



*Branded*

EMMA NICHOLE

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Also By Emma

Follow Emma

*To Harry Styles.*

*Fine Line was the soundtrack to every scene. Thank you for  
that.*

*I meant it when I said I'd have to dedicate this book to him.  
LOL.*

# Prologue

*5 Years Ago*



## Isaac

“Get in. Clear it. Get out!” I shout out to anyone within the vicinity of my voice. My throat is scratchy and painful from the near constant relay of commands and communication over the past day.

There are so many different crews mixed together, trying to put some kind of dent into this monster of a wildfire that is shredding through Southern California, it’s hard to keep track of who is with me now and who is somewhere else in the area.

“It’s a lost cause, man. Just put a man down, send in the redline, and move on. We don’t have time to clear every house!”

I don’t recognize the voice at all, which tells me it’s someone who isn’t from my station because none of our men would dare say something like that.

Tempers have been sizzling on the edge of boiling over all day. We are on our eighteenth straight hour. We’ve been fully suited, head to toe, in our bunker gear the same. It’s heavy. It’s hot. It’s hard to navigate. It’s really fucking hard to keep under control without a clear head.

“I’m going to pretend like you didn’t just fucking say that.” I point his way as the truck barrels through the blazing roadways. “You know how fast fires like this move. If there is even a chance we can save one life, we are doing it.”

It's like something out of a horror movie. Everywhere you look, there is an orange glow with raging flames not far behind. Ash is coming from the sky like snow, and the smell... Christ, the smell. It's nothing you soon forget as wildlife, homes, memories, and unfortunately... even people, are completely engulfed. Their lives snuffed out in one of the most horrific ways.

“The choppers in the air are saying it's bearing down hard and there are multiple residences in the danger zone,” Our chief says from his spot behind the wheel.

“Evacs sent out?” I ask.

“Yes, but they weren't sent quick enough. It's almost impossible to get out. Winds picked up and have essentially been gasoline. If it's dry, it's igniting.”

The silence that spreads over us is palpable. No evacuations usually equals death at some level. Not every time, but especially in situations like this.

Ever since I was a little kid, this is what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be the hero who got to strap on the cool uniform and run into burning buildings to save the day.

It's an idealistic thing as a child, but what you don't know until you are in the thick of it as an adult is; you will see dead bodies. You'll have to hold people as they take their last breaths because their lungs are too full of poison from the smoke to get them help in time. You'll hear families screaming and crying for their pets that had to be left behind and stand with them as they watch everything they've worked for

disappear into ash. It's you who arrives first to the scene of a fatal car crash, and it's you who has to bring in the Jaws of Life to pry a scared, crying child from a destroyed vehicle. It sticks with you like Venom in *Spider-Man* comics: inky and black, crawling up your skin and making a home in your subconscious. That definitely causes fucked-up dreams when you least expect them.

No one speaks as the truck continues up the hillside to the small neighborhood that houses a dozen single family homes. According to reports we are getting from above, there are flames coming in from the west, and the back halves of the homes are already on fire. This needs to happen fast. If it doesn't, it could be catastrophic.

"We're going to have to check each house in pairs while the two trucks behind us pull the hoses and work on containment until we can get out," Chief says, as he takes a sharp turn into the neighborhood that resides at the top of the hill.

We quickly run through what little of a plan we can throw together, because once the wheels stop and we move into action, it's got to happen in the blink of an eye.

When all of this started last week, firehouses across the state of the California and even into Nevada were pulled in to try to keep this from becoming the catastrophe it already has.

From San Francisco, to Orange County, San Jose, and my home, Sunset Valley, we've banded together as brothers, as one team. There's a mix of gear, of all colors, with multiple different patches, badges, and equipment, making it more than

difficult to keep track or even remember who anyone is. I don't even try. Right now, everyone is a stranger I have to trust with my life. It's not the easiest thing to accomplish, but I have to do what is needed to make sure everyone is safe.

The truck grinds to a stop and everything explodes into high speed, into organized chaos.

The houses sit on a stretch of road that curves into a cul-de-sac at the back. Five houses down each side and caddy-cornered at the end. It's hard to even tell what the scenery is like around them because all there is now is soot, ash, smoke, and fire.

With a partner on my six, I take off on foot toward the house in the far left corner. It's the most at risk, so I need to ensure everyone is safe and it is empty.

Running in full gear is a feat, and not as easy as it looks, but the pure adrenaline pumping into my blood right now fuels me when the lack of food, water, and rest threaten to send me to the ground.

"Jesus fucking Christ." I hear from behind me as we are finally close enough to the house to see the true damage. The entire backside is completely engulfed, nearly to the point of a lost cause, but the scream coming from the interior is all I need to hear before I head straight inside.

The smoke is thick and black, making it impossible to see anything even a few inches in front of my face.

It's a two-story home with a long hallway that leads straight back from the front door, and it's glowing red and orange, telling me anything past the stairway to my right is already too far gone.

"Fire Department," I shout out. "Is anyone there? Make some kind of noise so I can hear you."

"Help him!"

The shrill cry is coming from upstairs. It's loud and scared then followed by multiple coughs.

"Clear the bottom rooms!" I tell my partner behind me, pointing to the other side of the house that is still reachable. "I'm going up."

"This place is going to go, man. In. Clear. Out," he repeats to me. "We have to hurry."

"Clear it and go. I have to go up!"

A scream cries out from upstairs again, followed by repeated banging. My feet begin to move of their own volition, climbing the stairs two at a time, even with the extra seventy-five pounds strapped to me in the form of air and equipment.

With each step toward the second floor, the air is thicker, hotter, and more miserable. The paint on the walls is peeling and the carpet is caked in black soot. I can see what the home used to be in small sections that the fire has mysteriously avoided. A photo hanging on the wall, and a piece of clothing tossed over the railing of the stairs. Signs of life that once was, before tonight.

“SFD!” I call out. “Is anyone up here?” I shout into the ether, knowing the answer, but I just need to know where to go.

“Help him! Please! He won’t answer me!”

The panicked cries are coming from my right, so I burst into action.

At the far end of the hall, I can make out the shape of someone, a woman I think, based on the voice, banging and kicking on a door.

“Jason! Open the door! Get up! Talk to me!” She is frantic, trying to scream between coughs. If she is in here, breathing in the smoke much longer, she won’t make it. I’ve seen people collapse from far less time trapped in the smoke.

“Ma’am!” I touch her arm. “Come on! I need to get you out of here. You can’t be in here.”

She yanks her arm out of my reach. “Don’t touch me. My brother is in there! I can’t get him to wake up! The door is locked. He isn’t saying anything.” She turns away from me and starts beating on the door again.

“Martinez!” I shout out, hoping he can hear me downstairs. “I have someone! Come get her out. She says there’s someone else in here. Unresponsive.”

“No! I’m not leaving this house without him. Don’t you dare try to make me.”

“Ma’am, with all due respect, this house is going to collapse any second now! Unless you intend on dying here, you need to get the fuck out!”

I can hear the cracking of wood in portions of the house that we can't see; telling me the framing is giving in to the flames. Unless we move soon, we are all gone.

"I don't..." She coughs harshly. It's deep and guttural, and she reaches out to brace herself on the wall. "I don't care. He's just a kid."

"Whoa." I reach out and grab her before she loses her balance. "He's a kid? How old?"

"Seventeen."

I look at the door, assess as quickly as I can, then make the decision to try to break it down.

She isn't going to let me take her down first, and frankly, there is no time.

"I need you to lay on the ground, as flat as you can. You need to be away from the smoke."

"Just get him," she says, lowering herself to the ground, her eyes are glazed and she's wobbly, gasping for some kind of clean air.

"Martinez! Get the fuck up here!"

I can hear him climbing the stairs as I look at the door, making the call in a split second to kick the center as hard as I can.

With each connection my foot makes with the door, the framing above begins to crack and it grows larger, spreading down the hallway.

“Goddamn.” I hear Martinez behind me. “How many do we have?”

“Just the one on the floor and she says there is a seventeen-year-old in this room. Locked door. Get her out. I’m getting the kid.”

“No!” she says, trying to scramble to her feet, but she collapses back onto her knees. The smoke inhalation slowly taking its toll.

“Carry her. Get her now!” I say loudly, with one final kick to the door, it bursts inward... and a flame explodes outward.

Everything happens in slow motion. A scream. Flailing arms and legs as I have to physically keep this woman from running directly into a room that is completely engulfed in flames. If there was anyone in there, they are long gone.

It’s a chaos I’m trained for, but a chaos you can never be prepared for. Pulling someone out of harm’s way as they realize the one person they wanted to save in the entire world is gone and there is nothing they can do.

She’s screaming, hitting me, and coughing up blackness from the thick burn no doubt coating her lungs.

Beams are falling, walls are breaking, fireballs in the form of burning insulation make getting her out of the house almost impossible, but we find our way, the three of us, to the front lawn of her home just as the entire top floor collapses into the bottom.



She isn't looking. Her face is buried in the grass and sobs wrack her body.

The crew that stayed outside is aiming the hose, trying to get it under control as best they can but the damage is done.

"You have to go back in. We have to get him." She tries to push herself up to her feet, but stumbles again, and I catch her around the waist.

"Don't." She pushes me again and flops over to sit on her butt, giving me a clear view of her face for the first time.

It's covered in soot, sweat, and tears, but her eyes are bright blue. The kind of eyes that sear their way into your soul; beautiful and full of anger. They are covered by black, thick-rimmed glasses with the left lens completely cracked, but that doesn't mean they hide the intensity in her stare. Her short, blonde hair is matted and covered with black dust. There's blood over the left side of her face, smeared across her temple and cheek. She looks like she's come out of a war zone, and to be fair, she has.

"We have to get out of here. We have to move now! This shit is coming and it's coming fast." I try to pull her up and into my arms.

"Don't. Just don't. You didn't. You didn't listen." She wipes her face. "I tried to tell you he was in there." She struggles up to her feet again and rushes toward me, pushing me back with both her hands on my chest. "I hate you!" she screams out then begins to sob. "I hate you." She hits my chest over and over before collapsing into my arms. I hold her up, letting her cry

into my chest before we finally get her to the medics and they take her away. Her voice echoes in my mind even after she's gone though.

Normally, I'm able to shrug off things like this and move forward. In. Clear. Out. Onto the next call.

I try to do that for three days after pulling her from her house. There is so much to do, so many people in need of help. It's a disaster no one could have predicted, but even with every moment my mind is occupied with the next call, I keep seeing her face and the hurt and anger.

Her life changed forever that night and it, at least in her mind, was at my hand.

That's a feeling I can't just shake off no matter how hard I try.

# Chapter 1

Isaac

Present Day

“Are you going to win me a prize?” Isabelle asks with fluttering eyes. “Isn’t that what gentlemen do on dates?”

“When did I ever claim to be a gentleman?” I tease, sliding my arm around her as we step through the gated entrance to the main street area, where the Sunset Valley Harvest Festival is in full swing.

Orange, red, and yellow decorations dot the store windows and balloons rise high above the light poles. The sweet, greasy smell of food that is so bad for you, but so damn good wafts in the wind.

If there is one thing this city does right, it’s the Harvest Festival.

“Fair point well made. You are definitely not a gentleman.” She slides her hand under my T-shirt in the back and scratches her nails over my skin.

Isabelle and I have been seeing each other on and off for a couple of months. I’m a little more off, and she’d like to be even more on, but that’s just not something I’m interested in right now.

She’s a nice girl, easy as hell to look at, and doesn’t make me want to stab my eyes out to be around. I figure that’s enough of a reason to keep seeing her, even if it’s just casually. I’ve known her since high school, so she’s a friend too.

“I need to check in with Graham and see where the booth is I have to man for a little bit,” I tell her. “Then I’ll absolutely win you a stuffed animal.”

Graham is one of the guys at the firehouse that I’m the closest to. He and I have a lot in common. He’s good people.

“Oh, right. I forgot you had to do that today. Bobbing for apples?”

The fire department sponsors and works a booth every single year, and every member of the crew has to swing by and man the booth for half an hour.

“S’mores, actually.” I sidestep quickly as a pair of little kids bolt past us, running toward the bouncy house that resides at the far end of the street.

“Yum. Those are my favorite.”

“I’m going to find the guys and take over for a bit, but I’ll text you when I’m finished and find out where you are, okay?”

“Okay. I’m just going to check out some booths and shops. I’ll be around.” She rises up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to my lips, and I let her, even though my every urge is to turn away from her affection, especially in front of everyone all around us. I don’t want her thinking this could grow into more than it is, even if that makes me an asshole.

The hurt in her eyes isn’t lost on me as she pulls away, and stuffs her hands into the back pocket of her jeans before turning to head off toward the other side of the street.

With a heavy sigh that extends my cheeks out into a bubble, I remove my baseball cap, slide my hand through my hair then plop the cap right back on.

Fucking women. They will be the death of me.



“It’s about damn time,” Graham says, as he tends to the small fire used to roast the marshmallows.

“Language. Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” I joke. “I just got here, came straight to you.”

“You just couldn’t stay away, could you?” He blows me a kiss like the asshole he is.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what it is. Your charming personality and boyish good looks are irresistible. I had to leave my smoking hot date all by herself to come see you.” I pull some gloves on to my hands and start breaking apart pieces of chocolate.

The line for our booth stretches back into the middle of the street with excited children and their parents eager for this campfire classic, but mixed in are young girls with fluttering eyes, looking to flirt with firemen, and their boyfriends with puffed out chests beside them.

“Keep up the good work, fellas.”

I look up toward the voice and smile.

“Thanks, Whit. I really needed your encouragement. I’m not sure how I could keep on without it,” I tease her.

I never thought I'd see the day that Graham settled down, but Whitney swooped in with her big, pretty eyes and tough as nails attitude and swooped him right up.

“Are you flirting with my girl, Black?” Graham asks over my shoulder then rounds the counter to place a kiss to the top of Whitney's head.

“I was trying to convince her that I'm the best-looking man in the firehouse, but she seems to be blinded by whatever it is that she likes about you. I told her I'd wait for her,” I say with a laugh. We've always had this type of easy friendship. It's something I appreciate, and it's needed in our line of work.

“Shh. Don't tell him our secrets, Isaac.” She gives me a wink then slides her arms around his neck, pulling him into a hug.

After setting Whitney up with the things she needs for a s'more, she heads over to the small firepit with Graham to roast her marshmallows.

Thirty minutes passes in a breeze of easy conversation with the citizens of Sunset Valley as they make their way through our booth and the many others that are open to their business. This is the highlight of the season for our city, and everyone goes all out. Perk of living in a small town, I suppose.

As the clock strikes 8 p.m., our city mayor comes over the PA system and her voice seeps out of the many speakers lining the street.

“Ladies and gentleman, I hope you are enjoying your time here at our Annual Harvest Festival. As tradition, the Sunset

Valley High School band and dance team have put together a performance and will be showing off their skills at the stage in the center of the square. Take it away, boys and girls!”

I stand just on the outside of the booth with my arms crossed over my chest, watching as the performance begins along with everyone else.

That’s not what catches my attention though, because movement just to the side of the stage pummels me like a punch to the gut.

At first, it’s a flash of dark, brown hair pulled into a loose braid that hangs over her shoulder. Then it’s a blip of her tanned arms in the air as she dances to the music without a care in the world. A black bracelet decorates her wrist, red fingernails dot the ends of her fingers, and the most beautiful smile I’ve seen in recent memory shines perfectly on her face.

I can’t see much of her body from here, but I can see she’s wearing a black T-shirt with some kind of large logo on the front, like a concert shirt, and I can make out the tops of denim shorts or jeans hugging her hips.

My eyes are drawn to her even when I try to force my attention away over the next few minutes, but no matter how hard I try, my gaze finds her again.

She is watching the performance with closed eyes now while also sinking her teeth into a caramel apple, chewing slowly and licking the sticky treat from her lips.



*What the fuck is wrong with me? Stop staring like a lunatic, Black.*

“Hey!” Isabelle says, wrapping her arms around my middle and scaring the shit out of me in the process.

“Jesus Christ!” I spin around quickly and grip her shoulders. “Holy hell, you scared me.”

“Sorry,” she giggles. “I didn’t mean to. I said your name a couple times, but you didn’t hear me. I guess the high school band really had your attention.”

*Not quite.*

“What can I say? I’m a fan of the trumpet.” I shrug, wrapping my arm around her and pulling her around to stand with me.

I turn back around with Isabelle at my side, but my eyes search for a certain brunette who, much to my dismay, is nowhere to be seen.

## Sawyer

“Damn, you all really do big things around here for this, don’t you?” I add some soap into my hands and wash them under warm water in the bathroom.

“We love our festivals, especially of the Harvest variety,” Olivia says from the stall behind me.

She was the very first friend I made since moving here earlier this year. We both teach English at Sunset Valley High, and having her around has made this transition easier than I could have imagined.

I stayed in Los Angeles as long as I could, and arguably longer than I should have, until I just needed a change.

New place. New job. New people. New me.

“I like it. I didn’t know if I would really love the small-town vibe after so long in the big city but I have to say, it’s growing on me.” I pull out my cell phone and scroll through social media while I wait for her to finish.

“You fit in well here, and I mean, it also helps you’re a dime piece and really cool and easy to talk to, with a personality for days.” She opens the stall door and comes to the sink to wash her hands. “Actually, come to think of it, I should hate you. No one should have that much going in their favor. Did you make a deal with the devil?”

I can't help but laugh. "Are you kidding me right now? Do you see yourself with your beautiful, curly blonde hair and perfect skin? It's disgusting," I tease her.

"You're right." She fluffs her hair in the mirror. "We are pretty bad bitches, huh?"

Being the youngest teachers in the school, me being twenty-eight and Olivia being twenty-six, has put us in a position of having to perform extra well because when you are young, capable, and a woman, the older men and women in your field tend to feel a certain type of way toward you.

So we banded together, and promised to always have each other's back. I've only known her for nine months, but it's like I've known her my entire life.

"Well, this bad bitch has a hankering for some of that fried bacon stuff I smelled on the way in. Let's go get some of that."

"I like the way you think. We'll get some." She slips her sunglasses back onto her face. "Let's roll."

I reach for the bathroom door to open it, but to my surprise, it pushes forward on its own, causing me to startle a bit and step back.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" the pretty redhead on the other side says when she sees we were on our way out as she was coming in.

"No, no, that's all right," I tell her. "It happens."

She gives us a small wave and heads back into a stall.

I adjust my crossbody bag on my chest, looking down for just a moment to make sure it's hanging the way I want when I collide into a solid brick of man.

“Shit! Fuck!” he exclaims loudly, as I ricochet off his body and stumble back, nearly falling.

It takes a moment to register what the issue is, but I soon see he must have been holding two drinks in his hands, because they are now on the ground and the contents are all over his shirt.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck those are hot,” he says again, jumping up and down, tugging his shirt out away from his body.

“Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going. I didn't even see you,” I tell him, stepping closer. “Let me pay to get the stains out.”

“No, no. That's okay. It's an old tee. It was just hot. No harm, no foul.” He finally looks up and our eyes meet, and he stumbles back a bit, kind of like I did, but an unseen force caused his movement.

“Are you sure? That looks like hot chocolate. That will absolutely stain.”

He is, without a doubt, one of the most attractive men I've ever seen in my entire life, at least in person. He is taller than me by at least a foot, and considering I'm five foot three, he towers over me. His shoulders are broad with arms extending from them that aren't huge, but they are clearly strong,

considering the way the sleeves of his tee cling and stretch over them, and don't even get me started on the face. Wow.

He shakes his head, sending whichever thought that was there speeding away and a smile takes its place.

“I'm positive. It's no big deal at all.”

“At least let me buy you another drink. It's the least I could do.”

“You look familiar,” Olivia, who has been unusually quiet, pipes in. “Where do I know you from?”

“Maybe I just have one of those faces,” he answers her but his eyes are squarely on me, and it sends a delicious chill up my body that I haven't felt in so long.

“No, I definitely know you from somewhere.” She scrolls through her phone for a second, like it's going to have all the answers, and then she exclaims loudly. “Ah ha! You're June!”

“He's what?” I ask, confused.

“June. In the Sunset Valley Fire Department Calendar. He's the month of June.” She flips her phone around to show the man in front of us dressed in a pair of fireman pants and nothing else.

Of course, he's a firefighter, because the universe likes to mess with me.

“Uh,” he rubs the back of his neck in what I can only assume is embarrassment, “yeah, that's me. I'm Isaac Black.” He

holds out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you...” The question lingers, implying we should introduce ourselves.

“Sawyer.” I slide my hand into his. His grip is strong and firm. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Olivia,” she chimes in, shaking his hand after I do.

I shift on my feet a bit and catch him staring again, but this time he smiles at me, very brazen in his clear display of checking me out.

I’m just about to call him on it when a flashing red flag comes bounding in.

“Sorry about that, Isaac. I’m back.”

The voice from my left pulls my focus from him and our hands drop to our sides.

The pretty redhead, who startled me in the bathroom, snuggles up at his side, dropping a kiss to his shoulder.

“What happened?” she asks, when she notices his shirt is completely covered in hot chocolate.

I chime in, “I wasn’t watching where I was going and I collided into your boyfriend. The drinks went everywhere. I offered to buy more, but he wouldn’t accept it.” I arch my brow, silently calling him on the carpet for checking me out while on a date.

They speak in complete unison.

“I’m not her boyfriend.”

“Oh, that’s okay we—”

*Awkward.*

“Well, on that note, Sawyer and I should get back to the festival,” Olivia says. “Isaac aka June, it was nice meeting you, and... you too, Not Isaac’s Girlfriend.”

I offer my apologies again about the incident and then we get out of there as fast as we can, all the while mouthing, “Oh my God” to one another.

## Chapter 2

### Sawyer

“Can anyone tell me what the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock in East Egg represents or symbolizes for Gatsby?” I stand at the front of my classroom with a Smart Board behind me, staring out into a group of high school juniors. Some are paying full attention and completely engaged, some are trying to sneak in their phone, but they aren’t doing a great job, others are staring off into space.

“Come on, guys, work with me here. *The Great Gatsby* is one of the most interesting pieces of literature you’ll ever study. I know at least one of you read it.”

A young man in the back raises his hand and I point to him for an answer.

“I think that it could represent something that Gatsby wants. It’s something he looks for every day... kind of like a goal.”

I smile wide. “That’s a great answer, Alex.” I turn and write on the board. “The green light represents Daisy and the things Gatsby wants for his future. So close, yet still out of reach.”



Growing up, the only thing I ever wanted in life was to be a teacher. I love guiding young people in the most important times of their lives and doing what I can to make sure they get the most out of life. That's not to say it's an easy job, because it isn't. It's the hardest job I've ever had, but it's beyond rewarding.

I turn back to face my second period class.

"I'm going to be asking you to read—"

The sound of the fire alarm zings through the room. It's loud, unyielding, and you can feel it deep in your ears.

"Ms. Westbrook, is this a drill?" Danielle, one of my students, asks as everyone bolts up to their feet.

I check my watch. "It is. This was slated to happen sometime this morning." I go over to my desk and grab my bag from the bottom drawer. "We'll be coming back here afterward. Just leave all of your things, and follow me down the hall and out to our designated area."

It's harder than you'd think to carefully guide hundreds of teenagers in an orderly fashion out the door, but somehow we manage to make it all the way out onto the football field without too much fuss.

Once I make sure all of my students are accounted for, I look around for Olivia and her class so I can pop over to their line to say hello.

"Think this will last long?" I ask, when I bump her with my elbow.

“Who knows? The fire department sent a couple trucks over to go in and make sure all of our fire safety things are in working order, but I wouldn’t think that would take too long.”

“Well, that’s good at least. It’ll make me feel better knowing those things work.”

Ever since the fires five years ago, I’ve become, I wouldn’t say paranoid, but hyperaware of fire safety and how things should and shouldn’t be.

Not that those things would have made a difference that night. My house was going no matter what we did or the precautions we took. My brother however...

“Hello. Earth to Sawyer.” Olivia waves her hand in front of my face, snapping me out of the potential very dark tunnel I was about to spiral down.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m just not a fan of this stuff or thinking about it, ya know?”

“I know.” She leans her head on my shoulder for just a moment.

I kept my experience with the Los Angeles wildfires private when I moved to Sunset Valley, simply because it’s not something I want to discuss ad nauseam. I had completely left that Sawyer behind. I grew my hair out, completely changed the color, had Lasik surgery. I became a new me... literally.

It wasn’t until Liv and I decided to order sushi and get wine drunk a few months ago that the entire story spilled out in a rush of curse words and tears.

I head back down to my side of the field to check in on my class when Principal Andrews comes over the PA system to let us know we can come back into the building, and to be kind and respectful as the gentleman from the Sunset Valley Fire Department are still in the halls and at the doors.

Getting everyone inside seems to be a bit more chaotic than getting everyone out, so by the time we have stepped into the cool, air-conditioned lobby of the school, I've ended up at the back my line of students.

Off to the side, near the lobby, there is a small huddle of two or three men dressed in blue slacks with blue shirts tucked in. The back bears a symbol of two crossing axes with the fire station's numbers at the top.

I wish I could say I was staring for no reason, but the truth is, I'm looking for him.

Isaac Black.

Ever since I covered him with hot chocolate three days ago, he's been present in my mind. Maybe he's not in my every thought, but he's made a home deep in my subconscious.

*Get back to work, Westbrook.*

I turn on my heel to head back down the hall to my classroom, but I'm halted by someone directly in my path.

"Jesus!" I say, completely startled and way too loudly, calling the attention of everyone in my general vicinity.

The lobby goes silent and every eye in the room is on me.

“We have to stop running into each other like this... literally.” His voice is deep, a bit raspy even.

It’s then I realize his hands are on my waist, keeping me upright because otherwise I’d be on my ass right now.

I step back out of his reach and try to shake off whatever effect his touch seems to be having on me and gather my wits.

“One would think you were stalking me and causing these run-ins,” I tease.

“I like to think I’d be a bit smoother than trying to run you over like a bulldozer. I’m just here for the fire drill. Seeing you is a happy bonus though.”

“You think so? I’m sure your girlfriend would disagree.” It’s a stab, to be sure, and even though he said before they weren’t together, I’m still going to poke at him a little.

“Girlfriend?”

“The pretty redhead you were with.”

“Isabelle? She’s not my girlfriend. We’re just friends.”

“I’m not that cozy with my friends.”

“Then you have the wrong kind of friends.” He smiles and it nearly knocks me off my feet. “Are you a teacher here?”

I have to actively force myself to keep my eyes on his face because the way the T-shirt he’s wearing stretches across his chest and hugs his biceps should be illegal.

“I am. Primarily junior English, but I have an AP class as well.”

“English, huh? That was my least favorite subject in school. I’m more of a science guy myself, but I think if I had an English teacher who looked like you, I would have paid more attention.”

I roll my eyes. “Real smooth. What did your English teacher look like?”

“Mrs. Purdy? Hell, she was in her seventies, probably should have been retired, smelled like old socks and baby powder.”

I laugh louder than I mean to and throw a hand over my mouth. The sound causes everyone to look our way again.

“That was oddly specific.”

“It’s a smell you can’t really forget,” he chuckles.

“I can only imagine.” I shift on my feet a bit. I’ve never been really good at this whole flirting thing, so my mind is telling me to abort now while I’m ahead. “I should probably get back to my class before they go crazy in there.”

“Okay, I should probably go check in with the chief too.” He reaches out to shake my hand, just as he did when we first met. “It was nice seeing you again, Sawyer. Maybe next time, we can try to make sure you remain upright.”

I reach out toward him and place my hand in his, palm to palm, and we shake. The heat of our skin touching is hard to ignore, and so is the fact that he gently caresses the underside of my wrist before we finally break the connection.

“That would be nice.” I begin to back away. “It was nice seeing you too, Isaac.”

I take off up the stairs and back to my classroom.



“Don’t think I didn’t see you, young lady,” Olivia says, with an arched brow as we eat lunch in my classroom a couple hours after the fire drill.

I pause with my sandwich midair, halfway between my plate and my mouth. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. I saw you chatting it up with Hottie McFirefighter in the lobby.” She chomps into a carrot and stares holes through me.

“Oh.” I place my sandwich back down on the plate. “It was a total coincidence. He happened to be here, and I basically ran over him again.”

“He is very attractive, you know,” she says, before sinking her teeth very loudly into another carrot with ranch dotted on the end.

“I do have eyes. It would be pretty hard to deny he is a very attractive man.”

“And judging by the smile on your face and the smile on his, I have to assume he finds you equally as attractive.”

“He’s just being polite.” I wave her off.

“Oh, please. Mr. Jordan holding the door open for us every morning is being polite. Isaac Black is more than polite. He’s laying the groundwork to show you how good he is with his

big hose, if you catch my drift.” She holds up her hands, showing me what ten inches could look like.

“Oh my God. What is wrong with you?” I toss a napkin at her.

“I’m brutally honest and you love me.” She puckers her lips. “I gotta be honest, Sawyer, you’ve been here almost a year and you haven’t dated anyone at all. You need to get out there a bit. Have some fun.”

“He’s a firefighter,” I say plainly, to which she sighs heavily.

“I know, I know. You don’t date firefighters.”

“You know why, Liv. It’s too close. It brings back too many bad memories, and those memories aren’t worth a roll in the sack with—”

“A roll in the sack with a six foot three inch, Adonis-like god, who looks like he could dish out orgasms like he was born and bred for it?” she interrupts.

“Why don’t you date him then?” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Nah. He’s clearly super into you.” She shakes her head. “Plus, I prefer mine a bit more rough around the edges. I want to be kind of afraid of them, if you know what I mean.”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “I know what you mean.”

In any other circumstance, I might look at Isaac and jump at the opportunity to date him, or hell, even just sleep with him,

but there is a big glaring thing standing in the way... well... two things.

“He hasn’t even expressed clear interest at all, so I think we are getting a bit ahead of ourselves, aren’t we?” I begin to gather up my trash after glancing at the clock.

“Now you’re just making excuses. No one is saying you need to marry the guy. Just don’t say no before you’ve even considered it.”

“I don’t date firemen, Liv.”

“Yeah, yeah. You keep saying that.”



## Isaac

There is nothing better than coming off a twenty-four-hour shift, going home, sleeping like the dead for twelve hours then strolling into the bar, having a couple beers with good friends.

Vin's Bar is just on the outskirts of Sunset Valley, and we've been coming here since before we were even old enough to drink. Vin caught us trying to get in with fake IDs, let us in, then served us alcohol-free beer, all the while letting the placebo effect take over then promptly embarrassing the shit out of us. After that, Vin's became our spot, of sorts. He always let us in and put us at the back table, mostly away from the hustle and bustle of business. I think he wanted to keep us out of trouble, and if we were coming here, he could keep an eye out like a pseudo grandfather.

It's a small bar, with only dozen tables and bar seating, and dark, hunter green walls. The ceiling is shiny copper with imperfections, dents, and dings. Classic rock croons from the jukebox at the far corner by our table, and my friend, Finn, holds his beer in the air when he catches sight of me. The smell of cheap beer and bar food wafts through the air. I love everything about it.

“There he is. Come on over, princess. Your alcohol is waiting.”

“You’re lucky you’re like my family, you dick,” I say, as I toss my jacket on the back of the chair at the corner table we always occupy when we are here.

“Like your family? I’m offended. I am your family. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t have put up with your shit for years.”

Finn has been my best friend for as long as I can remember. We met in kindergarten, on the playground, and over time, he has become like the brother I never had, and made being an only child not so tough.

“Where is Caleb?” I lift the bottle of beer to my lips and let the cold liquid wash down my throat. *Fuck, that’s good.*

“He said he had to finish up grading some papers then he’d be here.” Finn looks over my shoulder then raises his bottle. “Speak of the devil.”

“Sorry I’m late. Chemistry is a big bitch to grade sometimes.” He adjusts his thick-rimmed black glasses as he sits at the third side of the four-sided square table.

Caleb was in our middle school science class. We always made fun of him for being a little on the nerdy side, but I’d be lying if I said Caleb didn’t pull more ass than Finn and I combined times five.

“I just got here. Late call right before my shift ended.”

“Yeah, I tried to find you when we were heading back inside, but I wasn’t able to,” Caleb says.

“It was a bit hectic on the back end.”

“That’s what she said,” Finn announces proudly before standing. “I’m going to go get another round. Interested?”

Caleb and I both ask for another beer and Finn heads up to the bar to undoubtedly flirt with the new female bartender working tonight.

Talk of being at the school today, obviously, sends my thoughts right back to Sawyer, which seems to be a regular occurrence as of late.

“Hey, Caleb. You work at the high school.”

“Yes, I’m very aware. I’m glad to know we are on the same page with that.”

“Shut up. I just mean, I just realized you may be able to help me with something.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you know about a teacher in the English department named Sawyer Westbrook?” I managed to catch a glimpse of the badge that was hanging around her neck, attached to a Marvel Comics lanyard.

He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. “Sawyer Westbrook.” He ponders for a moment. “I haven’t spoken to her much, but I do see her from time to time.”

“Is that it? What’s her story?”

“All I know is that she came here from a school in LA, and she is incredibly attractive. She tends to be the topic of

conversation amongst the male students. Why?”

“I ran into her, literally, at the Harvest Festival last weekend, then again at the school today. I wanted to know more about her because clearly the universe wants her in my path or some shit.”

“What are we talking about?” Finn asks, coming back with our beers.

“Isaac is trying to get his dick wet with one of my coworkers,” Caleb jokes.

“Poor girl,” Finn adds.

“I hate you both.” I down the rest of my beer before popping the cap on the new one, tossing it into the bucket at the edge of the table.

Caleb laughs at me then claps me on the shoulder. “Sorry. Sorry. Look, like I said, I don’t really know much other than the things I just told you, and she and another teacher in that department, Olivia Harper, are pretty close. They run the track every afternoon after school.”

“If you wanted a quick lay, you’d call Isabelle. What’s the difference with this girl?” Finn asks.

Isabelle. Even thinking about breaking things off with her makes my chest hurt from guilt. She’s a nice girl. She just isn’t for me long term. I know that’s what she wants, even if she won’t say it outright.

“I’m not sure yet. I just... want to get to know her. That’s all.” I pick at the label on my beer bottle. “And as for Isabelle,

I don't know, man, she's making it pretty clear she wants more than what we agreed on before. More than clear, actually."

"And this is a bad thing?" says Caleb.

"With her, it is. I don't want a relationship, and I know that makes me a goddamn hypocrite as I'm asking about Sawyer Westbrook in the same breath. It's complicated."

"Pussy tends to be that way," Finn says, and Caleb nods his head in agreement.

# Chapter 3

## Sawyer

“My legs are burning. My chest hurts. I’m way too out of shape for this shit. Why do you make me do this every day?” I whine to Olivia, as we round into our fourth lap around the track.

“Because running is good for you. It is good for mental health, physical health, and it’ll make your thighs and ass iconic. Don’t you want iconic thighs and ass?”

“I’d rather have non burning lungs.”

“Suck it up, baby. One more lap then we can go have margaritas.”

“Eyes on the margarita prize,” I say, both to myself and to her.

“Atta girl.”

The last lap brings a hot burning in my calves and I honestly think I’m going to collapse, but I press on.

“Home stretch,” Olivia says. “Go hard.”

I look out ahead of me toward our finish line and I can see someone stepping down from the bleachers and onto the track. As we get closer, it becomes more and more apparent who that person is.

“Well, well, well, look who we have here,” Olivia whispers, as we slow to a walk toward the stairs where Isaac Black is standing.

“Okay, it’s just creepy at this point, isn’t it?”

“It’s a small town, Sawyer. It’s not that creepy.”

“I’ve lived here for nearly a year and haven’t seen him one time and now I’ve seen him three times in a week. That’s weird.”

“Or it’s fate.”

Trying to catch my breath from the run, I place my hands on my hips and sigh. “I don’t believe in fate.”

“Better start looking into it,” she whispers, before waving to Isaac. “Well, isn’t this a small world,” she says loudly, as we approach him.

“I thought that was you two,” he says, as he secures his cell phone into the strap on his bicep. He’s wearing black shorts and a white tank top and looks absolutely delicious.

“Stalking us now?” I joke, reaching down for my bottle of water I left by the stairs. I open the bottle and gulp back three large mouthfuls, and it’s not lost on me that he’s staring.

“Couldn’t I ask you the same question?”

“Well, you came to where we are, not the other way around.”

“Maybe I run here all the time.” He crosses his arms and grins.

“No, you don’t. We run every day and I’ve never seen you.” I twist the cap back onto my bottle of water then hold it in the bend of my arm.

“There are other hours in the day, you know? I could run here.”

We stare at each other for a moment then both burst into laughter for no particular reason at all.

“Um, should I just go? Because there seems to be enough flirting here that my services are no longer needed.” Olivia waves her hand.

“No,” I say quickly. “No one was flirting.”

“Are you sure? It felt like flirting to me,” Isaac adds.

“If I was flirting, you’d know it.”

“Well, in that case, I’d like to get the chance to know it. Can I get your number?”

My initial instinct is to say absolutely yes, because he’s kind, charming, and so incredibly cute, but too many factors have wedged themselves into my brain that I just can’t.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I tell him.

“Why is that? Not that you owe me an explanation but call it morbid curiosity.”



