

BACK THEN? THEY WERE GREAT TOGETHER.  
NOW? THEY COULD BE EVEN BETTER.

# BETTER THAN MOST

JENNIFER  
MILLIKIN

A NOVEL

# Better Than Most

---

**Jennifer Millikin**

Copyright © 2023 by Jennifer Millikin

All rights reserved.

This book or any portion thereof  
may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever  
without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief  
quotations in a book review. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and  
incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any  
resemblance to actual events, or locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely  
coincidental.

JNM, LLC

ISBN: 979-8-9868099-7-7

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

Cover by Okay Creations

Editing by Emerald Edits

*To my little brother who isn't so little anymore. Thanks for  
keeping the lights on.*

# Contents

[Author's Note](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Prologue](#)

1. [Georgia](#)
2. [Georgia](#)
3. [Rhodes](#)
4. [Georgia](#)
5. [Rhodes](#)
6. [Rhodes](#)
7. [Georgia](#)
8. [Georgia](#)
9. [Georgia](#)
10. [Georgia](#)
11. [Georgia](#)
12. [Georgia](#)
13. [Rhodes](#)
14. [Georgia](#)
15. [Rhodes](#)
16. [Georgia](#)
17. [Georgia](#)
18. [Rhodes](#)
19. [Rhodes](#)
20. [Georgia](#)
21. [Georgia](#)
22. [Georgia](#)
23. [Georgia](#)
24. [Rhodes](#)
25. [Georgia](#)
26. [Rhodes](#)
27. [Georgia](#)
28. [Rhodes](#)

29. [Georgia](#)
30. [Georgia](#)
31. [Rhodes](#)
32. [Georgia](#)
33. [Georgia](#)
34. [Rhodes](#)
35. [Georgia](#)
36. [Rhodes](#)
37. [Georgia](#)
38. [Georgia](#)
39. [Rhodes](#)
40. [Rhodes](#)
41. [Georgia](#)
42. [Georgia](#)
43. [Rhodes](#)
44. [Georgia](#)
45. [Georgia](#)
46. [Rhodes](#)
47. [Georgia](#)
48. [Georgia](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Jennifer Millikin](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

## Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I love including past characters in my work, usually in small roles, mentions, or brief cameos. In *Better Than Most*, I've brought the Hayden family along on the journey. Once I'd decided on certain aspects of this story, it felt like not including them would be a missed opportunity. Of all my books, the characters from the Hayden family series are the ones who readers ask for more of most often. I know why, because I also love and miss that raucous, wild, lovable family. Weaving them into this story was a pleasure. If you've read the Hayden series, I hope you enjoy seeing them on the page again. If you haven't read them, perhaps you'll decide to give the four-book series a try. Links can be found at the end of this book.

Xoxo,


Jen






## Georgia & Rhodes' Playlist

---

 **Never Say Never (with Lainey Wilson)**  
Cole Swindell, Lainey Wilson


---

 **Georgia On My Mind**  
Ray Charles


---

 **Got It**  
Marian Hill


---

 **Eyes Closed**  
Ed Sheeran


---

 **Exile (ft. Bon Iver)**  
Taylor Swift, Bon Iver


---

 **Goodbyes**  
Sublime with Rome


---

 **You Are The Best Thing**  
Ray LaMontagne


---

 **Give Me One Reason**  
Tracy Chapman

---

 **(I've Had) The Time Of My Life**  
Bill Medley, Jennifer Warnes

---

 **Until I Found You**  
Stephen Sanchez

---

 **I Hear You Knocking**  
Dave Edmunds

---

Access the playlist on Spotify, or go [here](#).

# Prologue

---

## Rhodes

I'M LIFTING ANOTHER BOX FROM THE BACK OF THE MOVING truck when a tiny dog appears at my feet. The heavy box in my arms sags, impeding my efforts to shake off the ball of scruff chomping at my pant leg.

“What the—”

“I’m sorry.” A girl runs up the sidewalk, yelling the apology. Her features twist into a mask of mortification.

I wish I had a mirror so I can see my face, and then immediately make my face stop doing the stupid thing it’s doing. I feel it happening, this awkward reaction I have around beautiful girls, where my jaw goes slack and a cold sweat prickles the back of my neck.

Her flip-flops slam to a halt in front of me. Despite the sheer embarrassment plastered across her face, this girl is beautiful.

Scratch that.

She’s stunning.

*I’m stunned.*

Her long blond hair is tied up in a ponytail high on her head. Faded denim shorts show most of her legs, and her

oversized shirt reads *I don't care what you think*. Her cheeks are as pink as her lips.

Right now she's covering those lips with a cupped palm, eyes wide, staring at the ground beside my feet in horror.

Deep in the throes of my own embarrassing response to the girl, I'd forgotten about the dog.

Correction: this is not a dog. This is an approximation of what a rat would look like if it were dressed as a dog. Also: the rat/dog is peeing on the ground beside my shoe.

"You've got to be kidding me," the girl groans.

She's young. Younger than me by a couple years, probably, and I'm a week past my sixteenth birthday.

"I'm sorry. Like, really *really* sorry." Her face scrunches with embarrassment, as if she wouldn't mind the ground opening up and swallowing her whole.

I'm not sure how to respond, but I know I want to make her feel better. The dog is still peeing, so I say, "At least you know he's well hydrated."

I could kick myself. I want to be suave. Play it cool. The problem is, I don't have a cool bone in my body.

"She," the girl corrects.

I stare down at the not-dog, assessing. "Are you sure?" Rheumy eyes glare up at me, as if to say *hey genius, do you not see me squatting?*

The dog finishes and the girl whose name I'm dying to know scoops up the mangy ball of knotted fur. "Considering she is lacking a very important part of male anatomy, yes, I'm sure."

I set the box back in the truck and hold out my hand. “Rhodes Porter.”

The girl shifts the rat/dog into the crook of one arm, like she’s holding a football. “Georgia Whittier,” she announces, placing her hand in mine.

Her touch is warm, her skin soft and supple. My immediate desire is to keep her hand grasped in mine, but instead I take it back quickly, not wanting her to think I’ve held on for too long. The skin between her eyes pinches for a blip of a second, and now I’m worried my swift handshake has hurt her feelings. But then I look at the words on the front of her T-shirt and figure it would take more than that to hurt this girl’s feelings.

“So you’re moving into Candy House,” she says, peering around me at my new home.

I look with her. “Candy House?”

“It’s what we call this place. You know, because it has all the scalloped trimming and looks like something from Alice in Wonderland.”

“Yeah,” I say, scratching the back of my heated neck. “It’s weird.” I hate it, actually. I hate everything about this move across the country.

Or I did, anyway.

Georgia shakes her head vehemently. “Not weird. Awesome.”

“Awesome?” I think she’s trying to make me feel better about living in a house fit for a doll.

“How many other houses in the neighborhood look like an overgrown Alice could mistake it for a gingerbread house and

try to nibble at a corner?”

I chuckle. I think she’s trying to make me feel better, and it’s working.

Georgia opens her mouth to say more, but someone down the street calls her name.

She must recognize the voice, because she rolls her eyes. “That would be my brother,” she says, sounding annoyed at the mere thought of him. “He’s been *dying* for someone his age to move into the neighborhood.”

A tall guy rounds the back end of the moving truck. He looks faintly like Georgia, except for the big difference in height and size and opposite hair color. He glances from her to me, and back to her. “You’re taking forever to get the mail,” he says, and it sounds like an accusation.

She frowns at the dog nestled in her arms. “Homely decided to meet the new neighbor.”

“Homely?” I stare openly at the animal. It responds by scrunching its nose and baring its pointy teeth. “It’s accurate, but...”

“Mean?” Georgia supplies.

I remove my ball cap and scratch my head. “Yeah. At least call her Face Made For Radio.” It’s actually my dad’s joke, but he’s back in New York probably working seventeen hour days like always. As far as I’m concerned, that joke is what I got in my parent’s divorce.

Jake laughs, his head thrown back, then offers his hand in greeting. I introduce myself, and he says, “I’m Jake.” Thumbing at Georgia, he adds, “This lunatic’s older brother.”

The introduction is friendly, but I wonder if he's getting a point across. *Older brother*. It's a warning, a stake in the ground.

Georgia nuzzles Homely's ear, and I notice it's missing a portion. "She's getting a new name. We got her from the pound last week, and that's what they were calling her." Georgia looks up, her eyes grabbing hold of me, like a swirling sea of chocolate. "Do you want to help me name her?"

I start to nod, but Jake cuts in. "He doesn't want to help you name your *dog*, Georgia." Jake makes a face. "What's the point of renaming it now? That dog's not even going to make it more than a year. You heard the vet."

Georgia narrows her eyes. "Would you want to be called Homely, even if you only had one more year to live?"

"Homely doesn't know the definition of the word homely."

Georgia looks at me with exasperation, like she wants me to jump in and save her.

Thankfully, I don't have to choose, because Jake leans to peer into the hollows of the moving truck. "Where'd you move from?"

"New York."

He straightens. "New York or *New York*," he makes jazz hands and sings the words.

Georgia blows out a disgusted breath. "What a loser." She looks at me seriously. "Don't be friends with this guy."

I laugh at her. "The first one," I say, answering Jake's question. "A small town called Armonk."

"Cool," Jake responds. "Why did you move here?"

“My mom said she lived here for a while when she was little.” I shrug, as if that answers the question. It seems to be enough for Jake. I don’t want to talk about my dad, or the fact that he’s married to his job. As a criminal defense attorney, he spends his life battling on behalf of clients, but when it came to me and my mom, he let us go without a fight.

Jake sidesteps me. “Come on. I’ll help you unload, and then we’ll toss around the football.” He reaches into the back of the truck and comes away with a box marked *books*. He doesn’t bat an eye, doesn’t even let on that it’s heavy. Now that I’m looking, I notice the guy’s biceps are like cans of chili.

Jake strides for the house without being directed. “I hope you like burgers. My parents grill every Friday night,” he yells over his shoulder. “You should invite your family.”

I like that he doesn’t ask how many family members I have before extending the invitation. There could be seventeen of us, all wiggling our way into the weird nooks and alcoves inside the new house. *Candy House*. There aren’t seventeen of us. There are two. Me, and my mother.

Jake disappears into my new house, and a second later his booming voice greets my mom. Maybe things in Green Haven won’t be terrible. Maybe this place will work out.

I look back at Georgia. One side of her lips curve upward, but she doesn’t look convincingly happy. “You have a new best friend. I hope you had a vacancy.”

Disappointment stirs in my chest. Not at gaining a friend, because I’m low on those these days, but at losing Georgia. It doesn’t make sense, but that’s what this feels like.



She looks at me, I look at her, and something unspoken passes between us. Silent conversation seems unlikely after only knowing each other so short a time, but maybe it's not ruled by what the clock says. Maybe it's ruled by connection.

And it's clear to us what we've already become.

Off-limits.

Georgia, tattered dog in hand, tents a hand over her eyes to block the sun. "Welcome to Green Haven."

# Chapter 1

# *Georgia*

## Three Months Ago

ELEVEN YEARS SINCE RHODES LEFT ME, AND ALL I WANT IS for him to stay gone.

But there he is now, in the flesh, his charcoal gray suit hugging his muscular thighs, his white shirt stretching across planes of hard muscle.

He looks infuriatingly good, standing across Emmett and Victoria Jones's backyard, relaxed and confident and smiling. Like he doesn't have a care in the world. Like he doesn't *care* that I used to *be* his world.

He's shaking my brother's hand, congratulating Jake on his nuptials. Seeing them together like this, dressed up and hair perfectly done, makes me think of *before*. But it's silly of me, letting nostalgia take over and invade my thoughts, my emotions. There's no need for it. Nostalgia is a long road to nowheresville, with a guaranteed stay at the heartbreak hotel.

A beaming smile broadens my brother's cheeks, joy darting from his gaze like little bursts of fireworks. His elation makes me happy, because it is beyond deserved. Jake has been a single father since I was a freshman in college. His life was full of his son, Robbie. He didn't date, ever. Until Colbie showed up in Green Haven and we all watched the sparks fly, I thought my brother might be a perpetual bachelor.

And now Jake's gone and married Colbie and invited his stupid best friend Rhodes with his dumb wavy light brown hair and his idiotic carved cheekbones and his obnoxious blue eyes.

I down half my glass of champagne and muster up a smile for my new sister-in-law as she makes her way over to me. It's not difficult to find a genuine smile for Colbie, not when she's radiant like she is presently, her cheeks flushed and her eyelashes darkened by the two thick coats of mascara I applied a few hours ago. She'd opted to do her own makeup, but when it came down to it, her hand was too shaky to wield the wand.

She nudges me. "We're officially family."

I nudge her back. "Officially, yes. But we already were." I love Colbie. I especially love the way she came into our lives and showed Jake what he was missing. God, how that man needed someone.

Colbie's gaze moves across the yard. "I can't believe what a good job you and Victoria and Greer did with the setup and decorating. It doesn't look like my dad's backyard anymore."

Colbie's stepmother, Victoria, and her half-sister, Greer, and I spent the last week transforming the backyard into an 'earthy but make it chic' space for their wedding and reception. Colbie wanted buttercups for the centerpieces running down the middle of the two long, rectangular tables. We'd managed to get those and place them in glass vases, surrounded by greenery and candles. I made a last-minute run to a home store for faux candles when we realized the local fire danger level had increased to 'Extreme' due to lack of rain. We'd all agreed the last thing we needed was to be the cause of a fire.

Colbie's appreciative gaze drifts from all the wedding decor details, landing on my brother. And Rhodes. She gestures at the two of them, looking thick as thieves in the corner, with her champagne flute. "I'm looking forward to getting to know Rhodes better. I barely know him, and he's Jake's best friend."

He might be Jake's best friend, but he was mine too, and nobody knows it. It's not easy to let Rhodes belong to Jake, and not claim him as my own. I've been forced to hide my grief over him, and the loss of us, all this time. Secrets don't always have a definitive end point. This particular secret is ongoing.

Colbie would know Rhodes better if he weren't constantly traveling for work, going from crew to crew where he's needed. He's a lineman, a career he'd never talked about until he suddenly left for trade school.

Jake offers updates from time to time, and last I heard, Rhodes was in New York. A memory, clear as day, assails me. *Jake sings 'New York' in his God awful voice. Rhodes smirks, looking at my brother while secretly looking just beyond Jake's head, to me.*

"Act fast," I murmur, watching Rhodes gesture as he speaks. Every moment I spend cataloguing his motions is a wallop to my heart. "I'm sure he'll be gone again soon."

"Not this time," Colbie replies, her carefully placed side swept bangs drawing over her cheek as her head shakes. "He's back for good."

My stomach drops. "He's... *what?*"

Colbie tears her adoring gaze from my brother. I must have an awful look on my face, because her eyes crinkle with

concern. “He’s back. No more travel.”

I school my features, aiming for nonchalance when I say, “Oh, I didn’t get the memo.” My throat is doing this inside out thing where it feels like all the air has been siphoned from it. My heart? I don’t even know what that’s doing, only that suddenly I feel it too much, but also not at all.

I need Rhodes to be gone. I need Rhodes to be a traveler.

What I do not need is Rhodes to be in my little town of Green Haven, walking my streets, eating my breakfasts at Honeybee.

Interloper. Intruder. Trespasser. Various, but similar, words to describe him, all in an effort to mask the one badge I refuse to award him. *Heartbreaker*.

Colbie places a palm on my bare shoulder. “You good?” Her eyebrows draw together as she searches my face. She is gorgeous always, but especially today.

I nod once, then lie. “I’m good.”

I am not good. I do not know how I will survive Rhodes living in Green Haven again.

For the remainder of the reception, I become a master of knowing where Rhodes is so I can avoid him. My hyperawareness takes me out of the moment, keeping me tethered to Rhodes in a way I don’t like.

It’s made worse by the fact he doesn’t look my way. He doesn’t acknowledge me.

I don’t want to live in reaction to him.

What I want more than anything is to no longer care.

It has been years since we were together, and sometimes it feels like it didn't happen at all. Especially since nobody knows about it. *If a little sister and her big brother's best friend fall in love, but nobody knows about it, did it really happen?*

I visit the powder room inside the house, dipping my hands in the cool running water and dabbing it on the back of my neck. The outdoor air temperature is perfect, but I'm flushed anyway, heated by my warring thoughts. Happiness for my brother, sickened by my prolonged proximity to Rhodes.

Sweeping open the door, I step from the half-bath and stop short. There he is, all six foot two of him. Masculine. Gorgeous. A presence I struggle to reject. He released his hold on me so long ago, but it has remained, fortified by time and memory.

His gaze locks on mine, and all I can do is remember how his blue eyes changed from cornflower to denim when he said *I love you*.

Of all the details about my time with Rhodes, that has been the one to plague me. Those eyes held sincerity. Love. Our ending felt wrong, because those eyes held our truth.

Now, electricity zings through the connection of our gaze. My skin prickles. He steps toward me, and the small movement breaks the moment. My flattened palm shoots out, stopping him. I hurry down the hall, away from him, spilling myself and my tangled emotions out the front door.

I cannot, *will not*, allow Rhodes an inch of space in my life. He will sit *over there*, in a removed place as my brother's best friend, the way he has been for years. The way he always will be.



Pulling my phone from my purse, I send a quick text. I need a distraction. I need to remind myself that I've moved on. Rhodes no longer owns my heart.

Rhodes and Georgia are a relic, a *way back when*, teenage hormones and naïveté.

I'm no longer sixteen and heartbroken. I'm a woman. And this woman is going to prove to herself that she's been over Rhodes Porter for a very long time.

---

Sex is a multi-player game, and in this exact moment, as Ian rocks above me in his bed, it's more like one engaged player and someone who went *away from keyboard*.

Ian and I met at the dance studio where we take West Coast swing lessons. We've been casually seeing each other for two months. He's nice, and handsome, uninterested in commitment, and he doesn't seem to care that I'm a passenger on the Hot Mess Express. Dark hair, dark eyes, and baby-faced. Rhodes' physical opposite. Ian's companionship is on par with the orgasms he gives me. All in all, it's a win-win.

Ian cups my breast. Thumbs one nipple. His cheek brushes mine, his stubble scraping my jaw.

After a minute, he slows. He looks down at me, eyebrows tugging in the center. "Are you good? You're not usually this..."

*Unresponsive?*

"Quiet," he finishes.

"I'm great," I fib, winding my arms around his neck. "Keep going."

Ian listens. I close my eyes, drag my nails over his scalp, and imagine the short dark hairs are light brown curls. My fingers drift lower, to his upper back, and with a single rounded nail I trace the design of a tattoo he does not have.

A twinge of guilt pokes at my brain, making a foothold for itself alongside my memories. I shouldn't be envisioning another man, but I can't help myself.

When my orgasm arrives, I fold back the name on the tip of my tongue and swallow it whole.

*Rhodes.*

## Chapter 2

# *Georgia*

## *PRESENT DAY*

You wouldn't believe how easy it is to avoid someone in a small town. All you have to do is stalk them, memorize their schedule, and then tailor your own to your Never See Them need.

Still, I remained geared up, always ready for a run-in lest my stalking skills prove subpar, but as the weeks wore on without incident, I relaxed my guard.

Big mistake. Now I'm standing in line at the post office, heart pounding as I watch Rhodes through the large front window. He's across the street, on the sidewalk, at one in the afternoon on a Wednesday. I don't know if I'm more shocked to see him, or by the schedule aberration. He's supposed to be at work.

He pauses in front of the barbershop, opening the door for a mom and her teenage son. He nods his head, presumably acknowledging their gratitude for his polite behavior.

He follows them inside, and now I can barely see him through the smoky barbershop glass meant to protect patrons from curious passersby. If it weren't for that ridiculously

bright orange beanie he's wearing, I wouldn't be able to spot him.

My arms tighten around the small package I'm holding.

An old, playful voice behind me says, "Miss Georgia, do you have glue on the bottom of your shoes?"

I turn and see Jiminy, a bemused expression deepening his already-deep wrinkles.

"Not that I know of," I answer, grinning despite my shock at seeing Rhodes. A person can't interact with Jiminy and not smile. The sweet old owner of Honeybee Cafe could elicit a smile from me on my worst day.

He points a gnarled finger over my shoulder. Whipping around, I see that I'm holding up the line. Karen, the woman working the counter, leans on an elbow and watches me with detached amusement.

I make an *oops* face and hustle over.

"Anything interesting across the street?" she asks as I hand her my package.

"Nope," I say, shaking my head and watching her key in the destination zip code. She wears something that looks like a rubber thimble on her thumb, so I ask her about it to avoid any follow-up questions she might have about what took my attention.

"Helps when I'm sorting mail," she answers, then taps the package and asks, "Is there anything liquid, fragile, perishable..." I tune her out and wait for her to finish, then say no.

It's Colbie's package, and I honestly don't know what she's shipping, but I'm sure it's fine. I offered to mail it out for

her because she was busy and it seemed like a nice thing to do.

I say goodbye, turning to leave, but Karen leans over the counter separating us and whispers conspiratorially, “Was it the man in the orange hat? If I was twenty years younger, he’d be hard to look away from.”

I laugh softly, winking, and step away without confirming or denying.

Rhodes isn’t just hard to look away from. My heart has had the damndest time getting over him, too.



I snuck from the post office like a low-brow thief. Without a hat to hide behind, I used my sweep of hair as a curtain. One thing I know for certain about that barber shop is even though it’s difficult to see in, it is easy to see out.

When I’ve made it safely to my car, and I’m positive I haven’t been spotted, I let out a deep breath of relief.

Somehow, I know, I just *know*, that if Rhodes and I were to run into each other on the small town streets of Green Haven, he would be friendly to me. And the last thing I want is for that man to be friendly toward me.

Rhodes’ friendliness disarms me. It always has. Mostly because he’s genuine, so his smile really means he’s happy. His scowl really means he’s upset.

My head bounces back against the headrest in my driver’s seat, relishing in the relative safety of my car. My phone buzzes in my purse.

A text from Greer. She may be Colbie’s younger sister, but she’s been my closest friend since we were young. Even with a

few years separating our ages, we were thrown together a lot when we were little because my dad worked for her dad.

Help. Big Kahuna asked me out. This is NOT A DRILL.

On my way.

I throw my car in reverse, navigating to Green Haven Elementary school, where Greer works as a fifth-grade teacher.

When I first moved home from Flagstaff a few years ago, I was naïve enough to think I'd be able to walk into Green Haven Elementary and they would add me to their faculty. Not only did I have a degree in elementary education and taught for three years already, but I had attended elementary school there, from kindergarten all the way through eighth grade. I was a legend. I was responsible for Pickle Friday, for goodness' sake. (Oversized pickles sold in paper cups meant for Sno-Cones. Earth-shattering, I know.)

When it came down to it, my contribution to the school meant little because there weren't any openings. Greer swiped the last one. Fresh from earning her Master's degree in early childhood education, and only a few months in front of me in her return to Green Haven, Greer was awarded her first teaching position.

And me?

Diddly squat.

I'm doing my best, though. For a while I worked odd jobs, but right now I'm helping Greer's mom, Victoria, stage homes she's selling. I pay my mother rent, so it's not like I'm a total

hanger-on, but it's a low blow to be in my mid-twenties and back at home.

When I arrive at Green Haven Elementary, I hang around outside of the front office and wait for them to buzz me in. Once inside, I sign the visitors logbook and slap a Visitor sticker above my left breast.

The admin, who is new since my days here and not at all impressed with me, tells me how to get to Greer's classroom. I don't tell her I do not need those directions. When she finishes, she says, "Greer called ahead, so she's expecting you."

I open the double doors that lead to the rest of the school, making a right, then a left, and another right. Through the window in Greer's classroom door, I glimpse her seated at her desk, her chin propped up by a hand as she stares at something I can't see.

"I'm here," I announce, sweeping inside the empty classroom. "Where are the crotch goblins?"

Greer looks at me, bemused. "Have you considered that the reason you didn't get a job here is because you call children 'crotch goblins'?"

"Nope," I answer, grabbing a desk from the front row and dragging it in front of Greer's desk. "Look, I fit," I say, sliding my petite frame into the chair/desk combo.

Greer stifles a laugh. "You took longer to get here than I thought you would. My kids will be back from art in five minutes."

"Ms. Trunchbull up front took a full sixty seconds to let me in," I complain. "Guess she was busy forcing someone to eat chocolate cake."



Greer glances at the black and white clock at the back of the classroom. “Four minutes and thirty seconds,” she replies.

“Ok.” I slap my hands together, rubbing them. “Why am I here?”

“Big Kahuna—”

“Yes, yes, I know. Principal Kissy Face asked you out.”

“Shut up,” Greer hisses.

“The classroom isn’t bugged, Greer.” Her response is so strong that I feel bad for being goofy, so I sit up straight, adopting a serious tone. “Ok, tell me why this is a big deal. You’ve kissed *BK*, like, ten times. At this point you should be happy he asked you out. Don’t take this the wrong way, but your lips have been a wee bit loose.”

She laughs reluctantly and closes her eyes. “Shut up,” she groans.

“Three minutes,” I announce, but I’m making it up. I have no idea how much time has passed. “Talk, Greer.”

“*BK* is flirtatious. With *everybody*. The man thrives on female attention.”

“They all do, Greer, unless they also thrive on male attention.”

“It felt like he didn’t really mean it when he asked me on a date. Like he was doing it because he knows I want him to.”

Ok, that would hurt the ego. “What did you say?”

“I said I would think about it because I was trying to play it cool, but then I walked into the teachers’ lounge and saw him laughing with the new kindergarten teacher.”

“Hold up,” I lift a palm. “There is a new kindergarten teacher?” So much for *We’ll call you when there’s an opening*.

Guilt crowds the worry on Greer’s face. “This wasn’t how I was planning on telling you.”

“Diarrhea mouth prevails.” My joke eases the sting. Kind of.

“She was grandfathered in. Doris’s daughter-in-law.”

My indignation dissipates. Doris has been with the school for thirty years. She’s an institution. “I’ll allow it. Continue.”

Greer runs the small sapphire pendant on her neck back and forth across the silver chain. “She was feeding him a donut, Georgia. A *donut*.”

“Maybe he had glue, or glitter on his hands. Or finger paint. And his blood sugar was dropping, and she helped him out. It’s not like she was feeding him a slice of wedding cake.”

Greer is sensitive, and normally I admire that trait. This is not one of those times, because her sensitivity often leads to anxiety.

“None of those things are likely true, but I get your point.”

“Do you want to say yes to a date?”

“Um, yeah. I have to redeem my ho-bag lips.”

“Then how about you wait until the school day is over, and march into his office and tell him your answer?”

She nods once with strength. Her classroom door opens, the space filling with ten-and-eleven-year-olds.

“That’s my cue.” Pushing the desk back where I found it, I make my way through the sea of bodies. Three of them are

bigger than me, and one of them passes a hand over the top of my head.

“Second year fifth grader?” I ask him.

“Goodbye, Georgia,” Greer says pointedly.

I wave behind me as I go, returning through the front office. Big Kahuna stands beside Trunchbull, bent at the waist so he can talk to her while she remains sitting. She’s staring up at him with doe eyes.

He stands up straight when he catches sight of me. I’m just about to pass back through the double doors when he smiles at me. A cocky, mega-watt smile. And I see exactly what Greer means about him needing female attention.

I stop, ripping the Visitor sticker from my chest and tossing it in a nearby wastebasket. “I was just here dropping in on my best friend Greer. Or, Ms. Jones. She needed my advice about a guy who asked her out.” I smile at the pair, my nose wrinkling. “I advised her not to say yes. Why lower your standards, you know?” I shrug. “Anyway, have a nice day.”

I burst through the door and out into the sunshine.

An hour later, Greer texts.

What did you say to BK? He came to my classroom and asked me out again. Said he ran into my friend. Georgia...

Is that Georgia, I love you or Georgia, I’m going to strangle you?

The first one.

It took away his confidence that I’d say yes and made him want me to say yes even more.

My first inclination is to tell her not to want a man who needs to be maneuvered into wanting her. But I'm in no position to give advice on how to choose a good man. I have been nothing but let down by men I thought were good.

My good man measurement tool is broken beyond repair. So I keep my mouth shut and respond.

Congratulations to your loose lips.

I drive home, doing everything I can not to look down the street when I park my car in the driveway and get out. I'm successful all the way to my front door, where my curiosity (heart?) gets the better of me.

“Oh, would you look at that untied shoelace?” I say to no one. Bending down, I go through the motions of tying laces that don't exist on my sandals. Using my trusty hair to conceal my gaze, I peek at Candy House.

Rhodes' truck is out front.

It has been hell knowing he's there.

So close, but so far.

I want him. I hate him.

# Chapter 3

## *Rhodes*

AVOIDING SOMEONE WHO LIVES ON THE SAME STREET AS YOU is easier than it sounds.

Physically, anyway. There's no avoiding Georgia in my mind. In my heart. She is ever-present.

Mostly, staying away from Georgia in the physical sense is about maintaining a consistent schedule. Four days a week I am out of the house long before the rooster crows. Georgia is still dreaming of sugarplums and a mouse king.

Who am I kidding? She's probably dreaming of delivering a swift blow to my midsection. Possibly even lower. What she lacks in height, she makes up for in fire.

I wake up two minutes before my alarm, set for 4:06 a.m. I like the odd time, something not counted in fives or tens. When I was first starting out as a lineman, I struggled to wake up. Now it has been my wake up time for so many years, I probably don't need the alarm any longer. Still, I set it every night. Nobody wants to be the guy who holds up the job, or creates any kind of delay.

I step into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee, surprised to find my mom has beat me there. "You're up early."

Her back is to me as she stands at the counter, placing two pieces of bread into the toaster. With intense focus, she pushes down on the lever, and the bread disappears.

“Mom, you should let me make you breakfast.” I sound like I’m chiding her, and I guess I kind of am. I’m already going to the fridge, pulling out the butter and her favorite sugar-free raspberry preserves. “I’m here now,” I remind her unnecessarily. “I can help you.”

“I’m not blind,” she says irritably. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Mom,” I say, gentle now. This is tricky territory. “You’re on your way to it.”

She lets out a loud breath. “Remind me to sleep in tomorrow.”

“And miss spending time with your only child before he leaves for work all day?”

We’ve missed years with each other. My job has taken me all over the United States, with a couple stints in Canada and Mexico, but that was when my mom’s health was still good. All those years, her diabetes was a nuisance, but not yet punitive. A type-one diabetic since childhood, my mom always appeared to have it under control. Growing up, I didn’t think much about it. She wore her pump, she monitored her glucose level, she rarely had issues.

She didn’t tell me when she began having trouble seeing faraway objects. When she noticed streaks in her eyes that looked like cobwebs, she told her eye doctor, but not me. Her eye doctor increased her eye exam visits from annual to every three months, and still she didn’t tell me.

It wasn’t until she jumped a curb in her car and drove onto the Green Haven golf course that I found out she was

experiencing vision loss. *Diabetic retinopathy*.

Now she needs someone here with her. And she hates that fact.

The toast pops, and I retrieve a plate from the cabinet and prepare it the way she likes. Yawning, she sits down at the bistro table in the corner of the kitchen. I slide the plate in front of her, along with a glass of water.

“The water is on your right,” I tell her.

“Thanks.” She yawns again. “How do you get up so early every day?”

“Someone has to keep the lights on,” I quip, grabbing one of the breakfast burritos I prepped on Sunday, placing it on a plate and popping it in the microwave.

“It’s been nice having you home,” my mom says, biting into her toast. “Even though you are an early bird.”

I’ve been coming and going for years, using my mom’s house as a home base. It never bothered me that I don’t have my own home, or couch, or dishes. But lately, it’s starting to dig into me, a thorn beginning to press into my side.

“It has been good being back,” I reply, watching the seconds count down on the microwave screen. Honestly, it’s only kind of good being back. It’s hard knowing Georgia is so close, but still so far away.

I can’t imagine what she would do if I shone my flashlight in her window like I used to. Probably make those dreams I bet she has into a reality.

Georgia despises me. I got that message loud and clear at Jake and Colbie’s wedding. Quiet fury emanated from her, and I felt every searing inch of it.



I don't blame her.

"Are you still working at the mine?" my mom asks, breaking into my thoughts.

I nod, then remember she likely can't see the motion. "For a little while longer," I answer. The microwave beeps and I remove the plate.

I take the seat across from her, though there's little point. The burrito is gone in five bites.

"How's your new crew? Are they calling you by the right name yet? Or are they still calling you Randy?"

"Ricky," I correct, rolling my eyes. "And yes, they are calling me the right name now."

My mom frowns to communicate her displeasure at the trade-specific hazing ritual. "I still don't understand why they did that."

I think if my mom had her vision, she'd have done something really embarrassing, like accost the crew and demand they call her little boy by his name.

I shrug. I'm close enough to her that she can at least partially see me. "It's like being in a fraternity." That's the best way I can come up with to describe the brotherhood, the teasing camaraderie. Not that I've ever stepped foot on a university campus. I learned how to be a lineman from a trade school. Those classes taught me everything I needed to know to climb poles, and work with electricity. But all the other details of the job, and learning how to put your life in another man's hands, we learned on the job. It's a dangerous career, but one full of brotherhood. I went into it because I needed something to do with my life, but I didn't know I would love it the way I do.

My mom harrumphs, letting me know that no matter what I say, she won't accept my explanation.

"I better get going." I take my plate to the sink, then fill a large thermos with coffee. "I took all the coffee. Would you like me to make a second pot?"

I'm asking only because last week when I made her fresh coffee after taking the rest of it, she snapped at me and told me she could manage the coffee on her own. I apologized, then cleaned up the grounds scattered on the floor and the counter when I got home from work that afternoon.

"No, hon. I'll make it. I can still do some things for myself."

I'm screwing the top on my coffee when my mother gasps. The kitchen fills with the sound of breaking glass.

"Shit!" my mom shouts. Frustration and disappointment fill the exclamatory word.

"Don't move, Mom. I'll be right back."

I head for the front door and grab my work boots from the rack where I placed them yesterday. I stick my feet inside, not bothering to tie them, and make my way back to the mess.

Glass is everywhere. Large pieces, and tiny shards all over the tile floor. Water drips from the table and onto the floor. From every direction, glass glints in the overhead light.

"Mom, you're going to hate this, but I think I should carry you out of here."

"Rhodes, no." She sounds defeated.

"It's not safe to walk through here."

"You're walking through it."

“I have on my work boots.”

“So bring me my shoes.”

“So you can get glass on the soles of your shoes and drag it through the house?”

She sighs, resigned, and lifts her arms.

Pushing my way through the glass, I lean down and hoist my mom into my arms. I carry her across the tiled floor, setting her down gently at the point where the carpet begins and leads into the living room.

“Thanks for cleaning up my mess.”

“It’s the least I can do, Mom. You cleaned up my mess for years.”

She tries to smile, but there’s a quiver to it that breaks my heart. “It feels like my body is failing me, and I’m powerless.”

I don’t know what to say to ease her despondence, or my own. Maybe it can only be accepted. ”I’m sorry, Mom. That sounds like an awful way to feel.” I wrap her in one more hug, then go to clean up.

I’ll be late for work now, but my foreman, Lud, will understand. This is nothing like oversleeping the alarm, or being too hungover to wake up, or any of the other excuses I’ve heard from years of having various crew mates.

When the glass is swept, the water soaked up, wet paper towels dragged over every inch of the tile to pick up the tiniest of shards, I tie off the trash bag and place it in the trash can on the side of the house.

Then I climb in my truck, hot coffee in hand, and head out to the yard to meet the crew.

Like every morning since I returned to Green Haven, I glance at Georgia's bedroom window as I pass. Like always, it is dark.

# Chapter 4

# Georgia

MIRANDA LAMBERT'S *IF I WAS A COWBOY* DRIFTS FROM MY phone's speaker when a text from my brother comes through.

BBQ?

I roll my eyes at my bedroom ceiling, then wrestle a stray piece of hair off my forehead. I love my big brother, but I'm not entirely certain how he snagged a woman like Colbie.

Are you asking me if I like BBQ? Or if I know what the letters stand for? Or if I want to attend one?

Attend one.

When? Where? What time? Why are you being vague?

Tonight. My place. Six. Inhaling too many fumes at work.

I'm laughing when his next message pops onto my phone's screen.

Rhodes will be there.

The yogurt I'm eating turns sour in my mouth. I grab my napkin and spit into it.

I can't avoid Rhodes forever, but a little longer would be nice. I'm still reeling from seeing him on the sidewalk three days ago, and it's not like we had any interaction. I honestly don't know if I can be around Rhodes and survive it. There's a lot to say, and when I think of him, all I feel is anger.

Mostly.

My brain doesn't even know how to broach the possibility of being near him. Not when I've spent years avoiding him.

At this point, I have an advanced degree in evading that man. That's saying a lot, because his mom lives three houses down from my mom. And they've been friends for years. And I'm currently living in my mother's house. And, because I stalked him in the interest of my self-preservation, I happen to know he is also living in his mother's house.

Jake's invitation sits on my open phone, staring at me. As deeply as I want to say no, it'll be weird if I decline. Jake will insist I don't have anything to do that's more important, because as far as he knows, I'm low on extra-curricular activities and a real job. Staging homes isn't exactly a career, and I haven't told anybody about taking dance lessons again. Jake probably wonders what I do all damn day when I'm not helping Victoria.

"Gahhhh," I groan, falling on my bed and rolling onto my back. On the ceiling is a yellowed rectangle where an Orlando Bloom poster used to be. For years, I fell asleep to Orlando. Now I fall asleep to the ghost of Orlando past.

I hold my phone steady in the air above my face and respond.

I'll be there, and I'm bringing tuna casserole.

I'm attempting a joke, referring to our most hated childhood dinner, but tears burn the backs of my eyes. I sniff, shaking my head like I'm instructing the little balls of salted water. *Do Not Fall*. Rhodes does not deserve any more of my tears.

Instead, I go for a run through the neighborhood, careful to avoid Candy House. I pound the pavement, energized by the rivulets of sweat snaking their way between my breasts and down my back. When I return, I take a long, hot shower and pop in my AirPods for what I know will be an extended getting ready process.

I blow-dry and curl my hair, the way Rhodes liked it.

I paint my nails ballerina pink, the way Rhodes liked it.

That sweet, pear-scented perfume I spritz on the inside of my wrist and dot on my décolletage? That was his preference, too.

If I'm going to be around that man, I'm going to make it hurt.

It'll hurt me too, but the collateral damage is a small price to pay if I can make him remember the way he ran his fingers through my curls and kissed the places he smelled my perfume. The scent of pear is already twisting the knife in my heart, making me remember the way he'd run the tip of his nose over my jawline and say in a voice that was creeping closer to man than boy, *Why does Peach smell like a pear?*. That whispered sentence was inevitably followed by him devouring me.

He deserves it. After all we went through together, he disappeared.



This is the first chance I have to remind him just exactly what he's missing.

And there's no way in hell I'll pass up the chance to put the screws in him and give them a turn.

# Chapter 5

## *Rhodes*

JAKE AND COLBIE LIVE ON A FAMILY FRIENDLY STREET CLOSE to the elementary school. The school crossing guard lives next door, the only crime in the area is petty and carried out by vindictive neighbors and bored teenagers, and all the trees are mature. Even though this is a great place to live, he and Colbie are building a house on the other side of town, near her dad and stepmom, to make room for the addition to their family. About a month ago, Jake told me he and Colbie are expecting. I'm happy for him, for the way Jake's life has been on the upswing recently.

My truck idles at the curb in front of their house. I'm hiding out, preparing myself to be in close proximity to Georgia without the buffer of fifty other people, like I was at the wedding. Or maybe I'm scared. I'm telling myself it's the former, but it's more likely the latter.

Georgia's already here. Her late-model sedan sits parked in Jake's driveway, behind his new company truck.

Climbing out, I pause in the driveway to take a deep breath. I don't know how to be around Georgia anymore, but there was a time I knew her as well as I knew myself. I watched her sneak ramekins of pasta fagioli soup during her breaks from the restaurant where we worked together in high

school. I know her tongue peeks out of the side of her mouth when she's concentrating, she hates tomatoes but loves tomato sauce, and swears she knows a thunderstorm is coming even when there isn't a cloud in the sky because her left ankle starts to hurt.

It's possible none of those things are true about her anymore.

The acknowledgment feels like a sucker punch, one I've delivered to myself. I take full responsibility for everything that happened.

Eleven years hasn't changed that.

Or me.

I'm the same person I was the day I left Georgia. Suspended in time. Or stunted.

Desperately in love with her, and so damn ashamed of what I did.

I can't think of that right now, not when I'm preparing to face Georgia. She needs to think I'm long over her, so she can be over me. Whether that's true doesn't matter. I don't deserve her, and I never did.

I take a deep breath, my fists balled at my sides, and start for the house. But then the oddest thing happens. The driver's door of her car opens. I freeze, only a few feet from the car. One leg sticks out, toes pointed as they reach for the ground. Visible in the back window, her upper half stretches over into the passenger seat like she's reaching for something.

I would know that leg anywhere. I have kissed the inside of that thigh, and trailed my fingertips over the crease behind her knee.

“Peach,” I say, before I can get ahold of myself. It is the dumbest, worst thing I could say, but the name exploded from my mouth and there is no getting it back.

Her calf muscle tightens. She remains rooted in place, as am I. Then, slowly, she pulls herself from the vehicle. Standing in the space made by the open door, she fixes me with a long glare. Dislike. Distrust. Disappointment.

Even with the chilly reception, she is magnificent. Georgia was always beautiful, but now she’s a woman. The open innocence and naïveté of teenage Georgia has melted away. Her dark eyes are guarded. Her chest rises, falls, undulating in an unnatural way, tongue darting out to wet her lips.

Unthinkingly, I step toward her. I can’t help it. We’re magnetized. We always have been. She backs up, bumping into her car door, and I halt.

“I hate you,” she whispers.

I nod, my chin dipping as my gaze lowers, but I stop the descent and force my eyes to meet hers. Georgia deserves my full attention, not a guy who can’t look her in the eyes when she speaks her truth. “I know.”

“If you weren’t my brother’s best friend, I’d have told him exactly what you did.”

I nod again. She doesn’t know the half of everything. And if she did, both she and Jake would hate me forever.

She continues. “I kept my mouth shut for him, not you.”

“I know.”

I feel like shit, just like she wants me to, but I can’t help but admire her strength. Her fire. It’s one of a hundred things I miss about her.

“I’m going in there”—she points at the house—“you can wait ten minutes and then come in.”

I tuck my hands in my pockets. “Yes, ma’am.”

Georgia frowns at my head. “Take off that stupid orange beanie. You look like a traffic cone.”

Despite the shit mood I’m in, I laugh. It feels good, a pinch of relief in a painful situation. I slide the fabric from my head, running a hand through my messy hair.

Georgia’s eyes follow the motion, then she steps out of the way of her door and closes it. This puts her closer to me, and when she pivots her curled hair swings, a waft of pear coming my way.

I look up at the sky and swallow hard. I’m seventeen again, trying like hell not to be attracted to my best friend’s little sister. I lower my gaze, and find Georgia’s already at Jake’s front door. She lets herself in without a backwards glance.

I rake a hand down my face, my groan vibrating my throat. I knew when I accepted Jake’s invitation that being around Georgia was going to decimate me.

I just didn’t expect to like the pain.

# Chapter 6

## *Rhodes*

JAKE'S IN HIS KITCHEN, POURING COOKING OIL INTO A LARGE Ziplock bag.

“Hey,” I say, walking in. He turns, nodding excitedly, and sets the bottle and bag onto the counter.

He's ready with a hug and a back slap. “I've hardly seen you since the wedding.” He steps back, eyeing me.

“Been busy with work,” I explain. Jake knows what it's like to wake up at the crack of dawn, how exhausting it is to work with your hands and wear out your body every damn day. It's a hell of a distraction, one I've been using for a long time.

“Me too,” Jake says, leading me to the kitchen. “And being a dad. And getting married.”

A stab of envy slices through me at the happiness in his tone. It's not that I'm not insanely happy for my best friend. He deserves this life.

It's a life I wanted, too.

With his little sister.

And he doesn't even know it.

The only person who knew about us is dead now.



A throat clears. Georgia's leaning against the counter on the far side of the small room. Her arms are folded, elbows pointed back as she grips the lip of the counter.

"Rhodes is here," Jake announces excitedly.

"I have eyes." Georgia gives him a look that adds *dumbass* to the end of her sentence.

I huff a laugh. I can't help it. Georgia has always been witty, fast with the comebacks.

Jake curses under his breath. "Here." He reaches into the fridge and comes away with two beers. "Take these." He hands one to me, the other to Georgia. "Go out back and visit while I get the meat prepped."

Georgia lifts her bottle in salute. "Aye aye captain." She walks out first.

Jake nudges me along. "She has been extra salty lately." He glances out the window to the backyard. "Maybe you can get somewhere with her. You've always had a way of drilling through her attitude."

I nearly cough on my swig of beer. "Sure, sure. I'll try." I follow Georgia outside.

She's standing next to Jake's garden, the one he mostly ignores and yet it still flourishes.

Sunlight streams into the backyard, its rays pouring through the trees on the west side of the house. I pause, transfixed, as the sun and shadows play over Georgia's skin and hair. She lifts her beer bottle to her lips and drinks, her throat bobbing with her swallow.

This woman is the most beautiful creature God has ever created. Nothing compares to her. It never has, and it never

will.

Is it sad I met my match when I was so young?

No. It's sadder that I can't have her.

She's watching me. It hurts her to see me, and I hate that. Even years later, she's still hurting over me. I never thought she'd hold on this long. I'd hoped she'd care, that a part of her would love me forever, because that's what you do with your firsts.

First love.

First sex.

First heartbreak.

You hold on to them, folding them up and tucking them into a little place where you keep nostalgia and fondness. Later, when you take them out and look at them, it's with detachment, like *look at who I was and who I am now*. They become a measurement tool.

Has that happened for Georgia? As much as I hated it, that's what I wanted for her, even if I never planned to have it for myself. I expected Georgia to move on, while I languished in purgatory.

Is that not what happened? Was I wrong?

The way she's looking at me now, her arms folded and a hurricane brewing in those chestnut eyes, I'm not so sure. She finished high school after I left. She went to college at Northern Arizona University just an hour north of Green Haven, in Flagstaff. She earned her teaching degree, she lived and taught in Flagstaff until a few years ago, when she moved back home. I know all this because of Jake, from paying close attention over the years.

“Quit staring at me and say something.” Her tone is flat, but taut, like the surface tension of water.

I get the grill started for Jake just to have something to do, and ask, “What do you want me to say?”

“You can start by telling me what the fuck happened back then.”

