



CALAMITY  
MONTANA

# THE BLUFF

WILLA NASH

# THE BLUFF

WILLA NASH

## **THE BLUFF**

Copyright © 2020 by Devney Perry LLC

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-950692-34-7

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Editing & Proofreading:

Elizabeth Nover

[www.razorsharpediting.com](http://www.razorsharpediting.com)

Julie Deaton, Deaton Author Services

[www.facebook.com/jdproofs](http://www.facebook.com/jdproofs)

Karen Lawson, The Proof is in the Reading

Judy Zweifel, Judy's Proofreading

[www.judysproofreading.com](http://www.judysproofreading.com)

Cover:

Sarah Hansen © Okay Creations

[www.okaycreations.com](http://www.okaycreations.com)

## OTHER TITLES

## Calamity Montana Series

[The Bribe](#)

[The Bluff](#)

---

*Writing as Devney Perry*

## Jamison Valley Series

[The Coppersmith Farmhouse](#)

[The Clover Chapel](#)

[The Lucky Heart](#)

[The Outpost](#)

[The Bitterroot Inn](#)

[The Candle Palace](#)

## Maysen Jar Series

[The Birthday List](#)

[Letters to Molly](#)

## Lark Cove Series

Tattered

Timid

Tragic

Tinsel



## Tin Gypsy Series

[Gypsy King](#)

[Riven Knight](#)

[Stone Princess](#)

[Noble Prince](#)

[Fallen Jester](#)

[Tin Queen](#)

## Runaway Series

[Runaway Road](#)

[Wild Highway](#)

[Quarter Miles](#)

[Forsaken Trail](#)

[Dotted Lines](#)

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

# CHAPTER ONE

---

“I LOVE CALAMITY.”

Especially on a Saturday night.

Outside, the golden streetlamps were winning their battle against the darkness, casting a glow on parked cars and sidewalks. The buildings slumbered, resting until morning, when cheery people would infuse them with life. The stars peeking through the dense tufts of gray clouds were disappearing one by one as the storm drifted over the towering mountains in the distance.

It didn't take long for the snow to come. One minute, the air was still. The next, it was filled with heavy, fat flakes dumped from the heavens, like the clouds had hefted themselves over the countryside for so long, they just couldn't keep tight their seams anymore.

A white layer dusted the streets and parked cars. The flakes clung to the leafless branches of the trees. With the snow came a deep chill, the temperature on the bank's sign four blocks down dropping in steady succession.

I clutched the chunky tan cardigan I'd pulled on earlier, burrowing into its thick collar. The air coming off the glass was crisp, and when I blew out a long breath, a circle of fog formed in front of my mouth.

This spot had become my favorite hangout. Standing at my window on the second floor of this small building in downtown Calamity, Montana, I had a clear view of nearly all of First Street.

In the mornings, I'd pull a chair up to the glass. While sipping my coffee, I'd watch locals arrive to open their shops and offices. In the evenings, I'd swap coffee for wine. After months, I'd memorized the storefronts and shop signs.

I'd dated this guy a few years ago who'd had this obsession with old Westerns. He'd been so desperate to fit into the Nashville country scene, he'd thought he could study black-and-white films to learn how to be a cowboy or outlaw. I'd dumped the idiot poser after two weeks and too many movies.

But Calamity reminded me of those movies, the ones starring John Wayne and James Stewart and Kirk Douglas. Only here, it was authentic, not a Hollywood set. Though it had clearly evolved to fit the modern world, there were times when I could close my eyes and picture Clint Eastwood standing on one side of First, facing off with a villain cloaked in black.

The buildings had mostly square faces, some sided in graying barnwood. Others, like this two-story space where I lived, were covered in faded red brick. On a few of the oldest buildings' exteriors, the original painted signs still lingered, the hundred-year-old paint refusing to succumb to time and the elements.

My bed was pushed up against a raw brick wall and on the exterior side, the words *Candy Shoppe* were a ghost in chipped white. Sometimes I'd snuggle into my bed and press my hand against that wall, feeling the letters seep through the hundred-

year-old mortar. I'd imagine a line of children swarming into the space below me, wide-eyed and drooling for brightly colored candies in glass jars.

The candy shop was long gone. Now the space, which had been empty for years, was being converted into a fitness studio owned by my landlord and friend, Kerrigan Hale. Once it opened, I'd welcome a yoga or barre class to break up my days.

After nearly five months in Calamity, wasting my days and nights at this window had started to become . . . well, pathetic. I was a twenty-nine-year-old woman who spent her days in this studio apartment, watching the world pass while she stared from her second-floor perch. I had no job. I had no hobbies. I had no aspirations.

*Pathetic.*

But safe.

This town and this window, where I could watch people come and go, had become my sanctuary.

Was my future as empty and black as the night sky? *Yes.* Was I stuck in a rut? *Absolutely.* Did I care?

For months, that answer would have been a resounding *no*. No, I didn't care. But lately, my father's favorite question had been rattling around the back of my mind, creating enough noise it was getting harder to ignore.

*Everly, what are you doing with your life?*

For the past ten years, my answer had been the same. Singing. I'd wanted to be a singer. And I'd chased that future, sprinting through my days, stretching for that dream, even though no matter how fast I ran, I couldn't seem to get a hand on it.

Five months ago, I'd stopped running. My legs had given out. After a stalker, a near-death experience and a decade of disappointment, singing was history.

What was I doing with my life?

Hell if I knew.

My phone dinged in my cardigan's pocket. I dug it out to see a text from Lucy.

*Want to come over for dinner tomorrow night?*

I typed out a quick *sure*, then tucked my phone away and leaned against the window, the cold from the glass seeping through my sweater.

Lucy lived in Calamity with her husband, Duke, the local sheriff. She was my best friend and the reason I was here in Montana.

The two of us had grown up together in upstate New York. Together, we'd played with Barbies and princess dolls. We'd learned how to roller-blade in our cul-de-sac, scraping knees and deciding roller blades were evil. We'd built fairy gardens in her backyard and obstacle courses in mine.

And we'd sung.

Lucy had always loved to sing. She'd make up songs about riding the bus or going to swimming lessons or covering a driveway in sidewalk-chalk drawings. Music was as much a part of Lucy as her blood and heartbeat. Naturally, whatever she'd loved, I'd loved. It went both ways. Her voice was magical, and though it had never come as easily for me, I could carry a more-than-decent tune.

Singing had been another connection, another bond, and when she'd decided to move to Nashville to pursue a singing



career, asking if I'd come too, the obvious answer had been yes. With stars in my eyes, I'd dropped out of college to move to a new city with my best friend, full of hope and ambition.

Lucy and I had been roommates for ten years, and as her career had soared, mine had stagnated. But I'd never stopped trying.

Months standing at this window had given me ample time to think. To examine the past.

Had I worked so hard to become a singer because I'd actually loved singing? Or had I done it because I was too stubborn to admit defeat? Or too scared to admit I didn't know what I wanted from my life?

The truth was, I didn't want to be a singer anymore. Unlike Lucy, I didn't crave the music like it was my next breath. The stalker hadn't ruined it for her completely. But me?

Lucy was having a hard time understanding why I was just . . . done. With Duke's support, she'd put the stalking behind her. She was writing songs and working on a new album. She sang at Calamity Jane's bar with the local band.

All while I stood at the glass, staring into the future without a clue which direction it would take me.

My parents called me lost.

I preferred in limbo. And for a little bit longer, I was going to stay in limbo.

Because limbo was safe too.

I loved my small, sheltered apartment. I enjoyed my lazy-day routine. I needed to be the one who watched, instead of the one *being* watched.

So . . . limbo. Until something called to me and I started living again.

Minutes ticked away as I stood at the window, and below me, the streets of Calamity were quiet. With nothing but a few vehicles parked outside of Jane's bar, there wasn't much to watch but the falling snow, so I retreated from the window.

The lights in the apartment were off. I might stare at the people outside, but I didn't want them staring back. I used the blue glow from the microwave's clock to navigate across the open room. Wine in hand, I sat on the cream sofa I'd staged across the room from my bed. My tablet rested on the whitewashed oval coffee table, and I opened it to the book I'd been reading earlier.

My second favorite pastime these days was reading true-crime novels. I'd lose myself in the mystery and inner workings of a serial killer's mind. Somehow learning about the mentally insane made it easier to accept my stalker's actions. In these novels, I learned why the villain was the villain. The motivations were right there, in black and white.

Lucy and I didn't have a lot of answers about our stalker. The woman had been sick. But that explanation had never seemed like enough. So I read because maybe I'd find an answer in one of these books.

The snow outside continued to fall as I devoured the pages, reading in the dark until my phone dinged. I dug it out. An email from my mother?

It was nearly one in the morning in Montana, making it almost three a.m. on the East Coast. My mother had always been an early riser, especially during tax season, using the predawn hours to fire off a string of terse emails.

At least, I assumed her emails were all terse. I'd never received one with a gentle tone or friendly greeting, so that must be how she communicated with everyone.

Or maybe just me.

*EVERLY,*

*Your father and I are waiting for your response to our discussion last week. We've set aside an hour to call you this evening at five o'clock Mountain Standard Time. Please come prepared.*

*Cynthia Sanchez-Christian CPA, MPAC*

HER EMAILS WERE NEVER SIGNED *Mom*. There was never an *I love you. I'm proud of you. I'm mad at you. I'm happy for you.* Because Cynthia Sanchez-Christian was apathetic when it came to her daughter. Probably the reason I avoided her.

Five o'clock. That meant I had less than twenty-four hours until I got the privilege of hearing her disinterest, because skipping our scheduled call would only lead to more emails I had no desire to receive.

I deleted the note and stood, tossing my tablet onto the couch before making my way back to the window. I leaned against the frame, feeling the sheer white, floor-to-ceiling curtains drift over my shoulder.

I'd been in Calamity since September. After the stalker, neither Lucy nor I'd had much of a desire to return to Nashville and retrieve our belongings, so we'd had clothes and

other personal items shipped to Montana. The furniture, those pieces not riddled with bullet holes, had been donated and forgotten. Leaving me with the blank slate that was this apartment.

Kerrigan had cleaned the space up before I'd moved in, hauling away junk and scrubbing it from top to bottom. But she'd left the raw edge, the brick and the glass and the unfinished ceiling. I'd softened the room with textures, like the curtains and my plush white bed. Everything I'd bought was a shade of white or cream. What the apartment lacked in color inside, Calamity made up for outside.

Last fall, when the trees had turned a kaleidoscope of red and orange and lime green, I'd left the curtains wide open so the colors could bleed inside. Then the winter blues had taken their place. I couldn't wait for the greens of spring and the yellows of summer.

They'd brighten the room and draw me outside.

I didn't have a car. I hadn't needed one in Nashville. So I walked wherever I had to go. The grocery store. The bank. The tiny movie theater. If ever I was in need, Lucy would drive me the farther distances with her and Duke's German shepherd puppy, Cheddar, riding shotgun.

Small-town life was a welcome change from the city bustle. According to Duke, summer in Calamity would be busier. Tourists flocked to the area, crowding the streets and shops. But tonight, as the clock slipped into the early hours of tomorrow, it was peaceful. Silent.

Across the street and two blocks down, the electric-orange glow from Jane's neon bar sign tinted the falling snow into ginger flakes. There were only two cars out front taking up the diagonal parking spaces closest to the door. Like they knew I'd

been waiting, two men pushed outside, shaking hands before getting into their vehicles, their taillights soon disappearing.

First Street was empty.

Loneliness, darker than the sky and colder than the snow, seeped into my bones.

What was I doing with my life?

I bolted from the window and crossed the room for the coat hook beside my door. I shrugged on the forest-green parka I'd bought before Christmas and stepped into a pair of knee-high rubber boots. Then I was out the door before I could convince myself to climb into the safety of my bed.

Life in Calamity—my life, at least—was dull, a characteristic I was more than content to embrace. Except at the moment, without a distraction, the question clawing at my conscience, the question that made the loneliness sink deeper, would plague me all night.

What was I doing with my life?

*Not tonight.* That would be the topic of tomorrow's call with my parents, and I wasn't going to overthink it now.

I checked the peephole to make sure the stairwell was empty before unlocking the door. Since there was only one apartment up here, these stairs were mine. But just because my stalker was dead didn't mean the fears she'd created had perished with her.

The landing outside the door was empty, no surprise, so I made a break for it, navigating the gray staircase to the side exit door that dropped me on First Street. I checked its peephole too, then inched the door open, confirming I was alone. When I stepped outside, the winter air cooled my lungs.

Though it was warmer than I'd expected. The snowflakes that landed on my brown hair instantly melted. Not wanting to linger alone, I hurried down the sidewalk, listening for any sound of someone behind me. But the street was deserted and the only boots leaving tracks in the snow were my own.

The red-orange light from Jane's beckoned—along with a stiff drink. Wine wasn't going to cut it tonight. It wasn't going to numb the anxiety creeping up my spine, making my heart beat too fast, my breathing too shallow. Maybe venturing out into the darkness hadn't been the best idea.

Once upon a time, I'd been fearless. A two-block walk on a well-lit sidewalk wouldn't have made me think twice. But I was practically running by the time I reached Jane's door.

I flew inside, stomping my boots as I surveyed the area.

Empty. Almost.

Except for Jane herself and a man on a stool, sitting dead center at the bar.

I weaved my way past the tables in the center of the room, scanning the tall booths that hugged the walls. They were empty too. The stage to the left of the bar was deserted but the mic stands had been left behind. The band's equipment was shoved against the wall. Even the jukebox in the corner was off.

"I'm closing in forty minutes," Jane said as she spotted me crossing the room, holding up a finger. "Not one second longer. Want to get home before the roads get dicey."

Jane Fulson was a bit of a legend in Calamity. I'd met her only a few times on the nights Lucy had dragged me out for a cheeseburger and a drink, but Jane wasn't a woman you forgot easily.

Her white hair was tied up in a twist with a few tendrils falling down behind her ears. Her skin was permanently tan, the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth earned from years of hard work. Though it was open to the public, when you walked through the door to her bar, you knew you were in *her* bar. At Jane's, the customer wasn't always right. She was.

"One drink," I promised and unzipped my coat, taking the stool one down from the other patron.

I cringed at my reflection in the mirror behind the bar. The snow hadn't been kind to my hair and it hung in limp strands down my shoulders to my waist. I hadn't bothered with makeup this morning and my nose was red from the walk over.

Thankfully, the light was dim. Any brightness from the beer and liquor signs adorning the walls was soaked up by the tall ceilings and plethora of wood décor.

I cast the guy at my side a brief glance. Then did a double take as my mouth went dry.

*Hello.* Where had this hottie been hiding? I'd spent my fair share of time watching Calamity's residents and I would have remembered him.

His broad shoulders were curled in as he bent to the bar, hunched over his glass. The ice rattled in his tumbler as he stirred the cocktail with a tiny yellow straw. His profile was perfect. Straight forehead. Strong nose. A chiseled jaw covered in stubble. Luscious lips turned down in a scowl.

He was wearing a long-sleeved thermal that molded to his roped arms. Strength oozed off his body and the muscled definition of his back. The face and the body were perfection, but it was the energy he exuded that rendered me awestruck.

He had this raw and rough edge. A simmering brood that wafted off his body in waves. A warning. A message. *Stay away*. A bead of sweat formed at my temple and I struggled to drag in the heavy, hot air.

The man sat just feet away, but he was in a world of his own. An invisible wall separated his stool from the others, keeping others locked away.

“What can I get you?” Jane slapped a paper coaster in front of me.

I blinked, lost in the haze of this man and forced my eyes forward. “Uh . . . gin.”

“Anything with that gin?” Jane asked, her gaze darting between me and the handsome stranger.

“Tonic, please.”

She nodded and went to work preparing my drink as I shrugged off my coat and put it on the stool at my side.

I was in simple black leggings. Beneath my cardigan, I’d pulled on a white tank top over my sports bra. There was a dollop of salsa on the hem from my dinner earlier when I’d lost control of a diced tomato. I shifted the edge of my cardigan to cover it up and ran a hand through my hair.

This was what happened when I acted on impulse. I ran into the one hot guy in Calamity and I was practically in pajamas with bedhead.

*High five, Ev. Next time, just stay home.*

Jane returned with my drink, setting it on the coaster before shooting a look at the clock over her shoulder. “Forty minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



She grimaced at the ma'am before disappearing through a doorway that connected the bar to the kitchen.

Leaving me and my companion in utter silence.

The air around us was stifling. I lifted my drink with a shaking hand, sipping and savoring the juniper taste. I was tempted to gulp, to cool the fire thrumming through my veins, but I sipped.

Who was this guy? Curiosity got the best of me and I looked up to the mirror.

A pair of the bluest eyes I'd ever seen met my gaze. Blue like the ocean on a sunny day. Blue like the evening skies above the Montana mountains. An endless blue that swallowed me whole.

I tore my gaze away from the mirror and turned to his profile, wanting to see that blue up close.

It took him a moment to look over, and when he did, he only dipped his chin in a silent greeting. Then he went back to his drink, his shoulders hitching closer to his ears as he tried to shut me out.

His sandy-blond hair was cut short but the longer strands on top were damp. He hadn't been here long either.

"It's not fair," I blurted.

He looked up at the mirror, at my reflection. Then he slowly brought his glass to his lips. The yellow straw was bent, folded over the rim and held by one of his long fingers. His grip practically engulfed the glass whole. "What's not fair?"

Sweet lord, he had a good voice too. A shiver rolled over my shoulders at the rich and gravelly timbre. "Your

eyelashes.”

He blinked, then took another sip.

I was sure he'd just keep on drinking and ignoring my presence for the next thirty-seven minutes, except then he turned and . . . *bam*. Those eyes trapped me like a bird in a cage.

No man had ever made me feel this way with a single glance. My pulse raced. I wobbled on my seat. Desire bloomed in my core. The full force of his Persian blues sent a tidal wave of ecstasy rushing my way.

“Who are you?” I whispered.

His eyebrows came together. “Who are you?”

“E-Everyly Christian.” My tongue felt too big for my mouth.

He nodded and went back to his drink.

No way. He wasn't getting off that easy. “Now it's your turn. Who are you?”

“No one special.”

I hummed. “Nice to meet you, No One Special. Mind if I call you Hot Bar Guy instead?”

The corner of his mouth turned up.

*Victory*. I hid my smile in my drink, taking a long sip. I'd never been good at subtle. Shameless flirt was more my style, and though I hadn't inherited much from my mother, her innate talent for being blunt seemed to have stuck. Good or bad, I usually said whatever came to mind.

“What brings you down here tonight?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

He didn't disappoint. He simply sipped from his glass, his tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip.

Did he have any idea that just his presence was making me squirm on this stool?

"I was in need of a stiff drink." I answered my own question. "And maybe a little excitement."

"Probably should have come here earlier. You missed your window for excitement."

I quirked an eyebrow and met his gaze in the mirror. "Did I?"

---

THE SOUND of traffic woke me. The slush of tires on melting snow. I blinked awake, lifting off my pillow to shove the hair from my face. I didn't need to check beneath the rumpled sheet to know I was stark naked.

And the space beside me was empty.

I flopped into my pillow and stretched as a smile spread across my face. There was an ache in my core. My muscles throbbed. I'd been deliciously used and pleased last night.

Sometime before dawn, Hot Bar Guy—Hux—had disappeared without a word.

My laugh echoed in the empty apartment. "I love Calamity."

## CHAPTER TWO

---

“EARTH TO HUX.” Katie snapped her fingers in front of my face.

I blinked and shot her a scowl.

“What’s with you this week?”

“Nothing,” I muttered, spinning in my office chair so my back was to her. Then I adjusted my aching cock and wished the hard-on I’d been sporting for three days would go the fuck away.

Except every time I closed my eyes, I saw a sparkling bronze gaze. Caramel irises flecked with dark chocolate and cinnamon. I saw creamy, smooth skin the color of melted honey.

It was worse at night, when I could still feel the whisper of her sweet breath across my ear. When I craved the dig of her nails into the flesh of my back. Or the way her tight heat clenched me like a fist as she orgasmed with a cry and milked my own release.

*Fucking hell.*

I was rock hard.

“Hux.” Katie cleared her throat behind me.

“Yeah.” I didn’t bother turning. All I’d see was a scowl. Judging by Katie’s huff, she was losing patience.

Katie had been my friend for decades, and she knew my moods as well as I knew hers.

The two of us had gone to the same school—everyone in Calamity went to the same school. She was two years younger than I was, but since we’d lived in the same neighborhood, her parents had asked mine in fifth grade if I’d walk with her to school. We’d been friends ever since.

Katie was a little thing, standing a foot shorter than my six two, and there were times when she looked like she could fit in with this year’s Calamity Cowboys senior class. She’d been wearing the same thick, black-rimmed glasses for decades. Her light brown hair was chopped right above her shoulders, like it had always been.

There was comfort in her familiarity. She treated me the same today, yesterday, the day before, as she had when we’d been kids. I could always count on her, through thick and thin, which wasn’t something I could say about many people. Katie had been the one and only person to show up the day I’d gotten out of prison. She was one of the few people in this world I trusted completely.

“Are you okay?” she asked, concern lacing her kind voice.

I sighed and ran a hand over my face. “I’m good.”

I just couldn’t seem to get my mind off my night with Everly. What the hell had I been thinking? Hooking up with a woman in town was not what I was supposed to be doing right now.

“Is it Savannah?” she asked.

“Hmm.” Not a yes. Not a no.

“Any word from Aiden?”

I shook my head, finally turning around. If there was anything to get my mind off the mysterious and sensual woman I’d fucked three nights ago, it was my lawyer’s name. “He’s supposed to call me when he knows more.”

“Do you think they’ll assign a family services agent?”

“I hope so.” Because at this point, I wasn’t sure what else to do to get my daughter away from my bitch of an ex-wife. Not a topic I wanted to get into with Katie, so I leaned my forearms on my desk. She’d come in here for a reason. “What’s up?”

“Did you see the email about the commission piece?”

I shot a glare at the laptop closed at my side. “I hate email.”

Katie rolled her eyes and handed me the piece of paper she’d brought in. It was the email, printed out for me to read. Not only was she my friend, but she’d been working at my art gallery for years. She’d helped me build my business from the ground up.

Katie did everything at Reese Huxley Art besides paint. She acted as the receptionist in the showroom. She maintained my website and answered the emails I avoided like the plague. She kept the gallery’s books, doing her best to track whatever receipts I balled up and left on my desk.

Without her, there’d be no Reese Huxley Art.

I scanned the email, cringing at its length. The customer was requesting a custom landscape piece but without blue paint. She wanted a Montana scene with a river but without blue paint. She wanted it in the summer but without blue paint. At the end, she wrote *P.S. NO BLUE* in all caps.

“How am I supposed to paint a Montana summer landscape, with a goddamn river, and not use blue?”

Katie scrunched up her nose. “Should I just tell her you’re booked?”

I was booked. It wouldn’t be a lie. But money was money, and though I wasn’t hurting for it these days, I still remembered what it was like to live paycheck to paycheck, so I rarely turned it down, even if that meant I sacrificed my creative freedom. “Quote her fifty percent higher than normal if she doesn’t want blue.”

“Okay.”

Taking the paper, I wadded it into a tight sphere and tossed it into the trash can. “What else?”

“Nothing. It’s quiet.”

“It’s winter.”

We didn’t get much foot traffic in the winter, another reason I’d do this non-blue custom piece. I used the slow months to stock up on items we’d display and sell during tourist season and also to fill special orders.

“I think I might take off,” I said. “Head to the studio. You good here alone?”

“Of course.” She smiled, then spun on her ballet flats and walked out of the room, her footsteps no more than a whisper on the wooden floors.

Around my office, finished paintings wrapped in tan kraft paper leaned against the walls. My desk was littered with paper—empty coffee cups from the coffee shop, more emails Katie had printed for me to review, bills in envelopes that needed to be opened and paid.



All things I hadn't gotten around to doing yet and doubted I would. Today, I'd come in to clean up this mess, but I just couldn't focus. I couldn't get Everly off my mind.

The image of her on that barstool was ingrained on my mind. The seductive and mischievous glint in her eyes. The innuendo dripping from her sultry voice. The corner of her lickable mouth turned up in open invitation. The second her tongue had darted out to wet her bottom lip, I'd been a goner.

Christ, she was sexy. I hadn't been able to resist.

Hookups weren't my style. Not that I was a damn monk, but usually I left town. I'd go to a neighboring place, like Prescott, where I wouldn't risk running into a woman later at the café or coffee shop. The last thing I needed was more women spreading rumors about me around town.

Not that I gave a fuck what people thought of me. I'd been written off a long damn time ago. But I cared for Savannah's sake.

My daughter was dealing with enough shit. The last thing she needed was for some woman I'd fucked to harass her to get my attention. Almost as worse would be for April to get wind of it and make my life even more complicated.

My ex-wife seemed to have a bead on everything I did around town. Where I ate. Where I drove. Where I slept, even if it was here at the gallery on my couch against the wall, currently littered with blank canvases. *Hell*. No one, especially April, needed to know that I'd let Everly drag me to her studio apartment, where I'd fucked her senseless.

I rubbed a hand over my face, shaking away the image of Everly's coffee-colored hair falling in silky strands down her chest. Her rosy nipples peeking through the strands. Her hands

braced on my chest as she rode me. Her hips circling as she moved, up and down on my cock. Her mouth parted, just a bit, as a rouge flush crept up her chest.

“For fuck’s sake,” I muttered, shooting out of my chair.

Enough already. It was a one-night stand, nothing more. She was just a woman with a hot body and some sexy as fuck hair.

But damn it, that had been the best sex of my life. Everly had held nothing back. Neither had I. We’d come together in a rush of mingled breaths and tangled limbs and curled toes. No inhibitions. No limits. That woman had met me beat for beat, and we’d fallen together like wild, practiced lovers.

Not that I knew anything about being in a long-term relationship. The only lover I’d taken more than once had been April and look where that had landed me.

Prison.

There weren’t many people I truly loathed in this world, but my ex topped the short list.

April and I had been foolish kids when we’d gotten married. We’d been in love—if you could call it love at that age. The minute she turned eighteen, we drove the two hours to Bozeman, the closest town of any size to Calamity, and walked into the courthouse like we owned the damn place. Then we spent a weekend in a motel—a low-budget honeymoon—before coming home to tell our families we’d gotten married.

We rented a dumpy trailer, one her parents and mine frowned upon. She worked as a clerk at the grocery store for minimum wage. I took a job doing construction with a local crew.

Things were tight, but we were able to afford rent, gas and food. That wasn't enough for April. She didn't like the step down in monetary status. Why she thought things would be different, I had no clue. She'd known I didn't have any money when she'd said *I do*.

But she wanted more. A nicer house far away from the trailer park. A new car. New clothes. So I took the graveyard shift at a gas station.

For a year, I listened to her complain that I wasn't doing enough by working two jobs. So I worked harder, desperate to make her happy, to make this marriage work. Then on a rare night off, she dragged me to a party with some new friends. A group of guys were playing a poker game in the garage and invited me to join in.

That night, I won three hundred dollars.

Two weeks later at another party, I brought home five hundred. April loved it. So I kept playing and playing. I found new games, some in town, but most were outside Calamity. I learned quickly how to play. How to bluff.

How to cheat.

Then came the game that destroyed my life. The game was at a guy's house outside of town. Some fancy prick who liked to flaunt his wealth before us lesser mortals. He invited ten of us who played often to his table. Maybe if I had realized sooner that my sleight of hand worked better with a paint brush, things would have been different.

But I was too young at nineteen and too stupid—too arrogant—to think I'd get caught.

Eventually, everyone gets caught.

The rich guy called me out for cheating. He came after me and beyond that, I don't remember much.

He hit me. I hit him. Cheating at cards wasn't my only talent back then. I also knew how to fight.

I put him in a coma for two weeks.

He moved away from Calamity before I got out of prison, but according to the rumors, he wasn't as bright as he'd once been.

The public defender assigned to my case pled self-defense. The judge saw right through the bullshit and sentenced me to two years. Two years that I paid without argument.

I would have fought harder for a reduced sentence if I'd known April was pregnant.

She divorced me while I was inside. The papers arrived during my first month. I didn't fight that either.

She took every one of my possessions from that trailer to the landfill. She drained our checking account, leaving me with nothing. She told the entire town of Calamity that I'd been manipulating her for years, that she'd been afraid to leave me because of my temper.

I didn't have much of a fucking temper and I would never hit a woman.

But April was successful in tainting my name around town. During the twenty months I spent in a cell in the state penitentiary, not a soul reached out to me. Not my parents. Not my *friends*.

Except Katie.

She wrote me a letter about a year into my sentence. We didn't communicate much beyond a short note here and there,

but the day I walked out with four months of parole to go before I could put it behind me, Katie was the one waiting to pick me up.

She let me crash at her place while I finished out parole. She stuck with me as I put my life together.

Katie was the one to tell me about April.

Five days after our divorce had been finalized, April had remarried a lawyer in town. Julian Tosh was twelve years her senior. And five months into my sentence, April had given birth to a baby girl.

At first, I thought April had cheated, that her daughter was this lawyer's kid. Bullet dodged. But then the color drained from Katie's face and I knew.

That baby was mine.

Almost two years in prison and no one had told me, not even Katie. In her defense, Katie avoided April at all costs, and April had let everyone believe that the baby was Julian's. But as the baby grew and her features—my features—became more prominent, there was no hiding the truth.

I could have gotten over the divorce. The money. The lies. But I'd never forgive April for keeping my daughter from me.

I returned to Calamity a father, and it took me ten months before I was able to meet Savannah.

Ten. Months.

I begged April. I pleaded. And she refused me at every turn. Finally, I found a lawyer.

April's son of a bitch husband, Julian, ran the biggest firm in Calamity, so I had to go out of town to find representation. I wasn't able to afford much anyway. Luckily, I found Aiden.

Aiden Archer lived in Prescott, a town in the neighboring county. For ten months, every petition he filed was immediately denied.

Julian wasn't a better lawyer than Aiden, he just had more leverage. No matter how hard Aiden pushed, there was no overcoming the facts.

I was an ex-convict. A man convicted of a violent crime.

Coincidence was the only reason I even met Savannah. If April and Julian had had their way, I wouldn't have been allowed to lay eyes on her.

April's mother was babysitting Savannah and took her out for a special lunch. I was walking along First Street, having come downtown to drop off my paycheck at the bank, when I spotted the most beautiful little girl through the window of the White Oak Café.

April's mother wasn't as sadistic as my ex-wife. She let me stand there, awestruck at Savannah, for a solid two minutes before she waved me away.

Two minutes with my daughter, with a glass window between us.

Two-minute glimpses became my reason for living.

Two minutes at the park. Two minutes on the school playground when she snuck away from her friends and teachers to say hello at the chain-link fence.

Calamity was a small town and though it was impossible to escape the sins of my past, it was worth suffering here on the off chance I could see my kid.

At first, I don't think she even knew I was her dad. Julian had stolen my place as her father. So I stood in the wings,

waiting for my two minutes, determined that even if she didn't know exactly who I was, she'd know she was my entire world.

Eventually, Savannah learned the truth about my identity. After years of begging to see my child, a judge granted me weekend visitation. Supervised, of course. For a short, perfect time, my Saturday afternoons were spent at the park, pushing Savannah on the swings or helping her across the monkey bars.

Until April decided that visitation wasn't healthy for Savannah. She made up some bullshit story that Savannah screamed and cried each Saturday morning, dreading our playtime in the park.

*Goodbye, visitation.*

That had coincided with my purchase of the gallery. April had been jealous that I was making something of my life, so she'd punished me for it.

The family services lady who'd been supervising visits hadn't been able to change the judge's mind. No surprise. That judge played golf with Julian every Friday.

Petitioning the court had become a dead end. And finally, it had been too much. For my sanity. For my heart. I'd settled for those two-minute windows, giving up the big fight.

I wanted to kick my own ass for that mistake. For letting Savannah down.

But it was time to step up. Savannah had been through hell lately and she needed her father.

Just like I needed her.

Savannah was sixteen years old. It was time to battle, this time until the end. No matter what. No matter the cost. I was

getting my daughter.

I dug out my phone from my pocket and pulled up her name.

There were a lot of benefits to having a rebellious teenager as your child. Savannah didn't give a shit about her mother's or stepfather's rules. And she didn't give a shit what the courts had to say. She was sixteen and when she wanted to see me, she did just that.

*Hey, baby girl.*

It was her lunch hour so I wasn't surprised to see three dots appear.

*Hey.*

A girl of many words, my Savannah.

*You okay?*

A thumbs-up. I hated that damn emoji. It ranked right up there with the brown smiling shit pile.

*Got time to come over later?*

*K*

*Probably be in the studio.*

*K*

I doubted April and Julian would notice Savannah sneaking over to my house. The few times they had, they'd thrown epic fits, going so far as to call the cops to haul Savannah home.

*Assholes.* How was I the unworthy parent when they only drove her to trouble?



In the past year, my daughter had been caught riding around Calamity and the countryside on a dirt bike, acting like it was street legal. She'd disobeyed curfew. She'd been caught vandalizing property and spray-painting trees downtown. If there was a group of rough kids within a fifty-mile radius of Calamity who Savannah hadn't befriended, then I was Judge Judy.

It had escalated so much, she'd thrown a rock through a farmhouse window, all because the sheriff had been parked out front.

It didn't take a genius to realize Savannah was acting out.

She must have thought if she got into enough trouble, a judge would take her away from April and Julian. Sixteen-year-old logic at its finest.

She hadn't caused much trouble lately, though I was more worried about her than ever before.

Five months ago, at the same farmhouse where she'd thrown the rock, she'd been held at gunpoint. She'd witnessed a psychopathic stalker try to murder Duke's woman, Lucy. Savannah had watched as Duke had shot and killed the stalker.

She'd watched a person die.

Savannah refused to talk about the farmhouse. She pretended it hadn't happened. But I'd find her staring at a wall when she didn't think I was looking.

Maybe she'd talk to me if we had more time together, if there wasn't the fear of breaking the rules looming over our heads. It was time to get her out of April and Julian's house before it was too late.

Maybe it already was.

I swiped my keys from the desk and strode out of my office. At her corner desk in the showroom, Katie sat with the phone sandwiched between her ear and shoulder.

“Correct. No blue.” She spotted me and rolled her eyes.

I waved, striding past her to the gallery’s main entrance on First. Normally, I parked in the alley because it was guaranteed parking and I liked to come and go without fanfare.

I blamed Saturday night for the reason my truck was parked out front today.

I blamed Everly.

When she’d come into the bar Saturday night, I’d lied. I’d known exactly who she was when she’d slid onto that stool. She’d been at the farmhouse with Savannah. She was Lucy’s best friend from Nashville.

Everly Christian.

I didn’t frequent Jane’s often. I preferred to stay on the fringe of Calamity society. People here didn’t like me. And I didn’t like them.

But I’d been at the gallery on Saturday, dropping off some of my latest pieces from the studio. It was dark. The snow had started to fall. And I’d just felt . . . I don’t know what I’d felt. Lonely? Bored?

Jane’s was a couple doors from the gallery. There’d only been two cars out front. With the snow, I’d figured it would be a slow night, so I’d gone in for one drink.

Then Everly had walked in and my entire body had craved hers. The hair. Those eyes. The perfect pout to her watermelon-pink lips. Fuck, but I couldn’t stop thinking about their sweet taste.

I shot a glance across the street as I opened the door to my truck. Everly's window reflected the bright afternoon sun and the snow-covered streets.

It had been reckless and stupid, but damn, Saturday had been fun. More fun than I'd had in a while and it had everything to do with the woman I desperately needed to get off my mind.

Shoving thoughts of her aside, I drove across town to my house. The ten-block trip was slushy with streets full of melting snow. My place wasn't much, three bedrooms with an updated kitchen and a damp, unfinished basement that leaked in the spring. But I'd bought it because of the yard. It had a huge backyard, enough space for me to set up a separate studio.

I parked in the garage and went straight to the studio. My jeans had a drop of green paint at the hem and my gray flannel shirt had some white on one of the sleeves. Most of my clothes carried evidence of my profession, so it was no use changing before I got to work.

This was where I should have come on Saturday.

The smell of oils clung to the air as I walked inside and flipped on the lights. It wasn't much, about the size of a one-car garage, but it was plenty of space to paint. On the back wall, rows of blank canvases waited for me. I picked one up and dug through my workbench for a pencil, then settled onto the stool in front of my easel. Paint drops of all colors—crimson, marigold, butterscotch, chartreuse, sapphire and iris—flecked the wooden floor.

I began a sketch, falling into the zone. The world disappeared, leaving only me and the art behind. The pencil's

dagger tip skidded across the ecru canvas, leaving strokes of charcoal in its wake.

An elk. Maybe I'd do an elk. I began to outline the antlers, the shape of the beast's nose, but when I dropped the pencil and leaned back, it was . . . unsatisfying. It looked like an elk but the idea of adding colors today—*blah*.

So I put that canvas against the wall and retrieved a fresh one. Maybe I'd start on this custom piece. I had no doubt that Katie would convince the buyer to pay the additional price for her ridiculous request.

I outlined the skyline. The trees. The grasses and meadows and bend of the river as it cut through the earth. But the rough outline did nothing for me.

*Fuck.*

I knew what I wanted to paint.

I'd had the image in my mind for days.

A dangerous, beautiful image. One I should ignore.

Instead, I went for my third canvas, skipping the pencil entirely, trading it for a brush, the palette and my favorite carob oil.

And I painted the image I couldn't seem to banish from my mind.

## CHAPTER THREE

---

EVERLY

“WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?” Lucy asked, following my gaze out the White Oak Café’s front window.

The gallery. I’d been staring at the gallery for a damn week.

“Nothing,” I lied. “Just people watching.”

Kerrigan leaned forward, staring past Lucy on their side of our booth to gaze outside. “What people?”

The sidewalks were desolate. “Uh . . . there was a guy walking by.”

Lucy studied my face. “You’re acting strange.”

“No, I’m not.”

She gave me that look. The one that reminded me we’d been friends since pigtails, and she knew me well enough to know when I was full of shit.

The remains of our breakfast had been cleared away, but we lingered, visiting and refilling coffees from our carafe.

“Fine,” I muttered. “I’m just . . . distracted.”

“Is it your parents?”

I gave her a noncommittal shrug. No, it wasn’t my parents, but that was a good enough excuse for why I’d been a space

cadet at breakfast. I was most definitely not telling them about Hux.

“Have they talked to you since last week?” Lucy asked.

“Does email count?”

The scheduled meeting with my parents had gone as well as expected, meaning awful. I’d received a stern lecture from my mother and complete silence from my father. They’d called me from their firm and he’d probably been in his office while Mom had been in hers, each on their own headsets. Either he was so disappointed that I’d stunned him speechless, or he’d had the call on mute and only chimed in at the beginning—to remind me that most successful adults had a five-year plan—before going back to work.

“They want to know what I’m doing with my life.”

“What *are* you doing with your life?” Lucy asked.

I groaned. “Ugh. Not you too.”

She held up her hands. “Sorry. I’m just worried about you.”

“I’m fine.”

Kerrigan gave me a small smile. We didn’t know each other well enough for her to lecture. Lucy on the other hand . . .

“At some point, I need a job,” I said. “But I’ve got my savings, and I’m not out spending a bunch of money every day.”

“Once the gym opens, you’re welcome to work there,” Kerrigan said, tucking a lock of her chestnut hair behind an ear before picking up her coffee mug. “If the gym ever opens. The permits are on hold because the city is worried my design will

be too modern for the downtown aesthetic. If big windows are considered modern.”

“Uh-oh.”

“They’ll approve it.” She waved it off. “Eventually. It just delays the remodel and costs me more money to heat an empty space. Anyway, think about a job. I’d love to have someone there who I trust.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. Thanks.”

Did I want to work at the gym? It wouldn’t be the worst job in the world. But I also liked having Kerrigan as a friend, not employer. She’d become a fast friend to both Lucy and me since we’d moved to Calamity. Kerrigan had these pretty brown eyes that were so kind and compassionate. She was smart as hell and as hardworking as they came.

Dad would drool over Kerrigan’s five-year plan.

Lucy opened her mouth—from the look in her eyes, it was to bring up singing again—but I cut her off. “Your hair looks great.”

She narrowed her gaze, knowing exactly what I’d done. But she let it go, glancing at the long strands of her hair and threading a lock between her fingers. “One more treatment and I’ll be back to natural.”

“It’s going to take me some time to get used to the blond,” Kerrigan said, making us laugh.

When she’d run away from Nashville, Lucy had dyed her hair black. But black wasn’t Lucy, and I was glad to look at her and see golden strands kissed with sunshine. Even if the color had come from the salon.



The bustle of the restaurant filled the silence as we each sipped coffee. The Saturday-morning rush was beginning to slow. I rarely ate breakfast here, but the White Oak had become my favorite spot for a late lunch.

From the outside, the café looked like a rustic greasy spoon. But according to Kerrigan, the owners had remodeled about five years ago, giving the interior a trendy vibe.

The white tile floors sparkled. Chalkboard paint coated one wall, the daily specials written out in blocked letters. Three coveted booths hugged the front glass window, and we'd been lucky to snag one this morning. The back wall had a long counter where I'd sit for my solo meals. Otherwise, the space was filled with white oak tables and chairs.

“Does this place remind you of Hunt's?” I asked Lucy.

She smiled. “I thought that the first time I came here. All it's missing is the patio and corner street musician.”

The two of us had spent a lot of Nashville mornings at Hunt's—before the stalker bitch had ruined the restaurant. After enough pictures of one or both of us sitting on the patio had found their way into our mailbox, we'd started sitting inside. Until the inside pictures came, and eventually, venturing to Hunt's just hadn't been worth it. Not when we could eat takeout in our pajamas and not be photographed.

As Lucy had risen to stardom, she'd caught the attention of a stalker. A sick bitch who'd put us both through hell. Lucy had escaped Nashville, coming to Calamity to hide out. The stalker hadn't liked that much so in Lucy's absence, I'd become her next target.

After threats and bullet holes and protective custody, I'd fled Nashville too. Hiding in Montana with my best friend had

seemed like a much better idea than waiting for another creepy letter or text or photo.

Except when I'd come to Montana, I'd led the stalker straight to Lucy's front door.

If not for Duke, the stalker would have killed us. He'd taken the bullet intended for Lucy while firing one of his own, ending the stalker's life and her tirade of fear.

Five months had passed but there were days when I could still hear the boom of the gun's blast. When I could still smell the blood and death. When the hairs on the nape of my neck tickled, like I was being watched.

I turned to the window again, but this time, my gaze didn't snap to the gallery down the street. This time, I scanned the sidewalks. "Will we ever stop looking over our shoulders?" I whispered.

"I hope so." Lucy stretched a hand across the table, covering mine. When I glanced at her, she was looking out the window too.

The stalker had ruined too many restaurants and I wasn't letting her take this one too. I forced my eyes away from the window. "Any word on a renter for the farmhouse?" I asked Kerrigan.

She groaned. "No."

"It's winter. I can't imagine the rental market is hopping during the winter."

"It's not. I've got three vacancies at the moment. If I could fill one before spring, that would be huge."

Kerrigan owned quite a few properties in town, positioning herself to become Calamity's real estate mogul. When Lucy

had moved to Calamity, Kerrigan had rented her a farmhouse on the outskirts of town.

The same farmhouse the stalker had followed me to.

It was no surprise that a local hadn't rented the farmhouse from Kerrigan. The news of the farmhouse shooting had consumed Calamity for weeks. No one wanted to live in the house where a woman had been shot and killed by the sheriff.

All because I'd been a fool.

The guilt gnawed, and an *I'm sorry* formed on the tip of my tongue. I'd lost track of the number of times I'd apologized to Lucy for putting her life at risk, and to Kerrigan for ruining her rental house. Neither of them blamed me but that didn't erase the shame.

"What are you guys doing tonight?" Kerrigan asked before I could speak. "Want to go out for a drink?"

"I can't." Lucy smiled that dreamy smile that meant she was thinking of Duke. "We're having a date night."

"Where are you going? Need me to watch Cheddar?" Babysitting her puppy was a blast.

"No, but thanks. We're having an at-home date."

"I think maybe I need to talk to Duke about what date means."

She laughed. "It was my idea. We're getting takeout, renting a movie and cuddling on the couch."

"Aww," Kerrigan crooned.

I smiled through my prickle of envy. Though I was happy my friend had found love, I missed her too. Once, I'd been

Lucy's at-home date. I'd been the one who ordered takeout while she picked the movie. I'd been her person.

Limbo and lonely were becoming synonymous. Even at a breakfast with friends, the loneliness chased me down. The only time I'd had a reprieve had been my night with Hux.

Reese Huxley.

I shivered. The moment he'd enveloped my hand with his and told me his name in that rugged voice, I'd been doomed. *Call me Hux.*

Oh, I'd called him Hux. Moaning. Gasping. Screaming. I'd tested all variations of Hux as he'd pounded inside me.

I ducked my chin, hiding the blush in my cheeks. Damn, what a night. Sex with Hux might have ruined me for other men. In the past week, that man had rarely left my mind. I ached for more of his touch. His hands. His lips. The weight of his strong body on top of mine. We'd agreed to one night, not in so many words, but it had been implied. But what if—

“Ev?”

“Yeah?” I answered Kerrigan absently.

“Do you want to go to Jane's later?”

“Sure. Sounds like fun.”

And maybe I'd see Hux again. Maybe our one-night stand could be a two-night fling. I wasn't looking for any kind of relationship, but my body had come alive under that man's skilled fingers.

If he wanted a repeat, he'd get no protests from me.

---

“I HAVE TO GO HOME.” Kerrigan covered a yawn with her hand as she stood from our table at Jane’s. “I’m dead. Want me to drop you?”

“No.” I stood too, giving her a quick hug. “I’ll just walk.”

Or run.

It was pitch black outside and the second I stepped onto the sidewalk, I’d likely break into a dead sprint home. Part of me wanted Kerrigan to drive me the two blocks home. But the other part of me—the stubborn part determined not to let fear rule my life—was going to see that I made it home alone.

And the moment Kerrigan wasn’t looking, I’d dig the can of bear spray out of my purse.

“Coffee tomorrow morning?” she asked. “I am going to come and sneak in some work on the gym, with or without my permits.”

“As long as you don’t make me wield a sledgehammer or paintbrush, you’re on.” She might love doing renovation projects, but I’d never been into DIY.

“Let’s shoot for ten.” She yawned again. “I’m sleeping in tomorrow.”

“Me too.” And unfortunately, I’d be sleeping in alone.

There’d been no sign of Hux at the bar. Every time the door had opened, I’d masked my hopeful glances with bored curiosity, not wanting Kerrigan to know just how much I wished to see him again.

“Ready?” Kerrigan asked, shrugging on her coat.

“Since I’m not driving, I might stay for one more drink.”

“Want me to stay?”

“No. Go home and sleep.”

“Tomorrow.” She smiled, raised a hand to Jane behind the bar, then made her way out the door.

A blast of cold air whipped inside during the brief moment the door was open. I tugged the sleeves of my sweater over my knuckles and sat down, shifting in my seat so my back was to the door. Then I stared at the empty stage.

The band had been playing when Kerrigan and I had arrived around eight. But as the crowd had dwindled, the cold chasing most people away before midnight, the band had called it quits.

Kerrigan and I had stayed late, content to visit for a while. She told me story after story about growing up in Calamity. Every time another patron left the bar, he or she would stop by to say hello to my friend. The same happened when someone entered because Kerrigan seemed to know every person in this town. The Hales had been here since the town’s inception, back in the days when Calamity had been called Panner City.

A string of disasters was responsible for the town’s new name. Panner City had been a gold mining settlement, but after a stampede, a fire and a mine collapse, the town had garnered a new nickname: Calamity. It had been so widely used that eventually it had been easier to rename the place than change habits.

Part of the reason we’d stayed out so late was because I’d soaked up every word of the local culture.

