

A SET OF SILVER FOX
SERIES STARTERS

first
impressions

L.B. DUNBAR

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

A SET of SILVER FOX SERIES STARTERS

L.B. DUNBAR

www.lbdunbar.com



First Impressions 1

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DEAR READER

Dear Reader,

Welcome to this collection of series starters.

AFTER CARE: When a sexy silver fox meets a breast cancer survivor, love could be just what the doctor ordered.

Escape on a Hawaiian vacation where a former rock star now band manager meets an incredible single mother celebrating a new perspective on life.

After Care begins the #sexysilverfoxes, a collection of friends and their siblings as they navigate life and love over forty.

SILVER BREWER: When a small mountain town man challenges a chirpy city woman to three days of camping, what could possibly go wrong?

Travel to Blue Ridge, Georgia where the Harringtons are small town beer-brewing royalty, and a city slick woman is determined to make a deal with the eldest son—his land or his heart.

Silver Brewer starts The Silver Foxes of Blue Ridge where four brothers in a small mountain town get second chances at love in their forties.

HAULING ASHE: Life might be a highway, but the last thing this grumpy silver fox wanted was to travel cross country with a ray of sunshine on a spirit trip.

Hit up Route 66 for seven days of forced proximity in a tiny car between one curmudgeon businessman and his

assistant's too-happy sister who drives him crazy while sparking something in him he hasn't felt in a long time.

Hauling Ashe starts Road Trips & Romance where three sisters head for three different directions with love as the final destination.

I hope you enjoy each beginning, and these romances lead you home to the rest of the books in each series collection.

Happy reading! xo, L.B. Dunbar

after
Care

L.B. DUNBAR

www.lbdunbar.com

After Care

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Dedication

#cancersucks

For those taken.

Grandma

Aunt Joan

For those who survived – twice.

Mom

And for those who hopefully will never get it.

MD, MK, and A

1

The Introduction

“Is that your daughter?” A pretty blonde sat next to me on the edge of the pool. I fidgeted with the scarf wrapped around my head and smiled.

“Yes.” The beautiful brunette was mine, and even though she was eighteen, she was child-like in spirit, laughing as two little girls splashed her. Watching the younger two frolicking in the water reminded me of my own children at that age. Life was much different then.

“Both yours?” I asked, shifting only my eyes to the twenty-something woman, adjusting the scarf once again on my head, waiting for her to notice it. There wasn’t a way to miss it. The thin material made no sense in the heat of the Hawaiian sun, but the traditional paisley patterned bandana in bright yellow made sense to someone like me. I was a breast cancer survivor. If you didn’t know, the head wrap gave it away.

She nodded in response to me, and we remained silent a moment.

My eyes closed as I faced the brilliant blue sky, soaking up the sunshine, a welcome reprieve from the frigid temps we left behind in Chicago. I desperately needed this vacation. *Party of three, please.* I looked forward to family time with my grown children. The doctors told me we had much to celebrate. I smiled despite myself as I looked back at the two babes dousing my daughter.

“She’s good with kids,” the young woman remarked, and I stared at my own child on the verge of womanhood. She’d make a great mother one day. Tears prickled my eyes. I didn’t

want to think dark thoughts, but they often crept in. Silently, I hoped I'd get to see the day she mothered a child of her own.

“Cannonball.” A loud male screech erupted from my other baby—more a child than a man at the age of twenty-two. He catapulted into the huge, oddly shaped pool, covering his sister in a tidal wave of water, and drowning the two little girls.

“Caleb,” I shouted but the mother next to me laughed. A man with dark, chin length hair caught one of her daughters under the arm, hoisting her upward from the vigorous aftershock of my son's jump. Masie held the other. Tiny arms wrapped around my daughter's neck, holding tight like a second skin. Laughter surrounded all of them.

“That's Ava,” the woman pointed to the dark-haired one matching her apparent father. “She's six. And the blonde, choking your daughter is Emaline. She's four.”

My eyes drifted back to the collection of young people but froze on the man with rock star good looks. Deep set eyes, a thin scrap of scruff around his jaw, and the midnight color of his wet hair, added to what I imagined was a brooding look on an average day. Smiling at his child made all the difference in his appearance.

“You can ask,” the woman said. “Yes, it's him.”

I turned to her. Her features were equally striking while softer than his. A playful look filled her blue eyes. Puffy, pink lips conjured images of them kissing each other enthusiastically. Passionate enough to create two small daughters. I sighed. It had been a long time since someone kissed me like that. Even the man who created two children with me had fallen out of practice years before everything happened.

“He's Gage Everly.”

I blinked at her, shaking my head in confusion. “I'm sorry. Should I know him? Do I know you?” My eyes opened wider, a tingle of fear that somehow, I didn't recognize him

when it should be obvious who he is. Not only had the cancer taken my hair, maybe it had also taken my memory. I chuckled, knowing that couldn't possibly be true.

“Gage Everly, lead singer of Collision?” Her brow rose in question, as if I should recognize him or the name of the band.

“I’m so sorry,” I said again, cursing the terrible habit I had of apologizing for everything. *I’m sorry I wasn’t younger. I’m sorry you no longer love me. I’m sorry I got cancer.*

I shook my head to acknowledge I didn’t recognize him.

She chuckled softly and clapped her hands once before covering her cheeks. “Oh my, how refreshing.” Her blue eyes beamed brighter than the sky overhead.

“I think it’s just because I’m old,” I weakly smiled, reaching for the bandana once again. My hair had moved from the stages of peach-fuzz to crazy C-shapes and kinky curly Qs, going in all directions. I didn’t need the material covering my head, but sometimes, I felt safer wearing it. My hair color hadn’t returned to my natural fading brown, but a mixture of white and dirty blonde.

You can dye it whatever color you want when approved, Nurse Marjorie had told me. *Purple’s very popular for people your age.* Her sweet, innocent voice intended to encourage me. Instead, I wanted to erase the smirk on her lips.

Your age. I was forty-three. I should have been in the prime of my life. Where was the return of my sexual libido that everyone promised me would happen? Oh, right, it walked out the door with a younger model—blonde, thin, and cancer-free under her skin.

The new hair combination caused conflicting emotions. On one hand, the brilliant color reminded me of my growing age. On the other hand, the change from lackluster to vibrant aided to the new persona I wanted to adapt. It was time for a change.

“Oh.” My companion’s eyes opened wide, “Oh, I wasn’t implying ... I mean ... It’s just that ...” Her hands waved in

front of her as she swung her thin body toward me. “It’s just everywhere we go people know it’s him. It’s nice to meet someone who doesn’t recognize Gage.”

I smiled. I didn’t know how to respond. A child squealed and I turned my attention to the pool, noting my son in a deep conversation with her husband. Masie still held one girl while the other tried to climb her father. When Caleb was younger, he’d wanted to be a guitarist. It had been his life’s ambition, until he discovered baseball. The sport became my ex’s dream for our son. Watching Caleb, his body straightened, his awe trained on the man before him—someone I didn’t recognize, but surely Caleb did.

A gruff voice behind us bellowed, “Please step away from him.”

My body twisted to face the sound, rich in baritone, tough as a boulder, and rugged like gravel under bare feet. I shivered despite the heat. Two thick arms crossed a midnight-colored T-shirt stretched over the barrel chest of an older man, likely in his forties with silvery hair curling at his neck and salt-and-pepper facial scruff. He wore black pants, balancing himself with a wide stance on thick legs. Regardless of tinted aviators, the weight of his eyes bored into me. Rock star sprang to my mind.

“It’s okay, Uncle Tommy,” the woman said. “They’re only talking.”

“Well, we all know where talking can lead.” His knuckles met his neck and he scratched at the hint of hair under his jaw. The sound traveled to me, and a thrill tickled my sun-heated shoulders. His pouty lips crooked in one corner as I sensed him teasing the girl. It was obvious he knew her secrets. “But seriously, he’s on vacation. He doesn’t need a groupie and some wannabe—”

“Excuse me?” I interjected, attempting to make my voice as knife sharp as his but failing miserably as he removed the aviators. Two deep set circles of coal returned his focus on me and the will to breathe escaped me. He stole my breath,

literally, and I self-consciously tug at the scarf once again. There was no way he couldn't notice the bright material, but he kept his eyes pinned to mine.

Out of respect, I told myself.

To hold me prisoner, my mind whispered back.

Take me, I foolishly screamed, and then the warmest blush I've ever experienced crawled over my skin, prickly, tickly, tingly like the tiny tap of a million feet. I shivered again. The motion snapped his attention and he turned away.

"Tommy, this is..." the young mother paused. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Eddie," I said, holding out my hand while the other fingers found security in touching the fabric just above my ear. "Eddie Williams."

"This is Tommy Carrigan. He's the band's manager." She turned to look up at him over her shoulder, her smile affectionate. "He's a giant teddy bear when he isn't acting like a grumpy eagle." She pouted as she spun back to me.

"Don't ruin my reputation before I make an impression, sweetheart," he teased with a hint of a Southern drawl, his eyes redirected to the pool, but his shoulders loosened a little. Oh, he'd made an impression all right. A deep one, right between my thighs just from the sound of his voice.

Then I noticed my hand still lingering in the air, waiting for him to reach out and shake mine. When he didn't, I awkwardly lowered it, fussing with my scarf one more time.

"Don't mind him," the woman said. "By the way, I'm Ivy. Ivy Everly, and I'm happy to meet you."

Her smile put me at ease. For some reason, I was just as pleased to meet her.

Funny how a random introduction changed everything.

2

A Sane Woman Would Never

The headscarf isn't there, I reminded myself.

Reaching for it had become a habit, but I didn't wear it that night.

You don't need it, Masie told me as I got ready for the evening, and I agreed. This was the first step to a new me, I encouraged myself, only my heart hammered at the thought as I pulled open the solid club doors. The tropical air tickled my neck while the wave of air-conditioning hit my face. The humid caress was a welcome feeling as I questioned once again, how had I gotten myself into *this* position?

Within hours of meeting, Ivy had invited me to join her for cocktails. At first, I hesitated, knowing we were on a family vacation, but my daughter encouraged me to go. She also agreed to babysit Ivy's little girls. And just like that, I was going out for drinks with Ivy Everly and her famous husband, Gage, lead singer of Collision, a band I knew nothing about.

My son told me they were something. "*Mom, how have you not heard of them?*" His voice echoed in my head. Suddenly, my arm was enveloped by another, and my face shot up to find Ivy's arm looped around mine. Her big, blue eyes widened like a smile.

"Ready?" she asked, tugging at me as I smoothed my black dress over my hips with my free hand. I was still a little bloated from the treatments—everyone responded differently—although my body shape was getting better. Even without cancer treatments, I'd never regain my shape from twenty years ago.

Without thinking, I reached up, my fingers finding soft hair unhidden by a scarf, reminding me once again of how far I'd come.

“You look beautiful,” Ivy said, and I glanced at her again, my brows pinching at the compliment. Her eyes saddened for only a second before she let the sympathy pass and a smile brightened her face. She squeezed my arm tighter. “There’s Tommy.”

My eyes flipped instantly to a man I had no business staring at, or thinking about, although he'd filled every thought since we were introduced earlier in the day.

Tommy Carrigan.

Not Tom. Not Thomas. Tommy—even in his mid-forties. His salt and pepper hair gave his age away, but more accurately, the slightly longer locks curling at his neck were shimmery silver and black satin. My mouth went dry when he looked in our direction. My cheeks heated, and I was thankful for the dim light covering the teenage-like feeling of bashfulness. I was only embarrassing myself with thoughts I shouldn't have had of a man whose very essence said player. His solid, barrel chest and thick biceps under another black T-shirt proved what I already knew about him. He wasn't a young man, but all-male. There was a certain sexiness about an older man, one no longer lean with a six pack, but firm, with a rounded chest and tight abdominal muscles. Tommy's T-shirt showed all that off, leaving very little to the imagination. Unfortunately, my imagination was running rampant, as was my heart. I was doubly grateful for the pulsing beat of the bar music drowning out the organ in my chest drumming three times faster than usual.

When we met earlier in the day, Tommy had the same effect on me, and I credited the shiver up my spine to being out of practice in the art of flirtation. I was instantly overwhelmed by his dark looks. Yet his defensive vibe of crossed arms and refusal to shake my hand left a salty impression on me. His standoffish presence set up a wall

between us, and I scolded myself for overreacting to his rock star hotness.

As Ivy and I crossed the night club, I was conscious of people watching us, wondering myself how *she* ended up escorting *me*? Despite her innocent look, Ivy walked like she owned the room, and many eyes followed her every move. The stares could have also been intended for the man making a beeline for us. With dark, chin-length waves and even darker, intense eyes, Gage Everly's focus was solely on his wife. Within seconds, he cupped her cheeks and kissed her like he hadn't seen her in years. Ivy's arm was still looped with mine, making me the literal third wheel to their passionate display of affection. Attempting to free myself from Ivy's grasp, my opposite hand was clasped, and I spun to find Tommy holding it. His fingers spread and without thinking, I laced mine with his.

The thick digits brought an instant comfort and distraction. A strange ripple traveled up my wrist, increasing my pulse and ratcheting up my already pounding heart.

"Gage!" Tommy barked, and the lovers broke apart. He shook his head, and I looked back to find a wicked smile on Gage's lips and a dazed look in Ivy's eyes. "Don't make me have to babysit," he commanded, and Ivy turned to face him. Shaky fingers pressed against a smile curving her lips.

"Chill, Care," Gage snapped, wrapping an arm around his wife. The nickname startled me.

"Sorry, Uncle Tommy," Ivy mocked, but there was a certain teasing familiarity when she spoke to him.

"Let's get you guys to the VIP section." Tommy still cupped my hand in his, and while every fiber of my being wanted to press my palm firmer to his, I tried to keep space between them. Only ... it wasn't working. My hand started to sweat and panic spread. I hadn't held a man's hand since ... I couldn't remember when. I couldn't think of the last time David held my hand—not even bedside during the worst of times. I wanted to melt into the warmth palming mine. Heat

flushed over every inch of my skin with thoughts of that same hand skimming my body. The image screeched to a halt. *My body*. He'd discover parts of my body weren't mine anymore. What was I even thinking? A man like him would have no interest in a body like mine or a woman like me—older, settled, boring. Scarred.

My arm flinched, hoping to loosen my fingers, suddenly feeling dragged instead of led to the roped-off VIP section. But his hold tightened, forcing our palms together, suctioned with the warm dryness of his and the dampness of mine. *Nope, never going to have interest in a sweaty, middle-aged woman*. I sighed.

“Take a seat,” he offered, nearly whipping me into a chair, while Ivy climbed on Gage’s lap when he sat on a couch. Tommy pulled a chair next to me, his body angled to where he could watch the boys in the band. His back toward the crowd.

“Are you their bodyguard or something?” I asked, snorting at the thought, even though his stature suggested it. His brooding stance earlier in the day gave me the same thought.

“Nah, their manager, but I might as well be a bodyguard. These boys can be a pain in the ass, especially Jared.” He nodded in the direction of a lounge chair, and I twisted to look over my shoulder. Brown hair, blue eyed—he looked so all-American to me, but the most innocent could sometimes be the guiltiest. Tattoos laced his arm. In contrast, thick-rimmed glasses covered his eyes. I didn’t know who Jared was any more than I recognized Gage when I met him by the pool, and my age was certainly showing in that lack of knowledge. The feeling of being out of my element grew ten-fold, and I shifted in my seat, tugging at the hem of my suddenly too-short dress, willing it to reach my knees.

I didn’t know why I even brought this dress with me on our vacation. I supposed I’d hoped for a little family-of-three dinner celebration. I was a survivor of many things, and the

Hawaiian trip was proof of it. Still, a form-fitting black dress wasn't my typical wear, and I was suddenly self-conscious in it. It could have also been the way Tommy's dark eyes narrowed on my fist at the hem. His gaze followed my struggle to pull the dress lower over my thighs. In the dimly lit bar, his eyes were silky black ink, matching the streaks in his hair. Taking a deep breath, his nostrils flared, and he looked away from me, his knuckles stroking the heavy scruff on his jaw—not enough to be a beard, but more than a dusting. It was more silver than black, and the contrast with his hair was mouthwatering. I'd noticed this same contemplative motion when we met.

My eyes followed his to a group of women drawing closer to our section. *Of course*, I thought, *younger women*. I glanced away in time to find a waiter headed toward us and held my hand up for a drink. He ignored me.

“Whatcha want, darlin’?” Tommy's gruff voice startled me, and I turned back to find him staring at me. Twisting a discarded napkin in my fingers, I was about to speak when he continued.

“Something fruity? A frozen frou-frou blend with an umbrella peeking out the top?”

“No,” I chuckled. “Why, do I look like a fruity drink kind of woman?” Where did the flirty tone come from? I didn't flirt. I still couldn't believe I even spoke to him. He hadn't spoken to me earlier in the day, and I sensed I was just one more person for him to babysit.

His eyes roamed my body, starting at my exposed knees. He licked his lips as his gaze rose from my hem to my thighs, and then further up, to my breasts. My chest heaved, and that's when I looked away. He was only teasing me.

“Actually, you look like a fine wine, aged to perfection, sweet on the palate and lingering on the tongue long after you've been swallowed.”

I gasped. “What?” A nervous laugh escaped, half thrilled, half deflated.

He had to be teasing me, but the richness of his words, the essence of his description, lapped over my skin as if he drank me in, inch by delicious inch, and swirled me in his mouth like a wine sample before swallowing me whole. Just like he’d described. Ignoring my horrified gasp, he lifted two fingers in the air, and the waiter immediately returned.

“A bottle of...” he paused, his eyes shifting sideways to me. “Red for the lady.”

“Actually,” I interrupted. “I’ll take a glass of Moscato, please.”

“Hmmm,” Tommy murmured. “My skills failed me. You seemed to balk at the sweeter things.”

“Really?” I laughed again. “You just thought I’d like a fruity drink.” I reminded him, pausing as I tilted my head. “What did you have me pegged for then?” Maybe I wanted to be fizzy and funny, like someone young and frivolous.

“*Actually*,” he smirked as he emphasized my word, “I had you pegged as—”

“Tommy, don’t you just adore Edie?” Ivy squealed from behind me, and I spun around to find a girl drunk on love, holding a light pink drink in her hand with her husband’s arm wrapped around her midsection. I sighed again. Oh, how I hoped life would always remain this way for them. My heart pinched, knowing it wouldn’t. Marriage was hard work. One in two marriages still ended in divorce. I wasn’t a statistic; I was a trend.

I smiled up at Ivy.

“Edie.” Tommy snapped his fingers next to me. “I thought your name was Debbie.”

I shake my head in disappointment. Once again, any thoughts of attraction to a man like Tommy Carrigan were futile. It was as if I was a kid again, star-struck by the aura of

rock star around him. Only, getting struck by a star would hurt, like an asteroid pummeling the Earth. *Kaboom!* I was spiraling out of my orbit, and I'd already been hit by that kind of heat—something I never wanted to experience again.

“Care,” Gage sighed, shaking his head at Tommy. It must have been short for Carrigan, his last name. “Try to be a nice guy.” Sarcasm dripped from his tone as he peered down at his manager.

“Edie. Like E and D,” Ivy smirked, glaring at Tommy.

What's with these two? I avoided any questions by the arrival of my wine. The entire bottle was placed on the table and a glass poured. The sweet bubbles tickled my mouth, and I quickly swallowed the prickling cool refreshment. One glass, then I'd excuse myself, I decided. This was over my head. The pulsing lights. The rhythmic beats. The dim corner for VIPs. I didn't belong here, and Tommy, not remembering my name, confirmed it.

“Take Edie dancing,” Ivy cooed, and I spun to gawk up at the blonde getting nibbled on the neck by her husband. I turned back to Tommy, and something in my expression made his eyes widen.

“I don't dance,” I blurted, gripping the back of my chair with one hand, the cool glass of wine in the other. I never danced. *Never.*

“Everyone dances,” Tommy replied, looking incredulous.

“Not me but go right ahead.” I nodded to the filling dance floor and the rising number of girls nearing our section.

Commotion to our side made Tommy twist in that direction. A few girls had crossed the barricade, and Tommy stood to speak with them. Jared got up as well, patting Tommy on the back as he took half a step toward him. Another band member joined the small montage of men holding back the young girls in their low-cut, too-short, slim-fit outfits.

“Excuse me. I need the bathroom,” I said, jumping up too quickly. I drained the wine in my glass as I watched Jared

smile, Tommy's arms flap in exasperation, and the blond band member reach for a girl, bringing her into the VIP section.

"I'll go with you," Ivy offered. However, we weren't college girls needing to tag team. I didn't actually know why I was there. I was a forty-three-year-old woman, and she was ... what? All of twenty-eight, if that?

"I'll be fine," I said, holding up a hand after steadying myself.

"You'll come back, right?" Her voice squeaked in a yearning lilt. My shoulders sagged. My plan had been to use the restroom and escape, apologizing later by feigning a headache.

"I'll be right back," I acquiesced, patting her arm in assurance.

In the bathroom, I gave myself a pep talk. *You can do this*, I encouraged, as I stared at my too-wide blue eyes and pursed my bright red lips.

You don't need to dance.

Just have another drink.

He bought the bottle for you.

This trip was to celebrate.

I sighed as I tugged at the wrinkled skin under my chin. The folds sprang back into place after releasing them. My uneven tan was striped with rings of a lighter mixture because of the folds, reminding me of an okapi leg. I had to laugh at myself. What else could I do? I didn't need to impress these people. I wouldn't ever see them again. Ivy seemed to latch onto me, but I didn't understand why. She was sweet though, and I decided I could hold the bold face for another hour. I washed my hands, patted my warm cheeks, and exited the bathroom.

Upon re-entering the club, my eyes landed instantly on Tommy, dancing. Well, maybe not dancing, but standing on the edge of the dance floor with a woman leaning into him and

another pressing playfully at his chest. As I crossed to the VIP section, he turned to face me, possibly feeling the weight of my gaze boring into his broad back.

It wasn't fair. How is it men aged well, while women just aged? If I was fine wine, he was a bottle of whiskey, his flavor ripening as the years passed, maturing him to perfection over time. Nervous fingers swiped through my wayward curls, and I spun away from his glance. Eyes focused on Ivy, I stalked toward her.

"Are you alright?" Ivy asked. "You look a little flushed." She rose and wrapped slender fingers around my arm, guiding me to take her seat.

"I'm fine," I replied, and as politely as I could, removed my arm from her grasp. "I think I'm going to call it a night, though." I pasted on my best false smile. Her eyes pinched, and her sweet face fell a little.

"Are you sure? I'm sorry if something happened." I didn't even know what she could mean, but her genuine concern warmed my insides.

"What could have possibly happened?" I teased. "Honest, honey, I'm all good. This really isn't for me, but you have fun. I'll check on your girls." Without hesitation, I reached for her, pulling her into a quick hug. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Maybe Petty should walk you to your room." *Petty?* Was that the blond band member's name? I glanced over my shoulder to see him whispering into the ear of the girl he pulled forward from the crowd.

"I don't think that's necessary." I chortled. Petty wasn't going to willingly step away from his momentary interest.

"I'll go with you then." Ivy stepped toward me as Gage reached for her waist. "Babe?"

As a young couple, him a rock star and her a mother, I bet they rarely had time out together. I couldn't begin to comprehend the life of fame, so I didn't try.

“Ivy, it’s only across the way.” I rubbed a hand up and down her arm, gave Gage another false smile, and turned for the exit.

I hadn’t made it down the hallway for the lobby before the sound of heavy feet followed me.

“Whoa, where you headed so fast?” The gruff voice startled me, as did the hand that gripped my bicep, and I spun, ready to fight off an attack.

“Tommy?” I gasped, completely shocked that he held my arm, pinning me in place.

“Why’d you leave so quickly, darlin’?” His hand slipped to my wrist before releasing me. A trail of heat trickled where his palm had blazed against me. I shivered at the sensation.

“I’m heading back to my room. The bar isn’t really my scene.”

His eyes narrowed on mine, and his lips twisted in a way that made him look like he contemplated something. He took my elbow and started tugging me in the direction of large double doors.

“What the heck?” I muttered, struggling only slightly under his grip. He pulled the door open with ease, drawing me into what appeared to be an empty ballroom. Tugging the door shut behind him, we were submerged in momentary darkness. “Are you insane?”

“Maybe,” he murmured before stepping closer. The assault of the air conditioning disappeared the moment his body came near mine. Heat emanated from his presence. “Why did you leave?”

“It wasn’t my thing,” I repeated.

“And what is your thing?” His arms crossed, glaring at me as our eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. I wasn’t about to tell him *my thing* was a good book and maybe a rerun on Passionflix. Reading passed the hours, filling my heart with adventures I’d never experience. I was good alone, even if I

didn't always like it. Lonely most nights, but it wasn't something you spilled to a stranger.

I crossed my arms to match his stance. "What do you think is my thing?"

"Do you always answer a question with another question?"

"Why?"

"See, you did it again." The hint of a smile gentled his statement, and I relaxed my shoulders. I reached for my head, then tried to disguise the nervous habit by twisting a too-short piece of hair around my index finger.

"I would have danced with you," he said, as if he'd do it for my sake—do *me* the favor. The hairs on the back of my neck rose, hackles bristling like a dog ready to bite.

"Well, thank you for that generous offer, but as I said, I don't dance." I lowered my hand from my hair and fisted it at my side.

"Why not?"

"Why does it matter?"

"You did it again." He chuckled, and I huffed. I hadn't noticed the habit, but with my previous condition, asking questions was a necessity.

"It's still early. Let me guess where you were headed." He paused, considering me for a moment, like he'd done when he was trying to figure out what wine I drank. He scratched at his neck, something I found strangely seductive, and a spark flickered inside me. "Clandestine rendezvous with someone?"

"No." I laughed, thinking he was more capable of such a thing than me.

"Off to read the latest mystery thriller?"

"No," I scoffed, trembling. He was getting closer to the truth.

“That leaves washing your hair or a good time with Mr. Bob.” He motioned toward my lower regions.

“What?” I barked.

But he ignored me and continued. “Or are you going to call your cats at home, check up on how they’re doing?”

“Thank you for making me feel even older than I already feel about myself.” My eyes narrowed. I didn’t own cats. I didn’t even like cats. And none of this was the point.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” His arms uncrossed, and he stepped toward me. Our chests rose and fell in opposing rhythm, until slowly, our breathing regulated, falling into a pattern with one another, but I couldn’t say who followed whose lead.

“I saw that girl leaning on you,” I snapped, shifting the conversation completely and sounding like a jealous girlfriend, but I couldn’t be jealous, not really. “I get that you’re used to younger things.”

His dark eyes widened in disbelief, then narrowed to black slits. “You know, darlin’, jealousy is an ugly shade of green, but on you, the color is beautiful.”

I straightened. Was there a compliment in that statement?

“You know what your problem is, though?” A hand came to my hip, and I should have swatted it away. Any sane woman would have done that. Any woman trapped in a dark ballroom, standing too close to a stranger whose body heat was higher than ninety-eight-point-six degrees would have pushed him away. But he made me want to be a little crazy. Maybe the treatment had damaged my brain cells after all.

“Please, enlighten me,” I bit out, wanting to cross my arms as a shield, but he stood too close. My hip was tugged forward.

“You need to be sexed up, and often.” His voice lowered, his tone dropping like pebbles plopping into a pond.

“Did you...Did you just try to quote *Gone with the Wind*?” I stammered, appalled that he’d ruined one of the greatest quotes of all time, but thrilled at the same time, that he misquoted it on me. Flutters rushed through my lower abdomen in a way I hadn’t felt in a long, long, *long* time. His eyes sparkled and another thought occurred.

“Sexed up?” I choke-barked.

“I’d use a different word, but I’m sensing you’re too much of a lady, and you’d be offended by it.”

Suddenly, I felt more offended that he couldn’t say what he wanted to do to me. I didn’t think I was that uptight. *That old.*

“Try me,” I whispered through gritted teeth.

“Nah, I think sexed up is good enough for you, darlin’. Anything else would be too much.”

My heart dropped. He was correct in many ways. I was well past the point of wanting my body parts crassly labeled or physical interactions demeaned. On the other hand, I also wanted someone to want me *that* passionately, just once in my lifetime. To clarify, I wanted someone who just wanted to fuck me, like being with me was the greatest moment of their life. Like they could never get enough, deep enough, connected enough—to me. It was a silly fantasy.

“I see,” I offered, my voice quiet. My shoulders fell, defeated. I knew what he meant. It was nearly the same thing my ex-husband said. *I wasn’t fun anymore.* Tommy’s hand remained at my hip, but the other hand brushed back my barely-there hair, caressing around my ear. There were not enough locks to curl behind it. It was another reminder of how incomplete I felt.

“Actually,” he teased. “I don’t think you do see. You’re that fine wine. Perfected and waiting to breathe. And I’m sensing you’re ready to be uncorked and sampled.”

My mouth fell open, a popping sound filling the space between us, and that’s when his mouth descended.

Two warm, large, plump lips melted over mine.

And I stilled instantly.

It had been nearly two years since I'd been kissed, and it definitely had not been like this. His mouth moved over mine, too harsh at first, too aggressive, until he realized I wasn't responding. Thick fingers combed into my short hair, and his hand at my hip tugged me flush against him.

“Kiss me back, darlin’,” he growled against my mouth.

My lips followed his lead, tentative at first. A tug of the lower lip. A suck on the upper bow. A lick across the seam, and I opened for him. My body crushed against his, arms sliding up his firm biceps to grip his shoulders. My tongue met his, curling and colliding, crashing with his as I breathed him into me, willing him to get closer. My breasts remained firm against his chest, and I nearly cried at the lack of sensation, but the rest of my body responded. The drumming between my thighs beat triple-time, making up for other areas.

Our mouths moved together, and he tipped my head for better access. We were making out like teenagers—lips exploring, hands slowly groping, an energy building around us that took my breath and shook it like glitter in a glass jar. Then his palm came to the side of my breast, and I halted, releasing his lips so quickly a soft pop echoed between us.

“I can't ...” My voice trailed off. Oh, God, this was embarrassing. This was the worst thing. I didn't know how to say it. “I can't...”

His thumb caressed the side of my breast, rubbing harder, pressing firmer.

“You don't think I've felt a fake tit before, darlin'?” The query stopped me. I hadn't realized I'd curled up on my toes to reach his height. My feet fell as flat as my heels would allow at the question. My hands slipped from his shoulders, drifting over the hills of his biceps and skipping to his chest. I palmed the firmness of his pecs. Solid. Strong. Real.

“How did you know?” The question was stupid. Of course, he’d touched other women, most of whom, I assumed, were younger than me. Of course he had. Groupies surely had implants. Some women had them for funzies, enlarging what wasn’t there or enhancing what God already gave them. Either way, my situation was different. “Don’t answer that. Never mind.”

“Jealousy just shifted to a different shade. Still like you wearing it, beautiful.” The words brought tears to my eyes, and I rapidly blinked. I couldn’t be jealous. Of course, he’d been with other women. *Look at him*, I screamed to myself. Although, I was more upset over the fact he called me beautiful, and I didn’t feel that way.

“I think I should go,” I whispered, lowering my head and almost resting it on his chest, but I held back. The thick pad of his finger tipped up my chin.

“Tell me what just happened here.”

“You kissed me,” I giggled without humor. In fact, my whole body shook with the after effect of what we’d just done.

“When I touched you,” he clarified. His dark eyes beamed down at me, but there was a softness to the edgy black. His eyes shimmered like ink instead of granite.

“I can’t...I just can’t let you touch me there.”

“Why not?”

I sighed, taking a step back. Two large hands caught me on my shoulder blades and brought me back to him. He massaged along my bra strap, thumbs circling in a way that would make a normal woman relax. Instead, I tensed.

“I have breast cancer. *Had.*” The doctor’s words echoed in my head. “I have no sensation in one ...” I choked on the word. *Nipple*. I had one remaining, but all sensation was lost there as well. Masie had convinced me to get a nipple tattoo just to make myself feel better. *To balance the girls*, but the flat disc was two dimensional and not the same thing.

He didn't respond, but his hands slipped to my hips.

This is it, I thought. He's going to thank me for the night. Or worse, not thank me at all, just step back and walk away. My head lowered in shame. Cancer wasn't my fault. I wasn't even embarrassed I had it. It wasn't contagious. It wasn't that kind of disease. But I also didn't want it to be a crutch. The last thing I needed was sympathy from a near stranger.

Preparing myself mentally for the blow to my ego, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and...

The sides of my dress rose up my thighs. The thick, tight cotton swept upward, revealing more skin to the air conditioning and the roughness of his jeans. My knees already brushed denim, but my upper thighs were feeling the softened fabric as well.

"What are you doing?" My voice was so low, it struggled with the words. My brain fought to comprehend what was happening. The pulse between my thighs beat faster than my heart, speeding toward a finish line without knowing when the race started. Dampness pooled on my cotton underwear, and the faint scent of my sex filled the sliver of space between us.

"You have other areas that are sensitive," he offered. "I'm sensing they have uncorked needs as well."

The sound of his gravelly voice nearly undid me. I clenched, suppressing the tremble in my knees and the urge to lift a leg and wrap around him like a tree. My clit sought friction. He was what I needed. His thick leg would be perfect. Better yet would be the mass straining against his jeans.

His fingers climbed—up, up, up—scrunching the material of my dress to my hips until ...

Shit.

"What the fuck?" His finger found the high-cut band at the leg of my underwear. Since it had clearly never, ever crossed my mind that anyone other than me would see these panties, I'd forgotten about them. High-cut *and* high-waisted, they covered my lower abdomen, landing at my true waist to

flatten the loose baggage of my lower belly. I suspected he was more familiar with thin lace and racy strings, and I had on the grandmother of all underwear in hopes of keeping a few things tucked into place.

“Oh my God,” I muttered, pushing at his wrists to lower my dress and cover myself. Could things get any more embarrassing?

Yes, actually.

He had slipped two thick fingers under the elastic band at my hip and trapped me by my underwear. Fingers clenched in the fabric, pinning me against him. I couldn't budge against his strength, and he wasn't releasing me despite my protest.

“This is embarrassing,” I murmured.

“You think I care about your underwear? I'm more interested in what's under there,” he growled. Literally, it was a groan of an epic man-bear.

I felt like a rag doll, jostled by the tug of my underwear, as I pressed at his chest to free myself. Then it happened. Two thick fingers crossed over my sensitive skin, so slick, so achy, so repressed. We both stopped struggling, and he repeated the motion before entering me. My breath hitched. Had he violated me? No, this was more like visceral pleasure to the *nth* degree. My inner muscles clenched tighter than it ever had. I was so turned on, I couldn't think. My surprised eyes found his just as shocked by my response. Was this really happening? Wasn't this every woman's fantasy? A random, sexy man in a dark ballroom during a vacation, who you'd never see again?

Not mine. Not here. Not like this.

His fingers stopped moving, his arm frozen in a position that pinned me to the wall and connected me to him. My hand returned to his wrist, wrapping around the thick trunk and clutching at it to remove his fingers from me.

“I'm not going to lie. I want you...but I can't do this,” I choked out, sounding weak, desperate, and lame. Why

couldn't I just let him finger me? Why couldn't I be carefree and open to experimentation? To one-night stands? To a fling? *God, maybe I should have cats.*

One hand on the wall near my head steadied him as our breaths mixed, twirling over each other's like our tongues had moments before. He pushed off the wall and stood taller, a paw of a hand rubbing at the heavy strain in his jeans, pressing seductively up and down with the heel of his hand.

"Don't tease me, darlin'. I'm too old for this shit."

No teasing. I wouldn't even know how to tease. I'd been married, divorced, and alone for three years. Teasing was the last thing I knew how to do.

"I ..." My voice faded as his fingers slipped inside me before dragging back to my entrance, threatening to exit me, and that's when I did the unthinkable. My traitorous body betrayed me.

I clenched.

My thighs slapped together, and our eyes snapped to one another.

"Oh, you're definitely teasing me, beautiful, and that buys me a free sample." His fingers thrust upward again, retreated and then filled me once more, causing me to tip up on my toes. An animalistic groan settled between us, and I realized too late the sound came from me. My lids closed, and my forehead lowered to his shoulder. It was as if I was drugged. His fingers danced to the edge again, then leapt upward into my depths. I was too far gone, too wet, too wanting of his touch *Because. You. Want. This*, my body screamed. My hips curled, and I bit into his shoulder.

"That's what I thought, darlin'. You were ready to breathe." He sniffed at my ear before pressing his lips to my neck. I squirmed at the sensation and danced over his fingers as he sped up their pattern, thrusting deeper, harder, thrilling me in a way I couldn't remember being thrilled. He was right. I wanted to breathe, and I was taking my first breath in a long

time. The air was thin, the fragrance thickening. I heard the slick sound of my sex being touched, tender yet tantalizing, and I rocked with each stroke, silently begging to reach the tipping point. In addition to the pleasure of his fingers, I fantasized that he'd say something dirty to me.

I want to fuck you, whispered in my head, and I detonated. Champagne uncorking had nothing on the release that escaped me. I overflowed with foamy bubbles and crisp crackles and sticky moisture that smelled sweet, tasted divine, and made me drunk on Tommy Carrigan. My head lolled back and tapped lightly on the wall behind me. Stars of silver light flittered behind my closed lids.

“That was something, darlin’,” he muttered to my neck.

You can say that again, I thought. And then panic struck. Oh, my God. *What had I done?* The sound of his fingers slipping out of me made me cringe. I...I just let someone finger-f... me. I couldn't even think the word, although the thought triggered me over the edge mere seconds ago. A trickle of dampness slid down my thigh, and I reached for it without thinking. Swiping my wet fingers on the wall, I used my other hand to straighten my dress and maneuver my underwear back in place. I couldn't look at him.

“Now,” he whispered, his voice gravelly and strained. “Uncork me.” His belt clinked, and a zipper unzipped. I was suddenly in over my head and rolled mine against the plaster behind me. Sensing something from eyes avoiding his, his thumb and forefinger tenderly gripped my jaw.

“Just touch me,” he said, and I was reminded once again of pebbles plunking into a puddle. Smooth, plopping splats. I'd never been spoken to like that, in a voice like that. Hesitantly, I reached for the opening of his jeans. The tips of my fingers tickled over the smooth head, rounding the mushroom shape to discover a mass so thick, so firm, so hard that my mouth watered. I closed my eyes and let sensation guide me, plunging forward as he had, to fit my hand within his jeans and encircle his stiff shaft. Coarse hairs tickled my

knuckles, and I drew upward, caressing the trail leading to his belly button while stroking his length.

“Fuck, darlin’. Slow is good, but fast is better.” I repeated the motion, and he swallowed. “Okay, slow is good, too,” he muttered, lowering his mouth to my neck.

“Might need you to sample me. Give it a taste,” he murmured as I continued to tug him, increasing the pressure as I squeezed. His hand covered mine, guiding me. I knew one thing. I couldn’t taste him. That was too much. Wild thoughts threatened to ruin it. *Where had his...been? Who had he been with lately? How many? How often?*

“Stop thinking,” he murmured as his lips parted, and he sucked at my skin—the same skin that had ripples and folds, a testament to my age. My head tilted, allowing him more access. I was ridiculously drunk on this man, letting him intoxicate me with gruff words, a scruffy jaw, and wicked fingers. His hand palmed my backside and squeezed, pressing me toward him as my palm increased in speed.

“Mouth, now,” he demanded.

“No,” I said, my voice weak. I might have misunderstood, because his lips crushed mine, commanding I open for him. I faltered in surprise as I stroked, but he squeezed my smaller fingers under his large ones, forcing me to continue caressing him. My thumb caressed the slit on his tip, and moisture seeped outward, lubricating the pad of my finger. I used it to increase the beating, the stroking, the rhythm. All the while, his mouth moved over mine, a haphazard pattern of kissing and nipping.

I worried I was doing it wrong, taking too long, but pressed on his chest, guiding him to turn and lean on the wall. His stance relaxed, and his legs spread. His back held him upright and his head fell to the plaster behind him. His hand continued to work with mine, and I snuck a peek at what we were collectively doing. That unfamiliar flutter rekindled, filling my lower belly as I stared at what I considered a

scandalously delicious vision. I was helping him get off while he was working on himself. *Oh my.*

My heart beat as rapidly as my arm moved.

“Right there, beautiful,” he hissed. “So close.”

With strength I didn’t know I had, I increased the pressure, the speed, the dexterity of my grip, and warm liquid spurted from his tip. My fist was covered in hot stickiness, slipping through my fingers, coating our collective palms.

“Enough,” he whispered, stilling my fingers. His eyes closed, and he tapped his head against the wall. His clean hand pressed against his face and rubbed downward. Something was wrong. Shaking my hand free of any residue, I stepped back from him.

“Darlin’?” he questioned, his eyes suddenly on mine. My heart plummeted to my stomach. I didn’t understand what I was feeling. I couldn’t believe what I’d just done. I had to get out of there. So, I did what any self-respecting woman on a long-overdue vacation who just fulfilled a fantasy with a sexy stranger in an empty ballroom did—I ran. Wayward thoughts raced through my mind as the click of my own heels matched the thudding in my chest.

When leaving the hospital, aftercare was always part of the experience. What you did *after*—the procedure, the treatment, the incision that cut deep. However, nothing could have prepared me for how I’d take care of myself after Tommy Carrigan. There was no list, no online instruction manual at patient dot com for matters of the heart. No checklist. Nope, the aftercare sheet was a blank page. How did you treat tingling lips, skin rough from scruff-burn, and an ache so fierce your heart felt like it might burst?

3

Morning Delight

Shame washed over me at how I ran from Tommy Carrigan, a man ridiculously sexy for over forty. It wasn't fair. And neither was how I treated him. Running had never been my thing. I was committed to the core—to my children, to my marriage, to my job. Then my marriage failed, and I got breast cancer. It put things into perspective for me. Life was short, and I was only forty-three.

This led me to a yoga class the next morning with Ivy and Masie. I still didn't understand the young rock star's wife's obsession with me, but she was sweet, and she'd included my eighteen-year-old in the invitation.

"A girls' morning," she cheerfully said as she texted me. "Breakfast afterward."

I allowed myself another torturous indulgence. Seeing Ivy would remind me of my previous night's escapade in a vacant ballroom with the band manager of Collision. His life was rock stars. Mine was pearls and cardigans. We were polar opposites, and yet, for a few heated moments, we lived on the same planet.

"Isn't Ivy da bomb, Mom?" Masie asked as we walked to the north side of the resort. A grassy area was shadowed by the towering building and provided a serene space for morning yoga.

"Yes, da bomb," I replied, wondering what that meant. I chuckled to myself. Kids and their euphemisms, I couldn't keep up.

"Her life seems so awesome. Gage Everly as a husband, and her two girls are so sweet." Masie couldn't stop sharing

humorous stories of her babysitting adventure the night before. At one point, the fourth band member visited the Everly's penthouse condo, and Masie had more misadventures to share with me. I was worried she was a little star-struck by the whole aura of Collision, particularly their youngest member, Weston Reid. I didn't need her having a vacation fling with someone she'd never see again.

The thought stopped me.

Wasn't that exactly what I'd done? Although allowing someone to finger me couldn't really be labelled a *fling*. It was more like a one-night stand of sorts, kind of, maybe. Actually, it hadn't been any of those things. It had been mind-blowing, and my body still hummed from the heat. A pulse beat between my thighs with the memory. Of course, I couldn't sleep after I returned to my small, rented condo. Thank goodness, the kids had their own room. I tossed and turned, my thighs clenching, my fingers twitching, yearning for a repeat of what Tommy had done to me. But I cursed those thoughts repeatedly, putting myself in my place with reminders that he was affiliated with a famous band, and I was just...me.

Mother of two. Breast cancer survivor. Professional assistant.

"Edie." Ivy's voice echoed across the lawn as people gathered for yoga. A walking path at the edge of the property connected resorts and allowed visitors access to the ocean scenery. My boss had covered part of the cost of this vacation to Hawaii, calling it a well-deserved bonus. Despite the previous days off for medical leave, he told me I deserved a break with my family, and as the Christmas holiday was a slow time, ten days of vacation were allotted to me.

A scarf covered my hair again, although admittedly it was already warm in the early heat of the day. I didn't have the typical skinny girl yoga pants, or a cute work-out shirt, but wore a spandex skort and a tank top, possibly a size too small

as it was Masie's. Ivy's eyes fell to my chest before smiling and lifting to mine.

"You look sexy for a workout," she teased, and I blushed, glancing down at the swell of cleavage peeking over the red shirt.

"She always looks good," Masie added, a touch of support in her proud daughter voice. She'd been so reassuring when my hair fell out in clumps and my body bloated. *You're still you, Mom*, she told me over and over again. It was too much for a teenage girl to witness. *It wasn't fair*, I often screamed. Masie was my sole supporter when my ex, David, should have been at my side.

"Ready for this?" Ivy teased, spreading out the mandatory beach towel over the grass.

"Ready as I'm going to be." I'd never done yoga, but I had started working out regularly. It was a way to combat the swelling of my body and improve my mindset. I had to do something. The routine stuck long after the treatments ended. I reminded myself that no one was looking specifically at me. Women come in all shapes and sizes, and despite the public place, this was nothing.

We sat as instructed, legs crossed, and minds emptied, only mine refused to go blank. I continued to see Tommy's dark eyes, inky and concerned as he spoke to me. I had to chuckle when I thought of his surprise at seeing my underwear and the ridiculous struggle that took place before the shock of him penetrating me with his fingers. The mere thought made me wet, and my core clenched. Sitting cross-legged was not a good position for the images in my brain.

We stood and followed a series of stretching and twisting and balancing, until finally, we leaned forward, bracing palms flat on the ground, shoulder width apart, while our feet separated, forming an equilibrium of arms and legs, with backsides in the air. The downward dog position. My head lowered to center between my elbows, and I had a perfect

view of the walking path behind me when I should have been concentrating on my form.

A man in dark shorts and a sweat-soaked white T-shirt walked slowly on the wooden path, one hand on his hip, his barrel chest rising and falling with exertion, as if he was winding down from a long run. With earbuds in his ears, his fingers scrolled over a phone. He paced a step or two before stopping and facing our direction. I became acutely aware that my ass was in the air, pointed at him. I couldn't see far enough to know if he saw me, but heat rose up my chest. My arms shook, and my hamstrings ached as the instructor told us to press backward. I noticed the man begin to walk forward toward our yoga haven.

"Oh no," I muttered.

He's not looking at me, I argued with myself, but Tommy—yes, of course it was him—stalked straight for the collection of yoga participants. Always preferring the back of anything—a classroom, a theatre, a bus—I was at the back of this group, and when he stopped short at my side, it was obvious he recognized me.

"Uncle Tommy," Ivy hissed, clearly annoyed at his intrusion but keeping her focus on her position.

He dropped into the standard form for downward dog, making it look effortless as he bent forward and stretched out next to me.

"Didn't take you for a yoga expert, darlin'," he greeted me.

"How would you know?" I quietly snapped, leaning forward to support myself. He chuckled.

"Always a question."

"So, you're Ivy's uncle," I interjected, ignoring the jab. My legs shook. My arms ached. I couldn't concentrate.

"Yeah, she's my niece." His voice softened, the gruff smoky sound lighter, drifting, like the thought saddened him. I

ignored the fact he basically repeated what I just said and swung my head so I could look at Ivy on my left before rotating back to Tommy on my right. I noticed no resemblance between them.

“Back to yoga. Do you do this often?” he asked, a teasing curiosity blanketed his tone as his mouth twitched while he spoke. His head was turned to look at me behind his elbows. He was breaking form.

“First time for everything,” I mocked, and felt my face redden. Last night had certainly been a first.

The curl of his lips told me he knew where my thoughts were—in a dark ballroom, with his fingers ... *Oh goodness*. I shouldn't think of last in this awkward position, because my innermost muscled clenched.

“You're breaking form,” he said, noting my thighs had momentarily pressed together. My knees bent.

“I can't do this with you watching me,” I snapped, humiliated at being caught thinking of him and stretching my body in such a way it brought on lurid, luscious thoughts of him doing things to me. My face reddened further, possibly even purpled. I was nearly suffocating with dirty thoughts of Tommy.

“What happened, darlin'?” he teased, the question reminiscent of my momentary freak out from the night before when he reached for my breasts. The reminder forced my eyes to my cleavage, blatantly on display as the leaning position lowered my top, accentuating the curve of my breasts. I'd had them restored to my 36Ds as best I could after the surgery.

Go away, I wanted to mutter at the same time my brain cried, *Take me*. I was ridiculous.

“I just can't do this with you staring at me,” I said, peeking around my elbow at him.

“Why not?”

“Because...” I’m self-conscious enough as it is, I wanted to add, but the instructor’s mic crackled.

“Lady in red,” the instructor said. “You’re breaking form, honey. Straighten the legs. Tuck in your abs. Accentuate the backside.”

My elbows snapped, nearly collapsing me, and I wanted to bang my head on the ground. She was speaking to me. Tommy chuckled beside me.

“Okay, I’ll leave you to your struggles. But you know what seems better than this position, darlin’?”

I was afraid to ask. “What?” I grumbled.

“Bacon and eggs with me.” My head swung to face him. He’d folded down to his knees, looked at his phone, and spoke to it as he addressed me.

“I’m not done here.”

“I know where you can finish your work-out.”

“No,” I said as my body screamed *yes*.

“Room 413. Half an hour.” He rolled up on his toes and stood as if unfolding an accordion. His eyes met mine as I remained in my awkward position. Dark orbs flicked to my raised backside.

“No,” I repeated, but he smiled slowly and walked away.

+ + +

I couldn’t believe I was doing this. I hadn’t even waited fifteen minutes. My concentration was completely lost. I folded back on my ankles, excused myself from Ivy and Masie, and headed for the lobby. I told myself I would knock on his door, and he wouldn’t be there because I was early. Then I told myself, I was stupid *because* I was early. It made me look desperate. Then I internally argued, I was being ridiculous, and making

up the whole thing; he never invited me to his room for breakfast. So, I knocked once, waited, and then spun for the elevator. Defeat filled me instantly even though I'd been self-deprecating anyway.

I hadn't taken one full step when the door flung open. Eyes appraised me as I stood in my make-shift yoga get-up. I hadn't bothered to shower or change. I figured he could take me as I was. I meant, take me for how I was dressed. I ... *oh, forget it.*

"Edie," he said, eyes roaming back up my body. "I'm glad you're early. I'm starving." Did I imagine his teeth snap on that second sentence? Could I believe I was about to enter a strange man's resort room? As I stepped forward, I realized Tommy didn't feel like a stranger. I didn't have thoughts of him being an ax-murderer or something extreme. He managed a group of young men, whom I imagined could be unruly. His niece was part of that mix, and I'd seen him react to her daughters on our first meeting. This man was ... a good guy ... not a killer. My heart raced, nonetheless.

Then I noticed his attire. He stood before me dressed only in a towel.

"I couldn't concentrate," I replied, my eyes wandering over the firmness of his body. *Abs. Pecs. Biceps. Oh my.*

He nodded slowly, noting my appraisal. "I can help with that concentration."

"I can come back later," I stressed, my voice squeaking as I pointed over my shoulder for the elevator, but my eyes refused to pull away from the trail of hair leading above the curl of the towel wrapped low around his waist. *Mother of all things holy.*

"Breakfast is coming," he said, reaching out for my arm and tugging me into his room.

Breakfast, my mouth watered. *Coming*, my throat convulsed. Oh goodness, I was a mess.

I walked forward on stumbling feet. His room was a king-size suite. The large bed was the focus, but a couch with a small dining table for two also filled the room. The balcony door brightened the room, as the curtain was drawn wide, and the glass door stood open allowing in the subtle resort sounds and the whispering breeze.

He stood behind me, his body emitting the heat of a shower. I took a deep breath, preparing to speak, when he spoke instead.

“Didn’t finish your workout?” He paused. “I can help with that, too.” Thick hands came to my hips and his breath tickled my neck. Instantly, I tilted my head, allowing him access to my skin. *What was I doing?* I wondered only momentarily as my body started to tingle with his nearness and the flutters in my lower belly took flight like a flock of seagulls. “I didn’t take you for a yoga girl. We need to talk about your form, Edie.”

“You seem to have a check list of things you don’t take me for,” I said, not recognizing my own voice. “What do you take me for, then?”

He huffed against my neck, kissing me in a place I noticed this morning had a tender mark of broken skin. He’d given me a hickey. Not a full-fledged bruise, but enough of a purple scratch to mark me. I had a hard time explaining discoloration to Masie, who eyed the spot suspiciously as we walked to yoga.

“I think something bit me,” I’d said, *“and I reacted to it.”* It was almost too close to the truth.

“Hmmm ...” Tommy hummed against my skin, and my flesh prickled in anticipation of his lips meeting mine, which hadn’t happened yet. He simply teased me with his closeness. “I’m not sure how to take you yet.” His voice purred with the double entendre.

Thick hands caressed up and down my sides, curving over my hips and tugging up the skirt on my skort.

“Now, what the fuck is this?” He chuckled, and I should have been embarrassed, but I had to laugh. If I was getting an education in stranger sex, he was getting one in older women’s apparel.

“It’s a skort. It’s like a skirt over shorts.”

“What the fuck?” he repeated, lifting it higher as he stepped back to appraise the contraption. I swatted at his hand, laughing as he peeked under the skirting, trying to find an opening. “Take it off,” he demanded.

“What?” I choked.

“Take. It. Off,” he repeated slower, lower, as if I couldn’t understand basic English.

“Why?”

“Always a question,” he muttered, shaking his head. He crossed his thick arms over his bare chest. He hadn’t bothered to dress or even suggest it. There was something in the way he looked at me. Something in the way his arms stiffened over his chest and his widened stance that pissed me off just enough to do as he said. I forced my skort down, kicked out of my tennis shoes and stood before him in low-cut purple panties. His eyes widened, and I tugged at the hem of Masie’s tank top. In the light of day, the slight bulge of my stomach rested over the waist of my underwear. I was pear-shaped at best, but the underwear dissected me in the wrong places. Maybe I needed to rethink trying to be a tough bitch in response to him. I wasn’t one of those women, anyway.

My fingers folded into the thin material, and I began to stretch it toward my thighs. Tommy stepped forward so quickly he startled me, and I bumped into his bed. His hand caught my shoulders to prevent me from tumbling, and then he kissed me. The full onslaught again, but this time I was better prepared for the intensity. His mouth opened immediately, and I followed his lead, loving the confidence he expressed in kissing. His plump lips were assured, experienced, and surprisingly tender. He sucked and sipped and slipped his

tongue across the seam, taking me to another level. He tipped my head, and our tongues tangled deeper, stretching for connection. He swept the inside of my mouth before drawing back.

“We need to work on your technique,” he said, and I thought he meant my kissing, but he spun me to face the bed, one hand on my hip while the other applied gentle pressure between my shoulder blades. I toppled forward, catching myself on my palms. “Your downward dog could use practice.”

Oh, Lord.

“I didn’t know you were a yoga aficionado,” I said, though the statement was breathy.

“I have many skills,” he said, guiding my upper back toward the bed. “Stretch your arms forward.” I did as he said. My backside raised in the air. My arms flattened on the bed cover, and he stroked up and down my spine, rubbing a line down the bone before massaging my sides. Then he pressed forward, the stiff length of him meeting me square between the cheeks of my ass.

“I seem to have developed a problem when it comes to you, Edie,” he said, his typical puddle-plopping sound resembled a handful of gravel dumped into water. “I can’t seem to figure you out.” His thick hands continued to caress up my sides, while tugging me gently backward, forcing my backside to meet his hard length in short, steady beats. If I wasn’t so turned on, it might be reminiscent of a bad comedy movie. The rhythm continued, like a quick puff of air. *Uhn. Huh. Uhn. Huh.*

“Ever have sex like this, Edie?” The crass question should have given me pause, but my mind was fogging on the rhythm he set, the pulsing of my core, and the liquid pooling at the apex of my thighs. I was wet, and the damp material of his towel aided the moisture forming on my cotton underwear.

“Rarely,” I stammered, not wishing to recall the few times David and I had mixed up our sexual encounters. My response elicited the sound of a towel unravelling and the wet fabric hitting the floor. Bare skin hit the back of my thighs as he returned to his steady rhythm.

A tap. A tap. A tap.

I was coming undone, the fiber of my being beginning to unravel. The flutters in my belly had progressed from the flock of seagulls to a storm of flapping birds. My fingers gripped the duvet.

“This will be a better work out,” he groaned before saying my name.

I didn’t know if my name was a question or a statement, but all I could answer was, “Yes.” My underwear slid to my knees, and I pressed inward, forcing them to my ankles. His foot held them down and he tapped my heel to step out of one side. His fingers caressed the cool globes of my backside, and I couldn’t believe I was about to do this. I also couldn’t imagine stopping. I was so wound up; I was ready to snap. Tears welled in my eyes. I wanted this so badly I ached.

The nightstand drawer opened, and I heard the rip of foil. I almost laughed. It was a sound I hadn’t heard in nearly twenty years. How did I get here? How did I get in this position?

All thought escaped me when a thick finger slipped inside me, and I gasped.

“Fine wine,” he muttered, before removing his finger, and I whimpered. “Ready to breathe again, Edie?” I rolled my head against the bed cover. I didn’t have the breath to speak, afraid I’d crack if he didn’t enter me.

“I need the word, darlin’.”

“Yes,” I exhaled, and he slammed into me so hard I jolted forward on the mattress. I yelped, and he stilled. His hands rubbed down my spine, steadying me before drawing my hips backward. He filled me so deep the sack of his balls slapped

against sensitive folds. A strange sense of completion rippled through me, as if I'd never had sex before, and I nearly wept at that thought. It hadn't ever been like this.

He drew back to my entrance as he had the night before, teasing me with retreat, but I clenched my thighs, attempting to hold him within. Thrusting forward, he chuckled.

"I like how you're a little greedy even though you want to deny it, Edie." He pressed a kiss to my shoulder blade before repeating the near exit, only to fill me again almost instantly. The pace increased, the sound of slapping skin becoming a metronome of music. He pressed at the inside of my thigh, forcing my knee to rise to the bed. The position opened me up.

"You're breaking my form," I tried to joke, but his deep thrust cut off the words.

"I'm hoping to break many things," he muttered, and my heart pinched in my chest, because I knew Tommy Carrigan was going to break not just my heart, but all of me.

His fingers slipped to the spot where I needed him the most, paying attention as he stroked and parted and circled while he thrust into me. I screamed into the duvet as I came and instantly felt a second wave cresting as his release pulsed within me. The jolt of him, stiff and vibrating deep inside me, set off subtle aftershocks but not enough to cause another eruption.

"Sorry, darlin'," he said, as his forehead came to my back. "I sensed you needed another minute to get there again, but I couldn't hold on any longer." His forehead rolled back and forth on my damp skin. "What are you doing to me?" he muttered before pressing a quick kiss to my back and standing. He pulled out of me slowly and I collapsed on the bed, closing my eyes. *I just need a minute.*

I heard him step away and return with a towel. He startled me as he wiped between my thighs. Then he stretched behind me. We lay sideways across the bed. His chest hit my back and an arm curled over my waist.

“Feel good, darlin’?” he murmured to the skin on my neck.

“Just need a minute,” I said, my voice drifting. He chuckled and that’s the only sound I heard before I slipped into sleep.

+ + +

It didn’t feel like enough time passed before a knock came to the door. I jolted upright, wondering only briefly where I was and why I was still partially naked. However, I was covered by the duvet, and a pillow had been placed under my head. A resort server entered the room and set a large tray on the table. He smiled down at me, and I rolled to cover my face as he walked out of sight. I didn’t want to think about how many times he entered this room to find a woman in this bed. The subtle click of the door sent me upright. Scooting for the edge of the bed, I found my underwear and skort right where they’d landed on the floor. Further embarrassment set in, and heat colored my cheeks.

“Hungry, darlin’?” Tommy asked, reentering my view, now dressed in jeans without a shirt.

“I should go.” My voice rasped from sleep, and I searched for a clock. “What time is it?”

“You only slept a half-hour.” I reached for my head to adjust my scarf and discovered the head covering was missing. My short scruffy hair was exposed instead. “You look beautiful,” he said, and my eyes lowered. I couldn’t look at him when he complimented me.

“I didn’t sleep well last night,” I offered, ignoring his kind words. I remained at the edge of the bed, and he stepped forward, cupping my chin.

He examined my face before he spoke. “Breakfast is ready.”

I followed him over to the small table and sat while he removed metal lids from two plates. Scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, and fruit. I inhaled. “Smells delicious. Thank you.”

The gratitude surprised him, and he paused mid-air with the coffee carafe in his hand. I waved him off from pouring me a cup.

“I don’t like the flavor.”

“Huh, another thing I didn’t have you pegged for.” I noted the tease in his voice.

“How poorly you’ve perceived me so far,” I countered. He sat and stared at me a moment.

“Yes, I think I have.” I didn’t know what to make of that statement. If I thought there was a compliment in there, I couldn’t find it.

It should have been awkward. Two random adults having sex in the morning. I couldn’t even call it a one-night stand. The walk of shame was supposed to happen in the morning, not the actual sexcapades. I didn’t know what else to call what we’d done. Make love? Nope, the term did not fit. Sex, definitely. A slight tingle returned, my imagination nearly leading me to ask him for a second helping. And I wasn’t referring to the eggs. However, I took a hefty bite to rid my thoughts of the bed.

We ate for a moment in silence.

“How long?” he asked, and I swallowed the piece of bacon in my mouth before chewing it properly. He looked up at my hair. “How long did you have it?”

Instantly my fingers went to the wayward curls. I didn’t have a clue what I might look like, and I started combing the edges near my ears. He reached across the table to stop me.

“I’ve been cancer-free a few months. I had months of chemotherapy before that. Aggressive. I just wanted it out of my body. I had a single mastectomy and then added the implants to both sides to balance me out.” I offered a weak

chuckle at my vanity. I've never considered myself vain, but I also couldn't fathom anything other than the decision I made. "This vacation was a celebration of sorts. I have survived. For now." I sighed.

"Why the sigh?" he asked, his eyes still focused on my face.

"I guess at one point, I thought I might die, sooner rather than later. It was an awful period in my life. Worse than the divorce."

He sat back but took his coffee mug with him. After a sip, he said, "Just confirming what I already assumed. So, you aren't married."

"No," I blurted with a laugh, and then focused on him. "Are you?" My voice cracked. Hadn't I heard these horror stories of men who worked with bands, sleeping their way through the tours, while their wife raised children back in some small town?

"Nope," he said immediately, chuckling at the expression on my face. "Not my thing. Never plan to be." The statement wasn't an admission. It wasn't a threat. It was a declaration—*don't get any ideas in your head, Edie; it's only sex*. I nodded, smiling weakly as if I understood. As if I were cool with it, as my kids would say.

I took a deep breath hoping to redirect the conversation.

"So, a band manager," I began.

He stared back at me a moment, then confirmed. "A band manager."

My eyebrow rose, hinting I wanted more detail than his parroted response.

"I took over the boys when they were still raw talent. They were an opening act for a band on the edge of their retirement."

"I didn't know bands retired."

“Ever hear of Boys II Men? New Kids on The Block? NSYNC? Bands retire,” he adamantly stated.

“Wow. Never pegged you for a pop culture, boy-band kind of guy.”

He laughed in response. “Oh, what kind of guy do you have me pegged as?”

I thought for a moment, tapping my chin. “My first thought, Rolling Stones, unequivocally. But the more I learn, I’m not so sure. I think under the hardcore rock star manager might be something a little softer.” He choked on his coffee, laughter filling his expression.

“Now, now, don’t be pinning me as some soft rock freak, but I do like me some Stevie Nicks.”

I laughed as he referenced the female rock queen. “Annie Lennox?” I raised a brow.

“Her, too.”

“Madonna,” I suggested.

“Blasphemy.” But his soft chuckle told me he might like a song or two of hers as well.

“Music is your life, isn’t it?”

“Of course,” he said, setting his cup down.

“Do you play something?” The shift in his seat and the glance out the window answered the question. He did. But I sensed the subject wasn’t one he was going to share with me. Silence swirled between us.

“So,” I drew out the word. “If I were a song, what would I be?”

“Something classic,” he stated immediately, and my lips twisted.

“You really think I’m boring, don’t you?” My voice fell as did my shoulders. I must be so plain Jane compared to who he usually slept with.

He tilted his head and then motioned toward the bed. “Uhm ... no.” I giggled and his head spun back to me. He stared at my eyes, traveled down to my lips, and fell to my chest.

““Barracuda”.” His face was dead serious, but I barked out a laugh.

“What?”

“You had me down on my knees when I saw you again.” He misquoted the song, but his voice lowered, and I shivered hearing the deep tenor. The seductive song was certainly not me. I was no temptress like that. I continued to laugh, shaking my head.

“What do you think?” One eyebrow rose on his playful face.

“For myself?” I sat forward for a moment. “Maybe more “Landslide”.”

His face lowered. “How old are you?”

“Forty-three.”

He stared at me. “You’re not dead.”

“Not yet,” I chuckled without humor, and an awkwardness fell between us.

“I don’t mean that,” he corrected. “I mean, that song’s about change. What are you reflecting on?”

“Life,” I said, adamantly, letting my eyes drift to the bed.

“Darlin’,” he said. Why did the way he say that endearment make my skin tingle? He had a touch of Southern drawl, but it was the way he purposely rolled the *r* that made my insides leap. He leaned on the table. “How many one-night stands have you have in life?”

I sat up straighter at the question. “Why?”

His hand lowered, and I prepared for him to smack the table in frustration.

“None,” I answered. He swept his hand outward toward the bed, and I lowered my eyes. “It’s morning,” I justified.

He laughed. A hearty, rock the table, belly full of laughter.

“Okay, so what about me?” he asked.

““No More I Love You’s”.” The Annie Lennox song spilled out of my mouth. He sat straighter, his eyes not even blinking. I smiled to soften the odd choice of words. “I mean, who wouldn’t love a song that uses the word *woebegone*?”

“Is *woebegone* how you see me?” His voice sobered, and I didn’t want to ruin the playfulness of this game.

“No,” I tapped my chin, lying because there was a sadness just under the surface of him, just under the tattoo over his heart, that I couldn’t read. “I think “I Put a Spell on You” might be more fitting.”

“You think I put a spell on you, darlin’?” He questioned, his mouth curling at one corner.

“Definitely,” I said. “Most definitely,” I added, nodding. The flirtation smoldered between us. “Honestly,” I paused. “I was going to name you a Bee Gees’ song, but you don’t strike me as a Bee Gees kind of guy.” I lowered my tone to match his from each time he’d told me I didn’t seem one way or another.

He laughed again, drumming his hands on the table, and making his coffee mug rattle.

“That reminds me. You owe me a dance.”

4

Walk of Shame

Breakfast had been sweet, and parting did include sorrow, but as the flirting ran dry, it was either go to bed again or exit. As I seemed to be in a pattern of flight, I opted to leave, but not before Tommy questioned me.

“Why’d you run last night, darlin’?” he asked. I didn’t have a good answer. Should I tell him the truth that I panicked? Should I lie and say it was my normal response to awkward situations? I’d seen his face when we finished, and I couldn’t read him. I didn’t *know* him. I was caught between shame and thrill.

“I don’t know.” That was the best answer I could give him. We stood at his door after I thanked him once again for breakfast. Was I supposed to thank him for sex as well? I had no idea how to do this sort of thing. I’d been with David for twenty years. When we finished sex, we rolled over, each to our own side of the bed. Sometimes, we didn’t even say *goodnight*.

Tommy stroked my cheek with the thick pad of his thumb. His eyes searched mine, and I realized there would be no words between us. He kissed me softly, tenderly, sweetly. It was a kiss of goodbye, and I wanted to cry as his mouth covered mine, pulling at my lip as if to say, *take care*, and *I’ll think of you*, and *this was fun*. The last one cheapened the experience just a little, and I lightly pressed on his chest to signal I couldn’t take any more.

I returned to my room to discover Masie had already gone to the pool. I had missed an earlier text from her. Caleb hadn’t gotten out of bed yet but called out a sleepy hello from his room.

“I’m showering,” I answered before climbing under a stream of soothing water and crying quiet tears. When I finished in the shower, I dressed in my bathing suit, putting on a brave face to experience the walk of shame in front of my children. Exiting the bathroom, I found a note from Caleb explaining he was pool bound as well.

Masie was in the middle of the hubbub of rock stars when I made my own way to the pool. Surrounded by subtle bodyguards I hadn’t noticed the day before, Gage and his crew had a small section of the pool deck quarantined. Ivy waved me over, alerting the pool security I was with them as I drew near. To my surprise, Tommy sat in a lounge chair, laidback and relaxed as if he had not a care in the world. As if he hadn’t rocked my world with mind blowing sex in a position I’d practically never experienced. I sighed, attempting to hold my head high as I passed the chairs filled with lazy rock stars toward an empty one next to Ivy.

“How are you?” she asked, a touch of concern in her tone.

“Where did you disappear to?” Masie interjected, even though I texted her to say I was using the resort gym instead of finishing the yoga session.

“I worked out,” I said, and Tommy coughed from his end of the line.

“I went to look for you,” Masie said. I hadn’t counted on that, although I knew that her nature was to worry about me.

“I went for a walk.” I hated lying to her. She was a good girl and a great daughter.

“But you’re okay?” she asked, and I sat in the lounge with a huff.

“I’m fine.” I might have said it a bit too brusquely, but I didn’t understand the inquisition. Maybe I was missing for an hour, hour and a half tops. *Big deal.*

“Leave Mom be,” Caleb said, appearing out of nowhere and sitting at my feet. He was a good kid, too, albeit wrapped

up in his own world. He hadn't been home during the worst of the cancer treatments. To spare his protective nature from kicking in, I lied to him often, saying I was fine to keep him at school. I didn't want him missing college to come take care of me. Masie most likely told him the truth—some days were rougher than others.

I laid back and listened to the conversation around me, filling with chatter from two little girls, groans from hungover twenty-something adult males, and the occasional teasing of a young married couple. Heavenly and mind numbing, the dialogues flowed around me, lulling me into a comfortable state of lazy.

Despite a swift breeze, the heat was stifling, and I soon stood to enter the pool. I wore an orange strapless tankini with a black polka-dot bottom. Not the sexiest. But I was well past wearing the type of bikini that looked so good on the slim bodies of Ivy and Masie. As I entered the pool, an older woman stood at the end of the stairs.

“You have a lovely family,” she said to me, and I stopped one step from the pool's bottom.

“Thank you,” I said, glancing over at my two children, proud of the compliment. Masie had my original hair color, brunette, but streaked with gold highlights from the sun. Caleb was tall, his body filling out, on the verge of manhood, with subtle chest hairs. His hair matched his sister's, minus the golden streaks. I loved them both unconditionally.

“Your husband is a fine catch,” she offered, and I turned to face her. Following her line of vision, she focused on Tommy who sat forward on his chair, staring in the direction of where I stood. Dark aviator glasses covered his eyes, though.

“Oh, he's not my husband,” I nervously clear my throat, glancing back at him before addressing this shrunken raisin of a woman who obviously had eyes for Tommy.

“Oh my, unfortunate man,” she said, patting my hand, and I smiled at the hidden compliment. I twisted slightly to see Tommy shake his head, but I assumed he couldn’t have heard the woman from this distance.

“Are those little ones your granddaughters?” So much for compliments, I decided, as I looked at Ava and Emaline, Gage and Ivy’s daughters.

“Uhm, no,” I chuckled to lessen the sting. How old did I look?

“Didn’t think so, but you never know. Grandparents are getting younger and younger these days.” She smiled sweetly, and I guessed her age to be almost double my own. Just out of curiosity, I had to ask.

“Who did you think was my family?”

She chuckled as she responded. “The whole lot of them. You look like one happy family on vacation together. Those two girls look like sisters.” She nodded toward where Ivy and Masie sat huddled together, whispering to each other. “Thought you and the man might be celebrating something special, as you both look so happy. My husband and I took our family on a vacation to celebrate our wedding anniversary.” She paused. “That was back when it had been fifty magical years.”

“That’s sweet,” I said, trying to process how she thought I’d mothered all those boys and girls and was married to Tommy. Ava and Emaline saved the day by entering the pool, followed by Gage, West, and Masie.

I noticed West paying extra attention to Masie. Unfortunately, their situation had heartbreak written all over it. She was only eighteen, and he was a twenty-two-year-old rock star. As the newest member of the band, I assumed he was still trying to find his way amongst the older three, who seemed like life-long friends. Caleb had tried to fill me in, telling me that Collision was one of the hottest bands out there with their alternative rock sound, sultry ballads, and raging songs. After

sharing a few of their titles with me, I was able to admit I'd heard of them, but I couldn't say I knew anything more about its members, or their manager. Caleb was a music buff, and playing guitar would have been his dream, had his father not driven him toward baseball.

I exited the pool to find a margarita by my seat.

"Tommy took the liberty," Ivy said as I sat. I held up the tempting drink, ready to tip my head in thanks, but found him speaking to a young woman on his right. She wore a red bikini. I sighed as I took a hefty sip of the salty-sweet lime combination.

"It must be hard to fight off all the women," I muttered, referring to Tommy, but thinking of Gage as well. "I don't know how you do it."

"Oh, you get used to it." Ivy chuckled. "Although I'm not the one with a jealous streak. Gage is rather ... possessive. I don't worry. Gage would never cheat. Tommy would kill him."

For her sake I hoped her man would never stray. I wanted to believe in commitment and honor, but with what happened to me, I found it difficult to have faith in complete loyalty. Her comment about Tommy gave me a thought as well. It must be nice to know she was protected from all sides—a sort of checks and balances for her trust.

"Tommy told me you're his niece," I said, hoping to learn more about him and their relationship. Ivy didn't open her eyes as she lay in the Hawaiian sun.

"Yep. My mother was his younger sister," she whispered without offering more information. "So, what do you do for a living?" she asked, blatantly redirecting the conversation.

"I work for a manufacturing company."

"Butt plugs," Caleb coughed, and Petty sat forward on his lounge a few seats down.

"What?" Ivy giggled.

“We manufacture—”

“Butt plugs,” Caleb coughed again, and Jared started laughing as well.

“Caleb!” I admonished. “They do not make”—I lowered my voice—“butt plugs.” This set Jared laughing and Petty cracking a mischievous smile. “They manufacture plastic parts and pieces for a variety of companies.”

“One of which makes butt plugs,” Caleb said, wiggling his brows, and then squirming in his seat.

“Stop it.” I laughed. “I don’t know anything about that.”

“Mom, please.” Caleb laughed. He’d researched my company for a business project in college, finding all the subsidiaries and retailers who purchased products we supplied. One happened to include a sex toy manufacturer who specialized in...butt plugs.

“Do you get samples, Edie?” Petty asked, and Tommy reached over and swatted the curly blond on the back of the head.

“Be respectful,” Tommy demanded.

“Just asking,” Petty grumbled like a petulant child.

“You didn’t answer,” Jared stated, and fell into another fit of laughter.

“No, I don’t get samples.” For some reason, my eyes flipped to Tommy’s, but I couldn’t see his eyes behind his dark lenses. Besides, he had returned to his reclined position, and another girl had joined the first at his side. I decided I needed another drink. We weren’t family, but we were too close for comfort to this group of band members.

While standing at the bar, Gage joined me. The dark-haired, dark-eyed singer looked every bit a rock star, or a tortured poet, with his layers of leather necklaces and a wrist full of bracelets. I noticed that all the guys, including Tommy, had the same set of two: a solid silver band and separately, a row of brown beads.

“Hey,” he said, looking over his shoulder at his wife before turning back to me. “I wanted to ask you to back off a little.” The comment startled me.

“From Tommy?” I blurted, looking over Gage’s shoulder at a man clearly busy with other women.

“Tommy?” he questioned, brow crinkling. “No, Ivy.”

“What?” I asked, looking back at the young musician.

“Yeah. It’s just ... she’s become sort of instantly attached to you, and it isn’t good for her.”

I blinked in surprise. I’d noticed the same thing, but I certainly hadn’t pursued a friendship with someone nearly fifteen years younger than me.

“I don’t—”

He cut me off. “Ever since her mom died, it’s like she’s always searching for her. Missing her. I don’t know what it is about you, but she’s latched on, and stuck hard. You’re all I’ve heard about for the past twenty-four hours.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “I don’t think I understand. I didn’t mean to do anything to Ivy. In fact, she spoke to me first. She asked me to join you last night and included me this morning for yoga. She invited Masie to the pool. I’m just here with my daughter.”

“Look,” he said, brushing long fingers through his chin-length hair. “I just mean I think you should step back. Even if she asks, maybe tell her no.”

I blinked again before speaking. “Why?”

“Her mom died of breast cancer.” His eyes shot to my head scarf and away. “I’m not implying—”

It was my turn to interrupt, and I raised a hand to stop him. “I’m not sure what you’re implying, but I do have breast cancer.” I sighed. “*Did*. And anything that has happened with Ivy was never meant to hurt her, or mislead her, or anything else you might think. She’s a sweet girl, and my family has

enjoyed her company, but if you don't want us around her, we don't need to be." With that, I stepped away from Gage despite the protest of my name that echoed behind me and returned to the row of chairs, guarded by security. However, not protected well enough to keep out the girls talking to Tommy, or the woman Petty had pulled into the VIP section last night. The same one who was currently seated on his lounge. Then again, maybe Tommy and Petty invited these women into their private circle. I didn't care. I needed to get away from all of them.

"Where's your drink, darlin'?" Tommy asked me, as I returned empty-handed, and I almost snapped that it was none of his damn business. Instead, I wondered how he even noticed I walked to the bar and returned without one, as his concentration had been on the growing group—now three—of women next to him. I didn't directly answer him as I continued walking.

"I passed," I said, reaching my chair and picking up my bag as I slipped on my flip-flops.

"Mom?" Masie called out as Tommy said, "Your bathing suit should be green, honey. It's a color that suits you." He referenced my jealousy last night and called it beautiful. I exhaled as I fought to get my cover-up over my head. My scarf slipped within my dress.

"Care," Gage growled, returning to our cove of seats with a drink for his wife and one for himself.

"Where are you going?" Ivy asked, and I peered over at her husband before answering.

"I have a headache," I said, a bit too harshly.

"Mom?" Masie's voice rose as she sat forward on her seat, pressing Emaline upward. The four-year-old blonde wiggled between Masie's raised knees. "Are you okay? You haven't gotten one in a while, right?"

"I'm fine." I exhaled sharply, struggling to keep my voice under control.

“Do you need something?” Ivy asked, concern growing in her voice as well. “I can run to our room and get you something.”

“Babe,” Gage growled low, and I looked at him again. The pressure of Tommy’s eyes weighed on me, his direction insinuating he’d watched Gage and me at the bar, but I refused to glance up at him.

“I’ll come with you,” Masie said, scooting Emaline forward. With all the attention on me, my heart raced faster and my head did start to throb.

“No,” I snapped, and the world stilled. Emaline peered up at me. Masie stopped moving. Ivy stared. Gage looked away, and Tommy’s stare weighed heavier despite the reflective lenses covering his eyes.

“Leave her be,” Caleb said to no one, but implying Masie. *Always my protector.* Guilt riddled inside me.

“Look ... old lady.” I mockingly laughed, waving up and down to emphasize my body. “Hot flash or something.”

“You’re too young for that,” Tommy growled from his end of the chairs, and I wanted to shout *go back to talking with your little girlfriends*. Instead, my mouth remained clamped shut to keep from responding to him.

“Maybe it’s just the heat,” I said to Masie, avoiding eye contact with Ivy. “Or I didn’t get enough sleep last night. I’m okay. I just need a nap. That’s what vacations are for.” I was rambling. “I’m just going to lie down for a while. I’ll be fine.” I lowered my tone as I spoke, trying to lessen the attention on me and assure my daughter at the same time. “Dinner for three at six, okay?” I reminded her with a smile.

“Oh, Ivy asked us to join her and the guys for dinner at ___”

“No,” I bit out. “No, thank you, honey,” I said, redirecting my gaze to Ivy, but quickly looking away. “Family dinner for three tonight,” I repeated to Masie and then looked over at Caleb. He shrugged and sipped a drink.

“I’ll see you later, baby,” I said to him before glancing back at Masie, and she nodded in agreement.

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The condo door slammed. I was pissed at myself for running away again. Rather, being chased away. I’d done nothing wrong. I had not led Ivy on in any way, whatever that would even look like. And who was Gage to speak to me as he had? I didn’t care if he was the greatest rock star who ever lived; I hadn’t done a thing to his wife. In fact, I was suddenly feeling like his wife was the one sucking my family in, lulling us to act in ways I would normally never condone, and taking up the time I wanted to spend with my own children.

I sighed, swiping at my hair, realizing I lost another scarf. It must have slipped into my dress when I struggled to tug on my cover-up.

“Why am I here?” I said to the empty condo living room. It was a beautiful day. It was Hawaii. And I did not have a headache. I didn’t want to pretend I did, and I didn’t want to hide. But I wasn’t one to make a scene, so there was no way I would return to the pool. Remembering there was a long hallway leading to stairs on the side of the building, I decided I would exit the resort and head sight unseen to the beach.

The resort was originally a hotel, housing hundreds of rooms. Over time, two additional buildings were built, providing condos for rent. Ivy already told me they had the penthouse suite on the top floor of the original hotel, and I knew the rest of the band was a floor below. I couldn’t understand why Tommy would be on the fourth floor, other than a need for some separation, which was exactly how I felt.

I crossed the blacktop walk and cut through the scraggly bushes to get to the beach. A large set of boulders stood in my path, and I climbed over them. On the other side, I found a clear strip of white sand and walked a bit before spreading out

a double-wide beach blanket. Flopping onto the mini-haven, I fell back, deciding I didn't have the concentration to read. I drifted into a hazy, afternoon nap, heated by sunshine but cooled by a swift ocean breeze. Time peacefully passed.

"Where the fuck have you been?" The harsh words startled me, and I opened my eyes then squinted against the blinding sunlight. I had no idea how much time had passed, but by the position of the sun, I guessed it was late afternoon, nearing evening. I sat up instantly at the strong reprimand and twisted to look up at the person casting a shadow over me.

Squatting, his knees cracked. "We've been looking everywhere for you, darlin'." He sighed, swiping a hand over his silver and black hair, which curled at his nape in the heat. His eyes were still hidden by the aviator glasses, and he wore only crazy tropical board shorts. He looked like an older surfer and the athletic build of his body proved he would be able to handle the sport.

"Excuse me," I bit, my voice groggy from sleep but also offended at the tone of his. He looked out at the ocean as I wrapped my arms around my raised knees.

"Masie is going crazy, so is Ivy."

I snorted, looking out at the sea myself. Reckless waves rolled and crashed into each other. I hadn't braved the ocean yet. Deep water frightened me.

"What time is it?" I asked, ignoring his comments about Masie and Ivy. I twisted to reach for my bag and pulled out my phone. The time read four-thirty. *Shit*. I had been gone a while. I sent Masie a quick text telling her I was at the beach, and I was fine.

"Where'd you go, darlin'?" Tommy asked, helping himself to a seat in the sand. His position copied mine briefly before his legs stretched forward and his arms fell back to brace himself upright.

"I came to the beach," I stated the obvious. He waited but I didn't offer more.

“About ten minutes after you left, Masie went to check on you. She came back frantic because you weren’t in the room. Ivy got involved, wondering what to do. When Gage told her to chill out, you maybe wanted some alone time, she freaked out.” I’d been listening to him, but I refused to meet his eyes, keeping mine lowered to where my toes dug in the sand. Tommy paused and I side-eyed him. “I saw Gage talking to you at the bar.” He paused again, waiting. “Noticed the tension, too, when you both returned from it.”

I bit my lip. What could I say?

“Ivy asked Gage what he said to you. When he gets nervous, he swipes through his hair. She instantly knew something was up. She wouldn’t let it go until he told her that he asked you to back off. She went ballistic.”

I huffed. I didn’t see how any of this had anything to do with me. Shifting, Tommy rolled to his side in the sand, perched upright on one elbow while his legs remained stretched forward and crossed at the ankles. He looked like a bathing suit model for older men. His fingers dug tunnels into the sand. He seemed to contemplate something as he watched his excavation, then looked out at the ocean before returning to the furrows in the sand.

“Ivy’s been around music her whole life. God knows it’s a miracle she’s turned out as normal as she is. A bit innocent still, but not naïve.” For some reason, my heart beat faster, as if I had been the one searching for a missing person. He sighed. “Her father, Bruce, played bass guitar. He was a drug addict and killed himself. Overdose.”

My racing heart plummeted to my stomach. I swallowed the instant lump in my throat.

“She mentioned you were her mother’s older brother,” I said softly, wishing for him to continue.

“I am.” He scooped up sand and let it sift through his fingers. “When her father died, his band needed a new bass guitar player, so they asked me to join.” I sat up straighter,

remembering that I sensed he played an instrument during our breakfast conversation.

“My sister was the lead singer of a band.” I didn’t understand where this history was going, so I remained quiet. “I’d been in a band myself. One that had all kinds of trouble and was falling to pieces before we got started. We joined together and became Chrome Teardrops.”

My mouth fell open.

“It was a time when female-led rock bands were on the rise and rapidly hitting the charts.” Tommy scooped up more sand, more sifting occurred.

Was he kidding me? Chrome Teardrops was one of the best bands of my twenties, and the female lead singer was gorgeous. Every girl wanted to be her, dress like her, sing like her. *I wanted to be her.*

“Kit Carrigan was your sister?” I gazed down at him.

“So, you do know a bit of music history.” He scoffed, the laughter not filling his voice like I knew it could.

“Just that I idolized her. Her voice was amazing. I copied all her song lyrics in a notebook. ‘Broken Wings’ is one of my favorite songs ever.” I sounded like a teenage fangirl, which was exactly how I felt about finding out one of my idols was his sister. Then another thought came to me.

“Didn’t she die?” Before I gave it a sympathetic pass in my brain, the words tumbled out of my mouth. “Oh my God,” I muttered, my hand covering said mouth in shame.

“She did,” he replied, looking out at the water and throwing a handful of sand away from him. “Breast cancer. Eight years ago.”

I felt sick. The pieces were slowly coming into place. Kit Carrigan had one of those public deaths where she became a strong advocate of mammograms and breast self-examination. She died too young and still in the prime of her career.

“Ivy was only twenty. She needed Kit. They were two peas in a pod, but Ivy was in college. Kit was adamant that Ivy would be something other than a rock star’s child. When she got sick, Ivy was lost. She became a parent when she was still a kid, in more ways than one. I became her guardian, but she didn’t need me. She’s strong-willed. Thankfully, she finished college, but never used her degree.” He sighed, returning to rake the sand with his fingers.

“I know what Gage said to you. He admitted the truth to Ivy in their rather publicly displayed argument.” He shook his head, obviously upset with whatever had happened. “The tabloids will have a field day.” He sighed. “I actually disagree with Gage. I think you being around Ivy is good for her, but I don’t want her having any false hopes either. Ivy’s smart enough to know no one can replace her mother. However, it never hurts to have female role models.” He took a deep breath after those words. “She’s surrounded by a lot of men and poor examples of women, always throwing themselves at the band for cheap thrills. Ivy knows some women will use her to get to the band. She’s smart enough to *not* play along with those shenanigans.”

Silence swirled between us for a moment as my mind processed all that I’d learned. Kit was Ivy’s mother. Ivy didn’t have a father. Kit Carrigan was Tommy Carrigan’s sister. Tommy had been in a band.

“Is this what you think happened? That I was talking to Ivy to get to the boys or you?” My voice rose, and I shifted to face him. “I didn’t even know who the boys were. I still don’t even know who you are,” I added incredulously.

“I’m just me,” he said, sounding somewhat defeated as he didn’t meet my glare. “Just Tommy.” His eyes remained on the sea, and I sighed.

“Yeah, well, who is Tommy?” I asked because I was learning he was hiding things from me. He didn’t answer me, and I shifted to face the ocean myself. My ankles crossed, and

my arms braced me upright. My heart hammered in both irritation and empathy.

“With everything I just told you, I should have made you sign a NDA—nondisclosure agreement.”

I gasped. “What?”

“You wouldn’t believe how much that story would sell for.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s despicable.” I wanted to collect my things and run away from him once again. Instead, I scooped up a handful of sand and threw it weakly away from me in my disgust at another accusation and the thought of such behavior—money at the expense of someone’s personal history.

“Wait. You don’t think—” A raised hand stopped me, but my voice was filled with disbelief.

“You may not know me, but I’m getting a sense of you,” he responded gruffly. “I don’t take you for someone who would do that.” He paused. “I don’t want to believe you would do such a thing.”

“You don’t *want* to believe?” I choked, irritation filling my throat.

“It’s been less than forty-eight hours,” he sheepishly reminded me. We hardly knew one another, and I paused a moment, swiping at my hair.

“Fair enough. I’ll sign something if it would make you feel better, because I would never share that story with others.” I still felt physically ill at the thought, a heaviness filling my stomach.

The weight of his stare forced me to face him. “The fact you just offered to sign something is good enough for me, darlin’.”

“Why?” I blurted, although warmth filled me with the return of his drawled endearment.

“There’s something about you that I trust.”

We let that statement sit between us a moment.

“Want to sit on my towel?” I offered, noting the deep tan of his body and the sand sticking to his arm and leg where they pressed into the white grains. He smiled slowly at me, eyes roaming over my body.

“My view’s good from here.”

I blushed as I looked back at the rolling waves. In the distance, white foam shot above the surface—a tell-tale sign that a whale swam beneath the water. Suddenly, it breached, exploding above the ocean to expose half its glorious body before slamming down into the waves and disappearing.

“Did you see that?” I squealed, clapping my hands and bringing them against my chest in my excitement. I turned to look at Tommy, but his eyes were still on me. “That was amazing.” My voice rose like a kid on a Ferris wheel.

He shifted and scooted closer to me, resting his body on my towel after all. I looked at him over my shoulder. Lips to my sun-kissed shoulder were the only warning I received before his mouth found mine. Truthfully, his mouth seized mine, rolling over my lips like the reckless waves of the ocean. His tongue plunged forward, crossing the surface, as if catching a large breath, like the whale. His arm straightened to hold himself upright while his other hand cupped the side of my face, keeping me connected to him.

If whale breaching was possibly a mating message, the messages I kept getting from Tommy confused me. One thing was evident, though—I’d mate with him again if he asked. The morning still lingered in my mind, and damp heat pooled between my thighs as his mouth continued to take mine. Tommy kissed like a master, like he practiced frequently. His crafty kissing brought my thoughts to the girls at the pool. Sensing something, he pulled back slowly, dragging my lower lip between his before releasing me. His eyes glowed a dark coffee color.

“Now *that* was amazing,” he said, and heat rushed over my skin, which had nothing to do with the sunlight beaming down on us. “Know what else was amazing?”

“What?” I asked, setting myself up as his lip twitched and curled at one corner.

“This morning.”

5

Party of Three

Having dinner with adult children isn't much different than eating with younger children. They still wanted to be on their phones most of the meal, until I told them I'd confiscate them like when they were teenagers. Caleb chuckled, and Masie sent one final text before placing the device in her purse.

Spending time with my children was still one of the greatest joys of my life. I stared at these two miracles across from me. They had grown so fast. When had Masie turn into a beautiful woman on the verge of going to college? When did this young man take over Caleb's body, turning him into a budding minor league baseball player? I sipped my wine, marveling at the strangeness of life. I never imagined spending the next phase of my life alone, but that's exactly where I was going to be when Masie went to school.

Letting the thought pass, we ordered. Duke's Restaurant was a popular spot along the boardwalk between resorts, and I couldn't wait to dig into fresh-caught seafood. It was good to be with my kids. We had a pretty open relationship, maybe too open about a few things, but I did my best to be supportive and honest with my opinion. I worried about Caleb and his decision to play ball. I worried about Masie and her choice to become a nurse. She'd grown up too fast over the last two years.

"Okay, West said he's at the Pink Flamingo," Caleb announced after I paid the bill. "I'm going to meet the guys there." Caleb hesitated a moment. "If that's okay with you?" How could I tell a twenty-two-year-old no? He was a man, even if he would always be my little boy. As he left the table, Masie stared after him. She wanted to join him, but being eighteen, she wouldn't be admitted into the bar.

“So, West huh?” I started, sipping the last of my wine.

Masie’s head spun toward me. “Mom.” Her voiced whined in that way when she didn’t want to discuss something, or I’d embarrassed her, but the pink flush of her face proved she agreed. She’d noticed him.

“Well,” I replied, answering in the same elongated sound. He was a nice-looking young man of twenty-two, even if he was too old for Masie. I didn’t want her to get hurt. “He’s a little old for you, though.” I spoke softly, knowing I treaded in dangerous waters. With daughters, any slip of the tongue could lead to unintentional drowning.

“Mom,” she pealed again, before her shoulders sunk. “I know. And he’s a rock star, but he seems so different than I thought. I mean, he seems normal, like a guy I might meet at college.” The admission seemed to bother her.

“You’re going to meet lots of boys in college,” I said, reaching over and rubbing her arm. “You’re too beautiful for your own good,” I added. I was biased, but she was striking, and I was jealous, just a little. I never looked that good when I was her age.

“I know, it’s just ...” I waited. She shrugged. “I can’t talk about this with you.”

“Oh.” I sat up straighter. “Oh, okay.” Was I hurt? Maybe a little. But did I know what she wanted to say? I think she wanted to tell me a girl could have a little fun.

“I mean, I know I might never see him again. It’s not like I’d marry him,” she scoffed. “It’s just ... he is a rock star.” Her face brightened, and she giggled a little, euphoric at the possibility of hanging out with someone famous. I could only hope it wasn’t more. As if she thought about it a moment, her face fell, and she added, “I mean, he’s more than a rock star, of course. He’s just ... a really nice guy.”

She was the farthest thing from a shallow person, and I smiled to myself.

“Masie, we’re on vacation. I don’t mind you spending time with him. He seems like a nice guy, but I don’t think you should do anything more. I don’t want to see you set up for heartbreak.”

Masie nodded, agreeing with me. “I know. I get it. I do.” She paused, brushing back her long brunette hair. “But I like him. He’s fun. There’s nothing wrong with that, right?” She wasn’t looking for me to answer.

But I did. “Of course not. In fact, I think it’s great that you and Caleb found people your own age to hang with. I didn’t expect you to hang out with your old mom the whole time.”

Masie sat up, eyes widening. “It’s not that, Mom. You know if you wanted us to spend all our time with you, we would. I mean, this is your vacation.” Panic set in her voice, and I saw the stress covering her face. The purpose of this vacation was to remind all of us to be thankful and celebrate. I wanted my kids to enjoy themselves, to be worry free.

“It’s *our* vacation, honey. Just keep things in check,” I said, hoping it would be enough of a hint without spelling out that I didn’t want her sleeping with him.

Hypo-meet-crite. Guilt washed over me. With each passing moment of the day, I became more and more reflective of what I’d done, and how I’d done it with a virtual stranger. A stranger who still kissed me on the beach like we were celebrating something special. Maybe not a golden anniversary like the older woman from the pool had mentioned, but something momentous, at least for me.

“You know, Mom.” She hesitated, then caution filled her voice. “If you met someone and wanted to spend time with him during this vacation, that would be cool, too.” Her eyes lowered to the table, and she stroked her fingers over the rounded edge.

“Oh, honey, I don’t think that will happen for me.” Sadness filled me as I realized I didn’t have plans to see

Tommy again. While his attention had been refreshing, revitalizing even, I didn't expect to spend time with him.

"I saw the way Tommy looked at you," Masie said, turning a sheepish smile on me. "I think he might be interested."

"Masie." I mockingly laughed. "I don't think so, baby." I patted her hand.

"Well, if he did ask you out, I think it would be cool for you to spend time with someone as well." She lowered her brow and narrowed her eyes at me in a teasing manner. "Just keep things in check." Her voice deepened as she teased me, and I swallowed. *Too late.*

We ended up having a mother-daughter movie night where I let her drink wine in the condo, and we laughed at the shenanigans of *Bad Moms*.

"Thank goodness, you aren't like that," Masie said when the single man stripped the single mother on the kitchen counter. Yes, I thought, thank heavens. Being stripped and taken on the counter would be so...heavenly, but I kept that thought to myself.

Her phone continued to buzz and ping with messages throughout the movie, which she took on the sly, but she didn't ask to leave, and I silently thanked her for giving us this private time together.

"West says Tommy wants to know if you want to join them."

My heart skipped a beat and I found myself containing the excitement that he wanted to see me. It struck me as ironic that Tommy didn't even have my phone number after all we'd done. I looked over at Masie, and despite her expectant look, I wouldn't leave her alone.

"Tell West thank you, but I'm good here with my girl." Masie smiled, and relief washed over me. I'd made the better—the smarter—decision. She typed, hit send, and set the phone on the cushion once again.

“You know, I feel kind of sorry for Ivy. She doesn’t have a mother to spend time with. I don’t think she has many girlfriends, either.” Masie said, thoughtful a moment. “Probably because everyone wants to get close to her to be close to the band.”

“Is that what she said?” I questioned, feeling a pinch of sorrow for Ivy myself. After all Tommy told me, I knew Ivy missed her mother and didn’t have many female influences.

“She just told me I was lucky I still had you. She also said she was sorry that you had cancer.” She looked up at me. “I didn’t tell her, I swear, but Ivy knew. The headscarves are a giveaway.” Masie twisted her fingers together as she spoke. Her phone pinged again but she ignored it.

“Honey, you don’t have to be ashamed to tell anyone.”

“I’m not,” she cut me off almost instantly. “It’s just, I hate how people look at you sometimes, and I want them to know you’re okay. You’re still you.”

I smiled at my daughter. She was going to be a great nurse one day.

“Speaking of scarves. I lost mine today. I think it fell off when I was putting on my cover-up.”

“Yeah, Tommy took it,” Masie said, looking down at her phone again. “He was so pissed at Gage. I can’t believe Gage wanted you to stay away from Ivy.”

I sat up a little and faced Masie. “What happened?” Tommy had already told me, but I wanted to hear Masie’s version.

“I didn’t find you in the room, and I was telling Caleb when Tommy instantly jumped in. Ivy did, too. Tommy turned on Gage, asking him what he said to you, as if he knew something. Ivy started getting upset, and finally Gage admitted he asked you to stay away from her. It was so awkward for Caleb and I. Ivy immediately started apologizing for Gage and trying to assure us she wanted to spend time with us and you. Caleb was still pretty upset, though, and suggested we leave.

West tried to convince him we should stay. Finally, West decided he'd leave with us."

"Where did the three of you go?"

Masie laughed. "We went to the shuffleboard court and played with an older couple."

I couldn't help myself. I laughed, too. Caleb could befriend anyone. The fact West tried to shield Masie moved him up a bit in my opinion. The fact he played shuffleboard with old people pushed him even higher on my ladder of approval.

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We didn't see any of the band members the next day. Caleb explained they had practice and then some excursion on the island. Either way, I found myself poolside, but restless. My thoughts wandered to Tommy and what happened between us. I'd been married for twenty years and divorced for nearly three. In that time, I'd had less than a handful of dates and a heaping scoop of cancer. I had no time for relationships or even experimentation. I didn't know how to date in the modern age, and I wasn't sure I wanted to, but some nights were extremely lonely.

I did own a Mr. Bob, as Tommy referenced, but I didn't use it often. I always felt weird using it alone, which was exactly its purpose. Unfortunately for me, I wanted actual sex. I wanted a man—not to take-care-of-me financially and spiritually—but physically and emotionally. I wanted to feel loved, not be *told* I was loved when I wasn't. I wanted to have sex that meant something more than two bodies getting out a release.

I was pathetic, I decided. It wasn't going to happen. I'd had random sex with Tommy. How did I feel about that? Overwhelmed. Out of body. Orgasmic. There was no doubt I'd been more aroused than I'd ever been. Just kissing was an

experience with him, and when I thought of it my lips tingled. I wanted more. I wanted another round.

I wanted him.

And that was not a good decision.

That night, I was invited to come to the penthouse suite. Ivy stressed that she wanted Gage to apologize in person. I told her there was no need. I understood his motives, but she insisted. Being anxious, I asked my kids to come with me. However, Caleb said he had people to meet, and Masie said she was going to work on some winter-break reading homework. As weak as these were for excuses, I had no choice but to go alone.

The penthouse had a sprawling private balcony, and the band was in a relaxed state of mind, scattered around on outdoor couches and settees. Ava and Emaline were already in bed. Gage held a guitar on his lap and lazily strummed it. Ivy had greeted me with a warm hug and another round of apologies.

“He’s just ... stupid, sometimes,” she offered weakly as she led me closer to the group. Tommy sat in a chair with his legs sprawled apart, his arm resting over the wicker arm. A beer dangled between two fingers, one of which wore a large silver ring. He didn’t greet me, other than a head nod, like I was someone he recognized but didn’t know.

“Gage,” Ivy demanded, crossing her arms and staring down at her husband. He propped the guitar next to the couch and stood slowly, wiping his palms on his jeans.

“I’m sorry, Edie.” Silence followed the statement, and I swore I heard a whale bellow in the distance. It was painfully awkward for both of us.

“And?” Ivy said icily. Gage swiped his fingers through his dark hair, looking away from me.

“I didn’t mean what I said. That you should stay away from Ivy.” The silence again filled with the tick-tock of an unseen clock.

“Keep going,” Ivy snapped, lowering her crossed arms to two fists at her sides.

“I’d like you to spend time with Ivy, especially because she doesn’t have many friends.”

“Gage!” she growled, almost as if she were warning him.

“What are we?” Petty interjected, sounding hurt. Tommy cuffed him on the shoulder. “What?” Petty whined.

“*Female* friends,” Gage amended in response to his wife.

“And?” Ivy repeated, her foot tapping. Literally. She tapped her sandal-covered toes like a scolding mother.

“Jesus, fuck, Ivy.” He glared at his wife.

“Is that couch comfy, Jared?” she questioned the other band member sitting on an outdoor sofa.

“N—”

“Don’t answer that,” Gage said, holding up a hand to his friend.

“You know, this is kind of bullshit,” West said, glaring at Gage before rising from his chair, excusing himself from this awkward scene. Ivy’s foot stopped tapping, but her fists clenched harder. Gage and she stared at one another for a few moments before Gage looked away. I couldn’t believe this powerful front man for a successful band was waffling under his wife’s gaze.

“And I’m an idiot for saying what I said.” He rushed the words out, then sat with a huff, picking up his guitar and placing it back over his knees.

“Close enough.” Ivy sighed. Then she stepped forward, took the guitar out of her husband’s hands, and straddled his lap. She kissed him so passionately that I grew wet watching them. Then I looked away, ashamed by staring while they were so intimate, so private, so blissful. I caught Tommy watching me, and I had to look away from him as well.

“Get a room,” Jared groaned, picking up Gage’s guitar.

“Get out of mine,” Gage muttered against his wife’s mouth. There was no mistaking the *I love yous* that followed before Ivy shifted to curl up on her husband’s lap. The love between them was so intense, it vibrated in the air, and while my knees were weak from the display, I wanted to cry as well.

“Take a seat, Edie,” Jared offered, and I sat opposite him on another couch. Petty was to my left, but suddenly Tommy traded with him. The blond fell into the single chair and tipped his head back to stare at the stars.

“I need to get laid,” Petty moaned to the dark sky overhead. I choked at his bluntness, but Tommy sat forward. He prepared to punch Petty’s leg, but Petty was too quick, bending one knee toward the other, forcing Tommy to miss his target.

“Don’t be crass,” Tommy said.

“Since when did you become so uptight?” Jared asked.

“Since *he* doesn’t get laid,” Petty sighed, looking back at the band manager with a gleam in his eye.

“Who has time with you assholes to babysit?” Tommy mocked, taking a long sip of his beer.

“That’s okay, Tommy. You don’t need to defend yourself. We know you’re asexual.”

“Asexual?” I snort-laughed.

“Dude,” Gage warned, but Jared explained, “Against sex.”

I didn’t bother to clarify their incorrect interpretation of the word.

“Fu...” The *k* sound followed without Tommy completing the word.

“When was the last time you got laid, old man?” Petty teased.

“None of your damn business,” Tommy grumbled, finishing his beer, and then peering into the bottle as if more

would magically appear. Ivy stood.

“Always getting hit on, but not rising for the occasion,” Petty mocked, stroking his imaginary appendage above his jeans.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Tommy said, standing.

“Dude, shut up,” Gage barked, directing the warning at Petty.

“What?” the blond mocked, arms raised to protect his head in a fighter’s stance. I hadn’t seen Ivy leave, too mesmerized by the playful but telling banter between these men. She returned with an armful of beers.

“Babe, don’t serve them, especially him.” Gage pointed at Petty, who just laughed and helped himself to a bottle.

The frustration rolling off Tommy was palpable. While the words exchanged seemed jovial and teasing, Tommy sat rigid next to me. I don’t know where the boldness came from, but I felt the need to defend him.

“Don’t you think that’s a little unfair?” I directed to Petty. “I mean, Tommy’s an attractive man. He could get laid, if he wanted to, on the regular.”

Jared’s mouth fell open, repeating, “On the regular?”

Petty’s teasing expression dropped. Silence followed my statement. Then a burst of laughter rushed between the two band members. Even Gage chuckled a little. I looked at Ivy, who had returned to Gage’s lap. She shook her head and smiled, dismissing the guys as acting like boys.

“Why is that funny?” Suddenly, I wanted to know what I’d said to make them laugh. They continued to chuckle, dropping the tone down a bit at the seriousness of my question. I felt like I was defending mankind instead of a man.

“I mean ...” I swallowed, preparing for what I said next. “He’s sexy.”

Silence fell again. Birds chirped. The wind blew, and then a slow rumble began. A snicker. A chuckle. A gasp.

“Tommy?” Jared shrieked.

“Sexy?” Petty howled in humor.

“What?” I defended again. All eyes were on me, except Tommy, who sat still, slightly amused himself. His lips curled.

“You don’t think you’ll get old one day?” I addressed the group, but Tommy’s head swung to face me at that question.

“Darlin’,” he started, but I continued by placing a hand on his arm.

“What will you look like?” I said to Petty defensively, growing bolder in my need to prove that Tommy was a sensual man.

“Portly,” Jared snickered, cutting his gaze to Petty.

“Will you have sexy silver hair?” I said, eyeing Tommy’s head. “Wrinkles from laughter? Eyes that have seen too much? A heart that stays strong for others?”

Tommy leaned forward, his elbows coming to his knees as I continued to assess him.

“Scruff on your face, if you can grow any,” I teased, as Petty’s blond features didn’t lend to facial hair. I was hoping to lighten the tension around Tommy. Jared laughed.

“You don’t think your body will shift? You’d be lucky to have the strength to carry the weight of others.” I squeezed Tommy’s arm and he rolled his head to look at me over his shoulder. His fingers tented to support his chin. The movement accentuated his firm bicep, but I wasn’t talking about his physical potency despite my description. I was talking about who I sensed Tommy Carrigan was inside. He was strong, and he carried the heaviness of his band.

“That’s a heart full of love, giving up everything for everyone else.” Scooting closer to him, I scrubbed my palm

across his pecs, feeling his heart racing under his white T-shirt. I patted his chest, but my hand slipped downward.

“Those abs are—”

“Enough,” Petty squealed like a girl. He shriveled up, curling into himself by raising his arms and lifting a leg as if to shield himself from the sight of me touching Tommy. Acted in jest, there may have been some reality to his covered eyes, like a child witnessing his parents kissing.

Something flamed in Tommy’s eyes as he watched me describe him, caress him in front of these boys he mentored.

“What about his lips?” Gage teased.

“No!” Jared shouted, like a squeamish child, covering his eyes with the heel of each hand.

“Words of wisdom said to a bunch of punk-ass boys,” I stated, emphasizing the last three words. “Are you listening to him?” Tommy’s mouth twisted, and he bit the corner, holding in the laughter ready to spill. I wanted him to laugh. I wanted to hear that hearty sound again.

Leaning forward, I cupped his cheek and pulled him toward me. He met me halfway, and I kissed him. Sweet, slow, tender, my lips nipped at his. The moment we touched, a pulse shot up my middle so quickly, my whole body tensed, but I relished the feeling, desiring it to happen again and again. Still, I kept my mouth soft on his, pulling lightly at his lower lip and opening mine to gather more of him. I registered the thick scruff on his face as I stroked my thumb across his strong jaw. I might have purred.

“Holy fuck,” someone muttered.

“No shit,” another male voice stammered.

“I knew it!” Ivy squeaked.

“Mom?”

I pulled back abruptly, dazed from the kiss, muddled by the boldness of defending Tommy’s sex appeal. My brain

slowly processed that I had just been caught kissing a man by my daughter.

“I-I—” I brushed back my too-short hair, unable to fully face Masie, who stood next to West at the side of the couch where I sat. “I was trying to prove a point,” I muttered, my face reddening in humiliation.

“I think Tommy has the point now,” Petty snickered, and Tommy reached over to smack him on the side of the head. He changed his mind mid-swing and stood as he grabbed another beer from the collection Ivy set on the low table between the comfy couches. He walked over to the balcony railing and stood with his back to it, watching over the collection of people within the circle.

After Masie explained she was finished with her reading and West asked my permission to let her hang out a bit, I excused myself, uncomfortable with my behavior. I hoped that Tommy might offer to walk me to my room, or even ask me to stay, but I must have embarrassed him as well. He didn’t offer. Ivy walked me to the door of the penthouse instead.

“I don’t know what came over me,” I muttered. “I’m so sorry if I humiliated him in front of the boys.”

Ivy’s sweet smile curled to full wattage. “It takes a lot to embarrass Tommy. It takes even more to truly upset him. He’s fine.” She looked back in the direction of the men and Masie. Tommy remained like a statue against the balcony railing.

“I’m so embarrassed myself,” I said, my voice lowering. “I’ve never acted that way before.” I brushed a hand over my head, cursing that I didn’t have hair to pull in frustration.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay? Have a beer?” Ivy asked, peering back at her uncle before looking at me.

“I think I’ve done enough damage tonight,” I suggested, sweeping a hand down her arm.

“Thank you for not hating Gage,” she said, looking down at her feet. I tipped up her chin.

“Honey, I don’t think there’s much that could upset me, either,” I lied. As for Gage and Ivy, they were like children to me, still reaching for the world with raised fists, hoping to conquer every dream. There was always something bigger than a silly disagreement to be upset over.

At my age, I knew better.

+ + +

I’d fallen into a deep sleep, so I hadn’t heard Masie return, or Caleb enter even later, but I couldn’t miss the pounding at the front door. Caleb turned the deadbolt after peering through the peep hole. The pounding continued until the chain was unlatched and the door opened.

Tommy stood in the hallway, his eyes a little wild, his hands braced on either side of the frame. He looked drunk.

“I want to sleep with your mom,” he blurted, and Caleb’s head swung to me. He stood in only sleep shorts, Masie behind him, while I stared in disbelief at the unabashed statement.

“Just sleep with her, kid. Sleep,” he muttered, his voice lowering.

“Do you know what time it is?” Caleb accused him, always my protector.

“No,” Tommy said, eyes trained on me.

“Are you drunk?” Caleb questioned, knowing the answer.

“Maybe,” Tommy admitted.

“I don’t think so, pal,” Caleb said, starting to shut the door, but Tommy stopped it with a thick hand.

“I won’t force myself in, but I need your mother.” Something in his voice swelled my heart. I’d been in this position before. I knew too well the lies a man told when he was drinking, but Tommy seemed different. *Oh, the lies we tell*

ourselves as women. I stepped forward, patting Caleb on the back before pushing Tommy into the hallway, which was an open balcony.

“Just give me a minute,” I said to Caleb while I peered at Tommy. The door swung shut behind me, but remained slightly open by the deadbolt catch, my children waiting on the other side of the panel.

“What do you think you are doing?” I snapped, trying to keep my voice lowered in case any neighbors heard the commotion. If Caleb was home, it had to be after two in the morning.

“I need you,” he whispered. “Just sleep. Scout’s honor.” He lazily crossed his heart then attempted to hold up two fingers. He wasn’t sloppy drunk, but he was struggling.

“My ex-husband was an alcoholic, Tommy. I’m not going anywhere with you.” The comment brought Tommy’s head up, and he stood taller. David hadn’t ever been able to admit it, but he drank excessively.

“Darlin’,” he said, and I hated the effect that endearment had on me. My insides curled. My heart skipped a beat, and my head warned me. “It’s nothing like that.”

I heard noise behind me, and I spun to find Masie with my phone and my room key held out for me.

“Maybe you should just walk him back to his room,” she suggested. I couldn’t read the expression on her face, but I feared she thought there would be a scene. She’d witnessed a few in her years, and I couldn’t put her through it again. Not here. Not when this was supposed to be a vacation from such things.

I smiled weakly, trying to assure her with my eyes that I wasn’t frightened, and I’d be back soon. She closed the door on me before I remembered I didn’t have on any shoes. I wore only a T-shirt dress as a nightshirt.

“All right, Tommy, lead the way,” I demanded, a bit irritated.

“You don’t have shoes,” he said, looking down at my feet. “I like your purple nail polish,” he added, noting the pedicure I’d given myself. “It’s a much better color than green.”

I rolled my eyes and started walking, hoping the movement away from my door would prompt him to follow me. It did, and we walked in silence down the balcony hallway to the stairwell and then down to the lobby. We rode the elevator up to his floor in the main hotel and he led me to his room. I stood outside as he fumbled with his key. Leaning against the wall, I waited while he opened the door. He paused once he had it open, pressing his body along the door jamb. Half his body was in the room, the other half in the hallway.

“Why’d you kiss me like that?” he asked, his eyes meeting mine and then falling to my bare feet again.

I shrugged. “I didn’t like how they teased you.”

“They were only playing, darlin’, but I’m not going to lie, no one stands up for me.” My eyes searched his face, and I saw what I described to them. He had sad eyes that held in tears. He had a strong heart to keep theirs happy. He did everything for the band, everything for Ivy. Tommy Carrigan had a solid, outer shell, but I wanted to know more about what lay underneath.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I’m so sorry,” I said, and his head shot upward.

“You didn’t embarrass me. Fuck, I wanted to beat my chest and claim you as my woman.”

With my eyes too dry to blink, I stared at him. He couldn’t be serious, despite the caveman-ness of calling me his *woman*.

“I—”

“And that kiss, Edie.” He paused, biting his lip before letting the plump lushness spring free. “I felt that kiss in my toes. To the ends of my hair. In my ...” He rubbed his zipper.

“You’re drunk.” I chuckled, feeling a little tipsy myself just looking at him. I shook my head. I couldn’t deal with drunk, but he was sexy.

“On you, Edie,” he said. “Only on you.” He paused, staring me down, his gaze roaming over my nightshirt to my bare legs and back up again. “Come inside, darlin’.”

“I shouldn’t,” I said, standing my ground as I pressed off the wall.

“But you want to,” he added.

“I can’t,” I stated, twisting my ankle and letting my toe drag on the cool carpeting.

“But you could,” he teased, lifting his chin. “Just sleep, Edie. I promise. I don’t trust myself with what I drank, but I want you to trust me enough to know I’d never take advantage of you. Not like this.” He paused, lowering his eyes.

I waited knowing he had more to say.

“I just want to be close to you,” he admitted. “No one’s ever talked like that about me, like you really see me. I just want to capture the feeling for a little while. I want to hold onto it, if I can. For just a little bit.” I stared at him and the brick wall of defense I tried to use against him crumbled. I took a deep breath, loosened my crossed arms, and stepped forward.

His wide eyes proved I surprised him, but he readily stepped back, allowing me entrance to his room.

6

Jive Talkin', or Rather Dancing

The crash of thunder and a bright spark of lightning woke me. My body flinched with the suddenness, and the dark room illuminated a second time with another flash of light. An arm tightened over me, and I settled into the chest at my back despite my racing heart.

After Tommy led me into his room, he pulled back his bedcovers and motioned for me to climb in. He excused himself, stating he needed a moment, and returned to tuck the sheet over me, as a barrier between us. I didn't like it, but I appreciated the gesture. He was trying to assure me he wouldn't take advantage of me.

"I heard what you said, darlin', about your ex-husband." He kissed my shoulder and then breathed into my neck. "Thank you."

I didn't understand his gratitude, but he'd fallen asleep almost instantly, before I could ask him what he meant. I always hated this about men. They could close their eyes and their worries disappeared. I closed my eyes and my mind wanted to race through an endless list of concerns.

As the rain rumbled, and his balcony curtain billowed in the rushing wind, Tommy snored lightly behind me. I had to chuckle. I couldn't seem to escape a man that snored. David's nightly nasal orchestra was terrible, and I often joked the neighbors could hear him. But I didn't wish to think of David when I lay cocooned in the arms of another man. Unfortunately, seeing Tommy drunk dusted off memories long settled.

David accusing me of cheating on him when he was the one who'd had an affair.

David coming home drunk and acting like I was the love of his life, only to tell me fifteen minutes later I was the worst wife.

David attending activities for our children while inebriated, and my interference, out of fear he'd embarrass us all.

Life hadn't been easy, and it hadn't always been kind, but I was thankful to have my health. Selfishly, I didn't want to think about how I'd like a little bit more than that.

I squirmed, attempting to remove Tommy's arm from my waist.

"Where you going, darlin'?" he muttered as if he hadn't been deeply snoring less than a second before.

"Bathroom," I whispered, despite it only being the two of us.

"No running," he warned.

"No running." I softly chuckled, patting his arm as he rolled to his back to release me.

It was early morning, maybe six or so, but the darkness outside his balcony doors made it feel like midnight. There was something about rain that suggested a return to bed, and that's what I did after using the bathroom. I crawled up the center while Tommy lay on his back, one arm hitched behind his head, his full body sprawled on display. He wore black boxer briefs that accentuated his tan. There was no mistaking the bulge under thin cotton. He was beautifully made, cut as if trenches were dug along his skin. Not a full six-pack, but definitely dips and curves implying firm muscle. It was his chest that was impressive, nearly two plates of steel. My eyes roamed his form. His abs slowly rose and fell at the waistband as he took a deep breath.

He caught me admiring him and I lowered to the bed beside him, facing the model-worthy display before me.

A peaceful silence fell between us as he rolled to face me. The wind outside the window increased, matching the pace of my heart. There was something in the way Tommy looked at me. Thrill rippled through my body, causing the ends of my skin to tingle. I wanted him to touch me, but he only stared at me, looking exhausted.

“You should go back to sleep,” I whispered, knowing that was the last thing I’d be able to do.

“Not what I had in mind,” he said, looking down at my lips.

I slowly smile. “I have morning breath,” I said, rolling away from him and covering my mouth.

“Let me see,” he said, following me, his body bracing over mine as his hand struggled to remove mine from my lips. He was teasing me, not tugging as strongly as he could. “Don’t resist me, darlin’,” he said as his knee came between my thighs. My legs bent instinctively, opening, begging for him to draw closer.

My movement paused his, and I released my hand. The thick pad of his thumb stroked my cheek before his mouth crushed mine. This was something I’d learned about Tommy and kissing: he came in hard, demanding, but he quickly slowed. In fact, he’d slowed so much, this kiss was different. He took his time after the initial onslaught, pressing soft kisses to each lip and each corner, teasing me more before opening his mouth and covering mine. He sipped at my lips, tugging them to his, holding the lower one captive before opening once again. He was flirting with me, savoring me, and I was getting drunk on him.

Finally, his tongue crossed the seam of my lips, and while I wasn’t a fan of morning kisses, I couldn’t deny my hunger for his tongue. Sweeping through my mouth, our tongues tangled in a lazy, rainy morning kiss of discovery. He took his time, imprinting a memory on mouth and etching into my heart a kiss I’d remember long past this vacation. Our bodies shifted, and Tommy found his way between two open legs.

The heavy length of him pressed against my core, and my body squirmed, searching for friction, but he continued to kiss me.

I wanted to sprint. He wanted to stroll.

We seemed to compromise as the kissing intensified. His hips slowly thrust against me, and my response to his kisses increased. Eventually, I couldn't breathe and pulled free. His mouth didn't leave me, though, but moved to my jaw and my chin before traveling down to my neck. A fist gathered my nightshirt at my side and slowly the material rose.