Georgia was always a direct person. I’m glad to see she hasn’t lost that. “Do you really want to go through this?”

Her chin lifts a fraction. “Yeah. I do. You owe me at least that.”

Of course I owe her that. She deserves that, and more. But I can’t tell her the truth, and I can’t stand the thought of continuing the lie. “What’s it going to help? What is the point?”

Her arms cross, magnifying her cleavage. “I hear you’re back.”

I nod.

“If you’re back *for good*, and I’m going to have to see your stupid face around town more than I’m used to, I want to know what happened. My brother connects us, and I don’t want to be around you and still be in the dark. I deserve to know.”

“It’s what I said back then.” *No, it’s not.* “We were both putting our lives on hold for each other, and it wasn’t healthy.”

Her lower lip trembles, from anger or impending tears I can’t tell, but she bites the side of her lip to quell the motion. I hate watching her struggle to keep her emotions at bay, hate knowing it’s my fault.

She steps into me, her eyes glistening, and now that I see the moisture gathering in her eyes all I want to do is hold her

in my arms and make it go away.

But I can't make the tears go away. Not when I'm the reason they're there.

"I want you to know something." She stares up at me. She may only be five feet three inches, but she can make me feel two feet tall. "I hate you."

I.

Hate.

You.

It's the second time she's said it to me since we arrived. The words should hurt, and they do, but there's a small piece of me rejoicing. Hate is passion. Hate is not indifference. That would be far worse. And I'll take whatever I can get from her.

Now that I know she hasn't moved on, that she still hurts, an idiotic part of me feels hopeful. Which is foolish, because the reason I left before is as present as ever. "I know you hate me."

"Is that why you've stayed away?"

"I always came back."

"Never for very long."

She stares me down, waiting for my answer. Coaxing it from me. She knows if she stares long enough, I'll talk. She remembers the hold she had on me. The hold she *still* has on me.

I sigh resolutely. "Yes, that's why I've stayed away."

Triumph gleams in her eyes. She likes my answer. I like that she likes it.

*What are we doing?*

“Well, guess what, Rhodes?” She pokes my chest with a stiff fingertip. “I have a hell of a lot to say to you. Starting with—” Georgia’s gaze slides to something beyond me, closer to the house. She takes a quick step around me, and I turn, my gaze landing on my best friend, standing behind the glass door holding a tray and looking at us.

Jake’s eyebrows tug together, confusion in his features. I don’t see suspicion. I’ve never seen suspicion when it came to me and Georgia, even that time he almost walked in on us. Georgia’s paper-thin lie saved us, and cemented Jake’s status as most gullible person ever.

In an effort to diffuse the situation, I hustle over to the back door and open it for him. “Got the grill going for you. Should be hot by now.”

“Thanks,” he says, looking from Georgia to me. “You two good?”

Georgia’s eye flicker to me, and she pulls out another tissue-paper lie. “He was telling me about something that happened on one of his jobs.”

It reeks of bullshit, but Jake accepts it. He’s not stupid, not by a long shot, but he must have a total mental block when it comes to me and Georgia. The idea of us is so inconceivable to him that he cannot comprehend it.

To his credit, he looks skeptical. He opens the grill and places the meat on the heat. “You’re sure everything is fine?”

“Absolutely,” I say. I’m really racking up the lies tonight.

“Totally,” Georgia adds, tossing her lie onto my heap.

Colbie and Robbie step from the back door, and Jake’s attention is pulled from us. My gaze meets Georgia’s. She looks as guilty as I feel. We never meant to hide our

relationship from him, not for long anyway. That's the way it shook out, and once the lie grew legs, it ran.

After Jake greets Colbie with a kiss that lasts about two seconds longer than it needs to, she asks Georgia to help her in the kitchen. Is it only obvious to me that Georgia is more than happy to get the hell away from me? Probably.

I stay outside with Jake, helping him man the grill. Robbie stays with us, telling us about his new teacher and saying how much he wishes he were still in fifth grade with Greer as his teacher. I can tell by the look on Jake's face that he wishes Robbie were still in fifth grade, too. Jake struggles with watching his son grow up, even when he knows he's a lucky man to have such a privilege.

We settle at the outdoor table when the food's ready. Georgia does her best to ignore me.

I do what I do best: listen. In my experience, it's the best way to learn.

After idle chatter, largely dominated by Robbie, Georgia says, "I've been taking dance lessons again."

"Oh?" Colbie's eyebrows shoot up. "What kind?"

"West Coast swing."

Jake jostles me. "Remember when you helped Georgia with her dance classes?"

I brave a look at Georgia. Her eyes are on mine as we share the memory.

"Yeah," I choke out the word. Georgia loved to dance, and I loved to watch her. The way she'd move, how her hips switched, mesmerizing me. It was more than my seventeen-year-old brain could handle.

To Colbie, Jake says, “My dad was taking lessons with Georgia, but then he hurt his back.” He pauses, and I know everyone except Colbie and Robbie are remembering how that was the beginning of a long journey that ended tragically for Jake and Georgia’s dad.

Jake shakes it off and keeps going. “I used to watch these two in the living room. Rhodes would come over on Sundays and they would practice, but they were always in the way of the football game on the TV so they started practicing at Rhodes’ house.”

Colbie hears the words Jake isn’t saying, and she squints. “Is that right?” She studies me, eyes shrewd. “How generous of you to give up your time on a Sunday to help your best friend’s little sister learn West Coast swing.”

“I got pretty good,” Georgia adds, steering the conversation away from where Colbie’s sending it.

“So did Rhodes,” Jake says, pretending to do some kind of dance with his arms. Colbie groans playfully. “Why did you guys stop those lessons?” he asks. “You were still doing them when I moved down to Tucson.”

“Rhodes left for trade school,” Georgia answers. “Floated away from Green Haven like a ghost in the night.”

“Not quite,” I counter.

Across the table, Georgia sends me a smile so sweet it could only be fake. “But kind of.”

Colbie and Robbie watch us closely, eyes ping ponging across the table. Jake eats, oblivious as ever.

“So, you’re taking lessons?” I ask Georgia, taking advantage of the fact that she can only be partially rude to me because we have an audience.

“Yes. It feels good to dance again.”

“I’ll bet.” Those dance lessons with her turned out to be a lot more fun than I thought they’d be. Those dance lessons are the reason we got together. From the moment I moved in down the street, I knew Georgia was special. It was impossible not to notice her pretty face, her blonde hair, the parts of her body that were only beginning to curve and fill out. But she was off-limits. My best friend’s little sister.

Those dance lessons changed everything.

“Do you have a partner?” I hope I sound like I’m simply making conversation.

“Why?” Jake claps me on the shoulder as he stands up from the table. “You jealous?”

*Hello nail, excuse me while I hit you on the head.*

“Hah,” I say, deadpan. *Yes.*

“I used to dance with whomever’s available, but there’s someone I dance with regularly now. His name’s Ian.”

Jake stops beside the table, frowning. “Are you seeing him?”

My head dips forward, awaiting her response. My heart foolishly wants her to say no, my mind maturely and realistically wants her to say yes because ultimately all I want is for her to be happy.

Georgia rolls her eyes. “Sort of. But it’s not a thing, so don’t make it one. Also, I’m an adult.”

“You’re still my baby sister.”

She points her fork at Colbie’s stomach. “Save the protective stuff for your little girl.”



Jake keeps going into the house, and Georgia says, “There’s a competition I’m going to enter. West Fest. It’s in Phoenix on July fourth weekend.”

My head snaps up.

Georgia’s watching me. Her tongue darts out, furtive as she swipes it across her lower lip. Is she remembering all those times she talked about one day competing with me?

Clearing my throat, I ask, “Is he entering with you?” I hope like hell my voice doesn’t belie my envy.

I want to deck the guy, simply for having Georgia when I can’t.

Georgia nods. “He’s never competed before, but he’s really good. We dance well together.”

I feel restless. My fingers flex, then curl back into my palms. Both Colbie and Robbie’s gazes are trained on me right now, so I say, as noncommittally as possible, “Good luck. Break a leg.”

Georgia holds my gaze a bit too long, and I wonder if she wanted me to say something different. Maybe something like, *Don’t let him be your partner. Ask me. I’m back.* Does she want me to offer, even though she knows she’ll never accept?

Or is she thinking about our first dance, the one that started it all?

Maybe she’s not even thinking of me.

Maybe her head is filled with thoughts of her first dance partner.

Her dad.

# Chapter 7

*Georgia*

## Back Then

MY DAD LIMPS INTO OUR HOUSE. HIS RIGHT HAND GRIPS HIS lower back, agony in the lines of his face. He's bent over at the waist, doing his best to shuffle into the living room.

I abandon my calculus homework and hurry to him. "Dad, what happened?" I'm searching for an obvious injury, but there isn't one. Whatever is happening is on the inside.

He's quiet, like the response requires too much effort. The front door opens all the way, and his boss, Emmett Jones, steps inside.

"Georgia," Emmett breathes my name, relieved. "I'm glad someone is here. Your dad hurt his back on the job today. He wouldn't let me take him to the ER."

"Too much money," my dad grumbles. "Jake's headed to college soon, and she's right behind him." He's made it to the couch by now, and he reaches for the arm, using it to steady himself as he lowers down onto the cushion. Placing my hands on both his shoulders, I gently guide him down into a prone position.

Emmett deposits my dad's tool belt on the coffee table. "He needs a doctor," he says, in a way that tells me he's already made the suggestion, probably repeatedly.

“It’s just a spasm,” my dad argues, but his teeth are bared as he speaks through the pain.

Emmett sighs. “Just see a doctor, Tom. You don’t have to be a hero.”

“They’ll prescribe pain pills, and I don’t need that shit. Bad for you.” He winces.

Emmett’s eyes narrow. “They’ll give you a muscle relaxer, and you’ll feel better faster. The sooner you’re better, the sooner you’ll be back to work. Work means money, remember?”

Dad sighs, heavy and long. “How could I forget?”

Emmett leaves, sending me an apologetic look as he goes.

“Dad?” I bend down so we’re nearly eye to eye. “What can I do for you?”

“Just a couple ibuprofen and a night of rest. You’ll have to cancel our dance lesson tonight.” He looks disappointed. “Sorry about that. Just give me a day or two and I’ll be good as new.”

But he wasn’t good as new.

Not the next day, or the day after that.

When the ibuprofen stopped providing relief, Mom convinced him to go to the doctor. It wasn’t a spasming muscle after all, but a slipped disc.

They prescribed pain killers.

He took them.

The dad I knew disappeared, absconding with a piece of my heart.

Nothing was the same again.

# Chapter 8

# *Georgia*

IT'S AS IF THE UNIVERSE GOT TIRED OF MY SUCCESS AT avoiding Rhodes, and it's backtracking to make up for all the opportunities it missed to put us in the same place at the same time.

When I told Victoria I'd be at the Sumter house staging it for the showing, she hadn't said a word about the annoyingly good-looking man I'd find when I arrived.

Said man is currently bent over, feet planted firmly and using all his force to push a solid wood dining room table across tiled floor. His back muscles flex with his effort, his calves tightening as he draws up on his toes.

I stand on the threshold, arms wrapped around a paper grocery bag, and release an annoyed breath that is far louder than it needs to be. "Why are you here?"

Rhodes doesn't turn around. It's as if he expected me. "I made the mistake of telling your brother I was available today and ended up roped into helping Victoria with the heavy lifting."

"We have teenagers we hire for that exact purpose."

He still doesn't turn around. "Cool."

“You have a job.” I shift my weight, and the paper bag crinkles.

“Correct.”

“Why aren’t you there?”

Rhodes uses his hips to thrust the table into place. I frown. Honestly, that’s just pornographic. Judging by the heat warming the tops of my thighs, my lady part agrees.

Rhodes turns around, leaning back against the table. He crosses his arms, and then his right ankle over his left. After a long moment spent staring at me, he says, “I think what you mean to ask is *why are you here torturing me with your existence instead of your crew?*”

He gives me a moment to laugh, which I refuse to do, and then he says, “Is that what you really meant to say, Peach?”

The lusty warmth disappears from my thighs, transferring to an angry heat in my arms. “No Peach,” I half-growl. It’s only halfway because I’m trying to keep this man from knowing how much *this man* is still capable of drawing intense emotion from me.

“No Peach?” The corners of his lips lift into a smirk. “That belongs on a T-shirt.”

“Given that the peach emoji stands for an ass, I’m going to go with a no on that one.”

Rhodes opens his mouth with a retort, but I hasten my next sentence. “Why did Victoria ask you of all people?”

“Of all people?” His eyebrows raise, offended. “Thanks.”

“You know what I meant,” I snap.



“You left your brother’s barbecue without saying goodbye to me.” Rhodes is still standing in that infuriatingly sexy pose, watching me intently.

It’s true that I waited until Rhodes used the bathroom, and then I said the fastest goodbyes in the history of ever and hightailed it out of there.

“I didn’t want to say goodbye to you.”

“You didn’t want to say hello to me, either.”

“Correct.” My feet are finally working again, and now they are taking me into the kitchen. I heft the grocery bag onto the counter and begin unloading.

Rhodes saunters over, declaring each item as I remove it. “Lemons. Rosemary. Vanilla. Cinnamon sticks.”

“Are you an announcer on Supermarket Sweep?”

His eyes wrinkle in confusion as I pull out the last item. “A saucepan?”

“Yes,” I answer. “Now get back to work. The showing is at four.”

Shockingly, he listens. Rhodes strides away from the kitchen and out the front door, returning with two dining room chairs. He places them on one side of the table, then pivots. On his way out the door for the matching pair, he yells, “Just to let you know, I’m only listening to you because I’m getting paid to be here, and I have somewhere to be.”

“And?” I yell back. “If you weren’t getting paid? You’d do what?”

He stops, but doesn’t turn around. In the doorway he pauses, weight shifting from foot to foot like sea kelp drifting in the tide.

My arms cross as I wait for his answer. And then I see his right hand, hanging limply by his side, curl into a fist and flex back out slowly.

This tiny motion, and all the memories it floods me with, brings a stinging sensation to the backs of my eyes. “Go get the other chairs,” I whisper.

He probably can’t hear me, but he continues on with his task.

For the next hour we work, crossing paths and saying little. By the time Victoria shows up at three thirty, the home is ready to be shown.

“It smells delicious in here,” she sings as she sails into the kitchen.

Some realtors use freshly baked cookies to evoke feelings of homeyness to prospective buyers, but not Victoria. Her blend of rosemary, vanilla, cinnamon and citrus smells like stepping into a luxury home goods store. It works on me, and I’m the one assembling the concoction. I leave every job wanting to upgrade my mom’s throw pillows.

Rhodes appears from the backyard, where he’d been setting up a propane fire pit. Victoria greets him with a slightly awkward side hug. They know each other through Jake, but not well.

“Thanks for helping on short notice.” Victoria rifles through her purse, coming away with a white envelope which she presses into Rhodes’ hands. “I don’t even need to look to know you did a better job than those teenage boys. I’m pretty sure one of them is always high.”

I snort. “I would bet one hundred dollars both of them are always high, but one of them is better at functioning than the

other.”

Victoria laughs. “Shows how much I know. Greer didn’t do stuff like that.”

Greer most definitely smoked weed a handful of times. Yours truly got it for her. Her mother needn’t know that, so I nod my head and smile, corroborating Greer’s good girl persona.

I make the mistake of glancing at Rhodes. He’s fixing me with a challenging stare, and I remember he’s the one who gave the weed to me.

I smile harder at him, my eyes widening a fraction. One corner of his mouth lifts in a smile, and he glances at the ground, head shaking.

“You know,” Victoria says thoughtfully, tapping the pad of her pointer finger against her lips as she looks around. “There’s a weird energy in here.”

I peek around the living room. The place looks like someone opened to the middle of the latest Pottery Barn catalog, flung it in the air, and the whole page came to life in the room. “Energy?”

“Yes.” She walks through the rounded doorframe into the living room. Rhodes and I follow. He makes sure to stand a few feet away from me. We watch her spin slowly in a circle, and then she says, “It’s tense in here.”

“Tense?” Now I sound like a parrot.

Victoria touches the side of a candle I’ve placed on a riser. “Maybe there’s a ghost, and he doesn’t want the house sold.”

I can tell the idea excites her. Nothing like a friendly ghost in your home to spice things up.

I swallow and dare a glance at Rhodes. He's already looking at me, and we seem to be thinking the same thing.

*Oh, there are plenty of ghosts in here.*

# Chapter 9

# *Georgia*

THE HUSTLE & SWING DANCE STUDIO IS A MEDIUM-SIZED BOX of space on Idyllwild Avenue. I don't know why it's called an avenue, because it's a two-lane road, and across the street is the beginning of a residential neighborhood. Maybe the town planner had grand expectations that fell short.

I know the feeling.

It's a Monday, my usual night at the dance studio. All weekend long, I look forward to Monday. Imagine that, wishing for the weekend to hurry up because Monday is the best day of my week.

Hustle & Swing expects nothing of me. The owner, Donna, has loved me since I was a teenager. When I took up dancing again, she welcomed me back with open arms. She didn't ask why I quit abruptly back then, or why I hadn't danced in years. She gripped my face in her big fingers, squeezed a little too hard, and kissed my forehead. Donna understands what it's like to fall in and out of love with something, because it is simply the wrong time.

Here I am, back at Hustle & Swing, being given the opportunity to move my body, to stretch, to step outside the incessant thinking of my mind and just *be*.

I step into the studio. The air is rich with the scent of possibility, of hardwood and perfumes, so tangible it hangs like ripe lemons on a citrus tree, heavy with juice.

Class has not yet begun, and a palpable excitement drifts through the small group of people as we wait. Caprice talks about her most recent vacation to Australia and New Zealand, just loud enough so it's obvious she wants everyone to hear about it. Her husband, Jay, doesn't say a word. From what I can tell, that's how they are most of the time.

I glance at the clock on the wall. Donna is still in her office, squinting at something on her computer. Probably a financial form. Donna claims to have a love/hate relationship with the studio, with the hate only coming in every time she has to do anything remotely related to finances. "I'm not a numbers gal," she once said, sashaying away.

Some would say Donna's first love is Hustle & Swing, but I know better. Donna's great love is her daughter, who lives in Illinois. As Donna put it recently, "She's about ready to pop with her third kid. I'll head back there the second I hear she's having contractions."

Ian is late arriving, and though I'm not much of a worrier, his tardiness bothers me. The second class Ian and I took together, I skittered in at the precise minute class was starting. He'd looked at me, amused, and murmured, "If you're not early, you're late."

"Save the pearls of wisdom for after class. I'm trying to pay attention," I'd admonished him, flexing my flirting muscle for the first time since arriving home from Flagstaff. After class, Ian caught up to me in the parking lot. He gripped my elbow, taking me by surprise, and leaned in close. I was about

to remind him that dancing together didn't give him a pass to invade my personal space, but I decided not to.

Ian was the best dancer in class, probably in the entire studio, and I love that he chose me as his partner. Maybe I should have made him work a little harder for it, but in the end, I wanted an escape. I got it, and it was nice, and so was the casual nature of our relationship. I'd reached my limit of being disappointed by men, and I needed what Ian offered.

Donna comes from her office. She scans the bodies, eyebrows lifting when they fall on me. She's silently asking where my partner is, and I respond by shrugging one shoulder.

Because most people show up to this particular dance lesson with a partner, it means I am the odd man out.

Donna has a no phones policy. If challenged, Donna becomes militant about it. This means there is zero chance I'm going over to my locker to grab my phone and text Ian.

I end up dancing with Donna, which is fine, because she reminds me of a softer version of my mother. Donna smells like cinnamon Trident gum and, faintly, of cigarettes, two things my mother does not smell like. Donna says she's down to one a day, in the mornings, with her coffee. Her scent says otherwise.

We're halfway through class when Ian hobbles in. Or should I say, *swings*. The rubber bottom of the crutches come first, followed by his body being heaved through the space they create. I'm the first to spot him, and the first to stop. Donna pauses because I do. Like dominoes, everyone around us stops when their partner or neighbor halts.

"Ian," I say, but the music drowns me out. I make it across the room before he's made it five feet. His eyes squint, an



apology inside them.

“What happened?” I ask. Donna has turned down the music, and it’s quiet now, everyone waiting for Ian to explain.

He looks at me for an extra moment, then to the people behind me. “I fell this morning when I was running on a trail.”

Guilt assails me when my first thought isn’t of his health. I think of *me*. The competition. Losing my partner.

Swallowing against that, I offer a condolence. “I’m sorry you got hurt.”

He sighs, gripping the handles on his crutches. “I shouldn’t have been running. It rained last night. The trail wasn’t dry.” He shakes his head, frustrated. “It was stupid of me.”

“Ian,” Donna says, stepping into our exchange, her body positioned so that we form a u-shape. “Have you seen a doctor?”

He nods. “Yeah. I went to urgent care. They think it’s a ligament.”

“What’s the outlook?” Donna asks, and I wonder if she has asked the question so I don’t have to.

Frustration floods Ian’s eyes. His gaze switches from me to Donna, and back again. “I’ll be in a boot for a while. Six weeks, or so. And then physical therapy. I’m not allowed to do anything lateral.”

“That’s awful, Ian. I’m sorry this happened to you.” I’m doing my best to hide the disappointment in my voice. We were supposed to choose a song and begin developing choreography in the next week. Accidents happen, but the timing is terrible.

He nods. "I'm so sorry, Georgia. Maybe someone else can dance with you?" He looks over my head, eyes searching.

I already know there won't be volunteers. Ian and I are the star students by a mile. We are also the only people who've shown interest in competing.

"I'm sure I can find somebody. You just worry about healing and getting properly rehabbed so you can dance like you used to." I snap a brave smile on my face. Reaching for Ian's hand, I give it a reassuring squeeze.

To Donna, I say, "I'm going to take off early. Help Ian out to his car."

She pats my shoulder and offers a sad smile.

The music starts back up as I'm pulling my purse from the locker. Donna calls out a correction to Caprice and Jay, and then I turn for the exit. Ian is there, just inside the door, leaning on his crutches, a contrite look softening his gaze.

I hold open the door for him, and he swings out, then follows me to my car.

"You know how sorry I am, right?" Ian reaches for my hand, but he's still unsteady on his crutches, so he wobbles. My hands go to his shoulders to steady him, and he looks sad and sheepish. "There's always next year."

"Sure." I haven't told him what this competition means to me, so it's not fair of me to expect him to understand the depth of this loss.

I don't want next year. I want right now. I've been flailing for a long time, ever since my dad died, and I want to shed that skin. I want there to be something I'm good at, something I know I'm good at, and so does everybody else. I don't want to be the daughter of the family man who fell into drugs and

couldn't climb his way out. I don't want to be the punctuation mark at the end of his sad tale.

Ian runs his warm palm up and down my forearm. "I can make it up to you." His voice is low, the last word of his sentence trailing off as he lets his offer hang in the air between us.

My heart aches the longer I look at him. It aches because I understand the last time with him was the last time, and it aches because I know exactly whose fault that is.

# Chapter 10

*Georgia*

## Back Then

I'VE BEEN RAGE-STARING AT THIS DOCUMENT ON MY COMPUTER for a solid twenty minutes.

I've been intermittently crying too, and that pisses me off more.

Until my dad came home, I'd been having a good day. His rumbling work truck backed into the driveway, and I actually smiled. I'm always happy on dance lesson night, and I'm extra happy when dance lesson night includes my dad. I've been going without him for months, dancing with whomever I'm paired with, and it's getting old.

Not to be mean, or rude, or ageist, but there are so many more old men than young, and they all have a certain smell, like they turned sixty or seventy or eight hundred and forty-two and were handed a universal toiletry kit and instructed to use only those products. It's sort of nauseating.

My dad's in the shower now, washing flecks of dried concrete from his forearms. He'll use his Old Spice body wash and dab the Oil of Olay moisturizer my mom's been making him use on his face, and he'll smell like my dad.

But he won't be my dance partner tonight.

Because his back hurts. Again.

That's what he'd said when he finished depositing his tools in the shed after he arrived home and walked in the back door. He saw me sitting at the kitchen table doing my homework and his face fell.

*I can't make it tonight. My back is killing me. Sorry, sweetheart.*

To be fair, he looked genuinely sorry. And I looked genuinely fake when I told him it was ok, that I understood.

But I don't. I don't understand why sometimes he seems fine, *more than fine*, working a full day, and then making dinner and acting thrilled at my mom's surprised face when she walks in the door from work. Other times, he staggers in the house after work, shakes maximum strength anti-inflammatories from a bottle, and swallows them without water. Then he lies on the couch and sleeps, his feet dangling from one end.

A tear slips down my cheek. Angrily, I thumb it away. I don't want to cry. I want to scream about the sheer injustice of it all. But I don't, because he'll hear me, and I don't want him to know how hurt I am.

I will myself to focus on the computer screen, staring blankly at the first sentence of my English paper. *Jane Austen's novel, Pride and Prejudice, introduces to us the clever and prideful main character, Elizabeth Bennet.*

I wrote that when I first sat down, and my mind may as well be an unpainted canvas because my heart hurts and I can't fix that and I don't know if it will ever be fixed and *why can't I live in a world like Elizabeth Bennet where there isn't a dad who's also hurting and there's a Mr. Darcy?*

I slump in my chair, and this time I don't force away my tears. I deserve these tears.

It's only two minutes later when I hear the loud voice of my brother in the backyard, and when I hear a second voice, I know exactly who it is. He and Rhodes are never without each other.

I sit up straight, smacking my knee on the underside of the table while simultaneously using the bottom of my T-shirt to wipe away my tears.

The back door flings open in my brother's typical style, and he walks in, one shoulder leading before the rest of him is all the way in the house. Jake hit a growth spurt in the past few months, and he's like a giant now, bumping into me with his big body while I'm brushing my teeth in our shared bathroom, or hitting his head on the countertop when he bends down to get something from a low cabinet.

Rhodes follows Jake through the door. He, too, has hit a growth spurt, but instead of making him the human equivalent of a woolly mammoth, it has made him all-around bigger, more filled out. And more handsome.

From the first day Rhodes showed up at that crazy looking house down the street, I understood he wasn't mine. Jake staked his claim, and it made sense. They are the same age, in the same grade, and most of their interests are shared.

But I know what I saw that day. I know what I felt.

And I'm almost positive Rhodes felt the same.

Jake freezes in the middle of the kitchen when he spots me. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying, you idiot."



Jake continues on to the fridge, happily swallowing my denial. “Ok.”

Rhodes leans back on the counter’s edge, gaze on mine. He recently started working as a busboy at the Italian restaurant where I’m a hostess. As much as we see each other, we don’t have very many real conversations. Mostly it’s *Table seven is clean*, or *Can you help me push these tables together for a large party?*

I get the feeling Rhodes is very careful with his words around me.

“Here,” Jake says, tossing a cup of plain Greek yogurt at Rhodes. “If I have to eat this stuff that taste like sour cream, so do you.”

“Put a spoonful of jelly on top,” I suggest, rolling my eyes for no reason other than that he is my brother and he is annoying in his quest for *protein protein protein*.

“No sugar,” he replies, spoon upside down and hanging out of his mouth. He tosses a second spoon at Rhodes. “I have to go take a shower. I smell gross.”

“Yes, you do,” I say, looking at my screen and willing a second sentence to pop into my head.

“It’s because I was at football practice.”

“Oh? I thought that was just your normal scent.”

Jake ignores me and leaves the room. Rhodes wears a small smirk on his face. Then he takes a bite of the plain Greek yogurt and grimaces.

Pushing back from the table, I make my way to the fridge and grab a jar of strawberry jelly, then a spoon. “Here,” I announce, placing a generous dollop on his cup of yogurt.

“Just because he’s *protein protein protein* these days doesn’t mean you have to be, too.”

“Thanks,” Rhodes says, clearing his throat. “I haven’t had real jelly in forever.”

He sees my curious gaze and adds, “My mom’s diabetic. She’s really careful about sugar.”

I make a face. “Does she give herself a shot every day?”

“She used to. But now she has an insulin pump.”

I nod like I understand, but I don’t. I know very little about diabetes.

Rhodes has one ankle crossed over the other, and his T-shirt stretches across his chest in a *just right* way. “Your eyes are red,” he says, spooning a bite of yogurt into his mouth. “You were crying.”

“Yeah,” I take a step back. “My dad canceled dance lessons on me. Again.”

Rhodes nods. “These dance lessons—”

“West Coast swing.”

“West Coast swing,” he repeats, trying on the words. “Is it like Dirty Dancing?”

I laugh. “No. But I’m impressed you know the film.”

“My mom made me watch it with her. Probably twenty times.” His eyes crinkle in the corners. “So, West Coast swing... is it difficult?”

“Merv is seventy-two, and the Golden Living retirement home bus drops him off right out front for his beginner’s class.”

Rhodes grins, and it's like the sun is shining in my kitchen. With a push of his hips, he's off the counter, a step closer to me. "So if Merv can do it..."

His nearness has me curling my toes to grip the floor, steadying myself. "Anyone can do it," I say, finishing his sentence.

He takes another measured step. "Including me?"

My heart slams against my sternum. "Anyone," I confirm, trying to keep my voice steady.

His eyebrows lift. "I'm anyone?"

Where is careful Rhodes with his careful words?

I swallow. Hard. "No, you're not just anyone."

Rhodes' eyes deepen, the blue growing darker. The muscles in his cheeks are taut, his jaw flexing. "Right," he says, a hint of reluctant acceptance in his tone. He takes a big step back, returning to his position at the counter. "I'm your older brother's best friend."

The air around us is thick, pushing down on my body like I'm underwater. Somewhere in my brain, I register the sound of Jake's first floor bedroom door opening.

I return to my place at the table, heart racing from adrenaline. Rhodes finishes the yogurt and throws away the cup.

Jake wheels back into the room, hair shiny with moisture and wearing a fresh t-shirt. "Rhodes, let's go."

I don't ask where they're going. Maybe it's to meet some girls. I walk the same school hallways as them. I hear the chatter. Everybody likes my brother because he's kind of amazing, not that I would ever say that out loud to his face.

And Rhodes? He stirred up all kinds of curiosity when he showed up halfway through the school year last year. The girls clambered to be the first to get to the fresh meat, but I don't think anything came of it. I know Rhodes has gone on a handful of dates, to prom and homecoming and such, but as far as I know, he hasn't been in a relationship with anybody.

"Bye," I deadpan, staring at my screen.

Jake goes out the door first. I look up. Rhodes has paused in the open door. He's looking back at me. He opens his mouth, like he's going to say something, but he pauses, reconsiders, and whatever he was going to say stays inside him.

"See you at work tomorrow," he says, and closes the door behind him.

The blinds on the inside of the door smack the window, the string smacks the blinds, and then a quiet settles over the kitchen.

Me, though? I'm filled with inspiration. I know exactly what I'm going to write this paper about. An exploratory essay on unrequited love, on Mr. Darcy's refusal to allow himself what he wants most: Elizabeth Bennet.

## Chapter II

# Georgia

I'VE CALLED IAN TWICE AND MESSAGED HIM NUMEROUS TIMES. This morning, as I was getting ready to head to Colbie and Jake's house, Ian finally responded to my most recent message asking if there's anything I can do for him.

No, but thank you. Forced rest is my own personal hell and I'm busy feeling sorry for myself.

Let me know if that changes. I'm happy to get your groceries or whatever else you need.

Thanks for the offer. I'll let you know if I need anything.

A second message pops up.

See you around.

It's a dismissal. A release from our situationship. I suppose a casual relationship need only a casual ending. *See you around.*

I'm not sad, but I feel a minor sting at the rejection.

I arrive at Colbie's, ready to help her parse through baby items like she's asked me to.

Colbie's best friend, Christina, and her husband, drove up to Green Haven from Phoenix last weekend and brought an SUV full of baby products their baby has outgrown.

"What is all this stuff?" I turn in a circle, mentally inventorying the tornado of baby products covering Colbie and Jake's living room floor. "There's so much here I could swim in it." I mimic a freestyle stroke.

Colbie stands in the center, looking down around her feet. "I think we should call this *the baby section at Target threw up, and it landed in my living room.*"

Using my toe, I poke at a brightly colored assembly of plastic that resembles a UFO spaceship. "What is this contraption?"

"That's called an exer-saucer." She points out of the living room and into the kitchen, where I can barely make out a baby swing. "She also gave me a swing, and a bunch of other stuff. If I were having a boy, I'd be swimming in mountains of clothes as well."

"That was nice of her." I've met Christina a handful of times. She's as irreverent as Colbie, but less gentle in her delivery.

I wade through the collection and into the kitchen for a glass of water. "Why isn't my dear brother here helping you go through all this stuff?"

"He left thirty minutes ago to take Robbie camping. He's trying to get a lot of one-on-one time with Robbie before baby girl arrives." Colbie palms her stomach while she talks. "Jake is worried this will be hard for Robbie."

"Robbie has a little sister," I point out, glass poised at my lips. "It's not like this is all foreign to him."

“True,” Colbie agrees, “but this is different. He’s never had to share his dad before. Erin and Bella were a package deal when they showed up in Robbie’s life. This will be the first time Robbie has to share his dad’s attention with anybody.” She grins impishly. “Besides me.”

Robbie’s birth mother shocked all of us when she showed up one day. I know it has been a lot for my brother, and Robbie and Colbie, too, but everybody handled it well. Robbie’s needs came first, and I think that’s what sealed the deal for how much my mom and I both love Colbie. We liked that she loved Jake, but we loved that she loved Robbie.

“That makes sense, I guess.” I push off the counter. “Given that Robbie loves animals, and nature, he’ll probably be understanding of his little sister’s new role in the family. He probably sees it as his pack is getting bigger by one.”

Colbie laughs. “You’re right. That’s probably how he views it.” She hauls her phone from her pocket and begins typing.

“Get off your phone,” I tease. “We have work to do.”

“I’m telling Jake what you said about being a pack. He was planning on having a big talk with Robbie and I think he should use that metaphor.”

“Make sure you give me credit. I need all the accolades I can get.”

Colbie’s fingers pause. She looks up with her eyes while the rest of her head remains in place. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make remarks like that about yourself.”

“Remarks?”



She finishes typing her message, then sets her phone on the table. When she turns to face me, it feels like I'm in front of my mother and I'm about to get a talking to.

“Yes, remarks. Last week you said what you do for Victoria is something a trained monkey could do. That's my most recent example, but I've heard you say similar variations with that tone so many times since I've gotten to know you.”

Colbie's eyes soften and crinkle. “Let me be the first to tell you, what you do for Victoria is valuable. It's a real job, not a joke.”

I shift my weight. “How much did Victoria pay you to say that?”

Colbie does not crack a smile. “Georgia, you're an amalgamation of exceptional qualities. You're smart. Personable. Funny. Sassy. You're—”

“Are these qualities equal in proportion, or are some a larger percentage than others?”

She gives me an exasperated look. “You heard it that time, right? I don't have to spell it out for you again?”

“Nope. I'm too smart for that.”

Colbie laughs. “How are your dance lessons?”

I blow out an unhappy breath, lips vibrating. “Stymied. My dance partner injured himself and it's looking like we won't be able to compete now.”

Colbie's face falls. “That's terrible.”

“He'll be alright, he said—”

Colbie waves at hand. “I'm not talking about him. I mean, yes, it's awful for him. But I'm talking about you. That's

terrible for you.”

“Yeah,” I agree, shaking my head once slowly. “It’s shitty.” My fingertips drum the water glass. “I just really needed something, you know? Something that felt big and important. A goal. Something to work toward.”

“I feel you. I’m going to need to get something going here in Green Haven after the baby is born. Nothing against it, but I don’t know if I can be a stay at home mom. I’m envisioning myself being the kind of mom who has an on-the-go type of job, like one where I can take my child with me.”

“So you’re opening a daycare?”

Colbie recoils. “Never. Most other children scare me.” She pokes at her belly with one finger. “One baby at a time is enough.”

She loops her arm through mine. We go back to the baby product-vomit living room, her belly leading the way.

We haul items into the nursery, then sit down on the ground and begin folding onesies that would’ve been too small for my Care Bear when Colbie asks, “What’s with you and Rhodes?”

My folding falters, then resumes. “What do you mean?”

“That barbecue was awkward. I was eating chicken, but all I tasted was tension.”

I bark a laugh. “Pregnancy hormones make you funnier.”

“Stay on topic,” she instructs. “And quit trying to come up with some bullshit, because I can tell you’re stalling.”

I set my folded onesie on the stack. “You’re going to make a fantastic mom in the teenage years.”

“You are priming me for Robbie. He’s not even two years away.” Colbie adds her stack to mine and tucks them into the top drawer of a powder pink dresser. “Now, spill.”

I have to be really careful here because I don’t want to say anything to Colbie that will make her have to lie to Jake. Trouble is, I don’t think there’s anything I can say that will be truth on my part, and not require her to lie to her husband.

“Rhodes and I had a mutual crush when we first met.” Truth. “That’s all. It was no big deal.” Lie.

“So this mutual crush caused the two of you to stand in my backyard and vacillate between wanting to rip each other’s faces off and wanting to rip each other’s clothing off?”

My eyes widen at her words.

“What?” she challenges, chin lifted. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Panic flutters in my belly. I don’t want to lie, but I had no intention of Jake ever finding out about me and Rhodes. That is one secret I would’ve happily taken to my grave.

“Colbie, it’s complicated and—”

“Hello?” Jake’s voice rings through the house. “Where are my wife and my bratty little sister?”

“We’re in here,” I yell back.

Colbie rolls over onto her knees. I stand quickly, offering her my hands. Jake walks in at the same time I’m pulling her upright.

Colbie releases an embarrassed chuckle. “I totally could’ve gotten up on my own.”

“Right,” Jake says. “Totally.” He peers around Colbie’s head and mouths *no she can’t*.

I'm almost positive Colbie can get on her own two feet from a sitting position on the floor, but Jake likes to hover over her and treat her as if she's made of fine crystal, and I think it's sweet, so I let the comment pass.

Colbie kisses Jake. "Why are you back? Is everything ok?"

Jake inclines his head toward the garage. "Someone forgot the sleeping bag I told them not to forget."

"You did that?" My head tips sideways. "Weird. It's not like you to forget a pertinent item."

"Hah," Jake says woodenly.

Colbie slips her hand into Jake's grasp, like she can't stand beside him and not touch him. "Georgia was just telling me that her dance partner hurt himself and now she might not compete."

Of all the things we just discussed, I'm fully on board with talking about my most recent disappointment. "Sucks, huh?"

Jake shrugs. "Yeah, but you don't need to cry about it too long."

"Gee, thanks."

He nudges my shoulder. "I meant because of Rhodes."

My stomach tightens. "What about Rhodes?" Despite my effort to keep the apprehension from my voice, it is still there.

Jake brushes a kiss on Colbie's forehead. "Rhodes danced with you before. I'm sure he'd do it again."

Colbie's eyes meet mine, and I'm quick to look away. "I don't want to impose. Besides, how is he going to go on all those dates if he's busy dancing with me?" I'm trying to make

a joke, shooting for flippant. Like, *I care so little about your best friend I can make offhand remarks about him dating.*

Jake looks puzzled. “What dates? All that guy does is work, go to the gym, and take care of his mom.”

The last part of Jake’s sentence rips me out of my own predicament. “Why does he need to take care of his mom?”

Jake shrugs. “She’s getting old, I guess.”

Something about what my brother said feels false, but he continues. “You should ask Rhodes if he’ll be your partner again. It’ll be like old times.”

I nod in what I hope is a convincing way. Robbie calls to Jake from somewhere inside the house, informing him he has grabbed the sleeping bag.

“That’s my cue,” Jake says. He kisses Colbie goodbye, then leaves the room. Colbie looks at me, and I teasingly stick out my tongue and act like I’m going to be sick. She laughs.

Taking out my phone, I turn on nursery rhymes remixed as trap music.

“That isn’t like any Three Little Pigs story I’ve ever heard,” Colbie comments.

“Just you wait,” I warn. “There’s a lot more where this came from.”

We keep working until the room looks a lot closer to being ready than it did when I first walked into the house. Colbie, bless her heart, says not one more word about Rhodes. Or my lack of a dance partner. Or my overabundance of a messy life.

# Chapter 12

*Georgia*

## Back Then

“MOM?” JAKE POKES HIS HEAD INTO THE KITCHEN. HIS GAZE flickers to me at the sink, then to our mom standing beside me. “Can Rhodes stay for dinner?”

Mom’s forearms rest against the edge of the sink, a potato in one hand, and a peeler in the other. She stares through the window to our backyard for a moment before she says in a faraway voice, “That’s fine.”

She has been quiet since I got home from school, and I was trying to let her be, giving her space and waiting for her to tell me what’s wrong.

Jake steps to the middle of the room. “Is everything ok, Mom? Is it Dad?”

I stare hard at my big brother, and consider chucking one of these Russet potatoes at his head. Of course it’s Dad. When is it not?

Mom musters up a smile. “Just a long day at work, hon. Everything is good.”

We both know she’s lying. She knows we know she’s lying. But all of us are allowed to lie, because the truth doesn’t matter. The truth is nothing but sad, and acknowledging it out loud won’t change it. Our dad’s addiction to pain pills used to



be the elephant in the room, and now it is the air we breathe. It's everywhere, slipping into cracks, affecting everything.

Jake backs out of the kitchen. My mom, to her credit, tries to make small talk with me. "Are you going to dance tonight?"

"No." When I first started West Coast swing lessons with my dad, I was reluctant and embarrassed to be there with him. I was dancing with my dad as my partner, and it was confusing, because all I really wanted was to dance with a boy. At first, it felt weird that it was my dad's hand I was holding, but soon after, it stopped being weird and started being great. I learned there's a difference between being held like you're cherished, and being held like a lover. I've never been held like a lover, but somehow I understand how different it will be.

My dad was cherishing his time with his little girl, and I began looking forward to our weekly classes. I think now I would do just about anything to get them back. To get him back, too.

I grab a second peeler from a drawer and get to work. "I haven't been in a couple weeks. Classes aren't as fun without Dad."

"There are other people there, though, right? Other people you can dance with?"

I shrug. "Yes, and no. It's more fun when you're learning with the same person."

My mom's touch on my forearm stops me from peeling the next potato. "I don't want what's going on with your dad to stop you from doing something that makes you happy."

"It's fine, Mom." Why do I sound angry? I'm not angry with her. I'm just angry with... everything.

We eat dinner. Frankly, it's embarrassing with Rhodes at the dinner table. My dad's leg shakes the entire time, like he cannot calm himself down. At various times during the meal, it shakes the table. I look at Rhodes, and he looks up, meeting my eyes. I can tell he feels sorry for me. That familiar feeling of anger rises. I don't need or want anybody to feel sorry for me.

After dinner, Jake and Rhodes go to the living room to play video games. I've already finished my homework, and I don't know what to do with myself.

"Do you want to watch us play?" Jake asks.

I make a face. "I would rather scrub the baseboards with your toothbrush."

Rhodes huffs a laugh. Jake does a half eye roll head shake as he turns on the game console. "Don't be mean just because you're mad that Dad isn't taking you to the dance studio."

Rhodes glances away from the TV screen and looks at me. Is he thinking of our conversation in the kitchen a few weeks ago?

Jake rummages through a drawer on the TV stand, coming away with two controllers. "I'd help you out, but I don't have any rhythm. Rhodes does though." Jake tosses a controller to Rhodes, and Rhodes catches it. On the short walk from the TV stand to the couch, Jake attempts an odd-looking shuffle slide thing.

"You don't have to convince me you're a bad dancer," I say to Jake. "I already know."

Jake points at Rhodes, lifting his eyebrows like he's trying to send me a message.

“You have rhythm?” I ask Rhodes. Light brown tendrils curl over the tops of his ears, in need of a cut.

He meets my eyes, and this time he holds my gaze. “Yeah.”

He hadn’t said anything during our conversation in the kitchen, but he didn’t really get the chance to, either. There was very little time between when Jake left to shower and when he returned. Rhodes had asked me if *anyone* was capable of learning, but he’d said little else.

I do my best to treat Rhodes like my brother, which means I adopt my on-the-edge of being irritated tone of voice and ask, “*Yeah, I’m interested in learning, or, Yeah, I have rhythm and there’s no way I’m using it with you?*”

The corner of his upper lip curls into a semi-smile. “The first one.”

I nod once, as if it’s settled. Nerves pile up in my midsection. Dancing with Rhodes will not feel like dancing with my dad.

“I’m going to read,” I announce. “Yell when you’re done playing. If you’re up for it, I’ll teach you the basics.”

The game they’re playing has already started, and his eyes are affixed to the TV. “Ok,” he agrees.

I turn away quickly, overwhelmed by how fast everything happened, and nearly miss it.

The heavy swallow, the bob of his throat.

I do not miss what it does to multiple parts of me.

---

A soft knock pulls my attention from my book.

Rhodes stands in my doorway, one knuckle rapping against the frame. He knocks twice more, even though our eyes are locked. “Are you ready to be my instructor?”

He wears a lopsided smile and tilts his head. I’ve never seen him look quite so boyish. He usually appears to be in command of himself, an assured air about him.

I like the way he looks right now.

“I expected you to yell for me.”

He shakes his head side to side, as slowly as he knocked. “I didn’t think it would be nice to yell for you.”

I smirk, resting my open book on my chest and stretching out my legs. If my mother saw me right now, she’d accuse me of preening.

She’d be right.

“Are you saying I deserve more than a shout?”

He nods once. “Most definitely.” His voice deepens, and the second word ends in a near-whisper.

I’d love nothing more than to be assertive right now, to make it clear to Rhodes I’m available to be kissed. But I can’t. Jake needs his best friend. Especially now, when our dad is disappointing us over and over, Jake needs to have someone he can rely on besides me and our mom.

I toss my book on my floor and swing my legs over my bed. No more preening.

“Let’s go back out to the living room.” If Rhodes puts his hand on my hip here in my bedroom, I don’t know how much control I’ll have. It’s better, *safer*, if we’re not alone.

Rhodes backs into the hall, sweeping his arm wide. I pass him, holding my breath, because I happen to know from reaching around him to get a stack of appetizer plates at work last weekend that he smells better than he should. Or, better than I think he should.

Rhodes follows me out to the living room, where Jake still sits on the couch, this time playing a one-person game. “I told him he didn’t have to go get you,” he says, arms moving left as the car on the screen goes careening into a jersey wall. “He said it wasn’t polite to yell for you. Chivalry lives.”

I smack him a tad more than lightly on the back of his head. “You’d do well to learn from your best friend.” Is it just me, or did I say the words *best friend* with a little too much emphasis?

