black skies slowly turning to twilight. Brilliant streaks of blazing orange cracked across the horizon. I clapped my hands over my mouth, staring in awe. I couldn’t control my laughter, turning around only to find Austin with his phone out, taking a picture.

He pocketed his phone with a self-satisfied smirk and nodded to the stairs. “Go on.”

I bolted, scurrying down sand-covered steps and then darting across the beach. By the time I made it to the packed wet sand, I was out of breath. “Okay. Running in sand. Bad idea.”

Austin caught up to me and spread a blanket out a few feet away from where the waves licked up the beach. I sat on the very edge and reached out to feel the water.

It was like ice against my skin, but I didn't care.

Warmth enveloped me from behind as Austin sat and wrapped his arms around me.

We sat in silence as the sky lit up in a palette of colors. I had seen my fair share of sunrises and sunsets—even painted a cool half-dozen—but this was extraordinary.

“What do you think?” Austin murmured as he pressed a kiss into the back of my head. “Is the ocean everything you hoped it would be?”

We were the only ones on the beach. Each crashing wave was deafening. Bright rays in pinks and yellows danced on the water like stained glass.

“It's incredible. It makes me feel so small.”

“You know what I see?” Austin said. “I see the ocean and think of how strong you are. And the way you look at that sunrise? The brilliant colors, the power of the waves, the steadfastness of the sun—that's the way I look at you. No matter how hard the days are, the sun keeps rising. It never stops. Never gives up. That's exactly who you are.”

AUSTIN

I kept my arms around Caroline while we watched the sun rise. Each one of her little comments let her inadvertently worm her way deeper and deeper into my heart. It was the way she pointed out swatches of color in the sky and gave each hue a name. It was how she couldn't help but gush over how peaceful and powerful the waves were in real-life. It was her excitement over digging her fingers in the cold sand.

"Sorry," she said in a reverent whisper as the sun rose higher and higher over the Atlantic.

I nuzzled into the crook of her neck and nipped at her ear. "Whatcha sorry for, sweetheart?"

Caroline laughed softly. "I don't think I've stopped talking since we sat down. I'll shut up now."

"Don't you dare. I enjoy listening to you talk." Gently, I gripped her jaw and tilted her chin. And just like the first time, I kissed her. "I like a lot of things about you."

Her smile reached the corners of her eyes as she rested her cheek on my chest and stared down the beach.

"You made me realize how much I took for granted growing up here. I've seen these sunrises and sunsets thousands of times. I think I forgot how magical they are."

"Maybe you just needed to be away for a bit."

"No," I countered. "I just wasn't ever here with the right person."

She was quiet for a few minutes, soaking in the morning light as we snuggled under blankets.

“About last night—”

She looked up and shook her head. “Don’t apologize.” With a tender touch, she pressed her hand to my jaw and kissed me.

It may not have been the most macho thing in the world, but I got damn fucking butterflies every time she initiated a kiss.

Those walls were crumbling, and she was coming into her own.

“You’ve seen me literally unable to get in the bath. The least I can do for you is let you cuddle me when you need it.”

I pressed my lips into her hair. “I should have gotten a better handle on myself before I showed up at your place.”

“No. You shouldn’t have.” She turned her back to the sunrise and faced me. “Just because your pain is different than mine doesn’t make it any less valid. Life hurts. Things are never black and white. It’s not even shades of gray.” She turned back to the sky that looked as though it had been filled with a paintbrush. “It’s color. And colors can’t be compared to one another. They just are. How would someone look at the soft greens of the Northern Lights and think that it’s greater or lesser than a sunrise on a beach?” Caroline twisted and cupped my cheeks. “Give yourself space to acknowledge where you are and what you feel. Allow yourself to feel it regardless of how you think it compares to what other people are going through. It’s the only way to heal.”

I kissed her forehead. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“Yeah.” She kissed my chin. “I’m realizing that I need to give myself grace to exist in the season of life that I’m in, no matter how hard it is.”

“Are you gonna be sad when this season is over?”

“The list?”

“Yeah.”

Are you going to be sad when we're over is what I really wanted to ask, but I didn't.

Caroline shuffled in my lap again, turning back toward the ocean. "I made the list because I wanted to "skip ahead" so badly. I wanted to catch up to where everyone else is in life."

"And?"

She found my hand under the blanket and squeezed. "And I think without you I wouldn't have taken the time to enjoy each resolution."

She didn't know it, but by tonight we would have the list completed.

And whatever happened next would be up to us.

"Thank you," I said solemnly. Something about this moment felt sacred. It was the beginning of the end. "For letting me be a part of this."

She rested her chin on her shoulder, a devilish smile working up her lips. "I'm not sure if I should be mad at you or thanking you."

"Why's that, Sugar?"

She grinned. "I lost my virginity to a sexy firefighter with a massive dick. It was great, but you might have ruined sex for me."

I tossed my head back and laughed before tackling her and pinning her down. We rolled in the sand, Caroline shrieking and laughing as I grabbed her wrists and shackled them by her sides. Our chests pressed together as we caught our breath. "I guess I'll just have to ruin a few more things for you."

I HAD to physically peel Caroline off the beach. She only went willingly after I promised that we could come back to see it one more time before we went home. Her cheeks were whipped into a candy apple red by the wind.

“Where are we going?” she asked as we trudged back to the truck. As much as she was in love with the beach, she *hated* walking in the sand. I just hoped that seeing the ocean in all its majesty made up for the burn in her thighs.

“Well,” I said as I tossed the blankets in the truck’s bed and weighed them down with a toolbox. They were covered like sugar cookies. “I figured I could either show you around first and then eat breakfast, or we could eat and then explore. Up to you.”

She waited patiently as I opened her door and offered my hand. “Can we explore on our way to food?”

I leaned in the cab and pecked her lips. “Yes, ma’am.”

Driving down the coast as we listened to a country radio station was everything I had ever hoped for.

Love in this place.

It reminded me of those movies Beth was obsessed with when we were younger. Those magical tales where the girl who was just there for the summer met the hometown boy, and they fell in love over sunsets and salt air.

Maybe Caroline and I weren’t actually together, and maybe this had gotten out of hand. But in this moment, Caroline Tyree was mine.

I pulled out onto the tree-lined road and took her hand, lacing our fingers together as I drove.

“So, this is actually Atlantic Beach,” I said as I hung a left at an intersection and started over a massive bridge. “Beaufort’s two towns over. It’s on the water, but I wanted you to really see the ocean. When we get back on the mainland, we’ll be in Morehead City, and then we’ll go over another bridge to Radio Island, and then another one to get to Beaufort.”

She stared at the crisp blue water as we flew over the bridge. Little strips of white broke up the otherwise pristine surface.

“Do you come out here a lot?”

“I used to. Especially in the summer. Some locals hate the crowds, but I don’t. It’s a good place to get lost. Everything stops when you’ve got your feet in the sand and the sun on your back. All the stress, all the pressure. Going out there when it’s in the eighties and it’s just you and Mother Nature? Nothing better. Even if you’re sharing her with a thousand other summertimers.”

“Sounds like I need to spend my summer break here,” she mused to herself. “I’d have to bathe in sunscreen, but it would be worth it.”

“You should. What do you usually do with your summers off?”

“This is my second year teaching, so I’ve only had one summer so far. I still lived with my parents for my first, so I mostly spent it painting and surviving flare-ups.”

I gave her hand a squeeze. “Why’d you move out?”

“I wanted my independence.” Then, cautiously, she admitted, “I love my mom and dad so much, but they add a lot of stress. Constantly checking up on me and worrying about me made me worry more. It’s easier to manage my stress and keep the flares down when I don’t have someone constantly reminding me of everything going on.”

I had questions, but I didn’t want to pester her or make her feel like she had to defend her feelings. So, I settled on, “Makes sense.”

The truck shuddered down pothole riddled roads as we entered Morehead City. I pointed out a few local hotspots I used to frequent, then noted their fire station and gave her a rundown of their equipment and apparatuses.

Caroline played it cool while I nerded out about their engines and their features.

The bridge at the port was tall, making Caroline’s face turn a little green as we rose to the top. I gave her hand another squeeze and grazed my thumb over her skin in soothing, repetitive motions. “Don’t look down. Look at the horizon.”

Green marshes speckled the water that separated the mainland from the barrier islands. Boats dotted the strips of blue. Birds flocked around the tall grass.

She let out a breath and leaned over, resting her temple on my shoulder. I bent down and kissed the top of her head.

Radio Island was the size of a postage stamp and, before she knew it, we were heading over the last bridge to Beaufort.

American flags floated in the breeze as we pulled into a small downtown set on the water.

“I want to paint that,” she gasped as a large white hotel came into view. Massive columns held up the front porch. It was opulence and wealth mixed with seaside charm.

“That’s the Taylor Creek Inn,” I said. “Nice place.” I pointed across the street to a brick restaurant covered in snaking vines. “That’s Revanche. I grew up with the pastry chef. I might take you there for dinner if you feel up to it.”

“This town is adorable,” she gushed, peering at a Queens—a little coffee shop tucked away, catty-cornered to the hotel. I took a left into the grid of historic homes, each maintained with pride.

I couldn’t fight away my smile. I wanted her to love this place. “Yeah? You like it?”

She had her phone pressed against the window, snapping a photo of a tidy, white-sided house with a little blue cottage in the backyard. Flower beds looked prepped and ready for spring.

I slowed so she could get a better picture. “What are you doing?”

“I told you—I’m gonna paint this.”

“I thought you said you were gonna paint the Inn?”

“I’m gonna paint all of it.”

I stared at the house, my mind going back to the last time I had been there. The circumstances were much different. Much more dire. “I know the couple that lives there. I can see if

they're home. They'd probably be okay with you taking some more pictures."

She flipped through the shots she had taken. "It's okay. These'll work. I paint mostly from memory anyway."

I pulled away, happy to leave the past behind.

"Where to next?" she asked.

I let out a breath. "Home."

I took us around Jarrett Bay, and jumped onto Highway 101, cruising past Jokers before turning onto my street.

I lived in a one-story house on Core Creek that I had been fixing up for the better part of two years. Of course when it was finally done, I moved in with Beth.

"This is your place?" Caroline asked as I pulled into the driveway.

"Home sweet home."

She stared at the little yellow house with its white trim and neat flower boxes. My mom must have dropped by and swapped the winter wreath out with a springtime one she had made when she brought groceries by.

"This is..."

"Not what you expected?"

She shook her head. "Nope. I had you pegged as a bachelor pad kind of guy. And you live here alone?"

"Yep." I yanked the keys out of the ignition. "Let's get you inside. I suppose feeding you breakfast is the least I can do after kidnapping you in the middle of the night."

Caroline wandered around my house, taking it all in while I scrambled eggs and toasted bread.

When our spread was on the table, I found her staring at the river that snaked around my back porch. "Hungry?" I asked.

She leaned back into my chest and closed her eyes. "Yeah."

“You look like you’ve got something on your mind.” I held a piece of bacon out, waving it in front of her nose. “Any chance I can tempt you into talking about it?”

She followed me back to the breakfast nook and slid into the bench seat. “Just thinking is all.”

“About?”

She let out a wry chuckle as she dove into her breakfast. “Nothing important.”

“Bullshit. Tell me.”

She sighed. “Just wondering how different my life would have been if I never got sick. Does that make me a bad person? To wish that I never had to go through all of it? I missed out on so much. Summers at the beach. Making friends. All the milestones that I’m just now catching up on.”

“No,” I clipped. “You can wish whatever you want about your own life. But you know what I see?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’re gonna make me look on the bright side, aren’t you?”

I laughed. “Yes, ma’am. Bear with me. It’s fucking sunny over here.” I cleared my throat with a sip of coffee before reaching over and holding her hand. “Are you happy with where you are right now?”

She looked down at our joined palms and I wondered if she was thinking the same thing I was. “Yeah.”

“Maybe sometimes it’s better to wait and seize life when you’re ready for it, rather than just floating along, letting life happen to you. You feel like you’re behind, but you’re not. You have miles more earned empathy and life experience under your belt. Not despite everything you’ve been through, but because of it.”

“You know what I wish?” she said as she shoveled a bite in her mouth.

“What’s that?”

“That it was warm.”

I laughed. “I’ll have to bring you back in the summer so you can actually enjoy the beach.”

Caroline shook her head. “No. I mean, yeah, that too. But I wish it was warm because I’m craving ice cream like nobody’s business right now.”

I frowned. My mind raced with the implications of that, but I kept my cool. “Oh yeah?”

“Side effect of the transplant,” she said. “The doctors said that sometimes when you’re an organ donation recipient, you pick up some of the food preferences of the donor. I hated mint chocolate chip anything before the transplant, and now it’s my favorite. Freaking weird.”

I choked down the initial reaction and laughed. “That’s strange, but I guess it makes sense. You get a part of their body.” I swallowed down a lump of eggs. “Do you ever wish you had met your donor?”

“Yeah,” she said without hesitation. “I mean, I guess I understand why they wanted to stay anonymous. I just... I’ve always wanted to say thank you. I’ve always wanted to ask why they donated. I’ve always wanted to make sure that they were okay after the surgery. It’s no cakewalk for the donor either. I wish I could make sure they knew that I’m taking care of myself and taking care of their kidney. And I’d want to make sure they knew that I don’t take for granted what they did for me.”

“It’s Falls Creek. They probably know.”

We finished the rest of our breakfast in between bouts of small talk. When all was said and done, Caroline cleared the table while I washed the dishes.

A knock at the door startled us both. Caroline’s eyebrows furrowed. “Who’s that?”

I tossed the dish towel over my shoulder and peered out the window. “Brace yourself.”

Her eyes widened. “For what?”

“My mother.”

CAROLINE

“**W**hat do I say?” I hissed as I darted behind him, hiding from the window.

Austin laughed. “Hello?”

I swatted at his chest. “I mean, what do I say about why I’m here? I can’t just be like *I got snowed in with your son and spread my legs the first chance I got and now we’re here.*”

He pressed his fist to his mouth to keep from laughing again. “Yeah, maybe don’t lead with that.”

His mother knocked again.

“She knows you’re here, Sweets.”

“As what? Your friend? Your friend who you occasionally sleep with? Beth’s friend who you kidnapped in the middle of the night and drove to the coast?”

He bent and stole a quick kiss. His lips tasted like maple syrup and bacon. If it were just the two of us, I would have had a second breakfast from his mouth. *Naked.*

But it wasn’t just the two of us.

My not-boyfriend but occasional hookup and complete crush’s mother was right outside, and she was getting impatient.

I grabbed his arm before he could answer the door. “Austin —”

He must have taken pity on me, wide-eyed and scared, because he paused.

“I don’t know what to do. I need you to tell me.”

Austin cupped my jaw, smoothing his thumbs over my cheeks. “I’m going to introduce you as Caroline Tyree, the girl I invited to come spend the weekend here since we both had time off.”

“But what if she asks if we’re—”

“She won’t. You know why?”

I shook my head.

“Because we’re both adults who are allowed to have private lives and she respects that. We’re adults who have complex relationships that don’t necessarily fit in labeled boxes. So, before you go reducing yourself to a label, let me be clear that you’re more than a friend to me. You’re more than just benefits. I care about you.” I kissed her forehead. “I’m not gonna throw you to the wolves. I promise.”

I let out a nervous breath. “Okay.”

I stood in the corner, hiding in the juncture of the kitchen countertops as he opened the door.

“Hey, Mom.”

“There’s my baby,” an older woman cooed as the two of them hugged. She stepped back and took him in. “Why, Austin Scott—I know you’re done growing but I swear you get taller every time I see you.”

He laughed it off and stepped back, opening the door wider. “Come on in, Mom. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

I panicked and looked down at the rumpled sweatshirt and day-old leggings I was in. I was pretty sure I had dried paint on my butt. Austin didn’t exactly prepare me for meeting his parents when he woke me up at two in the morning.

I clasped my hands behind my back to hide the paint—wherever it was.

A tall lady in jeans and a Beaufort Fire sweatshirt stood in the doorway. She was an older version of Beth. Green eyes widened in slight surprise as she cupped her hands over her mouth. “Well, I’ll be—Caroline Tyree. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

I shot Austin a questioning glance, and he just shrugged.