I could tell him the truth, but how does one articulate something like that?

*Oh, I don't want to date you because dating a fireman would constantly remind me of my drug-addicted brother, who burned to death when my house burned down four years ago, plus I have some misplaced rage and hatred toward men in your profession because they saved me and let him die. My therapist says they did everything they could, but hating them is easier than accepting the truth. Sorry!*

"I don't date firemen," I say simply with a shrug.

"What do you have against firemen?" He leans his shoulder against the fencing that separates the track from the bleachers.

"Bad experience. You're all the same, and I'm not trying to be someone's one-night stand." I try to sound as sure as I can, even though I'm completely making this up as I go.

"That's a bold assumption that I am trying to sleep with you." He grins. "Maybe I just want to be your friend."

I roll my eyes. "I'll believe it when I see it, considering all I've seen so far is your eyes dropping to my chest when you think I'm not looking."

"I'm a man who appreciates beauty when it's presented to him but, Sawyer, I can promise you, I'm not the type of man who would just openly ogle you like a caveman. I prefer to ogle in private where I can touch too."

I wish I didn't shiver, in a good way, at the thought of that. I really do, but I'm only human.

Before I can respond to him, my smartwatch on my wrist vibrates, pulling my attention completely away, flashing an incoming text message from my mom.

“I should go,” I say. “It’s getting late already, and I have a couple things I need to do. Plus, I was promised a margarita.”

“Okay. It was nice seeing you again, Sawyer. Maybe we’ll run into each other again, and maybe then you’ll be a little less stubborn with your phone number. Good to see you too, Olivia.” He nods and steps back out onto the track.

“I have a feeling you’ll make sure we see each other again, Isaac Black,” I tell him.

“I will neither confirm nor deny that statement, Sawyer Westbrook.”



No sooner do I slide behind the wheel of my car and turn on the ignition, does my phone ring loudly through the speakers. I accept the call on the steering wheel.

“Hi, Mom.”

“I tried calling you and texting you more than once. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I was out for a run with Liv.” I lean forward and place my forehead on the steering wheel, suddenly feeling every second of that run in my aching muscles.

“I was worried.”

“I know, Mom. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Ever since Jason died, my mom has become a bit of a hoverer. Even now, with me pushing thirty years old, she still worries as much as she would if I were a teenager. Losing a child, especially under the circumstances she did, has taken a bit of a toll on her mentally.

“It’s all right. I’m sorry too. You’re an adult, I know that, but you’re still my little girl.”

“Always will be.” I smile a little even though she can’t see me.

“You sound tired.”

“I am exhausted. It was a long day, then adding in the run—when you know I’m not a runner—has wiped me out.” I lift my head from the steering wheel and stare out toward the track. I can see it perfectly from where I am, which means I have an unhindered view of Isaac as he runs.

“It’s good you’re getting out there though. I was worried you’d become somewhat of a hermit when you left Los Angeles. That was so far from home, but at least you had friends there, but now you don’t even look like yourself anymore. You’re a different human being.”

“I have friends here now too, Liv is great, and I just wanted a fresh start, Mom.”

“Any friends of the male variety catching your eye?”

“There have been a couple, but nothing to write home about. You know men, Mom, they generally suck.”

Isaac rounds the curve in the track, taking the long stretch that is beside the parking lot. I can see the well-defined muscles in his thighs and calves. He runs smoothly, with purpose and strength. It's incredibly attractive.

“That's not true at all. You just pick sucky ones.”

At that, I laugh. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Well, it's true. Remember the biker, what's his name?” I hear her snap her fingers, a habit she picked up when she is thinking hard on something. “With the skull tattoo on his hand.”

“Bobby.”

“That's the one. I hated him.”

“Bobby was a mistake I quickly learned from, and I was nineteen years old. I was being a rebel, trying to piss you and Dad off as best I could.”

“It worked wonders. Thankfully, you didn't make a mistake like that again.” I hear her sigh heavily then she speaks again, “Sawyer, I'm calling because I just wanted to talk. With Jason's birthday next month, I'm starting to feel so... lost.”

I've tried to put his impending birthday out of my head. It's the hardest day of the year. Even harder than the anniversary of his death. It's like a punch in the gut thinking about the birth of someone who isn't here anymore.

“You don't have to explain. I understand. You can call me or FaceTime me, hell, or even come visit me, anytime you need to. You and Dad.”

I blink my eyes rapidly, trying to fight the tears threatening to fall.

“I’ll talk to him about coming to see you. You know him, though. He throws himself into work this time of year. He’s a tough nut to crack.”

“Always has been.”

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer. I just wanted to hear your voice and say I love and miss you.”

“I love you too, and I miss you so much.”

We say our goodbyes, and when my car fills with the deafening sound of silence, I let true tears fall down my cheeks and burying my face in my hands.

I allow myself to cry, just for a moment, in pure catharsis before I exhale a sharp breath and shake it off.

When I lift my head from my hands to wipe my tears away, I see him, Isaac, standing there, about to climb into an SUV that is parked about twenty feet away from me. He’s staring at me, no doubt having witnessed me crying.

There is clear concern in his eyes, and I think for a fleeting moment, he is going to try to come talk to me, to check on me, so I give him a small smile, which seems to placate him long enough for me to throw my car into drive and head off to meet Olivia for our drinks.

## Isaac

There is no greater frustration than seeing a beautiful woman cry and not knowing how to help her. Hell, or even knowing if you should go over to help her.

I knew the entire time I was running, she was in the small compact car in the parking lot, watching me. I could feel her gaze. What I didn't know was the gaze was accompanied by tears.

I didn't know why she was crying, but it took effort of monumental varieties not to march over there and pull her into my arms to make sure she was all right, but I refrained. I don't know her that well, and the last thing I want to do is scare her.

Why was she sad? Did someone hurt her? Did I make her uncomfortable?

So many questions cloud my mind now, four days later, as I sit around the table in the firehouse kitchen with my crew, having a meal lovingly donated by one of the local restaurants.

Sometimes we fix food for ourselves, sometimes meals are donated, but regardless, we are a well-fed fire station.

“Awfully quiet over there, Black,” Graham goads, giving me a nudge to the back of my head with his elbow as he walks by.

“We can't all be the life of the party like you. I wouldn't want to step on your toes,” I joke.

“Probably a good idea. Not many people can keep up with me.”

Some shifts tend to be very quiet. Some would even say boring, but I would never say that out loud. That would be a one-way ticket to getting the shit kicked out of you for jinxing it all.

“I’m surprised Whitney let you off the leash long enough to work an extra shift. I thought you were too good for that now.”

We all love teasing him about what a pussy-whipped bastard he is now. It’s all in good fun, of course, but that woman has him wrapped around her finger and he clearly loves every second of it.

“Sit and spin.” He raises his middle finger.

“You’d like that too much. I think I’ll pass.”

The crew we have here is much like a family, because we tend to spend more time with them than our actual families at times, and being thrown into life-or-death scenarios with only your coworkers to count on seems to build trust faster than anything I’ve encountered in my life.

I’d lay down my life for any of the men in this room, and I know they’d do the same for me.

“Did you all hear they are wanting to do a big write-up on the firehouse for the five-year anniversary of the LA Wildfires?” Graham asks.

“Why the fuck would they want to do that? No one wants to remember that shit. I did the one ridiculous interview right

afterward, and I said I'd never do it again."

Everyone around the table chimes in and appears to agree with me. It seems everyone is turning them down.

"I agree with you, Isaac, but you know how the media can be sometimes. The darker, the sadder, the better."

"I don't want to be part of it. We don't do this job to be praised. We do it to save lives. If you're in it for the accolades, my respect is gone," I say generally.

"You sound like my damn brother," Graham groans. "But you're right. It's not right. Not at all."

That time in our lives was hard for all of us to process when we were finally able to come home. We were exhausted, of course, and on top of that, we were mentally shaken from the amount of death and destruction we were forced to face.

We all had blisters and deep marks on our faces from having to wear our masks for so many hours straight. I still have a small scar along my temple from it.

In the grand scheme, we were able to come home afterward and not face the long-lasting damage that comes with losing everything, and sometimes I do feel guilty for that, especially when all I have is a fucking scar.

People lost everything.

Reliving that pain isn't something anyone should have to go through for a fucking newspaper article.

Ever.



# Chapter 4

## Sawyer

How can there be so many different kinds of apples? Are they really that different?

Granny Smith. Red Delicious. Pink Ladies.

It's just ridiculous, honestly. Some things in life should just be simple, and the rows upon rows of fruit, staring at me in the produce section of the grocery store, are anything but simple.

"I suppose I'll choose you, Red Delicious," I say under my breath, selecting a few bright red apples and placing them in my cart.

The rest of the section is easier to navigate, but I pause when I see a small, perfectly shaped pineapple on a display table and I stop in my tracks.

It's so silly, the things that trigger memories, both good and bad. It could be a song, a breeze, or even a damn pineapple.

My brother's favorite.

I take a breath, try to focus on the good memories I have of him, and continue on with my shopping.

I'm exploring the fresh bread in the bakery when I familiar voice sounds from behind me.

"You don't have to flirt with every man you see, Grams."

I glance over my shoulder to see Isaac walking, pushing a grocery cart while an elderly woman rides in a motorized chair beside him.

"Why yes I do. I'm not getting any younger. I have to shoot my shot every chance I get."

"Shoot your shot?" He laughs. "Where did you hear that?"

It's so difficult not to eavesdrop, because it's not every day you see a hulk of a man helping a very small old lady grocery shop.

He's casual today, in a simple tee and blue jeans. His hair is mussed up in that *I just rolled out of bed* way that works so well for some men. He looks so good it hurts.

I make my bread selection then push my cart forward, trying to sneak away without him seeing me, but my name on his lips stops me.

"Sawyer?"

I turn slowly then try to act surprised to see him, like I had not been staring at him only moments before.

"Isaac?"

“I’m starting to think you’re the one doing the stalking here.” He tilts his head just a bit and gives me that sideways grin.

“I was about to say the same thing to you.”

I’m suddenly very aware of the cool air from the A/C on my heated skin.

*Maybe the maxi dress was a bad idea.*

“Doing some grocery shopping?” He shoves his hands into his pockets.

“That is what supermarkets are for.” I smile so he knows I’m teasing.

“Fair enough.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask him.

He motions over his shoulder to the older woman in the motorized chair, who is chatting away with one of the store clerks a few feet back.

“I bring my grandmother grocery shopping once a week. That’s her over there. She doesn’t meet a stranger, so she is chatting away.”

“That’s really sweet of you.”

“It’s the least I can do. She’s a handful sometimes, but she’s the best.”

As if she can sense she is being discussed, his grandmother comes toward us and stops just beside her grandson.

“That Paul is always such a sweetheart.” She reaches out and pats Isaac on the arm.

She is so small with crisp, snow-white hair and glasses. She is wearing an all baby blue tracksuit and black tennis shoes. She’s completely adorable.

“You just like flirting with him.”

“I do. I do.” Her eyes move to me. “Hello, there. It seems my grandson has forgotten his manners.” She reaches out to shake my hand. “I’m Jean.”

“He’s a man. He can be forgiven.” I smile and place my hand in hers to shake. “I’m Sawyer.”

“You didn’t even give me chance, Grams.” He chuckles. “And I take offense to that man comment.”

“Sawyer. What a unique and lovely name.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “I’m named after my grandmother. It was her maiden name.”

“I adore it.” She releases my hand and looks up at Isaac. “Tell me you aren’t hiding this one from your dear old grandmother. She’s one hell of a looker too.”

“Grams,” he scolds a bit under his breath. “Play it cool.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Thank you for the compliment. That’s very sweet, but Isaac and I just met at the Harvest Festival two weeks ago. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going and bumped into him.”

“Then she ran me over while I was working a drill over at Sunset Valley High, and then we saw each other again at the high school track. I was there for a run.”

I roll my eyes at him and bite my lip in a smile, because we both know he came there on purpose to see me.

“And now you’ve run into each other again here at the supermarket? Seems serendipitous to me,” Jean says with a knowing grin.

“Actually, Grams, I tried to get her number last time I saw her, but apparently Sawyer here doesn’t date firemen.”

That asshole is throwing me under the bus in front of his grandmother. He plays hardball.

“That’s just about the silliest thing I’ve ever heard.” Jean looks my way and shakes her head. “Firemen are strong, loyal, brave and,” she looks around, leans in closer to me and whispers, “they are wonderful in bed.”

I cover my mouth to stifle my laughter.

“Christ’s sake, Grams. Seriously?” Isaac covers his eyes and looks positively horrified.

“What? It’s the truth.” She shrugs as if she said the most natural thing in the world.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I cannot believe this is happening right now.” He is still covering his eyes. “I can’t even look at you, and I’m going to have to scrub that image out of my brain.”

I watch for a few moments while they tease each other back and forth. Their relationship is clearly close, and it makes my heart ache. I miss my family.

“Well, I’m going to leave you two to talk privately for a moment.” Jean starts to move but stops just beside me. “It was lovely to meet you, Sawyer, and do me a favor, would you? Don’t be too hard on my grandson. He’s a good one. Trust me.”

I just give her a smile and then I nod at her words. “It was nice to meet you too, Jean.”

“Isaac, I’m going to go over to the books. I want to find something new to read. There’s this new one by that pretty author, what’s her name... K. Bromberg, that I’ve been dying for.”

“Go find your book. I’ll be along soon. I just want to say goodbye to Sawyer.”

She waves him off then she’s on her way.

“She’s adorable.”

“She’s special, that’s for sure, and I’m sorry if she made you feel uncomfortable with the whole fireman in bed comment.”

“No, not at all. It was funny. I swear. It takes a lot to offend me. I appreciated her honesty.”

“If she’s one thing, it’s honest. She has kept my ass in line for a long time.”

“It’s great you do this for her. I know I said that earlier, but it’s the truth. So many people wouldn’t.”

“I love her,” he says simply.

It’s in this moment, right here in the middle of a supermarket, my armor cracks, just a bit, and I know if he asks me for my number again, I will say yes.

“It shows.”

He slides his hand through his hair and gives it a tug. “Grams was telling me, before I saw you in here, that taking chances when you can is really important.”

“Shooting her shot,” I say with a smile.

“You heard us?”

“I did. I have to be honest; I saw you before you saw me and I got nervous. I tried to make a break for it.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Am I really that scary?”

“You’re not scary at all, Isaac. You just make me a bit nervous, that’s all.”

He regards me closely for a moment, like he’s trying to read my mind, just like at the festival the last week.

“You really don’t trust people like me, do you?”

“It’s hard to trust anyone sometimes, isn’t it?”

He steps a bit closer and places a hand on my cart sitting idly between us. My eyes flick down to see his strong fingers curling over the metal. They are long, but not like piano playing fingers. Perfectly sized so if he were to hold my hand,

they would completely wrap over mine, and if he were to put his hand on my leg, his fingers would cover the entire expanse of my skin from outer to inner thigh.

“That’s true, but a very pessimistic outlook.” He stares at me for a moment then speaks again. “Grams always takes a chance, so that is what I’m going to do.”

*How can a simple phrase like that make me tingle from head to toe? Is he taking a chance on me?*

“Meaning?”

“Give me a chance to prove to you not everyone is bad, especially not everyone in my line of work, and especially not me.”

He isn’t pushy. He’s not trying to force me into anything. He’s just being consistent, and even I have to appreciate that... shooting his shot.

“What would this chance entail?”

“Five dates. Give me five dates to prove it, and after five dates, if you still think you can’t trust me or if you no longer want to see me, I’ll bow out gracefully and leave you be.”

“Five dates,” I repeat.

Jason’s memory is all around me every single day, no matter what I do, I can’t run from it forever. This nice, incredibly handsome, sweet man wants to spend time with me, and who am I to say no?



“You’ve got a deal, Isaac Black.” I extend my hand to seal the deal with a handshake. “Don’t make me regret it.”

“I would never.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his cell phone, then passes it to me. “Call yourself so I have your number and you have mine.”

His screen is already on when I look down at it, and his phone background is all black with the phrase ‘Negativity Is the Easy Way Out’ in the middle.

I open up keypad, dial my number, and let it ring until I feel the vibration in my pocket then I end it.

“All set.” I pass him the phone.

“Perfect.” I watch the muscles in his arms contort and flex as he slides his phone back into his pocket. “I should get back to her before she leaves here with more numbers than me.”

I giggle. “Probably a good idea.”

“I’ll call you sometime soon. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He flashes me that damn smile of his and leaves me in the middle of the supermarket with a racing heart and butterflies in my stomach.

## Isaac

“Aren’t you going to tell me about her?”

I’m honestly shocked how long it took Grams to push for more information about Sawyer. She waited all the way to the parking lot before starting twenty questions.

“Here we go,” I groan.

“Don’t you have that tone. I’m an old woman. You’re supposed to be kind to me.”

I laugh out loud and shake my head at her audacity.

“Are you saying that I’m not? Because if I remember correctly, I’m ‘such a sweet boy,’ unless you were lying to me when I picked you up and took you for doughnuts.”

Grams is a sugar fiend. That is a one-way ticket to her good side. Anytime she’s mad, I’ve learned to ply her with chocolate or some sort of sweet confection. She can never say no to that.

“I’m saying you are being defensive over a girl, and it’s the first time that’s happened. I’m a naturally curious person, so I want to know about her. She’s very pretty.”

The motorized cart she is riding in rolls to a stop just beside my truck and she stares at me, waiting for some kind of response while I load her few bags of groceries into the back of my extended cab. Her gaze is so palpable, like a typical

grandma gaze you can feel from across the room when you know you're in trouble.

“Why are you staring at me?”

She tilts her head to the side and holds her hands out like the reason is obvious. “Because I can tell you like her.”

“I hardly know her, Grams. I've only run into her a couple of times.”

“I may be old, but I'm not stupid. I can feel obvious sexual tension when I see it.”

I hold my hands up in surrender. “Okay, first of all, you can't see sexual tension and second of all, gross. Please don't talk about feeling sexual tension.” I place the final bag in the truck then close the door. “That's the last thing I want to think about.”

“How do you think you're here, Isaac? I had sex with your grandfather to have your father then he had sex with your mom to have you. Sex is normal.”

“I'm thirty seconds away from covering my ears like a two-year-old and shouting la-la-la-la-la until you stop.” I shake my head at her. “Give me your hand and I'll help you around and into the truck.”

“I am a stubborn woman, Isaac. I don't give up easily.” She gathers her purse and holds it tightly against her side.

I help her stand and slowly walk her around to the passenger side of the truck then maneuver her up and onto the seat.

“You? Stubborn? I would have never guessed,” I say sarcastically.

“Where do you think you get it from? That’s a Black family trait, you know? Stubborn asses who never accept no for an answer.”

I take my place behind the wheel and turn the keys, bringing the engine to life and her music of choice, old-school country music, croons through the speakers.

“Grams, there really isn’t much to say. I think she’s attractive, and easy to talk to, so yes, I’ve asked her out.”

“Did she say yes?”

“Not at first, but eventually.”

“Ah, playing hard to get. Good girl.” She clasps her hands in her lap and begins to sway to the music.

“I have a feeling you were one hard lady to land back in your day.” I pull out onto the road and head back toward her apartment.

“Back in my day?” she scoffs. “Are you calling me old?”

“Aren’t you though? I thought it was common knowledge you were there when the wheel was invented,” I tease her, like we always do each other. “You’re basically a dinosaur. Hell, not even that. You’re a fossil.”

“At least I’m pretty. You took after the unfortunate side of our family, dear. I’m really sorry about that.” She laughs, reaching over to pat my shoulder.

I really love this woman, and I'm grateful she is still here with me so I'm able to joke around with her, even if our love language is being mean to one another. She stepped up for me in my life when I had no one. Who knows where I'd be right now without her?

"You're right. You are pretty."

We sit silently, listening to Johnny Cash serenade us about a woman in love. Grams has always loved the Man in Black, and he's always her music of choice when she's in my truck.

"Listen, Isaac, I don't mean to press every single time a woman is mentioned, but I want more for you than this Casanova thing you've got going."

"How do you even know what I do and don't do in regard to women? I'm hardly a Casanova, Grams."

"Then what would you call yourself, because I am not blind, you know? I know you see ladies and see them often. I have my ways of finding these things out. What about that Isabelle girl? You were seeing her a lot."

"We're just friends. I've told you that."

She scoffs, "You may want to tell her that."

"Why? I've made it pretty clear I don't want anything serious with her."

"She still comes to the community center to volunteer from time to time. She stops by to say hello to me, and, Isaac, I know what it looks like. She's wrapped up in you good." She

reaches into her purse and looks at the cell phone I bought for her a few months ago, using one finger to poke the screen.

I release a heavy sigh as we turn into the gated senior community she calls home now.

“Great. That’s the last thing I need. I’ve been lucky enough to avoid this stuff for awhile.”

“Take my advice. If you’re not going to take things further than a roll in the hay with her, let her down easy. She’s a nice girl.”

“Does that make me an asshole?” I slide the truck into park and rest my hands on the steering wheel.

“Not having feelings for someone doesn’t make you an asshole, Isaac. You can’t help that.”

“Just like you can’t help who you’re drawn to?”

She reads my face so easily, and it’s like she knows without a doubt I’m referring to Sawyer.

“Exactly that, dear.”

# Chapter 5

## Isaac

Tossing my duffle bag onto the bench in the locker room of Fire Station 37, I plop down beside it and pull off my sneakers so I can change into my station wear. I can hear my cell phone vibrating against the metal of the locker. I lift it up and see a number I don't recognize, so I answer immediately, thinking it could be Grams.

“Hello?”

“Isaac, hello, this is Kendra with the Sunset Valley Journal. I'm calling because we want to—”

I hang up immediately. I don't want to talk about or relive that fucking weekend at all, and neither should they.

Graham pokes his head in.

“Morning.” He steps all the way in and leans against his locker. He's coming off shift and looks exhausted. “I've got coffee going down in the kitchen and Sue's Diner sent in some food for breakfast. Might want to get your ass down there before Connors eats it all.”

“Thanks.” I take off my plain T-shirt and pull on my blue, station-approved polo. “You look like shit. Long night here?”

“Car accident on the freeway. It was... not great. Multiple vehicles. Alcohol is a bitch, man. We were there awhile.”

He reaches over his back and tugs his shirt free so he can change into different clothes before heading home to his wife.

“Well, get home and get some beauty sleep. You look like you need it.”

Our career is unique, much like other uniformed and emergency services in that we have to work through, endure, and see a lot of fucked-up shit on the daily basis, but then we have to find a way to not let it disrupt our mental health. From fires, to death, to car accidents, and everything in between, we have to see it all.

I was always good at that, the separation, until the LA fires. Those have stuck with me and wedged themselves deep into my chest.

Once I’m changed and ready to roll, I place all my stuff in my locker and slam it shut. I won’t be getting it out until I’m relieved from shift at eight tomorrow morning. Twenty-four hours from now.



The day passes easily with not much to write home about. A few structural fire calls and a fire hydrant mishap, but all in all, no one was hurt in any call we took today. I call that a win.



I'm lying flat on my back in my bunk, listening to the snores of my coworkers around me, now. It's odd really, how much of a family you become here. I may only work two full shifts a week, but I'm closer with these men than I've been with anyone besides Caleb and Finn.

I love my job, but finding sleep on shift isn't as easy for me as it is for others. I'm on alert, waiting for the alarm to sound that sends us into action. I catch a couple hours here and there, but they're few and far between.

I usually spend the downtime in my bunk playing cards on my phone, even as lame as that sounds. It keeps me centered and chills my busy mind.

I'm in the middle of a pretty intense round of Solitaire when an incoming text vibrates my phone.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting when I open my text messaging app, but I can honestly say a text from Sawyer was firmly in the "not going to happen" category.

**Sawyer: Beg for my number then don't even call? I'm offended, Mr. Black. :P**

I check the time before I respond. It's nearly two in the morning.

**Me: Isn't it a little past your bedtime?**

The little dots showing that she is typing appear almost immediately.

**Sawyer: I'm a big girl, mister. I don't have a bedtime.**

**Sawyer: bed tome\***

**Sawyer: SHIT**

**Sawyer: B E D T I M E**

**Sawyer: Damn, thumbs.**

I laugh as quietly as I can and type out a reply.

**Me: Don't blame your thumbs. I have a feeling there may be a bit of alcohol at play right now.**

**Sawyer: I will neither confirm nor deny this fact.**

**Sawyer: So why haven't you texted me, hmmm? It's been a whole week.**

**Me: I've been planning my moment. It takes skill.**

Her response isn't as immediate this time, but she eventually replies.

**Sawyer: Are you sure you didn't just change your mind?**

**Me: Positive. Don't you trust me?**

**Sawyer: Not yet. I just know you're cute and nice to your grandma. It's hot.**

**Me: Oh, so you think I'm hot, huh?**

The blinking dots never appear again, and after I've gotten a bit of sleep and the sun is starting to rise through the bunk area, she still hasn't replied to me.

## Sawyer

“Why did you let me do this?” I plop my head onto my kitchen table while Olivia cooks breakfast for us.

“What? Encourage you to get tequila drunk with me on your living room floor, while I mourn the fact another asshole has decided to ghost me?”

“Yes. Exactly that,” I whine. “My head is killing me.”

“You just need a bit of hair of the dog.”

“No! Dear God, no. No more alcohol. Coffee and ibuprofen only and whatever delicious thing you’re whipping up over there,” I mumble against the table.

“French toast. The carbs will help.”

“I can’t believe I even had the stuff in the house to make that.” I sit up and pull my hair into a bun, securing it with the hair tie around my wrist.

“You didn’t. I had it delivered after my run this morning.”

“You can’t be human. There is no way you consumed that much alcohol and got up for a run this morning.”

“I’m not a lightweight like you.”

I stick my tongue out at her then go to find a bottle of water and some ibuprofen.

Once I'm medicated and hydrated, I pull on a hoodie from my bedroom and swipe my phone from the nightstand.

Back at the table with a delicious plate of carbs, butter, and sweet maple syrup in front of me, I unlock my phone to do a social media check, as I do every morning, but what I see instead makes me want to crawl under the table and hide.

“Oh God. Oh no.”

“What?”

“You're the worst drunk buddy ever,” I scold. “You let me text him? Why didn't you fight the phone from me? Or slap me? Or punch me in the boob? Anything to keep me from texting him.”

“Whoa. Calm down. Who did you text?” She comes over and looks over my shoulder at my phone. “Isaac Black.” She covers her mouth and begins to snicker. “I mean, they say drunk words are sober thoughts. You obviously wanted him to text you. What's the big deal?”

“I embarrassed the hell out of myself! What do you mean ‘What's the big deal?’ I told him I thought he was hot and that I wanted him to reach out, and I was a drunk idiot who couldn't even spell.”

“Well, now I need to read these.” She extends her hand. “Hand it over, sister.”

I place my phone in her hands then lay my forehead back on the cool wood of the kitchen table.

“This couldn't have gone worse.”

“Oh calm down, you big baby.” She continues to scroll through the messages. “They aren’t even that bad. You’re overreacting.”

“You think so?” I lift my head again and look at her.

“Yes. If anything, it’s cute and endearing. You should reach out to him again this morning, now that you’re sober. It’s empowering that you said something first. Show him he doesn’t have ultimate control.”

She tosses my phone back to me and I place it on the table next to my plate of food.

“I’m not even that interested in him.” I pick up my fork and push my food around a bit, waiting for Liv to say something, anything, but instead she’s simply glaring at me when I look back her way.

Liv has the kind of stare all good teachers have. The one that can level you completely and you feel the anger and disappointment that makes your gut drop to your toes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’m just waiting on you to stop lying to me, and yourself, before I give my opinion.”

“What do you mean? I’m not into him like that.”

“You’re a liar.” She finally plops down into the seat across from me. “You wouldn’t be freaking out about a drunk text if you weren’t at least a little interested. You certainly wouldn’t have agreed to go on five dates with him.”

Liv was shocked, to say the least, when I told her about the interaction at the supermarket and that I somehow let him talk me into going on five dates with him. Who was I kidding? He could have asked me to commit to a dozen dates, and I was so high on serotonin from seeing his adorable interaction with his grandmother I would have said yes to that too.

“Just hear me out, okay?” she asks, as she lays her hands on the table, and I nod in agreement. “How long has it been since you’ve been on a proper date?”

“Only once since I’ve been here, and just a few here and there in the last five years.”

“And when was the last time you had sex?”

My eyes go wide. “I’m not even considering sex with him yet.”

“Ah ha. Yet. And no one said you had to, I’m just trying to make a point here. When was the last time?”

I take a moment, and really think back. I haven’t had sex since I’ve been in Sunset Valley, that’s for sure, so it would have to be in LA.

“Like... three years ago, I think.” Fuck, saying that out loud makes it seem even sadder.

“And why is that?”

“I don’t even know if I have an answer for that.”

“Yes, you do. Find it and let’s hash this out. Because from what I’ve heard through the grapevine, Isaac is a good man,

and shouldn't your first time back in the dating scene here be with a decent human, at least?"

She has a point there.

Dating has been difficult since my brother passed away. My life didn't make sense for awhile. I couldn't understand why he was gone and I was still here. I processed a lot of guilt with therapy. Then I was trying to find a place to live, dealing with insurance from the fire, so dating wasn't exactly the first thing on my mind.

"After the fire and losing Jason, and everything that came with it, dating took a back seat. When I finally did try it out, everything felt empty. I owed it to him to live my life to the fullest because he didn't get the chance. I wanted to live for him. Why waste my time on emptiness when I could wait for greatness?"

"How can you find greatness when you don't try? You've spent enough time in your house on the nights and weekends. Go out, have fun, and live that life you want to live for him. I didn't know him, but I know he wouldn't want you to be a hermit, right?" She tilts her head to the left and regards me closely. "So I think it's great you're going to go out with Isaac. Even if just as friends, to have some fun, and get to know him. What's the harm in that?"

"His job."

"You can't hide from every fireman you come across, Sawyer."

I groan and put my head in my hands again. “So you think I should text him instead of waiting?”

“I do. Take the bull by the horns... or the fireman by the hose.” With a wiggle of her brows, she dives into her breakfast, confident she made her point.

Before I lose my nerve, I pick up my phone and fire off a quick text to him.

**Me: Drunk me is clearly more vocal. LOL. Still interested in taking me out or did I scare you off?**

I place the phone face down on the table so I can't stare at it while I wait for a reply. I'll finish breakfast, take the morning slow, cure this massive hangover, and then I'll look.

An hour passes before I finally come back to the table and flip my phone over, revealing two texts have arrived on my phone.

One shortly after I sent the first text, then other fifteen minutes after that.

**Isaac: It would take more than an adorably drunk woman calling me hot to scare me off.**

**Isaac: Absolutely still want to take you out. In fact, date #1, tomorrow night. Meet me at the corner of 5th and Main at 7 p.m. How does that sound?**

My heart races at the idea of this actually happening, of me actually going out with him. The anxiety is real, so real I nearly ghost him completely, but I close my eyes and summon my inner extrovert, the one who existed in me years ago.



**Me: I'll be there.**

# Chapter 6

## Sawyer

What do you even wear on a first date with a man you really don't know at all, when you don't even know what you're doing or where you're going, and when you're nervous as hell?

Apparently, you change outfits a dozen times before deciding on casual blue jeans, black flats, and a simple, pink flowy top. I wear my hair back in a sleek ponytail and slide in a pair of diamond studs my family gave me for my eighteenth birthday.

I sit in my car at the parking meter for far too long, until I literally have to get out or he's going to think I've bailed on him, and that's the last thing I want.

I slide my crossbody on and climb from my car.

When I round the corner onto the street I'm supposed to be meeting him on, I stop when I see him standing there.

He's scrolling through his phone with one hand in his pocket, dressed in dark jeans and a short-sleeve, white T-shirt.

His hair, dark and rich, is perfectly messy in that sexy, annoying way guys manage to pull off.

The streets aren't as busy as I expect them to be for a Sunday night, especially since the fall hours mean cooler weather and earlier sunsets.

I finally make my way closer until he senses the movement of me coming up to his side and raises his face toward mine.

"You made it," he says simply, and that damn smile greets me like an old friend.

"I did. Sorry I'm a little late. I just... I'm a little nervous is all." I shrug a little. If I'm really going to give this a chance, I figure honesty is the best policy.

He slides his phone into his back pocket. "If I'm honest, I'm a little nervous too."

"You are?"

I'm honestly shocked he even admitted that to me. Every man I've ever been with in my life would rather chop off his own arm than be vulnerable, so this is refreshing.

"I'm on a first date with a beautiful woman. If a man ever tells you he's not nervous in that situation, he's lying."

"Then I'm happy we are equal footing." I shift nervously.

"What do you say we head on inside and have a drink before things get started?"

"What are we doing exactly?"

"You'll see." He smiles wickedly. "Shall we?"

He places his hand on the small of my back and shivers climb up my spine in the best way. His touch is warm and kind. There is nothing about it that makes me feel uncomfortable or pressured.

“We shall, Mr. Black. Lead the way.”



“Haven’t you ever done this before?” I sip my sweet moscato from the stemless glass, as I watch him very carefully and very slowly slice a cucumber into strips.

I don’t know what I was expecting for a first date with him, but making sushi from scratch in a cooking class certainly wasn’t it.

“Not exactly, but I’ve got it. How hard can it be?”

He squints in concentration. I’ve offered to take over after I prepped the sticky sushi rice with sugar and vinegar, but he’s determined. Clearly.

The room is laid out like a swanky home economics room. There are a dozen individual cooking areas, complete with everything you could need to make a meal, plus the instruction area at the front.

Every cooking station is occupied by two people, wine is flowing, conversation is being had. It’s easy. It’s nice.

I watch him closely as he makes the final slice into the cucumber and places the knife down.

“Got it.” A huge smile appears on his face.

I just giggle. “Nicely done.”

We set out to start building our sushi rolls, working in tandem, one roll each at a time. We work in sync surprisingly fast, like we’ve done this many times before.

“So how long have you lived in Sunset Valley?”

I pat out a layer of rice onto my nori then answer, “I’ve been here almost a year.”

“Why here? I mean, it’s not exactly a place that people flock to. There’s usually a reason. It’s a small area.”

The truth isn’t exactly first date conversation, so I settle for telling him the CliffsNotes version.

“I was living in Southern California for a while. When I was younger I always wanted to live there, so when I was old enough, I left home and moved there for college. After a while, a change was needed so I looked for somewhere new and easy. So... I googled.”

“You googled somewhere and just decided to move here? Sunset Valley, of all places?”

“I know it sounds crazy,”

“No, not crazy, just surprising is all.”

“It’s paid off so far,” I tell him, before flashing him a smile. “What about you? Have you always lived here?”

“My whole life.” He adds the salmon, avocado, and cucumber to his rice and begins to carefully and slowly roll his

sushi. “A tried and true, born and raised Sunnyvillian. Where were you from before you came to California?”

“Tennessee. Southern girl to my core, but now I have that little bit of Cali flair.” My cheeks redden almost immediately. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

“I thought it was adorable,” he nudges me a bit, “I like Southern girls with Cali flair.”

After I’ve finished rolling my sushi, I dab my fingertips in the small bowl of water and seal the edges of the nori.

“You never wanted to escape the small-town lifestyle?” I ask.

“Never.”

His answer is simple and to the point, leaving no room for questions regarding it.

“I envy that actually; the contentedness with where you are.”

I slice through my roll, making individual pieces. I finish and glance over at him, catching him just staring at me. “What?”

He blinks quickly, like I’ve snapped him out of a thought. “You’re very good at this.”

“It’s my favorite food.”

“Lucky guess on my part then, huh?”

“I don’t know. You are showing stalker tendencies. Maybe you knew.” I stick my tongue out then shriek a little when he dips his finger into the water bowl and flicks it at me. I’ve

missed being playful like this. It's my favorite part of getting to know someone.

We continue to prepare our meal, sharing easy, fun conversation and I'm genuinely enjoying myself.

Just as I'm finishing rolling my second maki roll, an older gentleman walks by and shares a brief conversation with Issac, and soon, I'm being introduced to the chief of the fire department.

Seeing this interaction play out makes my chest tight. The mutual respect between the two is something I truly appreciate. I've spent so much time vilifying firefighters in my own head that seeing such admiration and comradery is nice.

"Sorry about that," Isaac apologizes when they head to their table. "Chief could talk all day long."

"You don't have to apologize. He seems like a lovely man." I take a sip from my glass. "Did you always want to be a fireman?"

## Isaac

She's asking questions about my job. That's a good sign, right? Because I really fucking like her, even more so now that I've spent some time with her like this.

*Don't fuck this up, Black.*

"I did, yeah. I like to help people."

"A bit of a hero complex?"

"You could say that," I laugh, placing my hand on the back of my neck, squeezing a bit then letting my hand drop away. "I have always wanted to keep people safe. This allows me to do that."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"I don't have time to be afraid. I have time to focus on making sure everyone is safe."

"What happens when you don't?"

It's impossible to hide the way my smile falls and the way my body goes a bit rigid. It's not an easy question to answer.

My stomach sinks to my feet. Those moments, thankfully, don't happen as much as you'd think, but when they do, they stick to your heart like thorny vines.