That, and because I wasn’t ready to leave. Not yet. Not when there might be a chance to see Hux.

Last Saturday, it had been one in the morning when I’d found him here. Maybe he preferred these late hours, when the

bar was mostly empty and Jane was washing glasses instead of filling them.

As the next thirty minutes passed and I nursed one more gin and tonic, my time at the bar felt more like desperation than hope. He wasn't coming. And I didn't want to be the woman waiting around for a man who'd already gotten everything he intended to get from her.

*Been there, done that.*

My freshman year in college, I'd reveled in my newfound freedom. Lucy had taken a gap year after our senior year. It had been her arrangement with her parents. They'd let her pursue music for a year before she'd agreed to go to college. My parents hadn't allowed anything other than school, so I'd attended a small private school a few hours from home.

My studies had suffered greatly once I'd been introduced to parties. I'd lost my virginity. I'd discovered alcohol. I'd thought the boys who'd shown interest were out for more than an easy score. I'd been so desperate for any kind of affection that I'd mistaken sex for emotion.

That, and most guys had promised a second date.

*Assholes.* Sometimes it felt like I'd been on an asshole streak for the past ten years. Even after I'd learned that sex didn't mean love and a few hookups could be good for a girl's stress levels, there were still some assholes who snuck through my defenses.

Hell, maybe Hux was an asshole too.

Except, he didn't seem like an asshole. My heart was as guarded as his, and the sex was, well . . .

I squirmed in my seat as my core pulsed. That man was wild in bed. Absolutely wild. He was just as quiet as he'd been

in his clothes and on a barstool, but damn, he hadn't needed to say much.

Hushed orders. A firm grip. When he wanted me in a certain position, he put me in it. Never had I been with a man so dominant and delicious.

I wanted more. I *craved* more.

But apparently, I was the only one.

With a long sigh, I stood from my chair and pulled on my coat. Dropping some cash on the table for my last drink, I smiled at Jane, then headed outside.

I was three feet down the sidewalk, cold from the dark air and ready to make a run for it, when I felt him.

His presence was a crackle in the air. A blast of warmth and lust and that magnetic pull.

I stopped, turning slowly.

Our eyes locked and the air vanished from my lungs. *Sweet lord.*

Hux stood on the sidewalk, his hands stuffed into his pockets. He wasn't wearing a coat, and his Henley stretched tight across his broad chest. The sleeves were rolled up, not quite to his elbows, revealing the colorful tattoo on his left forearm. A tattoo I wanted to trace with my tongue.

We stood staring, unmoving. The yellow light from the streetlamps highlighted the chiseled line of his jaw. His frame seemed stronger, taller, backlit from the dim glow. But even in the faint light, there was no missing the gleam in his blue eyes.

I cleared the lump from my throat and took two steps forward, dizzy from his proximity. "How about a repeat?"



Desire flashed across his gaze, dark and dangerous like the night and the heat between us.

“No strings.” My voice was breathless, my heart pounding inside my chest.

*Say yes.*

Hux gave nothing away. Had I read that look wrong? Was he here for me? Or someone else? My stomach knotted as I waited, doubt creeping in like poison.

*Say yes.*

He didn't say a word.

I swallowed hard, ready to turn and run and pretend I hadn't all but begged this man to fuck me again, but then Hux was moving. He closed the distance between us with giant strides.

My heart flipped as he invaded my space.

“This is just a fuck. Nothing more. Got it?”

The brutal honesty stung, but at least he'd given me the truth. That was more than any of the assholes had in the past. I gulped. “Just a fuck.”

He jerked his chin toward my building.

I spun on my boots, leading the way to the side door. Hux didn't fall in step beside me. He stayed one back the entire time.

Step after step, his footsteps were an echo of my own. My breath puffed in white clouds and my legs felt unsteady. Eager.

He hovered, close but not touching. His gaze cascaded down my hair. It burned into my shoulders and my ass. Every step was heady, every breath, simply because he was there.

It was the most erotic walk of my life.

My head was fuzzy, my body throbbing, by the time we reached the side entrance.

A whisper of a fingertip skidded across my coat, the scratch of callouses on fabric as he swept my hair to the side, baring the skin at my neck. I leaned into him, my back sagging against his chest.

The caress of his breath skated across my flesh. His scent, spice and soap and paint, filled my nose. The winter cold did nothing to cool the fire blazing under my skin.

Hux gave me a gentle nudge for the door and I blinked, forcing myself out of his haze. I fumbled for the keypad, punching in the numbers to unlock the door.

Last week, he'd carried me up the stairs. He'd spun me around at this very door, sealing his lips over mine. We'd kissed outside in the cold, under the stars. But tonight, he didn't touch. Even with the skin of my neck begging for his full lips, all he'd done was get close enough to drive me mad.

I looked up, over my shoulder, into his blue gaze. One flick and he ordered me inside and up the stairs. Though my legs wobbled, I managed not to stumble in my hurried climb.

And like he had outside, he stayed one step behind me.

Hux's gaze was his only touch, torturing me with burning strokes. The walk was foreplay I hadn't needed. I'd been wet for Hux the minute I'd felt him on that sidewalk.

Before I reached the landing, I dug my keys from my purse. I didn't hesitate at the lock, flipping it quickly as I burst inside my apartment and stripped off my coat.

Then he was there, spinning me into his arms.

His lips crushed mine as his hands dove into my hair. He stole my breath as he shuffled us deeper into my apartment, kicking the door closed behind him.

“Hux,” I moaned, frantically grabbing for the hem of his shirt, shoving it up his chest to reveal the washboard abs beneath.

His tongue swept into my mouth, silencing any other words as he took control. With my hair locked in his grip, his tongue plundering, I was at his mercy.

Not a bad place to be.

His arousal pressed into my belly as he steered me to the bed. When the backs of my knees hit the mattress, he tore his lips away. Then with one hand planted in the center of my chest, I was falling, bouncing on the bed with a yelp.

Hux reached behind his neck and yanked the shirt from his body.

My mouth watered at the sight of his bare chest. His jeans sat low on his hips, revealing the deep-cut V at his hip bones. Veins snaked under his skin and ropes of muscle coiled around each other. The tattoo on his forearm was a swirl of abstract, bold colors that didn't seem to have a pattern or a shape.

Hux was a work of sinful art.

And it was intoxicating, knowing he was mine tonight. All mine.

I sat and stripped off my sweater. The white lace bra beneath it caught Hux's attention, his jaw flexing as I unclasped the band.

The moment my breasts were free, his hands were there, palming my curves, his knuckles pinching my nipples. The

sting from his rough touch sent a shot of heat straight to my core. I arched into him, wanting more, but he tore his hands away and unzipped his jeans.

There was just enough light from the windows to cast Hux's body in muted tones. Shadows floated across his skin, defining muscle and showcasing strength, as he kicked off his boots. Every movement was graceful but rushed. Then his jeans and the black boxer briefs underneath were gone, leaving me panting as I took in his arousal.

Damn, he had a beautiful cock. Thick and long with a pearl bead at the tip.

I shoved off my elbows, acting before he had a chance to stop me, and flattened my tongue to capture the drop.

Hux's salty taste exploded on my tongue and as I lifted my lashes, I found him staring down with an intensity that made me tremble. I eased away, but he took my chin in his hand and pulled me back to his erection. "Repeat."

The corner of my mouth turned up before I did it again, this time dragging my tongue across his velvet and steel shaft. The lick earned me a rumbled groan.

With lightning speed, he released my face and shoved me into the mattress. I'd worn black leggings to the bar with Kerrigan tonight. He ripped the tall boots from my calves, then stripped me down, taking my lace panties away in a fluid whoosh.

Hux bent for his jeans, taking a condom out of the pocket. As he put the packet between his teeth and ripped, a grin spread across my face. Front pocket. Not buried in his wallet. Maybe he'd come to the bar for me after all.

Or another woman.

I shoved that thought away and waited for his next command.

He stood above me, his gaze trailing down my neck to my breasts, to the glistening folds below as he rolled the condom onto his cock. With the latex in place, he reached for my leg, raising it up. He pinned my foot against his shoulder, then knelt onto the bed.

Slowly, he pushed closer, bending my leg until my thigh was pressed against my side. My knee was nearly at my ear. The stretch in my hips was tight, but I reveled in the burn.

When I went to bend the other leg, to spread myself wide for him, he shook his head.

“Fuck me, Hux,” I whispered. “Please.”

Without any pretense, he drove into me, stretching me wide as he buried himself to the hilt.

I cried out, my body quaking as I adjusted to his size.

“Goddamn,” he groaned, turning his mouth to my leg pinned to his shoulder. He grazed his stubbled cheek along the thin skin of my ankle. Then he withdrew, leaving me empty for a second too long before he slammed inside again.

Just like I’d wanted, he fucked me with hard and fast strokes. His thrusts were so powerful I felt them in my very soul.

I gasped, breathless, as he hammered us together. The orgasm came on me fast in a blinding light, stealing my vision until I writhed and shook, begging for release.

All it took was Hux’s thumb, drumming on my clit, and I broke into a thousand pieces.

I screamed his name, not caring if the entire town of Calamity heard. Stars broke in my vision and I pulsed, my body convulsing until I was out of my mind.

“Fuck, that’s good,” Hux gritted out as my inner walls clenched around him, squeezing until he shoved my leg off his shoulder, buried himself deep and succumbed to his own release.

He collapsed on top of me, panting. The thunder of his heart slammed against my skin, the rhythm as quick as my own.

We twisted apart, him sinking into the mattress at my side as we both regained our breath and I stretched my leg.

A laugh bubbled free from my chest. The smile on my face was wider than it had been all week. This wasn’t just sex, this was fun. The best time I’d had with a man in my bed.

I pushed myself up to a seat, shoving the hair out of my face. Then I bent over the edge of the bed, stretching for Hux’s jeans.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his eyes closed.

I rifled around his pockets. My smile widened as I grabbed the other three condoms he’d brought.

With a toss, they all landed on his stomach.

“Repeat.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

---

“FUCK,” I hissed as my big toe connected with the corner of Everly’s nightstand.

She giggled from the bed.

I spun around and shot her a scowl. “Didn’t think you were awake.”

“I’m awake.” She clutched the sheet to her chest and stretched for the lamp on the other nightstand, flipping it on. The golden glow cast a warmth on her flawless skin. Her eyes were hooded with sleep, her eyelashes heavy as she blinked. But there was a spark of lust as she took in my half-naked body.

I’d managed to pull on my boxer briefs and jeans, but I hadn’t found my shirt yet buried beneath her clothes on the floor.

The sun was beginning to rise outside, bringing with it a kaleidoscope of gold, apricot and pale turquoise that peeked above the mountain horizon. I hadn’t meant to fall asleep last night, but hours with Everly in bed and she’d worn me out. It had been more like a blackout than sleep.

“You can stay for breakfast,” she whispered, her eyes tracking down my abs. I opened my mouth to tell her breakfast



didn't factor into this sort of fling, but before I could speak, she laughed. "Just kidding. Will you flip the lock on the door when you go?"

"Yeah," I breathed. At least she knew the score on this.

Going to the bar last night hadn't been the plan. I'd been in my studio, working on a project, then before I could convince myself it was a stupid idea, I'd been driving across town.

I'd told myself I was just going to get some supplies from the gallery, a couple of canvases that had arrived last week that I hadn't brought to the studio yet. One o'clock in the morning had seemed like the perfect time to go pick those up. And why not park on First instead of the alley? The exterior lighting was better, after all.

Standing on the sidewalk, I'd been feet away when Everly had come through the door at Jane's. I'd stood there, silently debating if I should let her go or call her back.

Turns out, I hadn't needed to do either. She'd stopped and turned on her own accord.

I'd made sure before taking one step closer that she'd known this was only for sex. That she knew it was just a fuck. The words had been harsh, but I couldn't afford gentle. Not that gentle was my style, inside or outside the bedroom.

Everly didn't seem to mind.

She snuggled into her pillow, her dark hair spread out on the cream sheets. She yawned and raised her arms above her head. That's how she'd been sleeping—or nearly sleeping—when I'd roused to get dressed. Her lean arms had been stretched above her head, her palms open to the tall ceiling. And those caramel and chocolate eyes, sweet pools that I'd gotten lost in last night.

Goddamn, but she was gorgeous.

I tore my eyes away from her swollen lips and searched the floor for my shirt. It was comfortably resting underneath her panties.

“Don’t let this go to your head, Hot Bar Guy, but you sure do know how to pleasure a woman.”

A grin tugged at the corner of my mouth as I pulled on my shirt. “Not so bad yourself.”

“Seems like a crime against humanity to let such good sex go to waste.”

I froze. *No. No, this wasn't happening.* I didn’t need her getting ideas about a relationship. I’d been careful. Crystal clear. This was purely physical.

A smile spread across her face and she giggled again. “You’re white as a ghost.”

“Look, I’m not in this for anything serious. Thought you knew that when I came up last night.”

“Just a fuck.” She quirked an eyebrow and propped her head up on an elbow. “I get it. The last thing I need right now is a relationship. I’m talking about some casual sex. No commitments. No expectations. It could just be a weekend thing.”

Fuck, that sounded good. I’d gladly lose myself in her body a couple times a week. But she’d been on my mind too much this week. She was a distraction I couldn’t afford. My attention needed to be on one and only one woman—or young woman.

Savannah.

“Don’t think that’s a good idea.”

She smirked. “Afraid you’ll fall in love with me?”

More like the other way around. Not that many loved me. But I didn’t need to have her get attached and be hurt when I walked away. “I’m not the loving kind. And these things never end well.”

“Fair enough,” she said.

I bent to grab my boots, yanking them on at the sudden urge to get the fuck out of this apartment before I caved. Sex with Everly was tempting enough I might break my own rules. Hell, I already had.

The two of us had chemistry off the charts. We lit the bed on fire, and I hadn’t even had time to play. Maybe if it was a once-a-week hookup. Maybe—

*Focus, Hux.*

I walked to the door, not letting myself look back.

And as Everly had asked, I locked it on my way out.

---

“HEY.”

I flinched, my heart leaping into my throat as I walked into the kitchen. “What the hell are you doing here?”

My question was answered with a frown and eye roll. “Nice, Dad.”

“Sorry. That’s not what I meant.” I sighed and crossed the room.

Savannah stood beside the fridge with a bowl of Frosted Flakes. I didn’t eat that cereal, but I kept a box on hand for

mornings like this when I'd wake to find she'd snuck into my house.

"Hey, baby girl." I dropped a kiss to her forehead.

"Where were you?"

"Uh . . ." No way I was telling her I'd spent the night with a woman. But my silence was enough because my daughter was not stupid.

Savannah's face scrunched up and she wiped the spot where I'd kissed her forehead. "Ew."

"What are you doing here?" I asked, more than ready to change the subject. "Does your mother know where you are?"

"Of course not." She shoved a spoonful of cereal into her mouth.

"Savannah."

"What?" Milk dribbled down her chin as she talked.

I tore a paper towel from the roll and handed it over so she could wipe her face. Then I went to the cupboard and took out a coffee mug. While my cup brewed, I studied Savannah from the corner of my eye.

Her blond hair was in a ponytail. She'd cut it this fall, after the incident at the farmhouse, and when she left it down, the ends drew a straight line across her shoulder blades. Normally, it was straight and sleek, but today, it was rumpled from sleep.

Her violet-blue eyes were droopy, like she'd just woken up.

At some point last night, she'd come to crash here. And I'd been gone. *Fuck.*

Just another reason this whole thing with Everly needed to end now. I should have been home when she'd snuck over.

"What happened last night?" I asked.

"Nothing." She took another bite to avoid the real answer.

I took my mug, sipping the steaming coffee, and settled against the counter. If I had to wait until she was done eating, so be it.

My daughter had inherited a lot from me. Oval face. Straight nose. Stubborn attitude.

She had my blue eyes too, though hers were brighter than mine. Her irises had a tint of violet at the center like nothing I'd ever seen. She was the loveliest thing in my life. No artwork I'd ever paint could compare to my daughter's delicate beauty.

She'd be even prettier without the lingering sadness on her face. All I wanted was for her to wear a lasting, genuine happiness. I wanted her to live a life with exponentially more good days than bad. But to do that, I had to get her away from her mother.

If we had lived in a different state, that task would have been much easier. Savannah would have been old enough to simply decide. But in Montana, kids didn't get a choice once they turned thirteen or fourteen. Her fate—my fate—was in the hands of a judge.

Savannah continued to eat her cereal but if she thought she was leaving here without an explanation, she was wrong. When she finished, she tipped the edge of the bowl to her lips and guzzled the milk. Then she put it in the dishwasher along with the spoon, giving me a smile as she tried to scurry away.

"Not so fast."

She stopped, her shoulders falling.

“What happened last night?”

“Nothing,” she muttered. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“So you drove that dirt bike here in the middle of the night in the snow, snuck inside and crashed in the guest bedroom?”

“Pretty much.”

“Not buying it.”

She turned around and rolled her eyes. “Mom and Julian were being loud.”

I grimaced and stole her expression. “Ew.”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t like you riding around town on that dirt bike on the snow. The roads are slick.” Especially at night after anything that had melted during the day froze again.

“I’m careful.”

“You need a car.”

“I like my bike.”

I frowned and took another sip of my coffee. That bike was partly my fault. Whenever she needed money, I handed over a wad of cash. I’d missed enough time with my daughter. Since I couldn’t exactly take her shopping in public, making sure she could buy whatever she wanted seemed reasonable. How the hell could I have known that she’d save all that money and buy a fucking dirt bike?

I’d offered to give her money for a car instead, but she’d always refused. Something about that dirt bike was precious to her. What, I had no damn clue.

“Any car you want. It’s yours.”

She shook her head.

“A sports car. A truck. A bug. A minivan. Pick one.”

Savannah dropped her gaze to the floor. “No, thanks.”

“Why don’t you want a car?”

“I like the bike.”

“You like riding it in the freezing cold?”

She shrugged. “I don’t mind. I have a coat.”

“Fine.” There was no use arguing if she’d dug in her heels. Maybe if she was living here, she’d be more apt to take me up on a vehicle with an actual roof and acceptable safety rating. Maybe she’d explain why she loved that bike.

Maybe if she was living here, I’d actually get to know my daughter.

We’d grown closer, slowly, over the years. With the too-short visits and, lately, the surprise sleepovers, I learned more and more about her all the time. But I didn’t *know* Savannah.

I hadn’t earned her trust.

A fact that broke my damn heart.

“Where do they think you went?” I asked. *They* being April and Julian.

“I left a note that I went to Candy’s house.”

“Who’s Candy?”

“My friend.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’ve never heard of Candy before.” But then again, I didn’t know who she hung out with.

“Because Candy doesn’t exist. I made her up.” The devilish grin that spread across Savannah’s face made my heart plummet. At that age, I’d had that same grin. And it had gotten me into a lot of trouble.

“Savannah,” I chided.

“What? It’s not like Mom checks with other moms.”

“But what if she does?”

“Then I’ll give her a fake number or something. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter because Mom won’t check. She doesn’t care.”

No, April didn’t care. She’d never really cared.

April loved April. April’s number one concern was April. Beyond that, she made sure to spend Julian’s money and satisfy his fetishes during sex. At least that was the rumor around town. April had hinted to her friends one too many times that Julian liked it rough.

Some people around town, like Duke, had interpreted the rumors to mean abuse. Duke had hinted to me once that he thought Julian beat the hell out of April. He’d never admit it publicly, not without proof. He was one of the few in Calamity who didn’t hold the Tosh name in high regard.

My guess was that Julian liked to play in the bedroom. And April would do anything to ensure she kept her husband, and his checkbook, happy.

It was none of my business how April and Julian liked to fuck as long as they kept the goddamn door shut. It was when their actions impacted Savannah that I had a problem with their sexual tastes.



Last night wasn't the first night Savannah had come here to escape Julian and April. About two months ago, she'd confessed that April and Julian had forgotten to close their bedroom door. Savannah had come upstairs at her mother's cry, only to catch them in the middle of some play.

Savannah was too young to learn about that shit.

It was just another example of how April made sure to act the part of Savannah's mother, though it was all smoke and mirrors. And if there was ever the opportunity to punish me again for the sins of my youth, April wouldn't hesitate.

If April knew Savannah had slept in the guest bedroom last night, she'd throw an epic fit. She'd call the cops and have them haul Savannah home, no matter the time of night.

That's what had happened for the past two years.

Savannah would sneak over here and somehow April would find out. April would call the cops and Duke would show up with no choice but to drag Savannah home.

I didn't have custody. My child wasn't allowed in my home.

Duke would have to carry Savannah out of here, kicking and screaming and crying. I'd scream too, pissed as fuck, because we all knew it was bullshit. Except he was bound by the law. And I had no rights.

None.

Savannah, my beautiful and stubborn girl, kept returning. And I'd never turn her away. She'd gotten better at hiding her visits. And if she was here, I made sure to sneak her out the back before I opened the front.

"Where did you park the bike?"

“A few blocks away in an alley.”

*Christ.* “And walked here in the dark.”

“I had my pepper spray.”

A decent father would put an end to it. My neighborhood was safe but that didn't mean bad shit didn't happen. A good dad would have been here when she'd shown up.

But like Savannah knew I wouldn't turn her away, I knew that arguing with her was pointless.

We wanted to see one another. And until a judge granted me the legal right, well . . . sneaking in time with my kid was the lesser of my past crimes.

“Anything else happen last night?” I asked.

“No.”

“He didn't . . .” I could hardly stomach the words.

Savannah shook her head. “Julian doesn't touch me.”

That was a lie.

But I'd called her on it enough in the past five months. No matter how much I pressed, her story stayed the same. *Julian doesn't touch me.*

Except for the day of the farmhouse. Maybe there were more times, but that was the only time I knew for sure it had happened.

According to the various testimonies from that horrific day, Julian had slapped Savannah.

She ditched school because of it. Her friend Travis found her crying, and rather than tell an adult, the two sixteen-year-olds cut class and went to one of their regular hideouts, an abandoned barn beside the farmhouse.

Travis, the more level-headed of the two, convinced Savannah to talk to someone, so they walked to the farmhouse. Lucy was living there. Everly had just arrived in Calamity. They welcomed the kids inside, where Travis confessed that they'd skipped school. He also let it slip that the reason was because Julian had slapped Savannah.

I wished to God what had happened next hadn't.

When Everly came to Montana, Lucy's stalker had followed, right to the farmhouse. The demented bitch held the women and the teenagers—my baby girl—at gunpoint. There was no doubt the stalker would have killed Lucy. Probably would have killed them all. The woman had been unhinged.

Thankfully, Duke had gotten there in time and saved their lives.

But that day at the farmhouse had taken its toll.

Savannah had changed since then. Gone were the desperate attempts for attention. Gone was her fight.

So I'd pick up the sword and do whatever it took to help my girl.

Over the past five months, I'd been exploring options with Aiden. In Montana, the court system used parenting plans to determine custody arrangements for minors. The crux of the parenting plan was that the parents agreed.

If the mother and father could agree upon an arrangement, it was blessed by the court.

Aiden had tried approaching April. Month after month, he'd offered her new terms. She'd string us both along, every fucking time. She'd pretend to agree. She'd offer a few counters. And right before it was time to take it to court, she'd tell us both to scrap the plan and start again.

I really, really hated my ex-wife.

April wasn't going to cooperate, no matter how amicable we were. Meaning it was time to let a judge decide. The next step was filing a petition and initiating a contested proceeding, something I'd never done with success.

Maybe the seventh, eighth, ninth time—I'd lost count—was the charm.

The entire thing would be easier if Savannah would admit that Julian had struck her. Or if she would talk about the physical violence he showered on April. But Savannah was as tight-lipped about what happened in that house as ever.

Why? No idea.

“What are you doing today?” I asked her, going to the coffee maker for another cup. It was time for a new topic. The last thing I wanted was for Savannah to feel like when she walked through my door, all she got was an interrogation.

That, and I was terrified of scaring her off.

Did other fathers worry about alienating their teenagers? Because besides her getting hurt or sick, that was my number one fear.

“It's Valentine's Day,” she said.

“Do you have a”—my heart dropped—“date?”

I wasn't ready for boys yet. I hadn't had enough time with Savannah to myself yet. Competing with a teenager didn't seem fair.

“Sort of.” She shrugged. “Travis asked me to the movies. He gets an employee discount.”

Travis. And I used to like that kid. “Want to ditch him? Hang with me instead?”

“You don’t have plans?”

“I’m not the Valentine’s Day type.”

The corner of her mouth turned up. “I kinda wanted to see the new movie. It’s only here for another week.”

The theater in town was small and played two movies at a time. Usually one was for kids and the other was the big box office hit. The hit movie didn’t stick around for long, only a week or two tops, which meant if she wanted to see it, the time was now.

I hated the movie theater. The seats weren’t as comfortable as my couch. There was always that one person who laughed too loud or talked too much. Not to mention, if April found out that Savannah and I were together, I’d be in deep shit. She’d make a note to add to her endless list of my *violations*, and when we walked into court, she’d roll them out for the judge to see.

A movie with my daughter was reckless. It was playing with fire. Aiden would have my ass if this blew up. He didn’t know Savannah snuck over here either.

But much like my night with Everly, temptation found a crack and wiggled through. “We’ll have to go separately. Sit in the back row so no one sees us.”

“Okay.” She nodded eagerly. “I can get there early. Get us snacks and stuff.”

“Popcorn.”

“Definitely.” Her smile was contagious. “I’ll text Travis and cancel.”

I almost felt bad for the kid, but I knew how teenage boys operated. “Better go home first.”

“Ugh,” she grumbled. “Do I have to?”

“Yes. What’s our showtime?”

“The matinee is at three fifteen.”

“Kay. It’s a date.”

---

WHEN I SNUCK into the dark theater later that afternoon, Savannah was sitting in the back corner of the back row, wearing a hoodie and a baseball cap with two buckets of popcorn waiting.

The joy that came from taking the chair beside hers was hard to contain. This was our first father-daughter date. Our first Valentine’s Day.

The movie wasn’t memorable, but I’d never forget those two hours. I’d remember the smile on her face as she laughed at the screen. I’d remember the popcorn littered around her feet because she ate by the fistful, not caring what spilled onto her lap or onto the floor. I’d remember the sad moment in the movie when she’d laid her head on my shoulder and fought tears.

It ended too soon.

I ducked out before the credits began to play, dropping a kiss to her head before escaping unseen. I used the alley exit, checking to make sure it was empty first, then walked to the gallery.

I'd just sat down behind my desk when the high-pitched buzz of a dirt bike sounded beyond the walls. Savannah's goodbye. My heart sank when that noise disappeared.

The gallery was dark, closed on Sundays this time of year like most other downtown businesses in Calamity. Come spring and summer, we'd be open seven days a week, but right now, there wasn't enough foot traffic to warrant paying Katie to sit there an extra day.

It might have been the dread of doing paperwork that chased me out the door. It might have been loneliness. Or maybe I'd just wanted to fuck her again.

I wasn't sure exactly what trigger drove me to Everly's door.

When she answered my knock, it was with a glare. "I didn't give you the code to get up here."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

She crossed her arms over her chest as the scent of lemon and lavender wafted to my nose. The drawstring pants she was wearing had a snowflake print. Her sweater draped over one bare shoulder, revealing that perfect skin and the dip beneath her collarbone.

One look at her and I was instantly hard. "Just sex. That's all I've got to give."

Everly's expression didn't waver. She didn't so much as blink. Either she'd slam the door in my face or . . .

The corner of her mouth turned up.

Then she waved me inside.

## CHAPTER FIVE

---



## EVERLY

“HI, MOM.” I forced cheer into my voice as I answered the phone. It was strange for her to call without a prearranged calendar slot.

“Everly.”

God, I hated the way she said my name.

I loved my name. It was unique and I’d always thought it looked beautiful in my swirly handwriting. *Everly Christian*. I looped the *y* and added a little flair to the end of the *n*.

But there was this edge to it in my mother’s tone. It hadn’t always been there. No, it had started about the same time I’d informed her and Dad that I was dropping out of school to move to Nashville with Lucy.

Ever since, the first syllable had always come with a slight snarl. *Evvv-erly*. I cringed.

Maybe it had been there my entire life and I just hadn’t noticed. It was the world’s worst kept secret that my parents hadn’t wanted children.

I’d been the surprise baby who’d forced her way into this world despite a strict birth control regimen.

My parents hadn’t told me to my face that I was an accident. They weren’t cruel. But they were pragmatic.

Matter-of-fact. So when it came up in conversation with other adults that I was an only child and would always be an only child, they didn't mince words. They hadn't planned on children.

My prying ears hadn't understood that when I was little. But as a teenager, I'd been able to read between the lines.

*Accident.*

"How are you today?" I asked.

"Busy. The reason I'm calling is because I haven't received your year-end financial information."

Ah, yes. Taxes. Now the call made sense. This woman loved taxes. So did Dad.

How was I their child? Sure, I was good at math, but they had no excitement in their lives. Except . . . tax season. They acted like it was the Olympics and they were poised to win gold.

"I'll just do my own taxes this year." I braced. "On TurboTax."

The line went silent.

It was outright ridiculous for a woman who was approaching thirty to be intimidated by her mother's silence, but here I was, standing in my apartment with my heart beating so hard I was about to pass out.

The quiet on the other line stretched so heavy and thick, I cracked. "Mom?"

"TurboTax." She spewed the word with such acidity it was a wonder my ear didn't shrivel and melt.

“There’s no point in you doing my taxes,” I blurted. “It’s a waste of your time. They should be simple enough.” Because for the last few months of the past year, my income had been zilch.

Mom’s silence meant she wasn’t buying my bullshit.

*Damn.* The reason I didn’t want her to do my taxes like usual—or pass them off to a low-level associate at her firm—was because I didn’t want her to know about my financial situation.

Over the past few years, I hadn’t made a ton of money singing, but I’d done all right for myself. I’d earned enough for rent, clothes and food while letting the tiny bit left trickle into savings. That little plus in the asset side of my balance sheet had mostly appeased my parents, so I’d managed to avoid an onslaught of lifestyle lectures.

But my balance sheet was careening dangerously close to the red. The cushion they’d taught me to build from my piggy bank days was nearly deflated.

I didn’t want them to know I’d failed.

Their lives were so wrapped up in the numbers, the debits and credits. They saw a flush financial position as success. And I was their broke, uneducated daughter.

What was I doing with my life?

Disappointing my parents, apparently.

“Was there anything else?” I asked, my hands shaking.

“No.”

Right. Our business was concluded. “Nice talking to you, Mom.”

“Goodbye, Everly.” Her parting statement was like a kick to the chest. *Click.*

My finances were none of her business. I didn’t owe her any other response.

Still, I craved their pride. I had for ten years. I wanted a *good work* or *nice job* tossed my way so badly I was like a starved dog in a dirty alley, begging for a scrap.

For a time, I’d thought that if I could make it as a singer, if I could be famous and wealthy like Lucy, they’d finally get over the fact that I’d dropped out of college. They’d realize that just because I hadn’t followed their plan, stood in their footsteps, didn’t mean I’d botched my life.

When was I going to stop fooling myself?

Every year that passed, the chasm between us widened.

It hurt.

I loved my parents. They loved me, in their own way. We simply didn’t . . . connect.

Tears welled but I blinked them away. No crying. I hadn’t done anything wrong.

I tossed my phone onto the couch and walked to the window.

Mom and Dad had called me once after I’d nearly been murdered. Once. Dad’s assistant had checked in on me more than that. She’d texted me every day for two weeks.

My parents were assholes. Lucy had said the same since we were twelve and cussing had felt like a thrill. I’d laughed at the time. Mom and Dad had grounded me for something I’d deemed inconsequential—I couldn’t recall the specifics now—

and when I'd snuck over to Lucy's to tell her I couldn't play for a whole week, she'd called them assholes.

Compared to her parents, they were.

Lucy's parents had adored her. They'd adored me. They'd pulled me into their family, encouraging our friendship, helping us bond as sisters of the heart. The outward affection and love I'd missed from my own parents had flowed freely at the Ross house.

When they'd died in a car accident, Lucy had been devastated. So had I. We'd grieved them together.

Not long afterward, her singing career had taken off. People in Nashville used to ask if I was jealous that she'd found such incredible success while I'd been singing at bars for five hundred bucks a night. Many didn't believe me when I assured them I was happy for her achievements.

Lucy had shot straight to the heavens simply because she was a shining star and that was exactly where she belonged.

Her motivation had been music.

My motivation had been employment.

I'd simply wanted to survive on my own terms. I'd wanted to live with my best friend. I'd wanted to prove to my parents, and to myself, that dropping out of college hadn't been a terrible mistake.

*Missed that mark, didn't I?*

My phone rang and I hurried to pick it up, checking the screen. It wouldn't be Mom again.

"Hey, Lucy," I answered.

"Hey." She sniffled and my heart stopped.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay? Why are you crying? Is it Duke?” Her husband was a cop. It had to scare her that anything could happen on his job.

“No, no. I’m great.” The smile in her voice made me relax. “Are you busy?”

*Phew.* “Oh, yes. Very busy,” I deadpanned.

“Good. I’ll be right over.”

Fifteen minutes later, she sat beside me on the couch, grinning from ear to ear as she told me she was pregnant.

“I’m so happy.” I pulled her into my arms, tears flooding my eyes for the second time today. Since Lucy had lost her parents, she’d been alone in a lot of ways. Then she’d come here to Calamity and found Duke.

There was a twinge of jealousy, not that she’d found a family. But that she was slipping from mine.

I was losing her to a happily ever after, while I was stuck in limbo.

“Everly is a really beautiful middle name,” I said, letting her go and shoving the envy away. It was my problem to deal with and I wouldn’t cloud my friend’s happy day.

Lucy laughed. “Yes, it is.”

I smiled, soaking in some of the joy in her pretty green eyes. “How excited is Duke?”

“He’s over the moon.” She beamed. “I asked him if he wanted a girl or a boy, and he told me he doesn’t care as long as the baby is healthy. I caught him browsing boy names on his phone this morning though.”

“Everly won’t make a great boy’s middle name but I’ve heard worse.”

Lucy giggled and we spent an hour talking until she had to go home to let Cheddar out.

My growling stomach sent me out of the apartment in search of food. It was three in the afternoon but that had become my standard lunchtime. The life of an unemployed, former singer was nothing if not flexible.

I made my way to First Street, bundled in my coat, and cast a quick glance at Hux’s gallery before turning the opposite direction and walking to the White Oak Café.

Hux and I hadn’t spoken since he’d left my bed on Sunday evening. Four days and not a word, not that I’d expected one. I suspected we’d be weekend *acquaintances*, which suited me fine. It would be easier to maintain those rigid boundaries if he was only an occasional companion.

He was just a fuck, to steal his words. A distraction. A fling with a hot, brooding artist was the perfect escape from reality. Hux had no need to worry that I’d become a clinger. I wasn’t looking for love or companionship. If I were, he’d be the first scratched off my list of candidates. That man was as closed off as the jar of pickles in my fridge that I hadn’t been able to open for a month.

Though I’d admit to myself it was thrilling for such a handsome, sexy man to desire me. It had been a while since I’d felt craved. Even if it was only physical, it was always nice to be wanted.

My short walk was cold and I’d forgotten my gloves. I tucked my hands into my pockets as I traversed the shoveled sidewalks. When I opened the door to the café, I was greeted

with a warm blast of air that smelled of bacon, cinnamon rolls and calories.

“Hey, Everly.” The waitress at the hostess station handed me a menu. “Nelson’s here. Want your usual spot?”

“Sure. Thanks, Marcy.” Never in my life had I thought I’d earn a *usual spot* in a restaurant. It was only a stool at the long counter on the far side of the room, but still, it was mine.

She no longer escorted me to my seat. I crossed the room while she went to grab me a glass of water.

“Hi, Nelson.” I unzipped my coat as my fellow late-lunchtime companion glanced up from the newspaper he’d been reading.

Nelson’s white hair seemed particularly wild today, sticking up at all angles. His gray beard was extra bushy. “Everly.”

“What did you order today?” I took my seat and flipped open the menu that I’d memorized months ago. “I think I might get soup.”

“French dip. With a salad.”

“A salad? Finally.” I raised my arms in victory. “Your arteries will thank you for skipping the mozzarella sticks.”

He chuckled and went back to his paper.

Nelson and I didn’t talk much. I wasn’t sure why he ate lunch this time of day. I didn’t know what he did for a living or if he had family in town. I didn’t even know his last name.

Our conversation was centered around food. And by conversation, I meant that I’d lecture him about incorporating more fruits and vegetables into his diet while he’d ignore me completely and order anything deep-fried.



“How was your Valentine’s Day?” I asked after Marcy came to take my order and collect my menu.

“Bought myself a box of chocolates at the grocery store. Does that count?”

I giggled. “I suppose.”

“You?”

“Oh, nothing much.” Other than sex. A lot of earth-shattering sex. I hid my smile with a sip of water.

“No boyfriend?” Nelson asked.

“No boyfriend. And my prospects are looking slim. Why, are you single?” I teased. “You keep talking about buying chocolate and I might just have to marry you.”

He laughed as our food was delivered and we settled into a comfortable silence, each enjoying our meal while he read and I browsed baby names, texting Lucy the top contenders.

*Addison Everly. Nora Everly. Bella Everly.* The list ballooned to nearly twenty before I was done eating and had paid my check.

“See you later, Nelson.”

He nodded. “I’ll be here.”

With a wave to Marcy, I bundled up and braved the cold. Instead of returning to the apartment, I walked a few blocks, pausing outside a little boutique that had a baby outfit on display in the window.

Though I couldn’t afford it, I bought it anyway. Lucy’s baby was going to be spoiled rotten by his or her aunt Everly. Which meant I’d need a job soon if I was going to afford gifts. Not that they’d be lavish gifts. I had no work experience

besides singing and waitressing. Minimum wage was in my future.

Maybe I should have listened to my parents when they'd begged me to finish my degree.

Maybe I should have looked for other towns before settling in Calamity. Towns with more employment prospects than a cashier at the grocery store or clerk at the gas station.

The Help Wanted section on the newspaper's website had been rather thin as of late. Besides the clerk and cashier openings, there'd been three listings for a "hired man." I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but three different ranches in the area were looking for said men.

Not women.

Chauvinism was still alive and well.

With my baby gift tucked in my purse, I took a shortcut to the apartment, walking down the alley. It was about ten seconds faster to my building's side entrance, and I had some job hunting to do. It was time to aim my energy at something other than my glass window.

As I walked down the trodden path in the snow, a muffled sob caught my ear. I scanned the parking lot to my left, then glanced over my shoulder. But the alley, wide enough for delivery vans and trucks, was empty except for a dirt bike parked tight to the building. A backpack rested on the ground, tucked behind the front wheel, like the owner had hidden it there to run a quick errand.

It wasn't until I took another few steps, coming to a narrow space between buildings, that I heard the sob again.

On a narrow walkway between my apartment building and its neighbor, a young girl was leaning against the wall. Her

face was buried in her hands, but I knew that blond hair anywhere.

“Savannah?”

Her face whipped up, her hands dropping to her sides. She blinked, her bright blue eyes wide and rimmed with red. I’d ruined her hiding spot.

“Are you okay?” I took two steps closer, but as her gaze narrowed, my feet came to a stop.

This girl broke my heart.

Savannah looked so much like Hux. She had his straight nose and brilliant blue gaze. But more so than her features, it was her attitude that reminded me of her father. She was obstinate. Stubborn. She kept everyone at a distance with that brave face.

Only, I’d seen the façade crack. The day of the shooting at the farmhouse, she’d clung to me. She’d cried on my shoulder until I’d lost her in the shuffle of police cars, cops and EMTs. Had Hux come to get her? Or had her mother?

I’d wondered about Savannah since that day, but not knowing how best to get in touch with her, I’d settled for updates via Lucy and Duke. They’d assured me that Travis was recovering from the incident. His mother had put him in counseling. And according to Travis, Savannah was on the road to normal too.

But seeing the pain on her delicate face for myself, I wasn’t so sure.

“Is something wrong?” I asked again, when she didn’t answer my first question.

“My mom can be such a bitch.”

I barked a laugh. *Yeah, so can mine.* “What did she do?”

“What she always does. Treats me like I’m this huge burden on her life, this inconvenience. But when I suggest I get out of her hair and live with my dad, she flips out. She doesn’t want me, but she doesn’t want him to have me either.”

It was so achingly familiar. I stepped close and put my hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

A tear, perfectly round and big and bursting with sorrow fell down her smooth cheek. “Why did she have me if she never wanted me?”

Savannah was in my arms before my brain could process that I’d pulled her in. Or that she could process I was hugging her. But I held her tight, wishing more than anything she weren’t in this position.

It wouldn’t get easier. She’d deal with this her entire life, searching for her mother’s love and approval.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

She sniffled and nodded, her tears soaking into my coat. Then in a flash she was gone, wrenching herself out of my hold.

Savannah dried her face, sniffled once more, then juttled out her chin. “What do you care anyway?”

Ah, yes. There was the bold girl. The one hiding her pain behind the bravado. “I care.”

“Yeah, right.” She rolled her eyes. “You don’t even know me. Just because we watched a bullet rip a woman’s heart open doesn’t mean we’re friends.”

Damn, this kid had a good sneer. Better than most adults. She was angry. She was humiliated that I’d caught her in a

moment of weakness. I raised my hands. “Okay.”

“Whatever. I’m fine.” With another eye roll, she shoved her hands into her pockets and flew past me, stomping in the opposite direction toward the dirt bike.

I waited, watching as she strapped on the backpack and revved the bike to life. Then she raced away without a glance in my direction.

“Teenagers,” I muttered. How could they insert so much spite into a *whatever*? “Whatever.” I tried to copy Savannah’s tone, maybe for my own mother, but it fell flat.

When the whine of the bike’s engine disappeared, I continued on to my apartment. My index finger hovered above the keypad. Should I tell someone? Savannah had said she was fine, but she wasn’t.

Dropping my hand from the door, I sighed and made my way to the gallery. The door chimed as I stepped inside, and my eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim light.

“Hello.” The petite woman seated at the corner desk smiled and adjusted her glasses. “Can I help you with anything?”

“Uh . . .” The words disappeared, stolen by the surrounding artwork that demanded my undivided attention.

*Wow.* Each piece was mesmerizing, no single painting more addictive than the next. Standing amid his work, I got my first glimpse into the man who’d joined me in bed, a glimpse far more intimate than the sex had been. His tattoo made sense now. It was a mirror to his artwork. Bold and colorful, without clean lines.

The landscapes were a mix of chunky strokes, dropped thick and heavy on to the canvas. The mountains on one piece

were such a brilliant indigo that they leapt from the sky. The animals he'd painted were of the same style. A wolf with white and gray fur, soft to the touch, collected snow on its sable nose. A rainbow trout with brown freckles on its underbelly and a reflective pink-blue sheen to its side flexed as it swam upstream. A deer hid in trees with antlers tinted the same caramel gold as the wheat field hanging four pieces over.

Hux's art was nothing like I'd seen before. The way he mixed rough strokes with soft lines gave the paintings enchantment. He'd given them life and dimension. He'd given them an edge.

His edge.

In the lower right corner of each, a black smudge marred the bright colors. Was it a thumb print? I leaned in close to inspect one, finding the ridges of his dried fingerprint. That was . . . him. It didn't surprise me in the least that he would forgo writing his name when a simple dab of his thumb would brand it as his own.

"This is one of my favorites." The woman from the desk appeared at my side. Her hands folded in front of her as she stared at the same piece I'd been inspecting. A buffalo.

The bison wasn't my favorite animal, not since Lucy and I had encountered a herd of the surly beasts in Yellowstone National Park. We'd gone hiking and mistaken a bison path for the hiking trail. The animals were enormous and intimidating as hell. Maybe some would say majestic. I preferred demented. Not even Hux's beautiful painting could hide the menace in their black beady eyes.

*Fucking buffalo.*

Though the run-in hadn't been a total bust. Lucy had met Duke that day. He'd rescued us from certain death and steered us in the right direction.

To Calamity.

"Are you shopping for a gift or your home?" she asked.

"Actually, I'm looking for Hux." I gave the bison my cold shoulder. "Is he here?"

The woman's pleasant smile vanished and she gave me a sideways stare. "He's on the phone."

"No problem." I shrugged. "I'll wait."

Her lips pursed together. "And who can I tell him is here?"

"Everly Christian."

It took her an uncomfortable moment to unglue her feet. With a suspicious head-to-toe glance from behind those black-rimmed frames, she turned and disappeared down a hallway at the far end of the room.

"Oh-kay," I drawled. "Customer service—three stars."

I walked around the showroom, trying to pick my favorite painting while I waited. The moment I spotted it, my breath hitched.

*Savannah.*

It was the one and only portrait in the gallery, hung at the back of the room and tagged with *Display Only. Not For Sale*. I pressed a hand to my heart to keep it from escaping. Hux might hide himself behind that stern, rugged exterior, but there was no question that he'd painted this with his very soul.

Savannah was younger in this painting, maybe twelve or thirteen. The colors on her face were pale and muted. The

same was true with her hair, nearly white with a shimmer that gave her an ethereal glow. It stood out like a halo against the gray and black background.

But the way he'd captured her violet eyes was so vivid that the painting didn't need more color. It was a violent blue like the color of electricity. In those eyes was every bit of the pain I'd seen in the alley today.

Her lips were a pale pink. Was she about to smile or frown? Her expression was void of all emotion, everything except those eyes. Those lonely blue eyes that cut so deep into my heart that my knees began to shake.

“Everly?”

I tore my eyes away from the painting, sucking in air as Hux came down the hallway with his receptionist bloodhound following close behind. “Hey. Sorry to bother you. Could we talk in private?”

A flash of panic crossed his gaze, but he gave me a single nod and jerked his chin to follow him down the hallway he'd just come from.

“Thanks, Katie,” he said as he passed her.

She smiled at him and gave me more side-eye.

*Attitude—two stars.*

Hux led me down the hallway and into an office, standing aside to close it behind us. His shoulders were stiff, his spine a steel rod.

“I just ran into Savannah,” I said, jumping right in. “She was crying in the alley behind my building. Thought you should know.”



“Oh.” His frame relaxed. “Fuck. She was going to stop by after school and say hi. Did she say anything else?”

“That her mom is a bitch.”

“Because she is.”

“Anyway, like I said, I thought you’d want to know.”

“Yeah.” Without waiting for me to leave, he dug his phone from his pocket and called who I could only assume was Savannah. “Hey. Just checking in. Are you coming down?”

Whatever her response was caused him to frown. But the voice on the other end of the line was too quiet to hear. She wasn’t screaming obscenities, so that was probably good. Though if Savannah was anything like me, ranting wasn’t the real indication that something was wrong.

It was the quiet.

Not wanting to stare, I diverted my gaze to the room, taking in the space. It was unorganized and chaotic. As expected. I couldn’t picture Hux keeping his office space neat and tidy. With papers strewn across his desk and others crumpled into balls littering the floor beside the trash can, this office would be my mother’s personal nightmare.

“You sure? You good?” Hux’s frown deepened at whatever Savannah said, then he pulled the phone away and stuffed it back into his pocket. “She says she’s fine.”

Savannah was not fine, but Hux was a typical man and hadn’t figured out that fine wasn’t actually fine.

“Okay. I’ll get out of your hair.” This wasn’t my family squabble to get into the middle of. I’d done my duty and hopefully, if she was really upset, she’d confide in her father eventually. I took a step to pass him for the door, but before

my fingers could touch the knob, his hand wrapped around my arm.

“Hold up.”

“Yeah?” I tipped up my gaze and . . . damn this man. One look at those blue eyes, soft lips and stubbled jaw and my temperature spiked. I swallowed hard.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” I nodded. “When I came in, what did you think I was doing here? Stage-five clinger?”

“Something like that.” The corner of his mouth twitched. An almost smile. A win, in my book.

“I like your art. You’re a man of many talents.”