You can do this Caroline. You interact with parents all the time. Sure, they’re parents of five-year-olds, but parents, nonetheless.

“Um ... hi. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“Well, Austin honey—she’s just darling!”

She is standing right here.

Austin scraped his thumb across his bottom lip. “Caroline, this is my mom, Susan Hale.”

“Oh, get out of here with the formalities,” she chided. “Caroline, I’m just tickled that you’re here for the weekend. Has my son been a gentleman and shown you around?”

“Yes, ma’am. Just the little bit I’ve seen is so idyllic.”

“Oh!” Susan patted down her jeans, finding a white envelope folded in her back pocket. “I almost forgot—” she handed the envelope to Austin. “That’s from Brenna. She dropped it off last week.”

“Thanks,” Austin clipped as he took it from her and stuffed it in his pocket. He tipped his head toward the refrigerator. “And thanks for filling the fridge.”

“Oh, it was no bother,” she said, waving his gratitude away with a flick of her hand. “Now, tell me about you. Austin says you’re an artist.”

I laughed nervously, balling the sleeves of my sweatshirt in my hands. “Not really. I just dabble. I’m a teacher, though.”

Lines crinkled around her eyes as she studied my face. “I can see it in you. That light. I bet you’re one of the good ones.”

I felt like she was reading my soul. There was an intensity about her I couldn't shake. It was kind, but overwhelming.

Austin's abdomen pressed against my back. "You talked to Beth lately?"

Susan cocked her hip against the edge of the countertops. "Yes, actually. She called this morning, and we caught up. Things seem to be okay." She let out a quiet sigh. "I wish your father and I could get up there to visit her, but with Granddad just getting out of the hospital again, I'm afraid to leave him without a caregiver for more than an hour."

"I know. And it's okay. I'm there." Austin's voice was firm. "Beth ... she's doing okay. It's hard on her, but she's taking it all in stride and she's got good people around her." I knew he was reluctant to admit it, even to himself.

"She told me you're moving out."

I snapped my head up and looked at Austin. "What?"

His bear paw hands squeezed my shoulders reassuringly. "A paramedic I work with was looking for a roommate. I figured I'd take him up on the offer while I look for somewhere more permanent so Beth could get started on the nursery."

Susan looked around Austin's house. I could see the disappointment on her face. I could feel it in Austin's body language, too.

This was a family home.

It was never meant for just him.

"The house has done well on that website you use to get summertimers to rent it. You gonna keep it on there or sell it?"

"I dunno. If I buy a place, I'll probably have to sell it. I might just rent for a while so I can keep this one."

Austin made another pot of coffee, and we settled in the living room to chat. He and I shared the couch while Susan took the armchair next to the window that overlooked the river. He left an appropriate amount of space between our

bodies, but kept his arm around my shoulders, tracing abstract shapes with his fingers all over my bicep.

Susan told stories of raising—in her words—polite hellions, and asked a little more about my paintings and life in Falls Creek. Time flew by and Susan apologized when she realized she had to get back home to give Austin’s granddad his medicine.

That was a lifestyle I was all too familiar with—being tethered to another person for basic needs like meals, medicine, and using the bathroom.

It was humbling for one party and exhausting for the other.

“I hope you come back to visit,” she whispered in my ear when she hugged me goodbye. “I really do.”

Austin hugged his mom, exchanging *I love yous* before promising to drop by again before we left town.

“So... How’d I do?” I asked when he closed the door.

Austin raised his eyebrows. “Huh?”

“You know ... how’d I do meeting your mom?”

He laughed. “Sugar, you could’a kicked a whole litter of puppies right in front of her and she would have said you were sweet as pie.”

I guffawed. “Why?”

Austin braced his hands on the countertop, caging me between his arms. “Because I told her you’re important to me. Simple as that.”

“THIS IS PERFECT,” I said as I licked around my cone. We were sitting in Austin’s truck with the heat cranked all the way up, watching the sun set over a little strip of islands that separated the Sound from the ocean.

Austin grinned from behind his Moose Tracks. “Yeah?”

“Mhmm.” I lapped at the ice cream again.

True to his word, Austin had taken me to Revanche—the nicest restaurant I’d ever been to—for dinner. Afterwards, we hit up a little general store—that also doubled as a laundromat—for ice cream to satisfy my hankering for mint chocolate chip.

Austin had parked along the street, spitting distance from the general store, next to a paddleboard rental shack. We had been making casual conversation, but he seemed distracted, eyes searching for something in the distance. I tried not to be offended, but he was being weird.

“There—”

Austin startled me, pointing at the windshield. “Look. Right there.”

I squinted into the hues of orange and red. “I’m not following... What am I looking for?”

“Not the sunset, Sweets. Look at the island.”

I followed the line of his finger for a moment before I saw it. “Is that—”

“Wild horses. Looks like a momma and her foal.”

I must have been frozen in my seat watching the horses for far too long. Austin startled me when he plucked my waffle cone out of my hand and licked around the side to clean up the drips before handing it back to me.

I blinked my way out of the stupor. “They’re majestic.”

The mare’s mane danced in the wind as she whipped her head back and forth.

“And they just stay out there?”

“Yep.” Austin took a chunk out of his ice cream cone. “It’s illegal to get within fifty feet of them. It actually keeps them safer than if humans intervened. They stay out there in their habitat and forage for food, survive hurricanes and storms, and take care of their own.”

“Like you,” I said, leaning over and resting my head on his shoulder.

His body shook as he laughed. “What do you mean?”

“You take care of your own. It’s how you looked at Beaufort, isn’t it? How you look at Falls Creek now. They’re yours.”

Austin’s eyes were soft as he watched the horses. “Yeah.”

We finished our dessert in silence as the sun sank low over the water.

“Do you miss it?” I asked as I found a napkin and cleaned off my fingers.

Austin pulled his seatbelt across his body and clicked it in. “Yeah. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t.”

“It’s okay to miss it,” I said. “It doesn’t make you a bad person to wish things were different.”

“Thanks, Sweets.” Instead of backing out of the space, he leaned over the cab and fisted the back of my hair, bringing my mouth to his.

The kiss tasted like vanilla, chocolate, and mint. I yielded to him, parting my lips as he slid his tongue against mine. Austin held my head in his hands, devouring me. I was resigned to taking it.

My all wasn’t enough when he was everything.

“You ready to finish the list?”

No. I didn’t want it to end. I didn’t want this to be the end of us.

But I understood what he was doing. Austin was protecting me by not drawing it out. The longer we went on like this, the more irreversible the feelings would be.

But did it matter when I was already too far gone?

“We’re going dancing?”

He grinned and pulled out of the space. “Yeah. I know just the place.”

That place was an unlit gravel lot on the side of the road.

“Uh...” I looked around when Austin cut the engine.
“Where are we?”

“Jokers,” he said as if it was obvious.

A dozen or so cars surrounded a dimly lit shack that looked like it was one gust of wind away from tipping over entirely. There were no exterior signs. Nothing that led me to believe that we were at an actual establishment...

...whatever that establishment was supposed to be.

“Is it safe to be here?” I whispered.

Austin’s rip-roaring laugh was all the answer I needed. “Sugar, trust me. It’s one of the safest places you can be.” He reached over and unlatched my seatbelt. “Come on. Time to take my girl dancing.”

I held Austin’s hand as he led me across the lot. Muffled music thrummed through the paper-thin walls.

“Austin, I don’t think we should be here,” I hissed as we hopped up onto the sidewalk. “This is like the place Flynn Ryder takes Rapunzel to scare her from being out in the world.”

He stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me like I was speaking in Latin. “What?”

I smacked him in the stomach. “Don’t *what* me. I spend most of my waking hours surrounded by five-year-olds.”

“Caroline—”

I blinked and Austin had me pinned against the outside of the building, shrouding me with his body. “What have I always promised you?”

It felt like he was scolding me for not trusting him.

He waited for me to answer.

“That I’m safe with you,” I finally said.

“And have I ever broken that promise or given you reason to doubt it?”

I shook my head.

“Then believe me when I tell you that you’re safe here.”

The door creaked precariously from one hinge as Austin opened it. We walked in and I was hit with a wall of country music.

The first thing I saw when I peered around Austin’s frame was a pregnant lady dancing on top of the bar.

“Hale!” the dancing mama-to-be hollered. Even though it was cold enough to snow, she was in a tank top that read, *God is great, beer is good, and people are crazy.*

A man with jet black hair and sleeves of intricate tattoos caught her as she leaped off the wood bar top.

A blonde pouring drinks chucked a towel at the woman’s back. “Clean up your shoe prints!”

“What is happening?” I whispered.

Austin’s only response was to tuck me into his side.

The pregnant lady barreled into us, throwing her arms around Austin.

He laughed and gave her a quick hug. “Hey, Mad.”

“Long time, no see! You just up and disappeared without a trace.”

“Long story,” he said.

“I heard about Beth,” she said. “Pass on my congratulations, will you? When’s she due?”

“August.” Austin tipped his chin in acknowledgement of the tattooed guy who had joined the little group.

He looked vaguely familiar.

“When’s your little troublemaker gonna make an appearance?” Austin asked.

She sighed and rested her hands on top of her very prominent bump. “One more month to go. Hopefully, this little guy will get a move on.”

She looked weary, but happy.

“Who’s this?” she asked, turning her attention to me.

“This is my girl, Caroline. Caroline, this is Maddie DeRossi and her husband, Luca.”

Holy Adrian Piper.

“Hi,” I said. My words were lost in the hum of the bar.

Austin tipped his head to Maddie and Luca. “Maddie’s the pastry chef I was telling you about, and Luca owns the restaurant.”

Luca lifted his eyebrows. “You took her to *Revanche*?”

“Yeah, we had dinner there tonight.” Austin looked down at me. “Figured I’d give my girl the full experience and bring her out here for a drink before we leave town.”

Maddie let out a little gasp as she looked at the two of us. Her smile turned nefarious as she backed away. “Well. Don’t let us spoil your fun. Y’all have a good night.”

Austin took my hand, leading me to the bar.

I stopped him dead in his tracks. “That’s *Luca DeRossi*.”

He grinned. “Yeah, I know.”

“*Celebrity chef Luca DeRossi*.”

“That’s right.”

“And we ate at his restaurant?”

“Yup.”

I was flabbergasted. “And you just *know* him? I’ve watched like ... all of his cooking shows.”

He nodded. “Yep. And there’s a fifty-fifty chance you might see Isaac Lawson here tonight.”

Shellshocked was an understatement. Isaac Lawson the billionaire?

The blonde, in a black and red Jokers tank top, smiled at him from behind the bar. “Hey, you.”

He rested his forearms on the bartop. “Hey, Bridget. How are you?”

Pins and needles pricked at my skin, and the back of my neck felt hot.

She braced her hands on the edge of the bar and grinned. “I’m good.” There was a little ring made from a straw wrapper on her left hand.

Austin winked. “I actually believe you this time.”

She looked down at her feet, then back at him, a little bashful. “Sentencing was last week. It’s over.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Judge maxed him out. Gave him everything we were hoping for.”

He swore under his breath. “Goddamn, that’s good fucking news. I’m happy for you both.”

Bridget turned her attention to me. “Hey, hon.” She tipped her head toward Austin. “You with this guy?”

“Um... Yes?”

Apparently, that was the right answer, because she looked pleased as she gave me a once-over. “You got an ID to drink?”

Austin snickered under his breath. “When was the last time you ID’d someone in this dump?”

“Well, I don’t get many newcomers and I know everyone else!” Bridget countered.

I dug around in my wallet and produced my driver’s license. “I’m twenty-two but I don’t really drink.” I looked up at Austin and mouthed, “Is that okay?”

Bridget waved me off. “No worries, peaches. I can get you a Coke or tea or mix you up something special. Whatcha want?”

“Um... Surprise me?”

“You got it.” She looked at Austin. “You want your usual?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When Bridget’s back was turned, crafting something up for me, I caught Austin’s attention and whispered, “That’s her, right? The girl you were hung up on?”

Austin shook his head and, without a moment of hesitation, said, “No. She’s not the one I’m hung up on anymore.”

AUSTIN

Damn, *it's good to be home.* Being back at Jokers for a beer with a pretty girl beside me was everything I needed to combat the stress of the week. It wasn't just being close to the ocean again. It wasn't the backwoods ambiance, music, and the crunch of peanut shells and pretzels underfoot.

It was her.

Caroline sat across the high-top table, watching the dance floor.

If I could read her mind, I'd probably find her taking notes and earmarking things to Google.

"How's your drink?" I asked as I sipped my beer.

Bridget had whipped up a fake Moscow Mule for Caroline. The copper mug hid the fact that it was just ginger beer, lime, and a sprig of mint.

Caroline smiled. "It's really good. I might start making these for myself just for the heck of it." She looked around, curiously studying the interior. "This is ... quite the place. I would have never expected it to be so popular from the outside."

"Bridget and her boyfriend, Chase—" I pointed out the other guy behind the bar with her "—are the owners now. Took over at the end of last year."

I lifted my hand and waved at Steve and Erica Pelham as they walked in. "That's Steve and Erica. He and Chase are

both cops with the Beaufort PD. We grew up together and used to run into each other a lot on calls.”

Caroline set her mug on the table and perched her chin in her hand. “You really know everyone, don’t you?”

“Pretty much. Especially here. I went to school with most of these people.” I pointed to Mel Jacobsen, who was now sporting a wedding ring. “I used to do CrossFit with her. She married Bridget’s brother, Jason, not too long ago. Layla used to work with her and those two are tight, so just know that when we get back to town, word will have gotten out about us being here.” I took her hand in mine, stroking the back of her knuckles. “You okay with that.”

Caroline swallowed a thick knot. “Yeah. Of course. Friends ... friends can road trip together. Right?”

Her words burned like acid, but I couldn’t argue with them. “Yeah, Sugar.”

I took another deep pull from my beer and set the empty on the table. “You ready to dance?”

“Oh, I—”

I followed her gaze to the dance floor. Maddie and Chase were killing it out there, swing dancing to a fast-paced 90s hit. Her pregnancy didn’t slow her down one bit. “Don’t be intimidated. Those two have been practicing those moves since high school. We’ll start easy.”

Before I could get Caroline out of her seat, a heavy hand clapped on my shoulder. “Hale.”

I turned and nearly ran straight into my old chief.

“Everett,” I said, shaking his hand. “How’s it going?”

“I should ask you that,” he said. “We’ve promoted some crew and brought on some probies, but I gotta say—I knew yours were gonna be some tough shoes to fill, but it hasn’t been the same without you.”

“I’m sure you’ll find the right candidate.”

“Say—how’s it going inland? Falls Creek, right? I’ve heard good things about the crew out that way. Got a buddy in the Hillsborough Department who speaks highly of your crew.”

“It’s good—”

Before I could introduce Caroline, he started talking my ear off, updating me on what it had been like since I left. Bridget sashayed by, clearing empties and doling out second rounds.

“How’d you like it?” she asked Caroline, pointing to the copper mug.

“So good. Thank you.”

There was a pause, before Bridget asked, “So, how long have you two been together?”

“Oh—we’re—”

“Just friends?” Bridget interjected before letting out a wry laugh. “Trust me, I did that song and dance for years. I can pinpoint those little lies pretty well.” Glass clinked as she picked up my empty beer bottle and tossed it in her bus bin. “I know you don’t know me, but here’s a word of advice from one woman to another.” Her tone quieted to a whisper, barely audible over Chief Everett talking to me. “Don’t let your pride or insecurity get in the way of something good. And he’s one of the good ones.”

Bridget gave me a wink as she hustled back to the bar to keep up with the crowd.

I turned to get Caroline out onto the dance floor, but she was gone.

Maddie’s screech of excitement was the siren song that led me back to Caroline. She was in the middle of the dance floor with—*fuck no*.

I elbowed my way through Maddie and her band of merry misfits and stole my woman back from Steve Pelham. “Nope. Fuck off. I’m not sharing. You have yours.”

His wife, Erica, laughed good-naturedly as she danced with Mel's husband, Jason.