"When I don't... I process it as best I can and make sure I did everything within my power to save them. If I tried, really



tried, but I just couldn't get there in time, I have to live with that. It's hard, yes, and I don't ever truly get over it, but I have to move forward for the sake of the next person I have to save."

She takes a breath and releases it slowly. "Heavy first date talk," she giggles. "I'm sorry for asking about it."

"You can always ask me anything you want, Sawyer."

We finish up preparing our food with easy conversation about movies, music, and television shows so when it's time to take our food out to the balcony seating to enjoy the meal, conversation is flowing easily between us.

I make sure to pull the chair out for her, which seems to surprise her just a bit.

"Thank you."

"Of course." As I push her chair in for her, my finger grazes her back just a little and I swear I can hear the smallest intake of breath from her lips. "So, tell me about you, Sawyer. Something no one else knows or a weird quirk. It's easy to learn the normal topics, but that can get boring, right?"

"That's a very loaded question." She looks down at her lap and smooths out the napkin lying there. "How about you ask me questions instead, and I'll ask you some back?"

"That's fair. I just want to get to know you." I tap the table with my finger. "Liquor, wine, or beer?"

"After the night I had Friday, I'm swearing off liquor forever, especially tequila." She takes a small sip of her wine

then places the glass down carefully. “I’m sorry about that, again, by the way. I can’t believe I did that.”

I try to stop the smile, because I don’t want her to think I’m making fun of her, but I can’t. “You don’t have to apologize. Like I said, I thought it was cute.”

“You say that like you get drunk texts from girls all the time.”

I watch her closely as she slides the tip of her finger around the rim of her glass. I’m not even sure she knows she’s doing it. It’s probably a nervous habit or a way to fidget.

“I don’t,” I say with a shrug. “Not to say I haven’t before, but it’s not a normal occurrence.”

“Still. It was embarrassing. I don’t want you to think I’m this sloppy drunk who parties every weekend.”

“I never thought that. Not even once. You’re a grown woman. You can get drunk whenever you’d like, and I absolutely encourage you having fun, safely of course. If you feel the need to text someone, my phone is always free.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She pulls the end of her ponytail over her shoulder. It’s impossible not to be instantly struck by how beautiful she is. She’s the type of beauty that stops you on the street and you just know whether it’s dressed to the nines or rolling out of bed in the morning, she’ll look just as incredible.

“Did you always want to be a teacher?”

That single question makes her face light up, and it's hard not to match the enthusiasm.

"I did. I always enjoyed helping people understand things, not in a bossy kind of way, but in a I want to make a difference in the world kind of way."

"You and I have that in common then."

"Yeah, I suppose we do." She clears her throat then takes another bite of her sushi. "Anyway, I always wanted to teach and my brother, he always pushed me to do it. Even though he was younger than me, he was trying to guide me along the path to succeed."

"I always wanted siblings when I was growing up, but my parents started and ended with me. How much younger is he?" I ask.

I watch her throat bob up and down and she looks down at her plate. "Uh, he was six years younger than me. He passed away five years ago."

"I'm sorry. I... I didn't know."

Her eyes sweep up to mine with a tender smile on her face. "It's okay, you couldn't have known. It's hard, but I manage."

"I can't even imagine. What about your parents? They live in Tennessee?"

"Mmm hmm. In the Nashville area. I've tried to get them to move closer to me, but they are retired now and really enjoy being in their hometown. I can't say that I blame them."

“What did they do before retiring?”

“My dad was an OB/GYN and my mom was a nurse. They ran a practice together, actually.” Her eyes light up when she talks about them. It makes my chest tighten at the thought of my parents.

“Wow. That’s incredible, and impressive.”

“What about your parents?” She takes another small sip of wine.

I lean back in my seat, taking my drink with me. “I never knew my parents. My mom had me young, and I guess just decided she didn’t want to be a parent. Same for my dad. Grams stepped up, they stepped out.” I shrug it off. “And here I am.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Why? We are getting to know one another. It was a fair question. No harm, no foul.”

I don’t make a habit of talking about my parents, mainly because there isn’t much to say. I know they are still alive and they live somewhere in Nevada, but other than that, I know nothing. It was just Grams, my grandfather, and me until I was sixteen, then once he died, I became the man of the house. It’s just been Grams and me ever since.

“So you help take care of your Grams, then?” she asks.

“I do. It’s the least I can do after she put up with my teenage shit,” I laugh. “I always tried to be on my best behavior, but boys tend to be assholes from time to time.”

“You can say that again. I deal with teenagers every day. All hormones and attitude.” She rolls her eyes.

“I imagine it’s much worse when they have a teacher that’s easy on the eyes too,” I joke.

She groans in response and I just laugh.

“That was a good line. I have to admit it.”

“Happy to be of service.”



The sun has long since set and the streets are growing emptier as we take a slow walk back to her car.

“I think I’m ninety percent fish at this point,” she pats her belly.

“I will say, if you start growing gills, I’ll have to gracefully bow out,” I chuckle, and she does as well. It’s a sound I want to hear as often as possible.

“This is me.” She points to a small, red compact car and pulls a set of keys from her bag. “I had a really great time, Isaac.”

“So did I.”

She leans back against the driver’s side door and smiles. “What do you have planned for date number two?”

“Is that your way of saying you want to do this again?”  
*Please say yes. Please say yes.* I try to play it cool on the outside, even though I’m clearly way too excited on the inside.

“Well, I did agree to five dates because some guy was awfully pushy.”

I lean forward and place my hand on her car by her head, and her breathing accelerates just enough to be noticeable.

“Sawyer, I don’t want you to agree to a second date because of a deal we made in jest. I want you to say yes because you want to. I’d never make you go out with me if you truly didn’t want to.”

“I want to. I had a nice time, and you’re a nice man who makes me feel comfortable. That’s hard to come by these days.”

“It’s a shame, isn’t it? Men treating women like anything other than the goddesses they are?”

A slow smile spreads over her face. I can see the slightest hint of her white teeth behind her lips. The contrast of the dark lipstick color against her skin is beautiful, and she has this beauty mark just under the left side of her mouth, and a slight scar in her eyebrow that raises skyward when she catches me gawking.

“Are you checking me out?”

“To be fair, I’ve been checking you out all night.”

Her cheeks flush red and she looks down at her feet then back up at me. “Thank you for tonight. Really.”

“It’s my pleasure. I promised Grams I would take her out tomorrow since I’m not on shift until the day after, but I’d really like to see you again soon.”

“I’d like that too.”

“I’ll call you?”

“You better.”

In any other circumstance, I’d lean forward, push her hair from her face, and place a kiss to her lips, but I promised her that she’s different; this is different, so instead, I take her hand in mine and bring it toward my mouth.

“Thank you for spending time with me, Sawyer. I can’t wait to see you again.” I place a gentle kiss on the top of her hand.

# Chapter 7

## Sawyer

“Listen, I know everyone is excited because we get to miss most of this period today for the career fair, however, that doesn’t mean you don’t have to pay attention now.”

I take my seat at the small podium that is placed just beside my Smart Board at the front of my classroom and my class continues to talk amongst themselves.

*Fine.*

I connect my laptop to the Smart Board via Bluetooth and begin to play a very loud, very obnoxious sound from *Dumb and Dumber* repeatedly, all the while staring at my class until they all turn their attention to me.

“We can do this all day long, so you can give me the fifteen minutes I have you to allow me to teach you something, or we can be assigned extra reading for tonight. The choice is yours.”

“Sorry, Ms. Westbrook,” they say in a unison that almost sounds rehearsed.



“Thank you. Now, please turn to where we left off in Gatsby last class.”

My cell phone is perched on my podium so I can see the screen, in case someone calls or texts, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t waiting on bated breath for Isaac to reach out.

It’s only been two days since our date, and I know he’s on shift today, but that doesn’t change the fact I haven’t stopped thinking about him.

To say I was surprised by how much of a gentleman he was is an understatement. He gives off the aura of arrogance that I normally associate with less than chivalrous tendencies, but he’s a conundrum.

I’m sitting silently, reading along as one of my students reads a passage aloud from the book when I see movement in my peripheral that pulls my attention.

Liv is waving at me to come out to the hall through the glass window beside the door.

“Keeping reading aloud. Just go down the rows. A page each. I’ll be right back.”

I slip from my chair and out into the hall.

“Oh my God, I stood over here forever trying to get your attention,” Liv whisper-yells to me.

“I was doing that thing you should be doing. Teaching.”

She waves me off then keeps talking, “I was just coming back from the career fair.”

She stops talking and smiles at me like I'm supposed to be able to read her mind.

“Is that it?”

“He's here.”

“Who's here?”

“Don't play dumb. Isaac. He's here. He's with some broody, very large, alpha male looking god. There are two of them. Two hot firefighters in our gymnasium, right now, one of whom wants to douse your vagina fire.”

“Liv!” I cover her mouth with my hand, “You can't say that here, and eww, that sounds like I have something gross going on. Rephrase that. Less grossness, less crudeness.” I drop my hand. “Try again.”

She takes a breath then explodes into a whisper-shout yet again, “The hot as sin firefighter, who clearly wants to spend time with you, and possibly let you handle his water hose is *here*.”

“Jesus Christ.”

The instant typical female feelings fire through my brain.

Do I look okay?

Is there lipstick on my teeth?

What do I say to him?

Do I even talk to him?

Is this outfit okay? What about my boobs, do they look good?

As if she can read my mind, my best friend places her hands on my shoulders and settles my mind. “You look great. Your hair is perfect and the high-waisted jeans were a good call. You’ve got this Van Halen thing going on.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re making all of us ‘Hot for Teacher.’” She fans herself.

I shake my head and laugh. “Are you sure?”

My hair is twisted up into a bun with a pencil through the middle, holding it in place. I had arrived to school this morning with it down, but quickly regretted that choice, piling it high less than an hour into my day.

“He makes you nervous, doesn’t he?” She nudges my shoulder.

“God, Liv, for so many reasons.” I lean back against a locker and sigh. “I’m not used to being affected this way by anyone. He throws me off my axis.”

“This is a bad thing?” She holds out her hand in confusion.

“No, but it’s a scary thing.”

“Don’t fight it. Enjoy it. You deserve it.” She gives my thigh a swat. “Now, go finish up and get your flirt on. I expect full details later.”

“We are at work. There will be no details to share.”

“Oh, give me a break. Go-go-go.”



I try, I really do, to not look like I'm blatantly searching for the first responders table when we make our way into the open gymnasium.

Tables are lined all around the outer edge with two rows back-to-back in the center, creating a round area for the students to learn and explore about all kinds of careers they could pursue after college.

Doctors from Sunset Valley Methodist Hospital are lined up on the right with nurses, LPNs, CNAs, and every position in the medical field you can think of. Cooks with a fancy culinary school logo embroidered on their white coats are to the left, cooking up something delicious on a hot plate, no doubt trying to sway a few hungry folks their way.

I remind my students to be back in the classroom in forty-five minutes then I start making my way around the circle of tables, not so subtly looking for a six foot three fireman who has been occupying most of my mind as of late.

I pass by the culinary arts table and happily take a sample of some kind of delicious chicken they offer to me and continue on around until a sight stops me in my tracks.

There are three tables stationed side by side with two people standing behind each.

A dark-haired, broad-shouldered man stands beside a pretty blonde woman, both in their police uniforms, at the first table.

They are chatting up two of my AP students, so I leave them to their conversation and make my way to the next table.

“Now who’s stalking who?” His voice is like caramel and it sends chills over my skin.

I turn toward him to make eye contact and I’m nearly knocked off my feet at the sight of him.

He is dressed just as he was the last time he was here for the fire drill, but this time he is wearing his bunker pants over his slacks and they are held up by bright red suspenders. It’s like a porno fantasy standing right in front of me.

“You’re in my place of employment, sir.”

The handsome gentleman at his side leans over and whispers loud enough for me to hear, “She called you sir. Keep her.”

“Well, that would imply he even has me to begin with.” I grin and step up to the table.

“I’m working on it,” Isaac adds with that killer smile. “Sawyer, this is Graham. Graham, this is Sawyer. She’s an English teacher here.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I reach out to shake his hand.

“Likewise, Sawyer.” He shakes my hand in return.

“So, young lady, are you here to inquire about the wonderful world of being a firefighter?” Isaac is trying to be cute, I know he is, but the display behind him sends chills up my back and I instantly feel nauseous.

Structural fires, wildfires, accident scenes, every kind of issue you'd take on as someone in that line of work, but the memories that wash over my soul sink like a boulder in my stomach and I have to look away.

“Actually, uh, I just remembered... I have... something I need to do.” I place my hand over my racing heart. “Graham, it was nice meeting you.”

“Sawyer? Are you okay?” Isaac steps around the table.

“I'm fine. I just... I have to go.”

### **Isaac**

I've never seen someone go from flushed to stark white in less than five seconds in my entire thirty-seven years on this earth, but Sawyer's beautiful face did just that.

And she was gone like a burst of wind before I could even make it around to check on her completely, and I lost her in the sea of high school students crowding in the area.

“Black,” Graham says, and I glance over my shoulder at him. “Go check on her. I've got this.”

“I'll be back.”

I weave through the throngs of teenagers zigging and zagging across in front of me, and I catch a brief glimpse of her chocolate brown hair as she slips out of the door on the other side of the area. I move as quickly as I can without

seeming like I am literally chasing her, even though that is exactly what I'm doing, and when I finally exit the same door she did, she is nowhere to be found.

“Shit.” I slide my hand over my face in frustration and drop my back against the wall.

I wait for a few minutes, hoping maybe she will come back down, but she doesn't, and I have no idea where to find her. This school is so much bigger and much more of a maze than you'd think.

“Aren't you supposed to be guiding our youth toward their ultimate path or some shit?” His irritating voice is the last thing I want to hear right now.

“I would say that's your job, but I know how much you suck at it,” I retort.

Caleb leans against the wall next to me and crosses his arms. “You're a dick when you're pissy. What's the matter?”

“Where is Sawyer Westbrook's classroom?”

“Ohhhh, so that's what the problem is. What? She get wise and run for the hills?”

“Not the time to joke, fucker.” I push off the wall and turn to face him. “I saw her a few minutes ago and she was fine then all of a sudden she looked like she saw a ghost and took off. I just want to make sure she's all right.”

He nods in understanding. “All right. Fair enough. She's the third door down in the English hall. Head straight down there, take a left. You'll see her name on the wall.”

“Thank you.”

I don't wait for him to say anything at all. I go straight for her.

The hallway is just as I remember it, even though it's been years since I walked these halls as a teenager. The smells are the same, and the far too bright lighting that casts a sterile glow off of the white, speckled tiles brings me right back to those years when I thought I was hot shit and ruled the world.

I look for her name on each of the metal plates on the wall by each door and when I find hers, I stop short of the handle... and just watch through the glass window.

She's sitting at a podium of sorts, at the front of the classroom, and her head is in her hands. I can tell by the movement of her shoulders she's crying just as hard as she was in her car that day at the track.

She raises her head just a little and uses the back of her hand to wipe tears away from her face, and I can see the rise and fall of her chest as she steadies her breathing.

I'm not sure when the decision becomes final in my head, but before I even register it's happening, I've pulled open her classroom door, strode toward her, and pulled her into my arms, holding her and trying to slay whatever demon has made itself known today.

“Isaac? What are you doing?” She doesn't push back against me, or even fight. She is stiff in surprise for just a moment,



then her muscles relax, and she allows herself to melt into my body.

“You’re crying. I’m a hugger. Seemed like the right thing to do.” I am trying to make light of the situation, to hopefully shine even a morsel of light on the moment.

“You’re actually a pretty good hugger,” she sniffs quietly, and I feel her flex her fingers against my back.

“Pretty good? I strive for excellence, so we’ll have to try this again one day in order to have a fair comparison.”

“Deal.” She releases a small breath I can feel hot against my chest.

With my chin atop her head, we simply stand together. No expectations. No needless chatter. Just her and me and the acknowledgement I’m just trying to be a good friend and a decent human right now.

“Will you tell me what happened?” I ask, and she leans back away from me so she can tilt her gaze toward mine. I instantly miss the warmth of her body.

“Am I allowed to say I don’t want to go into details?” Her tone is soft and her voice is small. It’s so... sad.

“You’re allowed to say, or not say, anything you want, Sawyer. I won’t push either way.”

She searches my face, and her beautiful eyes move with smooth ease over me before she sighs heavily and covers the blue irises with her lids.

“It’s really close to my brother’s birthday, and sometimes that just... hits me out of nowhere. I’m embarrassed it happened in front of you. I’m usually good at handling it.” She drops her head down and looks at her feet.

Placing my finger under her chin, I tip her head back to find her eyes again. “Don’t hide from me, you don’t have to, and never, ever apologize for missing your brother.”

Her bottom lip starts to tremble ever so slightly, and she tries to look down again, but I tighten my hold on her chin just enough to keep her exactly where she is.

“You make me nervous,” she whispers softly, “in a good way, I think.”

I can see the nerves etched all over her face.

The racing pulse in her neck, the red flush to her cheeks, and the smattering of goosebumps on her chest are all telling me what I need to know.

They are telling me I want to close the few inches of space between us and kiss the sadness right off her tear-soaked lips. They are telling me if I were to try, she’d let me.

But that would make me an asshole, and that’s something I promised her I wasn’t.

“Do you have plans tonight?” I ask her, as I push a bit of her hair out of her face.

“Besides grading papers over a bottle of wine and a pint of ice cream? No.”

“While that sounds riveting, I’d like to cash in date number two. What do you say?”

For the first time since I’ve seen her today, her eyes light up in happiness.

“I say that sounds perfect.”

“Can I come pick you up this time?”

“Are you going to kidnap me and hold me against my will in your car?” She smiles at her joke.

“That comes later. I can’t tell you all my secrets up front, can I?”

# Chapter 8

## Sawyer

I didn't technically lie to him, did I?

My brother's birthday is coming and that agony truly comes out of nowhere sometimes, and the last thing I wanted to do was say I was thrown into a panic attack because I saw pictures of house fires.

Because that makes me seem crazy.

He didn't tell me where we were going, he just told me to dress comfortably and casually, so I chose my dark wash jeans that make my thighs and ass look good and a white flowy tank, topped with a nude cardigan.

That must have been the right call because when he knocks on my door promptly at 7:30, he doesn't even try to hide the fact he is staring at me.

"You look... wow." He takes my hand and kisses the top, just as he did at the end of our first date. I never thought swooning was a real thing, but two dates with Isaac proves me wrong.

“Thank you. You look pretty wow yourself.”

And boy does he, in those jeans and black tee that hugs his muscles just right. It looks so good it should be illegal. No one has the right to be out in the world looking like that. It’s unfair.

“Shall we get going?” he asks.

“Absolutely.” I close the door behind me, making sure it’s locked, then turning back to face him. “Are you going to tell me where we are going?”

“Well, I will give you a hint.”

He takes my hand and walks with me stride for stride all the way down to the driveway to his waiting very large truck.

“Hit me with it. I’m great at guessing with hints.”

We pause on the passenger side and he opens the door for me to climb in.

“This date is a classic.”

I huff and roll my eyes. “That’s your hint? It’s so broad!”

“That’s the point.” He closes the door and comes around to the driver’s side.

“There are so many classic dates.”

“But this one brings out true colors. Are you very competitive?”

“I will fight you to win, regardless of what the competition is,” I say, mostly joking, but not really.

He tosses his head back and laughs. “Perfect.”



“I haven’t been bowling in years, literally. The last time I went, I think I was fifteen or sixteen, and it was because I was invited to a boy’s birthday party. I had a crush on him, so I wanted to impress him. I wore my favorite miniskirt and the cutest shoes.” I plop down on to the vinyl-covered, sofa-style bench at our reserved lane and hold up the rental shoes. “I didn’t remember we had to wear these monstrosities.” I toe my white Vans sneakers from my feet and pull the bowling shoes on. “There I was, trying to be cute, in a miniskirt with clown shoes on.”

“You should have worn a miniskirt today. Who knows, maybe skirts and bowling shoes are my thing?” He grins at me, before bending over to tie his shoelaces.

“Trust me, that’s nobody’s thing.”

The red sofa is in the shape of a U with the computer in the middle for us to input our names and to keep score. He’s sitting on the other side, directly across from me, but soon he slides around in front of the monitor.

This particular bowling alley is one of the most popular in the area apparently, because every single lane is occupied with couples, families, and groups of friends of many different ages. The skid, whirl, and crash of the balls sliding down the lane and colliding with the pins, mixed with the wide variety of pop tunes blaring from the overhead speakers, makes me feel like a carefree teenager again.

“What should our names be?” he asks, angling his gaze toward me.

“We wouldn’t just use our real names?”

“Nah, where’s the fun in that? They go up on the big screen above us so everyone can see. Let’s make it interesting.”

I smile and tap my chin. “How about I pick your name and you pick mine?”

“I like the way you think.” He places his fingers on the touch screen, hovering them for a moment while he thinks, and then he finally types something out. “Perfect.” He leans back in his seat with a proud as hell grin on his incredibly handsome face.

I look up at the screen hanging over our lane and burst out laughing.

“Wanda Wannadoher? Oh my God, what are we? Fourteen?” I shake my head.

“It’s funny and you know it.” He’s smiling like a boy who is thrilled with his joke. It’s pretty adorable.

“Move over, stud, I have some payback to send your way.” I crack my knuckles in a mock show of preparation, like I’m coming in for a fight.

I think for a moment, but it doesn’t take long until my fingers are flying over the screen and pressing enter, sending his new name for the evening up to the screen.

He squints a bit to read the screen then laughs loudly. “Willie Eetmiouutt? Seriously?”

“Seemed like the perfect match for Wanda Wannadoher, wouldn’t you say?”

“You, Wanda, fight dirty, and I like it.” He points at me. “Let’s go pick out our balls, and don’t even come at me with the puns and that’s what she said jokes that are hiding in that sentence.”

I snap my fingers, my voice laced with sarcasm, “Damn, that’s the only thing I have going for me, ya know? You can’t take away my need to call out innuendos.”

“A hot woman who appreciates a dirty pun? On second thought, always tell me when anything dirty is in your head.”

I roll my eyes and follow him over to the rack that contains bowling balls in every weight and color I can think of. He selects a dark, hunter green one for himself and tests the weight in his hands before nodding.

“This will work,” he says to me.

“I like that color.” I slide my hands over a few of the lighter ones on the lower racks and pull out a bright, icy blue one.

“I like that color for you too,” he leans in a bit to whisper in my ear. “It reminds me of your eyes.”

I drop my eyes closed as the tickle of his breath on my skin makes me shiver deliciously, and when I open my eyes, he’s already ten paces away from me.

“Are you coming, Wanda?” he chuckles back at me.

“Right behind you, Willie.”



I have a feeling this date is going to be one I remember forever.

## Isaac

Deep into our third game, she inhales deeply.

“Do you smell that?” She picks up a mozzarella stick from the basket on the small table in front of us.

“Smell what?”

“Victory.” She smirks and munches into the fried snack, proud of herself.

“You haven’t won yet.” I point to the screen above us. “I have my turn left and if I get a strike, your ass is mine.” I tilt my beer toward her. “And as you can see, strikes are my bread and butter.”

“I’m not scared.” She takes a sip of her own beer. “You see, because this win will put me ahead of you, two wins to one win, and if we are going best three out of five, the odds are so in my favor that it’s unreal.”

It has taken us a couple of hours to arrive at the end of our third game, and with each passing minute, she’s loosened up more and seems, at least from what I can tell, to be having a good time. That’s exactly what I wanted. She needed to relax and let everything else go, and just be carefree again.

I’ll catch her swaying to the music or cheering on a small child who is bowling in the lane beside us with his family. She’s incredible to watch. Her energy lights up the room, and

it's like everyone is enamored by her. She even gets cheers from the nearby lanes when she gets a strike.

“Do you want another drink? You'll need it for the disappointment coming your way.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes to the drink, and I'll be ignoring the rest of that comment.”

I type in the order on the screen and send it over to the bar.

“While you wait on that, watch and learn, Wanda.” I rise from my seat next to her and grab the bowling ball from the returner.

“What can I learn from mediocre technique?”

“Ouch. You're feisty after a couple beers.” I step up onto the oiled, wooden floors and toward our lane.

“So I've been told.”

I line up my shot, making sure my stance is just the way I want, and I take two steps, pull my arm back then sling it forward, sending the ball careening down the slick lane toward the pins.

*Stay center. Stay center. No. No. No. Not left.*

“Ha!” She raises both hands in the air in excitement.

“Shit.”

I only knocked down half of the pins in what is certainly my most pathetic display of athletic ability... ever.

“I'm sorry, whose ass is whose?” she asks, as she rises from her seat and does a little dance.

I scrub my hand over my jaw, making my way back to get my ball when it rolls back up into the return rack.

“You’re even more beautiful when you’re happy like this.”

“Do I not always look happy?” She stops dancing and steps a little closer to me.

“That’s not what I mean. You’ve always had this tense, less than sure, vibe about you, at least around me. I’m glad you’re able to be like this though.”

“You’re just trying to deflect from the fact I just beat you.” She crosses her arms across her chest, like she’s trying to protect herself from something, but her smile doesn’t match her posture.

“And you’re trying to deflect from the fact I just gave you a compliment and you don’t want to accept it.”

She drops her gaze for a fleeting moment then brings it back up to me.

“You make me nervous, that’s all.”

I, very slowly so she knows my intent, reach out and slide my hand around her body and lay it flat at the small of her back.

“Don’t be nervous with me.” I give her a gentle pull toward me, and I can feel the warmth of her body. She’s flushed all over from the alcohol, and she’s radiating heat.

“I can’t help it. You’re just very,” she pauses and places her hand on my chest, “intense.”

Intense isn't a word I would ever use to describe myself, but knowing this beautiful woman, with her curvy, petite body, stunningly impressive personality, and goddess-like face thinks I'm intense makes me want to pound my chest in alpha male pride.

The lighting in the entire alley shifts to a darker, deep red, almost like a darkroom for photography, and the slow beat of a new song seeps from the speakers.

"This is Harry Styles," she says plainly, with no explanation.

"What?"

"Singing this song. It's Harry Styles." She licks her lips. "Sorry, when I get nervous, I talk a lot."

"I can see that," I say, as the corners of my mouth turn up in a smile. "I think it's cute."

"You do?"

"There is nothing about you I don't like, Sawyer."

Harry Styles croons on around us about an infamous "she" and it's setting the scene before us like it was plopped right out of a movie.

I'm not sure when it happened, but we seem to have slipped into a slow, barely moving dance to the gentle beat of the song.

I sneak a peek at her full lips that have been making me laugh, heckling me, teasing me, and having brilliant

conversations with me all night, and all I can think about in this moment is how desperately I want to kiss them.

A guitar solo has taken over as I lean forward, making my intention clear, giving her every chance to pull back, but she doesn't stop me.

Instead, she pushes up on her tiptoes to meet me in the middle.

Time slows, and when I am so close I can hear her intake of breath before our lips meet, the music disappears and a voice sounds over the intercom system.

“Wanda Wannadoher, your drink is ready at the bar. Wanda Wannadoher.”

She drops back down off her toes and drops her head to my chest, laughing.

“Oh my God.” She covers her face with both hands. “That’s so embarrassing.” She must feel my chest moving because she immediately looks up at me and narrows her gaze. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Yes. I’m absolutely laughing at you. It’s funny.” I place my hands on her hips, giving them a slight squeeze then I take a step back, my body still high on the near kiss. “I’ll go get your drink, Wanda. Then we have some bowling to finish.”



“I deserve a trophy, Willie,” Sawyer says when we step out into the crisp, night air after our final game. The moon is

shining overhead and the lights from the parking lot lead the way.

“You’re enjoying bruising my ego, aren’t you?” I place my hand on my chest. “I’m hurt.”

“Very much so, yes. I never win anything, ever, so this is just exciting for me.”

We walk slowly, side by side, down the sidewalk toward the spot in the back of the parking lot where my truck is.

“For someone who hasn’t bowled in years, you definitely picked it up fast.”

“Maybe it’s like riding a bike?”

“Maybe or maybe I’ve been hustled?” I take a chance and slip my hand into hers. She doesn’t even hesitate to lace her fingers with mine.

The sound of our shoes on the pavement mixes with the sound of crickets calling out loudly to their mates.

“I wouldn’t know how to properly hustle someone at all. I have no poker face whatsoever. I’m terrible.”

“Remind me to arrange a strip poker match with you one day,” I joke.

“I’d be better off just arriving naked.”

The images flying through my head go from tame to filthy in two point five seconds, and I have to clear my throat because my body can’t process it without some kind of reaction.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

I open the passenger door and she steps up into the truck, with the aid of my hand on her hip.

“Thank you,” she says softly as she settles into her seat.

“You’re welcome.”

The drive back to her house is filled with simple conversation and there isn’t a single moment of awkwardness. I will admit a sense of disappointment settles in when I roll to a stop in her driveway.

“I had a really great time, Isaac.” She unbuckles and angles her body toward me.

“So did I. I really mean that.” I unhook my seat belt and open my door. “I’ll walk you to the door. Can’t be too cautious at night, right?”

Her door isn’t that far from where we are, but any reason to spend a bit more time with her is good by me, and it’s the polite thing to do.

When we climb the stairs of her small, wooden porch she digs in her bag and pulls out her keys, tossing them gently back and forth in her hands, her nerves apparent.

“Thank you for taking me out tonight. It really helped me in ways you can’t even know.” She stands with her shoulder perpendicular to the front door, and I move to stand in front of her.

“You don’t have to thank me for spending time with you because, Sawyer, I promise you, the pleasure is mine.”



“So you’d consider date number two a success? Maybe date number three will be even better.”

“Is this you agreeing to see me again?”

“I think it is.” She clears her throat a bit then slips her key into the lock. “I should get inside. I still have some papers to grade now that my buzz is wearing off,” she giggles.

“I’ll call you?” I ask.

“I hope so.”

I want to go in for the kiss, but I don’t want her to think I’m coming on too strong, even in the wake of the almost kiss in the bowling alley.

So I opt for a peck on the cheek, and when I pull back there is a flash of something in her eyes. Is it disappointment? Confusion?

“Goodnight, Sawyer.”

“Goodnight, Isaac.”

I stand on the porch until she is inside and I hear the lock click into place.

The entire walk from her door to the driver’s side of my truck, all I can think about is the way her lips would taste, and how she’d feel when she melted into my kiss and pressed her body into mine.

It’s all I can think about.

Christ, I should have kissed her. She was willing and even wanting it. It was written all over her face. When did I become

a pansy?

Fuck it.

I move with purposeful, powerful strides from the driveway, back up to her porch, and I deliver three loud knocks to her door.

A light in the front room flips on then the porch light follows suit.

The front door pulls open and she greets me just as I left her, except she has bare feet and the cutest blue painted toenails I've ever seen.

“Isaac? Are you all right?”

I step toward her, “No, I just forgot to do this.”

I clasp her face in my hands and pull her lips to mine.

There is no resistance, no pushback or pulling away. I can feel her wrap her hands around my wrists and hold on to me as her lips part, allowing my tongue access to her soft, perfect mouth.

She tastes like sugar with a bit of tang from her drinks. It's intoxicating, and if I'm not careful, I could get drunk on her right here where I stand.

I've kissed plenty of women in my life. Some have been mediocre, some have been pretty great, but nothing compares to kissing Sawyer Westbrook.

I can feel the rapid rise and fall of her chest against mine, and her body begins this slight sway, almost as if she doesn't

even have control of her movements anymore. She's just completely lost in this moment with me.

Her tongue finds a slow, perfect rhythm in a dance with mine before I finally pull away with a tug of her bottom lip between my teeth, and then a gentle kiss to it.

“There,” I slide my thumb along her jawline, “Now I'm all right.”

I step back from her with a grin before turning on my heel and heading back down to my truck.

# Chapter 9

## Sawyer

I can still feel that kiss on my lips three days later as I'm packing up my bag after dismissing my final class for the weekend.

I can still taste his tongue when I get home forty minutes later and collapse onto my back on the bed, with a smile on my face that has been there since the minute he pulled out of my driveway.

I've never had a kiss, a single kiss, affect me this much for this long. It was unexpected and absolutely perfect.

We've been texting constantly this week too, which is new for me. It makes me feel like a teenager with a crush. I stay up late when he's on shift, texting about nothing and everything at the same time. It's nice to have this connection with someone again. It's been a long time since I've felt the butterflies, and boy does he make my stomach flutter.

The last thing I expected was to actually like him, but he makes me feel comfortable and safe in a way I haven't in so

long. When I look at him, he isn't a flashing beacon that reminds me of my brother. If anything, he's helping me heal by actually living.

And at the end of the day, that's what Jason would want.

My phone is flashing on the counter when I step out of the shower a few hours after arriving home. I wrap myself in a towel, hair still soaking wet sending water dripping down my back.

**Isaac: I'd like to apologize on behalf of all men.**

**Me: I appreciate that. You men definitely aren't sending us your best, but what inspired this apology?**

**Isaac: I work with pigs, Sawyer, absolute pigs.**

**Me: I don't know. Judging by the calendar Liv showed me, you work with some foxes to me.**

**Isaac: I'm going to pretend you didn't say that.**

**Me: Jealous?**

**Isaac: Of these guys? Hell no.**

**Me: LOL! Slow night?**

**Isaac: I'll never admit to that. Not out loud. It's a one-way ticket to a long-ass night.**

**Me: Do you have plans tomorrow after you sleep?**

I'm going out on a limb here. I'm showing my hand and opening myself up to the possibility of being hurt, but the truth is, I miss him and I'd like to see him.

**Isaac: That depends.**

**Me: On?**

**Isaac: If this pretty great girl wants to hang out. If she does, I'll be with her.**

My instant thought is one any typical, self-conscious girl has. *Oh, he's absolutely not talking about me.* But I stifle that voice straight down where it belongs and stay as confident as possible.

**Me: I think that girl absolutely wants to hang out with you. Maybe at her place?**

**Isaac: I was hoping that would be the case.**

**Me: 7? We can have dinner?**

I place the phone on my bed so I can dry off and get dressed. I return fifteen minutes later in shorts and my favorite baggy tee, completely moisturized and feeling good, but my text still remains unread. He's likely out on a call.

He was right. We shouldn't have even spoken of the slow evening.

I try not to worry about him as I slip into bed a few hours later when I haven't heard from him.

It's not until my phone lights up just as I'm dozing off that I feel even a moment of relief.

**Isaac: I told you not to mention the calm. There's always a storm shortly after.**

Another text appears before I even have a chance to respond to this one.

**Isaac: 7 is perfect. I'll see you then. Sleep tight, baby.**

**Me: Stay safe.**

**Isaac: Always.**

## Isaac

I sit with sweat and dirt on my face while the entire station showers after returning back from what turned out to be one of the worst boating accidents I've seen in my time here.

I would never say it is easy to shake off the things I see on a daily basis, but a child died tonight right in front of me.

That's something you can't just wash away.

I try to keep my work outside of my life once I step out of those doors. That's why I texted Sawyer back and didn't say anything about what happened. I just wanted to confirm our time together, because the first thing I wanted to do once I left the scene was go see her.

But I couldn't.

"You all right out here?" Graham asks, when he comes down from the bunk area with a towel around his neck.

"Not really," I answer him as honestly as I can.

"Never gets easier does it?" He sinks to sit on the bench beside me.

I'm still sitting by the truck, still in my gear from the waist down. The bay water is still soaked into my boots, and I can still smell it everywhere.



It's amazing how much damage can be done by a boat when alcohol is involved, but when a speedboat collides with a family's pontoon boat tied to a dock, where children are swimming and playing, the worst comes to pass.

"We all did everything we could, Black. Between us, EMS, and PD, we did absolutely the best we could do."

"No, we didn't. A little girl died in the dirt on the banks of the bay. That's not our fucking best." I slide my hands through my sweat and water-soaked hair. "These are the days I hate this damn job."

"None of us want to lose anyone, ever, but there were people saved tonight. Without action across the board, we could have lost more or even everyone. In, out, onto the next. You have to do that otherwise you'll never be able to lead a normal life. You know it was hard as shit for me after everything that happened with Drew, but eventually, I had to... step up and do my job because it's an important one."

"You think I don't know that? It doesn't mean watching someone die is easier." I stand, wanting to just be alone for a bit.

"You've always struggled with this part of it, especially since LA."

"I don't like talking about LA, so don't start that shit, Graham."

"Don't start what shit? Being a veteran on this crew and trying to fucking talk to you after a hard call?" Graham rises

and starts pacing back and forth; clearly showing this call took a toll on him too, even if he's trying to talk me through it.

“I don't need nor want to be talked to right now. What I want is to go up there, shower, help clean up the truck; then lie down until we have to leave again. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No,” he says matter-of-factly. “I just want to know you're going to be all right if another call comes through in five minutes.”

“You know I will be. It's just... fuck. It was a kid, man, a kid. She couldn't have been more than nine or ten. She was on a boat with her family, enjoying herself, thinking today was going to be a normal day and it ended up being her last. Because of a shitty decision an irresponsible motherfucker made. Don't drink and boat. How fucking hard is that to understand?”

“I ask myself that question every, single time we have to go out on a call involving alcohol.”

“It's so fucking senseless, and now a little girl is gone. I shouldn't wish bad things on people, but I hope that asshole who was behind the wheel of that boat feels so much guilt it eats him alive for the rest of his life.”