Hux inched forward, towering over me, all height and strength. His spice-and-soap scent filled my nose. His heat engulfed me. Hux’s fingers found their way to my hair as his palm cupped my jaw.

A shiver rolled down my spine and the throb in my core drummed to life. “It’s not the weekend. I thought this was a weekend sex thing.”

“Do I look like a guy who gives a fuck what day it is?” His lips descended, hovering above my own as he waited for an answer.

I grinned. “Nope.”

## CHAPTER SIX

---

“TOWELS ARE UNDER THE SINK. I put a spare toothbrush on the counter.”

Everly gave me a sleepy smile as she hugged a pillow. “Mm-hmm.”

“Take your time.”

Her eyes drifted shut. “Care if I sleep a little longer? Someone kept me up all night.”

“No rush.” I left the bedroom, closing the door behind me before jogging downstairs. Then I went straight for the coffee pot.

Today, I was supposed to be helping Katie rearrange the showroom. Though I doubted I’d be much help come noon. I was wiped.

Everly had drained all my energy. Not that I’d complain.

Yesterday, when Katie had told me there was an Everly Christian to see me at the gallery, I’d panicked. I’d assumed Everly had come to ask me on a date or some shit. Because no matter what women said, they saw me as a challenge: the guy who didn’t want a relationship. When they realized I was a lost cause, feelings got hurt. That was why I’d stopped hooking up with women in Calamity.

That was also why I'd decided to end it with Everly. To just . . . be done. She was simply too tempting, and I needed to focus on Savannah.

Yeah, the sex was otherworldly, but what happened if she caught feelings? What happened if she ran to Lucy, who then told Duke and rumors spread that I'd fucked and dumped his wife's best friend? That kind of thing could blow my chances with a judge.

Duke was a good guy and all, but Lucy and Everly were tight. It was too much of a risk.

It was time to call it quits.

Then she'd walked into the gallery, not for me, but for my daughter. And damn if that hadn't shattered my plans.

So I'd kissed her.

After that kiss, she'd given me a wink and walked out of my office. She'd left me standing there, my cock throbbing behind my zipper.

If her play had been to get me to chase her, it had worked. I'd slipped out the alley door and looped around the block, spotting Everly as she'd been about to cross the street for her apartment.

I'd whistled.

She'd stopped.

I'd jerked my chin for her to follow.

The afternoon, evening and midnight hours had been spent worshipping her body in my bed.

I yawned. Damn, that woman had stamina. She met me beat for beat when we were in bed, always fighting to take the

pleasure to the next level.

Like last night, I'd been ready to call it quits, pass out and sleep for a few hours. But she'd given me just enough time to recover after making us both come, then trailed those long fingers up my thigh, letting them wander and trace the skin on my stomach, memorizing the peaks and valleys.

Five minutes of that delicious cruelty and I'd been hard again, so I'd flipped her over and taken her from behind, with one hand on her hip to hold her in place and the other stroking up and down her spine, memorizing my own path.

By the time I was finished, I'd been too tired to drive her home.

Truthfully, it didn't really matter which bed she slept in. Everly might be the only woman in the world who understood the stakes of casual, and thank fuck I'd found her before someone else.

I brewed myself a cup of coffee, guzzling it the second it cooled off from scalding. Then I made another cup, drinking it from a stool at the kitchen island, while I called my daughter. School would be starting soon, so there was no risk she'd be home and around April.

"Hey." Chatting teenagers and slamming lockers rang in the background.

"Hey, baby girl. How's it going?"

"I'm okay." Her voice was monotone. Flat. There was no smile in her words.

"You don't sound okay."

"Probably because I have a quiz in chemistry this morning and I'm going to flunk it."

“Why do you think you’ll flunk it?”

Another locker slammed, this one so close to the phone I could hear the metal rattle. “I hate chemistry.”

I chuckled. “But is it worse than government?”

“No.” She giggled. It was barely there, but it was enough to put some fears at ease.

“How are you really? The truth.”

She sighed. “Mom found out you met me at the theater.”

“What?” My heart dropped. “How?” We’d been careful. Very careful.

“One of her bitchy friends was there and saw you when she went to the bathroom.”

Well, fuck. “Shit.”

Why hadn’t April called me? This was normally something she’d take out on me, not Savannah. Maybe she was just hoarding this bit of information to use against me later. Maybe she knew Aiden and I were done negotiating and the next step was court.

“What else did she say?” I asked.

“She said that no matter how much I want to live with you it’s never happening. Then Julian got all pissed off because I called him Julian instead of *Dad* and they told me I was grounded for a month.”

My free hand balled into a fist on the counter. I fucking hated them.

Julian had been Savannah’s father figure from day one. Not because he’d earned it. Because he’d stolen it from me.

Julian had been there the day she was born. He'd been the one to bring her home from the hospital. He'd been the one to feed her bottles and rock her to sleep. He'd been there to watch her take her first steps.

Savannah's last name wasn't even Huxley. It was Tosh. That son of a bitch Julian had given her his last name when that had been mine to hand down.

She'd called him Dad until she was thirteen, both from habit and his requirement.

Until she'd decided differently.

I'd never forget the day Savannah had walked into the gallery alone. She'd been downtown with some friends shopping and had ditched them. Luckily, I'd been at the gallery that day. Katie had taken a rare vacation, so I'd been stuck at the desk.

Thank God for it. When Savannah had stepped inside, I'd been petrified. Scared that I'd get thrown back in prison because my kid had come to see me.

But the fear had vanished the moment I'd noticed the look on her face. Empty. Lonely. Lost.

I'd immortalized that look in a painting. Then I'd hung the portrait on the gallery wall to remind myself that the reason she was alone was because I'd fucked up. I'd let her down before she was even born.

Maybe I was still letting her down. Maybe I should have fought harder to get her away from April and Julian. But a man can only have his heart broken so many times before he finally admits defeat.

That was the first day she'd snuck away to see me but it hadn't been the last.



From that day forward, I'd been Dad. *So fuck you, Julian.* Somehow, I'd find a way for her to be a Huxley.

"I'm sorry, Savannah," I said, unsure of what else to say. I didn't want to tell her I was going to petition the court again. I didn't want to get her hopes up.

"He's a dick."

I laughed. "You're not wrong."

"And Mom's a bitch."

I grunted my agreement.

"But they can't keep me in that house." The defiance in her voice rang loud and clear. I could practically see her jutting out her chin.

"Don't get into trouble."

She scoffed. "Maybe if I piss them off enough, they'll let me go."

Doubtful. She'd been trying that move for years. Savannah would push and push the limits, both at home and with the law. In her sixteen-year-old logic, if she got into enough trouble, either the legal system would yank her out of that house or April and Julian would finally give her the boot.

It wasn't working and I didn't like the risks she was taking. And I really didn't like the dare in her voice. Like the trouble she'd already caused was only the tip of the iceberg.

"Just . . . hang tight. Please, don't do anything stupid."  
*Don't be like me.*

A bell rang in the background and the chatter intensified. "I have to get to class."

"Savannah—"

“Bye, Dad.”

The line went silent.

*Fuck.*

She was getting desperate. Nothing good would come of her acting out. Which meant it was time to pull the trigger. I pulled up another name on my phone, pressing it to my ear.

“Hux,” Aiden answered.

“Hey. Just wanted to check in. See if we couldn’t move things up.” We’d planned to file the petition in two weeks. That was a month since we’d tried to negotiate with April the last time. That month would show the judge we’d given her plenty of time to consider the last proposal.

“Why? Did something happen?”

“Yes. No. Just more of the same shit.”

“Are you at home? I’m actually in Calamity today. I had to meet with another client, so I came to town.”

“Yeah, I’m home.”

“Great. On my way over.”

I stood from the island, draining the last of my mug. This was good. Aiden and I could hash out a new plan and—*shit*. There was a woman in my bed.

This was not something I needed Everly involved in but maybe if Aiden was fast, we could talk about it while she was still asleep or in the shower.

It was silent upstairs. As I waited for Aiden to arrive, I listened intently for any sound of Everly as I drained another cup of coffee. But when I didn’t hear a footstep or the water turn on, I figured she’d fallen asleep. *Good.*

A car door slammed outside, and I made my way to the door, meeting Aiden before he could ring the doorbell.

“Thanks for coming over.” I shook his hand.

“Worked out well.” He stepped inside. “Good to see you.”

“You too.”

Aiden Archer was a few years older than I was and as honest as they came. I could always count on him to tell me the truth, no matter how brutal.

I led him to the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“Please. My daughter was up all night. I’m wiped.”

“She sick?”

“Yeah. She caught a cold at school. She’ll be just fine, but Lola caved and let her sleep in our bed all night,” he said, his face softening at his wife’s name.

Aiden was a down-to-business sort of guy and he respected the fact that clients paid by the hour, so he wasn’t prone to idle chatter. I didn’t know much about his wife, other than he’d met her at a party here in Calamity years ago. They had a daughter and a son, and like me, he’d do anything for his children’s happiness.

I made him a cup as he took a seat at the bar. Then I leaned on the counter across from him and cut right to the chase. “When’s the soonest we can try to get Savannah?”

Aiden sighed, drinking the steaming cup slowly. “Like I told you when we talked before, we can get the ball rolling whenever you want. But . . .”

“But, what?”

“Nothing has changed, Hux. You’re in the same position you were the last time we went to the judge. Yeah, it shows good faith that you’ve tried to work with April. It shows she’s uncooperative, that she’s refused any consolations. But you are an ex-convict and April loves to remind the judge you ended up there because of a violent crime.”

“That was years ago. I’ve been clean ever since. No trouble. No issue with the law. That’s got to count for something.”

“It does.” Aiden nodded. “It absolutely does. And Savannah is older, which means the judge will take into account her desires. Sounds like she wants to live with you.”

I nodded. “That’s what she says.”

“But . . .”

“Getting sick of that word, Aiden.”

He chuckled. “But Savannah has been getting into trouble. The judge is going to see that and start asking questions.”

“Good. Maybe they’ll actually look at what’s happening in that house.” We could find out if Julian was hurting Savannah. And if Julian and April were flaunting their kink in my daughter’s face, that had to score points in my favor, right?

“Or maybe the judge will assume she’s a rebellious teenager who wants to live with her single dad because he’ll let her get away with more than she does with her mother.”

“That’s bull—” I stopped myself. *Shit.*

It wouldn’t take Savannah long to figure out—if she hadn’t already—that I wasn’t good at telling her no. Not only was I scared to alienate her, but I didn’t know the first thing about

being a full-time parent. Hell, I didn't know how to be a part-time parent.

"I'm fucked, aren't I?"

"It's a long shot. But it's a shot worth taking."

Aiden had been telling me that for years. Brutal honesty.

"What should I do?" I asked. "I don't want to wait any longer and have her be miserable. But every time I do this, it ends up hurting Savannah." And me.

"The biggest difference between this time and the last is Savannah. Yeah, she's causing trouble and acting out. But she's also old enough to convey her wishes. The judge is going to do what's best for the child. And often what's best is what the child wants. But . . ."

"You're killing me today, Archer."

He chuckled. "This is a small town, Hux. People talk. People see. And judges are people. Get out. Be part of the community. Don't just have a clean record on paper. Make people here believe you're a good guy."

"I'm downtown at the gallery almost every day."

Aiden had encouraged me years ago to become part of the community, and the gallery was about as much community as I could stomach. He should be proud that I'd set up a shop at all. I could have just sold art from my home.

"That's not what I'm talking about. You still haven't squashed your reputation as the town recluse. I don't even live here, and I know you make people nervous."

People in Calamity didn't like me. And I didn't like them. It was better to maintain a distance, for everyone's sake.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

“It’s too bad you never remarried.” Aiden chuckled. “I don’t suppose you have a wife hiding in the studio out back.”

“What?”

“I’m kidding. Shit, Hux. You’re white as a sheet.”

“I don’t want to get remarried.”

He held up a hand. “It was a joke. I know April did a number on you. I was only teasing because if you had a nice, serious girlfriend, it would go a long way. Right or wrong, a judge is going to prefer a female presence in your house before handing over a sixteen-year-old girl.”

“Well . . . I don’t.” I didn’t have the time, or desire, to establish a serious relationship. I didn’t have the time or desire to find a wife. Even the word made my skin clammy.

“Again, it was a joke.” Aiden waved it off. “We’ll do our best with what we’ve got.”

“It’s not much,” I muttered. “Why won’t April just let me have her?”

“I don’t know.” Aiden shook his head. He knew enough about April to know that her tactics with Savannah were selfish. None of this was for Savannah’s own good. “Some people are vindictive.”

“Haven’t I been punished enough?”

Wasn’t a prison sentence enough? Weren’t years and years of guilt enough? Wasn’t missing out on Savannah’s life enough? Because she’d stripped me bare. April had taken every good thing in my life. My freedom. My child. That woman had broken my heart.

Maybe she hadn't loved me, but damn it, I'd loved her. I'd loved her since we were kids. Until I'd realized that love was nothing but a gateway to hate.

"I'm sorry." Aiden sighed. "I wish I knew."

"What if I offered her money?"

"No."

"I'd pay, Aiden." I'd give April every dime of the millions I had stashed in the bank for our daughter.

"You pay, she'll drain you dry."

"Maybe it's worth it."

"And when Savannah finds out, she'll be devastated." Aiden wasn't wrong.

Savannah didn't have much love for April, but April was still her mother. If Savannah learned that April had let me buy her, it would crush my daughter's heart.

"Then we try this," I said. "We keep trying. We keep fighting. She's only got two years left before she's eighteen. I know it's probably too late but . . ."

"It's the right thing to do." Aiden stood from the stool. "I'll be in touch soon."

"Thanks." I escorted him through the living room, shaking his hand once more. When I closed the door behind him, I let my forehead fall to its wooden face.

"So you need a wife."

I jerked, stood straight and spun around to find Everly sitting on the staircase.

From those steps, you could hear everything that happened in the living room and adjoining kitchen.

My stomach dropped.

Everly stood, coming down the last few stairs. The shirt she'd put on was mine. The arms were too big so she'd rolled them at the cuffs. The blue plaid hung down her thighs, but there was still a lot of leg on display. She had great fucking legs.

Too bad my heart was too far up my throat for me to enjoy the view.

“Thought you were sleeping.”

She shook her head and headed for the kitchen. “I wanted some coffee before I took a shower.”

So she'd heard it all.

I followed her to the kitchen, watching as she opened the cabinets searching for a coffee mug. I was too stunned to help her find one, though it only took her three attempts. Then she put it under the coffee maker, inserted the single brew pod, and hit the button, waiting for her cup to fill.

With a steaming mug in hand, she turned to face me, leaning on the counter in nearly the exact same place I'd been during my discussion with Aiden. “You need a wife.”

“It was a joke.”

She sipped the hot, black liquid. “Was it?”

Everly had this way of posing a question that contradicted everything. Like the first night we'd met at the bar and I'd told her she'd missed the excitement.

*Did I?*

One two-word question that had led me straight to her bed.



Well, this two-word question wasn't going to lead me to the altar.

“Did you want to shower before I drive you home?”

“Yes.” She didn't move from the counter.

“Ev—”

“I'll do it.”

“Shower?”

She shook her head. “Marry you.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

HUX STARED at me like I was crazy.

Maybe I was. But for the first time in months, I saw a path forward. I wasn't stuck. This was the next step and maybe the reason why I was destined to be here in Calamity. Maybe this was why I'd been suffering through limbo.

This, marrying Hux to help his daughter, was something I could do.

“No.” His voice brooked no argument.

I argued anyway. “Why not? It won't mean anything. It'll be fake.”

“Are you insane?”

“Probably,” I admitted.

He blinked, like he was trying to decide if this was real or a nightmare. “This is—this is . . . no. Aiden was kidding. I have no interest in getting married again. Or fake married. Ever.”

The way he spat *ever* was so vicious. His ex had done her best to break him. *Bitch*. “Your first marriage was the worst experience of your life, wasn't it?”

“No, that would be prison.”

I hummed. “About that . . .”

I’d learned about Hux’s past from Lucy and Duke. Months ago, not long after the farmhouse, I’d been at their place having dinner. Travis and Savannah had come up in conversation, and I’d asked about Savannah’s parents.

That conversation had happened long before I knew Hux. Before I’d spent hours tracing the contours of his jaw with my tongue and running my hands up and down his chiseled body.

With all the sex and other distractions, I’d sort of forgotten that he’d spent time in prison for nearly beating a man to death. Or it just hadn’t mattered. It had happened so long ago, and Hux didn’t emit a hardened-criminal vibe. A grouch? *Absolutely*. But he’d never made me feel unsafe.

Still, before I jumped into a marriage, it would probably be a good topic to touch on.

“Was that prison stint a one-time thing?”

There was that blink again. “Uh . . . yeah.”

“Good. Because you look hot in blue, honey. But I’m not down with you in orange.”

Hux’s jaw slackened. Another blink. A headshake. Then the shock on his face disappeared, replaced by his signature scowl. No person could scowl quite like Hux.

It was a full-body scowl. His shoulders were ramrod straight. His legs were planted wide. His eyebrows formed this perfect slash, like a teacher’s harsh underline under a failing grade. Add to that the flat hold of his mouth and the tension in his jaw, he was not a happy camper.

“You lied to me.” His voice was harsh and accusing, like he thought this was my way of trapping him and renegeing on

our agreement. “I told you this was sex only.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I held up a hand. “Let’s not get carried away. This is not a romantic thing.”

“Uh-huh,” he deadpanned.

A laugh escaped. I couldn’t help it. This man was so terrified of commitment he was practically shaking. “Listen, I get that you’re averse to commitment. You’ve made that inescapably clear. But I told you from the start, I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“Yet you’re willing to get married.”

“Fake married. There’s a difference.”

He wasn’t buying it.

“I’m assuming that guy who was here is your lawyer.”

Hux nodded. “He is.”

“Then your lawyer has a valid point. Savannah is a sixteen-year-old girl with an attitude but she’s cute as can be. You’re a single man who spent time in prison and—” I waved my hand up and down his body.

Hux looked down to his feet, then back at me. “And what?”

“This.” I waved my hand again. “You are all hard lines and angry glares. You don’t exactly radiate Mr. Rogers. I’d be skeptical about putting Savannah with you, and I just spent the night in your bed.”

Maybe it was because I’d spent the night in his bed that I was skeptical. This man was pure sin.

I shivered at the thought of him taking me from behind last night. God, it had felt so good to be handled, to be with a man

who knew exactly when to flip the switch from gentle to rough.

The reason I'd come down here this morning before showering was to have another go with him. I'd slid out of bed and tugged on his shirt. But when I'd hit the stairs and heard voices, I'd considered giving him privacy.

I'd sat on the stairs and eavesdropped instead.

Hux huffed and threw up his hands. "Aiden was joking."

"How could I forget when you keep reminding me? Maybe he said it as a joke. Except it kind of sounded like a really good idea."

"Marriage is never a really good idea."

I laughed again. Poor Hux. "This wouldn't be a real marriage. This is a way to help get your daughter."

"No."

"Think about it." I shoved off the counter and stepped to the island, moving closer. "You need to show the town of Calamity that you're not just a brooding artist with a magnificent scowl and marginal social skills."

His frown deepened.

"See?" I pointed to his face. "This is what I'm talking about. Seriously, Hux, you radiate pissed-off jerk. No one wants a jerk for a dad."

As a woman who'd had a jerk for a father—a stuffy, inattentive jerk, but a jerk nonetheless—I could attest.

"This is . . ." He shook his head and spun away from me, walking into the adjoining living room. "No. I don't need this shit. Get dressed. I'll take you home."

I ignored the order and went back to my coffee as he paced in front of a walnut coffee table.

If he didn't want my help, fine. But before he kicked me out, I was going to at least get some caffeine in my system. So while he paced, I stood there and inspected his home, instantly picturing Savannah within these walls.

She'd liven up the space. It could use some added personality.

This wasn't a new or large house but Hux had chosen quality pieces to fill the space. His couch was a plain, chocolate rawhide leather, its only charm coming from the natural scratches and wear patterns. The chair beside it was a lighter shade and nearly the size of a loveseat. The perfect seat to curl up with a good book.

There were only the two pieces, along with the coffee table. The space would accommodate another seat, but my guess was that Hux didn't entertain a lot of visitors. The only person watching that large flatscreen was him.

The décor was masculine, much like his bedroom upstairs. The only light colors were the cream walls and white trim. Besides the maroon rug beneath the coffee table, there wasn't much color either. My eyes darted to every wall. Each was bare.

"You don't have any art." Not even his own.

Hux stopped his pacing and looked at me, his hands fisting on his hips. "What?"

"You don't have any of your own artwork. Why not?"

His eyes darted to the ceiling. "Are you going to shower?"

My invitation had expired.

I doubted I'd get another.

"Yeah." I drained the rest of my coffee, then set the mug in the sink. I padded over the hardwood floors, passing Hux for the staircase. But before I could round the banister and disappear to collect my clothes from his bedroom floor, he stopped me.

"Why would you offer?"

"To marry you?"

He nodded.

"Reasons." Reasons that didn't matter since he'd shot me down. Reasons I didn't fully understand myself. It was just an impulse. From the moment his lawyer had mentioned it, a feeling of purpose had swelled inside me.

A calling.

*This.* I could do this.

I'd had the same thing happen in college when Lucy had told me she was moving to Nashville. She'd asked me to come along and I'd known, to the essence of my being, I could do it.

"Give me one of them," Hux said.

"It will help Savannah."

"I didn't realize you cared so much about my daughter."

"We went through something horrific together." And it was my fault.

I'd led the stalker to Calamity. Whatever wounds that incident had inflicted on the girl were on me. I had to live with that guilt, but if there was something I could do to make it easier for her, then I'd do it.



Savannah reminded me so much of myself at that age. Lonely. Lost. An outsider in my own home. I'd been able to run away to Lucy's for an escape. Savannah deserved to find her own sanctuary and maybe that safe place was with Hux.

From the sounds of it, the cards were stacked against him. I had the power to even the scales. Maybe not balance them completely. It was going to take a lot for a judge to look beyond the past. But I could help.

"It might not work," he said. "Even with a wife or a better reputation around town, it might not make a damn bit of difference."

"You won't know if you don't try."

He hung his head. "This is insanity."

My breath caught. Was that a yes? It almost sounded like a yes.

Until he raised his chin and leveled me with a penetrating gaze. "I don't buy it."

"Buy what?"

"Your reason for offering to marry me. Yeah, you and Savannah went through some shit at the farmhouse. But you could help her through it without marrying her father. Mentor her at school or something. Do what Duke does for Travis, just be in her life. You don't need to be my wife for that."

Suspicious much? "All true. Like I said, I have reasons."

"Give me another."

"Maybe I'm bored."

"Not a reason to get married. Try again."

He was asking me to open a window to my soul. To talk about my parents and my past and my feelings and . . . *no*. My reasons were mine. Hux wasn't going to agree to this anyway, so my reasons for offering to help him were none of his damn business. "Let's be done talking about this."

"Fine," he clipped.

I started up the stairs, muttering, "I don't know why I'm trying to convince you of this anyway. I'm not the one who needs to improve their image."

"What did you say?"

I stopped. "I said that I'm not going to convince you of this. It sounded like you were stuck. I offered to help. That's all. *I* don't have a problem with my image around town. *I* don't need a judge's approval. But I get it. You don't want a woman. You don't want a wife, not a real one or a fake one. Discussion over."

Typical Hux, he assumed his scowl.

And I went upstairs, stripped off his shirt and pulled on my clothes from yesterday. I'd shower when I got back to my apartment.

Hux was waiting by the door wearing a gray jacket and a black beanie that covered his hair.

I swallowed a groan. The beanie was sexy. It made his sooty eyelashes darker. It gave him a rugged edge. I would definitely let him screw me wearing that beanie. Too bad any and all future bedroom escapades were off the table.

When he dropped me off today, I doubted I'd see Hux again.

All because I'd opened my damn mouth and offered to be his wife.

We didn't speak as he led me into the garage. He focused on the road as he drove. I kept my gaze out the passenger window. The tension mounted, growing block after block, and when he turned on First, I knew it was my last chance to clear the air.

"Look, I only wanted to help." I sighed. "I don't want you to think I was offering marriage because I have any delusions of what is happening here. You and I are—were—purely physical. This wasn't something I thought to trap you with."

"Kay," he deadpanned.

He didn't believe me? *Gah*. This man was infuriating. Did he trust no one?

"I like Savannah," I said. "She reminds me of me when I was that age. Stubborn but soft. She wants to pretend like she's got it all figured out but deep down, she's scared. She's unsure, though she'll never admit it."

Hux remained silent, though his shoulders slumped a fraction of an inch. Because he knew I was right about his kid.

"I don't have much going for me," I admitted. "Honestly, I'm in limbo. My career as a singer is over. I left my home in Nashville. I grew up in New York and have no desire to return. So I'm here. But not really sure what my next step is. When I heard your lawyer joke about this, I just thought . . ."

What the hell had I been thinking?

Marriage? To a stranger? Limbo was not the time for me to be making major life decisions.

Except it didn't seem major. My parents' marriage had always been more like a business relationship. They were more passionate about their accounting firm than they were about love or sex.

They might have skewed my perception of marriage, but this thing with Hux could be similar. He'd improve his chances to win his daughter. I'd have a purpose—temporary, but a purpose.

“Thought what?” Hux asked.

“I thought it would give me something to do. Until I figured out what direction to go, this would be better than hiding in my apartment, watching the world instead of participating in it.”

Hux pulled up to the curb in front of my building. “It's just —”

“Too crazy.”

He nodded. “You don't know me. You don't want to.”

“I know enough.” I gave him a sad smile.

Hux wasn't a villain. Emotionally unavailable, but not a bad guy.

“Take care, Hux.” I leaned across the cab and brushed a kiss to his stubbled cheek, dragging in one last inhale of his intoxicating scent. Spice and soap and paint. I doubted I'd ever be able to smell paint again and not think of him. Then I got out of the truck and disappeared inside my building.

The rumble of his engine was gone before the door closed at my back.

*Alone again.*

“That was an interesting morning.” I laughed to myself and trudged upstairs to the apartment where I took a shower, leaving my long hair to air dry. Then I crawled into bed, yawning to the ceiling, but even after snuggling deep into my pillow, I couldn’t find sleep.

What better way to spend a Friday than clean?

I worked with fury through most of the day, refusing to go to the window and look outside. I didn’t want to see Hux’s truck in front of the gallery. I didn’t want to see the gallery period.

Because as I dusted, vacuumed and scrubbed, the morning played over and over in my mind. With each loop, the embarrassment grew. My cheeks were hot with shame.

*Goddamn it.*

I’d basically begged that man to marry me. I mean, I hadn’t dropped to my knees and pleaded, but there was nothing about what had happened this morning that didn’t make me look like the crazy woman who’d heard the word marriage and jumped all over it like the only single bridesmaid during the bouquet toss.

“I don’t even want to get married!” I cried to no one as I furiously polished the stainless-steel fridge.

At least, not right now. Someday, I wanted a family of my own. But I was in no place for a real relationship at the moment. Maybe that was why I’d suggested it. Reese Huxley was not real husband material. I’d dodged a bullet.

Yet *he* had rejected *me*. And it had been surprisingly painful.

What the actual fuck?

It wasn't about me. I took my polish to the dishwasher, buffing it to a shine. That rejection wasn't about me. Hux would have rejected anyone. Knowing that didn't ease the sting.

My phone rang on the counter and I picked it up. *Dad*. Uh-oh. What had I done now? "Hey, Dad."

Keyboard clicks rang in the background.

"Hello?"

More typing.

"Dad."

Nothing.

"Dad!"

"Everly?" he asked, coming on the line. "Strange. I didn't hear the phone ring."

"Because you called me."

"I did?"

"Yes," I drawled.

"Oh, sorry. I must have just hit the wrong name." And without another word, he ended the call. Probably to call the *right* name.

"And it's a wonder why I didn't go home for Christmas."

*Assholes*. Two rejections from two different men on the same day was enough to send my cleaning into overdrive.

My apartment wasn't big. The studio was one open room with windows only along the front wall. The bathroom, tucked beside the kitchen, was the only space with a door. But with nothing else to do, I made the place sparkle.

The duct work in the open industrial ceiling got dusted. I shined every inch of glass. I cleaned the inside of the fridge. I color coordinated my rolling rack of clothes.

I spent the day doing anything and everything to feel productive.

It didn't work.

For the first time in months, limbo felt weak. It felt childish. It felt . . . hopeless.

With the scent of bleach, glass cleaner and furniture polish in the air, I finally put away my sponges and rags to plop down on the couch and open my laptop. Job hunting was up next.

Nothing new had popped up since I'd searched the other day. The only new listing required a bachelor's degree.

"The grocery store it is." I could cashier there until something else opened up. *If* something else opened up. *If* they hired me. I groaned and clutched my twisting stomach. What if they didn't hire me? What if I was the worst candidate in their pool?

What if the problem wasn't the Calamity job market, but me?

My fingers hovered over the keys and my heart lurched as I let them type in the search bar.

*Jobs in New Orleans.*

If Calamity's job pool was too small, Montana might not be the place for me. The idea of leaving Lucy behind made my heart ache, but she had Duke and, soon, their baby. She might be my only true family in this world, but that didn't mean we had to live in the same town.

New Orleans might be fun. I'd never been there but Mardi Gras was on my bucket list.

The list of available positions for a woman with few qualifications was surprisingly long. The hourly rates were droolworthy.

I'd just clicked on a position with a clothing company when a knock came at the door. I set my laptop aside and crossed the room. It was probably Kerrigan. She often came upstairs to say hello whenever she was downtown. Maybe she'd be up for a Friday afternoon cocktail, because I sure as hell could use one.

But when I checked the peephole, it wasn't Kerrigan on the other side.

It was Hux.

"Hey." I opened the door and stepped aside so he could come in, but he stayed rooted to his spot beyond the threshold.

"Were you serious?"

As I'd cleaned, I'd tried to convince myself that Hux's rejection was a good thing. But with him so close, still wearing that sexy-as-fuck beanie, I knew my earlier efforts had been futile.

I would marry Hux.

"Yes."

He ran a hand over his jaw, then gave me the tiniest of nods. "Okay."

My stomach dropped. Oh. My. God.

*Holy fuck.*

I was getting married.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

“SORRY.” I shuffled to the side so Everly could pass me in the hallway. My back was plastered against the wall as she slid by, keeping her eyes trained on the floor.

Goddamn, this was awkward.

Everly darted down the stairs and I blew out a long breath, taking the box I was carrying to the office.

We hadn’t spoken much in the last five days. Too stunned that I’d actually gone to her place and we’d agreed to get married, I’d bolted as soon as we’d exchanged phone numbers.

Everly had agreed to become my wife and she hadn’t even known my number.

How fucked up was that?

It had started as a kiss in my office, a marathon fuck in my bed, and now she was my fiancée.

I’d inhaled too many paint fumes. They’d warped my mind.

Yet as I acknowledged this was crazy, I couldn’t seem to turn this train wreck around.

After the past five days, I’d thought a lot about what Aiden had said. I’d hashed and rehashed his concerns and my ex-

wife.

April was a master at tainting my reputation around town. She had the crying, pitiful, poor-me act honed to perfection. And most people bought it.

To Aiden's point, I hadn't done anything to dispute it.

There was no point. She was April Tosh, loving wife of Julian Tosh, a respected and admired attorney. Maybe some folks suspected that Julian liked to hit April—and that April liked it when Julian hit her—but there was no proof and April would never turn on him.

She was a master manipulator and liar. She wanted to cast me as the evil, criminal ex-husband, and that's just what she'd done. She refused to let people forget why I'd gone to prison. She'd convinced many around town that I was the one who'd shunned Savannah. She had too many believing I'd disowned my own child and that Saint Julian had stepped in to rescue her.

People didn't want to see the truth. They didn't want to admit I was fighting for my child. They didn't want to think about why I'd always, *always* refused to let Julian adopt her.

It was easier to believe her lies, buy into the crocodile tears and pathetic stories.

*Fucking Calamity.*

This town was too small for its own good.

If not for Savannah, I would have left long ago. But I refused to leave here until she was eighteen. *Only two years to go.*

I was thirty-five, and starting over before I hit forty sounded damn nice. The plan was to move to whatever area

she decided on for work or college. Thankfully, my baby girl wanted to get the hell out of Calamity too.

Katie could run the gallery here or we could close it down. I didn't care.

But that was for later. There were still two years left. Two important years. So I'd keep fighting, and it was time to step up my strategy.

I'd been in the studio painting when I'd realized this marriage idea might be a good one. It had stunned me so fast, the brush in my hand had dropped onto my jeans, streaking them with green.

Before I knew it, I was driving to Everly's apartment and knocking on her door.

What was it about that woman who made me act on impulse? That first night in the bar. The second night at her place. And now . . . marriage.

We were getting married.

In two days.

Today, she was moving into my home. She'd texted a few days ago and said we should probably live under the same roof.

It was strange to have her in my space. The box in my arms was full of chargers and electronics and a few books. She'd spent the past few days packing up her apartment, though there wasn't much. She'd decided to leave the furniture until her lease was up with Kerrigan. Then she'd sell it, either online or to Kerrigan, who could then rent the space as furnished.

Everly's footsteps echoed on the stairs. I braced for another awkward exchange.

We probably should have stuck with the sex.

Eventually, this would fade, right? I sure as hell hoped so. Because there'd be no avoiding one another.

I had three bedrooms, one of which I'd turned into an office. The guest room was for Savannah. So Everly and I would be sharing a room, a bed and a bathroom, like an actual married couple.

The ruse had to work here too. If Savannah came over, she needed to think I'd married Everly for real.

We couldn't risk anyone knowing this was all a bluff.

"Um . . ." Everly appeared in the doorway behind me with another box, setting it on the floor.

"I'll clear some space." The desk in my home office was as cluttered as the desk at the gallery. Buried beneath the papers was a smooth, hickory surface. I just hadn't seen it for a few years.

"Okay." She glanced around the room, taking in the crowded bookshelves. Her gaze darted over the tall-backed chair and the stacks of blank canvases in one corner.

I was always tripping over canvases but when the time came and I needed a certain size, I never could find the right one. I collected a large armful to take to the studio.

"I don't need much," she said. "You can leave them."

"No, I should have moved these months ago. Just didn't get to it."

She shifted so I could pass, five under one arm and three under the other. Then I bolted down the stairs, through the living room and out the back door, where I disappeared to my studio.

I breathed a long sigh when I was inside. “Fuck.”

*Savannah. This is for Savannah.*

Everly had her unknown reasons for agreeing and I had mine.

This was my Hail Mary so I might as well go all in. And somehow, if there was any person who could convince the entire town this was a real marriage, it was Everly.

She was magnetic. She drew people in with her warm smile and magical eyes. Maybe she'd be good for Savannah too. Any female influence besides April's would be a good thing.

I stacked the canvases with the others, then lingered for a few minutes. My studio time was about to go up. I'd spend more time out here painting. I'd spend time at the gallery and give Everly her space.

Anything to avoid the house until the dust settled.

It had to get easier, right? This was just the first day. I hadn't lived with anyone since April, unless my cellmates counted. If I could survive nearly two years in prison, I could survive a couple married to a beautiful woman.

Not wanting to make her unpack alone, I headed inside, meeting Everly as she came in from the garage, both hands loaded with clothes on hangers.

“There's only one more load.”

“I’ll get the rest.” With the rest of her clothes on one arm and the truck empty, I kicked the door shut and met Everly in the bedroom by the closet.

It wasn’t a small room, but with the two of us in here, it felt half the usual size. She’d slept in the king-sized bed. That hadn’t been strange. Why was this?

She cast me a glance over her shoulder and shoved the line of hangers and clothes down the rod so I could hang up the rest. Then we stood there, cloaked in uncomfortable silence.

“Make yourself at—”

“This is awkward—”

We ground to a halt in unison.

Everly scrunched up her nose. “This is awkward.”

“Pretty much.” I nodded. “Did you tell Lucy?”

“No.” She walked to the bed, plopping down on the edge.

That one move and the tension eased. Probably because Everly in bed was something I could compartmentalize. The bed was familiar. The bed was easy. If we had one thing going for us headed into this shitshow, it was the sex.

“I’ll tell her after we’re married,” Everly said.

“Think she’ll talk you out of it?”

She shrugged. “She’ll try. If our roles were reversed and she was sitting in my position, I’d try.”

“No one can know it’s fake. Lucy’s married to the sheriff. If the judge asks Duke to testify, then—”

“I know.” She held up her hand. “The real reason is between you and me. I’m good with vague. People can think

what they want. Most will probably assume I'm pregnant or something."

Hearing those words made my stomach drop. We'd taken precautions with the condoms and if she wanted to keep up the physical stuff, those precautions would continue.

Everly was my future ex-wife. There was no way I'd risk adding another kid to the mix.

"Two years. Maybe less. If I can get custody, then we can get a divorce once things smooth out."

"We'll get her."

There was something about the *we* in her sentence that gave me hope. Dangerous hope.

"Can I ask you a question?" She shifted on the bed, dropping back on her elbows.

I leaned against the wall. "Shoot."

"What made you change your mind about all this? You were so adamantly against it."

I sighed. "I came home after dropping you off and went to work in the studio. Sat there and couldn't paint. I kept thinking about what Aiden said, about what you said. Nothing has changed since the last time I tried to get Savannah. Yeah, it was years ago, but I'm still the same guy. Same house. No judge is going to give me my kid."

There was a hopelessness in my voice. She sat up straighter, then gave me a sad smile. "We'll get her."

There was that *we* again. "Hope so."

"Easy peasy, lemon squeezy."



I chuckled and pushed off the wall, jerking my chin toward the hallway. “I’m going to go order some dinner. You good with pizza?”

“As long as it comes with a cold beer.”

“Christ, we might actually survive this thing. Toppings?”

“Ham and pineapple?”

“Spoke too soon.” Fruit didn’t belong on pizza.

She giggled. “I like Hawaiian best, but I’m not picky. Whatever you’d like is fine.”

I turned to leave but stopped short of the door. I’d been dreading this part since dawn. *Get it over with.*

“I, uh . . . got you something.” Before I’d gone to pick up Everly from the apartment this morning, I’d taken the hour-long trip to Prescott. Their jewelry store was better than the one in Calamity. Not because they had better jewels, but because the staff wasn’t from Calamity. If any gossip traveled across the county line, it wouldn’t hit town until after Everly and I had already exchanged vows.

“Here.” I tossed the ring to the bed. The diamond glittered against the dark comforter.

Everly’s eyes went wide as she picked it up. “Hux. This is . . .”

I didn’t wait for her to gather the words. I didn’t want a thanks or anything else. It was an engagement ring because we were engaged. She needed a ring, so I’d bought her one.

Leaving her in the bedroom, I hurried downstairs to order pizza. Then I took out a beer from the fridge, drinking that first gulp when the doorbell rang.

*Ugh.* Today was not the day for visitors. I crossed the living room for the door, flinging it open. *Son of a bitch.* Should have checked who it was first.

“What do you want, April?”

My ex-wife crossed her arms over her chest, shooting me her favorite glare. She’d had that look since we’d been kids. Why the fuck I hadn’t seen it for pure evil then I blamed on youth and sex. Like most teenage boys, I’d thought more with my cock than my brain so I’d missed the viper behind the blond hair and pretty face.

“You need to stop texting Savannah,” she ordered.

“No, I don’t.” There was nothing in the past judgments that prevented me from contacting Savannah. Aiden had dug into the technicalities to be sure. There was nothing April could do to prevent me from calling, emailing or messaging my daughter. I had no visitation, but communication was allowed.

“Stop texting her or Julian will be forced to mention your little movie date to the judge.”

April did love her threats.

For a lot of years, I’d feared them because I’d thought she’d actually act on them. When Savannah was little, April had threatened over and over to leave Calamity. She’d promise she’d take Savannah and disappear to the other side of the country. I would have followed, but it would have meant uprooting Savannah’s life. At the time, I hadn’t had a lot of money to afford a cross-country chase either.

But I’d caught on to April’s game eventually. She was more bark than bite. Julian, on the other hand, was a fucking pit bull.

That son of a bitch loved to sink his teeth in. Given past history, my movie date with Savannah would have sent him straight to his friend at the district court. Maybe April hadn't told him yet. Or maybe that friend of hers thought she'd seen me there with Savannah but hadn't been sure. I wouldn't put it past April to have tricked Savannah into a confession.

"Why did you come here?" I asked. "You're supposed to communicate through my attorney."

"I was in the neighborhood."

*Bullshit.* April and Julian lived on the other side of town and from what I knew, she wasn't friends with anyone on my block.

Either she was here looking for Savannah because she couldn't find our daughter.

Or she'd heard about Everly.

April had her spies everywhere and one might have noticed my truck outside Everly's this morning loading up.

"Goodbye, April." I moved to close the door in her face but stopped when a hand dragged across my back and Everly appeared at my side. Lemon and lavender filled my nose.

"Hi." She smiled brightly at April.

There was a flash of jealousy in April's gaze that made my chest swell with pride. Everly was gorgeous. No way around it. She was fucking gorgeous and with one look, April knew I'd traded up. Way up.

"I'm Everly." She held out her right hand. "And you're April?"

There was no shock on April's face. Just that infuriating glare. Yeah, she was here because she'd already heard about

Everly. *Goddamn it.* There'd be no backing out now. Not that I'd planned to, but this was the first test to prove we were real.

April shook Everly's hand, her grip flapping loose like a dead fish. "Yes."

There was a lot of venom in that word but Everly brushed it off. When she let her left arm slide free of my waist, my heart skipped. She was about to drop the bomb.

Everly's hand snaked up my spine to drape over my shoulder. She looked like she was leaning on me. Really, she was flashing April her ring.

The four-carat, emerald-cut solitaire diamond on a platinum band.

April sure as fuck hadn't gotten that kind of ring out of me.

The minute April saw it, her mouth flapped open.

And a Cheshire cat grin spread across Everly's face. "Did you order pizza, honey?" she purred, standing on her toes to nibble my ear.

"Yeah. Your favorite." I turned and brushed my nose against hers. The plan had been to slam the door in April's face. Instead, I let it go so I could haul Everly against my body with both arms.

Everly held my gaze, flashing me a cunning smirk, then she turned to April. "You're still here?"

Fuck, but I liked that. There were no fake subtleties. No pretending. April was public enemy number one and Everly wasn't going to play nice.

April's eyes narrowed but she didn't speak. She just spun around and marched to the Audi sedan she'd left running in the driveway.

I slammed the door before April was out of sight.

“She’s lovely,” Everly deadpanned.

“Word will be all over town now.” *Shit*. “Better tell Lucy.”

“It will wait.” She shook her head and moved to stand in the living room. “We’re getting married on Friday. I’ll just avoid her for a couple of days. With any luck, she and Duke won’t hear about it through the gossip mill.”

“They don’t exactly run in April’s circles but he is the sheriff.”

“Let’s just let it play out. If she finds out, she’s going to have a lot of questions that we don’t exactly have the answers to yet.”

“Like what the fuck are we thinking?”

“Exactly.” Everly’s gaze moved to the door. “She’s pretty.”

“On the outside.”

“I thought Savannah looked like you, but she takes after April too.”

I nodded. “She does.”

Something crossed her expression—jealousy?—but Everly blinked it away and held up her left hand, wiggling her ring finger. “This is an expensive ring for a temporary wife.”

“I don’t plan to have any other wife, so you might as well capitalize.”

“On your commitment phobia.”

“Yep.”

She glanced at the ring. “Another woman, a better woman, would probably insist you downsize this, but it’s really

beautiful and it looks really sparkly on my hand and I kind of already fell in love with it so I'm keeping it."

"Good. I don't have time to take another trip to the jewelry store." And it was just a ring. I didn't care if she kept it and hocked it when this was over. Whatever money it had cost would be well worth it if this charade worked.

"Hmm." She tapped her chin. "Do you want a ring?"

"Bought one."

"That's sort of my job."

I shrugged and walked into the living room, taking a seat on the couch.

"Well . . ." She sighed. "A visit from the ex wasn't planned but at least it's not awkward as hell in this house anymore."

I chuckled. "True."

Everly walked to the couch, but instead of taking the seat beside me, she pushed my shoulders back and straddled my lap. "I was thinking."

As long as her thinking involved her naked body, I was for it. "Thinking what?"

She dropped a light kiss to my neck, her hair draping between us. "Instead of thinking of this as a marriage, what if we think of this as hot, exclusive sex for a couple of years?"

I shoved my hands into her hair, pushing her face away from my neck to see her eyes. "Sex."

"A lot of sex." A slow smile spread across her face. "I'll win best wife award for sure."

I chuckled and couldn't help my own smile.

She brushed her fingertips over the shell of my ear. “You have a great smile.”

The compliment made it fall flat.

We shouldn’t be complimenting one another.

There’d be no kind words. No cuddling or pillow talk. Better to establish those limits now.

“Don’t say shit like that to me.”

Everly flinched, her expression hardening as she dropped her hand. But instead of smacking me for the asshole remark, she ground her hips harder on my groin. “Then how about you have a great cock? Can I say that?”

I flipped us, pinning her beneath me in a flash to press my arousal into her core. “Yeah.”

“Good.” She leaned up and caught my lower lip between her teeth. “Then use it.”

She stripped me as I stripped her. When I had my dick covered with a condom, I buried myself in her tight heat and fucked her hard. My mouth latched on to a nipple. I tossed one of her legs over the back of the couch so I could strum her clit. And I pounded into her with a punishing rhythm until we both exploded together.

I reminded us both that this was about the sex. That she was just a fuck and nothing more.

Other than my soon-to-be wife.

## CHAPTER NINE

---



“DO YOU FEEL DIFFERENT?” I asked as I scooped another spoonful of ice cream.

“Not really.” Hux shrugged, eating his own pint of chocolate fudge swirl.

“Huh,” I muttered. “Me neither.”

The two of us were sitting at the kitchen island. Hux was wearing black slacks and a gray button-up shirt. He’d rolled the sleeves up his forearms after we’d gotten home with our celebratory meal of tacos and ice cream. I was still in my dress from the courthouse.

It was a long-sleeved burgundy chiffon dress that flowed to my nude heels—the shoes having been discarded by the garage door the moment we’d walked into the house because they’d pinched my toes like snapping turtles.

I’d ordered the dress from one of my favorite online stores and had it overnighted to Calamity. If a girl couldn’t blow her savings on a wedding dress, then what were they for? It had a simple design with a small seam at my hips. The front dipped low between my breasts and down my spine in matching Vs.

It wasn’t white. It wasn’t a gown. But it had done the job. All I’d wanted was to look pretty for a picture to hang on the

wall—for the sake of keeping up this charade. Judging by the appreciation in Hux’s eyes when I’d come downstairs earlier, I’d hit the bullseye.

The wedding had felt more like renewing a driver’s license than the joining of two lives. We’d walked in with the license. We’d stood before a justice of the peace who’d pronounced us man and wife. The end.

I was married.

“Does your tattoo mean anything specific?” I asked, taking another bite.

The bright colors snaked across his skin. They were chunky, like the artwork at the studio, and the lines weren’t as clean. But there was no mistaking Hux’s style in the brilliant evening sky as it met the bold, jagged ridge of the mountains.

“It was one of my first paintings. The first one that wasn’t total shit anyway.”

“Good to know.” A wife should know the significance of her husband’s tattoo.

Husband.

It should seem strange. That word should give me a thrill or a shot of panic. Instead, I just felt . . . the same. Wasn’t that weird? I’d gotten married today. Married. I was a wife.

*Wife. Wife. Wife.*

*Husband. Husband. Husband.*

Nothing. No fear. No shock. No awkward. That, we’d chased away the day I’d moved in, thanks to some epic sex on the couch. Any time it threatened to return, one or both of us would get naked.

Problem solved.

“Where did you learn to paint?” I put the lid on my pint and slid off my stool.