He pulled me to sit upright, and I followed his lead despite my galloping heart and the alarm bells ringing in my head. We hadn't been naked before, but I didn't stop him from removing my nightdress. Instantly, I covered my chest, arms crossing in a giant X. Within the blink of an eye, my wrists were clasped, uncrossed, and I found myself flung back on the bed, arms pinned to the sides of my head. Tommy was in a sort of half push-up position, and his eyes met mine for a second before he looked at my chest.

"Those are some pretty titties, darlin'." His eyes roamed the firm hills and dipped into the valley between them.

Any woman who has breastfed knows about the letdown sensation. A tickle just above the swell of cleavage, signaling what a female body was made to do. It's natural, and strangely sensual, and the feeling crept through me when I hadn't felt it in years. I wanted it to keep crawling, reaching a part of me that no longer existed, but it couldn't. Liquid filled my eyes, and I questioned if I could follow through with what we were starting. Tommy gazed intently at my breasts, but I had no sensation in them.

"I told you you're beautiful, right?"

I nodded, not feeling confident that I could speak without releasing tears.

"And I bet you had beautiful breasts before," he said, letting his voice lower. "But I don't give two shits if those are

fake or real, as long as what we're about to do is real to you."

I sniffed, blinking rapidly, but a tear slipped from my eye and slid to my hairline. He released one wrist and swiped at the traitorous drop, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together.

"Want to stop?" he asked, while his tone begged me to continue.

I rolled my head back and forth on the pillow.

"Thank fuck," he muttered, drowning out the *k* sound as his mouth covered mine again. His hips rolled, and I moaned against his lips. Releasing me, he sat back to look at my underwear—low-cut cotton again.

"Sorry, I wasn't expecting you," I said.

"Were you expecting someone else?" he grumbled, tugging down my underwear.

"No," I groaned with a laugh. "But I bet you're used to leather and lace, and I'm one-hundred percent cotton."

He flipped the material to the side of the bed and then pounced back, two strong arms caging me in.

"Don't bring other women into bed with us, darlin'." His eyes darkened in warning. My euphoria slipped down the meter scale. I nodded, and his mouth found mine again. While we kissed, his hand roamed, tucking up under my breast and smoothing down my stomach to tease the coarse hair at the apex of my legs. I was soft in the center, and as he palmed a hunk of skin, my hand gripped his wrist to halt him.

He stopped kissing me and pulled back again.

"Don't play with my fat," I warned, trying to tease him but slightly serious. Squeezing me there was only going to remind me again that I wasn't groupie material.

"Fishing for compliments isn't flatterin', beautiful."

"I'm not fishing. I'm stating the obvious." My voice rose, irritation filling it. A forced compliment was the worst kind of compliment. It was so disingenuous.

“What’s *obvious* to me ...”—he started as he slipped to my side and let a finger trail down the middle of my stomach, which flinched in reaction—“ ... is you don’t see yourself clearly.”

I wanted clarification, but I didn’t ask. Anything he said to me was within the heat of the moment. I needed to get out of that realm and back into thoughts of having sex with him, because I wanted that. I wanted to have sex with him again and again. There was no room for my emotions.

His finger traveled lower, combing through my crisp curls before diving in deep. My back arched off the bed at the intrusion, loving every bit of pressure within me. He twisted and released me before torturously entering me again. I gripped the bedsheets in a fist when his thumb hit that spot, the one that triggered all my pleasure.

“You’re sweet, darlin’,” he whispered as he watched me, my body rolling without control, drawing his finger into me and begging for the friction on that nub. The orgasm crawled up my thighs and crept down my belly, and when the two ends met, I detonated. My knees collapsed and pressed together to hold his hand between my thighs. I moaned as my back curled off the bed, and my head fell back. The sensation wasn’t ending but curling and crashing like the waves off in the distance, and I let the tide roll.

“Now that’s a sight I want to see again,” he said, releasing his fingers slowly and climbing over me for his nightstand.

Foil ripped. Lightning struck again, flashing behind him. The world was dark and murky around us as the storm outside continued, but all I sensed was him. He was thunder, and I anxiously awaited the resounding boom. He held himself outside my entrance, teasing me with the tip, as he parted me.

“This might be quick, darlin’. Morning sex usually is.” He’d said he didn’t want other women in this bed, but he just brought them here. Then again, I quickly forgot them when he rushed into me. I bowed off the bed again as he swiftly filled

me to my depths. The missionary position was different from the other day. Some might think it mundane, but something felt strangely intimate about him over me, looking down at me as he filled me. He must have felt it too because he slipped his knees forward and pulled himself upright. Taking my hips with him, keeping us attached, he lifted me by my backside. I used my feet to balance myself as he held my hips and pummeled into me repeatedly. Each thrust hit a spot deep inside me that I didn't know existed, tapping it over and over and over until I couldn't take anymore. My body wanted another orgasm, although I'd never had two in a row before.

When his thumb hit my center, stroking me rapidly as he thrust deep inside, tears filled my eyes again. Frustrated. I wanted this, this release, this pleasure, this painful desire deep within me.

“You right there again, darlin’?” He questioned, and I was reminded that we hardly knew one another. There were signs—sighs and sounds that people comfortable with one another expressed if the other is paying attention. Sometimes when you are with the same person for so long, you forget the joy in discovery, and I loved that Tommy didn't recognize yet that I was about to come a second time, and it was going to be huge.

I tipped my hips, clenched within, and released so large my toes curled. Moisture seeped from my core, and I heard the slapping of our bodies against one another in the wet heat I'd produced. He stilled. With my hips raised, I felt the sharp jolt of him inside me, pulsing and jerking. My head rolled to the side. I was sweaty and lazy; depleted of all energy.

He lowered my hips, slipping out of me, and removing the condom, dropping it off the side of the bed. After stretching out next to me, his hand settled on my stomach as my chest rose and fell with the exertion of what we just did. Propped on an elbow next to me, he looked like he'd barely broken a sweat.

I chuckled, and his hand jiggled on my belly.

“I love that you’re like opening a bottle of fine wine,” he said. My laughter died, and his finger traced circles on my soft abs. “You’re refreshing,” he said, leaning forward to press a kiss to my stomach.

“Something different for the palate,” I suggested. His lips curled as I played along with his metaphor.

“Something different, darlin’, definitely.”

He rolled away from me after that and picked up the condom from the floor. I still hadn’t moved. I didn’t know what to do next. Did I dress? Did I ask for a shower? Should I just leave? I sat up as he returned from the bathroom, a towel in hand.

“I guess I should ...” I faltered, knowing I wasn’t about to clean myself in front of him. I started scooting for the edge of the bed.

“I don’t want to leave this bed,” he said. “Not yet.” His tone matched the one he’d used the night before, the same one where he told me he wanted to hold me just a little bit.

He reached for his phone and ordered room service again. He’d slipped on his boxer briefs sometime when he went to dispose of the condom. Reaching for my nightdress on the pillows, he handed it to me.

“Would you be more comfortable if you put this back on?”

I nodded and took the nightshirt from him, excusing myself from the bed for a moment, and awkwardly covering myself as I hurried to the bathroom. Once inside, I collapsed against the door only briefly before realizing I was a mess. Using a washcloth, I cleaned myself, said a silent apology before I used his toothbrush, and dressed. My underwear was still missing.

I returned to the room and found him in the same position as I’d left him: one arm behind his head, partially propped up on the pillows, legs sprawled across the bed. He stared out the open balcony door at the fading storm. Turning to me, he held

out a hand, and I took it. His hands were thick, the tips of his fingers rough. Mine looked so small inside his, veiny and sprinkled with freckles. Beauty marks, my mother called them.

He sat forward, wrapped an arm around my waist and tugged me over him to bounce on the bed beside him.

“You have that look again,” he said, staring down at me where he towered over me on an elbow. “No running. Breakfast is coming.”

He returned to his resting position, and I sat up.

“We should talk,” he said next, and I stiffened. Here it comes, I thought, not even knowing what he could say.

This was nice.

Let's exchange numbers.

I never want to see you again.

My chest clenched with each scenario.

“Tell me about your ex-husband.”

The command took my breath away. “What?” I choked.

“You said he was an alcoholic. Tell me about that.”

“Why?”

“You’re doing it again.” He chuckled, looking at me, but my question was an honest one.

“Really, why do you want to know?”

“I find I still don’t have you figured out. You keep surprising me, and I want to know about this.”

“I thought you said no other people in the bed,” I teased, trying to make light of discussing David and wishing to avoid all messy conversations anyway.

“That was before. When I’m about to enter you, make us one, there’s only room for us two.”

My breath hitched again. There was something sweet in that statement.

“But now I want the deets on the ex.”

I shook my head, puzzled by the direction this conversation was headed, and answered. “He was an alcoholic. End of story.”

“Not enough,” Tommy said, letting his arm fall from behind his head. He clasped his hands on his lower abs, and I forced my eyes not to linger on his covered package, knowing how large it could get.

“I was married for twenty years. We were young when I got pregnant. We got married. It was the right thing to do, so we did.” I shrugged as my mother’s words echoed in my head. Twenty-one and a recent college graduate. Pregnant and married wasn’t the life I had planned for myself when I was younger.

“He graduated college a year before me and had a high-pressure job in an accounting firm. He worked long hours. He traveled. We seemed to circle one another instead of blending like married couples. We had been people who partied, but not partiers, if that makes sense. I guess life just got to him.”

“You making excuses for him, beautiful?”

“No,” I scoffed. “My ex had choices. He just chose himself, as he always did.” He’d been a selfish man throughout our marriage. Even the times he tried not to drink, his selfishness was still part of his personality.

“You stayed with him,” he stated. This was always where things got sticky.

“I did. I thought it was me. I thought it was the kids. He sometimes told me it *was* me. He mentioned a few times he didn’t want to be a father. We did therapy. We tried vacations. But the bottom line was *he* had a problem that he didn’t see as a problem. He lied to me, and he lied to himself. I couldn’t take it any longer.”

“What happened?”

“I turned forty. I was over it. My kids were older, and I didn’t like my life. I didn’t feel like I had one. When I found out he had an affair, it sealed my determination to take back something for me. I found a new job and asked him for a divorce.”

“You seem like an independent woman.” It was the first impression I think Tommy got correct.

“I am. Or at least, I like to think I am.” I couldn’t admit to him that there were many times I was weak. I still wanted to be held. I still wanted someone to tell me things would be all right when all everything else suggested otherwise. I still wanted someone to love me.

He took a deep breath, and I continued.

“I got cancer around the same time I served my ex-husband with divorce papers. He swore he’d change, that he’d be there for me. But he wasn’t. It was just one more thing that drove him to drink. I knew I’d be better alone than with him.”

“Very independent,” he muttered, as if surprised or impressed.

“I just wanted *me* back. I wanted my life,” I stated, patting my chest. “And then I thought I was going to lose it. Lose everything. I’m forty-three. If I’ve lived half my life, and was fortunate enough to get the other half, what would that other half bring? It couldn’t be a failing marriage, an alcoholic husband, and a very unhappy me.”

The air in the room grew heavy, and darkness filled the balcony window, bringing on another round of stormy weather. The oppressive atmosphere matched the one in Tommy’s room, and my stomach dropped at how I’d taken our carefree minutes and tainted them with memories of a man I’d once loved, but who didn’t love me.

Tommy hadn’t spoken, and I scrambled to the end of the bed, reaching over it for my underwear. I’d said too much, and the weight of it crushed me. If I was going to bare my soul, I wanted my underwear back on.

“I should go,” I muttered.

“I don’t want you to.” The words startled me. “I want to eat eggs, discuss music, and just look at you.”

“I ...” I had no words. My heart raced. My stomach flipped. I wanted to kiss him. His lip twitched, and he tipped his head as if he’d read my thoughts. Taking another risk, I climbed over his feet and crawled up the length of his body. His smile widened as I sat on his lap, painfully aware of what lay just underneath my backside.

“I’d like that, too,” I said softly, tracing a nail over his abs, making his breath suck in. A hand came to my hip.

“Kiss me, darlin’,” he asked, and I did.

I kissed him with the same tenderness I did last night, with the longing I had to be with someone who was hard on the outside like him, but equally sweet. I kept my body still as I concentrated only on his lips, the tips of my fingers stroking the stubble on his jaw, shifting to nails scratching through the smattering of short hairs on his chest. A tattoo covered one pec.

“You like that, darlin’?” he muttered against my mouth.

“I do,” I purred, continuing to scratch while I returned to kissing him. His lips were plump and delicate when he’d let them be, and the kisses washed over me, cleansing me of thoughts of my ex. I pulled back slowly, taking his lower lip with mine before releasing him. His eyes were closed, and he opened them slowly.

“You brushed your teeth,” he chuckled.

“So did you,” I replied.

“Is it strange that I like you using my toothbrush?”

“Not if you aren’t offended that I did.”

“Please, offend me,” he said, leaning forward for my mouth and forcing my body to rut back against his growing length. A knock at the door interrupted.

“Breakfast,” he muttered, gently pushing me off him. “I’d rather get drunk on you instead, but I am starving.” He said it so casually, so nonchalantly, as if he had no idea how that thought accelerated my heart rate and sent desire rushing through me.

If he wanted fine wine for breakfast, who was I to deny him?

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“Your music knowledge is atrocious,” Tommy chuckled, pointing a crispy slice of bacon at me.

I smiled in response. I described every song by the singer—you know, the one by the short, pixie blonde about being alone—*or*—the band with four guys and the front one looks like so-and-so. Tommy was good natured about my lacking information.

“Favorite song of all time,” he asked. I had to really think about it and then I had to try to clarify without using a movie or television show, which he mocked mercilessly, telling me those references didn’t count.

““Wait For Me” by a band called Colt45.” I shrugged my shoulder, glancing down at my plate. “I saw them at a small venue when I was in college. They were amazing, and I just loved that song. It hit the radio, but I remember hearing them before it became popular.”

I looked up to find Tommy staring at me, bacon still poised in between his fingers. He dropped the bacon on his plate and turned his head toward the balcony window. I had no idea what I’d said, but the air around us dropped ten degrees. He sat back and rubbed his jean-covered thighs.

“What did I say?” I asked, bewildered. His head turned back for me, and a smirk curled his lips but didn’t reach his eyes.

“Nothing, darlin’.”

I nodded not understanding what happened. Turning toward the clock, I gasped.

“Oh my gosh, is it really nine-thirty?” This wasn’t some play on escape and using the time as an excuse. It really was three and a half hours after we woke, and I could only imagine how my kids might react to my walk of shame across the resort complex. Thinking of that reminded me I had only my nightdress and bare feet to carry me back to the condo. Standing, I groaned, “How am I going to get out of here?”

Tommy followed me up from his seat. “Whoa, whoa, slow down, darlin’. You don’t need to rush off.”

“But it’s nine-thirty. My kids are going to think ...” I let the thought trail off and pressed my palms to my cheeks.

“They aren’t going to think anything,” Tommy said. “Why don’t you call Masie. Ask her to bring you whatever you need.” He paused and looked around his room. “Where are your shoes?”

“I didn’t wear any,” I said. “You were making a small scene, and I just wanted to get you back to your room.”

Tommy’s face dropped. The edges of his jaw hardened.

“Don’t ever let me do that again, you understand? You kick me to the curb. Tell me to fuck off, but don’t walk across a resort without shoes for me.” His tone was serious, almost eerie, and I nodded to agree.

“I really need to go, though.”

He offered me a pair of way-too-large slides before he tugged on a T-shirt, slipped into his own flip-flops, and escorted me from his room. After walking through the parking lot instead of the lobby, we neared my room and sadness pressed on me. Each time I parted from Tommy, I felt as if it would be the last time I experienced him. It wasn’t just the sex, but sex *with him*. To my surprise, breakfast afterward had

been equally rewarding. He was funny, smart, and nice to look at when he smiled back at me.

As we stood before my door, I awkwardly played with my key card, twirling it in my hand.

“I want to give you my number,” Tommy said. Although it was only a phone number, the thought warmed my insides. He pulled out his phone, and I realized something.

“I left my phone in your room,” I said sheepishly. He smiled slowly, and I noted this meant we’d have to see each other again.

“I’ll just text mine to your number,” he said, typing in the digits.

“Come in for a second. I’ll write your number down.”

He followed me into the condo where I noticed all the lights were still off. The blinds for the balcony remained closed. The door to my bedroom was shut.

“Just a minute,” I said, stepping over to my room, and opening the door to find Caleb sleeping in my king size bed. My heart pumped faster as I crossed the foyer and knocked on the door of the room Masie and Caleb shared. They hadn’t minded sharing a room. Caleb said it would be like when they were children in bunkbeds on vacation, only this time they each had a double bed.

“Masie,” I announced, opening the door to see Masie spring from her bed and West roll to the opposite side. I forced the door wide open.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked, stepping into the room.

“Mom?” Masie blinked while she ran a hand through her long hair. I’d clearly surprised her.

“Weston?” Tommy said behind me, and my heart dropped. This didn’t look good for any of us.

“Nothing happened,” West hastily defended. He tugged at his T-shirt, straightening it over his abs. “I swear, Tommy.”

Masie watched him as Tommy snarled, “If you touched her, you’re a dead man.”

“Mom,” Masie started, turning back to me. “We only slept together.”

I gasped, a hand covering my mouth to suppress the whimper.

“I mean ... I mean, *sleep*. Mom, we literally only slept.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” Tommy growled at West, who quickly crossed the bedroom, not even glancing in Masie’s direction. He slipped past me as if I’d reach out and punch him, which I wanted to do.

“Masie, how could you?” I groaned, thinking she did this because I wasn’t present.

“How is it any different than what you did?” If she physically struck me, the blow would have felt the same.

“Easy, girl,” Tommy said behind me, but I turned on him.

“Get out,” I bit out, swiping a hand over my barely-there hair. “What was I thinking? Get out. Please.” I stared at him, then shifted to West, whose head hung while he brushed back his longer bangs.

“Mrs. Williams.” It was the first time he’d called me by my full name.

“West, I’m politely asking you. Leave.” My molars gritted as I made the request.

“Darlin’, I’m sure it looks—”

“Out,” I cut him off. My heart was in my throat. I was the pot calling the kettle black, and I hated myself even more for it. I’d given my daughter the impression this behavior was acceptable, appropriate.

Tommy glared back at me and then gripped West by the nape of his neck. He tugged his charge and shoved him toward the door. I flinched as it slammed behind them.

Turning to Masie, I saw her horrified face before it hardened. Tears welled in her eyes.

“How could you embarrass me like that? Nothing happened.” She slammed the bedroom door in my face. My shoulders fell, and I pinched my own eyes, trying to process that my daughter had slept with a rock star in my condo. She was only eighteen!

Crossing to my room, I found Caleb smiling up at me.

“What’s wrong, beautiful?” he teased, spreading his arms like a child wanting a hug. I ignored him. “What happened?”

“I just found West in Masie’s bed.”

Caleb sat up and in mock-surprise shrieked, “What?” A hand came to his chest in an effeminate manner. “How could she?”

“Caleb,” I warned. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. Sounds like Masie did.” He wiggled his eyebrows and then noticed the seriousness of my expression.

“Oh, fine. He called her after you left. I didn’t see the harm. He’s a decent guy. Masie said they were only listening to music, and I believe them. Geez, Mom, chill. Masie isn’t like me.”

I found little reassurance in that statement but knew what my son meant. He often shared his man-slut escapades, offering more information than a mother should know. Fortunately, my son and daughter were close, and Caleb was protective. He’d never let a boy near Masie if he thought she’d be hurt.

“How could you let him in here when I wasn’t home?”

“Uh, Mom. Eighteen,” he said, pointing to Masie’s door. “Twenty-two.” He pointed to himself. “Think we can handle being alone.”

Frustrated, I exhaled.

“I’m going to shower,” I snapped, heading for the bathroom in the primary bedroom. When I finished, Masie still had the door to her room closed, and Caleb was in the other bathroom showering.

The day looked like it would remain overcast, matching my mood, and I decided retail therapy was in order. I needed to step away from all my thoughts and deeds.

I knocked on the bathroom door. “Caleb, I’m going shopping.”

“kay,” he shouted back.

Grabbing my bag, and slipping into flip-flops, I headed for the parking lot. I wore a T-shirt and shorts for easy removal to try on clothes. My credit card was suddenly burning a hole in my wallet. When I stepped out of the stairwell, I found West pacing near our rental car—a Jeep Wrangler my kids demanded I take over the economy option.

“West,” I said, surprised to find him walking to and fro, typing on his phone. His longer bangs were a mess, parting his hair in the middle with strands blowing in the low breeze.

“Mrs. Williams,” he addressed me formally again. “Nothing happened. I swear on my life. On my mother’s life. I’m so sorry. I know what it looked like ...” His voice trailed off. Something stabbed me in the chest, reminding me he was only twenty-two. His plea seemed sincere.

“How did you get into my condo?” I asked.

“Masie—” he paused, rethinking the direction he wanted to explain. “Masie and I were talking on the phone, and I asked her if I could play her something. I went there ...” He faltered, and I instantly learned West wasn’t a good liar. He was definitely covering for my daughter, the little vixen, who I

assumed invited him over as soon as I left. *Whose fault was that?* Tommy's? I sighed. Mine, I recognized.

"West, you seem like a decent guy, and I might have overreacted in the moment. I trust Masie. I think I was just a little startled."

"That's what Tommy said. But I'm still sorry."

"She's only eighteen," I added. "She's still in high school."

"I know." He sighed in frustration, combing back his hair. "I know."

I realized this young man had a crush on my daughter. He was trying to do the right thing, but the struggle was real.

"Do I need to say you shouldn't see her again?"

West stopped moving. His hand no longer swept his hair.

"I really wouldn't like that request." His honesty was refreshing. "But I'll respect it, if that's what you wish."

I shifted my bag, jutting out my hip. "Masie would kill me if I did that."

West looked at me, a slow smile gracing his lips, and two dimples formed around them. He was really cute, and I could see Masie's attraction to him.

"You need to keep things in check," I warned, repeating the words I'd said to Masie, and feeling guilty once again that I wasn't following my own rule.

"Definitely." West stepped forward and unexpectedly hugged me. The move was so sudden, I staggered after he released me. "Thank you. Thank you so much, Mrs. Williams. See you later," he shouted as he walked away, his voice sounding lighter.

I turned for the Jeep when I heard Caleb call my name from three stories up.

"Mom, hang on. I'm coming with you."

+ + +

My son loved to shop. It was a strange thing, but I assumed he'd grown into it because he was always with Masie and me, until he started playing baseball and guitar. He especially loved athletic shoes, which got pricier the larger his feet grew. As we walked the shopping strip, we wandered in and out of touristy boutiques, overcrowded with people who had the same idea as us on a cloudy day in Hawaii.

Caleb also loved graphic tees, and we spent more time trying to get him to make a decision on one or two than anything else. Eventually, he gave me time to visit a few dress shops, and I picked up three new dresses, perfect for summer back home. Most places we entered were over my price point despite the hole-burning credit card, but I was happy with the items I purchased, feeling slightly relieved from this morning's misunderstandings.

"Masie called Dad," Caleb told me as we ate lunch. I hated when she did things like that. Not because it was hurtful to me, but because it would only lead to a broken heart for her. I could only imagine how the conversation went:

What did your mother do?

Do you miss me?

Talk soon.

David didn't care what I did, only that I did something to make our children reach out to him. He had no backbone when it came to discipline, so I always looked like the bad-cop parent. On top of that, asking if our children missed him was only reassurance for his ego. He never told them he missed them. Why would he? He had a carefree life, living on a boat on the lake for a bit and then moving into a condo in downtown Chicago. The last statement—*talk soon*—was always a lie, setting the kids up with false hope. David rarely followed through with call backs and visits. He attended what

he could, when he could, he said. My heart ached that Masie thought her father would give her comfort after this morning.

“And what did he say?” I asked, drawing in a deep breath.

“The usual.” Caleb shrugged. He was already off to college when the divorce happened, and as baseball was David’s number one priority for Caleb, he hardly missed any of our son’s games. Caleb fulfilled David’s dream, but I often worried it wasn’t Caleb’s.

Hours passed. We shopped. We strolled. My son was a funny man, and I enjoyed his company. As we neared the Jeep, I saw another man leaning against it, his back to the spare tire, foot pressed to the bumper. He concentrated on his phone as his fingers typed frantically. Approaching slowly, I looked at Caleb.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Caleb said, holding up his hands in surrender. “Nothing, I swear.” But I knew my son, and he winked.

Tommy straightened as we approached.

“You have been so damn hard to find, darlin’,” he drawled, inhaling while looking relieved. My brows pinched as I glanced at Caleb.

“Keys,” my son said, holding out his hands.

“Wait.” Tommy held up his hand. “Did you buy a pretty dress?” His gaze dropped to the bags in my hand.

“I did.” My brows pinched, questioning his question.

“Slip one on.”

“What?”

Tommy looked at Caleb and back at me. “Hop in the Jeep and change. We’ll keep watch.” When Tommy winked at Caleb, I realized my son had conspired against me.

I stepped into the back seat and struggled to pull on a pretty lavender dress with thin shoulder straps and a deep vee at the neckline. I only had my flip-flops, so the ensemble had a beach-chic vibe to it. I combed through my hair and applied some lipstick I found in the bottom of my bag. Stepping back out of the Jeep, Tommy stared at me.

“What?” I snapped again, fanning out the dress at my sides.

“Beautiful, darlin’.” He hesitated, like he wanted to step toward me, but didn’t out of respect for Caleb’s presence.

“Keys,” Caleb said again, and I handed them over.

After Caleb pulled away, Tommy and I stared at one another. I wasn’t certain why I changed my dress or why we stood here, but I spoke first. “I’m sorry about this morning.”

Tommy nodded in response. “Did you mean what you said? That you made a mistake.”

“I didn’t say that.” I blinked, taken aback.

“No, your exact words were *what was I thinking*, implying you’d made a mistake.” His lips twisted after he spoke.

“I didn’t mean that,” I said, looking up at him sheepishly. “I might have ... overreacted.”

“Understandable,” he replied, nodding his head again. “I’d like to talk about that over dinner.”

“Okay,” I replied, dragging out the word, anxiety filling me while we stood in a parking lot. Dinner sounded nice but talking worried me. When he held out a hand, I felt a little better as my fingers entwined with his. Tommy didn’t just cup my hand. He held it, palm to palm, fingers between fingers. He held tight like he didn’t want to lose me in the crowd.

We walked in silence a few blocks before he stopped in front of a heavily populated seafood restaurant. I pretended I didn’t see some of the glares people gave us as we walked to the front of the line. Tommy offered a name, and we were

immediately escorted to a table along the windows with a perfect view of the ocean.

“How did you do that?” I marveled, noting all the patrons waiting for a seat. Tommy shrugged his shoulders. It was the first time I’d seen him use his position to his advantage. We ordered drinks and then he pulled something from his pocket.

“I don’t want to assume, but I’m thinking this David might be your ex-husband.”

He set my phone on the table between us and pressed the home key. The screen lit up with text after text after text from David.

“If he’s not your ex-husband, I want to know if you’re dating him, because if you are he needs his ass kicked.”

Tension I didn’t know I was feeling slowly released as Tommy spoke.

“If he is your ex-husband, he still needs his ass kicked, although I won’t do that, out of respect for him once being married to you.”

My mouth curled lazily upward.

“But let me add, he sounds like a fucking asshole either way.”

A laugh escaped. One sharp bellow. Tingles rippled inside me that the man across from me wanted to defend my honor against a man who promised to honor me all the days of his life.

Tommy slid the phone closer to me and I briefly noted the short quips regarding Masie, the jabs at my incapability of being a mother, and the mistake—*in his opinion*— I’d made in taking a vacation. Finally, he wanted to know if I was dating anyone, which was none of his damn business.

“That last one’s my favorite, so let’s start there. We’re both on vacation, and I’d like to propose we live a little. No promises. No commitment, but I like spending time with you, and I want a little more of it. So ...” He faded off to brush the

waitress away. “I don’t want to share you with anyone else while we’re here.”

My mouth gaped. I wasn’t surprised at the restriction, but at the implication that I *would* go out with someone else.

“You do realize that I have hardly dated in the past three years. It’s been even longer since I’ve had sex, and this ...”—I pointed between us—“ ... has never, *ever* happened to me before. So, I think it’s safe to say I won’t be going out with anyone else while I’m here.”

With a growing smile, a chuckle escaped him. He crossed his arms and leaned toward me.

“Three years.” He whistled low, as an eyebrow tweaked. His smile deepened. “Looks like we’ve got some work to do to make up for lost time then.”

The comment sent shivers down my spine, but I liked the sensation.

“To show you I’m serious, I’d like to give you my room key.” He slipped a black plastic card out of his pocket. “It’s so you can visit me when you can, when you want, whenever.” His voice faltered, and he waved a hand.

Was he nervous? I smiled again as I took the offered room card. “I promise not to be a stalker, though,” I assured.

“Phew,” he teased, swiping at his forehead. “Already had one of them. Though, had she been you, I might have enjoyed the experience more.” He wiggled his eyebrows, and I laughed, but the seriousness of what he said rankled inside me. There was so much I didn’t know about him, and the fact someone tried to take advantage of him frightened me.

The waitress returned, and this time Tommy didn’t wave her away. While we ordered our meals, I decided to let my questions rest. Over dinner we discussed the guys in the band, and Tommy told me more about each of them. I think he was trying to reassure me that West was the most decent of the four.

“Gage is Gage. He’s intense, and he loves Ivy fiercely. He almost lost her, because he can be stupid, but he knows he needs her. She gets him because of her mother.” Whenever Tommy mentioned Ivy’s mom, his sister, there was a certain sadness to him.

“Petty is a male whore, and I have no doubt he’d impregnate someone if I wasn’t so diligent about who he’s with. Jared’s smart. He went to college but dropped out for the band. He followed Gage’s dream. West is the newest addition. He replaced Cash.”

Tommy looked out the window as he spoke the last man’s name.

“Who was Cash?” I asked.

Tommy snorted softly. “You really don’t know music, do you? Cash Bennett. He was the lead guitarist of Collision. He killed himself.” Tommy sat back and drummed the table. “Damn overdose.” He swiped a hand through his hair.

I focused on his face. There was more to the story, but I didn’t wish to pry.

Tommy continued, “Anyway, West is probably the best of them all. Talented, but good at heart. Eager and mostly still innocent. He didn’t mean anything to be misunderstood with your girl.”

“I know,” I replied softly. “It was just sort of a shock, and I felt guilty.”

“Guilty?”

“If I’d been there, West wouldn’t have been.”

“Darlin’, I know about guilt, but what happened ... West sleeping next to your daughter ... has nothing on what I’ve seen. He’s a good kid.” He raised an eyebrow, defending someone belonging to him.

“I know,” I leaned on the table. “Again, I overreacted. That isn’t easy for me to admit.”

“Well, let’s get to admitting more of your sexual history, as your musical one sucks.”

I laughed, and he watched my lips. I wanted to kiss him, or he wanted to kiss me. It didn’t matter. There would be more kissing, either way.

When we finished dinner, we walked hand-in-hand again, taking our time meandering down the main strip of shops. He asked me about my job, and as I described it, I realized it didn’t sound very exciting, but it paid my bills. I was an executive assistant—which meant organizing other people, kind of like Tommy. The conversation switched to my home, Chicago. He’d been there several times for concerts.

“Collision’s dream is to play the big stadiums. Wrigley Field’s a rare gig. The guys would love to headline there.”

We halted at a corner, and Tommy tugged me to the left. We walked past two more storefronts on this side street before he stopped in front of what I assumed was a small bar. Neon sign, beer advertisements beamed through a narrow window. The place looked like a hole in the wall, shoved between a surf shop and a tattoo parlor. He opened the door, and I was assaulted with disco music.

“Is that ABBA?” I laughed as “Dancing Queen” flowed to the sidewalk.

“That it is,” he said, placing a hand on my lower back and pressing me forward to enter. Once inside, the lights were dim, and the bar was long. In the back corner were a jukebox and a strip of wood floor that could potentially be for dancing.

“What is this?” I softly laughed as Tommy led me to the end of the bar.

“Local hang out,” he replied, helping me up on a stool. He raised two fingers without speaking an order.

“You’ve been here before?” I questioned when two short tumblers with dark liquid were set before us. The dinner wine and rich seafood already made me warm and fuzzy inside. A

short sniff of the alcohol within the glass told me I was about to be set on fire.

“Something like that.” He raised his glass, tapped mine, and shot back the whiskey.

Oh, what the hell. I did the same, only I sputtered and coughed and didn't empty the glass. Tommy walked away from me after patting my back a few times, and I watched him stroll to the jukebox. Quarters were slipped in, and he pressed a few buttons. Returning to me, he explained, “The locals play this shit disco music to keep tourists out. If you can stomach the 70s, then you can hang without being bothered here.”

“How old do you think I am?” I teased, as he suggested I was familiar with 70s music, *which I was.*

“Not old, darlin', but you're not a headbanger, either. You aren't even bell bottoms and tie-dye T-shirts. You've got poodle skirt and pearls written all over you, although you aren't *that* old, either.” He wiggled a finger as if sketching me.

“You've just painted an awful image of me.” I laughed, but he had me pegged. I loved the 50s although I was a product of the 90s. College years filled with fishnet stockings, shoulder pads, and off the shoulder tees had nothing on my ideal of saddle shoes and a full skirt.

“Not really.” He paused, leaning towards me. “I'd like to color in the lines of that drawing and then color outside them just for fun.”

I gasped, but my insides tingled.

This place made perfect sense. The band could never enter a bar like regular people. Gage was recognized everywhere. Ironically, Tommy seemed to be recognized as well, which was strange as the band manager. Then again, he told me he played in his sister's band, Chrome Teardrops, and I figured that must be the recognition. Some music buffs really knew their band members.

A Bee Gees song popped on overhead.

“They’re playing our song,” Tommy whispered, leaning closer to my ear.

“How is this our song?” I laughed.

“You said you’d pick a Bee Gees song to describe me.”

I laughed as I clapped once.

“Dance.” He held out his hand.

“Oh, no. No, I told you I don’t dance. I meant that. It wasn’t a blow off.”

His lips rose and a beautiful smile filled his face. “Oh, yes. You owe me a dance.”

Tugging me off the barstool, he pulled me to the small dance floor and spun me dramatically. I stumbled a little and arched a brow to indicate, *see, I told you I can’t dance*, but he continued to guide me, pulling me close and moving my hips to match the sway of his. I giggled again, realizing this tough, rock star manager, who swore a little bit too much and kissed like the devil himself, knew how to dance ... and to disco.

“You *are* a wonder, Tommy Carrigan,” I said as he pulled me close, chest pressed to chest. We stood in more of a moving embrace than an official dance while the Bee Gees’ song “How Deep Is Your Love” played in the background.

“You are a *wonder*, Edie Williams. And one I want to keep wondering about.”

7

Baby, You're a Rock Star

My fingers delicately traced over lips still swollen and rough from kissing Tommy. After dancing, he brought me back to the resort, where he kissed me under a palm tree, and then walked me to my door, kissing me some more. We were like teenagers with our mouths mashed together and bodies pressed against walls. The stairwell. The hallway balcony. The tiny alcove entrance to my condo. Each time we broke apart, one of us would reach for the other and another upright surface met someone's back while mouths returned to devouring each other.

I laid in bed, replaying the night in my head. Each kiss. Each caress. Tommy had big hands, but he touched me like I was a delicate butterfly, like I might flutter away if he didn't tenderly care for me. It wasn't that he couldn't be rough, but there was a certain control to his hardness. Then I thought of his laugh—husky and rich—like the way he moved his hips. I giggled to myself, recalling how he tugged me into the disco-playing dive bar, and we danced. I never danced, but with Tommy as my lead, I'd do anything he asked. He made me feel spontaneous, and little more like someone *I* used to know.

I also thought about my daughter. When I had finally made it through my front door, I found Masie and West on the couch in the small living area, watching a movie.

“Night, honey,” I offered as a simple way of apology and approval for West sitting in the condo without me present. How could I judge her for wanting to spend time with someone who made her feel special? Here's the thing: Weston Reid *was* a rock star, but he was spending a lot of time with my daughter instead of trolling the bars with his two wayward bandmates, Jared and Petty. Was her heart going to break when

they parted ways? Absolutely, and I'd know firsthand how she'd feel. We'd just have to pick up the pieces together.

When I left my bedroom the next morning, I found Masie already awake, and we decided to hit the pool area early. For a while the silence pressed between us, but slowly she began talking to me. She couldn't stay angry for long, and she couldn't keep quiet long, either. We discussed the litany of things to come in her final semester of high school and her decision-making process for college. Nursing school was going to be a difficult journey, but one I knew Masie would embrace with passion, just like everything else in her life. I didn't want her going far from home, but she needed to branch out and see the world. She was torn between Wisconsin and California, two vastly different areas.

"Think West would come visit me if I went to Santa Clara?" she asked sheepishly.

"That would be fun," I offered, knowing I treaded on thin ice. "Might be hard with his schedule. Doesn't Collision have a world tour starting next summer?" Tommy told me some of the plans for the band. The world tour was a huge undertaking to promote their next album, which they needed to cut as soon as this vacation was over. I couldn't piece together why they stayed at a resort instead of renting a condo or a house on the beach. The time of year—winter break—made sense to me, but it seemed strange none of them had gone home to their families to celebrate the holidays.

Masie shrugged. "Maybe the tour will come through the Midwest?" Hope filled her voice while she tried to express with her body language that it didn't matter. My poor girl was falling hard, and the pieces might be harder to put back together after all. When I looked up to find Tommy walking toward the pool area with Ivy and the girls, I knew my pieces were going to be scattered among my daughter's.

"Hey," Ivy said, setting up next to us as if she were part of our family.

“Mornin’ darlin’,” Tommy said, biting his lower lip and letting it roll from his teeth. He’d already texted me this morning to say the same thing, but it wasn’t the same as hearing his voice. I really liked that rolled *R* sound.

“Good morning,” I replied, a slow smile pressing my lips upward like they held a secret. That secret included the sensation of his mouth on mine.

“Got to get to the guys. Band practice again today. You lovely ladies have fun.” He winked at me and bent to pat Emaline on the head. “Ivy, honey, see you later.”

“Bye,” she sang, holding up Ava’s hand to wave at their uncle. He blew a kiss to Ava, which Ivy made her reach and catch. Ava giggled. Tommy was too sweet.

We settled in like women do, chatting and chuckling about anything and everything. Ivy talked about the girls, and I answered questions about motherhood. Masie talked about college, and Ivy talked about her own experience.

“I went to college to be a music therapist. Even though both my parents were musicians, and I come from a musical family, I can’t really sing.” She softly laughed. “I guess the gene skipped me. As my mom grew sicker, I saw how music helped her and how sad she was that her singing and playing were slipping away from her. I wanted to help those who needed that peace.”

“I didn’t know your mom was a musician,” Masie said, and I held my breath, worried that Ivy didn’t wish to share that information with people she hardly knew.

“My mother was Kit Carrigan from Chrome Teardrops. They were popular when ... I guess maybe, you were in college,” she motioned to me.

“Oh, I’ve heard of her,” Masie said, sitting up excitedly. “Did she have a duet with some guy from the band Colt45?”

The name startled me. I’d mentioned that band the other day to Tommy, telling him one of my all-time favorite songs

was from a band with the same name. Hearing the name again was so strange.

“Wait, was there more than one Colt45?” In my limited music history, the only Colt45 band I knew of was an indie band when I was in high school. I saw them play at a small bar that allowed underaged patrons on occasion.

“Possibly, but not that I know of—” Ivy started, but then Emaline raced for the pool, and Ivy stood to follow her. We shifted to the edge of the pool so Ivy could get in the water with her daughter and the conversation about her mother ended.

A few hours later we were sunburnt and a little toasted from day-drinking. I was on the verge of one too many margaritas when Ivy asked us to dinner.

“It’s Sunday, and that means Tommy’s pasta night.”

I sputtered my drink as salt coated my lips. “What?”

“Every Sunday, Tommy makes pasta for everyone, demanding we eat together like a family and not a gaggle of musicians, as he calls them. It’s open invite for others, but the band *has* to be present. He even does it on the road.”

“I didn’t realize today was Sunday.” I’d lost track of the days since we started our vacation, but Sunday meant we were almost halfway through our ten days of Hawaiian heaven.

“All day,” Ivy chuckled. “Anyway, we’d love to have you all join us.” I appreciated that she was including Caleb, who was mysteriously absent today. He was in bed when we left this morning but hadn’t made an appearance at the pool.

Masie looked at me expectantly, but I was already accepting the invitation. “If you’re sure, what can I bring?”

“I think Tommy wants you to bring only you,” she winked, and I choked on the swallow of margarita I’d tried to sip after speaking. “You don’t need to bring anything else.”

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Hours later, we arrived at the penthouse suite with wine, garlic bread, and brownies. It was the best I could do in the small-scale galley kitchen of our condo. Besides, I wasn't much of a cook, but I could bake. The penthouse was filled with laughter, music, and even some football bowl-game. I loved how my family seemed to meld with theirs, as Caleb immediately jumped into an argument about who would win the Rose Bowl, and Masie joined Ivy to cut vegetables for a salad. I was charged with doing nothing after Tommy greeted Masie and I with a kiss on the cheek, and a firm handshake was offered to Caleb with a pat on the back.

"Mmmmm, hope those brownies are laced with something," Petty inhaled as I walked past him with the piled-high plate. The comment earned him a swat from Tommy.

The personal assistant in me wasn't good sitting still while others buzzed around me, and I kept interfering, trying to taste sauce, cut vegetables, or slice bread.

"Here, I have something for you to do," Tommy finally said, leading me down a hallway and gently shoving me into a bedroom. The door closed behind me, and I spun to have my cheeks cupped and my mouth crushed. I melted into him, relaxing a little as his lips moved over mine.

"Was that the something for me to do?" I teased, when he pulled away, sipping my lips in slow tugs.

"Yes," he muttered before returning his full mouth and thick tongue to kissing me. We only stole a few minutes before he said he needed to check the pasta.

"Please," I begged. "Assign me something to do." His eyebrow rose, and a smirk filled his face.

"You have no idea how many ways I want to assign you," he teased and then turned his back to me. I reached out for his back, spreading my hands over the broad breadth of it. He paused, and I bumped into him. Slipping my hands forward, I

wrapped my arms around his chest and pressed my cheek to his back. I loved back hugs. His hand rubbed down my arm and he lifted my fingers, pressing a kiss to my palm.

“Is it too much to say that I missed you today?” he said into my hand, not able to look at me.

I pressed a kiss to the middle of his back. “As long as it’s okay with you that I missed you, too.”

He bared his teeth and dragged them against my tender palm. The tingling pain sent pleasure rippling down my arm, and I shivered. More than twenty-four hours without sex with him, and I was a hot mess of desire. Moisture pooled in my underwear, and I rubbed my thighs together. If there wasn’t a room full of people down the hall, I might not let him leave the bedroom. My grip tightened on him, spreading my fingers across his firm pecs.

“Darlin’, if you don’t let me go, we aren’t leaving this room, pasta-night be damned.”

I released him with pouty lips he couldn’t see, as his back remained to me. He opened the door and swatted my backside as I exited. He wasn’t following me.

“I need a minute,” he said, taking a deep breath, and my eyes shot to the bulge behind his zipper.

“Stop looking, beautiful. That’s making it worse.”

I smiled broadly, my face heating, but thankful I wasn’t the only one affected. I liked that I’d done that to him.

I was assigned to set the table, an extra-large seating arrangement that provided space for everyone. Gage and Ivy sat at one end while Tommy sat as head at the other. I was given a seat next to him while Masie and Caleb blended in the middle. Dinner was a riot of loud conversation, delicious food, and the occasional slice of garlic bread sailing across the table to someone. I was teased by my children that spaghetti was my only specialty, to which Jared and Petty decided I was the perfect match for Tommy, as that was all he cooked.

The comment was said in jest, but my face glowed in shy embarrassment. It implied there could be something more than what we had, but Tommy had already been clear. He was on vacation and wanted to live a little. Matchmaking wasn't on the docket for this trip. The teasing passed just as quickly as everything else, and dessert consisted of my brownies and vanilla ice cream.

"Cleans the palate," Tommy said, holding his spoon between his lips just a little too long and staring at me. Wine was poured in abundance, and I'd definitely had my fair share by the time I stood to help clear the table.

"Tommy cooks, we clean," the boys chimed together. As a guest, I felt obliged to help.

"Uncle Tommy, can you sing to us before bed?" Ava asked while we were clearing the dishes. I hadn't realized how late it was, and the girls needed to get to bed.

"We have guests tonight," Ivy said, smiling up at me.

"Please," Ava begged, her younger sister echoing her whine.

"Have Daddy sing?" Ivy suggested, to which Gage looked up.

"Yeah, I can sing."

The girls giggled. "We *know* Daddy. You're always singing." Ava rolled her eyes. "But we want 'Jelly Belly'." Emaline clapped after her sister spoke, and her mouth opened in the most adorable surprise.

"'Jelly Belly'," she cheered, and Ava followed in with a rousing chorus of "Jelly Belly! Jelly Belly! Jelly Belly!"

"What's 'Jelly Belly'?" I asked at the same time Petty looked to the ceiling and groaned. "Not 'Jelly Belly'."

"It's a song by four probably pedophile guys who couldn't be a real band, so they sing kids' songs instead," Petty answered me.

“Yeah, well, those *four guys*,” Jared emphasized, “are freaking millionaires.”

“And what are we?” Petty scoffed.

“Close but not quite,” Jared added, and my head shot up in surprise. “Okay, maybe a little bit more.” He laughed as Petty scowled. Looking around, it made sense. They had the penthouse suite for ten days. Each member had their own room somewhere else in the hotel, but *millionaires*? I was so naïve.

“What makes Tommy singing “Jelly Belly” so special?” I asked the girls, bending at the waist to be on their level.

“Tommy’s voice goes deep, and he makes it deeper,” Ava explained, trying to imitate the sound with a froggy croak. She looked at her uncle and clasped her hands. Small eyelashes batted and her younger sister followed suit.

“How can you say *no* to that?” I asked Tommy.

“He won’t,” Ivy laughed.

I watched as Tommy reached for Emaline and then scooped up Ava, proving Ivy correct. Carrying one girl on his hip and the other under his arm, he walked down the long hallway and disappeared. He was a good man, maybe too good, and he loved his family which consisted of this ragtag group of relatives by blood and choice. It was refreshing to see a man act in this manner.

After a few minutes of clearing the table and forming a huge pile of dishes on the counter, the soft tenor of a male voice drifted toward the dining room. I stopped, perking up like a deer hearing a hunter in the distance.

“Is that Tommy?” I questioned, my head turning toward the sound. My heart ratcheted up a notch, and my breaths increased.

Ivy nodded toward the hallway. “Go listen.”

For some reason, I walked slowly, as if called to the song, lulled by the voice. This wasn’t a song about Jelly Belly,

whatever that was, but something deep and sad, like a lullaby. I slowed to a tiptoe, not wanting to interrupt the sound. Pausing outside the door, I peeked around the jamb to see Tommy sitting on Ava's bed, strumming a guitar. His fingers worked methodically, his eyes watching his fingertips stroke a string and pluck a chord. His voice followed, quiet and confident. A presence behind me made me turn.

"His voice is so beautiful," I whispered to Gage, slightly surprised.

"It is," he said, looking down at the floor. "He's a master."

My brows pinched, not understanding his meaning, and I turned to listen in again.

"Sing us one of yours," a sleepy Ava begged, stifling a yawn.

"Not tonight, baby girl," he said softly, but something must have shown on her face because he started strumming again. Instantly, I recognized the melody. As his voice filled the first line of lyrics, I stepped forward, filling the doorway. My mouth hung open. He sounded so familiar. I mean, he sounded exactly the same as...

"You sound like Lawson Colt," I muttered, staring at Tommy as his fingers screeched across the strings, coming to an abrupt halt. He turned to look up at me, eyes wide and a little wary.

"Lawson Colt," I murmured. "Of ... of ... of Colt45."

Tommy stood slowly, but I stepped back, bumping into the wall behind me. As Tommy took a hesitant step toward me, I looked from him to Gage.

Gage's dark eyes widened as his brows knit together. "You didn't know?" He chuckled. "You had to know."

"Her musical knowledge is atrocious." Weak teasing laced Tommy's voice. He stepped closer to me, holding up his

hands in surrender as mine flattened against the wall behind me.

“She’s star struck.” Gage laughed, and I heard the soft tap of Ivy’s sandals coming toward me down the hall.

“Star struck,” I choked, a tinny sounding screech erupting from my mouth. I paused, trying to catch my breath. “You lied to me.”

“Now, darlin’—”

“Don’t!” I raised both hands to hold him back from me. “You—” I paused, looking around his side to see two little girls watching us as harsher words tipped on my tongue. *You fucking lied to me*, I swallowed, irate.

“I didn’t lie,” Tommy defended as if he heard my thoughts.

“You didn’t tell the truth.” My voice rose a little louder. A little too loud apparently, because Caleb came down the hall.

“Mom, what’s going on?”

“He’s Lawson Colt,” I stammered, waving a hand in the direction of Tommy. “Of Colt45.”

“Well, duh,” Caleb mocked, smiling his damn dimpled smile. Then his face dropped. “What’s wrong?”

My mouth had popped open, but I snapped it shut. “You knew?” I questioned.

“Mom, everyone knows he’s Lawson Colt.”

“Not me!” I shrieked, and then I paused. *Everyone knew*. My eyes flipped from Gage to Ivy to Tommy. I looked like a fool. My music knowledge was bad, *but this ...* not recognizing one of the greatest guitar players of all time? Slowly things made sense. Colt45 disappeared. Tommy joined his sister, Kit Carrigan and Chrome Teardrops. A brother and sister who sang heart-wrenching ballads about lost love, missed opportunity, and permanent separation. He wasn’t just some guy in her band—he was her brother, her partner. Hell, if

my weak memory was correct, he wrote all their songs. They broke the charts. They were one of the greatest female-led rock bands of all time. She set record after groundbreaking record for female artists, and he helped her with songs he'd written for her.

I brushed past the small crowd in the hallway.

"Darlin'." The endearment echoed after me as I walked away.

"I told you," Ivy whispered, but to who I wasn't sure. Not wishing to make a grand exit, despite my embarrassment, I reached the kitchen and grabbed a dish, pushing Petty out of the way.

"I'll take over. I need something to do." Scrubbing dishes and handing them to Petty, we filled the dishwasher in silence. Jared remained present as well, most likely waiting to catch any dish I started throwing, as I was certain I looked like I wanted to break something.

Tommy had lied to me.

And truth by omission is the same thing. He hadn't told me.

I should make you sign a nondisclosure agreement for all I've told you. The words rang through my head. Did he still think I'd say something to someone? How little did he think of me? How little did he trust me? How could he give me his room key, unless he believed I'd never find out who he was?

We only have a few days. Let's live it.

Lies, I fumed, as I slammed the dishwasher shut and then filled the sink with sudsy water to tackle pots and pans.

"Darlin', let the boys do that," Tommy said softly from the door.

I don't want to talk to you, I yelled inside my head, but I'd already been embarrassed enough.

“I’ve got it,” I snapped to the pan I circled with the sponge over and over again.

“Boys. Out,” Tommy barked, but I turned and glared at Jared, willing him not to leave me alone even though I didn’t know him well.

“I don’t think—” Jared began.

“You’re not here to think,” Tommy snapped, and Jared narrowed his eyes at his manager. He didn’t move, though, and two large warm hands gripped to my upper arms.

“Darlin’.” He spoke softly, as if to a spooked child. I was spooked, but I was also pissed off. I rolled my shoulders forward, pulling my arms from his grasp. Refusing to look back at him, I rinsed the pot and started on a large serving bowl.

“You’re kind of stubborn, aren’t you?” I bristled at his comment. “I didn’t have you pegged for that.” How wrong he’d read me. How wrong I’d read him.

Lawson Colt. It didn’t make sense, but it did. He couldn’t be Tommy Carrigan to his sister, Kit. They would appear like a married couple with the same last name. Sister and brother acts had been a thing of the past. Not to mention, Lawson Colt had already been making a name with his indie band. Then his band disappeared. Had he given up his band for her? My shoulders fell, though not completely relieving the tension. His presence lingered only a moment longer before he stepped out of the kitchen. Jared took the dishes I stacked and started drying them. Petty had disappeared as soon as his duty was replaced by me.

“He didn’t mean it,” Jared said, speaking low. “He might have even liked the anonymity. He can’t go anywhere without being recognized. It’s crazy.” Memory flashed to the girls in the bar that first night, and more of them at the pool the next day. The dive bar where he said a local could hide and the way a name passed at a restaurant pushed us to the front of the line. He was a freaking rock star in his own right.

“I’d like to understand, Jared, but I feel a little foolish. I had no idea, and considering you all did, including my Caleb, and no one said anything...” My voice trailed off and liquid welled in my eyes. I blinked several times. A hand came to my back, but I shook my head.

“I’m fine,” I muttered, a phrase I’d said a million and a half times during a marriage of deceit. It was fine that David worked late. It was fine that he traveled too much. It was fine that he used our money to take a trip when he wanted a break from his life. Fine. Fine. *Fine*.

My shoulders fell completely, but the tension still pinched my back.

“Would you mind pouring me another glass of wine?” I asked Jared.

“Anything you want, Edie.” He stepped around me for the opposite counter. “He really likes you. I know that. He’s never dated anyone your age.” He paused, and I looked up at him, eyes narrowed. He was reflective a moment. “That probably came out wrong.”

Petty’s head popped around the corner. “Well, he dated, cough, cough, women your age when he was younger. Then when he got older, they got younger.”

“Not fucking helping,” Jared yelled with a false laugh, pushing Petty’s head away from the kitchen entrance.

“What I mean is—”

“Jared.” I paused, blinking back the additional tears in my eyes. “Would you mind if I finished the dishes myself? I just need a moment alone. Go watch the game or something.” I smiled weakly but hoped to convey that I really wanted to be alone. I was embarrassed enough, felt foolish enough, and had already created enough of a scene. I needed peace.

Jared nodded and pointed over his shoulder. “I’m right out here if you need anything.” Nodding, I swiped at a tear before it escaped and returned to scouring the dishes.

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“Do you have any idea how fucking long I’ve been looking for you?” Tommy snapped, crouching down next to the chaise lounge where I lay. I’d texted Masie and Caleb after I snuck out the employee entrance of the penthouse, telling them I was headed to the bar. I didn’t mention which one, although I’m certain they both knew why. I took a glass and the bottle of wine from the counter and went to the beach instead. I didn’t want to be around people.

My eyes opened fully, as I’d been dozing after finishing the bottle. Impulse forced me to reach out and I cupped his cheek, drawing down to his chin, and then scratching his neck with my knuckles. That prickly scruff brought me a strange comfort. Releasing his face, I slowly pressed myself upward, allowing him space to sit. He remained crouching a moment, watching me before he set a bottle of whiskey in the sand and took the seat opposite me.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything, darlin’.” He paused, and I waited. He was right; I was stubborn, but this time it was justified. I could wait a long time. In fact, I’d been waiting a lifetime for someone like him, yet somehow, I felt like he was already slipping away.

“You didn’t trust me,” I said, understanding all his reasons why and still not liking the answers.

“It wasn’t that. Not one bit. I liked that you didn’t know me. *Him*,” he corrected. “I’m still me. I’m still Tommy Carrigan.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, lifting my head to look at him.

“My name is Thomas Lawson Carrigan, Jr. My dad is Tommy, so they called me Lawson. I took the name Colt because it sounded bad ass and went with the vibe of our band. We wanted to be something classic, like the old 45 records,

although Colt45 sounded *tuff*. A gun. Alcohol. Bad things. *Bang.*” He signaled with two fingers towards the rolling ocean. He looked out at the water, and I observed his silhouette. His beautiful, silver-streaked hair and matching scruff beard. The buff of his body and the curve of his plump lips. He was gorgeous and we didn’t match.

He was a rock star. I was just ... me.

I turned away from him, looking down at the hand he returned to the arm of the chaise. He made music with his fingers, music that melted girls’ hearts and soaked their underwear. I had been one of those girls. I had stood, mesmerized, falling in love with him and his words, when he played at that Chicago venue all those years ago. Twenty-five plus years ago, and here he sat. He’d made it in life. I’d never felt more incompetent.

“You’re a fucking rock star,” I snapped, shocking him with my use of the word. “And I’m a fool.”

He rolled his head to face me, but it was my turn to look away.

“I thought you saw me differently than some groupie. I thought, maybe, you felt something for me.” Tears I refused to shed clouded my eyes. “You must have laughed double-time at my lack of music history, hoping, *no*, knowing, I’d never figure out who you were. You could keep up the charade.” I shook my head, disappointed in myself. My ex lied a hundred times and I never caught on. How had I fallen into this empty feeling again?

“I didn’t lie to you. I just left it out. And I’m not sorry you didn’t know. Your knowledge of the music industry *is* awful, and I loved it. It was interesting to watch you speak about things you lacked understanding about but were excited to share. Seeing your face light up as you realized you loved a song after I played it for you or trying to describe one you liked without knowing the artist. It was refreshing that you wanted to impress me, but in a totally unskilled, unbiased way.

And not recognizing me allowed you to get to see me without all the other bullshit clouding us.”

“Us,” I whispered. How could there be an *us* when only one of us was truthful?

“You are different, darlin’, that’s what I like so much about you. You don’t see the other stuff. You only see me.” His voice faltered. “Or maybe I just hoped you had.” Silence surrounded us for a moment, and I shivered from a chill in the night breeze.

“Please, beautiful,” he begged. “*Please*, don’t let this change anything. Be mad at me if you want to. But I kept the truth from you so I could feel like a normal man.”

“Normal?” I huffed. “You’re a rock star,” I repeated. “One that girls threw their bras at and showed you their tits. One where girls cried when you sang or fainted when you smiled at them.”

He closed his eyes, sighing deeply, the exhale sad. A million sorrows filled that sigh and my heart pinched. I understood his need to be seen for him—a man. It reminded me of me. I didn’t want to be viewed as a divorcée, or a mother of two, or a breast cancer survivor. I just wanted to be recognized as an independent woman—one who wanted to be loved and was willing to give love in return. If I forgot about what I *didn’t* know regarding Tommy Carrigan, I found what I did know, I liked.

I stood, straddled over his knees, and rested on his thighs. My hands cupped his cheeks, and I stared into his ink-colored eyes.

“You’re a rock star,” I repeated one more time. The words seeped into me with new meaning. I could see it might mean a world filled with loneliness and hard losses, pain and empty promises. He’d done so much for others, and I didn’t know the half of his reasons.

“So, what now?” he harshly scoffed. “You want to fuck *the* Lawson Colt?” His voice sounded shattered as his arm

swept toward his body. He scooted forward so I slid to his lap, his head tipping back like he was used to this treatment. Visions of women riding him, enthralled by his status instead of the man, made me sick.

I reached for his face once again, leaning forward until our noses nearly met. My heart raced, wondering where the boldness in me had come from. His eyes watched me, skeptical of what I'd do next

“I don't want to *fuck* Lawson Colt,” I growled softly. “I want to make love to Tommy Carrigan.”

My mouth captured his as I straddled him, pressing the full force of my core over the length of his stiff zipper. My hands dove into his hair and held his lips to mine, slowing the kiss enough to be tender, taking my time to savor each dip and curve of his mouth. My tongue reached out for his, and the kiss returned to burning flames. He sat forward, and I pushed downward, groaning at the position, the connection, the heat of him under me.

Still feeling emboldened, I pressed his shoulders back to the chaise and broke the kiss to remove his T-shirt. My hands skated over the subtle ridges of his chest and around his sides, focusing on the small tattoo I'd noticed previously. Small but right over his heart. *Kit Kat*, it said, with a breast cancer ribbon, a small token of his love for his sister. I bent forward, keeping my eyes on his, lowering to kiss him there. His heart thudded rapidly as I continued to scatter kisses across his firm pecs, scraping my teeth over his nipples. He hissed in response, muttering his favorite swear word.

I continued my exploration, rubbing my hands upward through the short vee of chest hair and rounding his shoulders. While we'd been together, I hadn't taken the time to really admire him in this way. My palms caressed down each arm at an equal pace until I got to his wrist. I wiggled over the thick length of him before reaching for his belt. Other than grunts and groans and the occasional *fuck*, he wasn't speaking. What I hoped was that he was feeling, experiencing, that I cared

about him—the person, the man, Tommy Carrigan. While the rest of his life was intriguing, all I knew so far was what he told me, and I liked it. I liked him, probably more than I should.

Don't fall in love with him, I warned myself, as I unbuckled his belt and sat back to undo his zipper. Awkward hands reached for his waist, and he joined me to lower his boxers and jeans enough to free him. I slid back to kneel between his legs. My eyes focused on the length in my palm.

“Darlin’,” he hissed, both begging and warning me. I wasn’t good at this, but I wanted to try. I wanted a taste. My lips kissed the wet tip, then my tongue joined for a swirl. I opened wide and swallowed just the head, sucking hard before pressing a kiss to the moist skin. His hand started petting my hair. I opened again and forced him as far as I could. My gag reflex was strong, but I hoped I could make up for it at first by licking along the cut ridges and stroking up the vein. Repeating the motion several times, his thighs quaked under my palms.

“Darlin’, I want this, but I want inside of you more.” His hands came under my arms, and he tugged me forward forcing me to release his dick with a soft pop. As I sat upright, he reached under my skirt and slowly dragged the scrap of fabric down my hips.

“Should we really do this here?” I whispered, suddenly conscious that we sat on the dark beach. Someone could see us if they wandered close enough. Then again, we hadn’t seen a soul near our secluded position by the break water wall.

He reached out a finger, swiping through folds ripe and ready for him, and I whimpered with need.

“Put this on me,” he said, holding out a condom he’d withdrawn from his pocket.

“I ...” I hadn’t done that in nearly twenty years. In fact, I worried I wouldn’t do it right. Seeing my trepidation, he decided to give me a pass. He bit the foil and tore the package.

I watched him roll the condom downward and hold himself upright.

“That—” I couldn’t say more, as words caught in my throat. *That was freaking hot.* He patted his thigh, and I stood to wiggle out of my underwear. Then I returned to straddling him, hitching up my skirt, and positioning myself at his tip. I gripped his shoulders, pausing as he rested just under my entrance.

“Don’t ever lie to me again,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him, and then I slid myself over his hard shaft. We both let out a groan, and his mouth sought mine as I stilled, acclimating to the thick length filling me. This position was different, deeper, and that special spot on me rested against him. I moved slightly and released his mouth as instant pleasure rippled through me. My nails slipped from his neck and dug into his shoulders.

“Like that, darlin’,” he chuckled. “Do it again.”

I did, slowly losing myself as I rolled my hips over him, holding him deep inside me, and rubbing that spot against his taut belly.

“I—” I couldn’t speak, and my hands slipped to his hips, where I tugged at his skin, trying to get him deeper inside me. I wanted him to crawl under my skin and stay there, never letting this feeling end. I rocked, groaning, and he let me take what I wanted from him.

“I’m coming,” I warned, as if he didn’t know from the clenching and rutting I did against his body. My hands released him, and I circled my breasts, reaching up to my neck, and slipping my hands over the back of my head. My whole body tingled as I came, falling forward when I couldn’t take it any longer.

With that, he wrapped an arm around my waist and began pistoning me over him, moving me up and down, giving him friction that stood him at attention within me. He was so hard, so very hard.

“Touch yourself, darlin’. Get there again.”

“I can’t,” I whimpered as he jostled me. “I don’t ... I mean ...” He’d taken not only my breath but my words. He slowed enough to grip one of my hands with his free one and drag it to my clit. He held my fingers there until I pressed against myself, lightly tickling until the tension built. I gasped at the sensation, and he increased the thrusting. Together, we climbed.

“Get there, darlin’. I’m too close.” He looked down at where I touched myself, and I followed his lead. Despite the dark night, I could see the outline of our joining. “That is fucking hot,” he said, and I softly chuckled, losing a bit of my concentration, but the laughter clenched at him. He stilled, and the pulsing inside me set me off. I stroked myself as he spilled forth with tender thrusts. I came again, though not as strong as the first time.

My forehead fell to the top of his head, and we remained like this a moment.

“You are a wonder,” he whispered, and I pulled back.

“I’ve never ...” My voice faded, and the corner of his mouth crooked. “I don’t touch myself,” I said, looking away, tickling my fingers over his abs. “I’ve never done that before.”

“I’m sensing there are a few things that you’ve never done before, and I’m happy to be the first, though I’m sorry it took you so long to discover those things.” He smiled broadly, and I smacked his chest.

“It’s embarrassing to admit you’re the first to give me a double orgasm.”

His brows rose. “What the ...well, we need to go for three then.” A pulsing aftershock of him paused us both.

“What was that?” I shrieked, the sound echoing in the quiet night breeze. He chuckled, and I felt that rumble inside me, which is where I wanted to bury his laughter, storing it for after I left. But I didn’t want to think of parting from him. Not yet.

“Number three in my room,” he teased.

+ + +

In his room, I excused myself for his bathroom. When I came out, I found him stripped and sprawled on his stomach across his bed. I admired his backside—two fine globes that would make ancient sculptors jealous. He rolled to face me and patted the space next to him, but something in his slightly opened nightstand caught my eye. Slipping the drawer open further, my eyes widened. Lifting up the fabric, I peered at him. His eyes didn’t leave mine.

“What’s this?” In my hand, I held the black scarf I wore, and lost, by the pool the other day. Turning back to the drawer, I found the scarf I left behind when he first took me doggie style against his bed. Red polka-dot material filled my hand. Last was a yellow scarf, the one I’d forgotten after that first introduction by the pool. He didn’t respond, his eyes hooded with his silence. My brows pinched but he still didn’t speak, only patted the bed once again. Staring back at him, my mind raced. He wanted someone who admired him for *who* he was, not *what* he was. Collecting my scarves seemed to be a small statement. Was it possible Tommy Carrigan liked me *for me*? Despite my earlier boldness, I wasn’t strong enough to ask that question.

“I shouldn’t spend the whole night,” I said instead, crawling over him to what seemed to be my side of the bed. He remained on his back, facing the ceiling, and we each lay with our thoughts for a second.

“You know that thing you did, when we were at Ivy’s?” he asked.

“What thing?” My brows furrowed, completely uncertain what he referenced.

“Where you kind of hugged me from behind?”

My lips curled at one corner. “Sure.”

“I liked that. I liked that a lot, beautiful.” His voice lowered as if he’d just admitted the world’s biggest secret. Pressing a hand to his shoulder, I pushed at him. He glanced at me, and I did it again, signaling for him to roll to his side, his back to me. When he did, I scratched up and down his spine a few minutes and then scooted closer to him, pressing as much of me into his back. He reached for the arm I wrapped over him and dragged it to the middle of his chest, flattening my palm under his. I kissed his back a few times and his shoulders relaxed. His breathing leveled, and he drifted off to sleep. Without asking him my question, I answered my own about my feelings for him.

I like you, Tommy Carrigan the man, I quietly kissed his skin. I like you a lot.

8

New Year. Orgasmic Goals.

I didn't fall asleep but waited until Tommy was deep at rest. Then I stood and dressed. I placed all my scarves back in his nightstand and was reaching for the bedside light when he gripped my wrist.

"I don't like you sneaking out of my bed," he said, his voice gravelly and gruff.

"Go back to sleep, baby. I need to get back to my room."

He scrubbed his hands down his face before perching up on one elbow. "That's a first." He smiled slowly, groggily.

"What is?" I asked, still whispering as if afraid to wake him.

"You call everyone else honey or baby, even that dumb ass Petty tonight, but not me. But now, you did." He smiled like a kid ready to see Santa, and I swiped a hand over that prickly scruff that I liked so much then kissed him briefly.

"I'll see you tomorrow, baby."

His hand reached for my nape so quickly it startled me, and I was pulled to his mouth, returning for more than the brief kiss I'd just given him. With a full onslaught attack, my insides leapt to life. If he kept that up, he'd get that third orgasm out of me, but I decided it wasn't a good idea. I wanted earlier to be about him, not me. I pulled back after a minute.

"I wanted a piece of you," he whispered, his eyes lowering to the nightstand. "Creepy?"

"Flattering," I replied, my lip curling with the hope he wanted to remember me as much as I would remember him.

“There’s a concert tomorrow. I want you to be there. I’ll send tickets for you and the kids,” he offered, sitting upright.

“Tomorrow,” I whispered, swiping at his nose, before he stood from the bed. My eyes questioned the movement.

“I’m walking you back to your room. Tomorrow, beautiful.” His wink was my warning, or better yet, my promise.

+ + +

When I returned to my room, I knocked on Masie and Caleb’s closed door. Pressing it open, I found West and Masie asleep on Masie’s bed. I should have woken him. I should have kicked him out, but they were dressed, and he lay cradling my daughter to his chest. It looked innocent enough. All clothes on. On top of the bed. So, I left them wondering about Caleb. I found him sleeping in my king size bed.

“Hey.” I rustled his arm. “Hey, go to your own bed,” I teased.

He rolled slightly, lifting his head from the pillow. “Masie and West are in there.”

“So?” I said, reminding myself they looked innocent.

“So, I’m not sleeping with West *and* Masie in the same room,” he said in mock horror.

“Well, I’m not sleeping with you,” I exclaimed. “Sofa city, babe.” I entered my bathroom, prepped for bed, and returned to find he hadn’t left.

“Caleb,” I hissed. “Out!”

“Mom,” he whined. “I’ll never fit on that couch.”

“Oh, my God.” I sighed, making a wall of pillows down the middle of the bed. I couldn’t believe I was doing this, but I was drained from all that happened—the moment of truth, the

wine, the sex. I was exhausted. Still, Caleb wasn't six years old. He was six-feet-three, and twenty-two.

As I lay down, my son's hand reached for mine. In a groggy voice he asked, "Did you make up with him?"

No, I shouted in my head. *No, I am not discussing this with my son.*

"Yeah," I answered instead, smiling slowly to myself. Honestly, I could only hope Tommy understood my intentions tonight. I liked him, as Tommy Carrigan, I really, *really* did.

"He seems like a nice guy. How did you not know who he was?" Caleb chuckled, sleep deep in his laughter.

"I don't know." I sighed. "I just didn't, and yeah, he is a nice man." Although that older woman at the pool suggested Tommy and the band were part of my family, Tommy had actually made us feel like part of his. He'd included us in dinner and treated us like we'd always been there.

"You know it's okay to date him, right?"

"Oh, honey, we aren't dating. We're on vacation. I might never see him again."

"Why would you say that?" Caleb asked, propping up and shifting as he continued to hold my hand.

"I just mean, we'll go our separate ways when this vacation is over. He's a busy man, a *famous* man. But our time together has been fun," I added, my voice saddening at the reality. I wouldn't see him ever again after five more days but being with Tommy had been exciting. "Why, what did you think I meant?"

"It's just ... I don't know ..." His voice faded. "You're okay, right?" The shift in his voice clued me into his concern. Cancer. Death. It's a hard discussion to have with your child, one especially difficult for him to understand when he was away at college, living his first taste of independence. Caleb came home immediately when I learned the diagnosis, but I

sent him back to school, knowing there was nothing he could do about it.

“I’m fine, honey. The doctors say that I’m all good.” *For now*, but I didn’t add that. There was a chance the cancer could come back. Some day. But maybe not. That was the part I was holding onto—the maybe not.

“Well, you have my permission to date him. Just have fun, Mom.”

I chuckled.

“You know he asked me if he could take you to dinner, right?”

“No.” I scoffed, a hand covering my lips in surprise. “When?”

“The other night, when he met us in town. He texted me to ask if he could take you to dinner. He wanted my permission.” Caleb fell back on the bed, and I stared up at the ceiling.

“That was ... very gentlemanly of him.” *And sweet*. Caleb grunted, falling back asleep almost instantly, like men can do. I rolled to my side, my back to him, with the wall of pillows between us. Fifteen minutes later, I heard him leave my room, and a few moments after that I heard the front door click open and shut. I smiled, knowing Caleb had been the bad guy. He kicked West out.

+ + +

The next morning, I woke to a text. **Good morning, darlin’.**
You look beautiful.

How would you know? I’m still in bed. 😊

Then you definitely look beautiful, but you’d be prettier in my bed. 😊

I laughed before texting him back. **Good morning btw.**
xo.

xo?

Kiss. Hug. Too much?

Ugh. I wasn't good at this and I fell back on the pillow, holding up the phone while the three little dots wiggled as he typed. They disappeared and then returned, and I held my breath. *Too much*, I decided and flung my hand with the phone down on the bed.

The ping noise signaled his response.

Shit, I like that almost as much as you calling me baby.

There was a pause and three dots again, so I waited.

Concert tonight. I'll see you there. Sending over three tickets. Call Ivy and ride with her.

The concert? I was too old for this, right? My knowledge of Collision was next to nothing, minus one or two songs. My kids were going to be thrilled, but that wasn't the adjective I'd use for me. Not to mention, I had nothing to wear to a rock concert. I flung the phone back to the bed and then remembered to type a thank you. He had mentioned the concert wasn't typically part of their stay in Hawaii. Ivy told me the Hawaiian vacation over winter break was a tradition. The concert was unexpected, and she wasn't happy about it, but when some publicist found out Collision would be on the island, they asked for a special New Year's concert that was too good for the band to pass up. Checking the date at the bottom of my screen, I noticed it was actually New Year's Eve.

In preparation for the concert, I suggested Masie and I get manis and pedis. I also needed to do a little shopping. In addition, I asked Masie if we could bring Ivy and the girls. Masie agreed with the invitation. After the day at the pool, I had a sense that Ivy didn't do much when the guys practiced. I couldn't imagine her life when they toured. I knew all about a

man who traveled often and being a single-but-married parent of young children. It sucked. As Ivy was on vacation—one hijacked by this concert—I thought it would be nice to include her.

We learned about the intensity of a Collision concert when we suddenly couldn't get to the penthouse suite. The elevator doors opened, and a security guard met us. We weren't on any approved list so Masie texted Ivy. Instantly, the penthouse door opened.

"Thanks, Sam, but they're welcome. I'll have Tommy update the list."

I assumed the guys were gone already for sound checks or something-something, I didn't understand.

"The press probably knew we were here all along, but with the concert, Tommy upped security. The stalkers can get a little crazy and he doesn't like to risk the girls."

"How do you do this?" I asked, concerned for Ivy's well-being.

"I've known this my whole life." She shrugged. "So, what's up? Masie said you had a surprise for me." Ivy's eyes lit with curiosity and excitement.

"Mani-pedis," Masie cheered. Ivy just looked at me.

"I thought you might like to do something girlish. Bring the girls. They can get a polish, too."

"Really?" Her surprise confirmed what I thought. Ivy didn't do these things often.

Gage entered the living room and paused when he saw us gathered. His hair was wet from a shower, and he scrubbed at it, making short waves.

"Babe," he said as way of questioning his wife about our presence.

"Edie and Masie want to take me out for manis and pedis. It sounds fun. Ava and Emaline will go, too." She walked to

her husband, and he stepped forward, reaching for her face and drawing her close, kissing her deeply like I'd seen him do before. I had to look away. It was too intimate.

The door to the penthouse slammed and heavy steps sounded across the entrance floor before we heard, "Gage Everly, what the fuck is taking you so—" Tommy's voice cut off when he saw me. "Darlin'?" His eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Edie wants to take me out for manicures before the concert." Ivy addressed her uncle, still enveloped in her husband's arms. "Doesn't it sound like fun?" If I didn't know better, there was a sense of pleading in her voice, as if encouraging her uncle to side with her in the decision to go. Was there something I was missing?

"I want you there with me," Gage said into Ivy's hair, loud enough for us all to hear.

"Stop being a possessive prick and let her go. What do you expect her to do, chase the girls and stare at you all day?" Tommy said, exasperated. Gage looked up at his manager and flipped him off.

"Yeah, well, right back at you. We're late. You have two minutes." Then Tommy pointed at me, the index finger sharp in my direction before curling it towards him, then he started walking away. I looked at Masie, shrugged my shoulder, and walked to the entryway. I was hardly out of Masie's line of sight when Tommy wrapped an arm around me and dragged me into the corner. His mouth took mine, surprising me with that way he has, before I melted into the kiss.

"You are a sight for sore eyes, beautiful." He shook his head and started kissing me again. My fingers combed through the hairs at his nape. They curled up a little, and I twisted a few between my fingers. With a little tug, he released me, muttering into my neck. "Fuck, I want you." Excitement shot through my belly like a firework, straight up my ribs to my heart. I bit my lip as I smiled.

“We’re late. Get the fuck in the truck,” Gage mocked behind Tommy in his worst imitation of his manager’s Southern drawl. Tommy released me and spun, as if protecting me.

“You know, you are the biggest pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, well, I’m your paycheck in the ass, too.”

“As if,” Tommy snorted, and I gripped the back of his shirt. I hadn’t seen this side of him with Gage before, but I sensed tensions ran high under the pressure of a concert. My arms slipped around him, and I pressed my cheek to his back.

“Play nice,” I muttered, the way I would speak to my children.

“He’s lucky you’re here, Edie. I’m getting sick of his grumpy shit,” Gage muttered.

Tommy flipped him off. “Well, right back at ya’,” he mumbled as he rubbed a hand over my arm and then released my hold on him. Spinning to face me, he kissed my forehead. “You know I love that, right?” Implying the back hug I’d given him, but my heart thumped at the word love. I nodded under his lips, and he pulled back with a quick smile before holding open the door for his lead singer. It slammed behind them, and I jumped.

Returning to Ivy, I asked, “Are they always like that?”

“They can be. Gage is ... needy, and it gets on Tommy’s nerves. But Gage also realizes he *needs* Tommy. Tommy knows the business. The people, the perks, the pitfalls. If Gage wants Collision to be something, he needs Tommy.” Ivy spoke nonchalantly, as if she herself had a business head on her shoulders.

When we couldn’t get into any salons with five people on New Year’s Eve, we decided to shop. Ivy found me a sort of hippie-looking dress with wide sleeves and a short hem. We went into a toy store, where I bought both girls an arts and crafts project, and then we found a pharmacy that sold cosmetics and bought nail polish. We ate lunch at a place

specializing in fish tacos and then returned to the resort. I painted Ava and Emaline's fingers and promised them craft time after a nap. Ivy let me put them to bed with a story.

"My mom would have loved you," she said to me as I returned from their room. "She didn't have many girlfriends. It was hard in the business. It was either cutthroat female musicians vying for the top, or groupies throwing themselves at the guys in her band." This comment included Tommy, and I tried not to think about it. "She found it difficult, always having to explain that Tommy was her brother, not her love interest. *Ew*," Ivy said with a shiver.

"She always felt she was defending herself. Her music. Her love life. She dated, and she had relationships, but she didn't want marriage. She said she was committed to me, and she was. I think she did the best she could to try to make my life normal. She wanted me with her, but she wanted me to experience school and sports and clubs like she had as a kid. I don't think it's ever that easy, though, when your parents are already famous." Ivy sighed, as I started painting her nails. "I told you I went to school for music therapy after she died. It was her dream that I go to college, but I can see in hindsight *why* she wanted it for me." She paused, watching the brush slip over her nail. "I need something to do. I can't keep following Gage all over the country. The girls are growing. Ava starts first grade this fall. It was hard having tutors and going on tour. I don't want that for them."

She peeked up at me. "And what about me? Is being a mom all I'm going to do while he sees the world?" She shrugged as if stopping herself. "Of course, I've already seen most of it, or as much of it as you can see when you are in twenty-six states in as many days."

"You don't have to work," I said as a statement, but it was more a question. Ivy surely didn't need the money.

"I don't, and I'm lucky because of that." She lowered her voice. "But I want to."

"There's nothing wrong with that," I said.

“I want to feel like I’m contributing.”

“You are, honey. You’re Ava and Emaline’s mother. They need you now.” I believed that wholeheartedly. I’d been fortunate to stay home while my children were younger, and David worked. It was only when Masie started fifth grade that I returned to a day job, more to get out of the house than to be employed.

“But what if it’s not enough?” she whispered, and I could see, in her twenty-eight years, the fear most women I imagined faced at some point. Being a mother was a miracle, and a dream, but you lost yourself a little along the way. Children’s demands, their needs, their desires all came before yours. They define you, and you don’t recognize yourself any longer. In the presence of an absent husband, I imagined Ivy’s life was as lonely as mine had been at times.

“What does Gage say?”

Ivy scoffed. “I’m sure you can guess he hates the idea.”

“Why?”

Ivy’s shoulders fell, and her hand went limp in mine. “So many reasons, but none of them valid anymore.”

“I don’t think he likes me,” I said, sounding like a teenager.

“He does. But he’s jealous. He wants to be the center of my world. It was hard when I lost my mom, and I lost him for a few years after she died. He sees you as taking my attention, but he doesn’t mean it in a bad way. He just doesn’t want me to try to replace her with you.”

The words were so honest, so raw, and I gathered they’d talked about Gage’s concerns.

“Honey, no woman is ever going to replace your mother. No one. But I’m here for you ... if you want me to be. I know I live in Chicago, and you live in California, but if you want my friendship, it’s yours.”

Tears came to her eyes. “You know, I come here every year at this time. My mother loved Hawaii, and it was the only time of year I had most of her attention. I return in her memory. She loved this resort, and we always stayed in this penthouse. Silly, isn’t it?” She swiped at a tear. “But I think she knew I needed something, and I feel like she sent you to me.” Wet fingernails or not, she reached out and hugged me, and my heart broke for a girl who lost her mother too soon and was losing herself as a mother. How cruel the world could be while giving us blessings at the same time?

+ + +

The bar was large. Edged with tall tables, it mimicked a concert venue by providing standing-room-only in the center of the space. I expected the scent of beer and my heels to stick to the floorboards, but several open doors at the back of the room allowed a tropical breeze to swirl throughout, resulting in a pavilion feel rather than a closed-in club. The hardwood floors were thick planked, like a deck, adding to the casual Hawaiian atmosphere. A long bar filled the wall to the left of us with the stage, perpendicular to the bar, set up for a band. The wide floor space allowed the crowd to participate without furniture in the way, and with the packed house, the place busted at the seams with people eager to see Collision. We had a reserved table, roped off, and guarded in a back corner. I smoothed down my hips as I remained standing, too nervous to sit yet. Although Ivy had me purchase the hippie style dress, Masie suggested I wear something different.

“It’s one size fits all, Mom. You can totally pull this off.” I slipped into her stretchy, black tank dress with thin ribbon straps. After I told her the dress highlighted my unattractive bump in the front too much, she added one of Caleb’s white dress shirts, having me tie it below my waist. The shoulder continued to fall, and Masie assured me that was the look I wanted.

“Mom, you look smoking hot. Tommy will drop when he sees you.” While I wasn’t so sure about that comment, I did feel good. It was a professional-slash-shabby-chic look. Strappy heels completed the outfit, taking it from what could have been a daytime look to a nighttime dance-club feel. I kind of liked how I looked. Actually, I felt freaking sexy. With my bright-colored nails peeking through the strappy sandals, I felt like I could conquer anything, including Tommy Carrigan as Lawson Colt.

However, my bravado stumbled when Tommy was introduced by the emcee, and the introduction revved the crowd to a rousing chorus of chants for Colt. Settling the crowd with his good nature and gentle laughter, he highlighted Collision. Gage entered from the left and his presence mesmerized the audience. He commanded attention, and it made sense why everyone, including Ivy, gave into him. Of course, his gaze scanned the crowded bar, seeking his wife, and smiling slyly in relief at the sight of her.

“Hello gorgeous,” he breathed deeply into the microphone. Apparently, this was his signature address, and the audience went crazy as he eyed his wife over their heads. Then Petty tapped his sticks, and the house came to life with music. They played two songs before Caleb grabbed both Masie and Ivy by the hand.

“Let’s dance,” he said, intending to tug them toward the front of the crowd.

“He won’t like it,” Ivy shouted over the voices joining with her husband.

“Do you always do what he likes, Ivy?” Caleb taunted, and Ivy gave in, following Masie’s lead to the stage. Gage did give his wife a narrow-eyed look as Caleb and Masie sandwiched Ivy, forcing her to dance. I sat back at the table and watched as Gage’s irritation grew, but he didn’t break the song. He pointed at her once, and while I thought she flipped him off, I realized she had actually flipped up her ring finger,

reminding him that the huge rock she wore meant she belonged to him.

The song ended, and Gage walked to West, before returning to the mic.

“How you enjoying the show?” Gage hollered with enthusiasm. “Collision is my family, but sometimes we have special guests join us for the holidays. Who’s ready for a new year?” The crowd went wild, shrieking and screeching, whistling, with hands in the air. “I’d like to give you all a treat, and call up our new friend, Caleb, to play a bit with the guys.” The audience roused again, encouraging my son to hop on the stage and take the guitar offered to him by Gage. Tension stood between the two men, but Gage’s stage presence kept him in the entertainer-moment. He clapped Caleb on the back and pointed subtly at his wife. I noticed Ivy heading for the side stage, and I rushed to intercept her there.

“Don’t you start with me,” she snapped at her husband as he reached her. Instantly, he embraced her, kissing her in that commanding way he had and dragging her behind the stage. I remained on the side, mesmerized by my son, wondering how much he might miss a dream he was never allowed to have. David wanted a baseball player, not a musician.

From where I stood, I saw Tommy exit the opposite side of the stage. He wandered through the crowd, where he was immediately accosted with pats and hugs and women sauntering up to him. Some hung on his arm, another grabbed his ass. One went in for an embrace, jumping up at him. I stayed hidden, watching the scene, torn between watching my talented son perform, wishing he could live his dream, but not wanting his reality to ever be as complicated as Tommy and Gage’s lives seemed. The women. The groping. The jealousy.

Gage returned only moments before the song ended, brushing past me for the stage. He hugged Caleb in that guy way, patting him on the back, and Caleb walked towards me as the crowd roared.

“That was fucking unreal,” Caleb shouted, pulling me upward in a bear hug. “He’s an ass, but that was awesome.” Setting me on my feet, I asked Caleb what Gage said to him.

““Keep your hands off my wife”. As if,” Caleb snorted. “Ivy’s cute, but she’s not my scene, and I don’t play that shit, wanting another man’s wife.” He huffed, brushing his hand through his brown hair. “His wife. Jesus,” he muttered. The sentiment ran deeper than Gage’s implication. My son had every right to be pissed, but he was also pumped. The high of performing was so similar to the adrenaline of playing ball, and the buzz of being the center of things rested in his flushed cheeks.

“What a rush,” he added, as someone handed him a water bottle and a shot of something. He downed the one and then guzzled the other. Looking over my shoulder, I followed his gaze to find Tommy standing behind me.

“Got talent, kid. And fucking guts, I’ll give you that.”

“Yeah, well, fuck him,” Caleb said, the high still climbing, keeping him amped up. Tommy nodded in agreement.

“Need your mom for a moment.” Tommy’s gravelly voice caused shivers to race along my spine.

Caleb nodded, instantly dismissing me, turning toward the stage.

“Oh no,” I said, the second Tommy tugged my arm, pulling me back in the direction Gage had disappeared with Ivy. “I’m not going anywhere after all those women were all over you.”

“Your dress should be green, darlin’. It’s such a good color on you.” He smiled as he pulled me into a small, private bathroom. I was on the verge of telling him where he could shove that color green.

“Got underwear on under that dress?” he asked, eyes roaming over me like he couldn’t decide which flavor to select at an ice cream counter.

“Of course,” I barked, my blood pumping in both agitation and excitement at the way his eyes dilated to black.

“Take them off.”

I stared at him, my hands gripping the sink at my back. I shook my head. He reached for the door and clicked the lock.

“You need to breathe, darlin’. You’re all pent up again.”

“Well,” I exhaled. “It’s hard watching women hang on you.”

“Oh, it’s hard all right,” he said, reaching for my hand and forcing it over the thick bulge in his jeans. “But only for you.”

Our breaths were the only sound between us as our chests rose and fell like we’d run a marathon.

“Who am I in this bathroom with, girl?” He glared at me, reaching for the small sink and crowding me in.

“Me,” I choke-swallowed, his nearness lowering my bravado and the willpower to stave him off. He inhaled along my neck, his nose skimming my skin without kissing me, and my mouth watered.

“That’s right. You.” He blew on my damp skin as the temperature in the tight space shot higher. “Only you.” He paused, his nose continuing to trail over my skin, causing the collar of the dress shirt to slip down my arm. “Now. Panties.”

He pressed back, allowing me limited space, and I slipped my hand under my dress without revealing anything and slid the material down my legs. Trying to be a smart ass, I held them up to his face with only one finger, but he grabbed them. Bringing them to his nose, he inhaled, and my mouth fell open. Then they disappeared into his back pocket and a small, square packet appeared instead. I couldn’t believe we were about to do this—in a restroom, behind a stage, in a bar—but when he dropped to a knee, I had my answer. We were. His fingers found folds, damp and eager for attention, before his

mouth lowered, and he sucked me hard. My hands fell to his hair, and I bucked forward.

Oh. My. God. I'd never felt anything like him. I'd had oral sex before, but nothing compared to his plump lips pumping my lower ones, parting me with the force of his tongue and lapping over skin so sensitive, so tingling, so aware of his aggressive attention. My lower belly filled with flutters and the tell-tale sign of clenching told me I was close, but he pulled back, after giving my clit a tender nibble. He rushed to his feet and unbuckled his pants, freeing himself as his mouth sought mine. His lips tasted like me, and I lapped it up, reveling in the risqué, just like our precarious location.

"I don't think the sink will hold me," I said, pressing down on it and wondering how I'd balance on such a thin edge. He was strong, but we were older. Wall sex didn't work the same as it may have in my twenties, not to mention, there really wasn't any wall space other than the back of the door.

"Turn around," he snarled, animalistic and ready to capture his prey. I did as he asked, and he hiked up my dress, massaging my cool backside with both hands before kicking my feet apart and positioning himself at my entrance. He pressed me forward, and I gripped the sink for leverage before he slammed into me without warning. My belly hit the edge of the sink, and my hand slipped to the faucet, striving for anything to hold me steady as he hammered into me, repeatedly filling me. One hand held my hip while the other slipped forward without missing a beat and stroked that spot I needed.

I caught his reflection in the mirror. He was watching me, and the expression on his face spoke of an intensity I'd never seen. I looked away. His hand released my hip and awkwardly cupped the back of my head.

"Look at you," he demanded. I peeked upward again, staring at our reflection. "Who do you see in that mirror, beautiful?"

“You.” I faltered, my breath catching as no man had been like this with me before.

“And?” he barked, pressing at the back of my knee so I’d lift my leg, positioning it on the corner of the sink, so he could go deeper, when I already thought he’d gone as deep as he could.

“You and me,” I groaned, feeling him hit something that brought stars to my eyes. The orgasm built, and it was going to be messy, but feel oh-so-good.

“That’s right. You and me. Us. Only us. That’s all there is.” I watched as he pressed forward with a grunt, and my eyes rolled back as I came big, so big it seeped out of me as he stilled his hammering and pulsed deep within my channel. I clutched the faucet, legs too shaky to hold me. Silently, I hoped for the sensation to never end.

He pulled out of me abruptly, and a rush of moisture slipped down my leg. He wadded toilet paper and caught the drips the best he could before pulling up his jeans. I hadn’t moved. I didn’t trust my legs to support me. Slowly, I raised my head to meet my own eyes in the mirror, dazed and wide, and a smile too bright, my lips seeming to glow in the fluorescent lighting.

Still gripping the sink’s edge to steady myself, I turned to face him. He worked at putting my dress back in place as my knees trembled.

“Give me back my underwear.” My voice quaked as hard as my legs.

“Nope, it’s staying in my back pocket.” He patted his ass. “Like your jealousy, tucked away for safe keeping.”

My eyes narrowed at him as he backed out of the room so I couldn’t reach his pockets. Then he held out a hand for me and led me back to the party.

Masie was drunk.

Despite the orange underage wristband, someone had gotten her drinks that looked innocent enough, like a rum and Coke, or a vodka and Sprite. I don't know what all she had, but just after midnight and the start of a new year, I had to get her out of the bar.

"I'll take her," West said stepping forward as Masie leaned on me.

"You will not," Tommy commanded, his voice harsh and direct. "You can't leave with her."

"He doesn't like me anyway," Masie slurred, weakly waving a dismissive hand at West and answering for him.

West's mouth opened but Tommy held up a hand. "You know why you can't leave with her," he said as he narrowed his gaze on West. Even I think I knew the reason—Masie was drinking underage, but more importantly, she was still in high school. The paparazzi were here in full force, snapping a few sanctioned pictures and stalking the front door for anything else.

"I'll call you an Uber. You'll have to go out through the back." Tommy took care of everything, kissing me quickly as I followed my daughter into the car, begging her not to get sick on the short ride to the resort.

"Why won't he kiss me?" she sobbed, breaking into full-blown tears as she fell against me. I stroked her hair, not having an answer other than that West knew the truth of their situation. Masie was still a kid in high school. As much as he might be attracted to her, he was doing the right thing by keeping her at a distance.

I didn't answer, knowing anything I said would either turn into an argument or bring on more tears, so I just held her close, praying again that she didn't puke on me. I got her to the condo before she rushed for the bathroom. Collapsing over

the toilet, she vomited, and it took all my strength to hold back her hair as my own gag reflex kicked in.

Shit.

I released her long enough to find a hair tie and wrap her hair at the nape of her neck. There wasn't much I could do for her. This wasn't a sick six-year-old child. This was a girl with the body of an adult who was going to have a wicked hangover the next day.

"The room is spinning," she said, and lowered herself to the tile floor. I'd been in that position once or twice. I'd dealt with David numerous times like this. The best solution was a towel for a pillow and the cool tile beneath her. The toilet in close proximity was the smartest thing.

Exiting the bathroom when it looked like she'd rest a moment, I entered my room and sat in a wicker chair near the window. The moon was full. It was a new year, a fresh start, another cycle. Only I didn't want to circle back. I couldn't return to who I had been when I returned home. Tommy had changed so many things in what I did and how I felt, and I didn't want to give him up. I sighed, stroking my neck, remembering the nearness of his nose, his breath, and the teasing of his lips. When it was time to let him go, I didn't want to lose this feeling.

Deciding to text him, I retrieved my phone and returned to the chair.

Made it back. Masie puking.

The dots appeared, and he replied, **Sounds awful.**

I waited a beat, wondering if I could ask the next question on my mind. Insecurity had returned as I recalled all those other women at the bar.

Still have my underwear?

Still bare? The message returned almost instantly. **How does that make you feel?**

I told him to never lie to me again, so that meant I had to give him the truth.

Painful.

I could almost see the surprise on his face. His dark eyebrows would rise, his eyes would brighten.

Really? How so?

How difficult could the truth be? How truthful did I want to be?

I ache for you. My core pulsed faster than my heart. Moisture dampened my thighs, and I ached, yes, I ached in a way I never had before.

There was no response, and I stood to undress. I wanted to text again, asking if my comment had been *too much*, but decided against it. My thoughts ran wild: worry over Masie; recollection of the backstage bathroom; hyper-awareness of the ache between my thighs.

Then my phone binged.

Stay dressed.

Most women might want to read, *get naked*, but that... that message sent my pulse to near desperate measures. My fingers twitched, and I wondered if I could do the unimaginable. Could I touch myself? Would it feel as good as his thick digits? Could it replace him buried deep inside me? The thoughts alone almost brought me to an orgasm, and the answer to each was a resounding *no*. I wanted him with every fiber of my being.

Fifteen minutes later, my heart skittered in my chest, and I tried to regulate my breathing as a soft knock at the door announced him. He texted as well, but I didn't need to read it. Taking a calming breath, I opened the door.

"How's Masie?" he asked as he entered, and it soothed my anxiety that he asked about my child. Last I'd checked, she was still on the bathroom floor, asleep.

“She’ll live, but she’ll hate life tomorrow,” I chuckled. Without questioning what he wanted, I led him to my room. I stopped in front of a chest of drawers with a flat screen television over it. It stood opposite the bed. My hands gripped the surface as my backside rested against it. I don’t know why I was so nervous.

He stepped inside and closed the door. Locking it, he looked at me. “You okay with that?” I nodded, agreeing that the interruption of one of my children would be mortifying. “I don’t think you’ll see Caleb for a while.”

He was probably right. Caleb still rode the tide of playing on stage, and he had a new collection of his own fans, or at least momentary groupies, but I didn’t want to think of him. Tommy sat on the edge of the king-sized bed, facing me.

“Put your shoes back on.” His voice was husky, deep and rough, like gravel in a glass jar, and I followed his order without question. Just like him telling me to stay dressed, replacing my shoes on my feet seemed sensual, alluring, and invigorating. I returned to my place by the dresser, and Tommy stood. First, he kissed me. His tough, thick fingers caressed my cheeks and stroked my neck as his mouth took its time to lick and suck and nip. Tugging at my lower lip, his tongue entered my mouth, but not in the aggressive, conquering way he typically took, but more like a casual stroll on a rainy day. He swept inside and covered my teeth, before tangling with the hungry muscle of my tongue.

His hands came to the collar of my shirt and pressed it open, allowing it to fall wide and slide down my arms. He untied the twist at my waist and slipped his hands inside, forcing the shirt to fall free. With hands at my waist, he continued to kiss me, drawing my mouth deep, lapping long at my lips and filling my mouth with his tongue again. A finger slipped under the thin shoulder strap and removed one side, and then the other. Hitching his thumbs in the sides, just under my arm, he rolled the material downward to expose my strapless bra.

How I longed for sensation, that tingle I should have felt, but Tommy took care of that. His mouth moved over the top of my cleavage, taking his time to suck at my skin and run his tongue over the swells. He unhitched the bra, exposing my tattooed tit and taking a long look.

“I hate cancer,” he whispered, his voice catching on a croak. “But you are so beautiful.” He paused, swallowing as he stared at my slightly uneven breasts. “And it changes nothing.” His mouth returned to attending each breast with tender kisses and light pecks before he dropped to his knees. He dragged the remainder of the dress over my hips and slid it to the floor, tapping an ankle. I stepped out of the material and stood before him only in the strappy heels. A calloused fingertip traced over the design across the top of my foot before he looked up at me, his eyes wide and obsidian black.

“I didn’t get to finish what I started at the bar. I knew there wasn’t enough time, but now I plan to savor every drop of you, and you’re going to come so hard, darlin’.” He parted my thighs, skating a hand upward and delving two fingers into me. Just as quickly, he removed his fingers, licked them and moaned, before he pressed my legs further apart. I gripped the dresser at my back for balance as his head fell between my naked thighs. He parted me with his tongue. It was different this time, slow and languid, as if he dug for every last drop of a favorite treat. The flatness of his tongue lapped at me, and then returned to slip inside me. My legs quaked again, but this time it wasn’t the thrill of the race but the torture of the tease. I looked down to find silver-and-ink-colored hair between my thighs, and it unsettled the tremors deep in the pit of my stomach. I released one hand to comb fingers through his hair, and he purred against my sensitive folds.

“Tommy,” I whispered, warning him, but he already knew. This man I’d known only days already read my body better than anyone ever had, and his attentions picked up the pace. He hitched up one leg, wrapping it over his shoulder as I balanced on one high heel. I gripped his head at my thighs, and within seconds, I came, so sweetly, so slowly, so

surprisingly long, I nearly cried. The sensation was nothing I'd felt before, and emotion poured from me as I rode the orgasm from his lips. After kissing me tenderly inside each thigh, he pulled back and blew a kiss to my sensitive folds.

"Fine wine, just like I pegged," he said, and I chuckled softly at the memory.

Oh, how I hated to leave this man, I cried inside, warning my heart in equal measure not to fall in love with him. My practical side said you don't fall in love within days, anyway.

He stood slowly, coming for my mouth again, giving me a searing kiss before walking me backward toward the bed. When the back of my knees hit the mattress, he gently pushed, and I fell to the mattress. The springing felt carefree. The bounce made me young. I stared in wonder as he undressed, taking his time to torture me with a striptease of T-shirt, jeans, and boxer briefs. He'd already kicked off his boots, and he removed his socks as I scooted up the bed.

"We have one small problem, darlin', and I hate to mention it now, but I must." I paused, and he stilled, waiting at the end of the bed. "I used my only condom on you at the bar. I didn't think to grab another one."

I nodded as I stared at him, an impasse of indecision, because I honestly didn't know how he wanted me to answer.

"I don't suppose you're on the pill," he questioned, and I chuckled in response, shaking my head. There hadn't been a need to be. David fixed all that after Masie. Besides, the chemo removed any other possibility of pregnancy.

"I haven't been without a condom in twenty years, beautiful. I'm clean. I'm tested, and all that shit." I nodded and continued scooting up the bed. Separating my thighs just the slightest encouraged him to start crawling, making his way up the mattress over me. I was wanton and desperate for him, but more importantly, I felt wanted by him in the way he looked at me. He gripped himself as he neared my entrance, pausing just outside, teasing me with his tip.

“You sure about this, darlin’?” he whispered, peering down at himself. Hesitating a moment, he added, “I feel like I’ve never wanted anything more than to feel the heat of you surrounding me.”

“I want you, Tommy Carrigan,” I replied, and nothing could have prepared me for how quickly he slammed into me. I gripped the sheets in tight fists, and he slipped in to the hilt. His heavy sacs hit the underside of me. Releasing the bedcovers, I reached for his shoulders, stroking down the slight hills and over the deep swell of his biceps as he slowed his thrusting to a steady rhythm. My palms sculpted his body, skimming his sides and wrapping around to his muscled back. I reached for the glorious globes of his ass and pressed upward, willing him to go deeper, harder, faster.

He continued to take his time before increasing in a manner that had us both catching our breath. If I thought I’d made love to Tommy Carrigan last night, he was making love to me tonight. He tried to kiss me, but we couldn’t keep the pace so instead he concentrated on filling me. Tension built in equal measure between us, and I clenched, desperate to hold off my release. Instead, he pulled out quickly, spilling over my lower abdomen.

I watched as he came, the milky substance coating my belly. He rubbed some of it around my loose waist and then pushed the rest upward toward my breasts. Skating between them, he painted me with his seed before he skipped up to my lips and forced a finger into my mouth. I sucked at the salty flavor, then licked to remove the stickiness. He withdrew his finger and stared down at me.

“You didn’t,” he admonished, knowing I hadn’t come again.

“I’m okay,” I stated, truthfully. He’d already given me two orgasms in the span of four hours. He’d given me more in the last six days than I’d had in three years. I wouldn’t fault him this failure, but he dropped onto the mattress by my side,

placing me on top of him. My legs parted, straddling near his sac.

“I’m getting soft, but I’m still willing. Take what you need, darlin’. Ride against me to get the rub.” I did as he asked, positioning myself so the spot I needed met him. I tried to be tender, but when I wasn’t getting the full effect, I slipped my fingers to the place where I needed relief. I came again with a deep shudder, my head thrown forward, biting my lip to keep from moaning.

“You are so damn hot, lady, do you know that?” He exhaled as he rubbed his palms up and down my sides while I sat astride him. I shook my head, feeling too replete to even speak.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t do it again for you,” I said, finding words as I slinked a finger down his broad chest.

“Darlin’, after having an erection for four hours, there was no way I could repeat so quickly.”

“Four hours,” I giggled, and then horror struck. “Oh, my God, did you—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” he warned, his voice dropping. “I’ve been stiff for four hours thinking of you. No other enhancement needed.”

“Oh.” I laughed, jiggling him underneath me. He held up a hand, and I reached out to smack it. He cupped mine in his when we connected. “What’s that for?”

“A high five. Three times. I knew I could do it.”

I gasped, swatting his chest with my free hand. “Did you just high five me for three orgasms in a few hours?”

“That I did, darlin’.” He chuckled under me, jiggling me up and down before tugging me with our clasped hands to fall on his chest and kiss him again.

9

Risky Adventures

Let's take an adventure, he texted me the next day. Masie was too hungover to move, and Caleb went to the bar to watch football bowl games. Tommy hadn't stayed the night, although we both wanted him to. He understood. I wasn't ready to subject my children to this kind of a thing—a man in my bed, especially a man who was only a vacation fling. I felt a little queasy with the thought.

Let's do it, I replied, and he asked me to meet him in the lobby. We drove the coastline, stopping occasionally at designated viewing points to watch for whales or stare at the ocean. After a stop or two, I'd had enough. I didn't want to seem ungrateful, but from how many vantage points could you see the same thing? Tommy seemed to sense my feelings.

"You're bored."

"I'm not," I whined. "It's just...it all looks the same to me."

He nodded and reached for my hand. Tugging it up to his mouth, he kissed my palm.

"Okay, then. More adventure." We stopped at a public beach and walked until we came to the ancient ruins of a Hawaiian fort. The ocean roared over the sharp, jagged edges of boulders and rock.

"Rumor has it, once upon a time a Hawaiian princess had fallen in love with an explorer," Tommy said, still holding my hand. "Her father denied his request for marriage, claiming she was betrothed to another. She refused to acknowledge this truth and promised the explorer she'd run away with him. Something happened the night they planned to escape, and the

explorer set sail without her. When she returned to her room in the castle tower, she found a message in a bottle, saying he'd return for her."

I stared at Tommy, wondering how he knew such island lore.

"She waited for him. Year after year. She married the other man as promised by her father, but she never gave up hope that the explorer would return for her. He'd see the world and discover new things, but he'd always want what he once had and desperately missed."

He waited a beat, and I squeezed his hand to continue. "So, what happened?"

"Story says, she saw him coming one night when the sun was setting, and the outline of the ship crossed the horizon. She raced for the water's edge, calling his name. "Accomandohulacoola," Tommy called out to the waves.

"And?" I encouraged.

"He saw her on the shore, thinking he could swim to her. Diving into the ocean, he didn't resurface. She raced into the water, thinking she could save him, and she drowned."

I stared at him and then looked out over the rolling water. "That's a terrible story."

"The moral of that story is never dive but jump in feet first. And don't race to save a drowning man."

"Those are awful morals." My eyes focused on the ocean waves a moment. "Wait a minute—Accomandohulacoola? You made all that up." I turned to punch his shoulder, and he tucked forward to avoid my fist, laughing hysterically.

"Okay, okay, I did. You should have seen your face." He continued to chuckle.

"You're mean," I whimpered, pouting my lips.

"But you love me." The comment stopped us both from laughing, and after a second, he squeezed my hand again. "I

didn't mean, you know, just kind of said it.”

“I know,” I said softly, letting the awkward moment linger. We couldn't be in love, not after a few days, I told myself. He kissed my knuckles to break the tension and turned us toward the parking lot.

Next stop, we hiked down a steep rise to where the shore met the rocks. Tide pools filled with the brisk, rushing surface. I wasn't as nimble as Tommy, so I took my time, praying I wouldn't fall in or slip and embarrass myself. To my surprise, he was patient, never rushing me with my hesitant descent, but encouraging me with gentle praise and occasional handholding as my guide. My fear of humiliation passed. We spent some time trying to find anything unusual in the shallow pools but didn't. As explorers, we agreed we weren't very successful.

Returning to the top of the lookout, we drove a short distance to a cove, and Tommy surprised me with a picnic lunch. Sitting on the beach, a gentle breeze blew as we ate.

“You made me a peanut butter sandwich?” I giggled.

“It was all I could do on short notice.”

“What if I was allergic to peanuts?” I questioned, teasing him.

“You aren't. I asked Caleb.”

My breath hitched at the thought that this man asked my son again for permission to take me on a date. I also noted he'd not made me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but just peanut butter, which I preferred. I stared at him, drinking in the sight of his scruff-lined face. How did I get so lucky to find him? Why did it take me so long to find him? How would I leave him behind?

“So, let's say I was an explorer of sorts,” Tommy said, interrupting my thoughts. “And I went off to see the world, but not to discover things. Say it was my job to travel.” He paused, setting down his sandwich. “Would you wait for me? Hypothetically?” He turned to face me and hesitant,

questioning eyes looked directly at mine. A nervous expression filled his face.

“Depends,” I teased. “Am I a princess?”

“You’re the queen.” He smiled slowly, picking up his sandwich again.

“Am I married?” I lowered my voice, afraid of the thought.

“Nope.”

“Then I’d definitely wait as long as it took.” For some reason, the song I told him was my all-time favorite came to mind—“Wait for Me”—a song he wrote as Lawson Colt in Colt45. The thought gave me pause. “Who was the song about? “Wait for Me”? Who did you write it for?” I bit the inside of my cheek, knowing I didn’t really want a response. It had to be another girl, possibly someone he loved a long time ago.

“No one special anymore,” he answered vaguely.

That gave me all the details I needed. He did love someone once upon a time. I couldn’t really complain. I’d been married twenty years. I’d loved my husband at one point as well. But things changed. People changed. David and I eventually weren’t those same two people who fell in love. I wanted to know more details about Tommy, but watching him crumple up his sandwich wrapper, I sensed the conversation was over.

“How do you feel about a drive?”

I nodded, and we stood, returning to his car which was a Mustang convertible. I had no idea of the year, but I didn’t care about things like that. There was only one car I’d recognize. Regardless, it was a nice ride as we wound up the curving Hawaiian roads. Tommy reached for my thigh and slowly climbed, eventually teasing me near my center.

“Watch the road,” I giggled, pressing his hand away from me. No sooner had he moved his fingers, they returned,

finding their destination. He slipped inside my shorts and under the band of my bathing suit. The angle was an awkward and wasn't accomplishing what I thought he intended.

"Open your shorts," he commanded, keeping his eyes on the road but his hand at my heat.

"Tommy," I hissed, uncertain we should be doing this.

"Take a towel and cover your lap but push them down a little and open up."

I did as he demanded, pushing my shorts down my hips. His hand returned, fingers delved inside, and I gasped. This was risky.

"Tip your head back. Close your eyes." Again, I did as he said, letting him lead me to pleasure, but not quite over the peak. Suddenly, the car jerked right. He pulled to the side of the mainly deserted road, hit the hazard lights, and turned to me. Eyes wide under the broad daylight, he worked at my clit until I clenched the door handle and the edge of my seat. I groaned as I came, startling a bird in the tree under which we parked. Panting, I turned to him.

"What was that?" I laughed, feeling carefree, spontaneous, and dangerous. He didn't answer, but pulled back on the road, returning to the scenic drive. I reached for him, rubbing at his zipper.

"Darlin', don't start something you don't intend to finish."

I continued rubbing, stroking over the firm bulge that leapt under my touch. He spread his thighs a little. "Eyes on the road," I warned.

Unzipping his shorts, I had just as much barrier as he'd had to me. He wore tight swim shorts under the outer ones, and I struggled to get at him. Freeing only the head, I leaned forward and licked. This warranted another jerk of the car. The hazard lights blinked again, and he shifted in his seat to free himself. I worked hard and fast, lapping at him, sucking deep in my haste to give him pleasure like he had done for me. It

was sloppy work, at an odd angle, and I feared I couldn't give to him what he'd given me. His hand came to the back of my head, holding me in place, and I dragged him deeper, swallowing hard, and licking the tight ridges of his length. My jaw ached, but I sucked.

"Darlin'," he hissed, and too quickly, he shot to the back of my throat. I drew back, dragging the length of him with my tight mouth, and he stilled me with his hand. He pulsed once, and then again. Stroking down my back, his hand rested on my spine as I released him. I sat up to see his elbow set on the car door. Thick fingers rubbed at his forehead.

"What's wrong?" I asked, suddenly terrified that I sucked, and not literally. His hand still on my spine, he rubbed upward, and turned for me.

Gripping my neck, he squeezed. "How am I going to let you go?" he said so quietly I wasn't certain I heard him. We stared at one another for a moment before he lowered his forehead, resting it against mine.

"Maybe you could come after me," I suggested, sensing the weight of such a heavy request. "Since I'm the queen and all, and I've been waiting for you, maybe you could return for me."

My neck was tugged back, and his mouth crashed against mine. The kiss was desperate. A farewell, and a remember-me, and a don't-ever-forget-me, and I wanted to cry big buckets of tears. But I didn't. I savored each pass of his tongue and the curve of his lips. There wasn't a chance I'd ever forget him.

When we finally returned to the resort, I found Masie still napping despite the lateness of the day. Caleb remained at the bar watching football games, so when Tommy asked me to come to his room, I didn't hesitate.

"I need a nap, beautiful," he said, stripping off his T-shirt.

"Okay," I said, thinking I'd misunderstood his invitation. I stood before heading for the door.

But he stopped me. "Where you goin'?"

“Well, I thought if you wanted to sleep, I should go.” He chuckled as he tugged my shirt over my head. “Or not,” I responded.

“Will you be comfortable in that?” he asked, implying my suit underneath. I wouldn’t actually, and I also needed a shower. Hiking, picnicking, having an orgasm in a car—it all made me sweaty.

I shook my head. “I need a shower.”

“Nap first. Shower later,” he said, reaching for a clean T-shirt from his drawer. He handed it to me. “Here.”

I pulled off my bathing suit and tugged on the tee. Too big, but comfy, the cotton smelled of him. Climbing into his bed, Tommy wrapped around me. We laid on our sides only a few minutes in silence before I felt something press at my backside.

“Can’t seem to get enough of you today, darlin’, but I’m lazy.” His fingers slid between my thighs, and he stroked me again until I came. Then he slipped off his boxers. I’d shifted to my back, and he tugged one of my legs over his thigh when he returned to his side.

“Ever do it like this, darlin’?” Somehow, I knew he wasn’t looking for my sexual history, but my permission to try this new angle.

“No,” I answered honestly. He scooted his body to line up his hard length with my wet entrance. With one of my legs still over his thigh, he slid into me. The angle was different, the sensation unusual, but he filled me all the same. We were nearly at a right angle, and he reached for my core, toying with me once again. He seemed to be waiting, holding off until I couldn’t take the pressure any longer.

“Tommy,” I hesitated, surprised with myself that another climax was building so soon. He strummed faster, and I reached for his waist, digging my nails into his side as I tried to meet his pace. I was a whirl of sensations, inside and out. Clenching around him, swallowing him deeply, I pressed

upward, holding him into me. His hand reached across my waist and held me firmly to him as he pulsed within me.

We lay there, out of breath and energy, as he rested inside me, my leg still dangling over his hip. Suddenly, he perched up on an elbow.

“Shit,” he said, hastily pulling out of me. “I wasn’t wrapped.”

The haste of his movement and the crassness of his words startled me. Hadn’t we done it the previous night without anything? But then I realized his concern. He’d come inside me.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I said, reaching out for his scruff-covered cheek, but the panic in his eyes told me my words gave him no comfort. He gripped my wrist before I could touch him. Kissing my palm too quickly, he rolled away from me and shot off the bed. I slowly sat up having an image of him with a hundred other women, all rejected after he shot his load. He’d done the deed, gotten what he wanted, and split the scene. I didn’t like the vision nor the feeling that suddenly applied to myself.

He returned with a towel.

“I guess you should shower after all,” he suggested, his voice lower, and slightly colder than I’d heard before. There was no *darlin’* or *beautiful* to accompany it.

“Can I shower here, or should I go?” I asked, holding my breath with the question, and hating how weak I sounded. He twisted his lips and glanced away from me.

“I guess here is fine.” I didn’t like that answer, but I didn’t think my legs could carry me to my room quite yet, suddenly feeling too *dirty* to traipse the distance. I stood and entered the bathroom, locking the door behind me, willing myself not to cry until I entered the shower. Standing under the spray, I let the tears fall, ruining a perfectly nice day and a slew of sweet words that he never meant if he could dismiss me like a mistake he’d made. I washed quickly, knowing I’d

wash again as soon as I returned to my condo. I dressed in my own soiled clothes and found Tommy in bed, the blinds still drawn, and his back to the door. He snored.

I got the message and left.

+ + +

When I returned to my room, I checked on Masie, and then took a long shower despite the draw of my bed.

“You’ll have to fend for yourself for food tonight, honey,” I told my daughter, feigning a headache, as I’d lost my appetite around the time I lost Tommy.

She still looked a little green, and she shook her head to say she wasn’t hungry. She sat staring at the television set, but her eyes were dull. She wasn’t watching anything, just staring. She looked like I felt—dead inside. I took a Tylenol PM I found in my shower bag and climbed into bed.

+ + +

I’d slept through the night and woke to what I believed to be a new day, a new insight. It was a new year, after all, and I was cancer-free, but I didn’t feel the inspiration of a fresh start. I hadn’t heard from Tommy through the night, although I shouldn’t have been surprised. Moments before we left for the day, he texted me.

We should talk.

Can’t. Have plans with kids.

As a family, we’d had difficulty scheduling all the things we’d wanted to do in Hawaii in a timely manner. The kids had each been allowed to pick an activity as their Christmas present on top of the trip. With only three days left in our

vacation, today was our snorkeling and sea turtle swimming excursion. Masie picked this activity. Caleb wanted surfing, which we couldn't get scheduled until the day before we left.

There was no response after our initial texts, and the empty messenger app glared at me, hollowing my heart. I hated the feeling. It was the very reason I hadn't dated much before. Dating led to heartbreak, I told myself. At my age, there were just too many unknowns with someone new. I wanted the history of someone when there was none. I had no interest in playing head games. I'd done it already in my marriage. For twenty years, actually.

While I'd had my own meltdowns over the days Tommy and I had been together, I honestly didn't think this was a big deal. I couldn't be pregnant. At forty-three, I was too old. I tried not to think of special cases I'd read about, and those tabloid ruses of women in their fifties having babies. It just didn't seem like a strong possibility. However upset Tommy was though, I couldn't fault him his fear. Possibly pregnant, and with a virtual stranger, did sound a bit frightening.

I willed myself to keep my head in the day with my kids. Masie was so excited, and she squealed with each sea turtle we passed, reminding me that she was still a kid at heart—on the verge of womanhood, but not quite there yet. Caleb was convinced he'd seen a shark, and that was my cue to get out of the water. I watched them from the boat in wonder, relishing their joy at doing new things. I wanted the world for them—oysters and all.

Shortly after they returned to the tour boat, we saw a wonderful display of whale breaching and I remembered seeing one off the shore. Was that only a few days ago? How quickly the time had passed. How much had changed? In so many ways, I had changed. I wasn't who I'd been when I arrived on this holiday. Tommy had changed me and reminding myself of that fact calmed me.

I hadn't been *me* in so long, I didn't recognize myself when I looked in the mirror. When I smiled at my reflection

after my time with Tommy, the tinges of a new me appeared, and a hint of the old me dusted off the cobwebs. *Where you been?* That haunting image asked, and I wondered the same thing myself. I'd been waiting, I decided. Waiting for that explorer, returned from the sea with his new ways of thinking, to show me what he had discovered. Through sharing his learnings, I found me. I was drowning before, but now I could swim, or at least be brave enough to wallow in the shallow end. I wasn't anxious to rush home and date, but I realized I needed to try and experiment more often. I *deserved* to take the risk. I didn't want to be alone. In fact, I didn't think I could be as alone as I'd been. I needed to get out more. However, my days and nights with Tommy were going to sustain me for quite a while, and I was all right with that thought.

We returned to shore and had dinner at a local restaurant known for their oversized burgers and fish tacos. Caleb was continuously texting, but Masie remained quiet, as she had been most of the day. When we returned to the condo, Caleb went out almost immediately, while Masie opted to stay in.

"What's going on?" I asked, standing behind the kitchen island as she scrolled the television channels.

"I just don't feel like going anywhere." She shrugged while her eyes focused on the mindless channel surfing.

"Masie, honey, what happened?"

She slammed the remote on the couch and looked up at the ceiling. "I'm such an idiot," she blurted, closing her eyes and rolling her head on the back of the couch. My mouth opened to speak but she continued. "He thinks I'm a kid, and after getting drunk, I'm sure that confirmed it."

"Did he call you a kid?" I assumed we were referring to West.

"Actually, he acted *interested*, but he kept his distance. One minute he came to share music and fell asleep holding me, and the next day it was like I had a disease. Then he

wanted to watch a movie, but he didn't even hold my hand. What am I, his little sister?"

"I certainly hope not," I scoffed. West had definitely shown signs of a crush on my daughter.

"Did I say something at the concert?"

"Well, uhm, I'm not certain that matters ..." My voice drifted, but my daughter eyed me in that way that demanded I speak. "You said he didn't like you when he offered to bring you home."

"And why didn't he bring me home?" she said, exasperated. "Because he doesn't like me. Not *like me* like me."

I paused, knowing the ice was thin, but I had to risk cracking it.

"He didn't bring you home because he realized if he left the bar with a drunk high school girl it would make the tabloids."