I lead Rhodes to the left of the TV. “In West Coast swing, you start on the one, and some counts will go up to six, as opposed to eight.”

Rhodes scratches his head. “Most dances are eight-count?”

Now I’m worried. “I thought you saying you have rhythm means you’ve danced before?”

“I do have rhythm, but I’ve never done anything formal. I just”—he shrugs, moving his hips side to side, his feet performing a step ball change—“move.”

Without meaning to, I laugh. As soon as it happens, I know it’s the worst thing I can do. Rhodes’ face shutters, and he sends me a look that tells me how much he hates being laughed at.

“I’m sorry,” I plead, arms raised. “It’s just that I’ve never seen you do”—I motion at his hips—“that.”

“Well, yeah, I don’t dance my way through the halls of Green Haven high school.”

“You should,” Jake says, eyes trained on the screen, fingers flying over the controller.

I ignore my brother’s remark. “What I meant to say is that you’re very good, and I think I was taken aback by the fact that you really do have rhythm and you seem to already know how to shift your weight. I laughed because I was uneasy, not because I found you funny.”

He eyes me, and I think he’s discovered something in what I’ve said, something he likes. “You were uneasy?”

I nod. If only he knew how *uneasy* he makes me.

“Now,” I say, putting enough space between us. “West Coast swing starts with us standing back from each other. Hold out your right hand.”

He listens.

I thread my left hand through his. Rhodes does that thing again, where he swallows hard. His left hand, hanging loosely beside his thigh, curls up into a fist before his fingers unfurl into tense lines.

*Oh, my God.* That’s...that’s Mr. Darcy. That’s his move, when he wants to reach for Elizabeth but cannot.

It takes all my strength to steady my emotions and my voice so I can talk. “Most of this dance is done with me moving up and down in a slot.” I demonstrate by stepping forward twice, then back. “Your job as leader will be to get out of my way when I’m going up and down the slot.”

Rhodes looks confused.

“I know it doesn’t make much sense right now, but when I say get out of my way, it means you are stepping aside as I make my way by with a slot pass or whip.”

Rhodes, bless his heart, nods like he understands. Of course he doesn’t. This lingo is specific to the dance. It would be like a lawyer appearing in the living room right now, speaking legalese, and expecting fluency from us.

“I think it’ll be easiest to learn on your feet. Literally. Let’s start moving so you can get the hang of what it’s like to move in time with someone else.”

I’m pulling out everything I can remember from my very first dance lesson with Donna. I am more the leader than I am the follower at this point as I coach him through the most basic moves. He’s a fast study, picking up quickly how to exert pressure and pull me into the first steps. Because we have an audience, and it’s Rhodes’ first time, I’m careful not to go too in depth. For the sake of everyone in the room, I’m careful not to step in too close to his body.

Honestly though, for all the attention Jake is paying us, we could probably lock lips right here in the living room and he wouldn’t notice.

We keep going. We’re a little all over the place, but I’m not trying to keep us in line. It’s better to get the feel for it than anything else. Plus, we don’t have the benefit of a mirror like we would if we were at the dance studio.

Jake leans around us. “You are kind of blocking the TV. And by kind of, I mean completely.”

“Video games will rot your brain,” I respond. What I really mean to say is *I hauled your best friend out here to dance with me in your line of sight for a reason, dumbass.*

The game ends and Jake tosses the controller on the couch beside him. He leans back, fingers roped behind his head, and says, “Is this going to become a thing? Because if so, you’re going to need to get your own practice spot.”

“We can use my backyard,” Rhodes offers. “My mom won’t care. It’s not as nice as your backyard.”

“See?” Jake says, as if he came to some great revelation. “Problem solved.”

I don’t think it’s a good idea. At. All.

Rhodes and I are tightrope walkers, balancing precariously on that tightly drawn string. And Jake is the safety net beneath.

I’m getting the feeling that if he weren’t here to provide us with that net, we just might fall.



# Chapter 13

## *Rhodes*

JAKE HAS OFFERED TO HELP ME INSTALL A RAILING ON THE stairs at my house.

My mom's house.

Candy House.

Damn, I don't know what to call it. I guess any of the three will work.

"I forgot how narrow these stairs are." Jake's broad shoulders fill the opening at the base of the stairs.

"You've grown a little since the last time you were here," I point out. "Where do you want this stuff?"

He points to the ground. "There."

I'm holding railing brackets and two posts. Jake has the spindles and his four-foot level. He's also wearing his tool belt.

"Nice tool belt," I joke.

He gives the leather a light smack and winks at me. "You wear one of these more often and maybe you'll finally get yourself a lady."

"Oh yeah? Is that what made Colbie fall in love with your smart ass?"

Jake presses his lips together and shakes his head. “Actually, no. It was her pink tool belt that did it for me.”

I hold up a palm, letting him know that train of conversation need not go any further. “That’s enough.”

Jake pushes past me, starting up the stairs. He fills the rectangular space to capacity, and it’s comical. When he gets to the landing, he looks down and points the stud finder at me. “Get your ass up here and help me find the studs.”

I make my way up, and Jake presses the small tool to my chest. “Beep beep. I found one.”

I take the tool, but I’m laughing. “Did you ask me to come up here just to make that joke?”

“It was low hanging fruit.”

After that we start working, finding and marking the studs on the wall. He pauses to ask, “Do you want to extend the railing past where the stairs start and stop?”

“Why would I do that?”

Jake tucks his carpenter pencil behind his ear. He’s struggling to keep his voice even, to keep emotion out of it. “It’ll give your mom something to reach for before she is at the stairs. More important for the top of the stairs than the bottom, probably.”

I look down at the ground and push away the thickening at the base of my throat. Once it clears, I say, “Sure. Yeah. Thanks for suggesting it.”

We measure. We place masking tape thirty-six inches above the stair nosing. “Why that many inches?”

“Building code,” Jake answers.

I snort. “Candy House couldn’t pass inspection if it was completed by a toddler.”

The house was built in the sixties by a man fulfilling his wife’s dream. He’d hired an architect long before neighborhood HOAs existed. Eleven owners have walked these halls, a fact I know only because I looked it up once. My mom has been here the longest, but each previous owner left their mark. Between the many coats of paint, the river rock fireplace, and the upraised barbecue pit in the backyard with the unfinished facade, the house is a tapestry of individual and differing tastes. I’m positive more than half of what the previous owners added to the house never passed an inspection, and certainly wouldn’t if it were put through one.

“Well,” Jake says, placing the masking tape for the final stud, “my work passes inspection, or it doesn’t move forward. That’s how I operate.”

Jake oversees Jones Construction, Colbie’s family’s business. He’s also a partial owner now, and more hands off than he used to be due to his elevated role in the company. He jumped at the chance to install this stair rail when I mentioned it. I think he’s itching to use his hands to construct something.

“You know there’s no way I’m getting an inspector out here, right? He’d probably condemn the place.” The last thing my mom needs is to be forced to relearn the layout of a home.

Jake laughs. “This place is far from condemnable. You should’ve seen this old place we came across last weekend when Robbie and I were camping. I swear it looked like something from the eighteen hundreds, sitting out in the middle of nowhere. There should’ve been a covered wagon parked out front.”

“Abandoned?”

“By everyone but the mice, I’m assuming.” Jake picks up one end of the railing. “Let’s get this outside and get it cut.”

We work for another hour, cutting, measuring, then doing it all again to get the rail to extend around the corners at the foot and the top of the stairs.

We’re standing in the backyard, sipping from Corona’s without lime because I forgot to buy one, when Jake says, “Georgia needs a dance partner. You game?”

The earthy beer sits in my mouth for a long second before I swallow. “I thought she had a partner.”

Jake shakes his head. “He injured himself. I didn’t ask how, but she said she won’t be able to compete now.”

“Hmm,” I answer, uncertain of what to say. I absolutely, completely, unequivocally cannot be Georgia’s dance partner. The idea of being that close to her sets an ache in my chest, not only because I want to, but because I know I can’t.

Shouldn’t.

Would be a fool to let it happen.

And yet... The thought of it burrows into my chest. West Coast swing is not a particularly provocative dance, not like the tango. Still, there is some level of intimacy. The moves, the timing, the trust in your partner. It’s not just the holding of hands required for the sugar push or the whip, it’s the connection between the partners that is vital to the dance.

Georgia and I had all that, once upon a time. We had it in spades.

“I don’t know,” I say to Jake.

He throws me a look, his head tipping back to take a pull from the bottle. “What the hell else are you doing with your

time?”

He has me there.

“Listen,” he says, lowering the bottle and tapping it on his thigh. “Life hasn’t been great to Georgia. It hasn’t been cruel, but it hasn’t been exactly kind, either. I thought she’d be alright once she went to college, after all the shit with our dad, and I guess I wasn’t paying close enough attention once I got back here with Robbie. She moved home a few years ago, and she can’t get a job teaching at the elementary school, even though she taught in Flagstaff.”

“Why’d she move home from Flagstaff if she had a job?”

Jake shrugs. “I don’t know.” His words are spoken slowly, like understanding dawning. “I don’t think I even asked.”

When Jake left for college, he’d asked me to take care of his mom and sister because he didn’t trust his dad. He was right not to trust him. But until now, I didn’t realize I’d been trusting Jake all these years since he returned, trusting him to take care of Georgia. Assuming he was stepping in and being there for her. And he wasn’t.

Jake continues. “She was close with our dad, and I think all of it really messed her up. It’s like she started out her adult life from the back foot.” He takes a drink. “What do you think? You were there during that time.”

Like always when Jake asks me about that period in our lives, I dumb it down. Shrugging, I say, “She was devastated, but I think she started grieving him long before he died.”

“We all did. It just feels like there’s something more. I know they were close and everything, but it’s like the effects of him are more far-reaching for her than they were for me,

and I can't figure out why. I'm starting to feel pretty damn guilty because I'm realizing I wasn't there for her enough."

"I was supposed to be there for her," I remind him.

He's shaking his head before I can finish the sentence. "I never should've asked that of you. It wasn't your place."

"What were you supposed to do? Give up your scholarship? Your chance at a college education?"

Jake is silent. We both know that if we follow that train of thought, the end result doesn't include Robbie, and even though the path has been tumultuous, he wouldn't trade it for anything.

"I guess not," he admits. "I feel like shit when I think about that time."

"We all do."

"How do you feel like shit?"

"I shouldn't have left Georgia so soon after the funeral."

"You had to start school. Your life needed to start, too. You couldn't stick around here and be another one of my dad's casualties."

The word sticks in my gut. Casualties.

Jake finishes his beer. "Anyway," he says, turning toward the house. "I feel bad for Georgia. She was looking forward to this competition. She could really use a win."

"Yeah," I echo, following Jake inside. We deposit our bottles in the recyclable and get back to work.

I'm only halfway present. Half of me is flooded with memories of what it felt like to dance with Georgia, to spin her

around and drink in the pear scented smell of her as she completed her revolution.

I hate to think of Georgia in that position. I'd do anything to make her happy. I just don't know that inserting myself into her life will make her any happier than she is right now.



# Chapter 14

# *Georgia*

DONNA HAS LEFT ME A VOICEMAIL ASKING (BUT REALLY MORE demanding) I come to the studio this evening. It's a Monday, a day I'd usually take her class, but without a partner there's no real reason.

That's not true. There's a reason. I just don't think it's worth it. If I'm not working toward the goal of competing, why am I spending the time and money?

What I should really do is use my time to make money. That would be the responsible thing.

My plan now is to see what Donna wants, and then gently tell her I won't be back. I'm going to have to move on from dancing at some point, even if I love it, and get serious about something else. I don't want to be twenty-seven and living in my mother's house anymore.

There's a word for that... boomeranger. I looked it up on the Internet. It means a young adult who returns to live with a parent after a period of independence.

*Boomeranger.*

That's what I am.

How depressing.

I love my mom, but I've got to get my shit together.

The minute I walk into Hustle & Swing, I'm energized. I don't know if it's the wood floor that has seen millions of steps, or the optimism in the air.

People may take their financial stress to the bank, trauma to their therapist, and overgrown hair to their stylist, but they leave all that at the door when they come to the studio. This place is nothing but an outlet for enjoyment and learning.

The usuals are gathered around each other, talking about their weeks. Caprice loudly announces her new favorite smoothie recipe, but it's not immediately obvious if anyone is listening.

"Georgia," Donna calls, standing in the doorway to her office. "There's someone I want you to meet." She waves me over.

I step around the crowd, feel the heat of their curious gazes.

Donna backs into the small room to make space for me, and I realize there's another woman standing further back.

I blink twice, trying like hell not to show my recognition of her.

"Hi," I wave, and my voice cracks.

The woman, with her strawberry blonde hair and wide open smile, returns my wave. "Dakota Hayden," she says, though she needs no introduction. Of course I know who she is. Not only does she own The Orchard in Sierra Grande, and run their once a month market, she's a *Hayden*. Tales of Arizona's largest cattle ranch and the family who owns it stretch far and wide. The tales probably get more inaccurate

the further they go, but Green Haven is a neighboring town, so I'm betting what we've heard might have a sliver of truth.

"Georgia Whittier," I respond, tapping my chest with a palm. A curtain of mortification drapes over me. I sound like I've landed on an alien planet, and I'm trying to inform the inhabitants I'm human.

Donna doesn't miss a beat. "Dakota and I have been trading emails for weeks about the running of this place while I'm gone to Illinois. Sydney's contractions began earlier today, so I'm headed out on a red-eye tonight."

"I didn't realize you danced," I say to Dakota without thinking.

Dakota's gaze turns knowing and amused. "I always forget about that infamous last name of mine."

I laugh, holding up my hands like I've been found guilty. "If it makes a difference, I saw your picture in Arizona's Best magazine a while back, and I've been to your market with my sister-in-law a few times. So it's not just your last name."

She grins. "Ask for me the next time you're there. I'll get my mother-in-law to give you some of her goat cheese. She just started offering a blackberry flavor that's to die for."

I gulp, trying to act like this isn't the coolest thing to happen to me in a long time. "Will do."

Donna interrupts our conversation to get down to business. "As far as dancing goes, Dakota knows her stuff. I never thought the flyer I put up in the Merc in Sierra Grande would land me this gem." Donna squeezes Dakota's forearm. "She swears she doesn't have anything better to do." Donna's deep, throaty laugh travels through the room. "I think she might be lying."

Dakota smiles. “I have plenty to do, but most of it isn’t better than this. I might have to bring my two kids with me every once in a while if I can’t find someone on the ranch to watch them. That doesn’t happen often though, because usually my sister-in-law will take them.” She holds her hands out to the side of her body and drops into a small curtsy. “So, I’m all yours.”

I’m dying to ask if the sister-in-law she’s referring to is Tenley Roberts, the famous actress who retired when she met and fell in love with one of the Hayden brothers, but I keep my mouth shut.

“Dakota is going to lead tonight’s class, but I was also thinking she can be your coach for the competition.”

My eyebrows pinch together. “Ian hurt himself. I’m not competing.”

Donna smiles smugly. “I’m talking about your new partner.”

My head shakes slowly. “I don’t have a new partner.”

“You sure do.” Her gaze goes over my shoulder to the entrance. “There he is now.”

I close my eyes tight, dragging in a deep, calming breath, taking a moment to gather my wits and strength. I know who it is. There’s a change in the atmosphere, a hush, an electrical charge, a wave of something unidentifiable that undulates from him to me, sending my pulse skittering.

I’m only turning around now because Dakota and Donna look that way, and it’s human instinct to follow their gazes, to look out for danger.

Danger is exactly what Rhodes is.

Especially looking like that, striding in with that confident swagger, smiling at Donna like she's a long lost second mother. He wears nice boots, clean and free of wear, jeans that give away the muscular indentations of his thighs, and a Carolina blue t-shirt that brings out the blue of his eyes even from this distance. No ball cap, no stupid orange beanie, just curls the color of local honey that are pushed away from his face like he swept a hand over them before walking in.

He ignores me, walking right to Donna and hugging her with such gusto he lifts her a few inches off the floor.

I scowl.

Rhodes introduces himself to Dakota. When he finally turns to me, my arms are crossed. My head is tilted and my lips form a grim line. He grins like I'm not showing signs of unhappiness, and offers his hand like he's meeting me for the first time.

I ignore his offered hand. "I am not agreeing to this," I say through clenched teeth.

Rhodes' head tips back-and-forth like he's considering my words. "But you're not disagreeing, either."

Donna titters. Dakota's gaze moves between me and Rhodes as she tries to understand this dynamic.

I muster up a smile for Dakota's benefit and say, "Rhodes and I need a moment alone. Please excuse us." Without waiting for Rhodes, I pivot and walk across the dance floor and out the front door.

I've been outside for nearly a full minute when I hear the studio door open. I'm facing away from the building, watching the cars pass by. It's later in the evening and traffic has slowed, but the breeze has picked up and the trees sway.

The thud of his boots on the asphalt warns me he's getting closer. They stop, but I still don't turn around.

"Why are you here?" I ask, arms crossed. Across the street, a couple pushes a baby in a stroller. I keep my eyes on them because I cannot bear to turn around and see Rhodes backlit by this building.

When we were younger, this is where we came to be together. Hustle & Swing was the only place where Rhodes and I could touch in public. Every other touch was secret, every glance stolen. Here, at this dance studio, we were encouraged to do both.

"Jake told me you need a partner. He said yours was injured."

"And then what? You called Donna and offered your services?"

"Georgia," Rhodes murmurs, my name taking on a pleading edge. "Turn around so we can talk. I don't want to talk to your back."

"Funny, your back is all I saw when you walked away."

"Dammit," he mutters. The word is muffled, coming through clenched teeth.

The seconds pass, the silence stretches on, and the couple pushing the stroller disappears around the corner.

I'm going to have to face him eventually, so I shift my way to pivot, but then he says, "You're going to have to get over it."

I'm not pivoting anymore. I'm whirling. My hair flies around my face, my lips quiver with anger. "You don't get to tell me what to get over. And I *am* over you." Something

passes in his eyes, a glimmer of hurt or regret or disappointment. “But I’d be a fool if I didn’t use the past to inform the future. You’ve proven yourself someone to be wary of, so pardon me if I’m wary of you.”

Rhodes’ shoulders dip, sloping down with unseen weight. “I don’t mean you should get over it because I deserve it, or because it would make life easier *for me*. Neither of those are true.”

His words trip through my mind, wandering, as I attempt to understand them. “It wouldn’t make life easier for you if I got over everything that happened back then?”

He holds my gaze, his blue meeting my brown, his hesitance coming up against my curiosity. “No,” he answers.

I don’t ask for an explanation. The one-word, one-syllable sentence hangs heavy, voluminous, like a snowball that has picked up every rock and twig in its path.

He continues. “You don’t want me as your partner, I get it. But if you want a chance at winning that competition”—he points back at his chest—“I’m your path.”

I study him. The curve of his jaw, the shallow of his neck. Can I do it? Can I be close to Rhodes, dance in his arms, follow where he leads? Do I want this competition badly enough?

I looked at the West Fest website this morning. The deadline to enter the competition is five days from now. Walk-on entrants are allowed, but only as space permits. If I want to guarantee my spot, I have to register. Soon. The decision is heavy, and I don’t have much time to make it.

In my mind, I see the gleaming dance floor of a ballroom somewhere in Phoenix. Tables bracket the dance floor, filled



with clapping people. My name being called by the booming-voice emcee. *Georgia Whittier dancing the West Coast swing with her partner...who?* It's a blank space right now.

But it doesn't have to be.

It's as simple as writing his name on the entry information. It's as difficult as seeing him every day, facing off with how his departure still stings all these years later.

Another distinctly different thought pops into my mind. What if the only way to getting over Rhodes once and for all is to see him *more*? Exposure therapy. Confront the stimuli. *Rhodes*. I could almost laugh at the idea of Rhodes being labeled stimuli.

I side step him, my arm brushing his as I go. He says nothing; he does not move. I pause at the entrance, my palm on the door handle. Tipping my head to the bruised blue sky above, I call, "Are you coming or what?"

# Chapter 15

## *Rhodes*

THERE ARE A HANDFUL OF MEMORIES I'LL NEVER FORGET.

Watching my grandmother spread room-temperature butter on saltine crackers.

The scent of the desert after a thunderstorm, air fragrant with resin and moisture.

My mother's voice, soft but certain, telling me she'd found work in Arizona, but my dad wasn't coming with us.

Those memories are tucked away and easily recalled, but there is one memory that really isn't a memory at all. And it's not single, but one made up of millions.

*Georgia.*

The way her eyes find mine, looking up at me, waiting for the music and my lead.

The feel of her hand, encased in mine, as we stand at arm's length.

Musical notes tumble around the room from speakers in the corner. *Never Say Never* by Cole Swindell and Lainey Wilson.

It's mid-tempo, probably Donna's doing, to help ease me back into the world of sugar pushes, side passes, and whips.

“Walk, walk,” Donna calls, circling the small crowd of dancers. “Triple step, triple step.”

Again, these cues are likely for me. But it turns out, I don’t need them.

Something else I haven’t forgotten? How to dance. More specifically, how to dance with *her*. Forgetting for a moment the indignation rising off Georgia like heat on a summer sidewalk, it’s obvious our bodies were made to do this with one another. She fits perfectly in my arms, like she was born to be in them.

She falls in line, follows my lead, completes a left side pass with a flourish.

Still, she hates this. Me. She makes no attempt to conceal the pull of her shoulders, the divot between her eyebrows. She is tense, clunky, mechanical.

Donna watches, her creased forehead telling me she’s noting our interaction.

“Loosen up,” I murmur into Georgia’s ear when she passes through on a whip step.

She spins out, releasing one of my hands, and flashes me a fiery glare. There are plenty of choice words inside that mouth of hers, but she refrains from sharing them. She’s on her best behavior for Dakota, the new instructor walking around with Donna. Thank goodness I have Dakota as a buffer. If it weren’t for her, Georgia would’ve stomped on my toe by now.

The song ends.

“Take five,” Donna announces, heading straight for me and Georgia. She pauses when she gets to us, spending a beat looking at us both before she says, “Are you two going to be able to compete?”

“Sure,” I answer.

At the same time Georgia says, “I don’t know.”

Donna’s gaze softens. She has always loved Georgia. And me, too, but something about Georgia tugs at Donna’s heartstrings. I get it. The same happens to me.

Dakota speaks up. “If you’re willing, I’d love to work with you guys one-on-one.” She looks at Georgia. “I think you have something special. Your steps are clean, your body moves effortlessly. This style of dance works well for you.”

“What about me?” I ask, grinning because I know the same cannot be said of me.

Dakota grins. “You need a little work.” She taps one finger on her lower lip like she’s thinking. “I know a guy who’d probably help if you’re open to it.”

I nod. “I’ll take all the help I can get.”

Georgia’s head tips up to me, her gaze curious. She says nothing, but I know what she’s thinking. *Why are you doing this?* Dakota keeps talking, and between the three of us, we decide on Tuesday and Friday evening lessons.

“Starting tomorrow,” Dakota adds. “There’s not very much time until the competition.”

Donna claps once, the class’s cue that our five-minute break is over. “That song was for you,” she says, winking at us.

We dance to two more songs, both of which I know are not for us, and Georgia never loses that look of curiosity. I do not linger when the lesson is finished.

Having Georgia in my arms again has overwhelmed me, and I need to decompress. Normally I’d call Jake and ask him

to meet me at our old spot, a rundown bar named Short Stack. It feels duplicitous to call him and sit beside him, when the reason for my melancholy is his little sister.

Instead of the bar, I head for home.

The rest of the evening looks like every other. My mom sits in her recliner, listening to an audiobook that plays from her phone in her lap. I warm up the leftovers from the dinner I made before I went to the lesson and change out the water in the vase of roses I gave my mom last night. She enjoys the fragrance.

There's no way I'm joining my mom in the living room, because the one sentence I heard as I passed through was enough to set a blush to my cheeks. She's listening to what she calls *spicy romance* and I want no part of it.

I dare to duck my head in the room just long enough to tell my mom not to be offended, but I'm taking my dinner to my room. She taps a button on her device to pause the book and huffs a laugh. "Prude."

I roll my eyes and shake my head, then remember she can't see me from across the room. "No, Mom, I just don't want to listen to porn with you."

"It's not porn," she defends. "They love each other, and it's beautiful. That's how babies are made. That's how *you* were made."

"What I heard when I walked through here definitely does not make a baby."

Mom laughs loudly.

"Besides," I add, going with the topic because I like when my mom laughs. "I'm the product of immaculate conception, Mother." It's easy to picture my parents in the same room

together, but nearly impossible to picture them even speaking to one another. As far as I know, they haven't spoken since I turned eighteen. Even now, my dad and I talk three times a year: my birthday, his birthday, and Christmas. It's sad, but I'm used to it.

“Sure, dear.” She pats the air, as if it's my arm. “Keep telling yourself that.” She resumes the book, and I hustle from the room, leaving behind the deep, gritty voice of the narrator asking *I'm wondering if you, perhaps, have a muffin for me to eat?*

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that 'muffin' is a euphemism.

I shake my head and rake a hand down my face. Fucking unbelievable.

My mother is my roommate, and I have a secret crush on the girl down the street.

I might as well be seventeen again.

# Chapter 16



# *Georgia*

## Back Then

ONE OF THE BEST PARTS OF TEACHING RHODES TO DANCE WAS that it distracted me from my dad. His slow pull away from my life became less noticeable because Rhodes' presence increased as steadily as my dad's decreased.

Rhodes and I were seeing each other for dance lessons with Donna once a week, and we practiced outside of the studio, too. The restaurant scheduled us to work the same shifts on Friday and Saturday nights. It wasn't unusual for me to see him this frequently, but normally he'd be with my brother, or steering clear of me at work.

But not anymore. Once we started dancing together, he began talking to me more at work. He'd meet me in the back to swipe a ramekin of pasta fagioli soup, and we'd split a breadstick. We're supposed to pay a quarter for the breadstick, but we have to order it as an employee meal from the bartender. The bartender despises spending her time ringing in something that costs twenty-five cents.

Tonight, Rhodes fishes a quarter from his pocket. It's the same quarter I gave him last night, and will undoubtedly return to him at our next shift.

"I'd like to pay you for the breadstick." He holds the money out to me with two fingers. I pinch the coin and deposit

it in my pocket. “Thank you,” I say, dipping my half of the breadstick into the soup. “Next time there will be tax.”

“I’m not sure if there’s tax on something that costs less than a dollar.”

I frown, thinking quickly. “It’s a new tax.”

Rhodes holds back a smile. “A peach tax.”

“A peach tax?”

His eyebrows lift as he waits for me to make the connection. A few seconds pass, and when it’s clear I’m not putting it together, he says, “Because your name is Georgia? Georgia peach?”

I nod. “Now I understand.”

The tiny flicker of a warm feeling comes to life inside me. I love our inside joke with the quarter. I love this new continuation. Peach tax.

“What are you guys doing?” Lacey, the head hostess who takes her job too seriously, sledgehammers her way into our bubble. She glances from me to Rhodes with suspicious, jealous eyes. “It’s not break time. There’s a lobby full of people who need to be seated.” Glaring at Rhodes, she says, “There’s a restaurant full of tables that need to be bussed.”

She stands with her arms crossed, waiting. It’s clear she’s not going anywhere without the two of us in tow. I turn away from Rhodes, and Lacey takes this as her cue to march us out of the back of the restaurant. We push through the double doors that lead to the floor. I move left to go to the hostess stand, and Rhodes goes right to get what he needs to bus tables. Just before we’re too far apart to touch, Rhodes’ pinky hooks onto mine and he tugs lightly.

Under his breath, he says, “See you around, Peach.”

---

Do you know how long it takes to fall in love when you're sixteen years old?

In my case, it happened in the span of one spoken word.

*Peach.*

That one word only has one syllable. And yet.

It said so much more. That nickname said everything else from here on out, was possible.

# Chapter 17

# *Georgia*

RHODES WALKS IN THREE MINUTES BEFORE THE LESSON IS DUE to begin.

His hair, still wet from a recent shower, falls over his forehead. He pushes it back, gaze sweeping the room until it falls on me. He holds my stare, then his chin lifts and it's as if he's saying *You didn't think I'd be here, but here I am.*

He walks closer. "Hi," he says, turning his head away from me to cover a yawn.

For the shortest second, I feel bad. I know how early he wakes up, the physically taxing work he does all day long. I did not think about how tired he probably is in the evenings, how he might prefer to rest and relax.

"There's a coffee station in the corner." I point to the Keurig and move quickly away from Rhodes. I need some space and fresh air, so I unlatch the garage door wall and lift it so it's open halfway. The latch doesn't catch on the runner like I thought it did, and it rolls down, picking up speed as it goes. I jump back in time to save my toes from being slammed, but only barely. Rhodes runs over, grabbing my upper arms and looking into my eyes with a panicked gaze.

"Are you ok? Are you hurt?" he nearly yells.

I swallow the fear. My adrenaline pulses in my ears. Shaking him off, I say through gritted teeth, “I told you to make coffee.”

“Who said I need coffee?” he asks, voice tight.

“Coffee helps with late nights.”

Rhodes stalks past me, annoyed. “Try early mornings,” he bites back.

I know this already, of course, but picking a fight feels better than admitting I’m embarrassed I nearly injured myself a moment ago.

Rhodes lifts the garage door, securing the latch on one end first, then the other.

I turn away, grateful I’m not on the way to the emergency room right now with a smashed foot.

A loud, rumbling four-door truck grabs my attention. The vehicle waits to turn left into the small dance studio parking lot, the letters HCC on the side.

The truck pulls in and takes up two spots. It doesn’t matter, because the studio is only open to us.

Dakota hops out of the passenger seat. A tall, broad-shouldered man wearing jeans and a cowboy hat climbs from the driver’s seat.

This must be the man Dakota mentioned helping Rhodes.

Then one of the second row doors opens, and another man steps out. He’s as tall as the driver, but he doesn’t wear a cowboy hat.

“Hi,” Dakota waves as she walks up. She ducks under the raised garage door, but neither man follows suit. They stride

through the front door, confident and at ease.

“This is my brother-in-law, Wyatt,” Dakota says, pointing at the man not wearing a cowboy hat. He shakes our hands, and once again I have to act like I don’t already know exactly who he is. Dakota addresses Rhodes. “Wyatt said he’d be happy to help you get a hang of your part. How to lead, and all that.”

Wyatt nods, then adds, “I’m sure my sister-in-law would have no trouble teaching a man to lead.” He glances teasingly at the wearer of the cowboy hat.

Now that we’re closer, I’m positive he’s Wes Hayden, oldest brother and head of the Hayden family.

Wes’s gaze sweeps the room, cataloguing the place. When he’s done, he delivers a withering look at Wyatt.

“That’s my husband, Wes,” Dakota says, pointing at him at the same time. He politely shakes both our hands.

I’m trying not to hyperventilate at the fact I’m casually being introduced to members of the Hayden family. Like it’s a normal weeknight at Hustle & Swing. *No biggie.*

Rhodes shows no such signs of being starstruck. Casually, he says, “My crew and I did some work out on your ranch a while ago. A flash flood took down a transformer.”

Something passes through their eyes, a pain of some sort, but then Wes says, “I remember your crew. We’re grateful you could come out. I know that work is dangerous, especially when it involves water.”

Rhodes waves a hand, like it was nothing. “That’s what safety gear is for.”



Wyatt says, “I remember coming out and meeting you all. I’m sorry I don’t remember names. It wasn’t a great time for our family.”

“No worries. The crew wasn’t using the right name for me back then, anyway. They would’ve introduced me as Ricky.”

Wes laughs. “Fucking men.”

Dakota makes an exasperated sound. “Wes, language.”

I laugh at her admonishment. I can’t help it. “Why do I get the feeling you say that a lot?”

Dakota rolls her eyes playfully and sends an indulgent smile to her husband. “Because I do.”

He tips his chin to the ceiling, lowering it once slowly, a silent confirmation.

Dakota claps. “Let’s get this lesson started.”

Rhodes and I get situated in the middle of the room while Dakota hooks her phone up to the sound system. “Have you chosen what song you want to use?”

I shake my head. “Not officially, no.”

Dakota’s lips press together, and her eyes sparkle. “I have a song I’ve always thought would be so fun to dance to. You can say no, but just give it a listen and see what you think.” She presses a button and hurries out to the middle of the room, where we’re standing. Wyatt joins her.

Wes takes a seat in one of the chairs lining the wall opposite the half-open garage door. His long legs stretch out, one ankle crossed over the other, arms crossed over his chest.

“Wes is here because he hates that he doesn’t know how to dance with his wife, and I do,” Wyatt says loudly, to make sure

Wes hears him.

Wes responds in a low voice, but the only word I can make out is *fuck*.

Wyatt must've understood him though, because he laughs and grabs Dakota's hand, pulling her in, spinning her and dipping her back. When he lifts her upright, he looks back at Wes. Wes holds up a stiff middle finger, and Wyatt laughs again.

Dakota rolls her eyes. "These two never stop. Can't take them anywhere."

I look at Rhodes, knowing how deeply he wished for a brother, how badly he wanted a relationship just like what Wes and Wyatt appear to have. Rhodes' friendship with my brother meant everything to him. I'm the only person he'd ever jeopardized it for.

Rhodes covers up his latent longing with a smile and a nod in my direction. "Georgia gives her brother about the same amount of grief, just with fewer hand gestures."

Dakota laughs and taps her phone, saying, "Here's the song. Please promise me you'll tell me if you hate it."

The sounds of a guitar fill the room. It's country, but also rock. An older song.

My mouth drops open. I could not have chosen a more perfect song. "I love it. Like, I really, really love it." I'm almost giddy with excitement.

*I Hear You Knocking* by Dave Edmunds.

I look at Rhodes to catch his reaction to the music, and I'm thrown by what I see. His gaze is fastened to me, his eyes dreamy and squinting softly, and a smile dances over his lips.

“It’s perfect,” Rhodes agrees.

The song is danceable, but filled with tension. It’s not too fast and it’s not too slow, with the kind of beat that will make people tap their toes.

Dakota beams. “I always wanted to dance to this song, but I took lessons with my dad, and it felt awkward because this song has so much romantic tension.”

My giddiness halts. “You danced with your dad?” In my surprise, I forget myself and look at Rhodes, as if he’s my friend and we’re sharing a *can you believe it* moment, a silent exclamation only the two of us are privy to.

Dakota nods. “It was awkward sometimes, but it was fun. My sister and I took lessons with him. I think it was his way of trying to hold on to us as we grew up.”

Dakota has no way of knowing her words are slicing me in two. So I do what I always do when something hurts. I plaster on a smile, brush aside the pain, and tell myself I am happy someone had what I wasn’t given.

I will be magnanimous if it kills me.

“That’s a-dor-able,” I trill, and though at first I’m careful not to make eye contact with Rhodes, I end up looking at him.

His eyes are scrunched, watching me intently.

I don’t like it.

He can see into my soul. He’s always had the ability.

I avert my gaze, training my attention on Dakota.

For the next hour we work hard, watching closely as she demonstrates moves I’ve never done before. I’m familiar with

the terminology from watching videos online, but trying them out with a partner is a different experience.

Rhodes is learning to lead me through the more complicated footwork, with Wyatt as his guide. Wyatt stands parallel to Rhodes, explaining he needs to stretch on the one-count to syncopate, and initiate a fast step back to let me follow him to the two.

“This move is fast,” Dakota explains. She demonstrates with Wyatt, counting out loud, “One and two.”

“That looks like three moves,” Rhodes remarks.

Dakota explains. “You move on the ‘and’.”

We do it again. And again. And again. Rhodes is slower learning, and I know it’s driving him crazy. He doesn’t like feeling like he’s holding people back.

“This is meant to be a fun dance,” Dakota says when we’re taking a water break. “It’s cute and sassy. After we get the basic moves mastered, Georgia’s”—she tips her head in my direction—“going to work on adding style. Shoulder rolls, hip switches, stuff like that.” She does a shoulder roll and a hip switch while she’s talking.

“Sounds good.” I drink from my water bottle. “Do you want to do it one more time from the top?”

Rhodes stands, and he looks so tired I start to say never mind. But then he takes my hand, weaving his fingers through mine, and gives me a gentle squeeze. The unexpected tenderness races through my heart.

“From the top,” he repeats, leading me to the center of the room.

# Chapter 18

## *Rhodes*

I'M MORE EXHAUSTED THAN I'VE BEEN IN A LONG TIME. Between work, dance lessons, and taking care of my mother, I don't have a spare second to relax. Not to mention basic household chores, like mowing the lawn. When I was gone, my mother had been paying a neighborhood kid to mow her lawn, but he stopped coming around when I returned for good.

I'll be getting him back on the payroll, pronto.

It's not like my mom is fully unable to fend for herself. She pitches in where she can. Adapting to vision loss has been tough on her. Of course it has. How could it not be? It hasn't been easy for me, either. I'm not sure how much to push her, when to let her feel down about her circumstance, and when to step in and do things for her.

Sometimes, the whole thing feels like a cluster.

Tonight, when I got home from work and she told me she might be coming down with a cold and she was going to bed early, I felt relieved.

It meant I wasn't going to have to cook dinner.

Or clean up the gigantic mess she makes when she insists on cooking dinner.

But then I felt guilty for feeling relieved. Like I said, *cluster*.

The only thing I want now is a bacon and tomato grilled cheese from Honeybee. In my estimation, that sandwich has magical powers.

I'm headed to Honeybee when I spot Georgia's car sitting out in front of her house. My foot lets off the gas. What would she do if I knocked on her front door and invited her to dinner?

We shared a moment last night at dance lessons, albeit briefly. She looked at me when Dakota was talking about taking dance lessons with her own father. Georgia was sharing her amazement with me, like she was saying, *Can you believe it, Rhodes? I'm not the only teenage girl who took dance lessons with her dad.*

I spend a lot of time wishing I could wrap Georgia up in my arms, but the look in her eyes last night made it hard for me to keep my arms at my side. Georgia's vulnerabilities undo me.

I keep going down the street, headed for Honeybee. The progress Georgia and I are making could be counted in baby steps, and I don't know if showing up announced and asking her to dinner would hurt the tally.

I take a seat at the counter at Honeybee, not wanting to take up a table meant for a larger party. Jiminy, the owner, isn't here tonight. He's usually around for breakfast and lunch. Jiminy once told me he's in bed by eight so he can get to Honeybee at five a.m. and open the kitchen.

The counter server delivers my hot sandwich and side salad. I inhale it, while feeling supremely grateful this is a meal not cooked by me, and I don't have to clean it up.

I'm three quarters of the way through my dinner when there's a tap on my shoulder.

"Hi there," Greer trills, plunking down on the empty stool beside me. "We saw you walk in."

Hope rises. Maybe she picked Georgia up and came here to eat, and that's why Georgia's car is parked in front of her house.

Greer points out to the restaurant. "I'm here with my mom and dad."

My hope disappears. I rotate on my stool, seeking Emmett and Victoria. When I spot them, I send a wave.

"So," Greer chirps when I face forward. "How is it going being back in Green Haven?"

"Fine," I answer automatically.

"*Fine* is such a boring answer."

I snort a laugh. "What answer would you like instead?" I can't say what I'm thinking, which is something along the lines of, *Your best friend Georgia is driving me as crazy as she did when we were young, and being around her now is a pleasurable pain to which I willingly subject myself.*

Greer taps her finger on her chin. "Hmm. Something like, I've been missing out on this tiny ass town all these years that I've been traveling. I missed its inhabitants even more." She raises her eyebrows, peering at me. We both know to whom she's referring.

I nod, taking a big bite of my sandwich so my mouth is too full to speak.

Greer frowns knowingly. "I play mind games with fifth graders all day long. In case you're wondering, they are better



at it than you.”

This makes me laugh. Greer has obviously been taking notes from Georgia’s sass handbook.

“Greer, everything is good. I promise.”

She surveys me for a long moment. “Congratulations on getting Georgia to let you be her dance partner again.”

The way Greer is talking has me wondering if she knows about me and Georgia and our relationship back then. I don’t think Georgia would tell, but who knows? Maybe she had too much to drink one night and let it spill.

She continues. “You’re lucky to be dancing with her. I find it interesting that you would volunteer a second time.”

I drag a long sip from my water to delay my response. Finally, when it’s obvious I need to answer, I say, “One way people show they care about another person’s plight is to offer assistance.”

Greer grins. “You care about her.”

“Of course. Being my best friend’s little sister and all.”

“Well, Rhodes.” She claps my shoulder. Hard. “I’m just here to tell you I remember the way you stared at her in high school.” Greer clasps her hands, widening her eyes and blinking rapidly, mimicking my teenage lovesickness. She is likely embarrassingly accurate. Dropping the act, she adds, “So if all you’re looking for is a forbidden love affair, look elsewhere.”

I guess this confirms Greer doesn’t know about my involvement with Georgia.

Greer’s upper half inches closer, her eyebrows furrowed. “Flagstaff nearly tore Georgia apart. It took her almost three

years to like a man again.”

My molars grind together. Forcing myself to stay calm, I ask, “What the hell happened to her in Flagstaff?”

She straightens. “It’s not my business to tell.”

“But it was your business to warn me away from her?”

“Hell yes.” The conviction in her voice rings like a clear bell. “That’s what best friends do. I like you Rhodes, ever since you and Jake would help my dad on his construction sites when I was a young girl. You were always nice to me.”

I remember. I thought Greer was so much younger than me then. Five years seemed like twenty.

She leans in again, her volume dropping so I have to lean in, too. “But make no mistake, if you hurt her, I’ll do the same to you. Concrete finishing tools have various uses.”

I stifle a laugh. “It’s just dance lessons, Greer. Chill.”

“Um hmm.” Greer stands up from the stool. “See you around.”

She takes a step away, but I say her name. She stills. “I’m glad she has you. Everybody needs somebody who will fight for them.”

“Thanks,” she replies, then walks away.

Greer may not know the half of what Georgia and I have been through together, but she knows what happened to Georgia in Flagstaff. She was there for Georgia when she returned to Green Haven.

That’s a hell of a lot more than I can say for myself.

# Chapter 19

## *Rhodes*

I WOKE UP THINKING ABOUT GEORGIA.

4:04 a.m.

My mind has run itself ragged since talking to Greer. I can't stop contemplating what could've happened to Georgia in Flagstaff.

My imagination has run the gamut, from serious (physical abuse) to absurd (kidnapped by a crazed posse of clowns).

I think my brain came up with the clown possibility to protect my heart from the more likely scenario that she was in a bad relationship.

Greer's words from Honeybee come back to me. *It took her almost three years to like a man again.*

The alarm on my phone beeps.

4:06 a.m.

Quieting it with a tap on the screen, I throw my legs over the side of my bed and get ready for work.

Georgia's bedroom is dark when I pass by in my truck, like always. My arms itch to hold her, to hug her, to erase thoughts of whatever bad happened in the past from her memory.

Just like before, I'll get to hold her in my arms tonight. Even if she's stiff, even if it's for the purpose of dancing, she'll be where I know she belongs.

Lud meets me and the crew in the yard. He's holding paperwork and a gigantic cup of coffee. Bags of darkened skin droop below his eyes.

"You ok, boss?" Chris asks.

"The wife had a charley horse again."

Lud's wife, Madelyn, is pregnant with their first, and she's plagued with nighttime muscle spasms. She stretches and drinks water, but still Lud spends a good hour in the middle of the night massaging her calves.

Chris nods quickly, not wanting to talk about Lud's wife any more than he has to. Chris is the third of four boys in his family, and once told me anything 'girly' makes him 'vomitus maximus'.

The guy is smart enough to learn a trade like ours, but has some emotional maturing in his future.

"Alright," Lud says, flicking his paper. "Today we're taking a break from the mine. There was a power outage on the other side of Parkton."

We load up what we'll need and head out of the yard, Lud in his pickup truck, me and Paul in the bucket truck, and Chris behind us in his line truck. Paul's still an apprentice, so he drives. On days like this, when I can't quiet my mind, I wish I were the driver. Unless somebody is sick and can't drive, it's important to maintain the hierarchy of a crew. Apprentices drive, and though it appears pointless from the outside, knowing one's place and function on a crew helps keep everyone safe. When everybody knows their roles, there are

fewer questions. The work is smoother, the safety less of an issue.

We're four hours into working to get this turned back on when an old man shuffles from his home. He wears a hat I'd picture on a railroad conductor, faded and worn jeans, and a buttoned long sleeve plaid shirt. It's almost painful to watch him walk through his overgrown front yard, across the street, up to the light pole currently giving us trouble.

He scowls at the four of us, leaning on the side of the trucks and eating our lunches.

"What is this, brunch?" He points a gnarled finger at my water bottle. "You have mimosas in there?"

My lips quake as I beat back a smile. "No, sir. Water."

He grumbles. "In my day, we knew how to work from sunup to sundown. You've only been here an hour and you're already taking a break?"

Lud speaks up. "Lunch comes early when you've been up since four."

The old man is still scowling, but I get the feeling his scowl is permanent. "I used to live in Kansas. Those tornadoes would blow through, and the electrical workers would have the electricity back on in less than a day. Bet they could show you all a thing or two."

"I'll give them a call when I get home tonight," Chris says sarcastically, and I shake my head at him. The old guy just needs someone to bitch at. I'd bet a hundred bucks he's all alone in that house.

He stands around, keeping things awkward while we finish eating. He doesn't say anything more, but he keeps making disapproving sounds. *Hmph.*

When we're ready to get back to work, Lud tells the guy he can't stand there because he doesn't have a hard hat and it's not safe.

"Hard hats," the guy growls, waving his hand. "Bunch of pansies. Nobody wore hard hats in my day."

Lud points at the guy's house, irritation plain on his face. "Sir, we will not start work until you have gone back to your house."

Lud's threat works. The guy shuffles back across the street.

"What an asshole," Chris mutters.

"He's awesome," Paul says. "I want to be just like him when I'm a million years old."

"Alright, alright," Lud says, trying not to laugh. "Back to work."

Two hours later, we get the electricity back on.

I hustle home, take a shower, prepare a dinner for my mom that will be easy for her to heat up, and head back out for my Friday dance lesson with Georgia.

I'm trying to decide how to bring up Flagstaff without upsetting her. I have to know what happened to her.

---

When our previous two dance lessons were finished, Georgia hightailed it out of Hustle & Swing like there was a fire somewhere and she was the only person capable of extinguishing it.

Tonight, she lingers. Dakota drives off in her SUV, and Georgia walks slowly to her car. When she reaches it, she

turns around, leaning back on the car.

“This is your chance,” she says loudly, staring at me where I stand beside my truck, four parking spots away.

“My chance?”

I’m going to need her to be more specific. There are many, many chances I want to take when it comes to Georgia.