Hux put the lid on his so I could put both in the freezer for a midnight snack. “Prison. They had some classes they offered inmates, like science and math and stuff. I’d had enough of that in high school, but they wanted us to sign up for something because it looked good for the parole board. I did a fine arts class and another one for mechanics.”

“You must have been a natural.”

“Guess so.”

“You guess so?” I grinned. “You have seen your own work, right?”

“Took some practice. When I got out, I went to work for a guy here in town. Didn’t pay much but I didn’t have a lot of options. No one wants to hire an ex-con around here, but this guy knew me from when I was a kid. I’d worked for him as a teenager putting up a fence on his ranch. So he hired me to do some work on his place. I lived cheap. Kept painting to keep my mind off things. Got better and then one day, Katie came home and saw my piece.”

“Katie. As in your assistant?” Okay, maybe I should have asked more questions before volunteering to marry Hux. “You lived together?”

“After I got out.”

“And were you a thing?” Were they still a thing? Because I didn’t share. Ice cream or men.

“With Katie?” He scrunched up his nose. “No. We’ve been friends for a long time but that’s it. She’s like a sister. When I

got out, she was there. Helped me get back on my feet. Let me crash on her couch for a while.”

“But . . . she works for you.”

“Yeah. In a way, I owe her my career. She saw a painting and thought I should try to sell it. There wasn’t a gallery in town, not that anyone here would have bought it from me anyway. So she took it to Bozeman. Shopped it at a few places. A decent size gallery picked it up. After it sold in less than twenty-four hours, they bought five others. I sold exclusively to them for a year until I had some money saved up. I kept working until I had a good chunk set aside. I bought this place first, then the gallery.”

“Good for you.” A surge of pride swelled. He’d worked so hard. He’d built himself up all from a skill he’d learned in prison. “What do you sell your paintings for?”

“Depends.”

“Give me a ballpark.” There hadn’t been any price tags in the gallery and my curiosity was piqued.

“I commission some for the gallery in Bozeman. They still sell twenty or thirty for me a year. Those go for about five thousand.”

My jaw dropped. “Dollars?”

He nodded. “On average.”

“Um . . . wow.”

“The pieces at the gallery range in price. I’ve got some at about two thousand. Some up to fifteen. Just depends on the piece.”

“I’m so impressed. How many pieces do you sell in a year?”

He shrugged again and stood from his stool. “About a hundred. Then I do about fifty commissioned pieces. But those cost more.”

“How much more?”

“Up to double. Just depends.”

The numbers began rolling through my mind. This man, this unassuming man whose clothes were always spotted with paint and who lived in this small—albeit nice—home, was raking in around one million dollars a year. Minimum.

“Do you sell prints?”

He shook his head. “Haven’t had to. People like the exclusive nature.”

“Postcards and small prints might do well with foot traffic.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Think I’m going to change,” he said, already unbuttoning his shirt. “Go work in the studio for a while.”

“Okay.” I hadn’t been in his studio yet, mostly because I’d invaded his home and was trying not to insert myself into every aspect of his life. At least during our first week as man and wife.

He took a step to leave, then stopped. “You look beautiful.”

I smiled. “Don’t say shit like that to me.”

He chuckled and took off for the stairs, untucking his shirt from his slacks as he walked.

I took my phone out of the clutch that I’d brought along today. No texts or missed calls from Lucy. *Phew*. Gossip

hadn't reached her yet. If she had heard, she would have been blowing up my phone.

Eventually, I'd have to tell my parents I'd gotten married. They'd probably be delighted my wedding hadn't been an expensive and extravagant affair, costing them a fortune. But before I talked to them, I wanted to tell Lucy first.

Hux's footsteps sounded above me as he moved around his bedroom. *Our bedroom*. I'd worried that sleeping here would be uncomfortable but again, thanks to the sex, we'd worn ourselves out each night before things could get awkward.

It didn't take Hux long to rejoin me in the kitchen, dressed in a pair of faded jeans that molded to his strong thighs. His gray T-shirt was free of paint except for a small red dot on the ringed collar.

"Have you heard from Savannah?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I texted her. Asked her to call me tonight."

After April's visit, Hux had told Savannah we were getting married. She hadn't answered his call so he'd had no choice but to text her. Hux hadn't wanted her to find out from April. Savannah's response had been *K*.

"Okay. Did you call Aiden?"

"Yeah. This morning while you were in the shower."

"What did you tell him?"

"That we'd been seeing each other for a while. That when he came to visit, you were upstairs and since I hadn't proposed yet, I didn't want you to overhear."

"Think he believed you?"

“No.”

I frowned. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“Doubt it. Whether Aiden believes we got married because of his suggestion or not doesn’t really make a difference. He’s going to get the ball rolling on the petition, hopefully filing it on Monday. Instead of me wanting custody of Savannah as a single guy, now I’m a married man. My new wife wants Savannah to be part of our family.”

“Yes, I do.” I gave him a small smile. “Fake marriage or not, I do want the best for Savannah.”

“I know.” Hux crossed the kitchen and framed my face with his hands. His eyes stayed glued to mine as he leaned in and brushed a kiss to my lips. It was as soft and gentle as the one he’d given me at the courthouse.

A kiss that meant nothing more than exactly what it was. A thank-you.

Hux let me go and strode toward the back door.

I glanced at the clock on the microwave. “We need to leave about five fifteen.”

“What?”

“We’re going to the basketball game at the high school. The game starts at six, but I want to get good seats.”

He shook his head. “Why would I want to go to the high school basketball game?”

“Because Lucy is singing the national anthem. And it’s a good time for me to tell her about us before she hears it from anyone else. And it’s the perfect opportunity to start working on your reputation.”

“How is a basketball game going to help my reputation?”

“It’s a public event.”

“So?”

“You’re a grouch.”

“No, I’m not,” he grumbled.

I rolled my eyes. “Do you hear yourself when you talk? That growl of yours can be mega sexy, babe, but it also kind of comes across sort of, well . . . grumpy.”

Hux crossed his arms over his chest. “I haven’t been to a basketball game at that school since I attended that school.”

“Good.” I clapped. “Then you’re overdue.”

The scowl he shot me would have made lesser people shake. But not me. We had a mission here and damn it, I was going to make sure it got accomplished. “There. That, right there.”

“What?”

“Your face.” I pointed to his nose. “It’s not a nice face. Handsome, yes. But not nice. We need to work on your nice face before you go stand in front of a judge and ask him *pretty please, can I have my daughter.*”

Hux sighed. “I don’t like basketball.”

“And I don’t like lingerie, but I bought something special for you tonight that I promise to wear. After the basketball game.”

He glowered at me, that blue gaze unwavering.

“It’s strappy. The lingerie. White. And it has a slit that runs from here”—I slowly dragged a finger from my collarbone, down my sternum and to my belly button—“to here.”



Hux swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "An hour. Max. And you wear that lingerie under your clothes to the game."

My smile was victorious. "Deal."

---

"WOOHOO, LUCY!" I put my fingers between my lips and blew a piercing whistle. It got swallowed up in the noise from the gymnasium's crowd. The entire building rattled with applause as she finished the last note of the anthem and gave the crowd a wave.

The smile on her face was dazzling. So was the matching one on Duke's.

"She's the best there is," I yelled above the noise.

He nodded. "She sure is."

Pride radiated from Duke as he kept his eyes glued to his wife's every step. Lucy left the microphone, navigating to the stairs, her gaze always finding Duke.

Watching them always put a dopey smile on my face. In a gymnasium full of people, those two might as well have been the only people in the world.

Lucy reached our row about halfway up in the stands and slid past Duke to take the empty seat between us.

"You got 'em pumped tonight." He dropped a kiss to her cheek. "Sounded great."

"Show-off," I teased, nudging her elbow with mine.

Lucy laughed and elbowed me back as Duke handed her a bottle of water. She drank nearly the entire thing as the players

took the court, filling the room with the sound of dribbling basketballs and squeaking tennis shoes.

As the kids warmed up for the game, Lucy's shoulders slowly eased from her ears. She wouldn't admit it, but I saw the nerves on her face. She wanted so badly to impress the people of Calamity, to fit in here as Duke's wife and a member of the community. But she had nothing to worry about. If she looked around, she'd see what I saw.

These people adored her. Yeah, many had turned out tonight to support the team as they played. It was getting close to the championship and the Cowboys were a good team. But a lot of people here, like me, had come for Lucy.

It wasn't every day a famous country music superstar moved to your town. Let alone the fact that she was willing to sing the national anthem and participate in local events.

Lucy Ross Evans was hard not to love.

"Do you want something from concessions?" Duke asked us both.

"Nachos and cheese pizza, please," she said.

I leaned forward with a smirk. "I'll take the hot dog she really wants but can't eat."

"Brat," she muttered.

Lucy loved hot dogs, but since they were a no-go on the pregnancy diet, I was stepping up to make sure the high school made their quota of hot dogs sold at the concession stand. If there were a sushi place in town, I would have eaten her share too.

"Be back." Duke gave her a kiss, then jogged down the stairs.

He returned waves and handshakes, getting stopped at nearly every row before disappearing beyond the bleachers to get our food. Though Lucy was gaining popularity, this town loved their sheriff.

The gym was packed tonight. As people came and went, I continually scanned the crowd, searching for Hux.

We'd decided to come separately tonight to give me a chance to talk to Lucy. So he'd dropped me off at the apartment a little after five. I'd sat in the quiet room until Lucy and Duke had arrived to give me a ride to the school.

I'd planned to tell them in the car, but she'd been so keyed up to sing, I hadn't wanted to distract her. Except now we were surrounded by people.

Should I tell her while it was just us? Or tell her when Duke returned? The clock was ticking. Literally. Once the game started, it would be harder to sneak in a conversation that the spectators around us wouldn't overhear.

*Drop the bomb.* That was probably the best. I'd tell her, pretend like it was no big deal, then get the hell out of here before she started freaking out or peppering me with questions.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. Hux should be here any minute. Unless his meetup with Savannah hadn't gone well. I pressed a hand to my stomach, willing the butterflies to settle. My knees threatened to bounce.

There was no sign of him. He'd told Savannah that instead of calling, he'd see her at the game. That he wanted to talk to her in person.

Their plan had been to meet in the parking lot twenty minutes ago. How long did it take to talk to your child about

marriage?

Apparently more than twenty minutes because he wasn't anywhere in sight.

"Ooh, there's Kerrigan." I pointed five rows down.

Kerrigan waved and held her hand to her ear, mouthing, "Call me."

My stomach dropped.

Lucy probably thought it was nothing. A friend saying *call me* to get together. But there was a look in Kerrigan's eyes. A knowing look. A look aimed directly at me.

Kerrigan was a lifelong Calamity resident. There was no doubt that she'd heard the gossip that Lucy had missed. I patted my jeans pocket, feeling for my ring tucked safely inside. I'd slip it back on after I told Lucy.

Duke appeared at the base of the stands, his arms loaded with drinks and trays and foil-wrapped hot dogs. Lucy swooned, sending imaginary little pink and purple hearts in the air with that soft sigh.

She was going to be pissed that she'd missed the wedding. Well, if she thought it was real. I'd stood as her maid of honor when she and Duke had gotten married by the same justice of the peace who'd hitched Hux and me.

Lucy had put more effort into her nuptials. She'd gone for a simple gown, like mine, though hers had been white. She'd had a bouquet and paid for a professional hairdo. No flowers for me, though I'd used my curling wand in the bathroom mirror.

Duke arrived, handing Lucy her nachos and me my hot dogs. "Here you go, Ev."

Lucy dove into her chips and cheese. “Thanks, babe.”

I did the same with one of my hot dogs, moaning to rub it in just a bit. “So good.”

Lucy chomped another chip, then asked, “What did you do today?”

Oh, boy. I might puke this hot dog up on the lady sitting in front of my knees.

*Do it.* The sooner I dropped this bomb, the better. If I could play it off like my heart wasn’t racing and my palms weren’t sweating, even better.

“Not much.” I shrugged. *One. Two. Three. Go.* “Cleaned. Did a load of laundry. Got married.”

Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.

Yeah, I was going to vomit.

“That’s ni—” Lucy blinked, registering my words.

Duke looked past her, his mouth gaping open with some pizza showing. “What did you say?”

“I got married.” I wadded up the foil wrapper from the hot dog and stood. “I’ll tell you all about it later. Thanks for the hot dog.”

*Run! Run! Run!*

“But—” Lucy tried to protest.

“Bye.” I patted her on the shoulder, doing the same to Duke, then made my escape. *Breathe.*

I could feel their eyes on my back as I descended the stairs. They were talking about me. Probably wondering who I’d married.

From the corner of the gym, Hux emerged, striding across the glossy yellow floor. He'd put on a black jacket over his T-shirt. He was in the same jeans he'd worn in the studio. They clung to his strong thighs and narrow hips, draping over his scuffed boots. The man's swagger was impossible to miss. It was pure confidence and a lot of *I don't give a fuck*. Intimidating and sexy as hell.

The moment he spotted me, my heart jumped.

*Here goes.* Time to make us public. Why did this feel like a test I hadn't studied for?

I slowed on a step to dig out my ring and carefully slid it on like it had been there the entire night. Then I sucked in some oxygen and lifted my left hand to wave at Hux.

I'd already caught his attention, but the two familiar faces behind his broad shoulders hadn't noticed me yet. Until the wave.

Travis smiled.

Savannah gave me an impassive stare and jutted chin. Uh-oh. The parking lot meeting must not have gone well. She certainly wasn't doing cartwheels with the cheerleaders that I was her new stepmother.

When he reached the student section, he stopped to drop a kiss on Savannah's cheek. The kids went to join the other teens while he met me at the base of the stairs, taking my hand to lead me toward the exit.

My breath was shaky as I whispered, "Is the entire room staring at us?"

"Yep."

"Awesome," I deadpanned. "How'd it go with Savannah?"

He grunted.

*Double awesome.* But not necessarily surprising.

Savannah was too stubborn to be excited about much. It would show too much weakness. But eventually, she'd accept I was a part of her father's life—temporarily, but we wouldn't be sharing that little detail.

The heat of five hundred stares didn't lessen until we'd rounded the corner and taken the steps that led to the concession area and bathrooms. And most importantly, the exit.

"How'd it go with Lucy?" Hux asked.

"Not great. I chickened out, told them I got married, then bolted before they could ask any questions."

Hux hummed. "So we aren't going to sit with them?"

"No." I shook my head and tugged him toward the doors. "Let's get out of here. You made your appearance. You said hello to Savannah and told her the news. I told Lucy. That's good enough for one night."

"I thought we had to stay an hour."

"Do you want to stay for an hour?"

"No."

"Then why aren't you walking faster?" I squirmed as he picked up the pace, wishing the panties I was wearing would stop chafing. The straps were sexy, but they were so thin that they'd carved lines into my ass cheeks.

"Why are you walking funny? What's wrong?"

"Well, if you must know, this thong I'm wearing isn't exactly comfortable under jeans."

Hux stopped, his clasp on my hand forcing me to a halt too. Then he bent low, his breath tickling my cheek as his teeth found my earlobe. “Then let’s get you out of those jeans.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me.”



## CHAPTER TEN

---

*YOU GOT MARRIED?*

“Damn.”

“What?” Ev asked, coming to my side with her coffee mug.

“Katie.” I held up my phone for her to read the text. “Forgot to tell her.”

I’d been so wrapped up in shit at home, moving Everly in and getting married, I hadn’t spent any time at the gallery. *Damn it.* Katie shouldn’t have heard about it through the rumor mill. I should have texted her after the basketball game last night, but I’d been too busy shredding Ev’s lingerie.

“Like you predicted, word is spreading fast.” Ev took a seat at the island. “Have you heard from Savannah?”

“No.”

When Savannah had met me in the parking lot, she’d come with Travis in tow. I should have told her to come alone. Maybe she would have acted differently without an audience.

She’d been haughty and short. When I’d asked her if she was okay, she’d given me that eye roll and a muttered *whatever*. She was hurt. Angry. Frustrated. Maybe because I hadn’t included her earlier. Only, there’d been no earlier.

Someday, years from now, I'd tell her why I'd married Ev. That I'd done it for her. Maybe then she'd cut me some slack.

"Christ," I muttered. "I fucked this up."

"Don't be so hard on yourself." Everly placed her hand on my shoulder. "It will get easier once the initial shock fades."

I was still learning how to communicate with Savannah. It was difficult given how little time we spent together, and every time I thought I had a handle on it, something changed. *She* changed.

"Teenage girls aren't easy even under the best circumstances," Everly said. "She'll come around."

The back door off the kitchen opened. And the topic of our conversation walked inside.

A blast of cold air came with Savannah, a reflection of both the weather outside and her attitude.

"Hey, baby girl."

Savannah's mouth was set in a tight, neutral hold. No smile. No frown. Just . . . blank.

"Hey, Savannah." Everly gave her a bright smile. "Want some breakfast? Your dad was just going to make us some pancakes."

"I already ate." Savannah walked to the cupboard where I kept the coffee mugs and took one out. Then she put a pod in the brewer and hit the button for it to start.

Since when did she drink coffee? Was it okay for teenagers to drink coffee? "Uh . . ."

Everly must have hopped onto my train of thought because she jammed her elbow into my ribs.

“Ooof.” I grunted.

She gave me a slight headshake and a scowl.

Fine. Savannah drank coffee.

After it brewed, my daughter went to the fridge and took out the milk, filling the mug to the brim so the coffee was more beige than black.

“Want some sugar?” Everly asked, going to the cabinet where it was kept. She’d learned quickly where everything in the kitchen was. Not that it was a huge feat. Nothing in this house was big and Everly was observant.

“I know where it is,” Savannah barked before Everly could even round the island.

“Okay.” Everly held up her hands and backed away.

Savannah searched through three cupboards before she found the container of sugar. “You rearranged.”

No, I hadn’t. But I wasn’t going to argue and point out that Ev knew the kitchen better than Savannah. She was probably here to stake her claim. We’d let her.

“Did you have fun at the game?” Everly asked.

Savannah shrugged as she heaped five spoonfuls of sugar into her mug. “I guess.”

“We didn’t stay. Did the Cowboys win?”

My daughter’s answer was a cold stare. Was that a yes or a no?

Everly, the wise woman, simply smiled and drank her coffee. Question time was over.

Silence descended on the kitchen, the atmosphere heavy and tense. Even my breathing seemed too loud.

Savannah slurped her coffee. If she was trying to do it loudly, she was succeeding. She refused to look at me or Everly. She found different objects in the kitchen—the microwave, the fridge, the bowl I kept on the countertop for my keys—to stare at until finally her cup was empty and she went for a refill.

The kid was going to be bouncing off the damn walls. Thank God it was a Saturday and she didn't have to sit through school.

“I'm going to, um”—Everly pointed to the ceiling—“get a load of laundry going.”

There was no laundry. She'd done it all yesterday and the only items in the hamper were the towels we'd used this morning after sex in the shower.

Everly disappeared upstairs, leaving me and Savannah alone. And after her second mug of coffee was as milky and sugared as the first, my daughter's blue eyes finally met mine. The pain there broke my heart.

Fuck. I sucked as a father.

“I'm sorry.” I wasn't sure what else to say.

She lifted a shoulder. “Whatever.”

“Not whatever. This thing with Ev happened fast. I should have told you sooner, and I'm not trying to make excuses, but I'm not used to explaining myself. To anyone.”

“I'm not *anyone*.”

“No, you're not. I'm sorry, Savannah.”

I hadn't gotten to help name her, but I did love her name. All three syllables. I think some of her friends called her Sav,

but I'd never shortened it. I didn't want to miss out on a single piece of her.

She shrugged again, her gaze dropping to her mug.

"I'm trying. Swear, I'm trying. But I'm going to mess up. Don't write me off when it happens. Give me a chance to apologize and try again."

Savannah looked up. "Why did you get married? Do you even know her?"

"Yeah. I do know her." Not a total lie. Everly seemed like a nice person. No matter what her reasons were for agreeing to marry me, she was in this partly for Savannah. That was good enough for me.

"Mom said you did it to make her jealous. And that Everly is using you for money."

I scoffed. Of course April would see this as about her. "This has nothing to do with your mother or money."

Well, not exactly. This had everything to do with getting Savannah away from April, but any lingering affection I'd had for my ex-wife had disappeared the day I'd learned that she'd had our baby and kept her from me.

"Do you even like her? Or is this about sex?"

"Please don't say the word sex." I grimaced. That was not a topic I wanted anywhere near my girl.

"I'm sixteen," she muttered.

And had better be a virgin. "Love you, baby girl. But that's not any of your business."

"You're my dad. She's my *stepmother*." Her lip curled. "It's my business."

“No, it’s not. What happens between Ev and me, that’s between us. She’s my wife.”

Savannah spun for the sink, dumping out the rest of her coffee. Her shoulders were tense and bunched toward her ears.

*Oh, hell.* I slid off my stool and went to her, putting my hands on her arms and turning her to face me. “Gotta trust me.”

She stared at me, searching for more answers than I could give her. For a brief moment, the strain in her muscles eased beneath my hands. But then that wall she hid behind snapped into place.

It was a wall built from years of pain and disappointment. It was strong as steel. Impenetrable without a tank. It hid the weeping, broken girl inside. The girl who just wanted to be loved.

Savannah’s wall was a mirror image of mine.

I’d given up hope of someone breaking through and coming to my rescue. But not Savannah. I wouldn’t let that wall get so thick that she’d be lost behind it forever.

“Whatever, Dad.” Savannah jerked out of my hold and marched to the door. She flung it open with too much force, then stormed outside.

She wasn’t wearing a jacket. Her shoes crunched on the snow as she crossed the yard for the alley that ran behind the house. I walked to the door, watching as she climbed into a car that had been idling out there.

*Travis.*

He jerked up his chin as she buckled her seat belt.

I didn't like how much time those two spent together. Not because he wasn't a good kid. But he was a teenage boy. If I could keep the whole species from my daughter, I would.

But Savannah needed a friend. Maybe Travis would be the one to get through to her.

Though what she needed more than anything wasn't a boyfriend, it was a father. A real father.

*Hold on, baby girl. I'm trying.*

"How'd it go?" Everly appeared at my side, the cold air streaming past us into the house. Neither of us moved from the doorway. We stood and watched as Travis's taillights disappeared around a corner.

"I fucked that up."

"Maybe you should tell her the truth."

"No." I shook my head. "This only works if people think it's real. I don't want to take any chances."

Savannah might slip up and tell one of her friends. And once one person knew this was a hoax, the entire town would know. If Everly wasn't even trusting this to Lucy, I wasn't going to take a chance on my side either.

"Gonna head out to the studio for a while." I stepped into the cold, not sparing Everly another glance.

She watched me as I crossed the yard, her gaze tethered to my shoulders. It wasn't until I'd reached the studio that she closed the door.

The smell of paint beckoned me inside. I breathed it in, letting it smooth the jagged edges. Then I walked to the canvases I'd laid out on my worktable yesterday. Three projects, each started but in various stages.



One I'd sketched and put the base layer down. Another was on the second layer. Another was nearly done but needed some finesse.

My process was fairly straightforward. I used paint—a lot of paint—until I got it right. It had been that way from the start.

I'd taken two art classes in prison, each taught by a different instructor. The first had been a skinny man who always wore black jeans and a black turtleneck, even in the heat of summer in a prison workroom with no air conditioning. He'd been wary of us inmates. I wasn't sure why he'd even taught the class. The man wouldn't come within five feet of a student, and he always kept one eye on the guard stationed in the corner.

He taught a class on charcoal sketches. Maybe that was the reason for the black wardrobe, so he wouldn't stain his clothes. Some people were weird about that—not me.

The charcoals were easy. I'd liked drawing since I was a kid. The teacher would stand at the front of the room with his own page and sketch out a face or an animal. We'd all copy his movements, but that got boring fast, so I ignored him and drew whatever the hell I wanted.

At first, it was faces. Other inmates from the prison. That guard. Even the teacher. But I struggled to get their eyes right. Eyes had always been difficult.

I guess that instructor wasn't all bad. He gave me some decent advice.

Near the end of that class, he'd grown more comfortable with a few of us and would come closer to inspect our

sketchbooks. When I showed him what I had and admitted I sucked at drawing eyes, he broke it down for me.

He showed me how to outline them within a spherical space. He gave me tips on the thickness of the eyelid and the placement of the iris. He showed me how to shade the pupils and whites and how to add eyelashes.

He'd turned out to be an okay teacher, but the second one, she had held my golden ticket.

She'd been a hippy. Her gray-brown hair had always been in tangles, swept away from her face in a colorful bandana. *Sparkles*. Neither teacher had given us their real names, just nicknames.

Sparkles would show up every day with more colors than I'd ever thought possible in a single outfit. Like Kelly-green pants paired with a plum blouse and a sky-blue velvet vest. She'd wear jack-o-lantern-orange clogs on her feet and a canary-yellow sash at her waist. Every day her appearance had brightened up the gray workroom.

In a way, her wardrobe had inspired my art.

Her course had only been about two months, but I'd learned a lot in that time. She'd called me a natural. She'd encouraged me to experiment and deviate from the class if I was feeling inspired.

Sparkles lived by impulse and inspiration.

I stumbled upon my style after hating a watercolor exercise we'd been doing as a group. There were only five of us in that class, but the pace dragged.

I'd done my mountain and sky scene. It was boring and flat. So I took a tube of blue oil and streaked it on the sky in bold, thick chunks. I ran out of time that class to smooth it out.

By the next class, it had dried, so I added more, a different shade of blue to the sky. Indigo and green to the mountains and trees. Sparkles came by and gave me a nod to keep going.

That first painting had been a disaster. Later, after more practice, I'd decided to try it again. By then, I'd been painting more frequently, even if it was just at Katie's kitchen table. The second attempt had been better.

Good enough for me to turn it into a tattoo.

The paintings on my worktable were much more refined than that initial piece or the early ones that had followed. I'd found my style. My groove.

There'd been a time when I could only work on one piece at a time. I hadn't been able to separate paintings in my head. These days, I had four or five going, giving one or two a chance to dry while I switched it up. It was the only way I could crank out over a hundred paintings a year.

At the moment, these three on my workbench were the only ones I had in progress. There was the commission piece. Every time I looked at it, I frowned because what it really needed was some goddamn blue.

Then there was the stallion bust I was doing for the gallery. I tried to go into the summer with a good stockpile of paintings so I wouldn't have to scramble to replenish inventory.

And then there was the third canvas. A piece slowly taking shape.

A piece that was different than anything I'd done in years.

A piece that scared the shit out of me.

The lavender strokes I'd added two days ago had dried, so I took it off the table and leaned it to face the wall.

Today was not the day for a passion project. What I really needed was to work on the money pieces, so I took up the custom landscape and set it on my easel. Then I went to the slotted shelves where I kept all of my oils.

I pulled out a burnt umber and a marmalade. They'd get layered with some ruby red in the trees. I still hadn't decided exactly what color to make the river. Maybe black with some golden ripples. Whether this lady liked it or not, there was going to be a hint of blue in that water. There had to be. It would be subtle and extremely dark, but a few navy undercurrents would go a long way to adding balance.

With my supplies ready, I found a fine-tipped brush and went to work, dotting and shading and feathering. It wasn't rushed work. That was what I loved most about painting. Every stroke was deliberate. Every minute spent was earned. There were no shortcuts in this. As a man who'd once believed in shortcuts, who'd once been punished severely for a shortcut, I avoided them at all costs.

Some might call this marriage to Everly a shortcut.

They'd probably be right. But considering it was a two-year commitment—a marriage—nothing about it seemed like a fast and easy solution.

Marriage. Something I'd vowed never to do again.

But I wanted Savannah enough to break an old vow in exchange for new ones. I wanted my daughter. And just this once, I hoped the shortcut wouldn't completely fuck up my life.

Hours passed as I worked, and with them the tension faded. Painting was my escape. When I was here, brush in hand, the outside world was a blur. All that mattered was me, my brush and watching my mental image come to life on the canvas.

When a knock came at the door, I jerked at the darkness coming through the windows. Last time I'd looked outside, the sun had been up. But while I'd been painting a river, it had become night.

Everly twisted the knob and peeked inside. "Are you alive?"

"Yeah." I waved her inside out of the cold. "Sorry. Kinda lose track of time when I'm out here."

"No problem. Sorry to bother you. Just thought I'd see if you wanted dinner."

My stomach growled.

She smiled. "I'll take that as a yes."

I walked to the table and checked the time on my phone. It was just after six but the days were short this time of year. In the summers, when it didn't get dark until after nine, I'd paint until after midnight. "What do you want to eat?"

Everly shrugged, crossing the room to the easel. "This is so pretty."

"It's all right."

"Do you not like compliments on your work? Or are you never satisfied with the end result?"

"Both."

She shot me a grin over her shoulder. “I can always count on you to be blunt.”

“Always.” I wasn’t going to lie to her. Not with what we had ahead of us. She deserved honesty, no matter how harsh.

I stepped closer, taking a look at the piece. I’d made a lot of progress today. A few highlights tomorrow after the darker colors had dried and it would be done. “This is a custom piece. The lady requested a landscape without blue.”

Everly’s forehead furrowed. “What’s she got against blue?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. But it’s been a pain in the ass. I should have told her no.” Boundaries in art pissed me off. I had enough of those in real life.

“You should consider it a test of your skill. Even with limitations, it’s stunning.”

I studied Ev’s profile as she continued to study the piece. She was right. It had turned out okay. But as she’d guessed, I didn’t like compliments. I sure as hell didn’t need them. Though from Everly, the appreciation felt . . . nice. It wasn’t flattery for flattery’s sake.

“What have you been doing?” I asked, leaning against the worktable.

“I wasted most of the day.” She stood tall and walked around the room, scanning the empty canvases and globs of dropped paint. “I read for a while. Then I tidied up the office. I hope you don’t mind that I commandeered a couple of shelves.”

“Like I told you, do whatever you want. It’s your house now.”

She went to the shelves at my back, opening and closing one of the drawers with some oils. “Before I came out here, I was actually looking for a job. I’ve almost drained my savings since moving here. There’s not a lot of openings in Calamity, so I think it’ll be the grocery store for a while. But it’s a paycheck so I can chip in here.”

I waved her off. “No need.”

“No, no. I’d like to contribute. I insist.”

“Kay. Then contribute at the gallery. I could use some help in the office.” The receipts weren’t going to organize themselves and I wasn’t going to do it anytime soon.

She tapped her chin. “Do you think that’s smart? Working together?”

“Would help show we’re serious. The more people who see us together, the better.”

She nodded. “True.”

“I know what it’s like searching for a job in Calamity. It sucks. Not a lot of decent work comes open, especially in the winter. Summer is different when tourism brings in more traffic. In the meantime, you can spare me time in the office. I hate bookkeeping shit.”

“It’s not my favorite thing in the world but my parents are accountants so . . .” She grimaced. “What about Katie? Isn’t she the official manager? How’s she going to feel about your new wife invading her space?”

“She won’t care.”

Everly hummed. “If you say so.”

“She won’t.” Katie might be pissed that I hadn’t told her about Everly, but she hated the bookkeeping stuff as much as I

did. If Everly had some experience, she'd save us all a headache.

I swiped up a rag from the table and used it to get a few streaks off my hands. There was always a mess after a long day with the brush.

“You have paint on your cheek.” Everly touched the spot, and when she pulled her hand away, there was a dot of hunter green on her fingertip.

I captured her wrist, dragging my thumb across the green to smear it over her skin. Everly had perfect skin. Smooth. Flawless. It tasted like honey. My fingers traced up her forearm, leaving faint black lines.

The palette I'd been using was between us. With my free hand, I dipped a finger in the red.

“What are you doing?” Ev whispered.

I raised my finger to her face, brushing the color across the angle of her cheekbone. “Your skin is perfect. I want to see what it would be like if I . . .”

The words fell away as I went back to the palette for a drop of orange. It went along the curve of her chin.

Fuck, but she was beautiful. The warm tones of the paint swirled with the caramel and cinnamon flecks in her eyes. The chocolate of her hair. Everly was a piece of living art.

“One of these days, I'm going to see you bare. I'm going to put a mark on every one of your curves. Highlight every line. Then I'm going to sink into your tight pussy and fuck you all night long.”

Her breath hitched.



I dipped into the palette once more, not caring what color my fingers found. Then I dragged my fingertips down the column of her throat, leaving three streaks, each a different shade, as she closed her eyes and let her head loll to the side.

Her ragged moan went straight to my dick.

“Fuck it.” I shoved the remaining canvas, the stallion, aside and hoisted Everly up to the table’s edge

Her legs widened, instantly wrapping around my hips to grind her center into my hardening cock. Then she looked up at me with those eyes and grinned. “Do your worst, babe.”

I ripped the top off her body and yanked at her bra, freeing her gorgeous breasts. My mouth latched on to a nipple, sucking hard and earning a little gasp.

Her hands dove into the short strands of my hair, tugging as her nails bit into my scalp.

My wife loved a rough fuck.

We didn’t bother with foreplay. We didn’t bother with a kiss or a shared look. We stripped one another bare and by the time I had the condom from my pocket in place, the paint from the palette had been smeared onto our bodies.

Everly looked beautiful, colorful and erotic and . . . mine. For the time being, this body was mine.

“Hux,” she panted, squirming closer on the table for me to fill her.

One thrust and I buried myself to the root, feeling the pulse and squeeze of her inner walls as she stretched around me. “You feel so good.”

“Move.” Her hands gripped my biceps, holding tight for what was to come.

I took her hips in my hands, squeezing so hard her eyes widened. Then I pulled out to slam back inside. Stroke after stroke, I pounded into her, taking pleasure and giving it with every piston of my hips.

“Look at me,” I ordered.

She obeyed, her eyelashes fluttering with every slap of our skin. “Faster.”

I gave her faster.

She widened her legs, her ass barely hanging on to the edge of the table. “Harder.”

I gave her harder.

“Yes,” she hissed.

“Touch yourself.”

Everly reached to where we were connected, but instead of obeying my command, she hitched a leg to make more room and slid her hand lower to cup my balls.

“Fuck, babe.” I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to come.

She rolled them in her palm, driving me wild.

Christ, I wasn't going to last.

“Touch yourself.”

She shook her head.

I fisted her hair in my grip, forcing her eyes to mine. “Touch. Your. Clit.”

A shiver rolled over her shoulders and this time she obeyed. She brought her hand up and circled the hard nub.

The flutter of her inner walls sent a surge of heat down my spine. I started moving again, fucking in and out, hard and fast

as the color bloomed in her chest, coloring that perfect skin above her breasts with a rosy pink flush.

She was close. So damn close.

And I was about to explode.

So I let go of a hip to grab her face and slam my mouth onto hers, slipping my tongue between her lips to plunder and swallow her moans as her entire body spasmed with an orgasm that triggered my own release. An orgasm so powerful it blanked my mind and consumed me entirely.

It took minutes to come down from the high, the aftershocks draining us both.

“Damn.”

“Wow. I like your studio,” she murmured, falling into my shoulder. Her hair draped down my chest as she went limp.

I took her head in my hands, tipping it back to study the streaks of paint.

It was perfect. Except . . .

“Would have been better with some blue.”

She giggled. “Next time.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

“THAT WENT WELL,” I deadpanned, blowing out a deep breath. “Wow.”

Hux had overestimated Katie’s willingness to take on a coworker. Or her supportiveness for his new wife.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I blinked. “What do I mean? Uh, you were in the room.”

“Yeah. She said congratulations. Said she’d show you around the gallery.”

Seriously? That’s what he’d heard?

*Men.*

Yes, Katie had said congratulations. She’d said it with her nostrils flaring and a glare aimed my way from behind those damn glasses. And her offer to show me around the gallery had been a bold-faced lie, muttered through clenched teeth.

“Hux. Honey. Your girl Katie hates me.”

“She’s not like that.”

My husband was as clueless to the subtleties of women as his fellow males. “Yes, she is. *All* women are like that. I’m the new lioness in the pride and she’s not happy to share the den.”

“Huh?” His forehead furrowed.

“Forget it.” I waved him off and went to the couch in his office and moved some blank canvases away to make a space for me to plop down. “We’ll figure it out.”

Eventually, Katie would come around, right? If I were in her position, I’d be irritated if my space were invaded too. Except this didn’t seem much like an overprotective friendship or a claim to the gallery.

This seemed a lot like jealousy.

Katie appeared so meek and mild. Sweet. But the attitude she’d sent my way had been ugly and green.

I’d bet the last dollars to my name that she was in love with him.

And my dear Hux was oblivious.

“Has anything ever happened between you two?” I’d tiptoed around their relationship when I’d asked about her on Friday. But Hux liked blunt so I might as well dive into the deep end.

“No.” He scowled and took the chair behind his desk. “I told you that already.”

“I just want to know what I’m getting into here. She’s clearly got feelings for you and—”

“Katie doesn’t have feelings for me. It’s not like that.”

“Oh, I think it is.”

“Don’t.” Hux pounded a fist on his desk. The move was so angry, so startling, I gasped. “Don’t do this jealous woman bullshit.”

“I’m just—”

“Just don’t,” he barked. “Katie has been my friend for years. Since we were kids. She was one of the only people in the world who didn’t turn their back on me when I got put away. She loves this gallery as much as I do, maybe more, and she’s given it her all. When I need her, she’s there. When my life blew up, she was there. Give her some fucking slack, yeah?”

“Okay.” I held up my hands in surrender. The urge to scream, or maybe cry, clogged my throat.

Of the women in this gallery, his loyalty was to Katie. That cut. Deep.

“I should have told her.” Hux sighed. “It wasn’t fair for her to find out from anyone but me. If she’s pissed, she has every right. If she’d gone out and gotten married, I would be angry too.”

So he hadn’t completely missed the ice in Katie’s voice. He’d just misinterpreted it.

“This isn’t her fault.” His jaw clenched as he shoved some papers aside.

“I’m going to go.” I stood. “We can do this a different day.”

“How are you going to get home?”

“I’ll walk.” It was only ten blocks or so and the weather wasn’t all that miserable today.

Last night, a chinook had blown in with the first of March and melted some snow.

“I thought you were going to help me here.” Hux crumpled a receipt and threw it toward the trash can.

He was angry with me. Katie was angry at my existence. On a normal day, I'd call Lucy. But I hadn't talked to her since the basketball game on Friday. I wasn't sure what to say after my announcement.

Which made me the asshole this time.

I'd find the words, and a really big apology, but at the moment, it was too daunting. Dealing with a grumpy Hux was the lesser of two evils.

"Where do these canvases go?" I flung my hand at the piles. There were double the number he had scattered around at home.

"Ask Katie."

I held back a smartass retort and plastered on a smile. "With pleasure."

Then I marched from his office, slamming the door behind me, and took a fortifying breath before making my way down the hallway to her desk in the showroom.

"Hey, Katie."

Her eyes shifted away from the laptop screen but not another muscle moved in her body.

*Oh, Katie.* She wasn't going to make it easy, was she? "I'd like to clean out Hux's office of the extra canvases. He said you could show me where to put them."

She blinked.

I smiled wider. Katie was important to Hux so if I had to bulldoze my way into her heart, then so be it.

Katie's gaze returned to her screen as her fingers flew across the keyboard. "Storage."



“Storage,” I repeated. “Which is . . .”

Nothing.

“You’re busy.” My voice dripped with sugar. “Sorry to bother you. I’m sure I can poke around here and find storage on my own.”

I was sure she’d stop me, either because she knew she was acting like a child or because she didn’t want me sniffing around her territory. But as I walked away, Katie kept on typing, the sound growing distant as I approached Hux’s office.

With my shoulders squared, I pushed through the door, refusing to look at him as I gathered up five canvases. Then I walked out and took a right to explore the corners of the gallery I hadn’t been in yet.

There was a small, windowless room beside Hux’s office. When I flipped on the light, the dusty, bare lightbulb in the ceiling caught streams of dust mites floating through the air. Paintings were all stacked against the walls, some covered with canvases, others leaning at odd angles. In one corner, the spiders were building an empire of webs.

“Oh my.”

This place was a disaster.

Katie looked like a stuffy librarian, complete with Mary Janes beneath the cuffs of her jeans and the white collared shirt poking out from beneath her gray sweater. But those clothes might be hiding her true colors.

She was as disorganized as my husband.

The showroom was spotless and her own desk clear of clutter. But behind closed doors, this place was a masterpiece

of disarray.

“Not exactly how I’d keep track of inventory,” I muttered, setting the blank canvases down. “But it has potential.”

I left the door open to chase out some of the mustiness and continued on my self-guided tour.

Beside the storage room was a bathroom. It didn’t shine but it wasn’t filthy. Beyond it was a narrow staircase that led to an open loft above the gallery. If the storage room had been dusty, this was downright dirty. I crossed the floor, my footsteps leaving trails in my wake.

But like the storage room, this space had potential. It was unfinished but spacious. A perfect rectangle, the entire size of the building. On the walls, puffy pink insulation had been stuffed in between the studs.

Much like my apartment had been above Kerrigan’s gym space, the wall facing First was full of windows. The glass had been covered with translucent white plastic to stop anyone from looking inside. They weren’t nearly the size of the windows Kerrigan had put into her building, but they let in plenty of natural light.

This could be a studio apartment, much like the one Kerrigan had finished above her upcoming gym. Though it would require an exterior exit be added to the building. I couldn’t see Hux agreeing to either.

The space would be great for a new office too. Or he could even put another painting studio up here. He could paint me head to toe here if it came with an orgasm.

I took a slow lap around the room, imagining possibilities and sexual positions, then shelved it all because today was not the day to pitch a renovation to Hux.

And the storage room was calling my name.

I stood on the threshold, hands on my hips, cataloging the disorder. *Shelves*. We needed shelves. So I marched back to Hux's office. "I want to order some shelves."

He raised his eyebrows, then went back to the papers on his desk. "Talk to Katie."

*Katie*. I swallowed a groan.

Husbands and wives shouldn't work together.

The grocery store was looking better by the minute.

Steeling my spine for another encounter with Katie, I plastered on my wide smile again as I emerged from the hallway. The front door to the gallery chimed and I looked over in time to see not a customer, but a familiar face storm inside.

By some miracle my smile held. If it lasted the day, I should get a goddamn medal for employee of the year.

I changed my direction, heading for our guest. "Hi, April."

Her lip curled as she looked me up and down. "Where is Hux?"

"He's working. Sorry. Is there something I can help you with?"

April's glare traveled past me to Katie. "Call him. Now."

Katie didn't move. In this, we were united. And because of it, I'd give her some—what had Hux yelled at me?—*fucking slack*.

April sneered and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not leaving until I talk to him."

“Actually, you don’t get to talk to Hux.” I crossed my arms, mirroring her stance. “You can send all correspondence through our attorney.” Saying *our attorney* instead of *his attorney* felt like a necessary reminder. To both women in the room.

If April wanted to get to Hux, she could go through Aiden. And me.

“You can tell Hux he will never get what he wants. Full-time residence with him? He’s dreaming. He will never take my daughter.”

“His daughter,” I corrected. “Savannah is his daughter. And he has every right to be her father.”

News really did travel fast in Calamity. Aiden had just texted Hux around nine this morning that he’d sent in the paperwork to the courthouse. It wasn’t even ten.

“He’ll never win.” April gave me a smug grin. “I’ll make sure everyone in this town knows what a deadbeat criminal he is.”

This woman wasn’t afraid to toss out the threats, was she? I guess this time, we’d see if she had the moxie to back them up.

“As you can see, we really are busy here today.” I gestured around the empty room. “Lovely to see you again, April. Please do send any of your concerns along to our attorney.”

The color rose in her cheeks as she huffed, then whipped around and flew out the door.

I sighed as the chime faded, wishing for a redo on this day. But I wasn’t going to get one. Nor was I going to catch a break. Because when I turned around, Katie’s dead stare was waiting.

*Not even a little camaraderie, Katie?* Damn. She hadn't thawed to me in the slightest.

"I want to order some shelves," I said. "Should I put them on a company credit card? Or buy them and save the receipt for reimbursement?"

"Hux has a company credit card."

Of course he did. But my darling lover wasn't doing me any favors today either. "And Hux is busy working."

Katie's mouth pursed as she ripped open a drawer at her side and pulled out a credit card.

"Thanks." I took it from her and shoved it in my jeans pocket. Then I started for the hallway, only to get stopped by a pair of blue eyes.

Had he been there the whole time?

"I assume you heard all of that with April."

He nodded.

"Good. Then I don't need to catch you up." I walked past him for his office. The sound of his footsteps followed as I pulled on my coat.

"Where are you going?"

"The hardware store." I snatched up my purse.

"For shelves."

I nodded. "Yes, I'm buying shelves."

Before I could storm past him and get some much-needed air, he walked closer, taking the keys from his pocket. "Take the truck. Have the guys at the hardware store load up whatever you buy. I'll haul it all inside when you get back."

“Thanks,” I muttered, swiping the keys. Even if he offered, I wasn’t letting him tag along. I needed air and space. I wouldn’t be responsible for my actions if he pissed me off while I was in the vicinity of hammers and nail guns.

“Want me to come with you?” he asked.

“You know I don’t.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. The bastard.

I made my break for the hallway, ready to get out of this place, when the gallery’s front door chimed again.

“Welcome,” Katie greeted.

“Hi. I’m looking for Everly. Is she here?”

That voice stopped me in my tracks.

The hits just kept on coming. So much for gathering my wits before facing off with my best friend. I emerged from the hallway, finding Lucy in the middle of the showroom.

“I’m sorry.” It didn’t matter that Katie was watching us like a hawk. I owed Lucy an apology and my pride wasn’t more important than my friend. “I didn’t handle Friday very well.”

“You’re forgiven.”

People should be so lucky to have her in their life. I knew I was lucky to have her in mine. “I have to go shopping.”

“I like shopping.”

I smiled. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Lucy gave Katie a finger wave, one that was met with a kind smile. So Katie could smile, just not at me.

I waited until we were outside and the door was closed behind us before I handed over the keys to Hux's truck. "Here. You'd better drive. I haven't been behind the wheel in months and if I crash his truck, he might divorce me."

Lucy took the keys but didn't move. "You got married."

The pain and betrayal in her voice made me feel an inch tall. I wanted to tell her the truth. That it was just a sham and she hadn't missed anything. That when I got married for real, she'd be my matron of honor and sign as my witness.

But I couldn't tell Lucy the truth. Not yet.

And the guilt of lying to my best friend began to sink deep. For the first time since Friday, I regretted this decision.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"Why?" She blinked a sheen of tears from her emerald-green eyes. "Why didn't you?"

"It happened fast. Maybe I was worried that you wouldn't understand."

"I don't understand."

*Yeah, me neither.* "You would have tried to talk me out of it."

"Hell yes, I would have. Are you pregnant? Is that why it was a rush?"

It would be easier if the answer were yes. A lot easier. But there were enough lies to keep up with and I wasn't going to add that one to the mix.

"No. I'm not pregnant." And I wouldn't get pregnant. Hux kept up with his condoms. Meanwhile, I was taking my pill like clockwork every morning.

“Oh.” She dropped her gaze to her feet. “Is this a real thing? Do you love him?”

If Lucy was questioning the authenticity of our marriage, others would too. A jolt of panic raced through my veins but I pushed forward, because if I was going to convince the town and a judge, I’d better be able to convince my best friend.

“It’s real,” I told her. No, it wasn’t love. But there were lots of married couples who weren’t in love. “I met Hux a while ago. I went to Jane’s one night and he was there. We hooked up and hit it off.” Which wasn’t entirely a lie. When it came to our physical relationship, we’d hit a home run.

“Couldn’t you have dated for a while? How well do you know him?”

“You didn’t date Duke for very long.”

She frowned. “I knew you were going to say that.”

“Sorry?”

“What is going on with you, Ev? You’re not the type to rush into a relationship. I mean, you’re the pickiest woman I’ve ever met.”

She wasn’t wrong. When it came to my dating past, I’d kicked plenty of men to the curb for superficial reasons. That, and because most had been assholes.