Masie sat forward and turned in my direction. Her mouth opened and closed. Then opened again. Then closed again.

"Did I say anything else?" Her voice lowered.

"You didn't say anything else at the bar. But you cried in the car on the way home, asking me why he wouldn't kiss you."

"Ugh," she groaned, covering her face with both hands and falling over to bury her head in the cushions.

"Honey, have you talked to him about this?" Her head rolled in response, still face first in the cushions. "Why not?"

She sat up, her face red, and stared at me. "What is there to say? I haven't spoken to him since that night. I'm too embarrassed."

"It's been practically two days," I said, startled that she'd let so much time pass. "Has he not tried to call you or text you?" It still astonished me that kids conversed through messages, never using their phones to make a physical call and

hear a voice. I'd been flipping my phone, rolling it on the surface of the counter I stood behind as I spoke to Masie.

"He's texted. He's called. I just ignore them."

"Don't you think he might be worried about you?"

"I'm sure Caleb told him I puked my guts out and was hungover." She rolled her eyes and fell back against the couch cushions.

"But to be fair to him, don't you think you should call him and just let him hear you are okay from you?" A slow unsettling filled me with my words. "Maybe he doesn't know what to say? Maybe he does like you, but he doesn't know how to proceed, because you're still in high school, or maybe because he's a superstar?" I babbled, guilt slowly eating at me with each word spoken.

"You owe him the courtesy of a returned call or text." The words flew from my mouth while my heart raced. Wasn't I doing the same thing? Ignoring Tommy instead of facing him? Granted, Tommy wasn't actually blowing up my phone with text messages or trying to call me, but I had been the one short with him in return. Did Tommy warrant more communication after my response that I couldn't talk? Maybe.

My thoughts returned to Masie and West. He'd been chasing her all week. I didn't believe he thought she was a kid, but if he did, he needed to tell her that. Then again, he was the one pursuing her.

"By the way, who gave you all those drinks anyway?"

"Petty."

+ + +

After three unanswered texts, and one phone message, I decided I needed more aggressive action. I'd broken down and texted Ivy.

Tommy's here, she sent back when I asked if she knew where he was. She opened the door on my first knock.

"I'm so glad you're finally here. He's been a total sourpuss all day." She paused as she closed the door. "No, he's been an ass. There's no way to sugarcoat it. A total asshole." She smiled to prove she wasn't upset with me but harried over her uncle's behavior.

I followed her through the living room and out to the rooftop balcony. Tommy sat in the same chair as the first time I'd been out there, his head rolled back as he stared up at the stars. The rest of the band was present, and suddenly the emboldened woman stalking across the resort wanting answers was nowhere to be found.

"Hey Edie. How's Masie?" West asked almost instantly, as I neared.

Tommy's head shot up and his eyes met mine—dark orbs that didn't look too excited to see me. The bottle of whiskey on the low table worried me.

"She's good. Maybe you should go see her." West's brow rose in surprise at my suggestion. "She decided to stay in tonight and watch a movie."

"Oh, lover boy," Petty sang out. "Your girl is calling." He'd snatched West's phone and dangled it in his hand. Petty held it back out of reach and West tried to lunge for it.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I asked, concerned that I'd just suggested he visit my daughter when another girl was calling him.

"No, but he wants one," Petty snickered, wiggling the phone further out of reach.

"Are you jealous because you don't have one?" I asked, and the slow *ohs* and sharp bark of laughter told me I'd hit a nerve for Petty. "Maybe, you wanted my daughter for yourself." My voice was rising and suddenly so was my temper. My fist clenched at my side. "Is that why you gave her all those drinks?"

The patio went silent as Petty lowered the phone, and West paused to look at me over his shoulder. The next moment time sped up as West lunged for Petty, clocking him in the jaw, knocking his head back against the seat. Gage stood to grab West off Petty while Tommy leapt to his feet.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Tommy snapped. “Giving an underage girl alcohol, not to mention a girl your bandmate has interest in?” He grabbed Petty by the collar and dragged him upward. Jared stood, trying to get his arm between his bandmate and their manager.

“Let go of him, Tommy,” Jared pleaded, attempting to push back at the older man.

“I’m sick of his shit,” Tommy snapped.

“Then quit!” Jared hollered, and suddenly I realized Tommy’s bad mood had to do with much more than me.

“You wish,” Tommy barked back.

“Do it,” Jared demanded.

“You know he can’t,” Gage said, still holding back West. “And you don’t mean that, Jared.”

I watched in wonder, not understanding any of what I heard.

“I do mean it, Gage. I’m tired of his old man ways and knocking around Petty. It isn’t necessary.”

“Jared,” Gage warned.

“No, I’ve had enough. You know my reasons, and he does, too,” Jared said, glaring back at their manager.

Tommy released Petty instantly, swiping a hand through his hair. He stepped back and looked at me, his eyes wide.

“Apologize,” Gage demanded.

“Fuck off,” Jared replied, but it was then that I noticed Tommy and Gage were locked in a stare down.

Tommy swiped a hand through his hair again, looking out over the balcony.

“Family always says sorry,” Gage demanded, and I remembered this from when Ivy was adamant Gage apologize to me.

“I’m sorry, Petty. You know I love you although you piss me off,” Tommy stated harshly but contrite.

“Jared,” Gage commanded, nodding at Tommy.

“No,” Jared said. “He’s been a fuck-off all day, and I’m tired of it.” Jared grabbed the bottle of Jack and stalked across the patio, entering the living area. Gage stepped forward as if to follow his best friend, but Tommy stopped him.

“Just leave him be. He’s right.”

“He didn’t mean he wanted you to quit,” Gage said.

“He did. But he also knows you need me too much for a while longer.” He wasn’t arrogant. He just seemed to be stating a fact. This band was rising to the top from what I’d been told, but they weren’t there yet. Tommy had explained to me this was going to be their year.

“We’d never get rid of you,” Gage said, his eyes lowering.

Tommy slowly nodded, twisting his lips. “You might.”

At this, Ivy stood to speak, but Gage wrapped an arm around her waist. He muttered something in her ear, and her open mouth shut. She looked at her uncle with sad eyes, and I wondered what all I was missing. West still stood next to Gage, released from being held back. Silence swirled around us.

“I think my daughter might be waiting,” I whispered to West, although it was loud enough for them all to hear. He looked at me, blinked once, then ran for the door. Despite the tension around us, I had to giggle at West’s reaction. Gage shook his head behind Ivy, and she smiled back at me.

“And you.” Tommy pointed at Petty. “Apologize to Edie for getting her daughter drunk. Then you owe West and Masie an explanation.” He waved his hand as if dismissing Petty, who stood, muttered a weak apology, and left the patio as well. Gage tugged Ivy toward the living room, which left Tommy and me alone. We stood at a crossroads. He swiped through his hair and fell back into the chair.

“I’m sorry you had to see all that, darlin’.”

I sighed with relief that he’d called me *darlin’*, and instantly, my heart screamed *you’re forgiven*, but I still needed other words.

“Are you okay?” I asked, lowering myself to the couch at his left.

“It’s been a shit day,” he said, throwing back his head, and staring up at the sky again.

“Why?”

His head sprang forward. “First, my girl wasn’t in my bed. Then she doesn’t have time to talk to me. Next, I’ve got to spend the day with these ungrateful fuckers, trying to figure out a plan for when we return stateside. Which reminds me we’re leaving soon and brings me back to you not being in my bed.”

I stared in disbelief. *What?*

“You freaked out about ...” I couldn’t bring myself to say it. “You know.” I wiggled a hand before me.

“Not gonna lie, I did. But then I fell asleep, and you snuck away.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I did.” I held up my phone to show there were no messages.

He pressed the *recent* button and showed me the eight attempts he’d made to call me.

“Why didn’t you leave a message?”

“And say what?” he demanded, a hard edge to his voice.

“I don’t know, like, hey, I freaked out and I’m sorry. Or don’t worry, I’m sure it can’t happen.”

Tommy slowly sat forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, clasping his hands. “Why can’t it happen?” His voice was low as he asked.

“Because I had cancer.” His head shot up as he blinked at me. “And because I’m too old.” My voice rose.

“Edie, beautiful, you are not old, and even with cancer, stranger things have happened. If you were pregnant, do you think that’s why I freaked out?”

“Of course,” I barked, letting my hand slap my thigh.

He sat up and scratched at the scruff under his chin. “Darlin’, you gettin’ pregnant might make me the happiest man in the world, but here’s the thing that freaked me out. If it happened, I’d still be me. I’d still have to travel and follow these asses all over the world, and I’m sensing you’ve already been that route, of being alone as a parent. I couldn’t do that to you, but I can’t quit them.”

“You thought all that in sixty seconds?” Silence fell between us. The ocean waves rustled in the background. I lowered my eyes and picked at the hem of my sundress. There was a compliment in those words, but there was also something unsaid. If something happened to me, he’d want to be involved, and that meant a lot to me. The thought was sweet.

I nodded and gave a soft snort before responding again to him. “I’m not worried.” That’s all I had to add. I wasn’t.

He tipped his head, directing me to come to him, and I stood. I stopped before him, and his hands grabbed the back of my knees, forcing me to straddle him. I cupped his face after I sat on his lap.

“It’s been a shit day, Edie.” Calling me by my name emphasized the seriousness. “And I’ve missed you.” His

mouth sought mine, slowly dragging my lips with his. A tug. A peck. Then his tongue pressed forward, and he was in his capturing mode where he conquered my mouth and demanded my tongue. I kissed him back as if it had been weeks instead of hours. I'd missed him, too. Missed him so much, I wanted my kiss to give him all the words I couldn't say. I wanted him to feel how much I cared about him.

"No more freak-outs, darlin'," he muttered to my mouth, although I'm not certain if he meant me or if he was reminding himself. "It wastes precious time."

"Then we better make up for it," I replied back with my lips pressed to his. He stood with me with me in his arms and I wrapped my legs around his waist. I let out a yelp as his hands hooked under my thighs and he hitched me upward.

"You can't carry me." I giggled, still holding his cheeks, as he stood with me latched onto him.

"I'd carry you to the ends of the earth and back, darlin', as long as you keep kissing me."

I kissed him again while he stood with me wrapped around him, but eventually, he set me down. We decided it would be faster. That way, we could race to his room.

10

Sway With Me

Sitting in the warm tub, I looked up as Tommy entered the bathroom, a glass of wine in his hand.

“Thank you, baby. This is sweet,” I said, looking up at him, and his face split with a smile. He sat on the closed toilet, and I crossed my arms on the edge of the tub after taking a sip from the glass he offered me.

“You’re sweet,” he said, staring down at me. We smiled at each other a moment, recalling the make-up sex we just had. He’d been rougher than before, spurring me with precious words as well as the stiff length of him.

Can’t get enough.

Don’t want to let go.

Missed you all day.

He was sweet, I amended in my head, and I didn’t know how I’d let him go.

“So,” I hesitated, taking another sip of wine and then lowered the glass to the floor outside the tub. “Want to tell me what that was all about with Jared?” Their fight had brought out some negative vibes and ugly words. Tommy shrugged and looked away from me.

“You know,” I gently pressed, “You can talk to me.” While we didn’t really have that kind of relationship—the kind where lovers with history share other things besides sex—I wanted him to know he could trust me. He’d already told me secrets about Ivy and the history of his sister.

“Being in a band is like being in a family. Tempers run high. Love digs deep. Hatred can exist although you try to

tamp it.”

“Why would Jared hate you?” I asked. Tommy seemed to do plenty for the boys, above and beyond what I thought a manager would do.

“He doesn’t actually, but he resents me. He wanted the band to get everywhere on their own, proving themselves. It stems from his old man, but when my sister died and Cash killed himself, we were all at a crossroads. Collision had been an opening act once for Kit with Chrome Teardrops. I saw their potential for so much more. I went to them with advice, and Gage asked me to manage them. I didn’t need the money. I didn’t need a job. But I saw what I could do for them. I saw *me* in them. The young Lawson Colt of Colt45, who wanted to take the world by storm.”

“You did take the world by storm,” I protested, but Tommy only snorted in response.

“My first band was a mess. Too high, too fast. We crashed, and Kit was there to pick up the pieces.”

“You said you picked them up for her, with her ex ... her whatever ... when he overdosed.” I didn’t know if Kit officially married the man who was Ivy’s father, but I recalled that he’d died from drugs.

“I guess Kit and I were always there for each other.” His head tipped upward and he scratched at below his chin. I sensed the memory of his sister haunted him.

“Anyway, when I saw Gage getting involved with Ivy, pursuing her, I worried. Her mom had died, and she was trying to finish school. She’d been involved with someone else in their band. Taking on the management role meant I could watch over the relationship.”

“Is that why you won’t quit, like Jared demanded?”

“No. I won’t quit because I fronted the money to help them reach the next level. I’m their silent production partner. It’s my money on the line if they don’t succeed.” The

generosity of his investment was hard to grasp. Curiosity got the best of me.

“Why did you do it?”

“Because I knew they needed a break. I wanted to give them the opportunity I never had.” I didn’t fully understand. Tommy Carrigan as Lawson Colt had been very successful in his own right. Maybe he felt like a one-hit-wonder as Colt45, the band from my high school days, but with Kit Carrigan and Chrome Teardrops, he’d been a tremendous success.

“What am I missing?” I questioned.

“My dad was a pastor, and he wasn’t a fan of the sinful music I produced. When I left home, I struck out on my own, literally. No support from family until my sister escaped as well. After all that happened—the struggles of Colt45, the death of Bruce—we realized we had to stick together to make music work. We were our only family.”

It was sad to me. My parents had always been supportive of my goals, but I had to admit I had nothing so grandiose as being a famous musician on my list of future plans.

“What was all that *family always says sorry* stuff? It’s sweet but seemed like it meant something deeper.”

Tommy sighed and swiped a hand through his hair, looking away again.

“Ivy and her mom had a huge blow out near the end of Kit’s life. Ivy wanted to stay home to be with Kit. Kit wanted her to finish school. Kit went into cardiac arrest. Ivy thought she’d never have the chance to tell her mother she was sorry for the selfish things she’d said. When Kit came around, Ivy asked her mother for forgiveness. Family loves unconditionally, Kit told her, knowing how our own father treated us. And family always says sorry, Ivy amended, knowing you can never assume family forgives you. Ivy holds it as a motto with Gage, and it transferred to the band. Gage considers Collision his family. Him and Jared and Cash were best friends. After losing Cash, when Gage wanted to

apologize for all sorts of things that weren't his fault, he demanded anyone associated with the band apologize to each other if they fought. He never wanted anyone to separate with thoughts of being unforgiven or unloved."

"Family loves unconditionally," I muttered, lowering my chin to my crossed arms on the tub. I admired their closeness, their dedication to each other despite not sharing bonds of blood. They were a special group of people.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Carrigan." He wiggled his brows in response and removed the shirt he slipped on to answer the door for room service. He stood and lowered his jeans, exposing his commando style. "What are you doing?" I laughed, sitting straighter in the tub.

"Enough talking," he said, a sharp turn in his voice. "I am a lucky man, and I want to get lucky again."

"That was cheesy," I said as he stepped behind me in the tub and I scooted forward. I didn't have a tub in my condo. The master suite had a ridiculously big double shower that could hold more than two people. The kids' bath had a shower stall. I missed a tub. A warm bath was a luxury vacations demanded. When I suggested the soak, Tommy obliged. However, I didn't see how we were both going to fit in this one. Tommy was a solid man.

"Gonna need to sit up on me, darlin'," he said, lowering into the tub and scooping up my backside.

"I can't sit on you," I gasped, worried the weight of me laying on him in the tub would be too much. He'd already stretched out his legs and lowered me to rest at his waist. His knees rose and bent while my legs crossed and slipped between his. It was a tight fit, but I liked it. I'd never bathed with David.

Tommy massaged my shoulders as I held his knees. I tipped my head to his shoulder, and he kissed my exposed neck. My eyes closed. Surrounded by warm water, a temperate sensation inside me from the wine, and the heat of Tommy at

my back, I was melting into sweet oblivion. Kisses on my neck increased, the pressure of pecks turning into stronger suction and an occasional nip. His hand lowered, brushing over the coarse hair at the top of my legs.

“Are you hurtin’?” he muttered. “I was a little rough.”

Make-up sex had been intense, but I found I liked it as he held my legs in the air, feet at his shoulders, and pounded into me while I lay on the small breakfast table. I wasn’t as flexible as I used to be, but I’d been able to balance. Surprisingly, we hadn’t knocked over the table.

“I’m good,” I sighed, slipping deeper into peacefulness under his attention. His dick hardened at my backside, and his shaft jolted when I purred. Tommy adjusted me so the cheeks of my behind straddled the hard length of him.

“Ever do it like this? In the back door?”

I sat forward, splashing water like a small tidal wave as I choked. “No.”

“Ever curious?” he continued, pulling me back to him and returning his mouth to my shoulder.

“I ...I don’t know.” Had I thought about it? Maybe. I mean all the hottest romance novels had it in them, but could *I* do it? I didn’t know, and I didn’t answer.

“What about toys? Got a Mr. Bob?”

“I—” I was about to answer *it’s none of your business*. I blushed recalling my awkwardness at purchasing a vibrator, but then I considered who was asking and wondered, “Why?”

He chuckled into my neck, as I’d answered his question with my own.

“Want to know how you’ll get off when you go home.” It was the first time he’d mentioned home, hinting at the separate directions we would soon take. I didn’t want to think about it and decided not to answer. Suddenly, my hips were gripped with two firm hands, and he lifted me, slightly. His dick stood upright and perched at my entrance.

“What the ...” My voice trailed off, as he slid me over him with no warning. We’d used a condom when we got to his room, but he was bare at the moment. Pressing me forward to accommodate the sudden intrusion, he groaned as he filled me. Then he stilled.

“Don’t want to think of others getting you off, Edie,” he said, as he started to maneuver my body, lifting and lowering me over him. He slid his knees beneath mine, forcing me to straddle his thighs as my back was to his front. I gripped the edge of the tub as he continued to move my body in the manner he wanted. I was full in a different way once again. Every time we were together the sensation was new, the experience original, and I wondered how I’d survived as long as I had without sex like this. I grunted as he started bouncing me up and down on him. The water sloshed and swirled, lapping at the sides of the tub as our skin slapped under water.

“Fine wine. I like you uncorked.” His voice came out choppy as he slammed me down on him. “I love you uncorked,” he amended, the words coming out on uneven exhales. Was that a declaration? I decided it wasn’t and let him work my body in the way only he could. “Touch yourself, Edie. Get there for me, darlin’.” I did as he asked, my fingers touching myself but also stroking the length of him as he entered me.

“Fuck that feels good,” he grunted behind me. He whipped me off him, and wet warmth jetted over my lower back. Reaching around me, his hand pushed mine out of the way. He took over attending to me, slipping his fingers into my ripe core and adding his thumb to the mixture. He strummed at me while he squeezed himself behind me.

I came almost instantly.

Resting his forehead on my shoulder, I pressed back, balancing my head against his.

I love you, I heard in my head, the words fighting to cross my lips. I love him, damn it, when I knew I shouldn’t.

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He stepped out of the tub first, and then handed me a towel. After exiting the tub, he worked the towel over me like a child, drying me off and wrapping it around me. He led me to his bed and pulled back the covers.

“I’ll set an alarm,” he said, setting up the time on his phone. I climbed under the covers, and he tugged the towel off me. “Naked cuddling,” he said, slipping behind me.

“Why aren’t you married, Tommy Carrigan?” I joked, but a tad serious in the asking. I didn’t understand. He was perfect in so many ways.

“Not my thing,” he muttered, wrapping an arm over me and dragging my back to his chest. I’d already sensed he’d been scarred by love in the past, but I wanted more details. His songs were filled with heartbreak, a telling sign, but I didn’t ask. After what felt like five minutes but was actually an hour and a half, I woke, and rose to dress.

“Don’t like you leaving my bed, darlin’,” he said with a groggy voice, climbing out of bed as well to dress.

“Go back to sleep, baby,” I whispered, but he dressed regardless.

“Need to be a gentleman and walk you back to your room,” he said, reaching out for my hand as he led me out his door.

He kissed me at my door and waited as I swiped the key card. When I entered, I saw West standing in the living room, Masie on her feet behind him. They both looked guilty, in a way only teenagers can.

“West.” I arched a brow at him. “Masie, honey, it’s getting kind of late.”

West nodded and stepped forward without a glance back at my daughter. Her eyes followed his retreat as he passed me with a short, “Good night.” My eyes didn’t leave Masie. Her body language screamed of longing, and mine ached as I recognized in her how I felt.

Leaving Thomas Lawson Carrigan was starting to feel impossible.

+ + +

We went to the beach to surf on our day before the last, and some of the band decided to join us. Petty and Jared were practically pros, balancing and maneuvering as one with the water. Caleb, Masie, and West were a little shaky. Masie, however, had balance as a former cheerleader, but for all of Caleb’s athleticism, he couldn’t stay on the board. Tommy told me West was from the East Coast.

“He’d never been on a board before, but he took to it pretty easily when he showed up in California.”

“What about Gage?” I asked, sitting on the white beach, watching all these young people enjoying sunshine and surf.

Tommy laughed. “I don’t think Gage trusts anything he can’t fully control, and since he isn’t mightier than the ocean, that would be a no to surfing.”

I smiled, staring off at the sea. We watched the younger set in admiration, soaking up the sun and letting the day drift. Tommy took a black notebook out of his bag and started scribbling down notes. He looked up once, out at the sea, and then returned to writing.

“What’s that? A little black book,” I joked.

“Every man’s got to have one,” he teased.

“Surprised there are any blank pages in that one,” I retorted, feeling a little uneasy at the possibility that he owned

an infamous black book, filled with phone numbers, amongst other things.

He glanced over at me. “Green is such a pretty shade on you.” His lips curled at one corner.

“Why do you always say that to me?” I laughed, knowing jealousy actually wasn’t attractive.

“It means you want only me for only you.”

My breath hitched. He was so sweet. We stared at one another for a moment before he broke eye contact and wrote more in the book.

“Going to show me what’s in there, then? Since I’m jealous and all.”

He snapped the pages closed with a soft clap. “Nope,” he replied, slipping the notebook back into his bag. Then he turned to me again.

“Have dinner with me tonight, darlin’?” His voice lowered, as if he were nervous.

“Of course,” I replied, leaning over to bump his shoulder. His hand came up to my lower back and he tugged me to him for stolen kisses.

“Dress nice, like that black dress from our first night.”

My brows rose at his recollection of my body-hugging black dress with the scoop neck. “Okay.”

The day passed quickly, and I took my time to prepare for my final date with Tommy, because that’s what this night would be. The next day, we would leave one another. He’d return to California, and I’d go to Chicago, and despite the modern technology of texting and social media, I didn’t see how we’d keep up with one another. He was in a rock star world after all, and I was in plastic production.

The restaurant was fancy, with white linen tablecloths and a sunset view, but the only thing I wanted to watch was the man across from me. Dressed in a white dress shirt rolled to

the elbows, a gray suit vest, and black jeans, his cleaned-up appearance took his hot factor to a new level of off the charts. We ordered wine. We chatted. It was another official date, and I wanted to believe the future held more times like this. But it didn't.

Tommy had brought me to another place that had a dance floor and music playing.

"Isn't this song typically a tango?" I asked, listening intently to the lulling sound.

"It's 'Sway' by Dean Martin, but Bubl  made it popular again," Tommy said, listening as well to the sultry interpretation from the female singer accompanied by a piano.

He reached across the table and stood, taking my hand and guiding me to the dance floor without asking me to dance. While he knew my apprehension, I trusted him to lead me. This wasn't the swirling fun of a dive bar and the Bee Gees. This was the serious tempo of a seductive song. A violin was added to the mix. Tommy's hip pressed near mine, and sliding a foot between my feet, he moved me to the lyrics about eyes for only one person and being swayed into seduction. His dancing skills were impeccable, and our bodies rolled together, gliding back and forth. A rippling embrace was the best description.

My fingers curled into the hair at the nape of his neck and his hand rested on my upper back. Chest pressed to chest, he held my hand propped between us. The singer shifted to a more modern song I recognized but couldn't exactly place with my spotty musical knowledge. Tommy began to hum in my ear, as the song had a slightly stronger tempo and seductive beat. The lyrics asked if the person wanted to fall in love, say the words, *I love you*.

"I love this song," I said by way of catching myself from spilling my emotions to Tommy. Along with the heat of his body, the music warmed me.

“Mmmm ... I write songs,” he said, and I nearly tripped on his feet.

“What?”

“The black book. That’s what it’s for. I wrote many of the successful songs for Chrome Teardrops, and Colt45 before that, and even some for Collision. Sometimes, I collaborate with Gage to perfect them.” He nuzzled at my ear. “You inspire me.”

I blinked up at this man, who had one surprising secret after another. “Can you sing one for me?”

“One day.” He chuckled, leaning forward and kissing my neck before returning to hum the current melody.

“You’re an incredibly talented man, Tommy. Do you know that? I mean, really understand that about yourself. You’re kind and generous, and a gentleman, and that’s a rare quality as well.”

He pulled back to look down at me. His expressions sobered. “Don’t make me feel like I could love you all the days of my life, Edie.” His tone teased, but his eyes remained dark, serious.

“Don’t make me *want* to fall in love with you, Tommy.” I tried to keep my voice even, steady, but it shook. It was too late. I was already in love with him.

“I won’t,” he replied, his eyes widening, frightened almost.

“We shouldn’t,” I replied, trying to stay strong, attempting to keep my voice light, as I teased him. It was definitely a bad idea to fall in love with each other. But love had already tricked me, and one-sided love was never a good idea.

“But we could,” he teased, lowering his voice, raising one brow, and tilting his head.

“Don’t say that.” My eyes closed, needing to shut him out and catch my breath for a second. I couldn’t play any longer.

The conversation had turned too serious despite the teasing undertones in our voices.

“Don’t say goodbye, darlin’. Not yet.” His voice returned to pebbles plopping in a puddle, and I wanted to capture the sound and carry it home in my pocket. My eyes slowly opened, and I combed through the curling hair at his neck. We continued to sway.

Not ever, I wanted to reply, but didn’t. “No goodbye.” I whispered.

Later that night, we made love like we’d danced, and I melted under him, melding my body to his as he led me in ways I’d never moved before. Unhurried, his movements were like warm syrup poured over pancakes—deliberate, drizzling, and layering me in sticky goodness and tender sweetness. My orgasm wasn’t an explosion of excitement but a tender rush, honey-sweet and slowly trickling as I released. Lingering as it flowed, the sensation coated my entire body from the fingertips to the back of my neck in a glorious out-of-body experience. As I came down from the high, and Tommy stilled to empty inside me, and I knew I’d never be the same.

Tommy Carrigan had swayed me, and I loved him.

11

Timing

I recruited Tommy for help the morning of our last day in Hawaii. With a mixing bowl, a stack of measuring cups, and a bag of ingredients in my hand, I waited for Tommy to open the door to the penthouse for me. Once inside, I set everything in the kitchen and followed Tommy to Emaline and Ava's room.

"Good mornin', sleeping beauties," Tommy softly greeted them, and they turned their sheet-creased faces to look at their great-uncle.

"Want to make pancakes?" I whispered. Ava sat upright and Emaline brushed back her mop of wayward blonde curls.

"Can I stir?" Ava asked.

"Mix, stir and pour," I offered, holding out a hand for her. The brunette beauty stood in her princess nightgown and walked with me back to the kitchen. Under my direction, the girls measured ingredients, filled the bowl, and stirred. Tommy sat at the island, drinking coffee and smiling in the atmosphere of excited little girls messing up a kitchen.

"What's going on?" Gage asked, rubbing the back of his head and standing in a pair of forest green boxer briefs.

Averting my eyes, I raised my hands like blinders, whispering loudly, like a child, "Daddy's in his underwear."

Emaline giggled.

"Pancakes," Ava announced.

Gage stared at Tommy before looking back at me. I peeked between separated fingers and then closed my eyes, telling myself not to admire his under-thirty body of steel and the strip of dark hair climbing to his belly button.

“I’d say I could buy you another hour or so in bed.” It was a peace offering for borrowing his children for my own reasons this morning. I didn’t want to say farewell yet.

Ivy padded down the hall, a robe wrapped around her. “What’s all this?”

Gage turned to her. “Another hour in bed.” He rushed her, picking her up by lowering his shoulder into her stomach and carrying her fireman-style back to their bedroom.

Tommy and I exchanged a look before I laughed, shaking my head. *Oh, to be so young again.*

“Are you a grandma?” Emaline asked, and I smiled at the innocence of a four-year old.

“No, sweetheart. Caleb and Masie are my babies, all grown up, but they don’t have any children, so I’m not a grandma yet.”

Emaline looked at me, confused by the process, but Ava filled in for her sister. “We don’t have any grandmas. Mommy’s mommy died and Daddy doesn’t talk to his. Uncle Tommy’s like a grandpa, though.”

I looked at Tommy, whose face beamed with pride. His eyes lowered, but his smile said it all. He loved these girls like a grandfather.

“You could be our grandma,” Ava said, shrugging her shoulder, like what she suggested worked as easy as asking. Tommy’s eyes shot to mine.

“Well, I’d be honored to be your grandma, but it doesn’t work that way,” I said, not willing to tackle the complicated explanation of why I could not be her grandmother.

“Just saying,” Ava said, sounding wise beyond her years and equally innocent at the same time.

“Yeah, just saying,” Emaline repeated, brushing back her blonde curls. I shook my head with a chuckle, looking away from Tommy. *Just saying*, I’d welcome them with open arms in any capacity to be part of my family.

The door opened, and Petty walked in, followed by Jared.

“Pancakes?” Petty shouted in question, and reached out for me, embracing me in a fierce hug. Rocking me back and forth, he spoke over my head to Tommy. “Can I keep her, Tommy? Please, pretty please.”

Tommy chuckled and then admonished him, “Get off my girl.”

Petty released me and took a bite off Emaline’s plate.

“Hey, that was mine,” she whined.

Petty asked, “Want it back?” like the child he could be. He kissed her blonde head and moved to the coffee pot.

Jared came up to me next, rubbed a hand across my back, and kissed my cheek. “Thanks, Edie.”

I looked up to find eyes filled with a request for forgiveness. The fight from the other night was forgotten; he didn’t need to ask. I adored these young men.

Suddenly, I felt like I was at a play, the final curtain was falling and each of the main characters were taking a last bow. The performance was ready to end, and my heart cried out for an encore. I wanted more time with these amazing people. As if on cue, Gage and Ivy reentered the kitchen, freshly showered. Gage went to Ava first, kissing her head, before picking up Emaline and removing her from the stool.

Ivy walked to me. Hugging me, she whispered, “Thank you,” and liquid filled my eyes. I pulled her tighter, blinking back the tears. How would I say goodbye to this sweet girl?

Releasing her, I stepped back to flip more pancakes. I’d already texted Masie and Caleb to join us, and I refused to look up when they entered. I couldn’t say goodbye to my growing children any more than I could separate from these strangers that had grown so important to me. But Masie was going to nursing school eventually, and Caleb would be leaving for spring training shortly after we returned home.

“You okay, darlin’?” Tommy asked at my side. I nodded without looking up at him. A thick finger tipped up my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Not yet, darlin’. Don’t go there yet.”

I nodded to agree but time was ticking. There wasn’t much longer to *not* go there, but I smiled weakly and returned to making pancakes.

+ + +

We spent the late morning and early afternoon at the pool, soaking in the final minutes of Hawaiian sunshine until the last possible moment. Caleb, Masie, and I had a later flight, but we still needed to shower and pack, return the rental car, and suddenly, a list of final details weighed on me.

“I think I’ll head up early,” I said, no longer able to sit still or prolong the inevitable. I collected my things and stood to slip on my cover-up.

I looked at Petty and Jared first. “It was a pleasure to meet you boys,” I said, nodding as they stared back at me. “Try to stay out of trouble.”

Jared was the first to rouse from his questioning gaze and stood to hug me. Petty followed. West and Masie had gone for a walk, so I’d wish him well a little later. Ivy called Ava and Emaline to me, and I kissed them each on the head before telling them to be good girls for their mother.

Gage surprised me, by enveloping me in a warm embrace. “Don’t say goodbye to her,” he whispered, and the concern in his dark eyes surprised me.

Ivy’s eyes filled as did mine when she stepped into me.

“My beautiful new friend. Not goodbye,” I said. I pressed her back before she hugged me too hard, breaking me into a public display of sobs. Holding her at her shoulders, I gently

shook her. “Not goodbye, right? You have my number and my email. You call me. I’d love to see you again.”

She nodded, unable to speak as her eyes lowered.

“Not goodbye,” I whispered and tugged her to me. She returned the hug hard, and I willed myself not to shatter in front of them. I couldn’t look at Tommy. He’d already said he refused to say goodbye, but he’d meet us in the lobby to load our car. “See you in a bit,” I struggled to say, still refusing to look directly at him as I walked away.

+ + +

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Masie asked, as she banged on the bathroom door.

“Nothing,” I said, through choking sobs. “Nothing,” I tried again, focusing on steadying my voice. “Be out in a few minutes.”

I heard Masie walk away from the door and then another door opened. There was a slam in the background and then a sharp rap on the bathroom door.

“Edie, let me in,” Tommy bellowed.

Oh, God, no, go away. I couldn’t let him see me like this. I promised myself no tears. I told myself I could be strong. I could walk away. I *would* walk away.

“Tommy, honey, I need to get ready to go.” He told me last night we weren’t saying goodbye. “Tell Ivy I said safe travels and kiss the girls again for me.” Another sob threatened to escape, and I covered my mouth with both hands. My voice refused to steady. I had faked a normal tone as long as I could.

“Let me in, darlin’.” His voice rose, agitation filling it. The handle to the bathroom door jiggled. I shook my head as if he could see me. *No*, I thought again. *No way*. My hands remained over my mouth.

With a thump on the door, it shot inward. Turning to face him, I was horrified to find he'd broken the door, but his wide eyes and open mouth proved he was equally surprised. I was a mess of tears, and I spun away from him again.

"Darlin'." He touched my shoulder, and I shuddered, but I kept my back to him. He forced me to turn and pulled me into a hug, tucking me under his chin and into his chest. He let me cry, and the tears flowed unchecked. I didn't even try to stop them. A sob escaped with a sharp bark. We stood like this a few seconds before he spoke.

"Darlin', do you want to see me again?"

I nodded, afraid my voice would crumble to begging. "But I can't."

"Why?" he said, pushing me back and trying to make me focus on his face.

"I'm going to die." Thoughts of cancer consumed me. It wouldn't be fair to involve him in my history and any potential relapse in the future.

"When?!" He barked, his eyes wide like I'd left out the details of my doom. Panic filled his face.

"Someday," I cried, tears streaking my face.

"When, beautiful?" he asked, lowering his voice, a smile in his tone.

"I don't know," I said, exasperated. "I'm in remission, but I can't saddle anyone with this," I added, tugging at my short hair. He chuckled, and I looked up, surprised and hurt.

"Who's *saddling*? Besides, I want to ride, Edie." He tugged me to him again.

"I'm being serious," I cried.

"Me, too." He kissed my forehead.

"Why me?" I asked, suddenly changing directions as I continued to think of all the reasons we shouldn't be together when it was the very thing I wanted.

“Why *not* you?”

“Don’t answer a question with a question,” I mocked, laughing through tears, sensing I’d reached hysteria in my grief at our departure.

“Okay.” He softly laughed. “Timing.”

I rolled my eyes, hating that answer. Someone once said the same thing about David. The timing was right, and David was there, so we were together. I got pregnant; that’s why we were married. And if relationships were about timing, how many had I missed out on? How much time had I lost? Sensing my displeasure with his answer, he tried to continue.

“Okay, it’s because—”

“I can’t have children,” I blurted.

“You think I want them?” His brows furrowed. “I’m surrounded by children.” He snorted, implying the wayward actions of the band. “Plus, I’ve been around Ivy practically since the day she was born.”

I sighed, and he tugged me to him again.

“Edie.” When he said my name, I knew he was about to say something serious, and I immediately missed him calling me darlin’. “Let’s ride, beautiful. See what happens. I’m not talking marriage here, just sex and some fun.”

I nodded, although I didn’t fully like that answer.

“Remember what fun is, darlin’?”

“Actually, no, not until recently,” I replied, rolling my forehead against his chest.

“Well, then, that’s why I’m here. Fun,” he stated adamantly, and cupped my cheeks to press my face up to his. His mouth covered mine, sweet and slow and heartbreakingly tender as he lapped up the salty tears on my lips and drank up my sobs with his tongue. We stood several minutes kissing like this, and I clutched his T-shirt in my fists, holding on to him like my life depended on it. In many ways, I hadn’t lived

until I met him, which meant my life had just begun, and now it was about to end. How was that for timing?

+ + +

We returned home to blustery, sub-zero degree temperatures and the start of a new year. Masie would finish her senior year of high school in a few short months. Caleb would leave for spring training in Iowa for the farm team of a Chicago MLB team. David was pleased by the Midwest proximity, but spring training would take place in Arizona. To my surprise, my ex cashed in frequent flyer miles so Masie and I could attend a weekend of games during her spring break. He even gave up hotel points to cover the stay. After the trip to Hawaii, I couldn't afford another vacation, so I didn't turn down the unexpected gift in order to see my son on the verge of the major leagues.

I'd held Masie's hand through most of the return flight. Her tears matched my previous ones, silent and steady. I had nothing left after Tommy let me finish packing. We decided to part ways in the condo instead of risking a repeat of my meltdown by the car in the parking lot. However, he didn't keep his promise and stood next to the Jeep before we left. He shook hands with Caleb, thanking him for his permission to take me out a few times. He hugged Masie, whispering into her hair as she nodded against him. My heart broke further at his tenderness toward my children. When he hugged me one more time, I thought I'd break in two.

"I—" he started, but I cut him off.

"I'm sorry," I blurted. He pulled back to look at me. "Family always says sorry, and I'm apologizing for that break down upstairs. We promised to keep things fun and light, and I messed it up." I shook my head and tried to laugh off my ridiculous behavior. He smiled slowly.

“Family loves unconditionally,” he whispered, and my lips curled in response.

His eyes searched mine, but I didn’t know what he was looking for. My mind was a jumble, and an ache had developed from all the tears. I just wanted to close my eyes and return home, knowing I’d feel as if I’d been in a dream—Dorothy returned to Kansas, a world of color restored to black and white.

When the Uber dropped us off at my townhouse on the edge of Chicago, I sighed as I turned the key. Home was sweet, but Hawaii was sweeter. Instantly, I returned to the old me. Turning up the thermostat, telling Masie to call her father, searching through the mail, I’d slipped back to who I’d been, as if I’d never left.

An hour later, I noticed a text.

Miss you already, beautiful.

I smiled to myself.

Just got home. Tired. Miss you, too. XO, I typed.

Get some rest. Talk soon.

Minutes later, my phone rang.

I laughed after checking the caller ID and answering. “Hello.”

“Too soon?” The rough voice of Tommy filled my ear, and my heart leapt.

“Perfect timing,” I replied.

“That’s what I like to hear, darlin’.” Silence followed, and I continued smiling knowing he was on the other side of the phone. “So, I’m not great at this phone thing,” he began. “But I wanted to hear your voice.”

“It’s okay. I’m happy to hear yours, too, but I’m tired. I have to work tomorrow.” I should have taken another day off, but I told myself I’d make it through one day before another weekend started.

“Okay, beautiful. We fly out early, but I’ll text you later in the day. Have a good one tomorrow.”

I told him the same, and we hung up. Silence filled the room, making it feel empty like my heart.

How was I going to make it through each day?

+ + +

I didn’t have time to ponder that question as the alarm went off too early. I prepared for work in a fog of jet lag. Returning to Hartcore Manufacturing after a ten-day reprieve was like walking into a waterfall. The work rained down on me, and my boss, Maximillian Hartcore, jokingly told me I was never allowed to leave again. Only, a serious tone underlaid his tease, and for the first time ever I noticed my boss looking at me. Thinking I had food on my face or spilt something on my dress, I swiped at my lips and brushed down the middle of my outfit.

“You look different,” Max said, his eyes roaming my body.

My boss was only a few years younger than me. Handsome in his own right, his hair had begun to speckle with gray, but his clean-shaved face remained salt-and-pepper free. His eyes were a pretty, piercing blue, and his smile was more of a smirk. He was actually rather attractive. Something I was aware of before, but suddenly more conscious of.

He’d known David for years, as my ex-husband had been his business accountant. They weren’t really friends, but professional acquaintances. When I wanted a new job around the time of the divorce, and needed special consideration during my treatments, David had done a decent thing and suggested the position with Max. I owed Max for his generous gift of the vacation.

“Seems a little sunshine agrees with you.” My skin pebbled with the appraising look he was giving me.

I had sex. It was as if he could read it on my skin and was curious to keep reading.

“Thank you. The vacation was wonderful. My kids and I really appreciated the time together.” The mention of my children seemed to snap him out of his leering stupor, and he looked away.

“Right. Well, if you need anything else, you know to ask.” His head remained lowered as if the report before him was the most important paper of his life. “But on that note, could I ask you to stay a little longer today? I’d like to get organized for next week. It’s been a shit show without you.”

I smiled despite knowing I’d have a longer day than I’d planned. It was nice to be needed, and I agreed to stay. I’d gone through the holiday mail, organized emails by priority, and made a list of a few things I thought should be first on his schedule for the next week. Entering his office around five, he motioned for me to take a seat as he finished a call. His eyes narrowed in on me as he concluded his conversation.

“Fine, fine. Next week, then,” he snapped. I’d often heard anger in his voice when addressing some of his business counterparts. He eventually ended the call and brushed a hand down his face.

“Rough one?” I asked, nodding to the phone.

“Long day,” he said sitting forward. “Hey Edie, do you like Chinese food?” It was a strange question, considering I’d often ordered lunches for him, and he allowed me to add myself on occasion.

“Sure.”

“Would you mind ordering dinner for both of us?”

My brows pinched, as I answered, “Okay.”

“Great. We’ll make it a working dinner,” he said, pressing back from his chair. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. When it’s

delivered, join me in here.” He stood and turned his back to me as he exited his office for his private bathroom. The door shut with a soft click, and I went to my desk to order dinner.

When dinner arrived, I joined Max at a small table in his office to eat. My boss had been professional as always, but I hadn’t noticed how funny he was until he regaled me with stories of the holiday temp who replaced me.

“She got her wrist stuck in the copy machine fixing a jam, but the best was when she propositioned me.”

“No!” I gasped.

“Yep. Asked me outright if I wanted to sleep with her.” Max was divorced like me. He had three younger children, as he married later in life. I could see the appeal from the temporary assistant’s side—Northwestern grad, successful business owner, still young, millionaire—but I could never image being so bold.

“Did you take her up on the offer?” I asked before realizing what I’d said. Max’s eyes widened, playful and gleaming.

“Would you be jealous if I had?” His voice lowered, and that pebbling skin returned.

I swallowed before I answered. “Of course not.” I dismissively swiped at the air. The sexual escapades of my boss were none of my business.

Rocking slightly back in his chair, his blue eyes narrowed and he bit his lip.

“Green really isn’t my color,” I added, remembering all the times Tommy mocked me for being jealous of other women’s attention to him.

“I don’t know, Edie. I think you’d be pretty in any color.” I caught my breath at the comment and found Max staring at me as he had when I first entered the office that morning. He smiled slowly, and my heart pattered. *Was he coming on to me?* I patted at some curls near my ear, dismissing the thought.

“Thank you,” I said, lowering my eyes and smoothing down the skirt of my dress. “If we’re done here, I’d like to go home. I need to get organized there as well after my trip.”

Max sat forward, his eyes still on me. “Of course, Edie. Whatever you need.”

+ + +

My hands trembled as I started my car, although I did not feel threatened. I chalked it all up to being overly tired. There was no way my boss was coming onto me. Not after all this time, not at my age. He was younger than me, and David’s business associate. I checked my phone while the car heated and noticed three missed calls from Tommy during my working dinner. I immediately called him back, only to have it go to voicemail. I didn’t leave a message. I didn’t know what to say.

I miss you.

I don’t know how I’ll survive without you.

I want to see you again, now.

The list was so desperate sounding. Even saying something as mundane as *I hope you had a good day* sounded weak and clingy in my head. I hung up, but dialed again to hear his voice, even though it was a greeting message. I hung up a second time, determining I was the most ridiculous woman on the planet. I wasn’t a teenager. I was forty-three, but I felt like a girl again, and not in a good way. Insecurity trickled through my veins.

Around one in the morning, my phone buzzed. I was a light sleeper, and I immediately answered.

“Hey,” my voice rasped, heavy with sleep.

“I woke you, didn’t I, darlin’?”

“It’s okay,” I said, happy to hear his voice.

“The time change throws me off. It’s only eleven here.” Tommy and the band had returned to their homes just outside Los Angeles. I had no concept of what that looked like. I’d never been to California.

“It’s fine.” I shrugged like he could see me and shifted on the bed.

“You in bed, darlin’?” His voice lowered and a tickle rose in my lower belly.

“Yes,” I exhaled.

“Describe it for me.” I laughed in response but explained the layout of my room finding it similar to the resort condo. I only had a queen-sized bed at home, but my dresser stood opposite of it, with a chair to the side and a nightstand closest to where I slept. The description reminded me of the night Tommy knelt before me, lapping at my core before making love to me. My heart rate increased, and my hand slipped to cup a breast before skittering down my belly.

“And what are you wearing?” The question asked with seductive intent caused a chuckle in response.

“A T-shirt and underwear.”

“The red ones?” he asked, his voice lowering.

“Nope.”

“The purple ones?” I laughed again, curious that he seemed to have memorized my boring, bright underpants. “Don’t say the pink ones.”

In fact, they were the pink ones, the same ones I’d worn on the night haunting my thoughts.

“Yes,” I exhaled again, too breathy, too deep.

“Where’s Mr. Bob?” he questioned, and I blushed as he referenced the toy buried in my bathing suit drawer in hopes my children would never find it.

“Too far away,” I whispered as my fingers hesitated at the top of the curly, crisp hair near the edge of my legs.

“Darlin,’ I want to touch you. Can you do it for me?”

I nodded as if he could see me. I sampled myself, tickling through the hair and pressing the nub that ached for him.

“Whatcha doin’, beautiful?” His voice sounded strained, and I was curious if he touched himself. Without waiting for an answer, he spoke again. “Describe everything.”

I should have been embarrassed. I *was* mortified, but I was also turned on. I was too close to the edge to stop myself, and my legs shook in desperation. The pulse between my thighs beat faster than my heart.

“I’m touching myself.”

“That’s my girl,” he stressed. “Tell me more.”

“I’m parting the folds, and I’m wet. Really wet.”

“Fuck,” Tommy groaned.

“My fingers aren’t as good as yours.”

“That’s right, darlin’, nothing feels as good as my fingers on you, spreading you.” The comment sent a surge through my middle, and I gasped before increasing the pressure. “Keep talking, beautiful.”

“I’m stroking fast, pressing hard. Oh, God, Tommy, I’m so close. So close, baby.” I moaned, spreading my legs wide and twirling over the folds, rocking my hips upward, reaching for something deeper.

“Feels good, darlin’. So good. You’re almost there, almost there.” He was panting through the phone.

“Are you touching yourself?” I asked, my voice too high, filled with surprise, despite my assumption.

“Fuck yeah, darlin’. Just thinking of you makes me so hard, so needy.” He paused for a breath, and it was the only sound from both our sides of the phone.

“Slip a finger inside, darlin’.”

“I can’t,” I whispered.

“Do it, darlin’.” His voice came out in a rush, his breaths jagged. I stroked over myself, rubbing harder, picking up the pace.

“I can’t,” I stuttered, feeling myself on the edge of something, but not getting there. The slick sound of my fingers caressing my skin echoed in the room.

“You can,” he barked, his breath hitching.

“I’ve never—” I started, but he cut me off.

“Inside. Now, Edie. Now.” I did as he said, slipping one finger in deep and I bit back the scream as I came. My back arched off the bed as my finger delved inward. My eyes rolled back, and I forgot the phone for a moment.

“That’s it, girl. Keep stroking, keep going. Oh, darlin’. So good, so wet, so sweet.” His raspy voice encouraged me, and I rocked on my finger until I was replete.

I exhaled into the phone, resting flat on the bed. My legs shifted, and my arm swiped along the sheet. Aftershocks rippled through me, and I longed for him to be with me. It was good but not enough.

“Miss me?” he questioned, his voice near a whisper.

“So much more than you know,” I replied, a tear slipping from my eye. “So much more.”

12

Sex. Period.

I got my period.

I stared at the text I'd sent, knowing tone was difficult to read in a few rushed words over a screen. However, I wanted him to know he had nothing to worry about. We were nearing two weeks apart, and my period was almost two weeks late. I didn't tell Tommy that, but remembering his freak-out over coming inside me, I wanted to let him know. This was a good thing. Honestly, at forty-three, who wants to get pregnant again and start the cycle of life over? But strangely, a small part of me was disappointed, and so my rash text was sent by my crabby mood.

I didn't wait for a reply. He was two hours behind me, and most likely, still sleeping. His schedule was one social activity after another, plus days filled with band practice and stopping shenanigans from the boys. My first call had actually been to my doctor. I'd made an appointment based on my growing anxiety but needed to cancel. Minutes later, Dr. Crain called me. We'd become friends in the professional way doctors befriend patients they see often.

"Edie, what's going on?" Elizabeth Crain asked.

Brushing a hand over my hair, I blushed despite her inability to see me. "I thought I was pregnant." The silence that ensued dropped the bomb slowly. *Kerplunk*. "But I'm not."

A pause followed those three little words, and I swallowed the ridiculous lump in my throat.

"Edie," she said low, soothingly like only a doctor can. "Although pregnancy is possible, we've talked about how the

treatments mess up your cycle and your body needs time to regulate itself.”

“I know,” I huffed. She was right. My panic was unreasonable.

“What made you think you could be pregnant? I didn’t think you were sexually active,” Elizabeth added.

“I’m not.” Being almost two weeks without Tommy, I wasn’t.

“Well.” She chuckled. “Then you know it takes two for that to happen. Do we need a refresher in the birds and the bees?”

“No.” I laughed along with her, feeling foolish. “It’s just —” I stopped myself. I didn’t have close girlfriends. Not ones that I would share such intimate details with about my newly restored and suddenly vacant sex life. Elizabeth’s pause hinted that I should tell her. I could speak to her, but this wasn’t a clinical thing. There wasn’t a diagnosis for what was going on inside me. I was in love. No doctor could detect that, but my heart was breaking with our separation. I just didn’t see where Tommy and I could go from where we were—living at opposite ends of a map.

“Look,” Elizabeth filled the pause. “You could still get pregnant. You haven’t reached an age where you can’t. But the likelihood is extremely low, and after all your body has been through, highly unlikely.” She paused for more effect. “Is this something you want?”

“No,” I exhaled. It wasn’t. I was at the opposite end of the menstrual spectrum and on the verge of being an empty nester. Still, the thirty seconds of thought at a new life growing inside me again, filling my days, did squeeze at my heart.

“You know, lots of women go through what you’re going through. It’s called adjustment disorder. Things around you are changing at an increased pace. The divorce. Cancer. Caleb leaving and soon Masie. It’s understandable that you’re having trouble adjusting to the changes. I can prescribe something for

that, if you'd like?" My head was shaking before she finished her question.

"No," I said, a bit too adamantly. I took enough pills as it was. I didn't need something else in the mix that I'd have to regulate with diet or other medications. "No. I'm okay. Just a freaky false alarm."

"Okay. Well, if you need anything, or think you do, you can call me."

I nodded again as if she could see me, thanked her, and hung up. Then I noticed I'd missed a text message: **What's this?**

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I answered. The word hello wasn't even out of my mouth when he growled.

"What kind of message is that, darlin'?"

My mouth fell open at the harshness in his question.

"Uhm, you were there. I don't think I need to spell it out, but I wanted you to know you have nothing to worry about." My tone was equally edgy for some reason.

Silence followed a moment, and I chewed at my lip. Time had dragged since we'd parted and yet had strangely sped up. The days always seemed like they'd be long, and then I'd been so busy at work the time passed. The nights were unbearably strained, as I missed him too much. I didn't wish to fight, but I was uncertain about our relationship. *Did we have a relationship?*

"I told you I wasn't worried."

"You were," I interjected, sharper than I intended.

Silence followed once more.

"You okay, darlin'?" I swiped at my growing hair. I'd gotten a cut to shape the growth, and I'd even purchased some new clothes, feeling different about myself after the vacation. But that day, I felt like old-me. A bit frumpy, a lot irritable, and just outright frustrated with life in general.

“Yeah,” I lied, letting my voice fall. “I didn’t sleep well last night.” That wasn’t true either. I usually felt drowsy the day before my period, and I’d fallen asleep early.

“Do you need anything?”

I chuckled without humor. As if he could do something, I thought. He’s in California. I hated my negativity and hated myself for even starting this conversation. I needed to stop this. “Nope, I’ll be good in a few days. I’m at work, and I’m sorry if I woke you, but I can’t really talk. Talk later?”

I could practically see him chewing his lip, wanting to say more but respecting that I’d mentioned work.

“Okay, Edie.” He hung up, and I cringed at his use of my name. He only said it when he was upset or serious.

Hours passed and, around three the front receptionist called my desk. “You have a delivery.” My brows pinched. I never received packages, so I assumed she misspoke, meaning it was something for Max. I decided to take the three flights down to the front desk, stretching my legs that ached a little and twisting my back which ached a lot. I needed some ibuprofen.

Arriving at the desk, I found a beautiful display of red tulips and a plastic bag from the local pharmacy.

“So, where’s the delivery?” I asked, looking over the counter for a box or mailing envelope.

“It’s there,” Fran pointed, implying the bag and the flowers. “You got flowers and this bag.” She tapped the plastic with her pen. Opening the bag slowly, I found several items inside—chicken soup, a heating pad, a bottle of ibuprofen, a bottle of Midol, and a Kindle gift card.

“What the heck?” I laughed outright, pulling out the contents one at a time. I stared at the collection, and then reached for the card attached to the flowers.

I drew the line at tampons, darlin'. Hope you feel better soon.

I laughed harder as tears sprang to my eyes. My heart raced and I hugged the small card and envelope to my chest. I gathered my things while Fran waggled a brow at me.

Walking back to the executive office, I was setting the flowers on the corner of my desk when Max came out of his office.

“What’s this?” he asked. “Special occasion?”

“Not exactly,” I said, staring at the collection of cheery red flowers.

“Got a boyfriend?” he asked teasingly in a sing-song voice.

Did I? He was more than a friend, and he certainly wasn’t a boy. Were we long-distance lovers? I didn’t know.

“Just a—” I couldn’t speak. With Max’s eyes on me, I swallowed hard and added. “A friend.”

The lie made me feel cheap.

Adding to my poor day, minutes before the workday ended, Ivy called me. I decided to take it, worried that something was wrong as she typically didn’t call me during the day.

“Hey, honey,” I started. Ivy’s voice choked on the other end of the phone. “Ivy, what’s the matter?” My heart raced, and I instantly thought of Tommy, worried something had happened to him.

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted, and tears echoed through the phone.

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Ivy and I spoke for nearly an hour while I sat at my desk despite my colleagues leaving the office.

“Gage doesn’t know yet. He’s not going to be happy.”

“Why not?” I asked, my voice rising in surprise.

“The tour is coming. He’s already upset that I said I wouldn’t join him. Ava starts first grade, and I want her to be home, going to a regular school, on a schedule.”

“I see. And he doesn’t like that idea?”

“He doesn’t mind. He understands where I’m coming from, wanting to give the girls a stable life after mine wasn’t, but he still thought I could take her out of school here and there and join him on the road.”

“Ah,” I sighed. Gage had this unnerving need to have Ivy always with him, and while I understood young love, and all that, it was bordering on possessive. He was smothering her.

“I don’t know how to tell him.”

“You aren’t going to do anything rash.” Panic rushed through my voice.

“No, of course not. I want this, it’s just...”

“It’s just what, honey?”

“I thought with Ava going to school, I was one step closer to a little freedom. I was hoping to get a job.” I blinked.

Ivy didn’t need a job. Her husband made more than ten heads of households, but before I even questioned her comment, I understood. Ivy wanted more in her life and Gage’s needs and attention could be suffocating.

“What were you going to do?”

“I’ve kept my musical therapist license renewed. I always thought I’d do something along those lines. Work not-for-profit or volunteer. Nothing major. Nothing rigid. Just something more than purple dinosaurs and singing backpacks.”

I laughed knowing exactly how she felt. Ivy had gone from college to marriage, with a baby in the mix. The same thing had happened to me.

“Ivy, you can still do this. Hire a babysitter. You need to get out. It will be better for you and the baby, especially if you feel trapped.”

“I don’t feel trapped,” she replied, her voice stronger than normal.

“Okay, trapped might be the wrong word, it’s just—”

“I’m sorry, Edie. I didn’t mean that.” *Family always says sorry.* “I’m just so worked up about this.”

“I think you should tell Gage everything. Tell him about the baby. Tell him about wanting a job, that you need something for you. You’ll work it out.” I tried to be reassuring. I remembered being her age and feeling so overwhelmed.

“I’m losing myself, Edie,” she whispered, and my heart broke.

“Don’t let that happen. Don’t.” I wanted to reach through the phone and shake her, and then hug her because she needed that *hug*.

And so did I.

+ + +

Max asked me to join him for drinks at the end of the week. He’d never offered before, and I never would have dreamed of accepting, but I needed that drink. It had been a rough, few days. Tommy and I still spoke each night, but it felt different. Time was rearing its evil head. Distance was not making the heart grow fonder.

“I really appreciate your invitation,” I said, looking around me, wondering where the other office staff was. Max

said it would be casual—a few people from the office just hanging out at the end of a winter work week.

“I feel like we don’t know each other as well as I’d like,” he said, taking a sip of his double whiskey on the rocks. “I mean, I know about David, and ...” His voice trailed off, avoiding the word *cancer*. “But I don’t know other things. Like what do you do for fun? What kind of music do you like?”

I took a large swallow of my wine, gulping more than sipping, as the question caught my breath. It was something Tommy might ask.

“I’m not really good with music. I find I love it but lack the knowledge to know who sings what.” I laughed off my own deficiency, guilt seeping into the conversation for some reason.

“There’s a concert in a few weeks. Ever hear of the Nights?” I had, and I loved their music. He continued, “I have two tickets. Would you like to go with me?”

I took a deep breath. Should I do this? Tommy and I never discussed being exclusive, but I’d expect the same of him. I wouldn’t want him to take someone to a concert, but he probably did. Not to mention, Max was my boss. My very handsome boss, whom I’d noticed more and more was looking at me in a way that was more than just appreciating my organizational skills.

“You can think about it if you’d like? It’s in two weeks.”

“Thank you. I’d like to get back to you. I just want to check my home calendar,” I offered, trying not to make it a definitive no and hurt his feelings. On that note, my phone buzzed.

Where are you? It was Masie.

Out for drinks. What’s going on?

Out for drinks? You never go out, she reminded me. She was correct, and I was starting to think I needed to change

that fact.

Well, tonight I did. I paused a moment and sent another reply. **Was there something you needed?**

I have a surprise for you. You need to come home.

Soon.

Now Mom. While texting didn't inflict tone, I didn't care for Masie's.

"Everything okay?" Max asked, nodding toward the phone.

"I'm so sorry. That was so rude. I'm not sure. My daughter's asking me to come home. I hate to ignore her. She won't be home for much longer. She graduates in May."

Max's eyes roamed my body. "It's hard to believe you have a high school senior."

"I also have a twenty-two-year-old son." I laughed.

"And you had him when you were twelve?" Max's eyes widened as he chuckled. "I'd forgotten." His warm smile and roaming appraisal were flattering but surprising. His roving eyes didn't ignite me like Tommy's did, but a flicker burned. Despite the argument in my head that he was only being complimentary, warning bells rung.

"I should probably go," I said, slipping off the stool and reaching for my wallet.

"This is on me," he said, reaching for his wallet inside his back pocket. "But you have to promise to do it again."

My head shot up, and I caught his baby blues sparkling.

"Okay," I said, my voice unsure, but willing myself to take chances. "Have a good weekend."

"You too," he said, and as I walked away, I sensed his eyes on me. I might have swayed my hips a little more than normal.

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“Tommy?” In all his rock star glory he stood in my living room, wearing dark jeans and a gray V-neck sweater. My breath hitched, and I wanted to catapult myself over the coffee table and tackle him to the couch. Instead, I exhaled his name, and he stepped around the low table. With Masie as our audience, he simply reached for my hand and brushed his lips against my cheek.

“Darlin’,” he breathed against my jaw.

“Can I spend the night at Daphne’s?” Masie asked, forcing me to flinch under Tommy’s touch. Daphne was Masie’s closest friend and a bit of trouble.

“Are her parents home?” Masie rolled her eyes in response, but a few weeks before the winter break, her parents hadn’t been home. There definitely had been drinking and boys involved before Daphne’s older brother had broken up the party.

“Mom,” Masie drew out. I looked at Tommy and back at my daughter, torn between being the diligent parent and the sex-craved woman this man had turned me into. I wanted nothing more than him alone in my house, but my need for responsibility gnawed at me.

“You don’t have to leave.” My eyes shot to Tommy and back at her. Tommy nodded, and I realized I’d already missed some conversation. “Is West with you?” The question was insensitive. Masie hadn’t heard from West, and the dismissal stung.

“We just chatted about him. He’s not here, beautiful.” Tommy winked at me, and I turned back to Masie, noticing a bag already packed and at her feet.

“Fine, you can go.”

Once Masie left, I was suddenly nervous. I smoothed my hands over my hips needing something to do with them.

Tommy took a seat again on my couch and I lowered myself to a chair near the sofa.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I have business here. Came to see my girl,” he said, sitting forward, elbows braced on his knees. “Is that all right?”

“It’s amazing,” I said, swiping a hand over my head. “I’m just so surprised.” In fact, I was absolutely dumbfounded to see him sitting on my couch, in my living room, in Chicago. Quickly, I stood again.

“Would you like something to drink? I have wine.” My voice trembled as I turned for my kitchen leaving him behind. My hands shook. Entering the kitchen, I gripped the edge of the counter, pressing my head forward to rest on the upper cabinet.

“What’s wrong?” His soft gravelly voice spoke directly behind me, and I turned to face him.

“I don’t know.” I laughed anxiously. “I’m so surprised ... and ... nervous.”

With that, he stepped forward, filling my space, cupping my jaw and lowering his mouth to mine. My body slowly thawed. His mouth was like sweet chocolate drizzled into cookie batter, and I licked at his lips, not wanting to miss a drop. His lips led mine, and he tilted his head, increasing the pressure, accelerating the intensity. My hands rose to his biceps, finding the sweater foreign when I’d seen him so often in T-shirts. Slipping up the hills of his shoulders, I found the curl of his hair at the nape of his neck, and my libido kicked in. I pulled myself to him, pressing firmly against his chest and breathing him in with my mouth. He was oxygen, and I hadn’t breathed in weeks.

“There’s my darlin’.” He chuckled against my lips, returning to kiss me with that aggressive appreciation only his mouth gave mine. “Still got your period?”

Nearing the end of my flow, the question should have killed the moment, and in some ways, it did. It was a reminder

of our awkward and brusque conversation earlier in the week.
“Why?”

“Always a question for a question,” he teased, coming for my mouth another second before pulling back. My lower lip was nipped between his before releasing me. “Let’s shower.”

The comment surprised me until he stepped back and led me to the staircase. Did he want to ...? While I had my period?

“Uhm ...” I paused as I blindly climbed the stairs behind him.

“Uh-oh,” he teased, leading me into my room after sticking his head into the doorway of Masie’s and then Caleb’s rooms. “Seems like I have some uncorking to do. My fine wine has been stoppered, and she needs a reminder of how sweet she tastes.”

“Oh, God, you can’t do that.” His brow rose as he chuckled. I’d misunderstood. He meant me as a whole. After turning on my shower, he stepped back, watching me. His bulk filled my bathroom. A space I considered a little haven suddenly seemed closed in and tight with his presence. I didn’t move, like I’d forgotten what to do.

“How do you feel about that shirt?” I looked down at the crisp white blouse. It was fine enough. I wasn’t really a blouse woman, and the material had been a little annoying and restricting, but it had been part of my new clothing purchases. Suddenly, two hands snuck into the opening at my neck and tugged. Buttons flew, and the fabric ripped. My mouth fell open.

“There she is,” he groaned, looking from my neck to my waist and back to stop on the nude bra I wore. His hands slipped around my sides, tugging me close to him and capturing my lips once again. The kiss loosened me up. My arms wrapped around his neck.

“I’ll give you a minute. Do what you need to do and then step into the shower.” His directions surprised me once again.

We hadn't showered together before, and I wasn't sure how this would work, but I did as he said. Stepping under the warm spray, I took a few deep breaths, releasing it slowly and willing my heart to stop hammering. This was Tommy. I wanted him here. I wanted him.

Seconds later, he stepped into the shower, and I lost my breath. Literally. I couldn't breathe at the sight before me. His tan had lessened, but only a little. The hair on his chest curled. The lower hair led to a treasure I couldn't peel my eyes from. Already stiff and upright, I swallowed as I took in the pleasure of admiring him covered in water.

"You are a wonder, Mr. Carrigan," I said, my voice husky and rough.

"You are a beauty, darlin'." With those words, he stepped forward and kissed me again. The hard length of him hit my belly, distracting me instantly, and I wrapped my fingers around the rigid shaft.

"Fuck," he growled against my mouth. "I promised myself I'd go slow, but I've missed you, darlin', and those hands feel too good."

I gave him a gentle tug, and he groaned, the sound echoing off the shower tile.

He spun me so my back was to his front. "Edie, baby. I can't wait. Can this first time be fast? I'll go slow next time, darlin'." His hands cupped the globes of my backside, and I leaned forward to balance my hands on the steamy tile. A finger slipped through the crack, slowly dipping deeper and lowering to the edge of my entrance. Uncertain this was a good idea, I clenched. "Still want to experiment back here one day, darlin', but tonight is a reunion of other parts."

He stepped forward, and the tip of him caressed my core as he swept back and forth a few times.

"Are you sure about this?" I said, my voice low and shaky with nerves. I'd never done this before. David was repulsed at the thought, although I sometimes found I was

excitable even with my period. Tommy didn't answer me before he slammed into me. The assault was a little awkward, and a tad rough. I wasn't ready in the way I should be, but as he slid forward and I pressed back, he filled me.

"Let's get one thing straight, darlin'. You feel me in there?" His voice deepened, demanded, and I nodded, my hand curling into a fist against the slippery tile.

I felt him, all of him, and it felt better than anything had in a long time. My eyes closed at the pleasure. Uncorking was a good metaphor. Tension released as we connected.

"Answer me," he bit, and my eyes, which had closed with heavy lids, snapped open. His hand came to my shoulder while the other rested on my hip.

"Yes, I feel you," I choked as he slid back and then reentered me as if to prove his point. He was in deep.

"I'm bare in there, Edie, because I don't give a flying fuck about your period or if you're pregnant or if you're not." He stilled, and my eyes widened, taking in the tile I'd seen every day for three years as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. His tone softened and like a sweet breeze on my cheek, he whispered, "All I care about is you. And me. Us."

I nodded, my head lowering as he continued to torture me by pulling almost to the edge and then surging forward with a heavy thrust.

"You feel me, darlin'?" he repeated, his words filled with meaning.

"I feel you." I swallowed as my voice caught with the next invasion of my channel.

"Where, Edie? Where do you feel me?"

I blinked. Did he want me to describe this? The hand at my hip slipped forward, and his fingers lightly stroked at the bundle of nerves that would trip me over the edge.

"Deep inside me," I moaned.

He pulled out and stalled. My head rose, and I peered over my shoulder as best I could.

“Where else?” he hissed, holding out from filling me again. His fingers stilled as well.

“My heart,” I whispered, and he slid inward, the thrust so fierce I lurched. My hand slipped off the slick tile. I jackknifed forward, but he caught me with an arm around my waist. We both groaned at the increased intensity.

“That’s right, darlin’ . You feel me in your heart like I feel you in mine.” He continued to hammer at me, and his fingers developed a matching rhythm. My body gave into his, and I came with a scream. The echo resounded in the shower. Then both his hands gripped my hips, tugging me back and holding me still as he pulsed inside me, washing my insides as he spilled his seed.

Jagged, rasping breaths forced my racing heart to skip a beat. *My heart* that felt him, that beat for him, sped inside my chest, trying to hold onto him, hoping to never lose the race to be his.

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We dried off, and Tommy dressed in only his boxer briefs. I’d typically wear flannel pajama pants and a sweatshirt in the colder months. Not a sexy image, so I dressed as I had in Hawaii in a nightshirt and panties, cursing the precautionary pantyliner. However, after what we’d done, my inhibitions were gone. Tommy had broken all the barriers.

“I’m exhausted, darlin’ . Mind if we turn on that TV and snuggle a bit?”

I climbed into bed next to him. He held out an arm, and I curled in close, resting my head on his chest, listening to his heart beat.

You feel me in your heart like I feel you in mine. The words warmed me, and I melted against him again. After a few minutes of TV, my mind wandered.

“What’s wrong, darlin’?”

“Nothing,” I said, rolling to press a kiss to his chest. I lay back. It seemed strange to do something so mundane as cuddle in bed and watch television. We hadn’t done that in Hawaii. Something so normal, something many couples do. *Were we a couple?*

“You’re doing it again,” he said, and I shifted my head to look up at him.

“What?”

“You’re going all stiff next to me instead of molding into me. What’s happening here?” He looked down at me, as his arm raised and bent to rest beneath his head.

“I just ... it seems a bit surreal that you’re in my house. In my bed. And we’re laying here.” His arm lowered to his side as he gazed at me.

“Want me to leave?”

“Hell no.” Shaking my head against his chest, the coarse hairs scratched my cheek. “No, absolutely not.”

He chuckled. “Okay, beautiful. You don’t need to beg me to stay. I wasn’t leaving unless you physically kicked me out, anyway.” He skimmed a hand down my back and leaned forward to kiss my forehead. “But I’m sensing there is more.”

“It’s ... well ... I don’t really watch TV.”

He chuckled under me again. “Okay, so what do you do?”

“I read.”

“Latest mystery thriller?” he teased, and my heart leapt at the reminder of what he said to me the night we met.

“Not exactly,” I answered with a smile.

“Well, get the book. Can you read while I watch this show?”

“Sure,” I replied, a bit too excited as I sat up, reached for my e-reader and returned to my original position. How strange it seemed to move around, nearly naked and uninhibited. How strange it was to balance my tablet on his chest.

“This isn’t working,” I muttered, feeling embarrassed and a bit ridiculous that I thought I could pull off reading next to him. *What was I thinking?*

His arm stretched behind me. “Roll.”

“What?”

“Roll, so your back is to my side. I can still hold you, but you can balance that thing on the bed.” I did as he said, shifting so my back pressed against his side, my head resting on his arm. Eventually, he bent a knee, and I slipped a leg over his, our inner thighs touching. He watched his show. I read my book, until I came to a particularly steamy scene. The words made my heart race. The pulse between my thighs beat, and I clenched. His leg slowly moved upward, and my thigh pressed over his.

I continued to read the erotic romance story, the words titillating. Could people really do that? The story took my imagination to a new level. I hadn’t noticed that my leg was slowly dragging over Tommy’s. My inner thigh rubbed against his, letting the faint curly hairs at the top of his leg tickle the inside of mine.

Despite the movement of my body, I kept reading, the words continuing to stoke my imagination and create a mental picture so vivid I clenched.

“Whatcha reading over there?” The sultry tone of his voice ratcheted up the pulse between my thighs.

“Nothing,” I rasped, feeling my face flush. I stilled my body, hyperaware of his thigh beneath mine and the weight of his leg between mine. I had my period, a light flow, but still...

“Your fine ass just rubbed my hip, like it wanted something.”

“Oh ... I ...the scene is hot,” I said, with a giggle. My eyes had drifted, so I started at the top of the page again, but my body betrayed me, reacting in the same way. His thigh pressed upward, my clit resting flat against the heat of his leg. Without thought, I lightly squeezed, the pulse at my center beating faster than my heart. Tommy’s arm curled, and he pushed the tablet down. His leg nudged harder, firmly pressing against a suddenly needy spot.

“You getting’ off on my leg, darlin’?”

My face heated, but I moaned. The sound escaped me before I could catch it. “I-I don’t know,” I purred, allowing my body to take over, rubbing my center against the firmness of his thigh.

My backside curled into his hip, and I developed a rhythm of rocking over his leg and rolling into his side. He shifted, pressing the length of him against my backside, and I whimpered. The tingles inside my belly had moved from flutters to flight. I was getting so close, and ridiculous as it sounded, I was about to get off on his leg. His hand gripped my hip, and he moved with me, letting me lead.

“Tommy,” my voice hitched.

He groaned behind me. “That’s it, darlin’.”

“Tommy,” my voice rose an octave, disbelieving this was happening. That I’d gone this crazy as to take his leg.

“Mmmm ... right there, baby,” he said, his voice once again sounding like pebbles dropping in a pond. *Plop. Plop. Plop.* And I drowned. My hand sought purchase on the sheets. My thighs clenched together, rubbing his leg. *This was insane.* My body disagreed, and I came and came. My heart hammered and breaths shallowed. As I slowed, Tommy pressed me to the bed and climbed over me. The hot length of him nestled against my entrance, damp and spent from what I’d done.

“I want inside again.”

I nodded lazily. “We might want a towel or something.”

“Get one,” he demanded, rolling to the side and I raced for the bathroom. Once there I removed my underwear. Back by the bed, I draped the towel over the sheets and lay down. He climbed over me instantly, entering me swiftly, and we both groaned in unison.

“I’ve missed you so much, beautiful,” he said, stilling once he was inside of me and brushing back the sweaty hair on my forehead. He pumped into me with short, jagged thrusts as he spoke. “Can’t go so long without you.” He kissed my nose and balanced on an elbow to continue the sharp pulsing. “Why is Chicago so far away?”

With that I laughed, jostling him inside me, and his eyes widened at the pressure. We didn’t speak after that. He took what he needed, filling me again, before collapsing on top of me.

“Edie...” he said my name, so serious, so hesitant, but when I looked at him, he only smiled, one side of his lip curling upward. Whatever he was going to say, he changed his mind, but I worried he could read my thoughts.

Because my mind said, *I love you, Tommy Carrigan.*

13

Leather and More Lies

We spent two wonderful days exploring the city, a city I loved and had lived in all my life but didn't know half as well as him. He'd been here before, on tour, and I remembered seeing him at that club back when I was in high school.

"I bet you were a feisty one," he teased as we talked about that night. "You should have introduced yourself."

"You wouldn't have noticed me. In fact, you didn't." I teased in return, recalling dancing in front of the stage, back in the days when I did dance. Tommy's voice had washed over me, and I remember thinking this man is going to be a star someday.

He took me to an underground jazz club on Saturday, where we danced like we did the night before I left Hawaii. The next day we went to the Athletic Club for lunch and looked out at the cold lake, frozen chunks floating on the surface. We even went ice skating at Millennium Park, although I think he was more comfortable on his own two feet instead of blades. The city was alive for me with Tommy at my side, and I wondered once again how much I'd missed in life while I'd been waiting for him.

On Monday, I had to work. Hartcore Manufacturing was near the airport, although the warehouse was downtown. There had been talks of moving it out of the city, but the incentive to keep the city property kept increasing. I could have driven Tommy to the airport, but he told me it was out of my way as it was past my office. We parted when he was picked up by an Uber.

"Not goodbye," he said, as he pressed his lips to my forehead.

“Not goodbye,” I repeated, swallowing the lump in my throat.

Once at work, I fired-up my computer. With the early hour, I decided to sneak a peek at social media. To the right of the headline was an image I couldn't ignore. My eyes gravitated to it instantly. A younger Tommy, looking absolutely droolworthy, sharing drinks with a stunning redhead. A second image showed the equally striking older version of him hugging the same redhead. My finger shook as I clicked on the picture. An article instantly popped up, filling my screen with details of Tommy and another woman.

Have Lawson Colt and Deanna Kaye decided to reunite?

The headline startled me, and I stared at the word.

Reunite.

My eyes roamed the article.

Seen here in a Chicago airport, rumor has it Lawson Colt and Deanna Kaye planned a secret getaway to spend time in the city where they met. Sources close to the former fashion model tell us she still loves Colt, now known as Tommy Carrigan, after all these years. Carrigan's people refused to comment. The former lead guitarist for both Chrome Teardrops and Colt45 has remained single ever since the couple split fifteen years ago. Maybe first loves never die, as Colt once bellowed in his infamous song, “Loved Nevermore.”

I clicked the X to dismiss the article. My stomach roiled. Bile rose to my throat. The taste of regurgitated milk filled my mouth. I stood and ran for the bathroom. Gripping the sink, I willed myself not to be sick, although the nausea nearly overwhelmed me. I hadn't been this shaky since my last treatment. Looking in the mirror, my reflection showed I'd paled to a sickly white. My lips were too bright, and my eyes watered, blurring the blue color.

“He couldn’t have,” I told myself, but I had nothing else to believe. Once again, he had omitted the truth. Pressing off the cool tile, I rinsed my hands and patted my cheeks. I returned to my desk and pulled up the article again on my phone. Copying the link, I forwarded it to him in a text message.

Reunited?! I typed under the article link. I threw my phone on my desk and sunk my head into my hands.

“Everything all right?” Max’s concerned voice washed over me like a damp cloth, the sensation warm and tender, but making me shiver. My eyes watered, and I blinked rapidly, refusing to look up.

“Edie?” The way he said my name, brought the liquid again.

“I’m okay. Just something I read online. A sad story.” I smiled weakly, attempting to recover.

“You have a good heart,” he said, as he entered his office.

My heart? *You feel me in your heart like I feel you in mine.*

There had to be an explanation. But it was hard to swallow that he’d lied again. Omitted. Had he been married? It wasn’t a big deal that he was divorced, but he hadn’t told me the truth. Again.

My phone buzzed.

“Darlin’,” he started, but I cut him off.

“Don’t. Don’t you darlin’ me. I asked you. No, begged you, to never lie to me again.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You didn’t tell the truth,” I shrieked, lowering my voice as I looked up to see Max watching me from his office. “You didn’t tell the whole truth. Again,” I whispered.

A heavy sigh filled my ear, and I pictured him swiping through his hair. I didn’t care. I didn’t want to think of him

nervous and sexy.

“It’s not what you think.”

“What I think?” I gasped. “The only thing I *can* think is the article is true as I don’t know any other truth.”

“Darlin’, you can never believe the fucking press. Never. They took an innocent image and skewed the whole thing.”

My heart dropped to my stomach. He’d all but admitted he’d met her.

“Who is she?” I hated that I asked. I hated that my voice cracked, sounding needy and sad.

“She’s Deanna Kaye, a former model for DHX.” I had no idea what that meant. I didn’t even care. She was a model, and I was ...in manufacturing. My elbow slammed on my desk, and my forehead lowered to my palm. I didn’t want to know what she did. I wanted to know who she was to him.

“Look, we were married all of three seconds. It didn’t mean anything, and that picture means nothing now.”

“You were married!” I hissed into the phone, eyes jumping up to Max again, who thankfully wasn’t watching me come unraveled. “You didn’t tell me.” In fact, I recalled him specifically saying marriage wasn’t his thing.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

“Why?”

“Did you love her?” *Damn it!* I kicked at the underside of my desk and met Max’s eyes. He stood, stalking toward the door of his office. “You know what, don’t answer that. I’m at work. I can’t do this right now.”

“Eddie—”

“I have to go,” I muttered, my eyes on Max’s as he walked through the entrance to his office, his hand working at rolling up his shirt sleeves, exposing strong forearms. I didn’t

want to be rude to Tommy, but I had to get off the phone. I clicked off.

“Edie, are you sure you’re okay?” Max walked all the way to my desk and sat on the edge. Eyes pressed on me—other eyes—those of the people in the outer offices watching as Max never spoke this intimately to an employee, even if I was his personal assistant. “You can talk to me. You know that, right?” he offered, and the generosity almost broke me. I sat up straighter, swiped my hands down my pencil skirt and smiled too large, too forced.

“I really appreciate that Max. Honest. It means a lot to me, but I’m fine.” A shaky hand smoothed at my growing hair, and Max’s eyes watched my fingers. I lowered them, hiding them under my desk.

“If you’re certain, how about meeting in my office in five? I have a few things to be scheduled this week.”

I nodded. He stood from my desk, and I watched his backside as he entered his office. It occurred to me I knew more about my boss than Tommy. I was in over my head with the former rock star. What I needed was a stable, considerate, no-holding-back-the-truth man. To my shame, Max turned and caught me staring at him. My face heated, and his lip curled. My phone vibrated on the desk, and I instantly looked away from my teasing boss. Reading Tommy’s name, I closed my eyes. I couldn’t answer him. I had work to do.

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Twenty minutes later, Max’s office phone rang. He didn’t say hello as he answered.

“Sure,” he answered, glancing at me. Holding out the phone, I stared at him. How could the phone be for me in his office?

“Edie.” Fran’s hushed voice hissed through the phone. “The most gorgeous silver fox is here to see you. Girl, you have some explaining to do.”

“Who is it?” I asked, knowing full well who might be standing in the lower office, but still shocked that it could be him.

“He says his name is Tommy Carrigan, but girl, he looks just like an older Lawson Colt.” She hummed into the phone, and I shook my head. He *is* an older Lawson Colt, I wanted to scream.

“Thank you,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’ll be right down.”

Looking back at Max, I found him watching me.

“I’m so sorry. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

His brows pinched, and he nodded once, dismissing me. I turned for the door, attempting to walk in even, normal steps, one foot in front of the other. But the second I cleared Max’s office, I was nearly sprinting, my heels clicking as I walked as quickly as my tight pencil skirt would allow. I banged on the elevator button, tapping my foot as I waited.

“Finally,” I huffed when the doors opened, although the inanimate object couldn’t care less about my galloping emotions. My insides coiled like a tempest, half-thrilled, half-angry. When the doors to the elevator opened on the ground floor, the tempest hit land like a hurricane, and my legs shook. Tommy stood just outside the double doors, facing me, waiting. His hair stood on end as if he’d been running his fingers through the silver and ink strands.

Stepping forward, I said something that was the furthest thing from my mind. “You missed your flight.”

“I’ll take another one.” He looked over his shoulder at our audience of Fran. Reaching for my elbow, he tugged me to the side. “Let’s get out of here.”

I twisted, pulling my arm upward, and releasing his grasp. “I can’t do that.” Some people needed to work for a living. I was one of them.

“Why not?”

“What do you want?” I countered. His lips curled in a smile as I answered his question with a question, but then they went flat as he took in my expression.

“Fine,” he huffed. “I met Deanna here in Chicago over fifteen years ago. It was one of those instant attractions. A one-night stand and we got married.”

I stared at him. That wasn’t enough information. It wasn’t even comforting information, and I sensed he was omitting again. My arms remained crossed, my hip out as I waited. His eyes looked away and he took a deep breath.

“She said she was pregnant. She claimed it was mine, and I did what I thought was the right thing and offered to marry her.”

My mouth popped open, an audible gasp echoing through the windowed lobby. My stomach, which already churned, circled again, and the nausea returned.

“You have a child?”

He shook his head. “She lied.”

My arms fell, and I stood taller. My mouth opened, but the anguish on his face had me closing my lips again. He’d wanted to believe she was pregnant. He wanted his own child, and it hadn’t happened.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice scratchy and low. I was sorry *for him*.

“She was a model. Six years younger than me. I should have known better. She didn’t want a kid. It would have ruined her figure. We were only married a few months, long enough for the tabloids to eat us up and spit us out. It was eventually annulled.”

“What about the airport?”

His head shot back to mine. “It’s an airport. She was heading out. I was coming in. The paparazzi must have snapped the picture as we greeted each other.” His voice was filled with irritation as he explained.

That greeting included a hug. His hands on her shoulders. Her hands on his jaw. Intimacy, longing, and something else was caught in that picture. Did they once love each other? Instant attraction? Hadn’t that been us?

I was ready to ask everything when the hard sole of a man’s shoes tapping over a tile floor drew my attention. Max walked directly up to us, determination on his face, as he came towards me. He stopped at my side, and I took a moment to compare the two men. It was a life-size display of “This or That”, like one of those games on social media. The man with a suit, or the man with tattoos. The clean-shaven, sensible short hair look, or the scruffy jaw with hair to his collar. The millionaire businessman, or the millionaire musician. My eyes flicked from Max to Tommy and back.

A battle of wills waged between the two. Max came to my side, and unprecedentedly, placed his hand on my lower back. It was a display of possession as he spoke to Tommy, but asked the question of me, “Are you alright?”

Tommy took in the position of Max, the placement of his hand and the nearness of him to me. “She’s fucking fine,” Tommy replied, and Max’s hand tightened on my back.

“Edie?” Max inquired, his voice rolling over my name and I turned to look up at him.

“I’m fine, Max. I’ll be back upstairs in a minute.”

“Who the fuck is this?” Tommy barked, and my head snapped back to him.

“This is my boss, Max Hardcore. The owner of the company,” I gritted through clenched teeth, cursing in my head how unbelievable this situation seemed.

“And you are?” Max asked, extending a hand.

Tommy gripped it and held a moment. “I’m Tommy Carrigan.”

Tommy looked to me, waiting for me to clarify who he was, but I didn’t know anymore. Every time I turned around there was a new piece to the puzzle of him, and too often I was too dazed by the sex to see clearly how the pieces never matched.

Tommy released Max’s hand and swiped his other one through his hair again. Looking away from me, he muttered, “Fine.” He took a step back, twisting toward the door. “Great,” he mumbled. I reached out for him, but he took another step before I could touch him. Turning completely, he headed for the double glass panes.

I spun to face my boss. Max’s expression held a smug look, his mouth curled in an ominous smile.

“I just need another minute.” My eyes pleaded with him, and to my surprise, his fingers came up to my hair. Brushing short curls behind my ear, he lingered a second.

“A minute,” he said, his eyes searching my face. My heart hammered. Then he stepped back, and I twisted to find Tommy walking out the door.

Quickly, I stalked after him, cursing my skirt for the tightness at my thighs, preventing me from actually sprinting.

“Tommy,” I yelled after him as he hit the curb. His phone was in his hand, and he was typing. “Tommy, wait.”

He spun to face me. “What the fucking hell was that?” I’d never heard him so angry, not like that, not at me.

“He’s my boss.”

“He wants to fuck you.”

My mouth fell open, and my arms crossed, cupping my elbows. “He does not,” I stammered, shocked and appalled by the comment.

“Don’t be so stupid, Edie.”

“Excuse me?” I gasped, eyes widening in disbelief. Who was the stupid one? *Oh right, me.* For thinking he cared about me, for hoping he’d no longer hold the truth from me.

“He totally wants all over you.”

“How did this get turned around to me?” My arms released and slapped at my hips. The chilly, late January air finally hit me. My body shivered.

“Go back inside,” Tommy snapped. “Go back to work.”

I crossed my arms again, rubbing up and down my sweater sleeves. “I don’t want you to leave like this,” I said, lowering my defensive walls a little. He looked out at the street, narrowing his eyes.

“Look, Edie, being apart is hard. It involves trust.” He sighed and looked back at me. My body was beginning to tremble, but it wasn’t the cold winter air. Shock was kicking in. He was going to break up with me. We weren’t even dating, and he was going to break up with me.

“You want the truth, Edie? I wanted that baby, the one she never had. And I wanted her to love me, but that wasn’t love. Tricking a man into thinking he’s going to be a father—that was treachery. Did I love her? I don’t think so, but I’ve written songs about it, about heartbreak and lost love and ruined dreams. But it wasn’t her. It was emotion after a tragedy, but not her.”

His whole body twisted, and he removed his leather jacket. Wrapping it around me, the soft material was heavy over my shoulders, but the heat of his body lingered in the fabric, warming me. His scent filled my nostrils.

“Darlin’, I love you, but if you don’t trust me, there’s nothing between us.”

My eyes shot up to his. I couldn’t even blink. The cold seemed to freeze my eyelids. He couldn’t mean it. He couldn’t have even known what he said.

“What?” He eyed me, as if growing nervous as my eyes remained wide and dazed.

“You-you just said you loved me.” I blinked. “But of course, it was just a slip. I mean—”

Hands cupped my face, and he stepped into me, his lips stealing any other words. This was his kiss—aggressive, pressing, and demanding. He parted my lips, commandeering my tongue, and took his time to cover every inch of my mouth. Pulling back, he looked at me, and I shivered.

“You can be so stubborn, darlin’,” he said, ignoring my comment and adjusting the jacket. I didn’t speak.

“I didn’t want to do this here. Not like this. I had it all planned out, repeating it over and over in my head, but it never came out.” I continued to stare, not taking his meaning. “I love you, Edie. I know it’s been a bit fast, and I said *don’t make me love you*, but you can’t seem to help yourself. And I can’t help myself either. I love you.”

Tears welled in my eyes, blurring my sight.

“Darlin’?” he questioned, pressing his thumb against my cheek and swiping at a tear that threatened to freeze in the chilly air.

“I love you, too,” I said, my voice shaking from the cold, but more so from the words. “I think I loved you from the first touch, but I definitely loved you before I ever left Hawaii.”

His mouth returned to mine, searching, seeking, savoring. It was in his kiss. All the longing, the miles and hours between us, and I didn’t want to separate again, but we had to. A car honked, and he pulled back from me.

“That’s my Uber. I need to get back to the airport.” He lowered his head to mine. “Are we good, darlin’?”

In many ways, I thought we had so much more to discuss, but this was enough. For the moment, it was enough. “We’re good.”

“I love you,” he said again, giving the collar of his jacket a little shake. “Trust, beautiful.”

I nodded while moving to remove the heavy coat.

“Keep it. I don’t need it in California. It will be my excuse to come back.”

My brows furrowed, and his finger pressed the crease. “What’s that look?”

“I want to be the excuse for you coming back,” I said boldly.

“You’ll never be an excuse, darlin’. Always my reason.” His lips curled with the comment, and we gazed at one another a moment.

“I’m never going to be able to surprise you. I can’t just fly off to California.” I looked down at my boot-covered toes. “I couldn’t afford it. How is this going to work?”

“Darlin’, you surprise me by saying you love me. That’s all the surprise I need. You love me, and you want to see me, that’s all you have to say, and I’ll send you a ticket.”

“I love you,” I said, my lips curling, my heart splitting between my sudden happiness and the cold sorrow of his departure.

“I love you, darlin’.” He kissed me once more and slipped into the car. Driving away, he might have left me his jacket, but he took a piece of my heart with him.

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“I don’t know how you do it,” I said to Ivy over the phone. My heart had shattered inside me, clogging up my insides with the sharp pain of missing Tommy. It was unbearable. I couldn’t see how our relationship could continue with only phone calls and no schedule to see one another.

“You get used to it. Separation becomes a norm of your life.”

I didn't like that answer. I'd already been with a man who traveled often, missed much, and was hardly present when he was home. A long-distance relationship was the last thing I thought I'd have at my age, but I couldn't see any way around our situation. He lived in California. I lived in Illinois.

“I just miss him so much.” I couldn't believe I'd admitted this to his niece, but I had to tell someone. It seemed inappropriate to tell my children how I longed for a man who wasn't their father, even if they were old enough to accept our divorce.

“I know.” Ivy's voice lowered, and I realized she'd lived her whole life with separation—from her mother, her lover, her husband. Shaking off the sad direction of our phone call, I asked her about other things.

“How did Gage take the pregnancy?”

“He was disappointed that I couldn't travel with him, but he's always excited about babies.” The idea seemed contradictory to his hard ass personae.

“Did you speak with him about the musical therapy work?”

“I did. He wasn't overly receptive.” Sarcasm filled her voice. “But I found the perfect place for me. Edie, I don't have all the details, but it's a not-for-profit school. The location isn't in the best, but they need a director after the last one misappropriated their funds. The board sounds desperate. I'm looking into something with them.”

I lowered my voice in conspiracy with her. “What's the something?”

“I'd like to buy the place.”

I sat straighter, eyes widening even though she couldn't see me. “Can you do that?”

“I’m researching it. Their board wants to just disband, but I see the program’s potential and benefit. The whole thing is kind of exciting.” The enthusiasm in her voice was infectious. Her desperation to be involved and take over the school, whatever that might mean, was nearly palpable.

“It sounds interesting. Can I help you somehow?” I had no idea what I could do from Chicago, but I’d aid her in any way I could.

“I don’t know.” She chuckled, her laughter filled with fear and passion. “But I’ll definitely keep you in the loop.”

“Is *anyone* helping you?” I hoped Tommy was supporting her if Gage wasn’t.

“I hired a lawyer. He’s working on the legality of things.” Her voice rose again with anticipation. She wanted this project.

“I’m so proud of you.” Silence followed the statement, and I worried I’d lost her. “Ivy?” I questioned, thinking the connection was cut.

“Thanks, Edie. That ... that means a lot to me. A lot.” Her tone had shifted, and the weight of her appreciation hit me in the chest. This is what Ivy had wanted, someone to be proud of her, like her mother would have been.

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Over the next two weeks, Tommy and I talked nightly, Skyped often, and occasionally included some risky, sexy time over the wires.

“Darlin’, whatcha doin’?” he asked me one night when Masie was at her dad’s, and Caleb had taken off for team meetings in Iowa.

In an exhibitionist sort of way, I took more risks with Tommy than I’d ever taken before. I slipped out of view,

stripped, and re-dressed. Reappearing before the screen, his dark eyes turned to obsidian.

“Is that my jacket?” He swiped through his hair, pressing his face closer to the screen. “I’m so fucking jealous of that leather.” He sat back, and his hand lowered out of view. “Open it a little more.”

I parted the jacket, exposing a hint of breast, and then slid my thigh through the opening to reveal more. He swallowed, and I watched the roll of his Adam’s apple.

“Fuck,” he groaned.

I moved the laptop to rest on my bed. Crawling toward the screen, I laid on my side, facing him. I shifted the jacket to cover me like a blanket. The sharp sound of his zipper ripped over the wires. We’d gotten a little out of control one night, and he showed me himself as he took care of his business. I drew the line at holding the phone between my thighs as I worked myself.

“I don’t need this on some foreign internet porn site,” I had teased.

I rolled to my back. The sound of gentle vibration echoed in my room, and I heard Tommy’s breath hitch.

“Is that ... Mr. Bob?” he choked. He couldn’t see what I was doing. Everything was under the jacket, but with the weight of the material, the scent of him surrounding me, and Mr. Bob between my thighs, it was as if Tommy were present. Not quite, but close enough. His voice increased my arousal, encouraging me with dirty words, and I rolled my head to focus on his face as I took my own pleasure with a little battery-operated assistance. We came together.

“Fuck, you’re better than porn, beautiful.” He reached for something outside the screen and wiped his fist.

I laughed, rolling to my side to face him. “Not quite.”

“My private porn star,” he muttered. His laptop rose and movement rattled my view of him. His mattress dipped, and he

settled on his own bed. Setting the computer in the same manner as mine, he lay facing me, propped up on an elbow. The position was awkward, with computer screens and not so perfect angles, but it was as close as we could get.

“I love you, darlin’,” he said, his raspy voice lowering.

“I love you, too, baby.”

His plump lips curled. “You know I love it when you call me that.” We just stared at one another a moment. “I wish I was there.”

“Me, too. I’d kind of ... it’s been hard for me.” I swallowed down the nerves to speak my mind. “I wish we lived closer. I want to see you. In person.” His eyes opened wide, and I worried I’d said too much. As if *I love you* wasn’t revealing enough, but they were only words. Admitting to my desire to live closer, spend more time with him, be near him, seemed more exposing.

“Hang on.” He disappeared and returned with his phone, lying back down. “What time do you get off work on Friday?”

“Around five.” I hadn’t told Tommy that I’d accepted the Nights concert ticket. I told myself it was nothing. Max was younger than me by a few years, but we were close enough in age. We’d been chatting more often about personal things, as well as business, and the attention was refreshing. He seemed tortured that he only had his kids twice a week and every other weekend. He said his ex-wife had been his best friend, and strangely they remained amicable despite their separation. It didn’t change the fact he still missed his children. He was alone, like me, and I’d convinced myself a concert wasn’t a date, just two lonely people listening to music. It wasn’t that I wanted to date someone other than Tommy, but I didn’t want to be alone any longer.

“Can you get off work earlier?” Tommy addressed me, but stared at his phone, and I grew a bit agitated that I lay under his leather jacket, replete and warm, while he played with his cell phone.

“Why?”

He chuckled at my response, and my phone pinged on my nightstand. Flipping his phone to face me, my eyes narrowed, but I couldn't read the information.

“Grab your phone, darlin’.” I sat up and reached for it. Opening up the text messages, he had sent. **Check email.** Clicking over to my email, I found a confirmation message from an airline.

“What's this?” I snorted, staring as I read the information. Friday afternoon flight from O'Hare Airport to SFO, San Francisco International Airport. “You sent me a plane ticket?”

“I told you, you say you love me, and you want to see me, and I'll bring you here. I'll be in that area this week.” He was proud of himself, and it showed in his expression. “It's the first time you asked.”

He'd been waiting for those words from me, and I wanted to kick myself for holding out on saying anything sooner.

So much for the concert.

That Friday, I was going to California for the first time in my life.

California Dreaming

His mouth crushed mine as he met me at the airport. It was almost embarrassing, but it had been weeks since our lips had been together, and he devoured me, publicly.

The coolness of San Francisco accosted me in a good way. I'd left behind zero-degree temperatures, so I was thrilled to shed my heavy jacket. Tommy took my bag and held my hand as he led me to his car. The vehicle wasn't exactly what I pictured him driving, and I stared at it.

"Is that a '65 Mustang in robin egg blue?"

"You know cars, darlin'?" I knew even less about cars than I knew of music, but *this* car I recognized.

"This is my dream car," I sighed, swiping a finger along its curved edges as I passed to the passenger side.

"Oh, yeah?" His voice teased, husky and puddle-popping. "What did you dream of doing in a car like this?"

I looked up to find his eyebrow wiggling, hinting, and I laughed.

"I'd dream of you doing me on that hood."

Tommy stared at me, bracing his hands on the trunk where he'd just placed my suitcase. He stalked toward me without a word, his smile dropping. When he reached me, he almost knocked me over as he pressed me into the passenger side door and kissed me hard. He wasted no time, lowering his hips and grinding into me.

"God, I've missed you, beautiful," he said, and my heart skipped a beat. He opened my door, and I sat on the leather seats, rubbing my hands up and down the worn canvas.

It was a beautiful car, a musician's car, and one that cried badass and carefree. He lowered to his seat and started the engine, which purred. Pulling onto the highway, I got a glimpse of the hazy surrounding area.

"Fog," Tommy clarified. "It isn't a joke." Neither was the traffic. The streets of Chicago couldn't rival the standstill. Eventually, we broke free as we seemed to be traveling north.

"Where are we headed?" I asked. I didn't understand why we were in San Francisco instead of his home in LA.

He drove with his right hand, and his left hand ruffled the bands at his wrist—a set of wooden brown beads, a solid silver bangle, and a leather strap. Jiggling them, he seemed nervous. "I thought I'd take you some place special." His eyes shifted to me before returning to the road.

"Okay," I smiled.

"Yeah?" His lips curled.

"Sure."

"We're going to Napa. I know a vineyard inn there that's private." He was elusive, and it sounded romantic, but the privacy thing struck me.

"Are you worried that people would recognize you?"

He shrugged and replied, "It happens."

Another thought occurred to me. "Are you worried people would see you with me?"

His head spun to face me, briefly blinking in shock before gazing back out the front window. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." The pause lasted a beat. "I mean, look at me." I waved a hand before myself. "And look at you." I dismissively flung my hand in his direction as my heart dripped like candlewax to my stomach. "We don't exactly match."

"What?" His voice rose, irritation lacing the edges.

“I mean, you’re all leather and I’m not even lace. I’m just cotton and occasionally pearls.” Come to think of it, I hadn’t worn my pearls since I met Tommy, but that was beside the point.

“Darlin’, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“You’re Lawson Colt and I’m just Edie Williams,” I said exasperated.

“First,” he bit out, “I am not Lawson Colt. I’m Tommy Carrigan. And second, you’re more than just pearls, although you’re just as precious and pure. I like that about you. It makes you different than the usual bullshit I see.”

“Different.” I sighed, my shoulders lowering as I stared out the window.

“Yes, *different*, in a good way, in the best way. You aren’t assuming. You aren’t scheming. You aren’t money hungry, or gold digging, or even recognizing of who’s who. You’re just you, and I love it. I love you,” he said adamantly.

“I just worry that I’m not enough.”

He sighed as he swiped a hand through his hair. The silver shimmered in the sunshine. “Are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

“No,” I scoffed, startled by the accusation. The hint sounded precariously similar to something David would say to me and that dripping-wax heart melted.

He shifted so his left hand held the steering wheel and his right hand reached for me. Taking my hand in his, he lifted it and kissed my palm. “Edie, you’re everything I need.” The comment gave me momentary ease, so I let my worries flutter away.

After an awkwardly silent ride, we arrived at The Vineyard Inn, the ironic name of a quaint and secluded resort. The older couple who owned the place told us they had been married for over fifty years. I loved their wrinkled faces and

the sly smiles they gave one another. Hard work and long love made them beautiful.

That night, we had a very quiet dinner despite other patrons in the restaurant. An eerie feeling surrounded me as I scanned the couples. I was quickly learning the guests were not there to intermingle but to not be seen.

“This place is famous for the rich and *famous*,” Tommy explained. He nodded toward a couple. “Movie director. She’s not his wife, but his assistant.”

Peering over my shoulder, I tried not to stare. Their age difference had to be over twenty years.

Shifting his eyes to my right, Tommy continued. “Movie industry exec and a girlfriend, also not his wife.”

I briefly took in the more age-appropriate match.

Then Tommy tipped his head toward the bar. “World champion MMA fighter. That *is* his wife.” The brunette beauty giggled softly behind the bar as she served her husband a drink. “Her grandparents own the place,” Tommy clarified, and I remembered the older couple who registered us.

“Just be thankful the first wives’ club isn’t in session this weekend.”

“What’s that?” I laughed nervously, sipping my California rosé to disguise the dread creeping over my skin as I awaited his explanation.

“A group of barracuda women on the rebound from their divorces. They’re first wives of the famous and they come here to celebrate their *freedom*.” He air-quoted the second statement. “They have no shame.”

I suspected Tommy had been the recipient of such a celebration. Moreover, he’d probably brought a woman here previously for its privacy. The place suddenly didn’t hold the romantic appeal I had imagined, knowing I didn’t qualify as the second wife, but more likely a third or fourth woman he’d

brought here. I took another sip of my wine to divert my attention.

The weight of his stare pressed on me as I remained quiet. “You don’t like it.”

“I do,” I said too emphatically. “It’s just a bit surreal. I feel like I’m having a clandestine affair instead of a romantic weekend away.” Then again, we were lovers. Nothing more.

Tommy sat back, his head bobbing. He tugged at his plump lips with his teeth and a hardness filled his eye. I’d hurt his feelings, and I laid my hand on the table, but he didn’t reach for me. My feelings hurt instead.

“So, what did you have planned for this weekend?” he asked, shifting the conversation.

I took a deep breath as I withdrew my hand, lowering it under the table as if ashamed of myself. “I was supposed to go to a concert.”

Tommy’s brows shot up in excitement. “Oh yeah, who?”

“The Nights.”

Tommy whistled low in response. “That band’s some serious shit.” He leaned forward, crossing his elbows on the table. “How’d you get that ticket? And why didn’t you tell me?”

I didn’t speak for a half a second, but I watched as his brain clicked.

“Were you going on a date?” he teased, but his dark eyes narrowed.

“No,” I sputtered. “No, not exactly.”

His eyes widened. “Well, what *exactly* was it?” he spat. His head lowered as he realized his voice rose too loud in the hushed surroundings.

“Just a friend going with a friend.”

Tommy’s eyes narrowed on mine. “What friend?”

I chewed at my lip, tugging so hard, it burned. “Max.”

“Your boss?” He sat up and slapped a hand on the small table, jiggling it under the pressure.

“Yes.” My voice was so low, it was hardly a whisper.

Tommy signaled for the check. When the waitress came to the table, he told her our room number and stood without a glance at me. I stood as well, thanked the girl. I followed him from the restaurant. His stride was long, but I didn’t race to catch up.

His anger filled the void between us, and it was all my fault. I shouldn’t have been honest. Actually, I shouldn’t have accepted the concert invitation, but I’d been alone so long, so often, and I didn’t see anything wrong in wanting company, even if it was my boss. My attractive boss, who might be paying too much attention to me.

I followed Tommy into the room, where he stood with a hand braced on the wall. He stared out the window, despite the darkness of the night.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have accepted.”

“You’re damn right you shouldn’t have accepted.” He pressed off the wall and spun to lean against it. He glared at me across a small room that felt just as wide as the miles between us.

“You don’t have to raise your voice.”

“Raise my voice?” His teeth clenched. “I’m pissed. What else should I do?”

I stared at him. “Maybe tell me what this is.” I waved a hand between us. “Tell me what we have.”

“I love you, Edie, isn’t that enough?” It was.

But it wasn’t.

“Where are we going? Is this a relationship? Are we exclusive? I don’t really know what you’re doing when you’re

socializing for business. You went to the Grammy's, for God's sake."

"I explained that," he huffed, exasperated with me. He had explained. The band had been nominated, and the tickets distributed long before I was even a thought to him.

"*I didn't predict you, darlin',*" he had teased, making light of the fact I came into his life after the nomination. It didn't bother me that I didn't go, but it was another reminder that he was famous, and I wasn't anywhere near him. I had no idea what he did at that event amongst the beautiful people, but I could only imagine.

"You did," I replied, not wishing to argue about something I had no control over. We glared at each other a moment, an impasse of crossed arms and strong wills. "So..."

"So?"

"What are we? Are we a clandestine affair, is that why we didn't go to your house? Are you hiding me from someone?"

He huffed as his arms flared and then smacked on his jean-clad thighs. "I thought it would be romantic."

"And it is." I stepped toward him, knowing our disagreement was ruining the romance. "But I wanted to see your home. I want to know where you live, so I can envision you there. I want to know how you decorate, where your grocery shop, where you take your runs." My heart raced as my voice stressed what I desired to learn about him. His shoulders sagged and his head lowered. His arms returned to cross over his chest. I plopped down on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry that I've ruined this. I just wanted to learn more about you and your real life."

Did he prefer bananas or apples? Potatoes or pasta? Orange juice or water? Did my desire to know intimate details of his life cross some line? I lowered my head, a war within my mind of all the mundane things I wanted to learn about him, as if I could capture his history and rush it into the

present, making up for lost time and years of never knowing him. The thought was ridiculous.

Then another thought occurred. I seemed ungrateful for this weekend, when I wasn't. He'd flown me here. He'd brought me to this beautiful inn. We were alone. I wanted him. I just wanted a little more of *him*, the man, not the extravagance.

Shaking my head, I realized I made no sense to myself. I was being foolish. I should just live in the moment.

I sensed him walking, and my eyes closed briefly, preparing for him to walk away. He surprised me when he sat in a chair diagonal from me. His elbows rested on his thighs and his hands cupped together.

"You really want to know those things about me?" His voice lowered, somber and hesitant. Looking up, I saw him staring at his fingers.

"Yes," I sighed, breathless.

His eyes met mine. "Why?"

Startled by the question, I had only one answer. "Because I love you. That means I want to know everything about you. At least, for me that's what it means."

He nodded slowly and sat back in the chair, his arms shifting to the rests. He seemed lost in thought, his mind drifting away, and I worried he wanted to return me to Chicago.

I stood and crossed the short distance, dropping to my knees before him. My hands caressed his thighs. "I'm sorry. If you want to send me home, you can."

"I don't want to send you home, darlin'," he said, reaching forward and brushing my growing hair behind my ears. His eyes roamed my face. When he looked at me like that, I felt naked—not undressed, but exposed, like he wanted to see inside my soul, like he questioned who I was, and what I wanted from him.

There was only one way I felt I could reach him. I hesitantly reached for his belt.

“Edie?” The seriousness of his voice spurred me on.

I unclasped the buckle, and he shifted his hips. Next, I slid down the zipper. Tugging at the sides of his jeans, I jostled him like a rag doll. He lifted his hips enough to free his thick shaft from his pants. My mouth watered, and I brushed my fingers up the rigid length, circling the tip with a delicate stroke, and then holding him upright. I rose up on my knees and lowered my lips, swallowing him deep, sucking hard and swirling my tongue. He jolted in my mouth, the wetness increasing the slide. My cheeks hollowed, drawing him deeper, tugging at the firmness as he filled my mouth. I lowered myself further until he reached the back of my throat. A hand came to the back of my head, and he held me steady. Twirling my tongue over him, I pulled back only to lower rapidly.

He hissed without endearment or my name, his fingers threading into my hair. I opened wider, swallowed deeper, and sucked harder.

He pulsed in my mouth without warning, the first jolt surprising me, but I took what he gave. Eventually, his hand stilled on my head, and he gently tugged at my hair. I released him and gazed up at him. He stood, tugging up his pants as he moved and then cupping me under my arms, taking two steps before we fell to the bed. As we tumbled and then bounced, he wrapped his arms around me, holding me close, but far enough so he could see my face.

“I don’t want to send you home, darlin’,” he said in that quiet, low voice he could sometimes have. “I want to make my home with you.”

“What?” The shaky question quietly squeaked.

“I wanted to take you to my home, but if I did, I’d never want you to leave.” I didn’t believe what he was saying. Was

he asking me to move in with him? That was crazy. We'd only known each other six or seven weeks.

"Next time," he amended. "Next time, we'll go to my house."

The answer worked for me, as his mouth took mine. His hands skimmed my body, lifting hems and lowering waistbands, and any other questions I had about us were lost in the sex. This was my problem. The sex was a thick haze that clouded my decisions.

+ + +

We spent the rest of that night huddled under the blankets talking and kissing.

"Mmmm. You like that don't you?" Tommy asked, as I stroked fingertips over his scratchy jaw and kissed his neck. My feet were tucked between his thighs, and I moaned in response. Those scruffy cheeks brought me strange comfort and contentment warmed my insides.

"There are so many things we should talk about," he said after another kiss. "But I just want to linger at your lips."

On that comment, I pulled back, the contented feeling cooling inside me a little. "Like what?" My eyes searched his face, and my heart tip-toed toward my stomach. My emotions were on a roller coaster, and I couldn't get myself to settle in and enjoy the ride.

"I want to know more about your marriage, but then again I don't. I want to know what he did to make you the way you are, but then again I want to forget he had you first." His fingers brushed over my hair and his eyes followed the motion.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know.” His words were so sweet. It was my own voice struggling to speak.

“I don’t know if I want the answers,” he said, finally looking directly at me. My brows pinched, completely uncertain what he might ask.

His mouth opened, closed, and then he spoke. “Sometimes, there are questions that don’t need an answer.” He returned to caressing my hair and curling his fingers around my ear. “You’re with me now, and that’s all I need to know.”

My brow pinched again, but his lips took mine, clearing away the discussion. *More haze.*

+ + +

The next night he said he had somewhere he wanted to show me. We drove through the early evening darkness and wound through forested roads. The lush coastline surprised me, as most of my limited impression of California included palm trees and sandy beaches, not open fields and conifers. Eventually we turned off the two-lane highway and crept up a narrow path through thick-trunked trees, pulling to a halt at the top of a cliff. Turning off the headlights, we were surrounded in darkness.

“Whoa.” I laughed at the depth of black around us.

“Give your eyes a second to adjust.”

Tommy opened his door and came around to mine. Holding it open, he extended his hand and helped me step out of the car. I looked up at the night sky, and my breath hitched. Millions of stars dotted the heavens. Under the slightly cool evening air, the image looked magical. Tommy had rounded the car for the trunk and returned with a blanket. Spreading it before us, he guided me to sit between his legs.

We'd had a nice day. Late breakfast. Wine tasting. Lounging in the room. The time had passed, lazy and pleasant.

"I love you," he whispered at my ear and something in his voice made me turn.

"I love you," I said back, keeping my voice quiet as if I'd disturb the peacefulness around us.

He swallowed at the words and kissed me too briefly.

"You've lived in Chicago your whole life, right?" I nodded, but he continued. "Ever consider moving?"

I pulled back, startled by the question. "All the time." I laughed. "It's cold there in the winter."

His eyes glinted despite the darkness, but something serious lingered in them.

"It is cold there, but I'm being serious. Ever think you'd move someplace else?"

"I guess I hadn't given it much thought." I shrugged.

Any Midwesterner considers moving when temperatures dip to sub-zero. We joke about it during an April snowstorm, but seriously considering a move, that I hadn't done. Then my brain tapped itself and reminded me not to lie, because I had contemplated moving, for about sixty seconds. I allowed myself the impossible dream that Tommy Carrigan would want to transplant me to California.

"My job is in Chicago," I blurted as if he could read those wayward thoughts. "Caleb is in Iowa, which is near enough, and Masie still has to graduate high school. I keep hoping she'll stay close to home for college." I did hope she'd be close, but she'd been leaning toward the schools on the West Coast. Her graduation was another reminder I'd be even more alone sooner rather than later.

"You mentioned that," he said, massaging at the nape of my neck. "You know, essentially, you'll be an empty nester."

The thought made me feel old, and a little no-longer-needed, as if my purpose as a mother had ended. I nodded reflectively, remaining silent under the eerie quiet of the dark night.

“Does that make you sad, darlin’? You’re very quiet.”

I exhaled before I spoke, preparing to share more honesty with him. “I hadn’t ever considered I’d spend the middle years of my life alone. David said it would be the time we’d travel, see the world, and have adventures. He’d tease the kids that we’d be happy to see them leave us, so we could do what we wanted with our lives. But the truth was, we never had adventures planned. We didn’t have grand ambitions. I didn’t know where his comments stemmed from.” I paused, uncomfortable that I mentioned my ex so casually. “I never foresaw travel in my future. Hawaii was a once-in-a-lifetime trip.”

Tommy kissed my neck, and his smile lingered. “Yes, it was, darlin’.” He nipped my neck again. “But you aren’t alone.” The words caressed my skin, and I shivered.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me tighter against his chest. We both looked up at the stars, wanting, wishing.

He sighed, as if releasing tension. “California *is* a lovely place.”

I smiled to myself. “Yes, it is.”

“Want to move here?”

I tried to spin to face him, but he held me fast, my back still pressed against his chest. He didn’t allow me to look him in the eye to gauge the seriousness of his question.

I twisted to look at him over my shoulder. “Why?”

He chuckled, his head shaking in the dark. “Always a question with a question.”

I wanted to point out he sometimes avoided answers with *that* answer. His arms squeezed me, and his mouth lowered. Another too-brief kiss covered my neck.

“You’re igniting dreams I didn’t know could exist for me, Edie Williams.”

I lightly laughed. “You’re quite the fantasy as well, Mr. Carrigan.”

He purred at my ear. “Speaking of fantasy ...” His voice drifted as he shuffled behind me and stood. Reaching down for my hand, he tugged me upward as he bent to retrieve the blanket. He threw the blanket over the hood of his car and then spun me until I backed into the front bumper.

“Wha—” The word wasn’t completed before his mouth covered mine in that signature, capturing kiss. He gently pressed against my body, molding me to his as I lowered to the hood. Releasing my lips, he pulled back slightly as his hand traveled to the waist of my jeans.

“I want to make all your fantasies come true, darlin’,” he whispered, his voice not as playful as it typically was, but a combination of earnest and urgent. His fingers struggled with my jeans. The button. The zipper.

“What are you doing?” I chuckled as flutters tickled my belly.

“Fulfilling my own fantasy first, beautiful.” His lips met mine, momentarily distracting me. Abruptly, he pulled back, working my jeans and underwear down to allow cool air to hit my thighs and a scratchy car blanket to tickle my backside. Fingers filled me, and I arched at the welcome intrusion. “Fuck, darlin’, this isn’t going to be enough.”

Releasing me quickly, leaving me empty, he wrestled my jeans to my ankles and then hastily undid his own pants.

“Taking me on the hood of this car?” I muttered, my hazy memory recalling the flirtatious tease I threw out there when I first saw this beautiful convertible.

“Oh, I plan to, darlin’. On this car. In this car.” There was no time to clarify the specifics as he leaned forward and thrust into me. I moaned as I slid a little with the force, the blanket

slipping beneath me on the smooth hood. “I plan to take you places you’ve never been.”

His mouth crushed mine, so I couldn’t tell him he’d already done that. He’d already taken me so many places I never dreamed I’d go, done so many things I only imagined doing. He’d been the adventure I never knew I’d have. Hawaii was a once in a lifetime experience, and so was Tommy Carrigan.

15

Extra Surprised

By March, the winter weather was getting to me. I hadn't seen Tommy in nearly a month. He traveled to Chicago a second time at the end of February, but the physical distance and longevity of time between visits continued to wear on me. He said I wasn't alone, but I felt more alone knowing he was out there, and I was over here. We chatted often like teenagers. Some nights we sexually played. Other nights we talked about life, but the separation was draining on me. I was too old to consider that this was the full extent of our relationship. He lived in a whole different world in California, one that revolved around social activity, and the frenzy only increased the closer the boys got to their summer tour.

Ivy had been upset to learn I'd been in California.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she whined.

"It was a spur of the moment surprise. Besides, we didn't even stay near L.A. We went to Napa." I tried to sound cheerful about the weekend getaway, making it appear as if Napa was too far away to be so close to her. I was still disappointed and a little discouraged that I hadn't seen his home.

"Why didn't he bring you here?"

I sighed in response. I still hadn't gotten an official answer to that question, and my overactive imagination told me he held more secrets.

"I don't really know," I said, my voice lowering.

He said it was because he'd keep me there, but I choked on another thought. Maybe he didn't want me to see his world. I didn't fit with him. It was something I thought of often, and

yet each time he called me, the negative thoughts erased. Nevertheless, I tried not to imagine a future with him, because I couldn't envision us together. I swallowed hard at the thought. We'd never discussed how to end this ... if things didn't work out. We'd never had that conversation I'd read about where lovers agree when it's no longer working for one person, they would let the other person go. I'd be crushed if he simply walked away.

"Well, it sounds romantic," Ivy said, her voice quiet, encouraging, as if she could read my thoughts. "He's been working so hard with the band lately. He must have wanted a weekend away, keeping you all to himself."

"Probably." My voice trembled. I wasn't convincing her any more than myself. I nodded like she could see me and quickly swiped at a tear trickling down my cheek.

Thankfully, the conversation shifted to the music therapy school and her progression with the lawyer.

"I would love to show you. Do you think Tommy will bring you out here again soon?"

"I don't really know, honey. I don't know when I'll see him next. We don't really plan things. Besides, I have a trip to Arizona during the last week of March." The words sounded pathetic. Again, I mentally questioned where we were headed. Were we just long-distance lovers? What kind of relationship was that?

I had a strong suspicion I had a better-located, more-attentive, possibility in my boss, if I wished to date locally. However, Max's attention had cooled after I cancelled the Nights concert. He still flirted on occasion and complimented me more than he had in the past. Or maybe I hadn't noticed, too absorbed in healing myself after the cancer treatments. Or maybe sex revived me, and the experience glowed off my skin, announcing I was ready to share myself with another person in a physical manner. I laughed. The only person I wanted to share anything with was Tommy Carrigan.

+ + +

Masie's spring break coincided with spring training games for Caleb. David not only offered miles and points for airfare, but he'd had slightly renewed interest in communicating with me because of our trip. I wasn't naïve enough to not be suspicious. My inner knowledge of him told me to hold on—the other shoe would drop eventually. However, he sounded sincere at times, and I wondered if he felt the same as me. Our children were outgrowing us.

“It's the last time we can really be together as a family,” he'd said, hinting at Masie's impending high school graduation.

I wanted to scream that the last time we'd been a family was over three years ago, and officially longer than that, but an eerie sensation prevented me from arguing. David teetered on the brink of being an absentee dad, and I feared that Masie's graduation would sever ties with his daughter. He didn't know how to communicate with his children, unless they were doing something he wanted them to do. Caleb had a connection with his father because of baseball. Masie, not so much.