Caroline's nerves faded away as I pulled her up against my chest and away from the melee. "I'm sorry," she said. "He asked if I wanted to dance and I didn't know how to tell him I was waiting for you."

I chuckled. "It's alright, Sweets. It's common practice around here to switch up partners and get newbies out onto the floor." I rubbed her arms reassuringly. "No harm, no foul. I'm sorry I got pulled away."

"So what was that about?"

My shoulder was a little high for her to comfortably be in frame. Instead, I took Caroline's hand and placed it on my chest, then took her other hand in mine and started to sway. "That man you were dancing with? He's a good guy. One of the best. But there might be a little lingering rivalry from a few years ago."

She looked up at me questioningly.

"Years ago, I was on duty and we responded to the scene of a car accident. The passenger was trapped and I was the one who cut her out of the vehicle. It, uh... It was pretty gruesome. Few weeks later I showed up here for a drink and saw her working behind the bar. Asked her out, and she shot me down." I tipped my head to Steve and Erica. "He was one of the responding police officers to that accident, and they fell for each other pretty quick. Now they're married and have a couple kids."

Her face fell a little. "Oh. I'm ... sorry?"

I cracked a smile. "I'm not."

We stood still in the middle of the dance floor, my hands roaming over her curves that were covered by a dress that looked like a sweater. She was so fucking cute in her leggings and tall caramel-colored boots. I wanted to peel each layer off like I was opening a present.

Mine.

I leaned down and grazed her lips. “Wasn’t the right person. Wasn’t the right time. And I think I’m learning to be okay when things don’t go my way. I’d rather wait for what’s meant for me.”

The kiss was deep, slow, and soul-stealing. Even in all the racket and chaos, it felt like we were the only two people on earth. I devoured her, drinking her in with every touch of my lips. Bodies bumped and shuffled around us, but I didn’t care.

Caroline broke away, sucking in a deep gasp of air. “That never gets old.”

“Yeah.” I knew she was talking about the kiss, but I was talking about her.

Timeless.

CAROLINE’S LAUGHTER was a soundtrack that I wanted to listen to for the rest of my life. I swung her around the dance floor to every song that came on the old, beat-up jukebox. Her skin glowed with a sheen of warmth and delight as she spun back into my arms and dipped backward to the tune of Jo Dee Messina singing about Carolina and California.

My hand was plastered to her lower back, keeping her close. “There you go,” I said, changing our pace for a two-step as the music transitioned to something a little slower.

I looked down to watch her feet. Caroline was a natural. She picked up the basics with ease and trusted me to lead her when I added moves to her repertoire.

“Is this everything you hoped it would be?” I asked as we shuffled across the floor.

Caroline looked up and nodded, her hair dancing along my arm. “Yeah,” she said wistfully. “It is.”

I stopped in the middle of the two-step and trapped her chin between my fingers. “Why do you look sad, Sugar?”

She just shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“Caroline...”

Instead of saying anything, she wrapped her arms around my hips and rested her head on my chest, closing her eyes. “I feel like I’m finally seeing you.”

I kissed her head. “What do you mean?”

“It’s like when I’m working on a painting. I have this ... this idea in my head of what it will be. I start on the background and build the colors. Then maybe I’ll paint a little of the subject, but it’s all vague. I bounce around, adding details. There’s usually a point where I’m pretty sure I’ve gone too far away from what I think it’s supposed to look like. And then I blink and it all comes together.” She looked up at me. “Seeing you here is that moment. It’s like I finished the subject, and then added all the background details. You’re still you no matter what, but it’s where you’re most comfortable that brings you to life.”

I was so far gone with this woman...

“You ready to go home or you wanna keep dancing?” I knew what I wanted.

Caroline popped up on her tiptoes and draped her arms around my neck. “Home.”

“Tired?”

“Mhmm.”

“Give me just a second to square up with Bridget and we’ll get out of here.”

I paid our tab and escorted Caroline out to the truck. The parking lot was half as full as it had been when we arrived. I pulled out onto the highway, the road noise drowning out the silence.

“Can I ask you something?”

I looked over at Caroline. “Of course.”

“What was that envelope your mom gave you this morning?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “You know how I said I used to help run a gym out here?”

“Yeah?”

“I had bought into it as a partner right before Beth—” my voice trailed off.

Caroline’s eyebrows rose. “Oh.”

“Brenna—the owner—found someone to buy me out, so I sold my half.” Slowly but surely, every last tie that was tethering me to Beaufort was being cut.

“I’m sorry,” she said, finding my hand in the dark cab and squeezing.

I wanted to tell her it was fine, but in all honesty it wasn’t. I uprooted my life without question, but that didn’t mean it was painless. I left things I loved. Places I loved. People I loved.

But it also brought me to *her*.

Caroline.

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

“So,” she said with a contented sigh. “How’d I do?”

I laughed. “You’re a natural.”

“Not just dancing. That was actually really fun. I just meant at ... at everything. The list is done.”

“I know,” I said as I brought our joined hands to my lips and kissed hers. “You’re a natural at all of it.”

I knew that the answer to the question I was going to ask would only bring pain, but dammit—I asked anyway. “What’s next for you?”

Caroline’s lips tensed. “What do you mean?”

“Now that you’ve finished the list. You, uh ... you planning on dating around a little?”

I vomited in my mouth.

A whispering sigh escaped her lips. “I don’t know. I’m kinda happy right now.”

I wanted to ask if she meant that she was happy having found a little more of herself, or happy in this moment with me. Truthfully, I wanted both. But that made me a selfish prick.

Caroline was three seconds away from falling asleep when I pulled into my driveway. I missed my house—the comfort of having my own space. But strangely, I couldn’t imagine living here ever again. It was just ... quiet.

Sure, I needed to get my shit out of Beth’s house and move in with Shane, but going back to nights alone?

I realized that it was Caroline I would miss more than I had been missing my old life. She crept into my heart without warning and made herself a fixture I couldn’t bear to lose.

We stood side-by-side, brushing our teeth. In our haste to get in the truck in time to see the sunrise on the beach, Caroline had forgotten to pack pajamas.

I gave her one of my shirts and promised to hold her to keep her warm.

“Can I be really honest about something?” Caroline asked as we peeled the covers back on my bed and climbed in.

“Always.”

She sighed. “I want to have sex, but I’m exhausted.”

Part of me wondered if “tired” was code for the morose feeling I’d been having since we started dancing like it was our last.

Because it was.

“Come here, Sweets.” I laid down and opened my arms. “Remember what I told you at the cabin?”

Caroline took up residence in her favorite place to sleep—my left side with my arm around her and her head in the divot between my chest and shoulder. “Remind me?”

“There are infinitely more things than just sex that make your body feel good.”

“You,” she said and went still, her breathing steady.
“You make me feel good.”

CAROLINE

“**T**his is for you, dear,” Susan said as she pushed a large gift bag into my hands.

Why is she giving me presents? It wasn't my birthday or a holiday.

Austin's casual nod said, “Just go with it.”

We had enjoyed a lazy morning of sleeping in and fooling around in bed before heading to his childhood home.

Susan showed me around, pointing out photos of adolescent Austin and Beth, looking thick as thieves. I met his granddad and teared up when he talked about how proud he was of his grandkids. After lunch, we piled into the family room for small talk. I sat beside Austin, a little unsure on how much I was supposed to interact with his family. I didn't want them to get the wrong idea. Austin had made it clear that he remembered we were *just* friends.

No matter what Bridget from the bar said, it wasn't my place to turn his life upside down by changing the rules of engagement.

It was all too much—taking a space that wasn't mine to hold. Doing the things that a woman who was going to be with Austin for the long haul should have been doing. It made me sick to my stomach.

“Oh, you shouldn't have,” I said as I peeled back the tissue paper.

“Nonsense. It’s not every day that my baby boy brings a lovely lady like yourself for a visit.”

I choked down the guilt and donned the face I used at school when I wasn’t feeling great and had to fake it. Sprigs of tulle, ribbon, and silk flowers poked out of the top. “Oh, how lovely—Austin and Beth have told me so much about your wreaths!”

Susan beamed.

Two were stuffed in the bag. I bent in half to pull the first one out, and felt Austin’s hand slide across my lower back. I righted myself with the wreath in my lap, but he didn’t recoil.

“It’s beautiful.” Red mesh, tulle, and ribbon circled the wreath. Sprigs of greenery popped out of the top, making the whole thing look like an apple. A little chalkboard in the middle read *Miss Tyree*.

“I thought it’d be perfect for your classroom.”

“I can’t wait to hang it up. Thank you.”

Austin took it from me so that I could grab the second wreath. It was lush green with silk butterflies floating on top of a bed of tulips. “Oh, I love this one!”

Susan’s eyes crinkled at the corners just like Austin’s did. “It’s one of my favorites too. This book I just read had such wonderful imagery with butterflies. When I found those at the craft store, I knew they had to go to someone special.”

I tried to discreetly dab my eyes as I thanked her. She didn’t know it, but each little show of kindness and normalcy only drove the knife in deeper.

“You about ready to go, Sweets?” Austin said quietly when his mom slipped out of the room to check on his granddad.

I nodded. “Whenever you are.”

Austin threaded his fingers up into my hair, massaging the back of my neck as he pressed his lips to my temple. “You okay?”

I wanted to pull away from him and pretend like I was unaffected. Instead, I leaned into his touch and closed my eyes, soaking up the last few moments of isolated bliss. When we got back to Falls Creek, we would be done.

I waited patiently as Austin said goodbye to his parents and granddad, promising to look out for Beth and visit more often. Both his mom and dad were teary-eyed as they hugged.

The Hales were a tight-knit bunch who loved each other fiercely and protected their own.

It was evident in how they had raised Austin to be so sacrificial, uprooting his life at a moment's notice when his sister was in trouble.

We rode in silence, heading back to the beach one last time before beginning the trip back to Falls Creek.

The sky was cloudy, casting a gray aura on the waves. Wind whipped off the water, making me shiver as we sat on the blanket in silence. I was positioned between Austin's bent knees. His arms were wrapped around me as he nuzzled his nose into my neck.

I let the roar of the ocean drown out my thoughts and, for a moment, simply let myself pretend I was Austin Hale's girl.



AUSTIN CARRIED our bags up the stairs. It was dinner time, but we had stopped for a bite before we got back into town. Neither of us was particularly keen on cooking after a day of driving.

"You're off tomorrow, right?" he asked as he carried my bags back into the bedroom.

"Yeah." I stood in front of the canvas that was perched on the easel. I had wanted to get started on it today, but I was losing the natural light. Maybe I could get a base layer or two in.

“You should take it easy,” Austin said, reappearing in the living room. He stood behind me at the canvas, resting his hands on my shoulders.

“We took it pretty easy all weekend.”

“Yeah, but all that traveling and change of pace probably stressed your body out. I don’t want you having a bad week because of me.”

“Austin—”

“Please,” he said gently. “For me.”

“I’ll take it easy tomorrow,” I promised with a sigh. “What about you? What are you doing?”

“Moving,” he murmured. “Shane said he’d have the spare room in his house cleared out this weekend. I’ll probably check on Beth. I need to make sure she’s alright.” He stood behind me quietly, studying the blank canvas. “What’s it going to be?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You gonna start on it tonight?”

I shrugged. “I was thinking about it.”

“Can I watch?”

I didn’t really like people watching me paint. It wasn’t that I had some carefully honed theory on how art should be created. It was always more of a “trust the process” scenario. And that process was messy.

I hated people watching me, because I was certain that they’d find me to be a fraud.

I laughed nervously as I thumbed through the TV tray that held my brushes. “I guess if you want to.”

“Are you nervous, Sweets?”

I shrugged. “No one’s ever seen me paint except for my mom and some hospital staff.”

“What do you mean?”

“Art therapy when I was there for long stays.” I smoothed my fingers over the textured canvas. “Having you watch kinda feels like losing my virginity again.”

Austin’s laugh was light. “Can’t be that bad.”

I smiled to myself. “It wasn’t bad the first time.”

His hands slid down my waist to my hips. There was a shuffle and I realized he had pulled my stool around for himself. Austin rested his forehead on my spine.

“Will you paint for me?”

There was something intimate about sharing this part of my soul with him. The part that equated emotions and sensations with color, bleeding it out on the canvas for posterity.

He sat behind me, silent, as I coated the canvas with a base of white. I worked calmly, adding dabs of color to the palette perched to the side, then stippling and brushing them into the background.

Clouds of red floated into my mind and leaked out of my fingertips onto the surface. I layered it with a splash of blue.

Green. It needed green.

Everything else faded away as I poured myself into my work. I grabbed my palette knife and edged out a sharp line silhouette in crisp white.

I didn’t need a reference photo for my subject. Every perfect mountain and valley was burned into my mind.

Green and brown swooped across the bottom in an abstract garden. Weeds and flowers sprung up, snaking around the subject’s ankles, dragging him to the earth. The man in the painting clutched his chest, splatters of scarlet pouring into the flower beds.

I mixed a pale pink and used the tip of the knife to dot drooping buds along green vines.

It wasn’t at all what I usually painted. I erred on the side of structure and realism, keeping my focus true to the inspiration.

This was ... different.

It was everything I had kept bottled up; abstract notions splayed on a canvas.

“My god...” Austin whispered reverently, his breath dancing around my neck. My hands were covered in muddled rainbows, but he slid his fingers through mine without regard for the mess. “It’s incredible, Caroline.”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice cracking as a tear slid down my cheek. I couldn’t wipe it away. “It’s you.”

“Sweetheart.” He reached out and touched the corner of the canvas, red transferring onto his fingertips.

I leaned back into him, taking the painting in as a whole. A man—an Adonis—clutched his heart as it poured from his chest, each piece of him that he lost giving life to the flowers blooming beneath. I had painted the bleeding hearts that grew around the Ballentine House in the spring. Weeds sprang up, snaring him to the earth.

It was painful and poetic. Beautiful, but tragic.

Because it’s how he saw himself. The one who sacrificed everything for everyone else.

I couldn’t peel my eyes away from the man in the painting. The savior *I* wanted to save. “Let yourself be wanted; not just needed. Fulfilling needs is easy for you. Letting yourself be wanted isn’t. You’re the guy whose arms people leap from after you rescue them. You watch them run to someone else time and time again and it kills you. You’re bleeding out inside while pretending to be strong enough to survive it.”

Austin’s voice was thick, lips parted as he breathed heavily. “We all bleed for something. Saving others. Saving ourselves. No one goes through life unscathed.”

I turned, looking up at him with glassy eyes. “But I ran to you because I wanted to. And I don’t want you to let go of me.”

Without thinking, I stripped my sweatshirt off and let it fall onto the dropcloth below my bare feet. I touched the canvas—

the place where he had left his finger prints. Red paint covered my hands.

Austin locked eyes with me and peeled away his t-shirt, exposing all of those ripping muscles. He was a beast, but he was wounded.

I stood before him and pressed my hand against his heart, transferring the red. “More than anything, I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.”

He didn’t say a word as I dabbed my fingers into my palette, then worked more color onto his chest.

“When I look at you, I see red. *Passion. Fire. Love.*” I dipped into another pool of paint, blending it down his sternum and across the opposite side of his chest. “I see shades of yellow. *Warmth and optimism.*”

I coated my hand in blue, then turned to face him. He grabbed my hips and pulled me down to straddle his lap. Austin draped my thighs over his hips and held my ass in both hands.

“You’re calm and trustworthy,” I said as I smudged his collarbone, neck, and jaw with blue. “Dependable.” Green and brown covered my hands as I worked them over his shoulders and biceps. “You’re strong. Unflappable. Stable.”

I wiped my palms on my leggings, cleaning them before I coated my fingers in crisp white. “Being near you feels like standing in light. You’re honest, and it makes me feel safe.”

My touch was light as I looked down at the colors blended across his chest and abdomen. “I don’t want you to bleed for me. I want you to know how much you healed things inside of me. Things I didn’t even know were wounded. I have no regrets, Austin. Not asking you to kiss me in that cabin. Not sharing all my firsts with you. Not letting you into my life in every way. I regret *nothing.*”

My lip quivered as I looked up at him. The words that spilled out next were sharp, splaying me open. “But if all of this is one-sided, I need you to tell me.” I sniffed and tried to dab my tears, then realized my hands were still covered in

paint. “I’ll be a mess, but I’ll survive. I’ll be okay. I just—I couldn’t let this be over without telling you.”