There’d been the investment broker with not enough muscle. The physical therapist with too much muscle. Cal Stark, the professional football player who had the body of a Greek god and a face made for billboards. But Cal’s arrogance had killed any chance of a relationship an hour into our first date.



“I know it’s rushed and out of the ordinary, but it feels right with Hux.”

I spoke the truth.

Maybe because I knew our arrangement had an expiration date—Savannah’s eighteenth birthday—but I hadn’t needed to search for imperfections with Hux. He let his show. I didn’t try to hide mine. There were no pretenses.

“You stopped singing,” she said. “Now this.”

My beautiful friend could not understand why I’d quit something she so loved. “I don’t want to sing.”

“Are you sure? Because—”

“I’m not like you, Lucy. It’s not part of me.”

“It was your dream,” she whispered.

“No.” I gave her a sad smile. “It was your dream. And it was time for me to let it go.”

“But you’re so talented.” Her eyes pleaded for me not to quit. “You are an incredible singer. Take the label up on their offer. Do an album.”

“I don’t want an album.” I searched for the words to articulate this better than I had since Nashville. To say the right thing so she’d understand. “I liked the excitement. I liked the thrill of the stage. I liked that it was a fun job and paid the bills. But then everything changed. I don’t want the excitement or the thrill anymore. I never loved the music like you do, so the rest is . . . empty.”

Her shoulders slumped but understanding crossed her face. “I didn’t know you felt like that. I thought it was your big dream and it was your fears holding you back.”

“No. I don’t need a big dream. I’d rather accomplish a small one,” I admitted. “I want a happy life. A simple home. I want to be around people who aren’t afraid to belly laugh and tell me they love me.”

“I don’t think that’s a small dream. Sounds about perfect to me.”

I closed the distance to my friend and pulled her in for a hug. “I’m sorry.”

“I feel like I’m losing you,” she confessed. “We live in the same town but . . .”

Everything had changed since that fateful day at the farmhouse. If we were being honest, everything had changed when Lucy had left Nashville. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m just . . . I don’t know. Trying to find my safe place.”

“Isn’t marrying a stranger a bit of an extreme solution?”

“Yes.” I laughed, letting her go. “But Hux makes me feel safe.”

Saying the words out loud made me realize exactly how true they were. I didn’t fear the doorbell. I didn’t fear a restaurant or going to a basketball game. Not with him by my side. “I’ve been scared. It was easier to hide in that apartment and shut out the world than face it. But we both know that couldn’t last forever.”

“Okay.” Lucy blew out a long breath. “I hope you two know what you’re doing.”

*So do I.* “Can we go shopping now?”

She nodded and walked to the driver’s side, climbing into the truck.

I went to the passenger side and clicked on my seat belt. “How did you know I was at the gallery?”

“I didn’t.” She turned the key in the ignition. “But since you didn’t call me all weekend, I gave it a few days to sink in, then I decided to come and find you. I went to Hux’s place first, then your apartment. Here was the next best guess.”

“Thanks for hunting me down.”

She leveled me with a glare. “Don’t make me do it again.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I laughed. “I’m sorry for avoiding you all weekend.”

“Please don’t be scared to talk to me.”

“To you? Never.” I stretched across the cab, pulling her into another hug. Lucy was my confidant, my sister of the heart. I might have worried about this conversation, but I wasn’t scared to confide in her. There were simply times when I needed a minute to prepare. Not for her. For myself. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” She squeezed me tighter before letting me go to back out of our parking spot. “What are we shopping for?”

“Shelves. I’m organizing the gallery.”

“Ahh. Making your mark.”

I nodded. “Yep.”

We spent an hour at the hardware store buying shelves. There weren’t many options, but we made do and when we returned to the gallery, Hux emerged from the alley door as we parked.

“Where is all this going?” he asked, surveying the boards and brackets in the back.

“The storage room.”

Lucy and I left Hux to haul everything inside and I escorted her through the gallery and out the front door to her car. I gave her another hug and promised to meet her and Kerrigan for lunch soon.

Kerrigan hadn't been like Lucy, leaving me to myself after the basketball game. She'd texted relentlessly yesterday while Hux had been in his studio and I'd finally given in and texted her back.

I waited on the sidewalk, waving as Lucy reversed away. Then I blew out a breath and went inside.

Katie's frigid expression did its best to ruin my mood.

I bit my tongue and gave her another fake smile, passing through the showroom for the hallway. Hux had just hauled the last load into the storage room.

“I need a drill and a level so I can hang these,” I said. Not that I'd ever hung a shelf before but I knew how to YouTube. Worst case, I'd call my DIY lifeline, Kerrigan.

Hux opened his mouth but before he could respond, I held up a hand.

“If you tell me to ask Katie, I'll smother you in your sleep.”

He chuckled. “How about you tell me where you want these and I'll hang them for you?”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “My project. Now go away.”

He grinned and walked closer but didn't pass me for the door. Instead, he snaked his hands around me, pulling up the back of my coat so his hands could dive into my jean pockets. One fantastically firm ass squeeze and I was pressed into his chest, leaning into his strong lines. "Tools are at home. We'll bring them in tomorrow."

"Fine." I wiggled out of his hold, then pointed for the door. "I'm going to organize for an hour. Then we're going to the café for lunch."

"They deliver."

"Yes, but you need to be seen around town with your new, loving wife." I rolled my eyes. "Buh-bye."

And I needed that hour to remember I was his new, loving wife.

This bluff was harder at moments than I'd thought it would be.

It would be easier to have a late lunch in a nearly deserted restaurant and tease Nelson about his eating habits, but forcing Hux out in public was important. I'd have to catch Nelson next time.

Hux chuckled again, shaking his head as he disappeared into his office. He was supposed to be organizing today so I could start on the bookkeeping tomorrow, but given the piles upon piles of paperwork, I doubted he'd finish in a day.

So while he attempted to make sense of that mess, I tackled the one before me, shuffling paintings into piles and sorting them by size. Finally, with them quasi-arranged into the genesis of an inventory system, I went in search of cleaning supplies. There was no way in hell I was *asking Katie*.

By the time lunch rolled around, sweat beaded at my temples and I suspected this room was as clean as it had been in years. The spiders would have to find a new home. Hux hadn't come to collect me yet, so I stayed in the safety of my storage room and made the call I'd been dreading.

The phone rang three times before she answered. "Hi, Everly."

"Hi, Mom. How are you today?"

"It's March." Meaning she was busy and I was interrupting her workday.

*Deep breath. One. Two. Three . . .* "I got married." Ouch. Yeah, that announcement wasn't getting easier.

"What did you say?"

"I got married." I held my breath, cringing at the squeal that had leaked into my voice. "Just wanted to let you know."

"Married."

"Um . . . yes. His name is Reese Huxley."

"Congratulations to you and Reese." Was that sarcasm? I wasn't aware Mom knew how it worked.

"Thanks?"

"You're welcome." Okay, that was a new tone. And whatever it was, there wasn't an ounce of excitement included. There also wasn't any shock or censure or any other emotion for that matter.

She just . . . didn't care.

I'd gotten married, and my mother didn't care.

Tears welled in my eyes. What had I expected? This was the mother I knew. Distant. Numb. Cold. I was a distraction. A

disappointment.

Who cares that I'd dropped out of college? Lots of kids chose not to pursue higher education. And hadn't I been a good kid in high school?

I hadn't rebelled. I'd kept good grades. I'd treated the Buick they'd bought me like a gold-plated Cadillac. The one and only time they'd grounded me was when I'd snuck out after dark to kiss a boy in my driveway.

Why was it so hard for her to give *me* some fucking slack?

"Why don't you love me?" The words weren't supposed to come out of my mouth. Luckily, they were so quiet I barely registered them myself.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing." I dried my eyes. "Please pass along the news to Dad."

Without waiting for her to hang up on me, I ended the call and stared at one of the blank walls. *Assholes*. I was surrounded by assholes today. Except for Lucy. And the hardware store guys.

But everyone else was on my shit list.

I sucked in a breath, willing the hurt to go away. I had a lunch to attend and a community to bluff. But the tears blurred my vision until one of them fell. I caught it quickly with my fingers.

Mascara streaks would give Katie something to smirk about today. She'd probably think they were her doing.

It was the desire to prove her wrong that made me pull my shit together. I could have a pity party later when I was alone at home. In this gallery, I was Hux's happy wife.

I sniffled and swiped under my eyes. Except before I could straighten my spine and go about my work, two strong arms wrapped around me.

“Your parents?”

I glanced over my shoulder and scowled. “Were you spying?”

“Maybe.”

“Then you should know your in-laws suck and I doubt they’ll send us a wedding gift.”

His arms banded tighter. “Your in-laws suck too.”

“Good to know.”

One of these days, we’d have to swap childhood stories, but today was not that day.

I stepped out of his arms, expecting him to be the gruff and grouchy man from earlier. But his expression was soft. His eyes were so full of concern that it melted any frustration that lingered from our argument earlier.

The change was surprising. Care was a good look on Hux.

“Come on, honey.” I grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the door. “I’ve got the company credit card. I’ll buy you lunch.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

---

“BEFORE WE GO TO DINNER, I need to run an errand.”

“Okay.” Everly pulled her coat and purse from the hook beside the door in my office. A hook I’d hung up yesterday.

In the past two weeks, she’d transformed the gallery. The storage room had never looked better. I could actually see how many pieces I had completed, all organized by size. The couch in my office was free of clutter and usable for a change. Not that I spent much time there, but last night after Katie had left for the evening, Ev and I had broken it in. An orgasm was the least I could give her for all her efforts.

When I’d asked her about a salary, she’d waved it off, saying it was her contribution to the Huxley household. Still, I’d called the bank and ordered her a debit card to my account. And her own company credit card. She’d mentioned running low on savings, so if she needed more, she could take it.

Given all she’d accomplished in only two weeks, I was getting the better end of the bargain. She’d done more around the gallery than I had in a year. While she’d bustled around, I’d spent hours going through the piles on my desk. I was about done, sick to death of paperwork, but with it somewhat sorted, she’d have an easier time taking over the books. It had

all been a welcome distraction, preventing me from harassing Aiden hourly about the petition.

We hadn't heard back yet from the court as to when my proposed amendment to the parenting plan would be reviewed, but we hoped it would be scheduled soon. Until then, I would work.

Everly and I came to the gallery every morning after it opened at ten. At first, she'd insisted on hanging the shelves and hooks and whatever else she'd wanted on her own. But after those first couple of days, she'd announced she wasn't *handy* and forked over the drill. So I'd taken over installation while she'd organized and filled a spiral notebook with inventory notes ready to be keyed into my bookkeeping program.

I'd gladly hand over control of that nightmare. If she thought this building was a mess, just wait until she opened my laptop.

It would keep her busy though while I spent some overdue time in the studio at home. Katie had lined up three more custom pieces for me to do in the next six weeks. Then there was getting ahead on inventory for summer.

"Tomorrow, I'm probably not coming down," I said as Everly shrugged on her coat.

"Good. That will give me time to get familiar with your books without you hovering." She nodded to the desk.

"You good to drive my truck?" I hadn't missed how Lucy had been the one to drive my truck on Ev's first trip to the hardware store. And since, she'd paired her shopping trips with our lunch hour so she could drag me along—all in the name of public appearances.

“Uh . . .” The look of panic on her face made me chuckle.

I dug the keys from my pocket and handed them over. “You can practice tonight.”

She frowned but took the keys, then led the way to the back door, going outside for the truck while I went to talk to Katie.

It hadn’t escaped my notice that the two of them didn’t get along. Yet. But they’d figure their shit out eventually. At least, I hoped. I sure as hell wasn’t stepping in the middle to play referee.

“We’re taking off,” I told Katie. “You good?”

“I’ve run this place for years, Hux.” There was a bite to her tone. It had everything to do with my wife.

“Ev’s just trying to help, Katie, find her place here.”

She shot me a flat look.

“She’s doing stuff we both hate. Might be nice to take some off your plate.”

Katie had never complained about the hours here. I’d offered to hire someone years ago, to spare her some time off, but she’d insisted on being here herself, that it gave her the chance to connect personally with buyers. So six days a week, she was here from ten to seven.

In the winter, we were closed on Sundays, giving her a day off. But once the tourists rolled into town, we were seven days a week. Sometimes I’d man the place, though normally it was Katie’s domain. She might not clean and organize beyond the showroom, but the showroom was immaculate.

If Katie would chill, she’d see that Everly’s contribution was a good thing for the gallery.

“Give Ev a chance,” I said.

“I have been nothing but polite.”

If polite meant cold and unwelcoming. “Be polite-er.”

“Okay, *boss*,” she muttered.

“Hey.” I sighed. “Don’t be like that.”

“You don’t even know her, Hux.” Katie threw out a hand. “Why would you marry her? I’ve heard you say on more than one occasion you’d never get married again, that you didn’t want a relationship. Then she shows up and has a monster ring on her finger. The entire thing screams gold digger.”

“She’s not a gold digger.” Everly didn’t need my money, right? She’d said she had her reasons to get married, but could money be one of them?

*No*. No way. When she’d offered to marry me, she hadn’t even known I had money. No one, including Katie, knew how much I’d stashed away.

“Look. I appreciate that you’re looking out for me. But there’s no need. Ev’s not the bad guy here. Just . . . be nice. Please. She’s important.”

The depth of that statement startled me. Everly was important, and she was doing more for me than Katie would ever know.

“Fine.” Katie waved me off. “We’ll avoid each other.”

Not exactly what I’d hoped for, but this thing was still new. It would take time. “Have a good night.”

Katie nodded. “You too.”

I hustled outside and found Everly in the truck, adjusting the seat and the mirrors.

She gave me a sideways glance as I climbed into the passenger seat. “If I wreck your truck, will you divorce me?”

“Yes.”

“Good to know that’s all it’ll take to get rid of you.”

I chuckled as she put the rig in reverse and backed out. “Head to First, then take a left.”

“Okay.” She drove, both hands clutching the wheel, and followed directions as I gave them.

We drove out of town as the sun was beginning to drop below the horizon. It darkened the mountains, tinging them purple, while the valleys shined gold with the lingering rays. The foothills were still covered in snow, but the evergreens had shaken off their white winter coats.

“It’s pretty,” Everly said, her gaze alternating between the road and the view.

“Sure is.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” I pointed to a turnout coming up on the highway. “Take that left.”

Soon we were off pavement and on gravel, the mountains drawing closer and closer as she drove. We traveled past flat wheat fields and over rolling pastures until we reached the tree line and disappeared beneath towering pines and firs.

Soon the road was nothing more than two tracks through the forest.

“This is mine,” I said as she slowed to a crawl.

“What is yours?”

“This land.” I jerked my thumb at the window. “I bought the property about five years ago. Don’t do anything with it, but I like to check on it every month.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said as we climbed a small hill and emerged into a wide meadow.

“Just wait until you see it in a couple of months.” The grasses would be green and lush, spotted with wildflowers of fuchsia, purple and yellow. They’d stay until fall, when the colors would change on the trees.

“Go ahead and park.”

She nodded and stopped. “Will you put a house here?”

“Don’t know. That was the plan when I bought it, but then I couldn’t bring myself to build. I guess I thought when I bought a place, Savannah could live with me. That never happened so neither did construction. I think when Savannah leaves for college, I’ll leave Calamity too.”

“You don’t like it here?”

“No,” I admitted. “When she’s gone, there’s nothing for me here.”

“What about the gallery?”

I shrugged. “Katie can run it. I can paint anywhere. Or we’ll close it down.”

“You grew up here, right?”

Everly probably didn’t realize that was a loaded question.

The fact that most people in Calamity knew my story was a curse—and a blessing. I didn’t have to talk about prison. Or my parents.

We'd been lucky so far. People might be curious but they'd stayed away, not poking into our marriage. But the more Everly insisted on us going out in public, the more she'd become ingrained in Calamity life. It was just a matter of time before she heard about my family.

And I didn't want her getting the shit version from other people. The version where *I* had betrayed *them*.

No, I wanted her to have the truth.

"Born and raised. My parents still live here. So does my older brother. My grandparents on my mom's side live in Billings. My grandma on Dad's side is in the Calamity nursing home."

Everly let that sink in. "But you don't see them?"

"We don't run in the same circles. Do you know why I went to prison?"

"Sort of." She gave me a sheepish smile. "Sorry. People talk."

"Yeah." *Goddamn people*. "Then you know I put a guy in a coma. The minute I got arrested and the story hit the town paper, my parents disowned me. My mom wrote me a letter saying not to call them again. They were ashamed their son had turned into a thug, and that they'd always known I was a bad apple."

Her jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

"Didn't even wait for me to give my side of the story. They believed every piece of bullshit spreading around town. That I'd been high. That I'd been selling drugs. That I'd been abusing April. Yeah, I beat that man. And I took responsibility. But the rest was all lies, and they believed it without question.



And they couldn't bother to talk to me. None of them did, not even my brother."

"What about after you got out?"

"Not a word." I shook my head. "I wouldn't have stayed if not for Savannah."

"Does your family have anything to do with her?"

"Nothing. They consider her Julian's daughter."

Everly huffed. "Assholes."

"Pretty much."

"Do you ever bump into them around town?"

"Not often. But as you know, I don't get out much."

Understanding crossed her features. "And I'm dragging you out everywhere, so you're telling me this because it's probably going to happen."

"Yeah. Eventually you'll cross paths with another Huxley. Mom and Dad are both retired now. Mom volunteers at a church in town. Dad spends a lot of time at the golf course once the snow melts. My brother is a financial planner. He's married with three kids I don't know. As square as they come. And I'm the black sheep."

Everly turned her gaze to the windshield, watching as the light darkened on the meadow. It would be night by the time we got back to town. "My parents didn't disown me, but we don't have the best relationship. It feels like they've given up on me. They don't understand me and maybe I disappointed them too much with my life choices."

I was familiar with disappointment. "Why?"

“Because I didn’t go to college. Because I didn’t become a boring accountant. Because we’ve never had anything other than blood to connect us together. Take your pick. More, they just seem . . . indifferent.”

*Damn.* I think I had it better. At least I wasn’t waiting for my parents to throw me a bone.

“It’s lonely,” she whispered. “Not having the people who are supposed to love you in your life. But I have Lucy. We’ve been friends since we were kids.”

“Where’d you meet?”

“We lived in the same neighborhood. I don’t actually remember meeting her. She was just always there, like a sister. Her parents were like my second parents. My freshman year in college they were in a car accident. Died on impact.”

So Everly had lost them too. “Sorry, babe.”

“I miss them. They were wonderful people. I don’t think my parents ever realized how much their death broke my heart. I dropped out of school because Lucy got picked up by a record label. She wanted to move to Nashville and I hated everything about college except the parties and boys. When she asked if I’d go with her, it was a no-brainer.”

“What did your parents say about that?”

“Nothing. They’ve always been very good at communicating with silence. But I was—*am* stubborn and loyal to Lucy. Once I made the decision, I was all in.”

“And you are a singer too?” That was what I’d heard about her.

“I was. Most would say I had—have—talent. But the ones who make it in that industry are the ones like Lucy. It’s in her

heart. Probably like your painting is for you. For me, it was just a job.”

“Do you still want to sing?”

“No.” Her face soured. “I’m done with that. How it ended was too tragic. Too hard. Too scary. After the farmhouse . . . no.”

I waited for her to continue, but she stared ahead and as the quiet dragged, I knew we wouldn’t be going there tonight.

That day at the farmhouse had tied her to Savannah, but the details of that day weren’t something Everly and I had discussed. If she wanted to talk about it, I’d be here to listen.

“If you built a house here, what would it look like?” she asked. Subject changed.

“Natural. Maybe log and stone on the exterior so it blends. Nothing too big.” When I’d found this spot, I’d imagined building a treehouse for Savannah. She was probably too old for that now.

Everly hummed and nodded. “That would be beautiful. If you decide to stay.”

“I won’t,” I said. She wouldn’t have to worry about bumping into her ex-husband around town. “What do you feel like for dinner?”

“Tacos.”

“At home?”

She laughed. “No.”

I groaned.

“If you want to change their perception, people have to actually see you.”

“They’ve seen enough,” I grumbled, though it wouldn’t make a bit of difference.

We were going out to dinner.

I’d eaten out more in the past two weeks than I had in ten years. On Friday, she’d probably drag me to the home basketball game again. Saturday morning she’d insist we go grocery shopping together. And on Sunday, we’d brave the coffee shop for whatever pastry she was craving.

Everly put the truck in drive and turned us around, heading down the lane. When we got to town, she parked in front of the Mexican restaurant, tossing me the keys. “I’m having a margarita. Or two.”

I followed her inside, bracing as we walked through the door. *Showtime.*

As she stood at the hostess station, I took Ev’s hand, threading my fingers through hers. It wasn’t like we didn’t touch often—our sexual appetite hadn’t dulled in the slightest since that first night. But this wasn’t foreplay. This was PDA.

I fucking hated PDA. It was too intimate.

The hostess had a bright smile as she led us to a booth where Ev ordered her margarita and I stuck with water. We browsed the menu and ordered our tacos, then we waited for the visitors to trickle over.

It happened every time we went out to eat.

Someone I’d known since childhood or seen around town would stop by our table and say hello. Someone who hadn’t wanted to talk to me for years, but now that I had Everly, I was interesting again.

This damn town. Now that I was married, I was worthy of a hello. It was all fake. They just wanted in on the gossip and to size us both up.

Tonight was no different. Except this time, I wasn't the one doing the introductions.

"Everly!" A brunette slid out of a booth across the room and came over with a wide smile.

"Hey!" Ev beamed, leaving her seat to give the woman a hug. "I didn't know you'd be here tonight."

"Last minute invite from my dad." The woman tossed her thumb over her shoulder to where the older man waved back. "Couldn't pass it up."

"Do you know Hux?" Everly asked.

"We've never formally met but I've been to your gallery," the woman said with a wave. "I'm Kerrigan Hale."

I stood and held out my hand. "Nice to meet you. Reese Huxley."

Everly slid into my side, playing the role of newlywed to perfection. "How's it going? I was actually going to pop down to the gym and check on the renovation project earlier, but I lost track of time at the gallery."

"It's good. Every day it seems like we're getting closer, now that I finally have the permit approved and the crew has started. I can't wait for it to open. I'm ready." Kerrigan's gaze darted to me as she spoke. She kept the smile on her face, but there was a wariness in her eyes. She was watching out for her friend. "I need more properties with bodies in them, not vacant ones."

Everly winced. "Any possible renters for the studio?"

Kerrigan shook her head. “No, but I did have a couple of calls.”

“Want my keys back?”

“Of course not.” Kerrigan waved her off. “Since you won’t stop paying me, that’s your space.”

Wait. Everly was still paying rent? What the hell? We’d be talking about that later. Not only did the woman not have an income, but why did she need to keep the space? Was she planning on moving out?

“Any bites on the farmhouse?” Ev asked.

“No,” Kerrigan muttered. “We can catch up on all of it later. Let’s meet for drinks sometime soon.”

“That would be great.”

I stood to let Everly out again. She gave Kerrigan another hug, then waved at Kerrigan’s dad.

“Have a good dinner.” Kerrigan looked to me. “And it was nice to meet you.”

“Same.” I nodded, taking my seat as Everly returned to hers. I waited until Kerrigan was out of earshot. “She’s your landlord.”

“And my friend.”

Though Kerrigan and I hadn’t officially met, it was impossible not to be a member of the downtown business community and not hear her name tossed around like candy at a parade. Kerrigan Hale was making a name for herself in Calamity, buying some of the less desirable properties and turning them into something new and fresh.

The gym she was creating was going to cater to a female clientele. She had rental properties all over town, including Widow Ashleigh's farmhouse.

The place where my daughter and my wife had watched a woman die.

If I were Kerrigan, I'd set a match to that place and let it burn.

"I can't believe you haven't met her before," Everly said. "I thought everyone knew everyone in Calamity."

I shook my head as the waitress delivered our drinks. "I know of her. But—"

"You don't get out much," she teased. "Hux, you really do need to stop scowling at people. You have a great smile. Use it. And don't tell me not to say shit like that. This is purely to improve your reputation."

"Huh?"

Everly sipped her drink, then lowered her voice. "When Kerrigan was talking, you were scowling."

"No, I wasn't."

"Yes, honey. You were." She pointed to my nose. "Just like you are now."

"Maybe because I didn't know you were still paying rent. Planning on needing a crash pad soon?"

She stared at me, her gaze blank. Then the corners of her mouth turned up and she laughed. "Don't worry, my darling husband. I'm not leaving you anytime soon. But I felt bad for Kerrigan and technically I have a lease agreement. I'm honoring those terms. She offered to let me out, but I insisted."

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh,” she mimicked.

“Then you’re not paying for anything at home.”

“But—”

“No. You can pay your rent. That’s it.”

“For now. Until I find another job.”

“You have a job.”

“An unpaid one.”

“Then I’ll pay you.”

She frowned. “I don’t need to be paid. My savings will cover rent, just not much else. And I want to chip in with groceries or utilities or gas.”

“What you’re doing at the gallery is more than chipping in. If you’re going to take over in the office, then you should get a salary. I’d rather have your help than hire someone.”

“It feels weird that you’d pay me.”

“That’s a you problem,” I teased. “Because it’s not weird.”

She stuck out her tongue. “Well, it is for me.”

“Gotta pick, Ev. Either you get on the payroll or you give up the idea of chipping in.”

“Or . . . I get another job.”

“Are you too good for my gallery?”

“No.” She shot me a glare.

“Now who’s scowling?”

Everly rolled her eyes. “What about Katie? She doesn’t want me working there.”



“She’ll deal. You two can figure out how to split up the duties.”

“That’ll be a fun conversation,” she muttered. “Fine. You win. Can we be done talking about this?”

“Please.”

“How come you don’t know Kerrigan?”

I shrugged. “She’s quite a bit younger than I am. When I got out, she was probably still in high school or leaving for college. The Hales and I don’t exactly—”

“Run in the same circles.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

The waitress arrived with our dinner and the two of us didn’t speak much as we ate. Unlike dating couples, Everly and I didn’t need to use meals as get-to-know-you time. Afterward, I paid the bill and escorted Everly outside. The margaritas had given her cheeks a faint ruby flush. Her lips were a darker shade of their normal pink.

“Let’s walk a little,” she suggested.

I gave her a sideways glance as she looped her arm with mine. “Why?”

“For show.” She rolled her eyes. “For fresh air. To walk off the tacos. For fun.”

I opened my mouth but she poked me in the ribs before I could talk. “What was that for?”

“Because there is that scowl again. Maybe with physical violence I can condition you to stop.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” The scowl wasn’t something I did intentionally. It was just . . . me. Maybe I’d smiled more as

a kid. I remembered smiling more with April. But that was just before my world had been turned to shit and there hadn't been a lot to smile about afterward.

“Come on.” Everly dragged me away from the truck and set a leisurely pace. Store lights and streetlamps lit the sidewalk as we strolled. Above us, the midnight-blue sky was dotted with diamond stars.

When we got to Kerrigan's gym and Ev's building, she let go of my arm to cup her hands to the windows, peering through a small slit in the paper that lined them inside. She didn't linger long before linking us again, arm-in-arm, to continue the walk.

“I love it here,” she said when we reached the end of a block, deciding to turn us around.

“Do you miss Nashville?”

“Not really. I miss the fun Lucy and I used to have. We were so young and full of energy. The bars were a blast for a couple of twenty-one-year-old women who were so excited to be there. Then Lucy's career took off and she traveled a lot. I was alone more often than not, which I didn't mind. I was busy singing too. But the stalker stole that joy. Bit by bit.”

I slowed my steps, matching Everly's strides because I wanted some time to hear about this part of her life. “How'd it start?”

“Letters. We actually didn't know Lucy was receiving death threats for a long time but when it came out, we learned how crazy the situation really was. The texts came after that. Emails too. It was this onslaught and there was never a break. We'd go out to eat and come home to a picture of the two of us laughing over sushi. She watched us. All the time.”

A shudder rolled down Everly's spine and she hugged my arm tighter.

"I still feel it sometimes. I know it's not real, but I still find myself looking over my shoulder, wondering if I'm being watched."

We passed the front window to the White Oak and the people seated at the booths along the window turned to stare. "Well . . . you are."

"Touché." Everly giggled. "They're just curious."

About her. About me. About us.

"Does it bother you that I drag you out in public?" she asked. "I guess I didn't think of it as that uncomfortable. But —"

"It's okay. It's for a purpose. And these people are a known enemy. Can't imagine what it was like for you and Lucy."

"Terrifying," she whispered. "After Lucy left, the stalker decided to switch targets. It was all an effort to drag Lucy from wherever she'd been hiding, but that didn't make it any less scary. I don't think I really understood what Lucy was going through until one of the photos arrived in my inbox and it was me in focus this time. They came daily. No matter where I went, she followed. It got so bad that I just stayed home. And then . . ."

Another shudder and her eyes stared unblinking down the street. The color she'd had earlier drained away.

"Then what?" I prompted.

"Then she shot at me. She fired twelve rounds through my balcony door from the building across the street."

My feet stopped. "What the fuck?"

Everly looked up at me and nodded. “I ran to the kitchen and hid behind the island, screaming and crying with every bullet. My phone had been on the couch when the first shot had broken through the glass. I left it behind when I ran to hide. After the shots stopped, I was too scared to go and find it so I sat there alone, waiting until finally the cops showed up. A neighbor had called.”

“Christ.”

“After the shooting, the detective on the case thought it would be better if I was in protective custody. I went because I didn’t have a lot of other choices. It was awful. And I was stupid.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked up at me and tears welled in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“What Savannah went through at the farmhouse was my fault. Reese, please know that I never would have come here if I’d known what would happen.”

It was the first time she’d called me by my first name.

A knife to the heart.

How long had she carried around this guilt?

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is.” She sniffled, blinking rapidly to stop the threat of tears. “I led the stalker here. I thought if I left Nashville, it would all go away. I was going stir-crazy in the safe house. I was selfish and dumb. They had me in this basement in Tennessee suburbia with nothing to do. After a while, I just

said fuck it. I wasn't going to live in fear in a cave. Turns out, I should have stayed right where I was."

"It's not your fault," I repeated but she wasn't listening.

"I didn't think. I got on a plane and came here. I didn't want to drag my parents into the mess. They wouldn't have understood anyway. And I didn't think he—I thought it was a man—would follow me all the way to Montana. But she'd shot at me. She'd tried to kill me. I should have known. That's on me."

For the first time, all pretenses were gone, the fake smile wiped clean. And the guilt eating her alive streamed through those beautiful caramel eyes. Guilt for bringing this to Calamity. For Lucy. And for Savannah.

Everly had said she had her reasons for marrying me. This was one. This was her way of atoning to Savannah.

Fuck, it all made sense. All of it.

"This was why you married me."

"Huh?" Her gaze snapped to mine.

"You felt guilty about the farmhouse. For Savannah being there. So you married me to help her out."

"Maybe."

"You—"

"Shouldn't have?" she finished. "Too late."

And with that, my wife started down the sidewalk toward the truck.

Conversation over.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

EVERLY

“READY FOR THIS?” Hux asked, his voice low.

Was he asking me? Or himself?

“Yes,” I lied.

His knee bounced under the table. It had been since the moment we’d taken our seats. I reached under the table, laying my palm on his thigh. The bouncing stopped but his anxiety was still palpable.

It had been almost a week since Hux and I had taken our downtown stroll. That had been the last time Hux had been relaxed and at ease. The morning after, Aiden had called and told us to be ready for a court appearance on Monday afternoon.

It was Monday afternoon.

And I was not ready.

We hadn’t had enough time to show the town that Reese Huxley was a good man. We hadn’t had enough time to be seen as those cute newlyweds. We hadn’t had enough time to prepare in case this went the wrong way.

But ready or not . . .

The courtroom was larger than I'd expected for a town the size of Calamity. There were probably ten rows of chairs behind us, all empty except for a woman with a white bob wearing a gray pantsuit who'd slipped in a few minutes after we'd arrived. The floors were covered in an industrial gray carpet. The walls had wainscoting of honey-stained oak that matched the judge's bench and the table in front of us. Besides the wood, the room was devoid of almost all color save for an American flag and a Montana state flag, each on golden posts.

The chair in the witness stand had probably held a lot of interesting characters. Criminals. Lawyers. Desperate parents?

Was I going to have to sit in that seat? Was I going to have to say something? Aiden hadn't given us any instructions. Hux had done this before, but he hadn't told me anything. Had they assumed I'd just know what to do? Because I had no freaking clue.

My stomach did another somersault. The acrobatics had been constant since we'd arrived.

Hux blew out a shaky breath. "If this doesn't happen, we can get this annulled."

"No." I looked up at his profile. "If this doesn't happen today, then we try again. And again."

I'd promised Hux the chance to get his daughter. If the decision today didn't go in our favor, then maybe the next one would. Or the next. But I wasn't going to give up or let Hux give up.

He was fighting, even after the process had beaten him down time and time again. If he needed my backbone to keep going, then it was his.

Hux closed his eyes, letting out an exhale. "Thanks."



“You’re welcome.”

His hand covered mine, trapping it on his thigh and squeezing tight.

The door behind us opened. The temptation to look over my shoulder was too much to resist.

April strutted inside, wearing a demure skirt, pale blue cardigan and—*pearls, really?* She looked like she belonged in the PTA. Meanwhile I was in black slacks and a plain white blouse. Maybe I should have dug out some pearls. April kept her chin high and gaze forward as she marched, followed by a stocky man with dark hair.

Hux didn’t spare them a glance as they took their seats opposite ours, but his already tense jaw turned to granite.

“Is that—”

“Julian,” he whispered.

From what Lucy had told me, the rumor was Julian liked to get rough with April, and April got off on it. Their business, not mine, unless it harmed Savannah. But she wasn’t talking about anything, including the time Julian had slapped her.

The day of the farmhouse, I’d seen the faint red mark on her cheek before everything had fallen apart. Maybe it was the one and only time Julian had touched her. Maybe not.

It didn’t matter.

Slap or not, we were here for Savannah.

The door behind us opened again, and Aiden strode into the room. He was a tall man, about Hux’s height at over six feet. He was good looking with dark, disheveled hair and bright hazel eyes. There was no urgency in his steps as he walked down the aisle, just confidence and charisma. One

hand was tucked into the pocket of his slacks while the other carried a briefcase. He wore a tweed suit coat, a colorful tie and an easy smile.

At least one person on the home team wasn't nervous.

He acknowledged April and Julian with a nod, then clapped Hux on the shoulder and gave me a wink before taking his seat.

"Hi. I'm Aiden," he said, keeping his voice low. It probably wouldn't be good for the Toshes to know that I was just now meeting Hux's lawyer.

"Hi," I whispered back.

"How are you guys doing today?"

Hux's hand gripped mine tighter. "Ready."

Aiden gave him a sympathetic smile that told me he wasn't buying Hux's lie either. "Should be fairly straightforward. We've got Judge Labb today. He'll review the information. Ask some questions. Be honest and you'll do great."

*Honesty?* Uh, no. This entire thing was built on a fake marriage. Honesty was much too risky. I gulped. "Will he ask me anything?"

"Maybe," Aiden said. "Though I doubt it."

"Okay." I let go of the breath I'd been holding, then did a quick glance at my blouse to make sure it hadn't dipped to show cleavage. There were no pearls, but I looked somewhat capable of rearing a sixteen-year-old child, didn't I?

Hux was wearing the same slacks and shirt he'd worn to this very courthouse the day we'd gotten married.

*Please, let this work.*

If it didn't, Hux would be heartbroken. Hux's shoulders were as stiff as steel plates. His mouth was set in a firm line. Those beautiful blue eyes brimmed with dread. He was already preparing himself for disappointment.

I squeezed his hand tighter.

"Will this work?" he asked.

Aiden jerked his head to the woman behind us. "That's the family services agent assigned to this case. She spoke to Savannah. I don't know exactly how it went but she's sitting on our side of the room. I always take that as a good sign."

"What?" Hux's forehead furrowed. "When did she talk to Savannah?"

"Yesterday at school. She arranged for it not to be at Julian and April's place."

Hux scowled. "She didn't tell me."

After Aiden had called last week with our courthouse schedule, Hux had finally told Savannah about the petition. I'd shamelessly eavesdropped on their phone call. He'd told her no less than ten times not to get her hopes up.

Since then, she hadn't spoken to him much other than to reply to his texts.

Maybe the reason Savannah hadn't told him about the family services agent was because she was already preparing for disappointment too.

*Please. Please, let this work.*

I wanted so badly to get Savannah under our roof. Legally. To give her the chance to let her guard down. To open her heart. To heal.

Hux knew part of the reason I'd married him was because of guilt. Maybe it would ease some of those feelings if Savannah grew into a happy, flourishing young woman. But today, that guilt didn't matter. Today, I wanted Savannah for Hux.

He loved her so fiercely, it broke my heart to see his pain.

Hux deserved the chance to be her father. And fuck April for screwing him out of that from the start. If this didn't go her way—*when, stay positive*—I was going to love this front-row seat to see the look on her face.

The door behind the judge's bench opened, and a man with white hair and a bushy, dark gray beard emerged wearing a black robe.

My mouth fell open.

I knew that white hair. I knew that bushy beard.

*Nelson.*

My friend from the café who I'd missed seeing these past few weeks.

Nelson was Judge Labb.

He took his seat and adjusted the placard in front of his chair, the one that had his name etched in block letters on a gold plate. Then Nelson looked right at me, holding my gaze, as the corner of his mouth turned up. Was that a good sign? Because he didn't exactly look happy to see me. It was hard to tell with the beard. He almost looked . . . smug.

*Nelson.* The man I'd lectured relentlessly to give up fried cheese as a lunch staple. The man who knew I'd spent months hiding in my downtown apartment.

The man I'd offered to marry because I didn't have a boyfriend and my prospects were looking slim.

Nelson.

*Oh, fuck.*

---

THE MINUTE that Nelson had stepped out of his chambers, my stomach had dropped, and it had been hovering around my ankles ever since.

*Two weeks a month.*

That's all Nelson had given Hux. He'd changed the parenting plan from no visitation to two weeks a month. Hux was also granted every other major holiday.

I thought he'd be overjoyed. I thought he'd crack that elusive smile. But since we'd left the courthouse, my husband had been eerily silent.

"Hux, I'm . . ." The words dried on my tongue as his jaw ticked.

His hands were so tight on the wheel I was worried the skin on his knuckles would crack. I'd tried to speak twice since leaving the courthouse, but I had no words.

Two weeks a month. That was better than nothing, right? But it wasn't what Hux had wanted and my husband was pissed. Probably because Savannah would still spend half her time with April and Julian.

Who knew what would happen during those weeks? Would April retaliate against her daughter? Would she make Savannah's life a living hell?

The look on April's face as she'd stormed out of the courtroom had been nothing less than murderous. According to past actions, her habit would be to lash out at Hux. But today, she'd lost some of the hold she'd had on him for sixteen years. Would Savannah become her next target?

We'd soon find out.

Nelson—Judge Labb—had put the new plan into effect immediately.

*Nelson.*

Talk about a surprise. I should have asked more questions about his profession during our late lunches at the White Oak.

The only look he'd sent me was the one right after he'd taken his seat. From then on out, he'd been a different Nelson. He'd assumed command of the room and I was merely a spectator. Nelson had put on a pair of wire-framed reading glasses and reviewed the paperwork. Then he'd called on the family services agent to deliver a report from her meeting with Savannah.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise that Savannah had requested to live with Hux. But from the way April had gasped and started crying, you would think Savannah had just stabbed her mother in the back.

None of those theatrics had stopped the agent from delivering the cold, hard truth. Savannah was a troubled teenage girl. Her relationship with her mother was turbulent at best. She didn't have much of a relationship with Julian. And she hated going home.

The agent had speculated some, stating that the reason Savannah might be unhappy with her current living situation was because April and Julian kept her on a tight leash—or

they'd tried. If Savannah thought life with Hux would allow her more freedom to bend the rules, then of course she'd exaggerate.

But in the end, the agent told Nelson that she suspected a change might do the girl good. Especially now that there was a female under Hux's roof.

The entire room, save Nelson, had looked my way. Not even standing on stage, singing to a crowded bar had been so nerve-racking.

But while everyone else had stared at me, Nelson had kept his eyes on the agent, his hands steepled in front of his chin. Maybe he suspected this marriage was a fraud. If so, he hadn't called us on it.

He'd simply thanked the agent, then called on Julian to speak first.

One sentence out of Julian's mouth and I'd wanted to pick up a chair and slam it over the bastard's head.

Julian had instantly reminded Nelson of Hux's past. He'd gone into gruesome detail about the beating Hux had delivered years ago. Then he'd waxed on and on about how hard it had been for April. How he'd stepped into the role of father and wasn't comfortable letting Hux ruin Savannah's life.

I'd never been so furious in my life.

Nelson had listened, taking a few notes as Julian had spoken, but he'd asked Julian no questions. He hadn't called on April either.

No, he'd saved only three questions for Hux.

*You're a newlywed, correct?*

*Do you have contact with your daughter now?*

*She's a troubled young lady, isn't she?*

Hux had given a simple *yes, sir* to all three.

What had happened next was a blur. One second I was sitting there with my heart racing, the next, Nelson had slammed his gavel on its block and vanished inside his chamber before his decision had even registered in my brain.

*Two weeks a month.*

I'd smiled. I'd been so happy. Two weeks! That was so much better than nothing. But then I'd looked to Hux and seen nothing on his face. It had just been . . . blank.

Up to that point, Hux had kept a death grip on my hand. With the slam of Nelson's gavel, he'd let me go. He'd crossed his arms over his chest and sat like a statue as April and Julian huffed their way out of the courtroom.

Aiden had clapped Hux on the back, congratulating him. Reminding him that it was progress.

All Hux had done was nod, stand and leave the room. I'd rushed to catch up, blurting a thank-you to Aiden as I scurried for the door.

The ten-minute drive home from the courthouse had been miserable. The waves of anger radiating off of Hux had turned the cab so stifling hot that I was sweating by the time he pulled into the garage. That scowl of his had never been harsher as he'd shut off the truck, climbed out and marched inside.

*Shit.* Two weeks was better than none.

But it wasn't enough.

I took a fortifying breath and followed Hux inside, bracing for the conversation to come. Could Aiden recommend me a decent divorce lawyer? Or was that a conflict of interest? I had



a feeling I'd need representation before too long. If I was still married by the time summer hit, I'd be shocked.

Hux was in the kitchen, chugging a glass of water when I found him. He'd stripped off his coat, laying it on the island. I did the same with mine.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know two weeks wasn't what you wanted, but it's a start. We can try again."

He set the water glass down too hard. He braced his hands on the island, his gaze locked on me.

My heart thundered. "Hux—"

He shoved away from the island and charged across the space. One moment he was staring at me, the next his body was flush against mine and his hands were threading into my hair. His thumbs caressed my cheeks as his lips crushed mine.

I gasped.

He took advantage, sliding his tongue between my teeth.

What the hell? I was so stunned that all I could do was stand there while he plundered my mouth. While he licked and sucked and nipped. With one last nibble on my bottom lip, he broke the kiss and dropped his forehead to mine.

"Thank you."

"Huh?" I panted.

"Thank you," he repeated. "Two weeks a month is more than I've ever had. It's . . . everything. Don't know why but when the judge came in, looked at you and smiled, I just knew it was going to work this time. This whole thing worked. Because of you."

I blinked. "So you're not mad? Because you seemed mad."

“No, I’m not mad.” He looked at me like I’d completely read him wrong. Which, I had. But seriously, this man’s moods were as hard to solve as a Rubik’s Cube.

“We really need to work on that scowl of yours.”

Hux chuckled, leaning back. “I was afraid if I touched you in that courtroom, I’d fuck you in that courtroom.”

“Oh.” A flush bloomed in my cheeks as I registered the hardness swelling against my hip.

“Thank you,” he said again. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“In orgasms?” I grinned.

Hux laughed, the smile on his face spreading wider than any I’d seen before, just before I lost it and his lips dropped to mine. His hands roamed over my shoulders, falling to cup my ass in his palms.

I inched closer, sliding my hands up his broad chest. Hux was steel disguised as muscle and bone. Beyond that steel was a bleeding heart shielded behind concrete walls built from years of pain. But today, there was no pain.

Today, we tasted victory.

Hux’s lips brushed mine, testing and teasing. He flicked the tip of his tongue at the peak of my top lip, demanding I open for him.

I was just about to drop to my knees, unzip his pants and take him into my mouth when the doorbell rang.

A growl, low and feral rumbled from my chest. “I’ll get it.”

He sighed and let me go, nodding toward the bulge behind his zipper. “It’s probably Aiden checking in. Just give me a sec

to cool off.”

I didn't want him to cool off. Hux was at his best when he was fire and heat and burning desire. But when the doorbell rang again, I frowned and walked away.

Hux didn't have a peephole to check. If he wasn't home, I didn't answer the door. But with him in the kitchen, I shoved old fears aside and twisted the knob.

“Hi.” I gave the man on the stoop a forced smile. “Can I help you?”

He leaned back, looked at the house number tacked outside. “Reese Huxley still live here?”

“Um, yes.” Who was this guy? He wasn't much taller than I was at five seven, but he was nearly twice as wide. Even with a coat on, the extreme bulk of muscle was hard to conceal. He must spend a lot of time in the gym.

And on steroids.

His dark hair was buzzed short and he wore a pleasant smile. But there was something about his dull brown eyes that made me want to take a step inside and bolt the lock.

A single, fast flick of his gaze and he scanned me head to toe. It happened quickly, a size-up similar to the one I'd just given him. But his perusal didn't feel like an assessment. It felt more like he'd seen me before, from afar. And now that he was closer, he was getting a better look.

I inched back, only to collide with Hux's chest.

“Chase?” Hux asked. “What are you doing here?”

Chase grinned. “Hey, man. Long time.”

“Uh . . . yeah. Didn't realize you were in town.”

“Just passing through the area. Wanted to stop by and say hi.”

Hux nodded as a tight smile spread across his face. Either he was still cooling off from our kitchen escapade, or he wasn't all that happy to see *Chase*.

Chase's gaze dropped to me.

“This is my wife, Everly.” Hux put his arm around my shoulders. “Ev, this is Chase Yelder. An old . . . friend.”

“Nice to meet you.” I gave him a little finger wave as I tried to get over the feeling from earlier. Chase was Hux's friend. Nothing more. I shook off the unease and smiled wider.

Hux shuffled us to the side and waved Chase inside. “Come on in.”

“Thanks.” Chase smacked Hux on the arm as he walked inside. “I can't believe I'm standing in front of your wife. Didn't think you'd get married again.”

“Uh, yeah. Me neither.” Hux sighed. “How long are you here?”

“Not long. I'm headed to North Dakota. Hoping to find some work in Williston.”

“Good.” Hux nodded, clearly searching for something to say.

Who was this guy? Because the longer the silence hung, the more I knew *friend* was a generous term.

Chase scanned the room and zeroed in on the couch. “I know this is out of the blue and I hate to ask, but I'm trying to save cash for my trip. Would you, uh, mind if I crashed tonight on your couch?”

*No.* I did not want this guy sleeping here. It was too bad that Savannah's visitation didn't start immediately because that would be the perfect excuse to boot Hux's friend.

"Um . . ." Hux swallowed hard. "This is kind of a strange time for us."

"Say no more." Chase held up a hand. "I'll just crash with Katie."

Katie? He knew Katie.

Chase took one step for the door, but Hux shot out a hand. "No. It's okay. You can crash here tonight. Don't call Katie."

"Thanks. Appreciate it." A smile stretched across Chase's face. A victorious smile, like he'd played the Katie card and knew Hux would falter.

The unease crept further into my veins. I shoved it aside and assumed my smile, biding time until Hux and I could have a word alone. "We were going to order—"

"Go out to dinner." Hux cut me off and shot me a look to keep quiet. "We were going to head out to dinner. Grab your coat, babe. Let's go."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

“YOU LOOK ready to fall asleep in that chair.” Jane collected the empties from our last round of drinks. And by round, two waters for Hux and me, plus a beer for Chase.