I was worn down by work, the weather, and the wayward thoughts of Tommy when we finally left for Arizona. I needed the long weekend respite Max allowed me to take and looked forward to the time with my children. The sunshine alone would do me good, I decided, and I went into the trip full of hope for rest and relaxation.

“You look different,” David said, eyeing me as we stood in the hotel lobby. I didn't see my ex-husband often. He'd been one of those men on the edge of model good-looking. Angular cheeks. Sparkling eyes. A dimple in his cheek that melted panties. It stung me that he was aging well—fine lines by his brown eyes, a little salt mixing in his once dark hair.

But his swollen jowls told me he still indulged in too much alcohol.

We hadn't flown together, but we coordinated enough to meet at the airport and ride to the hotel in one Uber. His eyes continued to skim over my body, taking in the skinny jeans and fitted T-shirt I'd worn, and the flip-flops at my feet.

"You look good." He spoke as if the comment surprised him, and I hated him a little more. There were so many times I'd look at him and try to remember I once loved him. Then he'd say something that would remind me why I no longer did.

We were called forward to check-in, and I beamed heat into the back of his head, noticing slight balding that strangely pleased me. He'd traded me in for a younger model on a whim that ended before we divorced. I'd never recovered from the betrayal. His freedom meant he partied harder than previously. My head shook, willing away thoughts I didn't want to envision because I no longer cared.

"Where's my room?" I snapped as we stood by the registration desk, and I watched the desk clerk slide one envelope to David.

"I only had enough points to book one room." If David had hit me over the head with a baseball bat, I'd be less surprised.

"You what?"

"Do you know how expensive it is here at this time of year? Not to mention how full most of these places are because of the Spring training games?" He tapped the key cards on the counter and took the pen from the pretty young thing working the desk. After signing a receipt, he slid a card to me.

"I can't believe this," I muttered, turning for my bag. Masie stood a few feet back from us, typing on her phone. The sight reminded me to text Tommy. He wanted to know we arrived safely and checked in. He wasn't pleased about my

traveling with my ex-husband, but he understood the concept of family, no matter how loosely ours was linked.

Made it here. I sent.

What room you in?

Without considering the question, I replied: **323**.

The elevator dinged, and we each entered, pulling our suitcases behind us. I lost connection for a second in the lift and slipped my phone back in my bag. Entering the room, I silently seethed as I noticed the two queen-sized beds and rather tight space. Clearly, Masie and I would be sharing a bed, but the thought of being in the same room with David made me uneasy. I sat with a huff on the edge of one bed. Had I known this was the arrangement, I would have booked a room myself.

Hardly a minute passed before a knock sounded on the door. David looked around at our bags, taking stock that we brought up our own luggage. Shrugging, he walked for the entrance and opened it.

“Who the fuck are you?” The slight accent and gruff tone, sharp on the *k* sound could only be one man. I stood and turned toward the door.

“Tommy?” A smile broke on my face at the welcome surprise; however, my expression quickly shifted when I saw the look in his eyes. Cold black steel.

“What the fuck is this?”

“This is my room,” David interjected. “And you clearly have the wrong one.”

“Where’s your room, darlin’?” Tommy asked, ignoring David, and attempting to pass him into the small space. David’s hand came up and pressed toward Tommy.

“What do you think you’re doing?” The calmness to his defensive tone almost made me laugh.

The comparison between the two men was night and day. Lion and mouse. Sunshine and snow. Tommy was black T-shirt and dark jeans—broad, powerful, confident. David, on the other hand, was thick from alcohol, demeaning in tone, but weak in presence with his golf shirt and khaki pants.

“I’m getting my girl,” Tommy announced, brushing past David and strutting to me. His hands cupped my face, and while I anticipated a kiss, none came. His cold eyes searched mine, thick thumbs stroking over my cheeks.

“What’s going on here?” David barked behind Tommy. Something shifted in Tommy’s eyes, the darkness lightening to confusion.

“I don’t have a room. I didn’t know he only booked us one.” A hand slipped from my face. The other stilled. His eyes shifted to coal again.

“For the two of you?”

“For the three of us.” I waved a hand toward Masie, who stood between the beds, watching this awkward interchange between her mother, her father, and her mother’s lover. Tommy turned toward her.

“Hey Tommy,” she said, waving weakly.

“Hey girlie.” A smile returned to his tone as he addressed my daughter. He turned back to face me. “I have a surprise for both of you.” His hand released my face and reached for my hand. His other hand reached out for my luggage. “Masie, honey. Grab your bag.”

“Wait a minute,” David demanded, standing before the open door, his back to it. hands propped on his hips. He looked like a retired superhero but overworked and underwhelming. “Just *who* are you?”

“I’m Tommy Carrigan,” he stated proudly, looking back at me. “Her boyfriend.” My mouth fell open at the announcement. It was the first declaration of any label between us, and I stared at the side of Tommy’s face as he addressed my ex-husband, who muttered a strangled, “What?”

I anxiously laughed, tightening my hold on Tommy's hand, so I wouldn't break into hysteria at the awkwardness of this introduction.

"And where do you think you are taking her?" David inquired louder, and I laughed outright at the inquisition. He sounded fatherly, but he wasn't. Not to mention, it was none of his damn business.

"She's coming to my room. I have space for Masie, too."

"My daughter is not sleeping with a stranger."

"Good thing I'm not a stranger." Tommy glanced at me after this remark. "Why am I gettin' the feeling he's never heard of me, Edie?" The use of my name was not a good sign, but his fingers squeezed mine.

"I don't really talk to David," I offered, ignoring the glare of my ex-husband. The truth was I didn't, and because of that, I didn't feel the need to explain my *boyfriend* to my ex-husband. Tommy's lip twisted, and I sensed this conversation wasn't finished, but he let it rest for the moment.

He turned to Masie. "I have a suite with separate rooms, so I hope you'll feel comfortable in that space."

Masie reached for her suitcase, and Tommy had his answer. For a moment, my heart pinched for David. His fists fell from his hips at the betrayal. Even his daughter didn't want to stay in a room with him. I worried for a moment the rejection would send him to alcohol for solace, but I couldn't let myself be concerned. I closed my eyes, reminding myself that David had made his choices, and they didn't include his family. I could not take responsibility for his decision to drink. I'd already born that burden, and I had learned to let it go.

"Let's meet in the lobby at seven for dinner, okay, Dad?" Masie offered as way of a peace offering.

David nodded and stepped back. Tommy passed first, holding onto my hand as if I'd slip away from him. As I passed David, he reached for my arm, and I stopped.

“Are you sure about this?” David’s eyes shifted to Tommy, assessing him.

If I could read his thoughts, I imagined he asked what a woman like me saw in a man like him. Silvered hair, longish to his collar. A ring on his forefinger and those bracelets on his wrist. Tattoos lacing up his arm.

Looking from Tommy to David, I answered: “I’ve never been more certain in my life.”

+ + +

The anger coming off Tommy filled the elevator, and Masie remained quiet as well. Marching down the hotel hallway, single file, I felt like a woman walking to a death sentence, the tension between us heavier than a chain gang rope. On the inside, I trembled with the notion that I’d stood up to David. While I’d done it in the past, the way in which I confidently walked away from him, holding onto Tommy, surprised even me. Previous attempts at defending myself seemed like small victories compared to the battle I’d just won.

Tommy opened the door of the suite and stepped aside, allowing me to enter first. A man rose from the couch facing the windows and turned toward us. Long bangs, black hair and bright blue eyes stared at me with a hesitant smile.

“West?!” Masie’s shriek startled me, but I quickly stepped to the side. West remained behind the couch, rubbing his hands anxiously up and down his thighs.

“Hey,” he said, the greeting strangled. Masie looked at me, and then she raced around the couch, nearly catapulting toward West, who laughed as he caught her. The two stood in an embrace, swaying back and forth for a moment before Masie broke the hold. A hand pressed into my back.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Tommy murmured. “He wanted to see her.”

“What are you doing here?” Masie’s voice rose with her excitement as she stared at West.

“Tommy said he was coming to surprise Edie, and I asked if I could tag along. We’ve been so busy, but Tommy told Gage to give me a few days off. Plus, I wanted to see Caleb play,” West replied, reaching out to stroke a long lock of Masie’s hair.

“Oh my God, Caleb,” I said, covering my mouth and turning toward Tommy. “I need to call him.” I fumbled for my phone, struggling through the mess in my bag and retrieving it from the bottom of the abyss. It was then that I saw Tommy’s response to my room number.

Surprise.

My brow pinched. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I wanted to surprise you,” he said. “But I guess I’m the one surprised.”

“I can explain,” I offered, hating the taste of those words in my mouth.

After a deep exhale, and dragging a hand down his face, Tommy replied, “I was hoping so, but first, the suite has two bedrooms. I was thinking West would have one and I’d have the other, but I’ll understand if you and Masie want to share.”

Tommy looked sheepishly at Masie and back at me. “I don’t think the hotel has other rooms available, but I can look into it,” he added.

“Masie can have my room, and I can take the couch,” West sweetly offered.

“This is all my fault,” I muttered, a moment after realizing West implied I’d be sleeping with Tommy in the other room. I couldn’t do that in front of my daughter.

“Because you didn’t tell me you were staying with your ex-husband?”

“Because I didn’t *know* I was staying with my ex-husband. I knew better than to trust David to handle everything.” I swiped a hand over my longer hair. I’d had it cut again into a stylish swipe, longer at the bangs but still trimmed up the back. Tommy’s eyes roamed over my hair.

“I like it, darlin’,” he said. “You look beautiful.” Without thinking, I stepped toward him, reached for that scruffy jaw I adored and tugged at his face to draw him to me. It was my turn to capture his lips and kiss him like I’d never let him go.

“I’ve missed you,” he said after I released him.

Masie jokingly groaned in the background. “Eww, minor here.”

“I love you,” I mouthed to his handsome face. The curl at the corner of his mouth told me I was forgiven, for the moment.

16

Declarations of Commitment

We passed on dinner with David and Masie, for obvious reasons, and West went in my place. While I initially thought we would go out to dinner, Tommy opted to stay in and ordered room service. When it arrived, I set my phone on the table, but it vibrated against the surface.

I can't believe you are allowing this.

The text from David didn't surprise me. Most issues, according to him, were my fault. However, he meant the sleeping arrangement, and guilt ate at my stomach that Masie had to fight my battle with her father.

Tommy set the serving plates on the small dining table and poured me some wine. Looking over at me, he asked, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just David."

Thick hands set the bottle down and reached for the phone in my hand. He glanced at the text and then tossed my phone toward the couch.

"Talk to me, not him," he demanded.

Instantly, I sensed we were headed for a heavy discussion, and I took my seat. Taking a hearty sip of wine,

I glared over the rim of the glass to find Tommy watching me. "I'm biting my tongue, darlin', but it's starting to ache."

"I know," I said, lowering my head, staring at my plate. "But I wish you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what? Bite my tongue? I'd like to bite yours, but only once I have answers," he teased without humor.

“What do you want to know?”

“Why doesn’t he know about me?”

“I told you, I don’t talk to David. We don’t share these things.”

“Like that you have a boyfriend?”

“I definitely do not discuss dating with my ex-husband,” I sniped, my voice harsh, and my heart rate rising. “Besides, I didn’t know you considered yourself my boyfriend until you told him.”

Tommy slid his chair sideways, angling his body toward me.

“I told you I love you. What did you think that meant?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged my shoulders and flipped a fork from side to side for something to do.

A thick hand covered mine, enveloping it, and then tugging me towards him. He patted his thigh, and I stumbled onto his lap.

“Darlin’, those three words are not a rash statement to get in your pants. If I say them, I mean them, and that means I’m committed to you. Do you understand me? I’m not saying them casually, not saying them to get you in my bed, which I miss, by the way. I’m saying them because I feel them.” He took my hand and pulled it up to his chest, pressing it against his firm pec. His heart thumped steadily under my touch. “Do you not feel the same, beautiful?” Sadness coated his words as his voice lowered along with our collective hands.

“I do feel the same, it’s just ...” Liquid filled my eyes and the emotion of the altercation with David caught up to me.

“Just what?” His voice hardened. Fear mixed with irritation.

“I don’t like our separation. I don’t want to sound needy, but I just want someone more present. I know we talk all the time. And I love the attention you give me. But I just thought

... I thought if I ever dated again, it would be with someone within the same state as me.” I sighed, feeling like I’d said too much but relieved a little to let the weight off my shoulders.

“Why haven’t you said something before?” he asked, shifting me on his thigh and I decided my weight was too much for him. I scooted off his lap and sat facing him again, placing my hands on his knees.

“I didn’t want to lose you. I still don’t. But this is hard for me. You’re so busy, with a crazy schedule and night life, and I don’t know what you’re doing—”

“I tell you what I’m doing,” he snapped, startling me with the curt sound of his voice.

“I know, but what I mean is ... aren’t you lonely without me?” My voice broke on the question, anxiety rushing through me that perhaps he wasn’t lonely because he filled the absence with others. A traitorous tear dripped off my nose.

“Edie.” He exhaled. “I’m used to being alone. I can’t say I like it, but I can handle it because I’ve been alone for so long. I’m not attached.” At the words, I pulled back my hands.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, reaching out for me, catching my fingers before I sat back. “I mean, I *wasn’t* attached to anyone, so I would come and go without concentrating on the loneliness. My life centered around the band. But having you in my life has changed all that. I’m shifting, darlin’. I miss you like a piece of me is missing each time we say good-bye or hang up the phone or go too many hours without speaking. It’s a strange feeling, Edie, but one I don’t want to give up, even if it’s all I get.”

Another tear fell, uninhibited this time.

“I wish we were closer, darlin’. I do. But for now, it has to be as it is.”

I nodded.

He was right. I knew he was right, but it didn’t make it any easier to accept. He’d joked about me moving to

California. The sunshine. The mild temperature. Him. But I never took the teasing as a genuine offer. “I wish you’d told me how you felt. You don’t have to hold back with me.”

I snorted unattractively.

“What is that?” Tommy demanded.

“Tommy, why are you even with me? You could have anyone. Someone more like Deanna Kaye.”

He released my hands and sat back, staring at me a moment.

“Darlin’, do you think I didn’t notice how your ex sized me up? I don’t give two shits about him, but that doesn’t mean I can’t read his thoughts. He doesn’t think I’m good enough for you. Do you know how that makes me feel? How I know he’s right in a million ways? My world is upside-down and backward most days, with shit I’d never want your innocent heart to see or bear. I question why you’re with me just as much. The only thing I’m confident of is it’s not because I’m a former rock star or affiliated with Collision. You’ve already proven that to me with your atrocious musical knowledge.” His eyes sparkled, and his face relaxed. “So, what do I have to do to prove to you that I want only you? That I’m sitting in Arizona, fighting with you over your worth, because you are worth everything to me?”

More tears fell and I swiped at my cheeks. I didn’t know how to respond. It wasn’t like I had a checklist. I just had trouble accepting what we were doing. But I realized I was wasting precious time by having this conversation when we *were* together. I reached for his hand and tugged him toward me. He leaned forward, his eyes aiming for my lips, but as he got close, I stood.

“Darlin’?”

I gently yanked at his hand and stepped forward, guiding him to follow me. A few more steps, and I was suddenly scooped up into his arms. Kicking my legs and laughing as my

arms wrapped around his neck, we were almost to his room when the main door of the suite opened.

“Get a room,” West teased, Masie bumping into his back.

“I have one,” Tommy hollered, but something in my face must have told him I couldn’t do this with Masie present. I couldn’t let him take me to his room with my daughter watching us.

“Put me down, please,” I whispered.

He stopped and set me on my feet.

“Maybe you’re embarrassed of me after all, darlin’,” he muttered as he spun away from me and returned to the table. Sitting down, he dug into a cold dinner while I’d completely lost my appetite.

+ + +

West and Masie left shortly after their return as West said he knew somewhere he could take Masie that didn’t require her to be carded. As soon as they left, I was on Tommy. The door closed and I crossed the suite to straddle him, gripping his face, nails dragging through his salt-and-pepper scruff.

“Don’t ever say that again,” I growled, trying to tease down my serious tone. “I am not embarrassed by you, and I don’t know why you would even say that. But I need you to respect that I’m not a groupie, and I’m not like the boys in the band. I can’t run off in front of a group, knowing that *they* know I’m about to have sex with you. And I especially can’t do it in front of my daughter.”

His hands curled around my wrists, and he tugged out of my grip.

“I’m sorry, darlin’. I shouldn’t have said that. I was ... frustrated.” His mouth came to mine too briefly, and as he pulled back, I cupped his cheeks again.

“Well, time to *un-frustrate*.” My mouth came to his and demanded he open for me, swiping across the seam of his lips and begging his tongue to play with mine. He kissed me back, opening for me as he gripped my hips and pulled me fully onto his lap. His hunger built and mine matched. I was starving for him.

Standing, I held out my hand, leading him once again toward the bedroom. Within seconds, he was before me, tugging me along, slamming the door, and flipping the lock.

“I’m not taking chances this time.” He dragged my shirt my shirt was over my head, and my fingers worked his belt buckle and zipper. We crossed the room disrobing one another until my knees hit the bed, and he pushed me backward. I scooted up the mattress, and he followed like a predator after prey. When my head hit the pillows, I stopped, and he lowered over me. His mouth found mine as he positioned himself at my entrance, but I pressed his shoulders, hinting that I wanted him to roll to his back. He flipped us, and my legs spread, straddling over him. I sat back and held him upright, stroking him.

“Darlin’, if you don’t get me inside you, I’m gonna explode all over your hand.” Laughing, I pressed up on my knees, balanced on his tip, and then slammed down to envelop him. We groaned in unison as my hands came to his abs. Slowly, I rolled over him, developing a rhythm that held him deep within me. His hand slipped between us, and his thumb caught me, pressing in a circular motion. Something came over me, and my hips rocked faster, my channel clenched harder, and my eyes closed with the sensation of losing control. Tension rolled off me, and a new tension built. His name became a litany of short puffs of air mixed with the struggle to cry his name.

My toes curled, and my thighs clamped at his hips. I held still and threw back my head. The release was sweet and spiraling, and I was still coming when he sat forward and flipped me to my back. Braced on his hands, he hammered into me, thrusting and delving, wild and reckless like we

hadn't been before. "Faster" and "harder" crossed my lips in a whisper. "Fuck, darlin'," crossed his. The bed squeaked with the rapid motion, and the headboard banged on the wall. He stilled, and the pulse of his release inside me set me off again. My hands gripped the globes of his ass, forcing him to remain inside me. Moments later, he collapsed on top of me.

"Sweet Jesus, that came from my toes," he muttered into my neck. I chuckled, as I understood the feeling. "I don't like to fight with you, darlin', but if that's how we make up, I'll fight you every day for the rest of our lives."

"How about if we don't fight and just make love like that the rest of our lives?" A moment passed as the words lingered, the reality of their meaning settling around us like pillow feathers floating to the bed. Tommy's head popped up and he stared down at me.

"I'd make love to you the rest of our lives, if you'd let me," he whispered.

"I'd let you," I answered in a quiet voice. I'd let him do anything if he kept looking at me the way he was in that moment—like the rest of our lives was everything he wanted.

+ + +

The next day we went to Caleb's game. Tommy and West had obtained tickets, and I could only imagine what favors were pulled to get entrance to the sold-out stadium. We sat mid-section along the first base line, as Caleb was a first baseman. He waved when he saw us and signaled for Tommy and West to approach the dugout. A manly handshake and a slap on the back from Tommy, and the same for West, showed how much of a bond my son had made with these men in such a short time. After Caleb played at the New Year's Eve concert, his love of music was renewed, and I noticed he took his guitar with him to training even though it had sat untouched in his bedroom during college. A dream died when he no longer

played those strings. He hid his passion from his not-so-understanding father, eventually dismissing it altogether to concentrate on sports in high school.

David spotted Masie and me and made his way to our seats. He nodded at me, his eyes drifting away as he sat next to Masie. She was typing on her phone, disinterested in the stats her father read off to her about the players. Tommy and West made their way back to our row, pausing at the end of the aisle for David to stand as customary at a ball game when people have seats in the same row. David eyed the baseball jersey of Caleb's team that Tommy wore open, exposing his white T-shirt. West wore a matching one, buttoned but hanging loosely outside his jeans. A backward baseball cap covered his dark hair. David turned to me.

“What is this?”

“Dad, you met West at dinner, and you already met Tommy,” Masie said as way of intervention. David sat back and twisted his legs to the side, hardly allowing room for West and Tommy to enter the row of narrow stadium seats. Masie and I stood, and I stepped over one seat so West could sit between Masie and me. I remained standing, allowing Tommy to step around me, but he stopped in front of me. Our bodies pressed together in the tight confines. His hand came up so quickly, I hardly registered his intention until his mouth took mine. The kiss deepened, and I melted into him before I remembered where we stood. A flash snapped to my left. Tommy released me, but kept his eyes trained on my lips.

“I think someone just took your picture.”

“I hadn't noticed.” His lips curled, and he bit the corner. My smile slowly matched his.

“You're a bad man, Tommy Carrigan,” I teased.

“That's why you love me.” He winked as he finished passing me and folded into his seat. He slung his arm behind me, resting on my stadium seat, and toying with my shoulder while the team finished their warm-up. David's eyes bored

into the side of my head, but I refused to look at him. He'd once found me undesirable, but a very desirable man just proved something it took me a long time to accept—David was wrong. My hand came to Tommy's thigh, and he looked down at it resting on his leg.

“Making a statement, darlin’?” he teased.

I rolled my head to face him, my smile growing. “Weren't you?”

“Abso-*fucking*-lutely, beautiful.” He chuckled, and I shook my head as I laughed as well.

+ + +

Someone had taken our picture, and a few days later, the picture of Tommy kissing a mystery woman was all over the internet. Speculation was that I was a one-night stand in Arizona where Lawson Colt was on family business. To my surprise and relief, Masie was completely blocked from the position of Tommy in the photo. Weston Reid, bass guitarist for Collision, and my high school daughter were of no interest.

“Don't let it get to you,” Tommy commented through Skype after we all returned to our respective homes.

“I'm more worried about you. What will happen when they discover I'm in manufacturing, not modeling?” I was mostly blocked as well by Tommy's hand cupping my face. There would only be a handful of people who could recognize me, and they'd have to be stalking Tommy like I did to see the photo in the first place. I laughed at my joke, but Tommy's face drew near the computer screen.

“You're fucking beautiful, and every man within a fifty-mile radius wants in your jeans. And if you were a model, men would want you for your fame and not your personality, which is off the charts gorgeous.”

I stared at him, blinking rapidly. “You say the damndest things sometimes, you know that? I’m just speechless.”

“Well, get used to it. Besides, I have better use for those pretty lips than talking.”

He *was* a bad boy.

“So when can we see each other next?” We hadn’t had much alone time in the shared quarters with Masie and West. West eventually did take the couch, and Masie and I bunked together, only I found my daughter curled over a sleeping West in the early morning. Innocently dressed, they were wrapped around each other, and my heart pinched at the youthfulness of love.

“April 22,” Tommy said at the same time I said, “April 15.”

“Can’t do the fifteenth, darlin’. I have a meeting in New York.”

“I have to bring Masie to California for a campus tour at Santa Clara University.”

“I thought she selected Marquette,” Tommy replied, knowing I’d hoped she’d decide on a school in the Midwest. Marquette had been one of her choices, but Santa Clara University offered her scholarship money we hadn’t expected. David promised our daughter he’d cover the remaining tuition if that scholarship came through. I couldn’t turn down the opportunity for her, even if I was anxious that David wouldn’t hold up his end of the deal. I’d never be able to afford the school on my salary.

“She did, but I told her we could look at Santa Clara. I’m hoping she hates it,” I teased.

Tommy scoffed. “Darlin’, one look at California and she’s going to love it here.” I bit my cheek, tempted to tell him I wouldn’t know. He’d been to see me twice, and the one time I went there, he whisked me off to Napa Valley, which was beautiful, but not the portion of California I wanted to know better.

“You know that’s only like five hours away from me. So, you’re coming all the way here, and I won’t be here.” A hand wiped over his face. “Can’t you reschedule?”

“She has a day off from school, so timing-wise it worked best. Plus, she has to decide by May first. What about you? Can’t you reschedule?”

“Can’t, babe. We’ve been waiting for this meeting for months. It finalizes the tour.”

The tour kicked off in June, and I sensed the stress each time Tommy mentioned the details. Forty-three days on the road. I couldn’t imagine.

“Well, another weekend.” I sighed, pasting on a false smile with my fake cheeriness. After the April date, Masie had prom, graduation, and a slew of parties and activities commemorating the end of high school. I didn’t have a free weekend until June, when the tour started.

“I’ll get to see Ivy this time,” I added. Excitement filled me at the prospect of seeing my young friend and learning more about her secret project, which she still hadn’t announced to her husband. She’d known I was coming to visit before I told Tommy, assuring me that I’d at least see her house as she offered a place for Masie and me to stay. Tommy’s brow pinched at the mention of Ivy, and the feeling that something was being kept from me crept through me again.

Secret Therapy

“Isn’t it beautiful?” The rundown building before me wasn’t exactly something I’d consider architecturally stunning, but the old church had potential. Ivy stared at me as if desperate for my approval, and I didn’t want to disappoint her.

“It’s got possibilities,” I murmured, my hands tucked in my jacket pockets as I surveyed the building once again. I wasn’t convinced this was the safest of areas, but my knowledge of Los Angeles was limited to my first official visit. Masie and I flew into San Jose on Thursday evening, took her campus tour on Friday morning, and then flew to LAX in the afternoon. My heart dropped, knowing Tommy was probably somewhere in that airport taking off at the same time we landed. Ivy picked us up, refusing to allow us to stay anywhere but at her modest home along Malibu Beach. Modest must have been said tongue-in-cheek. The home was gorgeous, set along the coast with an endless view of the ocean. White sand was her backyard, and the glass exposure hid nothing. It was breathtaking.

Tommy had offered his house, but I refused on principle. I didn’t wish to intrude without a proper introduction to his home from him.

“I know, right?” Ivy squeaked. Her excitement was hardly concealed as she tugged at my arm to follow her. A realtor had already sold her the location, and lawyers were involved in the details of her future music therapy school. “It’s perfect.” The sigh in her voice was nothing other than pure love for this facility and a dream coming to fruition.

“And how is Gage taking all this?” I asked.

A dismissive wave gave me my answer. As my pregnant friend led the way to the front entrance, fear grew inside me that her husband wasn't going to share her enthusiasm, especially after he found out she'd hidden all the details from him.

Pulling me into the church, construction plans were pinned to a wall, sketching out the division of the massive space into therapy rooms for both small and large groups.

"It has the perfect acoustics, but also all these niches for intimate study." Her face beamed with the thrill of helping others in a way someone raised in music might enjoy—by sharing the gift. With hands clasped reverently beneath her chin, she walked slowly through the open forum, eyes wide as if she could already envision the layout. I sighed behind her, my shoulders falling, but not in defeat.

"Your mother would have been so proud."

Ivy spun to face me. "Do you think so?" Her voice was small, child-like even, as she awaited my answer.

"Without knowing her, I'd say she'd be over the moon."

Ivy's face lit up, and her sheepish smile grew. She exhaled in subtle pleasure.

"I bet your uncle would be proud as well."

Ivy's smile faded a touch, and her head hung. "I just can't seem to find the right time to tell him. Any of them. They're so wrapped up in the tour, which is where they should be. In fact ..." Her lips twitched as if she fought the return of a smile. "It's been perfect for me, because they've all been too absorbed to notice I'm busy." A tiny giggle escaped as if she'd gotten away with mischief, which she had.

"Aren't you worried they'll be upset that they didn't get to be a part of this? That they didn't get to help you?" With those questions, Ivy's curled lips flattened.

"Actually, no. They wouldn't be a *part* of anything. Gage would take over, and Tommy would direct, and I'd be lost

again.”

At her sudden outburst, I drew in a deep breath, understanding once again Ivy’s strong desire to do this, to do something on her own, for herself. Being five months pregnant didn’t seem the ideal time, but what did I know?

“I wish there was some way I could help you,” I offered, letting my eyes drift upward to the dust motes tumbling through the sunshine, dancing before the dirty windows.

“Really?”

My head lowered and I peered at my young friend. “Of course. I’d love to help if I could.”

Ivy chewed at her lip for a moment as if considering something. Her mouth popped open and then closed. Her eyes lowered before she spoke.

“Actually, I could use a manager.”

“Good idea, with the baby coming. It sounds like this will be up and running around the time you give birth. I don’t know how you’ll manage both jobs at the same time. Motherhood. Music Therapist.” Knowing that Ava started first grade in the coming fall, Ivy still had Emaline at home, refusing a nanny or daycare. With another baby on the way, opening the school would be a double whammy of full-time responsibility.

“The timing isn’t ideal, no, but again, it’s why I’d need a manager. Someone I trust to run the place and look out for it if I couldn’t be here. Or ... run things while I was here, but if I was indisposed because of the baby.” Ivy and I had one of those strange conversations about breastfeeding children that women seemed inclined to share with complete strangers, as if baring one’s breast to feed a child is some kind of unwritten bond.

Nodding, I agreed with her plan.

“So ...” Her voice drifted as she watched me, my head still rolling in different directions taking in the large, sacred

space.

“So?” I shrugged, returning to look at her.

“Would you consider it?”

The world seemed to stop moving. The flutter of ancient doves flapping in the hollow room rippled through my ears. I couldn't have heard her correctly.

“What?”

“I'd like to offer you the position of manager. I'm certain I can match your salary, as I'm sure that's the biggest issue ...” Her words faltered as I focused on her, unblinking, unbreathing.

“I live in Chicago.”

Ivy nodded to agree with me. “You could move?” she questioned, and she had the decency to glance away in hesitation.

“I—”

“With Masie accepting the scholarship at Santa Clara University, and Caleb now in the minor leagues, traveling all the time, I thought you might be willing, interested, available even to move here. Masie would be close by *and* ...” She paused watching me as the words softened. “Tommy's here, too.”

“Honey,” I sighed. “Please don't use Tommy in this if he has no idea about the school. Not to mention, your uncle has never implied he wanted me to move here, nor has he asked me such a thing other than as a joke. I've never even seen his home.” My voice rose, and my hand slapped at my thigh, highlighting my rising frustration. Here I was, thousands of miles from my house, only a few miles from his, and I had no concept of where he lived.

“With his lifestyle, he's hardly there anyway,” Ivy said, dismissively waving away my concern. “He keeps an apartment in LA.” The words were spoken casually, as if nothing unusual was said in the combination.

“His lifestyle?” I muttered.

Her eyes opened wide. “Oh, Edie, I didn’t mean anything. I just meant he’s so busy, and he’s hardly around. He has a place for when he ...” Her voice drifted once again, as if she’d said too much.

“What’s in LA for him? Or should I ask who?”

Ivy’s brow rose as she stepped towards me, reaching for my forearms. “No, no, it’s not what you think. Tommy’s totally in love with you.”

While we’d said the words, and he was adamant they meant something deep to him, I still couldn’t process the depth of them. He didn’t say I love you in a pretentious way, but he almost said the phrase too easily, too comfortably. As a woman who hardly heard the words in my marriage, I had trouble accepting their full meaning as anything other than something casually said, like *I love pumpkin pie*.

Skeptical of Ivy’s explanation, I let the conversation pass, but something still lingered in how she said what she’d said. What was she leaving out? If it wasn’t what I thought, what was it then? However, I wasn’t here to probe her for Tommy’s secrets. I was here to witness hers.

“Anyway, I appreciate your offer. I’m honored and surprised. I mean, why me?” It was a rhetorical question, but Ivy seemed prepared to answer.

“I told you in Hawaii, I feel like you were sent to me. Like my mother wanted me to meet you, and I can’t shake the feeling. I like you, Edie, and I feel like I can trust you. I obviously do as you’re the only one who knows about this adventure other than my lawyer, the contractor, and now Masie.” Masie heard all about Ivy’s plans after our campus visit. Masie’s excitement for California was fueled by Ivy’s.

“You’re going to love it here,” Ivy promised Masie. “And I’m right here if you need anything.” The encouraging hug that followed told me Masie was sold, even without her vocalizing a decision yet. California bound she’d be come August, and it

made me feel even more like the empty nester Tommy called me.

“I know it’s a lot to consider,” Ivy’s words broke into my thoughts. “But I don’t want you to tell me no yet. Can you think about it? Just let it simmer a bit?” Her hopeful tone pinched at my heart. My eyes closed a beat, and my shoulders sagged. I had trouble saying no, and it led to most of my issues with David.

“I’ll think about it.”

The squeal that followed rang to the heavens and could have raised the steeple off the roof. A fierce hug enveloped me, and it was hard to remember I was only considering the slim possibility.

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Something tickled my neck, and I woke with a start.

Dark, playful eyes peered down at me as mischievous lips curled. “Mornin’ darlin’.”

I blinked in surprise as the weight of his body covered mine, obstructed by the blanket over me. I slept in a guest room at Ivy and Gage’s house, and my head swung to the other side of the bed where Masie was supposed to be.

“She fell asleep on the couch in the media room,” Tommy explained with a smile.

“What are you doing here?” My voice croaked.

“Took a red-eye flight overnight. I just couldn’t stand the thought that you were here, while I was there. I had to get to you.”

My lips curled, my insides warming at his sweet words.

“I like seeing you first thing in the morning,” I whispered, swallowing after the words escaped. Each time I

saw him, I was reminded of how much I missed him.

“We need to rectify that,” he muttered, drawing close to my lips, but only brushing his lightly over mine. “I might keep you out here.” He was teasing me, but I had to admit my heart raced with the possibility.

With Ivy’s offer still playing over in my mind, I hated that Tommy was a huge reason I was holding back. I didn’t want to appear as if I was chasing him. For once in my life, I wanted to be the one chased. The possibility of him giving up his lifestyle for Chicago and me was out of the question, though. There was that word again—*lifestyle*. What was he hiding from me? Was he a player and I’d been played? It was hard to believe that was the reason I hadn’t been to his home as he overpowered me with kisses after taking the red-eye flight back to California to see me. His hand slipped under the blanket, outlining the curves of my body, skimming downward for covered treasure, and all questions about moving disappeared.

An hour later, I met Tommy in the kitchen. The open concept was massive yet welcoming, with light colors of white and gray. It was the perfect beach set-up, with a view of the bright day and the roaring ocean. Masie sat on a stool between Ivy’s girls while Ivy stood on the other side of the island cooking breakfast. Gage watched his wife over the edge of his coffee mug. He was an intense man, but I also sensed he’d never purposely harm Ivy. He smothered her, but he loved her.

“Mommy says you’re going to school here,” Ava said to Masie. The comment brought my attention to my daughter. I didn’t know she’d finalized her decision, and if she had, I was a bit disappointed she told Ivy before telling me.

“Well, I’m still thinking about it,” Masie answered, sheepishly eyeing me.

“You’ll be here,” Gage interjected, a telling tease in his tone.

“So, I heard you’re getting a new school,” Masie said, deflecting the question away from her. Her excited voice filled the kitchen, suddenly quiet beyond the perk of the coffee pot and the sizzle of bacon. All other sound seemed to dissipate, including my breathing. I froze in mid-reach for my glass of orange juice and noticed the slightest pause in Ivy’s motion to flip a pancake.

“I’m going to be in first grade,” Ava announced, and my shoulders relaxed at the innocent response saving us all from a sudden awkward revelation.

“First grade? No way! I thought you were already in sixth grade,” Masie teased.

“I’m going to school, too,” Emaline replied, her head nodding adamantly to emphasize her participation in something similar to her older sister. “I’ll be going with Mommy.”

This time the quiet weighed heavy, the echo of silence after Emaline’s announcement ringing longer as Gage slowly lowered his coffee mug. Ivy set the spatula on the counter, and I stepped to Ivy’s side.

“What’s going on, darlin’?” Tommy asked, noting my sudden proximity to Ivy.

“Nothing,” Ivy and I said in unison.

“Mommy’s getting a school,” Emaline offered, her attention still focused on the pancake before her.

“Oh, God,” Ivy muttered as I whispered under my breath, “Shit.”

“Babe?” Gage questioned stepping towards his wife, and her eyes closed, knowing this was the opportunity she’d been searching for, albeit inopportune. Unfortunately, there was never going to be a right moment. It was time.

“I have something to tell you,” Ivy said, her voice lowering. Tommy’s eyes met mine, but I quickly avoided his

questioning glance and set my hand on Ivy's back. Gage noticed the movement and reached for his wife's shoulders.

"What's wrong?" His eyes searched her face. "Is the baby okay?" A hand lowered to Ivy's belly.

"Yes. Oh, God. It's nothing like that." She sighed. "It's just ... I bought a school." The words tumbled out of Ivy, and her eyes closed.

Gage's eyes widened in shock. This could only go one of two ways for Ivy, and I held my breath. He was going to hate it or love it.

"Tell me about it," Gage requested, and I took a sigh of momentary relief.

Tommy's eyes burrowed into the side of my head, but the need to protect Ivy didn't allow me to meet his glare. Honestly, I was afraid to look at him.

Ivy explained how she'd kept up her music therapy license and had been considering using it again. When she noticed the floundering school in the news, she inquired what it would take to restore the organization. She explained to Gage that she needed something to do. She loved the girls and being his wife, but she wanted something more.

"I'm your something more," he said selfishly before swiping a hand down his face.

"That's just it. You have your music. The band. I want something more for *me*." My heart broke as my young friend tapped her chest, the desperation evident in her voice. She needed this or she'd break. Ivy Everly had a quiet, confident strength, but she was teetering on the edge of cracking in that fortitude.

"Maybe we should give you two a moment," I offered, pressing Ivy toward Gage, hoping to encourage them to speak privately elsewhere.

"This is your fault, isn't it?" Gage snapped, looking at me over his wife's shoulder. "You put her up to this, didn't you?"

“I—”

“Check your tone, mister,” Tommy interjected in response to Gage’s accusation.

“Edie wasn’t involved,” Ivy whined. “This isn’t about anyone else. This is about me, Gage. Look at me,” she snapped at him. His eyes briefly shifted to her before returning to mine.

“Everything was fine until you met her. I don’t get it. Life was good. Now my band manager is jet-setting off to Chicago. My bass guitarist wants time off to visit her daughter. Just ... what the fuck?”

“Gage,” Ivy gritted, her eyes shifting to the children. On that cue, Masie picked up Emaline and reached for Ava’s hand before guiding the girls out of the room.

“Darlin’, why am I suspecting you knew something about this?” The tone of Tommy’s voice told me he considered Gage’s accusations. He thought them a possibility.

A sudden chill bristled over my skin. “Ivy told me of her plan, and I think it’s a wonderful idea. If she wants to do this, you should both support her. It’s very ... noble.”

Ivy peered at me over her shoulder, giving me a slow smile of gratitude.

“I support her just fine.” Gage glared at me. “I support you, babe.” He looked back at his wife, cupping her face in his hands. “I give you what you need, right? What else do you want?”

Ivy’s eyes widened, the excitement returning. She hadn’t detected false empathy in Gage’s tone. “Well, we need some sponsors and—”

“Not for the fucking school. I mean, what do you need? From me? For us?”

Ivy and I might have blinked in unison, in confusion. *Was he not listening to her?*

“What I need is your support *of me*,” Ivy clarified, suddenly realizing Gage’s tone had nothing to do with understanding her desire for the school.

“You have my support. I give you everything you ne—”

She tugged her face from his grip.

“Are you listening to yourself?” I snapped, knowing it wasn’t my place but suddenly protective of Ivy’s dream. “She’s telling you what she needs *is* this school. What she wants to do is give kindness and help others. It doesn’t involve you other than to love her.”

“Darlin’,” Tommy warned.

“It doesn’t involve you either,” Gage snapped. “Or so you say.”

“Actually, it will include Edie. She’s thinking of becoming the school’s manager.” A chill rippled through the room like a threatening breeze before a thunderstorm.

Tommy’s mouth hung open before he swiped his fingers around his lips and closed them.

“Darlin’,” Tommy questioned. “You moving to California?”

I was afraid to look at him, afraid to see his eyes. Anxiety slithered through me, and when I glanced over at him, my assumptions became reality. He didn’t want me here.

“I don’t think so.” The low tone forced Ivy to spin toward me, her back to her husband.

“You said you’d think about it. Edie, please. I can’t do this without you.” Her fingers reached for mine, curling into them and holding onto me like a lifeline.

“How long have you known about this, Edie?” Tommy’s tone hardened around my name.

“Since Ivy got the idea.”

“Which was when?” Gage growled.

“In January,” Ivy answered, lowering her eyes, knowing a truth that omitted all the details could be just as damaging as a lie.

“You didn’t say anything,” Tommy returned to me, the irritation in his voice growing. Then he spoke to his niece. “Ivy girl, are you sure this is the time for something like this? With the concert tour? The baby coming?”

“It’s the perfect time, Uncle Tommy.”

“I disagree,” Gage said.

“Well, you don’t have a say, as it’s already purchased and under construction,” Ivy snapped, the further admission startling both men. Tommy’s eyes narrowed at me, realizing I knew a lot more about this project than the *idea* of a school. The shock on Gage’s face was like a slap to his scruff-covered cheeks. Ivy had never been so direct with him in my presence. His head shook as he looked up at me.

“And just what do you get out of this?” Gage snorted, his nostrils flaring in anger.

“Gage, you’re out of line,” Ivy warned, her voice low.

“What is it you want from her, Edie? Notoriety? Money?”

Too stunned to answer, I stared at him. My eyes would have filled with tears if I wasn’t so angry at the accusation.

“I don’t know why you’re involved,” Gage continued, despite his wife’s second warning. “Who do you think you are? Giving her ideas that she needs something more. Encouraging her to take this risk and in her condition. You aren’t her mother.”

The words hung in the air like the crack of a whip. Sharp. Pointed. The sting resonated through me, but I was more concerned for Ivy, who gasped audibly. My poor friend, who’d made this decision because she’d lost her mother. Because she felt distanced from the band’s life. Because she didn’t want to lose herself. I’d encouraged her, and I’d assured her, had her mother been alive, she’d support her. But I never, ever

assumed a role of replacing her mother. I'd actually fought against any misconception of that thought.

"You've gone too far," Ivy muttered to her husband, her voice eerily low. In that moment, Ivy's pain was as palpable as Gage's words. She brushed past him and headed for the sliding glass doors to the deck. Not bothering to close them behind her, she raced for the stairs and the beach below. Gage followed her and I spun for the counter, bracing my hands on the surface.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Tommy asked.

"It didn't seem my place to share her secret." I exhaled, my shoulders shuddering.

"She's my niece. Practically like a child to me. You should have said something."

"That's the thing. She's a woman, and she wants to be treated as such," I said, looking up at him, hoping he'd understand.

He blinked, surprised. "Are you telling me how to treat my family?"

"No, I'm telling you, as a woman, that she wants things for herself that revolve around her, not just her children, or her marriage."

"You should have told me, Edie." His voice lowered to a tone I couldn't decipher.

"Like you tell me everything?" I whispered harshly. "This is hardly the world's greatest secret." I don't know where the words came from, but the sharpness was because of my growing anger. I'd just been accused of things I'd never imagine doing—taking advantage of them.

Masie came into my peripheral vision. "Mom, I don't want to interrupt, but we need to get going." A quick glance at the clock over the stove revealed we had twenty minutes to get our things collected for the airport. I nodded at my daughter, who disappeared almost as quickly as she entered the room.

“Look, this isn’t the end of the world ...” I began but Tommy raised a hand to stop me.

“Maybe it needs to be.”

Disbelief caused me to blink several times. “What are you saying?” My fingers curled around the edge of the countertop, my nails digging into the hard undersurface, needing stability.

“I’m saying, I think it’s time.” His eyes closed as he spoke, shutting me out of his vision. “My family is everything to me, Edie, and keeping something from me in regard to them is a hard limit for me. It’s about trust, and you’ve broken mine.”

I glared at him. After all the things he’d kept from me, *continued* to keep from me, he was accusing me of breaking trust. Was he seriously breaking up with me over this—his niece opening a therapy school? Or was it the possibility that I would move here? Was it his California lifestyle, that mystery I wasn’t allowed to know, that I might infringe upon if I were closer? The statement was clear. There was no place for me in his world. Any fight I had drained out of me, puddling on the tile floor.

With a calm I didn’t feel, I spoke. “If that’s what you want,” I whispered, pressing off the counter. He turned his head towards the beach view, refusing to look at me, and I rounded the counter to exit the room.

18

What the Doctor Ordered

Without a word to Ivy, Masie and I flew home. Still stunned that the purchase of a school was the cause of the end my relationship with Tommy, I stared out the airplane window, hollow inside like the clouds outside. The end of my marriage hadn't paralyzed me as much as the sudden, unexpected finish with Tommy. His accusations stung. The distrust incomprehensible. All my concerns that things would eventually dissolve had come true. Unfortunately for me, I never considered it would be over something so out of my control.

Understandably, I didn't fit with Tommy Carrigan, but in many ways, he'd been good for me. He'd restored in me feelings long suppressed and awakened desires I'd never known I wanted.

He'd been just what the doctor ordered.

When I went for my six-month check-up with Dr. Crain, her words resonated with me.

"I don't have to tell you how fortunate you are, Edie," she had reminded me.

I had survived the battle, for now, through treatments and a mastectomy, and after that appointment I had the all-clear for the foreseeable future. In many ways, I was blessed, and I didn't take my life for granted after all I had been through. Elizabeth's medical guidance and personal support had been unparalleled, considering I went through a divorce at the same time as my diagnosis.

Because of our friendship, borne through sharing such an experience, she had the ability to speak candidly with me.

“You’ve been given more time. Take advantage of it.”

The implication was clear. I’d been given a second chance to do what I wanted with the life I had. Despite the loneliness of being divorced, I was free of David. The weight of grief at no longer being married had taken time to lift, until I recognized the burden I bore with him, and the relief I felt at no longer being attached to him. It didn’t lessen the awareness that I was alone, but I was also my own person again. Tommy Carrigan had been the baptism of my rebirth. He’d let me see what I desired and that I could be desirable to another person. I missed him. Lord, did I miss him, because he’d brought to light things I didn’t know I wanted, things I’d never been comfortable demanding. He made me feel alive, and I had to credit him with giving me the experience of a lifetime.

Finally, the tears came.

Elizabeth diagnosed them as part of that adjustment disorder I’d experienced in January. My emotions were a mess from all I’d endured over the last few years. The loss of Tommy, coupled with the future loss of Masie through her graduation and subsequent move to California, left me feeling adrift, like bark floating down a rapidly moving river. Time was speeding up, and I couldn’t get a grasp on where I wanted to go next. In addition to my other losses, I missed Ivy.

“I’m so sorry,” she pleaded once we finally spoke. “I expected him to overreact, but nothing like he did.”

I nodded as if she could see me, her words a reminder of all that Gage said.

“You know I’d never take advantage of you, Ivy—”

“I never for a moment thought you were,” she interjected, cutting me off from any more explanation. “I can’t believe he said that.” She paused a beat. “If anything, I took advantage of you, wanting you to give up everything for me and move here to help me. And I’m so sorry about Tommy. He completely overreacted as well.” The heavy exhale after she spoke made my heart sink. Ivy carried a weighty burden.

“Tell me you’re still continuing with the school?” I asked hesitantly, hoping to deflect the conversation away from Tommy.

“Absolutely, and my offer still stands. I haven’t tried to find a manager. I’m hoping you’ll still consider helping me, despite my uncle and his stubbornness.” She chuckled softly, but I found no humor in the situation.

I had considered Ivy’s offer more than I should have. I’d been working in my current position for years. I was good as a personal assistant. Organization was my middle name, but the more spontaneous my life had become because of Tommy, the more disheartened I’d become at the mundane routine of dressing for work, going to work, and coming home from work, all with the sole purpose of making money. I hadn’t ever had convictions like Ivy; however, my life had changed. I was learning from her, and the idea that I’d been given a second chance returned to me.

“Honey, I think *because* of your uncle, I should continue to decline the offer.”

“Edie,” she whined. “This is exactly what I feared. Please don’t make it about them. This is still about me. I want you here. I trust you, and that’s exactly what I told Gage and Tommy.” The comment reaffirmed that Tommy and Gage both thought I had ulterior motives and I said as much to Ivy.

“They don’t trust me. The irony is, I’m the one who would lose on this venture. I’d be leaving the place where I’ve lived my entire life, giving up my home, a secure job, and a confident doctor.”

A short gasp filled the line. “You’re okay, right? Is something wrong?” The concern grew with each word expressed.

“I’m fine, honey. In fact, I have a clean bill of health for now. Medication for five years and regular check-ups. I’m all good.”

Ivy exhaled a quiet, “Thank God,” before adding, “You know I don’t believe what Gage said. I don’t think you’re trying to replace my mother.”

“I know,” I replied, a weak smile on my lips. I believed Ivy, and a moment of silence passed as we both thought of her mother’s plight.

“It’s a risk, Edie. The move and everything. I explained all this to Tommy. You would be giving up way more than you were getting from this arrangement, and I was the selfish one to ask.” She paused to add, “We’d find you the best doctor out here, by the way.”

“Aw, honey, you should have been a lawyer. You’re setting up a good argument, but I’m still going to decline. I can’t explain it, but I don’t think I can be around your family knowing how they feel about me.”

“Tommy loves you, Edie. I know this for a fact. He still loves you, he’s just ... he’s just Tommy.”

Despite a failed marriage, I knew enough about love to know this was not it. Distrust on this level, mixed with a lack of defense from me, this wasn’t love. But my heart lied to me, reminding me I still loved him.

+ + +

“Mom?” I didn’t have time to ponder my lacking love life in great depth as Masie called my name. It was prom night, and my daughter was attending alone. To my surprise, she wasn’t asked, but she didn’t want to miss this high school ritual. She was actually relieved not to have the pressure of attending with someone on a friends-only basis.

“I don’t want it to be weird,” she’d said, insinuating that even a male friend might have expectations for prom night hook-ups, another rite of passage for some. I shuddered at the

thought of my baby girl giving herself to someone only because of a date for a high school dance.

As I entered her room, I stared at my beautiful daughter, a girl on the verge of womanhood. In every way, her body was already there, but my heart couldn't reconcile that my little girl was nearly an adult. Through my cancer diagnosis, chemotherapy treatments, and doctor appointments, she'd grown up, but then again, she'd always been on the responsible side.

Her hands smoothed down her yellow dress, which wasn't a color I would have guessed she'd select, and yet, she looked like a modern-day Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* in the slim-fit dress, with her acorn-colored hair piled on her head.

If only she had a date to share the festivities, I thought for sixty-seconds, but then pride filled me in her decision to brave the night alone. She'd be surrounded by people who adored her, even if not one of them was her companion for the evening. She had a strong head on her shoulders, despite occasional shenanigans like getting drunk on New Year's Eve. She was a confident girl blossoming into a driven woman. She knew what she wanted, and she planned to go for it.

As she spun to examine the back of the dress in her full-length mirror, I couldn't remember ever being that confident, that ready to take on the world, but if I ever was that headstrong, one day I suddenly wasn't. I don't know when it happened, when I decided to take life so seriously, became too safe. Possibly it was the responsibility I received in having children. Maybe it was the commitment to my lackluster marriage. It had never been my job. A job was financial security, but for me, it wasn't personal fulfillment. It was simply something I did. The thought brought me full circle to Ivy's offer. Working with her would include doing something—something for a greater good—and that might make all the difference for me.

The doorbell rang and Masie looked up at me. “Did Caleb change his mind?”

We both knew Masie wanted him to see her off tonight, but it just wasn’t possible, as baseball season had officially begun. David was scheduled to arrive an hour ago, and Masie had given up hope. The calling of my name initially meant she was ready to head to Daphne’s for pictures. I swear, prom photography was worse than wedding photos.

The doorbell rang again as I descended the stairs before Masie. It couldn’t be Caleb unless he’d forgotten his key. A dark head of hair was the only outline I could make out through the opaque glass in the front door. Opening it, my eyes widened, and my mouth hung, his name about to fly out when a finger slipped over his lips to silence me. I stepped back to allow him entrance as the click of Masie’s heels on the hardwood staircase warned us she was approaching

“Quick,” I whisper-hushed. “In here,” I offered, motioning toward the living room to the left of the staircase. He’d be momentarily hidden until Masie reached the bottom step.

“Who was it?” she asked, patting her hair, tucking a wayward curl behind her ear and then returning the twist to dangle by her cheek. The smile on my face couldn’t be contained, and I motioned with my eyes toward the living room.

“Wh—” Masie froze, staring at the handsome young man dressed in a classic-cut black tuxedo that made him look older than his years.

“Masie.” His voice sounded rough, and he cleared it with a fist to his lips before speaking again. “Masie, I wondered if you’d go to prom with me?”

She hadn’t replied, but the quiver of her lip worried me.

“Don’t cry, baby. Answer him,” I encouraged, feeling awkward at witnessing his proposal, yet I couldn’t pull myself away. This was a grand gesture. My eyes drifted to the open

door, desperately hopeless in my search for another presence, someone silver and broad to witness this proposal. A dark muscle car was the only thing parked before our town home.

“I’d love to go to prom with you,” Masie said, swiping at a tear threatening to trail down her cheek. Stepping forward, he presented Masie with a wrist corsage of yellow roses, and she looked up at him in additional surprise. “I don’t have anything for you.”

“I only want you to be my date, Masie. That’s all I need.” My heart clenched at his declaration.

“I’ll get my camera,” I lied, slipping into the dining room, hidden from their view, allowing them a moment alone. Their conversation continued.

“I can’t believe you’re here.” Masie paused. “What are you doing here?”

“I hope you don’t mind. I didn’t know if I could pull it off until the last minute, or I would have warned you.”

“I never need a warning to see you.”

“I was worried someone else might ask you last minute.” His voice lowered and the dress sole scraping on hardwood told me he stepped forward.

“No one else asked me,” Masie murmured. The snap of plastic signaled the opening of the corsage container. “I still can’t believe you’re here.”

“I didn’t want you to go alone. I hope you don’t mind me crashing?”

“You can crash me anytime you want, West,” my daughter replied, and my hand covered my heart.

Weston Reid crushed it in the romance department.

19

Oh, Baby

Masie graduated from high school. Caleb played minor league baseball. And life went on. Months passed without contact from Tommy.

Summer came, as did Collision's concert to Chicago. It was mid-July, and Masie would be leaving soon for college. West sent two tickets for Masie and me, but I told her to take Daphne instead. I couldn't stand the idea of going and knowing Tommy was there somewhere but not wanting to see me.

I called Ivy on the night of the concert instead.

"How are you doing, mama?" I teased.

"I'm as big as a house. I can't see my feet, and I'm exhausted."

I commiserated with a chuckle, vaguely recalling my own days of pregnancy. The joys of pregnancy seemed a lifetime ago. We chatted about the therapy school, the final touches of construction to be completed any day. A grand opening was scheduled for the same weekend Masie moved to Santa Clara in a few weeks. Ivy intentionally scheduled it so I could attend.

"*You don't have to do that,*" I'd said, thoughts of seeing Tommy making my stomach churn.

"*I want you here, Edie. It's important to me.*"

We continued to talk about some sponsorships Ivy received, one being the infamous Nights, whose concert I missed months ago to visit Tommy. Then Ivy groaned.

"Ivy, you okay?"

“Jesus,” she moaned. “I don’t know where that came from.” She scoffed.

“Everything okay, honey?”

“Yeah, just a back spasm or something. This baby is laying on my spine. Gage swears it’s a boy trying to spoon me. He’s jealous already of our unborn son, because he knows a little boy will be the love of my life.” She snickered, masking a longing I hadn’t heard before in her voice. Another soft groan filled the phone.

“Ivy?”

“It’s nothing,” she grunted, attempting to speak again. “So, anyway, I had a generous donation from the Nights, and an anonymous one from someone affiliated with them as they ... *shhhiit* ...” Ivy whined.

“Ivy, are you having contractions?”

“I don’t think so. It’s a little too early. I’m not due for a few more weeks. Gage promised me he’d be home for the baby.”

Sarcasm erupted within me, but I kept it to myself. Gage might be almighty, in his opinion, but he wasn’t a god when it came to due dates. Ivy hoped to make it through the grand opening before giving birth, however, the timing could never be planned perfectly, and the stress of her therapy school, along with the absence of Gage, could induce labor early.

She moaned again followed by an elongated, “Fuck.”

“Ivy, you’re freaking me out,” I nervously chuckled.

“I’m freaking out, too. I think my water just broke,” she said, hysteria filling her voice before she burst into tears with a steady chant of *no, no, no, no, no*.

“Is anyone there to help you? I thought Gage hired a sitter-slash-housekeeper to be with you?”

“He did. I fired her. She was too pretty.”

I laughed outright. Ivy wasn't that shallow, and never acted insecure, but now wasn't the time to argue about the dismissal of a nanny because of her appearance.

"You need to call 911 and then call Gage."

"I'll never get a hold of him," Ivy moaned through the phone. "He's on stage." Glancing at the clock on my nightstand, Ivy was correct. The concert in Chicago had started twenty minutes ago.

"Try his assistant?" I offered, not even knowing if he had a personal assistant.

"That would be Tommy. He'll be engaged too."

"Well, *un*-engage him. Send a 911 text or something."

"Edie," Ivy laughed my name. "I'll just call 911."

"Okay, right. Okay, good. Keep me posted." We hung up quickly, and I paced my room, feeling helpless and frustrated that my young friend was all alone having a baby. Gage was estranged from his family. Ivy didn't have extended family other than the band, and they were all on stage. She should have had her husband present. She should have had her mother there for her. And with that thought, I did the craziest thing I'd ever done.

+ + +

With a quick text to Masie, I told her I'd lost my mind.

I'm heading to California. Ivy in labor. Can't get ahold of Gage.

I had no idea how I thought I'd help Ivy. It would take hours before I got to California, but I had to do something. Even if Ivy got in touch with Gage, he couldn't get to her until the show was over, even in the best scenario.

Texting West. Masie replied. **So exciting.**

I didn't know how texting West would help, but I didn't scoff. I was already embarking on ridiculous, literally. I boarded the plane, saying a swift prayer for safe delivery of both Ivy's baby and myself to California.

I arrived at an ungodly hour and raced for an Uber, calling out the name of the hospital. When I entered the registration area, inquiring about Ivy, my adrenaline came to a screeching halt.

"We don't have an Ivy Everly admitted, ma'am."

I stared at her, blinking. She had to be here. Where else could she deliver? Dawning came slowly that Ivy could have been taken to any number of other hospitals, but with her status, I assumed she'd be taken to the one she requested. I slammed a hand on the registration desk.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Are you family?" The question struck me as odd. Why inquire unless ... Of course, only family could be admitted.

"Yes." I breathed. "I'm her aunt." The lie didn't choke me like I thought it might. If I had continued my relationship with Tommy, the possibility could have been real. *Could have been.* I didn't ponder the lost possibility.

"And your name?"

"Edie Williams." Without thought, I blurted my own name.

"Edie Carrigan, actually," a deep Southern drawl commented from behind me, and I spun to face Tommy. My breath hitched. He should come with a warning. His silvery hair was slicked back, as if endless amounts of fingers had swiped through it. His dark eyes were lit and slightly tired, the tell-tale sign a touch of purple on the undersides. My mouth dropped, and I stood frozen by the sound of my name mixed with his.

"Edie Carrigan," he clarified. "I'm Tommy Carrigan. I'm on the list. Hell, I made the list." He chuckled, winking at the

female registrar. His instant charm was a reminder of all I didn't know about him, and my heart pinched.

A warm hand came to my back, pressing me forward toward a bank of elevators.

“Whatcha doing here, darlin’?”

The question stumped me, and I answered with the obvious. “Ivy’s in labor.”

He nodded with another soft chuckle. “How did you get here so quickly?”

“West. That pansy had me hold his phone, not wanting to miss out on finding Masie in the crowd. It kept vibrating in my back pocket, and I finally pulled it out. I couldn’t unlock the screen, but the first few notifications told me all I needed to know. I left immediately.”

Silence wavered between us as we rode up to the maternity ward. Awkward tension filled the lift. Heat radiated off his body, and mine responded with an internal cry of longing.

“I was sorry to learn you weren’t attending the concert,” he murmured. My head shot up at the comment.

“I thought it best to let Masie’s friend attend in my place.”

He nodded, and the conversation stalled again. The elevator signaled our arrival, and we stepped off. Tommy led the way down the hall, offering our names to a blushing nurse. We followed her directions, and Tommy knocked softly on the door.

“Hello, baby girl,” he murmured, his voice drifting behind me as he allowed me to enter first.

“Edie,” Ivy called out, exhaustion filling the sound of my name.

With two quick steps, I was at her side, embracing her while she broke into a sob. Hushing her, I stroked over her hair

as I held her against my chest.

“Shhh, honey. You did good,” I said, taking note of the little bundle, swaddled and sleeping in the clear bassinet on the other side of the bed.

“Why are you cryin’, baby girl?” Tommy asked, and Ivy shook her head, pulling back from me to swipe at her cheeks. A smile lit her face.

“I don’t know,” she said, giggling as more tears streamed down her face.

“It’s all the hormones, sweetheart,” I soothed, rubbing a hand up her arm as she fell back on the pillows. She gave me an understanding look, tears still flooding her eyes as she nodded at me.

“Ten fingers and ten toes?” Tommy inquired, peering into the bassinet but making no move to pick up the sleeping babe.

“Everything’s good,” she whispered. A knowing glance passed between the two of them. “Thank you for bringing Edie to me,” she added, addressing her uncle.

“Oh, baby, Edie and I just ran into each other downstairs.”

Ivy’s head swung between the two of us. Her brow pinching. “But you said—”

Tommy raised a palm and Ivy stopped. He shook his head, hanging it slightly, and a strange unease came over me. Then the baby squeaked. I stepped around Ivy’s bed, getting a closer look at the new babe.

“Can I get him for you?” I asked, excitement filling my voice at the prospect of holding an infant. Ivy nodded, her lips curling in appreciation. Scooping up the newborn, I nuzzled his head, rubbing my cheek against his fuzzy hair before pulling back to look at dark blue eyes peeking up at me.

“Hello, handsome,” I cooed. “He’s just perfect, Ivy.”

I stared down at his tiny, squished up nose, minute mouth, and wide eyes. A single tear slipped down her cheek when I glanced up at her, and her smile broadened. Realizing I might have overstepped my bounds, I glanced over at Tommy. He was family. Maybe he should have held the baby first.

“Want to hold him?” I offered, but he shook his head at the same time Ivy sweetly giggled.

“Babies aren’t Tommy’s thing,” she mocked, holding out her hands to take her son. Pressing the child into her arms, my body felt lighter, relief washing through me that all was well.

“You okay, darlin’?” Tommy asked, and I nodded as a tear escaped. I brusquely swiped my cheek, not trusting words to answer him. A warm hand rubbed up my back, and I shuddered.

“You’re shivering, darlin’,” he added, his voice that puddle-plopping sound that made my belly flutter.

I nodded again, unable to respond, afraid any words would open the floodgates of my adrenaline release. He continued to stroke his hand up my spine, soothing me as I continued to tremble.

Suddenly, the door burst open. A harried-looking Gage rushed to his wife, reaching for her cheeks and kissing her in that demanding way I’d seen him use before. Knowing the moment was intimate, I turned away, only my eyes wandered to Tommy, who was watching me. A slow, weak smile curled my lips.

The baby squeaked again, and we both turned to the kissing couple. Gage pulled back and looked down, as if he’d completely forgotten why his wife was in the hospital.

“Say hello to Daddy,” Ivy crooned to her son, kissing his forehead before looking up at Gage.

“Did you decide?” Gage questioned. His eyes were hopeful as he gazed at his wife. I glanced back at Tommy, uncertain of the question. Tommy watched his niece with just as much curiosity.

“Granger Thomas Everly, welcome to the family,” Ivy announced in a hushed tone.

Tommy gasped, his eyes filling, his hand stilling on my back to clutch at my sweater.

“Granger?” I questioned.

“Granger is Gage’s real name, and of course, Thomas, for Tommy,” Ivy explained, a loving expression filled her face as she watched her uncle. I turned to find him swallowing hard before he pinched his eyes with shaking fingers. Without thought, my arm slipped around his waist, and he tugged me into his side, a place I’d missed too much.

20

Moments of Truth

“You look dead on your feet,” Tommy commented after I excused myself from Ivy’s room.

After a few additional words of congratulations, I decided it was time to give the young couple and their new addition some privacy. Tommy excused himself at the same time and followed me out the door.

“I’m a little overwhelmed.” I chuckled, swiping fingers through my longer bangs. I’d let the curly Qs and crazy Cs of my hair remain, allowing a stylist to shape them more distinctly and trim my bangs in a way to flatter the waywardness. Tommy’s eyes followed the movement, his mouth opening to speak when I added, “And a whole lot tired.”

“Where you stayin’?” he asked and I stopped walking.

“Oh my gosh,” I laughed. “I have no idea. I didn’t even bring a change of clothes. I grabbed my purse and called an Uber, searching flights on the way to the airport. It’s the craziest thing I’ve ever done.”

Looking up at him, I knew that wasn’t really true. The craziest thing I’d ever done was let a virtual stranger drag me into an empty ballroom and finger me. As if Tommy could read my thoughts, one brow rose, and a smile broke over his face.

“Anyway, I didn’t plan any further than getting here.” I looked away from his intense gaze and easy expression. I couldn’t allow myself to remember all the things we’d shared as I stood in his presence. I’d break into tears again, the

emotion of Ivy's delivery and my rush to get here suddenly hitting me.

"Darlin'," Tommy hesitated. "I was wondering if I could take you somewhere."

My brows pinched at the nervous tone of his invitation, and for some reason, I couldn't deny him.

"Okay," I responded weakly, allowing myself to blindly follow him when there were so many unasked questions and unanswered explanations. I didn't have the will to fight with him, though. I was just too damn tired all of a sudden. So, when Tommy placed his hand on my back again, I let him lead me from the hospital.

+ + +

"We're here," he whispered, his voice low at my ear as my heavy lids opened slowly. I'd fallen asleep in the backseat of the car. A private driver met us outside the hospital, and I don't think we made it out of the parking lot before I sank into the soft leather and closed my eyes.

I woke at the sound of his voice tickling me, a thrill rippling through my body as my head rested against his heart. Somehow, I'd ended up against his chest, his arm around me where he repeatedly curled my hair around my ear.

A nervous energy vibrated off Tommy as he removed his arm from around me and opened the door. Stepping out, he reached for me and directed me toward a massive, modern-looking mansion. A large set of cement steps led to a double front door, but the thing that caught my attention was the ramp installed at the side of the entrance. I looked up in question.

"Welcome to my home," he said, his voice shaky as he spoke. Taking my hand, he led me to the front door and pressed a code into a keypad. There was a loud snap and then the door popped open. Tommy stepped forward. The entrance

was unfriendly—cold and sterile—and definitely spoke of wealth, with an elaborate chandelier brightly lighting the foyer and a set of stairs that led sharply upward. The combination loft-effect and Hollywood-eclectic was not distasteful, but the place was also not what I envisioned for Tommy’s home.

He led me past the staircase to a sunken living room that might have housed my entire townhome. The space was massive, with the largest circular leather couch I’d ever seen facing an entertainment unit above a fireplace. The brick façade was white, as was the couch, and my brows pinched as I scanned the room. The room looked clean but untouched. There weren’t any personal effects, and for a moment I felt as if I’d stepped back in time. The place reminded me of a 1970s ranch— sprawling, angular, and unwelcoming.

“I have something to tell you, Edie.” The seriousness of his voice and the use of my name immediately put me on alert. I gazed up at him as he stepped before me. He swiped a nervous hand through his hair.

“I have so much to say. I don’t even know where to start.” He paused. “Would you like a drink?” He took two quick steps in the direction of a large credenza that opened to display a fully stocked bar complete with various sized glasses and a backlight illuminating a variety of alcohol.

“No, thank you,” I murmured, and he paused, turning back to me.

“Mind if I do?”

I waved dismissively, knowing whatever he was about to tell me must be serious if he needed a drink at nine in the morning. The thought made me realize it was eleven at home and, other than the cat nap in the car, I’d been awake more than twenty-four hours.

He walked back to me, offering a seat on the pristine couch. Sitting next to me, he held the cut-crystal tumbler in his hand, not taking a sip, but staring at the amber liquid.

“This was my sister’s home. I inherited it upon her death.” The words struck me, and I took another look around the room. It explained the barren whiteness. He sighed. “I didn’t have the heart to sell it.”

Silence stretched between us and it took great patience to wait out further explanation.

“Shit, this is harder than I thought,” he muttered, raising the glass to his lips and taking a hearty gulp.

“You must miss her,” I said, breaking the awkward silence and trying to understand what I didn’t.

“You have no idea,” he mumbled, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees. He swirled the glass in his hands, allowing the liquid to dance along its sides. He peered over at me. “She was my best friend,” he offered as way of explanation. Then added, “But it’s more than my sister’s home. It’s where Lawson lives.”

His eyes bored into me, willing me to comprehend, but I had no idea what he wanted to say. The first thought escaped, setting bile churning in my stomach.

“You have a child?” The question choked me, and his head shook.

“No. Kit had a son.” If Tommy asked me to play guitar, I couldn’t have been more surprised. There hadn’t been one mention of an additional child, a sibling for Ivy.

“He has cerebral palsy and lives in a wing off this main room.” His eyes scanned the space. “I don’t have the heart to remove him from the only home he’s ever known. He has round-the-clock care, and he’s well provided for.”

“Tommy ... ” I questioned, still not fully comprehending.

“Kit did everything she could to protect him ... his identity, his condition. She didn’t want any unwarranted sympathy for herself or for him. She didn’t need his birth to be a media circus, propagandizing his condition and Kit’s sexual history. She was a God-loving woman, and she believed

Lawson came to her because it was His will. She had the strength to handle it, and thankfully, the resources.”

“What about Ivy? Does she know? How did this happen?”

Tommy rolled his head to look at me. “Of course. Lawson came after Ivy. Kit had been through so much already. The rejection of our father, the death of Bruce, raising Ivy as a single mother. Then she got pregnant by some roadie. It was a short-lived relationship, over before Kit recognized she was pregnant.”

He paused, exhaling.

“Actually, that’s the story Kit and I told, but I’m gonna tell you the truth of who his father is because I know you won’t breathe a word of this to a soul nor will you know him with your music knowledge.” He teased without humor and then mentioned a name, which—Tommy was correct—I didn’t recognize.

“So, her son lives here, and he’s well-cared for. Does Ivy visit him?”

“Making time grew more difficult with her own young children and the demands of following the band. Now with this therapy school, she comes to see him when she can.”

“Gage kept her from her brother?” I questioned, but Tommy shook his head.

“No, nothing like that. Ivy followed us those first years, and it separated her from Lawson. With her own children becoming a priority, Ivy’s attention grew divided, but she’s always been a loving and understanding sister. She couldn’t share him with the world. Kit didn’t want any attention on Lawson, knowing life was difficult enough for him.” He sighed, his lips curling into a weak smile. “When Ivy was little, she would go into his room and jingle a tambourine. She’d give him music sticks—you know those ribbed kind—and he’d bang them together. I think that’s where the music therapy comes from.” Tommy swiped a hand through his

longer hair. “Lawson has this barkish kind of laugh. Ivy’d giggle in response, and he’d grow louder. It’s like her laughter was music to his ears, and Ivy glowed, knowing she made him happy. Kit melted every time she saw it. That strength in Ivy is just ...” Tommy blew out a breath, unable to properly credit his niece.

“Is he ambulatory?” I asked, considering the ramp near the front door which I recognized as wheelchair accessibility.

“He isn’t. He’s an adult, and over time, he couldn’t fully support his own size. He’s wheelchair bound. He communicates, but through a sound machine, computerized with images, as he can’t read or speak.”

Tommy was silent a moment, his head hanging down as he took a final pull from the glass in his grasp.

“Tommy, is this why you didn’t bring me here?”

“God forgive me,” he mumbled, “I just couldn’t. This just seemed like too much to share.” He sighed. “I have my own place. Something much more modest, before Kit’s diagnosis. It was my room-to-breathe space. But when Kit got sick, I moved in. I inherited the place, and I keep it for Lawson.”

“Ivy says you have an apartment in LA?”

“I do. It’s over the studio, and I crash there when I’ve been working long hours. Other times I stay at Ivy’s. Sometimes I go to Chicago.” He smiled weakly again.

“Why?” My brows pinched with the question.

“My place is lonely, darlin’.”

“Tommy.” Sadness filled me as my shoulders sank.

“I should have had you sign a NDA,” he teased, humor lacking in his tone.

“You already know I’ll sign whatever you’d like,” I assured him. “Only a sick person would exploit Lawson and Kit’s situation.”

“Oh, there are plenty of people out there who would love this story.” He paused, looking directly at me. “I didn’t believe in you, darlin’, and I’m sorry.” The apology made me sit up straighter. Lifting a hand, he continued, “Ivy wanted to tell you about Lawson. She trusted you. Hell, she thought I already had. But this ... this was a heavy burden, and I didn’t trust myself to share it with you. It’s not about me. It’s about Lawson and Kit. It’s about family.”

“Family,” I said softly, agreeing with his concern but heartbroken that he didn’t trust that I would protect his family as much as my own.

“I trust you, Edie. I have from the moment I realized you had no idea who I was. Just something about you screamed safe, but also and scary to me.” He reached over and pressed a wayward curl around my ear.

“Scary,” I snort-laughed.

“I didn’t trust myself, darlin’. I wanted to give you everything, but that meant giving you all of this, too. And I feared for them, even when deep-down I knew the secret was safe with you. Maybe that safety scared me, too. I worried I’d get too close, draw you too near, and then if you left, you’d break me.”

“Where would I go?” I laughed, humbled and humored that he thought I’d be the one to leave him. “I don’t really want to be without you,” I admitted, my voice lowering along with my eyes. “But you said some really hurtful things, Tommy.”

His head hung. “I did, darlin’, and I’m sorry. Truly sorry. I’d understand if you kicked me to the curb, but I’m hoping you don’t. I’m hoping you can give me time to prove I don’t want to be without you, either. I overreacted, beautiful. I panicked.” His eyes drifted up to mine. “Family’s all I have, and I thrive on being in charge of them, being in the know. I’m used to putting out fires for the boys, but not trouble from Ivy. It just ...” His voice faltered. “It just threw me off that she went to you first, but I understand now. And by the time I

thought about what I'd done, the tour started, the boys needed me, and once again I put them before myself, before what I wanted."

His hand came to my knee. "I want you, darlin'. You and me. It took you walking away for me to realize you're the piece of me that's been missing. The loneliness I cover, that feeling I deal with, it's because I didn't know what I'd been missing was you." His hand moved from my knee to cup my face.

I bit my lip, loving the words but fear trickled through me.

"What is it, darlin'? What's happening in that pretty head of yours?"

"I want to believe you're sorry. I want to understand where you were coming from, but you ripped my heart out, Tommy. You jumped to conclusions and didn't let me explain."

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm saying I'm sorry, but I know apologies take time not words. Family always says they're sorry, though." A weak smile curled his plump lips. "You're my family. And I wanted you to hear how sorry I am."

While the logical side of me told me to kick him to the curb, my heart screamed at me to take all the risks with this man. A risk like that insane woman who let a stranger finger fuck her in an empty ballroom.

"I forgive you." His smile grew and a moment passed with only our eyes connecting us.

"Is it crazy that I want you to move to California after only knowing you a few months?" He chuckled, setting his empty glass on the low coffee table, and turning back to face me.

"Not as crazy as the fact that I would move if you asked me." The words hung between us.

“Darlin’?” he questioned, his brows furrowing, his expression a cross between serious and curious.

“What changed your mind? Why are you telling me about all this now?” I asked, changing the direction of the conversation. My hand waved to indicate the room and Lawson.

Tommy reached for my hand, drawing it over to his lap. Thick fingers curled around mine before flipping my palm to face him. He stroked over the tender pad with the tips of his thick digits, and a ripple shimmered up my arm.

“I planned to see you in Chicago. I thought you’d come to the concert, and I’d get your attention afterward. In fact, Ivy knew my plan to tell you everything and grovel for forgiveness if I needed to.” Dark eyes sparkled, before returning his gaze to my hand. “I’ve missed you, darlin’.” His words warmed my insides as he drew along my life-line. “The thing that clarified everything for me was seeing you in that hospital waiting room. I accused you of telling me how to love my family without recognizing you already loved them.”

“Family loves unconditionally,” I said, a tear trickling down my cheek. I swiped under my eye and the movement broke Tommy’s concentration on my palm. His head shot up.

“I’d never hurt Ivy or take advantage of her or you—” My assurances were cut off when his mouth took mine, nearly knocking me backward in his eager approach. His lips captured mine, drawing them into his before his tongue invaded my mouth, seeking mine. He’d released my hand, so I reached for the salt-and-pepper scruff at his jaw, nails scraping over his stubble.

“Like that, don’t you, darlin’?” He chuckled against my lips.

“I do like that,” I mouthed against him.

“Well, I love you, Edie.” I pulled back, startled, and he repeated himself. “I love you, and I want you to move to California. Next stop is my place. My real place, but I had to

share this with you first. I had to know that this ...”—he waved around the stark white room— “...was okay with you. Secrets of the rich and famous. But I’m sorry I doubted you.”

I wouldn’t have ever judged him for this secret. I cupped his jaw again. “Maybe before we see your place, I could meet Lawson?”

“God, woman,” he muttered, his mouth capturing mine as he pressed me back against the cushions. “First, I want inside you. That’s home. Then you can meet my charming nephew.” His hand skimmed down to the waist of my jeans as I reached for his. He had me on my back, his legs already between mine, but we were definitely not close enough.

“If your nephew’s half as charming as you, I might stay here with him instead,” I laughed.

“Never,” Tommy growled against my mouth, his fingers forcing my jeans down my hips at the same time. “You’re mine.”

21

Family Means Everything

“You should take the job with Ivy. I think you’ll be good for her. She needs someone here with her.” Gage ran his hands through his hair, a tell that he was nervous.

Ivy sat on the couch in their open concept living room, the baby resting in her lap. We stopped by to see Ivy and little Granger. The plan was to return in three weeks, when Masie moved into her dorm. We’d be driving cross-country to move her things. Tommy said he’d be up for a road trip, despite finishing the summer tour around the same time.

I stared at Gage from my seat next to Ivy, shock coming off her in waves.

“Family always says sorry, and I’m sorry for what I said, Edie. Truly.” His eyes closed, but his genuine apology was visible even without his eyes on me. He opened them in a flash, staring at me with pain in his gaze. “Never should have said what I said to either of you.” He looked down at his wife, his toes tapping at hers. I glanced over at Ivy, not realizing that the fight they’d had months ago wasn’t fully resolved.

“I’m selfish,” he said. “Ivy knows this, and she accepts it, but that doesn’t mean she lets me get away with it.” He knelt before his wife, surrounding her legs with his arms. He kissed his son’s head before looking over at me.

“Ivy’s been explaining the music therapy school to me, and I’m looking forward to spending time there as soon as the tour ends. We have to make up two dates for the birth of this little guy.” He kissed Granger again. “But then, I’m home. I’m all in.” Pressing up on his knees, reaching for Ivy’s face, she leaned forward to kiss him.

“All right, darlin’, we need to get going,” Tommy said, and Gage looked up at me expectantly. I wanted to take Ivy’s offer but there was still one offer I needed. We hadn’t made it out of Tommy’s sister’s home, spending the past twenty-four hours alternating between make-up sex and napping. I constantly argued with myself that good sex wasn’t a reason to give up everything I knew. Not able to respond to the question in Gage’s eyes, I leaned toward my young friend and hugged her hard.

“We’ll talk soon,” I whispered.

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Tommy’s studio apartment included an L-shaped kitchen and an extra-large island in the corner of a great room. Floor-to-ceiling windows illuminated the second-story warehouse space. Record awards filled one wall. His bedroom was off to the left. Galvanized silver, rich browns, and white walls accented the place. Scanning his masculine set-up of leather couch and large, flat screen television, I met Tommy’s eyes. He looked hesitant.

“I love this,” I said, my voice hardly a whisper. His shoulders relaxed as he stepped toward me. Tender fingers stroked my cheek.

“Did you mean what you said, darlin’?”

“What was that?” I smiled, feeling strangely at peace in his place, comfortable with his touch on my face.

“You’d move here, if I asked?”

“Yes,” I whispered, not trusting my voice, not believing the possibility of his asking.

“Then I’m asking, beautiful. I’d like you to take the job and move in with me.”

I could hardly contain my smile, but my logical side overruled my heart. “Don’t you think it’s a little fast?”

“Not as fast as I’d like. I don’t want to wait three more minutes, let alone three weeks,” he teased, his eyes melting to liquid chocolate. I didn’t speak, and the pad of his finger stroked over my bottom lip. “Sometimes fine wine needs to breathe. You’ve breathed enough. Now it’s time to savor you—every day, Edie. Every damn day.”

His mouth covered mine and all sanity left me, just like that first time. A sane woman might not have done what I did that night, nor would she do what I was considering doing this night. But I didn’t consider myself insane, either. I was in love, possibly for the first time. This time around things would be different. I had to trust in myself and trust in Tommy, which I did. When he pulled back and stared into my eyes, I knew the idea of living without him outweighed my fears of giving up everything and moving here. Not to mention that the job offered by Ivy sounded more purposeful, more self-fulfilling, more beneficial to others, and I was ready for something like that in my life.

“I don’t want you to leave,” he said, his voice gravelly.

“I can be here as soon as mid-August.” The timing would be right, with Masie’s move, and allowing for a reasonable notice at work.

“Sounds like perfect timing,” Tommy offered, a smile breaking across his face. For his part, he needed the concert tour to end.

“What’s next? After the tour?”

Tommy shrugged. “There’s always something with those boys, but I’m looking forward to some time off with my girlfriend.”

His lips covered mine again, and there was no more discussion.

Epilogue

December

Holiday in Hawaii

“This is where it all started.” Tommy smirked, rolling his head to look over at me as we sat at the edge of the pool, our feet dangling in the cool water while we soaked up the Hawaiian sun. It had been on the edge of this pool, one year prior, that I saw the tall, dark, and brooding man, dressed in black from head to toe, as if he were a security guard. The memory made me chuckle, considering his present attire of bright orange board shorts with giant palm leaves printed at odd angles. Either way he dressed, he still gave off that aura of protective alpha, and I adored the care he gave to me.

When I gave my two-weeks’ notice, Max hardly contained his surprise. When I told him I was moving to California, to be with the man I’d met during my trip to Hawaii, his forehead furrowed in disappointment.

“To think I helped support that trip,” he had muttered, recalling the gift he’d given me. He hadn’t spoken in anger but shock. He surprised *me* by adding, “If I’d gone with you, maybe you’d be staying here to be with me instead.” It had been the first blatant comment that he’d been interested in something *more* with me, and I realized an opportunity had been lost between us. Then again, my *more* now sat next to me on the edge of the pool.

In addition, nothing could have prepared me for David’s strong reaction to my decision.

“You’re what?” he’d barked into the phone, when for some strange reason I felt I owed him the courtesy of explaining I’d quit my job and planned to move across the country. “Is this about that tattooed dude in Arizona?” The

venom in that question reminded me, I owed David nothing. I was free to live my life the way I wanted it to be.

Who knew my forty-third year would be a whirlwind that changed everything? New location. New job. New love. All after-effects of having cancer, a killer disease that decided to rest for the moment and allow me a second chance at life. Love wasn't on the prescription pad when I got the clean bill of health, but it certainly had been the pill I needed. I could have continued my life as it was and been fine, but like Tommy joked, why always settle for wine, when some days call for champagne?

Our trip to Hawaii would certainly qualify for celebration. We'd returned to honor Ivy's annual tradition—as a family. Thankfully, Masie and Caleb were included in this special occasion. Shortly after moving to California, and moving into Tommy's studio apartment, he'd asked me to marry him.

“I thought you said marriage wasn't for you,” I teased, recalling his words despite the catastrophic marriage he'd had in his youth.

“Just hadn't met the right lady,” he replied, tackling me onto his couch. “And you haven't answered my question? Have I misread something, darlin'? Did you not want to do the marriage thing again?” His eyes held that hesitant gaze, one I'd seen more often than I originally witnessed from such a self-assured man, because therein lay the truth—Tommy Carrigan was just a man, who had once been a rock star, and he had doubts like every other person.

“I'd love to marry you, Tommy Carrigan.”

“So, let me ask again, and we'll keep all the other stuff out.” He winked, acknowledging that his proposal had been overshadowed by his previous marriage and mine.

“Eddie Williams, I'd love for you to be the fine wine I sip every day. I warned you to not make me fall in love with you, but I don't think you could help yourself. From the first

moment I saw you, you were irresistible to me, and I want to continue to worship your irresistibility for the rest of my days. Will you marry me?"

My head nodded before he finished the question, but he paused, awaiting the word. "Yes. Yes, yes, yes."

"Mmmm ... You know how much I love it when you say that word to me," he hummed into the crook of my neck before sliding off me to kneel on the floor. He slipped a ring out of his pocket.

"Well, I love you," I said, while righting myself on his couch. He remained on his knees before me, reaching for my left hand.

"I love you, too, darlin'." His voice dropping into that pebbly sound as he slipped a gorgeous diamond on my finger.

Sitting by the pool, I stared down at that ring, glistening in the sunshine. His hand covered mine, and he brought my fingers to his lips, kissing over the knuckle below the ring. We were getting married the next day—a beach wedding, surrounded by immediate family.

"Tomorrow," he muttered, looking up at me under hooded eyes. "And every tomorrow after that."

Epilogue 2

Months later

Reflections In the Mirror

[Midge]

How do I get myself into these things?

Oh, right, I can't seem to say no.

I'd gotten roped into coordinating the fundraising service project for my son's high school band. Ronin, my middle child, is a freshman, and he's struggling. Since his older brother is a stud athlete, Ronin suffers from second child syndrome. Add in the fact he's a band geek and theater nerd—his words, not mine—and guilty mother disorder kicks in for all the times I've hosted team dinners, contributed to the booster club, or attended a million football games. This event needed a parent representative, and the Miss-Never-Say-No in me volunteered to make Ronin happy.

One minute, I am standing at the Mystic Music Therapy School, introducing myself to the director, Ivy Everly, and her manager, Edie Carrigan, and a few weeks later, I'm attending a party.

Edie is a pixie blonde beauty, showing only a hint of her age, and we hit it off instantly. Both of us are transplants from the Midwest to California. She's only been here six months while I've been here six years. My ex-husband, Paul, was transferred, and we took the move as a fresh start to our marriage. The Golden State would be an opportunity, and San Gabriel would be the perfect area for us. How wrong I'd been to believe him.

Anyway, Edie and I are both in our forties, which is depressing to consider. I thought I'd be so much more accomplished by forty. Being forty-one makes *un*-accomplishment seem so much more unnerving.

Edie is somehow related to Ivy. I can't remember the connection. I can hardly remember my own family's names, let alone the relations of others. Either way, they seem close despite their age difference. Although she looks barely nineteen, I'd place Ivy at mid to late twenties. It must suck to be beautiful, I think, chuckling to myself, envisioning the California blonde who eagerly greeted me at her therapy school and walked me through all I needed for the fundraiser. I can't help admiring her hair. As I've grown older, my brunette color has dulled, turning mousy brown with streaks of gray woven through it.

"This is so exciting," she exclaims, after we run through the list of things I need to do with the high school students in preparation for the day. Rhythm Walk is the name of the walkathon to raise money for the therapy school. The high school band volunteered their support to show music is important to people of any ability and age. An event like this reinforces the private high school's mission of service for others. I also volunteered because band sponsorship reduces the exorbitant tuition my ex and I agree to pay per the joint custody stipulations in our divorce decree. I sigh at the thought, reminding myself band keeps my kid out of trouble.

Prior to the party invitation, most of our interaction has been via email. In our first face-to-face meeting, I find I've made a new friend in Ivy and found a kindred one in Edie.

"I'm a bit lonely here," Edie whispers, not wanting her younger counterpart to hear. "I mean, I love my new family, but I don't know many other women my age." It wasn't an insult. It was a show of solidarity. Sisterhood of the Over Forty. Hurray! Cue dying noisemakers.

"You know," Ivy interjects. "You should come to a party we're hosting. We're introducing Edie to some family

friends.”

Edie rolls her eyes at me. “Get this. The party is called Meet the Wife.” A soft chuckle follows the title. “My new husband thought it would be a good way to show everyone he got married.”

I’m certain there’s a story there, but I don’t inquire. The knowledge that someone in her forties has found love again makes me smile, and Edie beams like a teenager at the mention of her man.

“Anyway, the party is tomorrow night. You should come. Bring a date.”

“Oh, I don’t date,” I blurt, exposing myself before I think. I look up in horror at the admission. A knowing smile curls on Edie’s face, and Ivy’s eyes widen.

“You should definitely come then. This isn’t a party for the young’uns,” Edie teases. “You never know who you might meet.”

Ivy giggles, shaking her sunshine-colored hair, and again, I’m certain there’s a story between them.

“I’ll think about it,” I lie, accepting there’s no way in hell I’m going to a party where I don’t know anyone other than the two women I just met.

“I know that look,” Edie says, narrowing her eyes and waving a finger in a circular manner at my face. “If I have to drive to your house, and chauffeur you to mine, you’re coming.”

I laugh at her persistence.

“It will be fun,” she adds, reaching out to pat my arm. “I think.” Her brows pinch, but then she smiles. “On second thought, come for me. I might need the support.”

“You’ll be fine,” Ivy interjects. It’s a good thing she runs a music school. Her hearing seems impeccable. I didn’t even think she was listening as she sat at her desk, shuffling papers, and typing on her computer. “And Edie’s right. It will be fun.

Come join us. We're going to spend a lot of time together over the next month. Let's hang out."

The invitation seems strange to me, but why not. I haven't gone out in a million years unless you count band concerts, high school football games, and travel baseball. On second thought, I don't count those things as valid *getting out*.

"Okay."

+ + +

So here I stand, nursing a glass of wine and watching people mingle. Wait, let me correct myself. Rich, famous, and beautiful people mingle. The big hair, big watches, and big boobs give away that I am out of my league.

"Is that ...?" My voice trails off as I observe a young man and the petite brunette beside him, uncertain of the identity of the musical power couple standing before me.

"I think so," Edie answers. "My music knowledge is pretty pathetic. Just ask my husband."

"But it's one of the things I love about her." A gruff, Southern sounding drawl filters from behind us, and as I turn, Edie is enveloped in thick arms, wrapping around her waist and tugging her back against one of the most handsome men I've ever seen. A true silver fox. Inky hair with streaks of silver and a scruffy beard with more salt than pepper. He's delicious in a he's-another-woman's-husband sort of way.

Edie giggles, and her husband kisses her neck before looking up at me. "I'm Tommy," he offers. With one arm still around his wife, he extends his other hand forward to shake. "Tommy Carrigan, and I belong to this woman."

I chuckle at his unabashed announcement. "I thought this was a Meet-the-Wife party."

“Just clarifying I’m the husband. Oh, I like the sound of that so much, darlin’.” He kisses his wife again and then steps back from her. “Holy shit! Hank?”

Edie and I both look up at a larger man. I’m typically not attracted to tattoos, but I can’t seem to stop staring at his forearms. My eyes roam up to his jaw. Roughly covered with more silver than black, it’s the opposite of his ink-colored hair, which is cropped close to his head with here-and-there gray. He’s the perfect mix of salt-and-pepper. A silver fox, actually, and suddenly I’m thinking of silver glitter for some reason and wanting him to paint my skin with his scruffy chin. The thought makes me tingle in places I thought forgot how to tingle. My face heats at getting caught staring and his responding expression gives away the possibility of a hard life. Crinkles around his squint announce the lines of age, but his hazel eyes sparkle with mischief. *Oh, he’s dangerous.*

“Hank. Hank Paige, is it really fucking you, man?” Tommy’s voice carries. He reaches out to man-hug this bear of a man. Watching them clap each other on the back, I turn to Edie, hoping for some clarification.

“I have no idea who he is,” she murmurs, sipping her wine and pasting on a smile to prepare for an introduction.

“Edie, darlin’, this is Hank Paige. The best dru—”

“Just Hank,” he interrupts, holding out a hand for Edie but shifting his eyes back to me. “Hank,” he offers once he releases Edie and reaches toward me.

“Midge. Midge Everette.” I hold my breath a second, waiting for a man of his stature to make a snarky comment. His appearance is one of a former football player. Definitely someone who was a bully. He’d be the first to make fun of my name if we were still kids. Midge. Mudge. Sludge. Midge. Fidge. Fudge. I’ve heard it all.

“Midge? That’s an unusual name. One I don’t think I’ll quickly forget.” *Oh, he’s smooth.* The warmth of his hand lingers over mine. His fingers are thick, and thoughts race to

things I shouldn't be thinking like how they would feel rubbing up my thighs. I could get to lost in...*Sweet cheese*, what's wrong with me? My mind went straight to the gutter within thirty seconds of meeting a tall, strong, and all wrong for me stranger.

"How unfair is that? Not a strand of gray hair on your head," Tommy teases his friend. Hank rubs a hand over the cropped hair, and it stands up as he scrubs back to front. His eyes don't leave mine.

"It's there, but it seems to like my jaw more."

Oh, I like your jaw more, I decide as my eyes return to his chin and the scruff covering it. My thoughts flutter to how it might feel if he tickled my skin with his stubble. Heat spreads on my cheeks a second time. Something is definitely wrong with me. Maybe it's the wine?

His gaze finally leaves me, and I turn to Edie. "Where's the bathroom?" I just need a minute. I don't know what I'm doing among this collection of born-beautiful and potentially talented people. I'm out of my element and suffocating from the uncomfortable feeling.

"Down the hall. First door on the right," Edie explains. She twists and waves her arm.

"Last door on the right," Tommy corrects. Edie laughs.

"We've only lived here a month or so. I'm lucky we even got unpacked for this party," she adds.

"It's been more than a month, darlin'. We've been married for forty-three days."

What the heck? I chuckle at his declaration.

"Already counting the days. You have a long-ass future if you start there." Hank scoffs. He has a nice voice—smoky and smooth.

"A long-ass future is all I plan on having with this woman," Tommy retorts. "I'm counting the days to make up for the years it took me to find her."

For some reason, I just want to cry at the sweetness of this man. On that note, I need a break before I make a fool of myself.

+ + +

Suddenly, I really have to pee, and I can't find the light switch. Thankfully, a candle illuminates the small powder room, and since I know where all my body parts should go, I sit in the dark. After I finish my business, I wash my hands and catch my reflection in the mirror. The candlelight produces an angelic effect highlighting my face, and my hair disappears in the darkness behind me. Shaky hands smooth down my neck and tug at my cheeks. I turn my head side to side. I'm not awful but compared to the people on the other side of this door, I'm nothing special.

In the midst of my self-examination, the door opens outward, and a large body fills the space.

"Just give me a minute," he breathes, holding out a hand to someone in the hall, and then slams the door. I step back as he's blocking the doorway, and he spins. Leaning against the closed door, he breathes deeply, exhaling slowly as he scrubs his hands over his face. He roughs his hair, rubbing back and forth, before looking up.

"Umm ... I was just ..." It couldn't be more obvious. I've used the bathroom, but he's obstructing my exit.

"I just need a minute," he says, making no motion to move out of the way. Should I be frightened I'm in a small, enclosed space with a large man I don't know? It's dark. There's candlelight. It could be romantic. I sigh. It's a freaking powder room, for heaven's sake.

"I can just leave if you'll let me—" He straightens from the door, and my words falter.

"Don't be frightened."

“I’m not,” I say, and I mean it. I realize in the space of the two minutes we’ve been in this room I feel completely at ease with his presence despite his hulky size. He presses forward, but when I move to step around him, the sink wedges us together. He’s behind me, and I press into the counter, my backside brushing against the front of his jeans. We stop. Our eyes meet in the ripple of candlelight reflected by the mirror.

“Are you drunk?”

“Don’t drink.” His voice is husky like his size.

“Never?” I blink.

“Not in a long time.” He watches me a moment as if gauging my reaction. When it seems he’s decided on something, he says, “You have beautiful eyes.”

His compliment startles me, and I blush, thankful the dimness of the room hides my heated cheeks. My eyes tend to shift color. In this low light, they glow with flecks of gold among the deeper brown tone. I don’t have a chance to thank him before his hands grasp my shoulders, massaging them. Thick thumbs press into the back of my neck. Shit, his fingers feel good.

“Take a breath,” he suggests. “Breathe. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I do as he says and inhale. He continues to stroke the side of my neck, then whispers, “Close your eyes.” A smoky sound resonates from his voice, gravelly and gruff, and I like the robustness of it. Something sounding strangely like a purr rumbles within me. And then I do the unthinkable.

I lean back.

“Feel good, little lady?” A tender kiss greets my neck. My eyelids flip open, and I stand straighter, embarrassed for swaying. He still crowds my space. He isn’t fat. He’s broad—solid—and the feel of his chest against my back has me relaxing into him. I nod in response because, honestly, words escape me. He’s touching me as if he cares about me, as if he

wants to take away my stress. Uncontrollably, I melt into the sensation.

“I could make you feel good in other ways.” The suggestion causes me to stiffen, and he chuckles. “Relax, lady.” His raspy voice right at my ear sends shivers skittering over my skin.

With a boldness I’ve never felt before, I speak. “How?”

“How to relax or how to feel good?” His eyes meet mine in the mirror. There’s a mischief to the color I know is gray but sparkles like steel in the reflection.

“Wouldn’t they be one and the same?”

His lip crooks in the corner at my question. His eyes twinkle with mirth, and he chuckles, lazy and low, causing my skin to goose bump. With his hands stroking my shoulders, the white peasant blouse I wear stretches, slipping off over the curves.

“Hmm...” He moans as thick fingertips rub my cool skin. “I think I’d start with a nip to this neck.” I watch the roll of his Adam’s apple, and my throat clogs. My mouth waters. “I’d suck right here.” He presses into the apex of my shoulder and neck with the tip of a callused finger. I imagine the deep suction on my sweet spot, and my knees buckle. My lids flutter closed a moment. Another gravelly guffaw sounds by my ear, and I open my eyes to find him watching me in the mirror.

“I think next I’d go for a breast. Lick around your nipple before tugging at the tip.”

Holy. Shit. I’m instantly wet, and my thighs clench. He’s observant, so he doesn’t miss the squeeze of my legs. His hands drift from my shoulders to my hips, and ever so gently, he tugs me back against him. With one slow pump, the unmistakably firm length of him hits my lower back.

“You’re a tiny thing.” He huffs, spreading his fingers and then tightening them on my hips. “But I’d still fit.” The thought brings up my head, my eyes searching for his again in

the reflective glass; only he's looking down, over my shoulder, focusing on the swell of my breasts peeking out of my bra. I didn't realize my shirt slid down so far.

"I'd definitely need a taste between those thighs." A rush of liquid leaves me as a flock of seagulls ripple up my abdomen. If words could cause an orgasm, I'm certain he could give me one. The smoky tone. The brash intention. The silver stare reflected in the mirror. "You like the thought."

It isn't a question. He's reading me, and he's right. If he put his scruffy jaw between my thighs, I'd come in an instant. The image makes me rub my legs together once more, and I reach for the countertop, needing stability before I purposely lean into him again.

"I've never done this before," I whisper, uncertain what I'm admitting, and what I'm suggesting. He's a stranger, but do I want him to take me against the counter? *Hell yes, I do.* Do I think I could follow through on the actual act? Actually no, I don't.

"I'm here for you," he groans, pressing into me again. Our heights don't lend to aligning body parts, but I'm well aware of what he packs in those jeans, and he can't miss the subtle squirm of my thighs.

"Mmm, Hank," I purr. "Yes." The word escapes, the hiss lingering as my sex pulses. My hips roll back. My backside hits him. "I think I'm—"

"About to come, baby? Let me get you there."

Can you orgasm from the sound of a voice? Who am I kidding? Just listen to Jamie Dornan or Sam Heughan—an accent does it all the time. I won't admit I am close, but the tenor of his tone...

A sharp pounding on the door startles me, and I stiffen.

"Hanky, you in there still?" The singsong squeal of a female spins my head back to focus on his face in the mirror. For some reason, tears instantly prickle my eyes.

“Oh, God,” I whimper, horrified at what I was doing, at what I’d almost done, with a perfect stranger. Pushing back from the counter, I press into him, forcing him away from me. His touch lingers as I reach for the doorknob, shoving open the door and rushing past a woman I hardly see. Riled and embarrassed, I race for an exit and an end to my evening.

+ + +

Want a little bit more of Tommy and Edie? Read [Rockin’ New Year’s Eve](#).

Read the rest of Midge and Hank’s story where a single mom in midlife crisis finds the local mechanic might be able to fix everything:

[*Midlife Crisis*](#).

Read how Ivy and Gage began their love affair in [Collide](#).

SILVER
Brewer

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Dedication

For the love of a small town, a tight community, and a loving family.

1

A Long and Winding Road

[Letty]

Where the hell am I?

I'm losing the GPS on my phone, and I feel as though I've passed the same copse of trees three times.

Who can tell?

Birches, maples, and cedars surround me, and those are the trees I recognize. Everything is a sea of thick bark and greenery, but soon, this forest will be ablaze with golds, reds, and oranges. The changing season is the reason for my rush. I need to secure the property before winter so the ground can be broken first thing next spring.

Working for Mullen Realty, I've climbed my way up from assistant office manager to assistant seller to commercial real estate agent. Not exactly my career choice but it's been a steady income. When I didn't have a job at twenty-four using my college degree in English, my mom made me go to work for my uncle, a real estate mogul in Chicago. I'm now forty, so I guess you could say I settled into the family business. Uncle Frank prides himself on buying and selling, and what he wants is to buy this godforsaken property in Georgia and sell it to a hotel company who wants the space for their next lodge-like resort and spa.

As the only vehicle in sight while I wind through the curving roads, I'm waiting for Jason to jump out with his creepy hockey mask and start swinging a chainsaw at me at any second. I might have mixed a few horror movies together, but that's the scene in my head as I weave along the narrow drive. I'm not even certain I'm in the correct county, let alone

the right state anymore. I need Blue Ridge, Georgia, but all I've seen for miles is tree trunks and foliage, and occasionally, the inconspicuous marking for a turnoff. From the office, Marcus tries to assure me I'm in the correct place.

"There are only two tire tracks leading to nowhere," I say into the phone, struggling to drive the rented Jetta over the rough terrain.

"That's it. You're in the right place. Don't mess this up," his gruff voice barks through the speaker.

I hit a bump, and the phone jostles out of the cup holder to the floor.

Dammit.

I can't risk reaching for it, and I'm too afraid to stop until I see the place I'm destined to find.

Harrington cabin.

I'm not certain what I expect. I've been told it's rustic, but I don't know if that means quaint or just plain rough. Either way, Mullen Real Estate wants the property.

"I think I'm almost there," I shout, as the phone lies facedown on the passenger side floor. I can't hear Marcus's reply. He's not only my assistant but one of my best friends, and he knows this acquisition is important to me. I'd prove myself as a skilled real estate buyer if I can book this deal. I'd also solidify my position in the company and earn myself a cut of the business.

Partner.

The word echoes through my head. The sound has a nice ring to it.

Olivet Pierson. Partner.

As the dirt road narrows, I see light at the end of the tunnel of trees. A clearing of sorts opens before me, and I slow even more than the five miles per hour I've been driving. As I break through the lane, a vision of masculinity stands before

me. With his shirt off, the bare back of a muscular being slings an ax over his shoulder, splitting a piece of wood standing upright on another log. The thwack isn't heard inside the car, but the thunderous power in which he cracks the wood seems to vibrate under my vehicle and into my foot. I'm frozen at the appearance of his rippling back, sweaty spine, and low-slung pants that suggest he wears boxer briefs by the sliver of waistband exposed. In red. The hair on top of his head is short, trimmed close but not military style to his skull, while a bush of facial hair covers his jaw. My eyes focus on his profile as he stands and straightens, then quickly turns to see my car. Deep, dark eyes narrow, zeroing in on me in anger. He drops the ax and raises his hands, his mouth opening, but I don't hear what he says.

I'm blinded by the gleam of sunlight bouncing off his firm chest, a sprinkle of hair in the shape of a V between the flat plains of his pecs and above the slow hills of his abs. More hair leads south, dipping into the red band exposed above his waistline, and my mouth waters until two large hands hit the hood of my rental car, and I notice his mouth move as he shouts.

“Stop.”

Oh. My. God.

My foot slams on the brake, causing me to jolt forward and narrowly missing the bridge of my nose on the steering wheel. I stare out the front windshield, taking in the appearance of the man I almost hit. He's a mountain of a man, someone I envision people wrote tales about long ago. He's lumbersexual by modern standards, and then I note his hair again. Cropped and charcoal. It isn't black but more like the smoky color before the coals are ready. A perfect blend of dusty silver covers his head and jaw. He's a silver fox, but from the size of him, he looks more like an angry grizzly.

“I'm so sorry,” I mutter as I place the car in park and scramble to remove myself from the rental. My ankles twist as the heels I wear can't balance on the uneven dirt beneath my

feet. I clutch the open driver's door for support, expecting to fall and knock my chin. How many stitches would I need? Is there even a doctor out here? A hospital nearby? Oh God, I might bleed to death.

Then I take note of the puzzled man before me, still leaning against my hood.

Staring at him, I'd die a happy woman.

However, the vibe coming off him is anything but pleased. His chest heaves as his eyes nearly disappear while he squints at me.

"Who are you?" He emphasizes each word as he speaks. I certainly can't use the statement "I was in the neighborhood" because I doubt you'd find another human being within miles.

Oh Lord, if I screamed, would anyone hear me? If a tree falls in the woods, does it make a sound if no one is around to hear it? My thoughts are out of control.

"I'm Olivet Pierson, and I'm looking for George Harrington the second. Is this the Harrington cabin?"

I'm here for the land, but the cabin catches my sight. The two-story building is of medium size, balanced with a window on either side of a single front door, standing open and inviting. A heavy metal overhang shadows the porch, which runs the full length of the cabin. The weathered gray structure with the deep black shingled roof doesn't look worn. It appears brand new. With a small yard and a forestry backdrop, the place looks quite homey.

"How did you get here?" His gruff voice returns my attention to him. His curiosity causes him to look up over the back of my car, staring down the pinched lane I traveled.

"Are you George Harrington?"

His head swings back to me, and his lips twist. Pressing off my car, he turns for a cloth on the pile of wood and wipes his face with it. Absentmindedly, he travels down his chest, or rather purposely, as he must know I'm watching his every

move. I'm practically salivating as he takes his time to swipe across his broad pecs and dip to the trail leading lower. He pats himself with the cloth over the zipper region of his pants, and I flinch. My eyes flick upward, and his lips mockingly smirk.

I can't say it's a smile. His face looks far too serious for such a thing. Crinkles mark the edges of his eyes, and his cheekbones are well-defined. He might have been teasing me, but his face gives nothing away.

"So..." I repeat. "Are you George?"

"You must be looking for my father," he states, tossing what I realize is a white T-shirt back onto the pile of wood. He picks up the ax, and I try to catch my breath. I'm gripping the open door for support, peering at him as he turns his back on me and lifts the wood-chopping instrument. The sound of a splintering log resonates loudly around us, echoing in the deep quiet. I take a second to look around me, no longer lost in the woods, but noticing the beauty of various shades of green. Steeples of pines and broad sweeps of maple whisper in the breeze with a glorious blue sky as its backdrop. The landscape is breathtaking, and the silence reminds me this is the perfect location for a spa and resort. Secluded. Rustic. Peaceful.

Thwack.

Another log splits, and I shift my attention back to Mr. Lumbersexy.

"Do you know anything about the property?" I ask, interrupting him mid-swing. He doesn't miss the log, but it doesn't crack. The ax bounces back, and the log topples to its side. When he turns on me, the move is aggressive in nature, yet I find I don't fear him. His mouth opens, but I speak.

"I'm told it's owned by George Harrington II. A Miss Elaina Harrington on Mountain Spring Lane told me how to get here. Told me I'd find him here." I pause as he glares at me. I stopped at the original address given to me by the office. Mountain Spring Lane was a dirt strip with three impressive

antebellum homes along the private drive. Old money covered the white paint of each house.

When he doesn't speak, I continue. "It's a beautiful piece of property." I turn my head as if I'm noticing the land, but all I can concentrate on is the weight of his eyes on me, knowing he's following the twist of my neck as I gaze around me.

"What do you want?" he snaps. The gruffness of his tone snaps my attention back to him. Maybe Grumpy is a better name for him instead of Sexy Lumberjack.

"I'm looking to discuss purchasing the land."

The ax slips from his hand while his other hand fists into a ball of knuckles. He's scary, but again, I don't fear him for some reason.

"It's not for sale."

"Everything's for sale, Mr..." He still doesn't offer his name, but I'm sensing I'm in the right place, so he must be George Harrington.

"Listen..." He pauses, and I offer my name.

"Olivet Pierson. Mullen Realty," I say, walking around my door and closing it. Reaching forward for his hand, I realize my palm already sweats with the anticipation of touching the paw of his. The closer I get to him, he appears even bigger, and we stand in contrast to one another. He's bare chested in wood shaving-covered pants and rustic work boots while I'm wobbling in my heels with a pencil skirt, blazer, and uncomfortable blouse.

His eyes glance down at my hand, but he doesn't reciprocate and reach for mine. Instead, he crosses his arms, puffing out his barrel chest and producing two large biceps, flexed in warning.

"Cricket," he begins, but I correct him.

"Olivet."

“This place isn’t for sale, so you can just reverse out of here, hopefully without backing into an unsuspecting tree, and return to wherever you came from.” All those words in his definitive tone add up to one: *Leave*. But I’m not going anywhere without the security of this property signed on a dotted line.

“Now Mr. Harrington,” I say. Lowering my hand, I place both on the hood of my car. The problem is I’m still looking *up* at him, so I’m not really in a position of authority to talk him down. This always looks good in the movies, but it’s clearly not working with my five-foot-seven stature compared to his six-foot-plus-too-many-extra-inches height.

“Giant,” he states, and I stop.

“Excuse me?”

“Everyone calls me Giant.”

“Well, Mr. Giant—”

“What do you want with the land?” he interjects, his voice still thunder deep but not so menacing.

“I work for Mullen Realty in Chicago, and we’d like to acquire this property for a resort—”

“A resort?” he huffs, his arms falling to his sides as he interrupts me. He turns his large head to the side, giving me a view of his profile. Strong facial features, a sharp nose broken at least once, and a tic to his jaw as he concentrates on something in the distance. “Do you know anything about this property, Cricket?”

“Olivet,” I correct. “And yes, I do. I know it’s a fine piece of land situated perfectly for a beautiful resort that will offer people peace and tranquility away from their hectic lives.” I ramble off the future brochure sure to include such words to entice potential visitors. The serenity around us reminds me I’m not far off from my speculation.

He harrumphs, crossing his arms again. Not as fierce as the first time and more casual in nature, he shakes his head as

though he's laughing at me. Only he isn't laughing. "It's not for sale."

I dismiss his words, considering what he would look like with laughter on his face. Would his cheeks glow? His mouth spread? I bet he has white teeth. A smile and a good chuckle might set him on fire. He's already larger than life in size, but with a good guffaw, he'd be bigger than thunder. A Greek god of sound and stature.

He's staring at me, and I realize I've taken too long to respond. I eye the cabin behind him. Rustic is one word for it. Cozy, graying, inviting. I rid the possibility of seeing the inside from my head. *He probably hides bodies under the porch.* I chuckle with the thought. He's fierce but not fearsome. There's just something about him. My head tilts, and my eyes pinch. I decide to change tactics. A new appeal.

"If it's a matter of money—"

"I don't need money." He scoffs, cutting me off and glaring at me again with a look of offense. "There isn't enough money in the world for me to give up this place."

My mouth pops open. "So, you are George Harrington the second?"

"I told you, I'm Giant, and I think we're done here, Cricket."

"Now, Mr. Harrington—"

He turns his back to me, that beautifully muscular back. My mouth waters, and I want to kiss up the river of his spine and along the flexing plains of his shoulder blades, which is absolutely ridiculous, considering he's a stranger. Besides, I've sworn off men. Pretty men with fancy names. *No thank you.* Although this man isn't pretty. He's weathered and worn like the cabin behind him, and for once, I'd like to be a little less straitlaced and buttoned-up. The collar of my blouse itches.

"Name your price, Mr. Harrington," I shout to his retreating back. He's abandoned the wood pile and stalks toward the low porch. Without touching the first stair, he steps

up to the platform, swallowed by the shade of the overhang. My eyes are fixated on two firm globes filling out his Carhartt pants. *Oh my*. Within seconds, he's disappeared inside the cabin, closing the door on my proposal.

Well, that certainly didn't go as planned.

2

No Sale. Maybe.

[Giant]

Who the fuck was she?

I'm still pondering the answer to that question as I return to the main house on Mountain Spring Lane—nicknamed the Lane by those of us who grew up on it. I'm still fired up over that insect of a woman, chirping away, asking questions, and wanting me to sell. *Ha.*

“Who sent that woman up the mountain?” I bark. I hold back the profanity itching to explode out of my mouth, knowing my mama would still whoop my ass for such words.

“Giant, I don't know what you're talking about,” Elaina Harrington says all sugar sweet and false honey. My mother is the queen of nosy, and from the look on her face, she's put her nose where it doesn't belong. I didn't need to stop at the house, but I was passing the Lane on my way back to town.

“Better question is why would you think I'd sell the cabin?” My mother believes I spend too much time up there hiding out to avoid life. Unfortunately for her, I don't care what she thinks. The cabin is mine, and I'm not avoiding anything. I like it up there. In the peace and quiet, I'm away from my mother's attempt to intervene in my life. For God's sake, I'm almost fifty.

She doesn't miss a beat as she sets the dining room table. I internally sigh. The size of the spread means my younger sister will be coming over with her new beau—or rather her former best friend, newly returned to finally profess his love for my baby sister some twenty-years later. The bloom of love my sister has found after the death of her husband has my

mother playing matchmaker for me. The formality of the dinner plates hints that more than Mati and Denton will be joining us. My mother hasn't answered my question before I add, "Who's coming to dinner, the queen?"

I shouldn't ask.

"Mati's friend, Alyce Wright. She's perfect." *For you.* I don't have to hear the words to know what she isn't saying. My mother straightens from setting down the knives and looks up at me. "You know, it could happen again." Her voice softens. She's wrong, and this isn't up for discussion—*again*. Damn Mati for being happy.

"You didn't answer my question," I snap a little harsher than I intend, but my mother's matchmaking efforts piss me off. Or maybe it's the little spark inside my chest at that firecracker of a woman spewing her offer.

Name your price, Mr. Harrington.

As I told her, no sale. There isn't enough money in the world to take the land off my hands, but my irritation ignites from more than her pecking away at me with her fancy marketing jargon. It's the look she was giving me. Her bright blue eyes narrowed in on my chest, walking their way down my midsection and landing at my zipper. I had a little fun with her without intending to do it in that respect. She didn't even flinch at getting caught, just looked as if she might be hungry. *She probably eats nails for breakfast.* I snort to myself. A pretty brunette like her, all city slicked up in her dark suit and heels, isn't going to go for someone like me, even if I do have money to my name.

The money is of no consequence. I'm a fourth generation Harrington. Fourth generation George Harrington, to be specific. The second at the end of my name marks I'm the son to the junior, named after his daddy. We're beer men, making it behind barn doors until it became legal to craft beer in Georgia. Our granddad used to joke we were here before Georgia began. Giant Brewing Company is our brand, and I'm the chief executive operator under my so-called retired father.

“Mama,” I say exasperated, and she sets a vase of flowers down with more force than necessary.

“Fine, I sent her up the path.” My mother doesn’t look at me. She knows that land means everything to me, and while she understands why, she doesn’t understand how I can spend so much time up there. I don’t want to have to remind her it’s my life. I’m forty-nine. She can stop mother-henning me.

I spin and head for the front door. I have a house closer to town, one I avoid most days since I find solitude up at the cabin. *Who cares?* I want to scream. I’m alone anyway. Empty nester, that’s the term, although I think I’ve been empty for longer than the absence of my daughters going off to college and moving on with their lives. It’s the way it should be with my girls, yet lately, I feel as if I’ve missed too much.

“Giant,” my mother calls after me, a warning in her voice. “You be here for dinner at six.”

I won’t disappoint her, but I want to. For once, I’d like to do something spontaneous and not show up to a family dinner or a matchmaking setup or a pre-scheduled anything. I’m free to do as I please with my days, yet as I approach fifty, I feel trapped. As if something’s crawling under my skin wanting to be released.

My thoughts rush back to the bug of a woman leaning over her car, trying to appear all tough but instead looking adorable as her wide eyes skim down my body. Wonder what she would have thought if I placed her on her little silver hood and kissed her senseless just because I could and I wanted to?

Whoa. I slow my F-150 truck with the large Giant Brewing Co. logo on the side as I near the gravel lane heading to town. *Where did that thought come from?* My palms sweat on the steering wheel. It’s been a while since I’ve been with a woman, but still, she’s a stranger. I don’t know her. *I don’t even want to know her,* I admonish, but something taps at my skull.

Yes, you do, whispers through my thick head. I shake the thought.

Whoever she was, she talked too much. But then there were her eyes—bright and blue as the day—and the way she scanned my body. *Hungry*—that was the look. It was a nice look.

She also had that fierce attitude as though she wouldn't accept anything less than what she wanted.

Name your price, Mr. Harrington.

I'll give her a price: no sale.

Never mind my subtle attraction to her. I'm not going to know her because I'm not parting with my land. That property is special to me in a way no piece of ass will ever be, and besides, I don't want a piece of ass. If I need to get laid, I can go down to Elton. *When was the last time I got laid?* I mentally count back as if flipping sheets on a calendar.

Cripes. It *has* been a bit.

My dick whimpers in my outdoor pants when thoughts of a chirpy brunette with big blue eyes matching the sky come into play. *Down boy*, I curse, and then decide against the reprimand. The image of her pretty little mouth begging me for my land—begging me for anything—will make my shower-time fodder all the faster this evening.

And I'm going to need a release before another matchmaking session from my mother.

3

Proverbial Gauntlets and Other Hammering Instruments

[Letty]

“It didn’t go well,” I tell Marcus as I stand in the fluffy bathrobe provided by the Conrad Lodge. A thick towel swipes over my hair as I hear Marcus sigh through the speakerphone.

“Letty, you have to secure this place. This is your future we’re talking about.” If Marcus wasn’t forty, like me, I’d swear he was an old man or my dad. Too bad my father is dead, and Uncle Frank is the only father figure I’ve ever had.

“I know.” I exhale as I toss the towel aside and then throw myself on the extra-high mattress in the four-poster bed. *Who sleeps on such a thing?* Then I consider the giant of a man I saw earlier in the day. Giant. What an interesting name. It certainly suits his stature. “We didn’t get off to a good start.”

“What did you do?” he singsongs, assuming it’s my fault. Then again, most errors in my life are. Hudson was the biggest mistake.

“I almost hit him with my car.”

“What?” Marcus shrieks, releasing the mother in him. He wants to be a parent with his partner, so he understands my struggles. We aren’t getting any younger as *my* mother likes to remind us.

“It would have been a little love tap. Not even marking him.” Thinking of his long legs, I’m curious about their thickness within those low-slung pants. *They’re the size of tree trunks*, I surmise, proportionate to the rest of his body.

“Letty, way to make a first impression.”

That’s just it. I botched my first impression—nearly running over a man will do that. But in general, I struggle with sales as my career. I’m not good at introductions. I go in for the kill too quickly because I want the haggle process over. I also don’t make a lasting impression, which is why I’ve failed at life.

Sigh.

“You need to go back to him with blazing saddles and double barrels and those big breasts of yours.”

I laugh. “Marcus, there isn’t one drop of hope that man is interested in my breasts.”

“Oh, and do you want him to be?” The tweak to his tone and the higher octave bring visions of an eyebrow raised in question. Did I want Mr. Lumbersexy-and-steamy to be interested in my breasts? No, of course not. Absolutely not. That would be unprofessional, inappropriate, and not plausible.

“No.” I chuckle. “But I do want his land.”

“And how hung is his land?”