Without a word, Austin rubbed his palm over his chest and collarbone, blending the red and blue into violet. “I think falling in love is supposed to be messy.”

He cupped my cheek, painting my skin with purple as he kissed me. I tightened my legs around him as his other hand snaked around my back and unfastened my bra, letting it fall to the floor.

“You know what I see?” he said as he stood.

I clung to him with my arms and legs around his torso while he moved the stool out of the way, then laid me down on the dropcloth. Austin stripped my leggings away and braced himself above me.

“I see your ambition.” He grabbed a tube of paint and squeezed some red onto his fingers. He double-dipped onto my palette for white, mixing it into pink in his palms before sliding his hands over my chest and down the valley of my breasts. “I see your compassion.” Austin coated his entire hand in red and pressed it over my heart. “Your power. Your strength. It radiates from inside of you and nothing can hide it.” His thumbs rolled across my nipples making me gasp. He found orange and dotted it on the tip of my nose, smearing it around with his as he kissed me. “You’re creative.” He mixed a rich, regal purple, covering my ribs and scar in it. “Brave. So fucking brave.”

Austin kicked his paint-splattered jeans off, followed by his boxers. He spread my thighs, positioning himself between my legs and pressing his cock against my clit. “Don’t think for a fucking second that all this has been one-sided.”

He kissed me deep and slow, teasing me with just the head, careful not to get paint in places it didn’t belong.

“I love you,” he whispered against the corner of my mouth. His chest pressed against mine, blending the paint we had covered each other with.

I reached down and grabbed his ass, leaving a colorful handprint there just because I could.

“I—”

Austin had streaks of orange across his cheekbones, transferred during our kiss. “Say it to me when I’m inside of you.”

He reached down and grabbed my thigh, drawing it up to cradle his hip as he pushed into my pussy, bare and unencumbered. I groaned into his shoulder at the exquisite pressure. It was too much and not enough all at once.

“Breathe, Sugar,” he soothed in my ear, rocking his hips into mine as he fully sheathed himself inside of me. “Goddamn, you feel so fucking good.”

“I love you,” I said on the exhale. “I love you so much.”

“Keep telling me,” he said as he pushed inside of me again. “That’s what I want to hear. My name and those three words on your perfect lips.”

“I love you, Austin,” I cried out as he fucked me.

Because that’s what this was. *Fucking.*

The words were sweet, but the act was filthy. We rolled around on the drop cloth-covered floor, coating ourselves in paint and sweat as we whispered passionate *I love yous* back and forth.

Austin grabbed my hips and ground into my clit with steady pressure.

I whimpered, the roiling need to explode was nearing its peak.

“Come for me, sweetheart. I can feel your tight little pussy gripping my cock.” He held deep as flutters of ecstasy bloomed inside of me. “You’re squeezing it so tight.” Austin swore under his breath, his hands clenching, resisting the urge to use his paint-covered fingers.

My voice caught in my throat as I climaxed around him. I was silent and breathless when he pulled out. His hand

wrapped around his thick shaft, stroking and pumping as he stared at me with lust-filled eyes. His head tipped back in ecstasy as warm, thick ropes of his release painted my stomach.

Austin hunched forward, breathing deeply as he grabbed my hand, laced our fingers together, and used it to smear his fluids across my torso.

“Most of all,” he said, catching his breath. “My favorite thing about you is that you’re *mine*.”

AUSTIN

“**W**atch your step,” I said as I tucked a towel around my hips and offered Caroline my hand.

We had showered together, rinsing the myriad of colors on our bodies down the drain. Neither of us said much of anything, content to bathe each other, washing away the hues that we had chosen for each other.

The pressure of Caroline’s body against mine as I worked her curls into a lather was like an oxygen mask for my heart. She could have just as well done it herself, but knew that conceding and letting me do it was what I needed.

Her palm slid into mine as I helped her over the lip of the tub.

“I know I made a big deal about you taking it easy tomorrow, but all I want to do is bend you over this sink and make your little pussy sore.”

Caroline’s eyes widened, flashing clear blue like a glassy sea. “Yes, please.”

I laughed as I stood behind her, palming her ass beneath the towel that was draped around her shoulders. “Another day, Sweets. I don’t think I can go again.”

A wide comb was perched on the edge of the sink. I grabbed it and started working it through the ends of her hair, slowly making my way up to the crown of her head.

Caroline closed her eyes, letting out a little sigh of contentment. “That feels good.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded.

Combing her hair was one of the million little things that I knew she could do herself. But she let me do it for her because she knew I wanted to.

“We have some things to talk about,” I said.

Her eyes turned down to the sink. “I’m sorry.”

That ... wasn’t what I expected her to say.

“Why the hell are you sorry?”

“We agreed not to let feelings get in the way.”

“Come here,” I said, tossing the comb, and taking her hand, nearly dragging Caroline to her bedroom. I yanked the towel off her shoulders and the one off my hips and nudged her to get under the covers.

Caroline curled up in my arms. Skin-to-skin and souls bared, we lay together.

“I’m gonna say a bunch of shit and I need you to hear me out.” Instead of giving her time to be confused, I simply began. “Me agreeing to be casual with you when we started this had nothing to do with a lack of desire for you and everything to do with me wanting you to have everything you want in life. Since the night we danced together at the New Year’s Eve party, there hasn’t been a day I haven’t wanted you. I thought you were gorgeous. I liked hearing you talk and knew that if I could get you to open up, the two of us would probably never stop talking. And then we spent the weekend together at the cabin and you started opening up to me. You trusted me enough to tell me about everything you had been through and everything you were hoping to do this year.” I pressed a kiss to the side of her head. “I’ve always known how I feel about you. It’s never once been a question. But as much as I wanted to make you mine, I didn’t want to stand in your way.”

“So, you came along for the ride with me?”

“Yeah.”

She turned, positioning her body sideways so that she could use my chest as a pillow as we sat up against the headboard. “Where do we go from here? The list is over.”

I curled my fingers in her hair, bringing her lips to mine. “Maybe I want to take you out on your second first date. Maybe I want to show up to your classroom after school and kiss you just because I can. But I’m not going to take away your independence, sweetheart. You worked too hard to give it up so soon.”

“What if I’m okay with giving up a little bit of it?” she asked quietly, tracing her finger through my chest hair.

I couldn’t stop touching her. I worked my hand up and down her leg, tracing her ankle bone before squeezing her soft thighs.

“How about this?” I began. “I work a lot. You’re in the middle of your school year. I don’t want to put more stress on either of us. Let’s take this slow and leave the drastic decisions for the summer.”

She tucked her head into the crook of my neck, and I held her closer.

“Don’t think for a second that this means I don’t want you, sweetheart. Not in the slightest. I will always want what’s best for you. I don’t want to stop your growth just because you’ve bloomed.”

She hooked her pinky finger around mine and squeezed. “The summer, then.”

I squeezed back. “But you bet your fine little ass that I’ll still be sweeping you off your feet until then.”

“THAT THE LAST OF IT?” Beth asked from her perch on the tailgate of my truck. She had come along for—as she called it—moral support, since I wouldn’t dare let her help with any of the heavy lifting.

Not that there was much to lift.

Save for the mattress and bedframe I'd gotten myself when I moved in with Beth, all of my furniture was still at my house in Beaufort. I was a simple guy. I had a few boxes of clothes and not much more.

It floated through my mind again—the question I kept asking myself. *Why wasn't I moving in with Caroline again?*

For one, I had already committed to paying half of the rent here. On top of that, I meant everything I said to Caroline.

I didn't want to take her freedom. I didn't want to stunt her growth just because I knew I couldn't resist being an overbearing presence and that I'd be perfectly happy waiting on her hand and foot.

“That's it,” I said, wiping my hands on the front of my jeans.

Beth hopped down and closed up the truck bed. “So. We've had breakfast. I supervised while you loaded your truck. I managed the unloading of everything.”

“You wanna get to your point or are you just gonna keep telling me everything *I* did today?”

She smacked me in the chest. “What the hell, Aus! You take Caroline to Beaufort, she gets to meet mom and dad and granddad, and I don't even get to know that you're dating or that you've been sneaking around for two damn months?”

I snickered under my breath, quite proud of myself. “I didn't think you'd have a problem with it since you were the one who told me to ask her out.”

“And if I remember correctly, you're the one who said she was too young.”

“She *is* young.” *And yeah. I felt guilty about it.*

“But?”

I sighed and leaned against the side of the truck. “What do you want me to tell you, kid?”

Beth squealed, jumping up and down. “I’m just excited for you! My baby’s gonna have an uncle *and* an aunt!”

“Slow your roll there,” I said, putting my hands out to divert her energy.

“I will do no such thing.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and relented. “Fine. You get three questions and that’s all I’m saying on the matter.”

“Aww,” she cooed. “Look at you already being an overprotective ogre for someone other than me.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “You want your questions or not?”

“When did it start, how’d she like Beaufort, and is it serious?”

“Weekend at the Ballentine House, she loved it, and yes.”

Beth’s face fell. “That’s it?”

“What do you mean *that’s it?*”

“You’re not going to elaborate?”

“Nope.”

“Not even for your favorite sister?”

“You’re my only sister.”

“Fine. I’ll just have to get the gossip from Mom.” Her smile turned nefarious. “Or better yet, I’ll just go talk to Caroline.”

I scowled, ready to burn the world down for Caroline. I didn’t want anyone pestering her, especially not Beth. That fancy degree hanging on her wall was deceiving. She was whip-smart, but had the devious street smarts of a spy.

“Hang out with my girl all you want, but if I hear one word about you interrogating her—”

“She’s my future sister-in-law. We need to bond.”

“Fine. Bond.” I narrowed my eyes on her. “But if you scare her or tell her embarrassing stories about me, mark my words, I will get my revenge. I’ll lull you into a false sense of

security until one day I'll babysit your kid and return them to you hyped up on sugar and addicted to the most annoying kids' show I can find. I might even throw in a puppy for good measure."

"You wouldn't dare," Beth hissed.

"Try me."

A car pulled up and the engine cut off. Shane hopped out. His dark hair was soaked with sweat. He had gone to work out with Callum to give me space while I moved in.

Shane tipped his chin toward Beth and me. "Hey. Need a hand?"

"Nah, I got it all in. Thanks, though."

Shane's eyes flicked to Beth, and he gave her a polite nod. "Dr. Hale."

Beth went from her usual chaotic self to bashful in the blink of an eye. "No one calls me that. I don't have my doctorate yet." Under her breath, she muttered, "If I finish it at all."

He shrugged. "You will."

Nope. Didn't like that one bit.

Shane looked down at the t-shirt that was plastered to his chest. "I, uh ... I should go shower."

Beth looked him up and down.

I hated that even more.

"Probably should," she agreed.

As if summoned by Shane's car, a gray plume of fur darted out of the bushes and trotted up to the door. The cat looked at the door, then Shane, and then the door again. It was as if he was trying to say, "*Let me in, lazy ass.*"

Shane tipped his head toward the cat. "That's Richard."

Beth raised an eyebrow. "You named your cat Richard?"

Shane shrugged. "Didn't seem right to put "Dick" on vet paperwork. Richard was the compromise."

She gasped. “You did *not* name your cat Dick.”

Shane was unfazed. “Not my cat. I didn’t adopt him. He adopted me. And yeah. He’s an ass.”

Shane turned to me. “Your girl coming over?”

I frowned. “How do *you* know?”

He shrugged. “Callum told me. Layla told him. Some girl she worked with back where you’re from told her. Whole town knows.”

“Sweet Jesus,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Nah, she’s busy today.”

Shane must have caught a whiff of his own BO, because he grimaced. “Yeah, I’m gonna get that shower.” He shoved his hands in the pockets of his gym shorts and tipped his head to Beth. “Good to see you, Dr. Hale.”

Beth didn’t even argue about the nickname that time. She just lifted her hand. “You too.”

When the front door closed behind Shane, I turned to Beth and crossed my arms. “Wanna tell me what’s going on there?”

“Nothing,” she clipped.

I scoffed. “Bullshit.”

Beth crossed her arms over her stomach. It must have been a protective instinct. “Nothing’s going on with Shane.” Turning it back on me, she said, “Unlike you and Caroline.”

“I ‘fessed up to everything when there was something to ‘fess up to,” I countered.

“Fine,” she said. “When there’s something to ‘fess up to, I’ll do the same.” Her tone lowered to a whisper. “But mark my words, I won’t be ‘fessing up to anything.” She pulled her keys out of her pocket and jerked her thumb back toward her car parked on the curb. “I gotta go. BJ wants to go shopping for nursery things and if I don’t go with her, it’ll all be bedazzled.”

I pulled her into a hug. “Lemme know when you get home. Holler if you need something.”

“I will.”

I hugged her a little longer, sighing because my baby sister was gonna have a baby. “Love you, kid.”

Beth sniffed. “Thank you ... for everything.” She pulled back and wiped her eyes. “And for the record, I’m thrilled for you and Caroline. I have a good feeling about her.”

I waited until Beth’s taillights disappeared around the corner before locking my truck and heading inside.

Shane’s house was tiny and neat. Everything was cleaned and organized with military precision. I took a minute to sit on the couch and breathe. Life was changing, but it was good.

The cat was perched in the window, glaring at me.

A mason jar on the end table caught my eye. Colorful coins filled it to the brim. The one on top was bronze and had a “1” stamped into it.

A black keychain was wedged into the side of the jar, noting two years of sobriety.

Shane was friendly on and off duty, but mostly kept to himself. I realized that of all the times we had gathered at the Copper Mule for food or drinks, he always stuck to water, tea, or coffee.

I had no idea.

“I gave you the WiFi password, right?” Shane appeared in the living room, toweling off his hair.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. He knew I had been looking at the chips, so I addressed the elephant in the room. I nodded to the mason jar. “Congrats, man. That’s a big accomplishment.”

“Thanks,” he muttered nonchalantly as he straightened and tossed the towel over his shoulder.

And that’s when I saw it.

I had never seen Shane without a shirt on.

Not at the station when we were all changing after a call.

Not while working out.

Never.

Holy. Shit.

A neat scar slashed low across his abdomen. Two more smaller scars dotted the midline and side. I wouldn't have noticed had it not cut through his tattoos, warping the design.

Shane grabbed a clean t-shirt out of the laundry basket on the floor and pulled it on. His friendly demeanor shifted. "You got something you wanna say, Hale?"

Was I about to tank my new living situation in the first five minutes? Maybe. But if it gave Caroline closure, it would be worth it.

"It was you."

He stared at me for a moment, his passive face going stone cold.

"I guess it was only a matter of time until someone figured it out. Can't say I planned on it being today or you or ... *her* boyfriend."

Hearing him refer to Caroline as *her* made me want to sock him in the gut, right on top of that scar.

"You were Caroline's kidney donor."

"Yes."

"How many people know?"

"Two. Me and the person who drove me home from the hospital. Three, counting you."

"Who drove you home?"

"Brandie Jean."

WE RECONVENED over a pot of coffee. I needed the caffeine to make my brain work and stifle the instinct to go apeshit.

"It was going to be my final act of atonement," Shane began, sitting across the living room from me. Richard

stretched across the top of the chair he was in, having chosen Shane's side.

“What do you mean?”

He sighed and hunched over, resting his elbows on his knees. “I was in the Navy. Medical discharge after things went sideways overseas. I needed the military. The structure, the routine, the constant get up and go—it kept me busy. Kept my mind occupied. It was easier to compartmentalize the shit I saw and the shit I did. When I couldn't operate anymore, all I had to do every day was sit at home and drink.” He shook his head. “When you're isolated like that ... when you have nothing to live for ... when all you see when you close your eyes is pain, it leads you to some dark places.”

“PTSD?”

“Still have it, but it's managed now. I'm on some meds. I run a support group. See a therapist. The works.” He cracked a grin. “But if I wake up screaming in the middle of the night, just ignore me. It'll go away.”

And there it was. How he hid it so well. Behind the façade of the guy who sang Disney songs to pediatric patients, was a man who had seen and done shit I probably couldn't fathom.