My chance to get on my knees and beg for forgiveness?

My chance to grab her and kiss her senseless?

My chance to come clean?

“Greer told me she ran into you last night, and that she may have overprotected a bit too close to the sun.”

Her reference to Icarus makes me smile. The boy who soared so high his wings of wax melted and he plummeted to his death.

I walk closer. Georgia watches me with those chocolate eyes of hers, and when I’m within three feet of her, I stop. Leaning against her car, I say, “Greer doesn’t know how justified she was in all that she said last night. Technically, she didn’t soar high enough.”

“You think she was justified?”

“She’s under the impression I might be after something illicit with you. *Forbidden love*.”

Georgia groans. “Is that what she called it?”

“Yeah.”

“I never told her about us.”

“I picked up on that last night. Which is why I said she’s more justified in overprotecting you than she thinks.”



It's odd, talking about our secret relationship and break-up with detachment. Like it's just a past event instead of being *the* past event.

“She called me when she got home last night. She wanted to apologize, and give me a heads up. She said she'd mentioned Flagstaff, and it seemed to upset you.”

I cross my arms, looking out at the dance studio in front of us. “What happened, Peach?”

Georgia is quiet for so long I finally turn to look at her, prepared for her to clam up. But she's not retreating into herself. She's crying. Large tears roll down her cheeks, and she doesn't wipe them away.

Profiled in the ambient glow of the lit up Hustle & Swing sign, she opens up. “I met a guy while I was at NAU. Steven. At first, he was great. He showered me with attention, and I soaked it up. I was starved for it. He was smart, and we would have these dynamic conversations.” She glances at me, a ‘v’ between her brows. “I started to think maybe you were right, that we were young and holding each other back.”

Her words slice me in two, but I manage a nod to encourage her to continue.

“Eventually, I realized that every time we had an argument, he would turn it around and make it seem like I was victimizing him. He would say, ‘Why are you attacking me?’ and ‘Why do you do things to intentionally hurt me?’. I feel dumb when I say it out loud now because it sounds so obvious.” She rubs circles on her temples. “But at the time, it felt like being in the middle of a tornado. It was all around me, all the time. Walking on eggshells, constantly worrying that something I said would hurt him, it really messed with my head. I stopped trusting myself. My instincts, my perceptions.

It's hell to constantly feel unbalanced, like you can't ever really relax. Basically, everything went to shit."

I want to search the Internet for every Steven in Flagstaff, then spend however long it takes combing through each one until I land on the toxic motherfucker who hurt my peach.

"I'm sorry you went through all that." I lift the arm closest to her, waiting for her to give me the green light. When she nods, I wind it around her shoulders, tucking her in closer to me. "You didn't deserve what he did to you."

"It's taken me a long time to trust myself again, and I'm still not all the way there. When I look back on it, I feel stupid. Gullible. I saw myself as tough, but Steven decimated my self-confidence."

I'm seeing red, but then Georgia lifts her gaze and sends a tentative smile up to me, and the red cools to a lighter orange.

"He called for a while after I came to my senses and broke things off with him. I was back in Green Haven by then, and I didn't answer even once. One day I blocked his number." She shrugs. "And that was that. Now he's a story."

*Like us.* We're a story, too. And even though I hate that asshole who hurt her, I'm hating myself a little also.

Georgia motions at the studio. "Everything we're doing, dancing like this? It feels like old times. But this," she shrugs to indicate my arm around her, "feels like *old* old times. When we were friends."

"Were we ever really friends, Georgia?"

She laughs softly. "We were supposed to be."

Sighing, she steps away from her car, and me. I straighten.

“Rhodes,” Georgia addresses me with a serious tone and expression. “What do you think about being friends again?”

“Friends?” I’ll never be just friends with this woman. She’ll own my heart until the day I die. But if it brings her comfort, happiness, whatever it is she needs, I’ll let her think that’s all we are.

Georgia extends a hand. “Don’t leave me hanging, *friend*.”

When I take her hand in mine, I’m flooded with memories of the first time I shook her hand in my driveway. That mean dog nestled in the crook of her arm, baring its teeth at me, and Georgia, touching me for the first time, forever altering my world.

# Chapter 20

# *Georgia*

TELLING RHODES WHAT HAPPENED WITH STEVEN WAS LIKE snipping a binding. I was breathing easier for the first time in years.

It also helped me see that I'd not only had my heart broken by Rhodes years ago, I'd also lost my best friend.

Double whammy.

Having him as my friend again is like righting a piece of important furniture after an earthquake. Not a side table, but a family heirloom.

The days are getting hotter, longer. Rhodes leaves for work every morning at four thirty, his truck rolling slowly down the street. He always looks at my bedroom window as he passes, something I know because I caught it once when I couldn't sleep. I've begun waking up to watch it happen. Counting on it, even.

Sometimes I fall back to sleep, sometimes I don't. Today is a day I couldn't shut off my jumbled thoughts after Rhodes' truck disappeared from sight.

At seven thirty, Colbie texts.

Can you meet me at noon?

A second text follows, containing an address.

I answer.

Sure. Everything fine?

All good!

I frown at the cryptic message, then search the address on the Internet. All I can find is that it's a storefront on one of the bigger streets in town.

When I pull into a parking spot two stores down at noon, she's already standing out front, belly leading.

"Congratulations," I call, coming closer to her on the sidewalk. "You officially win the prize for the day's most mysterious text message."

She bops me gently on the end of my nose. "Don't give the prize away so soon. The day is young."

I lean right, peering past her into the grimy windows of the vacant store. "What's going on?"

Colbie holds her arms out to her side. "Ta-da!"

I turn my hands over and curl my fingers, silently saying, *gimme more information*.

Colbie turns around, standing shoulder to shoulder with me, and says, "I know it doesn't look like much now, but pretty soon it'll be beautiful."

"What will it *be*?" I ask, trying to figure out if I've missed something somewhere or if Colbie's pregnancy is making her think she's saying things out loud when she's not.

"A barre studio!" She waves her hands in the air.

"Yay?" I mimic her raised hands.

She laughs. “I’m opening a Burn Barre, and I want you to be a part of it.”

In the days before Colbie came to Green Haven, she and her best friend co-owned a chain of Burn Barre locations. They transitioned the business into a franchise, and Colbie planned to one day open another location. I guess that one day has arrived. I didn’t expect to be included in it, though.

“Me?” I point back at myself. “Like, *me me*?”

“Yes,” Colbie nods. “*You you*.”

“In what capacity?”

“Co-owner.”

If there was anything in my mouth right now, I would be spitting it out. “Colbie,” I say slowly, my hand on her shoulder. “This is not like Jake and Jones Construction. I didn’t earn a business.”

My brother worked at Jones Construction for years before Colbie and her dad made a plan to make Jake a partial owner.

Colbie walks forward, pressing her nose against the glass and squinting to look inside. “You love to dance, right?”

“Yes, but these are *ballet* barre classes. I’m not a first position kind of gal.” I lift my hands above my head and turn my feet so they overlap awkwardly.

Amusement tugs up the corners of Colbie’s mouth. “That’s good, because right now you’re in fifth position.”

I un-pretzel my legs and laugh, dropping my hands. “Tell me more about your cockamamie idea.”

“Well, I’ve already leased the place. Victoria and I finished the paperwork this morning. So if you tell me no, you are

ensuring my failure.”

“No pressure then.” I run a finger over the outdated gold door handle.

“None,” Colbie agrees. She pulls a key from her back pocket. “Ready for a tour?”

“Hang on, I need to buy wasp spray.”

“Why wasps, specifically?”

I point a finger and shoot it out quickly into the space between us. “The spray is more of a straight line, instead of a burst. I feel whatever is inside that store needs a straight line of poison.”

Colbie shakes her head and fits the key into the lock. “You can’t spray poison in an enclosed room around me, you fool.”

I make a bare-teeth face, like *oops*. “Next I’m going to force feed you sushi and deli meat.”

Colbie sends me a look of longing. “I would do some questionable things for sushi.”

She opens the door. I don’t know what I’ve been expecting, but this isn’t it. Aside from the dust, which is inevitable when you live in central Arizona, it’s not bad. The space is large and open, one big rectangle with hardwood floors.

“Where are all the scurrying rodents?” I step further inside while still maintaining caution.

“Scurried,” Colbie answers. She marches to a terra cotta painted wall. “This,” she smacks the wall, extending her arm perpendicular, “is where we’ll put in a wall so there’s a small lobby and cubbies.” She points across the room. “The front desk will be over there. Eventually I want hanging plants in



the windows, and local goods. Some cute workout wear on racks.”

I meander through the space, trying to see what Colbie sees. I’ll be honest. I don’t. “Hmm,” I say, shooting for diplomatic and positive.

Colbie smells the farce and laughs. She wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Fresh paint, new flooring. You’ll see, it’s going to be great.”

My teeth capture my lower lip as I nod slowly. “I’m trying to picture it, but I’m having a hard time.”

Colbie squeezes my shoulder. “I’ve done this four times, so I feel like that makes me an authority.” Excitement dances through her tone. It’s like she’s a potter, and this rundown space is her lump of clay.

My eyebrows lift. “And you’ve given someone a business before, so I suppose you’re an authority on that, too?” I can’t fathom this. Running a business. I’m not an owner. An operator. Those titles are for people like Colbie. And Jake. People who exude confidence.

She tosses her free arm up in the air. “Precisely!” She spins away, letting me go as she sings out, “Quit making it so hard for me to do something nice for you. Something you *need*.”

Do I need this?

*Yes*, whispers a tiny voice inside. I need more than staging homes for Victoria.

Colbie takes a small notebook and pen from her purse and walks around the room, talking to herself and jotting things down.

Colbie claims she'd do questionable things for sushi, but I would do questionable things to have even half of her self-confidence. How does a person get to that point?

“Colbie?”

She looks up from her notebook, pen poised to write. “Hmm?”

“How did you sail into town and take over a construction company?”

She lowers the notebook. “You don't really mean steps to how I did it, right? You're asking how I had the chutzpah to do something so bold?”

“Exactly.”

“First off, I was nervous, even if it didn't look like it. But more than that, I had my dad believing in me.” She looks down at her notebook, repositions her pen on the paper, and adds, “And you have someone believing in you. Me.”

It's official. My brother married way, WAY up.

“I'll do it,” I announce, even as the uncertainty and fear battles inside my mind. Because Colbie is right. I need this.

“Knew you would,” Colbie says, looking out across the room while she sketches something on the pad. “All you needed was a little push and a growth mindset.”

*Growth mindset.* I haven't heard that term in years, not since I was teaching second graders.

“Right,” I smile brightly, determined to keep this moment from souring. “But you're going to have to teach me everything. I mean Every. Little. Thing. I know nothing about barre, or running a business.”

She winks at me. “Good thing you’ve got me, babe.”

Colbie walks me through her sketch, then we leave. I pause on the sidewalk and wait for her to lock up.

“How are dance lessons with Rhodes?” she asks, tossing her keys in her purse.

“Going really well, actually. He’s better than he thinks.” I slide her a look. “Just don’t tell him I said so.”

Colbie mimes zipping her lips. “Why can’t you pay him a compliment? I’m sure it would be a good boost to him.”

I shrug. “Men generally think highly of themselves without anybody telling them how great they are. It seems like a good idea to manage the size of their ego.”

“Hah!” Colbie laughs. “Before you go too far down that path, I should tell you that Rhodes was over at our house a couple days ago. I overheard him telling Jake that he wishes you had the kind of partner you deserve.”

I stop on the sidewalk, stunned. “He said that?”

She pauses, nodding. “I don’t disagree with your generalization about men and their egos, but it doesn’t seem like Rhodes has much of one. Or if he does, it’s like”—she presses her thumb and pointer finger to within an inch of each other—“this big.”

We keep walking, and Colbie arrives at her car first. “I’m going to make calls so we can get started on renovating the space ASAP.” She pats her stomach. “It’s not like I have all the time in the world.”

We wave goodbye, and I go to my car. Colbie’s commentary about Rhodes plays on repeat in my mind. I don’t want to think of Rhodes feeling uncertainty, or like he’s not a

good enough dance partner. He's good at taking instruction, he is good at leading, and if I'm being brutally honest, we have the kind of chemistry some people only wish they had.

I spend Tuesday and Friday evenings fighting against the electricity that zings across my skin when he touches me.

I know we've decided to be friends, but with every lesson we take, it becomes more difficult to keep him in that category.

# Chapter 21

# *Georgia*

FORTY-FIVE DAYS UNTIL COMPETITION.

*Rhodes is not attractive.*

*He does not smell like something you could press your nose against.*

*You do not want to stay in his arms for an extra six or eight count.*

# Chapter 22

# *Georgia*

FORTY-ONE DAYS UNTIL COMPETITION.

*His touch is not intimate.*

*You don't remember what his fingertips feel like on your instep.*

*His hair needs a trim, but you cannot run your hands through it.*

*Yes, he missed a belt loop, but you don't need to find it nauseatingly adorable.*

*He sometimes counts the beats under his breath, and it's not endearing. It's annoying, and you should tell him.*



# Chapter 23

# Georgia

THIRTY-SEVEN DAYS UNTIL COMPETITION.

*So what if your feet were tangled beneath you today and he caught you before you fell? There was never a look of tenderness in his eyes. You imagined it.*

*He wore his old ball cap today, but you definitely did not find it attractive. It did not remind you of high school, and that time you took it off his head and wore it on your own. And you definitely, DEFINITELY weren't dying to check to see if he still keeps your note inside it.*

*He used the hem of his shirt to wipe sweat from his brow, but you did not enjoy the sight of his chiseled abs, and you definitely DID NOT remember that this is the man who first mapped your body.*

YOU DO NOT WANT RHODES PORTER.

# Chapter 24

## *Rhodes*

THE NOTE IS STILL THERE, SEWN INTO THE FLAP OF FABRIC ON the inside brim of my favorite hat.

*G loves R until the sky falls down.*

Not only have I kept this hat I used to wear in high school, but I still wear it. Jake once asked me if I ever wash it, and I said I did.

What I didn't tell him is that I wash it by hand. I can't risk Georgia's note becoming soaked and disintegrating.

I wore it to our most recent dance lesson on purpose. I wanted to see if Georgia would remember, and the second I stepped into the studio, I was rewarded with the flaring of her eyes.

I said not a word to her about it, nor she to me, but I felt something from her.

A softening.

A longing.

# Chapter 25

*Georgia*

## Back Then

I'M OFFICIALLY SIXTEEN, AND YES, IT'S SWEET. I'M TAKING MY driver's license test this Saturday, when my parents don't have to work and can take me. Rhodes and Jake have been teaching me, and Rhodes lets me drive to dance lessons to get as much practice as I can before the test.

Tonight there's a sweet sixteen party being thrown for me at my friend Nicola's house. Her parents have invited my parents, but the attendees of the party will mostly be my friends, and Jake's too, because Nicola has an older brother the same age as Jake. Nicola's house has a basement, something uncommon for houses in Arizona, and after the embarrassing stuff like singing and cake is out of the way, we'll go down there to hang out.

My dad side-eyes my dress when I walk from my bedroom. I can tell he wants to say something, but he's holding back. My mother leans over, and I hear her whisper, "Yes, it's too short, but let her have it for tonight. Tomorrow you can go back to policing her hemlines."

My dad frowns, casting me a second and final glance before sauntering away.

I'm about to thank my mom when Jake comes lumbering down the hall like the overgrown ape he's grown into. He

stops to stare at me, the side of one upper lip curled. “What brand are your underwear? Victoria’s Secret? You should ask for your money back, because they’re not keeping anything secret.”

I deliver a swift blow to his midsection, which is right in line with my chest. “Guess what your job is tonight?” I don’t wait for him to venture a guess. “Taking care of me. Guess how difficult I plan on making that for you?”

Jake stares down at me. “Rhodes will be there. He’ll help me wrangle your smart-ass.”

*If only.*

Rhodes has been a perfect gentleman the past few months, despite our dance lessons and seeing him at work for clandestine bread sticks. If there is a medal for exercising self-control, Rhodes should receive it. Tonight, my wish is for a break in that self-control.

“Cool,” I say sarcastically to Jake, rolling my eyes and over-playing the role of little sister so I don’t blurt out the truth. *Every time your best friend touches me, I melt.*

We leave for the party. Nicola’s parents shuffle mine into the kitchen, and send the rest of us to the backyard.

Tiki torches blaze around the perimeter of the yard, and Nicola has made a banner with pictures of me from every year of my life. Rhodes stands, looking at each one. He takes his time at each photo, until my brother says, “What are you looking for, clues to the location of the gold buried in the Superstition Mountains?”

Rhodes flips him off, but walks away from the banner to join Jake and their friends playing air hockey.



Nicola's dad grills enough food for a small army. Hit music from when my parents were teenagers streams from speakers in the corners of the yard. Nicola brings out a humongous sheet cake with sixteen candles, plus one more for good luck.

When I blow out the candles, I double-down on the wish I already had for tonight. *A break in Rhodes' self-control.*

We hang out in the backyard a little while longer, then Nicola reminds her mom we're supposed to break off and go down to the basement.

My parents stay up on the main level with Nicola's parents while we all troop downstairs. I wave at my parents on my way through the basement door, catching one last disapproving look at my dress from my dad.

Maybe a year ago it would've annoyed me. But after everything that's happened since he hurt his back, I'm grateful he notices. Grateful he cares enough to disapprove.

There aren't speakers downstairs, so someone places their phone in an empty water glass to amplify the sound. The basement is finished, with a bathroom and a bar that's stocked with various types of soda.

From someone's backpack comes a bottle of vodka, and someone else brings out beer.

"Birthday girl first," Jake's friend Shaw yells, coming at me with the bottle.

Over his shoulder I meet Rhodes' gaze.

*Wrangle me.*

Rhodes stays where he is, hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans. He watches me carefully.

Not my brother. He sends a shoulder into Shaw, knocking him off-balance. “Quit trying to get my little sister drunk.”

His friend plays it off, doing a pivot step and dancing a different direction to another group of people. The bottle goes around, and even though Rhodes stays away from me, I feel his eyes on me with everything I do.

After a while, the basement become stifling. I need a break from the smells of body spray and cologne, sweat and liquor.

The coolest part about Nicola’s basement house is the entrance from the backyard into the basement. Slipping out undetected, I climb the stairs in my Converse and breathe in the welcome scent of damp grass and the blooms from a citrus tree in the vicinity.

The tiki torches have been turned off, and the only light from the house glows from the kitchen. From the front yard I hear my parents saying *thank you for hosting*, my mother adding *See you at book club*.

A few moments later, the kitchen light goes out. I drift deeper into the backyard, towards the wall where there’s a loveseat and two chairs. Opting for the loveseat, I curl my legs beneath me and close my eyes. The crickets chirp in high-definition, and the music from the basement is a low thrum.

My dad seems to be doing ok. It’s impossible to know for sure, so I’ve been watching his behavior. He still hasn’t made it back to dance lessons, and I pretend it doesn’t hurt. If he returned to lessons with me, there’d be no reason for Rhodes to be there, and that’s the last thing I want. My mother would say I want to have my cake, and eat it too, a saying I’ve never understood.

“Hey.”

My eyes fly open. Rhodes stands only a foot from me, silhouetted by the moon.

“Hey yourself.”

He takes the open space on the loveseat beside me. “Fresh air?”

I nod. “Too many competing smells in there.”

Rhodes chuckles. “Agreed.”

He looks up at the sky. His profile is perfect, his full lips and his straight nose, gravity pushing his hair back from his head while his eyes search the stars. “What did you wish for, Peach, when you blew out your candles?” He redirects his attention back to me.

“A kiss,” I say boldly.

His jaw muscles flex. “I didn’t realize you like someone.”

“I do.”

“Who?”

“Pete Crawford.” The made-up name slips from my lips.

Rhodes frowns. “I don’t recognize the name.”

“You don’t know everyone at school.”

“Is he in your grade?”

Rhodes sounds perturbed. I love it. “Why do you care so much?”

“I’m not supposed to care?”

I shrug. “You can care a little, I guess. But why do you care *this* much?”

“I don’t want you to like Pete Crawford.” His lips curl on the name.

I shrug. “Too late.”

Rhodes’ mouth twists into unhappiness. He turns on the loveseat so he can face me. “I’m going to make you forget him.”

My lips press together. “I don’t think that’s likely.”

“It is. I promise.”

“How do you intend to carry out this evil plan?”

Rhodes leans forward. His eyes are warm and intense, lighting a fire in my core. “First,” he says, a single fingertip dragging along my cheek all in the name of pushing a strand of hair from my face. His touch heats my face, spreading down to my clavicle. “I’m going to make your breath hitch.”

I want to celebrate what feels like the beginning of a victory, but then he reaches for me and anticipation freezes me in place.

His hand drops to mine, two fingers curling on the inside of my wrist. Slowly, and with a featherlight touch, his fingers drag up my arm to the crook of my elbow.

“It’s not working,” I argue, but it’s an empty argument because my breath hovers in my throat like honey. It is literally hitching.

“Next,” Rhodes continues, “I’m going to put tingles at the top of your spine, and make sure they tumble down.”

He leans even closer, an invasion of my personal space so welcome it hurts. The tip of his nose presses to the hollow of my neck. He pulls in a breath, the air dragging across my skin. For a full three seconds he holds the air, slowly releasing the breath, letting the heat of it sear me.

How does he know? How is he so good at this? How are there really shivers at the top of my spine, toppling down?

Against my skin, he murmurs, "Is it working?"

"Yes," I manage, the word aimed at the top of Rhodes' head. Tentatively I touch his hair, and then I go deeper, my fingers descending into curls as soft as I'd imagined they'd be.

This is so much more than dancing together. So much more than swiping breadsticks and ramekins of soup.

"Peach," Rhodes groans. His head tips, and he looks up at me. His eyes are bluer than blue, deep as an endless sea, and hopeful in the best way. "I know we're not supposed to," he acknowledges, his voice tortured. "But I want you, Georgia. For a long time, I told myself not to want you. When that didn't work, I told myself it was ok to want you, but it wasn't ok to act on it."

I touch his face, stroke his cheek. The moonlight shines on his upturned face, highlighting his vulnerability. "And now? Now what are you telling yourself?"

His hands go to my hips, lifting me until I'm on his lap. I could almost cry at the positioning, for the relief I feel after wanting him for so long.

His fingers thread into my hair, moving up up up, until my head is cupped in his hands. "Now I'm telling myself that letting you pass me by would be the biggest mistake of my life. I knew when I met you there was something different about you. It was like something inside you reached out to me, called to me. Under your gaze, I came alive. I was half-dead until I met you, Georgia." He closes his eyes, eyelashes fluttering to the tops of his cheekbones. "I've been wrestling with this for almost two years. Seeing you and denying my

feelings. I denied, and denied, and denied all over again, until I figured out why I couldn't get you out of my mind." His eyes open, and he looks at me with such purity and strength of gaze. "You wouldn't leave my mind, because that's not where you are. You're in my heart, Peach. I love you."

I don't quite know what I thought it would be like the first time a boy told me he loves me, but I don't think I could've imagined it better than this.

I'm *soaring*. My heart has detached, and now it gallops, shooting through the dark night like a comet.

"I love you, too, Rhodes. I hate that my brother stole you away the first time we met. You were mine."

Rhodes' head tips, dragging a warm breath over my jaw. He moves up to my lips, his mouth sinking onto mine in a heady mixture of heat and tenderness.

We kiss forever, or that's what it feels like. We kiss until the soreness stretches across my lips, until my thighs scream from being in one position too long.

"We should go back into your party," he says, breaking to give us both a chance to breathe properly.

"I don't want to. I want to run away with you."

He pretends to consider. "Maybe next year for your birthday."

Carefully, I climb off his lap. My legs are shaky, the blood returning to parts that spent too long folded beneath me.

I look up at the house, dark except for the light from the small basement window. Music thumps the walls. "What do we do now? Walk to the center of the living room and kiss? Action instead of talk, ya know?"

“Well,” Rhodes hesitates. “I doubt Jake would appreciate being blindsided in front of his friends. And your dad seems to be doing really well. Maybe for now we don’t rock the boat?”

He’s right, and even though I know that, a part of me would love nothing more than to announce to the entire world that Rhodes Porter loves Georgia Whittier. My dad’s recovery is precarious, and we should proceed with caution.

“When the time is right, I’ll wear a sandwich board telling everyone I’m in love with my best friend’s little sister.”

A thrill races through me. *He’s IN LOVE with me.* It’s like my birthday wish on steroids.

“I’ll wear a matching one.”

“You’re in love with your best friend’s little sister?”

I bump him lightly. “Haha.”

Rhodes grins. “Publicly, we’re the same as we’ve always been. Privately...” he kisses me once, little more than a peck, but its effect lingers.

Furtive glances and stolen kisses don’t sound too bad. Especially when they’re happening with the object of my affection for the last two years.

“Where have you been?” Jake asks when we enter the basement.

“I wanted vanilla ice cream, and Rhodes didn’t want me walking to the store alone.” There’s a gas station two blocks away, so the lie is plausible.

“Where’s the ice cream?” Jake asks, eyes searching our empty hands.

*Oh shit.*

“There wasn’t any,” I answer, shrugging.

Jake eyes me. “There wasn’t vanilla ice cream? It’s the most basic flavor.”

I shake my head at him, like *what more do you want me to say?* “Can’t make this stuff up, Jake.”

Rhodes coughs into his fist. I’m positive he’s covering up a laugh.

Jake sighs. “I guess it’s a good thing. I’m drunk enough to break my sugar ban.” He’d declined a slice of my birthday cake earlier.

“Wasn’t meant to be,” I agree. Rhodes laughs again.

“Where are Mom and Dad?” Jake asks, pointing at the ceiling. “Are they still here?”

Like me, Jake’s worry about our dad remains, an ever-present hum.

“Dad was tired. They left.”

Worry parks itself on Jake’s face. I understand. When you love someone who’s experiencing what my dad is going through, you’re perpetually ready, a burner turned to the ON position. “They left?” he parrots.

His feelings tend to increase the magnitude of my own, and I can’t take it right now. I’m too high on the feel of his best friend’s lips on mine, on his declaration of love that I’ve dreamt of for too long. “Yes, weirdo,” I answer. “Clean out your ears.”

He turns away from me, his signature move of dismissal, and I go to the bar in the corner.



Rhodes joins me, watching me pour Sprite into a red cup. He removes a cup from the sleeve on the counter and pours a little from the seven kinds of soda sitting out, including the grape flavor nobody likes.

I grimace at the concoction. “What is that?”

“This is the reason we’re standing over here alone. You dared me to drink it.”

I’m so confused. “What are you talking about?”

“A few of your friends are whispering and looking over here. And in five seconds, Jake is going to catch on.”

I look over and see Nicola and Emily staring at us. When they realize I’ve spotted them, they whoop and holler. I turn back to Rhodes and take the cup.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to him, then walk out to the living room. Holding the cup aloft, I yell, “Who wants to see Rhodes chug a whole cup of every soda on that counter? I dared him, so he has to do it.”

Curious gazes switch from me in the middle of the room to Rhodes in the corner, and it takes a nanosecond for people to get behind the dare.

“Let’s make this more interesting,” Shaw says, grabbing the bottle of vodka. He comes to where I’m standing and takes the cup, pouring vodka until the mixture reaches the brim. Rhodes gives me a look before he drinks. Everyone in the room yells, and he comes away green-faced. “That was foul.”

The bottle goes around, and when it gets to me, Jake threatens to drag me home by my hair if I drink from it. I’m tempted to test his threat, but in the end, I’m grateful he’s there to keep me from making unwise decisions. I’m still floating

from kissing Rhodes, and there's no high better than that, no buzz as enjoyable.

Poor Rhodes takes the brunt of it. Before long, it's clear he is drunk, and how could he not be? It's a great excuse to be done for the night. I thank Nicola for hosting my birthday party, then Jake and I get Rhodes back to our house. We sneak him into our bathroom and Jake sits with him while Rhodes is sick. Jake tells me I should go, but it's the last thing I want to do.

I love Rhodes. I want to press a cold cloth to the nape of his neck and rub his back.

Instead, I slink out of the bathroom and into my room. I change into my pajamas, climb into bed, and run my fingers over my lips.

It wasn't my first kiss, but it was definitely my best.

# Chapter 26

## *Rhodes*

SHE SMILED AT ME WHEN I WALKED INTO THE STUDIO TODAY. A genuine smile, not one of those fake ones full of tolerance and tightening around the eyes.

And I could swear I saw her staring at me last week when I used my shirt to mop my sweat. I told myself it wasn't possible, but now... I don't know. My heart is shifting into dangerous territory. If I let it continue, it might soar. Unfortunately, it also has an equal chance of sinking.

But right now, after watching her glance at me, and smile before resuming her conversation with Dakota, I'm starting to think that maybe... Just maybe... There's a chance for us.

All I have to do is tell her the truth about why I left her. After that, it would be up to her, but at least it would be her choice. If I tell her, I risk making her hate me. But there will never be a chance for us if I don't tell her. She knows now, just like she knew back then, that the reason I gave her for leaving was flimsy.

“Are we ready to get started?” Dakota asks, clapping her hands.

I deposit my keys, wallet, and phone in a locker and meet Georgia in the middle of the room.

She rises on the balls of her feet and bounces twice before letting herself back down.

“What has you so happy?” I ask, trying to push back the dopey grin spreading across my cheeks. I love when Georgia is happy. It’s infectious, like sunshine emanating from her chest and touching everything around it.

“I just came from a meeting with Colbie. Did you know she and I are opening a barre studio? On Jewel street?” Georgia steps closer, placing her hand on my forearm as she talks. This is another thing Georgia does, when she’s talking to people *she doesn’t hate anymore*.

This is something she does to people *she loves*.

“Jake told me, I think it’s great. You’re perfect for that job.”

Georgia tucks her hair behind her ears. Her smile still hasn’t left her face, and damn do I feel its warmth. Like a lizard basking in the sun, I want to turn toward it.

“I needed something, I think, for a long time. Something I could feel proud of, and—” Georgia’s eyebrows pinch. She leans to her right, lifting on her toes, her hand reaching for my collar.

My neck.

*Oh shit.*

My burn.

Every trace of Georgia’s warmth disappears in an instant.

Her gaze hardens. “What are you Rhodes, fifteen? Letting someone suck on your neck?” She lowers back down to flat feet and takes a step away from me.

“Georgia, it is not what it looks like.”

She laughs once, an empty sound. “Says every man everywhere who’s ever tried to reverse out of a situation.” She glances up at the oval-shaped mark on my skin. “Good luck talking your way out of physical proof.”

“It’s a burn, Georgia.”

She tips up her chin, defiant. “Who is she?”

My head shakes slowly. “There is nobody.”

*There is nobody for me apart from you.*

“Whoa,” Dakota’s voice interjects. “There is some serious negative energy happening here.” She glances from me to Georgia. “Everything ok?”

“Yep,” Georgia says brightly. “We were just talking about something my brother told Rhodes.”

Dakota doesn’t appear to buy it, but she nods anyway, eager to get the lesson underway. She presses the play button on her phone, and the music spills out of the speakers.

I take my place, holding out my right hand to Georgia. She faces me, placing her left hand in mine. There is a look in her eyes, a determination, like she is recalling her dislike for me and doubling down on it. Guess I better kiss that friendship label goodbye.

All that progress we made, felled in an instant. She is too stubborn to listen to me, and I don’t have a leg to stand on because I ruined her trust a long time ago.

And so, what else is there to do but dance?

“Five, six, seven, eight,” Dakota counts, and we begin.

I pull, and I lead. Georgia spins under, and around. Left side pass, right side pass. Raise, lower, syncopate.

“Hitch ball step,” Dakota says in her teacher voice. “Georgia, remember to point your foot on the one, and put your rear into it when you shift your weight.”

Georgia nods, taking the instruction as the song continues.

If this were earlier when Georgia was in a good mood, and she never discovered my burn, I’d make a joke about putting her backside into the move, saying something like *you can do it, put your back into it*.

I don’t dare say anything like that now.

We keep going, doing the routine time after time. Dakota pauses the music seventy-five percent of the way through the song and asks, “Have you ever heard of a Monkey Bar?”

Georgia nods.

I shake my head. “You’re not talking about something found on a children’s playground, are you?”

“Nope,” Dakota says. She slips between me and Georgia, her back to me. “Here, let me show you.”

I step aside. Dakota faces off with Georgia, reaching for her hand, and acting as the leader in the dance. She counts, stepping in time with Georgia, and initiating the spin. She coaches Georgia through a duck under her lifted arm, saying the words to the song loudly.

Georgia comes away from the move with a smile on her face. “I love that,” she exclaims.

“Good,” Dakota says. “I came up with it last night when I was rocking my daughter to sleep. I was sitting there daydreaming about how to use some moves to add tension to

the dance. Although,” she glances at me. “You two have all kinds of tension in the dance today. Just not the kind I want.”

Georgia offers a weak smile.

“Just to let you both know, I’m not buying that bullshit you tried to feed me about your brother telling Rhodes a story and that’s why you were talking like that.”

“Well, you are a mom. Your bullshit detector is probably more sensitive than most.”

Dakota nods in agreement. “That, and the fact I’m surrounded by the Hayden family. If you can’t detect bullshit with that crew, you may as well see yourself out.”

Given what I saw when Wes and Wyatt came to the first lesson, I don’t think Dakota’s exaggerating.

Dakota steps away from Georgia and ushers me back in with a flat palm. “Let’s try the Monkey Bar a few times, and then I have homework for you two.”

“Homework?” Georgia asks. She’s probably terrified Dakota’s going to ask us to practice on our own. I’m sure the idea of having to spend time with me away from the studio is a fate worse than death to her right now.

“My once a month vendors market is this weekend. Saturday and Sunday. I want you to come one of the days. Both of you. Together.”

Georgia slides a look at me out of the side of her eyes. I can’t imagine she’ll say yes to anything that includes me, not with the daggers she’s sending my way.

“You got it,” she answers.

I blink in surprise. “Agreed.”



We practice the Monkey Bar a few more times. It's a struggle for me to hold her hand, or her waist, her body close and warm, yet still feel the frostiness coming from her.

Practice finishes, and though Georgia and I both say goodbye to Dakota, we do not speak to each other. I'm on my way home when I get a text from Georgia.

We're going on Sunday, and we're driving separately.

# Chapter 27

# *Georgia*

ON ONE HAND, I'M ABSOLUTELY DREADING GOING TO Dakota's market. On the other, I'm so excited I'm nearly vibrating.

I have this vision in my head, and it's embarrassingly specific. Me, in a white sundress, printed with tiny florals, my hair held back by barrettes on either side of my face. There is a woven basket in my hand, and I'm carrying fresh flowers.

But then my daydream takes it one step too far, and Toto pops out of the basket. Toto morphs into Homely, the hideous rescue dog that never got a better name because she wouldn't respond to anything else.

The vision implodes, and now I'm back to reality, back to a future where I'll be walking beside Rhodes from booth to booth and trying not to cry.

I hate that he has a hickey. Not only is it juvenile, but it means somebody else's lips were on him. I mean, sure, I'm positive somebody's lips have been on him countless times, but I've never had to see evidence of it. If I had just said no to him being my dance partner, I could continue not knowing.

My mother leaves for church, and I drag myself through the process of getting ready. I'm not only jealous and angry,

I'm feeling vengeful.

Some men go for boobs and butt, but Rhodes loved my back. The pronounced curve at the bottom before the rise of my backside was one of his very favorite spots on my body.

This is why I opt for a one-shouldered maxi dress that is mostly backless save for the simple bow in the center keeping it bound.

A few spritzes of that pear perfume he likes, and I feel a little more prepared to see him.

*Eat your heart out, asshole.*

---

I nearly cry when I put my key in my car's ignition and find the engine won't turn over.

"Nooooo," I moan, smacking the steering wheel with the palm of my hand.

I was conflicted about going, but deep down I think I really want to be there. Not just to meet Dakota's family, but to spend time with Rhodes.

Climbing from my car, I go back in the house and call my brother.

"I don't know what's wrong with it," I say when he asks me to describe the sound. "I'm not a mechanic."

"Is it making a sound like *boom* or a sound like *buzz*? Or a *chirp*?"

"Can you do that last one again?"

"No," he answers gruffly.

I snicker. “You know me too well.”

“I’m painting the nursery, so I can’t get over there and look at it right now. I’m sure most mechanics are closed today.”

“Dammit,” I mutter.

“Where do you need to go?”

“That vendor market in Sierra Grande.”

“Rhodes said he was headed there today. Why don’t you ask him for a ride?”

I pause, searching for a plausible reason for why I don’t want to call Rhodes.

“You have his number, right?”

I bite back a laugh. “Uh, yeah. I know your best friend’s phone number.”

I also know the jagged scar on the inside of his arm is from the time he crawled into my bedroom window and cut himself on the screen.

And that if I kiss the square of space just behind his earlobe, he makes the most delectable grumbly sound.

“Then call him,” Jake says, like *duh*. “I gotta go. Colbie says I’m distracted and doing a bad job.”

Colbie speaks in the background, something I can’t decipher.

“Bye,” Jake says, then hangs up.

“Ughhh,” I yell in frustration, tossing my phone back into my purse and marching out to my car. I’m going to try to turn it on again, and this time it’s going to work.

Yeah. It doesn’t work.

That's when I feel it. This intensity, like a calling, like someone is silently screaming my name. I look down the street, to that little house on the corner. Candy House.

Rhodes stands in front of his truck, arms crossed. He's looking at me. He holds his hands out to the side, silently asking, "What's wrong?"

I swipe a hand through our stare, as if to wave away both him and his gaze, and turn around. The next thing I hear is the rumble of his truck engine.

*Lucky bastard.* At least his car turns on.

The sound grows louder and louder until it pulls up at the curb behind me.

"Jake texted and said you're having car trouble."

I make a mental note to punch my overly-helpful brother the next time I see him.

"Get in, Peach," Rhodes yells over his growling engine.

I bite my lip, considering. If I dig my heels in about this, I'm going to regret not going. And I'll have to wait another month for there to be another market. But, if I get in his truck —

Rhodes ducks in front of me so fast I have no chance to react. He grabs me around the waist, effortless, and positions me over his shoulder.

"What the—"

"You stubborn, gorgeous woman."

And then he does the craziest thing. He smacks my ass.

"Are you fucking kidding me," I say from my upside down position. "When you put me down, I am going to knee you in

the balls.”

“Then I guess I will never put you down.”

I growl, and settle for smacking his rear end, too. He only laughs, which makes me growl again.

He walks to my car, throwing open the driver’s door. “Leave your keys on the seat.”

“Why?”

“Because a guy from my crew knows how to fix cars, and I asked him to come take a look at your car.”

“In the short time between Jake texting you and driving down the street to my house you managed to text someone?” Talking upside down really isn’t pleasant. The blood is rushing to my head.

“It takes five seconds to send a short message, Peach. Now, put your keys on the seat.”

I’m supposed to be mad at Rhodes. And I am. But it’s hard to stay *super* mad when he’s holding me upside down and being bossy in a way I kind of like.

I unzip the purse dangling from my hand and throw the keys on my seat. The door closes and he pivots, striding toward his truck. When he reaches the passenger door, he opens it with one hand and deposits me inside.

He gets in the driver’s seat and eyes me cautiously. “Were you kidding about kneeling me?” He lifts his right leg and brings it across himself as much as he can in the small space, as if to protect the family jewels.

“It would be kind of hard to knee you right now.”

His posture relaxes, so I add, “But I am one hundred percent considering a dick punch.”

He rakes a hand down his face. “Good Lord.”

“Regretting your choice to kidnap me?”

He starts the truck and glances at me before easing off the brake. “No. How else am I going to make you listen to reason?”

“I do not want to hear about your”—I make air quotes—“*burn.*”

He turns off the street and onto the bigger street that will take us through the Verde Valley to Sierra Grande. “It *is* a burn.”

“The thing looks just like a hickey.”

“I’m aware,” he says tightly. “I had dinner at Honeybee last night *with my mom,*” he says pointedly, because he knows I was going to ask if he had dinner with the Hickey Hand-Outer, “and Jiminy made sure to tell me to use a wooden stake the next time I want to avoid a vampire.”

Even though I want to be mad, I dissolve into laughter. That sweet old man is funnier than most people I know.

Rhodes sends a reluctant smile through the truck cab.

“Alright,” I say, unbuckling my seatbelt. “Let me get a closer look.”

Rhodes’ truck dings a warning sound at my unbuckled safety restraint. “What are you doing?” he asks. He sounds really unhappy at my rule-breaking.

“Getting a closer look,” I explain, tucking my knees underneath me and pivoting to face him. “Oh. Maybe I *could*



knee you in this small of a space.”

Rhodes breathes a laugh. “Please don’t.”

Leaning over, I press my palms on the center console for support. “Hmm,” I say, reaching across him. “It’s on the left side.”

His lips press together, and now I have his collar pinched between two fingers. My face edges closer to his neck as I push his collar out of my way. Goosebumps emerge on his skin, and I fight the urge to run my tongue over his response to my nearness.

*The burn.*

I peer closer. The mark is small, the size of a quarter, and though it resembles a bruise, the perimeter is darkening into a scab.

I open my mouth to retract my accusation, but I’m distracted by his chest, the total stillness where there should be a rise and fall.

“Why aren’t you breathing?” I ask.

He’s looking straight ahead, like he dare not turn his face even a fraction of an inch. Another second passes, his collar in my grasp, and he finally drags in a breath.

“Why does Peach smell like a pear?” His volume is low, his tone tortured.

My indignation deflates, my determination to stay mad at him going right along with it. I return to my seat, reattaching my seatbelt and quieting the truck still sounding alarm.

“I apologize. For not believing you.” My voice is quiet. “How did you burn yourself?”

Now he looks at me, just for a moment, before he returns his attention to the road. “It’s a chemical burn from the mine where we were working.”

“And here I was worried about your safety around electricity,” I joke, an attempt to quell the seesaw happening in my heart.

“You worry for me?”

I choose not to answer, and instead say, “Tell me about the burn.”

“The mines aren’t in use right now, but when they were being worked the miners would pour a chemical on them to leech out the copper.” We slow to a stop at a red light. He holds his palms in front of him, so they are two inches apart and parallel. He drags them down toward his lap, saying, “It ran down the hills, and they collected it.”

“I still don’t understand how it burned you.”

The light turns green, and he releases the brake. “The chemical is a son of a bitch, and it’s in the soil. We wear gloves, and we’re careful, but I guess I had some soil on my glove, and I reached up to scratch my neck.”

I suck air through my teeth at the thought of burning skin.

“I knew right away what I’d done. It hurt pretty damn bad.”

“Did you show it to your mom? She’s always been a witch doctor with those salves and balms she concocts. There’s probably something in her medicine cabinet, called Copper Leaching Chemical Balm.”

Rhodes grips the back of his neck, tipping his chin towards the ceiling, while still keeping his gaze on the road. “I didn’t

show her.”

“Why? Afraid she’d accuse you of fraternizing with a vampire?”

Rhodes laughs softly. “I guess Jake took it seriously when I asked him not to tell anybody.”

I blink, confused. “What are you talking about? Tell anybody about what?”

“My mom.”

My limbs tense. “What’s going on with your mom?”

“She’s having some vision loss. It can happen, after a lifetime of diabetes.”

I bring a fist to my mouth, breathing through my knuckles. “Rhodes, I am so sorry.”

My heart hurts for him, for the look on his face, the utter hopelessness that even now he pushes back by saying, “She’s a fighter. She might not see where her punches are landing, but her fists are flying nonetheless.”

I sad-smile at his joke. “Is there nothing that can be done?”

“I take her for injections, to slow down the progression.”

The thought of a needle coming near my eyes makes me cringe. “Is that why you came back to Green Haven for good?”

He nods. “That, and to compete in a dance competition with you.”

“Your altruism knows no bounds.”

He executes as much of a bow as possible in the space between his body and the steering wheel.

We're almost to Sierra Grande now, and I'm no longer conflicted about going. I'm simply happy to be here.

Happy while in Rhodes' presence is a place I haven't found myself for a very long time.

My God, does it feel good.

# Chapter 28

## *Rhodes*

IN MY MIND, WE WERE GOING TO A QUIANT FARMERS MARKET, with a few rows of white tents selling colorful fruits and vegetables.

This is not that. Not by a long shot.

This is massive, at least an acre of space, maybe more. There are white tents, but there are tents of every other color as well. The tables beneath are draped in cloth, the items for sale displayed on risers and crates. Handwoven blankets hang from knotted pine ladders at one tent, and another has platters of crackers offering samples of handmade jellies and jams.

Georgia and I have been walking around for only ten minutes, but now we're stuck at the homemade jam tent.

"This place is my kryptonite," Georgia whispers, helping herself to a cracker spread with blackberry orange jam. "Ohh," she moans around the bite.

I have to look away from her closed eyes and the way her lips form around the sound.

"You should get it," I say, looking back at her when I'm certain it's safe.

She reads the pricing list and shakes her head. "Until Burn Barre opens and starts making money, I'll be saving all my

pennies.”

“I’ll get it for you.” I reach for a jar stacked on a crate, but Georgia’s arm shoots out.

“I didn’t say that so you would buy it for me.”

“I know.”

Georgia gazes longingly at the jar. “It’s so cute the way she tied the twine around the top with the little handwritten label.”

If I wait for Georgia to decide, she’ll tell me no. I lift a hand, getting the attention of the woman standing unobtrusively toward the back of the tent. “Can I get a jar of your blackberry orange jam, please?”

Georgia looks up at me and smiles. “I’ll let you buy it for me on one condition.”

I smirk. “I should’ve known your agreement would be conditional.”

My transaction finishes and I hand the bag to Georgia, waiting to hear her condition.

She hugs the bag to her chest and says, “You have to invite me over to share it with your mom.”

My heart flip-flops in my chest. “My mom loves blackberries.”

She nods. “I know. Let’s hope she likes blackberries when they’re combined with oranges.”

I try to tell myself it doesn’t mean anything, that Georgia is only being kind. What a lot of people don’t understand about Georgia is that even though she is tough on the outside, she is tender and vulnerable, and so damn soft under the surface. It makes her genuinely happy to do nice things for other people.

Maybe it's because I'm overwhelmed by the condition which Georgia has set forth, but I don't attempt to halt my next thought from being spoken aloud.

"The size of your heart has always been one of the things I loved most about you."

*Loved.*

I'm using the word in past tense, but I don't mean it that way. Not at all.

Her head dips low. At first, I think maybe she's crying, but then she raises her head, a playful smile on her face. "Do you know what I loved most about you?"

My eyebrows raise, waiting.

"How generous you are."

I flick the paper bag with my finger. "You're just saying that because I bought that jam."