I laugh outright at the poor euphemism. I couldn’t even guess at the expanse of *his land* as it’s been almost a year since I’ve experienced the private property of another person. Damn Hudson. The thought sobers me.

“I need to obtain his land.”

“Now, you’re talking, honey.”

“No, I mean the actual property. The Harrington cabin and surrounding woods need to become mine.”

Marcus remains quiet for a moment. “And what are you willing to risk to possess his wood?” He’s still speaking in innuendos, but I’m not playing.

“Anything,” I say breathlessly. *Anything.*

The declaration is reinforced when the next call I receive is from my uncle Frank.

“Olivet,” he snaps sharp on the third syllable of my name. “How did it go today?” From his tone, it’s clear he’s concerned I can’t get the job done, and he isn’t off in his assessment. I begged for this deal.

Give me a chance. I wanted to prove I could do this, but most of all, I wanted the contract. I need the commission a property this size would offer.

“I’m still working on Mr. Harrington, Mr. Mullen.” Uncle Frank doesn’t care for me to call him uncle in the office. He doesn’t want to appear to play favorites with family members even though he clearly doesn’t when it comes to me and clearly does when it comes to my older sister. But Uncle Frank has a soft spot for *his* sister, my mother. She was married to his best friend, who died too young from cancer, and Frank promised my father he’d look after us. He does value family even if he doesn’t say it. It’s a strange duality to his personality. But money is his first love.

“Work harder, Olivet,” he demands. There is no confidence boosting. No words of encouragement. He doesn’t believe I can pull off this deal, so I’m surprised he even gave me the opportunity. Perhaps he believes when I fail, my lack of sales ability and partner potential will be proven once and for all.

You pull this off, and we’ll finally talk partner. Like a child, I swallowed up his promise. For some reason, I want to make him proud although I don’t like him much—as a boss or an uncle. Still, I can’t dismiss all he’s done for our family.

I sigh with the thought.

“Yes, sir. I’m meeting with Mr. Harrington again tomorrow.”

“Well, shut that deal down. We need you back in the office.”

Why? I wonder. Does he need more coffee? Maybe another copy made? A contract signature that he's too lazy to get on his own?

"I'll be on it first thing."

"Anything you need to do," he warns.

Anything, I repeat as the line goes dead.

+ + +

The following day, I return to the Harrington cabin with renewed determination. I'm only supposed to be in Blue Ridge for a few days. I could stretch it a week, but the longer I'm away from home, the more I worry my backstabbing nemesis Dayna will steal prospects out from under me. Real estate can be a ruthless business, especially if you're good at wheeling and dealing like Dayna is. Plus, my sister is getting married in two weeks. Thinking of these things fuel my spirit, and after getting lost only once, I arrive at the secluded cabin with fortitude and fierceness, to be deflated when I find no sign of George—*Giant*—Harrington.

"Now what?" I mutter, looking around the small span of flat land surrounding the cabin before deep woods take over the landscape to the front and a sharp slope rises up the back. The mountain climb looks easy enough, inviting actually, but it's been a while since I've hiked anywhere other than the nearest Starbucks. Blue Ridge doesn't have a Starbucks, but thank goodness the local bakery has good coffee. I set the second cup beside me and hold mine in both my hands. It isn't cold here, but there's a chill to the air. Though I'm dressed casually in jeans and a sweater, my booties still don't cut it on the uneven ground. My toes tap on the wooden step as I allow myself a seat on the porch and take a moment to let the quiet surround me.

As a city girl, born and bred, the silence is eerie. I need a plane overhead, a train in the distance, and a car horn honking

down the street, but there's something to be said for the peacefulness. Closing my eyes for a second, I feel as if I can hear the few clouds in the sky move in the slight breeze.

“What the hell are you doing?”

The gruff, masculine voice startles me, and I'm thankful for the lid on my coffee even though drops slosh out of the sipping piece. Hot splatters of coffee stain my jeans, and I'd feel the burn if it wasn't for the glacial stare and giant boulder of a man blocking out the sun.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” I say, cheerfully, trying my best not to cower under his pinched glare.

Be brave. Be strong. I repeat the chant Marcus sang before ending our phone call the previous night.

As I look up at Giant, his presence says he's a million times stronger than me, and it's more than his physique. His body language screams command and control, and I briefly wonder what it would be like to have that energy focused on me. My breasts tingle as my breathing labors. My core clenches, and I force my knees together.

“I brought you a coffee,” I say, realizing my fingers shake as I reach for the second cup sitting next to my hip and lift it toward him.

Looking off in the distance, he crosses his arms over his massive chest, displaying those bulging biceps once again. His stature says he's trying to shut me out. He's dressed in a flannel today, covering the awesome body underneath the clothing. *Too bad.* But then again, from my vantage point, I'm eye level with another area of him, and it's a struggle to keep my eyes upward. I'm suddenly thinking about *the size of his property* and *the lay of his land*. The width. The girth. The length. Damn Marcus for his innuendos.

“You'd have to do better than a cup of coffee to butter me up.” For a moment, I want to believe he's teasing me. Did his voice lower? Is he holding back a laugh? What would a deep

chuckle sound like from a man of his size? How much would it rock my world if he gave his laughter to me?

“Yeah, and what would a woman have to do to butter your biscuit?” I joke, fully aware I mean myself and fully aware he has no interest in me. As a woman. As a human being. In fact, when he turns his head back in my direction, I’m convinced he thinks I’m an alien, and he’s ready to report me to the Department of Defense for unidentified objects.

“Do you know anything about these woods?” he asks, surprising me as his face softens and his voice dips. I know the specs of the area. The property survey reports it’s a nice chunk. We’re hopeful of securing the woods on either side of this place to offer a decent spread of land to our prospective investor. I’m ready to spew all the particulars, but the way he holds my gaze tells me he’s asking me something else, something deeper, and I’m afraid I don’t have an answer for his question.

“Why don’t you tell me about them?” I pat a hand on the decking of the porch where I’ve made myself comfortable. It is comfortable, I note. Quiet. Pretty. The view before me isn’t too bad either.

He harrumphs and gazes away from me for another second. His arms remain crossed, but his shoulders slump, and I’m almost disappointed. I like our little game, and I don’t want him to give in to me too easily.

What am I thinking? I curse myself. Of course, I want him to make this as easy as possible. Just look into my eyes and give me what I want. I will the energy out into the universe and almost fall back when his eyes immediately return to mine. The dark chocolaty orbs have turned midnight, and a spark flares in them.

Oh no, I think without knowing what I’m oh-no-ing about.

“Want my land so badly?” he begins, and I’m about to interject, giving away my desperation for this sliver of space,

but he continues. “What do you even know about this land?”

“I—” He holds up a hand to cut me off before I can even form a thought.

“Have you ever spent a night under the stars? Or bathed in a stream? Have you seen a bear cub with its mother? Or what about hiking in the peacefulness of nature, listening to the birds sing?”

“I...” This time, my voice fades, and I don’t know how to respond to him. “I went to Girl Scout camp when I was ten.”

He stares at me as if I’ve just told him I can speak Martian.

“Before you try to steal my land, perhaps you should learn a thing or two about it.”

I stare up at him as his expression turns virile.

“I know this piece of property could earn you millions.” I look beyond him, taking in the small bit of landscape I can see around his broad hips and crossed arms.

“I told you, I don’t want the money.” He scoffs. “I’m talking about dirt under your toes. Wind in your face. Stars in your eyes.” His eyes nearly dance as though he has undisclosed information he’s waiting to share with me, and strangely, I want to know his secret. And though dirt under my toes doesn’t sound pleasant, it doesn’t sound terrible either.

Still.

Tell me. Tell me all your wisdom and woes. I swallow with the intensity of his glare and rub a hand down the thigh of my jeans.

“Okay, so I’m not Pocahontas. How would I learn?” My voice cracks, sounding meek. *Teach me, Yoda.*

“From the land.” He pauses. His crossed arms bulge before me and lift with the heave of his frustrated inhale. What would those arms feel like around me?

“And your land will just *teach* me?” Oh God. Did my voice just drop? Did I exaggerate *your land*, implying something other than the greenery around us? Damn Marcus and his damnable innuendos, but if this man means I can hike his landscape, I volunteer as tribute. “How?”

“Camping.”

“What?” I stammer. My mouth falls open.

“Camping. Three nights of roughing it and then I’ll think about your proposition. You break before that and no deal.”

My proposition? Did I proposition him? Can he see the images racing through my mind? I want to do all kinds of things to him, starting with the body part closest to me. My heart races, and my sweaty palms...sweat more. My breath catches.

Anything whispers through my mind along with the song “Colors of the Wind.”

My eyes narrow. My heart thuds to a screeching halt.

This is crazy.

But I slowly rise, pressing up on my thigh as I stand. I come to my full height, which doesn’t quite match his, but with the help of the two step difference, I’m close. My gaze meets his fiery eyes. There’s one thing this man needs to learn *about me*. I like nothing more than to prove others wrong.

“Challenge accepted.”

4

To Camp or Not to Camp

[Giant]

“Reporting for camping, sir.”

She salutes me, and I’m reminded of how not one of my soldier friends looked like her. She looks as if an L.L. Bean magazine spit her off their pages, but judging by the newness of the clothing, I’d say she didn’t happen to have these things on hand.

“Are those new?” I nod to the Timberland lookalikes on her feet that don’t boast a scratch, dent, or smudge. Her jeans hug her body, and the flannel shirt open a few extra buttons exposes a tank top underneath, hinting at the swell of her breasts. Her chestnut colored hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and each time I see her, she looks different. Fresher. Younger. She can’t be more than forty.

She peers down at her footwear and twists her ankle. “Do you like them? I got them at Duncan’s.” Duncan’s Hardware is the local shop for everything as the closest Walmart is a good half hour away.

“Those are gonna hurt, Cricket,” I warn her. “You can’t wear new boots for a lengthy hike. You’ll have blisters for days.”

“I’m tough,” she tells me, holding herself upright and facing off with me as best as she can despite our height difference. She props her hands on her hips, and it’s almost comical how her expression turns hard. Her face doesn’t allow her to be stern. It’s the curve of her lips, her pert nose, and those bright blue eyes. “Besides, it’s Letty.”

I stare at her in confusion.

“My name. Olivet,” she emphasizes. “Considering we’re going to spend a few days together, you can call me Letty, my nickname.”

I stare more.

“People typically wonder, how do you get Letty from Olivet? I should be Livvy, or Vette, or even Olive, but I’m not really an Olive and—”

“I’ll just keep to Cricket,” I interrupt her rambling.

Her lips twist, but she doesn’t say anything more. However, she has more to say. I already know this about her—she’ll have more to say.

“Spit it out,” I snark, trying not to let my eyes roam to the hint of cleavage popping out of the tank top under her open flannel.

“Well, I...” She wraps her hand around her ponytail and smooths down the length. An image of my hand curling the tail to wrap around my fist and yank her head back to take her yammering mouth fills my vision. I’m blinded by the thought. She clears her throat, and I return to the quandary.

“And...?” I prompt.

“I just wondered if your wife is okay with this. Maybe she should come with us or...?”

My arms cross, and my glare stops her chirping.

“Are you worried about your safety?”

Her brows pinch for a second, but without much thought, she responds. “No. I trust you.” Her words surprise us both. Her forehead furrows, and my eyes widen. “I know I don’t know you, but I’m not afraid of you.”

I want to warn her to be afraid, be very afraid, but then again, I don’t want to frighten her away. We haven’t even started this adventure, and strangely, I’ve been looking forward to the possibility over the past twenty-four hours. I wasn’t even certain she’d show.

“Does someone know where you’ll be?” I ask. Does she have a husband? A boyfriend? Someone who will worry about her.

“Marcus knows.”

I nod with a scowl as if my stomach hasn’t just roiled. Of course, she has a man. She’s too pretty to be alone. Suddenly, she laughs.

“He’s my friend. *Friend-friend*, not a boyfriend,” she clarifies. “He’s gay. I’m single as a Pringle,” she admits, then points at me. “You should see your face.” Her laughter is like a rain shower on a sunny day, unexpected and refreshing. As I stare at her, absorbing the sound, her chuckle subsides.

“Anyway, and your wife?”

“She’s dead.” I don’t mean it as harsh as it comes out, and I hate how my voice cracks despite the years since her death.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she whispers, and I hate the words on her lips even more.

“Cancer sucks,” I mutter, and she looks away with a pained look on her face.

“Yes, it does.” Her face drifts back for mine. We hold each other’s eyes for a moment, and I wonder what it would feel like to hold *her*. It’s been a long time since I’ve known the comfort of such things.

“So.” She claps. “Should we...?” She raises her hands and tips her hitched thumbs over her shoulder to the cabin.

“And you’re okay with being alone with me?” I’m suddenly second-guessing myself.

“I don’t have anything to worry about, right?”

There’s an unspoken question, but I don’t know what she’s implying. “Nope, not a worry in the world. I’m gay.” I wink, and her mouth pops open. The pink circle of her lips

makes my dick flinch with thoughts of what she could do with such a mouth. I point back at her. “You should see your face.”

“Are you...teasing me? Is that actually a grin?” Her grin grows, and her eyes twinkle to match the day’s sky. Does she think I don’t smile? My lips twist, attempting to hold back the unnatural curl. “Are you laughing at me?”

“I never laugh,” I say, holding back the rumble in my throat. She makes me want to laugh a little.

“I didn’t think so,” she mutters, a smile still on her lips, and turns for the side of my cabin. “So, camping?”

I step up next to her and point upward. Her eyes follow the line of my finger. “Up there.”

The strip of land I own is narrow and long. Up an old miner’s trail about three miles is the place I plan for us to share our nights. Not together, of course. Just trying to break her of her idea that she wants this land.

“But I thought...” She hesitates. I eye her outfit again as she eyes my cabin.

“Nope. Outdoors. Tent. Campfire. Stars.” She’s going to back down before we even start, and I have to admit the disappointment niggles at me. She blinks in the sunshine, looking up the slope of the mountain behind the cabin.

“Okay,” she whispers.

Okay? My feet want to do a happy dance, and I’m not a happy dance kind of guy. My chest swells with pride that she didn’t back down so quickly, and I worry I’m having a heart attack from the excitement. I can’t believe she agreed to this scheme.

“Got a bag?”

“Oh. Oh yes.” When she rushes back to the Jetta, a little city car, I wonder how she’s made it up and down the rutted ridges of the two-tire lane leading back to my cabin. Her vehicle isn’t made for such travel. I follow her to the trunk, and she pops it open. Inside is a large backpack.

“You gonna carry all that for three miles?” I whistle. I don’t believe she has the strength, and I’m ready for her to argue. She tilts her head around the vehicle and looks up the mountain rise behind the cabin one more time.

“I didn’t know what I’d need.”

“I have all the provisions already.” Her wide eyes almost make me chuckle, but I bite the inside of my cheek, reminding myself I don’t want to like her. She wants my land. “It looks like you packed for a week.” I have no faith she’ll make it past one night, let alone three, but that swollen heart thing feels like hope that she’ll stick it out, and hope is dangerous.

“I didn’t know what I’d need,” she repeats, her voice lowering as she lugs the overstuffed hiking bag—also brand new—from her trunk. The effort almost knocks her over, and I reach for the thing.

“What’s in here?” I snap. The bag probably weighs more than her.

“I didn’t know—” she begins, but I hold a hand up to stop her from speaking. I tug the bag from her and unceremoniously unzip the pack. Rummaging through her clothing, I notice several with price tags and a few unmentionables that are nothing more than scraps of lace. I pull out one slim piece in black.

“You’re going camping, not to a fashion show.”

“Are you finished fondling my undies?” she snaps, reaching around me and pushing my hands from her bag. My dick does a dance as I consider her wearing only the lacy fabric and nothing more.

I snort and hand the flimsy strip back to her. “Suit yourself.” I stand, leaving her opened pack to head for the porch where I have my own bag to carry.

“You have a tent in there?” she asks, coming up behind me.

“I’ve already taken everything up.” I turn to face her, noticing her backpack is almost bigger than she is. She stares at me a moment, and I note again how much I like how she looks at me, even with the quizzical expressions and wrinkled nose. Then realization hits.

“You’ve already been up there and came back to get me. That’s like a ten-mile hike in a day.”

“It’s six but good to see you can do math.”

Her eyes narrow as I slip on my pack and tip my head toward the mountain.

One last chance to back out, lady.

But she follows me.

+ + +

To my surprise, she doesn’t complain, but she jabbers on as we climb.

“You’re not an ax murderer, right? Not leading me to a lair where you’ll cut me up and leave me to rot. Let the bears eat me. I already told you Marcus knows where I am. I have a tracking device on my phone.”

“Thanks for letting me know. Your phone will be the first thing I destroy.” I continue walking, but her sudden quiet gives me pause, and I turn to find she’s stopped following me.

“What?” I question. She has one hand resting on her cocked hip as she stares up at me. “You already told me you trust me.”

“I know, but...I don’t think that’s funny.” Her voice turns serious even though she had to be joking when she asked if I was an ax murderer. The thought hits me like a bullet to the chest, which I already suffered a few years back from my days in the service. In my defense, I have killed people, but I don’t think now is the time to tell her that. On second thought, there

won't ever be a time to explain my history to her. I don't want her to know me.

"Well, you asked," I remind her. Her hand drops, and the other hand lifts for her hip. She glares at me. "Look, here's the rundown. My brother is the mayor of Blue Ridge. I don't think I'd get away with murder even if I wanted to commit it, which I don't. And even if I did, a prison term isn't on my bucket list."

"You have a brother?"

Jesus. "Do you know anything about the Harringtons? Aren't you supposed to research a prospect before you hound someone for their personal property?"

"I don't look into the personal lives of the owners, no. That would be an invasion of privacy. I only look at the property and the value for my client."

Heartless. "What about the value *to* the current owner?"

"I already told you to name your price." Incorrigible. Does she really believe everything has a dollar value? Then again, her new boots and the fresh backpack filled with clothing containing sales tags answer my question. *Gold-digging, money-driven city woman. Ha.*

I turn away from her and continue up the mountain, ignoring her suggestion.

"Tell me about your brother." She sounds farther away, but I tell myself not to look back. If she can't keep up, she'll just have to find her way.

"Why, so you can exploit him as well?"

She ignores me and begins to talk about herself. "I have a sister. For a long time, it's been just the three of us. My mother, my sister, and me. I lost my brother so long ago that I don't remember what it was like to have one."

The thought rips at my chest. I love my brothers and Mati, my sister. We're a tight-knit family, but I don't want to explain myself to her. Since she didn't bother to research the

Harringtons before she approached me, that's her loss. She has no idea who she's going up against.

When I don't answer, it feels as if only a few seconds pass before she starts chirping at me again. "How about a girlfriend? Got a lady friend?"

Not that I think that's any of her business either, but I stop and turn back to her, finding she's farther behind me than I thought. I briefly think of Alyce Wright, Mati's friend, whom Mother invited to dinner. I've met her on several occasions. With curly blond hair to her chin and light eyes, she's fine, but she just doesn't do it for me. And I'm pretty certain I don't do it for her either. Despite being the assistant volleyball coach at BRHS under my sister, she's more like a cheerleader with her high-pitched voice and constant enthusiasm. She talks too much, which reminds me of a certain someone who's too busy looking up at me to notice where she's walking. Cricket trips and falls to her hands and knees.

Instantly, I race the few feet back to her.

"Are you okay?" I ask when she doesn't look up, remaining on all fours. She nods slowly, and my heart pounds because she went down hard. *Is she hurt?* "Here." I reach for her chin, intending to make her look up at me, but she tugs her face away. I'm squatting, and the rejection almost forces me to fall backward.

"Letty?" She shakes her head and slowly lifts one dirty hand. She brushes under her eye and peels the other hand from the dirt. Gingerly, she lifts her upper body and then twists to sit on her backside. Her hands cover her knees, and her forehead lowers to them.

"Let me look," I offer, but she shakes her head again, dismissing me. She removes her hands, and I note how one knee of her jeans are torn and blood seeps through the opening. "You're hurt."

"I'm clumsy," she mutters, her voice choked. "I hit a rock." I search for the offending piece of nature and find the

sharp edge of a long stone sticking up from the earth.

“Hang on. I have bandages.” I slip off my pack and search for some cleansing ointment and a large adhesive. “It might sting,” I warn as I rip the ointment package with my teeth and then tug at the opening in her jeans, making the rip larger.

“Darn. These were my favorite.” I bite the inside of my cheek, not wanting to chuckle at her expense, but it’s funny that she’s more worried about her ripped pants than her broken skin. Her liquid-filled eyes tell me her joke hides the pain, and my chest pinches. She doesn’t flinch as I swipe the gel over the cut and then open the bandage. I blow on the damaged skin before working the bandage into her jeans as best as I can. Her voice is soft near my ear as she says, “Thank you.”

Slowly, my eyes lift, and I find her watching me. I swallow. Why is she looking at me like this? And why do I like it so much?

“Let me see your hands.” My command comes out a little too sharply, and her soft expression turns edgy.

“I’m fine.” She brushes her hands on her hips and tries to press off the ground. I don’t miss the wince.

“Here,” I mutter, reaching under her armpits and hoisting us both upward in one awkward movement. Her hands grip my biceps for support, and we stand. I’m hyperaware of her breasts brushing against my abs with our height difference. Her hands come to rest on my chest, and she gently presses off me.

“I’m fine,” she repeats softer, but I’m quick, and I circle her wrists, twisting them to expose her palms. Both are nicked and punctured from the gravel on the ground. I turn them back over and force her open hands to rub down my shirt. It isn’t the cleanest move, but she needs the bits and pieces scraped away.

“Does it feel like anything lingers? A sliver of something?”

“A sliver...of something.” Her voice is hardly more than a whisper. Her eyes remain on my chest while I remove her hands and blow over the broken skin like I did her cut knee. “That...that tingles.”

My gaze leap to hers, and suddenly, I tingle as well. In my heart. In my gut. And in my dick.

Dammit. I release her wrists and reach for her backpack, attempting to remove it from her shoulders.

“What are you doing?” she snaps.

“I can carry it for a while.”

Her head begins to shake. “Oh no. No, you aren’t going to make me feel like I can’t pull my weight and lose out on this place. I’ll manage.”

The mention of the land may as well be a slap in the face. Of course, she isn’t turned on by me like I’m suddenly worked up over her. She just wants my land.

“I was trying to be a gentleman,” I bite back, taking a step away from her.

“Well, just...don’t gentleman me.”

Yes, right. Why am I being nice to her? I should have left her on her knees, hands digging into the gravel and leg bleeding, but it goes against my nature to leave a wounded animal unattended. On second thought, I hope she rots from gangrene in her leg. I hope it festers and falls off. Then I reconsider the wish as I’ve known my share of men who had such a thing happen to them. It wasn’t fair, and it wasn’t pretty.

“Fine,” I bark, releasing her backpack strap and leaning over for my bag.

“Fine.”

5

This Isn't Glamping

[Letty]

My eyes fill again with traitorous liquid, but I rapidly blink back the sting. I should have let him take my backpack. It's heavy, and I curse myself for overpacking. My knee really does ache, and my other knee throbs from the tender bruise hidden under my jeans. My hands burn. And I'm thirsty. I reach for my water bottle and take a hardy drink of lukewarm liquid. I don't want to waste precious water, but I pour a little over my cracked hands. The initial drops force me to hiss, but I allow the liquid to cleanse the cuts. Looking up, I find Giant has continued moving, so I follow for the remainder of our climb.

The slope is steeper than it appears from the base, and he's right, dammit. My feet are killing me. My toes feel cramped, and my heel rubs uncomfortably. I'm going to have blisters, and I want to curse Giant. It's all his fault, I swear, but the blame is really mine. If I wasn't so determined to prove myself to him, I wouldn't be in this position.

You also wouldn't be getting this land, I remind myself. I need this promotion and the financial security it will bring; not to mention, the agency is depending on me. *Anything*. Thoughts of my future drive me forward but at a much slower pace than I'd originally set. Giant's strides are naturally longer than mine as his legs are three times bigger.

Okay, maybe not three times, but I swear he's hardly broken a sweat when all I want is a shower.

Tenting, whispers through my head.

I don't suppose that thing has a clawfoot tub with fragrant bubble bath and a few scented candles. Oh, or a glass of wine. Conrad Lodge, the place I've stayed while in Blue Ridge, had all those luxuries before I began this adventure.

My eyes travel to Giant's backside, still visible despite the length of the pack on his back. Even in his rugged pants, he has a fine ass. He's the epitome of outdoor sexy. The way he blew on my knee had my girlie parts swirling in wonder at how his warm breath might feel down there. It's been a long time since anyone's given attention to my nether region. My eyes leap up to the fine curve of his firm globes, and I curse him again.

I don't want to think about him. I don't want to be attracted to him.

A sliver of something. What was it that punctured my lungs, stealing my breath when he looked at me? His deep eyes warming to liquid iron instead of cold steel.

I lose Giant in a copse of trees, and I shake my head. He's doing this on purpose. He's trying to ditch me so I'll give up my pursuit. Well, he doesn't know me, and the second I'm told no, I redouble my efforts. Only my efforts are waning as my feet pinch. When I near the thickness of the trees, I notice Giant leaning against one, his arms casually linked, and his ankles crossed. He looks like a man ready for a photoshoot for *Outdoor Life* or *Lumber Men*. I don't know if either is a magazine, but I'd subscribe if all the images inside matched him. He's watching me, his lips twisting as though he's thinking. Probably wondering how he can toss me down this mountain or hide my body.

I must have been crazy to agree to this scheme. I didn't even know if he was married, and I said yes to a camping trip. In the woods. With a stranger. I don't know anything about his history. Prison records. Background check. Unknown felonies committed. Yet here I am, traipsing up a mountain with him. Of course, a quick Google search on him last night didn't

produce any illegal dealings in his past. In fact, he's a decorated military veteran from what I learned.

Still.

Hysteria wells in my chest, and I'm ready to break out in song. *The hills are alive with the sound of music...* Anxiety-riddled laughter builds in my throat. I'm going to sound like a madwoman.

What was I thinking?

Be brave. Be strong. Marcus's words come back to me, and I try to muster emotions I don't feel. I've made a mistake. I'm going to die. This man wishes I would.

I exhale heavily as I reach him, realizing I'm turning into a drama queen.

"Well, fancy meeting you here," I mock.

"Won't meet another soul." It's a warning and a reminder I'm alone with him and at his mercy. I'll need him to survive whatever awaits me for the next three nights. Then again, the thing I fear most is him.

I step into the shadow of the trees, and he swipes an arm forward, suggesting I lead the way.

"There's a path from here."

The worn-down trail, crushed by well-traveled feet, leads deeper into the trees. I keep my eyes on the flattened leaves and broken twigs before me, not wanting to take another fall.

"My great-great grandfather brewed beer up here."

I'm startled by the sound of his voice, both the deepness and the nostalgia in it.

"I thought the mountains were known for moonshine."

"He might have done that, too, but beer was his product. Even though it wasn't legal to distribute craft beer in Georgia until recently."

“That seems a little archaic. I’m from Chicago. We’re fond of our liquor and have the history to prove it. It’s called Prohibition.”

He snorts behind me, and I concede this to be a chuckle.

“He hid his talent up here and made runs along the miner trails.” Pride fills his voice with this heritage. “Today, we don’t need such a thing for our beer.”

I’m stumped once again as I don’t know the personal side of his story. “Which is?”

“Giant Brewing Company. I’m Giant.”

I stop and spin to face him. “You own a beer company. Like Budweiser?”

I found this information during my Google search but didn’t realize he was the *Giant* in Giant Brewing. His slow grin is evidence of both his answer and his pride, and I’m blinded by the effect of his lips slightly curling along the heavy scruff on his face.

“We’re more of a craft beer company. Our sales have jumped since my brother opened the pub, but we aren’t quite at the success of a major beer distributor.”

“I thought you said your brother was the mayor?”

“He is. This is a different brother.” I remember what he said while we stood outside his cabin. He thinks I’ll expose his family, so he isn’t sharing much, but this is another tidbit about him.

“Well, I’d love to sample Giant Beer one day.” Did my voice just drop? Did the statement sound suggestive? I turn away from him, heat rushing to my cheeks, and we continue walking in silence a bit before the trees open into a clearing.

“Do I hear water?” I ask as a rushing liquid sounds in the distance.

“There’s a river nearby. We don’t want to be too close as animals venture there as well, but we aren’t far.” Giant’s voice

sounds all business-like, and I notice a pile of camping equipment before us.

I mumble a reminder to myself. “Right, you were already up here.”

As we step closer, I see a collapsed tent, two sleeping bags, an extra-large cooler, a smaller one, and a fire pit. The space has been used before as the pit is a scorched metal ring buried in the ground a few inches to contain the flames.

“It gets dark early, so we should set up.” Giant pauses. “Maybe we should head to the stream to wash your hands.”

“Actually, I need a bathroom.” I’m wary to admit such an act of human nature, but I have to pee.

“It’s right through there.” He points toward another clump of trees. I’m ready to say, *You’ve got to be kidding*, when I realize he isn’t.

“I don’t suppose you have toilet paper.” He tilts his head a second and then reaches into his backpack. A small cylinder travel container contains a limited number of sheets.

“I’d use them sparingly.”

I shudder but realize it isn’t the first time I’ve had to pop a squat. Mustering up my college days, I stomp my feet as I march to the trees. It feels good to remove my pack. My back aches. I’m afraid of what I’ll find when I eventually remove my boots because my feet are screaming.

“And watch out for poison ivy.”

Have I mentioned how I curse him? I complete my business, eyes scanning the ground as if poison ivy is a living being that can climb up my backside. When I return to camp, Giant has laid out the tent, but he directs me to help him pitch it. We work collectively under his direction. Silently. He isn’t much of a talker, and I’ve already learned he isn’t going to willingly offer me any information. I tend to chatter to fill the quiet space, but I’m too tired to make small talk.

The tent appears rather small, but I don't give it another thought as we force the stakes into the earth. When we finish, he starts a fire in the ring as the late afternoon begins to grow dimmer.

"If you want to wash up, the stream works best. It's cold for bathing, but a little quick in and out works well enough."

Bathing in a stream? Is he crazy? I'm not getting naked near this man nor am I dipping in a stream. I don't know what I thought, but all practicalities escaped me when I said yes to this challenge. Toilets. Showers. What's going to be missing next? I turn back to the tent.

"There's only one tent." The statement echoes between us.

"And?" He pauses from laying wood in the pit. "Is there a problem?"

"Only if I need to sleep outside of it." I hadn't thought this through. His lips curve at the corner, and my fear dissipates a little at the welcome expression on his face.

"No, you can sleep inside."

"And you'll sleep out here?" I question.

"No, I'm sleeping inside, too."

My mouth pops open and then clamps shut. He's serious. "And what are the sleeping arrangements?" I sound haughty and prudish, but he's got another thing coming if he thinks I'm giving him cuddle time in order to prove myself worthy of this land.

"I brought two sleeping bags. One for you. One for me. You'll want to zip up tight. It can get cold at night."

His statement should settle me, but it doesn't. I need some separation from him.

"Maybe I need that stream after all," I mumble.

Giant points in the opposite direction of the makeshift bathroom, and I march off for fresh water. My breath hitches

as I see the low water rushing over the rocks. The sun streaming through the surrounding foliage to the crystal clear water gives the scene an otherworldly feel. Taking a moment, I breathe in the crispness, allowing the air to fill my lungs. A shiver ripples up my arms as I feel strangely alone. It's peaceful, but I don't like the sense of loneliness.

I lower for some water, scrubbing my hands together and then cupping a fair amount to drink. I should have brought my water bottle to refill. A twig snaps from somewhere nearby, and I assume it's Giant. When a second snap occurs, I look up to find a deer with a giant rack standing opposite the stream looking back at me.

"I wish I had my gun. He's eight points."

I turn on Giant in my crouched position. "You wouldn't dare," I hiss. The horror in my voice raises his brows, furrowing his forehead.

"It's called survival."

"It's called there's a grocery store."

"How do you think that meat gets into those stores?" He glares back at me. His hands come to his hips with a water container in each one, making him look imposing as well as ridiculous.

"The freezer fairy." I meet his stare until his face cracks. His mouth remains closed, but his chest rumbles. Was that a chuckle? He shakes his head as he closes his eyes for a second.

"City girl," he murmurs, before opening his lids and holding out my water bottle. He squats next to me to refill his canteen, and then we silently watch the deer trek away.

"Beautiful," I whisper.

"Yeah," he says just as quietly, but he isn't looking at the buck. His eyes weigh on the side of my face.

"You scared him with your evil thoughts," I mock.

“I hope not.” His voice remains low, gravelly and rough, as his eyes linger on me. Then he shakes his head again and effortlessly stands. “Let’s eat.”

Following him, I suddenly don’t feel hungry.

+ + +

“What’s this?” I ask although I know full well what he’s offering me.

“It’s from a grocery store,” he mocks me, holding out the long twig with meat on the end.

“That’s a hot dog.” I can’t remember the last time I had a hot dog, let alone one roasted over an open fire.

“Don’t tell me you’re some highfalutin, non-meat-eatin’, I-won’t-even-eat-a-vegetable-because-it-hurts-the-plant kind of person?”

His sass gets under my skin, and I want to wipe the smirk from his face with the bun he offers me.

“I’ll have you know I eat meat.” The tone of my voice is suggestive as I stare back at him. He sits perpendicular to me, but he’s close as the fire pit is small. The temperature has dropped considerably under the cover of darkness, and with the elevated location, I expect nothing less.

“I’m sure the hot dog gods are grateful.”

“*Hardy-har*,” I snap. “I eat hot dogs. Once a year at the ballfield.” I’m a Cubs fan, and the food is part of the experience in Wrigley—hot dogs with bright green relish, peanuts in the shell, and an ice-cold beer, which reminds me...

“Got any Giant Beer in one of those coolers?”

I’m not really a beer drinker, but I’m curious. His proud grin returns, and he reaches back for one of the coolers to

remove two bottles. Cracking each open on the edge of the container, he hands me one.

“It’s our October blend. We haven’t distributed it yet because we save it for Oktoberfest, our annual street party.”

“So I should be honored to taste an early sample?”

“Among other things,” he snarks.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He can make me go from zero to sixty in a heartbeat.

“Nothing.” He tugs the hot dog stick from my hand and holds it over the flames. “Burnt or lightly roasted?”

“Roasted, I guess.” I sound sullen when I should be grateful. At least he hasn’t tossed me off the mountain. He was even slightly sweet when I tripped. And he hasn’t said no to selling this property. It’s a pretty piece of land, and I imagine future resort goes sitting under a starry sky around a blazing fire pit. Of course, that pit will be in a raised fireplace made of stone with cushioned bench seating around it and a wine bar nearby.

Giant hands me the perfect hot dog, and I hold out the bun, using it to tug the frankfurter off the stick. Marcus would have a million innuendos for this meal.

“So why do you want this land so badly?” It’s an honest question, and I wonder if I can give him an honest answer without revealing too much. I need the deal for the commission.

“Have you heard of McIntyre Farm?” His head pops up, so I’ll take that as a yes. “Rumor is a corner of the farm will be used for a music festival in the future.”

I might as well be speaking a foreign language with the way he stares at me.

“Does Magnolia know this is going to be done to her land?”

“Who’s Magnolia?”

He huffs and shakes his head, and I realize I've made another mistake. Magnolia must own the farm property.

"Do you really think people coming to a music festival want a resort? They want the experience of a night under the stars." He glances up, tipping his head back, and I follow his gaze.

"Wow," I mutter, my throat clogging at the beauty. It's rare to see a clear sky in Chicago. It's even rarer to see one like this—filled with pinpricks of light. I want to connect all the dots.

"Yeah. Wow." Giant's voice struggles. When I lower my head, I find him watching me. My face heats, but I attribute it to the fire. It's a good flame for a small space.

"Do you need to call someone? Check in?" The questions surprise me; it's as if he read my thoughts of home. I shake my head.

"How about you?"

He replies with a simple headshake as well. The sadness in his face makes my hot dog lodge in my throat. Cancer, he said earlier. He must miss his wife, and I wonder how long ago she passed away. Instead of asking, I take a hardy drink of the fall blend. Crisp. Light. Apple-ish.

"This is good," I say with hopes of shifting our conversation, but Giant doesn't take the bait. He only responds with a chin tip, and I realize discussion time is over. It's going to be a long, quiet night.

6

A Touch Is Too Much

[Letty]

Giant offers me privacy to change into something more comfortable for sleeping. It's difficult on my knees and then on my back to slip into my pajama pants and a crew-neck sweatshirt, but I manage. A battery-operated lamp offers minimal light in the tent. He warned me not to use my phone for light.

“Conserve the battery as there's obviously no electricity around here.” Another thing I hadn't considered—charging my phone. I really should have called Frank, checked in, and assured him things were going well. My family knows I want this commission almost as badly as I want the partnership. Although I haven't secured the property or discussed the particulars with Giant, our companionable silence tells me he won't murder me in my sleep.

I slip into one of the two sleeping bags, which seem relatively close in the narrow pop-up tent. Giant asks if I'm finished, and then he enters the tent as well. His big body fills the remaining space, and I catch a whiff of him. Manly. Musky. Soap. Did he bathe in the stream after all?

Crawling on his hands and knees, he reaches for the lamp and switches off the light. I hold my breath at the sudden darkness surrounding me, blinking several times in hopes to see something, anything. Giant rustles around in the blackness before sliding into the bag next to me. A heavy exhale from him fills the air under the canvas, and I hold my breath as I lie on my back, tugging the edge of the sleeping bag under my chin. It's weird to consider sleeping next to a stranger, and I wouldn't have to consider it if I were exhausted. I should be

dead tired, but suddenly, I'm wide-awake. It's been a strange day.

Sigh.

"What?" The sound of Giant's low voice next to me startles me. He's been relatively quiet since our short meal, and we spent a long time watching the flames dance or gazing up at the stars. I wish I knew all the constellations. I bet he could have taught me, but each time I looked over at him, he appeared deep in thought as though his mind was a million miles away even though his body was present. He seems a little closed off. Is he thinking of his dead wife? Does he miss her?

I roll my head on the pillow in his direction. He isn't facing me, but I can see the rough outline of him. The visual rests in my head. Strong jaw. Edged cheeks. Firm lips. The tent is the darkest dark I've ever experienced, but I can *see* him. Large, silent, brooding type. On the other hand, the silence again is eerie. Where is an airplane? How about a train in the distance? The sound of an eighteen-wheeler on a highway?

"Relax," he suggests, his voice startling me again.

I inhale. Exhale. Breathe.

The silence continues, pressing down on me as I stare up in the direction of the ceiling.

"What?" he snaps again, his voice gruffer, and I sense his head roll near mine. *Is he looking at me?*

"I didn't say anything," I remind him, whining like a teenager.

"I can practically hear you thinking over there."

"It's nothing," I murmur.

"Speak," he snaps, his voice still low as if someone might hear us.

"I typically read before I go to sleep."

“Me too,” he says, rolling his head once again and surprising me with the comment.

“Really, what do you read?”

“Thrillers.”

I huff.

“What?” he asks. I hear him shift next to me, his nearness overwhelming me. Though his voice remains quiet, it’s closer. “I bet you read romances.”

I chuckle, caught with the truth. “And if I do?”

He snorts and flips to his back again. “Nothing.”

Minutes pass again, and his breathing grows shallow. I hope he doesn’t snore. Hudson snored, although he swore he didn’t. Of course, the great Hudson Rockford would never make such a crude noise. He hardly made noise during sex, I recall, and then will away thoughts of him. Camping is an adventure he’d never risk.

I sigh again.

“What now?” Giant speaks, his voice a little louder, and I flinch. *Wasn’t he almost asleep?*

“I just thought this would be a little more exciting. Lions and tigers and bears, oh my.”

“You don’t want bears close to us, sweetheart.” He mocks me with the endearment. “It’s why we hitched up our food.” Before entering the tent, Giant had me help him secure the coolers in some kind of rope netting which he hoisted up to dangle from a tree branch. The thought of a real bear coming near our camp makes me inch a little closer to Giant despite the zippered bags separating us. He doesn’t seem to notice as he doesn’t question me nor does he move away.

More silence. More deep breathing.

With assumptions of him sleeping, my mind races. One of my favorite romance novels comes to mind, and I’m hopeful my memory of particular scenes will help lull me to

sleep as if I'm reading the words. Unfortunately, the scene that creeps into my head is a sexy one, and now all I can think of is Giant and me in compromising positions, which isn't going to happen. He's about as interested in me as a fish wanting to be out of water. But my sex clenches, pulsing more rapid than my heartbeat, and I consider getting myself off in hopes of relieving the tension.

I'm not wearing a bra, so I slip my hand under my sweatshirt, palming my stomach as I lie on my back. Slowly, I work my way under one breast, feeling the weight of the achy swell. I curve my hand upward and tweak my nipple. It's already hard, and I tug at the nub. My thighs press together, rubbing against each other, and I cross my legs for more friction.

It isn't enough, and I listen for Giant. Will he know what I'm doing only inches from him? Will he think I'm a creepy, unstable, insatiably horny woman? Images of him in my head further ignite my desire.

His broad back splitting wood before he made our fire this evening.

His fingers brushing mine as he handed me the beer.

His eyes on me while I observed the stars.

I wonder what it would be like to have him on me. His full body over mine. His large hands palming my breasts.

My fingers release the heavy globe and travel south, slipping under the waistband of my flannel pajama bottoms. Curling into my underwear, they head to my core. My fingertips just breach the pulsing nub when Giant's voice startles me again.

"Awfully quiet over there, Cricket."

I groan, adding a little cough to make it sound like resolved boredom instead of disappointment. Caught red-handed with my fingers in the cookie jar, I quickly retract my hand, only to have a heavy palm land on my forearm, over the sleeping bag, stilling my retreat.

“Cricket?” There’s a question in his voice, and my mouth goes dry. I can’t tell him what I’d been planning to do. That I’ve been thinking about him. How I wanted to take care of myself with fantasies of him.

He sniffs and sniffs again, like a hound dog on the hunt. Oh God, can he smell me? Smell the essence of my arousal?

“Are you...touching yourself?” Mortification and a strong desire to be swallowed by a sinkhole fill me. My eyes roll back, and I close my lids as if he can see me, and I’m shutting him out.

“I couldn’t sleep yet,” I whisper, hoping the explanation is enough to appease him, force him to release my arm, and roll away from me. Instead, the pressure of his hand pushes at mine, suggesting I move it lower.

“Giant?” I question.

He shifts next to me, and his free hand comes to the edge of my sleeping bag. I can’t breathe. He’s going to know what I was doing, know my dirty daydream of him. He’s going to tug me from this bag and throw me off the mountain.

I’m so worked up by this scenario that I miss the rapid unzipping at my side. He reaches inside my bag for my arm and lifts my hand to his nose. Then two of my fingers enter the warm cavern of his mouth, and his tongue twirls over them. It’s so unexpected and intoxicating that my back arches and my sex screams.

He releases my fingers from his lips and guides my hand back into the sleeping bag. His palm covers the back of my hand, collectively lowering our fingers under my waistband and diving deeper. The pulse at my core sets a beat more rapid than my heart. With Giant’s fingers over mine, he leads me to the place I need attention, and then he stills his hand while I brush over myself. He’s so close to touching me, and the tease spurs me onward. This is the craziest thing I’ve ever done. We’re virtual strangers, yet this man does something to me. Something I’ve never felt, not even with Hudson. Especially

not with Hudson. I toss away thoughts of my ex and concentrate on my fingertips over the swollen hood.

As the intensity of my fingers increases, I notice movement next to me. A subtle scratching, jerking motion from Giant. Is he getting himself off while torturing me with his hand so close yet not quite close enough? I hum, and his breath hitches. It feels scandalous and delicious. Forbidden and necessary.

“Giant,” I squeak. Asking. Warning. Telling. I’m on the verge of one of the biggest orgasms I’ve ever given myself.

“Finish, Cricket,” he demands, and the command breaks me. My knees separate as much as they can within the confines of the sleeping bag, and my back arches. I give in to the pleasure rippling through my lower belly and the slick proof of my desire.

I hear Giant grunt next to me, and the sensual noise echoes straight to my clit. My knees come back together, holding Giant’s and my fingers pinned between my thighs. I could go again, but I’ve rarely had a second orgasm. I’d need his fingers on me, yet I could never outright ask him to touch me. Suddenly, I’m so embarrassed by my behavior.

The slick sound of skin on skin next to me fills my ears, and I roll my head to the side, wishing I could watch him but settle for imagining it in my head. I need another go, but Giant slowly retracts his hand, sliding his warm palm up my wrist and over my sweatshirt-covered arm. He frees his hand from my sleeping bag and awkwardly zips up the side. Movement rustles next to me, but I can’t see him, and I’m cursing the darkness. More shifting. Another huff. And then the stillness alerts me that Giant has turned onto his side, leaving his back to me.

This was the most adventurous sexual experience I’ve ever had, and with a stranger, no less. But Giant rolling away from me, building a wall between us, is reminiscent of Hudson and his quick, no-nonsense pace. The immediate rejection stings. My heart crushes under the weight of memory and the

lack of words from Giant. *Did he think that was crazy, insane fun? Or just crazy and insane?*

I should say something—thank him or apologize— but within seconds, I hear his breathing deepen and then a soft snore. I release my hand from inside the sleeping bag and reach toward Giant as if to touch his back, but I don't. Hovering over the broad expanse, I whisper to deaf ears, "Good night."

Then I roll to my side and allow the traitorous tears to silently fall.

7

The Day After

[Giant]

I shouldn't have done it, I think as I grip myself in my large palm for the second time in less than eight hours. With one arm braced on the tree before me, I rest my forehead on my forearm while my other hand jerks and juts, squeezing harder.

I couldn't help myself. She thought she was so stealthy next to me, but I'm military trained for slight noises. The hitch of her breath. The movement of her arm. And then there was the scent. Heady. Feminine. Sex. I smelled her fingers, sucked her essence off them, and then I couldn't stop myself. My twitchy fingers rested over hers—so close yet not close enough. My dick leaped to life, and I gave in to the raw pleasure.

Like I've never done before.

Like I'm doing again next to this tree.

When I woke this morning, the pressure at my back told me Letty had curled into me. I should have said something last night. I should have apologized or thanked her. I should have held her. She was a spark of that spontaneity I'd been longing for and never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined what we'd done.

I loved my wife. Clara and I had been similar—quiet and reserved. She was my high school sweetheart, and when I joined the military, the natural progression of things suggested I marry her before I went away. But when I returned, we were strangers. I'd been gone from home for too long. My desires were different, and she was hesitant with me. Then she died.

I hear a rustle of leaves to my side, but I don't look up. *Please be a curious animal instead of her.* I pray the mountain opens and swallows me if she catches me getting off again, but I can't seem to help myself. It's been a long time since I've been with a woman, and Letty isn't like any woman I've known, especially Clara. Uninhibited. Daring. Seductive. I woke with the hardest morning wood I've ever had, and it refused to go down no matter my thoughts.

*Baseball...*and traveling the bases on Letty's body.

*My grandmother...*and pulling Letty into a closet.

*Giant Brewing Company...*and then pouring beer all over her body and lapping it up.

I am a mess over this woman and making one in my hand. It was rough going with spit in my palm, but fast work as the fantasies would not cease. I bit into my forearm as relief quickly came, coating my fingers.

Fuck, it felt good, but dirty and shameful. I'm not ashamed of touching myself but using Letty as my woody wet dream seems disrespectful. We don't know each another.

But you want to get to know her, my heart beats. *You want the spontaneous spark she ignites.*

Removing a bandana from my back pocket, I wipe up the mess, then tuck myself back in my pants and zip up. It's only a few short steps to the quiet campsite, and I stoke the fire when I return. I don't even know what I'll say to her this morning or how I'll address what happened last night. I'm expecting her to demand I take her back down the mountain, and I admit the thought hurts my chest. I don't want her to go. Not yet.

I step over to the tent and discover Letty missing, but so is the towel and cloth I left behind for her. *I shouldn't do it,* I warn myself, but I rise from my haunches and trek to the stream. I'll be shocked to find her in the water. That rippling river is damn cold.

Instead, I see an unexpected sight. Her back to me, she stands naked from the waist up. She rubs a wet washcloth

slowly up her side, taking her time to outline her body, and I realize I could watch her all day. Lowering for the stream, I'm mesmerized by her backside. Her snug jeans accentuate each curve and hug the hips my fingers long to touch. Rinsing the cloth, she then adds more soap. The all-natural, easily dissolvable body wash works wonders when a full shower can't be had. After she stands, she slaps the cloth over her shoulder, and her hands lower to the waistband of her jeans. My throat clogs, and I cough. The noise startles her, and she crooks her head. *She can't see me*, I tell myself, as I remain under the cover of trees.

What am I doing? *Creeper. Stalker.*

What is she doing to me?

When her jeans come undone, and she lowers them to her thighs, a perfect white ass shines at me, and the cloth disappears from her shoulder.

Goddammit, I'm turned on again. It never happens this quickly. I'm almost fifty, for heaven's sake, yet I want her. Right here on this shoreline, next to the cold stream, I want to bury myself deep inside her.

Then I remember the land.

She wants my land.

She's here because of that.

Not because of me.

I turn away from her, fighting the urge in my pants and the ache in my chest. My punishment for wanting her will be the blue balls I suffer.

I return to the fire and begin the process of making eggs and bacon over a campfire. The large cast iron skillet works wonders, and I remain crouched down, focused on the sizzle of meat and the slow curl of eggs, allowing my thoughts to wander.

Clara would camp. She liked the outdoors as much as I did, finding peace in the quiet. But we were too silent as a

couple. We didn't argue with each other. We didn't yell at our children. We didn't speak about all the things missing between us, and we didn't make noise during sex. She was a good woman. The best. She made a home with my military earnings and loved our girls, the only gift I believed I'd given her. Clara wanted to be a mother, and fortunately, she was pregnant after my first tour. The girls became her focus while I was gone. When I returned home, she didn't know how to handle me. The PTSD. The brewery. We weren't those silent high school sweethearts anymore. Then she got sick.

"Good morning." Her cheerful female voice breaks into my morbid memories.

I snort in response and glance up to watch Letty's face fall. She's not the reason I'm gruff, and I curse myself for responding as such, but her singular nod and the twist of lips tells me she'll take no excuse for my rudeness. She walks over to a log and lays the towel and washcloth on the bark to dry in the sun. I want to reach for the material and rub the scent of her over my face and breathe her in again, but I don't.

Instead, I focus on cooking the bacon and eggs.

"May I?" she asks before reaching for the camp coffeepot. I nod again as if my throat's clogged.

Why am I not speaking to her? *Answer her with something, you big oaf.*

"Did you sleep well?"

She stops pouring her coffee and looks up at me. Her eyes narrow, and I raise a fist to cover a forced cough.

I'm an idiot.

"It's surprising how well I slept," she answers. "I mean, it's quiet here and dark, and I'm not used to that. Planes, trains, and automobiles zooming, and bright orange streetlights are more my scene, but a lumpy ground and a thick sleeping bag weren't too bad. I can't say I'm ready for *Naked and Afraid*, but it wasn't awful." She reflectively smiles, and her response draws a grin from me.

Maybe we don't need to talk about last night.

“So last night...” she begins, and my head heavily lowers, pulling my eyes away from her. *Or maybe not.* “You mentioned bears.”

My head pops back up.

“I wonder what I'm supposed to do if I see one. I read once I should fall to the ground. Another report told me to make myself large and yell.”

“You could always talk him away,” I scoff. Her face falls again, and her lips purse.

I amend. *Fucking idiot* describes me best.

“My mother teases me about how I talk too much. It's a nervous habit. I feel the need to fill the silence, so the words just spew. Maybe it's that my mind can't settle. I struggle to relax, so I ramble. I don't know. It just...” She glances up at me, and the words fall away. Whatever her reason for speaking so much, it's happening again, and she realizes it.

Her expression dampens again. “Smells good,” she offers with a nod to the sizzling breakfast, and then she shuts her eyes as if willing herself not to speak.

“Was there anything you'd like to do today?” I ask, not having a plan. I rarely have anything specific on the agenda when I come up here. That's the point. The brewery keeps me busy with schedules and meetings, so I use this place for a break from life.

“Ax throwing. Archery. Hunting.”

“Hunting?” The thought of her holding a gun surprises me.

“Actually, no. Firm pass on killing any Bambis.”

“Right. Freezer fairies are so much better.”

“Exactly.” She chuckles, and I like the sound. Bubbly, popping, like pebbles in a rain puddle, it fits her personality, which reminds me, I think it's going to rain later. It was in the

forecast, and the haze to the sky concerns me. Not for me. I love the rain, but my city-slicker friend here might melt under a mountain downpour.

“So ax throwing? Practicing for murder or got a hot date?”

“Something like that,” she huffs. I stare at her, not liking the idea of her going on a date. “Actually, it’s my sister’s wedding.”

“Planning to kill people at the wedding?” My brows rise higher.

“If only I could,” she mumbles, and I continue to stare. *Is she serious?* “Actually, ax throwing is on the itinerary of events leading up to the big day.”

“Ax throwing?” I question again. City people are so strange. “Got a date for this ax-throwing wedding?” I don’t know why I ask. I shouldn’t care, and I don’t, but I’m curious. She told me about Marcus, her boyfriend-friend, but she hasn’t mentioned anyone else.

She huffs. “Nope. Single as a Pringle, remember, and going stag.” My lips twist, fighting the smile and the ripple of pleasure in my belly as I make a mental note of what she says. I don’t know why I make a note. I don’t care that she’s single. *I don’t.*

“I guess I could teach you how to throw an ax.”

“Really?” She sits up from the log she’s been perched against. “It’s all the rage lately, and there’s a bar dedicated to it. I’d love to kick some ass there one night. Show them all.”

Her enthusiasm grows, and I wonder who *them all* is, but I don’t ask, too surprised by her first comment. “All the rage?”

“Yep. It’s replacing darts as the new bar sport.”

I should tell Billy. He might want to consider it for Blue Ridge Microbrew and Pub. Letty sets down her coffee, which she hasn’t drunk, and lifts both arms over her head, cupping her fists together as if she’s going to toss something. She lets

out a hefty grunt as she throws her imaginary ax. Then she sighs in relief as if the weight of the world went with the toss.

“I think you might need help with your technique.”

“There’s a technique?” Her eyes open wide, and I can’t help the rumble climbing up my throat. I laugh. Her eyes widen more. “Was that a laugh? Did Giant Harrington just chuckle?”

She’s teasing me, and I clamp my lips as if I’ve given her too much.

“I like it,” she says, her voice softening, and she brushes a wisp of hair behind her ear. Her soft brown tresses are piled on top of her head today, and she looks different again. Business suit to blue jeans—I like her in this attire better. My eyes flip down to her knees.

“How are the knees today?”

“Sore.” She glances at the cut in her pants. “But I’ll live.” Her exhale hints at worse things in life, and I know all too well what she means.

“So...ax throwing after breakfast?”

“Sure thing.” I sigh with relief as I’ve dodged the ax of discussing last night.

8

Ax Throwing

[Letty]

A battle cry bellows from me along with the thrust of releasing the ax.

I miss the tree completely.

“That was...” Giant’s voice drifts.

“Not good,” I mutter. Giant chuckles, and the sound makes my belly flutter. I meant what I said earlier. I like his laugh—deep, rich, rumbly. We’ve been at this for a bit, and each time I toss, he steps away. Way away.

“At least you’re nearing the tree,” he states, coming up behind me.

“Hardy-har,” I tease, but he isn’t wrong. My throws have been wild. “I need to get this.”

From behind me, he steps to my side. “Lots of axes to grind in the city?”

“My sister’s wedding, remember? She’s getting married in two weeks.”

“Unusual for a bachelorette party,” he scoffs.

“Oh, no. The bachelorette party was back in March. Mardi Gras in New Orleans.” His brows pinch. “Destination bachelorette parties are *all the rage*,” I mock. “As if a few shots and dancing at the local pub isn’t enough.” I scoff, but there’s no humor to my voice. I bend for the next ax and stand, but Giant grips my wrist, a subtle warning of caution.

“She sounds like a pain in the ass.”

“You have no idea,” I mutter, trying to lift the instrument, but Giant holds me still, probably worried I’ll miss and nick him.

“Tell me.” His commanding request surprises me.

“Dayna is my older sister. She’s the princess. Everything was perfect. Perfect life. Perfect wife. Until her husband left her. She calls him the practice husband, and now she’s getting married again.” My chest heaves as I relay my sister’s history.

“So she’s on marriage number two, and you haven’t had marriage number one?” He questions as if he’s all-knowing, but he’s so wrong. Well, I haven’t been married yet, but that’s beside the point.

“Hardly. I’m definitely *not* jealous of her. She can have him.”

Giant’s dark eyes narrow. “Who?”

“Hudson.”

“And Hudson is...?” Hudson Rockford. My ex-boyfriend, former fiancé, and the scumbag of the Earth.

“Not important. Not one bit unless you consider we were living together, and he slept with my sister. The one who is going to marry him.”

Giant flinches. “Jesus.”

“Nope, not Him. Hudson likes to think he’s God’s gift, but he’s anything but. Small-minded, micro-penis, no-emotion Hudson. She can have him.”

Giant laughs, another full-on burst of sound, and the thunderous noise ripples over me, comforting me. “Micro-penis? Poor guy.”

“Wrong again. Poor me.” I break free of Giant’s grasp and lift my ax arm. Giant catches it above my head, and those dark eyes narrow again.

“Okay, let’s not chop my head off for his faulty pipeline.” His tone sobers, and he lowers my arm. “Be safe here. Smart.”

He releases my arm and steps behind me. His chest brushes my back. “Drop the ax for a second but watch your toes.”

I toss the blade forward, and it lands on its side. Giant covers my shoulders with thick palms and then smooths them down my arms. I’m wearing a tank top as my flannel is tied around my waist. I’d grown warm from the exercise, but I shiver under his touch. The pads of his hands are callused but comforting, and he circles my wrists. He places his scruffy cheek next to mine. His lips graze my ear.

“Concentrate,” he whispers, but with his chest at my back and his breath in my ear, the only focus I have is on him and his closeness. He places my hands together and holds them collectively out in front of me. My fingers entwine as if wrapped around the shaft of the ax.

“Aim.” Warm air brushes the skin of my exposed neck, and I try to keep still, but my body quivers. He turns his head, skimming the slope of my neck with his nose. “No matter what’s going on around you, you must focus.”

I force my eyes to remain on the tree trunk before me, my arms aligned with the thickness, but as his nose reverses the path up my neck, I can’t think straight. I want his mouth to suck on my skin. I want his teeth to nip me. Then again, if he does, my ax-throwing lessons are over, and a new lesson will begin—the art of kissing.

His palms slip up my extended arms to my elbows. Those thick palms curl, and he simultaneously taps each elbow with a finger.

“Bend.” Oh Lord, why does the word sound sexy? Heed to his will. Kneel before him. My core clenches. My legs spread apart from the slip of his knee between my thighs. I have a new target in mind, and I want to drop the figurative ax throwing to rub against the tree trunk-sized thigh between mine.

“Cricket,” he quietly commands, and I bend my elbows to a ninety-degree angle. He presses on my underarms, guiding me to lift and hold the position. His chin rests in the crook between my shoulder and neck, and his mouth hovers near my ear. His beard was trim when we left, but it’s quickly growing thicker. The scratchy sensation on my neck makes my mouth water.

Kiss me.

“Stay,” he murmurs to my shoulder and then slides his hands down the underside of mine. I want to turn my head. I want to take his mouth, but my eyes remain forward while my body trembles under his tender touch. His fingers spread once he clears my pits, and he swipes the sides of my breasts, outlining my body. Whether intentional or not, my breasts tingle and my nipples pop. The nubs harden and strain against my bra, exposing what he’s doing to me. Finally, his hands settle on my hips, and he squeezes.

“Don’t lose this stance.” His front taps my backside for emphasis, and I lose control. My ass presses back at him as my arms drop. I can’t take the tension rippling up my inner thighs or the beating of my sex. My hands come to my knees, forcing my ass against him.

Take me, I scream inside my head. Bend me over your knee.

But instead, he instantly releases me, taking a step back.

“I think you’re ready.” He walks around me, ignoring how I’ve pressed into him. No reaction. Last night must have meant nothing to him because he hasn’t mentioned it, and he doesn’t appear even remotely affected by me today. I don’t know what I expected, though. I don’t know what I want from him.

You shouldn’t want anything from him. You need his land.

My heart clenches as I watch him reach for the ax on the dirt. When he holds it shaft out, I tug it from him with more force than I intend and narrowly miss nicking the pad of his

hand. My eyes lift to his, and he raises one eyebrow. He must know what he's done to me, though. I'm a hot mess.

“Take all the negative energy you hold for micro-penis and sister bitch and toss that ax.”

He rushes back a step or two as I aim with extended arms and lift to the angle he suggested. I reach behind my head and then pitch forward, tossing the ax with all the strength and anger and regret.

I hit the tree, but the ax doesn't stick.

“Goddammit.”

Giant retrieves the two axes we've been using and comes back to me. “Each try is one step closer to the goal. Don't give up.”

Without meeting his eyes, I focus on the trunk once again.

Giving up isn't in my nature.

+ + +

My arms ache from my many attempts. I lost count somewhere after the thirty-seventh throw. Giant has the patience of a saint and the willpower of one as well. His near kisses and brisk touches are my driving force to continue throwing the ax long after the burn begins in my shoulders. He thinks Hudson and Dayna spur me onward, but I've long since let go of them. Bitterness weighed me down at first. Overhearing Hudson telling someone—*my sister*—he couldn't wait to see her soon, and then discovering they'd rented a room at a hotel to meet up was a sour pill to swallow.

I was so lonely, my sister told me. Was I supposed to sympathize with her? Was her after-divorce loneliness heavier than the weight I bore in a relationship with an unemotional

man? The very man she decided would end her bout of being alone.

Four years I wasted on Hudson. Four years thinking we would get better. Moving in. Getting engaged. Making plans. Discussing marriage. I missed all the signs in my quest for happily ever after in a relationship that left me complacent and not content. Hudson is in finance, a business closely linked to real estate acquisitions and mergers. He also is a Rockford, and his family owns one of the largest privately held financial institutions in Chicago. He is Midwest royalty, and I was a blind fool.

Marrying me would have secured his family to Mullen, which would have pleased my uncle. When I broke everything off, Hudson wasted no time moving on to my sister. Or perhaps he'd already moved on to her after he broke all emotions within me? They'll be a match made in hell and definitely deserve one another. Both perfectionists. Both filled with pettiness. They are better suited than Hudson and I ever would have been. *Still*. It hurt to find him cheating on me, dissolving all his promises for a roll in the sheets with my sister.

Dayna and I had never been close. As the middle child, I was closer to my brother, Owen, even though he was years younger than me. I wipe away thoughts of him and focus my energy on Dayna. In two weeks, she'll be getting married, and I'm the maid of honor. What a fucking farce.

Put on your brave face and show them what you're made of, Marcus told me when my sister asked me. Awkwardly, the invitation came during a family dinner. Not only do I lack negotiation skills, but my ability to think on the spot struggles, and so I said yes. A whirlwind of dress shopping, engagement parties, and wedding plans followed, and my dislike of Dayna has grown deeper with each step of the process. As for Hudson, I've long since surpassed feeling hatred for him. I just want the wedding over with so I don't have to speak to either of them again.

Of course, that will be impossible as Dayna works for Mullen Realty with me, and she's probably figuring out what else she can steal out from under me while I'm here throwing axes.

I hit my mark. The ax sticks for eight out of ten consecutive throws.

"You did it," Giant says encouragingly from my side, and his voice draws me back to my surroundings.

I turn to him with a huge smile on my face.

"I did it."

I survived almost a year of in-my-face Dayna and Hudson, and it's almost over.

Giant grips my bare shoulders and rubs. "You're so tense, but it's the muscle strain. You worked hard. Just relax." His thumbs dig into the nape of my neck.

Relax.

If only he knew how *hard* I want to *relax* with him.

9

Lightning Does Strike Twice

[Giant]

Bad weather was coming. The ache near my bullet wound told me as such, and I didn't trust how Letty would fare. After our day of ax throwing and a night of burgers, we chatted more about her upbringing in Chicago. Her eyes drooped in the heat of the fire as she sat wrapped in a camp blanket. She was so pretty sitting there under the stars with the flames casting a glow on her cheeks.

"I think I'll retire early," she says, pressing off the ground, and my breath hitches. I want her to ask me to join her, but she doesn't. I've dodged a bullet, or rather an ax, all day as we never discussed last night. In some ways, I'm bothered by this as Clara and I never talked about awkward situations in our relationship. It was one of the strains on our marriage. In an effort not to argue, we didn't confront one another.

I'm not a talker, so it isn't as though I want an emotional chat, but I would like to know what she thought of last night. *Did she enjoy herself? Did I make her happy?* Last night wasn't like anything I'd ever done before, and selfishly, I want a repeat with more experimenting.

I wait out the flames a bit by stringing up our food, and then the first raindrop plops. Before entering the tent, I dump dirt on the dying embers. Once undercover, I strip down to my boxer briefs and a T-shirt like I did last night. I run hot, and the thermal sleeping bag makes me too warm. Slipping onto my back, I stare at the tent's ceiling, taking in deep breaths to calm my memories of yesterday evening. Letty's steady breathing next to me tells me she's fast asleep. She worked hard today,

tossing axes and helping me build a fire for tonight's feast, so I imagine she's exhausted.

I don't like what I've learned about her former fiancé. What an asshole. And her sister, well, there aren't enough words to string together for her. I'd kill one of my brothers if they ever went after a woman I'd been interested in. Then again, I've only ever had Clara until ten years ago, and after her, it's been rather sporadic. I don't fault Clara. I loved her, but without communication, we didn't understand what the other needed when it came to sex. And while I wanted more, Clara wasn't curious or adventurous.

With that thought, I exhale and roll to my side, my back to Letty.

A rustling occurs behind me, and I hear her shifting in her sleeping bag, its nylon covering rutting against the tent canvas. Unconsciously, Letty scoots into me. She doesn't wrap around me but burrows into my spine, and I stiffen for a second before giving in to the sensation. I don't question the movement, liking the way she feels behind me. It's comforting until the first crack of weather hits.

Letty shoots upright.

"What was that?" Her voice is filled with fear.

"Thunder," I mumble, rolling onto my back. I can't see her in the darkness, and then the lightning strikes. Her wide blue eyes meet mine for only a second, and the look on her face is pure terror before we are submerged in darkness again.

"Hey," I say, sitting up and reaching for her cheek. Her skin is soft but clammy. "It will pass."

She's nodding continuously as I guide her to lie back down. It's awkward in two sleeping bags, but I wrap an arm over her, attempting to hold her. There's nothing romantic or cuddle-worthy in the position. Letty trembles under my arm. Both her hands cover her face buried into my chest.

Thunder rumbles again. Lightning filters into the tent. And Letty shudders.

The rain hasn't started in earnest, but the wind picks up. The tent rattles, and Letty's coming unhinged, trembling under my arm.

"You're really scared, aren't you?"

She shakes her head against my chest, but it's the opposite of her body language.

"Is it the lightning?"

"It's the thunder." She pauses a beat. "If it's okay with you, I don't want to talk about it." Her voice quivers, and whatever she isn't telling me is bad, and the thunder is a trigger. I know all about triggers, and this tent isn't going to be enough to settle her.

"Get dressed."

She pulls back from me, and I hastily sit up.

"There's bad weather coming, and we need to get you out of here. We can't make it back to my cabin, but there's an old ranger station about a hundred yards from here. If we hurry, we might miss the rain."

I switch on the camp light and watch as her hands shake. She slips off her pajama bottoms under the sleeping bag and then crawls forward for something in her bag. Her smooth backside faces me as she's wearing a thong, and I try not to lose focus as I scramble for my pants. It's tight quarters in the two-person tent, but we somehow work in sync like a well-timed machine. She slips black yoga pants out of her bag and tugs them up her long legs. I notice her toes. Blisters swell on her pinkies as well as on each heel. My eyes leap to her face, but she isn't looking at me as she struggles to tug on her socks. I toss her my thin rain slicker.

"What about you?" she asks, pulling it on over her sweatshirt.

"I'll be fine." I don't consider being modest as I slip from my bag and pull on my pants. I finish dressing quickly,

tugging on a flannel but not bothering to button it. Then I grab my backpack and the battery lamp. Letty reaches for her pack.

“Ready?”

She nods before she follows me out the tent. Thunder cracks again, and Letty screams. I tug her to me.

“Sorry. I’m sorry,” she mumbles into my chest. Her trembling is unbearable. I don’t know what she’s apologizing for, but I walk us forward. I want to keep her pressed to me, but we won’t move fast enough with her wrapped under my arm. She must sense this as she slips from my side. “Just go.” She reaches for my hand, and I tug her along behind me, holding up the lamp to lead the way.

We haven’t made it ten feet before the rain pours from the sky. Thankfully, the heavy branches keep us relatively protected from the pelting drops. We race among the trees, Letty keeping up with me until we break into a small clearing with the old station. She shivers uncontrollably next to me as I fumble for the key hidden on the upper jamb. When I press the door open, she flings herself inside, tripping, and then scrambles to the wall opposite the door. The rain falls in earnest as the thunder and lightning increase in frequency. The storm is over us.

I drop my backpack and set the camp light on the floor. I want to turn it off to conserve the battery, but the fear in Letty’s eyes tells me to leave the soft glow on. I fall to my knees and crawl over to her. The old station has wood floors. Not hard wood, just uncovered boards. A single cot lines one wall while a metal desk and squeaky rolling chair stand on the other side of the room. The only other door in the place leads to a small bathroom. A kitchenette is next to the bathroom.

“There’s electricity here. I can go outside and find the switch.”

Her frightened eyes meet mine, wide and worried. “Please. Don’t leave me.”

I nod and continue to crawl closer. When I get to her, I shift to sit against the wall and slip an arm around her.

“Come here,” I whisper, forcing her pack off her back. She dips her head into my chest again. It isn’t enough. I need to distract her. I skim my hand down her side and then cup her hip. Repeating my command, “Come here.” I hoist her over my leg so she falls between my spread thighs. The wetness of the rain slicker soaks through my shirt, and if we don’t remove some of this wet clothing, the cold will be the new cause of shivers. I remove the jacket from her and shake it so some of the water releases. The inside is lined and warm, and I return the slicker over her like a blanket.

“Your shirt is soaked,” she says, and I press us forward. I tug the flannel plus T-shirt over my head and toss it to the side. *My skin will warm her better anyway*, I tell myself. She falls back against me, and my arms circle her waist.

Another roar of thunder. Another flash of light. Letty whimpers. My lips come to her neck, and I kiss her under her ear.

“Let me distract you.”

She nods, elongating her neck as she tips her head to the side. She has these fine hairs that curl along her nape, and they’ve teased me all day while she learned to throw an ax. I suck hard at her skin with my open mouth, marking her. She whimpers in response, and I lose control of my thoughts. I don’t hear the thunder or see the lightning. Only her. My hand roughly moves between her thighs.

“So warm,” I mouth into her skin, drawing my tongue down the side of her neck. Her knees spread, and I rub over the soft cotton covering her heat. I suck at her neck, latching on to the dip near those fine hairs. She whimpers under me, and I slip my hand under the waistband of her yoga pants, delving deeper to her center. My fingers brush over moist, lacy cotton.

“Fuck,” I mutter at her ear, and she shifts her hips to lower the pants a little, allowing me better access to her. She’s wearing another one of those thongs I found while rummaging in her backpack before we started this trip, so the material easily slips to the side, and my middle finger slides into her. She welcomes me by spreading her thighs wider. Her head tips back to my shoulder as she hums. She made the same noise last night.

“Always chirping.” I chuckle, nipping at her neck.

She bites her lip, and I worry she’ll stop making those sounds. I need the noise. I want to hear her satisfaction.

“Don’t you dare stop, Cricket,” I warn, adding a second finger to the first. Her head lolls forward as she moans.

“So full,” she whispers, and I smile, nipping her earlobe. My fingers slip back and forth, drenched in her essence.

“You’re so wet.”

“You do this to me.”

The comment startles me. There’s no denying I’m attracted to her, and her body’s response to me tells me she might feel the same. But this? This admission sounds like something more. Or am I projecting my feelings? Am I hoping for something...spontaneous?

I continue to coast in and out, adding my thumb to the nub outside her, the place I was so close to last night but didn’t dare to touch. Tonight, however, I’m all in, and there’s no going back. Her hips thrust forward, drawing my fingers into her. Softly, she moans, mumbles, and mutters. Her head rolls on my shoulder as she takes my fingers deeper and deeper.

“Giant,” she warns, humming along with my name on her lips, and then she clenches. Her knees come together, and she rides my hand pressed between her thighs. My fingers work her until she collapses. Her legs fall open as she relaxes, but I’m too worked up. I want this woman, and touching her wasn’t enough.

Quickly, I slip my fingers from her, the sound of slick suction and the scent of her fills our tight surroundings.

“Not enough, Letty,” I warn as I press at her shoulder blade to move her forward. She scrambles up to her knees and then falls to her hands, similar to the position when she tripped over the rock. I follow her and hold her hips, pressing her bare ass against the front seam of my jeans. I thrust forward, and Letty collapses to her elbows. She struggles to tug her pants to her knees with one hand and then slips them to her ankles.

“Letty?” I question although my chest hammers and my dick strains.

“Please,” she hisses. I’ve never done anything like this, taken a woman without regard, without thought, without knowing her a little better. But my only thought is how much I want in *this* woman. How spontaneous this act is. How raw, and wild, and uncontained. I’m grateful I left my belt behind when I fumble to undo my pants. Pushing the sides to my knees, I tug my briefs along with them. My dick twitches, slapping Letty on the ass. The warm skin-on-skin contact makes us both sigh.

I’m not a noisemaker during sex. I’ve always kept it quiet, but I have a feeling this woman is going to make me roar. I drag my tip along the seam of her ass and then lower, finding her soaked folds. As I coat the head of my dick, my legs tremble with anticipation. She’s more than ready for me, and I eagerly thrust into her. Letty makes her purr-like hum as I still, seated deep within her.

“Letty,” I rumble like a beast inside me has come unleashed. She moans in answer, and I exhale deeply. My God, she’s so warm, so tight, so wet. One arm wraps around her waist while my hand grips her hip. Looking down at our position, I watch myself slide free but keep the tip inside her. Then I rush forward, filling her until my pelvis hits her ass.

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod.” Her breath hitches on each praise. As I pull back again, she follows me, greedy to keep me buried within her, and I don’t disappoint, but I tease. I

draw out to the edge and then slam forward. She hums louder as her hands fist.

“Again.” The word echoes through the small room, and I repeat the motion. Skin slaps, grunts grow, and Letty clenches around me. My balls tighten. My lower back pinches, and I fill this woman with every drop of my seed. The only movement for a moment is me pulsing inside her as the largest orgasm I’ve ever known takes me.

I collapse over her, forcing us to the ground. It all happened too fast, and my breath comes ragged and restless. Quickly, I pull out of her and flip to my back. Staring up at the ceiling, I flop an arm over my forehead as my chest heaves, and stars dance before my eyes.

What just happened?

The weight of her eyes presses on my heated cheeks, and I roll my head to face her.

Please don't let her be disappointed.

I don't know why that's my first thought, but when I find her eyes in the dimming glow of the battery light, she slowly smiles.

“So tired,” she whispers as she lays flat on her stomach, her head tilted in my direction. “Thank you,” she mutters before closing her eyes. She drifts off to sleep, but I don't think I'll sleep tonight. Not with this beautiful woman next to me who just breathed life back into my hollow lungs.

Cold Night and Shoulder

[Letty]

I'm drifting to sleep when Giant rolls to his side once again, giving me his back. The storm has passed, but a different one rumbles through my chest. I want to scoot into him and press against him, but I fight the urge. Actually, I'd like him to hold me, wrap his arms around me and draw me into his chest like he did before we left the tent. Still, I shouldn't fool myself into thinking anything other than sex is happening between us, but it would be nice to be held for a few minutes before he dismisses me again—before he rolls to his side and forces a wall between us instead of his arms around me.

I remind myself he took care of me during the storm. He sensed my fear and tried to comfort me, tried to distract me. Maybe sex is simply a distraction for him. I wish I could be so casual. He's the first man I've slept with since Hudson. I probably shouldn't have slept with him, yet I wanted nothing more than to feel him inside me, blocking out the thunder and my thoughts. Pulling my knees up to my chest to add another barrier between us, I brush away the dangerous desires.

I wake to heavy footsteps on the decking outside the station, and Giant instantly rolls over me, covering me like a blanket while his eyes stay trained on the door. It swiftly opens, and a man stands just behind my head, pointing a gun at us.

“Fucking hell,” the man swears.

“Stand down, James,” Giant yells.

The man slips his gun into the back of his jeans. From my upside-down angle, I see he's tall, leaner than Giant, and has

more salt than pepper in his hair. A patch of scruff dusts his jaw, and his eyes match Giant's—dark and dangerous—but intensely blue instead of brown.

Giant peels himself off me, and I press myself up slowly, shaking as I go. I'm not a fan of guns, and the reality of a man standing over me with one catches up to me. I twist and scoot back toward the wall where Giant and I first sat upon entering the station.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?” the man named James asks as Giant kneels and then easily unfolds to stand to his full height. His pants are righted on him. It occurs to me that neither of us removed our boots during what we did last night. I curl my arms over my middle, not wishing to think of the raw sex we had, how much I enjoyed it, and how Giant then turned away from me again.

“I'm camping.”

James glances at me and back at Giant. “This isn't a campground.”

“I fucking know that,” Giant snaps. “We were over by the stream, but a storm rolled in. It was too much for the tent.” I'm thankful he doesn't rat me out by exposing my freak-out over the thunder.

The man steps forward and offers his hand. “I didn't mean to scare you. As this oaf won't introduce us, I'm James.”

“I thought you went by Ranger now,” Giant bites, clearly upset that James has approached me and holds out his hand. I reach up to shake it, and I'm surprised when he tugs me, forcing me upright to stand. His eyes roam down my body and then he turns to Giant. “I'm impressed.”

“You're an ass,” Giant says, stepping forward and slipping an arm around my waist to drag me behind him.

“Uhm, excuse me, but the woman doesn't need to be shoved around like a rag doll.”

James's brows rise, and his mouth crooks up in the corner. "Oh man." He chuckles, warm and rich, and not half as menacing as his overall appearance, which includes heavy black boots, like one would wear on a motorcycle, along with washed-out jeans and a leather jacket with a light gray crew-neck sweatshirt underneath.

"And you are?" James addresses me.

"Letty," I say from behind Giant's back at the same time Giant counters, "None of your business."

"Don't be like this," the motorcycle man speaks to Giant.

"Then come home." Giant's gruff demand startles me. Are they friends? Related possibly? The longer I look, the more I see the resemblance. The shape of their noses. The set of their mouths. James turns his head away from Giant and stares out the open door.

"You know I can't," he whispers, and something in his voice resonates with me. Heartbreak. Loss.

"What are you doing here?" Giant questions again.

"I needed a break." James meets Giant square in the face.

"You know I get that," Giant responds, his voice softening as his head slowly shakes. He looks at me over his shoulder. "We're set to go. The storm is over."

His tone is curt, and I nod without a word, leaning down to pick up Giant's jacket and his shirts. I hold the flannel out to him, and James's brow lifts again. There's a twinkle to his dangerous gaze. He's correct in his assumptions. Giant and I had sex. Raw, unadulterated, dirty sex. I loved it even if I hate him a little this morning.

Giant slips on the flannel and balls up the T-shirt before shoving it in his backpack. He lifts one strap over his shoulder while picking up mine.

"James." Giant gives the man a sharp nod and heads for the door.

“Nice meeting you,” I mumble as I pass James and exit the ranger station after Giant. We barely clear the porch steps when he finally speaks to me.

“I’ll take you back.” Something in his tone has my Spidey-senses rising, and I glare at his broad back as he leads us into the trees.

“Back to camp?” I clarify. He’ll escort me to the site by the stream and return for some unfinished business with James.

“Back down the mountain.”

I stop walking and cross my arms. “You’ll do no such thing.”

He spins and stalks back to me. “It isn’t safe if James is up here.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s my brother.”

“He can’t be the mayor,” I state, surprised at my judgmental tone but questioning whether a mayor would look like a motorcycle thug. “Is he the pub owner?”

“No, this is another brother.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Three and one sister, and none of this is relevant. Down the mountain we go,” he firmly states.

“Is this because of last night?” I blurt. “We had sex, and now you’re done with me.”

“What?” Giant’s eyes widen as his arms cross his chest. “No. No, I’m protecting you.”

“Well, the only person I feel threatened by right now is you.” I’m fuming without a real fuse. I don’t know why I’m so upset. Maybe it’s because deep down I’m not ready to leave the mountain or the man who brought me up here.

“Me?” Giant grumbles. “*Now* you’re afraid of me?” He’s aghast at the notion. His fists clench at his sides as he looks off into the distance a moment and then turns back to me with narrowed eyes. For the first time, he looks scary. “Forget it. I don’t need this headache. We’re going back.” He turns back for the woods, but I stand firm.

“That’s right, turn your back to me like you’ve done each night.”

Giant pauses and twists back to face me. “Woman, what are you talking about?”

“First night, we...” I point between us. “And then you give me your back.” My voice cracks, and I swallow, forcing unwanted tears to retreat. “And then last night, we...again...more...better...” I close my eyes, embarrassed to admit how much last night meant to me. “And you just dismissed me.”

Giant doesn’t owe me anything, but I’d have thought he’d open up a little bit. Thought we’d continue to learn more about each other, discover each other. We did have sex after all, but maybe that’s why he’s ready to take me down the mountain. Sex? Check.

Giant’s brows pinch. “I didn’t dismiss you. We went to sleep.” He’s serious. Something in his tone tells me that holding me wasn’t even a thought. We finished, and he rolled to his side of the bed. How very Hudson of him.

“You know what? You’re right. Forget it.”

“Right. Down the mountain we go,” he states as he waves a hand to emphasize his point.

“No can do,” I say, brushing past him. “It hasn’t been three nights.”

“You’ve had enough nights.”

“Nope. I get one more, then we talk. I’m not leaving without fulfilling my part of the deal.”

“We talk?” he questions, pausing a reflective moment. His expressions shifts darker. “About the land.” His voice

falters as realization dawns. The quieter tone concerns me more than his gruffness, but I'm not backing down. I need this property. I need the commission.

"Yes, the land," I yell back at him. Should there be another reason to stay? He isn't giving me one.

He shakes his head. "You're delusional."

"And you're...you're standoffish-*ish*." It's a weak retort. I don't know why I say it. As I've mentioned, I'm not good with on-the-spot comebacks.

"I'd keep her if I were you." I twist to find James leaning against a column holding up the overhang covering the small porch and realize we have an audience.

"Mind your own damn business, James. You're good at that." My eyes flicker from James to Giant.

"Seems like he's not the only one," I mutter. Stomping around Giant, I head for the path cutting into the woods but then stop and turn back one more time. "And don't ever treat me like I'm not there again." I point at the station, reminiscent of the way he and his brother spoke to each other without including me. This is how Hudson would act, as if I wasn't present, as if I didn't have an intelligent opinion or couldn't make a decision. I spin for the path. I don't even care if I get lost. I just need *away* from Giant.

Ironically, I find my way back to camp, and it doesn't seem half as far as it did while we raced through the darkness under rain and thunder. As I see the waterlogged fire pit and the soggy ground around our site, I turn on Giant who's kept his distance behind me.

"No bathroom?" I huff. "Yet less than a hundred yards off, there is one." Not to mention a solid roof and a small kitchen, but these things are the least of my ire. My anger festers into a storm of rage. I hate how he treated me like I was invisible. Not introducing me. Acting like nothing happened between us. I also do not like how he's willing to break our

agreement and take me back. *Was it only sex to him?* Did he not enjoy it like I did?

“And you’d like to traipse a hundred yards to pee?” he questions. “You didn’t seem to mind the woods.” His voice lowers as if the remark surprises him. No, I didn’t complain because I accepted we were roughing it. He wanted to prove something to me, and I...I wanted to prove something to myself, I realize. I wanted to prove I could do this.

“Never mind.” I sigh and shake my head, turning away from him. I scratch at my scalp. My hair is dirty and grimy, and I just want a hot soak and clean sheets and wine. Lots of wine. But not tonight. *One more night.* I stomp over to the fire pit and sit on an upturned log. I have one more night to survive this hell and rid myself of Giant Harrington once he signs on the line.

Only it hasn’t really been hell. It’s been rather wonderful, if I’m honest. The sexy time. The ax throwing. Even the hot dog roasted over a campfire was pleasant. I’m surprised how much I’ve enjoyed myself. Giant has catered to me in every way—organizing our menu, cooking, and cleanup. He’s trying to encourage me to appreciate the natural environment around us, and I’ve absentmindedly soaked it up. Do I really want to leave him? *Why has he done all this?* Did he just want sex with me? I hate to think this is the truth, and a bigger question niggles at me. Will he really give up his land after a three-night camping trip?

Giant sets his pack on the ground and rummages through it before pulling out something rolled up and tucked in a small bag. I watch him walk to two trees and clip one end of the material to a hook I hadn’t noticed drilled into the trunk. He crosses to a second tree and fastens the other end of the nylon cloth to a second hook. As he steps back, I notice it’s a hammock.

“You said you read.” The statement startles me. I stare up at him, wondering what this has to do with anything. The

tension between us is thicker than the humidity lingering from last night.

“My reader’s in my bag.” Without permission, he rummages through my pack and pulls out my tablet.

“Why don’t you read for a bit? It’s too wet to sit on the ground, and I need to dry everything from last night. I’ll make breakfast.” Now I am curious. What is this behavior? He hands me my e-reader, and I stare after him as he lowers the food from the trap in the tree. I should offer to help, but I don’t want to talk to him. I stand and walk to the hammock.

“Straddle it. Then set your butt down first. It makes it easier to lie back and get your legs in it.” I do as he directs and lounge back. Within a few minutes, my anger dissipates from the sway of the hammock, the whisper of the trees, and a warm breeze. I can’t concentrate on any words in my book, so I stare at them instead. Unfocused. Disappointed.

Why couldn’t sex always be like it was last night? Maybe only random sex can feel so liberating. Then again, if how I’m feeling today is a side effect of random sex, I don’t think my heart can take it. I haven’t been with anyone in a year, and Giant’s behavior is a reminder of why I’ve held back—I’m too emotional to have casual sex. My eyes close with memories of last night. Images of Giant touching me fill my head. His thick fingers. His mouth on my skin. His big dick. He’s a large man, and his private property is proportionate. I’ve never been so full, so satiated, and so at a loss when it was over.

I scratch at my scalp again.

Maybe I’m destined never to understand men. Hudson was closed off, unobtainable even when physically present. Why can’t I have a man who can be affectionate?

“Breakfast is ready.” His voice should startle me, but I’ve learned to listen for his quiet movements. I’m not hungry, but I roll from the hammock, nearly turning all the way over and falling to the ground. Giant catches me, but I shrug off his touch. “I got it.”

I stalk to the fire pit and sit. Fried eggs and corned beef hash—I haven't had such a breakfast since I was a kid. The combination reminds me of my dad, and I suddenly feel lonelier than ever.

“My dad died when I was a kid, so I don't remember much about him, but this was his favorite breakfast.” I don't know why I tell Giant this tidbit. *You're filling the empty spaces.*

“I'm sorry. About your dad.” Giant says, staring down at the meal in the skillet. He doesn't add anything more, and we fall into awkward silence, and for once, I don't feel the need to chatter and fill the quiet.

11

Silence Is Too Quiet

[Giant]

I can't handle her silence.

For the talker she is, she hasn't spoken since breakfast. In such a short time, her constant chatter has grown on me, and I miss the noise. The hum of life she whispers no matter what she's saying. The chirping beat she stimulates in my quiet heart. I didn't realize how empty my world felt until this vibrant woman entered the place I hold most sacred. My land.

She's only here for the land, I remind myself, but she certainly seemed upset about last night.

We had sex, she blurted, but those brilliant blue eyes were filled with hurt. The expression surprised me. Did she not want to have sex with me? Did I force her? Did I go too far? Her adventurous spirit tells me I didn't, so why did she look so offended? Was it only because I suggested we return to the cabin? Did she want something more from me? Other than my land, I can't imagine what I could offer her.

Her quiet unnerves me, and she scratches at her hair for the tenth time.

"Got an itch?" I don't think she has bugs. The insects are mild as the temperature drops this time of year. Still, a tick would love her hair. *I love her hair.*

"My hair. It's just dirty, and it feels gross. I think I'll go down to the stream."

"Not alone. I don't like James being around." What is he doing up here? I love my prodigal brother, but I don't trust his motives for anything. He claims he has his reasons to leave the

family, but we all have “reasons” in our lives, and that’s when we need family the most. “I’ll go with you.”

Letty’s eyes narrow at me. “Fine.” She stands and heads into the tent, returning with shampoo and a towel. She stalks past me, heading for the stream. I follow, once again keeping my distance. When we get to the edge of the water, she tugs off her shirt and then looks at me over her shoulder.

“You can turn your back.” It takes me a moment to realize what she means. She wants me to turn around, but I don’t think I can pry my eyes from her. The ripple of her spine. The dip at the base. The nape of her neck.

I’ll be damned if I let her out of my sight with James in the vicinity, but I begrudgingly spin around. She could give me the slip if she wanted. Then I hear the slap of the washcloth hitting the water. I imagine her rubbing up her sides and over her breasts. My mouth waters as I haven’t had a taste of them yet. *Hell, I haven’t even kissed her.* I envision her dipping the cloth lower, swiping her sex, and I’m a mess. She’s mumbling something behind me, and I slip my hands into my pants, adjusting my dick which is moving toward its new status around this woman—perpetually hard.

“Giant.” My name is a strained attempt at a whisper. “It’s...” Her voice stops.

“What now, woman?” I shift from foot to foot. She whispers my name again. Detecting something in her voice other than her easygoing chatter, I quickly spin and note a bear on the other side of the stream.

Fuck.

“Letty,” I whisper as loud as I can, hoping not to draw any attention to her. “Don’t move.” Then again, she’s in a precarious position. Her pants are down near her knees, underwear included, and two white globes of perfection shine at me. But I can’t think about my hands on that ass or driving into her from this angle like I did last night because she needs to get away from that water.

“Now slowly, lower for your pants, Cricket.” My eyes don’t leave the bear who is intent on watching the rippling water. With Letty in my line of sight for the wild creature, I see her slowly bend forward and drag up her jeans. Then she takes one step back and another. When her foot steps on a twig, and the sound snaps like a shotgun, the bear looks up. We both hold our breath. I’m calculating how quickly I can reach her, hike her over my shoulder and run when the large, black creature turns away and slowly moseys in the opposite direction. I step forward and grip her bare shoulders. She claps a hand over her mouth and melts against my chest. She’s trembling under my fingers.

“He’s so beautiful,” she mutters once she uncovers her lips, not yet fazed that a bear caught her with her pants down, literally. Or that she’s standing shirtless before me, leaning back-to-chest against me.

“Beautiful and dangerous,” I hum next to her ear, not certain if I’m talking about the bear or the woman before me. She relaxes another second before leaning forward, removing herself from my touch, and scratching at her hair. Her arm attempts to cover her bare chest, but it’s hopeless. Both swells are hardly contained. “I have an idea. Let’s head back to camp. Are you finished?”

“As good as it’s going to get, I guess.” Her irritation with me lingers in her tone. I should tell her I’m sorry for whatever I did and beg for forgiveness with my tongue, my fingers, and my straining erection. Her festering, fiery energy makes me want her again. I haven’t been able to calm myself for the second day in a row. *What is it with this woman?*

When I woke to the sound of James, I’d been dreaming of her, her lush body underneath mine. My mouth finally meeting hers. As I pressed over her, shielding her from James, my thoughts shifted to driving her down the mountain.

My truck. She’s going to hate me when the truth comes out.

I scrub a hand down my beard. It's grown bushier as the days pass.

"I'm done," she mutters, and my gaze shifts back to her. Her hair is rolled into a tight bun at the base of her neck, and she scratches at it again. Greasy hair or not, she looks beautiful.

I walk her back to camp.

"Let me fetch some water. I'll be right back."

"I thought you were afraid to leave me alone," she snarks, but the bite is no longer present in her tone. She can hold her own against the likes of someone like James, but still, his presence has me cautious. Ignoring her comment, I grab a bucket and a water jug, and then head back to the stream. When I return, she jumps up from the log she was sitting on. Her eyes wide with fear.

"What's wrong?" I set the water-filled containers near the fire.

"I-I thought you were a bear."

"Ah, I see the reality of nature is settling in with you. Lions and tigers and bears." I repeat her line from the other night.

"He was beautiful," she whispers, but fear still laces her voice. He could have been dangerous. She has her arms wrapped around her, and her hands rub up and down her flannel-covered arms.

"Here. Sit." I direct her to the fire pit. She folds down onto the log for a seat and stares at the dying flames. I kneel to stoke the fire and pull the water-filled bucket closer to the heat source. With my hands on her waist, I shift her body on the upturned log.

"What are you doing?" she snaps. Does she no longer want me to touch her in even the simplest manner? My chest pinches at the thought.

You're so standoffish. I don't think this is true. I'm just quiet. I'm not a talker, but her silence has me questioning my lack of chatter, or at least opening up about a few things.

"I'm washing your hair," I state. She twists and looks up at me over her shoulder.

"What?"

"I know how much it can be a bother." I swallow before I continue. My heart races as I speak. "When my wife was sick, she liked it when I washed her hair. When it all fell out, I cleaned her scalp. We pretended her hair was still there."

Her eyes instantly fill with tears, but I don't want her sympathy. She licks her lips and turns her back to me.

"She was a lucky woman to have such care and attention." I hold my breath, questioning the honesty of her words, but she twists back to face me with a weak smile, letting me know she means every word.

"It's going to be cold at first." Positioning one knee near her, I tip her back over my propped thigh. Then I release her hair from the band, allowing the thick tresses to tumble toward the ground. It's long, so I'll need to watch that it doesn't dip into the dirt. I pour a portion of the water jug over her hair, and she closes her eyes.

"Cold?" I question.

"It's okay," she mutters. *She's* more than okay. Other than when we started, she hasn't complained once about our arrangement. Outside bathroom. Eating from a pan. Even sleeping in a tent. I've had fun with her. Ax throwing, laughing, even a foiled attempt at flipping a burger over an open flame. Letty is a metaphor for life, and I want to live her. Yet disappointment seems inevitable.

"Clara..." I pause, and Letty's eyes snap open. "That was my wife's name. We were high school sweethearts. I was this big oaf football player, and she was a quiet book girl. I always wanted to go into the military, and she only wanted to be a mother. We weren't talkers. Weren't eloquent. We fumbled a

lot.” I chuckle, recalling our first kiss, our first time in bed, and all the near misses. We grew practiced but not passionate. “It wasn’t fair to lose her so young.”

Letty nods and water drips onto her forehead. I swipe at it, taking my time to caress the side of her face as I stare down at her. Breaking the connection of our eyes, I reach for the shampoo next to me and squirt some on her hair. Apricots. It suits her. I massage the growing suds around her temple and lift her head for the underside. She hums like she did when we had sex, and I smile to myself. This is a noise I’m not certain I can live without hearing.

“She was thirty-nine when she passed.”

“How old are you?”

“I’ll be fifty next spring.”

Her eyes pop open. “You don’t look fifty.”

The corner of my mouth tugs upward. “I’ve got gray hair.”

Her eyes narrow, and she checks out my beard. “A few, but you also don’t seem that old.”

“Thank you.” I snort. “And how old are you?”

“I just turned forty.”

I gaze down at her. She can’t be. “You look so young.”

A smile brightens her face although her eyes have closed. “You’re a charmer, Mr. Harrington.”

Her teasing tone further curls my lip.

“No one ever says that about me.” *You’re so standoffish,* returns to my thoughts. *How many people have you tried to charm?* I ask myself.

Her eyes open again as I massage her scalp. “Charmer?” she questions.

“Yes.”

“Huh,” she huffs. “I find you very charming.” Her lids lower lazily, but her lips twist like she doesn’t approve of this finding.

“And how is that?”

“You’re thoughtful and kind. And you obviously took care of your wife. You’re a lucky man to have loved someone so deeply. And washing hair is a romantic gesture.” My fingers pause on her sudsy locks. She isn’t wrong. I loved my wife. Clara loved me. We worked, but it’s been ten years. My mother’s voice trickles through my head.

It could happen again.

I peer down at Letty. Her blue eyes are cut off from me, but her pink lips pout. She has the perfect slope to her nose and apple-defined cheeks. I want to lower and kiss her, and then I remember again I haven’t kissed her. I’ve touched her and fucked her, but we haven’t kissed.

I’m such an idiot.

“Going to rinse now,” I warn. “Tell me if it’s too warm.” I lean forward and drag the bucket of water from the fire. Hoping I didn’t let it sit too long, I dip a finger in the liquid to test the temperature. Not hot. Not frigid. I grip the edge of the bucket and pour the water over her suds-filled hair.

“That feels nice,” she purrs like she did last night. My dick knocks at my zipper, unfurled to almost full mast. I continue to rinse her hair, doing the best I can to remove all the soap residue. This wasn’t a spa-like treatment, but I’m hoping it might help make her more comfortable.

I get one more night, then we talk. There won’t be much to say after another night, though I’ll admit I’m happy to have another chance with her. *Will one more night be enough?* my heart murmurs, but I dismiss my answer.

When I think I have her hair clear of shampoo, I press at her shoulder blade, helping her sit upright again.

“Better?”

“Much. Thank you. That was sweet of you.” She begins to comb her fingers through her hair, separating the wet clumps and spreading the long length.

“Have a comb?”

Her brows pinch in question, but she answers, “In my bag.”

“Be right back.” I can’t handle rummaging through her underthings again, especially now that I know what they look like on her body. When I was searching for her tablet earlier, I brushed against her collection of thongs and was instantly hard—again. The thin lacy material is so unlike anything Clara wore. Skimpy. Sexy. Spontaneous. Seeing Letty in this barely-there fabric does something to me and not just my dick. It hints at adventure in the bedroom. I curse myself for comparing Clara and Letty. They are obviously unique women, yet the opposition between them is what draws me to Letty. I want the adventure. I want different.

I return to Letty’s side and tug another stump up behind her, seating myself on it. My thighs straddle beside hers, and I’m careful not to touch her with my legs although I want nothing more than to pull her back to my chest. Instead, I place the comb in her hair and gently stroke downward, righting the tangles as I go.

“My God, you’re hired. Come to Chicago and you can do my hair before the wedding.”

I chuckle. “Right, the wedding. Where’s it at?” I don’t mean to bring up a sore subject, and I’m not good at small talk, but I am curious. I’ll do anything to start her chattering at me again.

“The Drake, of course. Overlooking Lake Michigan.” I flip open a mental notepad and pencil down the information.

“Sounds fancy.”

“Only the best for my sister,” she mocks.

“You’ll be the most beautiful woman there, I’m sure.”

She turns to glance at me over her shoulder. “See, charming.” Then her brows pinch, and she looks toward the dying embers in the fire pit. “I don’t want to be more beautiful than Dayna, though. I want to go unnoticed on that day and forget the reminders it could have been me. I want it over. Time to move on.”

Time to move on. The words ring through my head like a gong. For years, I’ve pondered what moving on means. I restored my home. I dived into work. I supported my brother with his pub. But none of it has been enough.

I finish combing through her hair and scoot closer to her, finally giving in to the tremor in my thighs that want to rest against hers. I risk an arm around her middle and press my forehead to the damp nape of her neck.

“I’m sorry if there was a misunderstanding about last night.”

Her breath hitches.

“If I was too rough. If I said something or didn’t say something I should have. I apologize.” *I’m not good at this*, I want to tell her. *I don’t know what I’m doing, feeling, wanting*, I want to say.

“You weren’t rough,” she replies, her voice dropping. “I liked it.”

She’s quiet again, and I lift my face to press a kiss to her wet hair, lingering there as I speak. “I don’t know how to be with...people.” *With you*. How do I be with you?

“With women?” she suggests, curiosity lacing her question.

“With anyone, I guess.”

“Tell me,” she whispers, and my one-arm hold on her tightens, leaning my chest against her back.

“I was in the military forever. When I came home on a medical discharge, I didn’t know where I belonged. Clara had a routine, and I didn’t know where I fit. My dad offered me the

brewery, but I didn't know anything about running a business. It was like a crash course in economics and marketing. It's my family. It's my name. But it hasn't been enough." *I'm lonely*, I want to tell her. *I've been lonely for a long, long time*, I think, but I don't admit this to her. I just hold her tighter, allowing my face to rest in her wet locks. With a whisper, I say, "My life is so quiet."

"And I talk too much." She chuckles.

"I don't think anything you do would be too much," I mutter. *You're perfect*. When she doesn't respond, I joke, "Your chirping is growing on me." *And so is your hum*. Then she chuckles. *Your laughter, too*, I add to my growing list of noises. Her body, her nearness, her scent. All of her. I don't want to let her go.

12

Night Sounds

[Letty]

We spend the afternoon on a short hike, and thankfully, Giant goes at my pace because my blisters have blisters. He surprises me by sharing more details about himself and his family.

His brother Charlie is the mayor brother.

Billy is the pub-owning brother.

James is the motorcycle brother.

“He’s the black sheep of the family. He used to be in search and rescue. He claims he has reasons for staying away from us, and I know those reasons, but they aren’t good enough to me.” Giant scoffs. “Now he’s mixed up in all kinds of things, and I don’t like knowing he’s up here.”

Giant reaches for my hand and draws it to his lips to place a brief kiss on my knuckles. To my surprise, he doesn’t release my hand, but holds my fingers as we continue to climb through the labyrinth of trees.

“Mati is my sister. Her husband died a year ago August, and she’s recently reunited with her best guy friend from high school. It’s about time he professes his love for her.” Giant chuckles. “Our mother was obsessed with Roald Dahl, and we are each named after a character from one of his books. I come from the BFG. *Big Friendly Giant*.”

I chuckle. It suits him. “That’s sweet.”

“It’s embarrassing,” he admits, and I’m about to disagree when he stops us on a large boulder, like a natural ridge. My breath hitches at the view. The valley is breathtaking as the

greenery shifts to reds, golds, and oranges. Fall is in full bloom. It almost doesn't look real, it's so picture-perfect.

"Wow," I mumble, scanning the sponge brush-painted landscape. My phone camera would not do justice to this natural image.

"Yeah, wow," Giant says, and I turn to find him observing me. A grin grows on my face. Just his eyes on me have me giddy and all seems to be forgiven from this morning.

His brow pinches. "I haven't kissed you."

I lick my lips and bite the corner. "I've noticed." I pause a second, reaching up for his jaw. "I've never been kissed by a bearded man," I add, scraping my fingertips against the thickly covered edge of his face.

"Think I should fix that?" he teases.

"I think you should." Giant lowers for me, cupping my cheeks in his large hands before taking my lips with a tender kiss. Even though it starts too slow and sweet, like all things between us, it heats within seconds, and our tongues collide. Giant draws me to him, and I melt against his large body, feeling the evidence that his desire matches mine. I want this man again, but I'm content to have him kiss me like he is, like I'm the air he needs to breathe and the color in his wind.

That night, Giant asks if I mind connecting the sleeping bags to make a double one. He slips in next to me in only his boxer briefs and a T-shirt. I start with my pajama pants and a sweatshirt, but he runs hot, so within minutes, I'm overheating, and I sit up to remove my pants. Giant tucks me into him when I'm only half-dressed.

"I'm not good at this stuff," he tells me, and I turn my head to look up at him. My hand rests on his chest while my ear listens to the beat of his strong heart.

"What stuff?" I question. When we returned to camp, he made dinner, stopping to occasionally kiss me before returning to the task at hand. He's pretty good at a few things.

“Holding someone.”

My brows pinch. What about his wife? He spoke of her with such adoration and sorrow earlier, my heart broke for him. I turn to kiss his covered pec.

“You’re doing just fine,” I tell him, wondering how many women he’s been with since her. Has he treated them all with the same distance as he’s treated me? Did he eventually pull them close with unending kisses? I snuggle into him with the thought.

Clara was a lucky woman.

The idea of her doesn’t make me jealous, but the devotion of Giant’s love does. I’ve never felt such dedication, such passion. If love exists, and I believe it does, it must be for other people, not me. However, my sister’s wedding comes to mind, and I reconsider when I think of the farce it’s going to be.

“Where are your thoughts?” Giant asks, and I shift to glance back at him.

“All over, I guess.”

“When you’re quiet, I get nervous.”

“I thought you didn’t like my chirping.”

“As I said earlier, it’s growing on me.” He chuckles, and the rumble against my ear warms my insides. He’s on his back, and I’m pressed into his side, so I slip a leg over his. I’m not expecting any more sexual encounters with him. Thinking of his wife makes me raw and sad, despite all our kisses through the remainder of the day. I don’t want to compare myself to her, and I don’t want to feel like I’m filling a hole for him, but I do want to be close to him. It’s nice to be held. Hug therapy—it’s a real thing where a person holds someone for an hour. I might enjoy the experience. Then I chuckle. I couldn’t hug a stranger, yet that’s exactly what I’m doing. However, Giant Harrington feels anything *but* a stranger to me. Something about him sings to my soul. Maybe it’s the intensity of the sex

last night. Maybe it's the loneliness I heard in his voice when he spoke of his wife.

He strokes up my spine and brushes back my hair from my shoulder. My leg hitches higher on his thigh.

"Dammit, woman," he hisses, and I pull back my head.

"What? What did I do?"

"Just being you. I'm rock solid again." He scrubs a hand down his face and lifts to kiss my forehead. My knee inches upward, nudging the sac contained in his boxer briefs. The firm length of him can't be mistaken. He's huge, hard, and straining.

"Should we do something about this?" I gently nudge upward again with my knee, and he groans.

"I promised myself I'd be good tonight. No more taking advantage of you."

I perch up on my elbow and peer down at him. Cupping his bearded jaw, I turn his face so he looks at me. "Is that what you think? You think you took advantage of me?"

"I didn't exactly ask permission the other night, and then last night..." His voice drifts.

"You did ask, with your hesitation, and then your consideration of me last night. I already told you I enjoyed being with you like that." My voice lowers as I speak the next words. "Please, don't take this experience away from me, okay?"

"What experience?" he questions, his voice rough.

"All of it. The camping, hiking, ax throwing, and the sex."

"Dammit," he grumbles, clamping his hand under my thigh, and then flipping me onto my back. One of his broad legs slips between mine as he holds himself up on an elbow. His thickness digs into my pelvic bone, and then he shifts his body, slipping the other leg between my thighs and positioning

himself at my core. He brushes my hair back, peering down at me.

“You’re the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.” His voice deepens as it lowers, and my face heats like a schoolgirl. I can’t remember the last time someone called me *pretty*. His mouth meets mine. Hesitant. Sweet. Prickly from his beard. Then his tongue comes forward, and I open. The fire ignites as the kiss flames. The pressure down below builds as his heavy shaft rests against my achy center. His tongue swirls with mine, and my hips shift, finding friction against him, but it’s not enough. He kisses and kisses, and my leg hitches over his hip, opening myself to him. He curls a hand under my thigh and lifts it higher, pressing harder at my covered core.

“Never been kissed by a bearded man,” he reminds me, groaning against my mouth as he rubs his firm length over my damp thong. “Can this bearded man give you a few other new experiences?” He rubs his hairy chin over my cheek and down my neck, then sucks at my skin to soothe the bristle brush sting. He lowers into the sleeping bag, skimming both my breasts over my sweatshirt until his face is level with my midsection. Then he presses the soft material upward.

“Take this off,” he commands. “And open this bag a bit.” I lift to remove my sweatshirt and then unzip halfway down each side of the heavy bag. He flips the thick material backward and scrapes his scratchy face up my stomach before rubbing over one breast with his chin. It tickles and teases and then his mouth opens for a swollen globe. His large mouth covers an equally large breast, and I’ve never felt so consumed. His tongue twirls over the nipple before he pulls back to suck the tip, already peaked and tight. His tongue traces around the stiff nub, flicking over the firm swell before returning to suck the fullness. He releases my breast with a pop before moving to the other one, dragging the prickly hair of his chin over my skin to mark me once again.

Releasing me, he moves down my body. His scruffy jaw scribbles on my skin, writing words I’ll want to remember. *He wants me. He’s going to devour me. He’s going to ruin me.* My

sex clenches with anticipation, and my knees open wider, allowing his broad shoulders to slip between my thighs. The stubbled jaw tickles as he rubs his chin over my sensitive skin before his tongue follows. Hesitant like his first kiss, he takes his time, torturing me with a lazy lick and a teasing twirl. Then his tongue flattens, and he laps up my seam. My hips buck, and my head lifts.

“Giant,” I hum, slipping my fingers into his hair. He continues to flirt with me until finally his tongue settles in and splits me open. His enthusiasm begins—licking, lapping, lusting. My eyes roll back as I tug at his short locks, singing praises to a higher being until I can’t take it any longer. My orgasm rushes me like the thunderstorm from last evening, rolling out of nowhere to roar between my thighs. I cry out as my head lifts again, and I hear him eagerly savoring me. I’m so turned on another ripple immediately follows the first.

“Giant. Oh God, Giant, another one is coming.” I exhale. *This never happens.* “I’m coming again.” Shocked and overwhelmed at the sensation, I lose control of my body as a second quake strikes as intensely as the first. Stars dance before my eyes in the dimly lit tent, and I fall back to the pillow. My legs shake, and my center drips. I’m spent, and eventually, Giant releases me to suck at my inner thigh. His scruffy beard will leave more marks, and I want them all over me.

Returning north, he presses kisses into my flushed skin as he moves up my body. When he reaches my mouth, he asks, “May I kiss you?” My brows pinch at the question.

“Please,” I beg, willing to taste myself on his lips. With equal excitement, his mouth captures mine, and we kiss for several minutes before I pull away.

“My turn,” I say, pressing at his shoulders to encourage him to roll to his back.

“Cricket,” he warns. “You don’t need to do this.” Again, I’m uncertain of his cautious tone, but I reassure him.

“I want this.” I tug his T-shirt, and he sits up to remove it. Working my way down his broad middle with kisses of my own, I want to do this. I twirl my fingers through the hair on his chest and stroke over his deep treasure trail. This is one of the sexiest parts of a man, and on Giant, it’s a trove of lush dark hair leading to gold. I curl my fingers into the waistband of his boxer briefs and pull them down his hips. He lifts, and once I have them to his knees, he wiggles his legs to kick them off.

He’s big. Huge. Ginormous. It’s ridiculous to think he won’t fit as he’s already been in me, but my mouth is different. Still, I want to taste him. I want to please him. I want to give to him what he’s given me.

“If it’s too much—”

I cut him off with a lick of the smooth head, wiping the worried tone from him. Circling round the mushroom edge with my tongue, I hum before I draw him in. Knowing I can’t possibly take him all in, I cup his balls and gently squeeze while I suck most of him. His hands cover my hair, stroking back the falling tresses. He bucks once and then apologizes, but I don’t want him to be reserved.

I suck harder, pulling him back as far as I can.

“That feels so fucking incredible,” he groans as his hips set a slow rhythm, tapping his tip at the back of my throat. My cheeks hollow and increase their suction. Within seconds, he sits up and yanks me off him.

I’m on my back before I can shriek, “I wasn’t finished.” My mouth drips with the flavor of him. He should bottle this blend at his brewery. I’d drink a full keg.

“This is how I want to finish.” He holds himself at my entrance, the wet tip easily slipping through my eager folds. “I’m sorry about no condoms. I had a vasectomy, though, and I haven’t been with anyone in so long.”

I press up to kiss him, hating this awkward conversation.

“I haven’t been with anyone in over a year. And before that, it was with the same man for too long.”

Giant groans as he enters me with more care than last night. He’s slow and deliberate, and I hum as he fills me. He reaches somewhere I’ve never been touched before, way down deep inside, and I’m fuller than I’ve ever felt. The sense of oneness makes me shaky and unnerves me a bit. But when he pulls back, my body chases his, and he chuckles over me.

“I like how you follow me as if you don’t want me to leave your body.”

“I don’t.” I exhale, and he rushes forward, forcing me to catch my breath. My eyes roll back as the oneness sensation ripples through my body again.

“You seem greedy,” he teases while his tone makes it sound dirty. *Toes in the dirt*, he mentioned, and I want to be all kinds of dirty with this man.

“So greedy.” My voice hitches as I clutch at his tight backside, squeezing each firm globe to keep him inside me.

“Jesus, Cricket.” He rocks back and then thrusts forward. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. *Chirp, chirp, chirp* is the friction song our bodies sing as we rub against each other. His large hand grips the back of my thigh while the other covers one backside cheek. He tugs me upward, lifting me a little to shift the angle of his thrusts. I can’t describe what’s happening to my body. The rhythm. The connection. The emotion.

“Giant,” I warn. “It’s happening...”

“Another one?” He sounds surprised himself. “Fuck yeah, Letty. Finish.”

He rests on one elbow with his hand under my backside. The hand on my thigh lowers between us, and his thumb flicks the swollen, sensitive hood, triggering me to tip over once again. I come alive around him, humming his name, adding it to the night sounds around us.

“Cricket,” he groans. “God, you’re squeezing me so hard. I can’t last.” He pulls out, and we both watch as he pulses streams of pleasure on my lower belly. Once finished, he collapses over me too briefly before shifting to pull away, but I wrap my legs around his hips and reach for his biceps, unwilling to release him so soon.

“Not yet,” I beg, not wanting the sensation to end. He’s larger than me, and heavy, but I want his weight to blanket me. Fearing he’ll shut me out again, I won’t let him escape. *Not yet.*

Twinkle Toes and Gun-shy

[Giant]

I've been more turned on in the last seventy-two hours than I've been in years, and the morning is no different. I wake with a solid wood, and when Letty nudges her backside against me, I can't resist her.

"Can we do it like this?" I question. The angle will be different once again. Our position last night, the way we moved, the deepness of my thrusts, we were anything but regimented in our rhythm. Letty and I sync. Deep down, I don't want the missionary position, but I want her any way she'll let me.

Letty wiggles her ass against me, and I slip my hand up her hip. She didn't return to her skimpy undies last night, and the discovery makes my dick twitch. I quickly remove my boxer briefs and press my length against her backside.

"You're warm," she teases, rubbing against the length. I'm going to be a whole lot hotter once I enter her. I'm a big man, but she took me deep last night, and I felt something I'd never felt before. Greedy, I called her, but it's total lust on my end. I want her like I've never wanted anyone, and that includes Clara.

I position myself between her thighs as we lie on our sides. "Hitch your leg over my hip." Letty spreads, doing as I ask, and I like how responsive she is to me. She hasn't stopped anything I've asked of her yet.

Don't take this experience from me. My heart leaped when she said this.

My finger dips into her, discovering she's already wet, so I prep her with a few gentle pumps and then I brace myself at her entrance. I'm out of control with this woman, and I slip inside with one long thrust. She yelps a little and jackknifes forward, bending at the waist and drawing me deep from this angle.

"Okay, Cricket?" I worry I've hurt her. Clara was sensitive.

"So full," she murmurs and slips her leg off my hip. The collapse of her thighs tightens her hold on me, and I slip in and out, pistoning like a revved-up engine. I wrap her hair around my fist and tug. Her back arches, and she hums that sound I'm coming to love. My pace increases. The tension builds. I'm not going to last.

"Letty, sweetheart. Get there. It's too much." She slips her hand between her thighs, and her fingers brush my dick slipping in and out of her. My eyes roll back, and I release her hair, gripping her hip instead. *My God, she's glorious.* I want to hold out for her, but I don't know if I can.

When she hisses my name, I know she's close. I'm sweating, straining to keep the orgasm back. When she growls and arches her back again, the tension releases. A shower of my seed pumps into her, coating her insides while she clenches around me. I should have pulled out like I did last night, but I couldn't help myself this morning. I want to fill her. I want to howl at the moon even though it's daylight. My fingers curl over her hip as I still, allowing the release a final spill. When I settle, I tug her back to my chest and press my lips to her shoulder.

"Good morning," I mutter. When she chuckles, the movement of her body jiggles me inside her.

"It is a good morning." She rubs her hand up and down my forearm over her stomach. I want to hold her like this for the rest of my life. Feel her warmth around me and her chuckle vibrating up my spine. I like this woman. But too soon, I'll have to take her back.

Not yet, she said, but soon enough.

My thoughts drift to Clara. I don't want to compare the women, but Clara hated giving head, and truth be told, she struggled at it. When Letty took me deep last night, I thought I'd blow right then. Not to mention, after I licked Letty, she let me kiss her. Clara would refuse, not wishing to taste herself on my lips. *Don't take this experience from me*, she said, and I agree with the sentiment. I don't want to forget one minute. Everything we've done is nothing I've ever done before even though I was a married man.

We rest for a few minutes before I slip out of her. I need to clean up and get her something as well. Camping hasn't been the most convenient time for my newfound sexual adventure, but then again, I didn't plan to sleep with the enemy. For a moment, I remember the land and then dismiss the thought. I want to enjoy Letty as much as I can before we talk business again.

"Let me get you something." I slip from the sleeping bag and rummage for a spent tee. She takes it from me and wipes herself. "Hey, I noticed your feet yesterday."

She twists to look at me over her shoulder and then looks down at her covered toes.

"Why didn't you tell me about the blisters?" I ask.

Her head falls back, and she stares off to the side of the tent. "Because I didn't want you to say I told you so." She huffs. She's tough, and I like that about her. I like her. Too much.

"Let me bandage them."

She shifts to her back and chuckles. "You do *not* want to touch my feet."

To prove her wrong, I slip my hands inside the sleeping bag, reaching for her toes. She kicks out at me, but I catch her ankle. Her other foot attempts an attack, but I clutch it as well.

“This could be a very compromising position.” I could spread her again and mount her like last night, which reminds me I haven’t left the tent to clean myself from round one. She giggles and throws her head back, attempting to wiggle her ankles free.

“Oh my gosh. Do not look at my feet.”

I look. She has perfectly painted toenails and nasty looking blisters. “You anti-feet or something?”

“Yes,” she huffs, settling her squirming legs.

I chuckle. “So if I were to lift these to my mouth, and say, suck your toes, that would gross you out?”

Her eyes close, and her legs wiggle against my hold. “Yes. Yuck.”

“What if I licked the underside?” I laugh a little more, lifting her foot and pointing my tongue at the intended spot.

She makes a puking noise.

“But I want to taste every part of you.” She stops squirming and gagging, and her lids pop open. She stares up at me. The petulant child act appears to settle her.

“I’d like that.” Her sultry tone makes something rush up my chest. I want her again, but I’m almost fifty and can’t quite get there that quick. My thumbs rub at her ankles.

“Maybe once these are healed.” The implication is there. Healing takes time, and this hints at seeing her in the future. Her legs relax. “I’ll get the bandages but let me clean up first.”

I step outside, naked as a jaybird, and use the water in the bucket near the smothered campfire to rinse myself off. The cold shock douses thoughts of seeing her again. Taking a deep breath, I suppress the scream rising in my chest. *It isn’t fair.* She wants my land. That’s why she’s here.

I turn back for the tent and find her sitting up. She wears one of my T-shirts and she’s holding the collar up to her nose.

“I’m sorry. I just...” Her voice drifts, and I hold up a hand.

“It’s okay. I like seeing you in it.” *When I shouldn’t.* When I shouldn’t think of her wearing my clothes, or coming to my home, or fucking her again. Seeing her in my shirt settles my restless thoughts a bit, and I kneel for my briefs. After tugging them on, I work on bandaging her toes and heels.

“I was hoping to go canoeing with you, but it’s a hike. I don’t know if those can handle it.” I’m referencing her blisters.

“I’m sure I’ll be okay. I made it through yesterday, and I’d love to go canoeing.” My eyes drift up to hers to find her watching me. “I can’t remember the last time I went.”

“It’s a three-mile hike up to the drop.”

She sits up straighter. “I can do it.” Her determination shouldn’t startle me, but her tone does. She sounds very business-like, and I decide she must use that enthusiasm in her job. The one where she steals land from people. Does she volunteer to tear people from their homes? Does she suggest she go in for the kill to take property out from under people? I curse myself for the sudden shift in thoughts. I just had sex with her. I like her, but what does she think of me? Am I only a business venture? A prospect? Does she do this often?