“I am.” I yawned. “No offense, but I’m ready to get the hell out of your bar.”

She smiled, the leathery skin of her cheeks forming lines around her mouth and eyes. “Honey, even I want to get the hell out of my bar. Any chance you can round those two up?”

“I’ll do my best.”

In the past hour, I’d watched as she’d wiped down the tops of every table, except ours, and cleaned the bar itself. Then she’d washed glasses and taken out the trash.

Hux had gotten the hint that it was well past time for us to go, but he seemed to be dragging the evening out, like he didn’t want to go home with our uninvited house guest.

The three of us had been the only patrons here for going on two hours. There’d been a crowd for dinner—the cheeseburger special had drawn in some locals who, like us, hadn’t wanted to cook. But now it was pitch black outside and well past midnight.

I yawned again and looked up to see Hux at the pool table, watching me.

“We’re almost done,” he mouthed.

I nodded, my eyelids heavy.

Maybe I’d learn how to play pool so I wouldn’t be consigned to watching when Hux’s friends from prison decided to stop by Calamity for a Monday night on the town.

Hux and Chase had spent most of the evening reminiscing about old times. The stiff tension had slowly bled from my husband’s shoulders as the night had gone on, but it hadn’t disappeared entirely.

Maybe because Chase was a serious douche bag.

I’d learned that Chase had been in prison with Hux, the two of them cellmates. Chase had been rather forthcoming about his crime—aggravated burglary. He’d broken into an auto-parts store intent on stealing some parts to resell. Unbeknownst to him, a janitor had been in the building, and instead of going home and rethinking his nefarious plan, Chase had clocked the janitor over the head with a flashlight and gone about his merry theft.

He’d laughed and joked during the entire retelling of his story.

Silly me, I hadn’t found it funny. Hux hadn’t either.

But Chase had kept on chuckling, talking like it was fate that he’d been arrested and sent to prison where he’d then befriended Hux.

After their respective paroles, Chase had come to Calamity to visit Hux a few times over the years. From what I could glean, Chase was a wanderer. Either by choice or



circumstance, the guy didn't have a permanent address or a bed of his own—unless you counted the bed of his own truck.

For Hux's sake, I wanted to like Chase. My husband had so few friends, and since Katie and I hadn't found our groove yet, liking Chase would have been a welcome change. Though, Hux didn't seem to enjoy Chase's company either. It was more like he tolerated it.

He nodded along at Chase's stories. He gave more of those tight smiles. Maybe something had happened in prison and Hux felt obligated to host his friend.

Whatever the reason we were here at the bar, that creepy vibe I'd had from the beginning hadn't disappeared. It had only gotten worse.

Call it paranoia, but I knew what it was to be watched.

And Chase was watching.

My neck prickled, and sure enough, when I glanced again at the pool table where Hux and Chase had been playing for hours, it wasn't my husband's eyes waiting. It was Chase.

He grinned, like he was glad that I'd caught him staring.

A shudder rolled down my spine and I hugged my arms around my middle.

*It's not the same.* I'd been telling myself all night. It was not the same.

Chase was not a stalker. Tomorrow morning, I wouldn't wake up to pictures of me in the mailbox. He was not out to hurt me or my friend. This was just a strange man who happened to be friends with Hux. Maybe his social skills were rusty from prison and time spent living out of a vehicle.

When we'd run into Kerrigan last week, Hux had mentioned that the reason he hadn't been introduced to her was because they didn't run in the same circles. Was this his circle? People like Chase?

Because if so, we were finding him a new circle.

The clack of the cue ball hitting the eight ball echoed in the empty room, as did the plunk of Hux sinking the last shot.

*Thank God.* Game over. Time to get the hell out of here. Before Chase could put two more quarters into the pool table, I stood and pulled on my coat.

"That was fun," I lied. "But Jane wants to close so we'd better head home."

"One more game," Chase protested.

Hux hung up his pool cue, then came to the table to grab his coat. "I'm getting tired too."

"Come on. Don't be that guy, Hux."

"What guy?"

"The guy who does whatever his wife tells him to do."

Hux's nostrils flared. "Let's go."

"You used to be more fun," Chase muttered, tossing his pool cue on the green felt.

*Super douche.* I fought an eye roll.

Hux took my hand, lacing our fingers together. Then he waved at Jane and led us to the parking lot.

"You remember Matt?" Chase asked as we climbed into the truck. "Big guy. Three cells down from ours."

"Uh . . . not really," Hux muttered.

“Sure you do. Anyway, he got sent back,” Chase said, then proceeded to tell us all about how Matt was such a fuckup.

It wasn't his first story about a former prison acquaintance. Chase had been throwing names into the conversation all night, asking Hux if he remembered Jim or Greg or Bob. He was metaphorically peeing on Hux's leg, marking his territory, so I'd know that I was new here.

*You knew Hux first. Got it.*

If Chase wasn't talking about old prison buddies, he was asking about Katie. It was unfortunate that Hux had intervened before Chase could crash on her couch instead. Why hadn't he just let Chase leave? Why stop him?

The second we were alone, I was asking Hux all the questions I'd been sitting on tonight.

Chase had hinted at making his stop in Calamity two nights. Which meant tomorrow I was going to plan a sleepover at Lucy's place because there was no way I could survive another evening like this.

I didn't need reminders that Hux had been in prison, and a *shut the fuck up*, Chase was on the tip of my tongue. Not that I was ashamed of Hux. No, what I hated was the fact that every time Chase brought up prison, Hux would tense. He'd withdraw deeper. He didn't need or want the reminders either.

“Well, I'm beat,” I said the second we walked inside our house. “I'm going to bed.”

“Same.” Hux slapped Chase on the shoulder. “You need anything?”

“All good. I'll grab my bag and make myself at home.”

“See you in the morning.” Hux placed his hand on the small of my back and led me up the stairs.

“Ugh,” I said when he closed the door to our bedroom behind us. “Okay, what’s the deal with that guy?”

Hux walked to the edge of the bed, slumping to the edge. “He was my cellmate.”

“Yeah. I got that.”

“There were some fights in prison. He always had my back. When we got out, he kept in touch. Would come visit sometimes.”

“When you lived with Katie? Is that how he knows her?”

Hux nodded. “He rubs her the wrong way. She doesn’t like him much.”

“In that, Katie and I are in agreement.”

“I didn’t want him going over there. Bothering her. Figured if we could just put up with him for a night, it would be easier on everyone.”

*Katie.* It would be easier on Katie. Meanwhile, his wife had to suffer.

“Why did we have to stay at the bar so long?” I yawned.

“Did you really want to sit around here and make small talk?”

“Fair point,” I mumbled. “You can’t let him stay here. Tonight has to be it. He’s . . . annoying.”

Hux rubbed a hand over his jaw. “One night. Then he’s gone. I finally got Savannah. Last thing I need is April getting wind that someone I knew in prison is hanging around.”

“Another good point.” Would it be rude to evict him tonight? *Yes*. Damn.

“It’ll be fine.” Hux stood, working free the buttons on his flannel shirt. “Knowing Chase, he’ll get restless and be gone from Calamity tomorrow morning.”

“I hope so,” I said, going to the bathroom to get ready for bed. I was asleep seconds after my head hit the pillow.

So when I heard a clang in the middle of the night, I sat up gasping for air and searching the darkened room, listening for another noise. Other than Hux’s breathing, it was silent. He was sprawled on his stomach beside me, totally dead to the world.

I twisted toward the alarm clock’s green glow. Ugh. Three forty-seven. I needed at least five hours of sleep to be functional. Snuggling into my pillow, I squeezed my eyes shut and willed myself back to sleep. But thoughts of Savannah drifted into my head. Would she like living here? How had she taken the news? Had Julian and April even told her yet?

After thirty minutes, I knew sleep was pointless. No matter how tired I was, my mind was awake and there’d be no shutting it off. So I slipped out of bed and tiptoed into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash the makeup off I hadn’t bothered to last night. Then I pulled on my red satin kimono robe, one Lucy had gifted me two Christmases ago, and tied its sash around my waist.

I was halfway downstairs when I remembered we had a guest. *Shit*. Cinching my robe tighter, I padded as quietly as possible, hoping Chase was as sound a sleeper as Hux because I really needed some coffee. Then I’d disappear into the office upstairs and hide until everyone was awake.

But my hopes were thwarted. The couch only held a rumpled blanket. Clothes were piled on the floor beside the coffee table.

“Morning.” Chase’s voice startled me as he rounded the corner of the kitchen. He was wearing a pair of black briefs and nothing else. He’d probably caused the noise that had woken me up.

“Hi.” *This is awkward.* I kept my gaze glued anywhere but on his almost-naked body. “I’m just going to get a cup of coffee. Then I’ll get out of your way.”

“No worries.” He nodded, keeping his gaze glued to me.

Chase stood between the island and the fridge, his large body filling the space, so I walked all the way around to get to the coffee machine. I plucked a mug from the cupboard and set it in place as the water percolated. Never in the history of the world had a cup of coffee filled so slowly.

*Brew, damn it.*

Chase walked closer, coming to the space at my side. He leaned against the counter, crossing his massive arms over his chest.

I shifted, sidestepping away.

He came closer again.

Another sidestep for me.

An advance from him.

What the hell? This was bullshit. Absolute bullshit. This was my house and he was a guest. Was this some sort of intimidation tactic?

Fuck this guy. I met his gaze and raised my chin. “Would you mind getting out of my bubble?”

He sniffed the air. “You smell nice.”

The arrow on my mental creep-o-meter jumped from mild to extreme. “I’m really not yours to smell.” Not a sentence I’d ever thought I’d have to say. “Please. Step back.”

He uncrossed his arms and made a move like he was going to leave, but then a hand shot out and wrapped around my forearm, dragging me closer.

The motherfucker put his nose to my hair.

“Don’t touch me.” I tried to wrench my arm from his grip, but he held it so tight there’d be a bruise.

“I saw you looking at me all night.”

Uh, what? This guy was delusional. “Let me go.”

“I saw you this weekend too. Shopping at the store. You and Hux going up and down the aisles together. Couldn’t hardly believe it. Was happy for him, that he found a good woman. But then you were eye fucking me last night and now he’s gotta know you’re just another whore. I know all about what his ex did to him. Won’t let you do it too.”

My heart dropped. No. No, not this again. Panic from the past came rushing back. Fears I’d tried so hard to beat surged to life.

Chase had been watching us.

He’d been watching me.

I couldn’t fill my lungs. The strength left my arms and my mind blanked as he leaned in again. It was the scent of his

morning breath that snapped me out of my panic. But even as I tried to get free, his grip only tightened.

“Get the fuck away from her.” A roar filled the room, and in a flash, Chase was out of my space. Hux had ripped him away and with a shove, Chase’s hip slammed into the counter. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“She wants me, man.” Chase held up his hands. “Last night, she kept staring at me. Then she sneaks down here this morning to make a play. You gotta know. I’m just looking out. I always got your back.”

“What?”

“I’m telling you, she wants me.”

Oh, God. My stomach churned. “No. Never.”

“Get out.” Hux’s arms flew into Chase’s chest, shoving him out of the kitchen. One shove, then two, and Chase tripped over his own feet, nearly falling but he caught himself at the last minute. Before he could stand firm, Hux shoved him again.

“Hux. Come on,” Chase pleaded. “We’re friends.”

“Get. Out. No one touches my wife.” He kept pushing until Chase’s back rammed into the wall beside the front door. Chase had the bulk on Hux, but Hux had height, speed and fury.

Hux threw the door open and without the slightest second of hesitation, pushed Chase outside.

The door’s slam rattled the house.

Hux strode to the couch, scooping up Chase’s duffel bag and clothes from the floor. I stayed on my feet long enough to



watch as he whipped the door open and threw Chase's belongings into the cold.

But then my knees gave out and I was sinking to the floor, curling into a ball. The same ball I'd been in for hours the day the stalker had fired a gun into my home in Nashville.

There was shouting in the background. There was another slam of the door. But I stayed tight in my ball, fearing that when I looked up I wouldn't be in Hux's kitchen. My kitchen. I'd be back in Nashville with broken glass scattered over the floor. Or I'd be back in the farmhouse, knowing that my life and my friend's life were about to end.

"Ev." Hux's hand came to my shoulder, but I didn't loosen the grip on my knees. "Babe, look at me."

I couldn't look at him. Didn't he know that?

"He was watching us," I whispered.

"What?"

"He was watching us."

A tremor raced through my bones, threatening to break me apart. My throat was closing. My head spinning.

I wanted to cry and scream and disappear. But before I could decide which mental breakdown I was going to have, Hux scooped me into his arms and carried me upstairs.

It was with the gentlest touch he laid me in bed. I stayed curled into my ball, my chin tucked into my knees, as I melted into the mattress. Then Hux was there, his arms wrapping around me as he cocooned his large body around mine.

"He was watching us," I whispered again.

“You’re safe, Ev.” He buried his nose in my hair. “I got you.”

Maybe today.

But what happened when this charade was over? He had his daughter. Eventually the ruse would end.

And I’d be back at the window, being the one who watched others. Because there was no one to watch out for me.

Not really.

Not even my husband.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

## EVERLY

“ARE YOU SURE?” Hux asked.

“Of course.” I widened my smile, hoping to disguise how badly I wanted to escape this house. “You two should have some time together. Alone.”

Hux sighed, then picked up his truck keys from the counter, handing them over. “It’ll get easier.”

“I know it will. But you guys should do something together today. It’s a Saturday. Take her out to lunch or a movie or something.” I didn’t care what they did as long as I had a break.

I clutched the keys so tight the metal dug into my palm. But these keys were my ticket to freedom, and I wasn’t giving them back until I had at least five hours away from Savannah.

Talk about a difficult child.

Why had I thought we’d gel together like a happy family? Clearly, my head had been in the clouds.

It had been two weeks since the incident with Chase. The asshole hadn’t shown his face around our house again, but maybe he was still in Calamity. Chase was as good as dead to Hux. If Hux knew of Chase’s whereabouts, he hadn’t mentioned it.

Just like he hadn't mentioned my panic attack either.

That day, he'd held me tight until I'd fallen asleep. When I'd woken up, he'd been there with so much concern in his eyes it had only made it worse. He'd seen me break. He'd seen me crumple. Maybe we should have talked about it, but I'd asked him to let it go. He had.

No discussion.

Not a word.

I'd channeled my energy into readying for Savannah's first stay. Maybe I'd been burying my fears, pretending that everything would be fine. Everyone had their coping mechanisms and preparing this home for a sixteen-year-old had been mine.

The couch where Chase had slept had been deep cleaned. Any surface that he may have touched had been thoroughly scoured and sanitized. Then I'd spent a day in Savannah's bedroom, making sure it was fresh and bright with new white bedding and a vase of pink roses on her nightstand.

When Hux had gone to pick her up from April's, I'd been so excited. So ready. So hopeful.

So idiotic.

Savannah had taken one look at the flowers and muttered, "Ugh. I hate pink."

Said the girl wearing a magenta tee beneath her black hoodie.

I'd ignored it and moved on, thinking she just needed a little time to settle in and loosen up.

Seven days later, I wanted to pull my hair out and scream. Savannah hadn't given an inch. She wasn't as hostile to Hux—

for her father, she gave him the occasional smile and actually made eye contact when she was speaking to him. Every glare, eye roll and muttered sarcastic comment was saved for me. The stepmother.

How could she hate me so much? How could we go through what had happened in the farmhouse and come out enemies? My only crime against Savannah had been to marry her father.

Oh, the irony. This marriage was part of the reason she was even here in his home.

My artificial cheer was beginning to fade and before I snapped, it was time to get some space.

“See you tonight,” I told Hux, then made my break for the garage.

“Ev?” He stopped me before I could disappear.

“Yeah?”

The worry etched on his handsome face cracked my heart. “You good?”

“Great!” *Too much force.* I dropped my gaze, unable to look into those blue eyes and hold it together.

Hux was slipping. He was letting emotion show. And that wasn't who we were, was it?

We didn't worry for each other. We didn't care or compliment. We didn't depend on each other.

We were fleeting. Temporary. Counting on Hux to help me pick up the pieces would only cause me strife down the line.

“See you later.” I waved, then slipped into the garage and climbed in his truck. As soon as I pulled away, the weight of

the week settled heavy on my shoulders.

Had I been that difficult when I'd been a teenage girl? Maybe I should call my mother and apologize, just in case. Because if I'd been anything like Savannah, well . . . She was not making it easy. Thank goodness for school or I would have taken up day drinking by now. When I'd woken up this morning, I'd known I'd never make it through an entire Saturday.

So I was going to work. Not that my job at the gallery was a real job but . . . details. I'd rather deal with Katie than Savannah.

Katie's attitude was a warm hug compared to Savannah's, even though Katie hadn't thawed in the slightest, no matter how many days I spent at the gallery.

We avoided each other as much as two people could in the small space. I'd organized the storage room and deep cleaned the studio space on the second floor. Then I'd spent hours in Hux's office developing a new inventory system to better track sales and assets. Katie might rule the showroom, but I was going to dominate the accounting portion of the business.

Reese Huxley Art would follow Generally Accepted Accounting Principles to precision.

That fact might actually make Mom and Dad proud.

The drive to the gallery wasn't long enough and when I pulled into the space beside Katie's SUV, I flipped it off, then screwed on my fake smile to go inside.

"Good morning," I singsonged, mostly because it made her visibly cringe.

"Morning," she mumbled, her gaze glued to her computer screen.

I made a move for Hux's office, but then decided against it and walked into the showroom, crossing enemy lines.

She'd rearranged some pieces this week, making space to highlight one of Hux's newest paintings. It was a horse, one I'd seen him working on in his studio. He'd made the animal's soul come to life on that canvas. The dark brown eyes were mesmerizing with little flecks of caramel. I wasn't sure why, but whenever I looked at it, my heart squeezed. Like the animal was trying to send me a message.

Be brave. Have courage. Don't give up.

"Do we have to sell this one?" I whispered.

"What?" Katie asked.

"Nothing." I waved it off, wishing this horse could be mine and stay with me always. "The new layout looks nice."

She narrowed her eyes.

Was a *thank you* so damn hard? What the hell was it with people? Why was everyone so sure I was going to ruin Hux's life? Katie. Chase. Savannah. Couldn't I just be married to the guy for two years, have a lot of sex, then move on with my life?

*Walk away. Don't pick a fight. Just walk away.*

I walked away. "I'll be in Hux's office if you need anything."

"I won't," she murmured, just loud enough for me to hear.

"You might." I stopped walking. "You don't take a lot of days off." Katie was always here. Six days a week without fail. "Is there someone who helps in the summer when it's busy?"



“Hux.”

“Besides Hux.”

She squared her shoulders. “We don’t need other help.”

Seriously, I was not a Katie fan. “But don’t you get tired of working nonstop?”

“No. I helped Hux build this place from the ground up. It’s as much mine as it is his.”

*Uh, no it’s not.*

Her name wasn’t on the sign out front. Either she was trying to insinuate, again, that she was more important in Hux’s life than I was. Or she truly believed this place was hers. Not entirely a bad thing when it came to employees. Katie was nothing if not loyal to my husband.

Without another word, I left her arena and disappeared to Hux’s office, closing the door and with it, shutting out the outside world. I settled behind his desk and splayed my hands on the clean wooden surface.

It was beginning to feel like mine. My seat. My job. My pride. I’d spent a lot of hours here in the past few weeks. Maybe I couldn’t fault Katie for taking ownership in this place, not when I felt the same. She wasn’t the only one claiming the gallery as her something special. With every passing day, this place became more and more important in my life.

It would be hard to walk away when the clock ran out on my marriage, but I wasn’t leaving empty-handed. I’d found something here.

A talent. A calling. A career.

I liked business management. I liked organizing.

I liked . . . accounting.

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks falling from the sky.

“Noooo.” I dropped my head to the desk, banging it once. Twice. “Ouch.”

I sat up straight, rubbing away the ache in my forehead, then pulled my phone from my purse and called Lucy.

“I like accounting,” I said the moment she answered.

Lucy laughed. “Cynthia? Is that you?”

“Funny,” I deadpanned. “This is a nightmare.”

“I take it that the gallery’s books are shaping up.”

“I’m getting there,” I said. “I’ve emerged from the mountain of wadded-up receipts and sticky notes. My goal is to finish getting this year’s books cleaned up in the next week or two. Then start my audit of the past few years.”

I shuddered, thinking of all that I’d find. Hux’s accountant prepared his taxes every year based on the numbers that Katie and Hux piecemealed together. I had zero confidence in those figures. I only hoped Hux hadn’t understated income so he wouldn’t be hit with a tax penalty should the IRS ever come knocking.

“What are you doing?” I asked Lucy.

“Oh, I was just playing around with a new song.” The strum of a guitar drifted through the phone.

Not all that long ago, the two of us would have sat on our couch in Nashville, each with a guitar on our laps, and played songs for hours. Part of me longed for those days, when Lucy and I would sing whatever lyrics she’d dream up. Song writing

had never been my strong suit, but she had a way of stringing words together with a melody that snared you from the first note.

I missed those days.

What I wouldn't give for a rewind button on life, not to fix my mistakes, but to relive the moments I hadn't appreciated enough.

"Will you sing it for me?" I asked.

"Um . . . are you sure?"

"Of course. Just because I don't sing much anymore—"

"Or at all."

"Whatever." I giggled. "Just because I'm not singing doesn't mean I don't love your music. I've missed it. I've missed hearing the early versions of your songs, the ones that were always just for me. I've missed being your guinea pig."

"I've missed that too."

We couldn't go back to the Nashville days, but maybe we could find even better in Calamity. And when this marriage to Hux was over and I moved on to wherever it was I moved on to, Lucy and I could do this over the phone. Today seemed like the perfect chance to practice.

I relaxed into the chair, closed my eyes and smiled. A real smile for the first time in a week. "Okay, I'm ready."

Lucy strummed a minor chord that brought goose bumps to my skin. Then she crooned a melancholy song about a woman overcoming heartbreak. The lyrics, the melody and the harmony were almost painful to hear. Because this fictional woman in Lucy's song didn't feel quite so fictional.

It was like Lucy had looked into my future and seen the woman I'd become after leaving Calamity.

Because as often as I told myself that this thing with Hux was pretend, deep in my heart, I knew it was beginning to feel real. It had started in the courtroom two weeks ago. It had started the morning he'd saved me from Chase.

He'd leaned on me for support.

I'd curled into the safety of his arms.

*Damn it.* Nothing good would come from me falling in love with my husband.

So I was going to pretend that it wasn't happening. That it hadn't *been* happening.

"Pretty song, Luce," I said when she finished.

"Is it too sad?"

"No," I promised. "It's brutally beautiful."

"It's one the album never would have let me do before."

Before the stalker and before we'd found out that her former producer had sold her out.

Now Lucy was doing an album on her own terms with a new label. She'd record them in the studio she and Duke were having built at their house, and she'd forgo the hectic concert tour schedule to simply enjoy catching her own songs on the radio.

Without a doubt, it would be her best album. If that song was anything to go by, this album was going to cement Lucy Ross as a country music powerhouse.

"Sing it again."

And she did. She sang it along with a couple of others she'd been working on, and even though she was on one end of town and I was on the other, I hadn't felt this close to my friend in months.

It settled a fear in my heart, a fear I hadn't acknowledged. I didn't need to live my life alongside Lucy to keep her close. When I left here, she'd always be with me, even from afar.

After our call, I dove into work, spending my morning tying sales information to my sold inventory logs. Hux would actually be able to see at a glance how many horses versus bison versus landscapes he sold in a given year.

I spent the lunch hour wading through the bank account and credit card transactions to make sure all expenses had been recorded—they hadn't been. Then I spent a couple of hours auditing recent sales to credits. Most were fine, but about one in ten sales had been fat-fingered and his income had been skewed.

There were also a handful of sales from the past twelve months that were about a thousand dollars less than I'd expected them to be, given the typical price of a painting of each size. Hux had probably run a sale or something. Maybe those were less popular pieces that he'd sold at a discount?

My stomach growled around three, reminding me that I hadn't eaten for hours. I emerged from the office to find Katie in the showroom, dusting the light fixtures that extended from the walls to illuminate individual paintings.

"I'm going to get some lunch. Would you like anything?" I asked.

"I ate at noon." *Like normal people.* The unspoken words rang loud and clear. Katie didn't spare me a glance as I pushed

through the front door.

The minute I stepped outside, the clean April air filled my lungs and raised my spirits. Hux's office was dark, the walls a deep teal and the furniture rich brown. The couch was camel leather. His desk was a wood the color of dark chocolate. Strolling into the sunshine was like emerging from a cave.

A couple passed going the opposite direction, each carrying paper cups from the coffee shop. I greeted them with a smile, then aimed my feet toward the White Oak.

The door's bell greeted me like an old friend when I stepped inside, as did Marcy. After a short gab to catch up, she nodded to my usual chair.

And another familiar face.

"You're a judge." I settled into the seat beside Nelson's and stowed my purse. "That's got to be an interesting job."

Nelson chuckled, a grin stretching behind his bushy beard. "Some cases are more interesting than others."

"Anything else I should know?"

"I ordered the special for lunch. With chili cheese fries."

"Nelson," I scolded.

"This is your fault. You haven't been here for a while and I'm afraid the old habits came back."

"Yes, this is my fault." I laughed and when Marcy came over, I ordered the special. With a salad.

"How's it going with Savannah?" Nelson asked as we waited for our tuna melts.

"She's a teenage girl."

He chuckled. “I had one of those once. My hair turned white during those years.”

“You have a daughter?” Seriously, I really should have asked this man more questions during those lunches.

“And a son.” He nodded. “Both are grown up and gone. My daughter lives in Phoenix. My son is in Atlanta.”

“Are you married?” He didn’t wear a ring, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything.

“Divorced.” Nelson’s statement was devoid of emotion and matter-of-fact.

Before long, I’d have that marital status too. Except I couldn’t think of the word *divorce* and not feel a sting. Hopefully it would fade in the years to come.

The chatter ceased when Marcy delivered our lunches. Nelson and I settled into a comfortable silence, eating until our plates were clear and our checks paid.

“See you next week?” I asked, standing from my chair.

Nelson nodded. “You’re the only other person in Calamity who eats lunch at three o’clock.”

“I like to avoid the crowd.”

He grinned. “Me too.”

I turned to leave, but the curiosity was too much. “You knew. About me and Hux.” About our fake marriage. “Why didn’t you say anything that day?”

“I figured if you would lecture me, a stranger, about eating healthy, you might be the mother that girl needs.”

“Thank you.” My heart swelled. Nelson had reminded me of my purpose here. He’d bolstered my determination to stick

this out for Savannah.

“Don’t make me regret it,” he said.

“I won’t.” I waved goodbye and walked out the door, returning to the cave of Hux’s office. After another two hours of finding mismatched numbers, my eyes began to cross and I decided to call it a day.

“Good night, Katie.”

She ignored me as I walked out the back door.

“Oh, what a bitch,” I muttered to myself as I climbed into Hux’s truck.

Knowing that I was about to trade one attitude for another, I scowled the whole drive home. A deep, crease-between-my-eyebrows Reese Huxley frown. Then as I pulled into the driveway, I summoned that sunny face I’d been wearing all week—all month—and went inside.

“Hux?” I called as I walked through the house. No answer. “Savannah?”

She didn’t answer either, though that didn’t mean she hadn’t heard me.

I dropped my purse on the island in the kitchen and walked outside to Hux’s studio, finding him on his stool with a paintbrush in one hand and green stains on the other. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He swiveled on his stool. “How was the gallery?”

“Fine.” I sighed, walking to his side. “I have a list of questions for you about some price discrepancies. And before you tell me to ask Katie, know that I’m going to ask you anyway.”



“Okay.” The corner of his mouth turned up. A little smile, one I’d been earning more and more often. It was endearing, like all things Hux. Too endearing. But at least it wasn’t his blinding smile. If he flashed that at me every day, then I really would be screwed.

I never should have told him to work on that scowl.

“You should also know that if I ever find a receipt wadded up into a ball and tossed on your desk, I’ll withhold sex for a week.”

He chuckled, shifting on his seat to dig in his pocket. His hand emerged with a receipt, balled per his usual. “Haven’t washed these jeans in a while. Found this in the pocket earlier.”

I took the paper and uncrumpled it. “You’re awful.”

“Probably not gonna change. Just like you’re probably not gonna withhold sex.”

“Stubborn and arrogant is not your best look.”

Yet he wasn’t wrong.

Sex with Hux was the best part of our relationship and there was no way I’d cut it out. It was simply too good to resist. So I refolded the receipt neatly and tucked it in my own pocket for safe keeping. Then I took in the canvas on the easel and the forest he’d been painting. “This is new.”

It was a forest and only a forest. There was no horizon. No mountains or sky. Only trees and their trunks, disappearing into a mossy floor.

The base layers were dark and ominous, the forest haunted by misery. It lacked the bright colors of his other pieces, and

though he would often add the lighter shades last, even those wouldn't chase away the despair.

"Is something wrong?" I put my hand on his shoulder.

He blinked, staring at the trees like he hadn't really taken a step back to look at the piece as a whole. "No. I don't know."

"Is it Chase?" I cringed at the asshole's name.

"He shouldn't have touched you, Ev. He shouldn't have watched us. I shouldn't have let him stay."

God, his voice. It broke my heart that he was hurting. "I'm okay."

Hux stared at the painting for a long moment, then he surged to his feet, tossing the brush in a cup of water. He swiped his hands on his jeans, leaving new streaks of dark green on the denim. When they were marginally clean, those strong, talented hands framed my face.

But he didn't kiss me. He simply studied, like he was memorizing my face. His thumb traced the line of my jaw. His finger circled my temple.

"The only man who touches you is me," he said, his voice husky and as dark as the painting. "The only man who watches you is me."

I melted at the intensity of his gaze. The way those words would have made me feel if this were a different situation . . . But there was no denying my heart. It swelled, wishing it was more than physical affection and Hux's alpha male kicking in.

I wished he'd say those words because he wanted me. For years and years to come.

His powerful body inched closer. The hardness of his chest, the heat, seeped into mine.

My breaths shortened as he pushed his hands into my hair, tugging hard enough for the slightest bite. That sting sent a pool of desire to my core.

“Where’s Savannah?” I whispered.

“Went to dinner and a movie with a couple friends.”

“Oh. Good for her.” And good for me.

We’d had to change our sexual escapades since she’d been here this week. No sex on the couch or in the kitchen. No screaming his name in the shower. But bedroom sex with Hux was never a letdown and keeping quiet had become a new challenge.

“Take me inside,” I said.

He shook his head, his mouth lowering. “No. I’ll take you right here.”

I surrendered to his kiss. I dropped my guard. I let myself pretend.

For tonight, I was his.

For tonight, he was mine.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

“PICK ONE.”

Savannah’s jaw dropped. “Are you serious?”

“You’re sixteen. Time for a car, baby girl.” And I was fucking sick of her on that bike.

Her hands came to her cheeks as a smile spread across her beautiful face. Then she squealed and took off, racing through the lot.

The cars at the dealership sparkled beneath the morning May sunshine. Savannah darted between the glossy red, navy, black and silver vehicles. Her legs couldn’t move fast enough, and her fingertips skimmed trunks and hoods as she rushed from one row to the next.

She’d protested when I’d offered her a car earlier this year. But I’d had a feeling that once we were here, where she could see and touch the cars, she’d be more willing to give up that damn dirt bike and accept the gift. Turns out, I’d been right.

“Think she’s excited?” Everly giggled.

My heart swelled as I watched my daughter.

This was my first. Savannah’s first car. This moment didn’t belong to April or Julian. It was mine.

I put an arm around Ev's shoulders, pulling her into my side to drop a kiss to her hair, dragging in a long breath of lemon and lavender. "Thank you."

"You can stop thanking me."

"No, I can't." I'd never be able to express how grateful I was for her help in getting Savannah.

And for the energy she'd brought into my life.

Life with Everly had taken me by surprise. *She* had taken me by surprise. Ev had the grit to gut out the hard moments. She had a smile that made the good ones shine like the sun. Along the way, it had stopped being about sex. Or only sex. She'd become a constant. A companion. Maybe even a friend.

I loved listening to her sing in the shower. She didn't know I listened, but I'd hang in the bedroom while she belted out a song. Ev had some pipes, that was for sure. But if she didn't want to sing professionally, I wouldn't push. I'd simply keep that voice of hers for myself.

Then there were the times when I'd find her in my clothes. She'd steal a flannel shirt of mine instead of pulling on her own sweater when the evenings were cool. She'd stolen a pair of my wool socks to wear at night around the house.

When this ended in a couple years, it was going to be brutal watching her walk away. Or maybe I'd be the one to walk when it was time to ditch Calamity.

Savannah was busy snapping photos of cars, probably to text to her friends and ask their opinions. So we stood by, smiling at the joy on my daughter's face.

It had been a month since Savannah's first two-week stay at our place. That first visit had been rough. Savannah hadn't made it easy on Everly. She'd been standoffish and short, but

I'd expected some attitude. My daughter wasn't going to let anyone into her life without testing their resolve first.

I might not have been there to raise her, but Savannah was a chip off her old man's block.

This past week marked her second stay with me. It had been better, mostly because Savannah had been busy with homework as the school year neared its close. She'd spent most evenings at the island with books and papers scattered over the surface.

But today was Saturday, and rather than see Everly run away to the gallery and avoid us all day, I'd decided to take them car shopping.

Both of them.

"Okay, your turn." I nudged Everly away from my side.

"My turn for what?"

"A car. Pick one."

"Oh, no." She shook her head. "I can't, um . . . that's okay."

I knew she couldn't afford one. Everly was still paying Kerrigan rent for the studio above Calamity's upcoming fitness studio and she wouldn't let me pay her for working at the gallery.

But she was getting a car today.

"Either you pick, or I pick."

"You can't buy me a car, Hux."

I stepped up to a black Jeep, peeking in the window. "How about this one?"

"Hux." Ev planted her hands on her hips.

“I like the black.” It matched my truck.

“No.”

“Sick of you stealing my truck, baby.” I walked to a black Tahoe, this one larger than the Jeep. It would be good to have her in something a little bigger. Same with Savannah.

“I can’t afford a car, Hux.” She sighed. “Not until I get a real job.”

“You have a real job.”

Everly had been working her ass off at the gallery. She’d spent hours going over my books, shoring up mistakes and making lists of questions. It had allowed me to spend more time in the studio, doing what I loved. There were only a couple days a week where I even went to the gallery these days.

Katie might not be her best friend, but it was good for them both to be there so neither worked alone.

Tourist season was getting into full swing and we’d just opened seven days a week. I’d have to spend more time in the gallery covering the showroom, but Everly could help keep us from getting buried. Despite Katie’s protests, she’d see this was a good thing.

I trusted Katie implicitly and knew that when she saw things were changing for the better, she’d be fine. Besides, if there was anyone who could make you love them, it was Everly.

Not that I loved her.

This thing with Ev was so different. Complicated. Maybe there were feelings there, but love? *No*. Couldn’t be. That was a line I wasn’t going to cross. Affection, yeah. I could give her



affection. I could give her friendship. But that's where it had to end.

Or I'd never recover leaving her behind.

"Consider this payment for your work at the gallery," I said.

Everly shook her head. "I'm not worth that much."

I scowled, striding over to where she hovered behind the black SUV, and put my hands on her shoulders. "You're worth this and more. Let me buy you a car. Please."

"That was sweet," she said. "You're not supposed to be sweet."

"Not sorry."

She dropped her forehead, letting it collide with my chest. "A car is too much."

"No matter what you say, we're driving off the lot with one today."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Argue all you want, either you pick the one you want, or I'll pick it for you."

She poked me in the ribs, making me laugh. "Why are you so stubborn?"

"Takes one to know one." Not giving a shit whether it was a boundary we should or shouldn't cross, I wrapped her in my arms, knowing exactly how she felt against my body. Then I dropped a kiss to her lips, soaking in her softness. "Would you please pick one? Please?"

"Fine," she muttered. "You win."

"Good." I kissed her again.

“Ew.” Savannah’s groan split us apart. “Can you cut down on the PDA? It’s bad enough at home.”

Everly and I didn’t kiss at home. Not like this. Did we? Yeah, we touched a lot. But it wasn’t like this. That was foreplay. Wasn’t it?

Just this morning, she’d settled into my side while we’d been drinking coffee. Savannah hadn’t woken up yet and Ev had stood on her tiptoes to nibble on my ear. I’d thought about carrying her upstairs, but then Savannah had walked in on us and the erotic shower I’d had in mind had been postponed.

*Foreplay.* Not PDA. Foreplay.

A distinction I wasn’t going to explain to my child.

“Did you pick a car?” I asked, shifting Everly under my arm again.

“Maybe I could get that red one.” She pointed to the deep red sporty Mazda at the end of a row. “Then I can leave it in your garage.”

“That’s fine.” As long as it had all-wheel drive for the winters. “But why would you leave it in the garage?”

“Because I have my bike.”

“Uh, the bike goes.” Why would she want to drive it around? She wouldn’t need it if she had a decent car.

Savannah clenched her teeth. “Then I don’t want a car.”

“That bike isn’t safe.”

“But I like it.”

“Why?”

Savannah crossed her arms over her chest and dropped her gaze to the asphalt, shutting me out.

Everly looked up and motioned with her chin that she was going to leave, but I held her in place. She shouldn't have to disappear during these conversations. She was Savannah's stepmother, even if it was new and short-lived. And I wanted Savannah to see a good woman. To have a decent female role model in her life because April was not that person.

Everly could be.

"Talk to me," I pleaded with Savannah. "Tell me about the bike. Help me understand."

"It's *mine*." Her arms dropped to her sides, her hands balling into fists. "Julian hates that bike. So does Mom. But they can't take it away from me. I hide it whenever they try until whatever made them mad blows over. You can get me a car, but I'll never take it to their house. Never."

"Because they'll take it away."

Savannah turned her face, giving us her profile. "They take everything away. I'm not letting them take my bike."

Everly stiffened, shaking her head. She didn't have to say anything because we were both thinking the same. *Assholes*.

"I don't want you on that bike. I'm worried someone will hit you. That you'll get hurt. A car is safer."

"We'll put the car in your dad's name," Everly said. "Julian and April can't take it because it's his. Or we could put it in mine. They'd have no claim to it."

Savannah huffed. "What do you know?"

Everly flinched and held up her hands in surrender. "Just trying to help."

Before I could stop her, Ev was out of my hold, walking away toward the other corner of the lot.

This was the only dealership in Calamity. It wasn't the sprawling acres of concrete you'd see in bigger towns, but there were enough cars that she'd be completely out of earshot and out of sight.

*Fuck.*

"Don't do that," I snapped.

"What?" Savannah feigned innocence.

"Don't treat her like that." If she only knew half of what Everly had done for her.

"You're so pussy-whipped."

I blinked. *What the fuck did she say?* "Excuse me?"

"You've known her for like, a hot minute. And then you married her. Who does that? She's using you, Dad. And you're totally blind because you guys are screwing every five minutes."

I rocked back on my heels, her words slicing deep. "Everly isn't using me."

No, it was the other way around.

"Please." Savannah rolled her eyes. "You're not exactly hurting for cash. She got the enormous ring. You're here to buy her a car. It's sooo obvious."

"Glad to see you have so much confidence in me that I'd let someone use me like that."

"You don't exactly have a good track record with wives."

Christ, I was getting my ass chewed out by a sixteen-year-old. How had we gone from smiling and car shopping to a fight? I didn't want to argue with Savannah. I didn't want to

risk chasing her away when I'd just gotten her. For the first time in her life, she was mine.

And I wasn't going to lose her over something she didn't understand.

"Let's just drop it." I raked a hand over my jaw, wishing I could go back in time ten minutes. Then I unglued my feet and walked to Savannah. "I know you're just looking out for me, but Everly's a good person."

"Whatever."

*Fuck, I hate that word.* "Come on. Let's check out this car."

Savannah spun on her sneaker and strode toward the Mazda. I followed, casting a glance over my shoulder to see Everly by a row of trucks. Her eyes were aimed at the mountains in the distance. Her arms were crossed over her chest. She looked miserable and I almost went to her, but we'd finally been spotted by a salesman and he was marching her way.

Everly heard his voice and turned. Then, like I'd seen a hundred times, she put on a smile and carried on.

Because that was how she dealt with everything.

She faked it.

She let the world see one version and hid the truth deep inside. And damn if she wasn't convincing. Maybe too convincing.

Had I fallen for it too? Was Savannah right?

Everly might have grumbled about the car, but she'd agreed. She'd done the same with the ring. And the job. All of

them were my idea but she'd gone along with them. And I knew she was hurting for money.

Was this one of her reasons for marrying me? Son of a bitch. Because I had plenty of reasons in the bank? She knew my balances. She had full access at the gallery and to my personal accounts.

We hadn't signed a prenup and Ev could walk away from this marriage with a huge payday.

My kid was insightful, even if she was a teenager. Maybe Savannah had seen something I'd been missing.

*No.* Everly wasn't like that, was she?

Except as my daughter had pointed out, my judgment was shit when it came to my wives.

My stomach plummeted, the happy mood from earlier long gone, even as we looked over Savannah's car. Everly dragged the salesman over to us and I negotiated a cash price for two vehicles—Savannah's Mazda and Everly's Tahoe.

I bought the Tahoe to shut Savannah up, to show her that I had faith in Everly, no matter the doubts she'd planted in my head. Everly deserved her own mode of transportation, if nothing else, and the car was in my name.

But damn those doubts. On the drive home, with Savannah and Everly both following, I couldn't seem to shake them loose.

“Think I'm gonna hit the studio for a while,” I said when we walked in the door. The forest painting, the dark one, was calling my name. I hadn't even realized it was such a foreboding piece until Everly had asked me if something was wrong last month. Since then, I'd put it aside and gone back to my usual work, but today, I wanted the black.

Everly picked up on my mood and nodded as I walked past her for the back door.

“Dad?” Savannah called, stopping me before I could disappear.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for the car. I really love it.” A smile illuminated her face, one that melted me every time, just like it had when she was a little girl.

I was living for that smile. My frame relaxed. “Glad you like it.”

“Travis is working at the theater today. Can I drive it down there and show him?”

She’d been spending a lot of time with Travis and I hadn’t asked what was happening. I didn’t want to know, especially today.

“Be safe.”

She nodded and hurried out the door.

“Hux?” Ev stopped me when my hand was on the handle.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

It was sincere. Too sincere? The doubts took control. “Why’d you marry me?”

Her forehead furrowed. “What?”

“Why’d you marry me? You said reasons. Maybe one was because you felt guilty about the farmhouse. Was another one of those reasons my money?”

The color drained from her face. “Y-you think I married you for money?”

“Well, did you?”

Everly flinched.

*Son of a bitch.* Before I could take it back, she was gone, racing out the door. The Tahoe tore out of the driveway—because she’d let Savannah take the other space in the garage—and left me alone.

Hell. I hammered a fist onto the counter. “Fucked that up, didn’t I?”

The empty kitchen didn’t respond.

Not that it needed to.

---

“HEY,” I told Katie as I walked into the gallery.

“Hey.” She smiled, looking past me. Her smile brightened when she saw I was alone. “What are you doing here today?”

“Just thought I’d check in,” I lied.

I was actually searching for my wife. But given that Katie and Everly were still adjusting to one another, I didn’t want to give my friend any ammunition to use against Ev.

I’d given Everly some time to cool off, but when she hadn’t come home after six excruciating hours, I’d decided to go find her myself. First, I’d driven by Lucy and Duke’s place, thinking that’s where she would have gone. No Tahoe. Then I’d checked her apartment. Empty. Finally, I’d come here.

“We had a good day. A really good day.” Katie stayed in her chair but jittered with excitement. “Lots of walk-in traffic,



and I sold one painting.”

“Which one?”

“The landscape you did of Ruby Range.”

That was an expensive one. The piece was huge and we’d had an eleven-thousand-dollar price tag on it.

“That is a good day.” I whistled. “Nice work.”

Katie’s chest puffed with pride. “Thanks. I was so excited to tell you.”

I leaned on the side of her desk and glanced around the gallery. She’d done a great job staging it for the early summer rush. Everything hanging was popular. The buffalo busts. The colorful landscapes. Katie might not be the best bookkeeper, much to Everly’s dismay, but she knew how to sell my work.

“I appreciate all you do here. Hope you know that.”

“Of course.” The color rose in her cheeks. “This place is important to me too.”

Because she’d built it with me from the beginning. Katie had been through it all, standing by my side with quiet, stoic support. We bounced ideas off one another. We celebrated the wins.

What did it mean if she was so standoffish with Everly? If both she and Savannah were uneasy about my wife?

What was I missing?

I shoved those questions away because I’d find no answers here.

The doubts had already ruined my Saturday.

“I was thinking about offering Savannah a job here,” I said. “She could sit and man the desk so you could have some

time to yourself.”

Katie waved me off. “I don’t need any time to myself. It’s not like there’s anything waiting for me at home.” Katie hadn’t dated anyone in a few years, and her last boyfriend had been a major dick. “And you’re here to help.”

“Not as much lately. I don’t want you feeling stuck. Besides, it might be good for Savannah to have a job.”

“I’m happy to train her. Show her how it works. Maybe she could do some evenings here and there until school is done. Then she could take the slower days.”

“Everly would be happy to cover too.”

At the mention of my wife’s name, Katie’s expression dimmed. “I really don’t need any help.”

Not wanting to argue with another woman in my life, I changed the subject. “What else is happening?”

“Nothing much.” She shrugged. “Guess who called me?”

“Who?”

“Chase.”

I stood straight, my hands fisting at my sides. “What the fuck?”

Katie knew what had happened with Everly and Chase. How he’d been watching us, and how that son of a bitch had given her a bruise on her wrist. When I’d told Katie what had happened, it had been the one time she’d actually softened for Ev. After all, Katie didn’t harbor a lot of love for Chase either.

“You hate him,” I said.

“Yes, I do.”

“Then why talk to him?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t. But I answered. Call it curiosity. I knew he’d have some story or excuse.”

“What did he say?” I asked through grinding molars.

“That you misread the whole thing, and he wanted me to talk to you.” She worried the corner of her lip between her teeth. “Hux, you know Chase annoys the hell out of me and I think he’s a freeloading prick. But are you sure that it wasn’t Everly who led Chase on?”

Ice raced through my veins.

The look on my face must have been murderous because Katie started shaking her head furiously. “Never mind. I was just relaying the conversation.”

“That motherfucker came after Ev. End of story.”

Maybe I’d doubted Everly’s intentions and let Savannah’s words sink too deep. But there was no way I’d misread the incident with Chase. He’d touched my wife. *My wife*. He’d terrified her.

The way she’d trembled afterward was something I wouldn’t forget. Her entire body shook until she’d finally succumbed to sleep.

Had I misinterpreted that? *Fuck no*.

“He’s not welcome here, Katie. He shows up, you send him packing.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Sorry. I know he’s full of shit, but I got to thinking and . . . maybe he had a slight point. You’ve been different lately. Since Everly.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but she was right. Ever since Everly had walked into my life, things had been different.

Of course Katie would notice. She was the closest person in my life, my best friend, and since I'd gotten married, I'd barely spent time with her.

The two of us used to work together to stage the gallery once a month. We'd close down on a Friday night and order pizza. Then over a beer or two, we'd change the layout for the next month.

On the Fourth of July, we'd go up on the roof and watch the town fireworks display together. Christmas dinner was always at her house, just the two of us because after her parents' divorce, they'd both remarried and moved away from Calamity. Katie had always felt like the outsider with the new family members.

So I'd been her family. And she'd been mine.

Adding Everly to the mix had changed everything. The cold, monotonous life I'd lived before her was gone. She'd brought a lot of color into my life. She'd brought passion.

It wasn't Katie's fault that she needed some time to adjust.