She shakes her head slowly back and forth, her eyes softening at the corners, gaze filling with something that takes me back to a time when she was mine.

"You're generous with your time. Even back then, you gave up your time to be my partner for lessons. You stepped in when my dad...went away." Georgia grips my hand. "Rhodes, I hope you know how grateful I am that you're dancing with me. I'm sure there's a lot you could be doing, but—"

"There's nothing else I'd rather do than help you win that competition."

She squeezes my hand. "Do you think we'll win?"

"You could dance alone and still win the couples' dance."

She rolls her eyes and playfully sticks out her tongue.



“That right there,” I try to poke the tip of her tongue, and she retracts it back into her mouth, “is a signature Georgia Whittier move.”

She laughs, pulling me away from the booth and on to the next. Her hair, long and silky, hangs down her back, the ends tickling the skin left bare by her dress. I want to place my hands on her lower back, let my fingertips linger in the depressions, and climb the swells of her body.

I don't. I walk with her from table to table, my longing becoming a vibration on my skin.

She may follow me when we dance, but I swear to God I'd follow Georgia to the ends of the earth.

---

We find Dakota standing under the *Hayden Goat Cheese* tent. It's not nearly as decorated as the other tents, no fancy risers draped in rolls of burlap. They probably don't need the attention-getting displays, because the last name Hayden *is* the attention-getter.

A baby with a wispy-haired ponytail sticking up on the top of her head sits on Dakota's hip.

Dakota waves when she sees us approaching.

“You made it,” she says, ducking under the tent. Shifting the little girl back and forth on her hip, she says, “This is Brenna.”

Georgia holds out an open palm, and Brenna peers at it before turning suddenly and tucking her face into her mom's neck.

“We’re in our shy phase,” Dakota explains. Brenna peeks out, catches my gaze, and I look away, then turn back quickly. She giggles, then remembers she’s shy and returns to pressing her face against Dakota.

“Let me introduce you to everyone.” Dakota turns to the older woman under the tent. “This is my mother-in-law, Juliette. Everyone thinks Wes is the hard-ass, but they forget who raised him.”

Juliette shrugs. “Can’t be a mother to my crew and be a softie.”

“You good by yourself for a while?” Dakota asks Juliette. “I’m going to find Tenley.”

Juliette indicates to the rest of the market. “Go on.”

Dakota leads us away. Georgia’s lips press together in excitement, and I lean closer, whispering, “How excited are you to meet Tenley Roberts?” I remember how many times she watched *Little Black Book* and *Last First Date* when we were in high school.

Georgia looks like she’s about ready to come out of her skin. “I’m stupid excited.”

Dakota falls in step with us. “It’s ok if you get tongue-tied around Tenley. She’s used to it, and she’s super nice about it.”

“I’m more afraid the opposite will happen.”

Dakota laughs. “She’s used to that, too. Just assume Tenley is perpetually prepared for any and all reactions.”

We round a corner tent and walk further, to a spot I hadn’t noticed at first. There are lawn games, picnic benches, and beyond it, a copse of trees.

“Those are pecan trees out there,” Dakota points, a hint of pride in her voice. “The story goes that someone passing through dropped some seeds, and they grew here. When I was looking at buying this land and heard about the story, I fell in love with the idea those pecan trees could grow despite the conditions. I decided it was meant to be. Hence, the name The Orchard.”

“I love that.” The wistfulness in Georgia’s voice draws my gaze down to hers. What’s she thinking right now? Why is there a hint of melancholy in her tone?

“There you are,” Dakota hollers. “Come here, baby.”

A boy, maybe four years old, sits on Wyatt’s back, his legs reaching halfway to the ground. The boy scrambles down, and Wyatt stands up off all fours.

“We’ve been playing that game for half an hour. I needed a break.” Wyatt’s hand goes to his lower back, and he pretends to hobble.

The little boy runs full speed for Dakota’s legs. Dakota must be used to this, because she bends her knees, plants her feet, and steadies herself for the rush.

“Whoa there, buddy,” Dakota laughs, her voice full of motherly tenderness. “You almost bowled me right over.” Brenna, still locked onto Dakota’s hip, looks down at her brother and shakes her legs happily. The boy grabs the girl’s feet, pretending like he’s going to bite them, and she dissolves into giggles.

“These two,” Dakota says with exasperation she one hundred percent does not feel. She musses the boy’s hair. “This wild man is Colt.”

Colt peers up at us. He sticks out a tiny hand and says, “Nice to meet you. I’m Colt.”

I notice three things about this kid, and all at the same time. He’s impressively well-mannered, his Wranglers are the cutest thing I’ve ever seen, and he wears a cochlear implant.

“Hey, dude,” I say, shaking his hand. “I’m Rhodes.”

“Like the roads we drive on?”

“Sure. Kind of.”

“Cool.” He turns to Georgia, his hand still outstretched, waiting.

“I’m Georgia,” she says, shaking his little hand.

“You have a state name, like my mom.”

Georgia laughs. “Yes, I do.” She smiles at me over his head. “A state name.”

“Colt, it’s your turn,” Wyatt yells, from beside the oversized Connect Four game.

Dakota walks us over and makes introductions. First to her sister-in-law, Jessie, and her husband, Sawyer, who are sitting in lawn chairs beside the game. Next, to her brother-in-law, Warner, and then she says, “Saving the best for last, Tenley.”

Tenley grins her famous smile, but behind her Jessie calls out, “Rude,” and the whole family erupts into laughter.

Tenley forgoes Georgia’s outstretched hand and goes in for a hug. “I’m famous, but Jessie is infamous.”

“Damn straight,” Jessie says.

Once Georgia recovers from the shock of meeting one of her favorite actresses, we settle in and watch Wyatt play his

third game of Connect Four against Colt. Sawyer gets Colt's attention and begins motioning with his hands.

"No signing where he should go," Wyatt complains. "That's breaking the rules."

Sawyer ignores Wyatt's protestations, and Colt wins. Wyatt pretends to fall down to the ground in devastation.

Colt signs at Sawyer, and Sawyer cracks up.

"What did he say?" Wyatt asks, standing and brushing the partially dried grass from his pants.

"He said 'Uncle Wyatt is a sore loser.'"

"Ain't that the truth," a woman says, coming up behind Wyatt and wrapping her arms around him. He lifts his arms, allowing her to walk all the way around, and plants a kiss on her lips. "This is my wife, Jo. This is Georgia and Rhodes. The couple Dakota is teaching for the dance competition."

*Couple.*

Georgia meets my eyes. Neither of us correct him.

Jo claps her hands together. "Let's see some of your moves."

I start to decline, but Dakota breaks in. "Are you guys up for it? Might be kind of fun, away from the studio and the mirrors."

Georgia eyes me. "What do you say? Dance for fun?"

My outstretched palm is my answer.

"Hell yeah!" Jessie says, shifting her chair so she can see us better. "I thought I was coming to the market to help Mom sell goat cheese, but here I am getting a show."

Colt signs at Sawyer again, and Sawyer's eyes slide over to his wife.

"What?" Jessie asks, chin tipped and her eyebrows cinching.

"Colt says that's ten cusses for Aunt Jessie and he's going to collect."

"Hard ass," Jessie mutters, and Colt's eyebrows lift in excitement. "Fourteen," he announces.

Everyone laughs. Dakota says, "Nobody said his counting is reliable."

"Dance," Jo says, fist in the air. "Dance, dance, dance," she chants. Tenley and Jessie join in. Dakota rolls her eyes. "I should've warned you, my family is wild."

"Not to worry," Georgia says. "I've heard all about them."

"Hah!" Tenley nearly barks.

"Something tells me she's heard more about *you* than anybody else," Wyatt says pointedly.

"Everyone hush," Dakota instructs. "The music is coming on."

Georgia and I take a step back, so our clasped hands form one line. The music begins, but neither of us move. It's not our competition song.

"Do what feels natural," Dakota calls, one hand traipsing through the air. She does a little two-step and shimmies as much as she can with Brenna on her hip. She restarts the music.

I don't know who's singing, but she has a deep voice, almost husky, the kind you feel in your chest. Georgia sends

me a tiny nod, letting me know she's waiting for me to start us off.

With the slightest exertion of pressure, I step back and tug Georgia in my direction. I don't know what to do when I don't have a routine to follow, so I do my best. It helps that Georgia senses what to do, how to move and where to go.

The singer croons about changing her mind if her lover will give her just one good reason to stay. It's slower than our competition dance, and Georgia uses the measured pace to add her own flare. She does something with her feet, kicking one foot out and changing her weight quickly. Then she spins past me, hips switching with this coquettish look on her face. Her behavior emboldens me, so I lead her into the Monkey Bar move we were working to master at our last lesson. Her eyebrows lift, and she grins. As the song ends, I surprise Georgia one more time by dipping her.

Her eyes widen, and she gasps, her grip tightening on the back of my neck.

Dakota whoops her approval. I'm lifting Georgia upright when Dakota asks, "Who taught you dips? I was going to introduce one into your routine next week, but after the way you two acted at your last lesson, I wasn't certain if it was a good idea to put her safety in your hands like that."

I scoff. "Georgia is always safe in my hands."

Dakota's lips press together, and her eyes widen. "Is that right?"

Georgia shrugs, one-shouldered. It's awkward, though, because she doesn't say anything, and after a few seconds the Haydens save us by breaking into applause. I bow, and Georgia drops into a curtsy.

There is no more dancing after that. Georgia and I spend the next hour playing horseshoes with Dakota's family. Of all the rumors I've heard about the Hayden family over the years, none of them mentioned how chill and fun they are. They tease constantly, but there's a palpable undercurrent of love running beneath their verbal jabs.

Paul from my crew returns the text I sent him earlier about fixing Georgia's car, telling me it's done. He doesn't even say what was wrong with it.

After a while, Georgia and I excuse ourselves to wander the rest of the market. It takes everything I have to deny my desire to reach for her, or place a hand on the small of her back. Maybe if Georgia were acting like she was when we arrived, content and jonesing for blackberry orange jam, I'd be brave and take her hand in mine.

But ever since finishing that dance, Georgia has been quiet, pensive. I can tell she's thinking hard about something, and I'm afraid to ask. Mostly because I probably already know the answer.

I just don't think it's the answer I want to hear.



# Chapter 29

*Georgia*

## Back Then

RHODES STAYED LATE WITH ME IN THE LIBRARY AFTER SCHOOL today.

Any shred of hope I had for studying for my world history exam was dashed by the sight of him moving quietly through the stacks. He looks so good amongst the shelves, the colorful spines, using a single finger to slide the books from their places.

After a full minute watching him, I realize he's not flipping to the back and reading the author's biography like I initially thought. He's reading the last page of book after book and then replacing it on the shelf. The reader inside me is aghast at this atrocity.

When he makes his way back around to the table where my books and papers are strewn, I hiss, "Why are you reading the end of the stories first?"

"Because," Rhodes whispers, pulling out a chair. "I can tell by the ending if the rest of the book will be worth it."

"No way," I whisper-hiss. I wholeheartedly disagree.

He nods solemnly, tipping back in his seat. "Yes way. Saved myself a lot of time not reading Romeo and Juliet. And Wuthering Heights."

I draw in a dramatic breath. “Emily Bronte and Shakespeare are going to appear and smite you.”

Rhodes grins in that crooked way I love. “Probably not.” He lifts his feet and lets his chair fall to the ground. “How much longer do you plan on studying?”

“How much longer do you plan on distracting me?”

“A little while longer.” He looks around. There’s almost nobody here anymore. Lorna, the librarian, sits behind her desk, and she hasn’t looked my way in a while.

“I found a dusty corner where I can kiss you. Maybe put my hand up your shirt.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

Silly, happy Rhodes is one of my favorite versions of him. He’s not in this mood very often, but when he is, it draws me in, like a flower turning toward the sun.

This mood is courtesy of our earlier agreement to finally tell Jake and my parents we are dating. We’ve both been on cloud nine since deciding. The sneaking around was fun at first, but the weight of the secret grew heavier. Rhodes is a terrible liar, and even though I’m frighteningly exceptional, I don’t have an appetite for it.

But I do have an appetite for Rhodes.

I’ve heard all about teenage hormones, *blah blah blah*. That can’t be what this is. This is an all-consuming desire, something I feel in my fingertips all the way down to the tips of my toes. The idea of Rhodes’ hands on me, in places nobody has touched, makes my toes curl in anticipation.

So far, we’ve done little more than feverish nighttime make-out sessions in his truck. But once, when Rhodes drove me home after we closed the restaurant together on a Friday night, he pulled over and hauled me onto his lap. With my

back pressed to his steering wheel, he unbuttoned my white hostess shirt, and I told him to unhook my bra. Until that night, I thought sucking on nipples was reserved for infants.

Not anymore.

Desire for Rhodes' hands and mouth has me silently closing my history book and gathering my papers. Rhodes stands up when he sees me packing up my backpack. He walks away first, and I give him ten feet before I follow.

Looking behind me as I go, I follow him through the bookshelves, winding our way toward the very back of the library. Like he said, it is dusty back here, and slightly damp-smelling.

A tall bookshelf hides us from view, and Rhodes is already sliding my backpack off my shoulder, lowering it noiselessly to the ground.

I step back, and like the steering wheel in his truck, my back presses against the wall of books. Rhodes' fingers knead my hipbones. My hips buck into his hands. I'm starving for him.

His closed-mouth groan is a grumble low in his throat.

"Georgia," he murmurs, looking me in the eyes. He nips along my jaw. My arms rope around his neck.

"I want my first time to be with you," I whisper.

He stops kissing my jawline, pulling back to look me in the eyes again. "There is no way in hell your first time will be with anybody but me."

I love it. The possession in his tone, the desire flickering in his eyes.

He works a knee between my legs, coaxing them apart. Our mouths meet, kissing in a way that is second nature to us now. But then Rhodes does something new. He presses his leg between mine, and he's so much taller than me that all he has to do is lift his knee six inches and it's right there at the apex of my thighs. Over and over he does this, swiping up and lowering back down. The sensation is enough to bring spots to my vision, tiny fireworks exploding in dazzling color behind my eyelids.

My hands leave his neck, drifting down the curve and into his shoulders, where my fingers dig into his skin. He keeps going, swiping over me, and the sensation becomes *everything* and there's nothing left in my extremities anymore because it's all rushing to one point at the center of my body.

My legs begin to shake and Rhodes breaks our kiss, quickly pressing a palm to my mouth while his gaze attaches to mine. Eyes wide, body jerking against him, he wrings every ounce of my first orgasm from me.

I slump, and Rhodes holds me up, smiling against my cheek.

"I feel," I say, catching my breath, "like I've reached the summit of a mountain, and now I want to take a nap. Is it always that good? Why does anybody ever leave their house? How do they get anything done?"

Rhodes' chest moves with his quiet chuckle. He takes a step away from me, picking our backpacks up off the ground and hoisting one over each shoulder. He tips his head toward the exit. "This place closes in ten. We should get going before we get locked in here."

"If we were locked in here, we could totally have sex."

Rhodes gives me a look like he's trying to contain his laughter. "You're not losing your virginity in a library, Peach. And neither am I."

I stop short, reaching for his arm. "You're a virgin?" Fear of the answer has kept me from asking.

"Yeah. And we deserve something more special than moldy books in a corner."

My hands intertwine beside my neck and I bat my eyelashes. "My boyfriend is such a romantic."

Rhodes holds open the library door for me. "Not normally," he says as I pass. "But anything for you, Georgia."

I stop once he's out of the library, forgetting for a moment that we are in public, and place a kiss on his cheek. "Just for me, will you agree to stop reading the ending of a book before you read the rest of it?"

He opens his mouth to argue, so I hurry and say, "You think you know, but you don't. There are a million little gems along the character's journey that you're missing out on by skipping to the end."

"Yes, Peach. Next time I pick up a book, I'll read the entire thing, starting with the beginning."

---

"Today's the day, right?" I bounce in the passenger seat of Rhodes' beat up truck. We both worked the lunch shift at the restaurant, specifically so we could use this evening to tell my parents and brother that we're dating.

"Today's the day, Peach," Rhodes confirms. He reaches for my hand, grabbing it and giving it a solid squeeze.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yep.”

“About my dad?”

“More so about Jake.”

“The most he can do is hate us,” I say cheerfully.

Rhodes shakes his head ruefully at my positivity.

“Also,” I continue, “he’s going to Tucson in August. So he can only hate us to our faces for, like, three months.”

Jake accepted a full-ride football scholarship to the University of Arizona. Rhodes elected to stay in Green Haven. He’s still figuring out what he wants to do. Or so he says.

He hasn’t said it outright, but I know he’s sticking around so he can be with me.

“Should we take the time to get cleaned up before we tell them?” Rhodes sniffs the uniformed sleeve of his polo shirt. “I smell like pasta.”

I do the same to my stiff white shirt. “Well, I smell like lemons and capers because I spilled chicken piccata on myself, so I win.”

Rhodes laughs. “It was sweet of you to help me bus that table.”

I make a face. “Evil Lacey told me to help.”

“I bet she has the power to make dishes come alive and throw themselves on people’s pants.”

“One hundred percent.”

In the end, Rhodes and I decide to walk into my house smelling like a restaurant. Now that we’ve decided to come



clean with everybody, neither of us seems to have much patience.

Rhodes pulls up in front of my house. He offers me a handshake, and says, “I wish you the best of luck in all your endeavors.”

I knock his hand out of the way. “Is this your formal resignation as my boyfriend?”

Rhodes glances at the house, thumb tapping nervously on his thigh. “I’m just practicing, in case Jake kills me.”

“Don’t worry. If he comes at you, I’ll get out my slingshot.”

Rhodes stares at me. “I can’t decide if you’re referencing David and Goliath, or if you actually own a slingshot and are terrifyingly accurate.”

I bop him on the end of his nose. “In this situation, I think keeping you on your toes is more important than answering.”

His head moves back and forth in the tiniest of motions. “Georgia Peach, I do not want a tap on the end of my nose. I want to kiss you until all your breath is mine.”

“Same. But we’re in front of my house, and I don’t know about you, but I want to be more in control of the dialogue here. Being caught necking in the car is not how I want the conversation to start.”

Rhodes’ eyebrows lift. “Necking?”

“That’s what my mom calls making out.”

“That’s what my grandma called it.”

“Do yourself a favor, and if it ever comes up, do not say that to my mother.”

Rhodes mock salutes. “Noted.”

I glance behind me at the house. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Don’t get cold feet on me now. Remember, the most they can do is hate us.”

“Comforting.”

“It should be.”

Like always when it’s just us in his truck, Rhodes hurries from his side of the vehicle to get my door. This display of chivalry is important to him, and so I’ve learned to wait. Last week I went with Jake to pick up something for my mom from the drugstore, and I sat in the truck after Jake got out, forgetting he wasn’t coming to open my door. Eventually, he walked to the front of the truck and waved his arms to get my attention, then he told me to stop daydreaming.

Rhodes and I are walking up the driveway, his arm on the small of my back, when my brother tears out of the front door.

Rhodes drops his hand from my back. Both his palms lift in front of him, either in innocence or the beginning of an explanation.

“He took my money,” Jake says, astonishment rounding out his hollow voice.

“Who?” Rhodes and I ask at the same time.

Jake looks at me. “Dad.”

I freeze, not understanding, then thaw and shake my head. “You must be mistaken.”

Our dad wouldn’t do that. Jake has saved every dollar placed in his palm since he was ten years old. Birthday gifts,

odd jobs, any time he found a dollar on the ground, it went into his stash in his room. It's even turned into a family joke, that Jake is too young to be a miser.

"Jake," I start, ready to suggest he's somehow misplaced it, because at this point, I'm grasping at straws.

Jake holds a scribbled-on piece of paper between us. The breeze picks it up, blowing it around in his fisted hand.

Holding out a palm, I say, "I can't tell what it says."

"It's an IOU," he grits out.

"An IOU...*from Dad?*"

I grab at the paper, the top of it ripping away as I bring it in front of my face to read.

*Sorry, bud. IOU.*

"Where did you find this?"

"Where my money is supposed to be," Jake explodes.

Rhodes steps between us, placing his palms on Jake's shoulders. "Take a deep breath."

I stare down at the paper, disbelieving. But there is no mistaking it. It's my dad's handwriting.

Emotions scatter through my mind and my heart. The disappointment is crushing.

"I thought he was getting better," I mutter, balling up his note.

"I guess not," Jake answers, his tone full of fury I know is not directed at me.

"Does Mom know?" She's barely keeping it together as it is. This is going to take her last frayed nerve and set fire to it.

Jake thumbs back at the house. “She’s been trying to call him for the last twenty-five minutes. No answer.”

“Do you know when he left the note?”

Jake shrugs. “No idea.”

“He seemed fine this morning before I left for work.”

“What does that matter, Georgia?” Jake directs his anger and hurt my direction. “What is the point of you telling me how he treated you before he stole from me?”

“Enough,” Rhodes thunders.

I’ve never heard him talk to Jake that way.

Jake flinches. “Sorry, G.” He steps around Rhodes and wraps me in a hug. “I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s ok,” I soothe, rubbing his back. “I know who your anger is meant for.”

“You should probably go in the house and see Mom. She’s really upset. She’s saying this is the last straw. She’s going to kick him out.”

I start for the house, but then Jake says something to Rhodes that draws me back.

“What was up with the look on your face when I walked out here? You had your hands raised like you were about to deny something.”

“Nah. Just reacting to the way you stormed from the house.”

For the first time since I met him, Rhodes has delivered a believable lie, and thank goodness he did. Telling my family about us has officially made it to the bottom of our to-do list.

I push inside the house to find my mom, leaving Rhodes to handle Jake.

# Chapter 30

# *Georgia*

COLBIE'S BEST FRIEND CHRISTINA HAS TALKED HER INTO A 'bon voyage, hello baby' night out.

"Bon voyage to what?" I ask, when Colbie calls and low-key forces me into saying yes to the idea. "Will Christina be driving up from Phoenix for this event?"

"She won't be attending, and I'm not sure what it is. It's all a bit murky. Bon voyage to life before a child, I guess. Except we have Robbie, so the math doesn't quite math. I'm really just doing it so she'll quit pestering me." Colbie clears her throat. "What it's really going to be is an unnecessary reminder of how grody Short Stack is, and why we don't need to go to that dive for at least another year."

"Ah, yes," I nod even though she can't see me, "the annual reminder visit. Better check that box."

"Obviously it's high on my list of things to do before baby."

"Count me in. It's been a while since I've stepped foot in a place that made me want to use steel wool like a loofah."

Colbie snorts. "Tonight. Seven. I need to be in bed by nine. I'll be the one in compression pantyhose and sensible shoes with orthotic soles."

“Keep dressing that sexy and you’ll get knocked up again in no time.”

“Yep. By your brother.”

I groan. “That comment is more grody than Short Stack.”

We hang up, and I spend the rest of the morning helping my mom clean the house. Victoria has a showing at three, so I swing by at two-thirty and get her secret weapon stovetop scent brewing.

Then I get myself ready for the evening, and force myself not to text Rhodes and see if he’s going tonight.

It doesn’t matter.

It *shouldn’t* matter.

But it kind of does.

---

“Is Short Stack under new management?” I’d been bracing myself for its signature smell—sweat, stale peanut shells, musk. I search the area around the door for one of those scented wall plug-ins, but find there aren’t any. “Usually, this place is crusty.”

Jake leads us through the one-room bar to a table for four. He pulls out a chair for Colbie. “The owner passed away last year, and the wife took over. She’s made some improvements.”

The *improvements* are substantial. Gone are the questionable rickety barstools, replaced by high-back seats upholstered in leather. The floor looks the same, but different, almost like it’s been painted a warm coppery shade. The back



wall is a matte black, with a giant sign that reads *Speakeasy* in gold lettering.

“She did a good job.” I wind my purse over the corner of a chair.

Jake goes to the bar to order drinks. “Margarita for you,” he says, setting the glass in front of me. “And soda water with a splash of cranberry and a lime for my stunning wife.”

He settles into the third chair at our table and glances at the entrance.

“Expecting somebody?” I ask, trying not to hope he invited Rhodes.

“Rhodes,” he answers, around a sip of beer. “He had a lot going on today, but he said he’d try to make it.

“What was he doing today?” My tone is just the right amount of casual interest. I think.

“He was getting something for his mom.”

“He’s really good to her, isn’t he?” Colbie comments. “I think it’s beautiful. Always a positive sign when a son is good to his mother.”

She looks at me meaningfully.

“Certainly better than the opposite,” I joke. “Let’s talk about Burn Barre.”

Jake sits quietly, listening but not commenting, while Colbie and I talk endlessly about ideas. Colbie wants to see if the smoothie shop down the street from the studio will let us put an info sheet on their counter in exchange for placing their discount cards on ours.

“Is there room for one more at this table?” Rhodes’ voice wafts over me.

Jake pushes the fourth chair out with his foot. “Sit,” he says. “I’ll go get you a beer.”

When Jake’s gone, Colbie asks, “How is your mom? Jake said you were doing something for her?”

Rhodes leans an elbow on the table, propping his face in his hand. Exhaustion tugs at his eyes. “I drove out to Sugar Creek after work to meet with a lady who has a Seeing Eye dog for sale.” The corners of his eyes crease in concern.

“Is her vision that bad?” Colbie asks.

“Not yet. But it’s not far off, and I want to be ready. I didn’t buy the dog yet, but I wanted to meet it, and let the lady know my situation.”

My hand finds his under the table, knuckles brushing over the top. It’s meant to be a supportive gesture, but his hand flips over suddenly, capturing mine. His large palm engulfs my much smaller hand, his long fingers clinging to me tightly, absorbing my silent comfort. I look into his eyes and see just how afraid he is for his mother. My heart hurts for him.

Jake arrives with Rhodes’ beer and suggests they grab a pool table while one is still open. Colbie and I watch as Jake and Rhodes battle it out. Their skill level is similar, which is to say neither is very good.

“I’m getting a second,” I announce, lifting my empty cup in the air and rattling the ice. “Do you need anything?”

Colbie shakes her head, *no*.

Short Stack has grown busier since we arrived, bodies filling the small space. I place my order with the bartender, a

grizzled old man who looks like he's seen the hardest parts of life. I've placed my elbows on the bar top, chin resting on a fisted hand, when a body presses against me from behind.

"What the fu—" the expletive dies on my lips as I turn around and see who it is.

*Steven.*

The man whose name I do not dare think about in my quietest moments, for fear it will conjure him. The only time I've spoken of him in recent memory is when Rhodes asked to know what took place in Flagstaff.

Steven's standing here now, wearing khakis and a polo, sporting a receding hairline and grinning like he has discovered he's holding a winning lottery ticket. He reaches for me, and I'm so stunned I allow him to pull me in and hug me.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, trying to put distance between us in the crowded space.

"My buddy is seeing a girl who lives in Green Haven. I came with him to see her, and I'm not going to lie," he smiles crookedly, reaching for my forearm. "I was hoping I'd run into you. Never thought I'd get so lucky, though."

The way he's smiling, the way he's dressed, the good boy haircut, they are a shiny veneer. I know what's underneath this earnest act. Because that's what it is. An act I fell for, way back when.

When I don't say anything, he steps back, raking his eyes from my toes to the top of my head. He thinks I'm still that vulnerable young girl, an innocent bunny wandering into his snare. "Somehow, you're even more beautiful now. Babe, it's been far too long."

The endearment bites like a rubber band snapping my skin, but it's the jolt I need. "Don't call me that."

His eyes squint the tiniest bit. He's trying to come off as playful when really what he's doing is hiding his mind games, smoothing the surface so it's not so easily detected.

"But that's your name, Georgia." His eyebrows pinch in feigned confusion, his gentle tone forced. "I called you by your name. *Georgia.*"

The familiarity of this mind game sickens me.

I say nothing. He wants me to engage, and I refuse. I've played that game, and I was never on anything but the losing end.

"You're looking damn fine," he says, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Gorgeous, stunning, sexy as hell," he continues, compliment-bombing me.

Too easily, I remember what it was like to be on the receiving end of all his compliments. But I remember everything else, too, and now my upper lip curls. "Flagstaff called. They want you back." I say it with a snarl, as mean as I can make myself appear.

Steven captures his lower lip between his teeth. "There's that spirit."

*The spirit you tried to break.* And he almost did, too. That's the scariest part of all. Steven didn't need fists. His gaslighting and mental games worked double-time to keep me under his thumb.

He didn't stop me from going out with my coworkers, but when he saw what I was wearing, he'd say, *Wow is that what you're going to wear? I can't believe you want people to think*

*you're shopping for a new boyfriend. Is that what you're doing?*

Or, my personal favorite, every time we'd argue he'd say, *You'll never find anybody as good for you as I am.* Like he was daring me to try, but trying to keep me scared enough to stay.

It was all about control with Steven, keeping me on my toes, never allowing me to feel safe. He wanted me in an uncertain state, and for two long years, that's where he kept me. It's where I would still be to this day, if I hadn't worked up the courage to walk away.

In a steady, clear voice, I say, "Fuck right off, Steven. Fuck off all the way back to Flagstaff. And when you get there, stand on the train tracks and see what happens when the train comes through."

That smooth surface containing his temper ripples, then breaks. His hands are on me, gripping my upper arms, squeezing. "Fuck off, huh? That's what you want me to do? How about I fuck off with you?" He shakes me once, so subtly it'd be hard to notice. But the threat is there, his grip digging into my skin.

Out of nowhere, there's a hand around Steven's neck. His eyes bulge, and he's dragged sideways, falling back onto the bar. The patrons on the other side of him push away, eager to not be caught in the fray.

Rhodes hovers over Steven, in a state of rage I didn't know he was capable of. Jake hangs behind him, swaying on his feet, ready to assist.

"Don't ever touch my girl," Rhodes growls, his voice brimming with unspoken threat. He points at me, but his gaze

remains locked on Steven. “My. Girl.”

“Ahh,” Steven nods, righting himself. He adjusts his shirt and steps away from Rhodes. “New boyfriend? Good luck with her. You’re going to need it.” He turns to leave, and Rhodes delivers a shove to his upper back. Steven goes flying, catching himself on a tall table. Some guy I’ve never seen before meets him at the exit and tries to say something, but Steven shoves him off and storms outside.

Rhodes looks at me, chest rising and falling with his heavy breath. His eyes are a little bit wild, a little bit untamed. Forgetting himself, he steps closer until he’s nearly flush with me, and tenderly cups my cheek in his hand. “Are you ok?” His voice falls over me, a cocoon.

I’d be more upset at seeing Steven and hearing his harsh words if Rhodes hadn’t come flying in to save the day and stake his claim.

*My girl.*

*Don’t ever touch my girl.*

“I’m ok,” I whisper, looking up at his handsome face, his chiseled jaw, his denim eyes. My hand finds his chest, his heartbeat thrumming against my palm.

Our gazes hold for the briefest second, and then we crash back into reality.

“Uh, *hey*,” Jake says, stepping up to stand beside us. His eyes narrow as he takes in my hand on Rhodes’ chest, Rhodes’ hand still on my cheek. “Is someone going to help me understand this?”

Rhodes’ hand falls away from me. “Listen, man, I—” He cuts off, looking down at the ground and shaking his head

slowly. When he lifts his head back up, he looks my brother in the eyes. “I’m not sure where to start.”

“The beginning,” Jake responds, his mouth an angry line.

The band that had been setting up in the corner starts to play a classic rock song, and now it’s nearly impossible to have any type of conversation.

Jake strides out of the bar. Rhodes gives my hand a reassuring squeeze, then follows him. My stomach, already somewhere around my knees from all that has transpired in the past five minutes, plummets to my feet.

I slap down a ten to pay the bartender for the drink he made, then push my way over to where Colbie sits with a bewildered look on her face. She opens her mouth to talk, and I lean down to hear her.

“There you are,” she says, relieved. “I can’t see anything because everybody’s standing up, and believe me when I say, the last thing I want to do right now is be on my feet.”

If being on her feet is a problem right now, she is not going to like what I have to say. “I hate to break it to you, but we need to go out front.”

She grabs her purse and stands slowly. “Is there an issue?”

“Maybe? Probably?”

She asks a question, but I don’t hear it because I’m already holding her hand and leading her through the crowd.

It’s quieter near the exit, and I hear Colbie yell, “Should I be worried?”

“I don’t think so,” I say, looking back at her. I don’t think my brother would do anything irrational, especially where it concerns Rhodes. Then again, he’s never been confronted with

the true breadth and depth of his little sister's relationship with his best friend.

We spill out of Short Stack and into the dark, warm night. The sun hasn't been down long enough for the temperature to cool off, but the bugs have quieted and so have the birds. The only sound is the thumping music behind us, and it's still pretty loud out here.

Jake and Rhodes stand on the far edge of the parking lot. Jake is taller than Rhodes by three inches, and he looks intimidating right now, with his arms crossed and his stance wide. They are too far away for me to hear anything, but Rhodes gestures with his hands.

I walk forward, but Colbie pulls me back. "I've never seen Jake stand that way. Do you think we should go over there, or let them deal with it? What do they even have to argue about?" She glances at me, understanding dawning in her eyes. "You. You're what they are arguing about."

I make a face. "Guilty."

"I knew it," Colbie mutters.

I take hold of her forearm and gently guide her to start walking again. "It was a long time ago, when they were seniors in high school. And for a brief time after Jake left for U of A."

Colbie gasps. "You mean when Jake asked Rhodes to look after you when he went to college?"

"Yes and no. It started before that."

We're halfway across the parking lot now. I could've already been there and back and there again, but I'm traveling with somebody who is waddling more than she's walking.



“You lost your virginity to him, didn’t you?”

“Yes, and him to me.”

“Aww, I love that.”

Despite my fear of the conversation we’re about to interrupt, I can’t help but send a small smile Colbie’s direction. “It was very sweet.”

We’re almost to Jake and Rhodes when Jake shakes his head and pinches the skin at the bridge of his nose. “I trusted you more than anybody. I asked you to care for her when I went to college, not...not...” his hand shakes with the word he either refuses or cannot say.

Jake continues. “And what the fuck was that in the bar? You shoved me aside to get to the guy first, and then you called Georgia *my girl*. Literally. You called her *my girl*.”

Colbie’s eyes are the size of dinner plates, and they’re glimmering with excitement.

“What the fuck is going on, Rhodes?” Jake demands. “Are you fucking around with my little sister? A second time?”

“No,” Rhodes says hoarsely. I’m about to open my mouth and insert myself into the conversation in an effort to save Rhodes from my brother’s ire, but then Rhodes says, “I love her.”

I stop, stunned.

“What?” my brother asks, agape.

“I said I love her. Georgia. I love her. She’s...she’s...” his fingers run through his hair in frustration, his hands remaining on his head as he looks up at the dark sky. “She’s everything to me. My sun, my moon, my stars, the air I breathe. She’s my

entire world, and if she weren't here, I wouldn't want to be here either."

What? I'm confused. Shocked. He *left* me. He stayed away for *years*. How can he love me, today, right now?

Colbie's hand curls around mine, reminding me she is here for me. I'm so grateful to her, so grateful that she is here to tether me to this moment. Emotions swirl through me, so fast and hard it feels like I could float away.

Jake's shoulders droop, the fight in him extinguished. "All this time, I thought you didn't let grass grow under your feet because you needed to be on the move. But that wasn't it. You stayed away because you are in love with her."

Rhodes nods. "After your dad died, she said she was going to stay here in Green Haven. She was grieving, and I thought she was using me as an excuse, because she was afraid to move forward into the next chapter of her life. I didn't want to be what held her back, so I let her go."

*He was telling the truth.* All this time. I've been clinging to my refusal to believe him, thinking it couldn't have been as simple as he claimed.

Jake nods slowly, processing. He says incredulously, "My little sister. All this time."

Rhodes nods. "Yeah, man. All this time."

I have no idea if I was supposed to hear everything Rhodes admitted to Jake. What I know for certain is that I would love to throw myself in his arms and make him drag me to his bed, right this very minute.

"Rhodes," I manage to say, barely more than a whisper.

He and my brother turn toward us, their faces illuminated by the neon lights of Short Stack.

I take a tentative step closer. “Rhodes?”

There isn’t even a chance for me to take another step, because Rhodes closes the space, lifting me up and pressing me to his chest. “It’s always been you,” he says softly.

I kiss his cheek, when what I really want to do is devour his mouth. I’m being respectful of our audience, namely my brother who has just learned Rhodes and I ever existed as a couple. I shimmy my way down Rhodes’ body until my feet are firmly planted on the ground. I stay in close to Rhodes’ body though, and he keeps a hand on my lower back.

Jake points a stiff finger at me. “You,” he says, facing off with me. He is huge, and I’m petite, but I square my shoulders and steel my gaze.

“What?” I ask, eyebrows raised. Adrenaline pumps through me from running into Steven, and then Rhodes’ heart melting confession. This would be a perfect time for my brother to pick a fight, because I’m as ready as I’ve ever been.

Jake sighs. “I must be the dumbest person in the world.”

“Ehhh,” I tip a flattened palm back and forth between us. “I’d say you are remarkably gullible and unobservant when it comes to me.”

“I never saw it. It’s...it’s you,” he sputters, grimacing the tiniest bit.

“I think it’s typical for a big brother to underestimate his little sister’s feminine wiles.”

Jake rolls his eyes, which is the exact reaction I was hoping for, because it’s so typical it means everything is fine.

Maybe not fine, but ok for the circumstance.

“Buttercup,” Jake says, addressing Colbie using a nickname I’ve only heard him use a handful of times. “These two,” he points from me to Rhodes. “They’re in love. They were in love back then, and they’re in love now.”

Colbie smiles and nod, and she looks too exhausted to do a better job of pretending like this isn’t something she already guessed.

Jake recognizes her lack of shock. “Did you already know?”

“I had my suspicions.”

“Damn,” Jake throws up his hands. “I’ve been hanging out with an oblivious child for too long.”

Colbie snorts. “Sorry babe, but I think Robbie has his suspicions as well.”

Jake makes an exasperated sound. “Fine. I’m blind when it comes to my little sister and my best friend.”

I glance up at Rhodes, really looking at him for the first time since he told my big brother that he’s in love with me. And not just in love with me, but that I am his entire world.

“Can you take me home, please?” Colbie asks Jake.

Jake steers Colbie to his truck after she hugs me goodbye, his gaze darting back to us. He looks awestruck, like he can hardly believe it.

We wait for them to pull out of the parking lot, and then I wrap my arms around Rhodes’ neck, bringing him down closer to me.

Brushing my lips over his, I say, “You were telling the truth. You really did leave because you thought you were holding me back.”

He tries to speak, but I silence him with a kiss that I put everything into. My heart, my soul, my love, my entire body.

# Chapter 31

## *Rhodes*

EVERYTHING IS GEORGIA.

My pounding pulse, the buzz of cicadas filling the night air with their sound, the scent of pear swirling around my head. It is all her.

She is breathless when she pulls away from our kiss, breathless when she says, “I heard what you said to Jake. You never stopped loving me.”

“I didn’t know you were standing there. I would’ve preferred to say all that to you, not your brother.” I cup her cheek, just like I did in the bar after I removed that asshole from the place. “I’ll say it all again, if you want me to.”

I meant every word I said to Jake. I didn’t know she was overhearing, but I’m glad she was. How long would it have taken me to gather the courage to tell her how much I still love her? How I have never, not even for a moment, stopped loving her?

“How about,” Georgia says, pressing her breasts against me. “You take me home and say it all again when you’re inside me?”

I groan. “I live with my mother.”

“So do I,” she responds.

“We’re in high school again.”

She laughs.

An idea strikes. “Come on.” I grab her hand and take her to my truck.

---

“What did you get?” Georgia asks, craning her neck to see what I’ve thrown into the back of my truck.

“It’s a surprise,” I answer, reversing out of my driveway.

“I feel like I should duck down so my mom and my big brother don’t see us together,” she jokes, pretending to crouch.

I grab her hand across the truck console. “We don’t have to hide anymore, Georgia.”

She looks so happy right now. I swear I could lasso the moon and bring it down for her, if she asked.

After a few more turns on familiar roads, Georgia grins knowingly. She’s guessed where we’re headed.

When I pull onto the turnoff for the Verde river, Georgia says, “I haven’t been here since you.”

Guilt gnaws at me. I remember how much Georgia enjoyed coming here. “Really?”

“I mean, I’ve been here to fish with Jake and Robbie. But I stay the hell away from our spot.”

I put the truck in park and take Georgia’s hand. “We are going to go to every place where good memories turned sour, and we’re going to change them back to good.”



“It’s not that easy,” Georgia says, a twinge of sadness in her eyes. “We can’t convince ourselves the bad part never happened.”

I capture her chin between my thumb and forefinger. “You’re right. We can’t erase our memories, or the feelings that went along with them. But we can do our best to give them a second side. When the sun shines on an object, that means there is also a shadow. We’re going to put the past into shadow.”

She leans forward, letting the tip of her nose trace my own. “From here on out, we are going to shine.”

I lead her out to the truck bed, and she watches me arrange the blankets and pillows. “What did you tell your mom?”

“That I was night fishing.”

Georgia gapes. “Is that a thing?”

“Yes, but not at this river. Still, first light is good for fishing here, so that’s probably what she thought I meant.” I finish and move over to the lowered tailgate, extending a hand. Georgia climbs up, and we settle on the blankets and pillows.

I’m eager to touch her and taste her, after all these years. I also want to relish her, to bask in what it means to have another chance with the woman I was certain I’d spend my whole life wishing I could’ve kept.

Georgia presses her nose to my neck and inhales deeply. “You have no idea how badly I’ve been wanting to do that since dance lessons started.”

I kiss her hair. “Your pear scent drives me insane.”

She looks up at me and wiggles her eyebrows. “How insane?”

“Insane enough to buy pear lotion and use it.”

Georgia’s breath thickens, hot against my neck. Her hand presses to my stomach, curving lazy circles over my shirt. “Use it how?”

“You know how.”

Her hands drifts lower, rubbing back and forth over the front of my jeans. “Like this?”

All I manage is a garbled breath. This is a side to Georgia I’ve never experienced. When we were together before, it was I who was the leader. The teacher.

She flicks open the top button of my jeans, the metallic sound of the zipper shrill against the melody of flowing water.

I’m straining against my boxer briefs, as if I’m dying to get to her. And I am.

She pulls me from the fabric, gripping me. As many times as I have imagined Georgia’s touch, the reality of it is infinitely superior.

She pistons her hand. “Or maybe more like this?”

“Yes,” I groan, seeking her lips. She settles them onto mine, working her hand as her tongue dips into my mouth.

We kiss until I rip my mouth away and say, “You have to stop doing that.” She pulls back, looking down at me wickedly, and pumps twice more. “What, this?”

Reaching down, I place my hand over hers and force her to still. But because she is Georgia, she exerts pressure, still trying to move her hand. I huff a pained laugh and say, “I mean it. You have to stop or I won’t be able to do things I’ve spent years dreaming about doing.”

She releases me, and I take my hand back.

“Like what?” she asks, trailing kisses along my jaw.

“First and foremost, burying my face between your legs.”

Georgia’s gaze drops to my chest. “I haven’t done that with anybody since you.”

My first response is utter elation. Damn straight nobody else knows what my girl tastes like. My second response is confusion.

“Have you—”

“Oh, yes,” Georgia answers without me having to ask the question. “I’ve had plenty of sex. But that was just, kind of...” She shrugs. “Something I wasn’t comfortable with.”

“Because it wasn’t me?”

She nods. “I’m sure that sounds crazy, but—”

She quiets as my hand comes up to her back, tugging at the end of a fabric bow tied there. The straps fall away, but the top remains in place.

“What is this contraption?” I grumble irritably, and she laughs.

Slipping a hand under a flap of fabric, she tugs a hidden zipper right down the center of her top. Her breasts tumble out, unhindered by a bra.

“Fuck,” I groan, taking each in a hand and grazing a thumb across the hardened peaks. “So perfect.”

She gasps when I surprise her by flipping her onto her back. I come over her, leaning on one forearm to support my weight. I take my time, kissing the undersides of her breasts, letting the soft roundness skim my face. I dip lower, kissing

her stomach in a straight line. Georgia blooms for me, a flower.

I thought maybe she'd be shy, after all this time, but no. She is one hundred percent herself, even in this moment when it would be understandable if she felt vulnerable.

I draw it out. I kiss the insides of her thighs, nip at her outer edges. She is already mewling and squirming, and when I hook her knees over my shoulders and fasten my mouth to her, she arches off the blanket.

Her nails rake my scalp, my name a whispered chant floating into the air between us, and when she crests, it's soundless, her pulsing center and quaking thighs screaming for her.

I kiss her once more, softly, a kiss of absolute reverence for this act of love she saved for me. Then I crawl up her body, dragging my tongue back through the trail it blazed only a few minutes ago.

"Rhodes," she murmurs, holding tight to my neck. "I want you so much."

I'm dying to get inside her, but I have enough sense to ask her if she's on birth control. I want a whole life with this woman, and all that it entails, but maybe not starting tonight.

"No," she answers, her face falling. "I didn't go back on it after Flagstaff."

"I have a condom." Fishing my wallet from the back pocket of the jeans I'm still wearing, I remove the foil packet. I shimmy the jeans and boxers down my legs, and kick them away. Sitting up on my knees, I lock eyes with Georgia as I rip open the condom with my teeth. She grins and bounces her hips once, an invitation.

When I'm sheathed, I lie down on her, using my forearm to support my weight. She reaches down, gripping me and guiding me in. We're forehead to forehead, nose to nose, sharing the same breath.

"You're perfect," I breathe.

"I am far from perfect," she answers, her face swathed in moonlight.

"You are perfect for me," I amend. "And I love you, Georgia Whittier. And I'm sorry for everything that happened before."

We don't talk much after that. There's only the sound of running water, of keening cicadas, and of lovemaking.

# Chapter 32

# *Georgia*

IF IT WEREN'T FOR MY SORENESS, I ALMOST WOULDN'T believe what happened last night.

Rhodes and Georgia.

Georgia and Rhodes.

Together again, and out in the open this time. It is literally my dream come true.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table, coffee cup poised at my lips while I stare out at our minimally landscaped backyard. Despite the sunny morning, I see nothing but a dark night and Rhodes hovering above me, backlit by the moon.

We'd gone to our old spot, the place we snuck off to during a time when nobody could know about us. There's something sweet and almost laughable about the fact that it's a little over a decade later, and somehow we are both living back at home, down the street from each other like we're teenagers again.

We both went on, to college and trade school, but it's almost as if we were stunted, frozen in time at the point where we stopped being *us*.

Back then, I was young and naïve, but I dreamed of having it all. With Rhodes. What if that's possible again?