It’s been a year since I’ve been with anyone. She sounded sincere, and I hate my doubts. I should ask her what we’re doing here—what’s between us—but I don’t because it isn’t my style. Confrontation. Communication. Discussion. Not my thing.

You didn’t do half the things you’ve done with Letty with your own wife, my head hammers. Try it. *Try talking to her,* whispers through my thick skull, but the problem with a thick skull is, it’s too thick sometimes.

“How about a protein bar breakfast with coffee so we can hit the trail?” I offer instead, ignoring all my doubts, questions, and fears in need of a distraction for the day. It’s exactly what

the land is worth to me. Distraction from reality, and the reality is, Letty's made it to her three-night minimum, but I wonder if she'll reconsider. I wonder if I can convince her to go home empty-handed but still holding me.

+ + +

We trek the miles upstream to where I keep my canoe. I explain how I come up here often and return the canoe to this launching area in order to ride it back to camp. I vary my destinations, but it worked out to have the canoe in place this weekend.

“When I was a kid, my granddad brought us up here. I told you about his brewing days, but after things were legalized and we established a brewery near town, he kept the land.” My chest pinches at the memory of Pap bringing me up the mountain and us traveling back down by the stream. “He built the cabin at the base, but I restored it after he died.”

To everyone's surprise, I inherited the land. It should have naturally passed to my dad, but Pap left it directly to me. The will stated he knew I loved the property as much as he did, and one day, I'd need it to remind me who I was and where I belonged. I'd gone off to fight for my country just as he had. And I'd returned a little lost, like him as well. He told me the mountain and the woods would ground me, and it has. I never want to see brown desert sand again.

“Were you close?” Letty asks me as we flip the canoe and push it into the water.

“Very.” It's all I can say as my throat clogs. I miss the old man every day. He died while I was still overseas, and I couldn't get home for his funeral.

“He sounds special. I've never been close to someone like that, except maybe my younger brother.” It's all she offers, not expanding on him or their relationship.

I help her into the bow and then push off the stern, jumping in at the last minute. Letty squeaks when the canoe jostles.

“I won’t tip us. I promise. This water is freezing.”

We travel in silence for a bit. The only sound is the lapping of water as I paddle from one side to the other of the vessel. Letty offers to help, but she hinders us at first even though I’m in no rush.

“It’s so peaceful,” she says, stealing my thoughts with her hushed voice as if she’ll disturb the silence. Nature whispers around us with the rustle of trees and the low ripple of the river. We quietly continue until she says, “Tell me a story about your granddad.”

I’m surprised by the request but immediately know what story to tell her. I begin with the first time he took me fishing. A river runs behind the properties on the Lane. Technically, the dock was on our neighbor’s land—the Chances. I chuckle with the memories of my first catch, which seemed huge but wasn’t. Then I tell her about coming up here and learning to hunt.

“I’m not a fan of guns,” she reminds me.

“Right. The freezer fairy.”

She chuckles. “Tell me more.”

I’m surprised at myself as I chatter on the remainder of our trip. I haven’t spoken of these memories in a long time, and it feels good to tell someone about Pap, even if a part of me is sad at his passing.

“Those are great stories.” She pauses. “I always wanted to be a writer. Tell stories.”

I stare at her. She shifted to her side as she listened to me, but she angles her face forward, reminding me of a sea nymph on the front of a boat.

“Why didn’t you become a writer?”

She shrugs, looking off at the distance before us.

“I guess I changed my mind,” she says, but her tone tells me that isn’t the truth.

“You can always change it again.” I nudge the issue because I don’t believe her, and for the first time, I wonder if real estate possession is really her passion. *Could she change her mind about wanting my land?*

“Maybe one day,” she states, dismissing the suggestion. We near the curve for our camp, and Letty leans backward to glide her hand in the cool water.

“Careful,” I warn, but her body tips precariously, and her arm flaps to balance her equilibrium. “Letty,” I snap again in warning. Her toe hooks into the edge of the canoe, but it isn’t enough. When I reach for her, I rock the vessel, and she dips farther, arching her back. Not even a second passes before her toe slips from the small lip, and Letty’s awkward position pulls her backward. I stand, which one should never do in a canoe, and Letty falls overboard.

The water is shallow here, but I worry she hit her head on the bottom. She pops up rather quickly, though, swiping at her face before she lets out a scream.

“It’s fucking freezing.”

A deep, uncontrolled belly laugh bursts from me. She’s a wet T-shirt dream with her soaked hair plastered over her cheeks and her drenched flannel hugging her body. Her already-hip-hugging jeans are saturated as she stands in the water and grips the side of the canoe, trying to wobble it and force me to join her. For a big man, I have the balance of a cat, so I move with her efforts. Her irritation grows, and that only adds to her fierceness. She’s adorable.

I use the paddle pitched to the bottom of the stream to hold the vessel in place. “It’d be faster for you to walk to shore.” I nod to the land only a few feet away, struggling to suppress my chuckles as she turns to note the proximity. Letty pushes off the canoe and struggles in her sodden clothing to

close the distance to the soft dirt of the shoreline. She stomps up the embankment as I steer the craft and eventually beach it. I tiptoe up the cavernous metal and jump out just as we hear rapid fire.

Three sharp shots.

And Letty's on the ground.

"Cricket!" I cross the dirt in two long strides and dive for her. She lies on her belly with her hands over the back of her head. I gently roll her to her side, quickly skimming her body with my hands and eyes. Her chest rises and falls, and she's gone pure white. "Are you hurt?"

"Did you hear that?" Her voice is a whisper, her lips blue and trembling.

"I did," I say, looking up and off toward the trees. Those weren't hunting shots. That was gunfire but not a rifle. *Dammit, James.* I glance back down at her. "Are you okay?"

I'm still not convinced she wasn't shot with the way she dropped. Her front is caked in mud, the dirt sticking from the wetness of her clothing. She slowly sits up with my help, and I brush back her hair, finding grit and fine pebbles mixed with it.

"What happened?" I stare at her. The noise. It triggered something.

Her lips tremble as ghosted eyes stare up at me. "My brother. He was shot in the streets. A drive-by shooting. I saw it happen." There are no tears or sadness, only hardness and fear. "He was only twelve." I pull her to me and hold her listless body against my chest. My hand covers the back of her head. I know all about her pain. The loss. I'd seen too many, too young lose their lives in battle.

"We're getting out of here," I tell her, pressing her back by her shoulders. "It isn't safe." Then I tug her back to me once again, cradling her against my chest. Briskly, I lift her like a bride and stalk to our site.

What are you up to, James?

14

Shot Through The Heart

[Letty]

Owen.

All I can see in my mind's eye is my brother. His smiling face with a bounce in his step and his hair flopping over his forehead. Him walking toward me. The call of his name and the twist of his head. He went down with three shots, right on the sidewalk before the middle school. At first, it didn't make sense. Not my brother. Not on my watch. But he'd been mixed up with the wrong kids for far too long, longer than we knew. My brother. Dead at twelve.

Should I sell drugs? Would it help us with money? He was so innocent, hopeful and earnest, when he asked. A middle school student with his whole life before him and he was worried about our family finances.

Giant carries me up the slope and the few yards to our campsite. Once there, I demand he set me down. We quickly gather our things. I'm shaking, but my body works without thought.

"I'll come back for all this," Giant says, but I turn on him.

"No. No, we'll get it all now and go together." I'm determined he won't leave me, and I don't want to let him out of my sight. We collapse the tent, and Giant lowers the coolers. I don't know how he got all the equipment here on his own, but we pile and fasten items to the larger cooler, building a makeshift cart. Giant carries the smaller one along with both our packs. It seems counterproductive to me to move toward the ranger station.

Until Giant admits he has a truck parked there.

I'm too out of sorts from all that's happening to register I didn't see a truck the night of the storm nor the morning after. It all becomes clear when we break through the trees near the back of the station. Giant signals for me to remain quiet as if we're on a mission of espionage. He sets all the stuff in the bed of the truck and then helps me into the driver's side of the cab, forcing me to scoot over as he enters. Once he starts the engine, he peels around the old station, the tires throwing up gravel and dirt as he circles to the front of the small structure.

"Fucking James." Giant doesn't look back, and neither do I, as I'm too stunned. It feels like we're fleeing a crime. Fugitives on the run.

We bounce down a worn path, crushed between a wall of trees. Giant wants to speed, but the rough terrain prevents it.

The time passes in silence.

"Say something," he commands, his voice full of an emotion I don't recognize. I don't even know if I can speak my full name.

"I don't know what to say."

"Anything. Just talk." *Your silence makes me nervous.* He swipes a hand over his longer beard, and I realize how damp I am. Everything processes in slow motion. My clothes are soaked. Dirt coats the front of me. My hair is a mess. Giant has a truck.

"Should we have searched for James?"

Giant swipes a palm over his hair and then slams the palm on the steering wheel. He shakes his head, lips clamped in refusal to discuss his brother.

"Ask me anything else."

"How long has your truck been up here?" It seems like a silly thing to ask. He obviously parked up here and unloaded to prepare for us. Then he came down the mountain to get me.

He quickly peers over at me and then away without an answer. *What's happening?*

“Explain to me what happened here?” I bite my lips, chewing at the tender skin as thoughts ramble through my head. Did he plan all this? Did he hope to seduce me? What am I missing?

“James fired a gun, and I got us out of there.”

“Not James,” I snap, my irritation growing although I’m not certain what I’m irritated about.

Processing: Giant drove up here. He set up camp. He knew I’d show. *Did he set me up?*

“Was this a game to you?” The thought surprises me, but I need to ask.

“What do you mean?”

“You brought me up here, but did you lead me on? I thought we were without amenities or transportation, and it was here all along. What were you doing?” Withholding running water and electricity feels like the least of my issues, though. He sighs and swipes at his hair again, but he isn’t offering an answer. In fact, he sheepishly avoids looking back at me, and his jaw clenches, reminding me of our second meeting when he proposed the camping trip.

“You tricked me into going.” But did he? I’m the one who went to his cabin. I’m the one who went up this mountain without coercion. What was I thinking? The land. *I wanted the land, but was that really the only reason?* my heart whispers.

“I did no such thing,” he snaps, side-eyeing me. “You came willingly.”

Oh, I came all right. Six, seven times in three nights.

Three nights. That’s how long I think you’ll last before the land breaks you.

He was so wrong. Three nights and he broke me because my foolish heart started to believe it was more, it was something else.

His cabin comes into view in the distance. His cabin. The place he inherited from his pap. On the land he isn't going to sell. My gut realizes it although my heart doesn't want to accept it. What was all this about then? Why did we play this game?

"Three nights," I whisper. "You lied to me." The words feel thick and heavy, and I'm shocked by the underlying truth. My body feels dirty, and it's not from the grit mixed in my hair or the mud splattered on my shirt. "Why would you lie to me?"

Again, he doesn't speak. He doesn't defend himself. Instead, he slows the truck, pulling up to the cabin and shifting into park.

"Answer me," I bark, and he flinches. His eyes close, and his knuckles turn white on the steering wheel.

"I'm not giving you the land." This is no longer an acceptable answer or even my question.

"Meaning?"

"I had no intention to sell. Ever."

Ever. The word echoes through my hollow heart.

I didn't plan to marry you, Letty. Ever. Hudson's admission pales compared to Giant's. I feel my dreams crumble and filter through the wind like paper torn to shreds and tossed into the air. Giant's rejection feels like something more, something deeper. It feels so much worse than Hudson's. But why? I hardly know this man. Admittedly, our current situation proves I knew less than I thought.

"Then what was this all about?" *Three nights.* Sleeping with him, enjoying him, falling for him. I glare at Giant, cursing him in my head as the stranger he is, and aching for him as something more in my heart.

His eerie silence is my answer.

"I see." I slowly nod even though I don't see. I don't understand anything. "Foregone conclusion, wasn't I? You

challenged me, and I accepted. And for what? For sex?"

What did he want from this arrangement?

"It wasn't just sex," Giant mumbles, but I dismiss the statement as any emotion is absent.

"Did you do it to make me feel...stupid? City girl and mountain man, or something like that?" But that's not what I felt. Used. Betrayed. Hurt. So very hurt. But not stupid.

I nod as if he spoke, as if he said something, *anything* to contradict me and give me hope I wasn't a joke. "Did you think if I slept with you, I'd forget the land?" Then another question dawns. "Or do you think I slept with you to get the land? To make the deal?"

He turns on me, his eyes narrow and dark. "Didn't you? You with your eager eyes and your pert smile, hoping to butter me up and take this from me. Telling me everything has a price. Well, this doesn't." He waves a hand toward the windshield and then slams it against his chest. I don't understand the motion and absentmindedly look at the cabin I'll never enter.

Cozy. Homey. Inviting.

I'll never have a home like this.

I'll never have a man like him, who loved a woman so much he washed her hair.

"You wanted what's mine, and I wasn't going to give it to you. It wasn't even a thought until..." His voice drifts, but I've heard enough.

"How could you think such a thing of me?" My lips instantly quiver. An ax thrown at my sternum would be less painful than what he's suggesting. I would never do such a thing. *Ever*. The word reverberates in my head. Sleep with the enemy. I've already done that with Hudson. Sleep with a client to score a commission. Not on my watch.

Then I hear Uncle Frank's voice. *Anything*. I continue to shake with disbelief. Not like this. I would never strike a deal

like this. This wasn't a deal. Things changed. Something happened, at least for me. This was so much more, and for what? Why did I go with him? Why did I sleep with him? These questions have no answer, and it's all a reminder that Giant and I are strangers. I lean forward and rummage through my bag for my car keys.

"I see," I repeat. Licking my lips, I reach for the handle to release me from the truck. "Well, enjoy your land, Mr. Harrington." I realize when a real estate deal has failed, but once again, I've failed to recognize a hopeless relationship.

It wasn't a relationship. It was only sex.

I don't offer a conciliatory handshake as I pop open the door. I've already wasted my heart on Giant and my body, which aches for his, even now, especially now.

Say something to change my mind.

"Officially off duty, sir," I spit, reminiscent of stating I reported for camp when I accepted the challenge. The challenge of this land. The challenge of this man. I salute him with one hand while my other grabs my backpack at my feet. With strength I don't feel, I carry the suddenly too heavy pack a few feet to my car and toss it over my front seat once I've opened the door. I collapse into my rental and reverse, narrowly missing the back corner of his truck.

With liquid blurring my eyes, I peel down the two-tire lane with a sad tune in my heart.

Country road, take me home, to the place, I belong...
Chicago.

15

Intent to Purchase or Not

[Giant]

Eight days. Eleven hours. Twenty-seven minutes. That's how long it's been since she drove off, and I didn't say a word to defend myself or apologize for my accusation.

The pain in her eyes undid me. The tears she fought. The courage it took her to get out of my truck.

I wanted to pull her to me the minute I said what I said.

Didn't you?

Didn't you sleep with me in order to obtain my property? Didn't you mess with my heart to get to my land? Didn't you want to stay? Didn't you feel something for me? Didn't you see I'm falling for you?

Three short nights.

I slam back the beer, hardly tasting the crisp October blend. My brother Charlie asked me to meet him at the pub for lunch. Being in public is the last place I want to be, but going back up the mountain isn't a possibility for me. She ruined it. My haven has been invaded by memories of a woman with blistered toes, a sweet laugh, and a delicious body.

Charlie is the mayor of Blue Ridge and the baby brother of our family. He took up politics after some of the corruption from our previous mayor came to light. He's been good for the community, working to keep the locals happy and the tourism thriving. The economy has been restored under his reign, especially with the help of one particular business.

Blue Ridge Microbrewery and Pub is my other brother's business. Billy didn't want to work in the factory, but when he

dropped out of college, he didn't have a choice. Eventually, he broke free and built a place for people to enjoy our family's brew—and party—which he knows best. Celebrate has been Billy's motto since his divorce from his high school sweetheart, or potentially the cause of it. He's been in business for about fifteen years and along with him, Giant Brewing Company has grown under me.

I thought I'd be military forever, but with the gunshot wound and a medical discharge, here I am.

Alone again.

It sounds like a song Mati's new beau might have sung back when he was a rock star. Matilda's our little sister, the real baby of the family, and the princess as the token daughter after four sons.

"Want another?" she asks me as she works the lunch shift before coaching volleyball in the evenings for the local high school. Her lion-red hair doesn't match any of us boys, as we're all shades of gray at this point. I'm still the lightest although I'm the oldest.

"Keep 'em coming."

Mati pats my shoulder and walks away. Charlie approaches, weaving here and there to greet people as he makes his way to the round table in the back corner. He's like a local hero. James is the real hero in our family, but he disowned us. For the past week, I've tried to figure out what he was doing up at the ranger station and if he was the one shooting his gun. His bike was gone when Letty and I arrived for my truck, but that doesn't mean anything. He's mixed up in some bad stuff, hanging with the Rebel's Edge MC outside of town, and I'm hoping to ask Charlie if he knows anything while we have lunch.

"Good to see ya," he says, slipping in next to me. The table seats four, but he pulls up a chair next to mine.

"Hey," I grumpily reply.

He waves at Mati, who holds up her finger, and Charlie nods. She'll be bringing over a beer for him as well.

"How are you doing?" Charlie asks, and I hate the suggestion in his voice, questioning me on a deeper level. Everyone worries about me. My mental state after returning home. My mental being after losing Clara. My mentality taking on the family business. Now, I have my mother worrying about my sex life. She tried to set me up with Alyce Wright again.

"I suck," I say, surprising myself as I don't give my standard answer of *I'm fine*. I'm not fine. I miss Letty something fierce, and I don't know what to do about it.

How could you think such a thing of me?

"Really?" Charlie's voice hitches. "Does it have anything to do with a request to purchase Pap's land?"

"What?" My head snaps in Charlie's direction, and my eyes narrow. How does he know about this?

"A request to purchase *uninhabitable*"—Charlie air quotes around the word—"land came through the zoning office. Of course, Betty knows the property belonged to Pap, so she brought it to my attention." Betty Jean Murphy was an old family friend of our parents.

Charlie pulls a copy of a legal document out of a leather portfolio he carried into the pub with him. My eyes leap to Mullen Realty Company of Chicago and the name Frank Mullen.

"Goddammit," I hiss under my breath.

"Do you happen to know an Olivet Pierson from this real estate agency?"

"What?" I snap, glaring at my youngest brother.

Charlie examines my face for a minute and then nods. "Huh. That's what I thought."

"What do you mean?"

He rubs a hand over the leather binder. “Last Thursday, I got the strangest phone call.” He pauses a second. “A woman with a Yankee accent is on the line, and she starts telling me this story. How she might lose her job, but she wanted to tell me how her company wanted to acquire Pap’s land. As I’m listening to her, I look up the company, and they’re no small business in Chicago. They buy and sell real estate for all kinds of companies, and they represent a hotel conglomerate who uses their service to secure property for resorts and such.” Charlie pauses. “You following me so far?” His brow hitches, teasing me.

“Get on with it,” I bark, my eyes aimed at the document, but the words blur.

“So, this chattering woman tells me how she found some loophole. How the property cannot ever be procured for commercial use. Not only as it’s private property, but *because* it’s private property.”

I could have told her that, I think. But you didn’t, my heart reminds me. You let her believe she was going to get the land after a three-night camping trip.

I have no intention to sell the land. Ever. The look of horror on her face, as if I’d just stabbed her, slayed me. Did she want the land that badly? Did she really think it was that easy? Fool the mountain man, lure him into lust, and take what’s his? I pause at the thought. I don’t actually believe that’s how things happened between us. In fact, everything happened so fast I’m not certain what the intention from either of us was.

My heart skips a beat. *You knew what you were doing,* it patters. You saw a spark in her, and you wanted the spontaneity of a flame.

“Land held in a land trust means it can only be inherited, not sold. It doesn’t qualify for purchase. Nor can it be divided for commercial use. In the case of Pap’s, if no family was living to claim the land, it reverts back to the state.”

I know all this, and I'm a little surprised Letty didn't. Did she not do her research first?

"Now, you might wonder how this woman knew all this or why she shared it."

Is Charlie a mind reader all of a sudden?

"Turns out, her company set forth this petition, trying to acquire the property to the left of Pap's, but as you might recall, it's unobtainable due to zoning and dimensions and..." Charlie pauses to wave a hand, knowing I'll drown out the legal jargon. "Anyway, they hoped to squeeze you out in the deal, but she wanted to assure me she was working on something as she disagreed with their sneaky antics."

"Cut to the chase, Charlie." My heart hammers in my chest.

"She says upon her visit to the area...Did you know she visited the area, Giant?" He pauses again for effect with an eyebrow hitched, reminding me of our mother. "She found the property *uninhabitable*. Something about no running water, no electricity." Charlie's voice slows. "Do you know anything about this?"

I don't answer my brother. Instead, I lift my glass and down the rest of my beer.

"Then she yammers on about how she learned the mayor of the town was the brother of the property owner, and she wanted to inform *me* of these loopholes." Charlie chuckles like it's the most ridiculous thing he's heard. He's a lawyer. He's my sibling. He knows all this information. "Seems her research skills failed her if she didn't know this information before making a trip down here. Then again, maybe she's their bulldozer. Send her in to handle the locals and hope they don't know anything about their land rights." Charlie snorts, but I'm failing to find the humor in anything he says.

"So?" I grunt. They never would have gotten my property anyway. Charlie already knows this. I know this. What game is she playing now?

“She wanted to personally let me know that the company repeals the petition. She was making certain of it. They were no longer interested in the property. And here’s the weird part. She was adamant I know and equally persuasive in suggesting I inform you. Isn’t that the damndest thing?” Charlie’s voice lowers, and I feel his eyes zeroing in on me, but my eyes remain on the document before me on the table.

I huff. Based on Letty’s grand exit, I assume she’ll never look back. The property isn’t the only thing she’s no longer interested in.

“Then”—Charlie chuckles—“she goes on to tell me we should consider an ax-throwing facility or perhaps a court at the pub.”

“What the fuck?”

“I know, right? I mean, that sounds ridiculous. Who throws axes for fun?”

Exactly, I think, exhaling heavily as my heart is ready to burst through my chest.

“However, she mentioned how she learned to fling an ax from an ax master when she was in the area.” Charlie’s voice rises, thoroughly enjoying this little tale he’s sharing. “Then she ends by telling me how sorry she is that her company won’t be building in the area because she just loved her time here. The land was so beautiful, she said.” Charlie mocks her Yankee accent. He flips a few pages of the document before me.

“The funny thing is, she sounded relieved the project wouldn’t happen, despite all her chatter about how great our community seemed. We have the nicest people here, she said. She loved the stars at night. Even the rain was wonderful.” Charlie snorts again. “She had the most amazing adventure in the woods, experiencing nature, and really came to appreciate it. No, *love it* were her exact words.” Charlie lets out a breath. “And man, does she have words. She’s a talker.”

Cricket, my heart sings. Always chirping.

I turn to my brother, waiting on more...holding my breath with hope for something else. "And?"

"Here's what I don't understand. Why was she telling *me* all of this?"

I have no idea, I thought.

"Did you ask her?" I ask, my voice sharper than necessary.

"No, I thanked her for the information. Told her how I hadn't visited Chicago in a long time but remember enjoying my stay there. Then I told her I hoped she'd be able to visit here again soon, seeing as she enjoyed *it* so much."

"Did she say she would?" My voice rises as I sit up straighter. Hope is a dangerous emotion.

"Should she?" my brother inquires, lifting a brow as he suddenly plays coy.

"Charlie, don't act like you know something when you don't. There's nothing to tell."

Charlie shakes his head, disagreeing with me. "Here's what's to tell. A woman checked into Conrad Lodge and then checked out, saying she was going camping in the area. She let it slip she was headed to the Harrington cabin. For three days, your place was empty, and you didn't answer your phone. James is called in for questioning about an incident up on the ridge, and he mentions your name as an alibi. Says he saw you with a woman up there."

Jesus, will the whole town know?

"What did James do? And how do you know this other stuff?"

"Cora told Mati who told me. Gotta keep tabs on my siblings." Charlie winks. "As for James, he claims it was target practice. God only knows why he loves that ranger station." He waves a hand, dismissing our brother while knowing all the reasons that particular station means something to our brother.

“You know it’s typically my job as the eldest to know what everyone is doing.”

“Yes, but then who looks out for you?” Charlie laughs.

I sigh as I look away from Charlie. No one. No more Clara. No more girls. No more Letty.

“I don’t need looking after,” I snark.

“But it’d be nice if someone did, right? If someone worried about you. Or had sex with you. Or loved you.”

“Jesus, have you been talking to Mama?”

Charlie chuckles. “Fuck, no. I just know how you feel.” He probably does. Us Harringtons haven’t had much luck in love, and he’s had one of the worst deals as his wife divorced him right when his small-town career took off. She left behind their adorable daughter, Lucy, as well.

Charlie points to information on the final page of the document. “There’s a phone number for the real estate agency in Chicago.” He taps the page where a Post-it tab rests below the information. “And she gave me her cell phone number. She said I was free to pass it on to the property owner in case he had questions, wanted details, or just wanted to talk.”

“Did she really say that?” *Then we can talk.* We never had the discussion we needed to have after her third night. The conversation I hoped to have where I explained that I couldn’t sell the land, and I hoped she’d understand the reasons behind my decision, and then I’d ask her if we could somehow explore what we had, what we discovered between us in our adventure on the ridge.

“No.” Charlie chuckles. “But maybe you should call her?” There’s a hesitation in his suggestion.

“I don’t have any questions,” I gruff, more irritated than I should be. Am I angry with her or myself for not explaining everything? “She already admitted she’s no longer interested in the purchase.”

“And what about you? Are you no longer interested?” His brow tweaks upward.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lie.

Charlie pats my shoulder. “Sure, you don’t.” With that said, he stands, leaving the copy of the document and the yellow tab glaring up at me.

Sometimes being a Harrington can be a pain in the ass.

16

Wedding Presents

[Letty]

“And he washed your hair?” It’s said like a question, but it’s more of a statement, and Marcus has turned it into his greeting the last week. It’s not *hello* or *how was your day?* It’s *He washed your hair*, as if I need the reminder of the romantic gesture from a man who ripped my heart out.

“Sit,” I tell Marcus as he pulls out a stool at the high-top table. We’re both dressed in business attire, and over the last eight plus days, I’ve found the clothing itchy and restrictive. I’m exceptionally fond of my yoga pants and sweatshirts on the weekends, but these past days, I’ve longed for jeans and a flannel in an unhealthy way.

Marcus looks every bit the professional he is with his sandy brown hair perfectly gelled into a mini coif by his forehead. The sides are shaved, which is a modern style with a razor-sharp part. His brown eyes hide behind dark rimmed glasses. He smiles tightly at me.

“Be brave. Be strong.”

The night will be difficult, but I find I’m more sour over a man some thousands of miles away than the man kissing my sister on the cheek near the door. Mullen Realty decided to host a party to celebrate the nuptials of Dayna and Hudson at the end of the week, as if we weren’t already celebrating Dayna’s good fortune all year leading up to her special day. It’s turned into wedding week, like Shark Week on television, and being eaten by one might be more pleasurable than the experience of this wedding. *Kill me.*

My uncle Frank beams at Dayna, so proud of the connection her marriage to Hudson Rockford will provide to his realty company. I, on the other hand, have turned into the biggest disappointment again. My contact with one Charles Harrington, mayor of Blue Ridge, Georgia, didn't go unnoticed.

“What do you mean you didn't procure the property?”

“It's not for sale nor can it be sold. Land entailment.” I've used the terminology to disguise my failure or, rather, my change of heart. I no longer want us to pursue Giant's land—the land his precious Pap gave to him. It wasn't just because he broke my heart, either; I truly didn't feel right trying to obtain something so precious, so non-materialist from someone so genuinely content with something so simple.

Uncle Frank strangely knew the detail of the land but decided not to include it in the prospect report he gave me. He believed some simpleton in a small town would only see dollar signs and hand over his property for greener pastures. Or in George Harrington's case, green papers with Benjamin Franklin on them. It appears Uncle Frank didn't investigate the Harringtons either. How wrong he was about Mr. Harrington, his attachment to the land, and his lack of desire for money.

“You look lovely. Want a drink?” Marcus says, distracting me from my thoughts. He doesn't mean what he says. He's seen me all day in this outfit—a pencil skirt, a tight blouse, and a stiff suit jacket. I look a little worn from the day I've had, but not as frightening as I looked when I arrived at a hotel outside of Atlanta before flying back to Chicago. I don't know how the woman agreed to give me a room. Maybe it was the tear-stained face and stiff, dirty clothes. I took an extra night to cry myself to sleep in a big, comfy bed with extra pillows after a long hot bath. It was heavenly...minus the crying part.

“I'll have a margarita on the rocks with salt.”

“Oh, fiesta time?” Marcus wiggles his ass on the wooden stool.

“Get me drunk time,” I say with a laugh although it isn’t true. I want to keep my wits this week so I don’t say something I shouldn’t. I’m over Hudson and my sister, but a little liquid courage might not stop me from spilling the truth. He cheated on me with her. Hudson didn’t want the bad press, so he asked that we part, stating irreconcilable differences, as if we were getting a divorce. As if he wasn’t seen with my sister at some fundraiser a week later. I didn’t want to admit his indiscretion, equally embarrassed that he’d slept with my sister, of all people.

“Gonna make it through this week?” Marcus asks although he knows I will. I’ll put on my brave face and big girl panties because I don’t want to seem like the bitter, sniveling little sister.

“When’s the ax throwing?” I tease.

“And then he washed your hair.”

I laugh bitterly at the reference. Yes, he washed my hair, and made love to me, and then he snapped me like a twig.

It wasn’t just sex, he said. What else could it have been? His silence had unnerved me, but I had my answer. *Just sex*, is all it was.

Mindlessly, I stroke back my hair, pushing it behind my ear.

“I can’t talk about him. Not this week.” I’ve already told Marcus everything. Well, minus a few graphic details. Don’t want to get his knickers in a twist. He listened and sighed and held my hand. *He sounds like a good man*, Marcus said.

For the most part, Giant Harrington is a good man. He just didn’t understand I would never consider sleeping with someone to score a deal. Something happened to me on that mountain...with him. It was no longer about the land after that first night, and it wasn’t just the assistive hand during my self-soothing moment. I’d never done anything like what I’d done with Giant, and it made my feelings all the more real. *To me*.

“So ax throwing,” Marcus states, perking up. “Gonna chop some wood.” Marcus makes karate-chopping motions over his lap. He’s so inappropriate.

“Marcus.” I chuckle. “I can’t handle your sharp wit. Get it, *handle?* Sharp?”

“Oh, oh, good one. You’re quite the cutup.” He winks at me, lifting his chocolate martini to his lips.

“That was a good one,” I admit with a giggle. “How did you *hatchet?*”

He laughs, and then claps once, holding his clasped hands before his chest. “It was an ax-cident.”

I laugh in earnest. “How about he axed her to marry him after I tossed him over.” I nod in the direction of my sister and former fiancé, trying to be clever, which isn’t my strong suit.

Marcus gives a triple *clap-clap-clap*. “He axed for it.”

Tears roll down my face as I guffaw even harder. “I wasn’t cut out for him.” But somehow, this isn’t a joke, and the tears shift from humor to hurt as my thoughts wander. I’m no longer referencing Hudson.

“Oh, honey.” Being my best friend, he practically reads my thoughts and hands me two paper napkins. “He’s an ax-hole if he doesn’t realize how wonderful you are.”

I giggle with sadness because I don’t consider Giant an asshole. Not even close.

“I did this to myself,” I mutter.

“After the way you said he did you, honey, I think you’re mistaken. He wanted you as much as you wanted him,” Marcus tries to reassure me.

The land. He believed I wanted it more than him, and for a few hours, I did, but then I got to know *him*. The man. And nothing made sense anymore. Can you fall in love with a stranger in three nights? I don’t have to *ax* my heart because it’s all chopped up.

+ + +

The ceremony is held on a Friday evening because Dayna wanted a night wedding. Also, Friday night weddings are cheaper, but considering the money between Hudson and Dayna, the expense was not spared. Not to mention, my uncle has chipped in to make this a real business affair. Dayna also wanted October for her wedding, but the dresses we wear scream July. Despite the mild weather of Chicago, the breeze briskly blows as the day dips to nightfall, and we shiver in our ludicrous attire while taking pictures down by Lake Michigan. A trolley drives us up and down Lake Shore Drive before returning us to the hotel for the wedding dinner.

Marcus is my plus one even though he was already an invited guest. I didn't have a date and didn't feel the need to find one weeks before the wedding. I only want to sip wine, give my toast, and get the hell out of here. Yes, I need to give a speech congratulating my sister on marrying my ex-lover. It's going to be short and sweet.

May you deserve one another.

The end.

The ballroom is dripping in yellow, and I feel as if I've entered a cream puff. *I hate custard.* I saunter up to the bar. Skipping the celebratory champagne, I decide wine will be my comfort.

"You doing okay?" Marcus asks me for the millionth time. I'm on the verge of making him into a cream puff if he asks me one more time.

"I'm fine," I grumble, reaching for the glass the bartender hands me and guzzling heartily the crisp liquid. It isn't as sharp and tangy as the beer I drank on a mountain ridge under the stars, but it will have to do. It's a weak substitute, I realize and sigh. Marcus notices.

“Remind me why you can’t call him?” I made that absurdly stupid phone call to Giant’s brother, the mayor brother, and included all kinds of details in my long-winded explanation. Then I left my phone number—could I have been more desperately obvious that I wanted him to call me? I decided it had to be up to Giant to reach out to me. If he wanted to talk, he had to come to me. Which he didn’t do.

“Because I’d already said too much, and he accused me of sleeping with him...for business...no less.” I exhale, whispering the last part before taking another sip of wine and realizing I’ve finished the glass. Well, that was quick. “Marcus, you know how I am. I talk too much, but it’s normally nonsense. For once, I want someone to listen to me. Really listen.”

Marcus’s eyes widen as he glances over my shoulder.

“And what is it you would want a certain someone to hear?” His voice shifts as he holds his lips in a strange grimace.

“I want someone to listen to my heart. To what I had to say. Hear how I feel.” Jesus, this wedding is making me sappy and sentimental.

“And what does your heart feel?”

“Dammit, Marcus, you know this. I felt something for this man, who was a complete stranger, yet the strangest part was the immediate attraction I had to him. Like he knew me, or saw something in me, or...I don’t even know what I’m saying. It’s the wine talking.”

“Then I’m listening to a damn good bottle of Moscato.” The gruff voice behind me startles me, and my eyes widen as I stare at Marcus. The sound certainly didn’t come from his lips although it holds all the teasing Marcus would make. My head slowly shakes, but Marcus nods with a matching pace. He knows what I don’t. I lift a hand to my upper chest, my heart hammering under my skin, and the pinched smile on Marcus’s face curls into a wide grin.

Slowly, I turn to face the rugged tone and meet a tux-covered chest. My eyes climb the tall stature, taking in the black bow tie at his throat and the dark spark to his eyes.

I'm hallucinating, I tell myself.

Before me stands a giant of masculinity, polished with a trimmed beard and combed hair. A sharp gleam graces those bark-colored eyes. His broad shoulders are covered by a fitted black suit like he's a member of the wedding party. My eyes roam the remainder of his large physique, drinking in the tux on him like it's the bubbly wine in my glass. Gone is lumbersexual, replaced by dashy and debonair.

My God, he's tasty.

"What are you wearing?" he asks, his voice gruff, reminiscent of our first meeting.

"*He* washed your hair?" Marcus gasps in a hushed tone from behind me.

"Giant," I breathe out his name with shock and desperation and longing.

"Cricket," he addresses me, and Marcus chokes at my back.

"He has a pet name for you," Marcus practically squeals. "You didn't mention a pet name."

"Marcus," I groan, keeping my eyes fixed on Giant, who isn't grinning, but his lips twist. He wants to smile. He's moving his mouth like he's fighting it, and all I can think about is how I want that mouth on mine.

"This is Marcus?" Giant asks, offering a hand to my friend, but I don't miss how he skims my arm to reach around me.

"George Harrington," he says. "But people call me Giant."

"Mmm...I bet you are," Marcus purrs. He doesn't play his gay card often or to the hilt, but this is over the top, even

for him, and Giant quickly retracts his hand. Marcus steps around me and looks back and forth between Giant and myself. “The pleasure to meet you is all mine,” he states, and then he continues circling, taking a step behind Giant but still facing me. He lifts his fingers toward his hardly-there hair and makes massaging motions as he mouths his new standard statement. I giggle as I wave him away.

“What are you doing here?” I ask of Giant, still breathless and stunned. He’s actually standing before me. *In a tux!*

“Heard there was a wedding happening, and the prettiest woman here needed a date.”

I step toward him, fighting the urge to wrap my arms around him and climb his body like the mammoth tree he is. He leans forward to kiss my cheek while he rubs my bare shoulder. It’s a little reserved. Where was the wild man from the ranger station? Or the adventurous one the first night in our tent? Or the one who kissed me senseless on our last night together?

You hurt him, I remind myself. *He hurt you*, my brain replies.

But he’s standing here before me.

In Chicago. “Let’s get out of here,” I whisper, and he chuckles, slipping his warm hand down my arm to my fingers. I grip them hard.

“It appears I might be late to the party. Don’t you have some obligations tonight?”

“You aren’t late.” I exhale. It’s only been twelve days, twenty hours, and roughly three minutes but not late. “I need to give a toast, but the second I’m done, you’re mine,” I groan, the wild in me clearly reaching out for him.

17

The Man in The Mirror

[Giant]

You're mine. I shouldn't like the sound of that as much as I do, but I do. I so do. Her dress is hideous, but she's so beautiful with her chestnut hair piled at the nape of her neck and soft curls framing her face. She's wearing makeup, which I hadn't seen her wear while camping, so she looks different. Still pretty but polished. I want to smear her lips with mine. For a moment there, I thought she'd jump into my arms, but something stopped her. My heart dropped.

I've waited twelve days to see her. I can hold out another hour to have her alone.

"The wedding was on a Friday?" I expected to arrive in time for a rehearsal dinner, surprising her and giving us time to talk. Instead, I walked into the Drake without a room or a plan to find the placard in the lobby announcing the wedding in the ballroom.

"My sister wanted to be unconventional." Letty lifts a glass of wine for her lips. "Just like how she obtained her new husband."

She's already told me she isn't bitter about him and her. It's more the principle of their meeting, and I understand. Cheating is unacceptable. Disloyalty, lies, half-hidden truths. I don't care for any of the sort even though I'm guilty of a few on a minor level.

"When did you get here?" she asks, lowering her glass and looking up at me. So many questions in those eyes, and I want to answer everything.

“About an hour ago. Took a bit to get here from O’Hare.” I don’t travel much. My nephew Jaxson is in charge of sales and distribution, and he’s the one who visits places. I’ve already been halfway around the world and back, so I’m happy in my mountainous backyard now.

The bartender hands me a local beer, and I sip, letting my tongue roll to distinguish the ingredients. It’s not bad. My brother Billy is more a brewmaster than I am, though. He’s a closet chemist, and my father learned too late of Billy’s benefit to the company. Fortunate for me, I extort my kid brother’s skill.

“Did you get a room?” She hesitates as she asks.

“Changed in the bathroom and asked the front desk to hold my bag,” I clarify.

“I have a room.” Her eyes sheepishly leap to mine. “I didn’t want the hassle of driving home, plus I have the send-off breakfast tomorrow morning, which is suddenly optional, and then that’s it.” Her definitive tone tells me she’ll finally be finished with obligations and can let this fiasco go. *Time to move on.*

“Optional?” I raise a brow.

“I might be busy in the morning.”

This woman. Her teasing brings a grin to my lips, and I take another sip of my beer. The night isn’t passing fast enough.

She doesn’t mingle, but as people approach her, she introduces me. Family and more family. Business acquaintances.

Finally, she gives her toast and leads me from the ballroom.

“We didn’t dance,” I mock although I’m not a good dancer. She laughs as she drags me toward the elevator, holding my fingers like I held hers on our hike. God, I missed her laughter.

When the elevator closes, I waste no time before I rush up to her and flatten her against the back wall. Her heels raise her closer to my height, but I still dip my head.

“I want to be naked with you.” I don’t know where the words come from, but they’re every bit the truth. I want to be bare and raw and honest with her. I said things I shouldn’t have said, and I need to apologize. With my hands. With my tongue. With my dick.

“I want to be naked with you,” she whispers, her voice shy, but her hips buck forward, and my hand lowers for one. My mouth waters, but I don’t kiss her. Once I start, I won’t stop because I didn’t kiss her enough when I had her on the mountains.

She leads the way to her room and holds the scan card over the magnetic lock. The sharp click releasing the catch is like a pistol shot, and I’m ready to race. When she steps inside, she stops and spins to face me. The door closes with a soft thud, locking us.

“This is more my camping speed,” she teases, swiping out her hand. “Bathroom.” She gestures behind me. “Comfy bed.” She chuckles. “A fridge.”

I laugh with her, but I can’t take my eyes off her dress. It isn’t her. It’s pretty enough, but it’s not my Cricket.

“What are you wearing?” I ask a second time.

Letty tugs at the loose material over her breasts and lets the fabric fall back.

“It’s a dress. I think. Buttercup yellow,” she clarifies.

“It looks like margarine on a biscuit. And the 80s called, they want their prom dress back.”

Letty laughs, a bubbly chuckle, and I’m reminded of pebbles in rain puddles. My spine shivers with the sound. I like it too much.

“Take it off,” I demand, torn between wanting to talk and needing to skip the formal stuff. She turns her back to me and

points at the zipper along her spine. Slowly, I unzip, and the dull yellow material spreads. The dress slips to the floor, pooling at her feet, and she turns back to me. Her hands come to her hips, and I swallow.

“You’re the prettiest thing...” I falter, roaming slowly over the nude-colored strapless bra and matching thong in lace. “Fuck that. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve laid eyes on.” Her head tips, and her smile grows, but I can’t take my eyes off the bra where her nipples nearly pop over the edge and the G-string of material covering her lower region. And her heels. Fucking strappy and high. She’s a fantasy of epic proportions.

I tug the tie from my neck and shrug off the jacket, throwing them at the bed. As I slowly unbutton the cuffs of my shirt and then a few at the neck, I keep my eyes on her.

“So, this is your idea of roughing it, huh?” Once I’ve loosened enough of my shirt, I tug it and my undershirt over my head from the back of my neck. I kick off my fancy shoes.

She purrs at me, watching me strip. Her eyes are hungry looking, and I’m starving for her. I hold out a hand for her.

“Let’s check out the bathroom first.”

Her head tilts, but she follows me as I walk backward to the large bathroom. Once we enter, I spin her for the sink, and my hands roam. Up her spine and around her sides, cupping her breasts. I watch in the extra-large mirror.

“God, I’ve missed you,” I murmur, kissing up her neck.

“Me too.” Her arm reaches back, wrapping around my neck and holding me to her. My eager palms squeeze at the material over her breasts, forcing the nipples to protrude above the silky fabric. I tweak them collectively, tugging until she yelps. Her hips buck back, and her ass hits my front. I’m rock hard and have been since the moment I saw her.

Correction: every time I’ve thought of her for the past two weeks, I’ve been stiff, but seeing her makes me three times more solid.

Two fingers dip into the thin string between her backside cheeks. I stroke downward, and my knuckles brush against her firm ass. Curling my hand under her, I discover her core wet and wanting. My eyes meet hers in the mirror, and I watch her face as I slip into her.

Her mouth opens. Her lids flutter. She releases my neck and reaches back to grip my hip.

“So beautiful,” I say, turning into her neck and kissing her again. I work my fingers in and out, not removing the thong but sliding it to the side.

“With this bra exposing your nipples, and the scrap covering your pussy, plus the heels, you’re a fantasy. One I’d watch on repeat. I want to fuck you like this, Cricket.”

Her breath hitches as she brings her hands around her back to blindly work at my belt. Without releasing my fingers from her center, I push her hand away and single-handedly struggle with the catch, loosening it but not removing it. Then I unzip my pants.

“Push at the sides,” I say, talking to her reflection in the mirror, and Letty presses my pants below my hips. I don’t want to be naked. Not yet. It’s sexy as fuck looking in the glass with me half-dressed and her in this outfit. It’s wild, and I want her.

“Giant,” she hums in warning. She’s close, and I am too. She hasn’t even touched me, and I’m ready to lose it. With my fingers in her, I grip myself and position my head at her entrance. I remove my coated digits and press her shoulder blades to lean forward over the counter. Her legs spread, and I bend enough to align myself with her. Slowly, I disappear into her, watching her swallow me. Then I look up to see her eyes on me through the mirror. My hands wrap over her covered breasts and tug the material downward. Exposing each of them, I cup them as I draw my dick back and then thrust forward. Letty grunts.

As I pull back, she chases me, and I smile in the reflection. “Greedy?”

“You have no idea,” she mutters.

“Oh, I have an idea,” I say, slamming into her. Repeating the motion several times, I clutch at her breasts and delve into her. She meets me thrust for thrust, bent over the counter. “I’ve missed you every second we’ve been apart.”

“You have?” she gasps as I tap inside her.

“So much.”

She smiles back at me. “I like your smile,” she says, watching me as I set a pace of driving into her.

“I like you,” I say.

“Watch,” she whispers as her hand snakes down her belly and lowers into the lace barely covering her curls. Sweet Jesus, I don’t know if I can look, but I can’t tear my eyes away. She’s touching herself, and I know it without fully seeing it. My eyes stay focused on the movement of her hand. Her lids close as her hips buck.

“Finish,” I snap, knowing I can’t hold out much longer. My spine tingles. My balls tighten.

“Giant,” she squeaks, and then my name dissolves as she stills, clutching me within her depths. Her head lolls forward, and I slam into her, holding her to me by her breasts as I have the orgasm of all orgasms.

Stars dance before my eyes, and I lower my head to her shoulder.

“Dammit. I didn’t kiss you.”

She chuckles with me still inside her. “Well, we’ll just have to try again.”

18

Baby Steps

[Letty]

He slips out of me, and I spin to face him. He finalizes the removal of his pants and socks, and I kick off my own shoes. I step out of my thong and unhitch my bra. Hooking a finger at him, I make him follow me into the double-size shower where he kisses me senseless until our mouths move to other places.

Wrung out, I wrap in a towel while he slips into the comfy white robe provided, and we head to the bed.

“This is a bed,” I tease, pulling back the top cover. “With linens and pillows. And oh, look, a mattress.” I press on the firmness to emphasize my point. Giant wraps his hands around my waist and tosses me on it, then follows after me. Half his body covers mine, and I love the weight of him over me. I’ve missed him so much.

He brushes back my wet hair and looks down into my face.

“Was it really that bad? The camping?”

“I survived,” I joke before reaching up to cup his scruff-covered jaw. “Actually, I really enjoyed myself. Surprisingly, I miss the place.” I might not be able to live in a tent eating food from a skillet the rest of my life, but I do miss being with him and enjoying the experience with him.

“I heard you’re no longer interested in the property.”

“Giant.” I sigh. “I lost interest the first night you made me a hot dog.”

“Who knew that’s all a girl needed to change her mind? I thought it might have been when I washed your hair.”

“That too.” I laugh, thinking of Marcus. “And when you taught me to throw an ax.”

He leans forward and kisses me, soft and delicate.

“How did the ax throwing go?” he smirks. “Heard a master ax thrower taught you?” He winks at me, and my skin heats as I recall the things I said to his brother.

“I didn’t win, but I hit the mark enough times to scare Hudson. I told him I’d learned to chop wood as well.” I mimic the motion of chopping by knocking the sides of my hands together. Giant shifts to his side, perching up on an elbow and looking down at me.

“As long as he knows his wood is off-limits.”

My lip crooks. “Not interested in anyone’s wood but yours. And I’m not talking about the trees on your property.”

Giant chuckles and draws a line along my collarbone with the tip of a thick finger. His expression darkens, and I know what’s coming. We need to talk.

“We never talked about your brother.”

Owen isn’t who I expect us to discuss first, and my lips twist as I bite the corner. “Do we need to talk about him now?”

“I think we have a few things to discuss that shouldn’t wait any longer.” Giant isn’t wrong, but we’re jumping into the deep stuff by tackling Owen first. I swallow the lump that always forms in my throat before I talk about him. I nod and explain again the circumstances of my younger brother and his gang affiliation.

“Owen was only four when our father died, and he hated Uncle Frank. Being six years younger than me, I was like a second mother to him. He was a little lost with our mother working, and Dayna acting as second parent but never doing a good job.” Some parent she turned out to be. “Gangs are prevalent everywhere in and around Chicago, but it’s not all colored bandanas and acid wash jeans hanging off a kid’s ass. Kids with means can just as easily get hooked up with the

wrong people, and Owen did. We struggled with money for a bit, and he was a worrier. He'd lost his way around middle school and got in with a rougher crowd in seventh grade. He suggested he sell drugs to help us meet ends." I chuckle with the memory of Owen telling our mom he wanted to help out. *Be the man of the family.* "He wanted Mom out from under Uncle Frank's controlling nature. Mom couldn't handle budding-teenage Owen." I recall how babyish his face was while his body was growing into the makings of a young man. He was smarter than he gave himself credit. Smarter than our mother recognized. He just needed guidance, and I tried to be there for him, but it wasn't enough. I was only eighteen. "I was his older sister, but I couldn't protect him." Liquid fills my eyes, and I blink back the pain as the memories fill my head. Giant reaches out with a thumb and swipes at the tear before it falls.

"I mentioned he was shot on the sidewalk outside his school. I was there to pick him up and give him a ride home. I didn't see them coming." Loud cars with trashy music are common around a school. It could have been any car with any group of kids, but this car was looking for Owen. I leave out the details of screams and blood and holding my brother in my arms.

"When I heard James's gun, I freaked out. It's also triggered by thunder." My eyes close, embarrassed by admitting such a weakness. Giant cups my cheek, forcing my eyes to open.

"I totally understand. I've seen my share of surprise attacks, and the horrific results in the military." His voice drops. "But on a sidewalk in a city with a kid, it seems so unthinkable."

I brush aside the robe and point at the wound near his left shoulder. "Is that how this happened?"

He huffs with his own set of memories.

"We were on a mission, and one of our men was injured. I was shot lifting him into a helicopter. The soldier friend

needed to be helivaced out, and suddenly, so did I.”

I lean forward to kiss the wound.

“You have a new appreciation for life once you almost lose it,” he states. However, I remember what he told me—how he didn’t know where he fit when he came home. How his wife had a routine. How he joined the brewery business. *What’s been in his life for him?*

The mountain. A gift from a beloved grandfather.

“I’m sorry about the land.” Should I tell him why I wanted it? Will he understand? It’s a lot to take in from someone he just met.

He stares into my eyes, twirling a piece of my hair between his thumb and forefinger “*I’m* sorry for what I said.”

My head shifts on the mattress, and I roll my body to my side. My hand rests on his chest, feeling his heart rhythmically pulsing under his warm skin. “Did you really believe I slept with you for your land?”

“What I said was a knee-jerk reaction. Why else would you be interested in sleeping with me?” His throat rolls as he swallows, and I open my mouth to speak, but a few fingers of his cover my lips. “You seemed too good to be true and wanting *me* didn’t seem like enough of a reason to give yourself to me.”

“Giant,” I softly whine, reaching up to cover the trimmed scruff on his jaw with my hand. “I’ll give myself to you a hundred times if you’ll take me. Of course, I want you.”

“You’re very different from what I’ve had in the past.”

I cringe at the thought. It sounds kind of bad when he says it like that.

“No, no, this is all good. My...” He pauses as his eyes shift to my shoulder. “My sex life hasn’t been as wild as it’s been with you. It’s been rather tame, in fact, and I’m enjoying the difference.”

I tip my head up to take his mouth, and we kiss briefly. I'm not certain how to take what he's said. Is he comparing me to his wife? To other women? Either way, I guess I'm glad I'm not the same as everyone else. He pulls back, looking over at me again.

"I don't think I'm explaining myself very well," he says, and I perch up on an elbow while he falls to his back, looking up at the ceiling. "I'm not good at communicating my feelings." There's mockery in his tone, and I imagine he's been told this a time or two. He does have a standoffish demeanor, which I accused him of, but I want him to open up to me.

"Try," I whisper.

"This seems like an awkward time to discuss it, but Clara was sensitive. We were two kids bumbling through the dark at first. Over time, I wanted a little more, but Clara couldn't handle it. Certain positions. Certain locations. We really only had one position, and she would accept sex in only one place—the bedroom. It wasn't awful, but it wasn't spectacular." He rolls his head to look at me and sheepishly smiles. "It was more functional. We weren't adventurous."

I fight the smile forming on my lips, not wanting to give away how pleased I am with what he's said. *Oh, so that kind of different.* My hand scrubs over his firm pecs, exposed from the open robe. My fingers play with the hair on his chest while he seems lost to the memory. He exhales.

"Anyway, I heard what you did, or rather, I got your message. What made you think to contact Charlie and not me?"

"Honestly, I didn't have your number."

"Don't you do any research before you go after a property? Why didn't you call the brewery?"

"Would you have spoken to me if I called?" I pause, sheepishly chuckling. "I don't really know what I was thinking with that ridiculous call to your brother." I lower my face to

the coverlet, hiding from the heat of Giant's eyes. "I hoped Charlie could pass on the legal jargon, and you'd understand it wasn't the land. It's you that I want," I mumble the muffled words into the duvet.

"I want you, too." He shifts to his side, and I turn my head to face him. His lip crooks, and he kisses my shoulder. "I think I'll always want you."

The words startle me and shoot right to my heart like an arrow on a mission. I don't know how to respond. *I think I'll always want him, too.* I brush away thoughts of the distance between us and the impossibility of being with him for always.

"What made you decide to come to the wedding?" It's quite the grand gesture to show up unannounced.

He chuckles. "I heard you needed your hair done."

I laugh with him. "I'm kind of a mess right now."

His fingers comb into my hair, brushing it back from my face so he can clearly peer into my eyes. "This is my favorite look on you."

Gah. This man. "Charmer," I tease.

"Hmm, let me see how else I can charm you." He leans forward for my jaw. When he nips at the juncture between my shoulder and neck, I'm totally charmed.

+ + +

We make love in the bed, and neither of us misses the fact that it's different once again. We've been rather wild and reckless but this, this is slow and purposeful. Soft hands caressing skin, and fingers lingering to outline bodies. Long kisses and deliberate movements. I come undone in a way I never thought I could while we take our time with each other. A new deal is sealed, at least for me.

I'm in love with this man.

Hook, line, and sinker.

The next morning, we agree I need to make an appearance at the send-off breakfast.

“One cup of coffee, and then we flee.” Giant laughs, but I’m serious. I don’t want to share him with my family, not yet, and I only have him until Sunday afternoon.

My sister Dayna and I look nothing alike. While I’m dark featured, she’s light, and she greets me with all the falseness of a nosy Nelly, which is what she is when it comes to Giant.

“And who is this tall drink of water?” she flirts, and I want to smack her hand when she goes for Giant’s chest. Fortunately, he intercepts it and makes an awkward show of forcing her to shake his hand instead. “Well, my, what a grasp you have.”

Giant slips an arm around my waist and tugs me to his side. “I’ve been told it’s all the better to hold an ax.” He jiggles me against him, and my sister flushes, not understanding the private joke. She’ll never know the strength of his hands, though. Not on my watch.

“Come. Meet Hudson.”

Giant’s face wrinkles in disgust, and I interject. “We’re only having a cup of coffee, and then I’m going to show Giant the city.” He claims he’s been here once or twice, but he’ll see it through new eyes with me as his guide. Navy Pier is our first stop.

While I’m hoping to escape Hudson, I can’t escape my mother or Uncle Frank.

“Cassandra Pierson, meet George Harrington.” Giant doesn’t correct his name when he meets my mother and the Southern charm pours off him.

“A pleasure to meet you, ma’am.” Mom is easily impressed. My mother is a smaller woman with bleach-blond hair to cover all the grays, cut in a sharp bob coming to her

chin. She wears a surprised smile while she shakes Giant's large hand.

"George Harrington," Uncle Frank interjects. "Your name sounds familiar." He pauses a moment. Frank is your typical Italian-looking mafia man minus the mafia. He's loud and brutally *frank*. "You're quite the big guy, aren't you?" Frank makes a muscle with his arm and aims it toward Giant as if he should be impressed. Then Frank realizes something. "You're that property we lost." Frank's eyes shift to me and back to Giant.

"Actually, I wasn't lost. Letty found me," Giant murmurs, tugging me into his side once again.

"Damn shame. Olivet, here, cost us a big deal," Frank continues, ignoring Giant's attempts to be sweet and lessen the awkwardness. My eyes close a second, but Giant gives me another squeeze. *Please don't blurt out the dollar amount*, I whisper in my head as Frank is famous for oversharing.

"Some things are more important than making a deal, sir," Giant corrects.

"Like what?" Frank scoffs, and Giant's mouth opens again to speak, but my mother steps in.

"Now Frank. It wasn't her fault. You know she only had one thing on her mind." My mother turns to me, and I hold my breath. *Oh God, she wouldn't*. "The baby."

Giant stiffens at my side, and it's my turn to clutch at him. My fingers fist in the back of his shirt.

"Right, another foolish idea of yours," Uncle Frank agrees. He shakes his head and looks up at Giant. "What do you think of this baby business? Adoption." He scoffs as though it's a dirty word.

"I think Letty can do whatever she pleases, sir," Giant says, surprising all of us. Mom's brows rise while Frank crosses his arms.

“Indeed,” he says, like the British man he’s not. He doesn’t agree one bit with Giant’s assessment. In fact, he disagrees wholeheartedly as does my mother.

“It was a pleasure to meet both of you. If you don’t mind, I need some coffee. I don’t function well without it,” Giant mutters, his voice struggling to remain level instead of rough. He’s saving all of us from an awkward confrontation. My mother laughs, agreeing that coffee is a necessity in life, and points us in the direction of the cafes on the buffet. I follow Giant who has released his hold on me.

“Please let me explain,” I mutter through tight teeth as I come up next to him while he pours a cup. He offers it to me.

“Oh, I intend to hear every bit of this story,” he hisses, and the rugged edge to his tone returns.

+ + +

After taking an Uber to Navy Pier, we begin a leisurely saunter along the old Naval pier. Restaurants line one side until the carousel while the right side is open to the lake—reminiscent of an ancient shipping dock. As we stroll, I feel as if I’m doing the walk of shame, minus the sex and last night’s clothing, but I have nothing to be ashamed of. I jump right in.

“It all started with Hudson. We weren’t really going anywhere, and I think in my heart of hearts, I knew we would never marry. I wasn’t in a rush until, suddenly, I was. I wanted a baby when I hadn’t really entertained the idea beforehand. Because a baby solves everything,” I mock myself. “Hudson didn’t want children. When he finally told me he never had any intention of us marrying, something snapped.”

I swallow back the pain. Not at losing Hudson but at the cruelty of what he did. He made me false promises. I brush a hand through my hair even as it continues to blow forward in the wind. Giant walks with his hands in his jacket pockets. It’s

a brisk day for October. There's more gloom than sunshine, and the cloud cover presses down on me like this history.

"I'm forty, and I didn't see the prospect of getting married to anyone else. The loss of Hudson was more than losing a man. A worthless man, I might add. I lost a dream, or so I thought. Marcus and his partner had begun trying to adopt, and it sparked the idea I could do it on my own. I needed this for me."

I keep my eyes forward, not risking a glance at Giant, fearing his judgment like all the rest of my family.

This is insanity. You can't raise a child alone, my mother said even though she'd done the very thing herself. Then again, my uncle stepped in to help her out. Where was the family loyalty when it came to this decision for me?

"In vitro with sperm implants seemed too complicated and a risk at my age. I'm not too old to have a child, but I didn't want to wait for things to take. It could have taken months or years, which I don't have. There are so many children who need a parent now, and adoption seemed more immediate..." My voice drifts as I recall all the babies I've seen in and out of the Bundle, a private adoption agency on the Northshore. "I just wanted someone...for me."

I blink away the tears. My sister is on her second marriage. She has three growing sons she hardly deserves. *Did I mention the irony that Hudson hates children?* It didn't seem fair some days, but I don't want to be jealous. I don't want what she has. A superficial first marriage. A business arranged second one. Empty relationships with her sons.

"Why didn't you tell me?" His rugged voice is full of sympathy instead of anger, and it's almost worse. I don't want pity. I want someone to be excited for me.

I shrug. "It isn't something I could easily bring up. Hey, while you teach me to throw an ax, I wanted to tell you I'm adopting a baby."

He snorts, and I look over at him. He squints into the distance before us. “So when do you get the baby?”

“I don’t, actually.” I swallow the lump in my throat. I’d been passed up again right before I went to Georgia. Maybe it’s another reason I did what I did. The spontaneity of a trip. The uninhibited sex with a stranger. The total release of all the hurt feelings inside me. He turns to peer down at me.

“What happened?”

“I didn’t make the cut. It isn’t that they aren’t willing to give me a baby as a single mom, but if a married couple comes forward or ones with more financial stability, they take precedence.”

He’s thoughtful a moment, his brows pinching. “Why’s that?”

I shrug again. “Money talks. Everyone has their price.” I choke on the words. Giant stops, and I take another step or two forward before I spin to face him.

“Is this the reason you wanted the land?”

My shoulders fall, and I look away. “I needed the commission. Adoptions costs money. If I had a little more, I’d look financially secure. The sale of your land would have garnered a sizable kickback for me, as well as secured a position as partner within my uncle’s company. It’s all about providing a stable home.” I shake my head. “It doesn’t really matter anymore,” I say, masking the truth. I’m heartbroken once again, but I tell myself it isn’t my time yet. I smile weakly, looking up at him. “There’ll be another baby, another day.”

I turn to continue walking, but Giant stops me with a hand on my upper arm. “Wait a second. This is important. You should have told me.” Irritation roughens his voice, and he looks genuinely pissed.

Here comes the breakup.

“Why, Giant?” I stare at him. Are you sorry you came to Chicago now? Do you want to take back all the amazing sex we had? Do you want to renege the sensation we both felt as we made love last night? “It isn’t a great conversation starter.” I’m teasing, sort of, but the truth is, it isn’t something I easily share. This adoption business—as my family carelessly calls it—is really important to me.

You can’t do it as a single woman.

You shouldn’t do it as woman without more means.

Who would want to be a single mom?

I would. Willingly. And I’m tired of defending myself. It’s no one’s business but mine. That’s the point. A baby. For me.

“Letty, you should have told me about the money.” His voice remains rugged.

“And what could you do about it? Sell me your land?” I pause, exhaling in frustration. “I don’t want it.” It’s not about the land, per se, but the money, and I don’t want either from him.

With a puzzled expression on his face, he states, “We could figure something else out.”

I laugh without humor. “No.” For some reason, I see the wheels turning in Giant’s eyes, which makes me both uncomfortable and ridiculously hopeful, but I don’t want to rely on someone else. That’s the point of this adoption. A baby. For me. Someone who needs me. For once, someone who needs *me*.

“Why not?” he snaps, his voice returning to mountain-man Giant.

“Because I’ll figure it out on my own.” *I always do.*

He steps forward and cups my shoulders. “But you don’t have to.” He stares down at me, but I don’t know what he’s saying. It would be too much to hope he’s saying all kinds of things I shouldn’t assume.

“You’re sweet.” I give him a genuine smile, even if it’s only half my lips. He is sweet, and I bet Giant Harrington is the type of man to take care of things, to fulfill obligations, and stick where he doesn’t want to be stuck because he thinks he’s doing the right thing.

“I’m serious.” His voice deepens, irritation remaining.

“So am I.”

He nods, but disagreement fills his eyes. He doesn’t let me go. His eyes grow serious and sharp, peering down at me while his hands slip to my shoulder blades. “I’m here for you. You can talk to me. I’ll do whatever you need, but I need the truth.”

He’s right. There have been a few too many secrets between us, but could I have laid all this on him after only three nights of amazing sex? I wouldn’t have thought so, but I should know better. Everything with Giant has been different.

My lips purse as I fight a smile, risking a little more of myself. “The truth is, I like you, and I didn’t want to scare you away. A baby screams commitment, and that’s not what I’m after. But thank you. If you’re willing to be my friend and stick around for some moral support, I’d love to have you be here... well, not here *here*, of course, because you live in Georgia...but here for me.” The reality hits me. He doesn’t live nearby, and he won’t be close enough to help me, but I don’t want to lose him. There’s so much more I’ve left unsaid. So much I couldn’t dare to ask of him.

“Okay,” he says softly, his voice the lowest I’ve ever heard. He tugs me to him, holding the back of my head as I take a deep breath with my cheek against his chest. He kisses the top of my head before sliding me to his side, keeping his arm around me, and walking us forward. I’d like to think the steps are metaphorical. We’ll go forward together—as friends—long-distance friends, with benefits, lots of benefits, but a niggling feeling tells me I might lose him for good once he leaves this time.

Just Friends. My Ass.

[Giant]

Friend? I don't want to be her fucking friend. I don't know how to define us—*her*—but friend is not my intention. I want her as my lover, as a partner, as a...I can't even consider something more. I shouldn't think it. But my heart jumps around like a monkey trapped in a cage, rattling the iron bars in hopes of release.

It could happen again, Giant, my mother said a few days before I left for Chicago as if her sixth sense, Mom-powers already knew something was out there. Someone.

Friend is not what I want.

We continue down the pier, the wind blasting around us as I prompt her to tell me more despite her initial protests. She explains how adoption works.

“It's very scary. A biological parent could come back and demand his or her parental rights. I don't want any issues. I just want a baby outright.”

I hold her tighter to me, but I don't feel close enough. My gut twists with the reality of her financial situation. She assures me she's well enough off and dismisses the commission once again, but I want to help. I just don't know how without offering her thousands of dollars, which I know she won't take from me.

We leave Navy Pier and travel to see The Bean where we take tons of selfies. I don't typically take a lot of pictures on my phone, but we smile and kiss and act silly. Finally, I have her phone number, and I save an image of just her to the contact. A photo of us becomes my new background.

From Millennium Park, we travel to Willis Tower, formerly Sears Tower, and wait in a long line to go to the observation floor with the Sky Deck, a room hanging off the tower with a see-through floor. Letty goes inside the three-sided glass box, trembling from the height, and peers out at the steel jungle of buildings. It's nothing compared to being on a mountain ridge overlooking a natural landscape.

"I could never live here," I blurt, realizing too late it's a bit insensitive.

"Why not?" she asks, her voice small as her eyes remain on the skyscrapers and rows of houses below. Chicago is very grid like.

"Too many buildings, too close together. I need space."

Letty stands before me, my arms around her, trapping her against the glass with her back to my front. She nods as though she agrees with me, but she doesn't say a word. Does she like living here? Would she like us to be closer? Would she continue to see me? Would she consider moving?

The last question surprises me, but I instantly realize I'd love to have her in the mountains with me.

"The mountain," she whispers.

"It's also the brewery. I'm in charge." I don't work for my dad. I'm the boss. I'm a forty-nine percent owner doing one hundred percent of the work.

Letty's head softly rests on the glass, and she rolls it back and forth. "I know that." Her voice is too quiet for someone who has talked almost the entire day.

My stomach grumbles, and Letty shifts to glance at me over her shoulder. A soft chuckle slowly restores her disposition. "What was that?"

"I'm hungry." It's true. We grabbed a Chicago-style hot dog, one steamed by a street vendor with no ketchup allowed, and ate as we walked to the Tower, but I need something more

substantial. “Would you be upset if I wanted a couch and a television set?”

“I think I can provide that,” she teases. “Ready to head home?” A smile forms on her seductive lips, and I give her a too-short kiss. A moment later, I register what she said.

Her home. *Here*. A long way from mine.

“I can’t wait to see it,” I assure her.

+ + +

I shouldn’t be surprised, but her place is another closed-in space. A condo on the fifth floor in a building surrounded by concrete. It’s funny how I can sleep in a tent, but this wouldn’t work for me. It’s cozy, but I’d be claustrophobic here.

We stopped back at the hotel to retrieve our bags and then took another Uber to her place. She hasn’t driven me anywhere, and it’s a foreign concept. I love to drive my truck.

“So food?” she says, clapping her hands. “I don’t have a campfire handy, but I’m wicked good at using this.” She holds up her phone and jiggles it. “Delivery?”

I stare at her.

“What are you hungry for? We can order in anything you’d like.”

We decide on something we don’t readily have in Blue Ridge—Chinese food. When she starts reading off the names with moos and choos and I don’t even know what, I just tell her lots of meat and vegetables are good enough for me.

“How do you feel about football?”

I chuckle. Is this a woman after my heart? “College or pro?”

“It’s Saturday, so it has to be college tonight.”

I toss myself on her couch and kick my feet up on her coffee table. “Game on.”

She curls up next to me while we mindlessly watch Georgia play Alabama. It’s comfortable like this and reminds me of similar moments with Clara when we were young. Of course, I spent months away from her, and once I permanently returned, we didn’t cuddle anymore. I had my chair. She had her corner of the couch. For a moment, I’m saddened by the memory.

Letty is so different from Clara. Her laughter. Her smile. The things she lets me do to her. The things she does to me, like absentmindedly stroking down my chest with the game on the TV. I can hardly concentrate as another part of me is turned on.

The food arrives, and my arousal needs to be put on hold. Letty drinks wine while she offers me more locally brewed beer.

“This is nice,” I finally say as we lounge on her couch with full bellies. We’re both drowsy from a day of cool, fresh air and alcohol. She leans up and presses her lips to my neck. “That feels nice, too.”

I chuckle until her tongue licks at the skin just under my beard, and then her mouth sucks on the section. She lies on her side, her back to the couch cushions while I lie on my back. Her leg hitches over my lap as she continues her sipping kisses. I cup the back of her thigh and close my eyes, mellowing under her attention. A sigh escapes, letting her know one more time how nice she feels. I like her mouth on me. I like how she looks at me. I even like how much she can chatter.

She continues to kiss me, moving her body over my legs and sucking at my skin. Her fingers begin unbuttoning my shirt. Last night, we made love—slow and soft—and I enjoyed every second of it, but I want her a little wild again. The tender moments are almost too much. Too close. Too intense. I don’t think we should go there with the distance between us. I came

here to give her an apology. I think I'm going to leave here without my heart.

She tugs at my shirt, loosening it from my pants. I quickly sit up and remove both my flannel and my T-shirt with one tug. Then she presses me back to the sofa, returning to cover me with the tip of her tongue and openmouthed kisses.

“Whatcha doing, Cricket?” She doesn't answer me, but hums against the dusting of hair at my waistline. She works at unbuckling my belt and unzipping my zipper. Within seconds, she has my briefs and pants off, and she stares down at me from where she stands next to the couch. The only light in the room is the glow of the television, and she mutes the sound. Then she tugs her sweater over her head. Jeans lower next. Slowly, she removes her bra, watching me as I watch her. I'm enjoying the strip tease act as she wiggles her hips to remove her undies.

Finally, she straddles me, flipping her hair over one shoulder.

“Cricket?” I question as she remains silent. I have no doubt about what she's doing, but there's an intensity to her gaze. The way she's soaking in my body with her eyes. I twitch between her thighs. My hand palms up her side, reaching for a breast and squeezing her nipple. My other hand remains behind my head, casual and calm, which isn't what I feel. My heart races. My dick strains. Just looking at her makes me hard, and then she settles on my length, coating me with the wetness soaking her.

“You drunk, sweetheart?” I chuckle under her as she rides my length, not yet inside her, but slicking over me all the same.

“Just feels good,” she hums, her eyes closing, and I kind of like that she's getting off by being on me.

“Whatcha need, honey?”

“I want to ride you.”

Jesus. “Yes, please.”

She lifts a little to set my tip at her entrance. Her hands brace on my chest. “Ready?” she exhales, and before I can answer, she slams down on me.

I grunt and buck upward. She groans in response. We fall together, and then I lift my hips. She yelps, sitting upright. Her hands go behind her head, and she raises her hair. She presses up on her knees and then drops down on me again. My eyes roll back until I see her hands slipping down to tease her own breasts. She’s putting on a little show for me, and I grip her hips, forcing her up and down, listening to the slick sound of her swallowing me while she teases her nipples. Her fingers eventually lower, and I watch as she touches herself while I disappear inside her. Her movements are wild. She’s riding me as requested. Hips roll. Tits bounce. Her hair falls over her shoulders. I love how she’s taking what she wants. She’s giving me everything I need.

I love her.

The thought hits me hard, and I thrust upward, determined to fill her with all of me. She hums louder, and I want to bottle that sound and take it with me to listen to on repeat. Then she settles, slowing her ride as she clenches around me. Her lids lower as she rocks over me, her orgasm lingering. My fingertips press into her skin.

“I’m comin’, sweetheart,” I warn before I jet off deep within her. I’d love to give her the baby she wants. The baby she so lovingly deserves. But I can’t.

If only we’d met earlier in life...

The ridiculous thought escapes me as she falls over my chest, spent and breathing heavily into my neck. I wrap my arms around her, holding her to me while she holds me inside her.

I don’t want to let her go. Not yet.

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Sunday, we head to brunch. It's what she does with friends, she says, only today she wants me to herself. We window-shop as we walk back to her place. The temperature has dropped.

"Hang around for a bit, it will change again." She laughs about the Midwest weather, but there's something deeper in her comment.

Could I stay here?

I can't. I have too many responsibilities back in Georgia.

Could she leave?

She can't. She's waiting on a baby.

I don't like the odds of hopeless, so I smile through clenched teeth as we make our way through the morning with my departure weighing heavily between us.

When we return to her place, time becomes awkward. It's almost as if we know I need to leave too soon.

"I can't thank you enough for coming to the wedding." It was only the reception and not long enough, but I lean forward and press my forehead to hers as we stand in her living room. "It was the best of surprises."

"Why do I feel like this is goodbye?"

"Isn't it?" she softly asks, and her voice cracks. I pull back to find a tear slipping down her cheek.

"Cricket, what's this?" I tenderly swipe at the tear, holding her face in my hands.

"I'm never going to see you again, am I?" Another tear falls.

"Do you want to see me again?" I weakly smile with hope.

"Yes." Her enthusiastic nod brings a quiet chuckle from me.

“Then let’s work this out, okay? In two weeks, the pub hosts an Oktoberfest. Can you come back to Georgia?”

“I think so. Let me check my calendar.” She pauses, another tear slipping from her eye. “I’ll make it work.”

“There’s my Cricket. She never gives up.” I lean in for her mouth, and we kiss through her salty tears before I have to tear myself away and head back to Georgia.

Home Visits

[Letty]

Giant wants to pick me up in Atlanta, and I can't contain myself when I see him. I leap for him when he greets me at the airport. I pepper his face with kisses, locking my legs around his waist although I'm certain I'm too heavy for him. He's laughing until his mouth catches mine, and then he holds me in place, kissing me hard before pulling free.

"That's better than any homecoming, and I'm already home." Giant doesn't talk much about his military experiences, but over the past two weeks, we've talked every night on the phone and sent sexy texts throughout the day.

"I've missed you," I blurt, not shy of my feelings at the moment. I'm so happy to see him, and his expression matches mine. He grabs my bag and my hand, and then we head to his truck. It's a beautiful day as we climb the mountain, and he tells me more about Oktoberfest.

"The event is Billy's grand idea to draw people into the pub and celebrate our beer. It's worked. He's been surprisingly successful." I have all the Harringtons straight in my head, but I'm nervous to meet them. It's obvious from our nightly conversations that his siblings are close minus James, and even there, Giant misses the brother below him in birth order. Their parents—Elaina and George—are still important to them, too. I want to make a good impression, a lasting one, even if I don't know how long Giant and I will last.

We plan to stay at his home. He has some obligations to Oktoberfest the following morning, but he promises me they won't take long. His house is on the edge of town, and it's

closer than the cabin. I'll miss the mountain, but I'm excited to see where he lives. I'm also anxious. This will be the home he shared with his deceased wife, so I worry there will be hundreds of reminders of her.

I'm gently surprised when there isn't. The living room is masculine with a bright red plaid couch and two brown leather chairs, one well-worn from a big body. A large stone fireplace is the focal point, whitewashed with a built-in bookshelf on one side. The dining area is behind the couch with the kitchen next to it. It's one great room. The space is neat and minimal, and all male minus any sign of his deceased wife.

"Did you...do you have pictures of her?"

He stops where he's walking, sets down my bag, and turns to face me. "I used to keep pictures of her everywhere until one day I just couldn't look any longer. So I boxed them all up. I keep one in my room, but I put it away." His eyes drift to the floor, sheepish of his decision.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to hide her. You were married, happily, and she died. It's okay." I wish to reassure him, but I don't know how. I don't have experience with a man who has already been married, who has already loved another. He isn't comfortable discussing her with me, but I know he'll tell me anything I ask about her.

I just feel like I'm betraying her and hurting you when we talk about her.

I can respect his feelings.

"I feel better with the picture down," he says. I step up to him and cup his face.

"I'm honored to be here." He glances up and over my shoulder.

"It's much different than it was. I changed everything after a year. Furniture, paint colors, even tweaked the layout." The house looks like a sprawling ranch from the outside with false dormers, but there's a second floor below us, hidden in

the cliff. A porch the length of the back of the house is half screened in and half open, and my eyes are drawn to it.

“Want a complete tour?”

“I do.” I nod with a grin, and Giant leads me through all the rooms. On the lower level, a pool table centers a room with another fireplace. A hot tub in a screened-in porch is off this man cave. We climb the stairs again, and I notice a glass-paned door leading to a second floor.

“What’s up there?” I ask.

“Nothing of consequence,” he answers. It’s a vague answer, but I let it slide as he leads me to his room. When we step inside, he tackles me to the bed. “Too soon to have sex with you?”

I chuckle beneath him. “Nope.”

+ + +

The strange thing about sex in his bedroom is it didn’t feel right. I mean, it felt amazing, but something was off, and I just chalked it up to the distance and reacclimating ourselves to one another. I’d never had a long-distance relationship, and we’re still so new to each another. I’m excited to be here and learn more about his life, but we weren’t the same people we’ve been in his bedroom.

After sex, he makes me dinner. This time, it’s on a grill on his deck instead of a campfire.

“I bought the house to keep Clara in one place.” He smiles weakly. “She didn’t want to continue traveling everywhere with me, and some places weren’t meant for her. I was career military but didn’t make it a full twenty like I planned.” He’s quiet for a moment. I don’t want him to be shy about talking about her, but the hesitation he had during sex is present again. He pours me more wine and opens a second beer for himself while our steaks cook. He continues to tell me

minimal details of his military time but emphasizes the distance. “I went for long spans without seeing Clara. It was difficult at times.”

I don’t know what he’s telling me, but I listen all the same.

When he serves dinner, we switch topics to the adoption process. I haven’t heard anything more.

“And there’s a time constraint, you said? You’d have to petition to remove the baby from the state for any reason.” Once I have a child, the finalization process could take a year. I wouldn’t be able to leave Illinois without permission from my adoption liaison. Again, I’m not sure where he’s going with his line of questions.

Finally, we shift to an easier subject—Oktoberfest and his family.

“You’ll meet the whole crew tomorrow.” He shakes his head. “I hope they don’t scare you away.”

“I’m not easily frightened,” I say.

“Oh, I’ve noticed. Although they might be worse than bears.”

The night is cool, but a fire pit near the table keeps us warm. Candles scattered around the deck give off a romantic atmosphere. The backdrop of the mountains is reminiscent of our time on a higher ridge. Soft music plays through an outdoor speaker, and Giant reaches for my hand, gently tugging at my fingers. “Dance with me.”

When we stand, he pulls me into him, and we sway like teenagers pressed together.

“I’m not a good dancer,” he mutters. It’s more of a moving embrace, and I’m warm and comfortable in his arms.

“You’re just fine,” I say. “Quite charming actually.”

He huffs before speaking. “I should have danced with you under the stars.” The assumption of where is clear, and I

tip my head back and gaze upward. There are plenty of stars to be seen here.

“This is pretty perfect,” I tell him, dropping my eyes back to him.

“Yes, you are.”

I smile. “See? Charming.”

“I don’t know about that. I think it’s more *your* doing. I don’t know how to be around you, yet I just be.”

My brows pinch. “You don’t have to be anyone special or someone different, honey. I love who you are.”

He stops moving and shifts to lean against the railing, putting his backside to it while he pulls me between his open legs. His hands loop around my lower back, and my palms rest on his chest.

“Is it strange being here?” Somehow, I know he doesn’t mean Georgia.

“Is it strange having me here?”

“Yes and no. I’m happy you’re here. More than happy. My home is my home, but I can’t shake this feeling...”

“Have you had many women here before?”

“Never.”

I’m shocked and honored to be the first, but it also explains his hesitation. “You don’t have to replace her.” His heart was full of her once. I know I can’t compare.

Giant sighs. “That’s just the thing. You have. It’s hard to explain. I...I need you. You’re good for me.”

My insides warm further. “You’re good for me, too.” I tip up to kiss him, and our mouths slowly move, drawing out each other’s lips—sucking, sipping, savoring. We stand under the aura of stars, within the candlelight and near the fire pit, and breathe in each other with only our mouths. It’s the most romantic moment of my life.

+ + +

We don't make love that night, and I don't complain. We kiss and kiss and kiss some more, and then we climb into his bed like an old married couple. Only he tugs me close to him, breathing in my hair and smelling my neck as if taking his time to get used to me in this bed with him.

He wakes early to help his brother, promising me he'll return soon, but by ten o'clock, I'm restless. He hasn't returned my call, and he doesn't have a second car. A quick GPS check confirms I'm eight miles from town. Feeling brave and overzealous, I decide I can walk to Blue Ridge. I haven't really spent time in the small town, other than my one-stop shopping at Duncan's for camping clothes.

By the time I reach a diner in the city's center, I'm drenched in sweat and irritated with myself. I collapse into a booth.

"Hi honey, need some coffee?" A very pregnant woman with a Southern drawl, blond hair, and the bluest of eyes asks of me.

"That'd be great."

"You passing through?" she asks, eyeing my sweat-stained shirt and workout leggings.

"Not exactly. I'm staying with a friend and took it upon myself to be ambitious. I walked into town from his place, but it was harder than I thought. The dips and climbs of the road made it seem a lot longer than eight miles."

She lightly chuckles as she fills my cup. "Where you staying at?"

"George Harrington's."

Coffee dribbles over the edge of my cup, and she quickly pulls a rag from her old-fashioned diner uniform and swipes at

the spill.

“Giant?” She gasps.

“Yes,” I say confidently, but my smile falters as she stares down at me.

“I can’t believe...I mean...that’s wonderful.” Her voice rises an octave. Another woman passes behind the enthusiastic waitress, and Blondie stops her. “Dolores, this here woman is staying with Giant.” Blondie turns back to me, and I read her name tag. Hollilyn. “What’s your name, honey?”

I should stop myself from offering too much information, but I can’t seem to help it. “Olivet Pierson. Letty.” I lift a hand to shake hers. Hollilyn shakes mine, and the other woman with piercing eyes stares at me.

“Welcome to Blue Ridge, Letty,” the brunette with sad blue eyes says. “I’m Dolores Chance.” Dolores of Dolores’s Diner. I surmise she is the owner.

“You have a nice place here,” I say, taking in the worn-paneling and roughened tile. It’s quaint, if tired looking.

“Where you from?” Dolores asks.

“Chicago.”

Her brow rises. “And you know Giant...?” Her voice drifts, suggesting I provide an answer.

“It’s complicated,” I say, waving a hand to dismiss the subject.

“Those Harringtons are.” She chuckles lightly and pats my forearm. “You let Hollilyn know what you need. Enjoy your stay.”

I order a breakfast of eggs and bacon and check my phone again. No response from Giant. I’ve also noticed my service goes in and out.

I randomly scroll through social media and my emails until Hollilyn returns with my food. A few minutes later, a man enters the diner and greets Hollilyn. While I eat, I have

the strangest sense of them watching me. Finally, I look up and Hollilyn approaches.

“I didn’t want to disturb you, but this is Jaxson Rathstone. He’s Giant’s nephew and works with him at the brewery.”

Jaxson tensely smiles and extends a hand. It’s clear he doesn’t want to be introduced to me as he tersely greets me. “Nice to meet you.”

“She says she’s staying with your uncle,” Hollilyn offers.

“Hollilyn,” he hisses. He’s a good-looking man, and I’m guessing late twenties for his age. His eyes are all Harrington. Dark and intense.

“What? I just thought you’d like to meet her.” Hollilyn turns to me, and Jaxson mouths, “I’m sorry,” from behind her. I smile and shake my head.

“Have you seen your uncle this morning?” I pick up my phone as way of excuse. “Having trouble with reception.”

“He’s still at the warehouse. I’m heading over there after I grab a coffee. *To go.*” He reaches for Hollilyn’s elbow, and she steps away from the table, catching the hint to fetch his drink. As she walks away, he tips his head toward her. “Sorry about that.”

“No worries.” I pause. “I’d drive to the warehouse, but I don’t have a car.” I don’t know why I offer this information, but Hollilyn must have sonic ears because from her place near the coffeepot, she hollers, “Jaxson can give you a ride.”

I look up, taking pity on the mid-twenties man. With his dark brown hair and matching eyes, I can see a slight resemblance to his uncle and wonder what Giant looked like as a younger man. “I bet your mother warned you about stranger danger. You don’t need to give me a ride. I’ll just find an Uber.” The words tumble out before I know if Blue Ridge even offers the service.

“You’ll be hard pressed to find that here.” He chuckles. “And my mother also warned me about one-night stands and look where it got me.” He winks as he nods in the direction of Hollilyn.

I’d be taken aback by the insult if Hollilyn hadn’t approached, swatted Jaxson on the arm, and then said, “You love me.”

He chuckles without directly answering her, but his eyes light up, and I imagine he does love her.

“I can give you a ride. You look innocent enough.” He winks again, and I decide charming must be a trait of Harrington men.

21

Oktoberfest

[Giant]

“Letty?” My tone rings surprised as I see her standing in my office door, a bit disheveled, with my nephew next to her. Charlie turns in his seat. We’ve been discussing a few things—legal stuff—and I note the time on my phone. I’m two hours later than I planned to be. I also have a few missed messages from her. She’s been waiting for me.

Shit.

Thankfully, she doesn’t look pissed.

“Imagine my surprise at finding this pretty lady at the diner,” my nephew says, all flirtatious for someone about to have a baby with a girl he won’t admit he loves. “And she says she’s staying with you.”

“How did you get to the diner?”

“I walked.” She leans against the doorjamb, crossing her arms, which only emphasizes the outline of her body. Thick breasts. Hourglass hips. Her hair sits in a messy bun at the base of her neck. She looks edible, and I’m upset again that I didn’t take the opportunity last night. My head got in the way of my heart, and I became overwhelmed with her in my place. Letty is so vibrant and energetic, and I like having her here. We should have had sex all night, but my bedroom shut me down, and I wonder if it’s the picture of Clara *in* my dresser.

Or was it guilt that I’d finally moved on?

Charlie had been giving me a pep talk before Letty arrived.

“How you doing with Letty here?”

“Wonderful.” I sighed.

“And it’s not strange in the house?”

“It’s very strange but in a good way.” I smiled, thinking of our romantic dinner on my porch. I pulled out all the stops, surprising myself at how much I wanted everything perfect for her.

“Mati said she had trouble with it.” Charlie means our younger sister whose new love was an old friend. My sister lost her husband in a car accident over a year ago. Needless to say, she moved on much sooner than I did.

“You know Mama’s going to have a field day with this.”

Yes, my mother who called only a few days ago to arrange another dinner between myself and Alyce Wright. I’m worried I’m feeding Letty to the bears, but I also think my mother’s going to love her.

“And your relationship is open, right?” My brother’s marriage was full of deceit, so I’m certain he means honesty, not a relationship where we see other people. At least, I hope we aren’t seeing other people. I’m not seeing anyone else, and I don’t want Letty to either. Like I told her, we’ll work this distance thing out.

I spent several months each year apart from my wife throughout our twenty years of marriage, sometimes up to eighteen months back during the Iraq War.

And how well did that really work? my heart whispers.

It made us distant and lonely even in the presence of each other. We loved one another, but we didn’t know one another after my years of service and separation.

“Letty,” Charlie says, standing from his seat and offering a hand to her. “I’m Charlie.”

“The mayor brother,” she confirms, and her cheeks flush. She must be thinking about her phone call to his office.

“Sure.” He chuckles.

“There are so many of you. I keep it straight by associating your profession with your name.”

“Oh goodness, what’s his profession?” Charlie teases, glancing over at me.

“Resident sex god.”

I choke on air.

Charlie stammers.

Jaxson bursts out laughing.

“Giant, she’s a definite keeper,” Jaxson says once he settles his laughter, sounding like James, the biker brother.

“Well, uhm...on that note. I’ll leave you to it,” Charlie says, turning red around the collar. “I mean, I’ll leave you to do it.” His eyes widen. “I mean—”

“I think we get it,” I say, standing.

“I didn’t mean to clear the room,” Letty says, a sly grin on her face.

“Oh, we were only hiding out from Billy. Pub owner brother,” Charlie clarifies. “He’s a pain in the ass today.”

“I can’t wait to meet him,” Letty teases as I reach her, and she steps under my offered arm.

“Don’t be too eager,” I say, leaning to kiss her forehead.

“Aww, you two are just the cutest,” Jaxson drawls, sounding more like his mother, my sister.

“Mama’s gonna have a field day,” Charlie repeats, pushing my nephew out the door and pulling the door closed behind him.

“I really didn’t mean to interrupt,” Letty says, looking up at me. I reach around her and lock the door.

“And I really didn’t mean to be gone so long. I’m sorry.” We only have so much time together, and I should be hanging out with her, not my brother. I can be with him on the days she isn’t here.

“So sex god, huh?”

“That was too much, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe we should test it out.” I lean forward and kiss her, urgent and earnest. Why didn’t I make love to her last night? In my office, I’m as turned on as she always makes me, and within seconds, I’m moving her toward my desk.

“You said you never kissed a bearded man before,” I tease, keeping my mouth against hers. “How about desk sex?”

“Here?” she chokes, excitement mingling with her surprise. I love surprising her, and I love how she surprises me by letting me do what I want with her body. *You love her*, my heart screams, but I ignore it. It’s too much, too fast. I can’t.

I hitch Letty up onto the edge of my desk.

“You walked to town? I’m a terrible host.”

“I was getting antsy. Too much energy waiting for you.”

“And how ready are you for me?” I slip my hand between her thighs and palm her over her yoga pants, but it isn’t enough. She tilts up her hips, and I tug down her pants, underwear too. Sliding a finger into her wet center, I find my answer. *So ready for me*. I rush to undo my belt and lower my pants. “God, you make me do crazy things.” I exhale as I drag myself against her wet folds, readying myself to enter her. She tips back on her elbows, her legs spread wide.

“You make me crazy, too,” she hums, a pleasant sound mixing with her words. I slip into her, and she falls to her back. Her legs hitch up and wrap around my hips, and I lean forward, bracing my hands on either side of her. I thrust up and pull back, setting a rhythm to keep us attached.

“I’m kind of a mess,” she softly says, her hair falling loose of the messy bun as her hands reach above her for the opposite edge of my desk. Papers slip to the floor.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” I say, straining as my pace increases. I slip my thumb between us, watching as I play with

her clit while I disappear inside her. “I love to watch this. Watch us.”

I look up to find her eyes bright and intense on me. She licks her lips as if she wants to speak but fights it.

I love you, my heart hammers. Tell me you love me, too.

I shake the thought, falling deeper into her body. Letty closes her eyes, her head tipping to the side as she bites her lip.

“Finish, Letty,” I growl, wanting her orgasm on my desk where I’ll remember her and this moment each time I sit here. Her back arches as she stills. Clenching me brings the result I desire. I let go inside her, feeling free of the hesitation I felt in my home.

Maybe we should just stay in my office.

Maybe I should just get my head together.

+ + +

That evening, we have dinner inside the Blue Ridge Microbrewery and Pub although the festivities are primarily outside. Billy is insanely busy, along with my sister, Mati, working the tent. Charlie’s making his mayoral rounds. Even James and a few of his cronies are present on the outer periphery. But the most important people for Letty to meet are my parents.

George Harrington Jr. is a good judge of character. Elaina Harrington is just judgmental.

“Giant.” My mother breathes out my name as though she hasn’t seen me in years. It’s the same sound of relief she had each time I returned home unharmed. Even when I was harmed, her relief came with the fact I lived.

“And who is this pretty young thing?” my father teases, reaching out to kiss Letty’s cheek. Letty offers it and blushes.

“I’m Olivet Pierson. But you can call me Letty.”

“And you can call me George.” His warm smile eases the tension I didn’t know she was holding in. Her shoulders relax. Was she nervous to meet my parents? I guess I’m anxious as well because I exhale when my mother beams a smile at me.

“She’s lovely,” she mouths as if Letty isn’t present and can’t hear her. They join us for dinner and unknowingly grill Letty, but she takes all their questions in stride. Good thing she likes to chat and doesn’t seem to mind the rapid-fire inquiries coming from my mother.

“Elaina, honey, I think you’ve asked enough. My only question is which beer do you like best?” my father jokes, cutting off my mother when she gets to question thirty-seven in what is clearly an unwritten list of *are you good enough for my son?* I think I’ll make my own decision, thank you very much, Mama.

“Time for the tent,” I suggest, and we head out to the overcrowded canopy set up between the pub and the bookstore named BookEnds on the opposite street. The covering takes up the first block of Third Avenue.

“Let me introduce you to a few people,” I shout over the volume of beer drinkers slowly getting hammered on Giant Beer. I walk Letty through the crowd, introducing her to Cora Conrad, Mati’s best friend, and Alyce Wright, who smiles without hurt feelings when she sees I’ve got a girl on my arm. I point at James, who nods at Letty, and then we make our way to the temporary bar.

“Billy,” I call out. “This is Letty.”

My brother has streaks of silver in his hair while the scruff on his jaw remains jet black, and we tease him that he must color it. His eyes sparkle when he sees Letty, and he wipes his hands on a rag before coming to the end of the bar and pulling her into a hug. He holds on a second longer than my liking, and I force my hand between them.

“She feels nice,” he teases, and I want to punch him even though he’s only looking to get a rise out of me. He’s my brother, and I know he’d never, ever go after my girl, but I don’t like the thought that some other man might want her too. When I push him back by the shoulder, he chuckles with a gleam in his eyes.

“I see how it is,” he says with a clap of his hands and then rubs them together. Letty laughs, and Billy smiles deeper.

“What’s your flavor, honey? I’ll let you taste anything you like.” The innuendo in my brother’s voice raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

“William Forrest Harrington,” I warn.

Letty looks back and forth between us a second. “I don’t understand that one.”

Billy’s expression slowly falls, and he tilts his head. “What do you mean, love?”

“Roald Dahl,” Letty explains, and Billy’s eyes shoot up to me.

“You told her the family secret?” He’s aghast. “She really must be special.”

I glare at my brother, not liking the direction of his comment.

“Roald Dahl?” a feminine voice says at my side, and I turn to see Roxanne McAllister, owner of the bookstore and my brother’s nemesis. One brow rises in question as she glares at Billy. No one understands the deal between these two. They act like they hate each other. Roxanne glances over at Letty. “Billy is the name of a character in a short story called ‘The Minpins’ by Roald Dahl. It’s a cautionary tale about not going into the woods.” Roxanne glances back at Billy with malice in her eyes. “Seems appropriate.”

Letty covers her lips with two fingers, biting back a chuckle. “Oh my,” she says under her breath, and I tug her to me.

“What would you know about playing in the woods?” Billy mocks.

“More than you’d know about reading a book,” Roxanne snaps.

Letty’s mouth falls open, and I watch as the two spar.

“Oh, good one.” Billy covers his chest over his heart with both hands. “Ouch, I’m hurt that I don’t read.”

“It’s better than being anywhere near your wood,” Roxanne retorts. Her eyes narrow on Billy.

“Go away,” he stammers, shooing her with the back of his hand.

“With pleasure.” Then she turns to Letty. “If you need a good book, come visit me.”

“And if she needs good wood, she can come to me,” Billy adds, puffing up his chest as he bellows his comeback. Only I’m not liking what he said one bit.

“Fuck that,” I say, glaring at my brother.

“I didn’t mean...” Billy turns red, which isn’t easily accomplished on him, and Roxanne chuckles as she turns and walks away.

“That woman...” he groans, turning back for the bar.

“Well, they certainly sound familiar.” Letty chuckles, and I peer down at her.

“What do you mean?”

She responds by pointing back and forth between us.

Hot Tubs Are Hot

[Letty]

Tipsy and tired at first, I have renewed energy when we return to Giant's home. I'm not going to be able to fall asleep so easily tonight.

"Mind if I try out that hot tub downstairs?" I ask, my words a bit slow but not too slurred.

"Mind if I join you?"

I'm happy he asked. We've had a good night. Lots of laughs and him holding me under his arm. He's been kissing my temple and making a real show of me as his to this town. People have given us a knowing smile all night, and I feel like they know more than me, but by the time I was three beers in, I no longer cared. I still don't. I just want to continue enjoying him.

We decide to strip naked for the hot tub, and I sink into the bubbly warmth. With the crisp fall air coming through the screens, the juxtaposition of heat from the water is soothing. Giant and I sit opposite each other, shyly smiling while our toes brush underneath the water. Eventually, he grips my ankle and pulls my foot to his mouth. He bites the pad, which causes my knee to jerk, but I'm not as repulsed as when he suggested kissing my feet while we were camping.

"You should put one of these up on the mountain. Maybe at your cabin."

"There is one."

I don't recall seeing it, but I didn't get a good look at his place. In fact, I haven't even seen the inside.

“That place is special to you.” He’s already explained the inheritance from his pap.

“The house was so dilapidated when Pap gifted it to me. I think he knew I’d need the project when I got home. I’d need the solitude of the woods and the work with my hands. Idle minds are not good for those with dark memories.”

My eyes fall to the wound on his shoulder, and my chest aches. I can’t imagine him not in the world. Not in my life either. I want to keep him.

“You’ll have to show me sometime.”

“You really miss it?” he teases, but there’s something more in the question.

“It was more than I expected. Peaceful. Serene.”

“That’s what the brochure would say.”

I push water at him. “That’s what I’d say. I found a little of myself that I didn’t know was missing.”

His lips crook in the corner. “Really?”

“I’ve been a little lost since Hudson. Not that I miss him. Lying, cheating bastard. Then I missed another opportunity with a baby.” I chuckle, but my voice saddens. “I just thought I was moving in one direction, and then I wasn’t. It’s the story of my life. I thought I’d graduate college and go one way and ended up where I’m at.”

“And that is...?”

“I sell real estate when I wanted to write books.”

His brows pinch, waiting me out. “I was an English major eons ago. What else would I want to do besides teach, which I didn’t want to do. I wanted to read and write. Period.” I chuckle at myself and my twentysomething dreams.

“And you can’t do it now?”

I stare at him, his big brown eyes questioning me with sincerity. “I-I never thought about it. I mean, I work all the

time and travel.”

“Do you like that?”

“No,” I offer a little too harshly and a little too quick. “It’s a job.”

“Could you do it anywhere? Sell real estate?”

“I wouldn’t want to.” The words rush out again, and his eyes widen. *Why is he looking at me like that?* “I mean, I wouldn’t want to sell real estate somewhere else because I don’t really want to sell it at all.” I can’t believe I’m admitting this to him. I don’t think I’ve even admitted it to myself. I’m miserable at my job, but saying it out loud makes me feel guilty. It’s a decent job, and I need the money for a baby.

“If you could do anything, anywhere, what would you do?”

“Write books,” I say a little more confidently. “I’d write a book.”

“About romance?” he teases, wiggling his brow.

“Well, I certainly have good material lately,” I flirt.

“Sex god.” He pats his large chest.

“Among other things.” I giggle. It’s so much more than sex. I feel connected to him in a way I can’t explain. Maybe it’s because of the mountain and our experience up on the ridge. I proved to myself I could camp, and he opened me up to an adventure I didn’t know I needed.

After covering his face with bubbles, he pulls himself from the tub. “I’m too warm.”

He’s hot, actually. So hot. His broad chest. The patch of hair. The trail leading lower. His dick, which isn’t extended but still large. His arms. His hands. I love this man.

Even if it seems too soon, I love him.

His eyes dip, and his grin turns mischievous. “Let’s go upstairs.”

+ + +

I'm wrapped in a towel covering the middle of me while Giant has one wrapped around his waist. I lead the way and note the time over the clock on his stove.

It's after two in the morning.

As we cross the living room, heading for his bedroom, Giant cups my elbow and tugs me to a stop. I turn to him, and he leads me between the furniture to the well-worn brown leather chair.

"Sit," he commands, his voice deep and rough, and a tingle runs up my spine. I sit with the towel still around me, but he untucks it as he lowers to his knees before me. "Sit back."

The leather is cool after the heat of the hot tub as I lean back, and he pulls the towel out from under me. He scoops under my knees and drags me to the edge of the cushion. Then he lowers his head and laps across my seam. I flinch at the sudden touch—cool on warm again. He smiles into the crease. Then he sucks on my clit, and I fall under the spell of his tongue. Charmed.

The flat pad separates me, dipping between the folds as his mouth deepens the seductive kiss on my lower lips. His head bobs, and he moans against sensitive skin. My feet lift for his shoulders, and my fingers delve into his hair.

"Cricket"—he sighs—"you make me so wild. I want to do all kinds of things to you."

"I want you to do everything to me." I can't think of one thing I'd deny this man.

He continues to work me with his mouth until I'm on edge.

“Finish.” One word and I want to do as he says. “Scream, Cricket. Fill this house.”

He nips me, and I let loose. My knees fold against his head, and my fingers tug at his hair. I call out his name, filling the room as he asked. I’m hardly done when he tugs me from the chair.

“Flip.” Again, I do as he says, my knees hitting the soft material of my damp towel on the floor as he presses my upper body to the cushion of the chair. My nipples peak to attention as they meet the cool leather. His hand twists into the messy bun I made to keep my hair up while in the hot tub, and he fists it, giving it a tug as he slams into me. I cry out. “Again.”

He pulls back and thrusts forward, the angle deep. Every time I think he can’t reach anywhere new in me, he does. He rocks his hips, forcing me upward before slipping into my channel. Then he repeats the motion.

“So wild,” he mutters behind me. “I can’t stop myself. I want you so much.” His voice strains as he takes me harder, faster, deeper. I’m close once again, and then he pulls out.

“No,” I whine, but he lifts me under my armpits, and we shift positions once again. He sits in the chair and guides me by my hips to climb over him. I easily slip down his stiff length, filling myself once again.

“This,” he says. “I want to see you fall apart over me. In my chair. Every time I sit here, I’m going to picture you over me, under me. In my mouth. On my dick.”

His words spur me on, and I lift and lower, holding his shoulders as I gyrate over him. I stroke at him in a way my clit rubs on the bone near his dick. The sensation is divine, and he presses at my hips, forcing me back and forth.

“Take me,” he groans as I ride him, finding my pleasure until he’s hissing.

“I can’t...Too much...Feels so good.” He stills, and the pulsing within sets me off. I come, digging my nails into his shoulders as he holds my hips, pinning me to him. Moonlight

streams into the room, hitting a section of his face as his neck strains.

Sex god. Mountain man. Lumbersexual. He defines each word.

Suddenly, I'm tugged down to him, and he wraps his arms around my back, holding my shoulder blades so my bare breasts cup his face.

"I love this," he says, kissing between them. "I love everything about you." He looks up at me with such adoration and fear and hesitation and surprise. I lean down and kiss him soft and tender, telling him I feel all the same emotions.

When we finally fall onto his bed with him on his back and me on my stomach next to him, I reach for his jaw and scratch the scruff.

"I love you," I whisper before exhaustion sweeps me under.

Waffles With Little Ears

[Letty]

“Papa.” The word jolts me upright in Giant’s bed, and I turn for him as he’s already leaping out from under the covers. We fell into bed naked and exhausted, and I twist to find bright daylight streaming through his windows.

The patter of little feet resonates down the hall, coming toward this room, and Giant stands, reaching for his pants on the chair and tugging them on. He looks around the room for something and then takes three steps to his highboy dresser. Briskly opening the drawer, he pulls too hard, and it jams. He slips a hand into the slim opening, tugs out a T-shirt, and roughly pulls it over his head. Another call comes closer.

“Papa.”

My heart drops to my stomach, which roils and coils, and not just from the excessive amount of beer I drank last night.

Giant steps for his bedroom door, not even acknowledging me, and wraps a hand around the handle.

“Papa?” I question, bile climbing up my throat. *As in Dad?* Giant’s hand pauses on the doorknob, but his back remains to me.

“Grandpa,” he clarifies, without looking back. His forehead hits the wood barrier to the hall for a mere second before he opens the door only a crack. “I’ll get rid of them. Just. Stay. Here.” His words are almost angry as if gruff Giant has returned. He slips through the opening he made and shuts the door behind him.

The second the door closes, I rush for his bathroom, emptying the contents of my stomach. *Stay*. What kind of command is that? Am I dog?

When I stand from the toilet and look in the mirror, my face is ashen. My lips dull. My eyes too bright.

Papa. Grandpa.

He has fucking children. He has grandchildren.

I lunge for the toilet again, but nothing other than liquid comes out. On shaking legs, I stand, splash water on my face, and then brush my teeth.

Stay here. I'll get rid of them.

Oh, no. Not this again. I will not be invisible.

I'm forty and about to do the ultimate walk of shame—meet the children after fucking their father senseless. I fix my hair into a tight bun and slowly cross his bedroom for my bag. I pull on clean clothes. Jeans and a long-sleeve shirt are the best items I have left. I wore a dress last night to the Oktoberfest, but it smells like beer and...it's down by the hot tub where I left it.

I pinch my cheeks for color and pull on my proverbial big girl panties.

“Well, here goes everything,” I whisper as I tug open the door a little too harshly and step into the hall. The noise of little girl voices and an older female fills the great room. A second strong feminine voice joins the first.

As I step to the edge of the room, I stop when two sets of eyes meet mine.

“Dad?” the one questions while the other just stares at me.

Giant turns with a girl roughly three years old in his arms. Another little one sits on a stool at the kitchen island.

“Hello,” I say, my voice cracking.

He has children. He has grandchildren.

Giant looks from me to the girls and back. The little one in his arms wiggles to be released to a second stool. I feel as if I'm walking through deep water as I cross the living room, approaching the gaping mouth, wide-eyed women who appear to be in their mid-to-late twenties.

I extend a shaking hand, hoping they can't see how much I tremble. "I'm Olivet Pierson. Letty." I choke on my own name. Not a Livvy or a Vette or an Olive. Just Letty. Invisible.

One young woman circles the island, extending her hand for mine. Her hair is a light amber color, but her eyes match her father. "Ellie. Ellie McCabe. These are my daughters, Kali." She points at a light brunette with eyes matching most Harrington offspring. "And Essie." The second brunette has brilliant green eyes and mischief in her little smile. She lowers her face away from my prying gaze. "And this is my sister, Sarah." Ellie points at the other woman.

Awkward silence falls around us as Giant still doesn't speak. He isn't looking at me, and I refuse to look over at him.

"We're here for breakfast," Ellie explains.

"Well, then," I say to the little girls. "What are we having?"

"Waffles," they cheer in unison. "With ears," the younger one—Essie—adds. I look up at her mother in question.

"Mickey Mouse ones. My dad..." Her eyes shift to Giant. "He makes them when we come for breakfast."

My heart is ripped into tiny little shreds, and while I should pack my bags and storm out of this house, never to look back, my pride wouldn't allow that scene. Instead, I'll suffer through this breakfast, humiliated and awkward, and make my presence known while feeling empty in my chest.

"Waffles with ears sound delicious," I say, stepping toward the kitchen as if I know where anything is.

Relationships of Fathers

[Giant]

The hurt in her eyes pains me more than the bullet wound near my shoulder. She won't look at me but keeps the tight smile on her face as she addresses my daughter.

Ellie, named after my mother, is twenty-eight years old and a beautiful mother in her own right to little Kali, five, and Essie, three.

"We live in Atlanta," Ellie explains, speaking on behalf of herself and her sister.

Sarah, so like her mother, is quiet, shy, and stunned. She hasn't closed her mouth yet while Ellie nervously chatters, filling the awkward silence while she rattles in my cabinets.

"Daddy makes breakfast the last Sunday of each month. That's our deal." Ellie isn't being defensive. She's stating a fact. Breakfast. The word distracts me, and I step around the island.

"I got it," I mutter, pulling out the Mickey Mouse waffle iron I thought would be a fun treat for the girls, and entice them to want to come to my house.

"I teach ninth grade English," Ellie states, and my chest rips open again. Letty told me only last night how she studied English and wished to write a book.

I love you.

There's no denying what she said to me before she fell asleep.

Yet she hates me today, and I don't blame her.

It isn't that I forgot about my monthly breakfast date. It's just...I forgot it was this weekend. And I forgot to mention I had children although I didn't really forget them.

"What are you reading with your class?" Letty asks, prompting Ellie to keep talking.

"Close your mouth," I mutter to Sarah as I pass her for the refrigerator. She clamps it shut and shakes her head.

"I'm Sarah," she says as if Ellie didn't already handle introductions five minutes ago. Letty smiles at her and reaches out a hand. She doesn't offer to shake so much as wraps both hers around Sarah's and squeezes.

"It's nice to meet you, Sarah." The affection warms my insides as Sarah struggles with social situations. Her shyness keeps her from acting confident. "And what do you do?"

"I'm studying to be a veterinarian, but for now, I work at an animal clinic."

"What's your favorite animal?" Letty prompts, encouraging Sarah to speak. My breathing comes quicker. She's being so nice to my girls. My girls who were shell-shocked by someone other than their mother coming out of my bedroom. My girls who have told me to date, but I told them it would never happen.

I break eggs and add flour, but I can't even calculate the measurements in my head. I'm making a mess. A mess of everything.

Letty comes around the counter and gently pushes at my hip. "Why don't you let me?"

"I thought delivery was your specialty." I'm trying to tease her, but my voice remains stilted as I speak.

"I think I can handle a few waffles. With ears," she adds, addressing my granddaughters. Kali looks up, hopeful of success. She's so like her mother. Essie, on the other hand, is a little deviant like her father. The absentee dad. I was like him. Always working. Never home. Missing everything important

to my girls. I didn't want that for the next generation, yet Ellie picked a man like me. Mick is in the military.

"So how did you meet Daddy?" Ellie asks, interrupting my thoughts of her husband.

"I wanted to buy his land."

"Pap's land?" Sarah asks, horrified at the thought. She enjoys it almost as much as I do, loving the wildlife in the woods.

"Yes. But then I had a change of heart."

Kill me. She's driving the knife deeper because it's *my* heart that changed, and she'll never love me after this.

"And when was this?" Ellie asks, digging for more details.

"A month ago." Letty stops whipping the batter. *Has it really only been a month?* I feel like I've known Letty a lifetime. I want to know her for a lifetime. I glance from Letty to Ellie, begging my daughter for a moment.

"Let's go wash our hands," Ellie announces, and the two littles jump from the stool. "Sarah, come help us." Sarah stares at her sister a moment until Ellie, not so inconspicuously, nods to follow her. Kali skips. Essie follows. Letty turns her head toward the French door leading to the second floor.

"Nothing of consequence? Their rooms are up there, aren't they?"

"I can explain everything," I mutter.

Her eyes close, and I'm certain she's heard those words before without good results.

"I should leave," she hisses under her breath.

"I don't want you to." With everyone out of the room, I tug Letty to my chest, where she lands against me like a brick wall, stiff and tense.

Noooo, my heart screams. The feeling reminds me of Clara, and I want to smash the bowl of batter and throw the waffle iron across the room, which would be so unlike me. Clara wasn't cold, but she didn't melt into me like Letty does. She didn't respond to my touch like Letty. She didn't give me...

"I need a minute," Letty mutters, disrupting my thoughts and pulling away from me. She heads for the back deck, and my stomach flips with unease. I can't relive what I had with Clara. I loved her, and I don't fault her for anything we had in our relationship, but Letty has been so much more to me, so liberating, and I can't handle her shutting down. In bare feet, the wood slats of my kitchen floor feel cold, chilling me in the briskness of the morning. I stare out the window after Letty, and my hand slams on the counter.

Dammit. Dammit. Dammit.

"Dad?" Ellie stands before me, and I quickly look up.

"Yeah, honey?" Eyes which match mine stare at me, apprehensive and curious.

"She's pretty."

I lick my lips. "I know." She's the prettiest woman I've ever seen. Clara had a simple beauty, a grace about her quiet nature, but Letty is stunning. *Don't compare*, I criticize.

"She seems nice."

"She is." I exhale, crossing my arms over my chest as I lean back against the opposite counter. Letty's kind, and when I consider her adoption reasons, she has a good heart. She's a good person.

"And you like her. I mean, she spent the night so..."

"I do. Like her. I...feel a lot of things for her." I'm not certain I should be having this conversation with my twenty-eight-year-old daughter. My girls and I aren't emotionally close. I'd been gone too long, too often, and when I finally came home, hurt and broken, I didn't know how to interact

with them. Then their mother died, leaving me with two teenage daughters and no clue how to be a parent. Thank goodness for my mother and Mati. I did the best I could, but we lived separate lives. It's one reason I lost them both to Atlanta.

“It's okay to love her, Dad.”

I stare at my girl. *When did she become such an adult?*

“I really fucked up here, Ellie Belly.”

She chuckles at the long-gone nickname. “Well, unfuck it.”

I should admonish her for her language, but instead, I just laugh. She steps up to me, and I open my arms, pulling her into my chest and kiss the top of her head.

“Dad,” Sarah softly speaks, and I glance over Ellie's head to see her sister hesitantly looking back at me. I release one arm, holding it open for her. As Sarah walks into the embrace, I can't remember the last time I held them each close, held them collectively like this. I shudder to think when it might have been. *Ten years ago.*

“I like her,” Sarah says, giving her stamp of approval.

“I like her, too,” I repeat to my younger daughter. “In fact, I think I love her.”

Sarah pulls back from the hug with tears in her eyes as she glances up at me. “It's about time,” she whispers.

Time to move on.

+ + +

“Are you going to be our Mimi?” Kali asks, and I drop my fork. Letty nervously chuckles from her seat at the dining table.

“No, sweetheart.”

My stomach drops next. *Why not?* Why can't she be their grandmother? Would she not consider marrying me? Both thoughts bring me up short. A bigger thought is why am I thinking such a thing.

"Oh," Sarah says, glancing from Letty to me. "Oh, I misunderstood."

Letty finally looks at me, concern in her eyes, before gazing back at my youngest daughter.

"I thought—" Sarah stammers.

"Okay, time for dishes, waffle ears," Ellie announces, cutting off her sister. The girls stand from the table, and the little ones follow. Letty picks up a plate, but Ellie reaches for it. "We wash if he cooks."

"Sounds like a good plan. I need to pack anyway." Her voice sounds as distant as she feels from me.

Ellie stares at Letty. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I live in Chicago."

"Chicago?" Sarah squeaks. "That's like a thousand miles away."

"Exactly," Letty states with a chuckle. "If you'll excuse me a few minutes." She disappears down the hall to my room, and my eyes flip from my girls to the hallway.

"Chicago?" Sarah questions again.

"Dad, go unfuck this," Ellie growls.

"What's unfuck mean?" Kali asks, and Ellie groans.

"Something your father needs to do often, but don't mention it to him." I should chuckle, but instead, I follow my daughter's advice and head for my room like a petulant child about to have my favorite toy removed from me for life.

Invisibility Cloak Malfunction

[Letty]

I start out folding and end up rolling my clothes into a ball before shoving them into my bag. The bedroom door opens and closes behind me, but I don't turn to him.

Suddenly, I'm bitter and resentful when it isn't his fault. He has everything I want. He fell in love. Got married. Had children. Works a dream job. Has a mountain retreat. His life is...perfect.

“Cricket.”

The nickname makes me bristle, and I close my eyes, blindly forcing my clothing into my open bag. Two hands land on my shoulders, and I stiffen.

“Please. *Please*, don't be like this.”

“You made me invisible again. You made them invisible.” I spin to face him.

“What do you mean?” His face is stricken, and anguish fills his eyes. He really has no idea. “Hudson used to do this. Treat me like I wasn't present. People would be surprised to learn he had a girlfriend or to discover we lived together.” I pause, drawing in a deep breath. “How could you do this? You lied to me.”

“I...” He closes his lips as quickly as opening them. “I omitted.”

“Same difference!” I snap. Hudson omitted telling people he had a girlfriend. He didn't acknowledge my opinion or decisions. He forgot to tell me he never planned to marry me. I turn away from Giant again, but he stops my restless packing

by wrapping his arms around my chest, pinning mine to my sides. His front to my back, I don't want to melt into him, but I want to melt. I close my eyes once again, encouraging myself to stay strong and hoping my tears won't fall. I'm too angry to cry.

"I didn't want to share you with them."

"Don't you mean *them* with *me*?" I mutter to the window before me, noting the mountainous view. My heart breaks a little when I recall our time up on the ridge.

"No. That's not what I mean." He spins me in his arms and holds my shoulders again. "I didn't want to share you with anyone. Not yet. You're mine. Not mine as in possession, but as in just for me, and selfishly, I wanted to keep you all to myself."

"That's bullshit. I met your family this weekend."

"My siblings. My parents. But my girls...it's different."

There are so many things I want to sling at him, but I bite my lip. His girls should be the most important people I meet, but maybe that's why I haven't met them. Maybe he didn't want me to ever meet them. An introduction would be another crossover between me and his past.

"I didn't know how they would react, and then I didn't want their reaction because I knew it didn't matter. I wouldn't give you up, no matter what they said. Then they surprise me and like you, which shouldn't have been a surprise because you're amazing. It's just been strange for me..."

"Because this is where you lived with Clara, and now I'm here."

"Yes. No," he says, his brows lifting. "I don't know." His tongue-tied chatter could almost be endearing, charming even, but I'm no longer looking to be charmed by him.

"I don't intend to replace her."

"That's not it. That's not it at all." He tugs me as he walks backward until he slumps down to sit on his bed. His hands

come around my lower back, trapping me between his open thighs. “I-I loved my wife, Letty, but she was nothing like you. I don’t want to compare the two of you because you are both unique women, but Clara and I, we fell into a routine. We fell into silence, and then she got sick. I...I don’t know what I’m saying. I’m not explaining this right. All I know is you come along, and you’re just life to me, Letty. Noise and energy and just everything I didn’t know I was missing. It isn’t that I don’t want you here. It’s that I don’t want you to leave. Ever.”

My hands come to his shoulders, hating how much I want to hold him. How much I love the feel of him under my palms, and how much I want to believe him.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I think I’m in love with you, and I don’t want you to go home.”

“Giant,” I begin, looking up and around this room. “You can’t even make love to me in this room. Her picture is jammed in your dresser. She’s all around you.”

“No, no, Cricket,” he says, lowering his head into my stomach.

“I can’t stay here,” I whisper. “I need to go home.”

He’s already had all I’ve been longing for, and the last thing he’ll want to do is do it all over again. And I don’t want to settle for jumping in midship. I want to fall deeply in love, get married and have children. I’m selfish, I guess.

I push back at his head and cup his jaw to tip his face up. Leaning down to kiss his lips, I intend to keep it tender, but the moment our lips touch, his mouth opens, devouring mine with tongue and teeth. We gnash and spar and nip until I need to pull back before I give in. Before I let him take me on this bed where he can’t make love to me.

“I...I think you’re pretty amazing, Giant Harrington. The best.”

I step out of his embrace, allowing our fingers to be the last connection before releasing him. Then I return to packing, keeping my back to him. I won't let him see the tears because crocodile tears have no place in this bedroom any more than I do.

+ + +

“Letty, may I see you in my office?” Uncle Frank’s tone warns me, and a cold ripple runs down my spine. It’s been ten days since I saw Giant. Ten days since his first email and I worry Frank has broken through the intra-net and scoped out the letter.