Maybe what I'm saying is taking it too far, especially as a professional, but this is Graham I'm talking to. I feel like I can have a moment of ugly honesty with him.

“I’m sure that it will when he is finally able to understand the gravity of what has happened.”

The driver, or who we assume was the driver, wasn’t conscious when the ambulance took him away from the scene. We haven’t, and likely won’t, know much more about him or about exactly what happened.

That’s not our job. We respond. We don’t investigate or follow up. That is also something I’ve always struggled with. Especially since LA.

“I wonder if I’m even the right person for this job anymore,” I admit in a moment of vulnerable honesty.

“Don’t start that shit, Black. You’re the best fireman I know, besides me, obviously.” He raises his arms up and back, then links his fingers behind his head with a grin on his face, and when he sees I’m not smiling, he sighs. “Talk to someone about all of this. We have resources for it. Use them. There isn’t any shame in that.”

“Says the man who pushed back on that for months.” I glare at him.

“Do as I say and not as I do. Isn’t that the saying?” he replies, as he claps a hand on my shoulder. “Are you still seeing that girl? Isabelle? You should get out of the house tomorrow and put this out of your head.”

*Fuck.*

Isabelle has been calling me for a week now and I haven’t been returning her calls or texts. A certain teacher has been

occupying my mind, and I haven't felt like an asshole about it until right now.

“Actually, I think there might be someone else.”

“That tone makes me think the uncrackable Isaac Black is starting to wear thin when a pussy is concerned.”

“Considering I haven't slept with her; your theory doesn't hold any water.”

“Who is she?”

“No one you'd know.” I tell him, even though he did meet her briefly at the career fair at Sunset Valley High.

I want to keep Sawyer to myself for now, as much as I can, at least until I see where it could potentially go.

Graham and I chat a bit longer as everyone descends into the truck bay, kitchen, and communal rec areas, but I don't stick around much after that.

I stop by my locker and check my cell phone, finding a text message from the same number that has repeatedly called me wanting to interview me about the wildfire anniversary.

**The story is going to run regardless. We'd love updated input from you, Isaac. Call me.**

*God, these people don't give up.*

I head up to shower, letting the water rush over my head and drown out all the noise so all I can hear is the whoosh in my ears.

With my eyes closed tightly and my hands pressed into the wall, the horrific scene I saw today drowns away and is replaced by Sawyer in a blue sundress, smiling and happy.

I never expected to feel much toward her, because if history is any indication, I never feel much for anyone.

But... is Graham right?

Has Sawyer Westbrook managed, in such a short time, to make herself a home in my heart?

I'm not sure I have an answer to that yet, but what I do know is I crave her presence and the more I'm with her, the more I want to be around her.

So that's what I'm going to do.

# Chapter 10

## Sawyer

I'm not sure I've ever deep cleaned this house as much as I am right now. I'm cleaning shit I didn't even know existed. I refuse to let him see even a speck out of place, even though at the end of the day, I'm a pretty messy person.

Not "eww, you're gross" messy, but I'll just leave the laundry piled in the basket and use it all until it just ends up in the washer again. It's a cycle that works for me, and what's the point in changing things now?

I'm proud of this home and everything I've done with it. I fell in love the moment I stepped inside with its open floor plan, expansive windows, and hardwood flooring. So much light is allowed in and that added vitamin D in my everyday life has made settling in Sunset Valley easier than I could have imagined.

The knock on the door sends my heart rate through the roof. I don't know why I'm so nervous. It's not like I've never been around him before.

It's just different with him being inside of my home. It's like... another level.

With one quick glance in the mirror that hangs in my entryway, I pull the door open to find the most delicious version of Isaac I have ever seen.

He is wearing dark, navy blue slacks with a white collared shirt that hugs his biceps in the most incredible way. His hair is a bit messy, but it looks intentional, and his sneakers are pristine white. He has this swagger about him that makes it hard to remain upright.

“Hello, beautiful,” he says in that caramel-like voice, with his hands in his pockets, casual as ever.

“Hi.” I lean against my doorframe and just take him in for a moment, because it would be a shame not to gawk, at least a little bit.

“Hi,” he repeats, then leans forward to press a kiss to my forehead. “Can I come in or are you going to stand here and stare all night?”

“What's so bad about that?” I joke then step aside. “Come on in.”

He walks by me and into my entryway and I close the door behind us.

“Wow, Sawyer. This place is nice. It's cozy.”

“That's exactly what I wanted it to be. It's what I needed.” I step around in front of him. “Are you thirsty? Hungry?”

“All of the above, actually.”

“Follow me. I’ll make you something to drink and dinner should be nearly finished.”

“You didn’t have to make dinner for me, Sawyer. I would have been thrilled with an ordered pizza and beer.”

“Well, I wanted to because I think cooking is fun, and as for beer...” I open the fridge and grab two frosty bottles. “I have that covered.”

“You’re beautiful, funny, adorable, sweet, and you have impeccable taste in beer? Pinch me.”

“Now you’re just laying it on thick,” I giggle. “Make yourself at home.”

I watch him walk around my living room with his hands in his pockets, looking at the artwork on my walls and the few pictures I have on the mantle.

“Do you need help with anything?”

“No, I think I have everything covered. It’s just in the oven,” I twist open my beer with my forearm, just like my Dad taught me, without even thinking anything of it.

“Whoa. We aren’t just going to ignore what you just did and not even acknowledge it,” he says, with wide eyes as he places his beer on the counter.

I nearly choke on my beer when I start to laugh. “What are you talking about?”



He mimes out what I did, “Uh, the thing with the beer and the opening. It was fucking impressive and hot.”

“Oh.” I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “My dad always teaches me off-the-wall shit. That was on the list. I think I was around thirteen when I learned. Which I see now was inappropriate,” I laugh. “But I always have fun when he teaches me.”

“I think it’s badass and one hell of a party trick. You’ll have to show me one day.”

“Sure, I’ll show you anything you want.”

The smile on his face at my words makes me realize just how laced with innuendo they were. “Oh, well, I mean... you know what I mean. Not like that,” I giggle.

“You always blush when you get nervous. It’s pretty.” He reaches out and touches my heated cheek. “I’ve been keeping my distance since I walked in because I don’t want to push you, but I’d really like to kiss you right now.”

“Asking for permission?”

“I’m asking if you have any objections.”

I pretend to ponder, counting on my fingers for dramatic effect before shrugging, “Can’t think of a single one.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” he says and takes my face in both of his hands. “I’ve needed this all week.”

His head dips down and our lips connect with the same spark I felt on my doorstep after our last date.

I place my hands on his chest and curl my fingers into the fabric, giving him a tug closer.

He steps forward, using our newfound closeness to his advantage, and forces me to step back and back until my ass connects with my cold, white counters. He's so much bigger than me, I'm sure if someone were to see us like this from the living room, they wouldn't even see my body. I'm being hidden completely by him, shrouded from the world so all that exists in this moment is this kiss.

Our tongues move together, mixed with sucks and bites. It's tender, erotic, and wholly perfect.

I can feel his breaths growing harsher and his touch becoming rougher. I like it. I want it, but this is happening so fast that my mind, heart and body are struggling to keep up with one another. My body is taking off in a clear lead and rushing to the finish line with outstretched arms. My mind is more logical, because slow and steady keeps us from tripping and falling into something we will regret. My heart is still wary, scared of being hurt or broken if she gets involved too soon... or at all.

I can't let my body take over on this one.

"Wait," I pant out, giving the slightest push to his chest, forcing us to break apart. He steps back and moves his hands to the counter by my waist, dropping his head. "I'm sorry," I whisper, watching him closely.

His head swings back up so our eyes connect, "Why in the world are you apologizing to me?"

“Because that kiss got pretty... heated, and I stopped it.”

“Never apologize for making sure you stay comfortable. I should be the one apologizing. I had a rough night last night, and I just... lost myself for a minute with you.”

I reach up, cupping his cheek in my hand. For a moment, he nuzzles it against my palm, letting the stubble scrape against my skin. He looks so sad in this moment.

“What happened?” The timer for the oven dings behind me, and just like that, he pulls away from me, like that moment of vulnerability didn’t happen. “Have a seat. I’ll plate up our food and then we can talk, if you want to, I mean. You don’t have to.”

He nods. “Do you need help? I know you said you didn’t earlier, but I want to make sure.”

“You,” I point to the table with a grin, “sit.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He salutes me then goes to the table.

A few minutes later, I’ve got music playing softly from a Bluetooth speaker and we are both digging into the bowls of baked pasta I’ve made for us.

“This is amazing,” he says, taking another forkful.

“Pasta is a no-brainer. It’s hard to mess up.” I swallow my own bite then wash it down with some water. “So, if you want, talk to me about what happened last night.”

He stares down at his beer bottle for a moment, picking at the label before he begins to speak, “Did you watch the news

this morning?”

I shake my head. “I try not to. It’s too depressing sometimes.”

“This won’t be any different,” he sighs heavily. “There was a boat accident up at the docks, just south of here. The man driving a speedboat was heavily intoxicated and wasn’t paying attention. He was going way too fast, lost control, and ended up colliding with a small pontoon boat tied to the dock.”

I cover my mouth because I have a sick feeling in my stomach that I know exactly where this is going. These things never end well for anyone involved.

“There was a family of five on the pontoon and a little girl was playing on the dock. Everyone was pretty severely hurt, but she,” he leans forward a bit and clears his throat, “she didn’t make it. She was gone before EMS even got there. We were on scene first, so we tried to do what we could for everyone.”

I close my eyes and my hand goes to my heart. Jason’s face enters my mind immediately and I try my best to shake it off.

“Oh my God, Isaac. That’s awful. I’m so sorry you had to be a part of that.”

“I knew when I took this job as a first responder, I would see things like this, but that doesn’t mean it gets easier. It gets harder, actually.”

“I’m sure it does, but it takes a special person to be able to do it.”

“And here I thought you hated firemen.” He forces a grin.

I look down at my bowl and push the pasta around. I don't hate fireman, not all of them at least. I just wish the ones who came to help in LA had tried harder to save my brother... but they didn't. They let him die.

I don't say that, of course, because I don't want the looks. I don't want the pity and sadness that is always present in their eyes when someone finds out how Jason died. I can't go there. Not with him. Not yet.

“I think one in particular is growing on me.”

### **Isaac**

I've been inside of her home for nearly four hours. It's nearing eleven and I feel like I've only been here a few minutes. Being around her is different and so much easier than the other women I've been with over the years. Work takes up most of my time, so having anything more than a quick romp or two is a rare occurrence.

After one of the most incredible meals I've ever eaten, we migrated to her living room with more drinks, a bit stronger now in the form of some gin mixed drink she whipped up. Her home is quaint, small, and somehow perfectly her with the bright white walls and deep hardwood floors. There are pops of color in her pillows, candles, and artwork. It's fresh and light. It's her.

As we sit in her living room, talking about everything under the sun, we slowly end up moving closer and closer together.

She started on one side of her L-shaped sectional and me on the other, but now, a few hours later, we are so close together in the curve of the sofa that our legs are touching.

“What’s your favorite memory?” she asks, tilting her head curiously.

“Memory in regard to?”

“Life. Anything. Just your favorite memory.” She shrugs one shoulder and takes a sip of her drink, letting the ice clink against the glass.

It’s a loaded question, and it doesn’t have the easiest answer. There are so many memories in my life I could consider positive, but I don’t know if they’d qualify as my favorite. There is one, however, that pops into my mind rather quickly.

“My family and I went up to the mountains for Christmas when I was ten years old. I had never seen snow before, and I remember thinking it was the most incredible thing. My granddad even tried to teach me to snowboard.” I laugh. “And that’s how I broke my first bone.”

She giggles, “And it’s still your favorite memory?”

“I wouldn’t change a thing about it. It was my favorite Christmas.”

“I love that, actually. You know it’s a great memory when the good outweighs all the bad that happened.”

I place my glass on a coaster on the coffee table in front of us and reach down, pulling her feet up and into my lap, resting my hands on her ankles.

“What about your favorite memory?”

I watch as she lays her head back on the cushioned sofa with her eyes closed for the briefest moment before a smile appears on her face.

“My brother, Jason, always wanted to go skydiving. He talked about it constantly. Obviously, since he was under eighteen, he wasn’t allowed. Not even with a parent signing off. God, that made him so upset.” She swallows more of her drink, crunching on a small piece of ice. “Anyway, we went on vacation to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee one year. I had just turned eighteen and was going to college that fall in California. We wanted one last summer vacation as a family.”

I can see the sadness blended with happiness at the memory building in her eyes in a mixture of tears and smiles.

“Jason was twelve at the time, and since he couldn’t actually skydive, there was only one option. Indoor skydiving.”

“That’s a thing?” I ask.

“It is. It’s this big, cylindrical tower with a giant fan in the floor. They put you in all the gear, let you step inside, turn on the fan and up you go. Anyway, my parents surprised Jason with a chance to do it while we were on vacation. I don’t think I had ever seen him so happy.”

I squeeze her ankle then rub from there up her calf and back down mindlessly, comforting her. “I can see the memory in your eyes. Your face is lighting up thinking about it.”

“It’s nice to remember him like that.”

“If it’s too much, you don’t have to tell me. You can tell me to mind my own fucking business and that’ll be the end of it, but... what happened to him?”

She stares down into her glass, which has now built up a bit of condensation and slides her thumb over it, sweeping away some of the droplets.

“He got into the wrong crowd and started doing things he shouldn’t. Stealing, fighting... drugs. Long story short, drugs placed him in a situation he shouldn’t have been in and that was it.”

My gut tells me there is so much more to this story that she isn’t telling me, but it’s not my business to push any further. She was brave enough to share that much, and that’s all I can ask for.

“Jesus, Sawyer, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I miss him so much every single day, but I have to live life for him now. That’s what I’m doing.” She holds her head high as she talks about him. It’s like she has to force herself though because I can see in her eyes how sad she really is.

“That’s very admirable.”



“Don’t let it fool you. I’m broken because of it and I have my bad days.”

“Like the day I saw you in your car after running at the track?” I say before thinking it through.

Her eyes lock on mine, and she nods. “Yes.”

“I swear I wasn’t spying on you or staring. I just looked over and there you were.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t expect to cry. It hits me sometimes out of nowhere and over the silliest things, as you know after what happened at school.”

“I wanted to come over and make sure you were okay that day, but it didn’t feel like the time.”

“I had just talked to my mom and that really brings it out sometimes,” she sighs. “I don’t like people seeing me cry. It makes me feel anything but strong.”

I slide my hand up her leg to where her hands are resting in her lap, wrapped around her nearly empty glass and take it from her, placing it on the coaster next to mine.

There is something about this woman pulling me in slowly, more and more every day, and I don’t want to fight it. Not even a little.

“You’re a very strong, capable woman. You shouldn’t be hiding in your car or in your classroom to cry all alone. Own what hurts you and know that crying doesn’t make you weak. It makes you human.”

She opens her hand and our fingers slide together, link, and fold into one another. I bring our joined hands up to my mouth and place a kiss to her middle knuckle.

“I like you a lot,” she says in a near whisper. “It’s scary, actually. I never expected to like you so fast.”

“What a coincidence,” I say, as I slide my free hand under her knee and tug her to sit sideways across my lap. “I like you a lot too.”

With roaming hands, never slipping underneath the barrier of our clothes, we kiss right here on her sofa in a mix of lips, tongues, teeth, soft breaths, and moans for the remainder of the evening until we both fall asleep curled together in the crook of the plush cushions.

It’s sensual without sex.

It’s intimate without losing our clothes.

It’s simply... perfect.



The sun slices through the window and over my face, pulling me from one of the most restful sleeps I’ve had in a while. I can still feel the weight of a sleeping Sawyer draped half on top of me, and I wouldn’t change that for the world.

I blink a couple times, trying to find my bearings, when I feel eyes on me. I tilt my gaze to the back of the sofa to find a very large, black and gray cat sitting there, staring down at me like I am public enemy number one.

“Umm, hi,” I say, and I swear this cat’s eyes get even smaller in a pure “I’m watching you, pal” gaze.

Sawyer inhales deeply and moves just a bit before I hear her quite voice, “What’s wrong?”

I whisper, “I think your cat is going to murder me.”

She sits up on her elbow and stares the cat down, “Oh my God, Herbert, get out of here.”

She waves him away and he just meows in response, still standing his ground.

“Herbert?”

“This is my cat, Herbert. He’s a bit of an asshole. He was hiding last night, apparently.”

“Herbert,” I say again, reaching up to pet him, but he dodges my touch and meows again.

“He isn’t exactly a people person, and he’s probably hungry.” She laughs as she pushes to sit up completely. “He’s been this way since day one. I got him from a rescue a few years ago, and he’s always after food.”

“Ah. He thinks I’m halting the progress of his breakfast.” I shift a bit, bringing my arm under my head to rest back against it.

“And as a fellow food motivated individual, I can understand the annoyance he has,” she giggles.

“What are your plans today?” I ask her, sliding my hand up and down her back.

“I’m supposed to be having dinner with Olivia tonight. She wants to do one of those wine and painting things and grab Chinese food before.”

“If she gets you for dinner, can I take you to breakfast?”

“I think I’d like that a lot.”

I cup the side of her face and press a gentle kiss to her lips, which is quickly halted by Herbert’s very loud and overly aggressive meow.

Sawyer pulls away with a huff, “Good God, Herb, I’m going, I’m going.”

She climbs from the couch and stretches, giving me quite the view of the curves of her body. She is goddamned perfect, all curves and softness, and beautiful skin. There isn’t a stitch of makeup on her face and her hair is a bit messy, but she could put any other woman to shame just as she is right now.

She catches me staring and a pink blush washes up her chest to her cheeks.

“What?” she asks.

“Just staring,” I say proudly. “And I’m wondering if you have plans two weekends from now?”

# Chapter 11

## Sawyer

“Wait, so you’re going away with him for a weekend?” Olivia asks with forkful of salad paused halfway to her mouth.

We are sitting in the teacher’s lounge together during the lunch period, thankful for a bit of reprieve on this chaotic Monday.

“I am.” I take my own bite. “Is it a bad thing?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m just surprised is all. You know I’ve been pushing you to put yourself out there since we first met.”

“If it were just going to be him and me, alone, on this trip, I would probably have a different opinion of it, but it’s for his friend’s wedding. He needs a date, so I was happy to say yes.”

If I’m being honest with myself, I would probably still go even if it was just him and me, but I’d have to really think first. I just like being with him. It’s easy and there is no expectation or drama.

“Why didn’t you mention it when we went out Saturday night?”

I shrug. “I guess I just wanted to make sure I actually wanted to go before I mentioned it to anyone else. When I realized the excitement was staying, I decided to mention it.”

“And you all haven’t... you know... yet?” she asks with raised eyebrows.

“No.” I shake my head. “We’ve just kissed, and those are just as good.”

“Bullshit. That’s just not true at all. You just haven’t had sex in a while,” Liv teases.

“You haven’t made out with Isaac Black.”

“That good, huh?”

“You have no idea.”

“Are you nervous? Overnight trips like that usually lead to sex, especially at weddings. Those make everyone horny.”

I would be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about it. Hell, having sex with Isaac enters my mind six hundred times a day. I knew when I agreed to go away with him I was essentially agreeing to sleep with him, or at least be open to the idea if our time together leaned that way.

“I am nervous, but not like I expected to be. It’s more of an excited nervous. I’ve never been to Napa and I have an excuse to dress up and dance with a hot guy. It’s formal attire.”

“You know what that means.”

“What?”

“We have to go dress shopping!” Liv exclaims and claps her hands.

## Isaac

“You invited her to Napa? Seriously?”

“Don’t sound so shocked, Finn.”

He cracks open the peanut in his hand and tosses the shells into the basket at the end of our table. “Why not? You never introduce girls to all of us at once. We are lucky if one of us gets to meet someone you’re with.”

“I’m not with her. We are just, I don’t know, seeing what happens.”

“Sounds like something a pussy-whipped asshole would say.”

“Hard to be pussy-whipped without the pussy.”

“You still haven’t fucked her? Jesus, man, who are you, and what have you done with my friend?”

I point at him. “Watch it.”

“Fine, fine.” Finn looks around, as the bar grows more and more crowded. “Where’s Caleb? He’s been in the bathroom for fifteen minutes.”

“Maybe he fell in.”

“Nah, we aren’t that lucky.”

I laugh and swallow a gulp of beer. “I told Christopher I was bringing someone. He was just as shocked as you.”



Christopher went to high school with all of us. We were all extremely close, hell, if he lived closer, he'd be here with us anytime we came.

“I still can't believe he's getting married.”

“Right? It's like saying Caleb is going to get married. I never thought anyone would tame Christopher, but I guess Danielle is gifted as hell.”

As if we summoned him by saying his name too many times, Caleb sinks into his seat with a huge smile on his face and lipstick marks on his neck.

“Why are we talking about me?” he asks, and Finn and I just stare at him. “What?”

“How the fuck do you do it? We haven't been here thirty minutes and you're already banging some chick in the bathroom?” Finn praises him, “Tell me your ways, Yoda.”

“My secrets, you need not,” Caleb replies, then sips his beer. “Besides, it wasn't a random person. It was Staci. She needed it; I needed it. We understood.”

Ah yes, Staci, the server he fucks frequently when we come by for drinks.

“You're an animal,” I tell him. “And we were talking about the fact it's weird Christopher is getting married.”

“We were also talking about the fact Isaac is bringing a date to stay the weekend up in Napa for said wedding.”

Caleb chokes on a mouthful of beer and coughs. “What?”

“You all are making this a bigger deal than it needs to be. So what if I’m bringing a girl? I’m allowed, aren’t I? So fuck off.” I glare at both of them. “And if you do anything to make her uncomfortable, I’ll kick your asses, got it?”

“Why would we do anything to make her feel uncomfortable? Come on, man, we are the lives of the party and everyone likes us,” Finn says.

“Exactly. We’ll make her, whoever she is, feel right at home,” Caleb adds.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about.”

# Chapter 12

## Isaac

Two weeks flew by in a flash.

One minute, I was talking to the guys about bringing a date with me to Napa and the next; I'm stepping onto the train for the ride up with Sawyer's hand in mine.

"I've never ridden a train before," she says with wide eyes. "This is amazing and so fancy."

The train from the Bay Area up to Napa Valley is one of the nicer train experiences. It really leans heavily into the luxe feeling the entire area has. After taking the ferry across the Bay, we were shuttled to the train, and I have to say, having Sawyer with me feels perfect.

"We are meeting a couple of my buddies. They're sitting with us. I'm sorry for anything they say ahead of time. They can be... a lot."

"I like when people are a lot. It keeps me on my toes."

"You haven't met Finn and Caleb yet."

We weave through the other passengers, toward the back of the main car, where we find my two best friends sitting next to each other, already nursing a scotch each.

“Early start, fellas?” I slide my hand to lie on the small of Sawyer’s back. I know Caleb will know who she is, considering they work together, and to be honest, I’m proud as fuck to have her by my side right now.

“You know it,” Finn says, rising to his feet to introduce himself. “I’m Finn.” He extends his hand to Sawyer.

She takes it gladly. “Finn. I like that name. I’m Sawyer. It’s really nice to meet you.”

Caleb is up next; he rises just as Finn. “Sawyer Westbrook. Holy shit.”

“Caleb Everhart? Oh my God. You’re Isaac’s Caleb?”

“And you’re the mystery date,” Caleb replies. “Wow. It’s a small world.”

“You can say that again.” She lets out a chuckle, visibly loosening up a little since she isn’t completely new to everyone.

We slide in to take our seats across from them. The sides of the train car are glass all the way to the roof and partially above you in order to provide the perfect view up to the Napa Valley. Sawyer is looking around in wonder, and the alpha male inside of me is proud she’s experiencing things like this with me.

An attendant, a young man with a pristine blue bowtie, appears at our sides quickly, asking us which type of wine or beverage we'd like for our ride. Sawyer opts for the favorite of the attendant, who has introduced himself as Lucas, which is a sweet white, while I opt for a Maker's Mark neat.

"So how did you two meet?" Caleb asks, motioning between the two of us.

Sawyer looks my way then decides to answer him for the both of us. "I bumped into him at the Harvest Festival and spilled hot chocolate all over him."

"Ruined a perfectly good shirt," I tease.

"And then he basically stalked me and forced me to go on a date with him. A few dates later, here we are," Sawyer says, as she smiles up to Lucas when he returns with our drinks.

"That part is only half true," I say in defense, but both Finn and Caleb are staring with clear humor in their gaze.

"Sounds about right for our friend here," Finn adds.

"Oh, so I'm not special? Gee, thanks. Nice to know I'm just another conquest." Sawyer takes a sip of her wine and holds stock in silence before giggling. "I'm kidding. Geez, I couldn't even pretend to be that crazy."

Caleb and Finn toss their heads back and laugh.

They like her instantly. Caleb had a head start because they are colleagues, but seeing her seamlessly shooting the shit with my friends makes whatever nervousness residing in my chest ebb away.

This is going to be a good weekend. I can feel it.

## Sawyer

“Holy shit.”

I stand stock-still after we step out of the black car that brought us from the train to the wedding venue, which is also where the entirety of the guests and bridal party will be staying, and stare in complete splendor.

“What?” Isaac asks with a hand to the small of my back.

“What do you mean *what?*” I hold my arm out toward the giant mansion in front of us. “You somehow failed to mention you were bringing me to a damn *castle* for the weekend!”

The monumental work of architectural magic feels like something that has been plucked from a fairy tale and placed before us. With its cathedral-style windows, and stunning smoky gray stone making up the structure itself, in addition to a beautifully high, angled roof, I almost immediately feel like a peasant about to walk in and ruin the illusion completely.

“Christopher’s bride, Danielle, comes from a very well-to-do family. She wanted the fairy-tale wedding. They came through,” Isaac tells me.

“I can’t go in there,” I say, with a shake of my head.

“What? Why?”

“Look at me. I’m so... plain, and that is so... not plain.”

“Okay, no,” Isaac says, as he turns and takes my face in his hands. “Look at me, don’t speak, just listen.”

Of course, I instantly open my mouth to say something, but he silences me with a kiss to the lips.

“You are not plain. You’re beautiful and you belong here. You belong everywhere.”

Any thought of self-doubt or anxiety about being in such an amazing place with such an incredible human being melts away with such a simple touch from him. A man I really don’t know that well. Hell, I don’t even know his middle name.

When he finally breaks the kiss and my eyes blink open, that cocky smirk is greeting me.

“You look awfully proud of yourself,” I tell him.

“I am.” He leans in and gives me one more peck then brushes my hair out of my face. “You’re beautiful, and I’m one proud son of a bitch that you’re going to be on my arm this weekend.”

His compliment makes me warm and fuzzy, but it also makes me want to shrink into the ground and hide. I don’t take them very well.

“Isaac, what’s your middle name?” I ask with absolutely no preamble.

“Andrew. Why? That was random.”

“Mine is Elizabeth. I just thought we should know that about one another.”



“Well then, Sawyer Elizabeth.” He stands taller when he speaks and gives his best regal accent, “Shall we?” He offers his arm to me and I slip mine through.

“We shall, Isaac Andrew.”



“I feel like I’m never going to stop being in awe all weekend long.”

I step into our room for the weekend and I have stop myself from audibly gasping. It is literally a room that could have belonged to a princess.

The walls are a rich champagne color with gold crown molding lining the tops and bottoms of the walls. There is a dark, oak wardrobe in the right corner by two French doors that lead to a balcony. There’s a huge four-poster bed against the left wall, centered directly in front of a beautiful fireplace with a black steel screen on the hearthstone.

I slide my hand over the lush, white duvet placed perfectly over the bed along with many inviting pillows.

“Goddamn,” Isaac calls from the bathroom. “Come check this out.”

I follow the sound of his voice and step into a bathroom that is even better than I could have imagined.

A Jacuzzi tub that could easily fit ten people is nestled into a little nook in the corner that is totally lined with mirrors. It’s decadent. It’s hot.

“This is out of control, Isaac.” I cover my mouth and laugh. It’s the only reaction I have. “This is insane.”

“Christopher told me it was going to be over-the-top, but I wasn’t expecting this. Not that I’m complaining. I’m absolutely not, especially since I have pretty awesome company.”

I look over my shoulder at him and smile. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful before? This is just crazy.” I slide my hand over the lip of the incredibly deep, inviting bathtub.

“Sawyer...” Isaac steps up behind me and I look up into the mirror in front of me so I can meet his eyes.

“Yeah?” I reply.

“I realize now that I never even considered the fact you might not want to sleep in the same bed. I should have asked you instead of just assuming, and I want to apologize for that.”

I spin around so I can see him face-to-face. “If I didn’t want to sleep in the same bed as you, I wouldn’t have agreed to be your date. We are adults, right?”

“I just don’t want you to feel pressured into anything, Sawyer. I just needed to say that. This isn’t some ploy to get in your pants. I really just want to spend time with you,” he says, as he cups my face in his hands.

“I like when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Make me feel like I’m more than a piece of meat. You respect me as a person, and that means more to me than anything.”

“I can’t lie to you though,” he slides his hands around my body and pulls me closer, “I do think about you in less than respectful ways sometimes. Does that make me an asshole?”

My stomach flips deliciously and a tingle builds between my legs.

“No, because if that makes you an asshole, what does the fact I also have the same thoughts make me?” I place my hands on his chest and stare up at him.

“Sawyer, I don’t know what we are doing or where this is going, but I do know I’m enjoying the journey, and I don’t want it to stop anytime soon,” he says with pure honesty written on his face. There isn’t an ounce of him that feels dishonest.

“On this we can agree. We like each other, we enjoy spending time together, and whatever happens... happens. We are grown-ups. We are allowed to have fun. I need fun.”

*Especially with Jason’s birthday looming.*

What used to be my favorite day of the year is now the one I dread the most.

“Well, lucky for you, I am the master at providing a fun time.” He presses a kiss to my nose.

“I like the sound of that.”

“So let’s take a few minutes to change or freshen up, then we can go explore the grounds and I can introduce you to everyone. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like the start of an amazing weekend.”

# Chapter 13

## Isaac

Sawyer has hit it off with every single person I have introduced her to this evening at the rehearsal dinner. She hasn't met a stranger and is so kind and able to contribute to every conversation without it feeling forced or awkward.

She looks beautiful in her flowy dress with sunflowers all over it beneath the orange glow the evening brings over the hills. I've never experienced time with a woman that's this easy. There's no pressure, no expectation—it's just us—going with the flow.

I'm watching her from the bar, which I'm currently leaning against, while she chats it up with Mrs. Leonard, Christopher's mother, at a standing table just across the courtyard. I watch the way she engages animatedly, using her hands to talk, which I've picked up on recently. If her hands were tied behind her back, she likely couldn't speak at all.

“She's a pretty one, Isaac.”

I look to my right as Christopher leans against the bar next to me.

“Ah, the groom himself.” I hold up my glass and he clinks his against it. “This turned out really nice, man.”

“I didn’t have a thing to do with it. Danielle asked if she, her sister, and mom could handle it all. All I said was, ‘Yes dear.’”

“Learning early.” I turn my attention back on Sawyer because let’s face it; I’m drawn to her.

“So tell me about this one. I didn’t get a chance to properly speak with her earlier like I wish I would have been able to.”

I can’t help but laugh at him. “It’s fucking hilarious to hear you speak so properly. Too much time in the Hills with the rich and famous.”

Christopher is one of my oldest friends. I’ve known him since we were in high school, and he’s always had my back. He comes from one hell of a rough upbringing, but you wouldn’t know that looking at him now.

He’s one of the most successful attorneys in the Los Angeles area and he is marrying a woman who is beautiful, successful in her own right, and keeps him on his toes. I’d say he’s done pretty well for himself.

“Man, fuck off.” He laughs and shoves me a bit. “Seriously, though, tell me about her. I’ve caught you staring a time or two.”

“Well, I met her at the Harvest Festival. We quite literally ran into each other when she was coming out of the

bathroom.”

I run through the CliffsNotes of our short time together. Christopher listens closely and doesn't give me shit like the other guys, not at first at least. I finish my story with a sip of my scotch. “So that's the long and short of it. We have fun together, so we are just... riding that wave.”

“Do you often ride that wave with that look on your face?” He uses his glass to gesture at my head.

“What are you talking about?”

“Dude, you're staring at her like she hung the moon. Like there is no one else you'd rather be looking at right now.” He laughs. “It's a look I know all too well because I wear it often. Just don't tell Danielle that. She'd use it to her advantage.”

I shrug it off because that is the typical Isaac thing to do. “Nah, I don't think it's like that. Is it? I've known her a little over a month. I hardly know her at all.”

Even as I say those words, I know they are hollow. A lather, rinse, repeat habit I have formed over the years and the many casual relationships I dropped before they could bloom into more.

“Since when does that matter? I knew I wanted more with Danielle on the first date. Fifteen minutes in.”

“Bullshit. That's not possible.”

“Man, anything is possible when the right woman is involved.”

We both turn when we hear his bride-to-be calling for him from across the way.

“You better go. Wouldn’t want to upset the bride. I’ll see you in there in a little bit.”

“I just want to marry her. I didn’t need all the hoopla.” He waves his hand around, gesturing at everything happening around us.

“Hoopla? Goddamn you’re getting old.”



“I caught you, you know?” Sawyer says to me when I slide up next to her, at a standing table that overlooks the large vineyard, while we wait for me to be called in to run through the rehearsal for the ceremony.

“Caught me doing what, exactly?”

“Checking me out. You weren’t very sneaky about it. I think Mrs. Leonard thought you were looking at her though. Be careful. She may attack you later.”

“I’ve known that woman since I was a snotty-ass teen.”

“Have you never heard of a cougar? That woman is the definition. Don’t knock it ‘til you try it.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“You’re gross.” I lean down and press a kiss to her shoulder that is dotted with freckles, no doubt a product of being in the sun.

“Well, that was mean.” She pokes at my stomach.



“Ouch.” I rub just over my belly button where she pressed in. “That hurt.”

“Good.”

We stare at each other for a moment before she finally breaks into a smile. “What?” she asks.

“I’m glad you’re here. I don’t know what to make of all of this with us, Sawyer, but all I know is I’m glad you’re here, and I hope you are too.”

“To be honest, I was nervous. I was worried it would be awkward for me, but truthfully... I feel so comfortable. Your friends and their families are so nice. Though, many of them have told me how shocked they are you have found someone serious. I didn’t really have the heart to crush their spirits.”

“So what you’re saying is that you’re pretending to be my girlfriend?”

She wrinkles her nose a bit, as if preparing for me to be angry. “Yeah, I suppose that is one way to look at it. I’m sorry.”

I place my glass on the table then take her hand in mine. “If we are going to play the part, we may as well be convincing about it, right?”

“What do you mean?”

Without warning, I pull her close then dip her back, causing her to shriek and pull every gaze our way. I kiss her like we have stepped into the middle of a romantic comedy and this is the big finale before the credits roll.

I don't hear the hooting and hollering at first, because I'm so lost in this moment with her that nothing else matters, except the sound of my own heart pounding in my ears. When their voices start to bleed through, I can feel her giggling against my lips, and I can't help but laugh with her.

I pull her upright and we keep laughing together along with the applause of everyone around us. I lean in to whisper in her ear, "Now you're mine." My brain knows this is for show, a game we are playing because she said she pretended to be my girlfriend, but I can't deny there is also a part of me that wants my words to be true.

## Sawyer

*Now you're mine.*

His words are still ringing in my ear and sending a chill over my heated skin. I have that tight, anxious feeling in my stomach when you really like someone and you're nervous to be around them. It's like I'm a teenager.

I'm sitting on a barstool in the back of the outdoor venue while Isaac, as part of the bridal party, goes over what he will be doing tomorrow before and during the ceremony.

I watch as the groomsmen take their place next to Christopher, the groom. How does Isaac, a man so stunningly gorgeous, have friends just as attractive?

There's Christopher, with his dark brown skin and haunting blue eyes, then you have Finn with his dirty blond hair styled in that way that is shorter on the sides and longer on the top. It could make him look like a tool, but he wears it so well, and Caleb... he's like a sexy as sin Clark Kent.

All of this testosterone isn't good for a woman who hasn't had sex in a couple of years. I feel the sudden urge to fan myself like the older women in Southern churches on Sunday mornings.

This cat and mouse game I'm playing with Isaac certainly isn't helping things either. Everything about him is so inviting.

He's the flame and I am the moth flying straight into its light, but I'm not scared of getting hurt. Not anymore, at least. Because I know at his core, he's a good man. I can see it in the way he is with me, and in the way his friends look at him. He's one of the good ones, and for some reason, he likes me as much as I like him.

It's hard to believe, honestly.

Danielle, the bride-to-be, walks down the area that will be the aisle tomorrow with her father on her arm, and I see Christopher's face light up. If he looks this proud and excited now, he's going to be a crying groom tomorrow, and I love that.

Sometimes when I'm having a day and need a good cry, and let's face it, we all need a cry occasionally, I'll watch videos of grooms seeing their brides for the first time. It always hits me right where I need it to so I can cry out my bad day and move on from there.

It may be sad, but it's what works for me.