One more time. This time, we'll be successful.

"You sure look like you're over there daydreaming of something pleasant," Mom says, breezing into the room. She prepares her coffee, joining me at the table. "Tell me what's going on. I know there's nothing so delightful in that backyard."

The backyard had always been Dad's thing, and when he went downhill, so did the landscaping. A few years after my dad died, my mom paid a crew to come in and raze the place. They pulled out every bush and shrub, taking it down to bare bones.

I don't know if she did that because she didn't want to restore it, or if she's still angry with my dad.

I lean back, propping my feet on the chair opposite me. "You're right. I am dreaming of something pleasant." I peek over at my mother, sipping from her steaming cup of coffee. How she will take this news of me and Rhodes? She was never a second mother to him. He didn't need one, and the mom he had was already there for him in every sense of the word. But she cares for him, always asking Jake how Rhodes is doing and about his current job. If it weren't for my mother asking and me overhearing, I would've been forced to ask the questions myself, or settle for not knowing.

Here goes nothing. "Mom, Rhodes and I..." I search for the right words. "We're..." Everything I think to say either falls short, or is too much.

"You and Rhodes finally got together?" My mother smirks, eyebrows raised. "Or you're finally admitting that you're in love? Which one is it?"

I gape at her. "Are you not shocked by this?"



“Not in the least. In high school, there were practically hearts in your eyes every time you looked his way. And you’ve had the same look on your face recently.”

I set down my coffee cup and shake my head. “You could have said something. Maybe not back then, but definitely now.”

“Have you met yourself? There’s no way I was going to say something to you these past few months. You’ve been like a little cactus, so prickly.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t realize I’ve been a pain to live with.”

“Not a pain, exactly, but maybe not something I want to put my arms around.”

I laugh. “Because I’ve been a cactus.”

“But now you don’t have to be. You get to be one of those cactuses they keep in the lobbies of the fancy hotels in Phoenix, where all the spines have been removed.”

I frown playfully. “Sad for the cacti.”

My mom finishes her coffee, and says, “It’s probably because all the tourists would touch it to see if it’s real.”

“That’s not the cacti’s fault.”

“Nope,” my mom responds, rising from her seat. “Don’t spend too much time feeling bad for them. They live in an air-conditioned lobby and not in the desert. In that environment, they don’t need the spines.”

She rinses her coffee cup and places it in the sink. “I’m going to get ready for church. Love you.” She kisses my cheek on the way out of the room. “Congratulations on finally being honest with yourself.”

I smile at her, but I'm still stuck on this concept of a plant, not needing its self-defense mechanism, because it is no longer in its natural habitat.

My father was the first man to hurt me. He was good to me until he injured his back. After that, it was a roller coaster of pain pills, and then promising to stop taking them. Then it was the lying, and hiding the pills he promised he didn't need anymore. It turned into him saying one thing, and doing another. And then things seemed to improve after he took Jake's money and my mother told him to get better or get out. We thought there was hope for him. For our family.

But then he tried something new, something I recognize by name only. Meth. The people at the hospital tell us he came in seeking help, saying he couldn't breathe. I'm still not sure what exactly happened, if there was something else mixed in. The nurses got him in, triaged him, and understood quickly he was in overdose. His heart stopped sometime between when the nurse left the emergency bay where he'd been taken, and when the doctor arrived.

Not too long after that, Rhodes told me he was leaving for trade school and that I should go to college like I'd planned. He'd taken the only light left in my life and snuffed it out.

And then, after college, Steven and all his mind games came along.

Until now, I've had almost a decade of nothing but disappointment and pain from men I loved. Men who claimed to love me. I didn't just develop a thick skin. I developed spines, designed to protect me from predators.

Here I am, back in my natural habitat. But there is no Dad, and no Steven. Just Rhodes, who never meant to hurt me. Who thought he was doing what was best for me.

I don't need spines. I don't need defenses.

All I need is Rhodes.

Lucky for me, he's down the street.

---

“Hi, Ms. Porter,” I say too loudly when she opens the front door of Candy House. I wince, embarrassed at my volume. She's going blind, not deaf. “It's Georgia Whittier.”

She smiles. “Even if I couldn't see you perfectly, I recognized your voice.” She steps away from the threshold to allow me entry. “Please come in.”

“Thank you.” I walk into the foyer. “Is Rhodes available?”

I saw his truck in the driveway, so I know he's here.

“He's in the backyard working on a project. Go on back.”

I make my way through the house. It's a totally different layout than my own, but I remember it.

Opening the sliding glass door, I step through and find Rhodes just to the right of the deck. He's on his knees, lining up what appears to be brick pavers.

“Hi,” I call out, coming closer.

He sits back on his heels, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “Hey, Peach.”

I warm at the nickname. “What are you up to?”

Rhodes climbs to his feet. He reaches for me, and I let him pull me in. He smells like salt and earth, a combination that is both heady and delicious. I don't know when he last shaved, but the sun shines on his light regrowth on his jaw. I rise on

tiptoe to place a peck on the corner of his mouth. His eyes darken, a look that tells me he wants so much more.

So do I, of course. Last night was a taste, and I'm hooked.

Rhodes gestures at the pallet of bricks still to lay. "Building a backyard that's accessible for my mom. Starting with this walkway."

My heart pinches. This man is just plain kind. "Can I help?"

He stares down at me, amusement curling up one side of his mouth. "You don't have anything better to do?"

"Are you kidding me?" I take a step back from him. "Your mom still likes to listen to those cardinals, right?"

Rhodes nods. "Among other things."

"Other birds, you mean?"

"Audiobooks."

"Well, it'll be hot outside right now, but just give it a couple months and she'll be sitting in the shade all day listening to birds and audiobooks." I clap once, a loud sound. "We better get started."

Rhodes doesn't listen. He stares at me for an extra beat, then says, "You're something else, Peach. Something really great."

"Psh." I wave a hand. "You're just saying that because I gave you a hand job last night."

Laughter shoots out of him. He shakes his head. My lips press together, and I shimmy my shoulders, pleased at having made him laugh. He laughs at this, too, eyes sparkling with amusement.

He leans down, kissing my forehead and murmuring, “I can’t believe I went without you for so long.”

“Let’s not do that ever again.”

“Deal,” he says.

Rhodes shows me his plans, written on paper similar to the way Colbie sketched her ideas for Burn Barre. We work together for the next two hours, wetting the ground and digging, then re-wetting and digging again. Even being on the northern edge of central Arizona, Green Haven doesn’t have soil, per se, not the kind a shovel would slide into easily. According to Rhodes, it contains more clay and rocks, and is less accepting of a shovel, even one that is sharp. Once we get a good little section cleared away, we lay down the bricks in the configuration already started by Rhodes’ earlier work.

By the time we are done, we’re both covered in sweat and filthy. Rhodes runs inside to refill our waters, and returns with two bottles of beer. He opens one and hands it to me.

“I wish you had a pool.” I push back the baby hairs matted to my forehead.

Rhodes takes a long pull from his drink, his Adam’s apple bobbing with his swallow. “I wish I had a pool, too.”

I gesture out with the bottom of my bottle. “It looks good. As long as your mom follows the path, she’ll be able to get to that little gazebo and sit in the shade.”

“Thanks for doing this,” Rhodes says. “It was nice of you. And I got to check out your ass every time you bent over, which was an enjoyable bonus.”

“You’re crazy.” My gaze skims my dirt-spotted arms. “And I am filthy. Unless you need help with something else, I’m going to grab a shower.”

“I have one of those.”

“Huh?” I finish the rest of my beer.

“A shower. I have one of those.”

“That’s good. Otherwise you’d have to use a hose, and I bet that would get cold in winter.”

Rhodes ignores my joke. “You know what I’m saying.”

I nod. “Oh yes, I know exactly what you’re saying. But—” I point to his house. “You live with your mother. Remember last night, when we established that we both have living situations that are not conducive to sexy time?”

Rhodes checks his watch. “My mom takes a two-hour nap midday, every day. We happen to be forty-five minutes into it.”

Empty beer bottle in hand, I give Rhodes a light shove towards the house. “Then what are we doing out here?”

We step into the cool air-conditioning and Rhodes places our bottles in the kitchen recycling. He ducks down quickly and hoists me over his shoulder.

I swallow my surprised squeal, and Rhodes carries me through the first floor to his bedroom. I always thought it was odd that the main bedroom is on the second floor, but Candy House itself is an anomaly, so it’s probably more normal that something not be typical.

Rhodes’ bathroom is small, with just enough space for two of us to maneuver. A long rectangular window is cut out high on the wall, letting in streams of sunlight.

Rhodes deposits me on the closed toilet lid and starts the shower. I lift my arms above my head, and Rhodes peels my shirt up my body, throwing it on the ground beside the door.

Next, he unhooks my bra, tossing it in the air. It lands in the sink. He lowers himself to his knees, and in the light of day, I watch those deep blue eyes of his rove over the top half of my body.

His expression is so damn appreciative, so wanting. It tells me I need not be shy around this man. He is just as sweet as he always was.

“What are you thinking about?” Rhodes murmurs, his fingertips tracing the top swell of my chest. “Your eyebrows are tugging together.”

“You,” I respond honestly.

“What about me?” He leans over to push aside the shower curtain and check the temperature of the water. He shakes his head slightly, communicating that the water isn’t ready yet.

I place my hands on his shoulders, guiding them over and up until my fingers interlock behind his neck. “I was thinking about how you can be as masculine as you are, but you have this super sweet side to your personality. You’re kind, Rhodes. You are just so damn nice. Back then, and today. I’m grateful you didn’t lose that.”

Rhodes eschews all the compliments in favor of the word *masculine*. “Masculine, huh?”

“Well, duh,” I laugh. “Of course. Look at your job. Look at your body. The way you walk, the way you carry yourself. You are masculine in the best way. Not in a stupid swagger kind of way where a guy acts like he earned his masculinity just by being born male. You have this air about you, like you earned it by being a protector, by serving those you love. It’s kind of beautiful, I guess.”

“Peach,” Rhodes says, curling one finger and running it over the nipple of my right breast. “Did you just call me beautiful?”

I swallow against the sensation from the back and forth motion of his finger. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

Rhodes stops what he’s doing and presses a palm to his chest. “I will endeavor to deserve the compliments you pay me.”

Steam rises from the shower now, and Rhodes pulls me to standing. I’m wearing soft shorts, the kind I can exercise in, so I slide them down my body and step out from them, kicking them to where Rhodes tossed my shirt earlier.

Rhodes reaches back with one hand, gripping the fabric at his upper back and hauling it over his head. It’s sexy, but not nearly as sexy as the muscles that ripple in his upper back. And there is that tattoo, just below his right shoulder blade.

The sparrow, wings spread wide.

*Wait, what?*

Rhodes removes his pants at the same time I run a hand on the ink. “You added to this.” There’s a compass around the bird. Numbers, like the degrees on the dial, and the first letter of the directions, capitalized. But the N for north is missing.

A ‘G’ is in its place. And the sparrow’s beak points right at it.

Goosebumps cover my skin. “Rhodes,” I breathe, my fingers tracing the G. Steam swirls around us, coating the mirror in moisture. “That G. It’s—”

“For you,” he nods. Shock has me dropping my hand back to my side. Rhodes turns around. He is utterly naked and



gloriously beautiful. Inside and out, this man is beautiful.

“When?” I ask, searching his face. Am I crying? I swipe underneath my eyes and find twin beads of tears rolling over my cheeks.

“A long time ago, Georgia.” His voice is rough, emotional. “I told you, I never stopped loving you, and I meant it. I missed you, and I needed you, and the only way I could think to have you was to put you on my body forever.”

Leaning down, he captures my face in his hands, and he kisses me, long and hard, then soft and sweet, he kisses me like the world could come crashing down around us and none of it would matter as long as we are together.

He ushers us into the shower. It’s so steamy, so hot, and he washes me first. I reach for his body wash, but he shakes his head and takes it from me. Instead of arguing, I stay quiet and watch as he soaps himself down as fast as possible.

“I have to get inside you, Peach,” he explains, tipping his head back into the stream of water. “No time for slow washing.”

While his eyes are still closed, I sink to my knees. His thigh muscles tighten when my mouth wraps around him. Above me, he hisses a single breath.

“Peach,” he moans quietly. His hand finds the back of my head. I do my best for a full minute, and then he’s reaching down and encouraging me to stand up. “That’s not how I want this to end,” he says, brushing my hair from my face and kissing me. He reaches down, gripping my ass in both hands, and tells me to hang on. I link my hands behind his neck, and he lifts me up, pushing my back against the wall. Reaching

between us, I help angle him to where we're both dying for him to get to.

My teeth sink into his shoulder when he enters me, and I will myself to be quiet. It's nearly impossible, everything about this is so good. So perfect. So right.

"I love you," I tell him, because I didn't say it last night. Not because I didn't feel it, or didn't already know it, but because those damn cactus spines were still doing their job of protecting me. Misguided protection, it turns out.

"Love you so much," I repeat, turning my head and kissing him.

"My girl," Rhodes murmurs against my mouth at the same time his hips drive up and into me. "My peach," he says again, this time using the strength of his arms to lift me off him and bring me back down. "I love you."

We both finish this way, with water and heat and steam and I love you's on our lips.

# Chapter 33

# *Georgia*

REHEARSAL DAY.

Twelve days to go until the competition.

We've got the routine down, and now we're working on tiny details. Pointed toes, hitches, weight shifts, and eye contact.

No need to work on chemistry. Not that we ever truly needed to.

"You guys are fire," Dakota says, watching us for the twentieth time this evening. "I mean, you're hot. Georgia, keep working on your facial expressions. Remember, Rhodes is knocking," she mimes knocking on a door. "But you're not letting him in." She shifts her weight, jutting out her hip, and facing away from us. She turns around, grinning. "The audience will eat you guys up."

Dakota restarts the music. "Once more, from the top. Full out facial expressions. Rhodes, you want in. Georgia, you're determined to keep him out."

I wag a finger at him. He winks.

Recently, *out* is the last place I've been keeping this man.

---

We're eight days from competition and I've got the beginnings of what looks to be a monstrous bruise on my mid-thigh.

"Mom," I yell, exiting my room. "What do I do about this bruise on my thigh?" I lift the oversize T-shirt I slept in and extend my leg.

She makes a face at the deepening purple-blue mark on my skin. "How did you get that?"

"I don't know," I wail. "I bruise like a peach."

Peach. *Oh*. Now I remember bumping my thigh on a corner in the dance studio two days ago, as Rhodes and I hid from view and made out like horny teenagers sneaking in kisses and rounding second base before Dakota arrived.

"Try arnica cream," my mom says, like *why didn't you already think of that?*

I've never heard of the stuff. "Where would a person find arnica cream? An apothecary store?"

She laughs. "Try my bathroom first. Probably near the back of the big drawer. I don't have much use for it, but I remember buying it at some point."

I hurry through the house, eager to slap some cream on this baseball sized marking on my thigh. If it's not gone by competition night, I'm going to have to use body make up. I've planned to wear a skort with tiers of fringe that will swing when I spin, and it shows most of my legs specifically for the purpose of showing off the intricate footwork Dakota and I have been working on.

My mom's bathroom is tidy, like always, but I know better. Beneath what the eye can see, my mother is a secret slob. I open the biggest drawer, and begin to rummage. There's all kinds of stuff in here, old, half-used travel bottles, sample packs, bottles of probably dried out nail polish.

"Arnica," I mutter, picking up every item I don't immediately recognize to read the label. I have no idea what arnica cream looks like. Tube? Bottle? Glass jar?

An orange prescription bottle near the back catches my eye, label facing out.

*Erica Porter.*

What the hell?

I grab the bottle. It's empty. The name of the medicine on the label is indecipherable at first glance. I try anyway. "Di..ex...Di...exhen... Nevermind." I can't sound it out, but one thing I know for sure is that this bottle expired years ago.

Forgetting the arnica cream, I hustle to the kitchen where I left my mom. I pump the brakes a few moments before turning the corner, realizing she may not know what this bottle is, or why it's there. Schooling my expression into simple curiosity, I come into the room and ask, "Do you know what this is?"

My mother looks over the bottle. "Honestly, I have no idea. That was in my drawer?"

"All the way at the back."

"Why would Erica's prescription bottle be in my drawer? This thing expired years ago. Who would put it there?" She looks at me.

"Not me," I say defensively. "It expired the year before Robbie was born, which means Jake was down in Tucson."

So, probably not him either.

“It must have been Tom.” Her voice holds little bits of many emotions. Disappointment, anger, regret, sadness, exasperation, exhaustion. “But why Erica? Why her pills? And what are they?”

Pulling out my phone, I quickly search the Internet, mistyping the name on the bottle in at least three spots. The top answer is in bold. I read it aloud. “Commonly found in the class of generic painkillers.”

My mom rubs her temple. “But how did Tom get Erica’s pills? Did he steal them from her? Did he—” She cuts off, horrified gaze cutting to me. “Was he having an affair with her?”

“Mom, no,” I assure her, though I don’t know the answer for certain. Before my dad became addicted to painkillers, I would’ve said such a thing could never be possible. But addictions change a person, coloring over their belief systems and their values. Sometimes it’s forever, and sometimes it’s temporary.

Tears balance on the brim of my mother’s lower lashes. I feel terrible for finding this bottle. For bringing this to her.

“All these years,” she whispers, gripping the edge of the kitchen counter and looking out the window to the backyard. “I thought I made peace with what he became. What I lost. I forgave him.” She glances momentarily at the bottle in my limply hanging hand. “And now this?”

I rub her shoulder. “We don’t know for sure what happened. It could be totally innocent. Don’t rewrite history without getting the facts, ok?”

She turns to me, the corners of her mouth lifting into a sad smile. “I’m sorry you found that, honey.”

“Me, too.”

“Are you going to say something about it to Rhodes?”

Realization rolls through me. *Rhodes*. I’d been so focused on my mom, I hadn’t considered Rhodes. Do I show this bottle to him? Put him through this angst?

“I’m not sure,” I answer, my mind tripping over the possible outcomes. We’ve just patched our relationship after all these years. And his mom is losing her eyesight. He adores his mom, and he’s focused on making life easier for her. How can I throw this at him? And it could all be for nothing. It’s within the realm of possibility that my dad stole from Erica. At one point, he’d been so desperate that he stole money from Jake’s bedroom.

But how did he know Erica had a prescription for painkillers?

How did he know where to find them?

“I can see that you’re torn,” my mom says. “But just know that honesty in a relationship is paramount. Your dad was not honest with me about his struggle. He hid it from me, and he felt ashamed, and I felt blindsided. If he’d been honest with me, we could’ve gotten him help, and none of it would’ve had to happen. I’d have my husband, and you’d have your dad. So, even when honesty hurts, the effects of dishonesty can hurt more.”

She squares her shoulders and kisses my cheek. “I need to go to work. I love you.”

I watch her go. Small in stature, mighty in heart. My mom is the strongest woman I’ve ever met.



Thirty minutes after my mom leaves for work, Rhodes texts me.

My foreman's truck wouldn't start. No work today.  
I'd love to see you.

I stare at my screen for a full five minutes before I respond.

Come on over.

My mom's advice makes perfect sense. So why does it feel like I'm marching toward the gallows, to a noose with my name on it?

---

The front door opens. Rhodes finds me sitting at the kitchen table.

"Hey, Peach." He kisses the top of my head, taking the seat opposite me. He frowns at my expression. "What's wrong?"

"I have something to show you, but I'm scared."

"Is it a positive pregnancy test?"

I'm taken aback by the direction his thoughts went in, but it's admittedly far more logical than what I'm about to show him. Especially since we were careless that day in the shower, not using protection even though I'm still not on birth control.

I take the bottle from my lap and slide it across the table. My stomach tightens, the nerves becoming live wires.

Rhodes tips the bottle back, reading.

I watch his face, ready to explain what I know and offer possibilities that it's not what it looks like.

The words tumble back down into my throat.  
Because on Rhodes' face, there's recognition.  
Then he meets my eyes, and pales.

# Chapter 34

*Rhodes*

## Back Then

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU TURNED EIGHTEEN YESTERDAY.” Georgia sits facing me cross-legged on her bed. She gathers up her hair on her head and snaps a clip around it. Her eyes twinkle with excitement, and she says, “You even got a tattoo.”

It was the first thing I did when I woke up on my birthday. A sparrow, wings spread, representing love, commitment, and loyalty. It’s partially for Georgia, but also for me. It’s what I want my life to be about.

“Does it still hurt?” Georgia asks, her hand hovering over my bandaged upper back.

“Like a sunburn would hurt.”

Georgia skims her fingers over the inside of her wrist. “You’re, like, a real adult now.”

I’ve felt like an adult for a long time. My milestone birthday was good, but it didn’t feel momentous. Maybe it’s because I stepped into the role of man of the house when my mom moved us away from my dad.

Georgia’s shoulders are pink from sitting outside yesterday at the barbecue my mother insisted on hosting. Gingerly, I run my hands over them. “Thank you for my cake.”

Georgia had outdone herself with a two-layer lemon cake with vanilla frosting and lemon filling. As a joke, she sliced a fresh peach and used it to line the top of the cake's perimeter.

My mother *ooh'd* and *ahh'd* about how pretty the cake was, and Georgia looked at me and winked. I'm getting ready to tell everyone about us. I want to love Georgia in the open. I'm tired of sneaking around.

We held off after Tom stole Jake's money, but when Georgia's mom stepped in and told Tom he could either get out or get better, everyone's attention shifted to helping Tom.

Jake had been so worried about leaving his mom and sister when they were in the middle of dealing with Tom's addiction, he almost stayed home from college. Then he'd asked me to look after them, and I'd agreed. It would've been a great time to come clean with him, but he looked sick with worry, and I didn't want to add to his emotional load.

But now Tom seems to be getting better, and Jake is in Tucson at U of A practicing with the football team before freshman year begins. The next time he comes home, I'm committed to telling him. I know he'll be mad at first, but if he can just see how much I love his sister, eventually he'll have to accept our relationship.

Time. That's all it will take. Time for him to get used to the idea, and time for him to see that his little sister is it for me.

Georgia beams, her smile stretching out to the corners of her face. "That cake was the single most delicious thing I've ever made."

It really was incredible, and everyone told her so. Her mother told her to see if Jiminy needs a new summer dessert to add to his menu. Georgia blushed, and later, when the real

adults were playing a card game, I found her in the kitchen wrapping up the leftover cake. I'd swiped my finger over the bottom of the cake before she'd covered it, then placed the frosting on the corner of her lip and kissed it away.

"That was bold of you," she'd hissed, glancing outside with worried eyes.

"I'm done hiding," I'd said.

She'd hugged me hard and said she was sick of sneaking around. "I want everyone to know that I"—she cups two hands around her mouth, like a megaphone, and whisper-yells—"Love. Rhodes. Porter."

We'd rejoined the group after that, and her dad dealt us in. We snuck furtive glances, more than usual, because we were giddy with the thought of soon being able to love one another in the open.

And since we haven't formed our plan for how to tell everyone, tonight I was stuck sneaking through Georgia's window like I have many times before. This time felt more fun though, because hopefully it's nearing the last time we'll have to go to those lengths.

"I missed you all day," Georgia says, leaning forward and kissing me lightly on the mouth. "I'm really not interested in studying for AP English." Her arms twirl overhead. "All I want to do is *dance*."

Georgia scrambles off the bed, wearing a polka-dotted matching pajama set. She holds one hand out to me. "Come on, *Rhodes*." She says my name in that way she knows always gets me, like a sing-song plea. "Let's dance."

I climb off the bed and join her, pulling her into my arms and flush against me. There's no denying Georgia.

In lieu of music, I hum. Something slow, something sweet. *Georgia On My Mind* by Ray Charles. Against my chest, Georgia's lips curl into a smile. There isn't much space to maneuver, so we mostly stand and sway, but I'm able to dip her back once, long and slow, and Georgia's eyes close while her head tips back. I kiss her exposed throat before pulling her upright.

"I love you, Peach," I murmur into her hair.

She snuggles deeper into me. "Not as much as I love you, Rhodes."

I don't argue, because there's no point in arguing with this headstrong girl in my arms, but I'm content knowing the truth is a point that need not be pressed. There's nothing I wouldn't do for Georgia.

My humming ends, and Georgia looks up at me. "Did your dad call yesterday?" she asks, tentatively.

I nod. "It went like it always goes." He spent less than a minute listening to me, and then launched into talking about his firm, and their success, and the big name clients he was landing. My bored "uh-huh's" landed on deaf ears. His assistant probably reminded him to call me. There's no way he was the one to remember.

"I'm sorry," Georgia says, rising on tiptoe to kiss me sweetly.

"I should probably go." I look at the window and down the street to my dark house. "You have to wake up early for school, and I..." Sadly, I don't have much to wake up for. I need to get that figured out.

"Use my window," Georgia says. "My dad's been staying up later. Reading, or whatever else. I don't know, but you can't



use the front door.”

I kiss her again. “Call me after school?”

“I’ll see your call, and raise you an in-person visit.”

I chuckle quietly. “Don’t forget you’re meeting your guidance counselor after school tomorrow.”

Georgia scoffs. “Yes, yes. College, whatever, all the things.” She wraps her arms around my neck. “Don’t they know I only want you?”

“You can’t major in me.” But it feels damn good to be loved this much, and by the best girl in the world.

“I can damn sure try,” she whispers, setting my world on fire with her lips.

When we break apart, my breathing is labored. Georgia’s lips are swollen. I open her window and swing one leg over. Pausing, I look at my girl standing there in the middle of her room. Her fingers intertwine, hanging in front of her. She blinks twice, her eyes big and brown, and one side of her mouth lifts in a smile.

I point at my eyes, then my heart, then at her. She blows me a kiss.

I swing my second leg over and stand. Behind me is the soft sound of the window closing. The night is dark, the moon a sliver, and I make my way over the landscaping pavers in the front yard, careful not to leave footprints in the grass.

“Boy,” I hear from somewhere near the house. “Get over here.”

*Georgia’s dad.*

Instant queasiness, along with leaden dread. What's he going to do to me? How much trouble will Georgia be in?

I square my shoulders and follow the sound of his voice. What else am I to do?

The closer I get, the better I see Tom. He's sitting in a chair in the shadows, but I can't tell what he's doing out here. No book, no phone, no nothing.

*He was waiting for me.*

"You've been sneaking around with my daughter for how long now?"

"Umm—"

"Don't lie to me. I saw you about a month ago, so I know it's been at least that long."

"Five months, sir."

"Five months," he repeats. "Are you having sex with her?"

I want to be sick. "No, sir."

"I said don't lie to me."

I can't believe this is happening. Can't believe I'm about to look my best friend's dad in the eyes and tell him the truth. "Yes, sir. Georgia and I are sleeping together."

He says nothing. If it weren't for the knuckles he's running over his lips, he could pass for a statue.

The night is full of chirping crickets, an occasional car on another block, but we're silent for seconds that feel like minutes. When he finally speaks, he says, "Your mother had dental surgery recently."

My eyebrows pull in confusion. "Yes."

“She got any of her medicine leftover?”

My head rears back, nearly taking my body with it. I grip a nearby post to keep from stumbling. “Medicine?” I ask.

“You know, Rhodes, you’re eighteen. Got your whole life ahead of you. It’d be a damn shame for you to get in trouble with the law so early. Just starting out and already having a record.” He clicks his tongue once, a regretful sound. “I don’t have to say anything about your illegal relationship with my daughter. But also, I might.”

I squeeze my eyes shut tight, wishing desperately I’d never left Georgia’s bedroom. Or that I’d never gone in there in the first place tonight.

Threat. Blackmail. Coercion. Extortion.

I don’t know what the best-fit term is for what Tom’s doing, only that it’s wrong. My stomach turns at the thought of Georgia ever finding out her dad has stooped this low.

“You can’t prove anything,” I say, struggling to keep my voice calm.

“Alright,” Tom says, moving to get up. “I’ll just drag Georgia out here and make her tell me the truth.”

“No,” I say sharply. I don’t want Georgia involved in any of this. She’s too good, too sweet, too pure. She thinks her dad’s improving, and she needs to believe that. “I’ll bring you what you want.”

Tom acts like he doesn’t hear me. He moves for the house, saying over his shoulder, “My truck is unlocked.”

He goes in the house, and the sound of the dead bolt sliding into place is a shot to my stunned heart.

I cross the street, and enter my home, walking into the kitchen where I last remember seeing the bottle. “*Dangerous stuff,*” my mom had said ominously when she brought home the prescription, eyeing me meaningfully. “*I don’t need it now, but might as well save it for a rainy day.*”

This doesn’t just feel like a rainy day. This is a monsoon, a hurricane, a planting of something whose effects will reach far into the future.

The bottle weighs almost nothing, but is an anvil in my hand.

I cross the street, retracing my steps. Maybe this doesn’t have to be a big deal. Maybe this can be a non-event. A blip.

From the tailgate of Tom’s truck, I watch Georgia’s bedroom light go out. I could knock on her window, tell her everything.

What would happen? The worst for me would be him reporting me to the police. Would I really be convicted of something? If so, what? Georgia is a minor, something I hadn’t thought of until now. Would that make me a sex offender? Would I be known as that for the rest of my life? Would I have to register as one? Will I be able to get a job?

And then Georgia... even if I call Tom’s bluff, what will it do to Georgia to learn about her dad? She’s been so happy lately. Everyone has.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

Before I can think any harder about it, I open up the driver’s side door of Tom’s truck and deposit the bottle in the drink holder.

On my way back to my house, I look up at the night sky and send up a prayer that the consequences of these actions

will be minimal. "Keep Georgia out of it," I plead to the darkness.

# Chapter 35

# *Georgia*

I CAN'T BREATHE.

The air is there, but I can't bring it up into my throat. I am going to be the first person to choke on air.

My shoulders shake and my stomach muscles convulse. Then it flips around and I drag in a loud and long breath that burns my lungs.

Rhodes pushes back from the table, his chair scraping the kitchen floor. He starts for me, but I shake my head for him to stop. I do not want him to come to me. I do not want him to console me.

“Why do you already know about this bottle?” I point at the old plastic container sitting halfway between us on the table. “Why do you recognize it?”

“It was my mom's—”

“Her name is on it,” I say flatly.

“Right.” He drags two hands through his hair, curling his fingers at the back of his head and remaining in place.

“Were our parents having an affair back then?”

My question breaks him out of his trance. His eyes flash, and he shakes his head. “What? No.”

“Then why did I find this empty bottle at the very back of my mother’s bathroom drawer? I showed it to her. She didn’t know what this is, or why it’s there.”

“Dammit,” Rhodes mutters. He closes his eyes and works his lower lip with his teeth, like he is preparing. “Georgia, I want you to let me tell you everything before you say anything, ok? Can you do that for me?”

“Absolutely not.”

A short stream of air blows from his nose. “Fine.” He stares down at the tabletop, bumping it once with his fist, and then he begins. “Your dad threatened to report my relationship with you to the police if I didn’t give him pain killers from my mom’s dental surgery.”

I make a noise in the back of my throat, a defensive sound of disbelief. “My dad didn’t know about us. Nobody did, remember?”

Rhodes places his folded hands in his lap. He opens his mouth to speak, but hesitates, as if weighing his words. “It was the day after my eighteenth birthday. He said he had known about us for a month by then.”

I press a palm to my stomach, where suddenly my core feels cold. “He wouldn’t do that.” The argument is weak. Because he would, wouldn’t he? The man who stole the money his own son had been saving since childhood would absolutely threaten and blackmail Rhodes.

Rhodes comes to me now, hurrying around the table and kneeling beside me. He takes my hands and encourages me to shift in my chair so I’m facing him.

“I will never stop being sorry for this.”



His words break through all the other shock I'm feeling. "Because you gave him the pills." Understanding creeps through me. "He was getting better. And you gave him those pills."

My brain goes back to that time, sifting through my thoughts and memories, pulling up the events and placing them along a timeline. "We all thought he was doing so well, and then it was like he crashed. And after he crashed, he burned. He went into the hospital that day, and he never came out."

Rhodes' chin drops to his chest. "I know."

"Rhodes, you...you gave him drugs. You gave my dad drugs." My eyes widen as realization after realization sinks in like a house of cards, all toppling down around me. "This is why you broke up with me."

My hands are still in Rhodes' grasp, and I stare down at them. My fingers, dainty with nails painted a delicate shade of lavender, and Rhodes' hands, roughened by his job, enveloping mine. Rhodes' head remains bowed.

"You lied," I say, almost in a tone of wonder. Like I can hardly believe it. "You told me we were keeping each other back from the things we needed to do in life, but that wasn't true at all."

I'm through with looking at the top of Rhodes' head, so I place two fingers beneath his chin and lift his gaze to meet mine. The look on his face makes me want to collapse, to draw him in my arms and soothe him. I don't understand the feeling, and I don't give into it either. He doesn't deserve to be soothed.

“Say it, Rhodes. Tell me exactly why you really broke up with me.”

Tears stick to his fringe of lashes. This fucking face with its strong cheekbones and straight nose and thick eyebrows and unfairly long eyelashes and freckles across the bridge of his nose from working in the sun, *this fucking face* is the face of a liar.

And it’s Rhodes.

My heart hates this.

“Tell me the truth to my face, Rhodes.”

“It’s true that I thought I was holding you back. But it’s also true that I broke up with you because the guilt was eating me alive. I felt like I had a hand in your father’s death.”

“You could have told him no. You could have told me, and I would’ve gotten my mom involved.”

“I thought about that back then. I promise. I thought about all possible scenarios, and they all ended with hurting you. At the time, giving him the pills seemed like the least likely way to hurt you. I thought he’d get high a few times, whatever, move on. How could I have possibly known that meth dealer from Sierra Grande was going to make Green Haven his next market?”

I take my hands back from Rhodes and wipe under my eyes. “I don’t know what to say to you right now.” My stomach turns over, my mind struggling to understand the events of back then. A truth that always existed, only I didn’t know it. But Rhodes did.

“Peach, please. Understand. I was eighteen, and I was confused and scared. I didn’t know what my future would look like if he reported me. And I loved you. Even back then, I

loved you in a way that never felt childish. It felt like it does today. Like it's an end-of-time love. It can transcend anything, it can survive everything."

"No," I say, standing so quickly that it forces Rhodes to either stand up or risk falling down. "Don't do that. Don't suggest to me that I should forgive you because our love is big enough to handle this mistake."

"It is though, Peach. It is big enough."

I catch sight of a picture of Robbie, stuck under a magnet on the fridge, and realize I'm going to have to tell Jake. And my mother.

"I need some time alone. I need to figure out how I'm going to tell my mom and Jake."

Rhodes nods. "Please let me be the one to talk to Jake."

"He's my brother. I think it should come from me."

"He's my best friend."

"Some best friend you've been."

It's a hit below the belt, and it reaches its mark. Rhodes winces, as if the blow is physical. I feel bad, but not enough to take it back. Not right now, anyway. Right now, it feels like every good deed Rhodes has ever done has been overshadowed by this instance of poor judgment.

My arms cross. "I think you should go."

"What about us? Where do we stand?"

"I need time to figure out how I feel. I can't do that with you in the room. I can't even look at you right now."

Rhodes snuffles, and it requires all my strength not to throw my arms around him.

“Give me time, Rhodes. Don’t call me. Don’t come over. I’ll let you know when I’m ready to talk.” He hovers, hesitating, so I add, “Please.”

He walks away, but pauses at the edge of the kitchen. His voice fills the small space, reverberating against walls and cabinets. “There are two things you need to know, Peach. The first is that I have been sorry since the moment I gave your dad those pills. The second is that I have loved you since the moment I saw you.”

He walks out the door. This time it feels different than it did back then. Back then I was confused, and blindsided. Today is confusing and blindsiding as well, but there’s a different gravity to it. This time there are principles, a moral dilemma, a place where right and wrong are not easily defined.

I sink back into my chair, and with one sweep of my arm, the pill bottle hits the ground.

My head drops into my hands, and I cry like I did when I was sixteen, the first time Rhodes broke my heart.

# Chapter 36

## *Rhodes*

THE WALK FROM GEORGIA'S HOUSE BACK TO MINE IS A BLUR.

That wasn't how I meant for her to find out. I don't know exactly when I was going to tell her, but it would've been soon.

I hate myself right now. Georgia didn't even cry. She looked hollow, like somebody had carved her heart from her body. In a way, it looked like she expected this. On some level, she expected to be hurt. Disappointed. She knows I love her, but the precedent has been set.

By me, by her father, by the asshole she dated in Flagstaff. And, now, by me again. It kills me to know I've hurt her. She's the last person I want to see in pain, and it wrecks me that I am the cause of it.

Georgia wants time. I'll give her time, I have it in spades.

The competition, however, will not. It's eight days away. I don't think she's gone that far into the future in her head. For her right now, there is only grief. Deception.

And now I'll have to call my best friend and tell him everything Georgia just learned. I don't even know that I deserve to be worried about myself at this point, but I am. Will I lose my best friend, and the girl I love, in one fell swoop?

Will the decision I made eleven years ago change my life today?

When I walk into my house, I don't mean to slam the door. My mother, in the middle of a nap in her recliner, startles.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“What's wrong?”

It must've been my tone of voice. Do I sound like my future, and even my past to a degree, is in jeopardy of being taken away from me? If Jake decides to hate me forever, does it mean all these years of friendship go away? Does it take our memories and change them from color to black and white?

“Rhodes, I know something is wrong. You just tried to take the door off its hinges.”

I fold myself onto the couch beside her chair. “I messed up, Mom.”

“With Georgia?”

“Yeah.”

“Messes can be cleaned up, Rhodes.”

“Maybe not this one.”

“Tell me what happened, and I'll see if I can help.”

The only way my mom can help now is if we can reverse time and make it so that she never had dental surgery. Or that Tom never overheard her tell somebody she had dental surgery.

I know it's not her fault. I'm just dying for it to be someone else's fault besides my own, or at least to share the blame a little.

I don't want my mom to feel guilty about any of this. "It's a long story, Mom, but trust me when I say it's going to be really hard to climb my way out of this one."

"Did you try the truth?"

The truth is what I should've tried on the night of Georgia's sixteenth birthday, when we decided to keep our relationship quiet for the time being. I'd been so worried about Tom's stress level, and my contribution to it if he found out I was dating his daughter.

There were so many times we should've opted to tell the truth, and we didn't.

It's pointless, but I feel anger toward my younger self.

I'm restless, knowing what I need to do next. I push off the couch, telling my mom I need to call Jake.

"Love you, Mom."

"Love you. It'll all work out, you'll see."

I step out back into the bright, full sun, letting the heat beat down on me. I'm nervous as hell, anxious and desperately hoping Jake will understand. Actually, I don't think I'm hoping Jake will understand. I'm hoping for far less. All I want is for him to not hate me.

Jake answers on the third ring. "What's up?"

---

"Dude, I've never heard you be so cryptic in my life." Jake ambles down the short river bank toward my truck. "What the hell is going on? Wait," he holds up a finger. "Are you going to tell me Georgia's pregnant?"



That's where my mind went first too, and damn do I wish that was my news. The idea of Georgia carrying our child is cause for celebration. This news? It might mean my funeral.

I'm sitting on my open tailgate, and Jake hops up. He holds out his fist for a bump. I oblige, shaking my head. "Georgia is not pregnant."

Jake looks a little disappointed. "I've got to tell you, now that I know about you two, I don't know how I ever missed it. You guys make perfect sense."

"Yeah," I agree, watching the river water glide over the rocks.

"I mean, you've got me to thank, right?" He elbows me. "I practically pushed you together. *Twice.*"

"That's true."

"So I guess what I'm saying is, you're welcome. And don't be mad if I say all that at your wedding during my best man speech because I'm not that creative and I can't be counted on to come up with more than that."

I rub a hand over the back of my neck. *Fuck. Here we go.*

"I don't know if there's going to be a wedding, Jake."

Jake sends me a disbelieving look. "Is this where I tell you that if you hurt my sister, I'll bury you in a shallow grave?" He says it in this irreverent way, like those are words he'd never have to use on me.

"Might want to start digging," I mutter.

This gets his attention. Jake quiets, his eyebrows pulling together. "What happened?"

“The reason Georgia and I broke up back then, it’s only partially true.” I sigh, wishing I didn’t have to say these words out loud. They’ve been a long time coming, and on some level I always knew they were inevitable. “I did something a long time ago, something I felt really guilty about, and I convinced myself Georgia was better off without me.”

Easy-going Jake suddenly looks like he’ll have my head for breakfast. “Did you cheat on my sister?”

My head rears back. When you find your soulmate, you savor it and protect the connection. You don’t throw it away. “God, no. Not at all. Georgia is better than most people in this world, and I was lucky enough to find her.”

“Ok, then What. The. Fuck did you do?”

I explain. Every word I don’t want to say, I say. I tell the truth. Every ugly bit of it. Jake nods. He sighs. He rubs his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of one hand. When I tell him the worst part about his dad, asking for painkillers and me acquiescing, he drags in a heavy, loud breath through his nostrils.

“I wish you would’ve told me. Back then, I wish you would’ve called me and told me.”

“And then what? What would you have done? Driven home from college? Dropped out to help your mom and dad?”

Jake hops off the tailgate. He rounds the back end of the truck, kicking his boot lightly against the tire. “Probably,” he acknowledges.

“I know you guys don’t understand because you were living in it, living the nightmare with him, but I was on the outside, looking in. I watched the toll his addiction took on your family, and I watched you guys on the upswing when

everybody thought he was doing better. I know it sounds backwards, but at the time I thought if I could give him a little of what he wanted, maybe that was all he would need and the peace your family felt could continue.”

“You were a teenager,” Jake says. “Teenagers aren’t exactly known for making great decisions. I’m sure that’s what my dad was banking on when he asked you.” He hangs his head and kicks the tire once more, harder this time. “Fuck,” he spits out angrily. “Dammit, Dad.” He crosses his arms and glares up at the sky. “How can I be this mad at him over a decade later?”

It hits me that all this time, this is exactly what I was trying to avoid. I know what it feels like to be disappointed in your dad, to not understand the choices they make. Perhaps, on some level, I was trying to keep Jake and Georgia’s dad around, because my own had been missing in action most of my life.

“Jake, I’m sorry, man. I wish you could see inside my head and know how much I regret what I did back then.”

Jake nods. He turns toward the river, hands tucked in his pockets. “I take it Georgia knows?”

“Yeah.”

“And she’s upset?”

“Devastated. Furious. Asked me for space.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“I don’t know if she’d like that.”

Jake huffs a laugh. “She has always despised her big brother telling her what to do.”

I join him at the river's edge. "I was terrified to tell you all this. For years, I believed if you knew, we wouldn't be friends anymore."

Jake claps his bear paw of a hand on my shoulder. "I don't blame you. Honestly, if you told me before I met Colbie, it might've gone differently than this. But that woman has taught me a lot about how to consider people's motivations as a reason for their behavior. Not to excuse it, but to understand it. She has the emotional maturity most people can't even wish for because they don't know it exists."

Motivations. *Interesting.*

Jake continues. "I can see your motivations today, and back then. And they're centered around not hurting Georgia."

"Something I still managed to do, twice."

"You tried, though, Rhodes. You tried. An adult took advantage of you. Manipulated you. There's no way my dad didn't know what you'd choose to do. He'd been around you for two and a half years by then. He knew the kind of person you were." Hurt sweeps over Jake's face. "I don't know if I'll ever stop feeling shocked at how my dad's life ended up."

I place a hand on his back. "Sorry for how things turned out with your dad, and my role in it."

"You might not have played as big of a role as you think. If he wanted it, he was going to find a way to get it. It was just about timing and opportunity, and it happened to be you."

"I'm still sorry."

Jake hugs me, slapping my back in the way he always has, where he forgets about how much of a blow his hand delivers compared to mine. My relief is palpable, a decade-plus guilt given reprieve.

He steps back. “What are you going to do about Georgia? And the competition? Isn’t it next weekend?”

“She asked me for space, so I’m going to give it to her.”

“And the competition? I can’t imagine she’d throw it away. It’s too important to her.”

“I can’t either. But I won’t go against her wishes right now.”

As of right now, Georgia is calling the shots.

# Chapter 37

# *Georgia*

THE HARDEST PART ABOUT BEING HEARTBROKEN THIS TIME around is that I don't have the luxury of time. The competition in Phoenix next weekend will commence with or without me and Rhodes.

Right now, my current suffering envelops my world. But to the rest of the world, my suffering amounts to nothing.

And that's actually freeing. What a gift it is to be shown how much more life there is outside of personal pain. It makes me want to face it head on, instead of tucking it away and letting it fester, the way I did for years. Over Rhodes, and my dad.

Now that I've had a few hours to think about it, some of my initial hurt has melted, slipping into the cracks of all my other emotions, and revealing them.

I'm *embarrassed*. My dad asked my boyfriend to steal painkillers from his own mother.

I'm *angry*. My dad abandoned me, leaving me to navigate life without him.

I'm *resentful*. My dad made terrible choices that hurt his family, and I've refused to grieve him.

Rhodes is not the cause of any of those feelings. My father, however, is a common denominator.

My mother comes home from work for lunch. She stands in the kitchen, assembling a tuna sandwich. If the smell wasn't reminiscent of my childhood, I would probably gag.

I tell her everything I learned about the pill bottle. She eats, her face showing the appropriate expressions, but she says nothing. She dabs at the corners of her mouth with a napkin, then balls it up and tosses it on the plate.

Her first words are, "I'm not sure what to say."

I can't figure out why she is so composed. "You are a lot calmer than I thought you would be." Is she not embarrassed? Angry? Resentful, like me?

Her brow furrows. She sips from her water, swallows, then says, "I guess I'm calm because I'm not surprised. Your dad did a lot of stuff back then, things you don't know about. Things I won't tell you. This is"—she shrugs once, letting her shoulders drop—"just another sprinkle on the sundae."

I frown at her flippancy. "Not for me, it's not."

"Of course not, hon." She reaches for my hand across the table. "You're obviously hurt. That's normal. But you should remember that Rhodes was a kid back then, too."

"It's not just Rhodes," I say, shaking my head. "It's Dad. I think I've been holding on to all these negative feelings I have toward him, instead of grieving. And then Rhodes tells me about these pills, and it's like taking all the feelings I've stuffed inside for so long, and throwing them in front of me, like red paint on a wall-size canvas." I motion with my hands like I'm painting the air. "It's *there*, you know? I can't escape



it. And I'm forced to deal with it because of the competition. This time I don't get to stuff it down."

"Maybe this time you *shouldn't* stuff it down."

"Hah," I say, a sound devoid of mirth. "Probably good advice."

Mom raps her knuckles on the table. "Are you going to take it?"