*Cricket,
I spent long periods of time without talking to people.
Times when I wasn't allowed to communicate. I can be
silent and quiet and still, but you make me restless, and I
want to talk. You aren't speaking to me, and I'm unnerved
by it. I miss your voice. Your chatter. Your laugh. I miss the
beat of your heart and the warmth of your body next to
mine.*

*I'm not an expert with words, so I'm going to ramble here.
Bear with me a bit.
When I was eighteen, all I wanted was to join the military.
I wanted out of my town, away from my dad and his
business. Pap understood. I was quiet and large and not
good at much. Clara was similar. Shy, bookish, and
interested in me. I was shocked. Pap was not. He told me
she was a good woman, but I needed bigger things.*

*The CliffsNotes version is this. I enlisted. Clara went to
college. We eloped. I went to basic training and was
deployed. Home on leave, she got pregnant. Motherhood
was what she wanted more than anything. Another tour.*

Another baby. I'd moved up the ranks. Pap warned me I was going too far and gone too much. I didn't know how to explain myself. I didn't know what I wanted. I wasn't certain I could come home. Then he died. I got shot months later and didn't have any choice. I was surly and upset, suffering from PTSD and guilt. Clara stood by me. Then she got sick. I stood by her.

I don't want to romanticize us, Clara and me, but I don't want to defame what we had either. On the other hand, you're special to me, different, and I felt guilty. For wanting your wild nature and craving it. Guilty for knowing the sensation of being with you—inside you—and having it be some of the best moments of my life. I miss your touch. I miss your kiss. I miss the way you look at me as if you see me and understand what I need. You're the opposite of me, yet we mesh.

You're always on my mind and in my heart, Letty. I want us to work, and I know we can.

I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth about them. I'm sorry I didn't tell them about you.

I'm just sorry.

Please come back to me.

All my love,

Giant

I'd read it so many times I have it memorized, yet I still haven't responded. A new email came every day after the first. He told me more about his girls, about their lives, and then he told me about the brewery. I cried each time I received one.

“Uncle Frank.” I address the only father figure I’d known since childhood. My mother’s brother has been a pillar of support, but it doesn’t mean I’m close to him. Dayna is his angel. I’m his disappointment.

He motions for me to sit in one of the two chairs across from him. His large modern desk of glass on a metal frame is cold like his demeanor toward me.

“You’ve been different these last few days,” he begins, folding his hands over something on his desk. “More focused. More driven.” I’ve thrown myself into the job I finally admitted I hate as a means of distraction. Determined to get any commission and convince the foster system I can be a parent has become my new goal. Seeing Giant with his children opened my eyes to one thing—I don’t want to miss out on the things I want most in life, even if I do them in a slightly backward manner.

“We’d like to send you to Tennessee to look at a property. Securing it will make up for the loss in Blue Ridge.”

Nothing in the world can make up for the loss I feel from that town. I miss Giant like crazy, but I’m too stubborn to give in and respond to him. He lied to me. He kept his children from me. He kept me from them.

“What are the specs?” I halfheartedly listen as my uncle drones on, knowing I’ll review the material later before attending the meeting. My thoughts drift to Giant and almost hitting him with my car. His sweaty, broad back. His muscular, sculpted chest. The hair leading lower.

“Olivet,” my uncle snaps. “Are you listening?”

“When do I leave?”

“Tomorrow.” It’s a Thursday.

“I’m good to go.” I stand and reach for the folder I assume holds the necessary information. It’s a small area in the Smoky Mountains, not dissimilar to Blue Ridge. It’s also only an hour or so from it.

Country roads... take me to the place I belong.

Emails and Phone Tales

[Giant]

Eleven fucking days.

This woman is torturing me, yet I know she's reading my emails. Knowing her, she can't possibly ignore them even if she's ignoring me.

We had the longest ride of my life when I drove her to Atlanta later that fateful Sunday. Silence heavier than a ton of snow from the mountain filled my truck. I didn't know what to say, and I admired her conviction not to speak. Not a word.

Eventually, nearing the airport, I pulled over and parked.

"Say something," I begged.

"I don't know what to say." She hugged her purse to her chest the entire hour ride as if it was a life preserver holding her afloat. "Lying is the one thing I can't handle, Giant."

That ex of hers was a fucking idiot to cheat, which is a lie, and I've done something similar. Only my heart is hers.

"I want to see you again."

"I don't know," she replied, her voice falling lower. Her lip trembled, and she bit the corner. I reached for her chin, forcing her to look over at me.

"You're so far away," I whispered. She kept her distance, and I didn't like it. For a woman who followed my lead or made me go with the flow, her stiff demeanor rattled me. "I don't want you to leave."

It wasn't fair of me to ask her to stay. Even after all I learned.

Charlie helped me investigate adoptions in Georgia. I wanted to ask Letty if she'd consider moving here and adopting here, so we could be closer and see each other more often. It was a selfish thought. Asking her to give up her home and job was a lot, and then...my girls. I didn't mean to hide them. I meant what I said. I didn't want to share her. Once Letty met them, my girls would want more of her, like me, but I didn't want to give her up to them. Not yet.

Letty stared at me across the bench seat of my truck. "What more are you hiding?" she asked.

"Nothing. I swear. There's nothing else to know." It's the truth. I'm a simple man. I made a mistake here, but there's no other agenda.

"I don't know anything about you."

She's wrong. So wrong. She has opened me up just as she claims I've done to her.

"That's not true. You know I'm good at throwing an ax. I can make eggs over a campfire. I like to wash your hair. I love your laugh." I'd give anything for her laughter instead of the tears filling her eyes.

"Giant." She exhaled. "I can't do this."

"Why not?"

"Because you already had everything," she blurted.

"What do you mean?"

"Marriage and children. Love and happily ever after."

"She died. How was that happily ever after?" I hate myself for snapping at her or even considering that Clara and I hadn't been happy. We were. We were content.

A tear trickled down her face, and I popped the latch on her seat belt, tugging her to me.

"Cricket. Please," I groaned, holding her to my chest and stroking my hand down her hair. I inhaled her scent, hoping to

memorize it. Apricots. It made my mouth water. She is spring rain to my snow showers.

Thankfully, her arms wrapped around my neck, and she hugged me back. I thought we were good, and then I dropped her off at the airport.

My heart crashed as she walked away, and I wondered if Clara felt this loss each time I left home. This fear that she'd never see me again. That I'd never return.

That's how I felt when Letty entered the terminal and then didn't answer my emails.

"Whatcha drinking?" The teasing sound of my brother snaps me from the memory. I'm sitting in Blue Ridge Microbrewery and Pub on a Thursday evening.

I'd sent Letty an email every day since she left me, telling her everything I haven't said and more. I kept it light, reminding me of the communication I once had while in the military. The action sparks my determination to make it work with Letty. I've had a long-distance relationship before—across an ocean—so I can do this again across a few states. It's only a short plane ride between us.

"Whiskey," I say, rolling the glass between my fingers on the bar. I'm more of a beer man, but tonight calls for the hard stuff. Eleven days. No conversation. I'm the only one talking in those emails.

I look up to find Billy watching me. "What's going on?"

I'm not an open book with my siblings. I don't delve into emotions, digging into my feelings, but I need to tell someone.

"Letty left me."

Billy's forehead furrows. "You broke up?"

"Something happened." I pause. "I didn't tell her about my girls, and they practically caught us in bed."

Billy chuckles while I fail to find the humor in the situation. Reading my countenance, he coughs into his fist and

tries to look sympathetic. The forced expression is lost on him. He's too good natured.

“And...

“She was upset I hadn't told her I had children.”

“Does she know about Clara?”

“She does.”

“And she wasn't upset about her?”

“I told her all the facts about Clara. I omitted the part about children.”

Billy whistles. “Why?”

“I didn't want to share her.” It's the sappiest, most honest thing I've ever told anyone.

“What does that mean?” Billy chuckles.

“I knew the girls might love her, get attached, and I just didn't want to share.” I pause, swiping a hand down my beard. “She wants things, and I didn't know if I could go down that path again.” *Marriage and children. Love and happily ever after.* Then again, it's all I've thought of since she left. I can see myself married to her. I see my daughters accepting her. I see us together. “But I don't want to lose her.”

“Seems like the answer is obvious,” Billy retorts, reaching for the whiskey behind the bar and refilling my glass.

“What's that?”

“Give her what she wants. Then you'll get what you want. It's win-win.”

“Who's winning what?” my sister asks as she comes to stand next to me. It's rare to see her at the bar on a weekday evening. Her girls' volleyball team is headed to the state finals.

“Giant wants Letty. Letty wants Giant. It's win-win.”

“She doesn't want me.”

“What did you do?” Mati asks. How is it always the man’s fault, yet I know I’m to blame in this round with Letty.

“I omitted.”

“Is that like lying but calling it another name?” Mati’s eyes meet mine, and her brow arches.

“I didn’t lie.” I meekly smile. “I withheld the truth.” It wasn’t like I *denied* my daughters existed. I just didn’t mention them. The justification sounds bad, even in my head.

“And the difference is...?”

I shake my head as my youngest sibling speaks like our mother. Mati pulls up a stool next to me.

“Although I guess I shouldn’t talk,” she states, lowering her voice. Billy pulls out another shot glass and fills it with more whiskey.

“What do you mean?” Billy asks.

“I’ve got to tell Denton something, but let’s keep to Giant. This is important. You love the woman, right?”

“How do you know that?” I question, and Mati rolls her eyes.

“Giant, when you take a woman up to Pap’s or bring her to your home, and you’ve never done those things before, it’s got to be more than a shag.”

“Shag?” Billy smirks, disgust on his face. “Is this England? He’s bonking her.”

Mati rolls her eyes again. “He’s not bonking her. He’s in love with her.”

What the hell is bonking?

“You just want everyone to be in love because you are. *Mati and Denton sitting in a tree,*” Billy sings.

My brows pinch. “What are you, five?” I huff.

“Forty-six and loving every minute of it.” He winks as if I should understand. I don’t. I haven’t had the cavalier one-

night stands my brother's had for the past sixteen years. I've been much more selective, and it feels as if I haven't enjoyed myself until I'm almost fifty.

"Anyway," Mati draws out. Her hand comes to my wrist. "I know it's difficult. You want to move on, but you don't know if you should. You want to feel something again, but what you feel is guilt for wanting that something. *I know*," she stresses, and my sister does know. Her husband. My wife. Both taken too young. "But you have to let go, Giant." Her voice softens. "It's been ten years. She's never coming back, and you already know that. You aren't betraying her. You aren't harming her memory. The memories will always be there, but it's time to make new ones. With your life. The one you're still living."

She's right. And I know she's right.

"It's just...I think I love her, and it all seems so fast."

"Well, nothing can be slower than twenty-seven years." Mati chuckles as that's how long it took her to reconnect with Denton. I don't want that much time to pass. I want twenty-seven years *with* Letty.

"Look, slow, fast—"

"In, out," Billy interjects, thrusting his hips at the bar. Mati slaps the wooden top.

"Can you try to remember I'm your sister for five seconds? Anyway..." she starts again. "I don't think there needs to be a time limit on love or grief. Grief ends when you're done. And love begins when you're ready."

You're so ready for me, Letty. The words drift into my head, reminding me of her on my desk. She is always ready for me, but it's been more than sex. So much more.

"I think I need to get back to Chicago and do some groveling," I say, picking up my phone from where it lies on the bar.

"You've been to Chicago?" Billy asks.

“Try to keep up,” Mati teases.

“I need to go,” I say, slipping from the stool. My phone buzzes in my hand, notifying me of an email. Hastily, I open it while I stand at the bar because the notification is from her, in response to my last email.

You're so far away.

+ + +

“Cricket.” I breath her name into the phone when she answers on the second ring.

“Giant.” She sounds equally as breathless.

“Are you okay?” Her email worries me, and I tap my fingers on my steering wheel as I sit in my truck in a parking spot on Main Street.

“I’m...I’m in Tennessee. I know it isn’t exactly next door, but it’s closer than Chicago, and I wondered if you’d be interested in—”

“Yes.”

She giggles, and I smile, a spark of hope flickering before me. “Well, that was easy, but you didn’t let me finish.”

“I’m easy.” I laugh.

“You’re very difficult, Mr. Harrington,” she teases. “Easy is not a word I’d use to describe you.”

“What word would you use?” Say charming. Say anything. Just let me hear your voice. It’s so good to hear her voice.

“Does *hard* work?”

“Hard?” I choke out. “I can be hard for you.” I don’t know where the flirting comes from. I should be apologizing, groveling...Dammit, I should have sent her flowers. I swipe a

hand over the thick hairs on my jaw, but she continues to chuckle.

“Well, maybe we could talk before we get to the hard part.”

I laugh uneasily. “Talking is the hard part.”

“I know.” She sighs. “But I’ve missed your voice.”

“Me too. I mean, I’ve missed yours.” *And your smile, your laughter, your arms around me.* “So you’re in Tennessee.”

“Yeah, I have a meeting tomorrow to look at a property. My uncle’s giving me a second chance to make up for losing out on yours.” She isn’t upset, and I can hear the smile in her voice. “I thought maybe Saturday, or whenever you’re free, if you’re free...I mean—”

“Just tell me where you are,” I snap, harsher than I intend but desperate to get an answer. I press the ignition starter, then reach for the navigation system in my truck.

“I’m in Appleton, just outside Knoxville. Have you ever heard of it?”

“Yes, I have. There’s a vineyard near there, right?” I know exactly where she is, and I type in the name of the lodge when she tells me where she’s staying. Then I reverse onto Main Street.

“A vineyard, yes.” The line goes silent for a moment, but I don’t want to let her go.

“So...uhm...how have you been?” I’m not good at small talk. When I called home while I was overseas, Clara did most of the talking, filling me in on the girls, my family, and any other gossip until my time was up.

“Lonely,” she admits, and my heart breaks. I know the feeling.

“I’m sorry. I mean, I’m sorry for what happened with the girls. Well, not the girls because they adore you just as I do,

but I mean, I'm sorry for not telling you."

"When did you become the chatterbox?" She giggles, and then silence falls another moment. "I know you're sorry. I am too. I might have overreacted a bit, but it was a shock, Giant. I mean you mentioned Clara and motherhood, but you hadn't even hinted at children, and then there they were, staring at me. Literally the elephant in the room."

"I wouldn't say an elephant," I good-naturedly mock. "More like a stunned bear."

"I was stunned but so were they. Are they okay? Their reactions suggest finding a woman in their father's house doesn't happen often." Is she fishing for something? I'm not going to hold anything else inside.

"I already told you, there's never been another woman in my house. Ever. Not my bed, my hot tub, or that damn leather chair I can't sit in without thinking of you."

She softly huffs into the phone. "Then why didn't you tell me?"

Haven't I explained this? I didn't want to share her. "Letty, have you ever wanted something for yourself? Something you didn't know you wanted until it was before you, and then, even though you want to shout to the world, *look what I found*, you're also afraid others will want it too?" I take a deep breath. "I've been longing for something different, some kind of spontaneity that I couldn't name, couldn't imagine, and then, there you were. *You*. You're what I've been longing for." It's all true. My life has been predictable. Routine. I've been waiting for something more, and I finally have it in her.

"I understand what you mean." Her voice drops lower. "It's how I feel about you, too. It scares me."

I'm terrified by what I feel because it seems like too much, too fast. Yet, just as Mati said, how can I put a time limit on such things? I've been waiting a long while for this feeling, so I don't want to easily give it up. Letty remains quiet

for another minute. Seems I've taken up her trait of needing to fill the quiet space, so I start talking about my girls.

"They liked you. Ellie called me the next day and asked when I'd see you again, then when would they see you again, and would they get the chance to spend more time with you." It was exactly how I knew they'd react. Curious. Eager. Hopeful. My daughters wanted the best for me, even if we weren't terribly close. We had a routine, so I didn't lose them completely: once a month Sunday breakfast at my house, their choice of days in the month to visit my parents' house, and then every other Wednesday for dinner in Atlanta. Phone calls were once a week because...I didn't have much to say.

"They were sweet once the initial shell-shock dulled a little. Your granddaughters are lovely." There's a sadness in her tone when all I want to do is keep things light, but I know we'll have to dig a little deeper.

"I'm sorry again about the Mimi comment. I don't know where that came from. Mick has parents in South Carolina, and they see them from time to time."

"I didn't mind," she replies, and another flash of hope ignites in me. "I just think I'd like to become a mother before being considered a grandmother." She laughs awkwardly. "It seems like the natural progression of things."

"How is that going?"

She explains the progress of her adoption request and how the foster system is hopeful of finding someone for her. She really wants a newborn but will accept any child under five. She wants it to be a boy. "My reasons relate to Owen. I want to make up for where I once lacked." It's a tall order, and no child will be a replacement for the brother she lost. It also wasn't her fault he died. "I think one thing that upset me about your girls is you having them. I'm jealous, Giant. You already raised children, and you're on to grandchildren. I haven't even started yet."

"It isn't a competition," I say. "Or a race."

“I know that,” she says, resolve in her voice. “I just... sometimes, I feel like I’m losing time, and I’m frustrated by the process of things.” The defeatist tone doesn’t suit her, and I want to wrap her in my arms and tell her she can do anything, *have anything*. Sometimes, what we want takes time. Like me finding her.

“You’ve already had it all.” She’s quieter as she adds, “The last thing you’d want to do is to start over.”

“Don’t tell me what I wouldn’t want.” The words are curt, and I shift on the driver’s seat, tightening my hands on the wheel as I mutter a quick apology. I don’t want to fight with her because starting over feels more and more like something I do want. Like a second chance.

“Fine. I shouldn’t make assumptions, but I don’t know what you want, Giant, and it’s a lot to discuss. We haven’t known each other very long, and we’ve already had so many misunderstandings between us.”

You, I want you. No misunderstanding there.

“Nothing’s between us,” I emphasize. My voice deepens, demanding, “No more holding back.”

Silence lingers for only a second.

“Would you want to do it all again?” she cautiously questions, but before I can answer, she nervously chatters. “Maybe that’s something we can talk about on Saturday when you’re here. I’d feel better if we talked face to face.”

I agree, only we won’t have to wait until Saturday before we’re face to face.

“So how is the beer-making business?” she interjects. I’m not letting this conversation slide, but I need to say some things when I can see her reaction, as she said, so I blow out a breath as I envision my office—and my desk—another place I can’t look at without thinking of her. I tell her about the upcoming holidays, which are a busy time for us, and how wholesale has really increased over the two years with Jaxson as head of sales and distribution. I’m proud of my nephew and

offering him the job was the least I could do after all his mother did for my girls. Plus, keeping the business in the family is important to me.

She yawns, and I pause. “Am I keeping you up?”

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know where that came from, but I’ve been awake since four this morning. Frank makes us take the cheapest flights, and the early-bird six a.m. was the least expensive.”

“No worries. You get some rest. I’ll be there soon.”

She chuckles, and then the sound halts. “Wait? What? You mean Saturday, right? You’ll see me on Saturday?” Is that hope in her tone?

“Actually, I’ll be there in an hour.”

“An hour?” she shrieks. We’ve already been talking for one, and it’s only another hour to the lodge. “You don’t have to come here tonight. I have meetings and—”

“I’m already on my way, and I’m not turning around. If you want to wait to see me, I’ll just book a room when I get there.”

“You don’t need to get a separate room.” Her voice lowers.

“Are you sure? I can always—”

“We already shared a tent as strangers. I think we can handle a hotel room with two beds.” I’m a little crushed at the notion of separate beds, but I chuckle nonetheless at the mention of the tent.

“It was a little wild that first night, wasn’t it?” Who *almost* finger-fucks a woman he only met two days prior? One who got under my skin from the moment I saw her.

“It was.” She exhales, and I hear her shy smile through the phone. “I think of it often.”

Me, too. “Oh yeah, what do you think about?”

“Your hand guiding mine.” Her voice drops a little lower. “And you leading me to touch myself.”

My dick leaps to life, and I shift to adjust. “Cricket,” I groan.

“Then I imagine you touching me instead of my fingers. You were so close.” Her breath hitches. Here’s my spontaneous, unpredictable, always ready for me girl.

“Are you...are you touching yourself now?” The heel of my hand rubs down the zipper of my pants. I can’t take care of myself while I drive, and I don’t want to. It’s been eleven days of torture without her. I want my hands on her and hers on me.

“Not yet.” She sighs. “But I want to.”

“Don’t,” I snap, which thankfully draws another giggle from her.

“Why not?”

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

“You just told me an hour,” she teases.

“I’m breaking every speed limit.” I’m already going dangerously fast on these backroads, and I’m hoping I don’t miss the switchbacks I need to take as not everything is properly marked in these parts.

She chuckles. “Okay, I’ll hold out, but I’m wet, Giant. So wet.”

Fuck. “Cricket, two beds or not, we aren’t sleeping separately. We can talk all you’d like, all night long if you want, but you will not touch yourself without me present.”

Her laughter fills my chest, and my heart pumps with excitement. “There aren’t two beds here, honey. Only one, with me in it, waiting for you.”

“Damn, girl, I’m going as fast as I can.”

“That’s what I’m hoping you’ll say once you’re here.”

I groan through the phone. “Soon.”

And then we both laugh. It's so good to laugh with her.

Lodgings and Loving

[Giant]

I'm nervous, and I swipe my hands on my pants for the tenth time as I walk to her room. I sent her a text when I arrived, and as I cross the lobby, I rethink what I've done. I should have gone home and showered. I don't even have a change of clothes or a toothbrush.

I comb my fingers through my hair as a door down the hall opens, and she steps out. Still dressed in a tight skirt that hugs her hips and a blouse cut deep to reveal a hint of cleavage, she takes my breath away. She's barefoot, though, and her hair is piled on her head. I want to run the rest of the distance, but I inhale and rub my hands on my pants again.

"Hey," she says as I near her. She smiles slow and sheepish.

"Hey." She's holding open the door, but I reach over her for the heavy plank, and she steps into her room. I follow, and the click of the shutting door sparks something in each of us. I don't know who moves first, but within seconds, we're on each other. Lips on lips and hands in hair. Her hips buck forward, and I scoop her up.

"My skirt," she mutters, not able to wrap her legs around my hips.

"Needs to go," I demand with my lips still against hers. She fumbles with the zipper at the back while I tug her blouse up and over her head. I stare down at her in a nude bra and black panties. Like the greedy man I am, both hands reach for a breast and squeeze. Her head falls back as her fingers pull my shirt from my pants. I release her only long enough to tug

my shirt over my head and stand bare chest to her covered breasts. She unhooks her bra, and I tackle my pants, kicking off my shoes and stepping out of my jeans.

I'm rock hard and straining in my boxer briefs. With exaggerated breathing, we stare at one another.

"Should we talk?" I swallow the question, knowing I want nothing more than to be inside her, but if we need to clear the air, I can wait. *A few more minutes.*

"I don't want to talk," she whispers, and I'm in her space immediately.

"Thank fuck." My mouth crashes to hers as my hands trace the outline of her body down to those black panties. I press them down her hip, and she wiggles so they fall to the floor. I walk her backward until she connects with the wall.

"You can't lift me."

If she's daring me, she'll lose because I shove my boxers down to my feet and then lift her as I stand upright. She squeaks, but I swallow the noise as her legs spread and she wraps them around my body. I'm frantic as my dick twitches between us, desperate to enter her.

She's right. I can't do this and give her what she needs.

I spin us for the bed, and then we fall onto the mattress. She lets out a laugh as she bounces and then quiets as I guide myself to her entrance.

"Giant," she whispers, her eyes meeting mine and growing serious. "I've missed you so much."

My mouth covers hers again, telling her in that kiss how much I've missed her. Her legs spread farther, and our bodies find their way. I enter her while our mouths remain attached, but as I climb inside her, we separate our lips, both moaning in relief.

Welcome home, I think.

“You feel so good,” I say, dropping kisses along her neck while I draw back and then rush forward.

“So good,” she mutters, keeping pace with me, just as eager as always to keep me inside her. We dance the oldest dance known to humans, and then I spin, dragging her on top of me. She sits upright, and her hair tumbles from her bun. Her breasts jiggle with each roll of her hips. Her fingers scrape at my chest.

“I love you,” I blurt, and she stops moving.

Her eyes widen. “What?”

“I love you. I don’t want anything else between us, so that’s the last secret I have. I’m in love with you.”

“I...”

I buck up, forcing my dick as deep as I can to prevent her from speaking. She grunts at the sharp intrusion. I’m hoping to distract her from telling me she doesn’t feel the same.

It’s too soon. That was too fast. We didn’t talk yet.

“Dammit, Giant. Hold up a second.”

I stop bucking under her while she sits with my dick buried inside her. “Hold up? Did you just say *hold up* in a Southern drawl?” More stalling.

“George Giant Harrington, you just let me talk before you move another muscle.”

I stare at the determination in her eyes with fear in my chest.

“I love you, too, honey. I love you, too.” Her voice softens as her shoulders relax. We peer into each other’s eyes in what should be an awkward and difficult moment, and it is. I feel vulnerable and raw, as if she can see into my heart, into my soul, and then she moves, the tempo slower than moments ago. She rolls and nods, her hips swaying while her head lolls. Her eyes close, and I follow her lead, soaking up what we’ve said while drowning in the connection.

She shifts after a few minutes, sliding up and then slamming back down. I sit up, and her legs flip from straddling my lap to wrapping around my backside. I bounce her up and down, dragging her over me with guided force and relishing the friction.

“Giant.” Her voice hitches as her clit rubs lower against me.

“Touch yourself if it helps. Let me watch.” Her hand slips between us.

Damn, she’s so hot. “Finish,” I hiss, as I’m too close to the edge with her doing what she’s doing while I disappear inside her.

“I’m coming,” she hums, and I still, pulsing inside her as she clenches over me. It’s incredible to orgasm simultaneously. I feel one with her in a way I’ve never felt before. Her arms wrap around my neck as every drop drains out of me. She doesn’t let me go, even when we’ve stopped, and I hold her pressed to my beating heart.

I’m never letting her go again.

+ + +

When I wake, I see Letty exiting the bathroom in only her skirt and a black bra. *Damn.*

“Where you going?” I ask, rolling my head to see it’s seven in the morning.

“I’ve got to go soon.” Her voice is low as she comes to my side of the bed. I sit up and reach for her waist, tugging her to me to pressing a kiss between her breasts. She giggles before she pushes me back. “Honey, don’t be teasing me. I just showered, and I don’t have time. I need to be at Caldwell Woods by eight thirty.”

I fall back dejected and slip the sheet down to my hips. “I’ve got a wood you can inspect.” I’m teasing her, but her eyes grow dark and hungry. She hums, and then she reaches down for my dick that’s standing at attention. Her fingers wrap around me, and she tugs.

“Now, who’s teasing who?” I groan, my eyes closing as the pressure around me increases. When my eyes open, she’s bending at the waist, pulling her hair over one shoulder and opening her lips. “Cricket.” I’ve hardly finished her name before she draws me into her warm mouth, swallowing me to the back of her throat.

“Sweetheart,” I groan again, stroking over her hair as she twirls her tongue around me. My hand skims down her back, over her curvy ass, and lowers for the hem of her skirt. I slip my fingers up the backside of her leg, lifting the material with the climb as her mouth sucks in earnest, drawing me deep. My fingers find her...

“You’re soaked, Letty.” I love how ready she is for me, and I slip a finger under her thin panty, delving deep while she grunts against my dick. The vibration ripples up the vein, and I choke. She’s so fucking sexy with my finger up her skirt and her mouth on my dick. This woman? *Incredible*.

It doesn’t take long before I’m warning her I’m close, and she rocks on my finger. I add another, and her knees buckle. Her teeth scrape up my shaft, and I explode. My eyes close under the sensation, but my fingers still work her until she releases her lips, groaning my name. She comes, holding my dick in her wet palm while drenching my fingers.

“Woman, a man could grow used to this.”

She chuckles. “You’re such a charmer.”

I slip my fingers from her and sit up to take her mouth in a brief kiss.

“I really have to go,” she whispers after a minute. I nod, acknowledging once again to myself I never want her to leave me.

She returns to the bathroom to freshen up, and I use my T-shirt on the floor for the time being. When she comes out of the bathroom, her eyes soften despite the gleam of naughtiness after what we did.

“I wish I could stay for coffee, but I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“I’ll be here,” I tell her, hoping she reads more into the words. I swallow back all the emotion and let the words escape. “I love you.”

She crosses the room and cups my face. “I love you, too.” Another too quick kiss and then she’s walking away. The door clicks shut, and I fall back on the bed, replaying last night. Our frantic lovemaking. Our declarations. Our talk after both.

“I want us to work,” I told her as we lay on our sides, facing each other.

“How would that be?”

“I don’t want to bring up the past, but I’ve done this before with a greater distance. We’ll have to commit to it. Phone calls. Text messages. Emails.” I reached for her face, hinting at the unanswered messages I sent her.

“I got them all, and I read them every day. Sometimes more than once a day.” Her eyes lowered to my chest.

“Why didn’t you answer me?”

“I didn’t know what to say, at first. Then I thought I might have overreacted a little. Then I decided we wouldn’t work. I mean, where does a long-distance relationship lead?”

“Where do you want it to go?” There was something she wasn’t saying.

When she didn’t answer, I asked something else to take off the pressure.

“How about we just try it for a bit?” I suggested. “Let it run its course.” As if it would run out—which it won’t, for me. I’d never have enough of this woman.

“Okay,” she whispered, hesitant and uncertain. I kissed her forehead.

“Speaking of commitment, I’d like to make sure we’re on the same page. I’m a one-woman man, and I’d like to ask the same of you.”

“You want me to only see one woman?” she teased, and I chuckled, but I held out for her answer.

“You don’t even have to ask. It’s only been you since the moment I saw you slinging an ax.”

“Ax throwing?” I laughed.

“No, chopping wood, when I almost hit you. You’re all I could focus on.”

“Sex god,” I teased.

“Lumbersexual god.”

“I’ll show you limber,” I said, reaching out for her and tugging her over my chest.

“Lumber,” she corrected, giggling over me. “Lumber, like wood.”

“I can show you that, too.” And we headed off to round two for the night.

My body feels a little used and abused. Sex twice in a night and then a blow job in the morning—I’m one lucky man. Plus, she loves me.

I smile to myself.

She says she loves me.

I stretch and twist to sit up in bed when my phone beeps. Her name pops up on the screen.

“Hey baby,” I say after she whines my name into the phone. “What’s the matter?”

“The rental car won’t start. The desk clerk says he thinks the battery’s dead. I called the rental service, but I don’t have time to wait for a jump start.”

“I’ll be down in a second.”

Something New from The Old

[Letty]

Giant to the rescue. It's cold outside, and I'm inside the lobby, pacing while I wait for him to exit the elevator.

"Don't fret," he says when he sees me, and his warm smile puts me at ease although I'm freaking out. I don't have time for a car breakdown, not after I took the time to satisfy this delicious man. I couldn't resist. He was all long and hard, stretched on his back with his shaft upright and ready. I wanted to climb him, but then I'd be even later than I already am. "I have cables in the truck."

It takes me a moment to realize he means jumper cables, and he leads me out to the parking lot. I'm parked facing a row of bushes with a car on either side of mine.

"How would you feel about me just driving you?" Giant asks, and I glance up at him.

"I can't ask you to do that. You already drove here in the middle of the night. Then we stayed awake most of the night." My face heats, recalling the little sleep we had and the reasons.

"Letty, let's be straight about this. I'd cross an ocean for you, if I needed to. This"—he points at his truck—"is nothing." With a hand on my back, he leads me to the passenger side and helps me in. When he enters the driver's side, he adds, "As long as you don't mind that I'm still wearing yesterday's clothes."

"We can go back to the front desk and get you a toothbrush," I suggest although I really don't have time to go up to the room.

“No worries. I already used yours.”

My mouth falls open, and I stare at him as he starts the engine.

“What? You already had something else of mine in your mouth, Cricket. Sharing your toothbrush is the least of things to consider.”

I laugh with relief as he pulls out of the lot, and we begin the drive to Caldwell Woods.

I love how easygoing he is today. We talked, and I’m relieved we came to some agreements.

“How about we try for every two weeks?” he asked. It seemed too long to wait, but it wasn’t too much to ask. He’d never move to Chicago, and he was clear on that when he came to the wedding, but he seems okay with visiting. I wonder what it means for the long-term, but as he said, let’s just see where things lead. I couldn’t answer him when he asked, where did I want us to go? How do you tell a man you’ve known for a month that you want love and marriage, and children and happily ever after with him? Especially when you’ve just said I love you to one another.

Did it happen too fast? The fullness in my heart says it didn’t.

“I want to invite you to Thanksgiving.”

I was shocked at the invitation—and honored. He’s told me about his closeness with his family, which is the opposite of my relationship with mine.

“Are you sure?”

“My mother adored you when she met you. She’d love to have you. Besides, it will stop her from setting me up on more blind dates or dinner arrangements.”

My head turned to look up at him. “Does she do that often?”

“She did.” I waited for more. “But since I told her how much I like you, she stopped.”

“Like me? Aww...are we going steady?”

“Yes,” he teased. “Steady. Very steady.” Then his mouth crashed into mine, and I forgot all about his mother setting him up with other women. Committed, he told me. I was all his.

“So what do I need to know?” he asks, interrupting my thoughts. “Let me be your sidekick, your Marcus. What do I need to know to get him to sell?”

I snort at the reference to Marcus. Giant and he could not be more opposite, yet I love them both for different reasons.

“Well, the property is actually located on a small lake. There once was a resort there. A whole town opposite it at one point. A few buildings remain but not the physical town itself. All the homes are gone.”

Giant side-eyes me. “Wait. Caldwell Woods? Wasn’t that the location of an old electrohydraulics plant or something?”

“It was.” The town was built up around the waterworks business and consequentially destroyed when the company moved to a larger city. Most of the land was either still owned by the original plant or returned to the state of Tennessee to go wild. “The piece of property we plan to look at is managed by a recluse.”

Giant shifts to look at me before turning his eyes back to the road. “That doesn’t sound safe.” He pauses. “I don’t like that you were going to go there alone.”

“It’s fine,” I say with a dismissive wave, but I must admit meeting a man I didn’t know in the heart of the woods near an abandoned village doesn’t sound all that smart. Then I glance over at Giant. Well, it might have worked out a little bit once before, but Blue Ridge isn’t desolate. “Don’t want me shacking up with a stranger in a tent to obtain the land, huh?”

Giant scoffs. “Don’t want you shacking up, period. No tent unless it involves me. And yes, I’m a little concerned about your lack of stranger danger.”

I laugh. “What about me? I could have been the ax murderer.”

“Considering I’ve seen you throw an ax, that’s highly doubtful.”

“Hey,” I whine, but then I reconsider. “Why did you take me up that mountain without knowing me?”

“Honestly, I didn’t think you’d show.”

“But you prepared everything.”

He twists his lips and side-eyes me. “I was hopeful.”

My smile grows. “And why was that?”

“Because from the moment I met you, Cricket, I could tell you were something special. Spontaneous need, remember?” He quickly glances at me. He told me last night how he wanted something different, something he didn’t know he needed, and apparently, that’s me. I’m all warm inside with the thought. “And I don’t regret one minute of that decision to take you camping, even if I did it under false pretenses.”

He was never going to let me purchase the land.

“I don’t regret a minute of it either.”

He reaches for my hand and brings it to his lips, kissing my knuckles and then holding it against his thigh.

“I love you,” he whispers, shy and quiet.

“I love you, too,” I say. *More than you know.*

+ + +

Mr. Samuel Calder is an old man, full of stories and memories of the land—what it once was and what he hopes it can be

again. A resort sat on the property once upon a time. Ironically, we can't get to the site without taking a boat to the secluded location *across* the river—he corrects me, it's not a lake—and Giant eyes me again, hinting at my lack of stranger danger. There's no boat to transport us, but the remains of a landing on both sides of the river hint at what once was.

“I promised my Annie I'd restore it for her. I wanted her to come back to me.” Mr. Calder's elderly expression speaks of lost love, and my heart breaks a little. With his advanced age, it might be too late to regain whomever the woman was to him.

However, I'm hopeful of the interest from the hotel company, considering there was once one there. Mr. Calder describes how the resort looked. It's difficult to envision its past majestic until Mr. Calder shows us some faded pictures of a lodge, golf course, pond, and patio. With the verbal image Mr. Calder paints in addition to the worn photographs, my imagination sees a resort something the likes of *Dirty Dancing*. We spend an hour listening to Mr. Calder recount memories of the old place as we traipse along the opposite shore of the river. I don't know what I was thinking because I'm not well prepared in my heeled boots and tight skirt. It reminds me of when I met Giant. I was equally unprepared for meeting the large man graciously walking next to me, discussing the land with my perspective client. Mr. Calder's weathered skin and liquid blue eyes hold so much passion for this place and its memories.

“Been in my family for generations.” His voice drifts, and I'm not certain if he's talking about the property or the company.

“Company moved upstream, but the resort went on for years after.” His eyes remain sad as he looks across the water. “Then it disappeared as well.” He already explained how the company razed the nearby community. His fingers shake as he reaches for his forehead and rubs. “But I'm going to bring it back. Bring her back.”

I look from Sam to Giant, whose brow pinches with concern. This man must be in his eighties. I fear his Annie might be dead.

“Where did Annie go?” I whisper, curious about the deep love he evidently felt for this woman.

“California.” His voice carries over the water like a greater distance divided them.

“I’m sorry,” I say, not certain why I apologize.

“Never let anything divide you.” Sam pauses. “Not family, money, business, or a river.” He chuckles to himself for a moment and then turns back for his car. I glance at Giant again. The two men have hit it off. He looks as confused as I feel over Sam’s references.

We each shake hands with Mr. Calder like old gentlemen did in a time gone by. An unspoken agreement sits between us although I’m not certain I’ve acquired the land. Sam mentions the name of his lawyer, who also happens to be his grandson.

“He’s about your age, so when you’re ready to ditch the giant, I’ll set you up.” He winks at me. He’s been a flirt all morning.

“You remind me so much of Annie.” Whoever she was, she held his heart for a lifetime, and mine pinches at the thought of such a memory. Our hearts retain true love, despite its end. Is this how Giant feels about his wife?

It’s sweet and sad, and I want to hug Mr. Calder to assure him she probably remembered him with longing, too.

“We didn’t have these fancy, newfangled cell phones. We communicated through pickle jars.” He chuckles softly to himself, reminiscing about the fodder of young summer love, and once again, his expression shifts to memories far away. *Dirty Dancing* returns to my thoughts, and I imagine a young Sam sneaking off to parties and kissing his lady friend down by the water. “Can’t remember where I placed the last one.” He looks around the late fall landscape, suddenly confused. “Don’t know if she ever got my message.”

After a moment, he reminds me once again to contact his grandson. “He handles all the money. Told me I wasn’t good with numbers.” I’m sensing his family took away his right to make decisions, but I don’t question why he’s the one meeting us instead of his grandson.

I’m quiet as we drive back to Appleton, my mind racing with Mr. Calder’s hints of once upon a time, and his loss of happily ever after. It’s the makings of a romance novel.

Giant and I stop at a Walmart to buy him a change of clothes, and I snoop around. I rarely go to one of these superstores, so I’m fascinated. I find odd things I don’t really need, like a daily planner, a notebook with a typewriter on the cover, some fancy markers, and a pretty pillow.

“How will you get that in your suitcase?” Giant teases. I shrug.

“Maybe you can keep it for me.” Two weeks and I’ll be seeing him again.

+ + +

“Was someone with you?” It’s the first thing my uncle says to me as I enter the office on Monday.

“Excuse me?” I don’t know why he’s asking although I know who he’s referencing.

“Mr. Calder’s attorney contacted me. He told me you met with his grandfather.” I stare at my uncle. What is he getting at? Samuel Calder, property manager. “You were supposed to meet with him. Drake Calder.”

No. *No.* “The paperwork clearly said Samuel Calder.” I’m adamant I didn’t misread the email confirming our meeting time and location.

“Samuel *Drake* Calder,” my uncle emphasizes. “The grandson. At his office in Knoxville.”

“Knoxville?” I would never make a mistake like this. Caldwell Woods was the location. I knew where I was going. *Not to mention, I wasn't far from Giant.* I brush away the thought. If my uncle discovers I entertained seeing Giant as a secondary mission the moment he mentioned Tennessee, he'll accuse me of being flighty.

“The documentation reads to meet Mr. Samuel *Drake* Calder at his office. Instead, you met his grandfather at the property location.”

“How did his grandfather know to be at the property then?”

“That's a very good question.” Uncle Frank glares at me, but the question I've asked is the same one I want answered.

“Mr. Calder was very excited about a resort on the property.” I recall the time Giant and I spent with the man. He wanted it restored to its original glory. *For my Annie.* He was so sweet.

“The old man wants one built there, but he isn't selling.”

“Yes, he is. We shook on it.” He gave me his word I could have the property. I realize as I'm speaking how ridiculous I sound.

“First of all, nothing's ever permanent unless it's in black pen on a dotted line, Olivet. Secondly, Mr. Calder's attorney, the old man's grandson, was quite adamant the property will not be sold. *Now.*”

“Then why did you send me there?” Is this a test? I don't understand.

“Because the grandson was willing to sell the land until you spoke to his grandfather.”

“I don't understand.” I don't.

“It appears the old man won't part with the land for some silly reason.” Silly? Annie? *It's romantic!* “The grandson has the power of attorney for the property and was going to sell despite the old man's objection.”

“Well, that sounds awful, trying to sell a man’s land out from under him.”

“Mr. Calder isn’t of sound mind.” Frank levels a stare at me as if that should explain everything.

“He seemed lucid to me.” I think back on our conversation. His humor. His flirting. His recall of the resort and a woman who never left his heart. “He was very excited about a resort on the property.”

“Because he thought you were a builder. You and your friend. He thought you were there to rebuild the former resort, not purchase the land for *another* resort company. He was very confused.” My uncle stares at me as if I confused the man and I’m to blame for twisting things. This doesn’t make sense. The papers stated the location, the owner, the meeting time.

As if reading my mind, my uncle twirls a pile of papers on his desk and pushes them toward me. It clearly states the property for purchase. The owner’s name as Samuel Dean Calder. Meeting time at eight thirty in Knoxville.

Wait. *Hold up*. That’s not what...

“I don’t understand,” I repeat. How could I have been in the wrong place, miles from where I should have been at the right time? How was the older man there? “He was waiting for me.”

Uncle Frank shakes his head. He doesn’t believe me.

“It seems your friend made quite an impression, and Samuel senior went back to his grandson to tell him of the good news. Imagine Drake’s confusion as he’d been wondering where his eight thirty appointment had been, and he discovers you’d been at the property with his senile grandfather.”

Again, I wonder how Samuel Calder, the elder, was present at the property, and my heart sinks at the slow realization that I’ve majorly fucked this up. An intelligent, organized businesswoman and I’ve made a huge mess of this second chance given to me by my uncle.

Where was your head? I can hear Frank asking without him asking. Giant. My head was wrapped around Giant as were my legs and my heart.

“There must be a mistake. I’ll just call—”

“You’ll make no calls,” Uncle Frank warns. “In fact, you’re staying put. I don’t know what’s up with you, but for the past two weeks, your head has been in the clouds. Just when I thought you were finally buckling down and getting serious about being a partner. This is the second attempt at a large land purchase you fucked up. Is this all that baby business? Are you hoping to get *pregnant* instead?”

My mouth gaps open to defend myself, but he continues. My uncle has never spoken to me like this before. He spits out the word *pregnant* like it’s acid in his mouth. Is he insinuating I’m sleeping around?

“We’re keeping you local, Olivet, where we can monitor your sales and assist you. I can’t afford to lose more deals because of you.”

My chest hurts, stabbed by his words. I didn’t do anything on purpose, and he’s making it sound as if I have.

“But he was there...” My voice drifts as I see my uncle wants no explanation, no excuses.

“Dayna’s going to speak with the grandson and try to smooth things over.”

“Dayna?” I shriek. Not only will she be the ultimate betrayal, especially if she does secure the property, but honestly, I think she’ll muck it up even more. It’s the second time in a month we’ve tried to obtain land with questionable means, and I’m relieved we haven’t gotten what we set out for. We don’t appreciate the history of these people or the land they love.

“Plant your feet back on the Earth,” my uncle demands, implying my head is in the clouds, but he doesn’t realize how much I want to do just that. Dig my toes in the dirt. Dip my hands in a river. And enjoy.

I stand to dismiss myself and walk out of his office.

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“He what?” Giant asks, and I ache for him. It’s been twenty-four hours, and I miss him already. I don’t know how I’ll last for the next two weeks. I want him to hold me. I want him to distract me. I want him here.

“He accused me of not being dedicated to becoming a partner.” I pause, letting the words swirl around me as they have from the moment my uncle spoke them. Was he really wrong, though? Do I want to be partner if these are our practices? *Yes, think of the baby, the one I don’t have.* Giant’s prolonged silence rouses me.

“Hello,” I call out, wondering if I’d lost the connection.

“Can I ask you something?” His tone is serious and quiet. I hear the hesitation, and my blood races through my veins.

“Sure.” I’m not confident in my answer, but I won’t deny him anything.

“Do you really want to be partner, Cricket? I mean, you told me you took the job because you didn’t find anything else.” He pauses again, and I recall telling him these things. How I fell into a rut and stayed. “You could always do something else.”

“If only,” I snort, but wasn’t I just thinking these same thoughts?

“Why not?” He’s silent for a moment as if he’s waiting for an answer. *I’m waiting for an answer.*

Why not?

“Because I’m forty, and this is the only work I’ve ever known.”

“You can learn something new.” He pauses. He thought he’d always be military and now runs the brewery. “Are you happy there? You don’t sound happy there.”

“No, but that’s not the point. I need this job.” This job is security for me. It’s what I need to prove I’ll be a sound provider for a baby. The agency assures me my employment status is imperative to receiving a child.

“What about writing?” I’ve been thinking a lot about Mr. Calder and his story. The hints of his love affair linger in my head. The way he spoke of his girl. The memories so vivid. The pickle jar love note.

“It’s not that easy.” I sigh in exasperation. However, curiosity haunts me about the old resort, Sam’s romance, and the mystery of the past town, but I can’t just drop my job and write a book, hoping it will make me the kind of money I need.

“I could provide for you.” The comment brings an awkward silence. I swallow the lump in my throat. It’s a generous offer, and I know he means it wholeheartedly, but I couldn’t accept.

“That’s sweet of you, but it’s not about me.” I wait a moment for the rest of the statement to sink in.

Are you trying to get pregnant? My uncle’s words still sting.

“Right. A baby.” He doesn’t ask about the progress of my application, and I’m wondering if he’s one more person on board the Letty-shouldn’t-do-this train. I’m too emotionally exhausted to argue with him and ask him what his tone means. Giant sighs.

“Will he fire you? Because of me?” I’ve told Giant about the misunderstanding and who Sam Calder thought we were. The genuine concern in his voice makes my heart ache for him again.

“He won’t fire me because I’m family.” Uncle Frank would never let his sister down by letting me go even though

he'd love nothing more. He doesn't have his own children, so his only hope of continuing the legacy of Mullen Realty is through his nieces, or at least Dayna especially since she has Hudson. I wouldn't trust either of them, but that's just me. The future of the company seems secure, at least from one niece.

"I can't wait until you're back here and see how a family should treat you." The comment stings because it implies my family doesn't treat me well, which they don't. Still, it hurts to accept the reality.

"It's another reason I want a baby. I'll treat him differently. Very differently. He'll be my family."

"A baby boy. You know, I thought all women dreamed of little girls."

"Maybe someday," I say, but I don't believe I'll adopt more than one child.

"Harrington brothers seem to only have girls. I have two, my girl has two. Charlie has one. But my mother had four boys, and Mati had twin sons. It's like an unknown curse. There isn't anyone to carry on our name." He says it with such pride and concern, I'm a little sad. I suppose a son of a son is important to a family legacy.

"What can you do about it? I guess that leaves James." I laugh at my joke, but Giant falls very quiet. "What did I say?"

"Nothing, sweetheart." The drop to his tone tells me not to ask, so I move on.

"So, two weeks? That's a lot of nights with my vibrator."

Giant chokes. "Your what?"

"Bunny ears," I tease.

"I...I want to see." His voice drops again, and I squirm a little with excitement. This man has certainly been an adventure. One I'd take again and again.

Baby Blues

[Giant]

Thanksgiving isn't for three more days, but people act like today starts their holiday. I'm sullen and somber for some reason, but when Letty's name pops up on my phone, I feel a little lighter.

"I'm getting a baby."

It takes me a second to register what she's said before I've even said hello.

"A baby?" I choke before I realize what she means. "I mean, a baby. Tell me everything." It's so wrong that I'm a little deflated with the announcement. I'm happy for her. I am. This is what she wanted, but I don't see myself going the baby route again. I've already been there, and while I'd like to say I've done that, I didn't. I wasn't home when Ellie was born. When Sarah was due, I was scheduled to deploy. She came early just so I wouldn't miss the experience, but I still wasn't around for diapers and late nights and breastfeeding. Not that Letty can do that last one.

"You don't sound happy," she says, her excitement waning a bit.

"No, no, I am. Bad day. Tell me all about him."

"He's beautiful. They sent me a picture. He's three months old, and the mother abandoned him. Brought him to the hospital and left him in the emergency room. After running a battery of tests on him, he needed some immediate medical attention. She was a young woman who didn't take care of herself and couldn't take care of him."

“What?” *Who abandons their child?*

“Yep. My adoption liaison called me right away. She said I’m the perfect candidate.”

“Medical issues? That don’t sound too good, Cricket.” There could be potential for all kinds of heartbreak if the child has a disease or an addiction. Who knows where this mother came from or what she did? And what happens if she returns? But Letty’s already told me she has faith in the system.

“Whatever he needs, as long as he’s mine. And the good news is, I only need to wait out the abandonment for six months instead of a year for the adoption to stick.” It all sounds worrisome to me, but Letty’s enthusiasm is contagious. “I’m so excited.” She squeals into the phone, and I wish I was there to celebrate with her. I want to be excited for her, but my heart selfishly sinks a little more because I know what’s coming after my next question.

“When do you pick him up?”

“Tomorrow.” Her voice cracks again with her eagerness.

“What about Thanksgiving?”

“I’m so sorry, Giant. I can’t travel under the adoption rules. I can’t go anywhere for six months.” Reality slowly sets in, and her voice falters as she repeats, “Six months.” The words echo through the phone like an empty cave.

I swallow back the fear in my throat. “We can do this,” I encourage.

“Will you still want me in six months?”

We haven’t really talked about this possibility—the *what-if*—of her getting a baby. I’m not opposed to long-distance dating. Nothing against her being a single mother. But a new baby and the distance? The future with a baby? Even I’m starting to doubt the situation.

“Six months is nothing, Cricket.” I’ve done longer stints without Clara, but when I think of how that really worked out for us, I’m not certain I’d promote a long-distance

relationship. Sure, it was okay for us, but if I had to do it all again, I'd want a little more continuity. Daily physical contact being number one on my list. With Letty, I thought I might have a second chance, but again, I'm suddenly skeptical. I don't tell her my thoughts, including the ones where I was hoping to convince her to move here. She could adopt here. She could work here. Blue Ridge might not be the real estate metropolis she has in Chicago, but a change of scenery might be what she needs.

"Please be happy for me."

"I am, sweetheart. I really am. This is exciting. You're going to be a great mother."

"I am," she says with her feisty determination to get the job done, but tackling a baby isn't quite like obtaining real estate. "I hate to dash, but I've got to go. I have so much to do. Clear the office in my condo. Buy a crib. Purchase clothes. Get some diapers." She laughs. "I never thought I'd hear those words cross my lips. I'm excited to change a diaper." She's giddy as she rambles, and I can picture the grin on her face. I want to kiss those smiling lips, but I can't. Not yet.

"You get settled, and then I'll come to you," I tell her.

She quiets a little. "You know, I don't expect...I wouldn't ask you to come here all the time, but I just can't—"

"I'm not worried about making this equal travel or wherever your pretty little head is taking this. We'll work it out. I promise."

"I just don't want to take advantage of you. If it ever becomes too much or you can't see yourself handling the baby, just...please...be honest and let me know your feelings. I'll understand. I will."

What's she saying?

"I'm not going anywhere, and neither are you. Go get your baby and your crib and your diapers. You'll be rethinking those diaper changes at two in the morning when you haven't

had any sleep.” I scoff, hoping to lighten the mood. “And call me tonight.”

“I love you,” she says breathlessly through the phone, and for the length of those three words, I actually believe we’ll be all right.

“I love you, too, Cricket.”

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“What’s up with you?” Billy guffaws, pounding me on the back while we hang out on Thanksgiving Day at my parents’. Elaina Harrington is in full force when her family gathers, and nothing is forgotten. Food. Beer. Desserts. I’m stuffed from overeating and a little heartsick without Letty present. The focal point of this holiday is the newest addition to our family, Christopher Jaxson Rathstone, Mati’s grandson. CJ’s adorable, and Mati gloats about another boy when all us brothers only have girls. Baby talk seems to be surrounding me lately, and I’m suffocating.

“Nothing,” I snap, lifting another beer to my lips.

“Uh-huh. Trophy Room. Now.” Billy brushes past me and walks down the back hall from the living room to a room off the garage. It’s a silly name for a room, but the enormous shelving unit once held all our sports’ trophies and contest ribbons, along with our high school senior pictures. Board games and gaming systems were stored in the cabinets below the shelves, and a large screen television sits in the center opening. Eventually, wedding pictures replaced the trophies, along with framed images of all the grandbabies. This room was our man cave as teenagers, conveniently located off the garage so we could sneak out, stash beer, or bring a girl into the house undetected.

“Talk,” Billy demands, and I want to tell him to mind his own fucking business. He’s been just as ornery today.

“Letty got a baby.”

Billy’s eyes widen so big I think they’ll pop out of their sockets. “She was pregnant?”

“No, idiot.” I swipe a hand over my beard. “She adopted a baby. And you’re catching flies.” His mouth remains open, gaping in disbelief.

“Did you know about this?” he asks, his lips slowly closing.

“Of course.” I sigh.

“And you aren’t happy?”

I lower to the old leather couch that has seen better days and its fair share of naked Harrington ass on it. “I’m happy for her. Thrilled. This is what she wants.”

“But...?” He rolls a finger, encouraging me to tell him more.

“I just...I hoped we’d have some time together. Long distance is hard enough. Actually, I was hoping to convince her to move here, but now with the baby thing, she can’t leave Illinois for at least six months. Maybe longer.”

“It’s not a *thing*,” Billy retorts, and I’m about to tell him he knows what I mean, but he doesn’t. Billy and his ex-wife, Rachel, never had children. I briefly explain the adoption process and restrictions. “I don’t think I see the big deal. Put a ring on her and get her down here in six months.”

I chuckle and scrub a hand over my jaw, stroking my thick scruff. “Doesn’t it seem a little fast? It’s hardly been three months.”

“Is there a time limit on these things?” Billy finally lowers to a chair opposite me, reminding me of what my sister said a few weeks ago. Billy and I both married our high school sweethearts for different reasons. Billy had stars in his eyes over Rachel. They were that image of a perfect couple: Homecoming king and queen, most likely to live here forever.

He wanted to have sex with her, and she held out until their wedding night.

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

“Look, I’m not the man to offer advice about love.” He scoffs. “But I’d have to say if the timing is right now, there’s nothing wrong with acting on it.” This is Billy’s philosophy on life. Since his wife left, he’s been living in the moment, screwing just about everything crossing his path for the past sixteen years. He’s out of control, but he’s my brother, and I love him.

“I just don’t know.”

“What don’t you know? I already told you that if you make her happy, you’ll be happy. If she wants the baby, accept the baby.” His voice lowers as he speaks, and he turns a little ashen.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I gotta thing...but we aren’t talking about me.”

“Did you get someone pregnant?” I sit up a little straighter.

“Not exactly,” he says lowering his head and squeezing his hands together. Then his elbows hit his thighs, and he covers his face with his hands.

“What did you do?” I hiss.

“I... I’m a father.”

“To who?”

“She’s sixteen.”

“You got a sixteen-year-old pregnant? What the fuck?” I feel a little sick to my stomach.

“That’s how it happened.” He chuckles. “And I mean the child is sixteen, not the mother, dumbass.”

“William Forrest,” I reprimand. “This isn’t a joke.”

“Do I look like I’m laughing?” He lowers his hands from his face.

He doesn’t, actually. He looks sick to his stomach. “How? When? What? Who?”

“It’s a long story, so let’s finish yours first,” he says. On that note, Charlie enters the room. He smiles big and bright at me.

“Man, the memories in here.” He chuckles. “What are you two doing back here?”

“Hiding out,” Billy mutters.

“Billy’s a dad,” I reply.

“What the fuck, Giant?” Billy snorts, looking up to glare at me.

“What the hell?” Charlie asks, staring down at our brother.

“It’s a long story, okay, and we’re in here for Giant, not me. He’s the one questioning if he wants to be a dad again.”

“I am not.”

“Who did you get pregnant?” Charlie asks, turning on me.

“No one. Letty adopted a baby.”

And damn Charlie, he smiles. “Well, alright.” Charlie knows the details as I’ve already spoken to him about the legality of adopting in Georgia, should I convince Letty to move here.

“She can’t leave Illinois for six months.” I stare at my brother, but he doesn’t acknowledge the concern in my voice.

“And you won’t see her until then?” His brows pinch in question.

“No,” I begin. “I plan to still see her.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Charlie asks. He’s the family member who understands a long-distance relationship as his

ex-wife lived in New York while he was here. It didn't end well for them.

"See?" Billy mocks as though he's an authority on advice. "Win-win."

"No win-win. I want Letty here, and she can't be." I sit up straighter as my voice roughens.

"For six months," Charlie clarifies. "That's nothing. The bigger question is, do you want a woman with a baby? A newborn, Giant. Your girls are in their late twenties. You have grandchildren already. Are you willing to start over again?"

Am I? I mean, I want Letty, sure, and I'll take all that comes with her, but a baby?

"Why is this suddenly so hard for me?" I whisper.

"Guilt," Charlie mutters. He's not wrong. Guilt pecks at me because of my girls. I wasn't there for them as babies, hardly as toddlers, and emotionally distant while they were teens. I've done it all wrong with them. "But it will pass, Giant."

"I don't know what any of this means. Do I ask her to move in? Should we get married? Do I adopt the baby?"

"Don't you think that's a little fast?" Billy snaps.

"You're the one who just told me there wasn't a timeline and to put a ring on her."

"I mean, don't you think you should talk to her before assuming she'll do any of those things. Like marry you, for one."

He's right, and my shoulders slump. Maybe she doesn't want to get married. Maybe she just wants a baby. She's told me over and over she isn't looking for any commitment from me. My girls tell me plenty of women do this nowadays. Single mom power without the hassle of a husband. Still, Letty seems like she'd like a partner. She's told me love and marriage, children and happily ever after.

Charlie laughs. “Giant, you should see your face. I’ve never seen you so love-sick and forlorn all in one expression. You’re normally so brooding. *I’m Giant. Don’t talk to me.*” Charlie throws his voice to sound deep and rough as he mocks me.

“Now, he’s all *I’m in love with Letty*,” Billy teases with a feminine twist.

The door to the Trophy Room opens, and our father leans in, holding the doorknob. “You boys might want to come out here before your mother finds you.” He winks, as this is something he’d say when he caught us drinking in this room or a girl under one of us. James was the main culprit in his day, and I suddenly feel the loss of him.

“Coming,” Charlie says, always the kiss-up, always the good kid. He’s a politician, so it’s in his nature.

“Seems *coming* is the problem,” Billy mutters as he stands from his seat.

“Only for you,” I say, standing as well and wrapping a hand around the nape of his neck, tenderly shoving him forward. We all walk out of the room with laughter on our lips but questions in our hearts.

The crowning moment to the holiday is when my nephew proposes to his girlfriend, who just had their son. He gives a toast, acknowledging our dad for his beer-crafting skills and then...

“And to Hollilyn, the mother of my child. Who could have predicted this is how it would end?”

Who could predict, I think—a woman demands I sell her my land and then follows me up a mountain to go camping?

Jaxson nods to his son in Hollilyn’s arms, and she pinkens. Their son is the result of a one-night stand that turned into many nights thereafter.

Would it be so bad to have another baby? Would Letty want to share him with me?

“But if I could have known the path would lead me here, I would do it all over again. I only wish I’d met you sooner, so I hope I’m not too late to ask.”

If we could only know where life would lead.

If only I’d met her sooner... I dismiss the thought. I loved Clara, but I want Letty in a way beyond what I felt with my wife.

Jaxson lowers to his knee before the overstuffed chair where Hollilyn sits, and she breaks into tears. Mati gasps as we all see what’s coming next.

“Will you be my wife and share the rest of my nights with me?”

Hollilyn struggles to stand from her seat, and Mati’s man, Denton, pops up to take the baby from her arms. With another hand, he helps her stand while Hollilyn nods and nods.

“Don’t do it,” Billy whispers, and I knock him in the back of the head from where I stand behind him. He’s seated on the couch next to my sister.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Hollilyn says, staring down at the ring Jax holds up to her. Jaxson murmurs something to her, and she pulls back to give him a kiss, which deepens rather quickly.

“That’s how they got in trouble in the first place,” Billy says, and Charlie laughs next to me.

“Jaxson,” Mati snaps, clapping her hands once as if that will break them apart. She sounds every bit like our mother.

“As if you don’t kiss him like that,” Billy mutters to Mati implying Denton, and Charlie snorts.

I know someone I’d like to kiss like that, and I hope I’m not too late.

Gratitude

[Letty]

When I try to explain to my sister that being a mother overnight feels strange, she tells me it's because I didn't have the nearly ten months of incubation of the baby in my stomach. I hate her a little more.

The nurses said I should talk to the baby, but babies don't verbally respond, so I spend all day speaking to myself.

Then there's this whole switch to calling myself mom. Mommy has been even harder.

"Mommy loves you." I stare at my beautiful boy rocking in the baby swing, relieved he finally stopped crying. I lie on the couch on my side, watching him tick-tock back and forth. I'm so tired, but I feel wired. I wonder if he knows I'm not his biological mother. Does he wonder where his birth mother is? Does he know she left him? I worry she'll show up one day to reclaim him. The agency warns against sudden attachment, yet Dayna says it's important to form an immediate bond. What does she know about children, though? Her boys are as distant from her as if they weren't her kids.

The agency cleared the baby of all initial medical concerns. They thought he might have a heart murmur and ran a bunch of tests. Heart surgery would have been imminent, but the diagnosis passed. Now, I just need to look for typical milestones of development. I'm already an anxious mess. It's been a rough couple of days, and I've been tackling most of it on my own. I skipped the family tradition of gathering for Thanksgiving. I can't remember when I last ate a meal. My eyes are drifting shut when there's a knock on my door. I will

myself not to answer it. *No one's home*, I want to say, but instead, I get up, hopeful it might be a family member deciding to visit me.

I peek through the peephole and then whip open the door.

“Giant,” I hush-whisper, staring at him in disbelief. I must be dreaming. I’ve gone delusional. I’m hallucinating.

“Cricket?” The moment he says my name in question, I leap for him. *Oh my God*, he feels so good as my arms loop around his neck, and I tug him tighter to me. I melt into his embrace, inhaling his neck, addicted to his scent. Then I remember I can’t recall when I last showered.

“Oh my gosh, Giant. What are you doing here?” I pull back from him, my voice rising, and then the baby cries. My shoulders fall. *Well, that was only a hot minute*. Giant chuckles and steps inside, closing the door behind him. I continue to stare. He should be home with his family. “It’s Thanksgiving.”

“Actually, that was yesterday,” he teases, and I look toward my windows. It’s been dark and gloomy for the past two days, and with the lack of sleep, I guess the days have run together. I swipe a hand over my hair—finding it greasy—as Giant watches me. I’m a mess. “You’re the prettiest thing I’ve ever set eyes on.”

I should cry.

I want to cry.

I’m too tired to cry.

He steps up to me, hugging me again quickly before pulling back and walking over to the baby swing. He stops a step before it and stares down at my son. *How weird is that to say?*

“He’s—”

“He’s biracial,” I interject, and Giant turns to me, brows pinched in question at the sharpness of my voice. I’m sensitive because of the high-pitched surprise in the voices of my mother and Dayna, their judgment apparent.

“I was going to say he’s a king of kings,” he states. His brows remain pinched, but a grin spreads on his face.

“I’m sorry.” I fold down to the couch. I’ll need to get used to reactions without sounding defensive, but the disapproval from my mother and sister has eaten at me for days. I don’t see skin color. In fact, I didn’t make any specifications on my adoption request. I wanted a healthy baby boy. I wanted a child, any child who had an economic disadvantage so I could give him all the love he deserved, which is why I registered with the foster system.

“My family hasn’t been very accepting.” His skin is a rich tawny color with eyes a deep onyx. His hair is as dark as fresh-tilled soil after rain. He’s beautiful, and I already love him. “His birth mother is Latino; his father African American.” The liaison knew this information from birth records in the hospital where Finn was deserted. I shrug. I don’t care about any of that. “His name is Finnikin. Finn for short.”

Giant squats before Finn who has stopped fussing even though our voices woke him and the swing stopped moving. “Can I pick him up?” He looks at me over his shoulder, and my heart weeps.

“Of course.” The new mom in me wants to tell him how to pick up a baby—support the head, hold the back—but then I remember he has children and grandbabies. He knows how to handle a baby, and at three months, Finn already has more strength than I expected. Giant scoops Finn out of the seat and stands, spinning to face me. The baby looks so small in his large hands, and then Giant cradles him in the crook of his elbow. I’m speechless as my ovaries explode. *I didn’t need them anyway*, I tell myself as the man I love holds my baby to his chest. Finn seems mesmerized by Giant’s warmth or heartbeat or something.

“He’s quiet,” I say, breathing a sigh of relief and frustration.

“Sometimes they need a fresh set of arms,” he says, the expert father. “Clara used to get so mad when the girls cried all the time, and then a family member would come over, and they’d be angels.” Giant’s head lifts, and he looks at me. I can’t decide if he’s worried at the mention of her or concerned at the state of me. I brush back loose hair near my face.

“I haven’t showered.” *Lately.*

“When’s the last time you slept?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Go shower. I’ve got him for a few minutes.”

My eyes narrow. “You spent days with me in a tent without running water,” I snap, implying we didn’t exactly bathe while camping.

“Yeah, but then you smelled like me, not baby spit-up.” He winks, and I want to snap again, but instead, my shoulders fall. I’m failing at this mother thing. “Come here.” He tips his head, so I stand and walk over to him where he spreads out his other arm and pulls me to him. He kisses my forehead. “I love you.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I whisper, and a tear escapes. Once the dam breaks, I know there will be no going back, so I suck in a breath to contain them, but another traitorous one releases.

“Hey,” Giant says softly. “Shower.” It’s like he knows I need the solitude despite the tears, so I step out from under his arm.

A half hour later, I feel like a new woman. I *am* a new woman, and my heart accelerates when I see Giant pacing my living room, rocking a baby, with *SportsCenter* on the television. He looks up at me with a grin, and I muster a smile although I silently curse Finn for sleeping. *Little traitor.*

“Why don’t you dial up some dinner?” Giant teases, gazing back at Finn, and my heart swells at the image. Finn looks so natural in Giant’s arms, or is it Giant looks calm and

collected with Finn tucked into him? Either way, it's a reminder I want Giant in my life, in Finn's life, but I don't see how that will happen.

Thinking of Giant's request, I'm ready to retort *this is why I didn't marry*. I'm not someone's little woman, raising children and making meals. I'm an independent female. Then I see him nod to my phone on the coffee table, and I chuckle to myself. Oh, right. The little woman knows how to dial a phone for delivery, and I realize a second later, I might not mind a home-cooked meal with a man in my house.

+ + +

After the warm shower and a hot meal, I'm drained of energy, but my anxiety gets the best of me as I prepare for a long night. I've read about this—*colic*—and I'm convinced Finn has it. It's like a timer goes off in his little system at nine o'clock and for two hours, I'll be pacing this living room trying everything to make him stop wailing.

"You didn't tell me why you're here?" I ask, sitting next to Giant on the couch. Finn rests in the car seat at Giant's feet. "I mean, I'm thrilled you are, but this is a surprise." I hate to ask because I'm so grateful. I can't do a heavy conversation with him, but I'm definitely stumped by the impromptu visit. His Thanksgiving plans involved being home with his family, and it's only the day after the holiday.

"My nephew asked his girlfriend to marry him."

"Jaxson, right?" The one who drove me to the brewery and was dating the very pregnant woman at the diner. I knew they'd had their baby. "A proposal prompted you...?" There's still a question in my voice.

"I'd just finished a discussion with my brothers." He keeps his eyes on his plate. He finished each bite of his moo shu pork while I couldn't finish my shrimp fried rice. "We were talking about you and me, and I was questioning where

we were going, with Finn suddenly in your life, and then we walked into the living room, and Jaxson popped the question right there in front of everyone.” He pauses, rubbing his hands on his thighs.

“And this inspired you to hop on a plane to come see me?” I’m flattered but concerned. “What are you wondering in regard to Finn?” Is the idea of a baby too much for him? I know he’s already raised children. Maybe he’s not interested in going through it again. Maybe the reality of my situation is catching up to him. Maybe he’s breaking up with me, which seems silly considering he bought a last-minute plane ticket on a holiday weekend to fly thousands of miles, but still...

“It’s kind of a heavy topic with all you have going on.” He sheepishly glances at me and then away.

“Just spit it out, Giant. Are we breaking up because of Finn?” My heart sinks to my stomach, and my shrimp fried rice wants to come back up. He shifts to face me.

“Absolutely not.” His expression is serious.

“What are you saying then?” I’m so confused, and I can’t process. I gaze down at Finn, who is making a squinty face.

“I’m saying, I know it can be rough to be alone with a new baby. You don’t have much family support, and I can’t be here all the time. I’m worried about you.”

“Well, don—”

He holds up a hand to stop me. “I can’t predict the future, Letty. I don’t know where we’ll go next, but I don’t want to lose you. As for Finn...I’m just concerned. I’ve already been this route of long distance and babies. I don’t want you to be hurt.”

My mouth falls open, and I glare. “Well, then don’t hurt me,” I snap.

Giant stares back at me, and my skin prickles. I don’t know why I’m so on edge. *You’re exhausted.*

“I still don’t understand what you’re saying. Just spit it out, Giant.” My tone remains irritated although I shouldn’t be barking at him.

“I want you to move to Georgia in six months.”

Well, that’s not what I thought he’d say.

“Why?” The singular word is said a little too harshly and a little too direct as if the thought wasn’t ever a thought. I instantly want to reel it back in, especially when his face falls, and he looks down at Finn who’s fully winding up for his nightly bawl. Suddenly, I want to join the baby with a good cry. I’m messing everything up.

“I guess...I thought...I don’t know.” Giant stands without finishing his thought and picks up our plates from my coffee table. My eyes follow his retreating back. I want to run after him. I want to tell him I didn’t mean it how it sounded. I just want to understand. Moving to Georgia? That’s a big step. I don’t know what I’d do for a living, or where I’d live, and any of these concerns are moot until I pass through the six-month timeframe of abandonment and post-adoption.

“Giant, I—” As soon as I speak, Finn breaks into a wail, and Giant disappears down the hall for my kitchen.

I glance over at Finn and sigh. This is so much harder than I thought it would be.

What do you want? I scream in my head, not certain whom I’m directing my thoughts at.

Men are so confusing, no matter what age.

Finnikin of the Rock

[Giant]

As I wash the plates and listen to Finn cry down the hall, I wonder what I'm doing here, and then I want to punch myself for bringing up the subject of moving. She's overwhelmed, and a discussion about our relationship status and our future is not on her radar like it is mine.

I want a plan.

She wants peace and quiet.

I let her deal with her son while I clean up her kitchen. I wash the baby bottles and take stock of her grocery needs. Then I go into Finn's room and find a small pile of laundry. Taking it to the washing machine, I begin a load and notice another sitting in the dryer. I fold the tiny clothes, marveling at their small size.

He'll grow into a man, someday. *He better appreciate his mama.*

I think of how she defended Finn from my first impression. I don't care about his skin color, but she didn't mention she was doing a trans-culture adoption—not that it matters. It doesn't. I just didn't know.

I want to kiss her senseless for her big heart. She's doing a good thing here, and I need to be on board if I want to keep her. Which I do. In fact, I want to keep both of them. From the second I saw him, I felt possessive of him. I want him to be the best of men, and he's going to need a man to teach him how. Not that Letty won't be a wonderful mother in her own right, but there are still things a man needs to teach a son. *A*

son. Does she want a father figure for her boy? Would Letty ever take a husband? Would she let me be Finn's father?

The night wears on, and Letty grows frustrated, but she won't let me help, and I feel helpless watching her. Eventually, she tells me to go to bed, and begrudgingly, I do as sitting on her couch watching her pace seems to upset her more. After another hour of crying, though, I get up and demand she give Finn to me. He settles within minutes, and I set him in his bassinet in her room.

"I hate you," she whispers, swiping at her eyes as I crawl in behind her. She doesn't mean it, and I know it.

"Why?" I press a kiss to her shoulder.

"You did that so easily. I'm terrible at this."

"He's just frustrated and more so as you grow frustrated. He can't calm down when you can't, and you're tired." I'm trying to be sensitive because I know if I say the wrong words, she'll snap.

She's quiet for a moment, and I think she's falling asleep, but then she speaks. "I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't mean what I said, but you did sort of surprise me."

"I shouldn't have brought it up," I begin, but she shifts to look at me over her shoulder.

"I can't come visit you, and it isn't fair to have you only visit me. I don't know how this will work for us, but I'm so grateful you're here now." I lean forward and briefly kiss her.

"I've gone nearly eight months without seeing my family in person, and that's not going to happen to us. I can handle six months."

"Still—" She interrupts, but I interrupt her right back.

"I want to be here for you. I promised myself if it ever happened again, I'd be available for the whole thing. I'm sorry it won't be that way. I can't leave the brewery behind, but I'll be here as often as I can."

“I’d never ask you to do this,” she tells me. “As far as moving—”

“Cricket, can you forget I mentioned it? Let that brain rest a little bit. Get some sleep, okay, and we can talk about all this another day.”

“I love you,” she mutters, her voice falling quieter as I stroke up and down her back. Those words are all I need from her as a sign of commitment, a sign we’ll figure it out.

“I love you, too.”

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“I miss you,” she whispers through the phone after telling me Finn fell asleep on her shoulder.

It’s mid-January. Eight weeks down. We haven’t spoken again about her moving to Georgia or what the end of six months will entail. I’m gun-shy to mention it, so I bide my time and fly to her every few weeks. This is an off weekend, so I’m home and we’re doing our nightly phone call.

“I miss you, too. I miss Finn.” He’s so much more than I thought he’d be. I didn’t think I’d want to start over again at almost fifty, and I’m actually a little surprised at the encouragement from both Billy and Charlie to take on fatherhood again. I haven’t mentioned the baby to my parents yet, using the excuse Letty’s too busy with work to travel to Georgia.

She still worries the mother will show up and want to stake her claim on Finn. I send up a silent prayer each day that doesn’t happen. Letty’s a good mother despite her fears or maybe because of them. She wants a good future for the little guy, and so do I.

I never considered boy versus girl. It isn’t an either/or; I just wanted healthy children, but I’m feeling this connection with Finn I can’t explain. Maybe it’s because I wasn’t there for

my girls as infants. Maybe it's because I have practice at being a dad. Whatever it is, I love the kid as though he's mine. I want him to be mine. Letty makes no hints about marriage or moving in or sharing Finn, though, and I won't ask for fear it will result in another disagreement. We seem to be on shaky ground despite the constant communication and the occasional visits. Our lovemaking has become less enthusiastic than our first meetings because she's exhausted. I feel her slipping from me, but I'm not ready to release her.

"How's the writing coming?" The last time I was there, she was scribbling notes in a notepad. When I asked her what she was doing, she said just jotting down ideas. I snuck a peek while she fixed a bottle for Finn.

"Are you writing a book?" I asked.

"Just playing around."

"Tell me," I demanded. I wanted to know what she was thinking, especially since she hinted this was something she wanted when she was younger.

"I just can't get Sam Calder and his Annie out of my head. Or the town. It's like an unsolved mystery. The place. Their love. Did she come for the pickle jar? Did she get his message, whatever it was? It's a great story." She shrugged nonchalantly, but I don't want her to blow it off.

"You should write this. Make it your own or call him and get more details." She smiled half-heartedly and handed me the bottle. I liked feeding Finn. I liked holding him close, and when she fell next to me on the couch, leaning her head on my shoulder, I liked how it felt to be connected. Each of us touching as though we're a family.

"I thought up a few more ideas, but it's hard to concentrate with a lack of sleep. I'm learning to type while holding Finn."

I hate her struggles. I hate how alone she sounds. I want to be there for her. I want her here with me.

"I can't wait to read it."

“It’s going to be embarrassing.”

“Why?”

“Because you might recognize some scenes, Mr. Lumbersexual.”

I chuckle, lying back on my bed. If I close my eyes, I can feel her next to me, pressing against me.

“You know I’m always limber for you.”

“I miss sex,” she whispers, and my dick twitches.

“Mmm...me too.” My hand slips into my pants to straighten my growing length.

“I hate how I’m not in the mood.” *And I release myself from my pants.* “Mommy-itis, I guess. Feeling a little not so pretty and desirable.”

“You’re desirable, darlin’. Very desirable.”

I hear her shuffle through the phone. “Hang on,” she whispers, and I assume she’s setting Finn down in his crib. Then I hear a door close.

“How desirable am I?” she teases, and a smile curls my lips.

“Want me to talk you through it?”

“Yes, please. Guide me.” This has become our code for leading her to touch herself like I did the first night we were together in the tent.

“Take off your shirt.” I hear the phone shift and know she does as I command. “And stroke over your nipples.” I slip my hand back into my pants, tugging at myself. “Show me.”

I hear her gasp through the phone. “Giant?”

“Let’s get on FaceTime. Lower the phone.” We’ve been playing with the visual more and more. She shows me Finn and his progression, and it’s amazing when Finn recognizes me and my voice through the video. She hangs up, and I send

the FaceTime connection. When the visual pops up, it's her finger swirling around her breast.

"Fuck, that's hot," I groan, squeezing myself.

"Show me how hot," she hums, and I lower the phone, giving her a view as well. It's naughty and dirty, and I can't help myself. I'd never dream of doing something like this, showing off my dick while I get off, but I hear her purring through the line, and I want to give her anything she wants. "Watching you touch yourself makes me so wet."

She holds nothing back, angling her phone to show me her fingers dipping lower, and it's better than porn. This is live action, and while I want to be with her, this is the next best thing. Her sounds. The sight of her fingers disappearing into her pants.

"Take them off," I choke, stroking over myself as the tightness grows. She shimmies her yoga pants to her hips and then her fingers disappear between her thighs. She hums, and my eyes close a beat, imagining my fingers entering her. Imagining her sitting on my dick. Imagining her mouth on me.

"Cricket," I groan. *So close*. Her breath hitches.

"I'm close," she whimpers, her fingers moving as the phone jiggles.

"Fuck," I hiss as hot streams pour out of me, coating my hand. She's watching me from her vantage point, and she swears as well as her fingers still, and she rocks her hips. Damn, she's hot. "I miss you so much," I cry out, wanting to touch her, feel her, surround her.

"Me too," she whispers, coming down from the high. "It's never enough."

Never enough. I don't want to be alone. I don't want her to be alone.

"Soon, right?" It's the first hint I give. We only have a few more months, and then we'll talk. Then we'll figure it out. We just need to wait a little longer.

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Letty applied for Family Medical Leave Absence, asking for the full three months despite the fact she didn't give birth to her son. Her uncle was an ass about it, but human resources warned him he had to honor her rights. HR happens to be her mother. Score one point—finally—in the mom category.

Due to a snowstorm in Chicago, I miss a weekend at the end of January and can't reschedule until the middle of February. Around Valentine's Day, she's sick with a cold, and Finn seems to be teething. She's miserable when I'm there, and I feel helpless. We don't make love, and while it's not the be all and end all, I miss our physical connection.

As we near the end of February, her three-month mark quickly approaches.

I'm just not ready to leave him. That's silly, right? Women go back to work all the time after having babies, and I didn't even have him, technically. I just...I don't want to leave him with someone other than me, she tells me one night. I don't have any answers for her.

Come to Georgia. Marry me. Stay home to raise him. These are my thoughts.

"You look miserable," my father says to me as he walks into my office. I sigh and scrub a hand down my face. I've just gotten off the phone with Letty. "What's going on?"

My parents know that Letty and I have a long-distance relationship. I've let them believe it's because of work issues, which is partly true.

"Dad, I have something to tell you." Like a child of thirteen when I broke his fishing pole, the one Pap gave him as a kid, I feel sick. Thankfully, my father's calm reserve back then dismissed the situation as an accident. I might have left

out how James and I were playing lightsabers with it, but still. This is so much bigger than a fishing pole accident.

“Letty has a baby.”

“Is it yours?” I can’t tell if my father is hopeful or concerned, but I quickly explain how Letty was in the adoption process before I met her. I also explain how I’m struggling to find my place in her life with the distance and the new little man.

We’re dating, but are we more? I want us to be more, but I don’t want to pressure her. She’s under so much stress already, and after her reaction to my suggestion she move to Georgia, I don’t have the heart or stomach to bring it up again. I don’t mention this part to my father.

“When your mother had each of you, I struggled as well. She was so busy caring for each of you, it’s a wonder there was another one.” He chuckles, and I don’t want to consider my parents having sex, but within seven years, they had five children. “Motherhood was her dream, and her pride is wrapped up in each of you kids. Where did I fit in then?”

I hold my breath, afraid for some reason.

“I was her rock. She’s a strong woman, but even a mountain risks erosion, and when your mother felt herself crumple, she relied on me. I provided for you financially, but I like to think I had my own place in developing who you are. A boy needs a father to show him how to be a man.” He takes a breath and smiles to himself, and I grin as I had the same thought regarding Finn. “And a man needs to lead by example, by loving and cherishing his wife.” He narrows his eyes at me. There’s no doubt my parents have loved each other well over the years. They never spend a night apart despite him taking late nights at BRMP or working long hours at the brewery. “*Your* place is in her heart. In her bed. Are you the rock? The soft landing? The comforting shoulder? Wherever or whatever she needs from you, that’s where you fit in.”

“I want to be all those things, but I want her here with me.”

“You want the boy?”

“Is that really a question?”

“It is. Do you want the boy to be yours? He’s still a baby, right? And he needs a daddy.” He waves dismissively at me. “Oh, I know Letty can probably handle him as a single mother, but kids still need a father figure. Who will that be to him?”

I want it to be me. I don’t want to even think of Letty with another man, or another guy becoming a dad to Finn.

“Are you ready to love him?”

“I was in love with him the moment I met him, just as I was with her.” The feisty woman leaning over her car, trying to talk me down. *Name your price, Mr. Harrington.* I could never have predicted it would be my heart.

Then I consider Finn. His sweet smile when he looks at me. How he tips his head on FaceTime like he recognizes my voice. Letty grows frustrated when he settles for me so easily when I hold him, but I secretly love it. It’s as if he likes me back, and he knows I’ll never let anything hurt him. He’s safe with me. With us. I love my girls, but a boy... there are so many other emotions.

My father is thoughtful for a minute before he speaks. “We have no Harrington boys, Giant. All my boys had girls. My girl had boys.” We stare at one another, thinking of James but not mentioning what happened to him. “Mati’s sons are just as much Harringtons, but they don’t carry the name.”

I’m not certain where my dad is going with this.

“Dad, he’s...uhm...he’s not white. Not that it matters to me or should to you, but I feel like I should mention it.” I also feel like an ass because I’m mentioning it.

“If you want her, you accept what’s hers.”

“I understand that.”

“Blood is blood, son, and we all share it. The entire human race shares it. Family, that bond is what we make of it.” He taps his chest, understanding we Harringtons are tight, and that’s how he always wanted it to be. He stands without another word.

“Thanks, Dad,” I call after him, still confused how to act or what to say. He pauses at the doorway to my office.

“Can you name him George? If you decide to adopt him.” I sit up a little straighter. Adopt him? I’d thought it briefly before, but with my dad’s suggestion... If I marry Letty, I can adopt Finn. Even if I don’t marry her, if she doesn’t want marriage because she’s all I-am-woman-hear-me-roar, and we only live together, I could still adopt him. It would be a little extra security for him.

“He’s already named Finnikin. Finn. She named him after some character in a book.” *Finnikin of the Rock*, she told me. He was a strong character who went after the princess and did all he could to bring her safely home where she belonged.

Bring her home where she belongs.

“Finnikin Harrington,” my father says, and my heart races as he speaks the name. “That’s a damn fine name, too.”

Mothers Know Best

[Letty]

“I have a proposal for you.”

My throat catches air as Giant’s voice rings through the phone. I hadn’t even said hello before he spoke. This isn’t how I envisioned being asked but—

“I’d like to take three months off and come stay with you. Like my own FMLA. I can watch Finn while you go back to work. This gets him to nine months old.” His voice sounds almost giddy with the suggestion, and giddy is never a word I’d use to describe Giant. “I want to adopt Finn with you.”

“What?” My voice comes out strangled in both shock and question. I look up at Marcus, who came to visit me when I got some distressing news. I hold up a finger and cross the living room for the hallway. The line remains silent a moment. I don’t know what to say. Giant adopting Finn was something I hadn’t considered. Well, I had considered it but only in my fantasies of family. But he isn’t even asking to marry me. He’s asking to adopt Finn. And on today, of all days. “Giant, I—”

“I love you. You love me. This can work. I’ll come up there and stay with him and begin the process. Whatever needs to be done.”

Giant doesn’t legitimately live here, so I don’t see how the courts would accept him.

“Then what?” I wonder, my voice dropping as my head hits the wall behind me. I can’t have this conversation. Not today. *You should tell him*, my mind whispers.

“I don’t know,” he says, his voice hesitant, the distance between us spanning more than a hundred miles. I’ve felt us drifting apart over the past few months. We talk every day, and I relish the time, but something has shifted between us.

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

“Why not?” his gruff question echoes through the phone.

“I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think adopting Finn is a solution. Or even a plan. I didn’t foresee sharing him. Selfishly, I saw a baby for only myself.” It’s true, but it’s not. I never envisioned being alone. I wanted love and marriage, a baby plus a husband. A family of my own. It all came together so differently in my dreams. I want Giant but not out of duress. Suggesting he adopt Finn feels like a scramble, grasping at loose ends to hold onto something falling apart.

“I don’t think this will work.” My voice drops even lower as I close my eyes.

“What won’t work?”

I don’t reply, a lump forming in my throat.

“Don’t do this,” he quietly pleads, sensing where I’m going with my comment. I swallow the lump clogging my airway as I prepare to do what I think is best under the circumstances. I walk back into the living room and sit across from Marcus. Wiggling my fingers, I reach out for his hand. I need support. I need to be strong.

Be brave. Be strong.

“I found a nanny. She’s young, but she’ll come to the condo, and my work is flexible enough that I can do most of it from home. Frank isn’t allowing me to travel, so this is covered.”

Marcus’s eyes open wide. He mouths, “*What are you doing?*” while I shake my head at him. I close my eyes, squeezing his hand.

“I love you,” Giant mutters, his voice rough and low, so low I can hardly hear him. I swallow again, the lump now the

size of a boulder and choking me. My heart feels just as heavy.

“I love you both,” he says, and my breath hitches. Finn.
He loves Finn?

“You’re the best thing to ever happen to me.” My voice cracks. “Along with Finn.” Finn comes first for me. He’ll always need to be first.

“So that’s it?” he whispers. “We can’t even discuss this.”

“I don’t see any other way.” Ask me to marry you. Ask me again to come live with you. Tell me everything will be okay. Don’t make it only about Finn, my son.

A shuddering breath releases with my thoughts. I’m doing what I think is best as Finn’s mother. *Don’t form sudden attachments*. I am attached, and I don’t want to lose him, though it’s a strong possibility. Giant’s grown attached to him as well, and a tear rolls down my cheek with the thought.

I refuse to look at Marcus even though he’s tugging my hand, begging me through the physical contact not to do what I’m doing.

“Goodbye, Giant,” I whisper.

“Bye, Cricket,” fills the line, and then he’s gone.

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“Tell me I did the right thing,” I say, still holding Marcus’s hand across my coffee table.

“Do you want me to tell you the truth?” he asks, jiggling Finn on his right thigh. Finn is almost six months old, and he’s grown so much in the three months I’ve had him. Holding his head up, pressed against Marcus’s belly, the miniature human being with his dark, trusting eyes is a marvel.

Did I do the right thing for you?

“Lie to me,” I mouth, tears clouding my eyes as I stare at my son.

“You did the right thing.” The lie hurts as much as the decision. For the past three months, Giant has come to see me every two or three weeks, and having him in my home has been amazing. He’s a great pseudo-dad, and my imagination ran away with me each weekend he was here, envisioning us as a family. But the more I imagined us together, the more unfair it seemed. We were on a one-way street, and we weren’t driving in the same direction. This—*us together*—only reinforced what I want deep down inside. I want love, marriage, and a baby in the baby carriage, along with happily ever after. I want it all with Giant while Giant has already had these things.

I don’t want a weekend-only father for Finn. I lied to him. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to share Finn with another person. My little man could use a male mentor in his life, but I couldn’t let it be someone coming and going. I want stability for Finn. Stability I didn’t have as a child after my dad died and Uncle Frank played father figure when it suited him. Owen needed someone consistently, too, and so will Finn.

After Giant’s one-time suggestion to move to Georgia, we never discussed the future again. I had all kinds of questions but didn’t ask them. Should I move away from Chicago? Did I want to keep selling real estate?

I’ve thought a lot about myself since I’ve had time off from work. What do I want for me now that I have Finn? Is real estate really my calling? Is motherhood the only thing that will define me? What about the next forty years of my life?

And when I am free of the adoption restrictions, what will I do about Giant and our long-distance relationship? Continue to travel once a month to see him with a small child? It doesn’t seem fair to anyone. We can’t keep playing part-time, weekend lovers...with a baby in the middle.

I want to adopt Finn. What was he thinking?

I didn't ask. I don't want to ask him to do something I know he can't—live here. He'd hate it. He already told me as much, and as the owner and director of his company, he shouldn't leave the brewery. And if I lose Finn, as today is hinting, there won't be any Finn to adopt, which clears Giant of feeling any obligation or whatever he's feeling to make this happen. I won't tie Giant down. He's the type of man to stick, but I don't want him to be stuck. As much as he doesn't admit it, he's already been in that position. I don't want to make concessions in my life as I've done with real estate and settling for a Hudson, and I can't ask Giant to do the same. He wants an adventure with me, but what kind of adventure can I offer him—single mother compared to an empty nester? Another child when his are grown? He has grandchildren, for heaven's sake. I had to make a choice, and for now, I choose me and Finn because I can't lose Finn.

Which reminds me of this morning's phone call from the adoption liaison. The birth mother has been found. The mediator assures me they can get the biological mother to sign off on Finn, but I'm on edge. She's abandoned him, yet she has all the rights to him. It isn't fair. It isn't just. I could use Giant's support, but I don't want to involve him. I understand this makes me wishy-washy when I need to be firm. Stable. Reliable. Here for Finn.

“Can I tell you the truth now?” Marcus asks, interrupting my rambling thoughts. I haven't been able to stay focused on any one thing over the past few months. “You look miserable.”

The tears fall in earnest at his comment, and I release his fingers to cover my face with my hands.

“I am,” I say into my palms, and Marcus shifts to sit next to me.

“Honey, I don't understand. You love him. He loves you. Why didn't you tell him?”

“I just...I don't know what I want.” Another lie. “I don't think I'm being fair to him by having him come here every

other weekend, and right now, I need to prove stability. I need to show the system I'm the more stable choice."

My personal life is under scrutiny, and the adoption liaison suggested I remove any thing not solid in my life. Giant is solid, but he's not mine to keep, and the process doesn't want to see a part-time lover, part-time father figure coming and going from Finn's life.

"I thought Giant came willingly."

"He did."

"He washed your hair." His voice softens, but I snap.

"Stop reminding me how he is one of the most romantic men I've ever met." I can't tell Marcus how one weekend when Giant was visiting, we struggled to get in my bathtub together, and he did it again. Then he curled me over the edge of the tub and took me from behind. The images in my head make me miss him already.

Marcus rolls his lips inward, staring back at me with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, lowering my head again as the tears continue to fall.

"Listen to me. That man did not travel hundreds of miles every few weeks because he didn't want to be with you. He had no reason to come here, Letty, other than you and this baby, which isn't even his, and he just offered to adopt him."

Marcus isn't wrong, but I need to do what I think is best. I can't have the liaison think I'm a flight risk or flighty with a long-distance relationship. I need to show I'm stable, concrete, and willing to stick for Finn.

What will I do if the system takes Finn from me?

Marcus held my hand to keep me steady in my resolve to end things with Giant. I know me. I was cracking under the tone of Giant's voice, but I had to do the right thing.

“He wants you,” Marcus states. “He wants Finn. I don’t see the problem. He just offered to play daddy while you return to Mc-Hell-in.” Mc-Hell-in is our nickname for Mullen RE although Marcus doesn’t really dislike his job as my assistant.

“*Play Daddy*,” I remind him. “Not be a daddy.”

“Don’t *play* semantics with me,” Marcus warns, lifting an eyebrow. “He just offered to come stay for three months.”

“Three months, not forever.”

Marcus glares at me.

“And what if they take Finn from me?” I whisper. Marcus’s eyes soften. He knows the fear is real as he and his partner still haven’t been matched with a baby.

“Don’t think such negative things. Be brave. Be strong. Think positive thoughts.”

“If only it were that easy,” I say, swiping at the tears which continue to streak my cheeks. “I don’t want Giant to sacrifice for me, for Finn. I don’t want him to put his life on hold, especially under these new conditions. I can’t have a...a lover...living here. And say I do keep Finn, what happens after the next three months pass?”

“He washes your hair?” Marcus teases in question, but when I scowl at him, his expression turns stern. “Why do you have to question everything? That’s what love does, Ms. Pierson. Gives. Holds. Sacrifices.” He doesn’t need to remind me Hudson did none of these things. Four years with one man, and nothing. Four months with another, and everything. Love is a strange beast.

“*When* you’ve completed your six months,” he emphasizes with full confidence that I won’t lose Finn. “You get out of here,” he suggests, making it sound like a prison break. Like it’s just that easy to spring free. Quit the job. Sell my place. Move several states away.

“What do I do? Drop everything and go to Georgia. He hasn’t asked me to do that again, and I don’t know how to bring it up. I don’t want to suggest I move there if he doesn’t want that anymore. I don’t want to push him into something when he’s already done the marriage thing. He’s offering to come here to be nice because that’s the kind of man he is. He isn’t suggesting something long-term.” I sigh. “Besides, I have bigger concerns to consider right now.” I stare down at Finn on Marcus’s lap.

“Letty, just stop it. You don’t think he can love again? He’s told you he loves you. You don’t think he wants this baby? He just suggested he’d adopt him. Maybe it wasn’t on his radar a few months ago when you hiked a mountain and slept with him in a tent. I doubt *you* were on his meter stick until you suddenly were.”

“Marcus,” I warn him and his euphemisms.

“Something happened right. You connected. No man travels hundreds of miles to see a girl if he doesn’t want her permanently. Nor does he wash her hair.”

“Marcus!” I growl.

“I’m just saying. Letty, so what if he hasn’t asked? It’s the modern age. Look at Peter and me. Ask Giant or, better yet, be your demanding self and tell him: I’m moving to Georgia. Ask *him* to marry you!”

Marcus and his partner had this unconventional question. When you’re gay, who does the proposing? Marcus decided to ask Peter to marry him. Peter’s the one who proposed a child through adoption.

“That’s ludicrous,” I admonish.

“And so is throwing away the love of your life. And don’t tell me Hudson was him because I’ll never believe you. I’ve seen you with Giant.”

Marcus met us once for brunch, and another time, we had dinner with him and Peter. He’s seen Giant and I together. We laugh. We stare. We touch.

I exhale in frustration. “I didn’t do the right thing, did I?”

“Want the truth this time?”

I shake my head, but I’ll listen.

“I don’t think so, honey.” His squinting eyes tell me I should have been honest with Giant. Told him the stress I was under. The news I received.

“I know,” I mutter. “But it’s not like I can call him back and say, hey, I’m a nut-head lately, forgive me. Or better yet, race down to him and grovel at his feet.” I can’t leave Illinois, and I want to curse the adoption process even though I understand its reasoning. I want to raise my fist and scream. *I am a good woman. I deserve this abandoned child. Why can’t you trust me?* But I don’t want anything to get in my way of keeping Finn forever.

Nothing’s permanent, Olivet, until it’s in black ink on dotted lines. It might be Uncle Frank’s only decent advice.

“If you call him, I think he’ll understand you’re a little off balance lately. And yes, typically an apology works best, and when groveling, so do blow jobs, but we don’t need to discuss that.”

My head can’t wrap around the fact I won’t be giving Giant one of those to make up for what I’ve done. I won’t be kissing him or touching him or anything ever again.

“You didn’t even tell him about Mr. Calder?” Marcus reminds me, and I sit up, brushing at my cheeks.

Marcus gives me a disapproving look once again. It took a few months of persistently pestering one Drake Calder, grandson and attorney to Sam, to forgive me and then get what I wanted—an interview with the old man. I’d been hurt after what my uncle thought I’d done, but I couldn’t shake the feeling there was a reason I met Mr. Calder, the elder, in the wrong place at the right time instead of his grandson. Maybe it was the romantic in me, but I couldn’t let it go.

“Why didn’t you at least tell Giant about that?”

Never let anything divide you. Not family, business, money, or a river.

Oh Mr. Calder, how right you were, yet what about miles and miles of distance? His girl moved to California, and he never got her back. Why didn't she come back? I bet she was afraid. I bet the resort in her memories didn't match the reality of her heart, and she couldn't turn back. Her summer of love was all a fantasy. A great adventure. One she'd never forget.

My shoulders fall, and I reach for Finn on Marcus's lap, needing the comfort of holding my child. Once he's in my arms, I remind myself I need to think about more than me. I need to continue with my initial plan despite the stabbing pain in my chest. I need to do what's best to keep Finn.

"I think I need to let the poor man be." My resolve returns just a little bit. The best thing for Giant is to set him free.

Brotherly Love

[Giant]

Three more months have passed, and being the last week of May, her six months are up any day.

“You look like shit.” A gruff male voice mocks me while my throat burns with another swallow of whiskey. I should be over at Blue Ridge Microbrewery and Pub, celebrating the Summer Fling Sample Thing Billy thought up as another draw to the bar. Samples and such will be provided to introduce our summer brews, but I couldn’t handle the festivities.

“Surprised to see you here.” A heavy hand pats my shoulder, holds a moment, and then a man sits on the barstool next to me. I turn to face James. This is his hangout. Ridged Edge is a bar on the outskirts of town, appropriately named, as well as owned and operated by Rebel’s Edge, the local biker club. James is second in command. He joined them at a low point in his life. They aren’t hard-core one-percenters, but they’ve had their share of unsavory dealings. It’s one reason I didn’t feel safe with Letty up on the mountain with him nearby.

You’re the best thing to ever happen to me, along with Finn. Then don’t walk away, I wanted to shout during that phone call months ago, but I heard it in her voice. We were over.

“It’s a free country because of men like me,” I slur, rousing myself from thoughts of Letty. I went off to fight for America. James decided to do service Stateside. Search and rescue was his calling, and he became a ranger in the Smoky

Mountain area, saving people on terrain more familiar to him than the dry, arid desert was to me.

“Thank you for your service,” he mocks, rapping on the bar and then holding up two fingers. This place isn’t their secluded club. It’s open to the public who might want a little taste of danger and maybe a one-night stand. I’m contemplating both, but then Letty pops into my thoughts once again, and I know it isn’t true. I’d never have a one-night stand again.

“What brings you here?” My younger brother’s rugged tone matches my own.

I hold up my low glass and jiggle it for him. The amber liquid inside sloshes from side to side like my stomach. I’m trying to ignore the ache in my heart.

Selfishly, I saw a baby only for myself.

She was lying. She wanted it all, and I was willing to give it to her. “I’m having a shit day,” I mumble. A shit week. A shit month. A shitty few months. So much *shit*.

James snorts next to me. The bartender brings him a few fingers of whiskey in a lowball glass like mine and slides another in front of me. James taps my glass with his before lifting it to his lips. “To women.”

I huff and stroke a hand over my beard. *I need a trim.*

“Lost my girl,” I mutter, shocked to admit the words out loud to my absentee brother. Being closest in age compared to my other siblings, he was my best friend as a kid. Two years younger made no difference. Then I went away. Life got in the way.

His head swivels, and he stares at the side of my face. I don’t need to look over at him to know he understands me—what I feel and what I’m thinking. He’s lost many women in his life.

He exhales. “Damn, I liked her.” He doesn’t mean it in any other way than he was impressed by her when he met her

that one time up at the old ranger station on the mountain. She held her own against me even with him as an audience. The time reminds me...

“What were you doing up there? At the station last fall?”

James turns his head forward, staring at the glass bottles along the opposite wall while I face him. His profile is similar to mine yet not the same. He has more gray hair—silver actually—despite being younger than me. A scraggly patch of hairs circles his mouth and lines his jaw, heaviest on his chin. His blue eyes are as sad as I feel, but the edge to his cheeks tells me he’s keeping it in. Maybe we aren’t so dissimilar after all.

“Camping.” He’s lying, and we both know it. As he told me, the station isn’t a campground.

“We heard shots.” I pause, giving my brother time to explain himself.

“That was target practice.” Sarcasm drips from his voice.

“That’s what you told Charlie. Want to tell me the truth?”

James’s lip tweaks at the corner of his mouth, and he stares back at me, his eyes admitting he knows I know he’s lying. “You always were the smartest of all of us.”

I chuckle without humor. “You know Charlie is the smartest.”

James snorts. “Let’s get back to your girl. What happened?” His voice shifts, and I hear the familiar sound of him buried beneath the tough exterior he’s built over the last few years. The voice of my brother, the best friend, who could read me and my silence better than most. He doesn’t typically chat with us as his real family, resigning himself to the club as his brotherhood, but I’m grateful for a moment he’s acting like the brother I once knew and still love.

“It’s a long story, but the short of it is, she adopted a baby, and she didn’t want me to be part of it.”

I want to adopt Finn with you.

Then what?

“Ouch,” James mumbles. Talking about a child is the last thing I want to do with my brother, but he continues to question me. “Why’d she adopt?”

“A number of reasons,” I say, not wanting to give away all of Letty’s secrets. “But I think most of all she just wanted a family after a jilted relationship.”

“How do you fit in there?” He scoffs.

“I was the next guy.” My attention turns back to my brother, and he stares at me, pain resonating in his eyes. He’s the only Harrington with blue eyes.

Was I some kind of transition man for Letty? I don’t believe it for a second, but still, I have my doubts. What were we doing all those months besides playing house? I thought we were building something, biding our time until time passed, and we could take the next step.

James nods next to me, knowing all about “the next guy” syndrome.

“Women sure do know how to sock a punch,” he mutters, giving away his only weakness as he turns his attention to the liquor in his glass. He stares at the whiskey before taking a deep swallow of the burning liquid. “I’m sorry, man.”

Silence falls between us another minute. It’s one of the best qualities about my relationship with James. We don’t need to fill any quiet with useless chatter.

Cricket certainly could chirp, and I almost chuckle with the thought until I remember how sad I am not to hear her voice, her sounds, her hum. My dick weeps at the same time it jolts for attention. My entire being misses her.

“Evie didn’t call.” The admission startles me as much as him sitting next to me. Evie Pepperly was the love of James’s life, and he never mentions her name. Never. But I know about his pact with her. Once a year, she guarantees to call him. It’s always around this time. *Fuck*. I don’t know who has it worse.

Then I peer over at my brother. Him, he definitely has it worse than I do.

“I’m sorry, man,” I reply to him as he did to me. He shrugs, but he isn’t so nonchalant over this missed call. He won’t tell me more, and his demeanor tells me not to ask.

“You know,” he begins after another moment. “If she was my girl, I’d fight everything in my way to keep her.”

Considering Letty is the main thing standing in my way of obtaining her, I snort.

“I’m serious. A baby wouldn’t keep me away from a woman if I loved her. It would redouble my efforts to be with her instead.”

Oh man, this is going to get real deep, real fast if we start talking about kids, but then a thought occurs to me. An elderly voice fills my head.

Never let anything divide you.

Sam Calder. That man had loved someone deeply. Enough that he wanted to rebuild a resort in hopes his lost woman would return. What could I build for Letty to bring her back to me?

“It isn’t the baby that’s holding her back,” I mutter although I’m not certain that’s true. She wanted everything: love, marriage, family.

I sit up straighter on my stool.

Family. Did she misunderstand? Did she not see I wanted it all with her as well?

Don’t do this, I said, but did I explain myself to her? It wasn’t only adopting Finn; it was about marrying her as well. It was about building a family.

Fucking hell.

I scrub a hand down my face. “Love sucks,” I mutter although I don’t mean it. The love I’ve had with Letty has

been everything to me. I'm not certain I've explained myself to her, and now, it's too late.

"Don't I know it," James mumbles. Then he taps my empty glass with the edge of his and downs the rest of his whiskey. "You win. You look pathetic, old man." His lips twist as the corner crooks into a half-ass grin, and I'm reminded once again of us when we were younger, always trying to one-up each other. God, how I've missed him.

"Speak for yourself," I snark, reaching out to ruffle his hair as though he were still a kid. His hand catches my wrist before I can touch him, and our eyes lock. The hold he has on me is tight and meaningful, a warning. My sign he's no longer my kid brother. "Sorry," I mutter.

"Me too," he says, releasing my wrist and lowering his hand to his thigh. His fingers spread and then clench together. He closes his eyes for a second. His body trembles.

"Still having nightmares?" I question, pushing him another inch. "You know I understand." It's my olive branch. My hope that he'll turn to me as his big brother, like he once did when we were kids. Turn to me like he should have when things turned sour for him.

"I'm not doing this with you." He immediately stands. His hand hovers in the air, and then he retracts it to his side. "Happy Birthday, big brother."

I'm surprised he remembered. The marker of my birth coincides with a low time in his existence.

"Thanks," I mutter, but he's already walking away. Fifty years old. Why do I feel like this is the story of my life? People always walking away. My wife is dead. My girls live in Atlanta. And the woman I believe to be the new love of my life doesn't want me involved in hers.

I continue to watch James retreat until a woman saunters up to him, wrapping herself around him, and he kisses her temple. The affection looks forced. His emotions are locked back within his jaw.

To brothers, I decide as I lift my empty glass. Then I pick up my phone to call Charlie for a ride. I'm too buzzed to drive.

An email alert catches my attention before I make the call, and I absentmindedly click the notification when I see the sender is Mullen Realty.

The court settled in her favor after the mother signed over her maternal rights. Thought you'd like to know she's finally free and gets to keep the baby.

All the best, Marcus Klurg.

What the fuck? Was Letty in jeopardy of losing Finn? Why hadn't she told me?

I stare at the message.

She would have called me if she wanted me to know. It's clear she doesn't. She got what she wanted with Finn, and he'll have a great life.

I just wish I could be in it—with both of them.

Instead, I delete the email and call my brother Charlie for a ride home, where I'll be going alone. Always alone.

Name Your Price

[Giant]

After my lacking celebratory drink with James, I give in to the longing to isolate myself. I head up the mountain the following weekend. I haven't had the heart to come to the cabin all spring, sensing memories of Letty would be all around me, but she never entered the place. We'd been higher up on Pap's land instead. And I want the solitude.

The heavy thwack of an ax splintering wood does nothing to ease my thoughts or the worrisome questions within my head. Why did Marcus send the email and not Letty? How had Marcus found me? I assume my information is office knowledge after Letty's attempt to solicit me for my land. I want to smile at the memory of her, but instead, I hammer down at the wood with more force. I don't want her to be a memory. I want her in my arms, in my home, in my heart.

I walk up the porch of the cabin to stack an armful of chopped wood by the front door and then return to the yard, preparing to start chopping another pile when an SUV clears the trees and exits the narrow drive.

Now what? I mutter in my head. No one comes up here. You'd have to be really lost to stumble upon this place.

The SUV draws near, and my fingers clench harder at the shaft of the ax in my hand. My chest heaves as I consider throwing it at the windshield to stop whoever is driving recklessly close to me. The vehicle stops short of my wood pile, and the driver door opens. For a second, the offending driver is hidden by the large door. Then, out steps a woman, one I recognize immediately with my eyes, my heart, and

another body part that hasn't been used on the regular since some time back in the winter.

Cricket, my heart screams, but I don't speak to her.

"Mr. Harrington?"

Is she serious? I watch as her throat rolls with a swallow, and her hands clench at her sides. Her eyes stay focused on mine. She's wearing tight jeans with flip-flops and a tank top. Her clothes hug her body, outlining a form I've missed with each passing second of the past few months. It's warm for late May. The trees are all in bloom, and the sky is bright, but I can't take my eyes off her.

"George Harrington the second?" she formally inquires, and I drop the ax in order to cross my arms. I turn my head away from her, staring off in the distance. *She's kidding me, right?*

"Giant," she whispers, and I close my eyes. My heart squeezes. I want to run to her, wrap her in my arms, and inhale the scent of her hair. Mouthwatering apricots.

Then I want to shake her for breaking my heart.

"Where's Finn?" I ask, turning back to the SUV and wondering if she left him somewhere back in Chicago at her home.

"He's sleeping." She hitches a thumb in the direction of the vehicle.

He's here. She brought Finn with her. She's free to travel about the country.

"What are you doing here?" I don't want to ask. I want to wait her out and hear her explanation before I sound desperate; however, my voice is rough and the question harsh. Her hands clutch together before her, and her head lowers.

"I don't suppose you'd believe I was in the area. That would seem a little impossible. Then again, I could say I'm looking for property, which I am. I'm looking to make an

investment for a buyer, and I heard this is a good area. Pretty trees. Lovely sky. The male scenery isn't too bad, either."

Not this again.

She's rambling to fill the space, and her lips curl up at the corner, pleased with herself. If she's flirting with me, she's going to have to try a lot harder. I'm hurt. We've had no contact since the break-up phone call. The rip-me-to-shreds-and-throw-me-away-in-the-wind phone call. I wrote a hundred emails and deleted them all. I never received one from her. I want her reasons. I want to understand.

You destroyed me, I want to yell at her while she stares at me all adorable in her tight jeans and teasing smile with chirping lips. Lips I want to kiss. I'm a fucking contradiction.

"There's nothing for sale here," I say, keeping my tone curt. My heart races, and my arms tighten around my chest, willing myself to stay still and not approach her.

"Perhaps in town?" My brows pinch. *What does she mean?* "Or something in the general area?"

What? "Land's empty and owned for miles."

"I could build. I know those Duncans have a construction business in the family."

What the...?

"You can't build out here, Letty," I snap, and she flinches at my voice.

"I remember."

My nostrils flare. *What's she playing at then?* Did she really return in hopes of gaining the land? What is she doing here? What does she want? I want to tell her to go home and leave me alone while at the same time, I want to pull her to me and fuck her in the front grass.

"Name your price, Mr. Harrington."

Is she fucking kidding me?

“There’s nothing left here.” I practically growl at her, my arms lowering to my sides. I mean, what can I say. I’m nothing. There’s nothing for her. She took all that was important to me. Her. Finn. My heart.

“Name your price. Everybody has one,” she states, holding firm as she takes a few steps toward me. Her fingers open and close, forming fists of control. I didn’t realize I’d moved, but suddenly, we stand closer to one another, only a foot or two apart.

“Mr. Har—”

“You. And Finn. That’s my price.”

She stills while her breath hitches.

Dammit. *Why did I let that slip?* My head lowers to face the ground. I scrub a hand over my trimmed beard. I’m waiting for her to step back, enter her big rental, and drive off. Instead, two feet with pink-painted toenails come into view near the tips of my boots. Slowly, I lift my head.

“Sold,” she whispers, and my eyes widen.

What is she saying?

“If I camp on the mountain, will you forgive me?”

“Cricket.” I sigh. Dammit, why is she so cute? No, beautiful. Fucking beautiful.

“I can hike up the mountain and back,” she offers.

I fight a slow grin that wants to curl my lips. My fingers twitch at my side.

“What about ax throwing?”

“Maybe.”

“I’ve been practicing.”

“Really?” I’m astonished.

“Yeah, remember there’s this bar in Chicago? I went there before the wedding. I scored a—”

“Anyone ever tell you, you talk too much?” I can no longer fight the smile threatening my lips.

“Yes, this grumpy mountain man once did. He made me sleep in a tent on the lumpy ground and eat out of a pan.”

Sheepishly, I gaze at her. “I thought he was a lumber something or other. And I don’t remember you complaining.” Are we really doing this? Are we flirting with each other? There’s so much to be said, but my heart leaps in my chest even though I still don’t understand what she’s doing here.

“Lumbersexual,” she draws out. “And no, I didn’t complain. In fact, I liked it. I loved it.” She swallows as her eyes hold mine. “I...I still love you.”

My head flicks back while my shoulders fall, and the tension slips out of me. I don’t know if I feel sucker punched by her words or if I’ve lost my breath.

She still loves me.

“What are you doing here?”

“I...I was thinking of moving to Georgia.” My brows rise so high the skin on my forehead crinkles. “There’s a little house in town for rent, and I’m thinking of—”

“Fuck that,” I bark.

“Excuse me?” Her hands come to her hips, standing off with me, and I see a hint of the woman I first met, the one who sparked my interest to play with her and dare her to go camping with me.

“You are not renting a house in Georgia.”

“And why not?” Her eyelids flutter as her face pinks.

“Because if you’re going to live anywhere, it’s with me.” I don’t know where the demand comes from, as I should phrase it as more of a suggestion, but I’m finished suggesting ideas to this woman.

“Well, aren’t you presumptuous? Or do I seem like a foregone conclusion?” Her smile grows, and her cheeks

brighten. Damn, she's the prettiest thing I've ever seen. "You think you can smile pretty at me with that sweaty back and heaving solid chest." She points at my waist. "With your manly hairs dipping into your pants and I'll just do as you say."

I look down at my bare chest, noting how my pants sit a little lower on my hips. My head lifts, and I meet her glowing blue eyes, matching the sky above us.

"Does that work for you?"

"If the price is right." She pauses. "But I have a price, too."

"Because everyone does," I mock. *Aw, shit.* I feel like I'm on a roller coaster ride, holding my breath on the ups and losing my stomach on the downs.

"No. But. Well, my price...is...I want you to love me and adopt Finn. Once you marry me."

We stare at one another.

Did she just say what I think she said?

Is she...?

"Cricket?" My voice strains as she lowers to one knee, digging for something in her pocket.

"Giant Harrington—"

I hold up a hand to stop her. I don't want to stop her, but this isn't how it should be. I'm prepared to do the asking. In fact, I've been prepared for months and have just been waiting out the time.

"Will you do me the honor of marrying me and accepting my son as your own?"

One finger covers my lips to hold back the laughter rumbling up my throat.

"What?" She stares up at me from her kneeling position, holding a thick dark ring between her fingers. I reach down for

her elbow and tug her upward to stand before me.

“Woman, I’ve wanted to marry you since I saw you in Chicago in that hideous dress at your sister’s wedding.”

“Really?” Her eyes widen as her hand lowers, but I catch her wrist, holding the ring-supporting fingers between us. My eyes remain on the thick band.

“Actually, I take that back. It was the night in the ranger station.” I tug her to me, her breasts knocking into my chest with the ring still in her fingers. “When I took you from behind during a thunderstorm.”

“And that sealed the deal?” She giggles while an admonishing brow tweaks upward in question.

“Knew I’d never be able to live without you from that moment forward,” I say, swearing it’s true as I dip my forehead to meet hers.

“You had me at ax throwing,” she teases, and I wrap an arm around her, pulling her even closer, still keeping her hand with the ring between us. “I’m sorry for what I did. I should have never broken up with you. I’ve missed you every day and —”

Her chattering stops the second my lips meet hers. Her tongue slips along the seam of mine, and I open, allowing her in, so happy she’s home with me. My home. Our home. We savor one another, feeling as if it’s been years yet only yesterday. I don’t want to ever lose her again.

“Is that a yes?” she asks, pulling back from me and glancing at the ring still braced between her fingers.

“Let’s have you hold that for a bit,” I say. Her lips fall, and then a squeak comes from the vehicle.

When a Door Opens

[Letty]

“It’s Finn,” I quietly say, crestfallen he didn’t respond to my proposal. Instead, he looked like he wanted to laugh. Laugh me off the mountain perhaps. I’d deserve it. I took a chance, and this is what I get.

You broke up with him. That’s what you got.

“I’ll get him,” Giant offers and steps around me. He hasn’t taken the ring from my fingers, and I don’t know what to do next, so I slip it back into my pocket, feeling foolish and idealistic. He stops as I haven’t moved and watches the ring disappear in my pocket. His mouth opens and then shuts.

I deserve the hesitant treatment. My heart aches, and I blink back the sting in my eyes.

“Why did you rent such a big truck?” he asks, opening the back door and leaning in to unclip Finn from his car seat.

“I didn’t rent it. It’s mine.”

Giant stands upright, holding Finn to his shoulder. “It’s yours.” His eyes narrow. “Did you drive here? From Chicago?”

“I did.”

“That’s a long drive alone. With a baby.” He jiggles Finn at his shoulder, pressing a kiss to the side of his head. “Who is growing into a big boy?” He smiles at Finn and then turns back to me. “Why?”

“I wanted to get to you as soon as I could, and Finn needs so much stuff. It was too complicated to fly. And I just...” I

wasn't really thinking. As soon as I knew I could leave the state, I packed our bags and all Finn's necessities. I put my place up for sale. Marcus is my realtor. I had to get to Giant. In person. I couldn't call him or send a text. I needed to see his face if he rejected me.

In hindsight, I might have been hasty in more than one decision.

"Cricket, that wasn't very safe," he admonishes.

"Ten hours plus stops. He was such a good boy." I reach up and rub down Finn's back as he stares up at Giant. "Remember Giant, Finn?" I ask him as if he can answer me, but he turns his head, recognizing his name. Then he looks up at Giant and tugs his beard. Giant moves his little hand and sucks at his fingers. He's so sweet to him.

I want to adopt Finn with you.

I guess he's changed his mind. I feel sick. I drove all this way, nerves eating at me, and now...I'm just tired.

"What time did you leave?"

"Around three a.m." It's close to six in the evening now. He eyes me for a minute, still playing catch with Finn's fingers as they reach for his beard. Giant's mouth sucks them in.

"You hungry?"

Not really. "I could eat." I slip my hands into my back pockets, which forces my breasts forward, and Giant's eyes lower to the cleavage swelling out the top of my tank. It's warmer here than in the Midwest, and I'm sticky from the drive and the heat.

"I'll make us dinner," he says, but there's an awkwardness between us.

"I should probably go to Conrad Lodge and check in." I drove all this way and suddenly feel like I need a minute away from him.

“Didn’t you hear what I said? You’re moving in with me.”

“But I...” *I just asked you to marry me, and you didn’t answer.* “I think maybe we should talk about a few things first.”

His expression holds firm. He’s given me a hint of a grin but nothing like the smiles he used to give me. No laughter, which I miss. I remember wondering what it would be like to hear him laugh. *Would it rock my world?* It did. In more ways than one.

He kissed me, searing and sweet but not enough. More like the marking of territory but not the possession of my heart. He doesn’t want me.

Then why is he insisting I move in?

“We can talk over dinner. You got any bags?”

“A whole trunk full of stuff.” Finn doesn’t travel lightly, and I didn’t know how long we’d be staying, if we stayed at all. I’m suddenly too exhausted to consider turning around and driving seven hundred miles back home. I don’t feel like Chicago should be our home. With Giant is where we need to be.

You’re moving in with me.

Why? He didn’t agree to marry me. I’m an idiot.

Giant walks to the back of the SUV and pops the door open. He whistles low as he looks at Finn. “She never did know how to pack.”

“Hardy-har. Most of this is his.” The pack and play portable crib. A bouncing seat. Diapers. Bottles. Clothing. Teething toys.

Giant hands me Finn and takes the portable crib and a duffle bag in hand. He walks around the open door, and I assume I’m to follow him.