They run through the ceremony, which seems rather quick, though I don't really have any frame of reference. It seems short, sweet, and to the point. Given the venue, I would have assumed the ceremony would be much longer and involved, but maybe they just want to marry one another and call it a day. I appreciate that and think it's incredible, if that's the case.

I cross my legs and lean back against the bar, watching quietly as they run through one more time, and I can't ignore

the fact Isaac and I have made eyes at each other multiple times.

He's caught me staring many times and I've caught him all the same. There's a clear tension between us that is impossible to ignore. It's so thick I'm shocked everyone around us can't see it.

While I want to dive in headfirst and give in to the growing heat in my body so desperately wants to be kept alive by him, there is something so inviting and perfect about the chase.

If I'm honest with myself, I'm worried once we have sex, everything will change for us. Sex has a way of doing that to people. I want to wait, to see what this is between us before we take that step, but then I see him smile or feel the soft touch of his hand on my back.

I hear the way he speaks to me and makes me feel so powerful and amazing about myself, and I see the way people are able to hold a conversation with him that is intelligent and kind.

And those are just his nonphysical traits.

Don't even get me started on those eyes of rich caramel, or those biceps I want to feel wrap me up completely. Then there's his abs that remind me of someone who could be on the cover of a romance novel, coupled with the fact his face is absolutely perfect. His strong jawline with the coarseness of his short facial hair makes me weak in the knees. Sometimes, at night, when I'm alone, I think about what it will feel like when his stubbly cheek brushes against the tender skin of my

inner thigh and my hands wander down my own body with him swimming in my mind.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

His deep, rich voice startles me out of the nice daydream I was having about beard burn and back into reality.

“Jesus, Isaac,” I place my hand over my heart. “You scared me.”

“I said your name a couple of times, but you were lost in space there. Everything all right?”

“Mmm hmm. Yep. Perfect.” I clear my throat a bit. “That went okay, huh? Seems like everything will go well tomorrow.”

I expect him to call me on my shit and force me to tell him I was thinking about his face between my legs, but he has some mercy and doesn't push further.

“They kept the ceremony simple it seems. I have a feeling Christopher had something to do with that.”

“He isn't into the big wedding?”

He leans next to me comfortably with one arm on the bar, “Nah, it's not that. He just doesn't like being the center of attention for longer than necessary, which is odd considering his profession, but that's him. I think if he had his way, they'd be married at the courthouse and skip out of town for one hell of a honeymoon.”

“That’s what I would want. When I get married, I don’t need all the pomp and circumstance. I mean, it’s fun and it fits for some people, but it’s not for me. I want a small wedding, maybe even just the courthouse and a trip somewhere European with really good pasta.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all planned.”

“Every girl does, or at the very least, she’s thought about it and if she tells you she doesn’t, she’s a liar.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He reaches out and takes my hand before pulling me from the barstool to me feet. “I saw you staring at me, you know. You were beckoning me with those bedroom eyes of yours.”

“I have bedroom eyes?”

“Sawyer, you have bedroom everything.”



Three hours later, after a rehearsal dinner that was to die for, and many flowing drinks, we finally head back to our room.

My heels have long since been hanging from my index finger, and I’m absolutely exhausted. Between teetering in these shoes, being stuffed with so much food, and consuming far too much alcohol, all I want is to relax and to sleep.

“You know what sounds incredible right now?” I ask, as I lean against the wall by our door while he searches his pockets for the keycard.

“What?”

“A bubble bath and one hell of a nap,” I giggle.

“Someone is a little drunk,” he grins as he speaks, sliding the keycard into the door.

I hold up my hands, pinching my thumb and index finger in front of my eye, “Just a bit. Drunk is a strong word. I’d go with tipsy.”

“Tipsy Sawyer is cute.”

“Sober Sawyer is cute too,” I say proudly.

“You’re right about that. She is cute and even more.” He pushes the door open for me and I walk in first, turning around and collapsing backward onto the bed.

“Finally,” I moan in pleasure, so happy to finally be off my feet.

“Stay put. I’ll get it ready for you,” he says before disappearing around the corner.

“What?” I push up onto my elbow. “What are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer me so I swing my legs around to the edge of the bed and stand, stepping slowly toward the bathroom.

When I peek inside, I see he is running a bath, adding bubbles and everything. The scent of sweet fruit is in the air and it makes my heart twist and tighten.

“You didn’t have to do that for me, Isaac.”

He stands upright after testing the temperature of the water. “You said it sounded nice, so why not utilize the giant tub at your disposal.”



I take a few steps into the bathroom when he steps toward me, so we are face-to-face, only a foot or two apart. It's obvious neither one of us knows how to traverse whatever path it is we have decided to take. My heart is beating out of my chest as my slightly intoxicated state takes the reins.

I spin around until my back is facing him and pull my hair out of the way and over one shoulder. "Unzip me?"

I glance to my right to see his reflection in one of the many mirrors on the walls of this room. I feel his warmth when he steps closer, and I shiver when his breath hits my shoulder and when his fingers glide over my skin with each inch he lowers the dress.

As the dress falls to pool at my feet, I'm thankful I decided on my favorite bra and panties today. I peek over my shoulder at him before reaching back and unhooking my strapless bra, letting it fall to the floor along with the dress.

"Sawyer," he says softly. I can't tell if it's an involuntary response or if it's a warning, and at this point, I don't care what it is. My name on his lips is foreplay of the best variety.

I exhale a breath and spin around to face him, to let him see me.

His eyes are dark and full of so many things: desire, hunger, intrigue, curiosity.

"Tell me what you're thinking right now," I say, as I slip my thumbs into the waistband of my lace panties.

“I’m thinking how fucking lucky I am you are standing in front of me right now.”

“Is that it?” I shimmy my legs back and forth, lowering my panties down and down until I can step out of them, leaving myself completely bare in front of him.

Thank God for vodka and wine.

I watch his Adam’s apple bob up and down with a swallow. “I am thinking you are so fucking beautiful it hurts.”

My lips turn up in a smile and I reach out to place my hand on his chest. “Thank you.”

I push up on my toes and close the distance between us with a kiss. I can feel the growl form in his throat and vibrate against my mouth. He’s coming undone all because of me, and fuck if that isn’t a powerful feeling.

When I break the kiss and lower back to my normal height, he’s looking down at me with heat in his eyes. “Get in that bath before I fuck you right here against the bathroom counter.”

I shrug playfully as I step up and into the deep tub, “Who has a problem with that?” I tease him with a grin, lowering into the hot water, shielding my body with the massive amount of bubbles covering me. “Oh my God,” I moan and lean back against the side of the tub. “This is amazing.”

He walks over and perches on the edge, staring down at me, “Close your eyes and relax.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

I drop my lids and sink down into the water until it touches my chin. I let the warm water loosen my muscles and soothe the ache in my feet.

I even think I doze off for a moment before the sensation of a washcloth sliding over my arm pulls me out of my trance and I open my eyes.

“Shh. It’s just me,” Isaac says, showing me the washcloth in his hands. “Eyes closed,” he commands, and I comply instantly.

My tongue darts out and slides over my dry lips when the washcloth connects with my chest, slowly moving from one side to the other. I can feel his powerful fingers behind the material, and that makes it even more heady and hot.

Down to my stomach and around my belly button he moves the washcloth, causing my very ticklish belly to pull in and I giggle.

“That tickles,” I whisper, eyes still closed, and I hear him laugh softly in response.

But he doesn’t stop. He continues down to my hips and across my thighs, avoiding the space between them that is aching, craving some kind of attention.

This continues for what feels like an eternity. I think he has touched every part of my body, except the ones that have since developed their own heartbeats. I’ve started moving my hips without even realizing, trying to chase any kind of sensation. I

think that's when he takes pity on me and the rough sensation of the cloth slides directly over my left nipple.

"Oh God," I moan quietly, and he does it again with the right nipple. "Mmm."

I push my head back into the porcelain tub and arch my chest out. My nipples must barely peek out of the water because the cool air makes them tingle and harden even further.

I curl my hands into fists when I feel him drag the cloth over my thigh and to my pussy. He barely slides it against my flesh and I already feel like I'm on fire.

"More," I mewl. "Please."

And more he gives me. With the washcloth draped over my pussy, I can feel his fingers on either side of my clit, pinching slightly then rubbing in a circle and applying gentle pressure. My chest begins to rapidly rise and fall, and I swear the people next door can hear my heart currently pounding in my ears.

"Tell me how it feels," he utters softly.

"It feels fucking incredible. Don't stop."

"Not until you come."

"Oh my God." His words are nearly enough to send me there.

It doesn't take much more. I arch my hips and roll them once, twice, against his hand and I shatter into oblivion. I can feel it from the tips of my toes to the roots of my hair.

“Ahhhh, Isaac,” I moan under my breath, trying not to be too loud, clamping my thighs closed around his forearm and digging my nails into his wrist.

When the convulsing subsides, I blink my eyes open and find him staring down at me.

“Hi,” I say simply.

“Hi,” he replies before leaning down and kissing my lips softly, then pushing my wet hair from my sweaty forehead.

“My mouth is so dry,” I giggle. “I’m sorry. I think it was all the heavy breathing.”

“I’ll go down to the front desk and get us a couple of waters.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Finish your bath. I’ll be right back.”

He kisses my forehead then stands, giving me a full view of exactly what touching me did to him. I can see his cock pressed hard against his thigh in his slacks.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he jokes, adjusting himself a bit before heading back out into the main room and out the door.

I take the moment of privacy to relish in what just happened, and I cover my face and laugh. It’s the happiest, most genuine laugh I’ve had in a long time. And in the spirit of Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, I say, to no one in particular, “Holy shit” and slide down under the bubbles and water.

# Chapter 14

## Isaac

It took massive amounts of supreme effort to keep myself from fucking her right there in the bathtub. The only thing I wanted to do was climb in there with her, clothes and all, and finally give in to what we are both craving.

But there was something so incredible about taking care of her like that. I wanted to have a front-row seat when I made her come for the very first time. I didn't want to be worried about anything else except making sure she felt good, and fucking hell, it was worth it.

It took a lap around the property and downing a half of a bottle of water before I finally felt like I could go back to the room without ravaging her as soon as I walked in the door.

Seeing her body without a scrap of clothing covering her was something I didn't expect to affect me the way that it did, considering I've seen many naked bodies in my time, but Sawyer's is... wow. She has curves in all the right places and she's dotted here and there with freckles I want to take the time to trace with my tongue one day.

I pause outside our room door, with our bottles of water in hand, and rest my forehead on the cold wood.

I'm not sure what I'm going to see when I open that door.

Will she regret what happened and want to leave? Will she be angry we took it that far? Or will she be waiting for me so we can pick up where we left off? Or the worst of all... what if she decided it was too much and she had to leave?

That's not what I find though, when I finally step inside.

Instead, I find the lights off, and the television on to some trashy reality show, and Sawyer, curled in a fluffy bathrobe on top of the covers, snoring softly. I shake my head and chuckle under my breath before placing a water on the nightstand beside her, and carefully extract the covers from under her body and pull them up and over her. She moves for a moment, grumbling something in her sleepy state, but when I settle her back on her pillow, she sinks in and once again begins to snore.

I take a shower shortly after making sure she's settled. With both hands on the wall, I let the hot water wash over my neck while thoughts swirl through my head like the steam all around me. I've never had this... feeling... before. It's a longing deep in my chest that makes my heart ache when she's not around and makes it sing when she is.

I feel like I'm crazy. I haven't known her very long, but I can't stay away anymore. I don't want to even try. There is no point. I'm a lost cause when it comes to this woman.

Freshly showered with still jumbled thoughts, I climb into bed beside her and pull her closer, resting my chin on her head.

She doesn't move at first then she gives me the smallest smile and nuzzles closer into my chest.

“I think I'm falling for you, Sawyer,” I whisper. I'm sure she didn't even hear me because she is out cold, but I need to say the words. My body needs to put them into the air because I need her to know, even if only subconsciously, how I feel.



# Chapter 15

## Isaac

“Are you nervous?” I ask Christopher, as his father helps him with his tie. It’s not that he doesn’t know how to do it, it’s just that his old man really wants to help in any way possible.

“For the ceremony, yes. Nervous to marry Danielle? Not even a little.”

“Good, because I think she’d have your balls if you tried to back out now.”

“On that, you’d be right.”

“They are already in her purse. What’s the difference?” Finn chimes in.

“Man, fuck off with all that shit.” Christopher waves him off when we all laugh.

I’m trying to be present. My friend deserves that on his wedding day, but I can’t help that part of my mind is on a certain brunette beauty I haven’t seen all day long.

Groomsmen duties pulled me away early and I likely won't see her until I'm walking down the aisle for the ceremony. I left her still sleeping, with a note letting her know where I was, but I haven't heard from her yet today.

I'm pouring a glass of Jack Daniel's for Christopher's father when my phone vibrates against my chest.

When I pull it free from the inner pocket of my suit coat, I see her name on the screen, indicating a text.

**Sawyer: How's it going down there?**

**Me: Drinks are flowing, ties are being tied, discussions of balls are being had. All in all, I'd say it's going well.**

**Sawyer: Sounds like a blast.**

**Me: I'm sorry I had to leave so early.**

**Sawyer: Don't you dare apologize. You have obligations. I'm a big girl. Besides, it gives me plenty of time to get all pretty.**

**Me: You woke up pretty.**

**Sawyer: You didn't see my pillow marks and bed head.**

I smile at the image that instantly pops in my head of what Sawyer will look like when she's sleep rumped and thoroughly fucked.

**Me: I have no doubt it's an image I want to see one day.**

"Let's toast, gentlemen," Caleb calls out from the other side of the room we have taken over to get ready in.

I glance back down at my phone to see the blinking dots that tell me she is typing a reply, but I lock the screen and slide the phone back into my pocket to join everyone as we toast a happy marriage to our friend.

## Sawyer

I stare at myself in the mirror and take a deep breath while I make sure I'm happy with how I look. I chose a long emerald green dress with cami straps, a plunging neckline, an open back with crossing straps, and a sheer lace overlay. I feel sexy in it. I feel powerful in it.

I've paired it with simple nude pumps and minimal jewelry; just a single, small diamond that hangs deep in the plunging neckline.

Add in my beach-waved hair and smoky makeup, and I'm wedding ready.

I wanted to feel sexy today, especially after last night... especially after hearing Isaac tell me he is falling for me. He thought I was sleeping and just... blurted it out. I can't believe I didn't react, but I didn't want him to know I heard. I don't know why. I just wanted to process that information on my own first because... I feel the same way.

It doesn't make any sense. I shouldn't feel this strongly this quickly about someone, but here it is, loud and in full HD. I'm falling for him and he's falling for me.

I sit on the edge of the bed with my phone in my hand and stare down at the last text message I sent him that has gone unread.

**Me: Last night was amazing, btw. Not a single regret. I just want to make sure you know that.**

And it's true. Last night was probably one of the most erotic moments of my life and we didn't even have sex. I didn't think it was possible, but then again, so many things I never expected are happening at the hands of Isaac Black.

My life has taken me on a journey that I wish I could circle back and try again. There are things I simply want to experience again, things I would change, and things I would never change.

I want my brother back, and the hardest thing I've done in my life is accept the fact he's gone. There are even days I still have a hard time with that fact, but ever since Isaac came into my life, it's been a little easier every day. He makes me happy with the here and now instead of living in what could have been.

My phone vibrates in my hand and I look down, expecting a reply from him, but instead it's an incoming video call from my mother.

I hold the phone up in front of my face and press accept, her face then fills my screen.

“Whoa, look at you. Where are you heading off to?” she asks me.

“I'm in Napa for a wedding. I told you that before I left.”

“Oh, yes that's right. With a man.” She smiles wide. “I'm just glad you'll be with someone tomorrow. I hate when you

deal with it alone.”

I had tried to forget tomorrow is Jason’s birthday, what would have been his twenty-second. I had successfully done that until this very moment.

“I’m trying not to think about it, Mom.”

“Why? We need to still celebrate him, Sawyer,” she scolds me.

“You’re torturing yourself. He wouldn’t want that for any of us. Remembering him is fine, but making a whole day and spending it in tears isn’t good for any of us. That’s not how we are supposed to move forward.”

“I didn’t call to argue.”

“It doesn’t have to be an argument. I’m just telling you I can’t be sad like this anymore. He’d kick my ass for that and you know it.”

She just sighs, “I know, I know. Look, I just wanted to call and check on you, but I can let you go enjoy your time. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you. I feel beautiful. You should see this dress in person. It’s kind of everything.” I smile.

“I’m sure it’s perfect. I want pictures, and when you get the chance, I want you to tell me all about this man who has you so smiley and happy.”

I grin, just as she says that. “He does, and I’ll make sure to snap some pictures for you.”

“Good. I love you, sweetie.”

“I love you too, Mom.”



I am able to put everything else away mentally when I step into the area where the ceremony is going to take place. It was completely transformed last night and is now covered with beautiful white flowers and twinkle lights with soft chairs arranged to create an aisle in the center. They will be married in front of a large window with a view of the grounds behind them.

It's stunningly beautiful.

There is soft music, a single violin I believe, playing overhead while the guests take their seats. Once I'm settled, I find myself glancing around, looking for Isaac; trying to sneak a peek of him in his suit before he comes out, but it's impossible.

I don't have to wait long though, because the officiant takes her place at the end of the aisle and Christopher walks down with his mother, and kisses her cheek when she sits. From what I've learned of him over the past day, he's a wonderful man, and it shows.

Once he takes his place, I can see a nervous breath leave his chest and I smile. It's sweet. I turn my head when the groomsmen make their way down the aisle next, and my body physically responds to the sight of Isaac in a suit.

I've seen this man in jeans, tees, and his uniform, but those are nothing compared to what is before my eyes right now. He's in a charcoal suit with a black shirt underneath and a pale pink tie. It's tailored and fits him like a damn glove. His hair looks like it's been trimmed today, and it very well may have been. It's shorter on the sides and longer on the top, styled back in somewhat of a pompadour style. It's delicious.

I'm sitting toward the front, so I can see his eyes as he gets closer. They are moving from row to row, looking for me, and when they finally lock on me, the smile on his face grows so big there is no way no one else notices. As he passes by, he gives me a wink then takes his place beside the rest of the men.



Throughout the entire ceremony, we are absolutely fucking each other with our eyes. It's impossible to deny, and there is nothing else I could call it. I want to eat him alive in that suit, and based on the looks I'm getting from him, I think he approves of what I'm wearing as well.

Weddings are foreplay. This is fact now. I am convinced and no one can change my mind.

My body had foolishly forgotten what last night felt like, but that all came rushing back like a tidal wave when I saw him and now my skin is tingling, craving any kind of touch from him.



I'll catch a smile from him and it sends heat up my spine. He must know because he slides his hand over his mouth to cover the fact he's laughing at me, and I just shake my head at him.

When the ceremony ends, and we have a newly married couple among us, the bridal party makes their way, arm in arm, back down the aisle and through the doors.

I stand, eager to make my way to the reception area and into the arms of a very handsome fireman.

## Isaac

I wasn't ready to see her in that dress.

I simply couldn't have been prepared for what that sight was going to do to me. She looked like a bombshell sitting in the chair, and now that I see her walking toward me as a full picture, hell if she isn't the sexiest woman in the room.

"Goddamn. Look at you," I extend my hand out for her to take.

"Do you like it?" she asks, doing a bit of a spin, showing me her bare back, save for the slinky crossed straps.

"Like it is an understatement. I fucking love it."

"I was hoping you'd say that." She meets my eyes again. "It was a beautiful ceremony."

"It was and the guests weren't too bad either." I slide my hand around from her hip to the small of her back and pull her in to me. "I got your text."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." I nod and lean forward for a kiss. It's soft and sexy. I can feel her breath shudder just a bit when I break the connection to speak again. "I don't regret anything either."

"Good," she says, as she slides her hands up my chest and then straightens my tie. "You clean up really nicely, Mr.

Black.”

“Don’t get used to it. I’m not a fan of ties.”

“And I’m not a fan of heels.” She angles her leg out of the thigh-high slit in her dress to show me her shoes. “But here we are.”

“Jesus Christ,” I say under my breath. “I didn’t know you were hiding fuck-me shoes under there.”

“I guess I was hoping to surprise you with them later.” She brushes herself up against me very, very purposefully then takes my hand. “Darn.”

I don’t get to respond to her before we are called to take our places inside the reception area, but my cock isn’t so lucky. His reaction is stiff and obvious.

*So that’s the game we are going to play tonight, is it?*

Game on then.



The next two hours pass with soft caresses to the bare skin of her back while we are eating dinner and in a stolen kiss when the lights dim for the first dance. It’s as if what happened between us last night has opened a floodgate of need between us that is so apparent; it’s basically glowing. She places her hand on my thigh while she talks to Caleb about something happening at their school, and I do the same in turn, but a little higher and squeeze. She seems to like that. Every time I do it, she clears her throat, and I laugh.

The party is in full swing as the sun sets on the hills of Napa Valley. Music is blaring and guests are dancing. Alcohol is flowing and everyone is smiling... happy. But that's not where my focus is. I haven't been able to take my eyes off of Sawyer.

Not as she took Finn up on his offer of a dance or when she was chatting it up with Danielle when she and Christopher came around to mingle with each table. And not now, as she checks her makeup in a small compact mirror she pulled from the shockingly tiny bag on her wrist.

She spots me in the mirror and smiles. "What?"

"Nothing. I'm just watching you."

"Creep." She smiles and puts the compact away. "You know, you haven't asked me to dance yet."

"Your time seems to have been monopolized by my friends. I was simply waiting my turn."

I take her hand just as the song changes to a slow, sensual beat.

"Dance with me?" I ask, as I stand then pull her in so I can whisper in her ear. "I want to feel you against me."

"I thought you'd never ask."

I lead her toward the dance floor, which is just an open area on the patio lined with lights and flowers, and we slowly begin to move.

"You're good at this," she tells me.

“My Grams made me take lessons when I was a kid. She said any decent man would be able to sweep a woman off her feet in a dance. I always pushed back, never wanted to go, but I learned over the years that it comes in handy.”

“You use your dancing prowess on other girls often?” She arches her brow with the question.

“Not often, but it’s come in clutch a time or two, yes.”

She giggles, “Well, remind me to thank her one day.” Her eyes immediately widen and she shakes her head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to assume you’d even want to properly introduce me to her.”

I pull her in closer to stop her talking. “Sawyer. Stop. It’s okay.” I chuckle. “You’ve met my Grams already, right?”

“Not because you wanted me to. It was an accidental meeting.”

“I would gladly take you to see her again, and I’ll gladly introduce you to her again when *you* are ready.”

“Where did you come from?”

“What do you mean?”

“How are you so... perfect? You’re an anomaly to me, Isaac. I’ve never met a man like you before.”

“I hope that’s a good thing.”

“It is.”

Her high heels even out our height enough so I only have to dip just a little to let our lips touch.

We kiss softly as we dance through three more songs. It's like no one else is even in the room when she is in my arms. All that matters is what is right in front of me, and that's her.



“Have something to tell us?” Caleb and Finn corner me by the bar when Sawyer excuses herself to the bathroom.

“Uh... what are you talking about?”

“We are talking about the fact we've never seen you with anyone the way you're with Sawyer. You seem so... content,” Finn says with a wave of his arm. “Old Isaac would have already had a bridesmaid in a coat closet somewhere.”

I rub my chin and chuckle. “Old Isaac is tired. New Isaac would much rather put his energy into the stunner on his arm.”

“Did you see Isabelle is here?”

“What? Where?” I turn around and glance over at the bar and out on the dance floor.

As if she had heard us mention her name, Isabelle appears at my side.

“Hi, Isaac,” she says softly. “I'm glad to see you're alive.”

“On that note,” Caleb announces, “Finn, let's go see if we can find... well... anything other than this.”

The two of them disappear back into the crowd, leaving me with a very despondent looking Isabelle.

“I forgot you were going to be here,” I tell her honestly, because at the end of the day, I probably would have made sure not to rub Sawyer in her face.

“Well, we did all go to school together, Isaac. Christopher is my friend too.”

“I know that, Bells. It just slipped my mind you’d be here.”

“You haven’t been returning my texts or my calls. Though, I can see now why that’s the case. She’s very pretty.”

Guilt eats at me. Isabelle and I were never official, we never would have been, but I do consider her a friend, and I know how she feels about me. Ignoring her was a dick move of the highest degree.

“She is,” I agree apologetically, because there is nothing else I can say that will make her feel any better.

“You know, you could have just told me, Isaac. Telling me to my face would have been better than ghosting me completely.”

Isabelle started off as the easiest casual fling. It was fun, it was hot, and then I could feel something shift a few months ago, and it was a shift I didn’t reciprocate. I should have broken it off with her then, but I’m an asshole who was more worried about continuing our arrangement than protecting her feelings.

“Listen, this isn’t the place for this conversation, but it needs to happen. It should have happened sooner, and I’m sorry it didn’t. You deserved better than that.”

“You’re right, I did, and I’m so hurt by your lack of respect in that way. That’s not the Isaac I know.”

“I have always been fond of you, Isabelle, but I think we both know it would have never worked.”

“I don’t know that. You just weren’t willing to try.”

“I just don’t see you in that way, Bells.” It’s brutal, it’s honest, but it’s real.

“But I was good enough to fuck?”

“We talked about this before we even started sleeping together, Bells. You’re my friend and I didn’t want that to change.”

She looks down at her feet then back up to me with a glistening of tears in her eyes.

She shrugs then swipes them away before they can fall down her face. “I should have known better, really. You’ve never been the type to commit, and you made it clear what you wanted when we first started. I guess the romantic in me thought I’d be different.”

“I don’t want you to take this as it meaning anything negative about you, Bells. Can you promise me that?”

“No, but I’ll try. I only want good things for you, you know?”

“And I want the same for you, and I still want to be friends.”

“To be fair, Isaac, friends is something I’ll have to think about. You understand, don’t you?” She reaches out and wipes



something from my suit.

“I do, and you know I’m always here for you, right?”

“I know,” she pushes up on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek.

“She’s very lucky.”

# Chapter 16

## Sawyer

I've never been a jealous person. It's just not a feeling I have felt often in my life, and for that I'll be forever grateful because if what I'm feeling right now is jealousy, I never want to experience it again.

It feels like there is a one-hundred-pound weight on my chest and my skin is prickling in awareness when I see him standing with a stunning blonde in an even more stunning pink baby doll dress.

I recognize her instantly as the one he was on a date with when we first met. She was very comfortable with him then, putting her hands all over him, and it's no different now. She touches his chest then his arm, and to make matters worse, he's just letting her.

I have no claim on him. He's not my boyfriend officially and we've never had the conversation about seeing each other exclusively, so in reality, I have reason or right to feel things.

But that doesn't change the fact my stomach is in my feet and my throat is tightening up in an unexpected bout of emotion.

I tend to cry when I'm frustrated. I don't know how to process anything without crying.

It's embarrassing really. The last thing I want to do is cry in the middle of a wedding reception, so I turn on my heel and head back across the main entryway toward our room.



I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, scrolling through my phone, trying to sort my thoughts when I hear the keycard slide through the lock. When the door swings open, Isaac walks through the door looking as fucking beautiful as ever. It literally makes it hard for me to breathe.

"There you are." He closes the door and steps up to me. "Are you all right? I was looking for you."

"I just needed to catch my breath a little," I tell him, and it's not quite a lie. I don't want to be that girl right now. The girl who freaks out simply because he was speaking to another female.

"Catch your breath? Is something wrong?"

He walks over to lean against the wall directly in front of me.

I toss my phone aside and look up at him.

“I saw you with that woman. I don’t remember her name, but I met her with you at the Harvest Festival.”

“Isabelle,” he sighs and slides his hand through his hair. “That was—”

I hold up my hand to stop him. “Let me get this out before I lose my nerve.”

He just nods. “Okay.”

“I saw you with her and I felt this blackness in my gut. I was so jealous it was making me feel sick. I’ve never been that way in my entire life, ever, not over anything. Not when I was a kid, and my neighbor had a Barbie Jeep that I wanted. Not when I was in high school and this girl I couldn’t stand started dating my crush. Jealousy has never been an issue for me... until I saw her touch you. I didn’t like it and I don’t like feeling this way.”

Nervous energy is pumping through my veins so I stand to walk across the room before I continue, “And I know that sounds crazy because you and I are so fresh and so new. I have no right to feel any type of way about you having a conversation with someone or even kissing someone. It’s not my business, but seeing you with her made me realize I really like you, Isaac.” I turn to face him so I can look at him in his eyes when I say this. “I really, really like you, and I hated seeing her touch you. I just want... you.”

I expect him to say something to me, but instead, he just stands there for what seems like an eternity with a fucking grin on his face.

“Isaac, I need you to say something. I just bared my soul to you... please.”

“I would rip the world apart if I saw someone else touching you, Sawyer, and if I have my way, I’ll ruin you for anyone else.”

Like a tiger unleashed from his cage, Isaac storms across the room and grabs the back of my neck and yanks my lips to his.

When I was a teenager, and still living in Tennessee with my family, I would go to these cliffs with my friends at a lake the next town over. We had to park our cars at the swimming hole then hike our asses through the woods, uphill, just to get to them. It was the perfect clearing to the ledge, overlooking the sparkling lake and I’d always take a running start down to the path and jump with my arms over my head, enjoying that split-second rush of adrenaline before I hit the water below.

That same rush is in my stomach now as Isaac backs me up against the wall and kisses his way down my neck, except it isn’t going away. My stomach is in knots, flipping and moving about as adrenaline pumps into my body.

That’s what Isaac does for me.

He gives me the ultimate rush.

I feel his strong hands slide from my shoulders, down my forearms then his fingers lace into mine.

“Look at me,” he demands, and I do. His eyes are dark, predatory, but they are still his—filled with softness and respect.

He leans down and presses a soft kiss to the tip of my nose then slowly raises our linked hands skyward and pins mine to the wall behind me, over my head.

“Your heart is racing,” he whispers, as he lays kisses across my chest and I drop my head back with a thud against the wall.

“Mmm,” I whimper. “I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be nervous, baby,” he speaks directly into my ear, and it tickles all the way to my toes. “I want this. I want you. It’s just me and you. No reason to be nervous.”

“I was worried you’d be angry,” I say, flexing my fingers around his. “But I had to tell you. I had to let you know how I feel.” He presses his knee between my legs and I cry out at the delicious pressure. “Oh my God, more.”

“I had always thought about what our first time would be like.” He trails kisses along my jaw as he talks. “In my mind, I always thought it would be rough, like we couldn’t get enough of each other.” He lowers my arms from the wall and guides them around his shoulder then leaves them there to encircle me with his. “I wanted to ravage you, to fuck you so hard you couldn’t walk the next day.”

He’s never talked to me this way before. It’s so dirty, so forbidden, and I fucking love it.

I slide my hands up into his hair, destroying any semblance of style that it had, and burying my fingers in, scratching at his

scalp. We are both still fully clothed, but I've never felt so raw, so wanted, in my entire life.

“Don't you still want that?” I ask, moving my hips slightly, trying to find a bit of friction against his thigh.

“Fuck yeah, I do, but that was before I got to know you as a human, Sawyer. Before I saw how beautiful you are on the inside as well as the outside, and now, I just want to worship at your fucking feet.”

He grips each of my ass cheeks and hoists me into the air. Thank God for the slit in my dress giving me the access I need to wrap my thighs around his strong body. My center is pressed right above his belt, and the apparent sex-starved animal I am begins to grind up against his hard abdomen. Each move sends a tingle down my legs and my toes curl into my still worn pumps.

“You're going to kill me,” he groans into my neck, then leans back to look at me.

“But what a way to go.” I roll my lips together then smile.

He spins us around to hold me up against one of the four posts of the bed. The wood is thick and smooth against my skin. He angles his hips to anchor me so he can free up his hands to shed his jacket with my help. I can feel the hard length of his cock pressing against the skin where my ass and thigh meet.

*Fuck, he's big.*

“You’re still shaking,” he says, as he pushes some hair from my face. “Put your hands on my chest.” I place my hands in the center of this chest and I can feel his heart positively racing under my touch. “Feel me. Feel what you make me feel.”

“I’m shaking from nerves, from adrenaline, and because I want you so badly my body is on fire. Every nerve ending I have is awake and pulsing. I’ve never felt this before,” I tell him softly. Not able to produce much of a sound at all. All of my energy is going to the feelings in my body.

I’ve also never talked this much during sex. I’ve never been so open and honest about what it’s making me feel and the things I want. Every sexual partner I’ve ever had has been decent, don’t get me wrong, but there was never this... palpable energy between us.

Our words are foreplay as much as our actions are.

“Neither have I,” he tells me.

Our lips and tongues dance together while I make work of his tie, yanking it free, and tossing it somewhere onto the floor where his jacket and his belt soon join the pile. My hands are trembling with excitement and eagerness when I lower his zipper and reach inside of his slacks to grip him tightly.

His cock is thick and his skin is velvety. I slide my nail over a vein that runs down the side then curl my fingers around him and give him a gentle tug.



“Jesus, fuck,” he groans out, reaching up to anchor himself on the post above my head.

I slide my thumb across the slit in the tip and swirl the bead of moisture over the head then begin to stroke him slowly. My core is throbbing more and more with each guttural groan from his lips into my ear. It’s like I’ve developed a second heartbeat between my legs.

His mouth is on my neck, biting and sucking, hopefully leaving marks on me that will never fade. I could do this all day long. There is something so powerful about having a man in your hands and hearing him moan because of you and something you’re doing to him.

He starts to rock his hips forward and back, fucking my fist. My free hand is resting at the crown of his head, holding his face in the crook of my neck, and I turn my face toward his so I bite and kiss the shell of his ear.

“Fuuuuck,” he growls loudly, before taking a step back and tossing me on to the bed. I land with a bounce in the middle, but I quickly sink into the soft, feathery blankets and pillows.

He’s standing at the foot of the bed, staring down at me with one hand on each of the posts by my feet. His cock is now free, jutting out powerfully from the opening in his pants, and his hair is complete mess from my hands.

He looks downright delectable.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, as I slide my legs together, unable to sit still. The wetness from my body is coating my inner thighs.

“I was about to come. I didn’t want to come in your hands.”

“What did you want instead?” My voice is low and my eyes are locked on him as I push up onto my elbows. My hair is cascading down my back like a chestnut waterfall.

A wicked grin spreads across his face. He then rids himself of one cuff link, then the other, and starts slowly unbuttoning his shirt before it is discarded somewhere on the floor.

His body is unreal with muscles in all the right places, and abs I can’t wait to slide my tongue across. There is a smattering of hair that starts at his navel and disappears behind his zipper, and I know it leads directly to his very impressive dick. He looks like he was plucked right out of a woman’s fantasy and placed here in front of me, and by some type of sorcery, he wants me as badly as I want him.

“I want to come while my cock is buried deep inside of your body. I want to come when you do, so I can feel your pussy tightening around me. You looked so incredible when you came last night. All I’ve thought about since then is making you do it again and again.”

“Holy fuck,” I sigh. Those are the only words I can manage. I’ve been rendered speechless.

He grips my ankles and pulls me down the bed. The slick fabric of my dress makes it very easy to take me from the center of the bed to the very edge.

He then drops to his knees in front of me and pushes the material of my dress up to my waist.

“I want to watch you,” I announce and return to my propped-up position on my elbows, looking down at him.

“Watch everything I do, baby,” he tells me, then slides his hands up my thighs and back down, trailing kisses from my knee and up, teasing every inch of skin except the one area begging for his attention.

The brush of his facial hair against the sensitive, tender skin of my thighs sets me on fire.

I try to bring my feet up to sit on the bed so I can widen my thighs more but my feet keep slipping off the bed frame.

“Take off my shoes?”

“Absolutely not,” he replies, as he lifts my legs up and hooks my knees over his shoulders. “Do you see these shoes? They are hot as fuck, and they are staying on your feet the rest of the night. I want them seared into my memory and dug into my skin.”

“Fair enough,” I say with a grin, which quickly morphs into a bite of my lip because he traces his thumbs along either side of my slit. Even through the lace of my panties it feels incredible.

“You’re soaked. I can see it already.”

“I have you to blame for that. I’ve wanted this since you left the room last night.”

With a hook of his finger under the fabric, he pulls my panties to the side and exposes my plumped and aching pussy

to the cool air. I feel goosebumps erupt from every pore in my skin.

He takes his time with me, teasing at first with a gentle blow or a soft kiss to my mound covered by neatly trimmed curls, then a barely-there flick of his tongue on my clit which sends my back arching outward.

“You’re so responsive. Every touch, every taste, everything I do to you gets a reaction. I fucking love it,” he tells me, before he begins to feast.

His entire mouth covers me, and his hands grip the backs of my thighs, holding me completely still while his tongue explores. He builds me up, takes me to the very edge then brings me back... over and over until I’m literally writhing.

Sweat is beading my brow when I look down to see him suck my clit between his lips and pull it out, just to release it with a pop. His eyes meet mine as he guides his thumb over to press against my opening, just a bit before pushing it inside at the same time he gives my clit two more hard flicks, and that is my undoing.

I don’t even get to announce I’m coming because it shatters over me faster than I can react. I collapse onto my back and slide my hands into my hair as he continues to move his tongue and fingers through wave after wave of pleasure until my thighs are shaking around his head. Only when my body goes limp and soft does he move from his position on the floor back to his feet.