A plan forms in my mind. "Yeah. I think so." I slide my hand out from under her grasp. "I'm going to get changed."

Mom turns on the television in the living room while I change into exercise shorts and a t-shirt. When I come back out, Mom is standing in the middle of the living room, arms crossed, her gaze fixed on the screen. The coiffed blonde weather woman talks in a grave tone about a hurricane approaching Florida.

My mom turns at the sound of my approach. "You think you have it bad? These poor Floridians have been advised to evacuate their homes. Imagine being under the threat of losing your possessions."

Framed that way, it dampens my outrage.

On the television, the screen switches from a shot of blowing palm trees and pounding rain to large trucks driving the opposite way of highway traffic.

A different person, this time a shiny-toothed, spray-tanned man says, "Thousands of linemen are coming in from states as far away as Washington, ready to wait out the hurricane and begin the likely months-long process of restoring power."

The word *linemen* automatically makes me think of Rhodes. If his crew decides to go out there, would he join

them? Would he want to, but choose not to go because of the competition?

“Are you headed out?” Mom asks, looking at the sneakers on my feet. She grabs the remote and turns off the TV. “My lunch break is just about over.”

“I’m going to go to the cemetery.” We’ve been every year on the anniversary of my dad’s passing, but I’ve never been on my own.

Mom’s smile is lopsided. “Good luck, hon. Personally, as many times as I’ve been out there, I’ve never felt close to him.”

“Where do you feel close to him?”

“Our bed. The restaurant he liked to go to on date night. Standing next to his tool bench in the garage.”

“I’ll consider the cemetery a jumping off point.”

She kisses the side of my head on her way past me. “Don’t forget to take water and a hat. It’s hot as hell out there today.”

She walks out the front door, and a minute later I hear her car start up and drive away.

I do as she says, grabbing a wide-brimmed straw hat and filling a water bottle with filtered water from the fridge. Nerves flutter through my belly, but with one foot in front of the other, I make it into my car.

Rhodes’ truck is missing from his driveway, but I go the opposite direction from where I’m headed anyway, just so I can pass Candy House anyway. Not because I think he will somehow be there, but because I want to feel close to him.

I know I could call him and ask him to join me. I know he would abandon whatever it is he’s doing to sit beside me in the

dirt and stare at my dad's headstone with me.

This is something I need to do on my own, so I kiss my fingertips and flutter my fingers at Rhodes' house on my way by.



Here's what I know about the cemetery.

It's hot.

It's dusty.

There is almost no shade, except for that from the spindly Palo Verde trees.

Even the slightest breeze, while appreciated in terms of cooling, is not appreciated in that it stirs up dirt.

And, my biggest complaint by far, is that my dad is most definitely not here. I do not feel him at all. This is a good thing, because now I don't have to wonder if I've been missing out all these years.

Chugging my water, I get back in my car. The cemetery is located outside of town on the northeast side. I drive back aimlessly, feeling the oddest slice of peace, even though my dad was nowhere to be found just now. Maybe it's the fact that I'm finally trying.

I find myself driving down Idyllwild Avenue, and as I approach Hustle & Swing, my muscle memory completes the left turn into the parking lot.

There is nobody here, so I use the key Donna gave me before she left town for her extended stay with her daughter.

I'm usually here in the evenings, so I don't get to see how beautiful the studio is during the day. Bright sunshine pours in through the windowed garage door wall. The floors gleam in the light, and the almond colored walls appear brighter.

I toe off my cemetery-dust shoes and leave them by the door. In the mirror, I watch myself glide to the center of the room. Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and realize something I've been missing this whole time. This is where I feel my dad.

His big, dark hair dusted forearms, his hearty laugh, his flannel shirts. The smell of concrete, and sweat, the lingering scent of a Coke he would sometimes crave after a long day in the sun.

The first time we came here, Donna was thrilled to have a father and daughter taking lessons together. "What a special way to spend time," she'd said, eyes soft.

Dance lessons were my dad's idea, and I was not fully on board at first. I said yes, even though I was reticent, mostly because my friend Lauryn swore her dad didn't even like her, and Rhodes said his dad barely knew he existed before they left him and moved away. After hearing all that, I decided I should be grateful I had a dad who liked me and knew I existed. The least I could do was agree to take dance lessons with him.

I didn't know I would love it. I didn't know it would be the beginning of my love of dance, and in particular, this style. And now, my interest in dance led Colbie to offer me a position to not only teach barre class, but to become a partial owner of a studio.

Opening my eyes, I begin to dance. I dance without music, improvising and slicing the air with my hands, disrupting the

dust motes and sending them on a spiraling journey.

I picture my dad as my partner, his sometimes clumsy feet, and his sometimes even clumsier hands, leading me despite his imperfections. Maybe the sad ending of his life shouldn't be a headline in my heart anymore, because when he was good, he was better than most.

I continue to dance, and I use the bottom of my shirt to wipe away my tears. All these years, I thought I've been pushing away my father, and somehow I still managed to get back to the place where I felt closest to him. I thought I was coming here because this is where I felt I could go to be myself, but that's what I had with my dad, too. In his arms was a home, a place I felt the purest love.

My solo, non-music dance ends. I drift over to the bench in front of the bay of lockers, sinking down until my elbows hit my knees, and my head drops in my hands. There is so much to unpack, and with all this emotion flooding my heart, it's not easy to sift through it all.

The door to Hustle & Swing opens, and my head snaps up.

"Whoa," Dakota says, taking me in with wide eyes. She's wearing a white t-shirt tucked into a brown suede skirt and turquoise cowgirl boots. "Come on," she says, coming my way with an extended hand. "Let's go."

I let her pull me up. "Where are we going?"

"Late lunch," she answers. "You look like you could use an ear and a friend, and I'm starving. I drove out here to get some paperwork from Donna's office."

"Why do you look so cute?" I wrinkle my nose at her, as if her outfit is offending me personally.

“Family pictures,” she responds, disappearing into the office.

She’s back a few moments later, papers in hand. “Donna needs to pay her quarterly taxes, but she didn’t have everything she needed.”

Dakota winds her elbow around mine and leads me to the door. She waits while I slide my feet into my shoes, then locks up behind us when we leave.

“I take it you have a key?” she asks.

“I have a screwdriver and a keen sense for picking locks.”

Dakota laughs. “If a Hayden had delivered that comment, there would probably be a ring of truth to it.” She stops at the end of her SUV. “Now, where does a girl go to get a good sandwich around here?”

“Besides The Orchard?”

She nods. “I eat there all the time. Show me where you like to go in Green Haven.”

There’s only one answer to that question. Honeybee.

# Chapter 38

# *Georgia*

HONEYBEE IS A LOCAL TREASURE. IF IT'S NOT THE WALL covered in matte black honeycomb shaped tile or the rustic hardwood floors ribboned with black causing people to say *wow*, it's the food. Jiminy's vegetable garden is something to be admired, and nearly every vegetable used in Honeybee's menu is grown in the raised beds behind the restaurant.

"I know this place," Dakota says, stepping from her car. "We sent the proprietor an information packet when we were first getting the market set up. He wrote us an email and said he uses most of his vegetables for the restaurant, and he wasn't interested in selling what he doesn't use because he gives it to a food bank in another town."

"Sounds about right." Jiminy is the most generous person I've ever met. Next to Rhodes, anyway.

I hold open the door for Dakota and we step into the blessedly cool air of the restaurant.

One of Jiminy's granddaughters leads us to a booth.

I open the menu, even though I know it by heart. Dakota takes in the space, appreciating the details in a way only a fellow restaurateur can. "I love the way the tables are laid out. Such a good flow from the kitchen. No tables obnoxiously



in the way, blocking the servers' path." Her head swivels. "And the pass-through from the kitchen to the counter service is a great idea. It delineates the fast service counter from the floor seating where people are more likely to take their time and want to interact with a server."

I close my menu. "You have many talents, Dakota."

Her eyes drift back to me. "I didn't always. I was a shit when I was younger."

This surprises me. "You didn't come out of the womb being this amazing?"

"Not at all. I made a lot of mistakes, and when I finally pulled my head from my ass, I had a lot of ground to cover to get to where I wanted to be."

"That actually makes me feel better," I say, pausing my train of thought to order an iced tea with lemon from the server. Dakota orders the same, and a hot turkey and havarti sandwich with homemade potato chips.

"Times two, please," I say. The server collects our menus and retreats.

"Go on," Dakota urges. "You were saying how my poor life choices made you feel better."

I burst out in laughter. "I didn't mean it that way."

She grins. "How else are we supposed to learn?"

"What I meant was that it's nice to hear someone else didn't follow a straight path and get it all right the first time. For so long, I felt like I've been this disappointment of a person, like I was emotionally stunted at sixteen, frozen by what my dad did. And then Rhodes." The server dropped off our iced teas while I was talking, so I unwrap the straw and

plunk it into the tea. “I guess I feel like I’m late to life. Or I did, anyway. I don’t think I feel that way as much anymore.”

“What changed for you? To make you stop feeling that way?”

“Rhodes.” His name is the first answer that comes to mind. And then, “The competition. And my sister-in-law Colbie asking me to be her partner in the opening of a barre studio in town.”

Dakota’s eyes grow rounder with excitement. “A barre studio?” she says around her straw. “Now that is a form of exercise I can get behind. I bet Tenley would do it with me. Jo and Jessie,” she lifts her flattened palm and tips it back and forth in the air. “Jo might agree to go sometimes, and Jessie will pretty much agree to go never.” A smile stretches across Dakota’s face when she talks about her sisters-in-law.

“I won’t lie, Jessie frightens me.”

“She’s harmless.” Dakota’s lips twist. “Actually, I take that back. She’s not at all harmless. But as long as you don’t hurt the ranch or someone she loves, she’ll do almost anything for you.”

I nod. “Noted.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Dakota squeezes her lemon into her tea and sets the used segment on a napkin.

“Ask away.”

“You and Rhodes... I know you’re together now, but there was some serious tension between you when I first met you. Is it safe to guess there was something there in the past?”

I blow out a breath so heavy it moves my hair from the side of my face. “We were together a long time ago, in high

school. And he blindsided me by breaking things off and leaving town. I'd see him every once in a while when he came home during jobs, but I went out of my way to stay away from him, and I lived in Flagstaff for college and three years after that, so it wasn't like it was all that difficult to avoid him."

"Until..." she intones, knowing there's more.

"Until he came home for good to help his mom, who's losing her vision. When my older brother told him I needed a dance partner, he offered because he'd danced with me in high school after my dad—" I pause, unsure how to say it all. Then I decide to go with it, because Dakota is open and honest, and I don't think she'll be judgmental. Especially not when she was a self-proclaimed *shit whose head was in her ass*. "My dad got addicted to painkillers after he slipped a disc at work. We thought he was getting better, but then this guy came through town selling meth"—I wince at the word—"and my dad gave it a try. The timeline is hard to piece together, and nobody really knows all the facts except maybe my mom and even she probably doesn't know everything. All we know for certain is that he went into the emergency room because he couldn't breathe and he died when he got there. His heart stopped." I look at Dakota, afraid of what I'll see when I do, but there's nothing except sympathy.

My cheeks heat with the sting of a vulnerability hangover. "Wow, I really just word vomited."

"Please don't feel embarrassed, or any other negative feeling. Some other day I'll tell you why I used to be a shit, ok? Not today, because here comes our food and today isn't about me."

The server comes from behind me, sliding our sandwiches across the table to each of us. She refills our iced teas, smiling

at our *thank you's* as she backs away.

“Sometimes I blame my dad for what he did. Other times, I blame the doctor who prescribed him painkillers, and other times I want to track down the meth dealer, tie him down, then pour a bucket of fire ants on his crotch.”

Dakota laughs so hard she coughs on her first bite. “While I appreciate the creative way to inflict pain on someone, I feel like you should know there’s no way to track down the meth dealer.”

I pull away a gooey string of cheese from my sandwich and take a bite. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Because if it’s the same person I’m guessing it was, his meth lab was just outside the property lines of the Hayden Cattle Company, and it exploded four or five years ago.”

The sandwich sits in my cheek like a squirrel with an acorn. “What?” I chew quickly, then add, “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m positive.” Dakota wipes her lips with a napkin. “It was on the news.”

“That is FANTASTIC.”

She grins. “Agreed. Now, let’s talk about how you’re going to win the competition next weekend. I’ve talked the entire Hayden family into going to Phoenix to watch. Even Wes and Jessie have agreed, and I can’t get the two of them to leave the ranch most days, and almost never at the same time. The head cowboy is going to watch over the HCC while Wes and Jessie are gone for the weekend.”

Air fills my cheeks before slowly leaking out. “I’m nervous, but I think we’ll be good. I’d like to practice every night leading up to it from here on out. You don’t have to be

there every night. I know you have a family and all that, but I can use my key.”

“I think that’s a great idea. And just have fun with it, you know? You both know the routine by now, maybe you can add a few of your own flourishes.”

“Yes, exactly, and—”

“Georgia?”

I turn toward my name. Ian’s standing beside the booth. On his own two feet. No boot on his right foot.

“Hi,” I say in surprise, getting up from the table. He leans in for a quick hug, then steps back and gestures at his foot. “All healed.”

“Wow, that was faster than you thought. That’s great.” I make introductions, and explain Dakota’s been running Hustle & Swing in Donna’s absence. “She’s also privately coaching me and my partner for the competition next weekend.”

Ian’s face falls. “Is it wrong that I was hoping you still needed a partner?”

“Not wrong,” I answer, shaking my head. “And if I didn’t already have a partner, I’d haul you into the studio for eight hours a day until it was time to drive down to Phoenix.”

He snaps his fingers. “Shucks.” He turns to Dakota. “It was nice to meet you. Georgia,” he looks at me. “I know it’s been a while since we talked. I was feeling sorry for myself,” he grins crookedly. “Sorry about that.”

I open my mouth to answer, but he doesn’t give me the chance. He does a mock salute and pivots, walking to the counter and picking up a large to-go bag.

“So,” Dakota says, tearing my gaze from Ian’s retreating form. “That’s the dance partner who was injured?”

Dazed, I answer, “That’s Ian.”

She takes the last bite of her sandwich. “Rhodes is definitely more handsome.”

I sip my tea. “Rhodes is more everything.”

Ian was good, too. Ian was what I needed when I was finally ready to take that first tentative step after Steven. Ian’s only real fault is that he’s not Rhodes.

Dakota smiles. “Feels good, doesn’t it? To know you’re with the right person?”

The question is rhetorical, but it makes me think. Earlier, when I asked Rhodes for space, I meant it. He respected my request, and he’s doing what I asked. I thought I’d need more time, more space, but maybe not. Maybe I’ve already figured it out.

Rhodes is the right person, even if he did something wrong in the past.

Dakota and I finish up and pay. I’m walking to my car when Colbie texts.

Can you meet the contractor at Burn Barre? He needs to take measurements.

I tell her I’m on my way over, even though all I want to do is show up at Candy House and talk to Rhodes. I asked for space, but as far as I’m concerned, that request has expired.

The contractor is an hour late, despite repeatedly telling me he’s on his way.

By the time he arrives and takes all his measurements, it's probably past the time Rhodes goes to sleep.

I text him anyway, hoping he'll be awake. There isn't a response, so I scribble a note on my Honeybee receipt and slide it under one of the windshield wipers on his truck.

*G loves R until the sky falls down.*

# Chapter 39



# *Rhodes*

*G LOVES R UNTIL THE SKY FALLS DOWN.*

The sun had only just surfaced in the east, stretching its reach into the gradient blue sky, when I left my house to drive to work. If the shock of sun hadn't illuminated the note tucked under my windshield wiper, it might have fluttered away.

But it didn't.

I read the note, relief settling into my bones at the same time the lead weight of all that has happened vanished from my chest.

Georgia knows. Jake knows. And everything is ok.

Now all I have to do is get through this work day. After that, I'm going straight to Georgia.

We're working on a new job about forty miles south of town, trading out old wooden light poles for new metal ones.

The drop in elevation means the air temperature is higher. We're in the middle of nowhere, desert as far as the eye can see, and we have to be careful of the prickly pear all over the place. One brush up against those cacti and it'll take weeks to get the spines out of our jeans. The soft-looking spines are tiny and fine, and damn near impossible to pinch between fingernails.

“Your turn in the bucket today?” Lud asks, fitting his hard hat on his head.

“Sure,” I answer, doing the same with my own hard hat.

I pull my harness from the back of the truck and start getting it situated.

“Have you heard about this monster hurricane approaching Florida?” The excitement in my foreman’s voice makes me pause halfway through fitting my foot through the harness. I look up, blinking against the sun. “My mom mentioned it last night.”

“What do you think?” he asks.

I fit my second foot through the opening. “About going?”

He nods. “They’re asking for more linemen.”

“Really?” Using two fingers, I scratch an itch under my hard hat. “All those images you see on the news makes it look like there’s an army of linemen headed that way.”

“There are,” Lud says, “and they need more.”

“You want our crew to go?” There was a time, before Georgia, when I would’ve been first to mention the hurricane to him. I would’ve been the one to find the general foreman in Florida and add my name to his roster.

“I think it’d be good for everyone. You’ve traveled all over doing this type of work, but softie over there,” he indicates his head at Chris, “could use some experience. And the pay.” He gestures with widened palms, as if he need not explain the money as motivation. “Would be nice for me to have a little extra with a kid on the way.”

The pay is higher for a reason. Working with electricity around water is dangerous. I finish securing my harness, and

Lud claps me on the back when I'm done. "Don't take too long to think about it," he says. "We have to have an answer by the end of the day. Flying out tomorrow morning."

*Shit.* Of course, there's no time. We're on mother nature's timetable now. Mother nature doesn't care that I need to talk to Georgia, or that there's a dance competition we're a week away from.

But I care. Deeply.

I don't have to go. I'll say goodbye to these guys at the yard this afternoon and that will be that. The general foreman will put me on another crew, hopefully one that's working in the vicinity.

That's what I want. Almost certainly.

So, why the hell am I hesitating? Why, when I'm on the precipice of having everything I've ever wanted, do I feel torn about the decision to let my crew go without me?

The workday goes smoothly. The pole change-outs are single phase, the easiest kind. Good thing too, because my mind is elsewhere.

When the day is done, I waste no time dropping the truck off at the yard and getting in mine.

"Let me know ASAP," Lud calls from his open truck window.

I nod once, distracted.

My fingers, my hands, my lips, they're itching to find purchase on Georgia's skin.

My heart may as well be reaching for her. In response, my foot presses down on the gas pedal.

Georgia, here I come.

---

In the interest of Georgia's delicate nose, and a day full of sweating, I stop at home for what I've already planned to be the world's fastest shower.

When I step into the house, I hear voices in the kitchen.

Two voices, to be precise, and they are both imprinted on my soul.

Georgia and my mother sit at the table, a plate of biscuits and that jar of blackberry orange jam from the farmers market between them.

"Um. Hi," I say, leaning against the entrance wall in the kitchen. I'm shocked, but I'm also doing everything I can not to rush at Georgia and lift her into my arms. These past twenty-four hours have been hell, and seeing her right now is making the longing I felt for her even sharper.

"We're having a tea party," my mom says, smiling. She looks happier than I've seen her in months. "A grown-up tea party," she amends, pointing at her glass. "That's wine."

"Honestly, Rhodes," Georgia says, her voice lofty, "How have you two lived in Candy House all these years and not had a tea party? The exterior is practically begging for one."

"Probably because I'm not a four-year-old." I push off the wall and walk further into the kitchen. Bending, I kiss my mom on the cheek. Standing up straight, I'm not sure what to do with Georgia, but she tips her head sideways and points at her cheek.

It's like my entire body lets out a breath. I feel the sigh *everywhere*.

"Would you like to join us?" Georgia holds up the bottle.

"I'm going to grab a shower." I gesture at myself from head to toe. "I smell like I've been working all day."

"You sure do," my mom says, tone full of sass.

I could cry. I haven't heard playful sass in my mom's voice in a long time.

I take my shower, and by the time I come back out, the biscuits are gone and so is the wine. "Well," my mom says, standing up from the table. "I'll leave you guys to talk. I might be half-blind, but even I can see all the words sitting between the two of you."

Georgia laughs, and my mom lightly touches my shoulder on her way out to the living room. I look at Georgia. Georgia's looking at me.

"Hi," she says softly.

I don't say hi. I do what I wanted to do the moment I walked in and saw her. Two strides and the distance between us is closed. One dip of my head and I capture her mouth with my own.

Our first kiss is my apology.

Our second is my reverence.

Our third is my hope.

Every one after that is my desire, mingling with hers.

"We should talk," she whispers, when we've taken a break to breathe.

I nod, grabbing two bottles of beer from the fridge and leading her out to the covered patio. It's not so far into summer that the nights are hot, too. There will be a point, come August, when the low temperature is still warm, but right now, in the late afternoon shade, it's bearable.

Georgia settles on the loveseat.

"Where do we start?" I twist the top off both bottles, handing her one. I take the seat beside her, so we can both look out at the backyard.

"My dad."

My throat knots. I hate the pain in her voice when she mentions him.

"I'm sorry," I start to say, but she shakes her head at me.

"Actually, I'm the one who should be apologizing on his behalf."

The bottle, halfway to my lips, freezes. "What? No."

"Yes," she says, firm. "He did a terrible thing. Threatening and manipulating you, using me to get what he wanted." She runs a fingertip around the opening of her bottle. "It was hard for me to wrap my mind around it. That's why I asked for space. And I'm sorry that I said I couldn't look at you. It's hard to be angry and disappointed with somebody who's not alive. It's like the feelings don't have anywhere to go, so they either get stuffed down or released into the world like an oil spill."

I stay quiet, and she continues. "It makes me sad to know you've been living with this guilt all these years. You weren't to blame."

It's the first time I've considered that it's not my fault. And it feels... *good*. Until now, I didn't realize how heavy the burden of guilt was. How deeply it weighed on me, pressing me down, keeping me in place. All these years, it kept me from going after Georgia.

I set my beer bottle down on the ground, turning to face her. She tucks one leg up on the bench, swinging the other over my thighs.

The burnt orange afternoon sun burnishes her blonde hair. Her face, muscles softened by wine and relief, looks lovingly at me. This woman has owned my heart since she was a girl.

"Thank you for saying that. I appreciate it. But I want you to know, if I could go back in time, I would do things differently. I would've challenged him. I would've gone straight back into your house and woken up your mom and told her what your dad was asking me for." I touch Georgia's hand, running my fingertips over her knuckles. "I'm sorry we've missed these last eleven years."

"Me too." A sheen of moisture forms in her eyes. "When we were younger and sneaking around, I thought it was kind of fun. But then I also thought one day soon it would end, and we'd be able to come clean and tell everyone we loved each other. We'd do the typical stuff: college, jobs, get married, start a family. All the things I'd always wanted."

"Quite the detour we took." There's a thread of disgust in my voice. I can't help it. There'd been so much hope for us when we were younger. It was never a matter of *if* we were going to tell everybody about us, but *when*. Then life came in and gave two young kids a dose of adult medicine.

"That's exactly what I've been trying to work out. I've been wasting time feeling sad about us, but then this thought

popped into my head. What if our story isn't sad? What if it's simply a journey? A road. And it's ok if our road had some bumps and roadblocks, when others have been smooth. I was floundering after leaving Flagstaff, almost like I thought if my journey didn't start out the way I had pictured it would, then it couldn't continue. And that's not your doing, Rhodes. That's mine. You are not the reason I had a hard time these past few years. I am the reason."

As much as I want to argue with her, as much as I want to shoulder all the blame so she doesn't have to, she has a point. A really good one.

"I think maybe a part of loving someone is letting them own their feelings. Their mistakes. And then sitting beside them and holding their hand and letting all those things just *exist*, without having to think any harder about it."

One of the biggest reasons I didn't tell Georgia about her dad was because I wanted to save her from feeling pain. But I don't need to save Georgia. Georgia is perfectly capable of hurting and recovering.

Look at how she handled the truth about what happened eleven years ago. She was upset, but she worked through it. She came to my house today. She understood why I did what I did. Those aren't the actions of a woman who needs to be saved.

"You're kind of amazing, Georgia Whittier."

"You aren't so bad yourself, Rhodes Porter."

She smiles. "I think this is where you kiss me."

"There is so much more I want to do to you than kiss you." I lean in, run the tip of my nose up her throat. "But you know what?"



“Hmm?” The sound is a vibration low in her throat.

“I live with my mother.”

“That again?”

I laugh at the unexpected response. “Our living situations are pretty big cock blocks.”

“What if I told you my mother has book club tonight, and is guaranteed to be gone until at least nine?”

“I’d ask what the hell we’re waiting for.”

She stands up, and I slap her backside hard enough she yelps and swats at me.

I empty the beer in the sink and toss it in the trash. On our way out of the house, my mother, earbuds in place, says way too loudly, “Wear a condom.”

Georgia almost chokes on her shock, but I roll my eyes. “My mom forgets not everyone is listening to the same explicit books as her and randomly makes inappropriate comments.”

“Fine,” my mom says. “Don’t wear a condom and give me a grand baby while I can still see.”

Her comment sidelines my lust-filled goals. I’d only been thinking of the here and now in terms of my mom and her eyesight, not what she will miss in the future.

Georgia makes a sad face, her lower lip jutting out.

We both hover near the front door, unsure if we should continue on or stay and talk this through with my mom, but my mom saves the day by saying, “Are you guys leaving or what? Things in my book are taking a turn for the spicy.”

I point a stiff finger out the door. Georgia leads, and I follow quickly behind her. When the front door swings shut, I grab her and pull her to me. Cradling her head in my hands, I dip my mouth to hers and ease my tongue inside. Georgia's hands ghost my hips, sliding around my back and under my shirt.

A car approaches, but we ignore it.

“Get a room!”

We break apart. It's Georgia's mother. She laughs, blows us a kiss, and drives away.

“A room,” Georgia nods. “A table. Any flat surface will do.”

Hand in hand, Georgia leads me across the street and down the still-warm sidewalk. Not for the first time in my life, I look at her profile and wonder how the hell I got so lucky.

# Chapter 40

## *Rhodes*

GEORGIA INVADES MY EVERY THOUGHT.

Her touch consumes me.

Her smile prompts my own.

Her third orgasm steals every last ounce of her energy, and when we're cleaned up and lying in her bed, she drifts off to sleep in my arms.

Florida? What Florida?

I have only Georgia on my mind.

# Chapter 41

# *Georgia*

I WAKE UP, CONFUSED AND DISORIENTED.

Hot. Hungry. And thirsty.

Rhodes is in my bed, and I don't know what time it is, only that outside my window the sky is black as pitch.

"Rhodes," I whisper, gently nudging the forearm he has draped across my stomach.

He makes a grumbling sound and rolls over.

"Rhodes," I repeat, more forcefully this time.

He tips onto his back and opens one eye. "What?"

"It's"—I peer at the clock on my nightstand—"eleven thirty."

He closes his open eye, and for a second I think he's going to go back to sleep, but then his eyes fly open, and he sits up, displacing me. I catch myself and sit up, too.

"What's wrong?"

"I was supposed to call my foreman and tell him my answer."

I'm confused. "Your answer to what question?"

"Florida. The hurricane."

“You mean, to work?” Rhodes has worked the aftermath of storms before. Jake has been keeping me up-to-date on Rhodes’ work for years, but with the revelation of my dad and Rhodes and figuring out my personal demons, I hadn’t connected this particular storm to Rhodes. To the possibility of his crew joining all the others headed to Florida.

He nods. “My crew is going. I don’t have to go. It’s not like I’m being sent.” He rubs at his eyes with the pads of his fingers. “It’s hard to be left behind. Not because I feel like I’m missing out, but more because it seems like I should be with them.”

“When are they leaving?”

“In the morning. Driving to Phoenix to catch a flight.” Rhodes drags a hand through his hair. “They have to get there before it hits, and then wait it out.”

I run a knuckled fist over my lower lip, thinking it through. “If it weren’t for the dance competition, would you have said yes?”

He brings his legs into his body, the blanket tenting, and rests his arms on his covered knees. “Yes.”

Decision made. I don’t want to hold Rhodes back. “Then you should go.”

“Nope,” he says immediately, and with certainty. “I’m doing the dance competition with you. We’ve spent two months preparing for it.”

“Rhodes,” I place a hand on his shoulder and use it to help me swing my knees under myself so I can face him. “There’s a way for you to go to Florida and work the hurricane, and for me to still compete.”

“How’s that?”

Apprehension makes me pause my train of thought, but practicality forces me to answer. “Ian has recovered.”

“Ian? As in, your previous dance partner, who you were seeing?”

“Yes,” I say, laughing only because the idea of Ian being anything more than a dance partner now is absurd. Rhodes is all-encompassing, my own personal squall.

Rhodes, however, is not laughing.

“Ok,” I say, adopting a serious tone. “It doesn’t sound great at first.”

“It doesn’t sound great *ever*,” Rhodes counters.

This time I hold in my laughter. Rhodes looks so... so... jealous.

I push a stray lock of hair off his forehead. “You know you have nothing to worry about, right? My heart has belonged to you since the day my dog peed on your foot.”

“*Next* to my foot,” he corrects.

“RIP Homely.”

Rhodes chuckles. He sits back, closer to my headboard, and pats the space between his legs. I crawl over, mirroring his positioning, so my back is against his chest.

“I don’t want you to dance with him,” he says, fingertips skating down my arm.

“For the record, I would much rather dance with you.”

Rhodes sighs, a stream of air so heavy it pushes my hair aside. “It’s not like it’s a sexy dance.”

“Right,” I agree. “Or else I would not have been learning it with my dad.”



Rhodes' chest shakes with his soft laughter. "That would've been weird."

"Cause for therapy."

"Do you think Ian can learn the routine on short notice?"

"Yes," I answer honestly. "He's really, really good. Remember when I showed you those videos where people get together and dance for fun, and they've never partnered together before, but everybody knows what to do so they can dance interchangeably? That's how Ian is. All he'll have to master are the little flourishes Dakota added in."

"I hate the idea of him taking my place."

"He wouldn't be taking your place." I sit up, flipping over so I can face Rhodes. It's too dark to see him well. Reaching over, I turn on my bedside lamp to its lowest setting. A soft, warm light bathes us in its glow as I settle into a cross-legged position between his legs. "He'll be dancing with me for a total of five days. Assuming he agrees."

Rhodes looks torn, and I hate to see him that way.

I have an idea. "Why don't you tell me what it is you like about traveling to work somewhere?"

Rhodes' lips twist, thinking, as he pinches each of my toes between his fingers, one at a time. "When the storm is done, you go out to see what damage you're left to contend with. It's witnessing the power of Mother Nature first hand. It's awesome, in the literal sense. And then you work, and you work, and you work, the longest days you've ever had, but there is such a sense of team and community that it makes the dirt and heat and hard work less unpleasant. And the people who live in the area are grateful. I mean, really grateful. I've had old ladies, and even old men, cry when their power was

restored. They were *scared*. It's not that I enjoy playing hero, it's just that I like to help people."

"You've been this way since we were young. Kind Rhodes. What seventeen-year-old boy volunteers to take dance lessons?"

"The kind who desperately wants an excuse to touch the girl he's crushing on. And to be fair, I was more volun-told than volunteered."

"I think you should go, Rhodes. To Florida. I don't want you to look back on this and feel like you missed out."

"What if I look back on this and feel like I missed out on dancing with you?"

"There's a competition every July." A thought occurs to me. "I'll take care of your mom. Between me and Jake, and Colbie and my mom, we've got your mom covered."

"Why are you so good to me?"

"Because you're so good to me."

His arms reach for me, pulling me close. He folds me into his chest, and I curl up there, listening to his heartbeat. After a while, he says, "I guess I better text my foreman. And pack."

But instead of getting up, we lie down. Rhodes comes up over me, covering me, his fingers running the length of my naked body.

He lowers his mouth to mine. "One more for the road," he murmurs in the pale light.

"One more for Rhodes," I amend, and I feel his lips curve up in a smile.

He is gentle and tender. We are quiet, fingers gripping sheets and skin when the pleasure peaks.

When it gets to the point he really must go, I walk him to the front door. In the curve of a fractioned moon, I kiss him goodbye.

“I love you, Peach.”

“Not as much as I love you, Rhodes.”

“Impossible,” he says, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Good luck in the competition. I want to hear all about it. Blow up my phone.”

He walks down the street and disappears into his house.

# Chapter 42

# Georgia

THE FIRST CALL I PLACE THE NEXT MORNING IS TO IAN.

“Georgia,” he answers, surprise plain in his voice. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“How do you feel about testing out that ankle of yours?”

There’s a pause, and then, “How so?”

“West Fest is in less than a week.”

“Uh-huh...”

“My partner was called away to work the hurricane that’s about to hit Florida. So now I need a partner, and I know it’s so last minute it’s almost *the* minute, but—”

“I’m in.”

I sag with relief. “Are you sure? I wrote a speech. I was prepared to grovel.”

“Honestly, Georgia, you’d be doing me a favor. I’m dying to get back out there. Rehabbing my ankle drove me crazy.”

“Are you ready to work every day, starting today?”

“Tell me what time to be at Hustle & Swing, and I will be there.”

This is one hundred percent not how I pictured any of this going. But I suppose if life has taught me anything by this point, it's that you make a plan, and everything but what you planned will happen.

---

Dakota doesn't have room in her schedule to be with us as much as we need to practice, but she agrees to come to the studio as often as she can.

With someone as advanced as Ian, it's easy to teach him everything he needs to know. We practice all day, every day. The only time I'm not at the studio is if I'm eating, sleeping, or setting up a house for Victoria. Being around Ian feels natural, but not at all romantic. There is zero attraction between us, zero desire, only a love for this dance.

Rhodes texts updates to me along his journey. First, he flies with his crew to Atlanta, where they meet a general foreman at a designated location and check-in with him. They pick up two trucks and drive them to the east coast of Florida, where they hunker down in a hotel on the eighteenth floor.

The hurricane hits the southern tip and west coast of the state, but Rhodes tells me that for them, it feels more like a really intense rainstorm. He sends video of wind smacking his hotel window, water leaking into their room, footage of him walking on the carpet and moisture bubbling on top of the pile.

I send him pictures of his mom and me eating dinner together. After the first day of checking on his mom several times a day and making sure her meals were prepared, I stayed in Rhodes' room at Candy House instead of going home. The

added benefit of this is that I'm sleeping on a pillow that smells like him. Or, in my mind, like heaven.

The only downside to dancing with Ian, besides the obvious fact that he's not Rhodes, is that he is so enthusiastic about the competition that he keeps suggesting we add a lift to our routine. It makes me think of being in my kitchen in high school, when Rhodes admitted he'd watched Dirty Dancing twenty times with his mom.

Dakota nicely reminds Ian lifts are for East Coast swing dancing, not West Coast. After the tenth time he says something about a lift, Dakota uses her firm 'mom voice' to shut him down.

Rehearsing the routine takes up most of my time, and I'm grateful. If it weren't for that, I'd be alternating between wringing my hands and biting my nails, worried about Rhodes' safety.

When the storm clears Florida and it's safe for the linemen to begin their work, Rhodes tells me they're hitting the road to their first job. He promises to be careful, that he'll use all his safety equipment in the proper way it's supposed to be used.

While Rhodes is busy doing something he loves and also happens to be damn good at, I am packing up myself and his mom, getting us ready to drive down to Phoenix in the morning for something I love and also happen to be damn good at.

# Chapter 43



## *Rhodes*

WE'VE BEEN SLEEPING UNDER A GIGANTIC TENT ON COTS. IT'S row upon row of men. Most of us are so tired when we get back to the yard at the end of the day that we pass out.

But tonight, I can't sleep.

Tomorrow is Georgia's competition, and all I want is to be there with her. Every other time I've been traveling for work, I've liked it. Doing good for others always made me feel good, but this time is different.

This time I have Georgia waiting for me in Arizona.

I'm still happy to be working on getting the power back on for people who are literally sitting in the dark. I've been given handmade gifts, drawings from children, homemade treats. When we left the yard this morning in a convoy of trucks, there were people on the side of the road where they knew we'd drive, holding signs. Men, women, and children, waving and saying thank you.

And yet. I want Georgia. Maybe this is how deployed men and women feel all the time. A sense of duty, constantly warring with the knowledge they are missing out on their loved ones.

I roll over, attempting to find an elusive soft spot on my cot. I know that's not going to happen though, so I console myself by flipping through pictures of Georgia.

Georgia sticking her tongue out at me.

Georgia with a smirk on her face when she is pleased with whatever comeback she has lobbed at somebody.

Georgia sending me the *need you now* eyes.

I continue flipping through pictures until the clock strikes nine, the time when I know Georgia will be back from her final dance lesson with Ian.

My thumb hovers over the button to call her, but a FaceTime call pops up on my screen instead. I'd rather not FaceTime with Georgia in here, not with all these men surrounding me. The last thing I need is somebody catching sight of her on my screen and saying something off-color.

I swing my legs over the side of the cot, hurrying to shove my feet into my boots. I'm tugging my T-shirt over my head on my way out of the tent, and at the same time trying to answer Georgia before she hangs up.

"Beautiful," I say in greeting when her face appears on the screen. I'm still striding away from the tent as fast as I can.

There is tension around her eyes, a tug of her eyebrows in the middle. Despite this, she beams at me.

"What's wrong?"

She drags a palm over her forehead. "I miss you. That's all."

"Peach, I miss you so fucking much."

"Ooh," she teases. "Enough to use the F word?"

“Oh, yeah. Definitely.”

She lays back on my bed, one arm tucked behind her head. “Have I mentioned how much I love that you’re sleeping in my bed while I’m gone?”

“Only three hundred forty seven-times.” There’s that smirk, the one she gets when she enjoys her comeback.

“Make it three hundred forty-eight.”

“Done.” She yawns, trying to cover it with her hand.

“How are you feeling about tomorrow?”

“Good,” she says. “But Greer called me today and told me she won’t be there, either. Mandatory meeting at the school tomorrow.” She pouts, and all I can think of is sucking her lower lip into my mouth.

She falls quiet, and so do I. We sit in the moment, looking at each other, talking with our eyes.

*I wish you could come home.*

*I can't. Not yet. But I want to.*

*I want you to.*

*Soon, Peach. Soon.*

The corners of her lips curve upward, a tiny smile. “When do you think you’ll be home?”

Technically, I can leave whenever I want. I’m not contracted to be here. It’s more out of a sense of loyalty and camaraderie that everyone stays. “There’s no telling. It depends on how many people stay on to work, and how much work gets accomplished, and in what timeframe.”

“That feels like a lot of circumstances.”

“It is. But it’s almost always this way.”

“Have you always stayed the longest?”

“Pretty much. I’ve been on and off different crews, but I always volunteered to stay.”

“Why?”

“Most of the guys have wives, kids, girlfriends, whatever. I didn’t. It made sense at the time.”

“But now? Will you volunteer to stay?”

“Hell no. I’ll be the first to raise my hand when they ask if anybody wants to go home. And I won’t feel bad about it either. I spent enough years keeping my hand lowered when others raised theirs.”

In the tent, the lights from phone screens disappear one by one. Everyone is going to sleep, knowing that four a.m. wake up is coming.

“I need to get going, Peach. Tired people make mistakes, and I don’t plan on making any.”

“Good. Don’t.”

“Can you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Dance for me tomorrow night, ok?”

She smiles, almost in a sad way, and the tightening around her lips tells me she’s trying not to cry.

“I’ll do you one better,” she says. “I’ll put your picture in my bra.”

That comment earns her a chuckle. “I love you, Georgia Peach.”

“I wish I had something cute like that to call you.”

“Just say my name. It sounds better coming from your lips.”

“Rhodes,” she says, her voice a melody. “I love you, forever and ever.”

As much as I don't want to, I end the call on my way back to the tent. I've just settled onto my cot when Lud shows up at my side. He bends down, saying in a low voice, “Madelyn went into labor. It's too early, man. Too early. She's only thirty-three weeks.” Lud drags his hands through his hair, making it stand on end. Between that and the frenzied look in his eyes, he appears crazed. “I'm leaving in three hours. Airports haven't started flying around here yet, so I have to drive up to Jacksonville. There's a flight at six tomorrow morning.”

“Lud, I'm sorry. Please tell me if there's anything I can do for you or Madelyn. I'm sure my mom or Georgia would be happy to help, too.”

“You can pray for my son.”

“Consider it done.”

He starts to stand, then pauses like he remembered something. “I know you like to stay on jobs, but I talked to the general foreman earlier and he said things here are progressing faster than they expected. You know the drill. The decision to stay or go is up to you.”

Lud walks off, and I watch him go to his cot and pack his bag. When he's finished, he lies down and sets his alarm on his phone.

I set my alarm, not that I'll need it. That good old internal alarm clock never fails me. I send up a prayer for Lud's little

boy, like I said I would. Then I close my eyes and picture Georgia until I drift off to sleep.

# Chapter 44

# *Georgia*

COMPETITION MORNING.

It's early, and Erica is sleeping. I use the time to slip over to my mom's house and grab my competition outfit from where it hangs in my closet. The house is so still, so quiet, that I startle when I'm on my way out and catch sight of my mother standing in the middle of the backyard.

"Mom," I call, opening the back door. "What are you doing?"

She turns at the sound of my voice, coffee cup poised at her lips. "I was thinking about your father. And how I've let it all go to shit." She gestures flippantly at the yard. "He took pride in this yard, and I let it all go." Her smile is rueful, and it's probably closer to a grimace. "It felt like a middle finger to him, after everything. Like he could look down from wherever he was and see dead grass and half-dead shrubs."

Laying the plastic-wrapped outfit over my forearm, I make my way out of the air-conditioned house and into the early morning sun-streaked warmth.

"And," my mother continues, "I was thinking about you and Jake, and how you're all grown up."

"I still live with you, so there's that."



She lifts her coffee cup to her mouth, sending me a knowing look over the brim. “Probably not for much longer.”

“We’ll see. His mom needs help, and she’s only going to need more of it as time goes on.”

“Tough spot for him to be in.”

“We haven’t talked about it much. We kind of had a different hurdle to clear recently.”

She laughs. “No kidding. But you did. You made it through all that.”

“We got lucky, I guess.”

“No. You worked on it. That’s how it happened.” Mom offers her coffee to me, and I take a small sip. It’s not how I prefer it, but I’m happy for the tiny jolt of caffeine.

“I’m going to check on Erica.” I hand the cup over to my mom. “But I’ll see you in Phoenix this afternoon.”

She nods. “I’m driving down with Jake and his family.”

I give her a quick hug. “Thanks, Mom. I appreciate you coming to cheer me on.” I’m overwhelmed by the number of people showing up for me. Overwhelmed and grateful.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” She smiles proudly. “It’s good that you kept on dancing, Georgia. You could’ve stopped after your dad. But you kept your heart open, and it keeps his memory going. The good parts of him.”

Tears prick my eyes. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too. Break a leg tonight.”

---

Erica comes downstairs with one button missed on her shirt. She is good-natured about her eyesight decline, but I can tell how much it bothers her. Of course it does. I can't imagine facing the rest of my life with the possibility of total blindness.

That comment she made before, about getting grandkids before her eyesight is gone so that she can at least see them? That one hit me square in the chest.

My dad died long before grandkids were a thought in my brain, or Jake's. But did my dad think about that? When he was in the throes of his drug addiction? When the fog cleared, did he think of what he was doing to himself, the future he gambled with every time?

"Here," I say, off-hand on purpose so I don't embarrass Erica. "You missed a button."

As quickly as I can make my fingers work, I nimbly thread the button through the opening and step away. "Do you have your things packed?"

She nods. She has hair the same color as Rhodes, but shot through with silvery streaks. We eat breakfast together, toast with a generous spread of butter and that blackberry orange jam. She loves it, and so do I, so I'll be making it a point to return to Dakota's market and buy more.

Erica cleans up the kitchen while I load up the car. There's still a lot she can do on her own, and it's hard to know what she is and isn't capable of. I don't think she definitively knows where her abilities lie, and so each day is a guessing game.

We've been on the road for one hour. We stopped at the gas station just outside of Green Haven on our way to the I-17, loading up on jalapeño almonds for Erica, and sparkling water for me. Martha was working behind the register, and when she

heard why I was headed down, she came out from behind the counter to give me a big hug and wish me luck.

“Georgia?” Erica turns down the volume on the classic rock station I’d turned it to. “Can I be nosy?”

This feels like a slippery slope with my boyfriend’s mother, so I answer, “That depends on how nosy.”

“You and Rhodes got into a fight last week, right?”

“Yes,” I say cautiously, not sure where this is going to lead.

“He never told me what it was about. He said he’d messed up, and he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to make it better with you. Then he took off, telling me he was going to meet Jake. He seemed so urgent, like talking to Jake was a matter of life or death.” She shrugs one shoulder. “I guess I’m just curious.”

“Oh, well. Umm.” I’m not sure how to respond. To me, it’s always seemed like Rhodes and his mom are close, so I don’t think he kept the details from her on purpose.

“It was because I found out the real reason he broke up with me when we were teenagers.”

She nods once, quietly tapping her fingers on her right knee. The seconds pass, and I can practically smell the raging curiosity emanating from her.

“It had to do with my dad,” I add. “Him asking Rhodes to give him drugs. And Rhodes doing it for him.”

“Whose drugs?” The way she asks, her tone of voice, draws my attention to the passenger seat. Not for long, because we’re going seventy through a curvy stretch of interstate, but I glimpse the pained reluctance in her expression.

Like she already knows. But, how?

“Yours from a dental surgery you had just before Rhodes’ eighteenth birthday.”

“Dammit,” she whispers, then fills my small car with an ardent, “*fuck.*”

I flinch. I can’t recall ever hearing Erica use that word.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, gripping the wheel, uncertain and fearful to hear whatever she has to say.

“It’s my fault.” She palms her chest. “Rhodes. The drugs. It’s my fault.”

“What? No.” This is probably why Rhodes didn’t tell her. He knew she’d try to take a slice of the blame.

We’re nearing Black Canyon City, and there’s an exit up ahead that will drop us off onto a roadside café. Erica says nothing as I decelerate, easing the car into the right lane so I can take the next exit.

When I pull into a slot in the crowded parking lot of Rock Springs café, Erica turns to me and says, “I’m sorry.”

“For saying the F word?”

She nods.

“Fuck,” I say. “Fuck fuck fuck.”

She breathes a laugh. “Now I feel better.”

“Good. That was my intention.”

“Oh, Georgia. Sweet, young Georgia. I remember coming out of my house and meeting you in the driveway the day we moved in.” She smiles at me, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening. “I saw the way my son looked at you, and I thought to myself, *I wonder if this will be trouble.* But you

weren't trouble. You were the best thing that happened to him. You still are."