Maybe we both did.

"I know things are different," I said. "But I'm always here."

"Same to you." She gave me a sad smile. "Want to go grab some dinner? I was craving a burger from Jane's."

"I can't tonight." Disappointment crossed her face. *Shit*. Any other day, I'd go with her. Spend some time with my friend. But I needed to find Ev and apologize. "I have Savannah this weekend. Rain check?"

"Of course."

“I’ll get out of your hair.” I pushed off her desk. “Let you close up.”

“See you later.” She slid off her chair and went to lock up the front door as I slipped out the back.

The evenings were longer now, the spring air fresh and warm. The sun was sinking toward the horizon for its nightly kiss. The yellow and orange glow shrouded Calamity in its beauty.

I sat in my truck but when the engine turned over, I was unsure where to drive. Where would she go? Home?

I’d called Ev a few times and each had gone to voicemail. She didn’t want me to find her. She wanted some space and time alone.

I could give her that.

So I pulled away from the gallery, taking a familiar route out of town to the highway. The grass was green and lush along the road. I rolled down my window, letting the breeze clear my head. The drive to my property in the foothills didn’t take long. I’d just check it out, kill some time before going home. Because once I got there, I’d be calling and texting Everly, begging her to come home so I could apologize in person.

Turns out, I didn’t need to go home.

As I emerged from the tree-lined dirt road into the meadow, I realized the reason I couldn’t find Everly in town was because she was here.

Something twisted in my chest at the sight of her Tahoe. Something unnerving and comforting at the same time.

Everly hadn’t run to her safe place to get some space.

No, she'd come here.

To mine.

Parking beside her SUV, I got out of my truck and opened her passenger door, sliding inside.

She didn't break her gaze from the meadow, the grasses darkening in the fading light.

"I'm sorry."

She didn't move. She didn't blink.

"Ev."

"Do you really think so low of me?"

Christ, I was such a dick. "No."

She finally tore her gaze away from the windshield and faced me. Her eyes were red-rimmed. Her face splotchy.

I'd made her cry.

"Fuck, Ev." I reached for her face, framing it with my hands. "I'm sorry. I'm so goddamn sorry."

Her eyes flooded. "I have never been anything but honest with you."

Maybe she didn't confess everything, but even when she held something back, she'd done so explicitly.

I pulled her closer, swiping at the tears on her cheeks with my thumbs. "I'm an asshole."

"Yes, you are." She pulled out of my hold. "You're not getting sex for a week."

I fought a smile. "What made you come here?"

"I don't know." She sighed. "I started driving and I guess . . . I like it here. It's peaceful. I needed some peace."

It was the same reason I'd come here too.

But another realization came crashing down as I stared out the window.

The peace wasn't in this meadow. It wasn't the grass or the flowers or the trees.

The peace was at Everly's side.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---



EVERLY

TODAY WAS A BAD DAY.

It certainly wasn't the first bad day. It wouldn't be my last.

How could Hux think that of me? How could he believe I was a sleazy gold digger out to rob him blind? Maybe I should have fought harder on the car and the ring. Both would be returned to him when I left Calamity, but I should have spelled it out. Except never in my mind would I have suspected Hux assumed I was with him for money.

After all that we'd been through, how could he?

I'd been furious earlier, but now I was numb.

Today was a bad day. A truly bad day. The ache in my chest felt deeper than the ocean. Vaster than the sky.

Hux's apology didn't lessen the pain.

As easy as it would be to blame him for this hurt, the problem in this car wasn't him. It was me.

While he afforded me so little grace, my faith in him was endless.

Wives should believe in their husbands. Real wives should. And damn it, I wanted it to be real. With every passing day, I

wanted to belong to someone special and have that special someone belong to me.

I wanted that special someone to be Hux.

Impossible. He'd made his desires crystal clear. Love and marriage and family were off the table. Luckily, thanks to a failed singing career, I had practice living with disappointment.

The meadow was nearly dark now. Moonbeams lit the tips of grass blades and flower petals barely in bloom. I stared disappointment in the face and let it soak through my skin.

This marriage had been a mistake.

"I'm walking on eggshells with Savannah." His quiet confession drew my attention.

"We both are."

He nodded. "I missed her life. I missed her being born. I missed her as a baby. I missed her first steps and her first tooth. I missed her first day of kindergarten."

"None of that was your fault."

"Yes, it was. I landed myself in prison. Not a day goes by that I don't wish I could go back and slap some sense into my younger self. Tell him that he's about to miss out on the greatest thing in his life."

My heart squeezed. Never in our time together had Hux spoken with such emotion. And tonight, for the first time, he was showing me his heart. He was showing me the man who created paintings from his soul.

"All I've ever had were glimpses of her life," he said. "And now . . ."

“Now that you have her, you don’t want to lose her.”

“Yeah.” He reached across the console and lifted my hand off my lap to his. “I’m fucking this up.”

“No, not with her.” Even though Hux hadn’t been allowed to participate in her life, no one could stand between the two of them and not feel the love between father and daughter.

“Sorry,” he whispered. The regret in his voice was my undoing. “Forgive me? I care about you.”

*He cared.*

Care wasn’t a promise for the future. Care wasn’t the same as undying love. Except care was something, wasn’t it? He’d admitted to feeling more for me than I’d hoped for.

He cared.

And I hoped.

It was foolish to let down the guard around my heart. It was reckless to look into his eyes and give into that hope.

But today was a bad day.

Tomorrow, I’d pick up the pieces.

So I leaned across the console and fit my lips to his. “You’re forgiven.”

Hux didn’t let me lead the kiss for long. He never did. One moment my tongue was in control, sweeping across his lips, teasing the corner of his mouth. Then the next, the dominant, voracious lover I’d come to cherish emerged and I was but paint on his skilled brush.

The console dug into my ribs as he pulled me closer. It wasn’t close enough.

He unbuckled my seat belt, then with his hands under my arms, he hauled me to his side of the car, only breaking our kiss for the briefest second as I settled my knees outside his bulky thighs.

As he kissed me again, I dove into his pocket, searching for the condom he always kept on the left side. But the pocket was empty so I tore my lips away from his. “Hux, where’s the condom?”

He shifted lower, his hand taking my place. It came out empty too. “Fuck. They’re at home.”

Probably because he’d been working at home exclusively and that was where we were together. Which did me no favors today. Hux owed me an orgasm or two, damn it. I wanted to feel him move inside me and let him toy with my body until I exploded.

We’d always used a condom, even though I was on birth control. “I’m on the pill.”

He hesitated, his chest heaving with his heavy breaths. Hux didn’t voice his decision. He just flicked the button open on my jeans and shimmied them along with my black panties down my hips.

It wasn’t easy in the cramped space, but I managed to pull off my shoes and then lose the pants entirely.

“Dresses. You gotta wear more dresses,” he muttered as he worked his own jeans down his hips.

I smiled, then dropped my gaze. The rigid length of his cock sprang free and a rush of heat enveloped us as I settled on his lap again, waiting for his command.

Hux put his hands on my hips, guiding me down on his shaft. Slowly, inch by inch, we connected. And when he was

buried, stretching me to my fullest, I collapsed on his chest and savored the delight.

“Fuck, you feel good, babe.”

I hummed my agreement, pressing my nose to the apex of his neck and dragging in a long breath. Spice and soap and paint. That was my Hux. And he was bare inside me. Nothing separated us but the emotional walls we’d put into place. Barriers that maybe didn’t need to exist in this car. Rules that my foolish heart wanted to break.

“Move,” he ordered, his hands guiding me.

Up and down, I worked us together, rolling my hips each time he was rooted deep. My clit throbbed against his hardness. I braced my hands on his shoulders, my fingertips digging into the soft flannel of his shirt.

“Lift your knee,” he said, urging it off the door where it was jammed and past his ribs. “Damn, you’re flexible.”

That was his doing. Every night Hux seemed to stretch me in new ways. He’d contort our bodies together, pressing with those large hands, until I was molded into his body. Until we could reach new positions and new heights.

He was the reason I could sink down on him now, changing the angle so the tip of his cock hit the spot that made every muscle in my body shake. The place Hux had claimed that very first night. Hux owned every memory from Calamity, even the ones before we’d met. Because they’d all led me to him.

“Ev.” His gravelly voice wrapped around me like silk. “Look at me.”

My eyes locked with his blues and . . . *crash*.

I loved him.

I was undeniably in love with Reese Huxley.

His sweet moments. His scowl. The way he loved his daughter. The way he made me feel safe.

Emotion clawed at my throat but I swallowed it down, holding those blue eyes that peered straight into my soul. He made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. He made me feel special. Craved. I was his addiction and he was mine.

A flash crossed his gaze. The intensity of his stare spiked as the windows fogged.

Never in our time together had it been like this. The tether between us wasn't only physical. Not anymore. Here, in this moment, we were raw and vulnerable. Two wounded hearts. Bruised and battered and broken, their ragged pieces fit together into a piece of art.

Tonight, we were real.

“Ev.” His whisper made my breath hitch. He stopped helping me move and brought his hands to my face, his palms cupping my cheeks. His fingertips traced the lines of my cheekbones. The ridge of my nose. The contours of my lips.

Then one hand dropped between us and with the easy swirl of his thumb, the orgasm I'd been chasing came upon me in a rush.

“Hux.” My body tensed as pleasure overwhelmed.

When I came with Hux, we both let out cries and moans, riding the wave until I collapsed onto his chest and squeezed my eyes shut to lock away another memory.

Hux helped me off his lap, then cradled me in his strong arms, holding me tight as we breathed.

It was a tender moment. One we normally didn't share. Hux wasn't much of a cuddler and after sex, we were usually so spent, we'd flop onto our pillows and fall asleep.

"Ev, I—" His hold tightened as he buried his nose in my hair.

"What?"

"Nothing," he murmured.

Then the moment was gone. He let me go and opened the door, the night air whooshing in and chasing away the steam. He stepped out and helped me into my jeans and shoes.

When we were both dressed, he took my hand, pressed a kiss to my knuckles and said, "Let's go home."

Maybe tonight had been the night we'd needed. This could be our turning point.

Nothing about this marriage was fake. Not for me. Not anymore.

Maybe tonight, Hux had realized it too.

---

"DAD, can we go out to breakfast?" Savannah asked, waltzing into the kitchen the next morning.

I glanced at the clock. It was seven thirty. This kid hadn't woken up on a weekend morning before ten in any of the weeks she'd been with us. But here she was, dressed in a cute green sweater and jeans.

This breakfast idea was about a boy.

“How about the White Oak?” I suggested.

She shrugged, but there was a small curl to her lips. “Yeah. I guess. I just don’t want cereal.”

Uh-huh.

I shot a glance at Hux, who was at the island, drinking his coffee and scrolling through something on his phone. “Fine by me.”

“Give me ten to get dressed,” I said.

Savannah didn’t have a smart-ass comment for a change. No quip that ten minutes was too long or not enough. So I raced away from the kitchen before the demon teenager could return.

Dressed in a pair of leggings and one of Hux’s flannels with the sleeves rolled up, I tugged on some knee-length boots and met them downstairs.

“I’ll drive.” Savannah jiggled the keys to her Mazda in the air.

Yesterday on the way home from the dealership, I’d watched Savannah peel out of the parking lot and leave tire marks on the pavement. No way I was getting in her car if she was behind the wheel, but I bit my tongue.

Thankfully, Hux swiped the keys from her hand. “This is breakfast. Not our last meal.”

“Hey!” She tried to get the keys back, but he raised his arm in the air and laughed as she jumped.

His gaze met mine over her head and the twinkle there was enough to melt me into a puddle.



God, that smile. Gone was the man who had wrapped his heart in chains. He stood there, open and free, showing the playful and generous soul he'd been hiding behind that stern exterior.

Savannah was lucky to have him as her father. She'd probably never know how lucky she was, or the lengths he'd gone to for her.

But I did. I'd appreciate him on her behalf until she was old enough to learn the truth.

"Fine." Savannah planted her hands on her hips, finally giving up on the keys. "You can drive."

Hux bent to drop a kiss to the top of her hair, then he repeated the gesture with me. "Nice shirt, babe."

Sweet lord, I was in so much trouble.

*What if . . .*

What if Hux didn't want a divorce either?

We could live here together. Happily. If he did want to leave Calamity after Savannah graduated, we could pick a new home together. Maybe we could add to our family.

Hope swelled and I let it loose. What if—

"Are you coming?" Savannah asked, startling me out of my daydream.

"Oh, um . . . yeah." I forced a smile and followed them out of the house and into the truck.

The two of them chatted as Hux drove us downtown while my mind kept spinning.

Would he want to stay married? I mean, it would be easy. No divorce. No moving out. It wasn't like the sex was getting

anything but better. And I didn't need an all-consuming love story. My parents had survived decades together on much, much less.

Why should we get divorced when what we had going was a good thing?

We reached the White Oak too soon, parking in one of the few available spaces on First.

Hux got out first, opening the back door for Savannah. Then he came to me, opening my door before ushering us inside.

The café was busy, nearly all of the tables and booths occupied. It was definitely too busy for Nelson to be here, though I scanned the room for him anyway.

“Morning.” The host, a teenage boy, took three menus from the stack beside the door. He barely glanced at Hux or me. His eyes were glued to Savannah.

Ah, yes. The reason we were here.

“Hey, Jordan.” She flicked a lock of blond hair over her shoulder.

Jordan grinned. “Want the corner booth?”

“I guess.” She shrugged. “Sure.”

Jordan led the way, Savannah falling into step right behind him.

“Who the fuck is that?” Hux's scowl was out and as magnificent as ever. *Poor Jordan.*

“Jordan, apparently. I thought she liked Travis.”

He grumbled something, then strode after the kids. Jordan was smart enough to set the menus down and disappear before

Hux and I could catch up.

“Savannah—” He began the inquisition, but then at once, his attention turned and his mouth snapped shut as he stared at the booth beside ours.

Everything about Hux’s demeanor changed. The light attitude from this morning vanished. The scowl he wore out of irritation morphed into a cold, indifferent glare. His hands fisted at his sides as he stared at an older man sitting beside a woman with gray liberally streaked through her blond hair. Across from them was a man who looked a lot like my husband.

Savannah followed Hux’s gaze to the table, recognition dawning.

Hux’s family. This had to be his parents and brother.

The older man slid from his seat, his eyes locked on Hux as he stood. The resemblance was there too, not as strong as with Hux’s brother, but it was there, hidden behind a weathered face and thinning hair.

Hux’s father said nothing. Not a word. He simply took out his wallet, lifted out a stack of bills, and set them on the table. Then he brushed past me without so much as a glance. His wife, Hux’s own mother, was close to follow.

The brother stood last, actually acknowledging our presence. “Reese.”

If Hux had been tense before, he went completely rigid at his first name.

I slid my hand into his, forcing his fist to relax. On the other side, Savannah did the same. Maybe the two of us hadn’t figured out our groove yet, but in this we were united.

“Caleb.” Hux jerked his chin.

“Heard you got married.” Caleb’s gaze, a dull blue, drifted my way.

I couldn’t help myself. I held out my right hand. “I’m Everly. And you are?”

Caleb tensed. He had the same nose as Hux. The same profile, but this guy was soft. His body wasn’t nearly as cut and lean. His looks weren’t as striking and handsome. “I’m Caleb. Reese’s brother.”

“Oh.” My hand dropped. I smiled wider, infusing it with a bit of evil. “*That* Caleb.”

He quickly looked away, his gaze darting to Savannah and then to Hux, before he walked past us, like his parents, to disappear out the door.

This was why I ate at weird hours. The White Oak was a great restaurant, but clearly, it wasn’t safe until after noon.

“Nice of them to say hi.” Savannah rolled her eyes, then slid into the booth.

But Hux stood rigid and unmoving, staring at the place where his parents had been seated. “They look old.”

The ache in his voice twisted my heart. “When was the last time you saw them?”

“Five years.”

They’d gone five years without bumping into one another in this small town. “How—oh, right. Different circles?”

He answered by ripping his hand free from mine. He did it so violently that I jolted. Then he shot me a look so cold and distant, it stole the air from my lungs.

*No.* We'd come so far last night, hadn't we? We'd had that moment in the car. The laughter this morning.

But as I stood there, surrounded by restaurant chatter and the sound of forks scraping against plates, my husband shut down. Shut me out. Hux erected a wall three times as thick as the one he'd had there before.

"Savannah, let's go." He motioned to the door.

"But—"

"Now."

She was wise not to argue. She slid out of the booth with a huff, then marched to the door.

"Hux, honey—"

He didn't wait for me to finish. He simply walked away.

He followed his daughter.

And left me behind.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

I KNOCKED on the door to my own damn office, hesitating at the threshold. “Hey.”

Everly looked up from the computer. “Hi.”

“We’re out of kraft paper. Got any extra rolls tucked away?”

“Did you check upstairs?” she asked, standing and rounding the desk.

“No. If you tell me where, I can look.”

“That’s okay. I’ll go.”

I gave her room, letting her slip past me and down the hall to the stairs. Then she disappeared while I hovered. Waiting.

“Excuse me,” Savannah snapped from behind.

I jerked, twisting and moving to the side. “Sorry.”

“Whatever,” she muttered, carrying a box past me and into the storage room.

She emerged, with the right size box this time, just as Ev came down the stairs with a new roll of paper in her arms.

I saw the collision before it happened. Savannah wasn’t stomping around like she had been all morning. Everly was rushing so she could disappear into the office and avoid me.

“Oof.” Everly’s shoulder connected with the wall as Savannah came barreling out of the storage room.

“Jeez.” Savannah glared at Ev. “Do you mind?”

Everly opened her mouth and the fire in her eyes said she had a retort on the tip of her tongue but she stopped herself before anything came out. She plastered on that fake smile and stepped back. “Sorry.”

“Savannah.” I arched my eyebrows.

“Sorry.” She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

Two *whatevers* in less than two minutes. Today was going to be fun.

As my daughter took her box to the showroom, Everly held out the paper roll. “Here.”

“Thanks.”

She nodded, avoided eye contact, and the moment I inched back far enough, she bolted into the office.

It had become her sanctuary over the past two weeks. My wife spent more time in my office than she did in my bed.

But I didn’t know what to say, so I turned and took the paper to the showroom, where Katie was helping Savannah wrap a painting.

“Like this?” Savannah asked.

Katie nodded from where she was kneeling beside my daughter. “Perfect.”

“Okay.” Savannah finished with the layer of bubble wrap, then looked to the roll in my hand. “Now the paper?”

“Yep.” I tore off a long piece and handed it over, only to have her snatch it from my hand. The icy mood she’d been in



since arriving was taking a while to thaw.

We'd spent the morning wrapping up three different sales so Savannah could learn all the steps. Bubble wrap, kraft paper, corner protectors and the box. Sunday mornings, even in tourist season, were slow to start so we had a mess in the showroom from the lesson. But we'd been open for an hour and eleven o'clock was approaching. Soon, we'd have a steady stream of people in and out until we closed at seven.

Packaging shipments was one of the tasks Savannah would be doing when she worked here. For now, Katie was going to continue being the face of the gallery. Savannah would come and do some easy jobs, like shipping and cleaning, until she was more comfortable. Then Katie and I had decided that Savannah would cover evenings.

Eventually.

We were treading lightly for the moment. Savannah would only work here on Sundays for the time being. It was a way for me to see her every week, not just the two when she was at home.

It had been two weeks since I'd bought her the Mazda and she was back to April's. I'd managed to convince her to take her car too. The dirt bike wasn't history, yet, but I had hope.

April, of course, had thrown a fit about Savannah working. Not to me. Since the courthouse, I hadn't seen or heard from my ex-wife directly. No, her new torture tactic was to throw a raging tantrum at home to Savannah. April would put our daughter in a shit mood and send her my way.

Like she had this morning.

"There's one more painting to pack," Katie said, standing. "I'll go grab it."

I waited until she was gone, then I blew out a long breath and turned to Savannah. “Okay. What’s up?”

“Nothing,” she muttered, refusing to meet my eyes.

“Try again. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!”

“Savannah.” I kept my voice cool and calm. Slowly, I was learning that Savannah needed a small push to open up. Another father-daughter similarity. As long as I didn’t get angry and as long as I didn’t give up, eventually she’d let out whatever it was that was bothering her.

Savannah stood and paced away toward the wall, stopping in front of her portrait. Her frame slumped as she took it in. For her age, she was carrying far too much.

I walked over and put my hands on her shoulders. “What happened?”

“Mom,” she whispered. “We got in a fight this morning.”

Exactly as they had before Savannah’s last couple of visits. April chased her out of the house, ensuring her own child was angry, sulking or hurt—sometimes all three. I’d known from the moment Savannah had walked through the gallery door this morning that today had been no different.

“They don’t want me working,” she confessed.

“Why?”

“Julian says my grades aren’t good enough. That I should be doing schoolwork instead.”

“School’s important. But what’s wrong with your grades?”

“I have a B in government and a B minus in chemistry.”

“Uh . . . what’s the problem?”

She turned and looked at me like I was crazy. “I can’t get a C.”

“But you don’t have a C.”

“But I might.”

“And the world will keep spinning.”

My parents hadn’t understood why my brother could maintain a four-point GPA and I was perfectly fine living with a two point five. But their pressure to get perfect grades had only turned me bitter about school and destroyed the idea of college.

“You don’t get it,” she muttered, turning to march away, but I caught her by the elbow and brought her back.

“They are grades. If they bother you, we’ll work harder at getting them up. But if you’re good with the B and B minus, so am I.”

Her eyebrows came together as she thought about it, then she sighed. “I don’t want a C.”

“Okay. Bring your chemistry here on Sundays and after you get done with work, you can sit in the office and study.”

She nodded, her chin dropping. “Mom said you’re trying to buy me.”

*Fucking April.* “Buy you?”

“With the car and now the job. That you want me to hang out with you because you’re trying to get back at her. That you don’t really love me, but I’m the only way you can keep trying to ruin her life.”

*That. Bitch.* I hauled in a long breath, fighting to keep calm. If I blew, it would become about April, not Savannah.

“Contrary to what your mother thinks, my world doesn’t revolve around her.”

Savannah didn’t look up.

I tucked a finger under her chin, tipping it up, and only when I had those blue eyes did I tell her the truth. “My world revolves around you.”

Her eyes turned glassy. “But you don’t love me.”

“What?”

“You never say it,” she cried, her arms wrapping around her middle, like she hadn’t just slammed a dagger into my heart.

I’d never told my daughter that I loved her.

The realization nearly dropped me on my ass.

“Savannah, I—” My voice cracked as the words choked.

Never in my life had three words been more important. What if I screwed them up? What if I said them and she thought it was only because she’d brought it up?

Why the hell hadn’t I said it before now?

Every person who’d said it to me had betrayed me. They’d left me behind. My parents. My brother. April. All people who’d claimed to love me but didn’t actually know what the fuck love meant.

But not Savannah.

I loved her with every beat of my broken, miserable heart.

“I’m sorry,” I said, reaching for the tear that dripped down her cheek. The apology felt almost as important as the words to come. “I’m sorry I didn’t say it out loud, but Savannah, there is no person in this world I love more than you.”

Then she collapsed, falling in my chest as her entire body shook from the sobs in her throat. They echoed in the gallery and down the hallway.

I clung to her, holding her tight as she cried in my arms. I pressed my cheek against her hair and whispered, “I love you, Savannah.”

That only made her cry harder.

“Hux, is everything—” Everly came rushing out of my office, but when she spotted us, she mouthed, “Is she okay?”

I nodded.

And with that, she backed away, leaving me to hold my daughter as she cried. I whispered *I love you* over and over, knowing I had sixteen years to make up for. But I’d do it. If it took me the rest of my life, I’d be the dad she deserved.

It took Savannah a while to stop crying but she pulled herself together and looked up. “I love you too, Dad.”

That was all I needed in this life.

Love from this beautiful girl.

The door chimed behind me and I turned, nodding to the customer walking inside. It was a middle-aged woman with a straw hat wearing a Yellowstone National Park T-shirt. A tourist. “Morning.”

“Good morning,” she said, already moving toward the wall of paintings.

“You good?” I asked Savannah quietly.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Okay. Let’s get this place cleaned up.”

While Savannah and I busied with the packing supplies, Katie came in to greet the customer and answer her questions about the style and artist. It was something I always hated doing, talking about myself.

There were artists who got off on preening for customers and showering them with details about the process and inspiration. But I didn't want to explain my art. Because though it had become an income source, painting calmed my soul. It centered me.

If they didn't pay me to paint, I'd do it anyway. I didn't need or enjoy the praise, so after I got Savannah settled upstairs with some cleaning supplies, I slunk away to the office.

"Hey." Knocking before I came in was getting old, but in the past months, this office hadn't felt much like mine anymore.

"Hi." She glanced up from the computer screen. Her smile was tight. Her eyes wary.

In the past two weeks, things between us had been . . . off. It had started at the café when we'd run into my parents. After that, Everly had pulled away.

The two of us hadn't touched one another since. Every night when I went upstairs to bed, she was on the couch reading. She'd promise to be up soon, but that normally lasted until I fell asleep. Then on the nights I was late in the studio, she'd be asleep before I came inside.

"Is Savannah okay?" she asked.

"Yeah." I nodded. "Just shit with April."

"Makes sense." She turned her attention back to the screen, dismissing me.

“Might pop to the store. Need anything?”

Ev didn't even look up. “Nope.”

“Want anything specific for dinner?”

“I'm going to dinner with Lucy tonight.”

“All right.” Another day and evening apart. I sighed, grateful for it.

These past two weeks, the mounting tension had made it nearly impossible to breathe when we were in the same room.

How did I fix this? I would if I had the slightest clue. My first instinct was sex but every time I moved close enough to touch her, she moved away.

Whatever I'd done the day we'd run into my family had pissed her off. Severely. Maybe she was waiting for me to explain my reaction to my parents and brother, but I'd needed some time to work it out myself.

Seeing them had brought back a lot of emotions. A lot of failures, or perceived failures. And real failures too.

I'd needed some space to process, so I'd spent long hours in the studio. Guess I'd taken too much space because now I was getting the silent treatment from my wife.

It couldn't last forever, right?

We'd work this out. We had a lot of days ahead of us and I wasn't going to waste them. So I'd give her today. Then tomorrow, I was locking us in the bedroom and working this out.

“Tomorrow, can we—” I started.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

We spoke in unison and I blew out a deep breath. Maybe she was thinking the same thing I was. We had to get this air cleared and move forward.

“Go ahead,” I said.

Her jaw was tight as she clicked through something, searching. She’d overhauled the accounting system but I’d stayed blissfully ignorant of the specifics. She’d explained it to me one night, and I’d let it go in one ear and out the other. Inventory management. Working capital. Balance sheet. Income statement. My accountant would fall at her feet come January.

Everly kept clicking until, finally, she let go of the mouse and looked up. “Would you close the door?”

“Sure.” I did as she asked, then sat on the couch, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees.

“This isn’t easy.” Her fingers fidgeted on the top of the desk and her eyes kept darting to the screen. What was she looking at? “I, um . . . I need to tell you something. About Katie.”

Katie? I blinked. I thought we were talking about us and this awkward-as-fuck tension in the room.

“Okay,” I drawled.

If this was more of the same bullshit about them getting along, I was going to lock them both in here for a week until they either killed each other or figured out how to get along.

“Hux, I think . . .” Everly swallowed hard. “I think she’s been stealing from you.”

Every muscle in my body tightened. *No. Never.* Katie was one of the only people in this world I trusted, and she wouldn’t



steal. “No.”

She held up a hand. “Will you let me explain?”

“Fine,” I grumbled. There was an explanation but whatever Everly thought she’d found was wrong. Katie wouldn’t steal from me.

“I got a call from a customer yesterday. It was the lady you did the piece for, the one without the blue.”

My lip curled. “Oh. Her.”

“Normally Katie answers the phone, but it was busy in the showroom and it rang through from the front so I answered it.”

“You should have let it go to voicemail like I always do.”

“Well, I didn’t.” She pulled in a long breath like she was fighting to keep calm.

That made two of us.

My hands were balled into fists because this entire misunderstanding was a waste of time.

“The woman wanted to commission another piece,” she said. “She wanted you to do the same size and style as the piece you did for her friend. An elk in a forest.”

“Okay?” How the hell did any of this equal stealing?

“Well, I didn’t know what friend, so I asked for the friend’s name so I could track down which painting it was. Only I couldn’t find any record of her friend in the system.”

“Did you ask Katie?”

“No.” She frowned. “No, I didn’t. Because I’ve been working for over a month so that I wouldn’t have to ask Katie every little thing. It’s why all your pieces get put into the

inventory records. Why every deposit links to a painting. I should have been able to find this purchase.”

“Just because you can’t find it, doesn’t mean she’s stealing. Christ.” I dragged a hand through my hair. “How could you accuse her of that?”

Everly’s eyes flashed, but she flattened her palms on the desk—my desk—and kept talking. “There are discrepancies in your deposits. I’ve found them over the past four years. Paintings that should have been sold for more than the deposits show.”

“And I told you, Katie negotiates. *She* has the authority to do that.”

Everly winced. “And I don’t.”

“No, you don’t.” The harsh truth was she’d been working here for a month. Katie had been with me for years.

“The friend paid online. Through PayPal,” Everly continued. “And she just emailed me a screenshot that shows the transaction.”

“Your point?”

“It’s not in your PayPal account. It’s not in the bank. Why?”

“How the fuck should I know? You have to *ask Katie*.”

“I’m not asking Katie!” Everly shot out of the chair. “There are paintings missing. Ones I swear I had in the storage room that are gone.”

“So that means she’s taking them? For fuck’s sake, Ev, don’t you think that’s a pretty big accusation? You didn’t even ask her. You just assumed she was doing something to screw me over. She’s not like that. Katie wouldn’t do that to me.”

“Things don’t add up.” She threw her arms in the air. “What if she took a painting and sold it on the side? The system doesn’t lie. They should be there. Let me show you how it works. Can I show you?”

“No.” I stood, shaking my head. “No, I’m not doing this.”

“But—”

“No!” I roared. “This is bullshit, Ev. It’s total bullshit. You come in here, tear into a bunch of numbers, and instead of giving Katie the chance to help you sort them out, you decide she’s a fucking thief.”

The color drained from her face and those caramel eyes stared at me like I was a stranger. “You don’t believe me.”

“No, I don’t fucking believe you.”

She jerked and whatever pain was in her eyes turned to fury. “I have never done anything but help you. I have never been anything but honest. And no matter what I do, you don’t trust me.”

“We barely know each other.”

Another flinch. Another flash in those eyes. And then the emotion . . . vanished. Her shoulders sagged. Her expression turned hopeless.

And I knew in that moment, there would be no discussion. They’re be no fixing us.

This thing between us was over.

“I want a divorce,” she whispered.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

“I WANT A DIVORCE,” I repeated when Hux didn’t respond.

His eyebrows came together. “Can you . . . can you wait? I just got Savannah. I don’t want it to look suspicious, have the judge change his mind.”

*Savannah.* It had always been about Savannah. I knew that. Still, it hurt so deeply I struggled to stand. Did I mean anything to him?

No.

How could I have let myself forget that this was all fake? How could I be so stupid to fall in love with this man? Because he didn’t feel the same. Any affection between us had been a figment of my imagination. The ashes of my incinerated hopes were now scattered across the floor.

No matter how hard I tried, no matter how often I proved my loyalty, Hux was never going to let me in. He was never going to trust me.

He was never going to love me.

“Fine,” I whispered.

He nodded, his gaze dropping to the floor. And in true Hux fashion, he didn’t say another word.

The walls were closing in. The air was so heavy and thick that filling my lungs was nearly impossible. Staying here would suffocate me, so I darted to the coat hook and grabbed my purse. My hand was on the doorknob when Hux's soft voice stopped me from making my escape.

“Ev?”

I didn't turn. One look at him and I might crumble. “Yeah.”

“Thank you.”

He kept saying thank you. Always with the thank-yous. But this one shattered my heart into a thousand pieces. I didn't want to be thanked. I didn't want his gratitude.

I wanted him. Every broken, grumpy, beautiful piece.

“It didn't have to be like this,” I whispered.

“Yes, it did. It was always going to end like this.”

*Don't cry. Not yet.* “I guess we had some good fucks, right? That's all this was. Just a fuck.”

His silence was too much to bear. Because in his silence was acceptance. Confirmation that all I'd ever been to him was a means to an end. A woman to warm his bed.

The door almost clipped me in the face as I threw it open and marched out of the gallery. I took the rear exit, not wanting to see Katie's smug face if I entered the showroom.

She'd won. She'd gotten what she wanted. She'd have Hux and the gallery all to herself. She could steal from right under his nose and it was not my problem. Not anymore.

I dug the keys to the Tahoe from my purse but my thumb froze over the button to unlock the door.

This wasn't mine; this was Hux's. And where was I going? His home? That wasn't mine either. I backed away from the SUV, terrified. The diamond ring on my hand burned into my skin and I slipped it off, tucking it into my pocket.

I had nothing.

I'd spent what little savings I'd had left to pay Kerrigan for rent. I hadn't found a paying job to replenish my bank account. I had nothing.

And it was all my fault. Because I'd thought a pretend marriage was my calling.

I spun and raced from the alley, rounding the corner of the block and heading down First. My feet steered me automatically toward my apartment but before I could rush upstairs and have the emotional breakdown that was encroaching, curling like smoke and ready to drown me in flames, I heard my name.

"Everly!" Kerrigan waved from inside the gym as she rushed my way.

She was wearing a pair of overalls dotted with white paint. The splatter reminded me of Hux and my heart twisted. But ever the pretender, I faked happiness with a smile and finger wave. "Hey! The place looks great."

"Thanks. I'm just doing some touch-ups and then I think, fingers crossed, we'll be ready for the grand opening next week." She beamed. "Want to get the first tour?"

*No.* "Sure!"

I followed her inside the gym, dredging up the memory of what it had looked like before. Dark and empty and dirty. Kerrigan had added large windows that overlooked the street, much like she had to the apartment upstairs, letting in natural

light. There was a nice counter beyond the door where a receptionist would greet members.

*Hire me.* I opened my mouth, ready to beg for the job, but stopped. I was not long for Calamity, and I didn't want to screw Kerrigan over when I skipped town.

“What do you think?” Kerrigan asked as she walked through the main space. It was open and airy. Mirrors lined one of the longest walls. A ballet bar ran along another. In the corner, a cage wrestled to contain large exercise balls. Yoga mats were rolled on a shelf. Kerrigan had found instructors to teach yoga, Pilates, Barre and Les Mills classes. Women and men of all ages were welcome here, including a once-a-week class for pregnant moms.

“You did an amazing job,” I told my friend.

“Thank you.”

The joy on her face was too much and my eyes filled. I tried to swipe them dry before she could see but damn those mirrors. They hid nothing.

“Hey.” She came over and touched my arm. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Everything.” I sniffled, fighting to pull myself together. “I, um . . . I might need to stay upstairs for a while. Is that okay?”

“Of course.” Understanding crossed her face. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” I dragged in a long breath, pulling myself together. “Maybe later.”

“I’m here, day or night. Just call.” Kerrigan pulled me into a hug that only made me want to cry harder, so I rushed a fast



goodbye, hurried out of the gym and escaped to my apartment.

The place where Hux and I had begun.

The place where we would end.

---

I JERKED AWAKE, so disoriented that it took me a moment to remember where I was.

The apartment. The couch.

My head throbbed as I pushed myself up to rub the kink in my neck. What time was it? The light still streamed in from the windows. My phone was sandwiched between the cushions and after digging it out, I saw it was nearly six.

I'd cried myself to sleep and let most of this shitty day melt into oblivion.

Chatter from the street drifted upstairs and I shoved myself to my feet, shuffling toward the windows.

Once, this place had been my sanctuary. It had been my safe haven. But when I looked through the glass, the town wasn't as vibrant and charming as it had been. The mountains weren't as tall. The sky wasn't as blue.

My marriage had dulled Calamity.

Good thing I was leaving.

Hux had asked me to wait, and though I'd agreed, nothing could make me stay. Maybe he could tell everyone that I'd gone on a vacation to visit family. That my vacation would be lasting longer than necessary. I didn't care what lie he wanted to tell as long as it meant I could escape Montana and start over.

Again.

Groups of tourists moved along the sidewalks, stopping at different shops. No matter how hard I tried to stop them, my eyes darted to the gallery.

Katie was no doubt inside. There was another hour until she'd close.

A mixture of hatred and longing swelled. The failure of my marriage wasn't Katie's fault. Her actions had just been the catalyst. *The twat*. How could Hux believe her over me? How could he have such blind faith and devotion to a woman I was one hundred percent certain was stealing from him?

*Fuck him.*

How dare he make me feel guilty? How dare he ask anything from me?

Hux and Katie deserved each other.

My stomach growled and I lifted my chin. No, I wasn't going to hide in here. I wasn't going to act like I'd done something wrong.

Did Hux have any idea how much time I'd put into his books? No, he didn't.

Did he have any notion how much I'd done for him? No, he didn't.

Did he have any clue how much shit I'd taken from his friends and daughter? No, he did not.

Fuck him. I was done.

After I collected my things, Calamity was history. Reese Huxley was history. I'd spend a few precious days with Lucy, then I was putting Montana in my rearview mirror. My time

here would be a blip in *The Life and Times of Everly Christian*. A footnote. I couldn't afford a plane ticket, but I'd max out my credit card to reach whatever destination I deemed my next stop.

San Diego had a nice ring to it. So did New Orleans or Charlotte.

I stomped downstairs and when I reached the sidewalk, I turned away from the gallery in search of food. And wine. The White Oak had been tainted thanks to the run-in with Hux's family. That, and I had no desire to go in there alone. Sunday evenings drew a huge crowd for their weekly prime rib dinner. So I kept on walking, breathing fire with every step, until I reached the Pizza Palace.

Hux didn't like pineapple on his pizza. Well tonight, I was ordering my own pizza covered in pineapple. Double, no, triple pineapple.

And a big *fuck you* to my husband.

The hostess's smile was bright as I walked inside, but one look at me and she covered away. "H-hi."

"Hi." It came out clipped and irritated. "Table for one."

Always one.

Forever one.

"Right this way." She snatched a menu and napkin-rolled set of silverware, then led me to a table. I'd been in here once before with Lucy but never with Hux. That was part of its appeal. "I'll take a glass of red wine."

"Sure. I'll bring you the wine menu."

"I don't need it. Anything red. If you don't have red, then white is fine too. I'm not picky. It just needs alcohol."

“Um . . . okay.” The hostess disappeared, hopefully to get my wine.

I flipped open the menu, scanning it even though I already knew I was ordering the pineapple extreme, when a familiar voice caught my attention and my entire body went stiff.

“Yes, Mom. I shut my phone off.”

*No. Not tonight.*

I looked up in time to see the hostess escort Savannah to a table. April and Julian weren't far behind.

They all spotted me, sitting alone in the middle of the room, as a panicked craze set in.

Should I leave? I hadn't officially ordered yet. I could sprint the hell out of here right now. But then they'd see me run. They'd think they'd won. And I would never, ever, let April see me as weak.

So I did what I did best. I plastered on my sugar-sweet smile, one I was so sick and tired of wearing, and held up my hand to wave.

“Hey, Savannah.”

“Hey.” She gave me a sad smile. It was the first time ever I'd seen her give me pity. She'd either overheard my argument with Hux or known that I'd left the gallery earlier because of a fight.

Well, I didn't want her fucking pity.

I wanted wine. Lots and lots of wine.

The hostess, her smile bright again, stopped at the table right beside mine. “How's this?”

*For fuck's sake. Could I catch a break?*

Julian didn't look my way, but the way he held his chin said I was nothing to him. I was lower than the flies buzzing around the dumpster out back.

Savannah seemed unsure where to look. She kept glancing at me only to let her gaze flicker between her mother and stepfather, like she was expecting an explosion and wasn't sure who would blow up first.

Then there was April, who sat at the chair directly across from mine, making it impossible for me to look up and not have her in my line of sight.

She really was beautiful, with her blond hair and high cheekbones and pert nose. It was hard not to be envious of this woman. She'd had Hux's affection. He'd loved her. Maybe he still loved her, something he just wouldn't admit to himself.

They'd probably made a beautiful couple, and they'd made a gorgeous daughter.

*Fuck them all.*

They could talk about me all they wanted. I wasn't sticking out a meal here. April could gloat around town that she'd won. What did I care? I was leaving.

I dropped ten bucks on the table and collected my purse. When I stood, I held my gaze steady on the door. I rounded my table and was almost past theirs when two words caught my ear.

“Gold digger.”

My feet stopped at April's mumbled insult. That fury inside me bloomed to a rage so powerful, so hot, it burned as blue as Savannah's eyes.

I turned, staring at her profile until she finally had the guts to look up. Then I fired my shot.

“Cunt.”

Never in my life had I enunciated a syllable so clearly.

Julian’s eyes whipped up from his phone.

The color drained from Savannah’s face, seeming to rush right to her mother’s reddening cheeks.

April gasped in outrage. “You’re a nasty bitch.”

I opened my mouth to tell her that she was a horrible mother for letting her husband slap her daughter. That she was a rotten influence for a child and, in general, a nasty human being. I opened my mouth to let loose every bad thing I knew or had heard about April and Julian Tosh, but I paused long enough to glance at Savannah.

One look, and every word died on my tongue.

She looked terrified. Maybe she knew exactly what I wanted to say.

I wouldn’t break Savannah’s confidence. She’d confessed the day of the farmhouse that Julian had slapped her. Later, she’d taken it back. There was a reason she hadn’t wanted anyone to know.

I wasn’t sure what it was, but that didn’t matter. Savannah’s reason was important to Savannah.

“Someday, karma is going to come and bite you in the ass, April,” I said with more confidence than I felt today. “I won’t be here to see it, but just know that when it does, I’ll be laughing at you. I’ll be applauding your demise.”

A sneer curled her lip, but I was already gone, shoving out the door and into the evening light.

It was peaceful outside. Birds chirped. A gentle breeze rustled tree leaves. The scent of lilacs floated in the air.

Not even this tranquil Montana evening could cool my temper as I tipped my head to the sky and screamed.

It was loud. It was long. It was overdue.

Across the street, a father was walking his kid on the sidewalk. Both looked at me like I'd grown a tail and horns.

"Sorry," I called to them. The father was already tugging his kid to walk faster.

Ugh. I needed this day to end. But first, I had some purchases to make. The closest gas station was around the block and they'd have a toothbrush and toothpaste. They'd also have wine.

Except the universe was still working against me. Before I could disappear to buy necessities, Savannah burst through the restaurant's door, her tennis shoes skidding to a stop as her hands collided with my back.

"Everly," she breathed.

"Go inside, Savannah. Eat some pizza." I didn't have the energy to be the patient, loving stepmother tonight.

Her forehead furrowed as she took me in. "Are you okay?"

"No, sweetheart. I'm not okay."

"Is it you and Dad?"

I sighed. There was no *me and Dad*. Not for much longer. "It's complicated."

"I'm not stupid."

“No.” My shoulders sagged. “No, you’re not. But I’m not going to tell you about what’s happening with me and your dad. It’s not my place, so you’ll have to ask him.”

A cop-out? Absolutely. But I wasn’t a long-term part of this girl’s life.

“Go.” I jerked my chin at the door. “Have a nice dinner.”

She nodded, turning for the door, but stopped and whirled around again. “Why did you do that? Why did you call Mom a —”

“Don’t say it.” I held up my hand. God, I’d really called April a cunt. In front of her daughter. What the hell was happening to me? This might make things hard for Hux, and a part of me wished I could rewind time and start this all over again. But another part of me was proud.

Hux wouldn’t say it, but he was terrified of April and Julian. He had every right to fear their retaliation. They could always try and take Savannah away.

But I didn’t have that fear. If Nelson got angry because of my crass language, it wouldn’t matter. I’d be out of Savannah’s life before her seventeenth birthday.

“Why did you do that?” Savannah asked again.

I threw up my hands, wanting to scream and cry at the same time. “I don’t know. Probably because your mom *is* a . . . you-know-what. And I wish someone had cared enough about me to call my mother a you-know-what because sometimes, she *is* a you-know-what. But I don’t have that someone. You grow up and people don’t shout and scream and fight for you anymore. Not unless you’re really lucky.”

The break was coming. Emotion crashed over my shoulders and if I didn’t move my feet, I’d crumble into a



puddle of tears, stuck forever outside the Pizza Palace. But before I left, she had to know.

“He loves you,” I whispered. “Your father loves you so much. Enough to fight. You’re a lucky girl, Savannah. I hope you know that.”

She stared at me with shock on her face and tears in her eyes.

I turned before she could see me cry, aiming my feet toward my apartment—the gas station was forgotten.

“Where are you going?” she called.

“Home.”

“But home is the other way.” She pointed across the street, toward Hux’s house.

I glanced over my shoulder and gave her a sad smile. “Goodbye, Savannah.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

---

AT THE SOUND of the front door opening, I shot off my seat at the island and raced into the living room. “Ev?”

“Just me.” Savannah closed the door behind her.

Not that I wasn’t always happy to see my daughter, but this morning, I would have rather seen my wife walk inside.

“Hey, baby girl.”

“Hi, Dad.” She gave me a sad smile.

“Want some breakfast? Coffee?” I’d done some googling to make sure it was okay for Savannah to have caffeine. One cup. Max.

“No, thanks. I don’t want to be jittery in first period.”

“What’s up?” It was early, just after seven, but it was a school day, so she was probably on her way. “Did you forget something?”

She shook her head and walked to the couch, plopping down on the edge. “I saw Everly last night.”

My entire frame stiffened. “Where?”

“Pizza Palace.”

She’d gone to the pizza place? I’d assumed she’d gone to Lucy and Duke’s. “Was she alone?”

Savannah nodded. “Yeah. She was sitting at a table. Mom and Julian wanted to go out to dinner, and they let me pick because I got an A on my algebra test. I didn’t feel like the café since . . .”

Since we’d run into my parents and brother and they’d pretended not to know her.

“I get it,” I said, taking the seat beside her.

“What did you do to her?” Savannah’s tone made me feel like the water cup in my studio after a long day at the easel: dirty and destined for the drain.

“It’s complicated.”

Yesterday had been one of the longest of my life. Since Everly had walked out of the gallery, there’d been a knot in my stomach. I’d tried to work past it. I’d come home and locked myself in the studio until after dark. When I’d finally come inside, I’d expected to find her here, but the house had been empty. Eerie. Lonely. Sleep had been impossible without her beside me, not knowing if she was all right. Every text and phone call I’d made had gone unanswered.

“Complicated,” Savannah repeated. “That’s what she said.”

Complicated was an understatement.

“She looked so sad. And then Mom was being a bitch and called her a gold digger.”

“Christ.” My jaw clenched. Everly had dealt with enough, especially from me. She didn’t deserve to have April coming after her too.

Savannah huffed a laugh. “Don’t worry. Everly dealt it right back. She called Mom a cunt.”

I choked on my own saliva, coughing and clearing my throat. Not just from hearing that word come from my kid's mouth, but the fact that Ev would lose her composure like that. Normally, she put on a false smile and killed with kindness.

"It was kind of funny to see Mom lost for words. Like a taste of her own medicine. Usually she's the one throwing shade."

Still didn't make it right that Ev should have had to in the first place. "Then what?"

"Everly left. I ran after her and asked why she wasn't going home. And she said it was complicated."

"Yeah." I rested a hand on her knee. "It is."

"I'm not stupid. I can understand complicated."

"I know you're not stupid, Savannah. I just . . . I don't want to burden you with this."

Her shoulders curled in. "She could have said a lot more than just calling Mom a cunt."

"Please stop saying cunt."

"Sorry." She laughed. "It was funny."

I was jealous that Everly had gotten to say exactly what I'd wanted to for years.

"She could have done worse," Savannah said. "She could have told them and everyone that Julian slapped me."

My breath caught in my throat. It was the first time Savannah had admitted to me that Julian had hit her.