My lips are dry from the many deep breaths I've been taking so my tongue darts out to lick them, "Wow," my voice is breathy and quiet.

"Don't get too comfortable," he says. "We are just getting started."

With that, he pulls me from the bed and back up to my feet before telling me to turn around, and with my back to him, he pulls the zipper at the small of my back down. I can feel the dress loosening around my waist and then he pushes the straps from my shoulders, letting it fall into an emerald pile at my feet.

I'm not wearing a bra today, which he seems to approve of because as soon as my dress is gone, his arms snake around me and my breasts are in his hands. His large, hard body is firm against my back and I drop my head to his shoulder, relishing in the sensation as he twists, tugs, and pinches my nipples. Each movement sends a lightning bolt from there all the way to my clit.

His touch moves over my body, exploring every curve, appreciating each inch of me as he bends down slightly to push my panties to the ground, nipping at my left ass cheek, causing me to squeal.

"Ouch!" I giggle.

"You liked it." He rises back up to his feet then spins me around.

"I did."

I hook my fingers into the waistband of his pants and push them, along with his boxer briefs, down to the floor.

“Tell me what you want, Sawyer,” he growls with his hand on the back of my neck. “I want to hear it on your lips again.”

I place a gentle kiss to his bottom lip. It’s so soft and so tender that I nearly melt right here and I whisper, “You.”

My feet leave the ground instantly.

He has his arm banded around my waist and guides me back down onto the bed, only this time he comes with me.

With my thighs open to give him room, he nestles in between them and covers my body with his.

We don’t bother to get under the blankets, so the cold breeze from the air-conditioning is blowing on our heated skin and it adds another layer of sensation to an already deliciously overwhelming scenario.

His hands are planting on either side of my head and he rises up like he’s doing a push-up and stares down at me. The underside of his cock is resting on my pussy and his tip nudges at my clit.

“Mmm,” I moan, my hands finding their way to my breasts, cupping them, squeezing them.

“Christ, I love watching you,” he says. He keeps shifting his hips to tease my clit with his tip.

“Isaac... please...”

“What? Say it.”

“Fuck meeeee,” the last word comes out in a long gasping moan because he takes his cock in his hand and playfully slaps it against my clit.

“Let me grab a condom.”

He moves off of me long enough to retrieve a condom from his bag.

“Did you think I was a sure thing?” I ask, watching him roll the latex down his length.

“Absolutely not, but a man can hope.”

He crawls over me again, this time staying on his knees, resting the tops of his thighs against the backs of mine. My legs fall open and wrap around his waist as he takes my hip in one hand and his cock in the other.

“Are you ready?” he asks me.

“What do you think?”

“I want to savor every second of this,” he says, angling himself just right, before slowly pushing the first inch or so inside of me.

I can feel that one, simple movement through my entire body. I curl my fingers into the sheets when he pushes in even farther.

“Fuck,” he exhales under his breath.

He’s staring down where we are connected, watching himself sink into me. He moves his hand over so his thumb can gently stroke my clit while he pushes the remaining inches

home, filling me to the brim. Every inch of him has me stretched wide. The fullness is intoxicating.

I cry out some version of his name while he holds himself deep and focuses on my clit with his thumb.

“Move,” I reach down to scratch his thighs with my nails.  
“Please.”

“You feel so fucking good,” he grunts the words, as he pulls out at a frustratingly slow pace then pumps back in sharply.  
“Tight and wet, Christ, so perfect.”

“Touch me,” I beg him.

“Tell me where.”

I feel him pinch my clit between two fingers and my body bows off the bed so far the crown of my head is pressed into the mattress.

“Everywhere,” I cry out in a scream of pleasure, covering my mouth because I’m afraid someone will hear.

“Don’t hide yourself. Be loud. Be loud for me. I don’t care if anyone hears.”

His big, rough hands grip me just at my rib cage then move down on to the mattress at my side and he leans over, completely covering my torso while still pumping into me like the skilled sex god he apparently is.

Two lips wrap around my nipple and suck then his tongue drags across the valley between my tits to the other side, doing the same.



I wrap both arms around his body and dig my nails into his back. His labored breaths are at my ear now, telling me how much he loves fucking me, and how amazing he knew I'd be. How badly he wanted this and how much he likes me.

I slide my cheek against his rough jaw and then push him by the shoulder until he flips onto his back. His cock slips out of me in the process and my body aches at the emptiness.

"I want to ride you," I tell him matter-of-factly and he just grins.

"Be my guest, baby."

With my hands on his chest, I anchor myself over him and lower myself back onto his waiting cock. It's deeper this way. So deep I swear I can feel him in my stomach. It nearly hurts, but it's a pain I'll welcome again and again.

I toss my head a bit so all of my hair moves over my right shoulder, and then I begin to bounce my ass, using him as leverage.

With each bounce, my clit connects with his pelvic bone and the head of his cock glides perfectly against my G-spot. His hands explore all the new areas of my body he can reach now with our change of position, and occasionally he'll grip my hip in one hand and hold on to me at the side of my neck with the other. It's powerful and fucking hot.

"Isaac, oh God..." My moans are higher pitched now as my body keeps circling itself, winding up tighter and tighter. "I'm going to come."

“Tell me you’re mine,” he growls. “Say it.”

“Oh, fuck, Isaac, I’m yours, and you’re mine,” my head falls back and I sigh, “I don’t want to drag it out anymore. It’s crazy, but I don’t want you to be with anyone else.”

Leave it to us to have a conversation like this in the middle of sex.

“Tell me what you want. Use your words.”

I can hear the smile on his face without even looking at him.

“I want you to hold my hand in public and introduce me as your girlfriend,” I moan loudly. “Fuuuuuck, and I want to try, Isaac. I want you to only be with me.”

“Does my beautiful goddess want to go steady?” he asks, gliding his hands up and down my rib cage. He’s teasing me, making a bit of fun, but I don’t care.

“Call it what you want. I just want to know I have you, and I’m not the only one who feels what this is between us.”

He moves quickly at my words, sitting up so we are nose-to-nose and wrapping my body completely in his arms.

“You’re not. I feel it too, baby. Every time I look at you or hear your voice, it’s like my chest is being ripped open in the most incredible way.” He captures my lips in a searing kiss. “You’re. Fucking. Mine.”

“Yesssss.”

I grind down on him, chasing my orgasm that is teetering on the edge. Close... so close.

He takes a hand and grips my left ass cheek... then I feel a single finger pressing against the tight ring of muscle there.

“Oh fuck.” I don’t pull away though. I welcome the sensation as he captures my mouth in a kiss and I come.

My channel is clenching around his cock over and over until convulsions overtake my body and I’m whimpering into his mouth.

He comes within moments of me, pulsing and jerking deep inside my body and grunting into my mouth in return.

Fuck, I love the sounds men make when they come.

There’s a thin sheen of sweat covering us both. My makeup is a mess; I’m sure with my lipstick and eyeliner smudged all to hell. Our hearts are racing and we can’t seem to catch our breaths.

He breaks the silence first when he grips my hair at the base of my neck and tugs back so I’m forced to look at his face.

“You’re phenomenal,” he says, before placing a soft kiss to my lips.

“I have a feeling we are never going to stop doing this,” I say with a giggle.

“Not if I have anything to say about it.”

And we don’t. We spend the rest of the night fucking each other into oblivion.

Bent over the bed, up against the wardrobe, in the shower, and when he takes me one final time, spooning together in

bed, we come simultaneously and stay just as we are, with him inside of me. He whispers into my ear that he's never going to let me go and I tell him the same.

He's mine and I'm his.

Somewhere along the way, we fell for one another and cemented it in a flurry of sweat and sex. That was the final push toward the inevitable conclusion of our courtship.

I know it sounds immature and fanciful, but it's almost as if fate placed Isaac in my path that day at the Harvest Festival. He instantly felt familiar and I was drawn in. No matter how hard I fought it, there was no denying that one day this was going to happen.

And I wouldn't change a thing.

# Chapter 17

## Sawyer

I can feel soreness in every muscle inside of my body when I slowly begin to move after the sun has woken me up for the day. Memories of last night sink into my mind and a smile spreads over my face. I remember his hands on me and his voice in my ear. It makes me feel so... wanted and happy.

My feelings for him have truly caught me off guard, because the last thing I expected was to like him as much as I do, let alone want nothing more than to make things exclusive.

We really need to discuss that today.

Things were said last night in the heat of the moment, and I meant them, but I need to hear him say it today, one-hundred-percent sober without the excitement of sex brewing in the air.

I slide my hand over the sheets, eyes still closed, searching for the warmth of his body, but all I find are cold pillows.

I blink my eyes open, finding the curtains mostly drawn, save for the sliver in the middle that allows the sun to beam in

over my face and an Isaac-less bed. I sit up and look toward the bathroom, but the light isn't on. He's not here.

I release a heavy sigh and my shoulders drop just a little when I see a piece of paper propped up on his nightstand. I lean over and snatch it up to find his scrawled handwriting.

*I didn't want to wake you.*

*Rest.*

*I went to play a few holes with Finn and Caleb.*

*I'll be back by lunch.*

*Isaac*

I place the paper back on the nightstand then flop back onto the bed, sinking into the soft cushion of the mattress once again. The sheets still smell like us, of perfume, cologne, sweat, and sex.

I've never had a sexual experience like this before. I had always assumed I've had pretty great sex throughout my life, but Isaac Black has officially ruined me for every other man. The way he moves and the way he touches... the gentle tugs and harsh, sharp bites, fuck, it's nearly indescribable.

I reach over my head and move my hand around on my nightstand, searching for my cell phone then pulling it down to check the time, finding it's barely ten.

There are a couple of texts from my mom so I fire off a reply then decide to take a scroll through social media, finding I have a notification on Facebook telling me I have memories on this day.

Maybe I'm a masochist or just incredibly stupid, but I click on them and take a scroll toward the bottom... finding posts from over six years ago of my brother and me for his birthday. A rock forms in my gut and my throat constricts, forcing me to swallow the lump there.

I click on the photo from his sixteenth birthday and I can't help but smile. He was so happy that day and so full of life. It's insane how quickly things can change in just a few years. Hell, Isaac has shown me how much can change in just a few weeks.

I close out social media and start thumbing through my camera roll, looking at photos I've taken over the past two days. Some of the scenery, some of the venue... a couple of Isaac being fucking adorable... and a couple of us together. His general presence makes me smile, and honestly, it kind of scares me because I feel like I'm getting really attached, incredibly fast. Sometimes, that's just asking for a broken heart.

My phone freezes for a split second before it begins to vibrate in my hand and Olivia's face appears on my screen, indicating she is calling me. I slide my finger over the screen and answer the call.

“Hello?”

“Why are you answering the phone? You’re supposed to be having wild firefighter sex right now,” she scolds, and I giggle in response.

“Then why are you calling me?”

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t answer.”

“Well, you called a few hours too late,” I admit.

“What?” she squeals loudly on the other end of the phone, and I have to pull the cell away from my ear.

“Ow...”

“Tell me everything! I need details. I want to know it all.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. There’s a ringing in my ear.”

“Oh, shut up. I’m excited. Don’t rain on my parade.” I can hear her shuffling around a bit like she’s settling in for a story.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Start with the beginning. Are you having fun?”

“I really am. His friends are amazing and this place we are staying, oh my God, Liv, it’s incredible. It’s basically a freaking castle with these rooms that look like royalty stays in them, and don’t even get me started on the grounds themselves. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You better have pictures.”

“You know I do. I was just looking that them.”

“Where is Isaac? I don’t want to force you to discuss your sexcapades in front of him if he’s around.”



“He’s out playing golf with Finn and Caleb, we know him by the way. Caleb Everhart.”

I hear her coughing out something that I can only assume is coffee. “What? Caleb Everhart is friends with Isaac.”

“Uh, yeah. I mean, I knew it was a small world because we work with him, but your reaction tells me there might be something deeper in here somewhere.”

“We aren’t talking about me right now. We are talking about you. So, how is he in the sack? As good as he looks?”

“Jesus, Liv.”

“What? You know I’m blunt and straight to the point.”

“If that were the case, you’d tell me why you had such a visceral reaction to Caleb’s name.” I curl onto my side, pulling the covers up to my chin, and keep the phone tucked between my pillow and my ear.

“A long story that will need alcohol and lots of time,” she sighs. “Back to you and stop avoiding.”

“He’s... the best I’ve ever had. Ever. And I’m not just saying that because I’m riding this high, but truly the best I’ve ever had.”

“Soft? Gentle? Hard? Rough? Details, Sawyer, details.”

I tell her everything normally, but there is something different, something special about my time with Isaac. I want to keep it to myself.

“All I’ll say is he is somehow all of the above and everything in between.”

“Did he make you come? Honestly, that’s the most important detail,” she asks as nonchalantly as one would ask how the weather is outside today.

But that’s Olivia for you.

“Many, many times.”

I swear, I can see her punching the air like Bender at the end of *The Breakfast Club*.

“I knew it! I knew he’d be amazing, I mean look at him. He’s gorgeous.”

“That is the understatement of the year,” I sigh.

“What’s that sigh for? Are you okay?” She hesitates for a moment before she realizes, “Ohhhh. Shit, Sawyer. I forgot what day it was.”

“No, no, it’s okay. I’m actually handling today better than years past. I think it’s because I spewed everything out to Isaac last night. It felt... like a purge, ya know, since I don’t talk about it much.” I pull the covers completely over my head like I used to do when I was teenager on the phone with my friends. “It’s not just that. Isaac and I said some things to each other last night in the heat of the moment, and I think we have to have the awkward conversation today.”

“What do you mean? What kind of things?”

“Serious things, like I don’t want to see other people and I don’t want him seeing other people... I told him I was his and he was mine. It got very intense, very fast, but I wanted that... I still do, but I don’t know if he meant what he said. Maybe it was the alcohol talking.”

“I seriously doubt either of you were drunk last night, based on the fact he’s playing golf right now and you don’t sound hungover at all, but even if you were, don’t you know the expression drunk words are sober thoughts?”

“Well, those words carry a lot of weight, and I want to make sure we talk about them while we are both level-headed and not sex drunk either.”

“God, I haven’t been sex drunk in so long. My vagina is sad about it,” she says dramatically, and I just roll my eyes. “Seriously, though, babe, just talk to him. It has to be discussed. You’re both adults and he seems like a good guy.”

“I’m scared of what I’ll feel if he tells me he didn’t mean it.”

Even the thought of it makes my stomach clench and a boulder take over residence where my heart it.

“If he says that, fuck him. It’s his loss. You’re a catch, you’re beautiful, you’re smart, you have a job, and a lease on a gorgeous house. You’re kicking ass and taking names. If he doesn’t see that, move on.”

“You’re always so good at making me feel better.”

She’s right. I need to stand with my shoulders straight and be an adult about this. Sure, it’ll hurt for a minute, but I’m not

going to be destroyed by a man. Nope. I refuse.

“That’s because you’re good at self-deprecating.”

“Ugh. I am. I’m working on it.”

“Good. I’m happy you’re having fun up there with him. Have the conversation today, okay? Get it off your mind and into the ether.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

We end the call and I toss my cell to the middle of the bed then head off to take a much-needed shower.

## Isaac

“Damn, you suck at golf too?” Finn teases Caleb, as he lines up to take his first swing at hole number ten. “Look at that form. I’m sorry for the girls you fuck if you’re this uncoordinated here. Yikes.”

“Fuck you, Rogers. I’m a master at anything that involves skill and finesse,” Caleb responds, as he swings the club and sends the ball flying across the green. We watch until the ball bounces a couple of times and rolls, stopping just a couple feet short of the hole. “Boom,” he gloats. “Like I said.”

“Lucky shot,” Finn says, taking a drink of his water.

“You guys are fucking insane. Will you be measuring dicks next?” I ask.

“Hell no. I wouldn’t want to make Finn more of a sad sack than he is now.” Caleb slides his club back into his cart bag.

Finn flips him the bird then starts to line up his own shot.

“So where’d you disappear to last night?” Caleb asks me, coming to stand at my side.

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on, don’t be shy. You disappeared with your hottie pretty quickly and never came back. So tell me all about it. Unless you’re embarrassed.” He snaps his finger. “That’s it.

That's why you're barely speaking. What's the matter? Couldn't get it up?"

I swat the back of his head and knock his baseball cap off. "You're a dick."

He swipes it off the ground and pulls it back onto his head. "It's a common problem, Isaac. One in ten men –"

I cut him off by pouring my very cold bottle of water over his head.

"Fuck. You. Getting it up wasn't a problem. Not that it's any of your goddamn business. Maybe I don't want to tell you about this one, okay?"

"What are we talking about?" Finn asks, when he comes to put his club back in the bag.

Caleb goes to respond but I point a finger, threatening his life if he opens his mouth.

"I was telling Caleb that maybe I don't want to share every sordid detail about anything I do, or don't do, with Sawyer. I think that's a fair fucking request."

"Who are you and what have you done with our friend?" Finn crosses his arms over his chest.

"I'm still here, it's just..." I hesitate and swing my club around absentmindedly, "different. She's just different."

"You really like this one, don't you?" Finn asks.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I do."

“Well hell, I never thought I’d see the day Isaac Black was pussy-whipped, but you, sir, have been whipped by pussy.”

“Maybe I just think it’s time to be a little more grown.” I shrug.

“Nah, I’d rather keep on my path, banging whomever I’d like without anyone to answer to and without any expectations,” Caleb says, as he slides behind the steering wheel of the golf cart.

“One day, Caleb,” Finn points at him, and continues, “One day some girl is going to come by and knock you to the dirt, and I can’t wait to see it.”

# Chapter 18

## Sawyer

Isaac was unusually silent the entire trek back to Sunset Valley.

Sure, he was speaking and cracking jokes with his friends here and there, but it felt like there was something on his mind. Obviously, being the overthinker that I am, I assume it has to do with last night.

It's not until he's helping me with my bags onto my front porch that I muster up the courage to say something to him.

“Are you all right?”

He slides his hands into his pockets. “I'm fine. Why?”

“You're just being so quiet. It's not a side of you I'm used to.” I smile a bit so he can see I'm simply checking on him.

I watch his face closely and see the slightest tick of his jaw before he answers, “I didn't sleep much last night.”

He steps up toward me and slides his hand to rest at the small of my back.



“No? Hmm. I wonder why?” I tap my chin.

“Some hot brunette couldn’t get enough of me.”

“Are you sure about that? Maybe you couldn’t get enough of her.”

“That’s a distinct possibility,” he says, cupping one side of my face in his hand.

His eyes look full of thought. Like he’s here, but not really here. Like there is so much on his mind that he is having a hard time compartmentalizing it.

“Do you want to come inside? I can make us something to eat before you have to go rest up for your shift tomorrow.”

*Please say yes. I’m not ready to end this yet, and I want to know if I’ve fallen too hard too fast.*

He bends down to kiss my lips and nods his head. “Yes, I think I do.”

I smile against his kiss then pull away to let us in the front door.

Herbert greets us with a grump “*oh, you’re back*” look from his perch on the back of my sofa.

“Does that cat ever look happy?” he asks.

“Never. You know the Grumpy Cat meme? That’s basically him. He’s rude and a bit of an asshole, but I love him.” I walk by him and give his ear a scratch that he takes only for a moment before angling his head away.

“I guess that means he’s finished with you, huh?”

I giggle. “I guess so. Remember who feeds you, you little jerk.” I point at him and he just meows in response. “He probably misses Liv. She was the one feeding him while we were away and she sneaks him treats.”

“He can be bought with treats? I’ll keep that in mind.”

That one, simple sentence gives me hope that I didn’t have ten seconds ago. The ride here had given me plenty of time to overthink and determine he’d regretted things he said to me last night. That one sentence means he intends on sticking around awhile.

“Soup okay? I’m craving Italian Wedding.”

“Soup is great, but I don’t know what Italian Wedding is.”

“You’re in for a treat, then. Make yourself at home. I will heat some up. I won’t pretend it’s not canned. I keep it around for times just like this.”

I leave him in the living room with Herbert to make our soup, and when I come back a few minutes later, what I see stops me in my tracks.

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

“Don’t. Make. Any. Sudden. Movements,” Isaac says quietly as Herbert walks toward him, gives him a sniff, and starts to climb into his lap.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I say somewhere between a whisper and a yell.

Herbert starts working his paws back and forth on Isaac's thigh, making biscuits, as I like to call it, before spinning in two circles then curling into a perfect pile right there on his legs.

Isaac looks at me with wide eyes. "I feel like this is a trick and I'm about to get murdered."

"Do you have treats hiding in your pocket? Tuna anywhere on your person?"

"Nothing. Maybe he just... likes me?"

"That's impossible. This asshole hates everyone."

"Apparently not."

There is a hint of a smile on his lips when he very, very slowly reaches down and pets the top of Herbert's head. He looks so proud of himself.

"Well, now you're stuck there until he decides to get down, because the cardinal rule with cats is when they choose you, you don't move until they do. It is law." I sit on my small chaise lounge across from him and curl my feet under me. "The soup is simmering on the stove. It will be fine."

"There are worse ways to be trapped," he says.

I lean my head back against the soft cushion. "Isaac, I think we should probably talk about something."

His eyes bolt from where they were resting on Herbert to mine. "About?"

"I'm honestly shocked you don't know."

He shifts a bit in his seat, trying not to scare the cat away then speaks. “Sawyer, look I...”

I hold up my hand to stop him. “Just let me get this out.” I tell him much like I did last night.

“You seem to need that a lot,” he teases.

“I have to get things out while they are fresh in my brain, especially if the conversation is important or awkward.”

He swallows so hard it’s audible and that just cements what I was worried about.

“We said some things in the heat of the moment last night. Things that really shouldn’t be ignored because they are important. You asked me to be yours and said I was... I said the same in return. We both said we didn’t want to see other people. I just want you to know I’m not going to hold you to your word on that. You’ve been so... quiet all day today. I’m not the type of girl who is clingy or needy like this, but I just wanted you to know I still want those things. It’s okay if you don’t. I just need you to tell me so I can break the news to Herbert.” I smile, hoping it eases whatever weirdness I’ve created.

He doesn’t say anything to me at first. He just looks at me, like he’s thinking of something to say. The anxiety in my chest is growing by the second until he finally speaks up.

“Come here, please. I would come to you, but it seems I’m the chosen one.” He smiles, nodding down to Herbert.

I uncurl myself from where I settled on the chaise lounge and walk across the living room to sit beside him on the sectional sofa, and he reaches over to place a hand on my thigh.

“Sawyer, I said the things I said because I meant them. Every day that I’m with you, the light in your eyes grows brighter and I can feel the same happening in mine. I’m not ready to lose that.”

“Even if it means you’re stuck with me for awhile?”

“I don’t want you to see anyone else and I definitely don’t want to be with anyone else, and Herbert likes me, so I mean, it looks like you don’t get a say in the matter.”

Herbert tilts his head and begins grooming himself and we both just laugh.

“What a traitor.” I shake my head and turn my body so I’m facing him.

“Sawyer, I don’t know what it is about you that has me so captivated, because it could be so many things. Maybe it’s your eyes or your smile. It could even be your laugh or your incredible personality. Or it’s the fact our connection is off the fucking charts. I like to think it’s all of the above. Whatever it is that we have, I’m addicted and all I can think about is my next fix of you.”

I move up to kneel on the sofa cushions and bend forward, taking his chin in my hand, tilting his head back to meet my gaze. “I know that affliction well.”

Our lips meet in a soft, gentle kiss. He tastes like his drink on the train and the breath mint he took from Finn afterward. It's delectable and intoxicating.

It builds slowly at first, well on its way to more, but the moment is broken by the hissing sound of my stove as the soup boils over.

“Oh shit!”

I scramble off the sofa and into the kitchen all the while he laughs at me.

## Isaac

“This is actually really delicious,” I say, as I take another spoonful of soup into my mouth. “Even if most of it ended up on the stove instead of my bowl.”

I quickly dodge a wadded up napkin tossed my way.

“See if I ever feed you again, mister.”

We are on the sofa together, warm bowls of soup in hand, simply enjoying each other’s company. It’s not something I do with women often. Most of my time with them is very much like a business transaction. I get what I need, they get what they need, and then we go on with our lives. We are repeat customers for one another if we are feeling it, and sometimes we aren’t. A relationship is not something I could have ever predicted or wanted for myself. Until Sawyer.

“Thank you for taking me with you this weekend. I really had a great time,” she says, blowing on her spoonful to cool it down.

“Everyone adored you. Anytime I spoke with someone, they’d ask me where I found you because you’re so vivacious and personable.”

“Which I don’t understand because I think I’m a bit weird and awkward.”

“Why do you think you’re weird?”

She shrugs a bit then takes another bite. “I just feel like I do odd things. I find silly things funny and like to play around, sometimes too much. I have a horrifically dirty mind.”

“Um, since when are these bad things? There is nothing wrong with playing or laughing, and I always encourage a dirty mind. Hell, I make dad jokes all the time, and I’m not even a dad.”

She leans forward to place her now empty bowl on the coffee table, quickly objecting when I stand to take hers along with mine into the kitchen.

“You’re a guest in my home, Isaac. I’m not letting you pick up after me.”

“And you cooked. My Grams taught me manners, Sawyer. The least I can do is clean up the dishes.” I bend at the waist and kiss her lips. “I’m just going to wash these. I’ll be right back.”

I take a moment in the kitchen to really absorb everything I see, to try to get more of an insight to Sawyer. She has such a unique style in her home. Everything has her personal touch, and nothing feels out of place. It’s crisp and clean, but it doesn’t feel stuffy. There are magnets on the fridge with papers, bills, and pictures attached, and one of those black cat clocks from the 80s by the door that leads to her backyard.

I place the bowls in the dish drainer then look down to see Herbert has decided to make figure eights between my ankles.

“What are you doing down there?”



I scoop him up in my arms and scratch his chin, which he seems to enjoy.

“Are you just checking me out? Making sure I’m good enough for your mama?”

He doesn’t answer, of course, unless you count licking his chops then wiggling his head as an answer.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

I shut off the light in the kitchen and head back into the living room with Herbert in my arms, and when Sawyer sees, she just scoffs.

“I don’t approve of this. He’s stealing you from me.”

She reaches over her head and pulls a blanket from the back of the sofa and tosses it out over her legs.

“What do you say, pal? I’ll put you down now so I can go make out with your mom, and then once she’s fast asleep, I’ll come find you in the cover of night, okay?” I hold him closer to my face, pretending he is answering me and then I put him on the floor. “Thanks. I’ll make it up to you.”

“You only want me for my kitty.” She wiggles her eyebrows then holds up the blanket, offering up the space next to her.

“I am fond of that kitty of yours. I haven’t spent enough time with said kitty though. We’ll have to remedy that, don’t you think?” I sink into the space beside her and tuck her into my side, pulling the blanket around us.

“You can pet my kitty anytime you want to. My kitty is your kitty.”

“Oh yeah?” I pull her legs up into my lap and trail my fingers along her knee.

“There’s only one way to get to know a kitty, right? You have to pet them and stroke them... learn what they like.”

I walk my fingers up her thigh, thankful she changed into shorts and I can feel the warmth of her skin under my touch.

I place kisses along her cheek to her ear. “Can I stay the night and leave from here tomorrow morning?”

She shivers and leans into me even more. “I had hoped you would.”

I take her hips in my hands and lift her up, settling her over my lap.

“I hope you don’t like very much sleep.”

# Chapter 19

## Isaac

It's amazing how quickly two and a half months can pass when you find yourself having fun with someone every moment you aren't working. Thanksgiving zips by and so does Christmas until we settle into the middle of January.

Sawyer and I have gotten closer every single day since the night we got back from Napa. I knew from the beginning she'd be a problem for me. What I didn't count on was just how much of one, because even now, as I'm wiping down the truck after a call, I can't hide the look on my face knowing I'm taking her to dinner with Grams tomorrow night. The two most important women in my life spending time together, formally, means everything to me.

"What's gotten you so chipper today, Black?" Graham asks, with arms crossed over his chest.

I hop down off the side of the truck and toss the towel I was using over my shoulder. "Can't a guy just be in a good mood?"

Sawyer and I haven't really been advertising to folks back here in Sunset Valley that we are seeing each other. We are just taking the time to get to know each other and just enjoying simply... being together. Being with her is, without a doubt, altering everything about me for the better. That's for sure.

"You're usually such a sulky bastard. I'm trying to understand the mood shift happening here."

"Fuck you, I'm the life of the damn party and you know it." I fling the towel from my shoulder to his as I walk by. "You all would be lost without me here."

"You mispronounced happier. We'd be happier without you here."

"Don't you have something to be doing rather than out here flirting with me? It's getting old, man. I appreciate the compliment though." I pull a clipboard from the wall; checking things off I've done so far.

"You're not exactly my type. You're missing a few key things that I very much enjoy."

"Black. You've got a visitor."

Graham and I both turn toward the front at the sound of the chief's voice over the intercom just as Sawyer comes into view with two to-go boxes in her hands.

"Well, hello there," Graham says. "I think I have found my answer to why you're so damn happy. You're finally getting laid."

I jokingly shove him back as I walk by him on my way to her.

“Hi,” she says sweetly, holding up the boxes. “I thought I could drop off some food for you? Olivia and I went to dinner so I ordered some for you. I figured I could bring it on my way back home.”

Fuck, she’s beautiful.

She’s wearing a pair of high-waisted jeans and this short blue top that shows off just a sliver of skin between her pants and shirt. Her hair is in a bun on top of her head. She’s radiant like this. Simple and casual, that’s a deadly combination on Sawyer Westbrook.

“That’s very sweet.” I cup her face in my hands and kiss her. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t know the protocol of things like this so I took a chance. Plus, I really wanted to see you in your station wear. I figured food was a good enough excuse.”

I grin, proud she is using terminology I taught her. “You never need an excuse to drop by here.” I kiss her again, but it’s quickly interrupted by hoots and hollers.

“I think we are being watched,” she whispers, when I drop my forehead to hers.

“You’d be correct. I’m sorry in advance for anything they say. They like to fuck with me. Especially Grah—”

“So you must be the beauty that’s helping Isaac here be less of a miserable asshole during the day.” Graham appears by our

side immediately, nudging me out of the way and extending his hand to her. “It’s nice to see you again, Sawyer.”

“You too.” She says with a smile. “And I hope if he’s in a good mood it’s because of me.”

“Ignore him. We all do,” I tell her.

“That’s no way to talk about me to my face.”

“Go away,” I jest Graham, wrapping my arm around Sawyer’s body, pulling her into my side. “I don’t want you assholes scaring her off. I kinda like her,” I say, then place a kiss on the top of her head.

“Huh, that’s weird. I kinda like you too,” She looks up to me with a sweet grin that I want to kiss off her face.

“Gross,” Graham jokes. “I’ll leave you two alone then.” He laughs. “Keep this one in line, Sawyer. He needs it.”

“I can certainly try.”

He slaps me on the shoulder then heads back into the kitchen area, leaving us alone in the front of the station.

“I’m really glad you came,” I tell her honestly.

“I’m really glad I came too.”

The past two months with her have been exactly what we both needed. We’ve had time together, time apart, more sex than either of us can handle, all while still wanting more. She’s genuinely fun to be around. This has been... easy.

“Are you ready for tomorrow night?”

“I’m so nervous, Isaac.” She shifts from foot to foot, like she can’t stand still.

“Why? It’s just Grams. You’ve already met her before.”

“Yeah, in a grocery store months ago. Now I’m meeting her officially. It’s scary.” Her eyes go wide with expression.

“She’ll love you.”

“I hope so.” She hands me the to-go boxes. “I thought you’d like to try this. Pastitsio. It’s a Greek dish. It’s incredible.”

“You don’t have to go yet.”

“No, I should. I don’t want to be the girlfriend who hangs out around your job.” She pushes up on her toes to kiss me.

“I like that word, girlfriend, and no one would care if I showed you around for a little bit.”

I can feel her smile against my lips before she kisses me again. “What time will you pick me up tomorrow or I can just meet you somewhere?”

“I’ll come to you then we’ll go get Grams together.”

“Okay.”

I wrap her up in my arms and squeeze her tightly. “Text me later?”

“Of course.” She steps backward a few paces. “Stay safe out there, okay?”

“Always am.”

She gives me a one finger wave then turns on her heel to leave.



## Sawyer

Who knew going to see a woman that you've already met could be so nerve-wracking? I know how much she means to him. He tells me all the time how special she is.

I want to make a good impression. I don't want her to dislike me because that would absolutely break my heart.

When I finally settle on an outfit, opting for a long maxi dress with a denim jacket over top, I give myself a look in the mirror and actually feel pretty content with my choice. It's still me, but simple. Perfect.

As I'm making sure I have everything in my purse I might need, my phone vibrates across my dresser, indicating an incoming call.

"Hello?" I say when I answer.

"I'm pulling onto your street. Are you ready?" Isaac's smooth voice is even better over the phone. He has a total phone sex voice.

"I am. I'm just making sure I don't forget anything."

I give myself a few spritzes of perfume then head out into the front room with my phone still to my ear.

"Do you think I can convince you to come home with me afterward?"

“I mean, if you’re going to twist my arm, I guess I can do that,” I tease.

“Good, because I’ve missed you and I want more of you since I have two days off.”

“I’m all yours.”

“I do enjoy hearing you say that. I’m here. Do you want me to come in? Do you need help?”

“I just have my purse. No need. I’ll be right out.”

I toss my phone into my bag; grab the charger from the wall behind my sofa then head out the door.

When I climb into the passenger side of his truck, he greets me with a kiss.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you. I’m nervous so I wanted to make sure I at least looked nice, just in case she isn’t a fan of my personality.”

“You’re nervous for no reason. I promise you.” He turns his head to check behind him before reversing out of my driveway.

God, since when did men’s jawlines get so attractive?

His arm is outstretched around the seat and his hand is casually resting on the back of my neck. He does this a lot lately. He always looks for reasons to touch me, and I love it. I’ve found myself craving this connection more and more. The heat from his hand warms my cool skin. The January chill is in the air now. Sunset Valley gets much colder than Los Angeles

does this time of year, but nothing like the winters in Tennessee. They may not be arctic-like, but they are very cold and dreary nonetheless. The Bay Area here is more of a mild crispness. I really enjoy it.

“Grams is excited.”

He slides his thumb up and down my neck where his hand still rests. It’s a simple touch, but it ignites a fire in my belly that I’m starting to long for.

“I am too.”

“She’s going to try to embarrass me, so just be ready for that.”

“What kind of grandmother doesn’t try to embarrass her grandkids? I’m looking forward to it. I never got to know my grandparents on either side before they died.”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“No, there’s no reason to apologize. I never even met them. My mom was never close to her parents and my dad’s lived really far away. It just never came to be. It doesn’t make me sad. It’s just part of my story.”

“I’m sure if you tell Grams that, she’ll take you on as an honorary grandchild.” He laughs.

“She may be too much grandma for me. From what I remember of the interaction we had in the grocery store, she’s an incredibly feisty lady.”

“That is putting it mildly, to say the least.”

The rest of the ride to her small senior citizen community is so easy, filled with conversation and listening to music, I almost forget I'm nervous... until he pulls into a parking spot near the front and kills the engine.

“Shall we?”

“We shall,” I respond, taking a moment to check my makeup in the mirror.

He gets out of the truck, telling me to stay put, before circling around and opening my door for me. I don't think I've opened a door for myself since the day I met him.

“Thank you.”

“You're going to have to stop thanking me for doing normal things, Sawyer.”

“Men being this chivalrous isn't a normal occurrence, Isaac, plus I'm grateful. I'll always say thank you.”

“My Grams and Gramps taught me right.”

The community she lives in is unlike anything I've seen. It's a small, gated area with individual cottages, so the residents can maintain the independence they have while also being monitored, should that be necessary. There's a community center in the middle that boasts a sign out front saying tonight there will be water exercise in the indoor pool, plus a movie night.

“This is really nice.”

“I tried to get her to move in with me, but she’s stubborn, as I’m sure you guessed. She wanted to be somewhere she could be on her own, but still looked after. She did her own research and decided this is where she wanted to stay.”

“I can think of worse places.”

We follow the sidewalk down until we reach a small, blue cottage with hanging baskets on the porch and a rocking chair just beside the door.

He knocks twice on the door before sliding a key into the lock and pushing the door open.

“Grams?”

“I’m back here! I’ll be out in a second!” she calls from the back of the house.

There’s a small kitchen to the right when you first walk through the doorway and straight ahead, you come to a small living area with all the things you’d expect in a grandmother’s home.

Pictures of her family, beautiful antique furniture, and crocheted blankets folded neatly in a stack with one in process in a wicker basket by the sofa.

“You can sit. Make yourself at home,” he tells me.

“Actually, I want to look at this.”

I move closer to the hanging shelf on the far wall by a window that has framed pictures on the top shelf. One of them is obviously very old with its sepia coloring. It’s a photo of a

young woman in a beautiful dress, with a scarf around her hair, standing next to a man who very much resembles Isaac in a military uniform.

“That’s my Phillip.”

I look back over my shoulder and see Jean standing there with her hand on her heart.

“Hi, Grams.” Isaac walks over to her and places a kiss on her cheek. “You look nice today.”

“Well, it’s not every day my grandson takes me *and* his girlfriend out on a date.” She pats his cheek then turns her attention back to me. “It’s lovely to see you again, Sawyer.”