“So, you decided to be an organ donor to help with the PTSD?”

Shane shook his head. “The opposite. I wanted to end it. I wanted to end everything.”

I stifled the urge to interrupt and waited for him to continue.

“I lived my life with plenty to die for and nothing to live for.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I knew I was up a creek without a paddle. My brain was fucked more than my body was, so I left the town I grew up in—the town I returned to after I got out—and moved here. I was a full-time drunk. Ten sheets to the wind and hadn't left my house in days when someone from the Ladies Auxiliary knocked on my door and gave me a flyer about a local girl who needed a kidney.” He shrugged. “They had her blood type listed. It was the same as

mine. Somewhere in my inebriated brain, I decided that was how I was gonna go out. Saving her and taking my own life was going to be my atonement for the things I had done on this earth.”

Shit. I scrubbed my palms down my face.

Shane stammered as his words choked the life out of him. “Sorry. This is ... this is the first time I’ve said this shit out loud in a long time.” He grabbed his coffee and took a sip. “I quit drinking for thirty-six hours. Long enough to call the number on the flyer and get tested to see if I was a candidate.”

“Don’t you have to go through a psych eval. to qualify to be a donor?”

He let a wry smile slip. “The government made sure I was good at pretending I had my shit together. I even got sober for the surgery. I was always good at following orders.”

“How’d Brandie Jean come into the equation?”

He chuckled. “You ever seen BJ in a hoodie and a pair of jeans and a ball cap? No makeup on?”

I shook my head.

“You and the rest of Falls Creek.” Shane smirked. “But I have. I was leaving the liquor store the night before the transplant. I was stocking up on booze to drown myself in after I got sliced open and sent home. Didn’t exactly want to be sober when I swallowed a bullet. I caught BJ sneaking around, handing out takeout containers from the Mule to some folks who were taking shelter under the awning. She looked completely different. No makeup. Hair in a ponytail under a ball cap. Blue jeans and a nondescript sweatshirt. Even drove a different car. But I could smell her.”

“It’s the perfume,” I noted.

“DoD needs to look into having Love Spell tested. That shit’s gotta be chemical warfare.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“She started talking my ear off, asking me what I was doing drinking alone. Ended up worming the information out

of me. I'll tell you what—I was trained to withstand torture and interrogation, but no amount of SERE can prepare you for Brandie Jean when she wants to get information out of you. Whole town knew Caroline was scheduled for the transplant. Everyone was cheering her on. I ended up telling BJ that I was the other half of that. When I woke up after the surgery, she had somehow weaseled her way into my hospital room and told the staff she was my sister. Kept visiting me until I got discharged. Went to the pharmacy to fill the prescriptions I was supposed to take. Escorted me to the follow-up appointments. I swear she didn't leave me alone for two seconds for a month. I lived four weeks longer than I planned to."

"Then what?"

"She started asking questions."

"Like a dog with a bone?"

He nodded. "She wouldn't let it go. It's like she knew everything already, and she was waiting for me to tell her on my own terms."

I chuckled under my breath. "I swear she's either a secret genius or a spy."

"You're not wrong. She paid for me to see a therapist. Got me the help I needed—the kind that the VA would balk at. Helped me stay sober." He leaned back and ran his hands through his hair. "I had some experience in combat medicine, so she suggested becoming an EMT. Worked my way up to being a paramedic. She still checks in on me every now and then, so if the house smells like that damn perfume, you know why she was here."

"So, you and Brandie Jean kept this a secret from all of Falls Creek for seven years?"

"Yep." He studied me like I was a target. "Until you showed up and fell ass over turnouts for Caroline Tyree."

"Pretty sure that was Brandie Jean's doing too," I said.

"Wouldn't surprise me. That woman practically runs this town."

“Caroline wants to know,” I said. “She doesn’t want anything from you. She just wants to know.”

Shane’s expression was controlled. “Do you expect me to tell you to lie to your girlfriend or withhold information?”

I still wasn’t used to Caroline holding that title, but damn I liked it.

“I wouldn’t even if you did.”

“Whatever you tell her is on you. You have the information. Do whatever you want with it.”

I let out a heavy breath. “So that’s why you walk out of the room whenever someone even says her name.”

For a moment, he looked haunted. “Nothing quite like seeing a living, breathing reminder of the days I didn’t want to be on this earth anymore.”

“So, you won’t talk to her.”

“No.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You won’t throw my shit out on the lawn like a crazy ex if I tell her about it, will you?”

“Like I said. What you do with that information is your business.”

“She’s gonna be coming around here,” I warned him. “And she might ask questions.”

“And it’s my business if I want to answer them or walk the fuck away. I have no contact with her.”

We stared each other down in a battle of wits. Eventually, I conceded. “Fine.”

“Now you can consider us even,” he said, slapping his knees and standing up. “Because one of these days, I’m gonna ask your sister out, and you’re going to be okay with it.”

I didn’t like that one bit.

“One more question,” I said, stopping him before he left the room.

“What’s that?”

“Do you like mint chocolate chip ice cream?”

CAROLINE

Someone knocked on my door as I was pawing through the couch cushions for my keys. “Just a second!”

Where the heck were they?

I had gotten so caught up in painting that I had lost track of time. I promised Austin that I’d be over to see his new space at Shane’s house before we got dinner together.

The knock sounded again.

“Uh, hold on—”

“Sweets, it’s me.”

I froze, then straightened.

That was weird.

I checked my phone to make sure I hadn’t missed any calls or texts from Austin, but there was nothing.

Shaking it off, I made my way to the door. “Hey,” I said when I flipped the lock and opened it up.

Austin was standing on the other side, a single gas station rose pinched between his fingers.

“Did I get our plans wrong?” I asked. “I’m sorry I’m running late.” I dug my fingers into my hair and looked around. “I can’t find my keys.”

He hadn’t moved from the doormat.

Hadn’t even offered the rose in his hand.

“There’s—um... There’s something we need to talk about, Caroline.”

He used my name instead of calling me Sweets or Sugar. *How fucking dare he.*

All those promises of safety and security faded away. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours since I told him how I felt, and he did the same. Now we were back to first names?

“Can I come in?”

I realized I was standing in the doorway, blocking his entrance. “Why do I feel like you’re about to tell me someone died?”

“There’s just... There’s something I need to tell you.”

Was it even possible to break up with someone less than a day after solidifying things?

“If you’re second-guessing—”

“What?” Austin blinked and shook his head. “No, sweetheart.” His body language relaxed. “I’m not second-guessing a damn thing, but I didn’t want to wait to have this conversation.”

“You’re scaring me,” I whispered.

“Hey—” Austin dropped to one knee in front of me and cupped my cheek. “Everything is okay. I love you. Nothing is wrong. I just found out some stuff that I need to talk to you about.”

I took a few steps back, giving him space to come inside. Austin led me to the couch, handing over the gas station rose before rummaging around in the basket I kept in the corner and grabbing a blanket.

He sat beside me, spreading the blanket over both of us and tucking me into his side. Before I could blink, his arms were around me.

My stomach sank. “I’m used to people giving me bad news. No amount of preparation ever makes it better. Whatever you have to tell me, just get it over with.”

“It’s not bad news.”

I looked up at him. “If it was good news, you would have already told me. You wouldn’t be treating me like I’m made of glass and you have to cover me in bubble wrap first.”

“It’s just...” He ran a hand over his hair. “It’s just news.”

“Please just get it over with.”

Those powerful arms tightened around me again, but I wasn’t convinced that I wanted to lean into his strength. I sat still, barely breathing.

“I found out who your kidney donor was.”

Everything went numb.

I must have been hunched forward with my mouth gaped open, because Austin sat forward, gently rubbing my back.

“What’s going through your head?” he asked quietly. The gravel in his voice was oddly soothing.

After a few tries, I found my words. “Who?”

Those soothing circles continued, keeping me from going numb again. “Shane.”

Shane Hutchins was my donor? What? That made no sense. “I-I don’t understand. Shane hates me. Why would he ___”

“Hey, now,” Austin scooped me up and dropped me onto his lap before kissing my forehead. “Just breathe, sweetheart.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks without rhyme or reason. I didn’t know why I was crying.

Relief? Confusion? Hurt?

All those moments where I’d be invited by Callum or Layla to join their group—he looked at me like he wished I would disappear.

Had the transplant hurt him? Was he okay?

I pressed my fingertips to my cheeks, wiping away the tears, only for them to be replaced by more. “When did you find out? *How* did you find out?”

Austin didn't answer right away. He tilted my chin up and kissed across my cheeks and the corners of my eyes, ridding me of stray tears. When he was done, he sat back, pulling me with him.

"When I finished moving my stuff into the house, Shane came out of the shower. He has the donor scars. I asked him about it, and he confirmed it was him."

"But why?" I cried. "It doesn't make any sense. He didn't even know me. Especially not back then."

"I don't think he did it because of you, sweetheart. He did it because it's what he felt like he had to do for himself. He called it an atonement."

"For what?" I whimpered.

He shrugged. "I didn't press it."

"Does he know you're telling me?"

"Yes." Austin combed his fingers through my hair, brushing it away from my face. "Shane's reasons for doing what he did are his and his alone, sweetheart. And I don't want you to burden yourself with trying to understand why he went through with it."

"Easy for you to say."

"Don't push me out," he said sternly.

"I'm not," I sniffed, wiping my eyes.

"I'm not trying to blindside you," he said. "I respect you and know that you can work through the information that you wanted. That's why I didn't wait to talk to you about it. I know it's confusing. It's gotta be a lot to take in. But I'm here. And whatever you're feeling won't scare me away."

I was dazed and I couldn't shake it. "I feel like I need space."

"Sweets—"

Uselessly, I wiped at the tears that were streaming down my face. "I thought I could handle it. I thought knowing would

somehow make it all make sense.” I shook my head. “But it doesn’t. I have more questions than answers.”

“Then talk to me. Tell me what’s on your mind.” He cupped my cheek. “Tell me what I can do to make it better.”

“Nothing.” I whispered. Because for the first time, even Austin Hale couldn’t make me feel better.

Austin: Thinking about you. Hope you’re having a good day. If you feel up to it, you should come by the station on your way home. Estelle Gould brought muffins and there are dozens more than the crew can eat.

Me: Is Shane on duty?

Austin: You should still come by. I want to see you.

Me: I’m feeling a little run down. Are we still on for tomorrow night?

THREE DOTS APPEARED and disappeared periodically—like he was writing out a response, reading it, deleting it, and repeating the process. Finally, a new message bubble appeared.

Austin: Of course. See you tomorrow, gorgeous. I love you.

Me: I love you too. I’m about to leave school. Packing up now.

The cloud that had been looming over my head since last night was heavier than ever. If I was being honest with myself, I wasn’t sure why.

It wasn’t Shane’s fault. I had an infinite number of questions about why he did what he did. But after seven years of silence and sharp looks, I was about as inclined to talk to him as he was to talk to me.

Why did I feel this way?

If my mom knew, she would tell me I needed a green smoothie, a short walk, and a nap.

No way in hell was I going to tell her.

It wasn't Austin's fault. He could have withheld the information, claiming that it was for my own good. But he didn't. He told me as gently as he could.

No matter how much I asked him to go home and get sleep before his shift, he wouldn't leave. No matter how much I claimed I wanted space, he refused.

I sat on his lap and cried for a while, half in relief and half in pain. Instead of going back to his place for dinner like we had planned, we scrounged up leftovers from my fridge. I ate a little before my stomach decided that it wasn't the time for food. There was no sex before we went to sleep, but Austin held me until dawn, keeping me close, making sure I felt safe.

"Hey, Caroline." I looked up from my desk, where I was packing up my bag, and saw Adam leaning in my doorway.

"Mr. Kipler." I shouldered the bag, irritated that he always seemed to show his face right when I was ready to leave. I wasn't the "linger and gossip around the water cooler" type. "Something you need before I head out?"

He put his palms up. "Okay, I get that we may have gotten off on the wrong foot."

I thought back to every mildly nauseating interaction we'd ever had. Most of them consisted of him ambushing me while I was trying to do something.

Kind of like now.

"How so?"

He grinned. "I know it can be a little intimidating, Caroline."

I frowned. "I don't follow." Actually, I knew exactly what he was getting at.

There was a slight curl to his lip, like he was getting annoyed that I wasn't playing his game. "I've tried a soft approach, but you don't take hints very well."

Wow. Nothing like an insult to kick off asking someone out after they've shot you down time and time again.

A frustrated huff slipped and I raised my voice. "Then maybe you should be clear and concise."

"You should go on a date with me."

Nothing quite like being told what to do. Over his shoulder, Sloan, Rita, and Hazel were watching from Sloan's classroom door.

I smiled politely and shook my head. "No thanks."

He scoffed. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not sure how else I can put it, considering how many times I've had to politely say, "no." So, let *me* be perfectly clear. *No*, I do *not* want to go on a date with you."

"But..." He stammered for a moment, clearly not having expected that outcome. "C'mon, Caroline. Don't be such a stick in the mud."

I swear to Renoit, I wanted to get one of those scooters the kids loved to use in P.E. and clock him in the face with it.

"I have no interest in going on a date with you because I have a boyfriend. And even if I didn't, I wouldn't want to because I don't date coworkers. And even if I mixed personal and professional, it certainly wouldn't be with you. Because while I tolerate you as a colleague and an educator, I do not tolerate men who disrespect me under the guise of asking me out." I pushed past him, bumping the wreath from Austin's mom that hung on my classroom door as I stepped into the hallway. "Have a good evening, Mr. Kipler."

"That's my girl!" Sloan shouted at the top of her lungs.

Hazel and Rita high-fived me as I turned to leave.

Somehow that wildly uncomfortable interaction left me feeling energized. Maybe it was because, for once, I came out

on top. The adrenaline hadn't fizzled out by the time I made it to my car or took the long way around town.

Do something spontaneous.

Instead of heading home, I went the opposite direction, driving out of town. Maybe going on a detour and clearing my head would help me sort through my thoughts about Shane.

Did he regret it? Is that why he looked at me with pure hatred every time I was nearby?

I didn't expect to be everyone's cup of tea, but we had never really interacted. Not before the transplant or after.

I gained elevation as I headed up the mountain to The Lookout. I wanted to go back to where Austin and I had gone stargazing. I smiled at the memory.

The snaking turn snuck up on me, and I eased on the brake, slowing down enough to make it around the corner. The road lifted, and I added a little more gas to make it up the hill.

My phone rang in my bag. I reached over, one hand on the wheel while I pawed through stacks of papers.

"Where the heck is it?" I muttered as I shifted in my seat to try and reach deeper into my bag. I felt the smooth surface of my phone and grabbed it.

Austin was calling.

"Hello?" I let out a breath and focused on the road.

"Hey, Sugar. You on your way home yet?"

"Actually, I decided to drive to The Lookout. You know—switch up my routine. Do something spontaneous."

He chuckled. "That's my girl."

"Busy day for you?"

"Nah, it hasn't been too bad."

"That's good. Hopefully, it stays quiet—"

I didn't even finish the word.

A flash of brown darted across the road. I couldn't stop.

I tried to dodge the deer, but the impact made the front of my little car spin and slam into the guardrail.

And then everything went sideways.

AUSTIN

“**A**ctually, I decided to drive to The Lookout. You know—switch up my routine. Do something spontaneous.”

I laughed, settling into the recliner in the rec room. Kiara was in the opposite one, ankles crossed, and eyes closed.

“That’s my girl.”

“Busy day for you?”

I looked up as Shane and Missy walked in, fresh off a call. Someone at the Copper Mule had an allergic reaction and they got sent out to deal with it.

“Nah, it hasn’t been too bad.”

“That’s good. Hopefully, it stays quiet—”

A whirlwind of noise and the crunch of metal on metal crackled through my phone speaker. My heart pounded against my chest as every other sensation in my body dulled.

“Caroline?” I tried to keep my cool; tried to keep a lid on things.

Shane cut his eyes at me.

My worried tone was thinly veiled. I usually maintained my composure in stressful situations, but not this. Not when it was Caroline.