I was going to kill that son of a bitch. I was going to break every bone in his body and leave him a bloody pile of pulp. I'd always wondered what had happened in that house. I'd

speculated. But hearing Savannah admit it created a rage so deep in my veins, violence seemed like the only way to work it out. Dragging a long breath through my nose, I grabbed hold of my temper with an iron fist. Now was not the time to explode.

“When?” I asked even though I already knew the answer. “When did he slap you?”

“The day of the farmhouse. We got in a fight that morning and he slapped me across the face. That’s why I skipped school. Why Travis found me in Widow Ashleigh’s barn. I admitted it to Travis and Lucy and Ev at the farmhouse, right before that psycho tried to kill us. Everly could have called Mom and Julian on it last night and made it public. But she didn’t. I think because she knew it would only make my life harder.”

Only if she had to live with Julian. “If he hit you, then you can’t be there.”

“It was just once.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re never going back to that house again. After school today, you come here. Then we’ll go get the rest of your stuff together.”

The moment she left here, I was calling Aiden.

“No.” She shook her head. “They can’t know that I told you. I’ll just deny it again.”

“But—”

“Dad, please.” She gripped my forearm, squeezing it as she begged. “Please. They can’t know.”

“Why? Explain it to me.”

She closed her eyes, a move I'd seen—and done myself—a thousand times. She was shutting me out.

“Talk to me.”

Moments passed and she sat silent. But I waited, my heart in my throat, until she finally spoke. “She said you'd go back to prison.”

“Who? Your mom?”

She nodded. “Mom told me that if I ever told anyone about Julian, she'd make sure you paid the price. That everyone in town believed you were a criminal and all she had to do was tell them that you hit her and raped her. Then they'd send you back to prison.”

*Cunt.*

Next time I saw April, I was calling it to her face too.

“It's bullshit,” I seethed.

“She'll do it, Dad.”

And my beautiful teenage daughter believed that to the depths of her soul. April could have been telling Savannah that nonsense for years. Savannah was too young to know any better, so she'd decided to take it upon herself to protect me.

“I love you, Savannah.”

Her beautiful blue eyes flooded. “I love you too.”

“There's nothing your mom can do to me. No matter what lies she tells, it's not possible. There'd be no evidence. And I'm never going back to prison. I screwed up when I was younger. Made the biggest mistake of my life. But it won't happen again.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Positive. Just like I’m positive you’re never going back to that house if you don’t want to.”

“Could I really live here?”

“We’ll make it happen. But that means you’ll have to tell people that Julian hit you.”

The color drained from her face.

“Was it just that once?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

I put my arm around Savannah’s shoulders, pulling her close, then kissed the top of her hair. “We’ll figure it out. Promise.”

“What about Everly?”

“What about her?”

“Why did you marry her?” she asked.

I opened my mouth to dodge, but Savannah had confided in me today. She’d given me that trust. She deserved the truth from me too. “For you. We thought it might help improve my chances for you to live here.”

“Makes sense. It would be kind of weird for me to move into a bachelor’s house. Probably better keep that a secret, though.”

I chuckled. Of course she wouldn’t be fazed. “Yeah. That doesn’t leave this house.”

“Why did Everly marry you? What did she get?”

Nothing. She hadn’t asked for a damn thing. “She had her reasons.”



And at the moment, I couldn't seem to remember exactly what those reasons were. Yes, she'd done it to help Savannah. Because of lingering guilt after the farmhouse. Because maybe she saw some similarities in her life and my daughter's. But was that really enough?

What was I missing? Why had she married me, of all people? Living with me wasn't a damn picnic.

Ev hadn't married me for my money. She wouldn't take any of it. Even yesterday, when she'd left the gallery, she hadn't taken the car.

Why? Why would she marry me?

Why go through all this bullshit? Why put up with Savannah's attitude? Why deal with Katie's cold shoulder?

I hadn't the faintest clue and until she came home, there was no way I'd find out.

"I really like her," Savannah said.

I blinked. What had she said? "You like her?"

She shrugged. "She's cool. Nice. And no one else would ever call Mom a cunt to her face. You never did that."

"No." I rubbed my jaw. I'd been too terrified of April to put her in her place. But not Everly. My wife was fearless.

I'd spent all of last night pondering our argument in the gallery yesterday. I'd mentally replayed her words.

*I have never done anything but help you.*

*I have never been anything but honest.*

*And no matter what I do, you don't trust me.*

Fuck my life. She'd been right. She'd never done anything but help me. Maybe that was the reason I was suspicious.

Because people didn't do things simply to help other people.

So why had Everly married me? Why had she tied herself to my mess?

Until I knew that answer, I couldn't trust her. Or maybe, the reason I didn't trust Everly had nothing to do with Everly. It was my own insecurities shining through.

From the moment Ev had come into my life, she'd thrown me for a loop, constantly surprising me—always in a good way. Somehow, I'd deemed her too good to be true, so I'd kept her at a distance.

I'd made sure that when she tried to break my heart, she'd fail.

Except I hurt. I was tired. I ached.

I was fucking miserable.

"You'd better get to school," I told Savannah. Not that I didn't want her here, but my list for today had just grown tenfold.

"Okay." She hugged me, then stood. "Thanks, Dad."

"Love you." I stood too and walked her to the door. "See you after school."

I stood in the threshold and watched as she jogged to her car, waving as she backed out of the driveway. Then I got busy.

Aiden was my first phone call. He was as angry as I was and promised to have something prepared before the end of the day. With him tackling my upcoming custody siege, I hopped in the shower, got dressed, then drove to the gallery.

I had research to do.

---

“THANK YOU,” I told the customer on the phone. “I’ll get to work on it right away.”

“No blue.”

“No blue.” I cringed. “Can I ask why?”

“I have tritan color blindness. It’s rare but blue looks green. Yellow looks different too, sort of purple, but the blue bothers me the most. It never looks right in art.”

Now I felt like an asshole. Well, a bigger asshole. “No blue. You got it. Have a nice day.”

After ending the call, I dropped my face into my hands. “Fucking hell.”

I’d spent three hours digging through Everly’s new inventory system. I had to give her so many props. Without any training or instruction, I’d found everything in my bookkeeping program. Every painting had been added, cataloged by size and tagged with a description.

It was all there, plain as day. And I still couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

Five paintings in the inventory system were highlighted with a note from yesterday. Five paintings I remembered creating. Five paintings that should have been in the storage room, but no matter where I searched, they were gone.

Only one was accounted for. According to the customer I’d just spoken to, it was hanging on her friend’s wall. The customer, my no-blue fanatic, wanted one exactly the same

with some color variations. She'd texted me a picture of her friend's piece so there'd be no misunderstanding.

And she'd given me her friend's number.

The friend was my next phone call.

Thirty minutes later, I was coming out of my skin.

*Son of a bitch.* That phone call had been one of the hardest of my life.

The woman had been kind. I'd explained that I was an artist, not an accountant, and that we'd had a mishap with our records. I'd asked if she could resend me the payment screenshot she'd sent to Everly. In all my searching, that was the one thing Everly had mentioned that I couldn't find. Probably because it had gone to her personal email.

I shook my mouse, refreshing my own email. And the one I'd been waiting for was right there.

An online payment from PayPal, from the customer's email address to Reese Huxley Gallery.

Only my PayPal email wasn't Reese Huxley Gallery. It was Reese Huxley Art. I didn't have a gallery email.

It was a fake, created by someone I'd always trusted.

I stared at the proof. It was right there. Easy enough to find. Proof that Everly had tried to show me yesterday. Instead of listening, I'd told her she was wrong. I'd chosen Katie over my own wife.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I scrubbed my hands over my face again, pissed at myself. Pissed at Katie. Then I shoved out of my chair and walked out of the office.

“Hey! Good timing.” Katie smiled when she saw me walk down the hallway. “I was going to order lunch for us.”

She’d been all smiles today, since I hadn’t arrived with Everly. How could I have been so fucking blind? How could I have not seen what was happening here?

I swallowed the lump in my throat and strode to the front door, flipping the lock and turning the sign from *Open* to *Closed*.

“Hux?”

I closed my eyes, drawing in a fortifying breath, before turning to face my oldest friend. “Need to talk, Katie.”

“Okay. Is it about Everly? Did you guys have a fight?”

She’d probably heard raised voices from the office, though I doubted she’d been able to make out specifics. Otherwise she would have been scrambling to cover up her crimes. Though she might have overheard Everly ask for a divorce. It would explain her cheery attitude this morning.

Only to me, it had been like a slap to the face.

I’d been lying to myself for far too long. This marriage was as real and important as they came. Along the way, I’d fallen for my wife.

I was in love with Everly Christian Huxley.

And I’d let my fears push her out the door. I’d made the wrong choice yesterday. Now I had to fix my fuckup and convince Ev to keep my last name.

“No, this isn’t about Everly,” I told Katie. “Why’d you do it?”

“Huh?”

“The paintings. Why’d you take them?”

“W-what?” The shock that crossed her face was almost genuine. Almost. But I’d known her for a long, long time. Katie had a tell. She blinked too fast when she was hiding something. At the moment, her eyelids fluttered like trapped flies behind her glasses.

*Guilty.* Damn it.

“Just . . . tell me why.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Blink blink blink.

I waited, staring at her as she avoided eye contact and fiddled with a pen on the desk. “Katie. After all we’ve been through. How could you do this to me?”

“To you?” Her mouth fell open. “It’s always about you, isn’t it? Chase was right. I was so blind.”

“Chase?” Wait, had he done it? Had this been him? After what I’d seen him do to Everly, I could see him screwing with my business too. Manipulating Katie.

“That day he called me, after the whole Everly kitchen thing, he told me I was a fool for waiting around for you. That you’d never see me. That you were just a selfish prick who’d fuck me over the minute you had the chance. Just like you did him. And I guess he was right.”

“Wait.” I held up my hands. “He came after my wife. I didn’t fuck him over. How could you even listen to his bullshit? What the hell is going on?”

“You got married!” she cried and the sweet, kind friend I’d known for years disappeared. A snarl curled Katie’s upper lip. “Do you know how long I’ve waited for you to open your

eyes? To see me as more than just your friend? All I ever wanted was you. And then you go and marry that woman. That stranger.”

Oh, fuck. No way. Katie had feelings for me? Everly had been right. Her first day at the gallery, Everly had said that Katie had feelings for me. Asshole that I was, I hadn't listened. *Son of a bitch.*

“Katie, I-I didn't realize you felt that way.”

“Because you're broken. You're not ready for a relationship, and I was never going to push you. You're still healing after what April did to you.”

*Broken.* April was sixteen years ago, but Katie still saw me as broken. As the helpless ex-con crashing on her couch.

Except I hadn't felt broken with Everly. She'd made me feel whole. Happy. Loved.

“Tell me about the paintings.” I wasn't going to pander to Katie, not now. If she had feelings for me, she should have spoken up years ago. And I would have let her down gently. Instead, she'd stolen from me. “Tell me why.”

Katie raised her chin and adjusted her glasses. Then she pursed her lips in a thin line. What she didn't do was answer my question.

“Was it revenge? Have I not paid you enough? Are you in financial trouble?”

Silence.

She was furious. There was more hate in her gaze than I'd ever seen.

And hurt.

This was her revenge because I'd broken her heart by marrying Everly.

Stealing was not the way.

"Give me your keys." I held out my hand, palm up.

She didn't move.

"You've got four paintings unaccounted for. Leave my gallery immediately and I won't call the cops to find them."

"Your gallery?" She scoffed. "I built this place. It's nothing without me."

There was a shred of truth to that statement. Katie carried the lion's share of duties around here, and a year ago, I would have freaked at the idea of replacing her. Not anymore.

"Keys." I snapped my fingers. "Or I get Sheriff Evans down here."

The bravado on her face faded, the seriousness setting in deep. How long had this been going on? How long had she taken whatever it was she thought she was due?

Katie might dislike Chase, but those two deserved one another.

A few months ago, I thought I'd deserved *friends* like that too. Until I'd met a selfless woman who hadn't asked anything of me. Who hadn't expected anything. Not even love.

Everly Christian was the best person in my life.

And I had shoved her away.

I snapped my fingers again, for the last time, and Katie sprang into action. She ripped a drawer open and tugged out her purse. Then she rifled through the bag until she had her keys. With a twist, the three keys to the gallery were off their



ring. Then she slammed them onto the desk and marched out the rear door.

I held my breath, letting the slam reverberate through the building. Then I tipped my head to the ceiling. “Fuck.”

There was a mess to clean up here. There was a locksmith to call to change the locks. Katie had long ago memorized passwords to my bank accounts and those would need to be switched. Someone needed to be here today to run the gallery. It would wait.

I had an apology to make first.

Jogging to my office, I grabbed my own keys, then made sure the gallery was locked up. I ran the blocks toward Everly’s apartment. The code to the back door hadn’t changed and it clicked open after I punched in the combination. I took the stairs two at a time, hoping she was inside.

I pounded on the door, then held my breath, listening. Was she there? Nothing but silence greeted me. “Come on.”

I knocked again. And again.

Until finally, I heard the soft rustle of shuffling feet and a groan when she checked the peephole.

Everly undid the locks and flung the door open. “What?”

My mouth went dry at the sight of her. She was only wearing a black tank top and jeans. The same jeans she’d worn yesterday. The tank top had been on underneath her sweater. Her hair was mussed, and behind her, a blanket was bunched up on the couch.

“You were right. About Katie.”

She crossed her arms. “I know.”

“I’m sorry. Fuck, babe. I’m sorry.” I took one step closer but she shook her head. My feet froze. “Ev, let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“You were right. Everything you said yesterday. I trust the wrong people.”

She nodded. “Yes, you do.”

“I’m sorry. I’m telling you I fucked up.”

“Yes, you did.”

“And?”

“And nothing. You’re too late, Hux.”

Then my wife slammed the door in my face.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

EVERLY

DISHEVELED HAIR. Bags under his eyes. Those broad shoulders hunched.

Hux looked like shit.

I held my breath as my palms pressed into the door. It wasn't easy to spy on him with one eye through the peephole and not make a sound, but so far this week, if he knew I watched him every morning, he hadn't let on.

Hux had shown up at my doorstep every morning over the past week. He always brought one pair of pajamas, one change of clothes and breakfast. The morning after his apology, the delivery had included all of my toiletries.

No less. No more.

It was enough so I had something fresh to wear that day and to bed. And something warm to eat.

From the looks of it, this morning's meal would be a carrot and raisin bran muffin. I'd be wearing a pair of jeans and a white tee. Stacked with them were my favorite gray Nikes and a sweatshirt. One of his sweatshirts.

He set everything down, then stood tall, his gaze on the door. He raised a hand, knocked once, then stepped back. Waiting.

My heart hammered in my chest as I held my breath and fought a familiar battle.

*Don't open it.*

Yes, he looked like shit. Yes, it broke my heart to see. But he'd done this to himself. *He'd betrayed me.*

*Don't open it.*

His apology last week wasn't enough. An *I'm sorry* wasn't going to cut it.

Because we might make up from this fight but staying together was much too painful. I couldn't return to Hux's house and pretend life was grand. I wouldn't settle for his company when I couldn't have his heart.

There was no going back.

This had to be all or nothing, and while it was sweet of him to come by and bring the necessities, Hux wasn't acting out of love.

This was guilt.

My head was getting dizzy from the short breaths. My calves burned from standing on my tiptoes. I took one last look at him, my paint-splattered, handsome and weary husband, then sank to my heels and backed away from the door.

One step. Two. Three. I moved far enough away that I could fill my lungs as my ears stayed trained on the man behind the door.

It wasn't until his footsteps echoed down the stairwell that I relaxed my spine. I counted to twenty before sneaking to the door, double-checking the peephole twice, then slowly unlocking the deadbolt and twisting the knob.

I snatched up my clothes and the muffin, raced inside and closed the door. Setting the clothes on the bed, I lifted Hux's sweatshirt and pressed it to my nose. Soap and spice and paint. Hux. I'd missed falling asleep to that scent. I pulled it over my head, letting the thick cotton dwarf my frame, then picked up the muffin and carefully removed the wrapper.

The first bite melted in my mouth, the inside still steaming from the oven. A moan escaped at the buttery, sweet flavor. No matter what I ate today, it would pale in comparison. That had been the case with all breakfasts in the past week.

Because even my foolish *taste buds* loved Hux.

I walked to the window, sticking close to the curtains I'd drawn so they'd camouflage my silhouette. Morning sunshine streamed through the glass, warming the apartment. My gaze zeroed in on Hux as he walked down the sidewalk.

His hands were stuffed into his pockets, tugging the denim of his jeans around the curve of his perfect behind. The long sleeves of his shirt were shoved up his forearms. His lengthy strides ate up the distance between my building and the gallery. Damn, that man had a sexy walk.

I popped another bite of muffin in my mouth just as he glanced over his shoulder to my window.

Like I'd done the other days this week, I didn't hide when he spotted me. I ate my breakfast as he paused on the sidewalk and stared.

Hux raised one hand, straight in the air.

I didn't return the wave.

He held it for a long moment, then dropped it to his side. His chin fell. He looked away. And he continued on to the gallery.

*Damn you, Hux.*

Why had he made it impossible not to love him? My heart twisted. Was I cruel for punishing him like this?

Sooner rather than later, we'd have to have the difficult conversation. Or, have it again. Divorce had seemed so trivial, so practical, when we'd started this marriage. Now the word terrified me. Because once this was over, we'd be over.

*We were over.*

I stood and watched the beginnings of a busy day in Calamity. The visitors from the holiday weekend seemed to have lingered in the area.

Yesterday had been Memorial Day and I'd escaped the confines of my apartment to watch the annual parade with Lucy. Duke had been on sheriff duty, ensuring the event went off safely. Afterward, the three of us had gone to their house for an afternoon barbeque.

Lucy had offered to let me sleep in their guest room, but I'd wanted to come back to the apartment. She didn't know Hux stopped by every morning.

Though she knew we were having troubles, I hadn't worked up the courage to tell her that the marriage was a sham.

Just like I hadn't told her I was moving in four days.

That was on today's not-so-fun to-do list.

I finished my muffin at the window, then put the wrapper in the trash and picked up my phone off the kitchen island.

There was a text from Hux.

*Meet me for lunch?*

I scoffed, my fingers flying. *Can't. I had a big breakfast.*  
*Come by the gallery later. Let's talk.*

God, it was tempting. So tempting. But if we talked, my resolve would weaken. And damn it, I was still too mad.

He'd chosen everyone else in his life above me. Everyone. And when he'd realized the truth, it had been too late.

Instead of replying to his text, I pulled up my mom's name and sucked in a deep breath, holding it until my lungs burned. Then I blew it out and pressed *call* before I lost my nerve.

She answered on the first ring. A change to her normal. "Everly?"

There was no strange tone. No bite on the *v*. "Hey, Mom."

"How are you?"

"Fine. You?"

"Fine, thanks. We haven't heard from you in a while."

Because I hadn't wanted to call. We'd traded some emails, but the announcement of my marriage had been our last conversation. Apparently, that was what our relationship had become. Phone calls to highlight major life events.

Like divorce.

"I have news," I said. "I've been offered a job at an art gallery in New Orleans."

I hadn't been shy about using Reese Huxley Art on my résumé. Truthfully, it was the only employment—*was it called employment if you were unpaid?*—that wasn't tied to singing or my time as a waitress.

Luckily, the curator of the New Orleans gallery had recognized Hux's name, and I'd been offered the job. The pay



was shit, but even shit was greater than zero. Today, after making the painful announcements to my family and friends, I'd be scouring the Big Easy's classifieds for the most normal *Roommate Wanted* ad I could find.

"So you and your husband will be moving," Mom said. "All right. Please send me your new address once you're settled."

"Actually," I drawled, "it's just me. I'm getting divorced."

Silence. That dreaded silence.

It spread through my veins like poison. It reminded me that I was inadequate. That I was a failure.

I had enough of my own reminders that I was screwing up my life. I didn't need hers too.

"Goodbye, Mom."

"I'm coming to Montana."

I'd barely caught her statement since I'd pulled the phone from my ear. "Say that again?"

"I'm coming to Montana. I'd like to see you and help as you get your affairs in order."

This time when I pulled the phone from my ear, I made sure I'd dialed the right person. Because Cynthia Christian hadn't expressed any desire to see me for years. And though her declaration was blunt, close to hinting that I couldn't manage the divorce myself, there was some tenderness and concern buried beneath.

"We'll kill each other," I said.

She let out a dry laugh. "Probably."

"Why now, Mom?"

“You got *married*, Everly. You joined your life with a man we don’t know. Your father didn’t get to walk you down the aisle. I don’t even have a picture. You did your taxes on TurboTax for goodness sake! There’s not a lot I can do for you but darn it, I can at least save you the time and do your taxes better than a computer program. You’re so set on cutting us out of your life, but would you please let me help with something? I can be there to support you in this divorce.”

My jaw dropped. My head spun. I shuffled to the couch, sitting on the edge before I toppled over.

“I-I didn’t realize you’d want to be included.” Or that she did my taxes herself.

“You’re my daughter.”

And she was my mother. Maybe I’d been too harsh on her these past few years. Maybe I had cut them out. “Why don’t we get along?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “You’re so much like my mother. You wouldn’t remember her, but we didn’t get on well. Though she would have called you a kindred spirit. She was bold, daring and vibrant. And I’m . . . I’m an accountant.”

Mom had reduced her personality to an occupation of numbers, rules and regulations.

“I’ve been doing some accounting,” I said. “It’s interesting.”

“No need to pander to me.”

I giggled. “It’s not pandering. It’s been *almost* fun.”

“You can tell me about it when I arrive.” There was a smile in her voice. “Your father will want to come too.”

“Okay.” My voice cracked as tears filled my eyes. “Why didn’t we have this conversation years ago?”

“Oh, that’s my fault. When you dropped out of college, I thought I’d failed you. The truth is, it was hard for me to know that you preferred Lucy’s parents to your own. Then the accident and I just . . . I know you loved and grieved for them. I’m not proud to admit that I was jealous.”

I had grieved the Rosses’ deaths. I had loved them. And maybe I’d pushed my own parents away because if I lost them too, I really would be alone.

“I’m glad you’re coming,” I said, swiping my eyes dry.

“Me too. Are you still singing?”

“Only in the shower.” I’d miss the acoustics of Hux’s shower.

“Just like you used to do when you were a teenager.”

“Yeah.” There was an awkward pause. It would take time but hopefully we’d find a way to work those out of our conversations.

“I’ll email you my itinerary when I book flights.”

“Okay. Bye.” A weight lifted from my shoulders as I hung up the phone and let the allure of the windows pull me across the room.

My parents were coming to Calamity.

I was glad they would see it from this vantage point. Just once.

However bittersweet, I’d always remember this charming town. This wouldn’t be my last time here. Lucy had a baby coming who’d need to be spoiled. But first, I needed some

time away from Montana. And by the time I returned for a visit, Hux would be a memory.

A crowd was gathering in front of the gallery. Not the usual cluster of window shoppers stopping to admire whatever paintings were displayed in the center window. This was a blockade on the sidewalk, the space filled shoulder to shoulder with spectators.

I even recognized a few faces in that crowd. Marcy, the waitress from the White Oak stood there. And was that Nelson?

What was going on? Hux must have put up a new painting. Or maybe Katie was inside and he was publicly firing her. An evil grin spread across my face. He wouldn't do that, but a girl could hope.

The crowd milled around the gallery for a few minutes, and I watched as newcomers drifted in. Maybe he'd put up that dark forest painting. He'd finished it and the piece was truly something special. Unique, like him. Haunting and beautiful.

Before curiosity got the better of me and I did something stupid, like go to the gallery, I tore myself from the glass and disappeared to the bathroom for a shower. When I was dressed and my hair was dried, I texted Lucy and asked if she could pick me up from the apartment. I had an announcement.

My best friend came rushing over and dashed me away to her house.

Lucy didn't take the news of my moving well. Or of the divorce. Or that I'd lied to her about my reasons for marrying Hux.

She cried. I cried. We hugged.

We spent the day together, reminiscing about the past and talking about the future, until she dropped me off at the apartment after a homemade dinner. It was past seven when I waved goodbye from the sidewalk and most of the shops were closed. The only open businesses were restaurants and the movie theater four blocks down. Its marquee's magnetic letters were being changed by a teenager in a white shirt and a black vest.

Travis.

I lingered on the sidewalk, watching as he worked. It would be a shame not to see that boy grow into a man. A twinge of longing hit that I wouldn't know Savannah as she became a woman.

The gallery was dark, like the other stores, and without people clustered around the display window, I was able to see . . . something.

I leaned forward, squinting. What was that?

Earlier, I'd managed to dodge the curiosity. Or maybe postpone. But the overwhelming need to know what Hux had put in the window drove me across the street. My steps quickened the closer the gallery came into view.

And then I was standing there, staring at a face.

My face.

I gasped, my hand flying to my mouth.

Those were my caramel eyes. That was my chocolate hair.

That was my straight nose. My rosy mouth. My tapered chin.

He'd captured all of my flaws. All of my perfections.

The painting blurred as tears filled my eyes.

When had he painted me? Why?

There was love in this painting. There was affection and detail that only came from hours and hours of staring at another person.

What did this mean? Why would he place this portrait in the front window? It wasn't even for sale. The placard below my face was the same as the one that sat beneath Savannah's portrait.

*Display Only. Not For Sale.*

Cars rolled down the street. People passed behind me. The light faded from the sky, and I stood transfixed, unable to tear myself away.

I was too scared to leave this spot. Because here, with my portrait, was hope.

Hope that Hux might love me.

The sound of a horn blared in the distance, jolting me out of my stupor. I shivered, the night air still cold in late spring. Music filtered from Jane's jukebox. Lucy would be singing with the live band later this week. She'd asked me to come watch before I left for New Orleans.

But before I moved, there was something else I had to do.

Hux had used this painting to summon me for a conversation.

I gave myself one more moment with the portrait, committing it to memory, then I fled down the darkened streets of Calamity, racing for the house I'd called home for a short time.

Old fears came clawing back to life as I navigated the sidewalks alone. When I was with Hux, I had no reason to fear being watched or chased or hunted. He kept me safe.

But tonight, the fears threatened with every stride. I shoved them away, step after step. *I'm safe here*. I was safe in Calamity. And as soon as I got to Hux, I'd be safe there too.

Only when I rounded the corner to his street, the lights were off at his house. The driveway was empty. I hurried toward the alley, expecting to find the bright lights of his studio piercing the night, but it was as black as the velvet sky above.

Where was he? The gallery? Sweat beaded at my temples and the nape of my neck. My chest heaved from the ten-block run. Damn it. I hadn't even considered he wouldn't be home. Without me to drag him out in public, there weren't many places he went.

The gallery. Jane's. Maybe his property. Without a vehicle, searching for him wasn't an option, so I turned and raced along the same path I'd taken, retreating toward my apartment downtown.

My fingers fumbled with the code at the door to the building. When the lock clicked, I hurried inside, finally breathing as it locked behind me. Fear had nipped at my heels on the run back and I'd practically sprinted those last few blocks. With shaking legs, I trudged up the stairs, my spirits sinking with every step.

Was Hux with another woman? My stomach pitched. *No*. He wouldn't do that to me. Not after the painting. Not after the breakfasts. He had to be somewhere, and tomorrow, I'd seek him out. Tomorrow, I could ask him about the portrait and say a goodbye.

I rounded the corner of the staircase, ready to disappear into the apartment, pull on his sweatshirt and curl up on the couch, when a dark figure seated on the top step stood up.

My heart leapt into my throat. My gasp bounced off the walls. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you.”

The man I’d been searching for had been here all along.

I slapped a hand over my thundering heart and continued the climb. “You scared me.”

“Sorry.” Hux waited for me to dig out my keys and unlock the door. But he didn’t follow me past the threshold. He stood in the hall, hovering in the same space he had every morning for a week. “I’m sorry, Ev.”

“Was that why you did the painting? Because you were sorry?”

“No.”

I tossed my purse on the floor inside and spun to face him. “What do you want, Hux?”

“Tell me why.”

“Why, what?”

Had he heard about my move to New Orleans? Impossible. The only person I’d told was Lucy.

Hux scowled, stalking closer. The intensity of his eyes stole my breath. Gone was the sullen man from this morning. This version of Hux was the one who made my heart skip. The man who knew every dip and rise of my body. The man who wanted something and was determined to get it.



“Tell me why you married me.” He stepped past the threshold, crowding me deeper into the apartment.

“Because I was bored.”

He shook his head, advancing another step. Then another. And the farther he came, the farther I retreated, until he had me just where he wanted me, pinned against the brick wall beside my bed. His hands came to my arms, his grip firm as he lifted them above my head.

A jolt of lust ripped through me as his scent filled my nose.

God, he was hard to resist.

“Everly.” My name in his rumbled voice was low. Harsh. Demanding. Erotic. “Tell me.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I shook my head, looking past him.

“Tell me.” He shifted his grip, holding my hands with one of his so his other could come to my chin. He hooked a finger under it, forcing my attention to his.

“I wanted to help Savannah,” I answered. Hadn’t we gone through this before? Didn’t he believe I’d been sincere in helping his daughter?

Hux shook his head and his face softened. His hands fell away from my skin. For a moment, I thought he’d leave me here, panting against this wall. But then his fingertips lifted to my face.

He traced my nose, bridge to tip, in one featherlight touch.

A brushstroke.

My heart dropped.

All this time, the gentle touches on my face. The lines he’d drawn for months, the countless nights he’d traced my

features. He'd been painting my face. And now the final result was on a canvas, framed in his gallery's studio window, for all the world to see.

That canvas had gotten the final, colored strokes. But I'd had them first.

My eyes welled and one tear spilled down my cheek.

"Don't ask me why." If I had to confess, if he learned this about me, then I had nothing left of my own. My defenses would come crumbling down and he'd learn what I'd been trying to hide for far too long.

"Tell me, babe." That rough, rugged voice worked so hard to be gentle. "Tell me why you married me."

Why was he asking me questions when he already had the answer?

"You already know," I whispered.

He nodded. "Tell me anyway."

"So you can break my heart? So you can push me away, again and again?" I lifted my chin. "No. Get out. We're over."

"The fuck we are." His lips crashed down on mine, silencing any protest with a powerful kiss.

I struggled, pushing at his hard chest, trying to break free, but Hux was having none of it.

His strong arms banded around me, pulling me into his embrace. "Ev," he whispered against my lips.

That whisper broke my resolve.

One sweep of his tongue across my lower lip and I opened for him to slip inside. Then I was lost. Lost in the man who'd

captured my heart. Lost in the man I'd loved from that very first night.

Hux kissed me until I was dizzy, then his lips moved away from mine, trailing across my cheek to my ear. "Tell me."

"I'm scared," I admitted, shaking my head.

After an emotional week, I couldn't fake my way through this one. Not with Hux. Tears flooded and dripped down my face. A sob worked its way free.

"I'm sorry, Ev." He clutched me closer, cupping the back of my head as I burrowed into his neck. "Please."

"I can't."

"You can. You know you're safe with me."

The sincerity in his statement made me pull away. And when I looked into those dazzling blue eyes, the truth came pouring out. "Because I loved you."

From the beginning, Hux had been special. Maybe I'd fallen for him that first night. Maybe the second. I'd been denying my feelings for so long, it was hard to pinpoint when it had started. But the real reason I'd offered to marry him was not for Savannah's sake.

It had been for mine.

Hux made me feel safe. He made me feel wanted and worshiped. His heart was a mirror image of mine, the missing piece.

How could I not love him?

Hux dropped his forehead to mine. "I started your portrait three days after that first night."

"What?" But then that would mean . . .

“I love you.” His voice was a warm caress. “Fuck, but I love you.”

My chin quivered and a sloppy smile split my face. “Don’t say shit like that to me.”

He chuckled, and that laughter brought my entire world to a halt. The anchor I’d been searching for, that something that would keep my life from spinning out of control, was right here.

“I’m still mad at you,” I said.

“Figured that.”

“I got a job in New Orleans at an art gallery.”

“You already have a job.”

“Maybe I don’t want to work at your gallery.”

He leaned back and gave me a cocky smirk. “Maybe you do.”

We both knew he was winning. “There are things I want.”

“Name it.”

“What about kids?”

He nodded, letting the idea sink in. “I’d like to do it again. Be there from the beginning.”

Oh my God. This was happening. How was this really happening? I’d brought it up, but it was almost too much for even me to wrap my head around. “Who are you and what have you done with my scowling husband?”

He flashed me his breathtaking smile. “My wife told me to work on that scowl.”

# EPILOGUE

*THREE MONTHS LATER . . .*

“Nervous?” Hux asked Savannah.

“No.” The look on her face and the unspoken *duh* made me choke on a sip of coffee.

“Let’s go take the first day of school picture,” I said, taking the phone from my cardigan’s pocket.

She groaned. “Do I have to?”

“Yes.” I smiled and nodded for the door.

We all shuffled outside to the front porch, and I made Savannah stand by the door with her backpack on.

She stuck out her tongue.

I gave her the finger.

Finally, after some cajoling, she agreed to a nice photo in front of her car, Hux standing beside her.

Whether she liked it or not, this picture was going on the wall. Hux didn’t have any of Savannah on her first day of school. He’d missed kindergarten and all the other grades, but we had senior year and it was going to be a showcase.

“See you at the gallery after school.” Hux kissed her hair, then opened the Mazda’s door.

“Okay. Bye, Dad.” She waved at me. “Bye, Ev.”

“Bye, kid.”

I slid into Hux’s side and we watched her back out of the driveway and zoom down the street. The squeal of her tires made us both cringe. That and the barely-there brake tap at the stop sign.

“One more year,” he said.

“We’ll make it the best.”

“Yeah.” He bent and brushed a kiss to my lips, then wrapped me in his arms, holding me as we stood in the driveway of the home that would likely belong to someone else within the year.

“We’d better get going if we’re going to meet Kase.”

Hux nodded and let me go. Then we hurried inside to refill coffee mugs and hit the road, driving to the property out of town before we had to open the gallery at ten.

Kase was a friend of Hux’s who owned a construction company in town. He’d remodeled the gallery after Hux had bought the building, and Kase also did a lot of work for Kerrigan on her properties, including the gym.

We’d hired him a few months ago to build our dream home on the property. Normally, Kase was six to eight months out, but the custom home project he’d had slated for this fall had been delayed, allowing him to squeeze us in.

Our days and nights over the past months had been spent daydreaming about floor plans and bay windows and roof peaks. The architect had finalized blueprints yesterday and we were meeting with her and Kase at the property for a final review before they broke ground.

My legs bounced as Hux drove, excitement buzzing through my veins.

It would take about four months for the house to be complete, barring any disaster. With any luck, we'd be pregnant by the time we moved in.

So far, my period had come like clockwork, but we were sure having fun trying. At home. At the gallery. In this truck. I hoped the passion Hux and I had for each other never faded.

"Do you think we should have made Savannah's room bigger?" Hux asked.

"It's three times the size of her room now."

He hummed, a crease forming between his eyebrows.

"She'll love it, honey."

"Hope so."

Savannah didn't care where we lived. She didn't need a large room or fancy things. She was simply happy to have this year with her father.

It had taken nearly six weeks for the family court process to run its course, but after Savannah's statement about Julian's violence and her heartfelt plea to spend this year with her father, Nelson had agreed that Savannah could live with us full-time.

She was old enough to make those decisions. In other states, she would have been able to decide for herself.

April hadn't taken the news well. She'd been angry and had done her best to spread rumors around town about Hux. But surprisingly the people of Calamity were mostly deaf to April's bullshit. Whether it was because Hux hadn't given them enough credit for their willingness to look beyond his



past, or because my marriage to him had opened their eyes to the man he truly was, I didn't know. Regardless, April, the stupid bitch, didn't realize that her reaction was going to cost her something precious.

Her daughter.

Savannah had tried to stay in touch with April. She'd call and invite her mother to meet for coffee. There was the occasional text. But even those were dwindling. When Savannah did talk to her, all April did was complain about Hux and *the trophy wife*.

Apparently, I was special enough for a nickname.

Savannah and I had grown closer over the summer, mostly because we spent so much time together at the gallery. We weren't best friends. She still loved to throw me the eye rolls and glares and *whatevers* when she was feeling sassy. But I think she realized that I was on her side. I'd always be there for her in her time of need.

Every day we made a little more progress. Every day, our family's bond grew tighter.

School would be a welcome dose of normalcy for Savannah, though Hux was already mourning the loss of the time he'd had with her over the summer. No more Thursday afternoon matinees. No more Tuesday lunch dates while I manned the gallery. No more breakfast muffin runs to the coffee shop on Fridays while I slept late.

He was going to have to compete with her *friends*. Male friends.

Savannah didn't have a boyfriend, she had boys. Travis. Jordan. Christian. The latest kid was named Mitchell or Michael or Micah—I couldn't keep up. One or more would

swing by the gallery while she worked. They'd flirt shamelessly in the showroom.

My poor husband was not adjusting well to sharing her attention.

Last week, he'd forbidden her to have friends come over during work hours, unless they were girls. After a screaming match between the two, he'd escaped to his studio for hours and Savannah had stormed to her room and slammed the door.

It had been their first knock-down, drag-out fight.

When I'd found Hux in the studio, he'd had a paintbrush in his hand and a look of horror on his face.

I was proud of him for not giving into the fear of losing her, for standing his ground. The two of them had worked it out, because as much as Hux didn't want to hurt Savannah, she didn't want to hurt him either.

There'd be more bumps along this road. She was a teenage girl with a wild streak, and the more comfortable she became around us, the more willing she was to let that streak shine.

But never in my life had I looked forward to a year.

She was probably too old for me to step in as a mother-type figure. But I was a loyal friend and I had a feeling in the years to come, she'd need one. All women did.

We rolled down the gravel lane to the site of our future home, finding Kase and our architect waiting.

The walk-through went quickly, the only major sticking point being Hux's studio. He wanted to give Savannah an enormous bedroom and me a shower the size of Montana to sing inside. But the man wouldn't even consider a new studio.

He wanted to have Kase move the studio from his backyard up here.

Why wouldn't he listen to reason? He could have a brand-new studio connected to the house. No more trudging through the winter snow or melting in the summer heat.

"But—"

"I don't need a new studio."

"And I don't need a kitchen island as big as a car."

He crossed his arms over his chest.

Stubborn mule. "Why can't we just plan out a new studio? We can put it right here." I spun in a circle, the tall fall grasses tickling the denim of my jeans. "Then Kase can try to move your old studio. If it survives, great. If not, you'll have this space too."

Hux sighed. "Are you going to let this go?"

"Nope."

"Fine," he grumbled.

I clapped and winked at Kase.

Kase wasn't excited to move the old studio, given the cramped nature of our current neighborhood. Just getting it out of the yard would be a struggle. This was step one in our *convince Hux to give up the old studio* scheme. Step two was having the new studio be so amazing, with custom shelves for his paints, top-of-the-line lighting and a surround sound system, that Hux would step inside and fall in love instantly.

I was already planning the reveal. It was going to be the two of us, Hux in a blindfold. I planned to be naked, simply to reinforce the new studio's superiority.

After another stroll through the meadow, imagining how it would change, Hux and I left Kase and the architect behind and drove to the gallery.

Hux hadn't replaced Katie, unless you counted me and Savannah. He'd been hesitant to hire anyone from the outside, choosing to run it himself for a while. With my help, of course. I'd offered to work and be treated like an employee, paid on a salary for my time, but Hux had nixed that idea instantly.

I wasn't an employee.

I was a co-owner. Fifty-fifty, another one of my husband's stipulations. I'd argued for less, but the man had his ways of torture. Delicious, magnificent ways. After a night of endless orgasms, I'd finally given in.

Hux stayed at the studio, painting most days, while I was at the gallery. Some days, he came with me, especially the days when Savannah was working too. With tourist season coming to a close, he wasn't as busy keeping up with demand. Just yesterday, we'd closed for a long, late lunch at the White Oak, seated beside Nelson.

It had been a fun few months, learning everything there was to know about the gallery. Lately, Hux had been teaching me how to hang paintings and shift the lights to bring out various colors. The atmosphere in the gallery was lighter now that the tension between Katie and me was gone.

Word around Calamity was that Katie had moved a few weeks after Hux had fired her. He was struggling with her betrayal. Hux had lost a person he'd trusted. A person who hadn't deserved that trust.

But we were making new friends. Slowly, I was pulling Hux out of his shell. Just this past weekend, we'd gone to dinner with Lucy and Duke. I hoped that if Hux's relationships with some good friends deepened, the loss of Katie wouldn't bother him so much.

"What's the plan for today?" Hux asked as we walked inside the gallery.

"Will you help me restage the front window?"

"No."

"Hux." I dropped my purse on the corner desk, then planted my hands on my hips. "It's been three months."

"So."

"I'm sick of seeing my face."

"I'm not."

"It's time."

He shook his head. "I like that up front."

"Why? It's not even for sale. And I'm tired of people coming in and asking if it's me." Why people felt the need to ask was beyond me. Clearly, that portrait was of me.

"Babe, no."

"Honey," I drawled through clenched teeth. "How about we put it in your new studio at the house?"

He shook his head and moved into my space. "I like it on display. Tells everyone who comes by exactly who you are."

"Your muse."

"My wife." He threaded his fingers into my hair, pulling me close. Then he dropped a kiss to my lips and let me go.

I was proud to be his wife. I was proud to have inspired a piece like that. So if he wanted to leave it out front, I'd indulge him until next year's tourist season began. But that was where I was drawing a line.

As much as I wanted Hux to display his art, I also wanted to sell artwork. Featuring a painting that was neither his typical style of work, nor for sale, wasn't a stellar business model.

"My mom emailed me this morning," I said as we settled in for the day. The front window was off-limits, but we'd decided to add one of Hux's newest pieces to a wall, meaning there was some shuffling to do. The weather was changing and foot traffic on First was dwindling, so we got to work with fewer interruptions.

"What did she say?"

"They want to come here for Christmas."

"Hopefully we'll be close to done at the house."

"I hope so too." I'd love nothing more than spending our first Christmas together in our new home. "If not, they can stay—"

A woman's enraged shout rang outside, loud enough to permeate the gallery walls and windows.

Hux and I shared a look, then we both bolted for the front door. We stepped onto the sidewalk just in time to hear it again.

"Kerrigan?"

She was standing across the street, one block down. I started rushing down the sidewalk before I even recognized

what was happening. I dodged other shop owners who'd come outside to witness the commotion.

Kerrigan had a piece of paper in her hand. She was red-faced and fuming, wearing a pair of black leggings and a tank top with the gym's logo.

In front of her was a man in a charcoal three-piece suit. His dark hair was neatly combed, his frame tall and straight. He was a bit too well-dressed to fit in Calamity, but he stood stoic and firm, like the mountains in the distance, as Kerrigan raged in his face.

"Fuck you!" Her curse bounced off the storefronts.

"Shit," I hissed, picking up my pace. Kerrigan didn't lose her cool, not like this.

Hux's footsteps were right behind me.

We rushed across the street in time to reach their side as Kerrigan ripped up the paper in her hand and threw the shredded pieces into the man's face.

He didn't so much as flinch. "Thirty days, Ms. Hale."

Who was this stranger? He was new to Calamity because I would have remembered that face. His strong jaw was covered in a neatly trimmed beard. His eyes were shaded by mirrored sunglasses. His shoulders were as broad as Hux's, his suit cut to perfection around the man's muscled frame.

"Thirty days," he repeated, then he was gone, striding past us. His polished shoes clicked on the cement.

"Hey," I panted, touching Kerrigan's shoulder. "What happened? What's going on?"

She shook her head, glaring at the man's back. But then her eyes flooded, her shoulders fell, and she looked at me with

utter hopelessness. “He’s going to take it all.”

“Take what all?” Hux asked. “Who was that guy?”

“My investor. Or, the grandson of my investor. He’s going to take it all. I can’t . . .”

“Can’t what? What’s going on?”

She buried her face in her hands and cried. “I’m in over my head. I’m broke.”

“Oh no.” I pulled her into my arms and gave Hux a worried look.

His scowl was aimed at the man in the suit, who spared us one quick glance before sliding into his Jaguar and driving away.

“What can I do?” I asked.

Kerrigan shook her head, standing straight. Then she wiped her face dry, her gaze fixed on Jane’s. “I need a drink.”

Without another word, she marched toward the bar.

“Are they even open?” I asked Hux. It was barely past ten.

“Guess we’ll find out.” He took my elbow and steered me after my friend.

Three hours later, Kerrigan had explained all about her financial problems. Problems that wouldn’t have been problems had her investor not passed away, leaving everything to his ruthless grandson.

“I’m screwed,” she slurred, raising her empty tumbler.

Jane appeared across the bar, trading Kerrigan’s empty glass for a full one. The bar didn’t officially open until eleven, but Jane had heard Kerrigan’s rampage too and had made an exception to business hours.



“You know? I can’t even taste the vodka anymore.”  
Kerrigan hiccupped and gulped her drink.

“Cuz that’s water, sweetie.” Jane patted her on the shoulder. “And as much fun as it’s been for you girls to keep me company all morning, I think it’s time for you to go home. Your daddy’s here.”

“No,” Kerrigan groaned, collapsing forward on the bar. “You called my dad?”

“Yes, she did.” Kerrigan’s father appeared, helping her to her feet. Then he collected his daughter in his arms while she burst into tears. He shuffled her to the door, turning to mouth, “Thank you.”

“Phew.” I gave Jane a smile, then stood. “Thanks, Jane.”

“She’ll bounce back.”

“I hope so.” I waved and made my way outside. The bright morning light was blinding after three hours in a dark bar.

Once Hux’d had Kerrigan and me situated at the bar, he’d returned to cover the gallery. He’d been texting me but I was anxious to give him the full recap of what I’d learned. Only the gallery was empty when I walked through the door.

“Hux?” I called.

Footsteps pounded above me. What was he doing upstairs?

There was no need to ask. Hux appeared with fresh paint smears on his jeans. “Think I’ll turn the upstairs into a studio. Then we can both come here during the day.”

I hid a smirk, having thought of that months ago. But now that it was Hux’s idea, he wouldn’t resist.

“What if you get sick of me?”

“Never.” He stepped close, bringing a finger to my face. He traced the bridge of my nose with a finger smeared with white. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

And there, with a streak of white on my nose, I melted into my husband’s arms.

This marriage had begun as a lie. A ruse. A hoax.

Turns out, the only people we’d been bluffing were ourselves.



Want more Everly and Hux?

Click [HERE](#) to download a bonus epilogue!



The Calamity Montana series continues with Kerrigan’s story in [The Brazen](#).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for reading *The Bluff*! I'd like to give special thanks to my incredible team for all the work they do on each of my books. My editing and proofreading team: Elizabeth Nover, Julie Deaton, Karen Lawson and Judy Zweifel. My cover designer: Sarah Hansen. It is such a pleasure to work with you all on each project. To my publicist Nina and agent Kimberly, thanks for all you do!

Thank you to the amazing bloggers who take the time to read and post about my books. I can't thank you all enough for the endless support. Perry Street, you never cease to amaze me with your kind words and enthusiasm. Thank you to all of my author friends and the Goldbrickers for being so supportive. To my friends and family, I wouldn't be here without your unconditional love.

And lastly, a thank you to Hux and Everly. The two months I spent writing your story were a couple of really hard months. You gave me a place to hide and escape the madness for just a few precious hours each day. For that, you'll always hold a special place in my heart.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Willa Nash is *USA Today* Bestselling Author Devney Perry's alter ego, writing contemporary romance stories for Kindle Unlimited. Lover of Swedish Fish, hater of laundry, she lives in Washington State with her husband and two sons. She was born and raised in Montana and has a passion for writing books in the state she calls home.

Don't miss out on Willa's latest book news. Subscribe to her newsletter!

[www.willanash.com](http://www.willanash.com)

Willa loves hearing from her readers.

Connect with her on social media!

[Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Twitter](#)