“You too, Mrs. Black.”

“Oh, piss,” she waves me off. “Don’t call me that. Jean is just fine.”

“Jean. Got it.” I turn my eyes back to the photo. “Was Phillip your husband?”

She comes up to my side and pulls the frame down into her hands. “Husband. Best friend. Lover. You name it. He was my everything.”

“He was very handsome.”

“Whew. Don’t I know it? That man made me weak in the knees. When he came home from the war, Lord Jesus. We couldn’t get enough of each other.”

“Okay, okay. Enough of that. I don’t need to get the mental image of you and Grandpa in my head. It’ll bury itself there

and never leave,” Isaac says, shaking his head as if he is trying to shake the image away.

“You had to get here somehow, Isaac. Obviously there was lots and lots of sex involved.”

“I take it all back. I don’t want to do this anymore today. Sawyer, we can have dinner alone.”

I roll my lips together to keep myself from laughing.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Jean says to him.

“You’re right. I like you too much,” he replies. “Did you decide on where you’d like to eat tonight?”

“Actually, I was hoping you’d both agree to eat in the community center with me tonight. It’s lasagna night, and I have to tell you, it’s the best I’ve ever had, plus they’ve got a jazz band coming to finish out the night. It could be fun.”

I look over to Isaac for his answer, but he’s looking to me for mine.

“I love lasagna,” I tell him and he grins.

“Well then, let’s go have some lasagna.”



“Whoever made this is a genius and we should go thank them personally,” Isaac says, as he takes the final bite of his food.

“I told you. I don’t know what it is but they do serve good food. None of that hospital food mess you’d think.”

Jean is sipping on a cup of coffee and swaying a bit to the music coming from the small room to our back, where the band is set up for dancing and enjoyment. There are many people inside watching, and just as many dancing together. They've forgotten about all their worries and are enjoying the moment.

“So, Sawyer, Isaac tells me you're a teacher?”

“I am. I teach English over at Sunset Valley High.”

“How do you enjoy doing that?”

“I love it. I grew up wanting to teach, and I always had this passion for literature. It seemed like the perfect fit for me.”

“And you handle those rowdy teens all right?”

I wave my hand like it's nothing. “I'm meaner than they are. They know better than to mess with me.”

She laughs and reaches over to pat my hand. “I like this one, Isaac.”

Isaac has been watching Jean and I converse with a smile on his face. He didn't contribute much unless he was directly asked, and I think that was intentional. I know, even if he wasn't nervous today, introducing me as his girlfriend to his Grams was a big step. It holds a lot of weight and I am taking that very seriously.

“I like her too, Grams. A lot,” he says the words while his eyes are on me. The butterflies that have permanently resided in my belly since the moment we met begin to flutter wildly.



“Excuse me, Miss Black?”

We all turn to see an adorable older gentleman with khaki pants and a blue polo shirt tucked in. A pair of gold, wire-rimmed glasses are perched on his nose and there’s a tuft of white hair on top of his head.

“Oh, hello, Samuel,” she says happily, with her face lit up like the Fourth of July. “I was hoping you’d be here.”

“You know I never miss the jazz,” he says with a chuckle.

It’s obvious to me immediately what is going on here, and I think it’s so fucking cute.

“No, you never do.” She smiles up at him. “Let me introduce you to my grandson. Samuel, this is Isaac and his girlfriend, Sawyer. Isaac and Sawyer, this is Samuel.”

Samuel reaches out and shakes first Isaac’s hand and then mine. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both. I’ve heard a lot about you, Isaac.”

“All good things I hope,” he replies.

“Ah, well, that I’ll never tell. Pillow talk is private talk.”

I cough at that, nearly choking on my water. “I’m sorry. Wrong pipe.”

Isaac rubs my back. “Are you okay?”

I reassure everyone I’m fine before Samuel turns his attention back to Jean.

“What do you say I take you for a spin around the dance floor? We’ll take it slow and easy. That is, if you don’t mind

me stealing you away for a few minutes.”

“I’d love that. Isaac, why don’t you and Sawyer join us?”

Isaac and I exchange a glance. “A dance doesn’t sound half bad. Sawyer?” Isaac asks, offering his hand.

“Don’t step on my toes, Black, and we’ve got a deal.”

When we make our way over to the next room and onto the small, makeshift dance floor, Samuel and Jean have found a spot on the edge, while Isaac has pulled me to the middle and wraps me up in his arms. We sway gently to the music, his hands cradling me at the small of my back, and my arms around his shoulders.

“You and Grams are hitting it off.”

“She is ridiculously fun, and pretty smitten over Samuel there.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on. You’re not that obtuse, are you? Look at them. She’s got the hots for him and I am pretty sure the feeling is mutual.”

He looks over my shoulder, presumably at the pair of them then shakes his head. “Nah, no way. They are just friends.”

I arch my brow. “Did you miss that pillow talk comment?”

“I tried to ignore it,” he admits.

“Well, sorry to break it to you. Grams is still getting it.”

“Congratulations. I’ll never get hard again.”

I bury my face in his chest to laugh. “The horror.”

“You joke about this, but that’s my grandmother we are talking about. She is sweet and adorable. She isn’t supposed to be... wanted by someone like that.” He shivers dramatically.

“Hey, she may be elderly, but people are still sexual very late in their lives. Sometimes as late as their eighties. I took a human sexuality class in college. Read all about it.”

“Maybe that means I’ve got good genes and I’ll still be wanting to bone in my old age.”

I shake my head at him and smile. “You’ll never want to stop doing that. I am starting to see that you are quite insatiable.”

“Maybe that’s just with you. You’re pretty incredible, you know?”

I can feel my cheeks heat at his compliment. “Thank you. I’m just... me.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Sawyer. You’re a wonderful person. Everyone in my life is drawn to you. Anyone who you’ve come in contact with in my circle adores you immediately. I’ve yet to find in single flaw. Sometimes I worry this is all a joke and I’ll wake up one morning to see it’s not real.”

My body and mind instantly want to reject every compliment he’s just given me. My head even begins to shake back and forth, physically saying no to every word. “I’m full of flaws, Isaac.”

“Your flaws are perfection to me.”

The residents of the senior community, still paired up and dancing to the slow music shift out of focus for me, and the world hones in on Isaac Black. On the stunning color of his eyes, and the barely noticeable scar on his temple. I've always heard people you need come into your life when you're least expecting it. I needed him in my life. I didn't even know I needed anything, but now, in this moment, it's crystal clear to me. I've been waiting for Isaac Black. He's making me feel whole again.

“Isaac... I...”

*I love you.* I want to say it, but the words just won't leave my lips on their own. I'm scared. I'm too scared to love him because loving means if I lose him, it's going to hurt ten times more.

But I don't have to say it, because he kisses my lips gently and changes my world with his next words.

“I think I'm falling in love with you, Sawyer.”

A floodgate opens in my heart, sending everything pouring out of me and onto the dance floor. I smile and slide my hands up into his hair then back to his shoulders.

“I think I'm falling in love with you too.”

# Chapter 20

## Isaac

You know those scenes in movies where the couple is so enthralled with one another and can't keep their hands to themselves long enough to get in the front door? So they are tripping over things and stumbling around until they finally make it to the closest hard surface once they finally make it home?

Sawyer and I are living that reality.

The entire drive home after leaving Grams was spent with her tucked against my side in the middle of the truck bench, kissing at red lights and stop signs, hands roaming, with soft moans leaving her lips when I'd tickle her skin in areas I know she likes.

Her hand was in mine when we climbed the stairs of my front porch, and I pinned her against the outside of my door and explored the area between her earlobe and shoulder with my lips, tongue, and teeth. To be honest, if my neighbor hadn't come outside to check his mail, I probably would have fucked

her right there against the door, outside for all passersby to see.

I have her inside now, privately, with no prying eyes, and all mine.

I lift her feet from the floor and place her to sit on a small table I have by my front door, where I normally toss my keys and wallet when I come in. It's waist high and suddenly the perfect place to fuck my girlfriend into oblivion.

I pride myself on taking my time with her, making her come multiple times with my hands and mouth before ever pushing inside of her, but after the declaration we shared, all I can think about is getting inside of her and showing her I meant what I said. I'm falling in love with her more and more every second.

"Say it again?" she asks, as I push her denim jacket off her shoulders, letting it fall somewhere on the floor.

"I love you, Sawyer." My lips kiss and lick the new skin exposed on her shoulder, connecting each small freckle to the next with my mouth.

"I'll never get tired of hearing that."

She grabs my face in her hands and forces my lips back to hers.

"Lie back," I growl against her lips and push gently against her chest with my hand. "And keep your eyes open."

The table isn't particularly big in its wooden, rectangular shape so when she eases backward, her body just fits on the

surface, with her head hanging off the far end, so I wrap my hands around her hips and adjust her so her waist is off the end and her head lies comfortably against the wood.

She reaches down and curls her fingers into the edges of the table so tightly that her knuckles are white.

“Fuck me,” she begs in a whisper. “Please.”

“Say it back.” I pull her legs around my waist and slide her long dress up to her stomach.

“Isaac, I love youuuu!” The last word comes out as a surprised gasp as I slip my finger under her lace panties and swirl her wetness up and around her clit.

“Again,” I demand, continuing to circle her clit with one hand and unbuckle my belt with the other.

“Oh, God, I love you. Fuck.”

“No God here, baby... it’s just me.”

The sound that leaves her lips nearly makes me lose my nut right here in my pants. She laughs, but it bleeds into the sweetest moan of pleasure I’ve ever heard in my life.

I have to pull my hands away from her and lay them flat on the wood on either side of her body, bending over her with my eyes closed.

“What? What’s wrong?”

I shake my head and chuckle. “You’re just fucking incredible. I have to slow myself down or this will end before it starts.”

“Don’t hold back. We have all night for more.”

She yanks me back down to her, chest-to-chest, mouth-to-mouth.

It happens quickly after that. Zippers lower, lace is torn, and right here by my front door, I push inside of her with no barrier between us, skin on skin for the first time.

“Ohhhhh,” she cries out, arching her back off the table as I thrust viciously.

The wooden legs of the table scoot across the floor with each movement, creating a beat that blends with the sounds of our bodies connecting, blurring into a rhythm that will no doubt play in my head over and over.

Reaching forward, I slip my hand under the back of her neck and tighten my grip there, both for leverage and because I know she loves when I do it. My thrusts slow, becoming deeper and more powerful, like the ticking of a clock.

In... slam...out... in... slam... out.

Her nails claw my neck just under the collar of my shirt, no doubt marking me in a way I’ll be able to see and feel tomorrow as the walls of her pussy begin to flutter around me.

“Tell me you love me when you come,” I groan against her lips. “Tell me.”

With one hand on the tabletop, I push myself up so I can look down at her face. I watch as she bites her lips and I see the flush begin to rise from her chest all the way to her cheeks.



“Close. I’m so close,” she whimpers, reaching down to rub between her legs.

“That’s it. Come for me. Fuck, I love you.”

My balls begin to tingle, tightening up to the point of pain, my orgasm so close I have to force myself to hold back. I won’t go until she does.

“Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh my God. Yes. Right there. There. There. There!!” She screams out so loudly I have no doubt Mr. Lawson next door heard her. “I. Love. You!”

Her entire body arches, her chest skyward and her head down, pussy walls contracting around me. Two pumps later, I’m following her over the edge, grunting my feelings into her ear in the forms of harsh breaths.

We don’t stop. We can’t get enough.

Our floodgates have opened and the constant need for one another has grown into a beast of its own.

Not that you’ll hear a complaint from me.

I’ll never get enough of her. Not anymore.



The room is still dark when I open my eyes. The muscles in my forearms and upper thighs ache just a little; enough to be a reminder that what happened with Sawyer wasn’t a dream. It was real.

I hadn’t expected being with her in that way to be so all-consuming. Don’t get me wrong, I knew it would be

incredible, but as I got to know her as a human, as I began to develop feelings for her, the better I knew how explosive we'd be together.

I can't see much in the darkened room, as the curtains are pulled, but I can see the darkened form of Sawyer beside me, only she's not sleeping, she sitting up with her knees pulled up to her chest and her cheek resting on one.

"Are you all right?" I ask, reaching out to touch her arm.

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

She tries to hide it, but I can hear the slight snuffle before she speaks.

I ignore her question and push myself up to sit next to her.  
"Are you crying?"

"I'm sorry." She sniffs again and wipes her cheeks. "Today is a hard day for me."

"What happened? Did I hurt you?"

She leans over and flips on the bedside lamp then looks back toward me and shakes her head.

"No, Isaac, you didn't hurt me. You're amazing. This has nothing to do with you."

I glance over her shoulder to the small alarm clock on the nightstand and see that it is barely four in the morning.

"What's the matter?" I reach across to wipe her tears with my thumb. "You can tell me."

“I don’t want to drag you down with my shit, Isaac. The past two days have been incredible.”

“Talking to me about why you’re crying won’t drag me down, Sawyer. I love you,” I say honestly. “A lot.”

She smiles the smallest smile then leans over to kiss my lips. “I love you too.”

I wrap her up in my arms and settled back into the pillows with her head on my chest.

“Tell me what’s happening in that beautiful mind of yours.”

She doesn’t say anything for a minute, simply opting to trace shapes over my stomach, but when she finally speaks, her hands go still.

“I had a dream about my brother.”

“Fuck,” I say under my breath. “I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize. It was a good dream. They used to make me sad, but I’ve tried really hard to be better. I can’t live my life the way he would want me to if I’m upset all of the time. The way he died was so... traumatic for me. I had a hard time reconciling it in my head and heart, and I don’t even know if I have yet.”

“What happened to him?” I ask, because I want to know what she is thinking in her head. I want to know everything about her so I can help her in whatever way I’m capable of. I don’t expect her to answer me, honestly, but when she does, I let her speak until she’s completely finished. I don’t interrupt. I don’t ask questions.

“I was living in L.A. He had just turned seventeen years old, and started making incredibly wrong choices in his life over the course of a year. He kept getting in trouble with the police and we found out he was on drugs, and my parents didn’t know what to do or how to help him. He was pushing back, getting worse. The last straw was when he stole money from my parents for more drugs. He and my father got into a fight. I had to step in and help, so I told him I would let him stay with me as long as he got help. He agreed. I guess I was naïve.”

I can hear the emotion in her voice with each word, but still, I don’t speak, I just rub up and down her spine so she knows I’m here and I’m listening.

“He moved in with me a few months before the wildfires.”

My hands go still.

“The first month was hard, but he seemed to be doing okay. We had a few job interviews lined up for him and he’d been seeing a recovery therapist. I was so proud of him. Then a couple months later, the fires started. They happened so quickly. I mean, you know how fast it happens. It’s what you do for a living. I was watching the news and I thought we were safe. I was just leaving work when I got a call from Jason’s boss, who was a guy I was dating at the time, to tell me Jason hadn’t shown up to work. It didn’t take me long to figure out he had swiped my debit card and took hundreds of dollars from me.”

I can hear the anger and sadness in her voice, and my stomach is in my throat because of the things she must have

gone through.

“I knew what he had done before I even pulled into my driveway. When I got inside, his bedroom door was locked. I pounded and pounded, trying to get him to open it but he kept telling me to go away, that he was sorry, and I didn’t need to see him like that. I refused. I sat in the hallway because I wanted him to have to face me when he finally opened the door. Hours passed... and I guess I had fallen asleep because the ringing of the smoke alarms woke me up. Everything after that happened in a blur. My house was on fire. I remember feeling the heat from the flames and not being able to breathe the smoke was so thick. I pounded on his bedroom door, but he never responded. I never heard his voice again. I tried to use my body to break it down, but between the exhaustion and the amount of smoke in my lungs, I had no power left in me. I stumbled my way through the halls to try to find something to pry the door open, but I ended up falling, cracking my glasses and gashing my head open.”

It’s like a cold bucket of water has been poured over my entire body. Somewhere, deep inside, I know what she is going to say next and where this story is going to go, but I think I’m in denial.

*There’s no fucking way.*

“I was still trying to get him to respond or to get the door open when the firefighters got there. I kept screaming at them that my brother was in the room and he wasn’t answering. They kept trying to make me leave, but I couldn’t go without

him. I couldn't leave him there. Everything kept spinning and I couldn't stand up anymore. Eventually they finally fucking listened to me and one of them started kicking in the door while the other dragged me down the stairs. I was kicking and screaming. I couldn't leave him. I couldn't. But when that door opened, the entire room flashed and went up in flames.... and that was it. I remember sitting on the front lawn for just a few seconds before EMTs were trying to take me. All I could do was tell the fireman how much I hated him. They just wouldn't listen to me at first, and if they had, maybe they could have gotten to my brother.”

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

So many things flash in my eyes like a montage scene out of a goddamn movie, but I am doing anything in my power to discount or disprove everything that connects because there is no fucking way Sawyer Westbrook is the woman I saved from the LA Wildfire. There is no way.

“I found out later, once we were able to get his body, he was already dead when the ceiling caved in. Overdose, of course, but that didn't seem to temper my anger. I tried to stay in LA for a while, working through insurance stuff on the house and looking for a way to move on, but I quickly realized I needed something new. A fresh start across the board. So I changed everything about myself. I had short blonde hair at the time, so I let it grow out long and colored it brown. I lost my glasses and had LASIK eye surgery so I'd never have to wear them again. I put on the weight I'd lost from the stress of helping

Jason... then losing him. I found a job in Sunset Valley, made the move, and the rest is history.”

I feel like I’m going to be sick. This has to be a joke from whatever higher being exists in this world, because otherwise, this is a fucked scenario I have stumbled my way into.

I’ve fallen for a woman who associates me with the reason her brother died.

*But she doesn’t associate you. She doesn’t even know it was you. She couldn’t see your face.*

My inner voice tries to make sense of it all, but comes up short every time. How is this possible?

“And I’m really glad I chose Sunset Valley.” She tilts her face up so she can see mine, but her smile quickly falls. “Are you all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Yeah, yes.” I shake my head a bit and pull her closer. “Just thinking about all of that, it’s horrific. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“Now you know why I was so reluctant to go out with you,” she says then kisses my chest.

Does she remember me? Is that even possible?

“I just couldn’t be around someone who worked in the field you do without it bringing back awful memories. I didn’t want to put that on anyone else, but then you persisted.” She smiles. “And I am so happy you did. I’m finally starting to feel better, Isaac, like I can finally move forward, and it’s because of you.”

There she is, baring her soul to me for the second time in a handful of hours, and I'm just staring at her face. Staring at the scar in her eyebrow, no doubt from a cut, and the fact if I picture her with glasses and different hair... it's her.

There is no doubt in my mind.

The girl who seared herself into my mind all those years ago and I always wondered about. The girl who never told me her name and only told me she hated me.

That girl, through some kind of twist of fate...is Sawyer.

What the fuck am I going to do? If I tell her, I'll lose her. She won't want to be with someone she associates with the death of her brother, but if I lie to her, that's even worse.

She's coming back to life because of me, and I have the ability and knowledge to strike that down instantly if I do the right thing... or I do the wrong thing and keep her, just as she is, happy and perfect in my arms.



# Chapter 21

## Sawyer

“All right. Who remembers when I said the essays on *The Great Gatsby* were to be emailed to me over the weekend?” I say with my arms crossed over my chest, standing at the front of my classroom. This is my favorite part of a new semester, getting to cover my favorites again.

Most of the students raise their hands.

“That’s weird because if I’m counting correctly, there are twenty-one of you in this class, and as of this morning, I only have twelve in my inbox. That’s not something I’m very happy about.”

As I continue my morning scold of this particular class, I can feel the ache in my muscles and between my legs with each movement. It makes focusing on the task at hand more difficult when all I can think about is the way Isaac touched me and the way his voice sounded when he told me he loved me in my ear.

Plus, the emotional catharsis that came with finally telling him the story of my brother has put me in a place mentally where I feel like I could conquer the world... and handle moody teenagers like it's nothing.

“To those who actually followed instruction, you're exempt from the additional reading and essay questions I'll be assigning for homework at the end of the week.”

There are scattering sighs of relief and annoyed groans. You can't make everyone happy. That's the life of a teacher.

I give them a bit of reading to do right now, silently to themselves before we begin open discussion, then I pull out my cell phone to check for any messages but not finding any.

I stayed with Isaac until this morning when he took me home to drop me off so that I could come into work. This weekend was incredible to say the least. I really felt like some walls were broken down and we absolutely took the next step.

I've never felt this strongly for someone before, so I'm riding this high for as long as I can.

He's like my green light across the pond, and I'm Gatsby, clinging to the hope that at the end of the day, we will be happy, just as we are, and there isn't something ominous coming our way.

Because as someone who spends her every day discussing the highs and lows of the human experience as told through fictional characters, I'm programmed to always wait for the other shoe to drop.

But when I feel the stress or worry of that sinking in, I think about the fact he told me he loves me. I have to hold on to that as a positive and not let the fear of the negative drown me.

## Isaac

What have I done in my lifetime that is so horrible? Why is the universe choosing me to fuck with? Haven't my good deeds far outweighed the bad? It sends the most incredible woman my way then tosses the biggest wrench in history right into the middle of us.

It's all I've thought about for nearly three weeks, since she told me about her brother. I've almost told her who I am a couple of times, but part of me is scared to hurt her because that's the last thing I want, and the other part of me is scared if she knows... she'll leave.

"Do you think he's ignoring us?" Finn says from across the table, snapping me out of my own thoughts.

"Or he's dead," Caleb adds, waving a hand in front of my face, but I push it away.

"Cut the shit. I'm fine. Sorry. I was just thinking," I tell them, taking a sip of my beer.

The bar is quiet tonight, thankfully. I'm not in the mood to deal with a crowd of drunks.

"Must have been important since we've been saying your name for ten minutes and you've just been picking at that beer bottle label," Caleb says.

“Sawyer finally come to her senses and realize she’s way too fucking hot for you?” Finn asks with a laugh.

“Watch it.” I shove my finger into his chest. “Careful.”

“Jesus Christ. What’s your problem?”

I take a breath then scrub my hand over my mouth. “I told Sawyer I love her.”

I wait for a response but I’m met with blank stares with no reaction whatsoever.

“And she said it back...” I add.

“Hold on. I need to process this,” Caleb says, holding up his hand and Finn nods in response.

All I can do is laugh and shake my head. “If that is the surprising part, you have no idea what’s coming.”

I’ve, of course, told them all about the girl from the LA Wildfire. About how I still thought of her and I harbored so much guilt, even though I know I did everything I could. I still hear her voice in my ear telling me she will never forgive me for letting her brother die, even though she had no idea who I was.

“Okay, you love Sawyer and she loves you back. I’m not sure why that is making you a moody asshole, but hit us with whatever is next.” Caleb waves me on.

I lift my beer to my lips and take three large gulps then place it back on the table with a loud pop.

“Sawyer is the blonde girl from the LA fire.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Finn answers. “That’s literally impossible.”

Caleb replies quickly, “Not literally impossible, but really fucking bizarre. Are you sure? How do you know?”

“She told me with her own mouth.” I pull my ball cap off and toss it onto the table. “She couldn’t sleep and was just sitting up in the middle of the night. I asked her what was wrong and it developed into a conversation about her brother and how he died. Every detail, guys, every single one was there down to the scar in her eyebrow where she was cut.”

“What did she say when you told her who you were?” Finn asks me, but his eyes grow wide when he realizes the truth. “You haven’t said anything to her, have you?”

“No. How can I say anything to her? If you were in her shoes, would you believe it’s a coincidence? Because I wouldn’t. I would immediately think the worst of the other person.”

“It’s a pretty big fucking development, isn’t it? You can’t just *not* tell her.”

“Yes, but I’m not going to just dump this on her. She struggles with her brother’s death enough as it is. I can’t just lay myself at her feet and let her know she fell in love with the man she blames for leaving him there.”

Caleb, who had been unusually silent, finally pipes in, “You have to tell her, Isaac. You can’t just hold something like that

to the vest. That's not okay, and eventually it will come out. The longer you wait, the worse it's going to be."

"If I tell her, it could make everything implode... and... fuck. I don't want to lose her because I really do love her." I chuckle to myself and pull my cap back onto my head. "Jesus Christ."

"Look, no one said you had to tell her today. Take a week, sit with it, figure out what you're going to say then tell her, but you have to at some point. You know that," Finn says.

They are right, and I know that. I know I can't get away with not telling her. I wouldn't want to because that's a fucked-up move. I respect her too much for that, but I know how this story ends.

Once she finds out who I am, our time together, how we feel about each other, will be in her rearview mirror.

And I can't blame her.

"Like I said, take a week, really plan out what you're going to say then have a conversation with her over the weekend... after my birthday party, of course." Caleb grins.

"Always going back to your damn birthday. Don't worry, asshole, I didn't forget. We'll be there. I think she's bringing Olivia too. I know you think the more the merrier."

"Olivia Harper?" he says with wide eyes.

"Why do you sound so shocked? You see her every day and you knew they were friends. We've covered this," Finn states.

“Just didn’t think about her coming,” he clears his throat,  
“Welp, I’m going to go get us another round.”

Caleb zips out of here like a bullet, heading up to the bar.

“What the hell was that about?” I ask Finn.

“Who knows with him?” He shrugs it off. “I agree with him,  
by the way. You have to tell her so make sure you’re ready for  
whatever outcome happens, because she’s a nice girl. She  
needs to be told the truth.”

A boulder has formed in my gut.

Fuck.

I’m going to lose her.



# Chapter 22

## Sawyer

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Olivia says, as she hooks her arm through mine.

We step into the karaoke bar just outside of town and are immediately overtaken by the sound of someone very loudly and aggressively singing “Rapper’s Delight” by The Sugar Hill Gang on the stage.

I lean over closer as we walk so she can hear me. “You needed a night out, plus I wanted you to meet Isaac’s friends.”

“I already know Caleb. I don’t need to meet him again.”

I scan the surprisingly large crowd, looking for Isaac, but I’m not seeing him yet. Caleb has rented out the entire bar for the evening so there are party decorations everywhere, drinks decorate every hand, and everyone seems to be having a great time.

“I didn’t realize he was so well-liked. What’s your problem with him anyway?”

“Ancient history.” She waves me off.

We turn when we hear someone tapping on the microphone and see that Caleb has taken the stage with a drink in his hand and everyone explodes into loud applause and cheers.

I had no idea Caleb was so... popular. Wow.

“Thank you, thank you,” he laughs. “All right, I just wanted to get up here while the night was still young to say thanks for coming to the annual celebration that is the day the world became a better place, all thanks to my birth.” He pauses because the crowd once again erupts in cheers, and I can’t help but laugh. I’ve never seen anything like this before. “So, as always, the entire bar is ours until two. Drink up, sing away, let the worries of the world slip away, and have fucking fun. Cheers!” He raises his glass then downs a large gulp of it.

“Not that he’s not a nice guy, but I don’t understand how one person can be so liked,” I say to Olivia.

“They are sheep,” she says plainly. “I need a drink. Go find Isaac. I’ll be along soon.”

She unloops her arm from mine, and heads back toward the bar, leaving me to traverse the crowd alone in search of a familiar face.

The variety of people in this bar is staggering and beautiful.

Young, old, white, black, brown, big, small, and everything in between. I’m impressed by the fact Caleb has been able to positively affect so many types of people, but it makes me wonder what has happened in his life that makes him want to surround himself with so many.

The interior of the bar is dark with nearly black walls and neon signs hung all across them. There are red, leather U-shaped couches with long tables in the middle that line a back wall, all of which are packed to the brim with people.

I weave through the standing tables that reside just in front of the stage and then I see Isaac leaning against the wall by one of the sofas, bottle of beer in his hand, looking as incredible as ever. He's talking to a man I've never met before very animatedly. He must be telling a story. That's something I've noticed as I've gotten to know him. When he talks normally, he doesn't really move his hands, but when he goes off on a tangent and starts storytelling, his hands become necessary components of the story. He's even told me I do the same thing. Two peas in a pod, we are.

*Ugh, easy there, Yoda.*

Just seeing his face makes me happier than I can remember being in years. I wasn't a miserable human at all. I had fun and was still able to enjoy myself, but there were days that sadness absolutely consumed me, and my every waking thought.

He leans in closer to the person he's talking to, I'm assuming to hear them better then he tosses his head back laughing. He really is a beautiful man.

He must sense my presence the way I can his, because he begins to scan the room and quickly settles his eyes on my face. The room disappears around us, and all I can see is him.

His mouth turns up in a grin and he extends his hand out to me, beckoning me to come to him, and I do without question,

but by the time I reach him, the grin is replaced with a somberness.

“Hi,” I say to him as I slide my hand into his. “You okay?”

“Hello, beautiful. I’m fine.” He pulls me in for a kiss. “Did you find the place okay? Liv with you?”

“Yes and yes. She went to get a drink.” I lean against the wall next to him, shifting a bit on my heels. I really should have worn flats.

“You look incredible,” he tells me, without really looking at me. He’s rigid and stiff, not like the man I saw from across the room thirty seconds ago.

“Thank you,” I say, smoothing my hand over the flowy black dress I chose for tonight. “I have a question, actually. About Caleb.”

“Okay, that’s pretty ominous. Go for it.”

“Has he always been the life of the party like this? I’ve never seen so many people in one place for one person unless it was like a concert or something.”

“Caleb likes to surround himself with a lot of people. He always has. He didn’t have the best upbringing, so he’s overcompensating now, I think.”

“That’s really sad, actually. I think he and Liv have a bit of history, but she’s very unwilling to share with me anything about it. Do you know anything?”

“I don’t. All I know is that when he found out you were bringing her, he had a pretty big, weird reaction to it.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“Sure I did, but he didn’t go into details. Caleb gets around so I’m sure he fucked her once or twice and now it’s awkward.”

“Hmm. I would think she’d tell me if it were that simple.”

“Nothing, no matter how it seems, is ever simple, Sawyer.” He kisses my temple. “Have a seat. I’ll go get you a drink.”

He leaves me standing there with the weight of his words on my shoulder. *Nothing is ever simple.* That was laced with meaning, even if he didn’t mean for it to be. I don’t understand the heaviness I’ve felt around him this week. He’s been around and present, sure, but there’s this extra layer of... something.

I’m an empath. I always have been. I feel what others feel, be it good or bad, and there is a layer of stress radiating off of him that is so thick it’s nearly suffocating.

“There you are,” Liv says, plopping down next to me with a vodka tonic in her hand. “This place is insanely packed. Over Caleb? I don’t get it.”

“What is your deal with him, Liv? I’ve never seen you this way over someone before.”

“Caleb and I have a history I really don’t like rehashing.” She takes a sip of her drink then changes the subject. “Why are you over here all alone? Where’s boy toy?”

“He went to the bar to get me a drink. He seems off tonight. I mean, he didn’t at first but once he realized I was here, his mood altered just a hair.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

“I don’t know why there would be. Nothing has happened and as far as I’ve been concerned, things have been incredible for us since Napa.”

“Have you asked him?”

“What do you think? Of course, I have. He keeps telling me everything is fine and he is fine. Maybe I’m just paranoid because I’m finally feeling... relaxed, and there are more good days than bad ones.”

“You tend to do that, babe. You have to accept that good things are happening in your life now and stop overthinking. That’s a one-way ticket to killing a potential buzz, and if you expect me to get up there tonight and shake my ass with you, I’ll need that buzz. So will you.”

“Speaking of a buzz... keep drinking,” I whisper in her ear then stand up. “Hi, Caleb! Happy Birthday!”

“Thanks, darlin,” he replies and gives me a hug. “I’m glad you came.” I move back to my seat and his eyes settle on Olivia. “Hi, Olivia. It’s good to see you outside of the school.”

She plasters on a smile and sweeps her eyes up to him. “I wanted to spend the evening with my friend and enjoy some drinks. It was the perfect excuse. Your birthday is an afterthought.”

I roll my lips together and my eyes go wide. Oh shit. The hostility is real.

“Damn, is that still how it is?” He tilts his head and stares at her. The sexual tension between them is so thick even I feel it. I’ve never seen them together before, so I had no idea it even existed.

“That’s how it will always be, Caleb. You know that.”

“Doesn’t have to be. We had fun once upon a time.”

“Once being the key word,” she snaps.

“Not by my choice.” He takes a sip of the amber liquid in the glass he’s holding. “Let me buy you a drink.”

“I’ve got one here. Thanks,” she says, holding her glass up.

He chuckles and glances down at me. “Tell her I’m not a bad guy, will ya?”

Isaac appears behind him then steps around so he can sit beside me, but he doesn’t say a word, only passes me a drink.

“Thank you,” I tell him before turning back to Caleb. “Well, you know us women always have to stick together so if she sees you as the bad guy, I’m morally obligated to take her side and bad-mouth you over wine and ice cream.” I shrug with a smile.

“Women, man,” Caleb groans. “I’m going to make the rounds again to make sure everyone is having a good time. I’ll catch you all later.”

“What was that about?” Isaac asks, sliding his arm around me.

I go to answer but Liv downs the rest of her drink and answers first. “Your friend is a dick. That’s what. And he pisses me off because he’s so damn pretty.”

“This should be an interesting night,” I tell Isaac.



## Isaac

The night is going strong, and I am having a good time, but the looming reality of my connection to Sawyer is ever-present in my mind. It's preventing me from letting go and enjoying a night out with her.

I try to make sure she can't tell there is something on my mind, but she is calling me on my shit anytime she catches an off glance or a little tension.

But now, with one in the morning around the corner, she and Olivia each have a few drinks in them and are flipping through a binder to decide which song they are going to sing together.

We've all been singing along to every song chosen, like a big, inebriated, poorly performed concert, but seeing her smile and laugh is more intoxicating than the beer in my system.

"Oh my God, Liv. I'm not getting up there and singing 'My Neck, My Back,'" Sawyer says loudly, all while holding her stomach from laughing.

"Why not? That would be fun!" Liv playfully nudges her.

"I'm not singing in front of everyone about someone licking my pussy," she whispers the final word and it's adorable, yet hearing the word pussy from her mouth makes my cock twitch in my jeans. Even with all the added madness in my head, me wanting her has never been an issue. And that makes me feel

like a dick for wanting someone I know would hate me otherwise.

“Booooring,” Liv says, leaning back against the sofa.

“Go with a classic. Those always get the crowd engaged,” I tell them.

“Hmm,” Sawyer says, tapping her chin then smiles wide. “I’ve got it!” She thumbs through the binder until she finds what she’s looking for and shows Olivia.

“Oh, that’s absolutely perfect!”

Sawyer snaps the binder closed then stands. “If I’m going to do this, I need another shot.” She pulls Olivia up with her. “Let’s go turn in our song, get shots, then bring this party down.”

“You go ahead, I need to run to the bathroom real quick. I’ll meet you by the bar for that shot.”

“Okay!” Sawyer comes over and bends down, cupping my face in her hands and kissing my lips. “Wish me luck up there.”

I curl my finger into the fabric of her dress and tug her closer, stealing another kiss. “Good luck.”

“I love you,” she says softly, before disappearing into the crowd to go to the bar.

“Now that we have a second to chat....” Olivia says, standing right in front of me with her arms crossed over her chest.

*Uh oh.*

“Ah, the best friend talk.” I shift in my seat a bit and straighten my posture, crossing my leg and resting my ankle on my knee, arm extended along the back of the sofa. “Hit me with it.”

“You’re right, she is my best friend. I love her with my entire heart and the last thing I want is to see her sad again. The girl you’re seeing now isn’t the same girl who moved to Sunset Valley last year. That girl had a dark cloud over her head. It followed her every single day, everywhere she went. She had just started slowly breaking out of her own head around the time of the Harvest Festival, and now that she’s with you... she’s alive. I’ve never seen her smile so much or look so happy. I have to assume it’s all thanks to you.”

I swallow hard, listening to her every word with the weight of the truth pressing into my chest. Truth that would no doubt send her barreling back toward that dark cloud... maybe even worse.

“What I’m trying to say is please don’t hurt her. You have a bit of a reputation around here, but I know that men cannot be defined by their choices over time. And if you do hurt her... I’ll stab you,” she threatens, with a point of her finger to my chest.

My first reaction is to laugh, but I stop instantly because the look on her face is deadly serious.

“Olivia, I love her. It’s really as simple as that. The last thing I’d want to do is cause her harm in any way. I’d rather throw

myself on a sword than hurt her. That's a promise."

"Good." She nods once and tosses her hair over her shoulder. "I should go get drunker so I can show you all how to really karaoke."



I make my way over to one of the standing tables by the stage, and I'm quickly flanked by Caleb and Finn, both far more intoxicated than I am.

"You're not drunk enough, Black," Finn says.

"I've got a nice buzz going. I'm all good."

"Your girls seem to be enjoying themselves." Caleb motions just to the side of the stage where Sawyer and Olivia are dancing along to a song that is playing. Sawyer looks so happy and so carefree.

"Olivia gave me the talk. The if you hurt her, I'll hurt you talk," I tell them. "Funny timing."

*Considering what I have to admit to her.*

"Ladies and gentleman, give a round of applause for Sawyer and Olivia!"

The entire bar explodes in hoots and hollers when they step on the stage, each with a microphone in hand.

Sawyer shields her eyes from the lights and scans the crowd, wrinkling her nose at me when she finds me at the table, and I raise my beer to her to cheer her on.