“*Caroline*,” I clipped, rising out of the chair. “Can you hear me?” Sweat broke out on the back of my neck. I checked

my phone screen to make sure the call was still connected.
“*Caroline—*”

Tones rang out across the station. Dispatch relayed that a roadside assistance company had notified emergency services that one of their vehicles had been in an accident.

I knew in my gut that it was her. I hauled ass downstairs to the bay and jumped into my turnouts with my phone still trapped between my shoulder and my ear. “Talk to me, Sweets. Come on.”

Nothing.

“Fuck!” I shouted and pocketed my phone without ending the call. I’d try to get her attention once I had my gear on.

“Where is she?” Shane hollered as he ran to the ambulance. Missy jumped in the passenger’s seat.

“Said she was leaving the school and on her way up to The Lookout.”

The ambulance was out of the bay first, sirens screaming as they eased out onto Main Street. Blue lights flashed as police cruisers flew down the road.

“The fuck is going on?” Elijah clipped as he jumped into the front of the rig.

I didn’t answer him. I was leaping into my seat and bringing my phone back to my ear. “Sugar, can you hear me?”

Elijah nearly went purple in the face when I didn’t answer him.

Paul hooked a right as he pulled out of the station, lights and sirens blaring. Engine Two was on our ass.

Dispatch came over the radio with an update that another 911 call came in from passing motorists.

A deer that turned into a single vehicle-versus-guardrail.

It was a scenic drive. Folks liked to stop on the shoulder and get out to take in the view. Those hairpin turns were sharp, and the guardrail was old. It didn’t cover every section.

Kiara cut her eyes at me. “Driver was Caroline Tyree. Hale was on the phone with her when it happened.”

I glanced at her and nodded gratefully.

Elijah looked between the two of us, and the rest of the crew wedged in their seats. “Keep trying to establish contact until first-on-scene arrives.”

I nodded, sending up desperate prayers as we sped out of town.

I kept saying her name, asking for her to talk to me. Telling her I loved her.

My phone buzzed with an incoming text.

Layla: We're in the air. She's going to be okay.

It took everything inside of me not to break down. Because that was Falls Creek.

METAL DEBRIS LITTERED THE ASPHALT. The front of Caroline's little sedan was crushed into the mangled guardrail. The sides of the vehicle were scraped and beaten. By my guess, she had overcorrected and rolled twice, landing upright on the chassis.

A deer was smeared all over the road. The last of the puzzle pieces fell into place, filling in the blanks of how the accident happened.

I leaped out of the side of the rig, acutely aware of every eye on me.

Gear on, I took a slow breath, held it for four seconds, and then slowly released it.

“Hale,” Elijah shouted. “You're on hydraulics. Get her out and hand her off to the medics. Watch for a spinal.”

His orders to the rest of the crew were white noise as we scattered. Bodies parted as I towed the hydraulic cutter-spreader over to the vehicle.

My stomach lurched.

Blood trickled from a cut on Caroline's forehead. Airbag burns abraded her cheeks and forehead, and her lip was swollen from a cut straight down the middle.

"Austin—" Caroline cried as tears streamed down her cheeks. The car engine hissed an unsettling song as smoke clouded around us.

"I'm here." I let out a whooshing sigh of relief. "I'm right here. We're gonna getcha out, but I need you to be real still. It's gonna be loud."

She nodded and bit her lip to keep from crying, but all it did was stain her teeth red.

"Try not to move too much. Can you do that for me?"

My hands shook as I got the jaws in place. The machine roared to life, cracking away at the metal frame. The deafening sound made Caroline jump in her seat. The door was bent at an odd angle, preventing us from opening it. The passenger's side was wedged against a guardrail that barely held it back from tumbling down a steep ravine.

Pulling her through the backseat wasn't an option. Not with all the possible injuries. At the very least, she had whiplash. At the worst...

I couldn't stomach the thought.

Sweat stung my eyes and my arms ached as the heavy machine worked through the frame. I lifted it higher, hoping that one more cut would release the door enough for me to pry it apart. I shoved the jaws into the crack and reversed the mechanism. The door jolted off of the body of the car, scaring the shit out of Caroline.

I cut the power to the machine as one of the other guys took it from me. Kiara ripped the door off of the car, and I was reaching for Caroline.

"Careful with her," Shane barked as he elbowed his way in. "Get the seatbelt."

I grabbed the cutters out of my pocket and sliced through it. Caroline was shaking. I slid my arm behind her back and one under her knees, slowly easing her out of the car. Missy came up on my other side, stabilizing Caroline's head and neck. Blood stained her blonde curls, turning them a grotesque shade of pink.

Shane was ready with a stretcher. He and Missy descended on Caroline, silently working through vitals and assessing her injuries. Grim looks and silent nods were their primary form of communication.

I yanked my glove off with my teeth and held her hand. Her slim fingers closed around mine. "I'm right here," I whispered. "You're safe with me."

Caroline gritted her teeth, trying to keep from sobbing but it was all too much for her. Uncontrollable shudders racked her body.

The rhythmic thump-thump-thump of helicopter rotors filled the air. The cops on scene had cleared a space on the road for the pilot to touch down. As soon as the AirCare team landed, they jumped into action.

Layla ran over with a new guy on her heels. There was a ferocity in her eyes. It was the same one in mine. In Callum's. In Elijah's. In Kiara's. In Missy's.

And Shane's.

"Have Odin call into Chapel Hill. Get her in the ED there. For fuck's sake if you take her to Duke, I'll raise hell. She's gonna need a CT scan to make sure there's no abdominal trauma, and make sure they have a nephrologist or someone from the transplant team there to assess," Shane barked without skipping a beat.

Layla stammered. "Uh. Anything else you wanna note?"

Without a second of hesitation, Shane rambled off a grocery list of drug names before turning his attention to Caroline. "That everything?"

She cowered on the stretcher. I squeezed her hand.

Caroline didn't break his gaze. "Yeah," she whispered. "That's everything I'm on."

Layla looked at Shane, dumbfounded. "How did you—" She shook her. "You know what? I'll grill you later. We gotta go."

Her pale, tear-filled eyes looked up at me. "Can you come?"

My heart shattered. I was caught between love and duty. "I can't, sweetheart." In a stroke of I-don't-give-a-fuck, I leaned over and kissed her. "I love you," I said quietly. "I promise I'll be there as soon as I can. I promise."

Missy elbowed her way into the mix. "Here, Miss Tyree," she said and handed over Caroline's phone. The call was still connected, the timestamp on the screen steadily ticking away without skipping a beat. "It was on the floorboard. I'll make sure your bag gets put in the chopper with you."

Paramedics strapped Caroline down and stabilized her for the flight, but she hung onto her phone with her fingertips.

I reached into my pocket and lifted my phone. "I won't hang up until you do." I wiped away the tears that were welling up in my eyes.

There was weight in those seven words. She knew it meant more than ending a call, and I did too.

There would be no giving up. No backing down. No conceding. No chickening out.

I knew without a doubt that Caroline Tyree was my forever.

Her lip trembled, and it crushed me. I wanted nothing more than to get in that helicopter with her.

"That night I told you I wasn't done dancing—I'm still not done dancing with you, Sweets."

"I'm not done either," she whispered, squeezing my hand before letting go. "I love you."

“I’ve got you, girly,” Layla said as she, Shane, and I transferred Caroline to the gurney that fit into the back of the helicopter. “And you have some serious explaining to do.”

I left her with a kiss and the copper tang of blood on my lips, watching as the AirCare chopper lifted off the ground. When it was nothing but a faint dot in the sky, I turned to Shane.

“What was that bullshit about *no contact*?”

He shrugged, packing up his equipment. “What about it?”

“You know the name of every drug that she takes.”

“So?”

“You know, for someone who pretends not to care, you sure care a lot.”

He shouldered one of the med bags and came face-to-face with me. “Call it a coping mechanism, then.”

“Hale.”

I turned and spotted Elijah Fisher walking through the wreckage, glass crunching under his boots like demented diamonds.

“Sir?”

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “You’re off duty.”

I frowned, my brows knitting together as I tried to make sense of what the hell he had just said. “What?”

“You heard me. You’re off duty. Randle’s on his way to the station to relieve you. Fletcher’s gonna give you a ride back while we wrap up here.”

I looked over his shoulder and spotted Callum waiting by his cruiser.

“I’m good to keep going.”

“No. You’re not.” Elijah crossed his arms and nodded to the car. “If it was my wife in there, I wouldn’t have held it together like that. Now stop holding it together and get your ass to the hospital.”

I didn't need to be told twice.

Callum went lights and sirens back to the station. I jumped out and stripped out of my gear in record time before grabbing my shit and sprinting to my truck.

When I finally arrived at the emergency department in Chapel Hill, Layla was waiting outside, pacing with her flight helmet tucked under her arm.

“How is she?” I asked, breathless as I glanced at my phone. The call was still connected.

“Vitals stayed strong through admission. She has some external injuries. No SCI as far as I can tell, but she's gonna be hurting for a while. Because she was a transplant recipient, they're going to do extra testing and imaging. They'll probably admit her and keep her, at the very least, overnight for observation.”

“Why?”

Layla pursed her lips, probably debating how much information to give me. “The traumatic force that she experienced in the crash might cause her body to reject the donor kidney.”

I swore under my breath, taking a few steps back as I laced my fingers together and braced them behind my head.

“What's her blood type?” I snapped. If she needed another kidney and we matched, I'd get tested immediately.

Layla's smile was soft. “Don't go there. Don't jump to the worst-case scenario. She's your girlfriend—not a call to respond to. Remember?”

I sighed, scrubbing my hands down my face. “Yeah. I know.”

“Oh, and Hale?”

I looked at her.

“Mr. and Mrs. Tyree just got here. Word of advice? Be her boyfriend. Hold her hand and tell her it's going to be okay. She's used to being in the hospital. The environment is

familiar to her. Just be her support. If you're calm, it'll help her be calm. If you think you're going to be in a frenzy like her folks are right now, take a few minutes and collect yourself."

"I'm good."

Layla reached out and bumped my fist with hers. "I've gotta go. Catch you on the next call." She headed back through the ED entrance before stopping and looking over her shoulder. "One more thing."

I raised my eyebrows.

"I'm happy for you two."

I said my thanks and took the recommended few minutes to compose myself before walking inside and giving my name to the nurse at the door. I was led back to a glass-walled room that had the privacy curtains pulled.

Caroline was in the bed, her folks crowding around the side. Her phone was in her lap, the call timer ticking away.

Mine was in my pocket.

She looked up at me, eyes wide.

Calm. Cool. Collected. "Hey, sweetheart."

Her father eyed me suspiciously and opened his mouth to say something, but Mrs. Tyree clapped her hand around his arm.

I leaned down and kissed her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

She looked at me with just her eyes, careful not to move her neck. "Um... Okay."

I took the chair on the opposite side of the bed and reached over to shake her dad's hand. "Hey, I'm Austin. I'm sorry we haven't been able to meet before this."

The pain in his eyes was vivid. He stammered for a moment before clearing the stupor from his mind and shook my hand. "John."

I nodded toward her mother. “Nice to see you again, Mrs. Tyree.”

My attention turned back to Caroline. I brushed her hair away from her face. “Anything I can get for you?”

Caroline slowly shook her head. “Not right now.” She leaned into my touch. “Thanks for coming.”

“I think you should move back home, Carrie,” Mrs. Tyree said with crocodile tears filling her eyes.

“Mom—”

“I mean it this time,” she wailed. “Being out on your own—in your condition—it’s just not a good idea.”

“It was a deer,” Caroline clipped, closing her eyes. “It has nothing to do with where I live. I was driving and a deer ran out onto the road.”

Her mother clucked dismissively.

“She’s right,” I said. “It could have happened to anybody.”

Her dad looked at me like I was the devil incarnate. “Don’t you tell us not to worry about our daughter,” he hissed. “After everything we’ve been through.”

“I would never tell you not to worry, Mr. Tyree. I’m aware of everything *she’s* been through.”

That made him soften a little, and Caroline’s mouth opened in surprise.

“And truth be told, I’m worried too.”

Before anyone could say anything else, a woman in a white coat appeared in the doorway. “Caroline Tyree?”

Caroline smiled politely. “Present.”

“Would you like me to step out?” I asked quietly.

She carefully shook her head and gave my hand a squeeze.

I nodded, keeping a gentle hand in her hair as the doctor went through the results of the tests they had already done, the ones they were ordering, and the imaging she wanted to see

happen. Caroline listened intently, nodding and interjecting with questions every few minutes.

“I don’t know how you remember all that,” I said when the doctor left.

She patted the empty side of the hospital bed, urging me to join her. I felt a little weird about it—being in front of her parents and all—but if my girl wanted me in bed with her, that’s what she was getting.

“I’ve had lots of practice.”

I settled in beside her, keeping my station shoes on the ground, and carefully wrapped my arm around her.

Caroline groaned as she shifted to rest her head on my chest. “It helps that I have you to support me.” She reached over and squeezed her mom’s hand. “And I had people who taught me to advocate for myself.”

Her mom’s smile was watery. “Letting go is hard.”

Caroline blinked back a tear. “Letting go doesn’t mean saying goodbye.”

“I know,” Mrs. Tyree said. “For so long my whole life revolved around you. And now I ... I don’t know what to do with myself. When you moved out, I felt like I lost a part of me.”

“You should get a hobby,” Caroline said. “Isn’t Gran Fletcher always trying to get you to join the Ladies Auxiliary?”

Mrs. Tyree brightened. “I picked up one of those Whitney West books you like from the library.”

Caroline groaned. “Great. Now I have to burn all of them and throw myself off of a cliff.”

CAROLINE

W *Weekdays are weird*, I thought to myself as I blended blue into thin lines of white, mimicking the ocean's whitecaps on canvas. It was strange to be off work in the middle of the week without it being a holiday. But here I was, painting away on a Friday morning.

I was going stir-crazy.

Miraculously, my parents had mellowed a little in the hospital. Maybe it was the bedside confession that my mom didn't know what to do with herself since I moved out. Maybe it was the fact that Austin politely refused to leave my side until they discharged me.

Whatever it was, it had given me the gift of a few days of R & R with none of them hovering.

Well, except Austin. His hovering was a small compromise if it meant I didn't have parents treating me like a child.

Yesterday morning, he finally left to go back to work. *And then immediately called me on his way to the station.*

My phone rang. *Speak of the devil.*

I wiped my paint-stained fingers on the front of the pair of jeans I had dubbed my *art pants*. Carefully picking up my phone, I swiped across the screen to put it on speaker while I dabbed a little more color on the canvas.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sweets." He sounded tired.

“Hey,” I said. “You getting off work?”

“Yeah.”

“Long night?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me about it?”

Austin sighed. “Residential structure fire. Took a while to contain.”

My stomach dropped. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just tired. Enough about me. How are you feeling this morning?”

“I’m fine,” I said with a laugh. Truth be told, I was still really sore from the crash, and I could feel myself entering the early stages of a flare.

But I was grateful.

It could have been worse. *So much worse.*

“Have you checked your temperature this morning?”

I stifled the urge to snap at him. “Yes. I’m fine.”

“Any blood in your urine?”

Well, that was a sexy conversation to have first thing in the morning.

I rolled my eyes. He couldn’t see that, so I felt a little less guilty about it. “No, Daddy Hale.”

“You rolled your eyes, didn’t you?”

“I swear to da Vinci—”

He laughed. “You’re the one who called me ‘daddy.’ I’m just living up to the name, Sugar. You wanna keep up the attitude, and I’ll show you what ‘daddy’ is all about.”

I clicked my tongue. “Promises, promises.”

As we shared quiet laughter, Austin’s voice softened. “I wanna see you, but I’m really fucking tired, sweetheart.”

“Don’t worry about it. Get some rest. I’ll see you later.”

“Actually, I was gonna ask if you wanted to come over and sleep with me.”

It was sweet for a moment, and then it dawned on me. “You just want to keep an eye on me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation.

“Do you think I’m up here doing jumping jacks and shotgunning beers in between wrestling alligators? I’m sitting down and painting.”

Austin sighed. “I just want to hold you.”

The accident had clearly left him shaken. Truthfully, I felt the same way. I was using my mom’s car until I could get my insurance squared away for a new one. Apart from feeling terrible, I couldn’t stomach driving more than a few miles. It would probably be a long time before I drove outside of town on my own.