Her words are sweet and kind, however I sense a 'but' coming around the corner.

She gazes out the windshield at the massive sign on the roof of the restaurant bearing a slice of blueberry pie. "But I think I messed it up for you."

"By having dental surgery?" I raise my eyebrows dubiously.

"I knew your dad wanted those pills. I saw him listening in at the BBQ to celebrate Rhodes' eighteenth birthday. He went into the house, and I had this sixth sense he was looking for them. At the time, I had them in my bathroom upstairs, and I knew he wouldn't go that far to get them, because it would be obvious." Erica rubs her hand over her forehead. It drops back down to her lap and she says, "Rhodes didn't give your dad painkillers."

"What do you mean?" I'm baffled by whatever it is she's trying to say.

"I flushed the painkillers down the toilet. I replaced them with regular over-the-counter pain reliever and left them out on the kitchen counter. When the pill bottle went missing, I assumed your dad let himself into my house and swiped them. He'd been in the middle of repairing my sink, and I was upset by the way he'd been treating your mom. What he was putting her through. So I figured if he was going to try to get his hands on my painkillers, he was going to get tricked." She lifts a fisted hand to her mouth, knuckles grazing her lower lip. "I didn't know he was going to ask Rhodes to get them for him. And why would Rhodes say yes?"

“Because my dad had learned that Rhodes and I were in a relationship. He threatened Rhodes with calling the police and reporting that he was having a relationship with a minor.”

Erica stares at me, slack-jawed. “Your dad was worse off than we knew.”

“I guess so. That’s pretty low, right?”

“Oh, my poor son.” Erica’s face crumples. “What he must’ve gone through to do such a thing, and then live with it.”

“He was so overcome with guilt about it that he broke up with me.”

“And stayed away all this time.” Erica sighs. “He shouldn’t have done it, you know?”

“My dad? Of course.”

“No, Rhodes.” She shakes her head. “I mean, of course, your dad shouldn’t have done a lot of what he did. But I mean my son. He should’ve involved me, at the very least, and your mom.”

“Agreed. But what a position to be in.”

“Moral dilemma,” Erica says. She sighs and looks out the windshield at Rock Springs café. “It’ll be awhile before Rhodes is home, and I can explain all this to him. And I don’t know about you, but even with my shitty vision, I can tell there’s pie on top of that restaurant, and now I’m thinking the only cure for this ill is pie.”

“*The only cure for this ill is pie,*” I repeat. “That belongs on a T-shirt.”

She smiles, but not in a super happy way. More like in a bewildered, befuddled, *can you believe the shit we just*

*uncovered* kind of way.

“Do we have time?” she asks, gripping the car’s door handle.

“There’s always time for pie.”

“That also belongs on a T-shirt.”

“Erica, I think the universe is telling us to form a T-shirt printing company.”

Between everything Erica just revealed, and the fact that I’m competing tonight, my stomach is already a bundle of nerves. Pie probably isn’t the best thing for me to eat.

But I don’t care.

Being with Erica makes me feel closer to Rhodes.

And that is all I can bring myself to care about right now.

# Chapter 45



# *Georgia*

WEST FEST IS BEING HELD AT A RESORT IN THE CENTER OF Phoenix, nestled against Camelback Mountain.

I navigate my car onto the resort property, trying to pay attention to my driving when all I want to do is gawk at the beauty surrounding us.

Palm trees sway beside the adobe buildings. In the background, luxury homes dot the mammoth mountain resembling a camel lying down. I navigate my car to self-parking and carry most of what Erica and I have packed. Erica insists she can carry her own bag, and I ask her to please focus on her surroundings.

The searing early July heat attaches to my skin the second we emerge from covered parking and onto the resort property. Green Haven is two hours away and higher in elevation, affording it a break from the astronomical summer temperatures for which Phoenix is known.

“I hope you brought your sunscreen,” I say to Erica. I’m doing my best to follow Rhodes’ instruction and stay at least eight inches in front of her so she can follow my movements.

“I did. Plus a hat. Tomorrow, after the competition is over, I’ll be sitting poolside, and the only time I plan on moving is

to roll over.”

I get us checked into the room that was supposed to be mine and Rhodes’. After a few interminable minutes standing with the front desk associate, he finally confirms he can switch Erica and me into a room with two full beds instead of the one king I had booked.

I’m hanging my competition outfit when Ian texts to let me know he’s arrived at the hotel and he’s in his room.

I change my clothes and freshen up, and Erica announces she’s going to take a nap while I leave to meet Ian and check in with West Fest registration.

Ian waits for me in the lobby, offering a high-five when he sees me. “Before we head over to registration, I’d like to introduce you to someone.” He leads me past the white brick walls in the lobby and around the corner, to a small, intimate bar with seating for ten and a handful of tall tables.

“Jillian,” Ian says, walking up to the lone woman at the bar with her back to us. “Babe, come meet Georgia.”

Jillian turns at the sound of Ian’s voice. She’s beautiful, with flaming red hair and exquisite cheekbones. She smiles, sliding off her barstool and extending a hand. “Georgia,” she says, surprising me with a southern accent. “I’ve just got to say thank you. You got this guy up off his rear end and back onto the dance floor. If I wasn’t born with two left feet, I’d have done the same.”

“You’re welcome,” I reply, falling a little bit in love with Jillian and her accent. “I’m lucky he was available on short notice.”

“Ian said your partner was called away to work in Florida for the hurricane that hit.” Her tone is gentle, mixed with a

smidge of *you poor thing*.

“My boyfriend,” I clarify. “Rhodes.”

Jillian nods. “Hopefully, he’ll be home to you in no time.” She turns to Ian. “The ice in my drink is meltin’, even in the air conditioning. Don’t y’all have somewhere to be?”

Ian brushes a kiss on her cheek, saying something I can’t hear. She pulls back from him with a wink, and says to me, “It was nice to meet you, Georgia.”

Ian and I retrace our steps to the lobby. “How did you snag her?” I ask.

He snorts. “Thanks.”

“Well?” I ask, when he doesn’t offer additional information.

“She came to Green Haven to help her aunt after her uncle died. She was supposed to go home to Huntsville a couple weeks ago, but,” he shrugs, “she stayed.”

“Does she know about us?”

Ian glances at me from the side of his eyes as he walks out of the lobby and into the full sun. “That’s the first time you’ve mentioned there was ever an *us*. You also didn’t say your missing dance partner was your boyfriend. Or that your boyfriend is Rhodes.”

“Does it matter?”

“No. Neither of those details has any bearing on what we’re doing here.” We pass the adult only pool, where groups of people stand in the shallow end, hats on and drinks in hand.

“What do you know about Rhodes anyhow?” I’m almost positive I never mentioned that name to Ian. I was careful to

rarely think of him myself.

“I saw him at Honeybee the day of your brother’s wedding. I didn’t know who he was, but then Jiminy was so happy to see him. I overheard them talking while I was waiting for my order, and Rhodes was saying he moved back to town officially and he was headed to your brother’s wedding that night.” Ian slides his sunglasses from the top of his head and fits them onto his face. “I know you and I were casual, but I guess my feelings were hurt that you didn’t invite me to your brother’s wedding as your plus one. And then I wondered if maybe the reason why was two counter stools away from me, shooting the shit with Jiminy.”

We skirt a row of potted cacti, and somewhere in the back of my mind I notice they are all missing their spines.

The event building and ballroom are up ahead, and Ian keeps talking as we approach. “You text me that night after the wedding. I knew what you wanted, and believe me, I had no problem giving it to you, but I felt different afterwards than I had any other time we slept together. I felt empty.” He gives me an admonishing look. “I could tell you weren’t really there that night. Your body was there, but your mind and your heart were somewhere else. Wherever Rhodes was, I presume?”

A pinch of guilt assails me. I hadn’t meant for Ian to pick up on that. I’d been emotionally flooded that night, and behaved thoughtlessly.

We arrive at the ballroom, and Ian steps off into the shade instead of walking inside.

“Anyway,” Ian says, not waiting for a response from me. “I think I kind of knew the last time was the last time for us. I started hiking more, because I wasn’t getting the stress release

that I had been getting”—he looks at me pointedly, and I chuckle—“so, technically, it’s your fault I injured myself.”

Lightly, I smack his shoulder with an open palm. “Nice try.”

Ian looks down at me, his lips twisted in a rueful grin.

Even if I don’t feel anything romantically for him anymore, I do feel like I owe him something for swooping in and saving the day. “I fell in love with Rhodes when I was fifteen years old.”

“Ooh,” Ian teases. “Older brother’s best friend. How tragic.”

“Something like that, yeah.” No details need be shared. That’s not the point of what I’m trying to get across. “I enjoyed my time with you, Ian, so please know that it was never about you. It’s hard to explain, but Rhodes’ presence is just so—” I hold out my arms, opening them wider and wider. “*Enormous.*”

“I get it,” Ian says, slipping his hands into his shorts pockets and rising on the balls of his feet. “That’s how Jillian’s presence feels. I’ve never been able to put it into words like that, but it’s the perfect way of describing it.”

“Feel free to borrow it. I won’t tell.”

He laughs once, soundless. “She knows about us, by the way. On our first date, as I was sitting there in that damn boot, she asked if I’d been seeing anybody recently. I was honest.”

I grimace. “How did she take it when you told her you were going to be doing this competition with me?” I hadn’t considered the possibility Ian was seeing someone and maybe she wouldn’t appreciate him dancing with somebody he was

casual with before. I feel bad. I hope I didn't cause him any angst in his new relationship.

“She was supportive. Honestly, Jillian is probably the most confident woman I've ever met.” He makes a face at me. “I hope that didn't offend you.”

I shake my head. “It wasn't offensive. It was truthful. I kept you at arm's length because I had a lot of baggage to work through.”

“And have you? Worked through your baggage?”

I think back to my dad, to learning about Rhodes' role in it all. And then, to what Erica told me on the drive down here. “I'm getting there.”

Ian inclines his head toward the door. “I don't know about you, but I'm sweating. Are you ready for this?”

I've been waiting to make it to this point for a long time. “I am so ready.”

Ian opens the door. “After you,” he motions me in.

The place is decked out in red, white, and blue for the July fourth holiday. Large cutouts of fireworks exploding adorn the walls of the cavernous room where registration is occurring. I explain to the woman running the show behind the long rectangular table that Ian is a last-minute substitute for Rhodes Porter. She frowns and tells us she's going to need to reprint some things.

“You might as well keep this.” She hands me papers and a lanyard printed with Rhodes' name on it. “Otherwise it's going in the trash.”

Once all the paperwork has been taken care of, Ian and I explore the different ballrooms. There are various classes

taking place before the competition tonight, including one for juniors. It reminds me of myself, standing across from my dad and holding his hand, while Donna taught us the most basic foot work. Look at me now, a decade and a half later. Maybe I should see his introduction to my favorite hobby as a gift he gave me.

“This ballroom is empty,” Ian says, peeking in through a set of heavy wooden doors. “Let’s get some practice in.”

As we run through our routine, I can’t help but think about how much I miss Rhodes. He hasn’t texted me yet today, but between the time difference and the long hours he’s working, that’s not surprising.

After an hour of practicing a routine that is damn near flawless, Ian and I part ways. He returns to Jillian, and they go off together. I head back to the room I’m sharing with Erica, and find it’s still dark.

I’m too keyed up to rest, so I go back to the ballrooms and sit in on the next beginner’s class. I’m in study mode, learning how the instructor talks to the students, breaking down the moves so they are easily digestible. It won’t be too much longer before I’m the instructor in a room full of people taking barre classes.

The longer I watch, the more I find that I am already prepared. Leading a dance class is not all that different from leading a classroom. The content may be different, but the leadership is the same.

Now, not only am I looking forward to tonight, but I’m actually looking forward to the future. To Burn Barre. To me, the person I’m becoming.

To Rhodes.

# Chapter 46



## *Rhodes*

I'VE BEEN AWAKE SINCE ONE A.M., EASTERN STANDARD TIME.

Lud's alarm had awakened me, but I think maybe I was half awake, anyway. That's what happens when I'm anticipating something.

It just so happens what I was anticipating was getting out of that tent and catching a ride to the airport with Lud.

I love my job. I love helping people. But I love Georgia more than anything on this earth. She is my own unique natural disaster, awe-inspiringly beautiful and capable of devastating me.

The last thing I want is for my own personal hurricane to dance in another man's arms. I don't care if he's just a friend, or a West Coast swing world champion. I don't care if she's dancing with Jake or sweet old Jiminy. That girl is mine. The only man who's going to twirl her around that dance floor tonight is me.

There wasn't room on Lud's six o'clock flight, but there was a single seat left on the one p.m. with stops in Raleigh and Denver.

I said goodbye to Lud at his gate after we got coffee and a breakfast sandwich. As I walked away from him, I sent up a

second prayer for his baby boy.

I found my gate and grabbed fitful sleep in the uncomfortable chair. I did the same as I traveled from city to city, attempting to stay as rested and hydrated as possible. I can't show up, take Ian's place, and then dance like a dud. I have to be there for Georgia, a worthy partner.

The plane touches ground in Phoenix. As it taxis, the flight attendant announces the local time and weather. When she says the high temperature a collective groan floats through the cabin.

I don't mind. The dry heat might sear a person, but at least my shirt won't be soaked in sweat within minutes, the way it did in Florida.

I'm antsy, my leg bouncing as I watch all the people in front of me deplane. Last seat meant last row, and is it just me or is everyone suddenly going tortoise speed getting off this plane?

Finally, it's my turn, and I waste no time thanking the flight attendants and then getting the hell off the plane. It's four o'clock now, the saving grace of the later flight being turning back the clock as I returned to Arizona.

The competition begins in one hour, and like the ultimate romantic movie gesture, I haul ass through the airport and to the curb. If this was a movie, I'd be met with setback after setback. No cab or Uber available, traffic, can't find my wallet, on and on.

None of that happens. Every leg of my journey to the resort where the competition's being held is seamless.

I'd wanted to surprise Georgia, dramatically showing up at her door, but there's no way to do that without asking her what

room she's in and arousing suspicion.

I step to the side in the lobby, taking out my phone to tell her I'm here, when I hear her voice.

I find her in a group of people walking from the elevators. She's stunning in her skirt (skort, I think she called it?), and top. She's walking with my mom just the way I showed her. My mom looks proud and excited, with her hair curled and her makeup done. My heart squeezes, knowing Georgia was probably responsible for that.

Behind my mom and Georgia are Dakota and her husband Wes, Wyatt and his wife Jo, Warner, Tenley, Sawyer and Jessie.

*Holy shit.* The entire Hayden family showed up to support Dakota. And Georgia.

I take a step toward Georgia, but she spots me before I have the chance to call her name. She grinds to a halt, and my mom bumps into her. The entire crew slows down, and Dakota says, "Rhodes? What are you doing here?"

Georgia says not a damn word. Fringed skirt swinging, she launches herself at me. Her legs wrap around my waist and she buries her hair in my neck. "You came," she whispers, emotion making her voice tremble.

She pulls back to look at me, and I rub the spot behind her ear with my thumb. "Nobody dances with you but me."

"Yeah," she yells, fisting the air. Then her lips find mine and she kisses me, long, deep, and loud.

Someone whistles, I'm not sure who. A throat clears.

Georgia and I break apart and turn toward the sound. A man stands nearby Dakota, arms crossed at his chest. He

doesn't look mad, but his expression says, *what the fuck?* I have no idea who this guy is, but I can guess.

Georgia slides down my body, landing on her own two feet. "Ian," she says, taking a step closer to him. I step with her.

"This is Rhodes. Rhodes, Ian."

I do the gentlemanly thing and shake his hand. I can afford to be magnanimous. After all, I have Georgia.

"What's going on, Georgia?" Ian asks.

Georgia glances at me. "Um. Well..."

"I appreciate you being there for Georgia when I had to go to Florida, but I'm back, and I'm going to dance with her."

Ian's mouth drops open. He doesn't look too happy, and I can't say that I blame him. But also, I don't care very much. He'll survive.

The elevator dings and a woman steps off. She walks right into our group and sidles up to Ian, slipping her hand in his.

"Whew," she says in a loud southern accent, "whatever is happening in here right now has this lobby feeling like August in Alabama. Air so thick you could cut it."

As if her words are a knife, the tension is sliced through. Ian smiles first, then Georgia, and there is chuckling all around.

"Well," Ian says to the woman. "Do you want to try to make dinner reservations somewhere? It doesn't look like I'll be dancing after all."

"Uh," Dakota says, stepping forward. "You could still dance with me. I'll be a walk-on."

Wes frowns. I get the feeling he doesn't love the idea of someone who is a stranger to him dancing with his wife. I also get the feeling Dakota knows how to handle Wes and usually does what she wants, and Wes is used to that, too.

"To the competition," Georgia announces, leading the charge. "Jake and Colbie are already seated with my mom." She takes in my clothes. I'm wearing what I wore the day I left Green Haven for Florida, black jeans and a gray T-shirt. "It's not your competition ensemble, but it will do."

Dakota drags Wes in front of us, getting there first to add herself to the competition, and notify them of the change to Georgia's partner.

Here we go.

---

I've never seen Georgia nervous before, but here she is, clinging to my hand right before it's our turn.

"What if we're terrible?" she asks, biting the side of her lip.

I press a reassuring kiss to her temple. "The most they can do is hate us."

She looks up at me, recognition lighting up her eyes.

The announcer booms, "Dancing the West Coast swing are partners Georgia Whittier and Rhodes Porter."

There is an eruption of applause, so loud and concentrated it's obvious we have our own large group of supporters.

Georgia and I take our places on the dance floor.

The music begins, and we launch into the routine. Georgia is unbelievable, pouring everything she has into the dance. She is a flirtatious, hip-switching vision, a magnet. I can't keep my eyes off her.

We end the dance with a dip, like we practiced. The applause is a roar, but the kiss she plants on me when I haul her upright? It paints over every sight and sound in the ballroom.

This moment means everything to Georgia.

Georgia means everything to me.

# Chapter 47

# *Georgia*

“WHAT A RUSH,” DAKOTA SAYS, FLINGING HERSELF INTO A chair at the outdoor bar.

We’ve snagged a section of clustered seating. A rectangular fire pit sits in the center of the seating, blue flames licking up from the tempered crushed glass.

We are a party of twelve, taking up every available chair and armrest available.

Except we’re missing one. Rhodes is walking his mom back to the room.

A server approaches, a young woman with plump unlined skin, and asks if she can take our drink order. She gets halfway through our group before she recognizes Tenley.

“Oh my God,” she squeaks, slapping a hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

Tenley smiles good-naturedly. “Happens all the time.”

After spending just this one evening with Tenley at the competition, I can attest to the truth of this statement. Over and over she was stopped for pictures. She was nice and gracious every time, but once she saw me staring and whispered to me, “Yes, it gets old.”



The server finishes taking our order. When she walks away, Wyatt produces a handful of cigars.

“Where did you even get those?” Jo asks.

Wyatt winks. “I have my ways.”

Rhodes returns, and I get up, allowing him the chair so I can sink down onto his lap.

Three servers deliver our drinks, and even though I know it’s a large order, I also know it’s because they’re trying to get a peek at Tenley.

“Why does your wife have to be famous?” Wes gripes at Warner.

Warner pokes him in the cheek with one finger. “Why do you have to be so cute?”

Wes knocks his hand away, and the whole group laughs.

The servers leave, and Dakota stands with her martini glass in hand. “I would like to take a moment to congratulate my *students*,” she grins at me and Rhodes. “For all their hard work these past few months. You might not have won the competition tonight, but you are number one in my book.”

Rhodes and I placed fourth out of thirty-five duos competing. And I’m thrilled. It was never about being number one. It was about forcing myself to do something I’ve wanted for so long. About working hard and putting myself out there.

I lift my glass. “And to you, Dakota. For being patient, but also pushing us to be better. You are the best West Coast swing teacher. Just don’t tell Donna I said so.”

Wyatt stands up. “Alright, are we done with the sweet nothings? These cigars won’t smoke themselves.”

“Away,” Jessie says, pointing to an unknown location in the distance. “I hate that smell.”

“Also,” Colbie points to her stomach. “Baby.”

The guys walk away, and I hear them asking Rhodes questions about Florida.

“How much longer?” Jo asks Colbie, settling back into her seat now that Wyatt has vacated it.

“Two months,” Colbie answers, rubbing her stomach. She looks at me. “And we have so much to do before then.”

Dakota fills Tenley, Jo, and Jessie in on Burn Barre. Like Dakota predicted, Tenley is all over the idea. Jo and Jessie have too much happening on their respective ranches, but both promise to try to grab a weekend class when it opens.

In all honesty, I cannot see Jessie taking a barre class. She seems more suited to a Boot Camp style exercise class. Then again, if a Boot Camp instructor told Jessie to give him twenty more push-ups or Burpee’s, she seems equally likely to tell him where he can put his instructions.

“Where did Ian go?” Colbie asks me.

“He went back to his room. He was pouting.”

“That’s too bad. His girlfriend seems like she’d be a lot of fun.”

“Well,” Dakota shrugs, “maybe Ian should’ve listened to me last week during rehearsals and he wouldn’t have gotten kicked out of the competition.”

Jo says, “I thought Wes was going to come out of his seat and drag Ian off the dance floor—”

“By his balls,” Jessie interjects.

Jo nods her agreement. “When he tried to lift you.”

I laugh. “I think Ian picked up on that and that’s probably why he did not join us.”

The guys return after a while, smelling of cigar smoke.

Colbie pinches her nose and makes a face at Jake. “You stink.”

He kisses the top of her head. “I’ll take a shower before I lie down beside you tonight.”

Colbie yawns hugely, as if the mention of lying down has made it appear. “It’s my bedtime,” she announces, using the arm of the chair to push her to standing. She and Jake say their goodnights and leave.

Two by two, the couples split off, until it’s only Wes and Dakota with me and Rhodes. The adrenaline was probably strongest with the three of us who danced, but for me, it’s waning.

We talk a little longer. Wes tells us about the history of the Hayden Cattle Company. The love he feels for his heritage shines through in his tone.

Another half hour passes as we talk.

Wes pats Dakota’s thigh. “You about ready?”

She nods. “We’re heading back home in the morning, after we stop at the veterans cemetery in North Phoenix.”

“Did you lose someone who served?” Rhodes asked.

Wes nods. “A guy from my platoon is buried there. Ethan Shepherd.” He runs the back of his thumb over his lower lip. “This will be my first time paying him a visit.” The way Wes says it makes it sound like an admission.

We walk to the elevators together, saying our goodbyes when Wes and Dakota get off on the second floor. The doors close, and Rhodes turns to me.

“I got us our own room.”

“What?”

He grins. “It was my mom’s idea. When I walked her to the room, she told me to check with the front desk and see if I could get a room for us.”

I wrap my arms around his neck as the elevator moves us up to the fourth floor. “Ten points for Erica.”

The doors open and Rhodes leads me in the opposite direction from where my first room was. He slips a key card in the slot. “I tossed as much of your stuff into your bag as I could,” he says, apology in his tone. “I was kind of in a hurry to get back down to you.”

I pull him into the room and close the door. “I’ve been waiting all night to have you to myself.”

“All week,” he corrects, his voice husky.

He pulls me into him, burying his face in my hair. We are finally without an audience, finally able to release the relief.

“I went all those years without you Peach, because I thought you were better off without me. It took me moving back to Green Haven to understand that wasn’t the case. We are better together.”

“I hate we missed all those years.” My lips press to his chest, muffling my voice.

“Me, too. But who knows where we’d be if we hadn’t.” He gathers my hair in one hand, letting it fall slowly against my

back. “All those bad things that happened in the past, maybe they had a purpose.”

The idea sinks into me, the concept rolling around. It’s hard to accept that my dad succumbing to drugs had a purpose, but it’s better than believing it was all for nothing.

I lean backward so I can look at Rhodes. Only his outline is visible in the darkened room. “What are we supposed to do now?”

“Tonight?” Rhodes grips my arms, holding me steady as he walks me backward to the bed. “Tonight I’m supposed to show you one of the many reasons I left Florida early.”

The backs of my calves bump the bed. “I like that idea. And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow we’re going to sit by the pool and relax.”

My hands slip under the edge of his soft cotton shirt. “And all the days after?”

He runs knuckled fingers up and down my arms, and I shiver beneath his touch. His voice, on the louder side of a whisper, grounds out, “I am going to spend every day of the rest of my life showing my Georgia Peach that she is the best person I’ve ever met, and there is nobody more meant for her than me.”

“Life won’t be perfect, Rhodes.” But he knows this already. Of course he does.

“I’m aware.” His knuckles make their way to my shoulders, sliding over my collarbone. “I’m not perfect, and neither are you. You’re totally unafraid to say what you think, and you can be sassy as fuck. I have a tendency to want to fix everyone’s problem, even at my own expense. But as long as we keep communicating, keep saying what we think and what

we need, we'll get there. We'll make it. As long as our good days are better than most of our bad days, we'll make it."

"Better than most," I repeat, the words becoming 3D in my mind. I like it. It's better than feeling letdown every time things don't go as planned. Built-in space for bad days.

Rhodes urges me back onto the bed. "This skirt—"

"Skort," I correct.

"*Skort* has been driving me crazy all night." He lifts a section of fringe. "These things move when you walk, and it's like your thighs are flirting with me."

I burst out in laughter. "You're funnier than you give yourself credit for."

Together, we work the fabric down my thighs, underwear included. My hands find his stomach, the light dusting of hair at his navel. He sits back, reaching behind his neck and pulling the shirt from his body. He traces my rib cage, my stomach, my hip bones. His eyes lower, to the middle of me, and even though it's too dark for him to see anything clearly, I open my thighs for him.

He repositions himself between my legs, bracing himself with a hand on the mattress when he leans forward. His mouth sinks into the gap between my breasts, the tip of his tongue licking its way higher, up the length of my neck.

"Better than most, Peach," he rasps against my lips. "Remember that when things feel tough, ok?"

"Promise," I answer, flicking open the button of his jeans. With my help, he slides them and his boxer briefs off his body.

"Get this stuff out of my way," Rhodes groans, pulling at my top.

He helps me work it off my body, and then it's he and I and our beating hearts and our mingled breath.

He's so good at this, so slow and purposeful in the way he scrapes his kisses over my jaw, and cups my head tenderly. When he finally pushes into me, I press my feet into the bed and arch up. Rhodes holds my hands above my head, eyes searching my face, watching my expression each time he pulls back, driving in again. All my attention focuses on that feeling in my core, the building and stretching of its deliciousness, the crescendo when it hits.

"That's it," Rhodes whispers as I unravel, his lips at my ear. "That's my girl."

My fingers graze his neck, his tattoo, his flexing back muscles. A jolt, followed by a shudder, rolls its way down his body.

We lie together afterward, the sheets in disarray and the pillows nowhere to be found. Rhodes' hand grazes my back.

"You know what?" he asks, and the way his voice sounds makes me think he's staring at the ceiling.

I open an eye. "What?"

He turns on the bedside lamp, both of us wincing at its brightness. He leans down until he's only inches from my face. Pushing aside my hair with a finger, he says, "I want to marry you."

I breathe hard, a smile tugging at my mouth. "Well, yeah. I'd say that's where we're headed."

He shakes his head, blue eyes twinkling. "Tomorrow. I want to marry you *tomorrow*."

I laugh. "Right."

“I’m serious.”

I wait for a joke, but it doesn’t come. The seconds tick by, and *oh my God* he really is serious. “Rhodes, I...I...”

He takes my left hand. “Marry me, Peach. It doesn’t have to be tomorrow. But it has to be soon, because I’ve been in love with you since I was sixteen and I’m not interested in waiting anymore.” He slides a pretend ring on my finger.

“Yes, Rhodes. Oh my God, *yes*.” I fall back on the pillow, sheer amazement and disbelief coursing through me. I reach for Rhodes, bringing him onto me. “I’m so happy Homely chose you as her personal fire hydrant.”

“*Next to my foot*,” Rhodes argues, and I laugh and then I’m crying and then I laugh again until Rhodes silences me by kissing me breathless.

The kissing leads to round two. After, we order an ice cream sundae from room service, and when it arrives it’s served in a glass bowl so big fish could swim in it.

“This is the life,” I say, clinking spoons with Rhodes before taking a gigantic bite that I have to keep a cupped hand under to catch the dripping syrup.

Rhodes kisses me again, an ice cream and chocolate and whipped cream kiss, and a small plan takes shape in my mind.

If tomorrow is when Rhodes wants to get married, I bet I know someone who can make that happen for us.



# Chapter 48

# Georgia

You're insane.

Will you help?

Help? You mean, will I do it all?

Yes.

YES.

ONE OF GREER'S BEST TRAITS IS THAT SHE CAN GET THINGS done. Maybe it's the teacher in her, but she is decisive and has no problem giving instruction.

I've told Greer we'll arrive in Green Haven at four.

I don't have the luxury of being choosy about color, themes, *anything*, so she'll pick something she thinks I'll like.

She'll text me the venue.

All I have to do is keep quiet around Rhodes for the remainder of the day, and that's no small task.

We requested a late check-out from the hotel, and everyone else has gone home already. Now it's Erica, Rhodes, and I, lying on chaise lounges beside the pool. The royal blue swim

trunks from the store on the property make Rhodes look good enough to eat.

He tips up his chin at me. “What’s with the smile on your face?”

I smile harder. “I can’t smile?”

“You look like you have a secret. You’re doing the Cheshire cat thing.”

I try to push the corners of my mouth down, but they won’t budge. “I do have a secret, remember?” Wiggling my fingers on my left hand in the air, I stretch out further on my lounge chair.

“That’s not a secret,” Rhodes says. His head swivels the other direction, where his mom lies in her purple one-piece bathing suit and white sarong. “Mom, Georgia and I are going to get married.”

Her eyes are closed, face tipped to the sun. “That’s nice, honey.”

Rhodes looks at me with wide eyes, thumbing back at his mom like, *can you believe this woman?*

What Rhodes doesn’t know is that his mom already knows we’re getting married. *Today*. So do my mom, Jake, and Colbie. I also text Dakota to let her know, in case she’d like to attend.

We order lunch, turkey wraps and fruit salad. The pool is my favorite temperature, closer to bath water than refreshingly cool.

Our checkout time forces us back to our rooms. We shower and pack up, leaving behind the slice of paradise in the desert.

Rhodes caught a ride to the airport last week with Lud, so we're all in my car for the return trip.

Communication from Greer is almost non-existent. It worries me, but I force it to the back of my mind. We wind our way up the I-17, feeling victorious because the opposite side of the interstate is a parkway full of weekenders going home to Phoenix.

We pass the giant pie sign above Rock Springs café, and I realize Rhodes doesn't know about Erica switching the pills. There'd been so much happening last night, from Rhodes' surprise return to the competition and the ensuing exhaustion from the adrenaline, that it was pushed to the back of my mind.

I don't know how Rhodes will take the news, but I don't want to wait to tell him. "Can you pull over at the rest stop at the scenic overlook ahead?"

Rhodes does as I ask, guiding the car into a spot that faces away from the blazing sun. Even with tinted windows, the sun heats the cabin of my car.

"Too much water, huh?" He smiles crookedly at me.

"Actually," I look at Erica in the backseat. Her headphones are in place. She's probably listening to an audiobook.

"Are we stopping to use the facilities?" she asks loudly, then removes the earbuds.

"We passed the pie sign and it reminded me of everything you said on our drive down." I nod at Erica, urging her to speak up. To me, it's more her place than mine.

"Right." Erica leans forward, placing a hand on Rhodes' shoulder. She tells him everything she told me.

The color drains from his face.

When Erica is finished talking, he says, “All this time.”

Reaching across the center console, I place a hand on his thigh. “Technically, it doesn’t change anything. From my perspective, it shows how deeply the claws of addiction had sunk into my dad.”

Rhodes pinches the bridge of his nose. “I hate all of this. The whole damn thing.”

“We all do.” I give his thigh a reassuring squeeze.

“Does anybody need the bathroom?” Rhodes gestures at the brick building.

“No.” I answer. Erica echoes my response.

Rhodes navigates us back to the interstate. “Bizarre day,” he murmurs. “I wake up on cloud nine, and now I hear this and I feel sick inside.”

I run my hand up the back of his head, my fingernails scraping his scalp. “I’m going to turn this day around for you.”

He sends me a small smile, like *ok sure, good luck*.

---

We’re thirty minutes out from Green Haven when Greer texts me our destination address.

I enter it into my navigation app, and Rhodes balks. “Why are you sending us out there?”

“You’ll see.”

Rhodes squints at me, trying to figure out my game, and I do my best to hide my smile. In a much needed effort to

release a smidgen of my excitement, I tap a finger on my knee.

It doesn't escape Rhodes' notice.

We drive on, and I opt to not talk for fear of blurting out the surprise.

“Ok,” Rhodes says, slowly pulling up to The Orchard. “Here we are.” He looks around the parking lot, trying to understand. Because it's a late Sunday afternoon, the parking lot is nearly full with people eating at the restaurant. Even so, he spots Jake's truck with the Jones Construction logo on the side.

“Jake and Colbie are here?” He looks at me over the roof of my car. “What's going on?”

I shrug, and he narrows his eyes. “You have something up your sleeve.”

The grin I've been holding back slams onto my face. “I mean, maybe.”

The three of us skirt The Orchard's front doors, walking around the restaurant and past the outdoor seating area with picnic tables and lawn games. We continue down the stone path, our destination the two buildings ahead.

Rhodes stops short. “I know where we are.”

He lightly tugs my hand that he's holding, bringing me to his chest. “Is this what I think it is?”

“You said you didn't want to wait, so,” I lift my free hand in the air. “Surprise! I don't want to wait either.”

Short streams of air, almost like breaths of incredulous laughter, come from both of us. “This is *incredible*, Peach.” He kisses me.

“Save that for later, you two.”

We break apart. Greer stands in front of the chapel, hands on her hips. She points at me and Erica. “I want you ladies to come with me. You,” her finger moves to Rhodes. “Go into the building behind me and find the second room on the right.”

Rhodes squeezes my hand and kisses me one more time. His lips skim the space below my ear, and he murmurs, “I’ll see you in there.”

He releases me, following Greer’s instruction.

“You are a fright,” Greer says, walking to me and looping an arm through mine and Erica’s. “Let me work my magic on you.”

“How did you get this place on such short notice?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“You have friends in high places.” Greer leads us around the side of a chapel, to a hidden room in the back.

Colbie, my mom, and Dakota are waiting when we walk in.

I stop short, cover my eyes, and release a quick yelp because *I just can’t take it*. This is too much goodness.

Colbie laughs and hands me a flute of champagne. “Here. Have this for the both of us.”

Everything after that is a blur. There’s an ivory, knee-length dress that mostly fits. My hair is good enough, and I do my own makeup. The chapel is so beautiful on its own that I wouldn’t decorate if given the chance. Greer has somehow procured two simple gold bands.

“You owe me two hundred dollars,” she says, handing one over to me and taking the other to where Rhodes is getting

ready.

“I owe you a lot more than that,” I tell her when she returns.

Rhodes wears the suit he wore for Jake and Colbie’s wedding, taken from his closet after my mom let Greer into Candy House.

Dakota’s son, Colt, is the ring bearer, and he is our only attendant.

I’m as calm as a woman in this situation can be until Jake steps up, elbow crooked and waiting for my hand.

*Oh.*

The whirlwind of this day, *this weekend*, kept me from feeling my dad’s absence. But now, here it is. There is no turning my head from it.

“Hey,” I say to my big brother, voice trembling.

“I know,” he answers, patting the hand I’ve wound around his arm. “I hadn’t thought about it until Colbie asked if I’d walk you down the aisle.”

It’s the first time today I’ve felt anything less than euphoric. I wish I didn’t have to feel this way. I wish Jake was my dad.

I wish, I wish, I wish. Wishing does nothing. What I have is here, and now. A big brother who’s here for me, ready to walk me down the aisle to where his best friend awaits. That simple, yet enormous, fact is nothing short of incredible.

No matter how my heart wished for Rhodes and what we began building when we were teenagers, I didn’t foresee this future. I’d assumed Rhodes would forever be the boy who stole my heart, who met me for clandestine breadsticks and



ramekins of soup, who tattooed his name on a heart that beat only for him.

He's still all those things. And now? He's so much more. That boy grew into a man, and he's waiting to make me his wife.

On tiptoe, I press a kiss to Jake's cheek. "Thank you for being here today. For stepping in for Dad."

Tears build in Jake's eyes. It looks like I'm not the only one who still hasn't come to terms with our dad, even if he did a far better job than me at muddling through.

"You're a pain in my ass, Georgia, but I love you."

I deliver a swift and half-strength elbow to his side. He grunts, pretending it hurt.

"I love you, too."

Serious now, Jake says, "Let's get you down this aisle so you can marry my best friend."

I take the first step, murmuring, "I saw him first, you know."

"Hmm," Jake says, in step with me. "You're right. I've never thought of it like that."

We step up to the back of the chapel. White wooden folding chairs flank an aisle covered in ivory cloth.

Heads turn. The music starts.

Rhodes' lips purse the closer I get, and when I'm near enough to see them tremble, I realize he's holding back tears. I make no such effort. The moisture in my eyes leaves trails down my cheeks.

If there'd been time to plan out this wedding, I would've removed the pastor's line about who gives me away. But there wasn't, so he asks the question and Jake answers, "Her older brother. To his best friend." The small gathering of guests titters, Rhodes and I included.

We exchange vows. The pastor says, "You may now kiss your bride."

Rhodes pauses at my lips, whispering, "Georgia Peach, how I've longed for you."

Then he kisses me, his lips chaste but his arm wrapping around my waist and his fingers snaking into my hair at my neck.

This man. *This man.*

My husband.

The private dining room at The Orchard holds our reception. When I thank Dakota profusely, she says, "It was honestly easy. Nobody books this room on a Sunday night."

Greer earns the title of Magician, and Dakota declares herself the Magician's Apprentice.

"All of us Haydens were married here," Dakota tells me over a glass of Sancerre. "This place has seen so much love, Georgia. Now that includes yours and Rhodes."

She and I toast. We dance. Greer shoos everyone off the lush green grass we've been dancing on and announces the bride and groom have a special dance.

"We do?" I ask, dumbfounded. Rhodes looks equally confused.

"Yes," Greer insists, pushing us to the now vacant grass. "You've been dancing together for years. Show us what

you've got."

"Oh, I know!" Dakota's hand shoots into the air. She grins excitedly at Wes, standing beside her. He smirks, like he already knows exactly what his wife's thinking.

Dakota runs over to her phone. A moment later, the slow trickle of music comes from the speakers installed on the wall. It takes me a moment, but then I recognize the notes.

*The Time Of My Life.*

I'm laughing, because it's so perfect. Rhodes recognizes the song a few moments later, and he laughs and shakes his head.

He points at Dakota. "I should have known."

She shrugs and grins.

Rhodes takes my hand. Pulls me in, then back out. A twirl, a shuffle.

We stop for a kiss on a side pass.

Dancing is what brought us together in the first place. And then again, years later.

The music builds. I stand back, nodding at Rhodes when it's time. As best as I can in my streamlined dress and bare feet, I run at him. His grip tightens on my waist and he lifts. I'm airborne.

Dakota whoops. The ladies follow suit, and then my brother, his deep voice overtaking all the feminine lilts. Wes, Warner, Wyatt, and Sawyer clap, all clearly impressed.

Rhodes lowers me, letting my body run the length of his as he sets me on my feet.

“That was amazing,” I breathe, my arms wrapped around his neck.

“You’re amazing,” he responds, his breath hitching.

Everyone else joins us. Dakota teaches all her brother-in-laws how to do the lift, and Jessie loudly and colorfully tells Sawyer if he drops her she’s going to find a creative way to get him back.

Lucky for him, he lifts her effortlessly.

Wyatt, not shockingly, is the best at it, but Jo looks uncomfortable when the attention shifts to her.

The party continues. Rhodes pulls me close, whispering, “You’ve had a lot of good ideas, Georgia, but this is the best one.”

I kiss the square of space beside his ear. “By far,” I whisper. And then I kiss him. Hard, then soft, a kiss that is borderline inappropriate.

By the end of the evening, I’m spent. My heart bursts with love, to the point of it being overwhelming.

The final surprise of the night is delivered via my mom, who tells us she has booked us a room at the newly renovated Sierra hotel. “Your wedding night can’t be in your childhood bedrooms,” she says.

We’re so exhausted from the day that we fall asleep fully clothed on top of the comforter once we get to the room. A few hours later, Rhodes wakes me and carries me into the bathroom. We undress and step into the shower, and once we’re clean, he carries me back to the bed. Lying on the soft white sheets, Rhodes and I say very little, letting our bodies do the talking.

# Epilogue

## Georgia

“WHO ARRANGED FOR THE RED RIBBON?”

Colbie peeks outside Burn Barre, to the crimson ribbon tied to two gold stands.

“It was a gift from Tenley, and look at this,” she waddles over to the white desk holding the computer, guest sign-in sheet, and decorative potted succulents.

From beneath the desk, she produces a pair of scissors the length of my entire arm. “For cutting the ribbon,” she explains.

“Or giving a giant a haircut.”

“Toe nail trim.”

“Ew.”

“I have feet on my mind constantly because I can’t see my own.”

Colbie is three days past her due date. Her next checkup is in two days, and Colbie’s doctor said if she hadn’t gone into labor on her own by then, he would send her to the hospital to get it started.

I tried to convince Colbie to delay the opening of Burn Barre, just so we weren’t so close to her due date, but when

she sets her mind on something, she becomes a force to be reckoned with.

Today is the official grand opening of our studio. After the ribbon-cutting ceremony, I'll lead a free community class, followed by a champagne toast.

We'd asked that people make reservations using our online system, just so we would know what we'd need in terms of supplies. Greer knew that Tenley and Dakota planned to attend the class, and I told her it was ok to tell the teachers she works with. Word of Tenley's attendance spread like wildfire, and now the class is so full we had to stop allowing reservations. No need to break fire code on day one.

The studio is ready. It is pristine and fully decorated. It looks like a place people will want to spend time in. Colbie is excited, but she has done this before. For me, this is thrilling. It is the opening of a new book. Chapter one, paragraph one.

We slip out front when we see people arriving. Rhodes, Jake, and Robbie. Erica, and my mom. Emmett and Victoria. Greer, Dakota, and Tenley. People from around town gather. Some faces I recognize, and others I don't.

Colbie gives a brief speech. She makes a joke about hoping to deliver her baby during a squat sequence. Everyone laughs, and Jake assumes a stance like he is catching a football.

We use the gigantic scissors, Colbie holding one side and me holding the other. The ribbon is snipped, and there is cheering.

Rhodes, Jake, and Robbie take my class, and it's pure comedy. All three are the opposite of limber.

We toast with champagne, and people linger, shopping the racks of workout wear, and hats with cute sayings. Including one that reads *The only cure for this ill is pie.*

The day is a smashing success. When everybody's gone, and the studio has been cleaned up, I lock the front door behind me and can't wait to return tomorrow for the first full day of classes.

Rhodes is waiting for me in the kitchen of Candy House. He has a set of blueprints rolled out on the kitchen table.

Scratching his head, he says, "I don't know why I thought it would be easy to read these."

I look them over, but it's all Greek to me. "Jake was right. We need Colbie."

Among Colbie's many talents is the ability to decipher blueprints. She spent a majority of her early childhood with Emmett at his construction sites, picking up a thing or two along the way.

Rhodes wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me to his side. "Blueprint literacy or not, we're breaking ground tomorrow."

A new home, near Colbie and Jake's recently finished place. Ranch style with more space, and a big backyard. A mother-in-law suite in the back, outfitted specifically for Erica's needs. She's begun working with a low-vision specialist who has introduced assistive devices and helped her learn new ways of living and coping with her vision loss.

Rhodes has been working outside of town replacing old wooden electricity poles. He came across a home in the middle of nowhere, and the man who lived there had long hair and a



beard. Rhodes assumed the guy was old until he got a closer look one day and saw he's about the same age as himself.

Rhodes' crew has been referring to the guy as *Yeti*. Yesterday, Rhodes saw a child in front of the house, piquing his curiosity about this mystery person.

"What do you think about telling the police?" he asks as we're getting ready for bed that night.

I hand him the toothpaste. "Why would you do that?"

"Welfare check?"

"Did you see any signs of distress? Harm?"

"Other than it being odd to live way the hell out there by yourself with nobody around for miles?"

"Yes, besides those things."

"No." Rhodes spits toothpaste in the sink. "She looked well-fed. Clean clothing and shoes. Around the age of Robbie, I would guess."

"I can ask Greer if she knows anything. She might even be in her class."

We finish up in the bathroom and climb into bed.

Rhodes curves his body, forming the big spoon. I little spoon my way into him.

"How would you rate the day?" He kisses the back of my head.

"Better than most, for sure."

"I'm inclined to agree."

Then, like I knew would happen, Rhodes' hands explore my body. "I want my wife," he low-growls.

“Then take her,” I whisper.

And he does.

After, the last words I hear as I’m falling asleep in his arms are my favorite four words in the English language.

*I love you, Peach.*

The End

# Also by Jennifer Millikin

## **Hayden Family Series**

*The Patriot*

*The Maverick*

*The Outlaw*

*The Calamity*

## **Standalone**

***The Least Amount Of Awful***

*Return To You*

*One Good Thing*

*Beyond The Pale*

*Good On Paper*

*The Day He Went Away*

## **The Time Series**

*Our Finest Hour - Optioned for TV/Film!*

*Magic Minutes*

*The Lifetime of A Second*

# Acknowledgments

Baby brother. Thank you for teaching me about your trade, and answering my endless questions while I was writing. Who would've thought your chemical burn would make it into the book?

Readers. I have an infinite amount of gratitude for you. I don't think I'll ever get used to the way you make space in your hearts for my stories.

Beta readers: Crystal, Julia, Melissa, and Erica. THANK YOU for working with me to make this story the best it can be. Your contributions are invaluable.

My kiddos. Thank you for constantly showing interest in my work, for telling your friends who inevitably tell their moms, and just generally being proud of your mama.

My Luke. You are Better Than Most, baby.

## About the Author

Jennifer Millikin is a bestselling author of contemporary romance and women's fiction. She is the two-time recipient of the Readers Favorite Gold Star Award, and readers have called her work "emotionally riveting" and "unputdownable". Following a viral TikTok video with over fourteen million views, Jennifer's third novel, *Our Finest Hour*, has been optioned for TV/Film. She lives in the Arizona desert with her husband, children, and Liberty, her Labrador retriever. With fifteen novels published so far, she plans to continue her passion for storytelling.