They both look up at the screens above them for the words then the a cappella intro to “Bohemian Rhapsody” by Queen begins, and as expected, every person in the building starts singing along with them.

For the entire six-minute runtime of the song, Sawyer is a beacon of energy: singing at the top of her lungs, dancing, and enjoying herself. Someone brings them each a bottle of beer, which they hold in the air and wave back and forth as the final verse of the song begins. The entire room joins in with them as the song rolls to a close with Freddy Mercury’s lyrics exiting the beautiful lips of the woman I’m desperately in love with.

As I stare at her up on that stage, I see her happiness radiating off of her. Olivia’s words repeat in my brain, telling me over and over that I’ve brought Sawyer back to life.

I know right here, right now... I can’t tell her who I am.

# Chapter 23

## Sawyer

There's a looming sense of dread, of being watched and judged, woven within the narrative of *The Great Gatsby* in the form of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg's bespectacled gaze. That's how I see the anxiety in my life. A way to give it a name, a being. It's easier for me to work through that way.

I feel it heavy on my shoulders when my eyes open before the sun has even fully made her appearance. I inhale deeply then push the air slowly out my mouth, repeating that over and over until I can feel a sense of calm settle into my chest, shaking what I can of this bad feeling. The last thing I want is for it to overtake my entire day.

I spent Friday night, after the party, with Isaac at his place, and he stayed here with me last night, before leaving an hour or so ago to prepare for his twenty-four-hour shift today. Slipping into a routine with him is one of the easiest things that I've done. We fit together like a puzzle. My wobbly, awkward into his perfectly smooth-edged piece, creating one cohesive portion of a larger picture.

I tug the comforter up over my head and roll myself toward his pillow, creating a burrito of myself and burying my face into the fabric that smells like his shampoo. Love is a weird thing that makes you do and think things you'd roll your eyes at any other time.

I'm settling into a peaceful, very comfortable place... sleep just on the horizon until...

*Meow.*

I groan, tugging the covers tighter over my head. *Maybe if I don't make any sudden movements, he'll leave me alone.*

*Meow.*

"Ugh." I toss the covers off of my head and find Herbert standing on my nightstand, staring at me. "You're rude."

*Meow.*

"Fine." I toss the covers completely aside and sit up. "You're lucky you're cute."

I snatch my cell off the table, resigning myself to the fact that if I'm up, I'm staying up. May as well scroll social media and have some coffee.

Herbert hops up onto the kitchen table and continues to meow the entire time I prepare his bowl of food.

"You're the most impatient cat." I place his bowl on the floor to which he hops down and begins to happily eat. "There. Now you can stop bugging me."

I squat down to pet him from his head, down his back, and up his tail. He may be an asshole but he's mine, and I love him.

I pop a K-cup into my Keurig and slide my mug underneath that boasts one of my favorite quotes from *Hamilton*. *A legacy is planting seeds for a garden you'll never get to see.*

I lean against the counter, scrolling through my phone while I wait for my coffee to finish brewing.

The usual is happening on social media. Drama here, feud there, hilarious pictures, and wildly untrue political memes abound. I can only handle so much of it before I close out all of those apps, opting to check my email instead.

Swiping through all the spam and junk, I see a new email this morning from the Sunset Valley Journal. I think I may have signed up for their weekly newsletter when I stopped by their booth at the Harvest Festival back in September.

That's not the part that makes my stomach do a front flip though. It's the headline of the email.

***“Los Angeles Wildfires - Five Years Later - Sunset Valley's Finest Heroes”***

I know better than to read it. At least that's what I tell myself, even as I move to the table to sit. Even as I press the screen to open the email. Even as I begin reading. It begins as a normal memorial piece, but the middle shakes me to my core. The middle brings tears to my eyes. The middle shakes my world up, throwing it around and tossing it upside down.



*While this tragedy may not have affected us directly here in Sunset Valley, some of our finest men in uniform ran into those fires head on, saving lives in the process.*

*Isaac Black has been a firefighter here in Sunset Valley since he was twenty-two years old. He has battled house fires, structural fires, aided in car accidents and more, but a story he told us five years ago has stuck with us, and we're sure it will stick with you too.*

I click the link just below and it takes me to a different web page. A video dated five years ago nearly to the day begins to play, and Isaac's face fills my screen.

He looks the same, but a little younger. He didn't have his facial hair then, probably opting to shave it off. Even as my gut is swirling, my face can't hide the slightest hint of a smile.

But that doesn't last very long.

I watch his lips as he details his experience while battling the fires all those years ago. Telling stories of the things he saw and the things he had to do. Some heroic but heartbreaking, but he transitions into a story that he says has been branded into his brain.

*My story.*

He details saving a woman from her home who wouldn't leave because she was scared for a loved one. He leaves out the details of my brother that he knew, but everything else... it's there. My bloody forehead, the room exploding into flames... everything.

Isaac saved me from the fires that night.

Isaac saved my life.

Isaac let my brother die.

A sob I'm not expecting escapes my lips and I toss my phone onto the table. I cover my face with my hands and begin to cry.

I try to rationalize it as best I can. Maybe he didn't know it was me? That's something I can get over, isn't it?

*But what if he did know? What if he knew all along and didn't tell you?*

My mind begins to spiral into worst-case scenarios. I'm like a pendulum swaying back and forth from anger to confusion. Anger to acceptance. Anger to sadness and back to confusion again. Over and over it swings until I summon the courage to do what I need to do.

This is what it comes down to.

Best-case scenario, he never connected the dots and we can find some kind of way to wade through this once I have time to think... even if I can wrap my mind around falling in love with someone I tried so hard to hate.

Worst-case scenario, he knew and said nothing, and I won't be able to look him in the eye anymore.

I'm praying to God for the former, even if I don't know that it will make a difference.

## Isaac

There's a bit of a tradition here in the firehouse when we get new meat in for their first week. Hazing them over a game of poker on quiet nights.

The sun has set now, and there's a crisp chill in the air, but it's nice, so we have the truck bay doors open, letting the breeze come through the entire firehouse.

"I'll see your five dollars and raise you ten," Jordan, the new guy, says, keeping a straight face.

I'm watching with my arms over my chest as Graham takes a peek at his own cards then back to the four cards in the middle.

"Let's see it." He nods to me and I reach out, drawing the fifth card and laying it on the table, the Queen of Hearts.

It's silent while Graham and Jordan size each other up.

"I'm going all-in, fellas," Graham says, pushing every coin and bill he has to the center of the table.

He's bluffing. I have always been able to read Graham like a book and he hates it. That's why he'll never play against me.

All of our attention goes to Jordan, who is now looking at his hand, back at the cards in the center of the table, then to Graham.

*Come on, Kid. Don't be scared of him.*

“Fuck,” he sighs, tossing his cards down. “I fold.”

Groans erupt from all of us who are watching before Graham begins to wildly laugh.

“Should have been braver, kid.” He shows his hand, and he didn't have shit. Nothing at all.

The bragging begins, all in good fun of course, when my name rings over the intercom.

“Black. You've got a visitor.”

I check my watch and it's nine o'clock at night. “On my way,” I call out.

I half-jog, half-walk toward the front of the station, through the two trucks, and find Sawyer standing there in a pair of leggings and a hoodie. Her hair is in a high ponytail, and her makeup free eyes are red and blotchy.

“Baby? Are you okay? You've been crying.” I try to reach for her, but she steps backward out of my touch. “Sawyer?”

“Don't touch me, okay. I just... I can't handle it right now if you touch me.”

“Did something happen? What's wrong?”

She sniffs and wipes her cheek with her sleeve and thrusts her phone at me. “Please explain this and tell me I'm crazy.”

I only have to read the title of the video to know what it is, and my surroundings start to shake, my stomach nearly drops to my feet.

“Sawyer, I need you to listen to me...”

“Did you know? Did you know who I was?”

*Now or never. Fight or flight. Don't fuck up, Black.*

“Not at first, but... yes.”

Her eyes squeeze closed as another tear slips free. “How long?”

“Sawyer, please let me hold...”

She shakes her head and steps out of my reach again. “How long, Isaac?”

“A few weeks.”

“A few weeks?” she shouts. “You’ve known for a few weeks and you never told me?”

“I didn’t know how to tell you. It wasn’t like I could just come out and say it.”

“Yes, you could! That’s exactly what you should have done.” She pauses to take a breath. “How did you find out?”

I stand stock-still, fighting every urge I have to grab her by the shoulders and pull her to me, kissing the life out of her just so she can see I love her. I love her so much.

“When you told me about what happened to him. I never put it together before because you look so different now, but once you told me the story... I knew.”

“I feel so stupid. You just lied to my face every day for weeks. Isaac... I... You should have told me right then. Right that second. Maybe we could have figured it out then, but

now....” She is pulling away, curling into herself. I can almost see her walls building as high as the sky in front of my eyes.

“Now what? Tell me, Sawyer, what does this change in the grand scheme of things? I’m still me. You’re still you. Yes, we have a fucked-up connection to each other, but that played zero part in my feelings for you.”

“How doesn’t this change everything, Isaac?” She begins to cry harder now, not even trying to contain it anymore. “I spent five years mourning my brother, trying so hard to blame his death on anyone but him because that was easier. I spent five years hating the man who I felt didn’t react fast enough or didn’t do something better, even though I knew it was a lost cause. I felt like I was doing something right by my brother for placing that anger and resentment on that man. Then I went and fell in love with him.”

Her last words come out in a staggered breath.

“Sawyer, I did everything I could do that night... Jason...”

“Don’t!” she snaps, pointing a finger at me. “Don’t say his name. Just... don’t. You didn’t know him. Don’t talk about him like you knew him. I can’t listen to it. Not after everything. I had practiced what I would say to that man if for some reason our paths ever crossed... I guess the joke is on me though. The universe likes testing me, I guess.”

Fuck the distance. Fuck the tension. I need her to look at me. To feel me. To see me.

I step forward, taking her face in my hands and force her eyes to mine. She doesn't pull back; she doesn't fight me.

"I love you, Sawyer. I love you so much. I didn't tell you because I couldn't break your heart like that. I just... fuck... I love you so much. Isn't that enough?"

Her bottom lip begins to tremble. "Maybe... if you hadn't lied to me. That isn't something I can look past, no matter how much I love you. And I have to be honest, Isaac. Every time I look at you now, all I see is his face and think about the fact he's not here anymore. I don't know if I'm strong enough for that."

"Don't do this."

I feel it coming from a mile away. With every second that passes, a link to the chain that connects our hearts together starts to break. One after another until she pushes up on her tiptoes, presses a kiss to my lips, and snaps the remaining one free. "I love you, Isaac... but I can't do this anymore."

She turns and bolts back out the front of the fire station toward her car, disappearing around the corner.

I stand there in shock... in sadness... in anger at myself.

I should chase after her. I should go to her. I should fight for us.

But I don't.

Maybe it's a sick form of self-punishment for not following my first instinct and telling her the truth.

Maybe I deserve this, because she's right. I'm a constant reminder of the worst day of her life. How can I ask or expect her to put herself through that?

Is love enough to overcome that?

I guess I'll never know.



# Chapter 24

## Sawyer

I'm not sure how long I've been driving. It could be three minutes or it could be three hours. I can't go home because everything in my house reminds me of him. I can't stop driving because the silence of a killed engine and lack of music is deafening.

So, I drive.

Tears have been falling down my face since I turned and walked away from him, and a stone has made a permanent home in my chest where my heart used to be. I don't have that anymore though. I gave it to Isaac and he didn't give it back. I have a feeling he'll have it for a very long time.

I don't know if he's called or texted me. My phone is off and in my purse in the back seat, out of my reach, out of my sight. If I see it or see him call, I'll answer and I'm not strong enough to stay on my path right now. I can't look at him. It only makes everything hurt more.

I've long since stopped recognizing the streets I'm on, letting myself get lost on the winding roads with only my headlights and the sounds of my radio keeping me company. All I want is to drown out my thoughts and just forget all about this.

If I forget about him, maybe it will hurt less.

I roll to a halt at a stop sign before taking a right onto another curvy road, just as the first trickle of rain hits my windshield.

A laugh bubbles in my throat. A pure, feeling sorry for myself, like this day could get any worse laugh escapes my lips.

*Of course it would rain.*

But with rain, comes cleansing... clarity... regret.

I miss him.

I've only left him a few hours ago and the longing in my soul already outweighs the anger and betrayal I feel toward him by a clear mile. I'm squeezing the steering wheel so tightly that my knuckles are white. He lied to me. He kept something huge from me and that's unforgivable.

*But he was going to tell you. He just didn't want to hurt you.*

There was this cartoon I loved when I was a little girl. It was silly and ridiculous, but I remember one of the characters had an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. They would try to sway him to do one thing or another. It was all funny things, of course, but I can relate to that in this moment.

Angel Sawyer is telling me to go back to him. To give him the benefit of the doubt and talk to him. To listen to him. To love him. It would be a balm to the aching inside of my heart.

Devil Sawyer is telling me to keep driving and never look back. To drive away from Sunset Valley and start over where the memory of him will be in the rearview because he lied. He looked me in the face and lied. After Jason, lying is something I never allow in my life.

But I remember the dancing in Napa and making sushi together on our first date. I remember the way his face lit up when Herbert jumped up onto his lap and when we kissed for the first time. I remember the way his hands felt on my body and the taste of his lips. I remember his laugh... his voice... I remember falling in love with him so quickly that I felt drunk.

I remember that I don't know if I can live without him.

My heart begins to race as more tears begin to fall. I need to get back to him. I need to tell him I'm sorry and I'm here. I want to be with him, no matter what.

I round the next curve, determined to find a place to turn around, but all I see are headlights.

All I hear is the sound of bending metal and breaking glass.

Then... nothing.

## Isaac

I should be sleeping.

The bunkroom is dark, cool, and quiet. Arguably, I sleep better here than at home sometimes.

But I can't even close my eyes right now. When I do, all I see is her tear-stained face, and all I feel is my heart breaking all over again as I replay our conversation over and over.

I've called her cell phone a dozen times. Every single call rings and rings then goes to voicemail. She isn't ignoring the call, just simply letting the phone go unanswered. I've kept my cell clutched in my hand since the moment she ran away from me in hopes she'd answer a text or call me back.

But it stays dark... silent.

"You okay?"

I hear the whisper from the darkened distance then footsteps coming closer to my bunk.

"I'm fine, Graham."

"We heard what happened. It was hard not to."

"I don't want to talk about it. At all." I stare up at the ceiling, talking without even looking toward him.

"Good, but you need to make sure your head is clear. This can cloud your judgment and we can't have that right now. If

you need to go home—”

“I’m not going home. I can do my job without personal shit getting in the way.”

No sooner do the words leave my mouth does our alarm begin to scream into the night.

Everything happens in a blur.

We jump from our bunks, dress in our gear, and get on the truck in less than ninety seconds.

Codes are being thrown out, indicating a driver called dispatch to report a two-car accident off Manuel Canyon Road. Fuck. If there is one place you don’t want to have an accident, it’s there. With dense forest on one side and a steep embankment down to rocks and trees on the other, it’s a fucking nightmare waiting to happen.

We verbally run through our checklists as we make our way to the crash site. It’s never easy being one of the first people on scene. You never know what you are going to encounter and sometimes, it turns into the worst-case scenario.

When we round the darkened corner, the red taillights from the cars come into view.

There is a white SUV on the side of the road, and the front end is mangled to shit and who I can only assume is the driver is standing next to the guardrail with his cell phone to his ear, looking over at something.

Our truck’s brakes hiss as they’re applied, and I’m the first to hop down out of the truck, making my way over to the man.

He's middle-aged, I think, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He seems to be all right with no outward signs of injury.

“Sir?”

“I'm fine!” he shouts. “Her! Help her!” He points over the guardrail and that's when I see the second car.

A car whose driver's side is completely mangled and crushed inward, hanging upside down with its hood toward the rocks at the bottom. A car that is still running, sending exhaust into the air in a thick cloud. A car that is barely held in place by a piece of the metal guardrail caught on the bumper, and if it snaps or gives way, it'll be a car that is falling straight down into the rocky embankment.

My stomach would be in knots in a normal circumstance, nervous and pumped-up on adrenaline from being on a call, but it's the color of the car... the make of the car... and the small white flower window decal on the back passenger window that sends my heart into overdrive.

“Sawyer?” I shout, taking off in a full sprint, completely disregarding every safety protocol and rule we have in place, hopping the guardrail, sliding through the mud toward her driver's side, just to see if I can see inside, careful not to touch the car, afraid it will go. “Sawyer?” I shout, trying to see into the car, but the twisted metal, broken glass, and rain make it almost impossible. “I need some help down here!” I yell up toward the road.

I drop to my stomach in the slick mud, my heart pounding so wildly I can hear it in my ears.

“Sawyer? Can you hear me?” I holler into the car. The sound of the pounding rain makes everything harder. It’s like a discombobulating, constant white noise wrapping around us. It’s nearly impossible to think.

“Isaac!” I hear Graham call from behind me as he slides down on both feet, the mud becoming more and more dangerous as the rain keeps pouring. I look back over my shoulder at him to see him securing the safety harness around his body.

“She’s not responding.” I’m near frantic at this point, shoving past him to the passenger side of the car, which thankfully has been spared the brunt of the impact.

I lay on my stomach to look through the window, that is still intact, and everything in my body starts to buzz with fear and anger.

I can see her, twisted around with her torso laid over the center console, but slightly hanging as the seat belt has her pinned in the seat, completely upside down.

“Fuck! Sawyer!” I pound my fist on the glass window but the metal begins to groan and hiss from the movement.

“Christ, it’s going to go any second!” Graham yells out.

The driver’s side of her car is completely crushed in, pressing up against the left side of her body. The center console has totally encased the latch for the seat belt. The belt itself is pulling tight over her chest, keeping most of her body

pressed tightly into the seat. It's trapping her upside down. She couldn't move even if she were conscious.

The rain and thunder set the scene like it's straight out of a movie. Lights and voices are everywhere around us now, as the rest of my crew makes their way carefully to where we are. The embankment is steep. One misstep and we will end up at the bottom.

"Talk to me, Black," Graham shouts over the pounding rain.

"I need to get her out. That guardrail can only hold so much weight and this car is going to go any second. I need to cut her from the belt and help her out."

Everyone who is able descends upon us, trying to secure the car in place, but the added movement on the mud under the slick roof of the car starts making the car slide forward, adding tension to the piece of metal holding it in place. The metal begins to creak and crunch as it moves.

"Get back!" I wave them back up the hill. "Don't come down here."

"Go back up!" Graham shouts back.

"I have to break the window," I tell him. He is the only one down here with me now. "I'd have to tug on the door too much to get it open and I don't want to jostle it around." I take off my helmet and jacket, leaving it in the mud.

"Isaac, you don't have long."

"I won't let this car go with her in it. We are getting her out first. If nothing else, you make sure you get her out first, okay?"



Even if it means I'm in the car if something happens. She comes out first."

"Isaac..."

"Look at me!" I nearly scream, grabbing the front of his helmet. "She comes out first. Okay?"

"Not a chance I'm leaving here without both of you in tow. No exceptions."

I nod once and lie back down on my stomach, pulling the bright orange window punch from the utility belt around my waist. I give the window a tap, to see if I notice any twitch or movement from her hand, but I do not.

*God, if you take her away from me... I'll never forgive you.*

"Busting now!" I communicate with Graham before giving the window a firm stab with the pointed end of the punch, causing the window to shatter into a million pieces.

I toss the tool back out behind me, and use my gloved hand to move the glass out of the way, before sliding the front half of my body into the window of the car.

It's never easy to keep your bearings inside of an overturned car, and unfortunately, this isn't my first time inside of one. It's confusing at first and feels so foreign for something you've been inside of so many times.

The airbags have deployed, causing the white, fire suppressant dust to cover the dark interior of her vehicle.

I carefully roll over to my back, and slide my body underneath what is left of the steering column when the metal begins to groan again. I freeze, closing my eyes and holding stock-still until the sound stops.

When I open my eyes, a sight I never hope to see again greets me.

Sawyer face is swollen, covered in blood, coming from somewhere I can't pinpoint yet. She nearly doesn't even look like herself.

"Baby? Sawyer?" I slip my glove off then reach up and touch her face, sliding my fingers down the column of her neck and holding there, praying I feel the beating rhythm of her pulse. "Come on, baby. Come on."

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

There has never been a better feeling.

"She's alive!" I call out to Graham, and I hear him relay the message up the embankment.

I feel around her, trying to see if I can just unhook the seat belt and get her out, but the angle of everything and the state of the car itself makes it impossible.

"Isaac, we've got a lot of water coming down this hill. The rain is picking up. We gotta move it!" Graham warns me, as I reach down and pull the seat belt cutter from my belt.

"Get down. Get ready to pull her out!"

I yank the belt away from her skin and line the blade up with the material and try to yank the slice through in one motion, because doing it more than once becomes a game of Russian roulette. I know when I finally get her free; her entire body weight is going to shift. I have to be able to brace her on top of me to keep from jostling the car too much.

“Are you ready?” I ask out to Graham, and he confirms he is.

“I won’t let you die out here, baby... I promise,” I tell her, even though she can’t hear me, then I slice into the seat belt across her lap, cutting it into two pieces.

As expected, her body begins to slide down from the seat, but I grab her, as best I can, guiding her down until she’s lying on top of me.

Cradling the back of her head, I roll us to the side so I can help Graham get her out.

“Grab her legs!” I tell him, trying my best to protect her head and body because I just don’t know how extensive her injuries are.

“I’ve got her, I’ve got her!” he shouts back, as he begins to pull her free.

I don’t want to move, not even a little, until I can see she is completely out of harm’s way.

The moment her feet clear the window and Graham confirms she’s clear; I begin the slow process of extracting myself from the car with careful precision.

A crack of thunder sounds through the air and lightning flashes with the loudest snap I've ever heard in my life, just as my legs clear the window frame.

“Isaac! Look out!”

*Snap.*

*Crash.*

# Chapter 25

## Sawyer

Beep.

*Turn it down.*

Beep.

*It's so loud. My head is killing me.*

Beep.

*Wake up, babe.*

That voice. It sounds so distant in my head. So far away it's like it didn't even happen, like I'm imagining it.

I swear I can feel him. Whenever he's close by, my heart races and my skin heats, like they know he's around... like they're waiting for his touch or attention.

Beep.

*I just want to talk to you.*

There are muffled sounds, movement, whispers... a door.

I blink my eyes open, but close them just as quickly because the light over my head is so bright that it's shocking.

"Lights," I say, or try to say. I'm not even sure the words come out. My mouth is so dry I can't even move my tongue. It's essentially stuck to the roof of my mouth and my lips feel dry and tight.

"Sawyer?" another voice, a different one, calls to me.

"Lights," I say again, louder this time. "Bright."

"Lights. Okay, I'll turn them off. I've got it."

I can hear the shuffling of feet and the click of a switch before darkness washes over my eyelids, giving me the sanctuary to open them without fear of pain.

I blink once, twice, then look around. A hospital room. I take stock of my body, trying to focus. Where am I hurt? How badly am I hurt?

I look down at my chest; my right arm is in a splint, lying across my body right under my chest. I feel like I've been repeatedly punched in the face, and my head is killing me, but all in all, I think I'm okay. It's not lost on me how lucky I am to be breathing right now.

"Sawyer?" the voice says again, this time closer... much closer.

"Liv?" I turn my head toward her and see her standing against the door, dressed in leggings and a baggy tee. She must have just come here from bed.

“You scared the shit out of me.” She places her hand on her chest then begins to cry. “You can’t do that to me. Never again.”

I can feel a tear slip from my eye and leave a wet trail down my cheeks. “Water?” I ask.

“Yes. They left you a pitcher.” She pulls the rolling tray closer to me and pours water into a paper cup from one of those white and pink water pitchers that apparently come standard in every hospital.

She guides the straw between my lips and I suck the cold liquid into my mouth. It’s so refreshing and needed I swear I can hear my tongue sighing in relief.

“Thank you,” I say, then reach for her, wanting my friend to come closer, to hug her so she knows I’m all right.

She shakes her head. “You have so many tubes and wires. I can’t.”

“Liv, you’re not scared of anything. Come here, please.”

I pat the small side of the bed for her to sit next to me. There’s an IV stuck in the top of my hand that I hadn’t even noticed before, but it’s not attached to anything. Thank God. That makes me queasy.

She very gently half-sits on the bed next to me, and I lay my hand in her lap to hold her hand.

“Every single worst-case scenario ran through my head when I found out.” She stares at my hand as she talks. “You’re

my best friend. I was so scared you were going to be so hurt, or worse.”

“But I’m okay, so no more tears.”

“How long have I been here?” I look toward the window. It’s still dark out.

“Just a few hours. You lost consciousness for a while. You hit your head really hard. The doctor said you have a concussion and a fractured arm. You’re pretty beaten up, but you’re incredibly lucky. Once they got you here, they gave you something in your IV for pain and I think that just kept you asleep for awhile. They did some scans to check your head, but said besides the concussion, there isn’t any swelling or bleeding. And when you hit the steering wheel, it cut your forehead open pretty bad. Sawyer, they said there was so much blood.” She looks down at our hands.

“That explains the throbbing.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

The lights flash in my eyes, the tires screech in my ears, my stomach drops as the car flips... It’s vivid in my mind, until that moment... after that, there’s nothing.

“Not really. I just remember swerving and then waking up here.”

The door to the hallway pushes open, sending light slicing through the room and revealing the black silhouette of a very backlit man that nearly fills the entire doorway. He’s stock-still... unmoving until he speaks.



“Ah, I’m glad to see you’re awake, Ms. Westbrook,” he says, as he steps into the room. He’s an older gentleman with a balding head, a white jacket synonymous with doctors, and a stethoscope around his neck. “I’m Dr. Wilder. I’m a trauma physician here in the emergency department.”

“Hi,” I say weakly.

He peeks over my chart again then adjusts his glasses. “You gave everyone quite a scare, but I’m happy to report that you’re going to be just fine. You took a nice bump on the head and you’ve got some cuts, scrapes, bruises, and that fracture in your arm, but overall, you made it out of this fairly well. As long as your vitals stay steady and there isn’t a change on the scan I’d like to do tomorrow morning, we’ll have you out of here by dinnertime tomorrow. How’s that sound?”

“That sounds perfect to me,” I tell him.

“Good. Now, I’d better go tell that boyfriend of yours you’re awake. He’s been pacing the waiting room for hours.” He laughs as he exits the way he came.

I nearly sit straight up, and I think I would have if I were able. “What? Isaac is here?”

Olivia nods. “He was the one who called me. He and his station were the first on site, sweetie. He pulled you free.”

My bottom lip begins to tremble and wet, hot tears fill my eyes as I try to process it all.

“Is he okay?” I ask in a husky tone, my dry throat and impending cry making it even deeper.

“I’ll go get him and you can see for yourself.” She bends to kiss my forehead before leaving me alone for a few moments to prepare myself. The last time we spoke, it was in anger. I have so many things to say, so many things to take back.

I can hear the loud footfall, like someone is running down the hallway before it stops just outside my door... and pushes it open.

He’s backlit, of course, just like Dr. Wilder was, but that doesn’t last long.

He takes another step into the room so the small light shining from the bathroom reveals his face to me. He’s filthy, covered from head to toe in a thick layer of mud and dirt.

We are completely alone with a giant elephant in the room and a desperate need to just be near one another. It’s a living, breathing being: our feelings for one another. I was foolish to ever think for one second I’d ever be able to live without him.

“You saved my life,” I tell him simply.

“I would have given mine to make sure I did.”

I shake my head. “Don’t say things like that to me. I can’t even think about that.”

He takes another step closer. “Sawyer, you don’t seem to understand, I love you that much. Hell, maybe I didn’t even understand it until I saw you in that car. I would have laid down my life, done anything, to get you safely out of harm’s way.”

I purse my lips together as tears begin to fall. “I shouldn’t have left you. I should have just listened to you.”

“And I should have told you the truth from the moment I found out, but I didn’t. I don’t want to live with the weight of woulda, coulda, shoulda on my shoulders, and I don’t want you to either. I just... I love you Sawyer. It’s simple really. I love you.”

“Please come here. Please don’t stay so far away from me.” I reach for him with my uninjured arm.

“I don’t know where we stand, baby,” he says, as he sits down in the chair right by the bed and cups my face gently in his hand. “That’s why I stayed out there and let Olivia be here with you. I didn’t know if you’d even want to see me, but now that I have you within reach again, I’m not giving up. I’m here. I’m right here with you, and I’m not leaving until you tell me to, and if that’s what you still want, I’ll go. It’ll tear me into pieces, but I’ll go.”

I swallow the knot forming in my throat. “I was so angry at you. So angry and hurt that I was blind. All I knew was I felt so... embarrassed and confused. I felt like I had done something wrong to my brother by falling in love with you. I know that doesn’t make any sense, but it’s how I felt. For five years, I healed through letting my anger toward you—a person I didn’t know—build. Then you were placed in my path to teach me a lesson, I think. You see, you’re my hero. You were my hero then, that day in my house, and you were my hero

tonight. You didn't let my brother die. My brother's choices killed him. Blaming you was easier than blaming him."

He rests his hand on the side of the bed, hiding his face from me, but I can hear the sound of him crying, even if he doesn't want me to.

"I saw that car and thought you were gone."

"I could have never been gone. You wouldn't have let that happen." I touch his head. "Look at me."

He lifts his head and uses his very dirty sleeve to wipe his face. "Don't tell anyone I cried. Especially Caleb," he tries to joke.

"Your secret is safe with me on one condition."

"Name it."

"You kiss me and tell me you love me. As long as we have that, I think we can handle anything."

# Chapter 26

## Isaac

It's been two weeks since I thought I lost her twice.

Once standing in the middle of the truck bay and again on the side of the road at the hands of a distracted driver, but somehow, the universe knew we weren't finished with each other yet.

Minus the bump on the head, a few scrapes, cuts, and a fractured arm, she came out relatively unscathed.

Because of my blatant lack of regard for my safety in the rescue, I was awarded a two-week paid suspension. I'm not mad though, because I wanted to be near if she needed anything, and selfishly I was still riding the "she took me back" high. I wasn't ready to give that up yet.

"I want this damn thing off," she groans, fidgeting with her sling. "It's annoying. I need my hand back."

"Two weeks." I pass by her on the sofa and kiss the top of her head then lean against the far wall, just watching her with an amused grin.

“Don’t you miss sex? I miss sex. People have sex with splints on all the time. Get this thing off me and we can have sex right now.”

“We had sex last night,” I remind her with an arched brow.

“We did, and it was incredible, but imagine how much better it could have been if I could have used *both* of my arms and hands.”

I smirk, thinking back to last night when she was on her side with me tucked in perfectly behind her, thrusting myself in deep. I bit and sucked on her ear and neck, telling her how perfect she was and how much I loved her.

“I don’t know, last night was spectacular as it was, but if you’d rather hold off on any more until next week...”

“No! Don’t you dare, Isaac Black!” She points at me like a teacher scolding a misbehaving student. “I’m just whiny and annoyed.” She plops back into the couch.

I chuckle and sit next to her, prompting Herbert to hop down from his perch on the window and climb into my lap, which has turned into his favorite place to be. Sawyer hates it. I love it.

“You know what kind of sex is the best sex?”

“Doggy style with all four limbs in use?” she whines.

“Well, yes, but I was going to say morning sex.”

“That’s random, but I agree.”

“Wouldn’t you like to have morning sex... anytime you wanted?” I stroke Herbert’s back and look toward her.

She stares at me blankly, not even blinking for a second before rapidly blinking and looking away. “Did you just ask me to move in with you?”

“I did. You are only renting, and don’t think I haven’t heard you casually mentioning that your lease is ending. Sawyer, I want to see you in the mornings when you’re all messy and sleep ruffled. I want to be here when you come home after a long day. I want us to cook together and sleep together every night. I want the morning sex and the bickering then makeup sex. I want it all, Sawyer, everything. I want it with you.”

“Are you ready to have Herbert ruling the house?”

“I’ve already gotten him a litter box... and a cat hammock thing that I think he’ll like and—”

She cuts me off with a kiss to my lips before pulling away with a smile then drops her forehead to mine.

“Yes. Herbert and I would love to move in with you.”

With a fist raised in the sky, I pull her back to me and take her lips once again.

The last thing I was expecting to happen to me was to fall in love, let alone with someone I was supposed to leave behind once the job was finished, once the flames were doused.

But some flames never burn out; some can’t be tamed or muted.

Some are branded on you forever, and sometimes you don't even know it until you least expect it.

We were placed in each other's paths for a reason, and I'm ready to spend everyday of forever never taking that for granted.



Epilogue

**Ten Months Later**

## Sawyer

“Keep your eyes closed, Sawyer. I swear, if you ruin this surprise...”

“I’m not peeking, I promise.” I reach out in front of me with one hand as I walk blindly, only being guided by his hand in mine.

“I have a question for you,” Isaac says. “There’s a step. Be careful.”

I carefully step up, noticing under my feet that we’ve gone from a soft, grassy surface to a hard, concrete one.

“I have an answer, hopefully.”

“Do you remember telling me the story of how Jason always wanted to go skydiving, but he was never able to?”

“Of course I do.” My heart constricts even now at the thought of it. “It’s all he ever talked about.”

“Okay, stop here,” he says, then releases my hands. “Keep your eyes closed.”

I can sense him moving to stand right in front of me. I can smell some kind of fuel. It smells kind of like a garage wherever we are. Not familiar at all.

“What’s going on?” I ask, eyes tightly shut.

“You still owe me another date, remember? You agreed to five and I don’t think we ever got those officially.”

“I’ve been on plenty of dates with you, Isaac.” I laugh.  
“Where are we?”

“I want to do right by Jason, even though I never met him. Open your eyes.”

I do as he asks and it takes me a moment to figure out where we are. It’s a large airplane hangar with a small, yellow plane being tended to by two men in flight suits. I spin around to look and take it all on.

“What? What’s happening?”

“Jason never got to experience something he wanted. He never got to fulfill this dream because other things clouded his mind. I want to give you the chance to close that loop for him, to do this for him, in his memory, in his honor... on his birthday.”

My lip begins to tremble and I cover my mouth with my hands. I’m overwhelmed. I don’t know what to say.

He pulls something from his pocket and walks around to stand behind me before clasping a necklace around my neck. It’s long and hangs just between my breasts. I reach down to look at the pendant, and it’s a locket. When I open it to see what’s inside, my knees nearly buckle.

My favorite picture of Jason, in his flight suit, and I waiting for his turn to go indoor skydiving.

“Now, he can go up with you.”

My heart feels like it's going to pump out of my chest. The only thing I want to do is throw myself at him, and so I do. I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around his waist, burying my face in his neck.

“Where did you get this picture?”

“I had a little help from your mom. She was my accomplice.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” I sob. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

To some, it may be silly, but to me, it means the world.

“I love you, baby.” He cups the back of my neck and pulls my lips to his.

“I love you too,” I murmur against the kiss, but don't dare break it. Honestly, I would probably let him have me right here on this cold concrete if we weren't interrupted.

“Ahem.”

I break the kiss then uncoil myself from his body, turning to find a very cute strawberry blonde woman in a full flight suit and a pretty smile on her face.

“I'm sorry,” I tell her, wiping my face. “I'm a bit emotional.”

“Sawyer, this is Ella. She's actually Graham's sister-in-law. She owns this place.” Isaac motions to the large sign I didn't even notice before. “It's a sky-diving school.”

We shake hands.

“Wow, what a cool job.”

“It was my dream and now I have it. It’s surreal sometimes.” She giggles. “I’ll be jumping tandem with you, after we go through the mandatory safety training, of course.”

With each minute that passes as we go through the training videos and safety information, the tension and anxiety build in my chest. I’m terrified to do this. I never thought when I woke up this morning that I’d be free-falling out of an airplane today.

But when I kiss Isaac goodbye, step onto the plane with Ella at my back, guiding me through the process as we reach our appropriate altitude, I feel like my brother is with me.

I reach up and clutch my locket in my hands as the doors slide open, sending wind whirling all around us.

“Ready?” Ella asks in my ear and I nod. “Three... two... one... Let’s go!”

I don’t know what I expected when we took that step off the plane into a free fall, but it certainly wasn’t peace.

But that’s exactly what I feel. Somehow in the roar of the wind and the adrenaline being produced in my body, a calm floods my mind and I see Jason’s face.

This is what he wanted to chase: the rush, the feeling of nothing and everything all at once. I’ve never felt more connected to him since the day he died than I do right now. Somehow, even though it’s crazy... I can feel him until my feet slide across the grass when we land.

Ella unhooks herself from my back and I wildly exclaim what a rush it was and that I'm addicted. She just laughs and tells me she knows exactly what that feels like.

We walk together back to the hangar, where Isaac is waiting for me.

As soon as I see him step out of the hangar and face me with his hands in his pockets, looking like a modern day god, I take off in a sprint toward him. I jump into his arms, hugging him as tightly as I can.

"That's a rush I want to chase forever," I tell him, as he cups my face.

"Well, I want to chase you forever." He strokes his thumb over my lips.

"Looks like you've already caught me. Now what?" I lean in closer, our mouths nearly touching.

"Lucky for us, we have forever to find out."

THE END

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