“A nap sounds good,” I said.

“You want me to come pick you up?”

“No,” I said as I cleaned my brushes. “You’re tired, and my apartment is in the opposite direction. I’ll come to you.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. Are you heading there now?”

“I’m gonna swing by Beth’s and check on her before I head home.”

“Okay. That’ll give me time to clean up.”

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too. See you in a bit.”

I knew that if I didn’t end the call, Austin would let it run on indefinitely.

I won’t hang up until you do. It was almost as good as *I love you.*

I pocketed my phone and went to work cleaning up my brushes.

AUSTIN AND SHANE'S house was a tidy brick ranch two blocks from the fire station. Fresh mulch edged the front flower beds. From the looks of the brush pile off to the side, they had been busy getting ready for spring.

The attached garage was closed, but the lights were on inside. I pulled into the driveway and slowly eased out of the car.

Everything hurt.

If I was being honest with myself, I was terrified that my body would go into rejection. That I'd be hospitalized again. That I'd be on dialysis again. Every little internal pang or flash of discomfort scared the shit out of me. It made my mind go to the dark places that I once thought I'd never escape. It made me want to curl up in a ball and never move.

But that was wasting the second chance I had been given.

It was okay to cautiously approach life, but hiding from it completely was a crime.

I made my way up the walk, scaled the three squat steps that led to the front door, and fired off a text to Austin to let him know I was here before I knocked.

A few moments later, the lock turned, and the door swung open. Shane's passive indifference quickly morphed into surprise, and then a scowl.

"Uh..." I took a step back and put space between us, half expecting him to slam the door in my face.

He just stood there and stared at me. A gray cat darted out of the bushes and ran inside, startling me.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out. "Austin said he was on his way home. I was supposed to meet him. I just—"

Shane didn't say a damn thing. I doubted he was too keen on having me in his space without a buffer.

Truth be told, he was a little scary. All those tattoos. Piercing eyes. His clenched jaw. I had seen him interact with kids during First Responders Day at the school. I'd seen him hanging out with the group of people—now including Austin—who congregated at the Copper Mule. He was fun and personable with them.

But not me.

“I'll just wait in my car,” I said quietly.

He opened the storm door and stood to the side. It was the universal sign for *come on in*, but his body language didn't exactly ooze hospitality. “I don't want you catching a cold.”

And there it was. The first thing that the man who saved my life had ever said to me.

Warily, I walked up the steps and into the house.

Shane turned and disappeared, leaving me standing in the living room on my own. I clutched my bag to my chest like it was a life preserver. Was I just supposed to stand here? Was it rude to sit on the couch or just ask where Austin's room was and wait there?

Clanking porcelain echoed from the direction Shane had gone. A minute later, he reappeared with two bowls of ice cream. “I hear you like mint chocolate chip now.”

I looked down at the bowl he had pushed into my hand. “It's like ... nine in the morning.”

And, for the first time, Shane Hutchins smiled at me. “Live a little.”

We sat in the living room with the safety of a coffee table separating us. He sipped on a mug of coffee and finished his ice cream while I just stared at mine.

“Thank you,” I said, finally speaking up.

“For what?” he clipped, shoveling in another bite.

Where did I even begin? “Um—the accident.”

“Just doing my job.”

I swirled the spoon in my ice cream before lifting it to my mouth for a tiny bite. *Damn, it was good.* “You knew all of my drugs.”

He shrugged. “Didn’t want Layla giving you something that could have had an interaction. Made it smooth sailing getting you into the ED, didn’t it?” There was an edge to his voice.

“How did you know all of them off the top of your head?”

He stabbed at a lump of melting ice cream with his spoon. “When I started going to therapy after the transplant, the therapist said that coming to terms with why I made a choice to donate would be easier if I saw you as a person rather than a final act of atonement. I kept up with your recovery. Easy to do in Falls Creek. Everyone knows shit.”

I nodded and took another bite. “Are you on any of them?”

He laughed under his breath. “Medications? I’m on plenty, but not from the transplant.” When I didn’t look up from my bowl, he gently added, “It’s fairly easy on the donors. A few weeks of recovery and check-ups every now and then.”

“That’s good,” I added pathetically. “I always wondered if you were okay. Or if you had complications. Or regrets.”

“The transplant was the easy part. Living with *why* I had done it was the hard part.”

My stomach turned to stone. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said, setting his bowl aside and leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

“I always thought you hated me,” I admitted. “I don’t think we ever met before the transplant. And when I started hanging out with Layla and Callum and everyone—I don’t know. You always seemed perturbed that I was there.”

“I was,” he said bluntly.

The ice cream soured in my stomach.

It was rude, but there was also a weird comfort in the truth.

“I can just wait outside until Austin gets home.”

“*Was*, Caroline. Past tense.”

“What changed?”

“Seeing you in that crushed-up car.”

Well, isn't this conversation just a bundle of fun...

“Let me clarify.” He looked at a jar of colorful coins. “For a long time, you were a walking reminder of a low point in my life. I was ready to give up, and giving a stranger a kidney seemed like a small penance if I gained just a little bit of peace before I left this life. I’ve done a lot of things that I regret, and not a single one of them has a damn thing to do with you.” He sighed. “Maybe it makes me a sappy motherfucker, but I saw Hale’s face when he heard you crash.” Shane sighed. “And I felt it.”

I forced a polite smile. “I’m glad you guys are friends.”

Shane shook his head. “I didn’t feel Hale’s pain—although seeing him fucking wrecked tore me up too. I felt *your* pain.”

“What?”

He shrugged. “Phantom sensations, probably. I guess it’s like when twins can feel each other’s pain. You have a piece of me, and I felt it. Call it a medical event. Call it a mental break. Call it whatever you want. It happened. I felt it.”

Instinctively, I curled an arm around my stomach.

He held up his hands. “Look, I’m sorry that I’ve been a dick. Trust me when I say that I’m working on it. For years, I avoided you because every time I saw you around town, I had to confront the fact that I was willing to be cut open to save someone else, but I wasn’t willing to save myself. And that’s a tough pill to swallow. But Tuesday when I saw you in the car, I had to confront all of it. And in that moment, I knew I would do it again in a heartbeat. I didn’t just give you a second chance. You saved me, too. If I hadn’t been in the hospital recovering, I would have already been gone.”

I couldn’t help myself. I dropped the bowl on the coffee table, ran over, and threw my arms around him. “Thank you,”

I whispered, ignoring the ache in my bones from being tossed around in my car like a quarter in a dryer.

Shane's arms tightened around me. "Same to you, kid."

The door opened and closed. I turned and saw Austin, looking worse for the wear. "Hey," I said, wiping my eyes.

Austin raised his eyebrows, looking between Shane and me. "Everything okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

He cocked an eyebrow at Shane, who just raised his hands. "Trust me. I'm not making any moves on your girl." He smirked and added, "Not this one at least."

Austin just shook his head. "Sorry, I got hung up at Beth's." He leaned down and kissed me gently, careful with the healing split on my lip.

"Is she okay?" Shane asked.

He sighed and ran his hand over his hair. "Baby daddy showed up again. I was there, but it scared her. She's got a class to teach and then I'm gonna take her up to the courthouse to file a restraining order."

Shane swore at the ceiling.

"Do you need to go to the campus and be with her?" I asked.

Austin shook his head. "Beth said that campus security is aware, and they've got a guy outside of her lecture hall to make sure Childers doesn't show his face."

Shane was already on his phone. *Probably texting Beth.* "I'm going on a run." *Probably on campus.*

"Cool. You ready for a nap, Sweets?"

I looked up at Austin and nodded. "Honestly? Yeah."

"Good." He kissed the top of my head. "Me too."

Shane cocked his head at Austin. "Not working out today?"

He shook his head and glanced at me. There was peace in his eyes. “Nah. I’m not punishing myself today. Just gonna rest.”

Austin took my hand and led me down a narrow hallway to the bedroom at the end. It was clean and surprisingly put together for a bachelor who had just moved in. A soft gray duvet and crisp white sheets covered his bed. Pillows leaned against the wood headboard. A hamper sat in the corner, and two end tables were nestled on either side of the bed.

A picture frame was on one of the end tables, but there was no photo. Instead, a tan piece of cloth, streaked with paint, was in the middle. I laughed. “Did you steal my drop cloth?”

Austin grinned, closing the door behind us. “Cut a little piece out of it when you weren’t looking.”

I picked up the frame and studied the smears of red, purple, and blue. “From the night that we—”

He came up behind me and slid his hands around my hips. “Yeah.” The tension leached from his posture as he pulled me back against his chest. “I think it’s my favorite painting yet.”

AUSTIN

“Don’t get up,” I said as I stood and cleared Caroline’s plate.

She opened her mouth to argue with me, but I hit her with a stern look that rooted her fine little ass into the dining-room chair.

Mrs. Tyree snickered behind her napkin, and Caroline glared at her too. “I’m calling it. We’re never having dinner over here ever again.”

I rolled my lips between my teeth to hide my amusement. “Why’s that, Sweets?”

Caroline flung her arms between her parents and me. “Because you three gang up on me!”

I cleared Mr. and Mrs. Tyree’s plates while I was up. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said with complete conviction. “I’m just trying to be polite and make a good impression.”

“Good impression. More like sucking up,” she grumbled.

Mrs. Tyree dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “Austin is a lovely young man, and it says a lot about the folks who raised him.”

Now it was Caroline’s turn to laugh. “*Young man* my ass.”

When I walked behind Caroline to get to the Tyree’s kitchen, I whispered, “Careful, Sugar. Don’t threaten me with

a good time. There's quite a few things I'd like to do to your ass."

She shifted in her chair as I walked into the kitchen and dropped the dishes into the sink.

Caroline was still under the doctor's orders to limit her activity after the accident, but she was going back to work on Monday.

Her apartment was littered with get well cards from her kids. I had picked them up when I swung by the school to drop off the lesson plans she wrote up for the substitute.

Caroline was beloved, and she was mine.

I rinsed and dried my hands before returning to the dining room. Mr. Tyree was in the middle of an excitement-fueled story when I took my seat beside Caroline again.

"If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times. Michael Keaton was the best Batman. And Jack Nicholson as the Joker? Iconic."

I smiled to myself. "I agree. My dad took me to see it when it came out in the theater. We had to drive a ways away to get to one, but I'll never forget it."

Caroline's hair whipped around as she looked up at me. "I'm sorry—did you just say you saw that in a theater? That came out in the eighties!"

I nodded. "I was born in the eighties, Sugar."

"Carrie thinks Christian Bale was the better Batman," Mr. Tyree said, flummoxed.

I waffled for a moment. "Arguably the better Bruce Wayne, but not the better Batman."

She rolled her eyes. "He was a superhero, and I was eight." A little smirk drew up on her mouth. "You never forget your first."

I nearly choked on the sip of water I had just sucked down. "You were *eight* when *Batman Begins* came out?"

“No. I was eight when *The Dark Knight* came out.” She grinned at her dad. “Dad pulled me out of school early one day and took me to see it.”

I scrubbed my palms down my face and muttered to myself.

“What?” she pried.

I turned and faced her. “I was out of college when it came out. I went and saw it on my day off when I was a rookie with the BFD.”

“Those were the days,” Mrs. Tyree said wistfully. “Cheap movie tickets and Michael Keaton.”

“Oh my god.” Caroline pinched the bridge of her nose. “Please do not “those were the days” with my boyfriend. It’s just weird.”

Mrs. Tyree turned her attention to her daughter and grinned. “That’s fine. Would you like to discuss the Whitney West book that came out last week? I’ve gotta say—I’m so glad we enjoy the same books. Ooh! We should start a book club!”

Caroline dry heaved. “Dear God, no. Batman it is. Heath Ledger was the best Joker and, if I’m being honest, I thought Ben Affleck did a damn good job.”

Mrs. Tyree snickered victoriously.

Caroline preferred to listen to audiobooks while she painted, but I had found one of those Whitney West paperbacks tucked beside the bed. The parts of the story that I thumbed through were ... *damn*. They were *fucking hot*.

I wrapped my arm around Caroline’s shoulders while she caught up with her parents.

She was more relaxed now. Maybe it was because she and her mom finally said the things they needed to say. Maybe it’s because she stopped trying to prove her ability to care for herself and just lived her life. At least a small part of me hoped that some of her confidence and comfort in her own skin was because of me.

“I’m getting a little tired,” Caroline whispered as she rested her temple on my shoulder.

I kissed her head. “You ready to go?”

She nodded.

We said our goodbye to the Tyrees. I promised to join them for weekly dinners with Caroline when my schedule allowed. I didn’t want to encroach on her time with her family, but I wasn’t going anywhere either.

This magic between us was the most real thing I had ever felt, and it happened when I least expected it.

“I’m good,” Caroline said when I tried to drape her jacket around her shoulders. It was a balmy evening that was teasing us with the hope of spring being right around the corner. “It’s not that cold out.”

I raised an eyebrow and held the jacket, waiting for Caroline to thread her arms through.

“I just said—”

I licked my lips. *I wanted to devour her.* “I know what you said. Jacket on.”

She grumbled under her breath as she shrugged it on.

Gently, I pulled her curls out from under her collar, whispering, “Behave and I’ll reward you.”

Caroline’s blue eyes twinkled. “And what happens if I *misbehave*?”

I stole a quick peck when her parents weren’t looking. “Then I’ll have to show you a few more things in the bedroom, sweetheart.” I nipped at her lip. “And I can’t promise you’ll like them.”

She grinned at the floor. “I guarantee you I will.”

“So confident,” I said under my breath as I led her outside. “But you won’t misbehave, will you? You like being told what to do too much.”

“Oh yeah? That’s what you think?”

Her misguided arrogance was adorable.

“Careful,” I said as I helped her up into the truck. Truth be told, I was still worried about the possibility of Caroline going into rejection. But my worrying didn’t help her agonize any less. Instead, I kissed her and said a silent prayer of thanks that, for however long I would have her, Caroline Tyree was mine.

She was exhausted by the time I pulled into the apartment complex.

I scooped her out of the truck and carried her up the stairs like a bride.

Someday.

It was hard not to want to rush things, especially when I wanted forever to start right fucking now.

“Austin?” Caroline looked up at me with tired eyes.

“Yeah, Sugar?”

“You’re carrying me.”

“I am.”

“I can walk, you know.”

I chuckled. “I know.”

She yawned. “Then why?”

I stood there, under the stairwell lamp, and kissed her as the moths flitted overhead. “Because it’s what we do for the people we love. We hurt with them. We carry them. We bleed for them. We save them. And we help them heal.”

Caroline tucked her head in the crook of my neck, pressing her forehead to my skin. “I love you, too.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing it.” I set her on her feet and unlocked the door.

“Spring break is coming up, you know.”

“Got something you wanna add to your list?”

She laughed, a light yet tired sound. “We finished the list.”

“I think we should make a new one,” I said as I flipped on the lights.

“Yeah?”

Before she could kick her shoes off, I had her trapped against the wall. “Yeah.”

I grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head with one hand. I slid the other beneath her sweater, up her soft stomach, and over the swell of her breast.

“I think we should keep making lists for the rest of time,” I said in a low rumble against her neck. Her lips parted in a gasp. “I want all of your firsts.”

I kept her trapped against the wall while I kissed up the column of her throat.

Caroline tipped her head back and moaned. “Yes.”

“I thought I could take just one, but I’m a selfish man. I want them all.”

“Take them. Take me.” She said it without hesitation and without fear.

Every kiss was potent. Every touch was galvanic. I craved every one of her little whimpers of pleasure and need.

I grabbed the doorknob and yanked it closed, rattling the artwork that hung on the walls. I scooped Caroline into my arms and carried her to the bedroom.

“Austin?”

“Yeah, Sweets?” When she didn’t immediately follow up, I set her on the bed, knelt in front of her, and cupped her cheek. “What do you need?”

“Will you dance with me?”

I looked at the bedroom floor. “Right here?”

“Yeah.”

There was no need to question it. I stood and offered my hand.

Caroline kicked her shoes off and wrapped her arms around my neck. Her long skirt brushed my calves as she popped up onto her tiptoes. My hands circled her waist.

“It feels like New Year’s Eve was ages ago,” she said as we swayed in the silence.

“What did you do at midnight?”

“At the party?”

Caroline nodded, then rested her temple on my chest. “I left before midnight.”

“Trust me,” I murmured into the top of her hair. “I remember.” I spun Caroline under my arm, watching every flit of her fingers, every swish of her hair, and the way she smiled as she turned. “After we danced, I caught up with Beth, Callum, Layla, and Brandie Jean. They were wondering why you had run out of the party like your ass was on fire.”

“I was scared,” she admitted.

I stopped swaying and froze with her body bracketed in my hands. “Scared?”

“You scare me in all the best ways. I can’t catch my breath when I’m around you. It’s exhilarating.” Caroline slid her palms down my chest. “Being with you feels like really living. I was so stationary before that night, and one dance with you felt like magic.”

Vacant memories of advice I had given a friend in the past floated through my mind. “You scare me too, Sweets.” I reached down and grabbed her ass, lifting her and laying her out on the bed. “In all the best ways.”

I started with her sweater, pulling it over her head and tossing it on the floor. Her blonde curls splayed across the sheets. I pulled her leggings and skirt down at the same time. She shivered, but not for long. I covered her with my body as I kissed down her neck and across her chest.

“You ran out of the dance like you were Cinderella leaving the ball. I didn’t even get a glass slipper.”

Caroline pressed her lips against my neck, her breath warm against my skin. “You made me brave.”

I stripped down and pulled the covers over us, drawing Caroline close enough to share my body heat.

She groaned in slight frustration. “I feel like I’m gonna have a flare soon.”

“It’s going to be okay.” I hated seeing her in pain. More than anything, I wanted her to be vibrant and carefree. I cupped her cheek and kissed her forehead. “That flare will be one moment in your life. And I want it. I want it and all the rest of them.”

“I think that’s my favorite ‘I love you.’”

I smiled against her lips. “Are we gonna make a new list in the morning?”

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Let’s do it.”

I savored the feeling of her pressed against me. There was strength in her vulnerability. I wanted to shield her from pain. I wanted to take it from her and carry the burden myself.

But I couldn’t.

All I could do was hold her hand while she walked through it.

I was so fucking proud of her. Her resilience and determination were some of the most attractive things about her. *And Caroline was fucking gorgeous.*

I kissed her forehead. “Wanna get ready for bed?”

She shook her head. “Just a few more minutes like this.”

“Kay.”

I brushed her hair off her neck and spotted little flecks of paint on her skin.

“Did I miss some?” she asked.

I chuckled and smoothed my thumb over the red specks. “Yeah.”

She laughed. “You sure you want to deal with my mess?”

“I want all of it.” I tipped her chin up and kissed her gently. “Don’t tiptoe through life. Make it messy. Make it loud. Take up space. Try something new.”

Caroline sighed happily. “I love being yours.”

That was my favorite *I love you*. Because she was mine.

Finally mine.

EPILOGUE

CAROLINE

August

“Is that the last box?” I asked as Austin pack-muled my classroom decorations in from the truck.

He straightened and swiped his arm across his forehead. “Yeah.”

Every door was open as teachers migrated back to their classrooms to prepare for the new school year.

But there was little work actually being done because everyone and their mother had been rubbernecking at my boyfriend as he hauled in all my supplies.

I couldn't blame them.

Austin was in a pair of sneakers, gym shorts, and a FCFD t-shirt that was obscenely tight. After all the moving we had done this summer, I wasn't surprised that he had unintentionally packed on a little more muscle.

And I wasn't complaining.

With Austin's schedule with the fire department and my summer's free, we went to the beach as much as possible.

Warm sand between my toes and the sun on my face was a bliss like no other. There was something magical about the salt air.

Now I was back to the scent of freshly waxed floors and industrial cleaner. I inhaled a deep breath and sighed happily as I stapled a red paper plate to the bulletin board.

I heard Austin pop open a box, and looked over my shoulder. “What’s that?”

“Your wreath, the fabric cover for the glass pane on the door, and your desk shit.”

I snickered under my breath. “You can’t say “shit” in a kindergarten classroom.”

He grinned from ear to ear. “There are no kids here, Sweets.”

“Still,” I said. “It’s like swearing in church.”

He snorted. “You were swearing while praying last night.”

“I was not praying,” I hissed.

“You were talking to God. Rather loudly, I might add. Over and over *and over* again.”

I rolled my eyes and threw a little block of sticky tack at him. Austin laughed as he caught it and threw it back to me.

“Hush your mouth,” I said, cutting my eyes to the door.

“I know, I know,” he said as he hung a wreath on my door. “The walls have ears.”

I did a double take. “That’s not the apple wreath your mom made me.”

“Nope,” he said as he got it centered. “She made you a new one and wanted it to be a surprise. Snuck it in the truck last time we were down there.”

My heart swelled. “That was sweet. I love your mom.”

Austin smiled softly and his eyes crinkled at the corners. “She said the same thing about you.”

I finished fastening the decorations to the bulletin board and stepped back to admire my handiwork while Austin arranged the desks according to the floor plan I had drawn up.

Paper plates were painted with a full spectrum of colors and put together to look like a giant watercolor palette. I had duct taped brown tissue paper to a pool noodle to create a larger-than-life paint brush.

“Here,” Austin said, taking the pool noodle from me. “Just tell me where you want it.”

I eyed the board for a moment. On the left side. Kind of diagonal.”

He lifted it over his head and put it up against the board. “Here?”

I shook my head. “The other way.”

He switched directions. “There?”

“A little more to the left.”

“Here?”

“Right.”

He moved it again.

“No! Put it back!”

“You just told me to move it to the right!”

“No,” I said with a laugh. “I meant right—as in correct.”

Austin lifted it back to the spot that I liked. “Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

He stood still, holding the pool noodle while I looped strands of fishing line around it and tacked it to the cork board to hold it up.

“Thanks, babe,” I said as I hopped off the stepstool I was using and folded it up.

“What’s next?”

“Uh...” I looked around for my to-do list. “Either unpack all the books for the library corner or get the craft supplies organized. But honestly, those can wait until tomorrow. I just wanted to get everything moved in today and get some of the wall stuff up.” I looked at the time. “We should probably get

going. Aren't we supposed to meet Beth for lunch at the Mule?"

Austin shoved his hands into the pockets of his shorts. "Yeah. Why don't you make sure you like where I put all your desk stuff and the door decorations, and we'll head out."

I glanced at it. "Looks great. Let's go. I'm starving."

Austin and his gigantic body blocked my path through the desks. "Go. Look. At. It."

"I can just rearrange it tomorrow."

"At least look at the new wreath. Mom wanted me to tell her if you liked it."

I crossed the room and opened the door, stepping into the hallway to get a look at the wreath. "I love it!"

It was so colorful and festive. Loops of rainbow tulle were fluffed into a circle. Susan had crayons, markers, and little splats of fake paint tucked inside the wreath. In the middle was a little chalkboard that read, *Mrs. Hale. Kindergarten.*

Wait. *What?*

I yanked open the door again and saw Austin sitting on the edge of my desk, cool as a cucumber.

A new little nameplate sat right beside a mug. Both said the same thing.

Mrs. Hale.

Austin's eyes were glassy as he tapped his finger against the metal front of the desk.

While I was looking at the wreath, he had taped a garland of letters that—like everything else—read, *Mrs. Hale.*

"Austin..." It came out as a whisper as I cupped my hands over my mouth. "What's happening?"

He eased off the desk and took careful, measured steps toward me, producing a single rose from behind his back. If I had to guess, it came from a gas station.

Slowly, he got down on one knee, reached in his pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper.

“Sugar, we started this thing because you had a list and I wanted to be a part of it.”

Dammit, I was already crying.

His smile was kind as he handed me the rose, then reached up and used his thumb to wipe my tears away. “I got to thinking and made my own list. And I want nothing more than for you to be a part of it.”

My vision blurred from the tears as he looked down and read his list aloud.

“One, I want to marry you. Two, I want to have a family with you. I know you’ve got some worries about that, but all I’m asking is for you to let me worry with you. Three, I want to grow old with you, for as long as time sees fit for us to have each other. Four, I want to keep making lists with you. I want to keep living. I want to keep seeking adventure. I want to keep growing with you.” He shoved the crumpled paper into his pocket, trading it for a small velvet box. “I want all your firsts. I want it all, and I want it with you.”

He opened the box and lifted out a diamond ring with a thin gold band.

“Caroline Tyree—” Austin could barely get the words out; he was smiling too much. “Will you marry me?”

I forgot the ring and leaped into his arms. “Yes!”

“*CONGRATULATIONS!*”

The patio at The Copper Mule was packed with friends and family, cheering as we made our way up the sidewalk.

Beth stood in the middle of the craziness, her hands resting comfortably on her belly. She looked miserably happy. I couldn’t blame her—it was as hot as a griddle in Hell, and she was still a month from her due date.

Austin took my hand, lacing our fingers together. The ring felt so foreign, but so right.

We were surrounded by bodies the moment our feet hit the patio. Beth was the first to tackle me in a hug. “My baby’s gonna have an aunt!” she squealed.

I squeezed her tight. “How long have you known about him proposing?”

Beth laughed. “We’ve been scheming all summer.”

A tornado of pink glitter ripped me out of Beth’s embrace and nearly tackled me to the ground. “Congratulations, my little moonbeam!” Brandie Jean shrieked. “Three down, one to go!”

I peeled her hair off my tongue. “Three?”

“You, me, and Layla!” She pointed to Beth. “Now we just have to work on that one.”

Beth cackled. “Good luck with that.”

“Wait—you’re engaged?” It was then that I spotted a rock the size of a Buick on her finger.

“That’s right!” She pointed across the patio to an old man doing a crossword puzzle. He popped the question last night! You’re looking at the next Mrs. Amos Johnston and the fourth Mr. BJ Palmer!”

I was too deliriously happy to make sense of that.

“Congratulations, babe!” Layla threw her arms around me. “I’m so happy for you!” She turned and hugged my fiancé. *I had one of those!* “It’s about damn time, Hale.”

He chuckled. “You can say that again.” His arm around me was safe and secure. “But the wait was worth it.” He tipped my chin up and kissed me in front of everyone. “So worth it.”

Shane elbowed his way into the mix and hugged me first. Austin’s palm was warm and comforting on my back as Shane wrapped me up in his arms.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“When are you gonna stop saying that?” he mumbled.

I wiped my eyes. “Never.”

“Don’t you dare make me fucking cry.”

I sniffed. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you.”

He swore under his breath and used the collar of his t-shirt to wipe his eyes. “Same to you.” We took a few steps back to get some necessary breathing room. “Happy for you, kid. Even if you stole my roommate.”

Austin and Shane successfully cohabited until the summer when Austin snagged a little rental house that was only a few miles from the school. To absolutely no one’s surprise, we moved in together immediately.

Before we had even set up our bed or unpacked our clothes, Austin had set up my studio in the spare room.

I laughed through the tears. “Sorry about that. I guess it was short-lived.”

“No worries,” Shane said, slapping Austin’s back as they hugged. “Happy for you both.”

Beth sided up to Austin and threw her arm around him.

Shane studied her with pursed lips. “You okay? You look pale.”

She fanned herself. “Fine. It’s just hot out.”

Before Austin could say anything, Shane had a chair behind Beth and helped her sit down. A glass of water appeared in his hand like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

Any time that Beth expressed the slightest bit of discomfort, Austin nearly jumped out of his skin.

I put my hand on his arm and pulled him away. “Shane’s got it.”

“But—that’s—”

I yanked Austin down to my level and pointed to where Shane was kneeling beside Beth. His hand was wrapped

around her wrist, fingers pressed against her veins as he checked her pulse. It was a discreetly intimate moment.

“*See?* Shane’s got it.”

Austin groaned. “I’m gonna throw up.”

I laughed. “Breathe through it, babe.”

“Fuckin’ hate it,” he grumbled.

“Come on,” I said, pulling him to the long row of tables that had been pushed together so that everyone could sit together. “Give her a little breathing room. She’ll let you know if she needs you.”

Austin glared at me. “I hate that you two gang up on me.”

“Doesn’t feel so good, now, does it?”

“Smart ass,” he said as he pulled my chair out for me.

“I feel like we just did this,” Callum said, looking around at the crowd of people gathered to eat.

I was sitting between Austin and Layla, just like the first time we met. “We did.” I looked up at Austin and smiled. “But it’s so much better this time.”

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “So much better.”

BONUS EPILOGUE

Not ready to say goodbye to Austin and Caroline?

Grab their spicy bonus epilogue, then come back and read all my *thank yous* to the people who made this book possible!

[Click here for a peek into the future!](#)

WHAT TO READ NEXT

Did you love Austin's hometown? [Click here](#) to meet Maddie and her merry misfits in the completed *Beaufort Poker Club Series*!

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COMING SOON FROM MAGGIE GATES

We're heading back to Rhode Island!

While you're waiting for Annie the pie shop owner's happily ever after, check out *Nothing Less Than Everything!* This spicy sports romance will have you swooning, and you'll get a peek at Annie!

[Click here](#) to read *Nothing Less Than Everything!*

AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE READER

Dear Reader,

Here he is: Austin Hale in all his glory! I'm so thankful for all of you wonderful humans who pestered the hell out of me until I FINALLY gave him a book!

But then Caroline came in and stole the show.

Out of every heartbreak Austin went through in the Poker Club series, I knew Caroline was coming and it would be worth it. Because every priceless painting needs a frame strong enough to hold it up and make it shine.

As one of the girls who felt like life had left them behind and they didn't have a manual on how to catch up with everyone else, I felt such a strong connection to Caroline throughout the entire writing process.

For Austin, Caroline, and all of us, life happens exactly when it's supposed to. Don't rush it. Just hold on and enjoy the ride.

XO,

—Mags—

PS. Because you're super cool, [let's be friends!](#)

Want to spread the love? Tell others what you thought of this book by leaving a review on [Amazon](#) and [GoodReads](#) (I'll do a literal happy dance if you do)!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Mr. Mags: You're my best friend. My everything. My real-life book boyfriend. I reread your note daily because I can't do this without you. Life threw us a curveball during this one, but there's no one I'd rather be with and nowhere else I'd rather be. Our team always. I love you more. Fuck you, Tony.

To M³: I am SO grateful for you two and the support and encouragement that you give me. Quack quack, motherfuckers. You're ducking awesome (cheers to the TikToks that wreck our schedules in the best way).

To My Sensitivity Readers: Thank you for sharing your experiences and helping me build these characters. You are invaluable!

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To Sam E, Melina, Sam W, Lindsay, Nikki, Carissa, K. Dani, Morgan, and Alice: Thank you. Your daily encouragement keeps me going.

To My Readers: Because naming all of you one by one would double the length of this book: You all are the reason I keep writing books. I'm thoroughly convinced that there's no greater group of people in the world than my real life poker club. Y'all are amazing human beings! Thank you for loving these characters and getting as excited as I do about their stories! Thank you for your hype, encouragement, and excitement!

To Starbucks Baristas: You don't talk to me and never question why I'm sitting in the corner 40+ hours a week.

To Santa: Because I can.

ALSO BY MAGGIE GATES

Standalone Novels

The Stars Above Us: A Steamy Military Romance

Nothing Less Than Everything: A Sports Romance

Cry About It: An Enemies to Lovers Romance

The Beaufort Poker Club Series

Poker Face: A Small Town Romance

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In Spades: A Small Town Billionaire Romance

Not in the Cards: A Best Friend's Brother Romance

Betting Man: A Friends to Lovers Romance

The Falls Creek Series

What Hurts Us: A Small Town Fake Engagement Romance

What Heals Us: An Age Gap Romance

What Saves Us: A Brother's Best Friend Romance (Coming 2023)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maggie Gates writes raw, relatable romance novels full of heat and humor. She calls North Carolina home. In her spare time, she enjoys daydreaming about her characters, jamming to country music, and eating all the BBQ and tacos she can find! Her Kindle is always within reach due to a love of small-town romances that borders on obsession.

For future book updates, follow Maggie on social media.