My heart hammers as I finally enter his cabin. The inside is rustic but cozy. The living room spans the length of the front of the house with a giant fireplace as the centerpiece. An overstuffed couch faces the fireplace with a bearskin rug on the floor. On one side of the chimney is a ladder leading up to a loft.

“My girls slept there. It was the original sleeping quarters. The rafters are low, and there’s a mattress on the floor.” Giant nods to the door next to the ladder. “My room is back there. I’ll set Finn’s crib up in there. It will be easier than hiking up and down that ladder. The kitchen’s on the other side,” he says, tipping his head to an archway opening to the right of the chimney.

“That’s not real, is it?” I ask of the rug.

“What do you think?”

“Wayfair dot com, I hope. Otherwise, Sarah might be upset,” I suggest, referencing a popular online homeware retailer and his animal-loving daughter. Giant chuckles, not answering me. He takes Finn’s stuff in his room, and I follow. The bed is made up with a camp blanket in red and black plaid. It’s a four-poster bed, and I can’t imagine his big body fitting on it. Then I imagine other things—like my wrists tied to the headboard or me bent over the footboard—and I want to cry at the ache in my core. He’s never going to enter me again. He wants to be roommates. I want a husband.

“You okay?” he asks, and I weakly smile.

“Yeah. I’m good.” *I’m horrible.* This isn’t the greeting I’d hoped for, but I was too romantic in my thoughts. I’d propose. He’d say yes. Then he’d say he loved me, forgave me, and couldn’t live without me.

Knew I’d never be able to live without you from that day forward.

He heads out to my SUV for another load and drops most of it just inside the cabin. “We can sort this later. I’ll start dinner.”

He's so...standoffish again.

"Can I help?" I ask although I don't know how or what I'd do. I'm losing the fight with tears as my eyes burn and my nose prickles.

"I got it. You look tired. Need a shower or a nap?"

I need both, but I'm afraid to leave his presence, and what about Finn? *Oh, my poor boy.* What have I done to us?

Giant walks up to me. "Why don't you surrender him to me? Take a shower. Lie down. I'll have dinner ready in an hour." My brows pinch in question while his lips twist, and he nods to his bedroom. "Go."

+ + +

The tears of emotional exhaustion fall as I shower in the small bathroom off his room. Like everything else in the cabin, it's cozy and comforting, and the sensation of fluffy towels and Giant's soap overwhelms me. I inhale as I wash and hold the towel to my puffy eyes when I finish. I slip into fresh jeans and a T-shirt and then climb onto the bed. The scent of him fills my nostrils as I roll into the pillow. My eyes close for a minute, and then I feel a dip behind me. I stiffen, feeling caught doing something I shouldn't have.

His hand comes to my hips and skims up my side, hovering below my breasts, nudging at it but not cupping it.

"You're really here, right? I'm not imagining you." His nose dips into my wet hair, and he inhales. I shiver at the touch. His hand skates back down to my hip, tugging me back against him. His hard length rubs against my ass, and I arch my back. Instantly, I'm wet and ready and wanting him.

"Giant," I hum.

"Later tonight, I'm going to take you so hard, Letty. I'm going to make you wish you never broke my heart."

“Oh God,” I whimper, wanting the punishment and fearing the revenge.

“I broke my own when I did it.” I exhale, rubbing my backside against his firmness. “I’m so sorry, Giant. So very sorry.”

“We’ll see,” he says, kissing my shoulder and then lowering for my neck. He nips me hard, and I cry out, spinning to face him. His lips crash mine again, tongue forcing its way into my mouth. I whimper and moan and whine for more. I want him to take me. I want to give me to him.

He pulls back too quickly, too harsh. “Dinner’s ready.” And I want to cry out, *let me be your feast. Let me nibble on you instead*, but I keep all my thoughts packed away like my bags by his front door.

He rolls off the bed and holds out a hand for me. I follow, standing to face him, and then he tugs me into him again. A hand dips into my hair while another covers my ass. He pulls me into his chest, finding my lips again and kissing me hard. I don’t struggle. I don’t fight. I swallow each punishing kiss.

“God, I’ve missed you,” he says, pulling back and closing his eyes as if he’s just admitted too much. His forehead lowers to mine and rolls against it. Then he breaks away, releasing me, and I wobble, feeling breathless and wrung out although he hasn’t touched me. Not really. I’m on the edge of an orgasm, desperately aching and hot. *Damn him.*

Answer my question or kick me out. Just don’t torture me like this, I want to scream.

Instead, he turns for the door, and I have no choice but to follow his lead.

Punishment and Proposal

[Giant]

We're quiet as we eat the chicken I prepared. Letty gives Finn tiny shredded pieces and then feeds him mashed peaches from a jar.

"He's grown so fast," she says, breaking into our silence. "It's a wonder to watch him change."

He can sit upright now, and he holds tight with his fingers, testing out his legs. He looks ready to stand, run across the floor, and take over the world. A king of kings, I called him, and he's appropriately named for the fictional character in the book Letty likes.

"What ever happened to the book you were writing?" I don't know why I think of that other than considering Finn's name is from a story.

"Funny you should ask." She pauses and reaches for her water glass. "Remember Mr. Calder? Did I mention I've been in contact with him?"

No. I haven't heard anything from you in months.

"I asked him if I could write his story." My head pops up, and I meet her eyes. "I couldn't let it go. The mystery of the town, the history of the resort. His story with Annie. I wanted to know more. I interviewed him a while back and then told him I'd be in the area. I asked him if I could meet with him."

I sit back in my chair and cross my arms. "Pretty sure of yourself," I scoff.

"I'm suddenly not sure of anything," she says, keeping her head lowered as she pushes her food with a fork. My

brows pinch. *What isn't she certain of?*

“So how does that work with him?”

“I’m going to interview him a second time. Have him proofread what I’ve written so far. His grandson is a pain in the ass. Drake had the land on the market, which is why I went there, but when Sam found out the truth, he was very upset. It’s sad.”

My eyes question hers. “What are your thoughts?”

“I’d love to rebuild the resort for him, but I don’t have that kind of capital.”

“But you know how to find buyers or investors. Could you help him out?”

“I don’t know.” She sets down the fork and looks up at me. “Think that’s a possibility for him?”

“I think Old Sam might like the idea.”

She beams, and I swear my home doesn’t need electricity when she looks at me like that. She lights up the whole place. “I could trade him. His story for my help.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I lean forward again and pick up my fork.

“Of course, that’s near Appleton, two hours away.”

The silence stretches between us.

“What happened to your nanny?”

“Oh...” She turns red, playing with her food again. “That didn’t work out.” She closes her eyes, keeping them closed as she licks her lips. “Actually, I didn’t have a nanny lined up.”

My fork clatters to the plate. *Did she lie to me?*

“Then I did hire one, and...I didn’t like it. I didn’t like her being in my house and dealing with Finn. I want to raise Finn, not share him with someone else.”

And we’re back to this.

“I remember.”

“No,” she says, reaching across the table for my wrist. “Not like that. It’s that I don’t want to share him with a stranger. I want to be home for him. I want to give him a family.”

“I think you need to back up a bit. What about your job?”

Her hand slips from my wrist, and I watch it retreat.

“I quit my job. I put the condo on the market.” She shrugs. “I guess I just leaped, and if it doesn’t work out, I’ll figure out something after I finish Mr. Calder’s story. I have enough savings to last me a year.”

I stare at her. *Just like that.* She left it all behind. For me? For us?

“Letty, let’s be straight here. What were you hoping?”

She looks away and brushes at her cheek. If she cries, I’m a goner, but she turns back to me, dry-eyed.

“I was hoping you’d say yes to me...to Finn and me...but I don’t want to pressure you. I know I made a mistake. A big one. I didn’t think I was being fair to you, so I set you free. Only my heart wouldn’t let you go. I was hoping...but...I can see I’m too late.”

She stands, lifting her plate. Stepping forward, she goes to walk past me to the sink, but I catch her forearm.

“Who said you were too late?”

Finn drops his cup off his booster seat, and we both look in his direction. He smiles over at me, and Letty pulls free of my grasp. She sets the dishes by the sink and then returns for Finn’s cup.

“Cricket,” I demand. She didn’t answer me.

“I think we should talk later.”

Yes, talk, but I have other plans as well.

+ + +

Letty gives Finn a bath, and then he wobbles around my cabin, holding her fingers, stretching his legs, and cooing as he goes. When he starts rubbing at his eyes, Letty gives him a bottle, and he falls asleep against her. It's a vision I want to see every night. She disappears into my room to set him in the portable crib and then returns to the front room.

"I only have beer," I say to her, rising from the couch and heading for the fridge. "It's a summer blend. I have one that's made with lemonade, our Summer Shanty, and one that's more berry, Berry Brew."

"A Summer Shanty would be fine."

I return quickly, finding her sitting on the couch, her knees tucked under her as she faces me.

"Thanks," she says, taking the beer from my hand. I fall onto the cushions next to her. We remain silent for too long, and I feel forced to fill the quiet. She's the one who chirps, but she's surprisingly not speaking.

"So," I huff out.

"So," she whispers.

I exhale. There's so much I want to say, ask, do, and I'm afraid if I don't, I'm going to lose her forever.

"I got a very cryptic email from Marcus a few days back."

"Marcus?" she shrieks, and I watch her swallow hard.

"He said something about you being free, and the courts ruled in your favor. I assume since you're here, the adoption passed."

"Well, there was a bit of a hiccup, but it's all settled now."

I stare at her, telling her with my glare she needs to speak.

“The birth mother was located, and I panicked. That day you called offering to adopt Finn...I had gotten the news earlier in the day that I might lose him. It was the only thing on my mind.”

I sit up straighter, focusing on her as she looks down at her beer, chipping at the label with her nail.

“The biological mother reneged her rights. My liaison said it would have been a difficult fight if she wanted custody as they found her in a drug house on the southside of town. There was no way she could have taken care of a child, but there was still a risk...”

I stare at her. “Why didn’t you say something? I could have helped you. I could have been there for you.” What was she thinking?

“I don’t know how,” she says, lifting her eyes to me and blinking at unshed tears. I don’t know how I would have helped her either, but I could have been there for her, been moral support or physical comfort.

“It hurt, Letty. Hurt damn bad when you let me go.”

“I’m sor—” I hold up a hand to stop her from speaking. I need to get it all out, and then she can chatter away at me.

“I want to say I understand why you did it, why you pushed me away, but I don’t. I promised you I was all in and committed to making it work.”

“And I didn’t think it was fair to you. I didn’t want you to feel trapped. I didn’t want to be trapped—not by you, but the process—and I didn’t want to drag you in. I didn’t want you asking to share Finn because it seemed like the only way. And on that day, I didn’t even know if I’d have Finn to share with anyone.”

“Because you don’t want to share him.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“Then tell me what you did mean.”

She sighs, and I'm expecting little white lies, but she's surprisingly honest. "I want it all, and it didn't seem right to ask it of you. It didn't seem fair to ask you to take on Finn when you've already raised your children."

"You didn't ask me, though. I offered, and you took the choice from me."

"What was I supposed to say? *Gee, Giant*, that sounds awesome. I want you to adopt my son, but you hadn't mentioned marrying me. I mean, I want to marry you because I love you, and I'm pretty sure my son loves you, and I think you'd be a great father and a good husband. But it seems like too much..." Her voice drifts. She looks over at the chimney.

"Yes. Yes, you were supposed to say those things if you wanted them. But you told me marriage wasn't in your plan, that sharing Finn wasn't in your plan, Letty."

"I've always wanted it. I told you, love and marriage, and a baby and happily ever after, but I didn't want to ask...I wanted it to happen."

She swipes a hand through her long, chestnut hair, and I want to wrap it around my fist. I want to tug on it until she gives in to me, until she sees she robbed us of months together.

"I want all those things too, Letty, with you and Finn." Her head turns back to me. "But I'm angry right now. I want to forgive you and punish you. I want to hate you and love you."

"Want me to beg? Want me to play *Naked and Afraid* on the mountain? Want me to kneel before you?" she snaps, and my irritation grows.

"Yes."

She takes a long pull of her beer and uncrosses her legs to stand from the couch. She walks to the fireplace, places the beer bottle on the mantle, and then turns to face me. The light has dimmed in the room as the sun has dipped. I don't have a fire burning as it's just warm enough, and my heart heats anyway with adrenaline and frustration. She pulls off her T-shirt, standing before me in a pink bra. Then she shucks off

her jeans, exposing a matching panty. She wasn't wearing shoes or socks. She lowers to the bear skin rug on both knees and places her hands on her thighs. Holding my gaze, she looks vulnerable and scared, and my heart races both guilty and thrilled at her position.

“I asked you to marry me today, and you refused.”

“I did no—”

“It's my turn to talk. I'm sorry for what I did to us. I'm sorry for saying there wasn't another way or not believing you loved me or loved Finn enough. I didn't want you to feel pressured into something you've already experienced. I was scared of losing Finn, so I pushed you away.”

“But my experiences haven't been with you, and I want them to be,” I say, sitting forward and setting my beer on the floor at my feet. She holds up a hand.

“My turn.” She rubs her hands down her bare thighs, and my mouth waters. “I'm sorry, Giant. That's all I can say. I'm sorry.” Her voice cracks, and I can't take anymore. The sorrow in her eyes. The vulnerable position. I lunge for her, catching her before she falls back.

“Where's the ring?”

“What?”

“The ring you offered me earlier.”

“In my jeans.”

“Get it.” She crawls to her pants, and my gaze follows her. I lick my lips, watching her ass in the air. She pulls the ring from her pants. “Set it on the fireplace edge.”

Her brows pinch, but she turns on her knees and does as I ask. After placing the circular band on the concrete ledge, I crawl up behind her, and she stills when my hand rubs down her spine.

“Giant?” she questions.

“Stay just like this.” She nods without looking back at me, and I rise to quickly undress. When I kneel again, behind her, I unhook her bra, allowing the material to fall down her arms, then cup both breasts. I tug her back to me, up on my lap, against my thighs. I nip her neck like I did earlier. Hard. And her back arches as she hisses my name. She presses her breasts into my eager hands while the back of her head lands on my shoulder.

“Don’t ever take my choice from me again,” I whisper into her ear as my nose traces up her neck. “Never take yourself from me again.”

“Okay,” she yelps as I bite her again.

“Shhh. We don’t want to wake Finn until I’m finished.”

“He’s almost ten months and sleeps for several hours.”

“Hours?” I tease. “Won’t be enough time. I need days. Months. Years.”

I squeeze both her breasts, tugging them forward to pull her nipples to tight peaks. I twist the firm nubs, and she whimpers, bucking back at me, my bare dick hitting the seam of her covered ass.

“Lean forward. Hands on the edge.” She does as I say, placing her hands flat on the stone ledge. She’s on her knees, and I slip mine under hers, so she straddles me. With one fierce rip, I tear the material of her cotton undies down the middle, tugging them to the sides to free her two globes of perfection. I cup them each, lifting her a little to bring my hard length against her center.

“So wet,” I hiss as my tip brushes her core. I flinch at the connection. We’re hot, wanting, ready. She kneels upward, positioning me at her entrance and then slams down, drawing me into her. We both let out a loud groan, and I cover her mouth with my hand while pressing my head into her shoulder. She stills to hold me in her depths. I’ve never felt this before. Not like this. Only with her.

“I love you, Letty.” I speak low and deliberate at her ear. “Don’t ever take that from me again.”

“I love you, too, Giant. So, so much, and I’m so sorry. I was scared you wouldn’t want what I want.”

“The only thing I want in my life is you.” My hands come to her hips, and I lift her forward and then tug her back down on me. Her hands balance her, and I repeat the motion until we form a rhythm. She bounces over me, up and down, up and down, and I watch as I disappear into her. My hand snakes around her hip, finding her clit and flicking at it. “This will be fast and hard, Letty, but next round, I’m taking my time. This is the punishment. Round two, I’ll forgive you.”

“Punish me,” she whispers, and I take control, rubbing her clit and guiding her with one hand on her hip. We’re sweating and sliding, skin slapping and suction sounds, and then she hums, and I slam her down on me, holding her still as she clenches around me, milking me hard, as I release months of pent-up frustration and desire.

“I love you,” I repeat into her shoulder, my mouth open and sucking at her salty skin. While I’m still inside her, I reach for my T-shirt behind me and slip it under her. It’s going to be a mess when I pull out. She giggles as I release her, but I hold her hip as I reach for my jeans next. I dig in the pocket and then place something next to her ring for me on the stones.

“Giant,” she whispers.

“I had it back on Valentine’s Day. Cliché, I know, and then you were so sick. I wanted it to be a good memory for you and me, but nothing is going to top you getting on one knee in my yard and asking me to marry you. So maybe we can promise that from this day forward, we’ll do things together.”

I reach around her while she still kneels naked before me, and I pick up the ring I placed next to hers.

“I didn’t say yes earlier because I wanted us to say yes together, Letty. It’s always been yes for me.”

“Giant. I...I’m so...Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

She chuckles, and I realize it isn’t exactly what I said. “Yes,” she says. “Yes, it’s what you said, and what I say. Yes. To us. To all of us.” She spins without taking the ring and cups my face, giving my lips a tender kiss of acceptance. When she pulls back, she reaches for her ring for me and holds it up.

“Together.”

“Love and marriage. A baby and happily ever after, Cricket.”

We slip the rings on each other, and I like the look of hers on me. A black titanium band sized large enough to fit my big finger. Hers is a sparkling solitaire diamond on a silver band.

“It fits,” she says as I squeeze my hand and then flatten my palm.

“You fit me best,” I say, surprised at the comfort and the feel of the ring. I look up at her and bring her lips to mine with a hand on her jaw. As I kiss her, relief washes over me. She’s going to be mine. No more leaving. No more distance. All mine, all the time.

I pull back but continue to hold her face.

“Letty Pierson, I would love to be your husband and a father to Finn.”

“Thank you,” she mouths. “I would love for you to share this adventure called parenthood with me and be my partner in all things.”

My mouth crashes hers again. She has nothing to thank me for. It’s going to be my honor to love and cherish her for all the days of our life.

Fatherhood

[Letty]

Finn wakes while we kiss at the fireplace, and I chuckle when we break apart. Happiness fills me to my core, but I also feel a little silly being caught naked. Not that Finn's old enough to see us.

"Here." Giant hands me my T-shirt, and then he reaches over for his boxers. He destroyed my underwear, and I marvel at his strength and the sexiness of it. *Lumbersexual*. He redefines the term.

"You get him. I'm gonna grab a few things."

Giant follows me into his room where I search for clean underwear and then pick up Finn and nestle him against my shoulder. He settles in, not really needing a nighttime bottle. Giant rustles around behind me, and then he follows me back into the main room. The light is completely gone from the day, and the evening temperature has settled in. Giant starts a small fire and spreads a blanket over the bear skin rug.

He tosses two pillows on the blanket.

"Lie down with him." I do as Giant asks, setting Finn next to me as I curl on my side. Finn remains asleep, and Giant perches on the other side of him. Up on an elbow, he looks down at Finn and then over at me.

"I love you both," he says, and my heart leaps. He reaches for my left hand, pulling the diamond to his lips and kissing over it. "So to be clear, we're getting married. You're moving in with me, and...I'm adopting Finn."

“Yes,” I say, keeping my eyes on him. His smile grows, and he leans over Finn to kiss me too quickly.

“Everything I’ve been wanting is right here.”

“What about your girls?” I whisper, not wanting to break our bubble, but they are his family.

“That would be awkward.” His brows rise, implying they wouldn’t really fit in the space around us.

“Giant,” I hiss, knowing he’s teasing me.

“Okay. Let me try to explain this. I love my girls, but I can’t go back. I can’t redo what I didn’t have. We have a relationship now, and it’s good. It works, but we jumped in when they were adults. I want another chance.” He looks down at Finn. “I want to be better.”

“Honey, I’m sure the girls think you’re the best.”

“And I think they are. But Finn’s going to be a best, too.”

“He is,” I whisper, gazing down at my boy. *Our boy.* “Finnikin Harrington.”

“You’ll give him my name?” Giant’s brow rises.

“I’ll be taking yours, too.”

His smile grows once again, warmer than the firelight. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Giant lies down, his arm coming over both Finn and me, and we stay there for a long time, just staring at one another.

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When it seems Finn has settled, Giant pulls the portable crib into the front room, just outside the door to his bedroom.

“What are you doing?” I ask groggily.

“I can’t make love to you with him in the room.”

“Oh,” I say, sitting up, my back creaking from being on the floor for a bit. I scoop up Finn, hoping not to disturb him, but he’s in that heavy, dead-weight sleep. I place him in the pack and play with a kiss and then follow Giant into his room. We leave the door open to listen for Finn but quietly slip into the sheets.

“Forgiveness fucking,” I say as Giant climbs in over me, naked as can be. My legs spread, taking his wide hips between my thighs.

“Love, Letty. Only making love.” His fingers slide down the center of me, between my breasts and over my stomach until they dip into my underwear and find my clit. I purr as he takes more time and care to tease me, circle me, drawing out the anticipation before slipping two fingers into me.

“So deep,” I whisper, feeling lazy and loved as he slowly plays me. Giant struggles to remove my underwear, then hitches my leg over his hip. His tip meets my entrance, and he easily slides into me, deliberate, purposeful, and filling. I lift both legs over his lower back, and he cups my backside as he rolls his hips. We move like a dance, taking time but building quickly to another rushing orgasm.

“It’s been so long,” he says into my neck.

“Too long,” I say.

“We’re going to do this every night, Letty.”

“Promises, promises,” I tease until he moves in a way a new spot is discovered. I squeak, and his head pops up.

“That’s my promise, Cricket. Spontaneous.”

“Again,” I whisper, and he flinches upward a second time. My eyes roll back as my arms wrap around his neck. “I’ll never get enough of you.”

“That’s the plan.”

We don't stay slow for too long before we are both rabid and needy, releasing once again together. He's just so much and everything I've ever wanted.

When he pulls out of me, I shudder at the loss, but he's quick to return, cleaning me up and then crawling in next to me and tugging me to his chest.

"It's always going to be like this," he tells me as if he's asking or warning or wanting.

"It will always be like this."

He kisses my shoulder, and then we sleep.

+ + +

In the morning, I wake alone with the door to the bedroom closed. I find a fresh T-shirt in Giant's drawer, pull it on, and then head out to the main room. A soft masculine voice drifts from the kitchen.

"So what do you think, little man? Is it okay to marry your mom? And how about me becoming your dad? You good with that?"

I hear Finn making incoherent noises in response.

"I'll teach you how to fish and hunt, and brew beer, and of course, when you're older, catch a girl. You'll learn all the traits of being a Harrington from me as your dad."

"Dada." I freeze. Giant must have too because not a sound comes from the kitchen. I step forward and see Giant staring at Finn. His dark orbs leap up to mine, wide-eyed and surprised.

"Did he just...?"

"That was his first word," I say, my voice low. *Little traitor.*

“I never...I wasn’t home...” Giant sets the jar of baby food on the table and pinches at his eyes.

“Giant.” I step forward for him, wrapping my arms around his head as he falls against my belly. “Honey?” I comb over his hair, but he shakes his head into my stomach.

“Dada,” Finn says again, and we both look over at him.

“Thank you,” Giant whispers, and then peeks up at me. “Thank you for this. For him. For you.”

Epilogue

Wedding Bliss

[Giant]

“What would a wedding be without ax throwing?” I hear Letty explain to Billy, and I chuckle. “I’m telling you, it’s all the rage.”

It’s a beautiful fall day, almost a year from the date I first met Letty. I guess you could say she’s obtained my property after all as she has agreed to be my wife. We have no interest in selling, though. In fact, we’ve made the cabin our residence. It’s a little bit of a haul to the brewery from here, but I don’t mind. I’m widening the drive, so we don’t run into trouble during the winter months. Then again, I can’t think of anything I’d like more than to be snowed in with Letty.

We’ll be adding onto the cabin although Letty doesn’t want to make too many changes. She’s adamant I keep the floor plan, so I can remember Pap’s original structure, but the addition will be our personal touch to make the cabin our home. Letty needs an office as she did interview Sam Calder again about his Annie and the resort. She published her work in September, and she’s had a good run of the story. I don’t understand all the particulars, but she’s hitting fancy lists and beaming with pride, and that’s all that matters to me.

I want my girl to be happy.

She tells me every day she is.

“I don’t think I can build a court right in town,” Billy replies.

Letty’s trying to convince Billy he needs to incorporate this activity into the bar’s attraction. Our wedding is tomorrow up on the ridge where we camped, but tonight we celebrate in

a casual manner where Letty and I met. I didn't want a bachelor party although Billy was more than willing to hire strippers. Instead, we set up a spot for ax throwing and a picnic dinner for our rehearsal.

Actually, I take back what I said about the strippers. Billy said he knew where he could get one, but he didn't suggest we hire one. My brother has changed a little bit. He's still a flirt, and he's still wild, but he's settling. Seems fatherhood might agree with him or maybe it's the new woman in his life.

I jostle Finn on my hip although he's getting so big. He's just over a year. Letty's adoption of him finalized when he was nine months old, and my adoption of him will be complete soon. It feels like I've known him a lifetime. A lifetime I didn't know I wanted until I met Letty. I had those spontaneous needs, but this was more spontaneous than even I imagined.

"Just throw the ax," Letty encourages Billy. "It's surprising how good it feels."

Billy gives me an eye roll, and I chuckle. He's under Letty's spell just as most of my family is. My dad adores her, winking at me when he catches me staring at her. My mother claims she's relieved she can stop setting me up with available women and tries to take credit for introducing me to Letty.

"You know, if I hadn't directed her to the cabin, you might have never found her."

My mother is wrong, but I let her think she's right. I didn't find Letty. She found me.

Billy thinks my future wife is hot, and he likes to tell her and me how good she looks, but that's as far as he'll ever take it. He's opened up a little bit about what happened to him, and I think he's learned his lesson about women. At least, I hope he has.

"Yeah, William, just take the shaft and give it a toss," Marcus shouts, and I snort as I jiggle Finn once again. He

wants down to the ground, but I'm hesitant with all the axes flying around.

"I'll take him. We'll sit safely on the porch," Marcus says to me as he reaches for Finn. "Uncle Marcus will keep Finn away from the big bad ax-men." His teasing, whiny voice makes me laugh once again. Speaking of flying things, Marcus is full of puns and euphemisms, and I'm glad he's here for Letty. He's the only family she invited to our celebration even though he isn't directly family. She was adamant that if her family couldn't accept Finn for who he was, she didn't need them judging her wedding day either, or her. Nothing about our ceremony will be traditional, and I can't wait.

"Ready for a tussle?" Letty teases Billy, wiggling her brows.

"You know I'd give you a toss any day," Billy flirts. It's in his nature, and if he wasn't my kid brother, and I didn't know he was just playing, I'd toss him right to the ground like I did when we were kids and make him scream uncle. Billy isn't really a fighter, more a lover, and he'll be the first to tell a woman such things, but I know my brother would fight for love if it crossed his path.

"Quit hitting on my wife," I snap at Billy with a smile.

"She isn't yet," Billy teases. "I can change all the conditions."

Letty laughs and shakes her head. We've written a list for our wedding vows, ones Billy will read off tomorrow as he obtained an ordained minister's license so he could wed us. Stranger things have happened, it's true. Anyway, Billy calls the list our conditions for marriage instead of our vows, but Letty and I know the truth. This is our promise to each other.

To love one another.

To communicate our needs.

To spend time outdoors.

To never go to bed angry.

To be open to adventure.

To treat each other as equals

“There’s still time,” Billy addresses her. “I know the way out of his secret lair. I can save you from the big bad wolf.” His voice teases, and Letty’s eyes leap to mine.

“I kind of love the big bad wolf,” she says, keeping her gaze on me. “Especially when he threatens to eat me.” She winks at Billy, and the ax my brother is holding slips from his hand. The metal head thuds on the packed dirt at his feet, and he stares at Letty before he bends at the waist and laughs.

“Good one, Letty,” Marcus encourages from his spot on the porch, and I’m happy Finn is too young to understand.

“Oh, my God, Giant. She’s definitely a keeper,” Billy says through his trickling laughter.

He has no idea. I’ll definitely be keeping her all for me.

And there’s nothing I’m looking more forward to than tomorrow, when Billy, as the minister, will ask us that imperative question—if we’ll take each other as husband and wife—and I tell everyone, “I do.”

A sip of *Silver Player*

1

Jokes on me

[Billy]

A young girl walks into a bar...

I'd like to say this is the start of a bad joke, but it isn't really.

It's my life.

It all started as I was giving my sister a pep-talk about getting back out there. Dating again. Open yourself up to someone new. I practically wrote the book on this cheerleading speech as it's the philosophy I've lived by for the past sixteen years.

"Hey, boss, there's a girl here to see you," a new busy boy addresses me. Blue Ridge Microbrewery and Pub is my pride and joy, and the staff is a second family. Our waitstaff is pretty consistent, but with summer ending and college kids going back to school, we lose a few, gain a few. Our specialty is a house beer brewed by my family's business – Giant Brewing Company. My family has been brewing beer for decades, although my oldest brother is the official Giant in the title. I didn't want to work directly under our father and when Giant returned from the military and Rachel left me...well, let's just say the pub was my gift—happy thirtieth birthday to myself.

My youngest sibling Mati sits across from me in my office. Her lion-red hair doesn't match the rest of my siblings who have varying shades of gray happening as we grow older. She's one of the consistent workers, as head waitress, human resources sort-of, and event concept coordinator. Basically

meaning, Jill of all trades. Mati's husband died over a year ago and she isn't sure if she should follow her heart and do the horizontal shuffle with her once best friend from high school who recently returned to Blue Ridge. It has taken twenty-seven years for them to reunite.

Me? It took me a dozen years to wise up about sex. More like a dozen years of having sex. Random. Wild. Uninhibited. I'd been a blind fool over my high school sweetheart back in the day but that's a story for another time

"I'll be there in a minute," I tell Hosea.

"Always something," my sister mutters under her breath standing from the seat opposite my desk. I chuckle to myself, not in the least concerned I just admitted to my sister I'd slept with someone I shouldn't have. Someone clearly stalking me. I wasn't in any rush to get out to the bar area, but I didn't want to keep someone waiting, especially if it's a lady.

"What's up?" I address Clyde Bebzine. Clyde looks a little like a hot mess with a wild beard and thick sandy brown hair. He's a few years younger than my forty-six but still close enough we get along well. He tips his head in the direction of a young black-haired beauty sitting on a bar stool—and I mean young—like not legal to sit at the bar but it's okay because it's the middle of the afternoon. Her light brown eyes pierce me to my core and there's something familiar about those eyes. She'd be a looker minus the emo shit she has going on. Pasty-skin. Kohl eyeliner. Nearly black lips. Midnight colored fingernails. I immediately dismiss the sensation of recognition. Every woman looks familiar to me.

They got breasts. They got lips. They got fingertips.

Only I don't do the young ones and regardless of a body looking like a twenty-something woman she still has the face of a teen.

"May I help you with something?" I ask standing behind the bar while Clyde wipes some glasses dry near me. We're prepping for the nightly rush of those appreciating local craft

beer and community camaraderie. I opened the bar with the intention of improving our little down area, hoping to attract tourists and locals alike to boost our mountain ridge economy. Blue Ridge Microbrewery and Pub is my baby.

“I’m looking for Billy Harrington,” she states, like she’s about to deliver a message. Her voice rings rough as if she’s a member of *The Godfather* or something equally mysterious despite being youthful and female. Her eyes scan my body as if she likes what she sees but she’s also sizing me up. I’m over six foot with silver in my hair but dark scruff on my jaw. My brothers tease me, thinking I dye the facial hair for visual contrast. They’ll never know the truth...besides...the ladies are attracted to the dichotomy so what do I care. *Keep the ladies coming*, and there’s a double meaning in that declaration. Only I don’t dip lower than thirty years old lately. Those twenty-somethings want the spanking and the baby girl nickname and the daddy issues. *No thank you.*

“What can I do for you?” My voice teases and I hear Clyde chuckle next to me.

“You him?” She pauses. “You look different than I thought.”

I’m a little surprised she might have thoughts about me one way or another. Her expression clearly tells me she’d eat me up and spit me out, so I don’t think when I say:

“Not interested in fulfilling some daddy fantasy, honey.”

I reach for a rag and begin swiping at the wood bar top although it already shines with cleanliness. Her Tennessee-whiskey eyes on me are making me nervous all of a sudden and the way they narrow, the sense of familiarity washes over me once again.

“You’re sick. I’m your daughter and you would be the furthest thing from my fantasy.”

My hand pauses on the bar. The hint of country music fades to the background. The sound of some afternoon sports

competition on the television drones to silence. The voices around me trip and mutter to a stop.

What did she say?

“Excuse me?” I chuckle along with choking and then clear my throat as if the action will open my ears and clear my hearing.

“The only daddy issues I have is the issue of you being my dad.”

“I...” What. The. Fuuuuuuuck. My brain wants to say impossible. My dick knocks against my zipper saying, *maybe*.

No.

No, this can't be.

I always wrap that shit up. No leaks. No tweaks. No just a dip and I'll pull out. Full coverage. Every damn time.

“I...” I can't seem to find words, so she spears me with a few more.

“Yeah, I can't either,” she states as if she read my thoughts, somehow mysteriously knowing what I think. “And an absentee one on top of it. You win father of the year, Billy Harrington. *Not*.”

With that, she raps her knuckles on the bar, hops off the stool, and sashays her black-jeaned ass out of my bar.

No joke.

+ + +

Want a little more of Giant and Letty? Read [A Walk to Remember](#).

Read the next Harrington brother when the woman Billy likes the least becomes the person he needs most: [*Silver Player*](#)

Learn where the Harringtons began in the #sexysilvercollection where friends reunite and crushes are exposed for newly widowed Mati Harrington: [*Second Chance*](#).

Hauling
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HAULING ASHE

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DEDICATION

From Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road”

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading where I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need
nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.

1

PRE-TRIP

Playlist: “Unwritten” - Natasha Bedingfield

[Mae]

I’d been looking for a sign.

After stepping off the electric train affectionally known as the ‘L’ in downtown Chicago, I’d breathed in the fumes of the city on a warm summer day. The robotic voice of the conductor stated that the doors were closing and mixed with the chaotic sounds of people moving on the platform toward the stairs. The noise around me was different from my small hometown with its quiet afternoons of whispered breezes and chirping birds. I’d ridden the train in this dynamic city with my sister before, but never alone. And today’s adventure had to be done on my own.

I’d stepped forward with the flow of people pressing toward the staircase like sugar grains filtering through a funnel and descended to the street below as the overhead train continued its loop through this city like a steel serpent, weaving in a perpetual circle around brick and mortar.

I have always loved the magnetism of this metropolis, but it wasn’t home for me. My older sister Jane lived here, and it was a pit stop on the journey I was about to embark on.

My spirit trip awaited me. I was in search of renewing my soul and perhaps my heart, as mine had been shattered by Adam. My seventeen-year marriage was over. We’d been distant for some time and divorced for three years. After his first affair, I stayed with him. He made promises. He made

plans. Now, I had a plan of my own. Eight states. Fourteen days. The open road. I'd hit the highlights as I went, where I pleased, when I pleased.

This was the starting point and that's why I was looking for a sign. An actual brown and white metal rectangle that signifies the beginning of something special. It marks the start of Route 66, the iconic highway from Chicago to Los Angeles. Using the GPS on my phone, I had worked my way to the corner of Wabash and Adams and then headed east on Adams toward Michigan Avenue. A coffee shop on the corner had distracted me and I reminded myself I was in no rush. Ahead of me were two weeks with no timetables and wide-open highway. The Mother Road was my destination and I wanted to plant my feet at the beginning.

When I entered the coffeeshop, I'd decided on the unusual. Instead of black coffee with limited cream and sugar, I ordered something that sounded fancy and fun.

"I'll take a mochaccino." Mocha-*ccino* had rolled off my tongue in a sassy, saucy way and I sashayed my hips a bit as I ordered. I wanted to be flirty. I wanted to be fun. I wanted to remember who I was before marriage and kids and commitments. I didn't begrudge those things in my life, but I was ready for...adventure. I hadn't really ever been anywhere, and I wanted to say I'd been somewhere. If I hadn't been in a coffeeshop on a street corner in Chicago, I might have broken out in song like Belle in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Somehow, I didn't think the other patrons would appreciate me swinging out my arms and spinning in a circle in the cramped space singing off key about a great wide somewhere.

Once I'd exited the café, I popped the lid off my to-go cup and took a sip. The liquid was too hot to fully enjoy the chocolate-flavored zing I anticipated, so I took a short slurp and let the sweetness rush past my tongue in hopes of not burning it. Struggling to snap the lid back in place, I crossed the street obeying the crosswalk signal. The people around me acted like cattle herded over cement and I had laughed at the image since I'd been in this town when the famous painted

cow statues had been placed in various locations as decoration. A tourist mission at the time was to find all the cows.

Today's mission felt almost as daunting. Tons of signs on steel poles lined the sidewalks and as I hit the walkway opposite the coffee shop, I noticed the Art Institute on the other side of Michigan Avenue. I paused and spun in that circle like some animated peasant girl, trying to find my bearings. I pulled my phone from my oversized bag and struggled one handed to open the app where I had saved the coordinates while I stepped forward, looking at the device in my palm.

“Umph.”

I slam into something hard but pliable before me. In fear of spilling my coffee, I was desperately trying not to bump into anyone on the packed city sidewalk. But the hot liquid washes over the front of me and something else. Or rather, down the impeccably tailored suit jacket stretched over the back of *someone* else.

“What the fu—” The remainder of the expletive spoken in a harsh, deep masculine tenor drones out like an echo at the end of its stream. Steel gray eyes lock on mine. For a moment I forget where I am, who I am, and what I'd been doing. Taking a moment to assess the damage, I notice the lid has popped off my cup resulting in hot liquid spilling over my wrist, splattering my once-white blouse, and dripping down my bare legs beneath the hem of my cut-off jean shorts. My sandaled feet are coated in mochaccino, and I step back from the person I've collided with.

But my foot slips off the raised sidewalk and I struggle once more with the uncovered cup in my hand. Attempting to balance the semi-full container, I'm off kilter with one foot down in the street and the other on the raised sidewalk.

“Easy there, sunshine.” Long fingers catch my upper arm and yank me forward. The endearment throws me off balance even more and additional chocolate-flavored drink spurts from

the cup like a sputtering fountain, sprinkling the front of his suit jacket.

“I’m so sorry.” Not only is my skin hot, but I’m a hot mess, and of course, my savior and victim is a hot man. He looks like he stepped off a poster advertising professional business attire for men. His frame is a good half-foot taller than mine, with solid shoulders and long arms. His hair distracts me next as it’s more salt than pepper. His cheekbones are clean-shaven cliffs but given a few days, I imagine the scruff on that firm jaw will match the coloring of the hair on his head. The potential ruggedness of ink and chrome facial hair in combination with that sharp jacket screams *sexy silver fox suit porn*. However, a sliver of leather and beads at his wrist hints there might be a rebel underneath that silk and gabardine material.

“Whatcha got in that cup?” His voice drips with insinuation. The playfulness of calling me sunshine dissipates a bit.

Sharp, silvery eyes ensnare mine and heat rushes across my cheeks because I’m caught staring. Forcing my gaze away from those eyes, I look at my cup. “Uh...nothing, anymore.” He doesn’t smile at my joke. “I wasn’t drinking,” I defend next, although I feel a little drunk just looking at him.

I’m always stupid around good-looking people, especially handsome men. I’d like to say I’m out of practice—with men, flirting and otherwise. However, I can hold my own with the best of flirty people. I’m the one with teasing comments at work or subtle remarks under my breath in public, but today I’m off my witty comebacks game.

Releasing my arm, he shakes out his, flicking droplets of coffee off the expensive-looking coat in a summer khaki color. He tips his head, attempting to glance over his shoulder, and spins in a circle like a dog chasing his tail. The sight of such a handsome man twirling around causes me to giggle like a schoolgirl. Then again, the rhythmic squeak could be the sudden anxiety rippling up my center.

I just spilled coffee on a hot man.

He abruptly stops twirling and his gaze falls to my lips. The corner of his mouth hints at a potential grin. “What’s so funny?” His warm voice washes over me like the drink still soaking my thin shirt. His cadence is lyrical, like a classic rock star or maybe someone in a blues band.

Shaking my head, I apologize a second time. “Let me get your suit cleaned for you.” Suddenly, I have visions of him stripping out of that suit right here on the street and my breath hitches at the possibility. *The lazy removal, slowly shrugging the jacket down his arms. The pop of buttons on his dress shirt. The quiet snick of his suit pants zipper.* Another part of me strums to life and I clench my thighs. *What is happening to me?* Is this a hot flash? I thought I wasn’t due for them for another ten years.

Deciding I need his phone number, and that I can figure out the logistics of getting him out of his suit...I mean, getting his suit *from him* later, I realize I’ve dropped my phone and I begin my own tailspin, scanning the cement at my feet.

“My phone.” Spotting the device in the street, I step down off the curb, and my ankle twists, throbbing as a result of my earlier slip. I wince as I bend at the waist, pitching forward at the last second to retrieve my phone. With my backside in the air, aimed at my coffee-spill victim, I pick up the device at the same time he grips my hips and tugs me back up onto the sidewalk. A taxi driver wails on his horn as the yellow vehicle zips past us.

“Sunshine, you’re a real hazard to yourself.” The rough sound near my ear sends shivers down my spine.

I spin to face him, forcing his hands to release me, and my face heats once more at the flirtatious endearment and sensual voice. We stand closer than two people who don’t know one another should. I definitely do not look like sunshine. I’m a forty-three-year-old brunette with hints of gray; a mother of two with a belly scarred like a taxi ran over

my midsection; and an exhausted business owner who has bags under her eyes packed with sorrow and stress.

“I was looking for a sign,” I say to him for some reason, as if that explains knocking into him, spilling coffee, dropping my phone, and fumbling—*twice*—into the street.

He tilts his head, assessing me, perhaps wondering once more if I’d been day-drinking instead of savoring syrupy chocolate mixed with coffee.

He takes a cautious step backward. “Maybe you need some...help.” His tone mocks me a bit, deepening in concern for my mental stability.

Holding my phone in my hand, I swipe the screen against my hip to wipe off the street dirt. “Let me get your number.”

His chiseled face shutters to stillness. “Now you’re hitting on me?” Incredulity fills his voice. His brows arch and the corner of his pale red lips twitch. The grin is more forced than flirtatious. He thinks I’m a nut.

“I wasn’t... I mean, I’m not... I never... I just want to have your suit cleaned.” Well, that pretty much covers it all. In my line of work, a pleasant attitude helps sales. The customer is always right, so I’ve learned how to master words and a wink to soothe someone who is disgruntled. Of course, a little banter never hurt anyone and some of my best customers enjoy the repartee. The innocent jesting might even be the reason they return to my garden center. But in the case of this encounter, I’m surprisingly flustered.

“It’s a thousand-dollar suit. A mere dry-cleaning won’t salvage this mess.” He glances down at the arm of his jacket and at the once-white shirt he wore, now looking like freckles dot the material. The underscore to his statement resonates louder than the hint of his concern I was hitting on him. He’s not joking about the cost and his expression tightens even more. Disgust and disappointment etch his fine cheekbones.

“Made of gold-laden thread?” I joke, hoping to lighten the moment, but in return those silver eyes pinch. His gaze

becomes colder, matching the metallic posts holding up a variety of signs along this street.

“Something like that.” His voice is suddenly devoid of all emotion, monotone and dry, which is everything opposite my clothing still soaked with coffee. Absentmindedly, I reach for the middle of my peasant blouse and squeeze the material, which looks like I’ve tried to tea-stain fabric at home. Warm liquid seeps over my fist like I’ve wrung out a sponge. His eyes follow the motion, and narrow when his gaze reaches my chest. I look like I’ve entered a wet T-shirt contest.

Without another word, he reaches into his suit coat and pulls out his own phone. My breath hitches for some reason, momentarily thinking he’ll ask me for my number. Instead, he stabs the device with a forceful finger and lifts it to his ear. His eyes peer upward, locking on mine once more before he abruptly turns and walks away.

“Hope your day gets better,” I holler after him, taking a mental snapshot of him walking away. He shoots me a one-handed wave over his shoulder, then closes his fingers leaving only the one in the middle upright.

Well.

My gaze falls to his backside. The slightly lifted jacket in his single arm salute gives me a clear view of firm globes in form-fitting suit pants. Those thousand dollars were well spent to accentuate him there. However, a man with a fine ass does not make him a fine man. It normally just makes him an ass.

Too bad. He was nice to look at.

On that note, I glance around me, taking in the rush of the ‘L’ down the block, racing over Wabash Avenue. Brakes screech and horns honk as all types of vehicles come to a stop at the red light down the street ahead of me. I scan the tall buildings shadowing the walkway and then I see it.

A brown and white sign marked with the iconic emblem for Route 66.

Underneath the landmark rectangle is another sign with one word.

BEGIN.

2

Playlist: “Julia” - The Beatles

[Tucker]

What is happening today?

I’m definitely having an out-of-body experience. One minute, I’m standing on the sidewalk, checking an email notification on my phone and the next minute, someone slams into me. Something warm and liquid coats the back of my suit jacket and when I spin to bitch out my fellow pedestrian, I’m slammed a second time by incredible eyes.

Blue as a summer lake, the cool color caught mine like a fish reeled in on a hook. *Foolish fish.*

Yet there I’d stood on the cramped sidewalk during rush hour, shell-shocked by the woman’s innocent look. What was it about her that had me tongue-tied, but calling her sunshine? Where did that even come from? Flirting with a woman was second nature. A soft smile. A teasing wink. Nothing too suggestive. I understood women; they’d been my business for decades. Over the years, I never gave into offers aimed to tempt me. Room keys in my pocket. Phone numbers on a cocktail napkin. Suggestive comments on social media. *Never.*

Then she’d mentioned looking for a sign, sounding like a nut, before the trigger of all triggers, she asked me for my phone number.

It wasn’t nine in the morning yet and today had already been a shitty day.

As I stand in my office, ripping off my coffee-stained dress shirt, buttons fly across the room like my agitation, pinging all over the place. The shirt is ruined anyway as is my

brand-new suit. I'd already tossed the jacket on the couch. The coffee-speckled shirt goes next, and I stalk for the closet outside my private bathroom where I keep a collection of secondary shirts. Tugging on the fresh-pressed material, I continue to chide myself about earlier.

I had just stood there, ready to sandwich that ray of sunshine between the building and my body. Her blue eyes struck me first, sunny-sky bright and eager. The way she looked at me—all apologetic and anxious—as she should be. She'd ruined a thousand-dollar suit.

Which she offered to have dry-cleaned, I weakly remind myself.

When she had stepped into the street and narrowly missed being run over by a taxi, I nearly had a heart attack.

More coffee splatters. More ruin to my clothing.

Then she asks me for my number, and like a hit-and-run, I fled the scene. She'd tipped me in the wrong direction of an already downhill day. I didn't need her knowing who I was, where I worked, or what I did for a living. I don't trust women, although my business for years was to support them, motivate them, empower them. However, I no longer believe in the intentions of most women and that was my wife's fault.

Reaching for my phone, I call my daughter.

"Hey Dad." Julia greets me before I can say hello. I love this girl, now a beautiful woman of twenty-four, paving her own path through life.

"Jellybean, I have a problem." I hate to distress her. She has more important things on her mind right now than my transportation. "The car company cancelled."

"Dad, you cannot miss this." Julia doesn't whine often, but this is important to her *and to me*.

"I promise I'll be there." I don't feel half as confident as the reassurance I'm trying to give her. I don't know how things got so messed up. The car service confirmed only days

ago that I would be transported from Chicago to Los Angeles in a timely manner. Once there, I would meet Julia and we would travel north to Napa together. The road trip would give us some father-daughter time before her big day.

“I can’t believe this happened,” Julia continues, and I squeeze my forehead, agreeing with her. By nine o’clock this morning, this day had officially been a shitshow.

“I know, Jellybean.” Julia is my only daughter, but she isn’t spoiled. If anything, she’s the least spoiled person I’ve ever known, which is surprising considering how her mother was revered like royalty. Julia is quiet and kind, and everything opposite of Rochelle.

When my daughter decided to head to California for college, her mother and I were stunned. Secretly, I was pleased she’d chosen the place I’d once run off to. A place I recall with fond memories and deep regrets. Even more surprising was when Julia eventually decided to become a baker despite earning her business degree. Her mother had always hoped Julia would follow in her footsteps. Those were some steep six-inch stilettos to fill, though, and I’d been proud of our daughter for forging her own way, even if it meant baking cupcakes over two thousand miles away.

“Can you hire another service?” Her voice is tender with empathy. The best solution is to head to O’Hare International Airport, hop on a plane and be in L.A. in a matter of hours. But I don’t fly. Julia knows my reasons.

“I’ll figure something out.” Pressing my forehead harder, I realize I hadn’t seen my assistant Daniel outside my office. “I’ll be there if I have to start walking tonight.” I chuckle at the notion, because I’d never make a cross-country trek on foot, but I’d do what I could to get to Julia. I’d do anything for my daughter, except fly.

“You know, Daddy, you could have ridden with Jude.”

Ah, my son. He was also not an option, and I didn’t want to discuss that right now.

“Jellybean, give me some time and I’ll get back to you on my plans, okay? If I have to leave tomorrow, I will.” My work is my life, but I’ll figure something out. I’ll find someone else to drive me.

“Okay Dad. Can you message me when you’re on the road?” Her soft plea expresses her unspoken concern. Julia’s had to grow up a lot over the past three years. Not like my daughter isn’t a mature, responsible adult, but the reality of her mother’s life had been an eye-opener. The need exists to constantly reassure Julia I’ll always be here for her, as I always have.

“Of course, baby girl. Love you.” It feels important to remind her in the moment. She’s the only person I use the phrase with.

“Love you, too, Dad.” And that response right there reminds me no matter what it takes I need to get to a Napa Valley winery for my daughter’s wedding.

+ + +

“Where the fuck is Daniel?” I blurt, bursting into Jane Fox’s office. As our top account executive, I swear this woman runs this office in more ways than one. She isn’t Human Resources. Hell, she isn’t even responsible for my assistant’s whereabouts, and yet Jane seems to know everything about everyone here. She was one of the few women who handled Rochelle, and that was a real feat, taking a strong constitution.

“Mr. Ashford,” she stands to address me. “He called in sick today.”

“I can’t fucking believe this,” I bark.

“What happened?” Jane’s concerned voice does nothing to settle my agitation.

“The car service Daniel booked for California cancelled. They don’t have another driver for such a trip on such short

notice and I'm royally fucked."

"What?" Jane shrieks. She's been working for Impact—a media marketing company I own with my business partner, Machlan Wright—for roughly eight years. As much as I know about Jane, there is just as much I don't. Her employment credentials were my only interest when we hired her. She reports to Mach more than to me.

"They sent me an email this morning."

Jane bends for the computer on her desk, rapidly typing on the keyboard. "We discussed you taking the train," she reminds me. She is one of the few who empathizes when I say I don't fly.

"I'm not taking some cramped, smelly train, sharing a food car with strangers, and sleeping on a thin, lumpy mattress for three nights." I huff, sounding petulant. "And to top off this crazy morning, some lunatic ran into me and spilled coffee all over a new suit. The piece is completely ruined."

Slowly, Jane stands from her bent position where she was frantically hitting the keys on her laptop. She stares at me, blue eyes behind yellow framed glasses narrowing a bit.

"Spilled coffee," she whispers, and I wonder why she's looking at me like she is. The corner of Jane's mouth curls upward, taking its time to break into a grin that hints I shouldn't trust what she says next. Her eyes dart to something in her office and I twist only enough to notice someone else is in the room. I turn back to Jane, realizing too late that I've interrupted her meeting, but just as quickly my head swivels in the direction of a woman sitting before Jane's desk, hands clutching the armrest of a chair, glaring up at me.

"No," I groan.

"Yes." The woman from the sidewalk, dangerous with a cup of coffee, leers at me. The scowl she wears suggests I'm gum under her shoe.

Yeah, well, she ruined my suit. "Did you follow me?"

Her head flinches back. “I was here first.” Her tight grip on the armrest confirms her position. She was in Jane’s office before me.

Jane clears her throat. “Tucker Ashford, this is my sister Mae Fox-Holland. She’s visiting today before she...” Her voice trails off, or maybe that’s the unease inside me that dulls the sound of Jane speaking. I stare at the woman sitting before Jane’s desk.

How is *she* sitting in Jane’s office? She’s in the late summer of her life as am I, but she’s pure sunshine as I called her upon first meeting her. Unfortunately, I’m in a rainy-day kind of mood.

“Just Mae Fox,” the woman mutters at the introduction before turning away from my gaze. She glares at Jane. *Her sister?* How did I not know Jane has siblings?

“My sister happens to be driving to California. She could take you across the country.”

“What?” Mae and I both say at the same time.

“No.” My rebuttal is definitive. *Absolutely not.* I need someone responsible to drive me to the west coast. This morning’s encounter with Mae floats through my head. How she slipped into the street after we collided. How she purposely stepped into it for her phone, narrowly missing a taxi. Add in her bumping into me, and she can’t be trusted to walk down a sidewalk with coffee in her hand, let alone drive two-thousand miles.

“She’s already planned a trip and I don’t want her to travel alone. She’d be the perfect traveling companion.” The tension in Jane’s voice is aimed at her sister as they stare at one another, having a silent conversation as only sisters can.

“I need to be in Napa Valley by Wednesday.” That’s seven days away from today.

“Well, I’m going to Los Angeles, and I’m not scheduled to arrive until two weeks from Sunday.” Mae’s voice drips

saccharine-sweet and full of sarcasm. She doesn't want to drive me anymore than I want to ride with her.

"I'm sure Mae could speed up her trip to accommodate you," Jane says to me first before sheepishly glancing at her sister. "You said you weren't on a timetable. You can always drive Mr. Ashford to California and do your trip in reverse."

Mae shakes her head just the slightest bit, silently telling her sister *no way*.

"Could you even make it to Los Angeles by next Wednesday?" What the hell am I asking? Am I even entertaining this thought?

"No," Mae snaps at her sister, still clutching the armrest of the chair as if clinging to a lifeline. Her answer should settle it. I cannot possibly take a ride from this woman.

"You could if you left tomorrow," Jane suggests to her sister.

"What?" Mae and I again say in unison. I watch as Mae's shoulders fall, her eyes fixed on Jane. This isn't a good idea. This isn't the plan. I do not want to sit in the car for one, two—I count in my head—six days with this woman. *Six!*

"Drive yourself," Mae offers, her voice full of vinegar. Her head tips as she scans up my body from leather shoe-tips to the top of my head. I'd done the same thing to her on the street, taking in her casual appearance. She was a petite thing but there was something solid behind her small stature. She has iridescent blue eyes that cut me like sharp glass as she glares at me in *my* workplace. Her hair is slightly lighter than the dark head of her sister and based on what she is wearing—strappy flat sandals, cut-off jean shorts, and a once-white blouse now covered by a cardigan—she's heavy on casual attire. Then again, it is summer and warm in the city.

Our ages are roughly within a decade of each other. Nearing fifty has hit me hard and while I am still a year away from the daunting age, I am also close enough to that finish line that I'm struggling with the final sprint. I no longer have

direction. Sure, I have the marketing firm with my best friend and brother from another mother, which is a story in and of itself. I also have Julia and then there's Jude, but I don't have the fulfillment I expected to have as I near half-time in the game of life.

"No," I snap at Mae again as if that explains why I won't drive myself. I don't have the time or the patience for a six-day car trip, thus wanting a driver.

I work. Someone else drives.

Without excusing myself, I step out of Jane's office and head to my own to search other services for availability while cursing my assistant's absence. Within twenty minutes, I'm further frustrated as no other transportation company has an open driver on such short notice.

I return to Jane's office.

She watches me, as does her sister, and something unsettling fills the quiet between all of us. The silence isn't something unsaid. It is the truth that I'm struggling to accept.

Riding with Mae Fox might be the only option to get me to the church on time for my daughter's wedding.

3

Playlist: “You Don’t Own Me” – Leslie Gore

[Mae]

My sister and I had been having the same conversation we’d already had yesterday, and the day before, and a month ago, when we were so rudely interrupted by this man.

“I can’t believe you’re really doing this,” my older sister said.

“I know, right? It’s one of the craziest ideas I’ve ever had.” Marry my college sweetheart. *Not unheard of.* Open my own business under his family’s corporate umbrella. *Risky but worth it.* Finally find the nerve to dump Adam’s ass. *Long overdue.* But this stunt—traveling the iconic Route 66 on my own—is simply...insane.

However, I’d been living under the auspice of sanity for too long. I’d done what was expected of me. I married young and had children immediately. Owning my own business wasn’t something I ever planned to do, but I did it well. I also needed a break. Adam said I was self-centered for taking this trip during the summer when our eldest was home from college and our second was ready to leave the nest in the fall. Both our boys were self-sufficient, though, and worked for me at Mae’s Flowers, a play on the *Mayflower* ship. My thriving garden center and flower shop was co-owned with my business partner, Pam Vincentia, and I trusted her to keep my boys busy during their summer employment. They wouldn’t be in the way of Adam’s newest conquest. Perhaps my trip was selfish, but it was also time. I’d given up two decades for everyone else. And I was ready to take back me. *Whoever that might be.*

I was in need of a long overdue life assessment. A restart to my engine. Like the travelers on that iconic seagoing vessel, I considered myself a voyager, setting sail across the country on a maiden trip even if I wasn't a fair, young maiden.

"I don't like you doing this alone, though." The eldest Fox sister is a worrier by nature. Fear has kept her single for all her forty-five years. Fear and drive. She's been determined to work in an industry that's fast paced, everchanging, and productive. Her job has been the entirety of her life. My work and family have been the extent of mine.

"I'm only going alone because I couldn't convince you to go with me."

"You know I can't leave."

Actually, I don't really know if that is true. Jane wants to be a partner at Impact one day, and she likes to think she's indispensable. Perhaps she is, but my sister could use a major life-break herself. She works long hours and buries herself in projects. Sometimes I wonder if her dedication to work has to do with her potentially unhealthy obsession with Mach, the other owner of Impact. She needs to get out of this office and seriously get laid. However, I can't concern myself with her. *See? Selfish.* I only want to think about me and this trip.

Then, *boom*, a deep masculine interruption happens, and Jane militantly stands as if the mayor or someone important had entered her office. A ripple of confusion rushes over my spine at the sharp attack of his voice until I hear the words *lunatic* and *spilled coffee* in the same sentence.

I'm still wearing my coffee-stained shirt but placed a cardigan I had in my bag over it. I didn't have time to return to Jane's condo for a clothing change. A paper napkin in the public restroom at the coffee shop was the best I could do to clean off the sticky liquid that coated my bare legs and covered my sandals. I smell of day-old coffee and melted chocolate.

Spinning in the chair I sit in before Jane's desk, I immediately note three things about *the* Mr. Ashford Jane has mentioned over the years.

One, I don't know why she's speaking so formally to him like he's some eighty-year-old foggy instead

of a man with fine lines of fifty around his eyes.

Two, he's no longer wearing the coffee-stained shirt or the soiled jacket, returning me briefly to those wayward thoughts of him sexily striping out of the aforementioned ruined suit.

Which leads to number three, where I recognize him instantly and he notices me—*the lunatic*.

"No," he groans.

"Yes," I mock, straightening my back before peering at my sister who introduces us, sort of.

Oh, and number four, I do not appreciate his demeaning tone with Jane. Where is her gumption? What has happened to my feisty, take-no-shit older sister? She's the bossy one. The mother hen one. The I'm-in-charge one. *What is this?*

If I didn't know better, I'd say Mr. Ashford holds Jane's heart. Her eyes reflect admiration, perhaps respect for him, but his business partner is the man Jane pines for. Her love-hate relationship with Mr. Wright—Machlan Wright—is a dynamic I don't understand. Underneath all her complaints about long hours and working on days off, she has a serious crush and desperate desire to get laid by someone she's deemed *Volde-Mach*.

Then I notice Jane leering at me. A tight grin forms on her thin lips. The animated Grinch in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* has nothing on the face my sister wears and I recognize that look. I fear that look. That look suggests a plan has just formed in her small, caged heart and that plan somehow involves me.

No, Jane. *Don't you do it.* I shake my head before she speaks. Then, she announces my travel plans for California and suggests I give Mr. Assford a ride. I nearly fall out of the office chair.

He's headed to California, too? Why isn't he flying? This is Chicago, a hub for air travel.

However, I already have a hint of his haughty airs. Not on a plane. Not on a train. He won't drive a car. I want to tell him where to shove his soiled suit and just how far.

When he rejects Jane's offer of my services, I bite my tongue. *Yeah, right back at ya'.* I am not driving this ass—despite the firmness of it in his one-thousand-dollar suit pants—across the country. He can find his own car and drive it off a cliff for all I care. I hope the gear stick gets shoved up his—Thank goodness our timing doesn't match up.

But then Jane opens her mouth again. “I'm sure Mae could speed up her trip to accommodate you. You said you weren't on a timetable. You can always drive Mr. Ashford to California and do your trip in reverse.”

Jane and I glare at one another. *How is his problem suddenly mine?* Even more so, this is the exact thing I'm avoiding in this trip. I do not want, nor need, nor desire a traveling companion, especially one as arrogant as this guy. I'm doing things my way on the highway.

Not to mention, Jane has had a difficult time understanding the purpose of this trip. Despite the blessed divorce. Despite happy motherhood. Despite my business success. I'm in search of myself. *Who am I?* Where am I going in the future? Going in reverse defeats the purpose. I'm moving forward in life. My carefully constructed, otherwise known as creatively unplanned, trip is from Chicago to L.A., not L.A. and back.

When suit-man asks if I can make it to California by Wednesday, I'm only too pleased to respond in a firm

negative. We couldn't possibly make it that far that fast. And he can't possibly be considering Jane's suggestion.

I glance over at Mr. *Ashhole* and notice him looking back at me. He's leveling me with a glare that could bury me. Disgust fills his expression. His strong nose wrinkles like he smells a stench. However, I'm a fan of dirt. Flowers are my business. And I've perfected the I-dislike-you-too stare, compliments of my ex-husband. I break away from looking at this man, wondering just what my sister is thinking.

Eventually, the ultimate idea arrives, and I tell him to drive himself, again gnashing my teeth at the desire to tell him a few other choice things he can do.

His sharp "no" doesn't surprise me, but what does is when he leaves the office in a manner similar to how he left me on the sidewalk this morning. Without a word, he spins on his heels and retreats from Jane's office.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I snap at my sister as soon as we are alone again.

Jane lowers herself to her desk chair as if the weight of this conversation presses on her. "I don't want you alone."

"I *want* to be alone. That's the point. Do something for myself. Be free to be me." I pat my chest, exasperated that my sister doesn't understand and upset that she'd suggest I take on her boss as a rider. "I am not hauling his fine ass across the country."

Jane tilts her head, and a grin pokes at the corner of her mouth. "Fine ass?"

"Just ass. I am not driving that ass anywhere." On those words, I suddenly sense said ass's return. He hovers just inside Jane's door and the three of us remain in tense silence.

I cross my arms and fall back into the chair across from Jane's desk. The position reminds me I'm uncomfortably damp from the coffee that ruined my shirt and seeped into my bra underneath. The cardigan is also absorbing some of the mess and the entire moment feels like a bad omen.

“I’ll meet you tomorrow morning at six.” The directive hangs in the air before he spins once again on his expensive leather loafers and exits Jane’s office.

“He cannot be serious,” I turn on my sister. Her shoulders fall in relief.

“Please, just do this for me,” Jane folds her hands and lifts them under her chin, pleading with me like she did when we were kids and she wanted something done, by me or our younger sister Lindee.

“Why, Jane? Why?” Why him? Why this? How is this... this... insufferable man suddenly riding in my car with me all the way to California?

She softly shrugs. “He needs you.”

My brows pinch. The shift in her voice makes my skin pebble. She isn’t making any sense.

“And you might need him.” *Because she doesn’t want me on the road alone.*

Shaking my head, I disagree with her.

There is no way I will ever need Tucker Ashford.

4

ILLINOIS – DAY 1

Playlist: “Sweet Home Chicago” written by Robert Johnson
(1936)

[Mae]

If my sister hadn't told me the exorbitant price Tucker Ashford was willing to pay a car service to haul his ass across the country—which would be paid to me instead—I wouldn't be parked before Lou Mitchell's at six on Friday morning. The infamous diner is noted as a traditional starting point ritual. Before hitting the Mother Road, travelers stopped here to fuel up on their world-famous coffee. Upon visiting, every woman is given a box of Milk Duds. According to the internet, Greeks are known for their hospitality and when entering their home, women and children are offered something sweet as a warm welcome. I'm nearly giddy with the possibility.

That body-ripple excitement comes to a crash when I see Tucker Ashford in another business suit, tugging a rolling suitcase behind him and wearing an over-the-shoulder computer bag. *A man purse. Why am I not surprised?* What I am surprised about is that he showed. I was hoping he wouldn't. Which isn't exactly true, but it's what I'm telling myself. When my sister bamboozled me into giving this insufferable man a two-thousand miles ride across the country, cutting into my spirit trip, I drew the line at picking him up at his condominium like a damn chauffeur.

“If he's so desperate for a ride, he can meet me at Lou's.”

Jane wasn't happy with my ultimatum, but neither was I. My trip was scheduled for two full weeks of cross-country bliss including cheesy pitstops and cheeky locations. I wanted to see everything. Realistically, two weeks didn't allow me to visit every single highlight along the way. I'd spend more time pausing than driving and I wanted the drive time. One thing I knew about myself was that driving long distances often led to reflection. Of course, on the last long-distance trip I'd taken, it became abundantly clear it was time to leave my husband. There was also the fact he was in the shower with his lover in our home when I returned, but I'm not allowing thoughts of Adam on this trip. Adam is ceasing to exist for me as anything other than the sperm donor for my sons.

"Good morning," I call out, sounding more cheerful than I feel at seeing Mr. Hot Suit Pants. We'll be in the car for long stretches of time, and I can't imagine a business suit is the most comfortable attire to ride in, but then again, what do I know about fashion? My professional wear is jeans and T-shirts. If I could wear pajamas to work, I would, but my industry involves dirt, sweat, and weather conditions, therefore I dress accordingly.

Mr. Assford grunts in response to my greeting. Gone is the momentarily flirtatious silver fox from the sidewalk yesterday morning. *Fine*. I open the door to the restaurant for him.

"What is this?" he asks, noting my hand on the door handle.

"It's called opening a door. Anyone who is a gentleman might recognize it." I don't need a man to open doors for me, but the traditionalism of gentlemanly behavior would be welcome. In my early years, this action was called manners. But, he's the one lugging baggage and I have free hands, so I opened the door for him.

"I mean, why are you going inside?"

"*We* are going inside for breakfast," I state. "It's the most important meal of the day." Plus, I love pancakes and I'd read

the ones here are delicious.

Tucker, as my sister had reminded me was his first name, tilts his head as he glares back at me. “I don’t think I can trust you around a cup of coffee.”

If he were anyone else, I’d be expecting a slight smile to follow his sarcasm, but from what I’ve learned of him, he’s dead serious. Jane told me *Mr. Ashford* is the strictest of professionals. And I wonder for the millionth time how my sister talked me into this situation.

Swallowing back the chuckle in my throat, I shrug. “Suit yourself.” My eyes roam his attire, which might be another thousand-dollar suit for all I know. The dark navy color of this one highlights his eyes, hinting at a touch of blue within the steely gray irises. His more salt than pepper facial hair is apparent today as a thin sheen of bristle speckles his jaw. Those edgy cheekbones are male model-worthy, and I wonder for half a second if he was a model. Jane informed me he has expensive taste and fashion sense, but she wouldn’t give me more information. She hesitated when I asked what his deal was. Why did he talk to her the way he did? Why did she address him as she did?

“It’s a sign of respect. He’s my boss.”

“He’s only a man.” A good looking one at that, but he’s arrogant. *“And he’s our age.”*

Jane only shook her head, dismissing me as the country bumpkin she thinks I am. I hate to remind my sister that I *own* my business while she’s working *for* someone, so I don’t mention it. What Jane does is important in its own right, and most of all, what Jane does she does because it’s her life. No two Fox sisters have traveled the same path.

While Tucker decides to remain on the sidewalk, I enter the restaurant and take a deep breath.

Step One.

I wanted to return to the BEGIN sign this morning and then travel to the diner, taking my time to mentally absorb the

fact I'm really doing this. I'm really going to drive across the country from one coast to another. Okay, Lake Michigan isn't considered a coast of the United States, but it should be. The third coast should be a thing. However, I took my pictures yesterday by the sign and as my trip is being condensed to a week's journey, I'm forging onward.

The hostess leads me to a booth, and I slip onto the bench seat, perusing the menu after ordering a black coffee with cream and sugar. No mochaccino here. As I scan the breakfast selections, a body flops into the seat across from me. I don't look up.

"Look, I'm sorry how things went down yesterday. I know this isn't the best of solutions, but I have a business to run. I have calls to make and reports to read, and we need to get on the road. I need to be in California by Wednesday."

Refusing to visually acknowledge him, I continue to stare at the menu when I respond. "I don't think we can make it before Friday."

"My daughter's rehearsal dinner is Friday. I need to be in L.A. by Wednesday."

My head pops up, and I stare at him, ignoring his dictating tone but suddenly understanding *his* rush to reach California. "Friday gives us wiggle room."

"I don't want wiggle room." On anyone else, that statement might sound silly. On him, it's ridiculous and I can't help the chuckle that finally escapes at his expense. He's so uptight compared to the smiling man of yesterday. The one with sparkling silver eyes and firm hands on my hips.

"Again, suit yourself." I glance back at the menu, but the stiff plastic is pressed down to the table, followed by the sharp thud of his palm.

"I'm not joking around with you."

"I'm not anything with you. You need the ride, not me." Slipping the menu free of his flattened hand, I lift it to cover my face and block out the view of him.

Who does he think he is? A fucking rock star or something?

He exhales. “Fine. Breakfast. Only coffee and to-go.”

I lower the menu enough to see that silver-sheened hair on him and I’m grateful the waitress returns to take my order before I smack him over the head with the flimsy plastic sheet.

“What can I get you?” she asks, all Midwestern sweet.

“Coffee. To-go,” *Mr. Ashford* barks.

“Pancakes and bacon. For here.” My eyes narrow at him while the waitress takes my menu and steps away. The tension between myself and the ass I’m hauling across the country is thicker than the chocolate syrup in a mochaccino, and if I had some, I’d pour it over my breakfast companion. He needs some sweetening.

“We need to establish a few things,” he states, and I narrow my eyes even more at him. His eyes avoid mine. “I have work to conduct during the day, but I could share in some driving time in the evenings if that gets us there faster.”

No way in hell is he driving my car.

“We need to discuss sleeping arrangements.”

“I am not sleeping with you,” I blurt. The waitress happens to return with our coffees as I make my announcement and she snorts. Our eyes meet for a brief second and her nod says, *you tell him, girl*. I thank her for the hot drink while Tucker doesn’t acknowledge her presence. Instead, those metallic eyes of his watch me. His nose wrinkles as it did yesterday when he saw me the *second* time. As if he smelled something stinky.

“Of course not,” he huffs.

Same, pal. While I haven’t had sex in I don’t know how long, and the last thing I’ll be doing is shacking up with this guy along the road, his adamant tone is a teeny bit hurtful. His harshness stings, pinpricking at my insecurities. Adam didn’t want to sleep with me either and I was his wife. Tucker’s

disgruntled words along with the wrinkle of his nose make me feel like day-old trash. I might be forty-three, but I'm not old, and while I'm no beauty queen, I'm not a Cabbage Patch kid. Maybe he's used to pretty and peachy, and that's on him. I'm homegrown, sunburnt, and proud of both characteristics.

"I simply meant we'll need to rest along the way."

I nod. I've actually mapped out a few places where I'd consider stopping. The truth is, I wanted the road to take me where it will, and I don't have confirmed hotel reservations anywhere. I figured I'd stop when I wanted and keep driving when I could.

Suddenly, I'm excited again about the journey.

"Let me show you the map." I reach for my oversized tote and pull out an extensive binder I've made, highlighting the route per state, marking locations where I want to stop, and places I want to see. Laying the three-ring binder flat, I flip to the first page and point to our current location.

"We're starting here because it's—"

His cell phone rings, and he doesn't hesitate to answer it at the table. This is rude and something Adam would often do on official date nights when we were trying to 'repair our marriage'. I don't know what he could possibly talk to his assistant about at seven in the evening or what customer was so important he'd take a call at nine at night, but Adam did it. He allowed business to interrupt everything. Dinner. Vacations. Private times.

Without glancing down at my booklet, Tucker slips from the booth and begins talking while walking to the diner's exit. Once he's outside, I watch him pace back and forth along the sidewalk. While my ex-husband was everything opposite Hot Suit Man, this type of behavior is synonymous...married to his phone more than his wife. Then again, Jane assured me Tucker isn't married. *Widower*, she said without providing additional details.

My breakfast arrives hot and fast, and I tap on the window in hopes of catching Tucker's attention. He doesn't look up, and I take a deep breath. The inhale causes the scent of fresh pancakes, sweet syrup, and crisp bacon to invade my olfactory senses and my mouth waters.

Who needs sexy silver fox suit porn when you can have pancakes instead?

Not this girl. No siree, not me.

Playlist: “Life is a Highway” – Tom Cochrane

[Tucker]

“Is this a joke?” I blurt once Mae finally exits the restaurant and approaches a vehicle. I’d gotten a call from Jude and the argument inflated my irritation with this driving situation.

“No, it’s Louie,” she scoffs, her voice full of delight, and I glance at her hand on the driver’s door handle.

“It’s a fucking Toyota Prius,” I clip.

A bright blue, four-door sedan that screams dad-mobile, and while I’m a dad, I wouldn’t be caught dead driving one of these cars.

“So?” Her hand leaves the handle and fists land on her hips, hitching one to the side as she gives me her best death glare. I’ll give it to her that she tries to stab me with those bright blue flares but she’s just too...cute...to pull off an evil look. “You need a car with a V8 engine to prove your manhood? One that guzzles gas like a sorority sister drinking vodka and Gatorade?” She pauses as if she expects an answer. Bitter mockery rings in her voice and I’m wondering if she’s projecting on me an experience with someone else.

She adds, “It’s ecofriendly and fuel efficient.”

“Nope,” I snap. *I’m not riding in that thing.*

“Yep.” She shrugs again, turning for the driver’s door and I swear I never want to see that shoulder hitch again. We haven’t even lasted half an hour, nor have we hit the road and I already want to run her over. She’s so...*her*. “You should be thankful I didn’t go with a VW campervan.”

The mention of the iconic road trip van reminds me of days long gone. When some new friends and I used something similar to cart around equipment and hit local bars until— I pause. I don't want to think about those days. *Not* recalling those days is best.

I don't respond to Mae's comment about the campervan as she pops the trunk on the sedan. Several suitcases of her own rest inside, plus a reusable grocery bag. *Ecofriendly*. When she removes it, I set my carry-on beside her luggage. My suit has already been shipped to the wedding location. I had another one custom made, as my only daughter gets married only once. It's an important moment I'll want to commemorate.

Closing the trunk, Mae returns to the driver's side, and I circle the back of the car, opening the right-side rear passenger door.

"What are you doing?" Mae questions. Ignoring her, I slip into the backseat with my laptop bag. Mae leans into the front seat, glaring at me in that way she does—like a blue sky on a clear day—over the headrest. I ignore the unsettling ripple running through my body as she leers at me.

"I have work to do," I remind her.

"This isn't *Driving Miss Daisy*," she snaps.

"Of course not," I remark, and her voice echoes mine, mocking me under her breath. "Just get in and drive," I demand. It's going to be a long couple of days, especially since even when she's beaming those flaming blues at me, my heart beats in a rhythm I don't recognize. She huffs, tossing herself into the driver's seat and places the reusable bag she removed from the trunk next to her in the passenger seat. Reaching over her shoulder, she locks her seat belt in place and starts the ignition.

"Buckle up, buttercup," she mutters. "Or should I say, keep your hands and feet inside the vehicle at all times, Mr. Ashford. I'd hate to dismember you."

The hint of her desire to maim me isn't missed and I fight the curve of my lips. She's snarky and quick. Now, if only she'll be speedy on this highway.

A few minutes after we pull into the never-ending city traffic, Mae speaks. "So, I have a playlist made for the journey, but I'm open to requests." Her voice lifts, sounding like a radio announcer or a nightclub disc jockey. "I also have a selection of audiobooks but those might be a bit inappropriate." From my vantage point to the rearview mirror, I see her wrinkle her nose as a soft laugh crosses her lips.

I'll assume inappropriate is synonymous with dirty, raunchy perhaps, even porn-worthy, and I'm a little taken aback. Not offended, just surprised. Could I listen to something of that nature with a stranger? Most likely not. I'm not being some dick-headed prude, but I'm more afraid my dick will have a mind of its own.

My gaze remains on Mae in the rearview mirror. She's pretty in a natural way. Her chestnut-colored hair is a bit wild, loose and long. Her skin is sun-kissed, making her eyes sparkle and her teeth brighter when she smiles. And Mae is smiling...to herself. I called her Sunshine yesterday. She was a singular ray of it, planted on that sidewalk for some reason.

What is she thinking up there?

I don't know why I care and decide I don't. Pulling my laptop out of my bag, I open it and connect the portable Wi-Fi I'll need to use for internet service on this trip. I already anticipate inconsistency, but as long as I can be online for a little while, I can always reconnect when we take pit stops. I'd been warned by Jane about occasional pauses in our travels. I still can't believe I've accepted this option.

"So, where should we begin?" Mae asks, interrupting the first email I'm trying to read.

"I thought you had this mapped out." Her hands rest at a perfect ten and two on the steering wheel while her phone dictates travel status for the highway exiting Chicago.

“I do. I simply meant where should we begin in our life stories?” Glancing over her shoulder, she clicks on her blinker and properly changes lanes.

“Our life stories?” I echo, my mouth falling open.

“Yeah. Since we’re stuck together for the next few days, we should probably get to know one another. I’m Mae. I run a garden center in northern Michigan. Now, your turn.” Her tone teases but I’m not taking the bait.

“We don’t need to talk. In fact, let’s not.” My eyes lower to the laptop screen and the car jolts to an abrupt stop. My head pops upward again and I notice bright red taillights on the car before us.

“Sorry about that. Traffic.” Friday morning is gridlock, and I blame the growing number of cars on our delay. She didn’t need breakfast. “Anyway, we might as well be friends.”

“We don’t need to be friends,” I mutter.

“Everybody could use another friend.”

“Not me,” I state, turning my attention out the side window a second. I’ve only had one true friend, and that’s Machlan, which is surprising considering how our friendship began.

“Is this a *When Harry Met Sally* moment?” she asks, tipping upward in her seat to peer at me better through the rearview mirror.

“A what?”

“You know, the movie *When Harry Met Sally*? They drove from Chicago to New York City, and Billy Crystal’s character told Meg Ryan men and women could never be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.”

“I am not thinking about sex with you,” I retort.

Her lips twist a bit as her shoulders fall and she settles back into her driving position. “I didn’t say you were thinking about sex with me. I’m simply asking, if you are suggesting

you can't be friends with me because of the sex thing? A male-female thing. Whether attracted to me or not, you're thinking about sex because I'm a woman."

"I don't know what you're talking about. As for a male-female thing, I'll be keeping my male thing away from your female thing, so we don't need to discuss this. We can add it to the rules."

"What rules?" she pauses before answering her own question. "Rules of the Road 101. No sex between passenger and driver?"

I choke on air, then cough to clear my throat. There is no way she's propositioning me; however, it's happened before and often. Rochelle and I would be at a conference. Women would profess their admiration of me, my dedication to my wife, and then hint I should ditch the devotion.

I'm in room 403 if you'd like to discuss vagina power a little deeper, harder, faster.

I'll be in the bar if you want to share a drink and show me how to Liven Up Thursdays.

Does she really appreciate all you do for her?

I shake my head, ridding it of thoughts of Rochelle and her made up terms for spicing up marriages. Taking a sip of my coffee, I try to loosen my clogged throat.

"That's okay," Mae proudly states. "I don't fake orgasms anyway."

Coffee sprays forward, splattering over my laptop screen, the back of the seat before me, and my fresh-pressed shirt.

"Excuse me?"

"You know, in the movie, Sally fakes that orgasm in a diner to prove a point. Women can fake them. Men don't recognize them. I don't do that anymore. My orgasms are all real and all mine."

Good God. *Stop the car*, I want to yell. *Let me off this ride*.

Instead, I choke again, struggling with the laughter tickling the back of my esophagus. Just who is this woman and where has she come from?

“I think I’m okay with you keeping your orgasms and your friendship to yourself.” Peering at Mae’s face once more in the rearview mirror, her brows pinch and I realize I might have said too much, gone a little too far. I should apologize. She’s right. We have days together in this car, if this thing can be called a car, but we don’t need to talk. We don’t need to get personal or physical. Definitely not getting physical, even if that wounded look in her eyes sends a strange sensation to my sternum.

Quickly, I glance down at my laptop, realizing for the second day in a row, I’m wearing coffee because of this woman. And while hot coffee seeping into my shirt has me thinking of warm places, wet and dripping on a woman, I shut that thought down and focus on the emails awaiting my attention.

+ + +

“Mach, I already told you no deal.”

Currently, Impact has a publisher hounding us for a biography about Rochelle. They want us to immortalize the grassroots girl-turned-woman-empowerment motivator, but then we’d need to uncover the disturbing truth. Rochelle had never been grassroots and despite the pretty face, six-inch stilettos, and winning smile, an unpleasant woman resided within that picture-perfect form. I would know firsthand about the unattractive creature she’d become because I was married to her for almost twenty-four years.

Mae has detoured us off the highway at an exit promoting the original Route 66. I didn’t question the shift, but as we hit

a two-lane highway with zero cars on the road around us, her window goes down and the papers surrounding me begin to fly.

“Mae,” I holler over the sudden noise of air whooshing into the vehicle and the flapping of papers.

“Who’s Mae?” Mach asks.

“My driver.”

“You have a driver named Mae?” Mach snorts. “Tell me she’s an eighty-year-old grandma who can barely see over the steering wheel.” My eyes flit to Mae as I try to capture the papers now disorganized and spilling over the back seat. I’ll need to re-shuffle everything once I’m off the phone. Mae rolls her window back up a little bit and I hold my gaze on the side of her face, noting once again the chestnut coloring of her hair as the strands whip around her cheeks in the breeze from the open window. Her fingers delicately brush long locks off her face, exposing the side of her neck. Her index finger twirls the wayward hairs around it for a brief second before slipping free and the tendrils dance around her cheek once again.

“She’s not,” I say, my voice cracking as I answer Mach. He knows about my predicament. The transportation service cancelled. When I told him Jane’s suggestion of her sister, Mach laughed as I had.

Is she hot? If I’d had coffee in my mouth yesterday when he’d asked, I’d have sputtered and choked around the liquid as I did a bit ago. Hot isn’t the right word, but there is something warm about her. Maybe it was that tan skin giving off proof that she enjoyed sunrises and summer days. Maybe it was that soft brown hair floating around her face. Maybe it was those blue eyes, which give me a quick glance over her shoulder.

Sunshine.

“Better?” she asks.

Am I better? In the years since Rochelle’s passing, the question has been asked by many. Was I better off without

her? The thought was terrible to consider after her death and how it happened. The question was honest, though.

“So. Mae?” Mach hums in my ear, taunting me with the name and drawing my attention back to him.

“She’s Jane’s sister.”

Mach laughs harder. Had he already forgotten her name? Had I mentioned it yesterday?

“You didn’t?” He chuckles harder, implying he can’t believe I hired Jane’s sister.

“I had no other choice.” I really didn’t. Flying wasn’t an option. The train wasn’t either. Mae seemed to be the answer when I was still struggling with the question. *Why?* “She owes me a suit. The least she could do was drive me to California.”

The trade wasn’t exactly even.

“Well, this certainly sounds interesting.” Mach snickers and I purse my lips as if he can see me.

“Not interesting,” I state, catching Mae’s eyes in the rearview mirror again. *Dammit.* Why does she need to look at me like that? Then she narrows those azure beams and returns her sight to the road where she should be concentrating.

Suddenly, music fills the interior of the car. Rapid drumbeats and an electric guitar count off the beginning of “Life is a Highway.” *Is she kidding me?* Not joking in the least, Mae begins to sing with all the wrong lyrics.

Mach chuckles again through the phone. “She sounds like heaven.”

“She’s from hell.”

My clearly inexperienced singer belts out line after line of mumbled words, as she doesn’t know the song until the chorus hits. Then at the top of her lungs, she’s on point and shaking her head, tapping without rhythm on the steering wheel. She’s killing this song and I cringe.

“I gotta go,” I mutter to Mach, disconnecting us before addressing Mae over the riotous song. “Dogs are crying on the side of the road.”

“What?” she yells over the music, cupping her ear.

“You can’t sing,” I tell her, a little too harshly. “Turn that down.” Suddenly, I sound like my father and a memory I keep locked in the recesses of my mind stumbles forward.

“What is that noise?” Jonathon Ashford would yell at me as my fingers flew over the piano keys.

“It’s not noise, Jonathon. He’s a prodigy.” My mother defended my love of music. I didn’t know what prodigy meant when I was young, but I played on those eighty-eight keys like a master. Like the ebony and ivory were part of my fingers. Their sound was part of my soul. The ‘noise,’ as my father called it, was heaven. Blissful, aural nirvana, drowning out all the silences of our home, or at times, the screaming matches between my parents.

After another rendition of the chorus returns, Mae belts at the top of her lungs before turning down the music.

“Maybe you need noise canceling headphones,” she suggests.

I actually have a pair as I’d assumed I might need them to concentrate on the trip. However, I’m not pulling them out simply because she recommended them.

“Just wait until I put on the dirty romance novels,” she warns. Her body shimmies in her seat and a cute-evil grin curls the side of her mouth. Her shoulders wiggle and her upper body squirms while she continues to mutter the wrong words to the song.

She wouldn’t dare switch to a naughty romance book. She said no fake orgasms, and the last thing I need to witness is a real one as she gets off to the sound of some deep tenor reading words like pussy and cock to her.

The thought causes stirrings in my own pants, and I wonder what this reaction is to her. *Don't even go there.* Shaking my head, I disagree with the lyrics of the song.

This woman will not get in my blood.

She will not make me a no-longer lonely man.

I will not fall in love with her.

This highway *is* a dead end.

6

Playlist: “Soul Man” - Sam and Dave

“Think” - Aretha Franklin

[Mae]

If life was a highway, somewhere along the way I’d gotten a flat tire.

I didn’t know who I was anymore or what direction I was going. I remained stranded on the side of the proverbial road, looking at the other drivers as they passed me by in their shiny Audis and practical Hondas. I stood speechless, wondering if anyone would stop and help me, or if I’d be on my own, as I always have been, to fix things myself.

I wanted to ride that highway...or at least, take a journey to rediscover myself.

Who am I? Who do I want to be? Where have I been?

The physical answer is I haven’t been anywhere. Born and raised in Missouri. Planted and currently living in Michigan. I’ve been a mother, a wife, and a business owner but I am still lost.

This trip was about me searching for a deeper answer. A truer version of myself. Because somewhere over the years, I’d become someone I didn’t recognize. I don’t have much to complain about so being unhappy sounds unreasonable. I have beautiful grown children—something many women dream of having grace their lives. I own my own profitable business—in an economy where jobs are rare and coveted. The main unhappiness in my life ebbed and flowed around a volatile marriage—one that had more ups and downs than a rollercoaster. Traveling around curves, mood swings happened

like the sudden drop of a cart, or my anxiety increased like a slow, steady climb to the top of the rails. The unpredictability of marriage might be something romance-lovers crave, but I don't hunger for it. I thirst from *the lack* of romance. My life should feel better without Adam. Yet despite being an independent, confident, *hear me roar*, kind of woman, I don't feel that way. I am still missing something. I recognize the hole, but I don't know how to fill it.

Love seems like an obvious answer.

Dating in the new age as an older woman leaves me numb. Beautiful men make me stupid, and most of them aren't attracted to me anyway. Case in point, my backseat passenger. I resent his good looks, and the image of his life as perfect. Then again, why wouldn't it be? Willing women throwing themselves at a handsome man? *Yeah, it must suck to be a good-looking guy.* I have no sympathy.

For some reason, my sister's warning returns to me. "*I don't think it's safe for a woman of your age to drive across the country.*"

A woman of my age? What did that even mean? Was I incapable, uneducated, disillusioned? I was forty-three, not six feet under. Forty was the new twenty. I could do whatever I pleased, when I pleased, how I pleased and be proud. *Snap-snap-snap.* However, my worried sister had planted a seed of doubt in my head. Should I really drive across the country alone? Would it be smart? Would it be safe? What if I did get that dreaded flat tire? Then again, that's what AAA is for.

"*I'll be fine. This is just what I need,*" I'd argued back.

"*I'm not saying you can't. I'm just saying I'd feel better if you weren't alone.*"

Her wish came true. I am not alone. A stupidly good-looking man sits behind me, staring at his laptop as the country air whirls inside the car and the scenic view of slowly growing crops whizzes past him. He isn't on a journey of discovery. He knows very well who he is, and I bet women do

throw themselves at him all the time. He doesn't have trouble being friends with those women. Friendship doesn't get in the way because sex is all he thinks about with *them*. *They* have sex with him.

I heard what he said to his partner on the phone.

Jane's sister: She owes me a suit. Not interesting. She's from hell.

Well, he's no picnic and strangely, I feel even more alone with him in the car than if I'd been by myself.

As we pass through Joliet, Illinois, where an infamous prison is located, an iconic blues song fills the car. Made popular by the characters Jake and Elwood Blues in *The Blues Brothers*, a classic 1980 film, the song feels appropriate. I've been sprung from a cage around my heart and it's time to be free. I will no longer be a passenger in my own life. The steering wheel is in my hand.

"Why aren't we on the highway?" my riding companion asks as we travel a portion of Route 66 covered by the modern path of I-55, which overlaps and interweaves with the original highway. In 1985, the original Route 66 was decommissioned to allow for the faster-paced interstate expressways instituted to connect city to city from Chicago to Los Angeles. Unfortunately, small towns paid the price. Quaint locations turned into abandoned vestiges of days gone by and I wanted those forgotten hints, those mysteries of the past. It was difficult to explain why, and I definitely did not think someone like Tucker Ashford could understand.

"We're headed for the Gemini Giant." One of three gentle giant structures, nicknamed Muffler Men, exist across Illinois, and I was in search of each one. The first was located in Wilmington in front of a diner, and I was almost giddy once again with the prospect of seeing something authentically antiquated from the old highway.

Tucker huffs at my explanation but doesn't ask for more information.

“Are you a blues fan?” he asks instead. Curiosity rings through his voice along with a touch of surprise. For once, he isn’t snapping at me. My window remains at half-mast after his earlier outburst and the car warms with the rising heat of a Midwestern summer day. Outside the major city, the land is flat. I’ve turned down the music, after he insulted my singing, but he no longer seems bothered by my playlist.

“Not really.” I don’t know much about the sound attributed to Chicago. I recognize drums, horns, and throaty voices, but nothing more, and I briefly consider asking my passenger if he’s a fan, but I don’t. After his earlier comments about my singing, I decided against speaking to my traveling companion. I don’t know a single lyric to this song other than the title but something about the sound makes me want to dance and I never dance in front of others.

Tucker returns to his phone and I’m starting to think I’m the one who needs noise canceling headphones. I’d consider purchasing a pair at the next major service station, if I didn’t think they were dangerous to wear as I drove. Besides, I don’t anticipate a gas station with a convenience store anytime soon and I’ll need to keep that in mind as I travel.

In the silence that continues between Tucker and me, Aretha Franklin belts out “Think,” emphasizing her warning to a man about his decisions, clarifying their need for one another, and asking him to consider her feelings. For a moment, my thoughts drift to Adam and my upset that he called me selfish with regard to this trip. I’d never known a more selfish person and the audacity of him accusing me—*Nope*. Not going there. Adam was not allowed head space on this journey.

Following the GPS, I weave toward a small town and almost miss the green giant I’d been seeking. Slowing, I pull into the parking lot of the diner where patrons are urged to take photos with the fiberglass man. Parking the car, I hop out while Tucker ducks his head, staring out the side window after me. The astronaut, reminiscent of space age dreams in the 1970s, is dressed in a Kelly-green outfit, with what looks more

like a welder's hood on his head than an astronaut's helmet. He holds a silver rocket in his hand. For a moment, I breathe him in. He's nostalgic although I can't decide why. Turning around, I do my best to take a selfie, which I have not mastered. My arms are too short, my face always too close to the camera and the angle can't really capture both me and the large statue.

"Well?" Tucker questions when I return to the car.

Assuming the single word question wonders what I thought, I tell him the truth. "I thought he'd be bigger." Noting once more the rocket held in the statue's hand, I snicker to myself, my mind resorting to the twelve-year old boy inside me. "And that's what she said."

I snort, laughing at my own joke because the tension between me and the man in my backseat is getting to me. Going into this trip on my own, I accepted I wasn't going to share things I encountered. I'd been prepared for the singular experience. I'd been prepared to think my own thoughts and see what I sought, and then enjoy them—or not—on my own. Expressing my disappointment to a man clearly disinterested in our journey was equally disappointing and for a half second, I consider turning around and returning him to Chicago. We'd only gone a little over an hour and a half. I'd still have time to spend the weekend with my sister and Tucker could find another ride to California. I could start my quest on Sunday as initially planned.

Instead, I sigh.

"Would you like something?" The restaurant behind me is your classic drive-in, an original fast-food counter, and I envision a chocolate milkshake made with ice cream.

"I'm good." Tucker's disgruntled tone pisses me off. He's missing out, but I decide I'll pass as well. Pancakes and bacon from this morning have left my belly full, and I don't need the stomachache milk products give me as I age. The sad fact is I can't handle things like cheese and ice cream like I did when I was younger. There are a lot of things I don't handle as I had

when I was in my twenties and thirties, and one of those things is pouty men.

Tucker's indignant silence unnerves me, and I start the ignition, reversing out of the parking lot and returning to a strip of Route 66 running parallel to the interstate. Eventually, I pull into another small town and park in a public lot.

Welcome to Pontiac.

"Now what?" Tucker mutters.

"This is one of the more famous Route 66 museums along the way. I'm not stopping at every one of them, but I've picked a few and this one wins in Illinois. You can stay in the car if you wish." The statement reminds me of bickering boys and their whining while I ran errands. When my sons were little, leaving them in the car was never an option. As teens, they could just sit and stew. As my passenger wants to be an adolescent, he can do the same.

"How long will you be?" he asks, reminding me once more of my grown boys.

"Not more than an hour."

"An hour?" he huffs.

"Consider it my lunch break."

"It's hardly ten." He continues to mumble while I'm exiting the car. After crossing the road, I enter an old fire station, which houses the museum. Wandering the aisles between display cases, I scan the memorabilia of the most iconic main street through the States—metal road signs, rusty tin cans of oil and gas, preserved menus, black and white photographs, toys and knick-knacks. The numerous mementos are too much to absorb and knowing an impatient man awaits me in the car, I don't take the time I might have to read every notice and explanation.

Instead, I imagine families with a mom, a dad, and two kids riding along these classic roads to their vacation destinations. Life has veered from that picture-perfect image,

not only since the decommissioning of Route 66 but also since the opening of it. With the rise in divorces, women in the workforce, the extended longevity of life, and the expense of children, the world has shifted in what it considers the ‘normal’ family.

As a female divorcée, I’m marked as a single mother and am breaking that antiquated norm. I was also raised by one. I’m a working mother as well, and...*gasp*...own a successful business. None of these things are as unheard of today as they’d been fifty, sixty, seventy years ago, and it’s incredible to consider it’s only been just over fifty years since these changes in the familial structure occurred.

My mind continues to wander, imagining a young couple on their honeymoon, traveling along the highway as they start their new life together. Hopes and dreams fill their heads and their hearts. How long ago that had been for Adam and me. How young and disillusioned I was when I was in that newly married state. How I had loved my husband at first. My disappointment in him shouldn’t still weigh heavy on me and perhaps it’s a reflex, one in which I continue to blame myself for him straying in our marriage.

Why wasn’t I ever enough for him? Why hadn’t he loved me like I had loved him?

“What are you staring at?” The gruff male voice behind me startles me, and while my hand comes to my chest, I don’t spin to face him. Instead, I catch his reflection in the glass enclosure housing history and preserving a time long past.

Why do we encapsulate memories?

“Just taking it all in. There’s so much to look at.”

He huffs. “Looks like a bunch of junk.”

I twist at his assessment at the same time he leans forward, narrowing his eyes to better see something within the case. He stands close enough that his arm brushes mine and I inhale, catching the scent of him, spicy and wild, which surprises me. Amid the musty fragrance of the museum, my

senses wreak havoc, and my imagination pulls me off to the side of a road, one lined with large, lush evergreens. In my head, my young honeymoon couple scrambles into the backseat, eager to touch one another, desperate with their mouths on each other, before clothing is lowered and body parts connected, rocking that parked car under perpetually green trees.

Tucker turns his head in my direction while this montage plays out in my mind. His face is close as he leans beside me. His eyes meet mine and all my thoughts merge into him and me in the same position. His suit pants lowered. My shorts removed. Our centers connecting.

I lick my lips, wondering what it would taste like to kiss him and just as quickly wondering where the thought comes from as I don't even like this man. Sure, he's attractive and I bet his rocket is bigger than the one the Gemini Giant was holding, but our mouths will not meet.

Two roads diverged... Our paths and body parts shall not connect.

Still, Tucker's gaze holds mine as he slowly stands taller. "Why do you like all this stuff?"

I shrug, unable to find an appropriate explanation let alone coherent thoughts with him staring at my mouth like he is.

"I'm coming to hate that shrug," he mutters under his breath, and he wrinkles his nose as I've witnessed him do several times. Is the musty smell too much for him? *Or do I smell bad?* His nearness is too much for me, and my reaction is something I don't understand. Forcing myself, I take a step to the right and wander down the remainder of the aisle. As I pass case after case, I decide I don't want to see the artifacts as much as I want to experience what I can of the open road.

Tucker stays behind me, keeping his distance and his hands in his pants pockets. While we've driven, he removed his suit jacket and rolled his sleeves to his elbows. He must be

warm, and I wish he would relax. Shadowing me, he makes me nervous.

As we near a display case for the Arizona portion of the trip, Tucker pauses, and I turn back in his direction. My gaze tries to follow his, but I have no idea what he's looking at on the shelves behind glass.

"Is there something about Arizona you're excited to see?" I ask.

"Nope," he says, popping the *-p* as he does. Nodding at him, I glance back toward the case, scanning the exhibit once more in wonder. There's something in the display case about Winslow, Arizona which sounds familiar, but I don't understand why. I've never been there.

"We can go," I state, disappointed in yet another thing on my travels. My irritation isn't really with the trip, though, as much as my companion.

We return to the car, continuing our silence, and I pull up the GPS to recalibrate our location for directions leading south down the highway.

Near a town named Lexington, a roadside sign reads Memory Lane. The path is a strip of the original route.

"Think I can actually drive down that road?" I don't know why I'm asking Tucker, as if he'd know. However, I don't want to destroy anything intended to be a historical landmark. My curiosity is piqued, though. If closing my eyes and driving the strip were an option to feel the ambience of a time gone by, I would. Instead, I want my eyes wide open. No more shutting out what I can't accept as reality in my life. I'd closed my eyes too many times in the past.

"How should I know?" Tucker states snidely from the back seat, and I ignore him as I have from the last stop to this one. Slowly, I pull forward and drive down a small strip of original road, heavy with foliage on either side of the cracked cement path.

“How did people drive those big-as-boat cars down this thing?” I ask aloud, not really wanting an answer, just expressing my thoughts. The section of road isn’t long, isn’t wide, and isn’t much, but something swells inside me. All those travelers. All those sightseers. All those hoppers and dreamers. Did they make it to their destination? Did they find what they were looking for? Would I?

“Well, that was—”

“Have you never taken a road trip?” I interject over his comment, worried he’ll ruin the moment.

“I have. I just—”

“Let me guess, you’ve always traveled by some cozy SUV, complete with A/C and high-tech stereo, plush leather seats, Bluetooth, and maybe a mini-bar,” I mock.

“Actually, the road trip I once took involved something similar to that VW campervan you mentioned earlier.”

My mouth falls open. “Where’d *you* go road trippin’?” I absolutely cannot imagine him in a beat-up van, but suddenly an image of him in jeans, a tight T-shirt, and flip-flops fills my head. He could pull off beach casual as much as he rocks the business suit.

Tucker squints, turning his head to peer out the side window. “California.”

My heart hammers in my chest. “Have you already traveled Route 66?” *Why hadn’t he mentioned it?*

“No. I went more direct. Straight out I-80 west through Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, Utah, Nevada to L.A.”

“Wow,” I whisper, tugging on the steering wheel to pull myself upward and glance at him through the rearview mirror. “That must have been some trip.” That direction is the way I’ve considered doubling back to Chicago. Then again, I haven’t planned my return trip.

“It was.” Softly, he smiles. Just the corner of his mouth crooks upward. His eyes squint again in the bright sunlight as

he focuses out the window, lost in his own memories.

“Why?”

He turns back to me. “Why what?”

“Why did you take that trip?”

He softly huffs and I wish I could look at him better while we speak instead of the seats separating us, with him behind me. My attention needs to remain on the road before me.

“Just young and hopeful back then.”

This surprises me. “What did you hope for?”

“Things that don’t matter anymore.”

This again surprises me, and I risk another peek through the rearview mirror. His head lowers. His forehead furrows. Then he reaches for his phone and the conversation is closed, just like him.

Playlist: “The Piano Man” - Billy Joel

[Tucker]

I’m losing my mind in this car. The fresh scent of Mae mingles with the warm air traveling through the car and I can’t breathe. Her scent along with the continued attempts to talk to me, stifle me. *She’s too much.*

We continue down the road again in silence and as much as I try to concentrate on the emails before me, I can’t. My thoughts continue to wander to her question. *Why? What did I hope for?*

Sometimes it’s difficult to recall the dreams I once held dear. The hopes I had of making it big, being someone in my own right. In my life, the path to success flipped. Instead of obtaining the accolades I desired, Rochelle received them. I wasn’t a jealous man, but I’d been envious of the empire she’d built with my assistance. The following she had, all by looking pretty, exposing our home life, and giving away our secrets, empowered women to take control of who they wanted to be. I supported Rochelle in those ideals. I am not a chauvinist, but I am a realist. I’d given up my dreams and took the sideline while she achieved hers.

The irony in her accomplishments was that she never set out to be as famous as she was. Her initial intention had been a simple blog. She wanted to vent her grievances and connect with other women. She spoke about motherhood and loneliness. She talked about friendships and lost connections. She mentioned our immediate family and intimate rituals in a manner that weren’t quite reality but sounded picture-perfect. She created a model image, not too far off from the cartoon

replicas I'd seen in that museum we'd stopped at of perky-breasted, skirt-wearing mothers and suit-clad fathers from the 1950s.

The exterior of those images has changed but the ideal has not. A woman is more than a mother now; she is a superpower, a warrior, an innovator, and I'd support all these things, as long as someone is genuine. Rochelle had not been. She was moody, easily agitated, and spoiled beyond reason. I faulted myself in many ways. In supporting her pursuit of all things, I'd become someone I never wanted to be.

Glancing out the window at the late morning sky, I quietly allow myself to mourn the person I had once wanted to be for a few seconds, and then return that dream to where it belongs, deeply suppressed within me.

Eventually, Mae pulls into another small town and we near a second Muffler Man, as she called the giant male statues. This one holds an oversized hot dog in his hands.

“He was originally located in Cicero at Bunyon's Hot Dog but was moved here.” Her tour guide voice gives nothing away. I expected her to be more excited with every stop we've made but her quiet demeanor reminds me of Rochelle. *Is Mae not appreciating this trip?* This path was her plan. I'm certainly ready to come out of my skin with the slower paced by-way. I don't understand why we aren't hitting eighty miles per hour on the freeway and crossing this state off our list.

However, Mae parallel parks and exits the car, walking toward the fiberglass structure. She turns her back to it, posing as people do for selfies. Yet, she's struggling with the phone in her hand and lining up her stature with the taller one behind her. Rochelle had been a pro at selfies. Then again, she'd had a permanent camera man—me. As her right hand, I followed beside her everywhere she went, documenting so much of her day, her conferences, her life.

Frustrated by watching Mae's struggle, I forcefully open my door and step onto the sidewalk.

“Here. Let me take it.” If I don’t help her, we might be here all day as she tries for the right angle. Then again, she isn’t exactly posing. She isn’t fluffing her hair or positioning it over her shoulder in a certain way. She isn’t standing sideways, bending a knee, placing a hand on her hip, and tilting her head. She’s just...Mae.

Reaching for the phone, I tap camera mode and focus in on her and the hot dog holding man behind her.

“Think that wiener is big enough?” I ask, recalling her joke about the previous statue and his rocket.

Mae turns to glance at the structure, and I snap a picture of her. When she turns back to me, her face explodes in a smile and my finger presses on the red button again. *Click.*

“Did you just make a joke?” Her grin illuminates her face, highlighting her white teeth and sparking those blue eyes like miniature flames on a gas stove. *Click.*

“Nope,” I mock, staring back at her and taking another picture of her, zooming in on the wide curve of her lips. *Click.* Mae isn’t classically glamorous but she’s perfectly pretty and that smile is...stunning. As in, I’m suddenly stunned in place by the force of it, and my finger presses the camera button once more. *Click.*

“Did you get a good shot?” she asks, slowly approaching me. Glancing at the phone in my hand, I scan the images, pausing on the last one.

“Yeah, I think I got something.” For half a second, I almost ask her to text me the image. Instead, I do it myself, opening the message app and sending all the pictures to my phone.

“What are you doing?” She softly laughs, reaching out for the device.

“Just adding my number in your contacts. You should probably have it in case...”

“In case?” she questions.

In case something happens. I swallow the phrase, recalling how Rochelle sent a final text to me. I shake the memory.

“Just in case we get separated.” My voice drops as I fight the confusing swell of emotion filling my throat. I don’t want to be separated from Mae, which is a strange thought considering I don’t know her. We aren’t exactly getting along on this trip and it’s all my fault. I’m keeping her at a distance for a reason.

I glance down at her phone once more and my mouth curls the slightest bit.

“Is that a smile?” she teasingly questions, and I look up at her, realizing she isn’t looking at the image on her phone but at my face. “Don’t you be smiling, pretty boy,” she coyishly jests and the expression on her face is brighter than the sunshine overhead.

“Don’t hit on me,” I state more harshly than necessary.

Instantly, her beam of sunny rays collapses to a storm cloud. “I wasn’t hitting on you.”

Maybe she wasn’t. Maybe it was just an innocent statement, but I need Mae to keep her distance. She needs to hold back because I don’t need a woman in my life. I already had one who took over everything, and the last thing I need is a road trip fling with my driver. My tempting driver who looks at me one moment like a shining star and then clouds to the feisty woman standing before me now.

Better. This is better. Her irritation will maintain a barrier between us.

Mae’s mouth falls open like she’s about to speak but then her lips slam shut. She looks away from me, but I turn away from her as well because I cannot think about those lips. When we stopped at the museum, Mae stood too close to me. My shoulder brushed her arm as I leaned forward, and my concentration fell to her reflection in the case instead of the contents in the display. Briefly, I’d wondered how she’d react

if I had pressed her up against the exhibit and kissed her senseless, ridding us of the tension swirling around us. Then I remembered that keeping that tension intact was important. I didn't need to cross some imaginary double line, swerving into the wrong lane, and come head-to-head with Mae. I already knew she was more than I could handle.

She takes her phone from my hand, glances down at the pictures I've taken, and creases her brows.

What's wrong with the photos? I almost ask, but don't. I already know I captured her face and that ridiculous statue with the giant wiener behind her.

"Not impressed with his sausage?" I mock and Mae's brow relaxes. She glances up at me, all innocent eyes like she gave me on the sidewalk when we collided only yesterday.

"Are you trying to be funny? Cracking a joke?" Her tone isn't harsh, but her cadence hints this is a serious question.

"I can be funny." I shrug as she's often done to me. Although, her shrug suggests she's keeping something from me, and I don't like it. Then again, I don't need all her secrets because I won't be sharing mine.

"I can be flirty. Doesn't mean I'm hitting on you."

"I—" I'm not certain how to respond. I've acted in the same way countless times. A wink. A smile. The gestures never meant anything. The motions weren't a promise to anyone. I'd been faithful to Rochelle.

"And as long as we're passing out 'don'ts,' and adding to our Rules of the Road 101, don't fall in love with me."

My brows pinch so hard, I'm certain I've made a permanent crease. "Of course not," I stammer.

"Good," she says, nodding once before brushing past me, dropping into the driver's seat and slamming her door.

Slowly, I saunter back to the passenger side and lift the handle, only briefly wondering if Mae would rather leave me here in this small town. Somehow, I wouldn't blame her. I'd

left myself behind a long time ago. Strangely, I might end up missing her if she ditched me.

+ + +

When Mae nears a giant covered wagon minus the cloth and featuring a huge Abraham Lincoln statue in the driver's seat holding a book, I'm ready to lose it. The silence between us for the fifteen-minute ride has been heavier than the rest of the trip. Thankfully, Mae must read the tension coming off me because she continues onward.

"Your tour will continue for another forty minutes before we stop in Springfield for lunch." Mae's announcement, in a voice similar to that of a bus driver, pulls forth all kinds of memories. A van filled with the guys. A list of our destinations. Our excitement. Our failure.

My thoughts rush back to the museum where Mae had stopped, and where I'd refused to exit the car at first. Trying to recall how to hotwire a car, I fought the urge. It wasn't like I hadn't done it once or twice in my past. I was never stealing, I justified. Just borrowing the car for a little bit to see some band—a local gig I wanted to catch, a sound I wanted to hear.

If I only heard the music, I could replicate it.

In my head, I see the item that caught my attention in the museum—a rusty harmonica on the shelf. Playing harmonica is a dying skill, a lost talent, and one I haven't used in so long I don't know if I could remember how to properly blow out and breathe in as one should with such an instrument. My fingers twitch, curling around an imaginary four-inch sound machine. I only had a 10-hole diatonic harmonica when I was young. It was a beginner's windpipe, but I could play that piece wicked well.

When I first returned to Chicago, I'd hit that harmonica like a nicotine addict unable to quit cigarettes. Hiding out in the farthest corner of my grandfather's backyard or in the dark

alley behind Rochelle and mine's first apartment, I'd inhale the sound I would eventually give up. One day the piece I'd prized my entire life as a gift from my grandfather had disappeared, and I took the disappearance for the sign it was. I was never going back to who I wanted to be. My limited career and short stint of independence was over.

My soul feels that heartbreak once again.

To make matters worse, the car fills with "The Piano Man" by Billy Joel and Mae begins her version of singing.

"Turn that crap off," I snap, more harshly than I've spoken to Mae so far as echoes of my past rip through me. Mae huffs and clicks to the next song in her dreaded road trip playlist and loneliness hits me almost as hard as her finger jabbing the sound system for the next selection. I need out of this car, away from the intoxicating scent of my driver, her off-key sound, and the memories racing through my head.

Playlist: “When He Sees Me” (from *Waitress the Musical*) -
Sara Barielles

[Mae]

Don't fall in love with me. What a perfectly ridiculous thing to say to him. His response was just as preposterous. I wouldn't expect Tucker Ashford to love me even on a good day and he seems like he is having a perpetually bad one.

“What is this?” Tucker asks when we pull up ninety silent minutes later before a white brick building. The name should give the place away: Cozy Dog Drive-in.

“Does that sign say ‘home of the original hot dog on a stick’?” he asks next, and I hear the curious displeasure in his voice.

“It sure does,” I reply, opening my door and stretching my legs. Although we've been stop and go, my knees are cramping, and I could use a good walk. Not to mention my shoulders are tight after our last altercation. One minute he's smiling that off-kilter smile and taking pictures for me, and the next he's making a joke that dies like a punchline you have to explain to someone.

I don't understand this man.

The pictures he took of me were not how I saw myself. He must have played with some filter I don't know how to work on the smartphone camera because I don't look like myself. I'm smiling and my eyes are bright. They made me look...good.

Then he had to ask me not to hit on him. I could understand if I took things too far. If I was throwing myself at

him, begging him to take me on the uncomfortable bench seat of Louie, but I hadn't suggested anything of the sort. Speaking of bad moods, one minute I want to request a backseat rendezvous, and the next, I want to stuff him in the trunk and pretend I'm not carting a body back there. He is so... frustrating.

He also isn't pleased with my lunchtime selection, but a deep-fried hot dog is on the menu and this place is classic Route 66. Admittedly, I don't know how my stomach will handle a hot dog, let alone one batter dipped, but I'm willing to try one for the experience. That's what this trip is about. Seeing places I haven't seen. Trying things I haven't tried. Partaking in activities I wouldn't normally partake in.

Surprisingly, there is comfort—albeit unsettling—to having Tucker with me. He doesn't talk much, and he calmed down about the music selection after the “Piano Man” outburst. His sharp command to cut the song left me puzzled, but obviously he isn't a Billy Joel fan. Maybe the lyrics hold a bad memory for him, but I can't imagine Mr. Picture Perfect having had bad moments in his life. Except maybe his wife's death.

Immediately, I realize my assessment isn't fair. I'm the first to admit you can't read what's underneath the skin of another human being. I'd been fooled too often by Adam.

Tucker follows me into the iconic-looking counter service diner. Of note, he held the door for me. Maybe he is a gentleman after all. Peering at him over my shoulder as I head for the counter, I decide against it. He's too hard-edged. His face too handsome.

He squints at the overhead menu. This is not his kind of eatery, and he looks out of place in his dark slacks and starched dress shirt. With his hands in his pockets, he continues to peruse the menu while I scan his profile.

Slowly, he turns to face me, and I should look away. He's already caught me glancing at him too many times through the rearview mirror. He's told me not to hit on him. His expression

screams not to even consider flirting with him, and yet... underneath all that pretty skin with fine lines near his eyes is just a man. A man who hates a song and was staring at something in that display back in the museum.

I wonder if it was the rusty harmonica that held his attention. I have no idea how that could connect to anything other than the strong presence of the wind instrument in Billy Joel's famous song about people in a bar who are lonely and sad.

"What are you having?" Tucker asks me, interrupting my thoughts.

"The Cozy Dog, of course, with fries and a cola."

Tucker nods and we step forward until it's our turn. The teenage boy behind the counter who asks for our orders reminds me of my son, Owen. They share similar features—floppy dark hair and bright blue eyes.

"The lady will have a Cozy Dog, fries, and a drink. I'll have the same." I'm snapped from thoughts of my second son as Tucker orders for us. Reaching into my oversized bag, I scramble through the contents seeking my wallet when a hand comes to my lower back and gently nudges me to the side.

"What the—?" I stop when Tucker hands over his credit card. "What are you doing?"

Silvery eyes meet mine and the hint of a smile curls the corner of his mouth when he says, "I'm buying lunch."

"You don't have to do that." I'm ready to burst into a lecture about how I can pay for my own damn lunch and have every intention of us taking care of our own meals and lodgings along the way. I hadn't figured out the gas situation but assumed with the money I was intended to receive for hauling Mr. Ashford to California I could splurge on the gas charges. Obviously, I'd been planning to pay for everything all on my own anyway.

"I know," he replies to my comment and then faces the young cashier to retrieve his credit card.

“Well, thank you.” I should sound more appreciative. His gesture is the first decent thing he’s done on this trip next to holding the door for me, but there’s still an edge to my voice. He confounds me.

After we’re given a number to claim our food when it’s ready, we take a seat. I notice a T-shirt pinned near the menu featuring two caricature hot dogs cuddling like a couple. It’s cute. I’d considered grabbing souvenirs from every place I went but that would financially add up, and I was holding out for something special. Something truly unique to mark my passage through each state. I’d know it when I saw what I wanted.

Then again, I should grab something for my boys and the T-shirt reminds me again of Owen. He loves graphic tees.

“I noticed you staring at that kid,” Tucker says. “Got a cougar thing happening?”

The inappropriateness of his question shouldn’t shock me, but my mouth gapes. “He reminds me of my son.”

The surprise on Tucker’s face is almost priceless and I wish I’d had my camera ready to capture the moment.

“You have a son?”

“I have two.”

Tucker’s eyes roam my upper body as that’s all that’s visible above the table where we sit across from one another. “And you had them when you were ten?”

Now who’s flirting with whom? However, he doesn’t mean anything by his comment. “You’re sweet, but I’m forty-three and had my first boy when I was twenty-three.”

Tucker’s brow arches as he stares back at me. He must know Jane is in her mid-forties and I’m close behind her. He’s simply teasing me and a hint of the man on the sidewalk returns.

“My oldest is Wyatt. He’s twenty and he’ll be a junior in college in the fall. I fool myself into thinking he’s there to

study, but he's there on a hockey scholarship and just changed his major to communications. He's probably going to follow in his father's footsteps and work for Eden Landscaping when he graduates."

Adam's parents originally owned a farm supply shop which he shifted into commercial landscaping. Then a boom in second-home owners in our small lake town and do-it-yourself gardeners led me to turn a little section of garden plants into a thriving business.

If I had my way, Wyatt would have gone into environmental studies. He could have grown the landscaping business by learning more innovative pathways along the lines of sustainable design and green spaces. However, Adam didn't have to work too hard in his studies at our alma mater because he always intended to work for his father's business. Sadly, Wyatt seems to be following Adam's direction.

Tucker's face shifts, hardening a bit. "Jane told me you were divorced."

"I am." Skipping those details, I continue describing my sons. "The boy at the counter looks like my second son, Owen. He's eighteen and your typical second child. He keeps to himself and he's quieter than his brother. He's not much of an attention seeker but a sneaky troublemaker in his own right. He has a huge heart, though. If these were historical times, he might feel he doesn't matter as much as his older brother, being the second son. He's ignored a bit by Adam because he's into art more than athletics."

Sadly, Owen doesn't receive the attention he deserves from his father. Our creative child has a vision that could also profit Eden Landscaping or Mae's Flowers, but I'd be equally happy for him to forge his own path. While Owen is the lover and Wyatt is a protector, neither boy showed much interest in my spirit trip. I don't want to find fault with their lacking enthusiasm, as they are males and teenagers, and both those traits can make them selfish, but a pinch of disappointment

pierced me by their absent support of my decision to take this trip.

“Owen will be a college freshman this fall. I’m hoping he’ll major in art.”

Tucker tilts his head, ready to question the comment but our order number is called out and he slips from his seat to retrieve the tray with our food. When he returns, he eyes the batter-dipped hot dog.

“Ketchup?” I ask.

“No self-respecting Chicagoan puts ketchup on a hot dog,” he mocks, and I laugh, since I’ve heard this statement before from Jane. Only, the batter-covered hot dog isn’t on a bun.

“It’s a hot dog on a stick. I think you’ll be forgiven.” I wink at him, unable to stop myself. I hate to suppress what feels natural to me. I’m in a business where I interact with people daily, and there’s no reason to be standoffish. It’s not in my nature to be, but warning bells go off around Tucker and I almost apologize for teasing him.

He squirts a heavy dose of ketchup in the corner of the wax paper covering his plastic basket and I quietly laugh as he takes his first hesitant bite. When he hums next, the sound goes straight between my legs, and I imagine that hearty purr in response to him being touched some place private and sacred.

“I haven’t had food like this in I don’t know how long.” He slowly chews as he savors the flavor of greasy batter wrapped around processed sausage. “This reminds me of my grandfather.”

“How?” I softly smile, hoping he might open up a bit and prove he’s human.

“He loved niche-y hot dog places and we’d stop in one when I was with him as a kid. *Don’t tell your grandmother*, he’d warn but she always knew what we did.” Slowly, his face

morphs from pleasant childhood memories to his typical stern expression.

“You were close with your grandfather?” I question.

“I was. He was the cornerstone of our family.” There’s so much more in that statement but he doesn’t expand so I let it slide. I could mention my own Granddad and how he was the glue of our family, especially after our father abandoned us, but I don’t.

“You mentioned a daughter, but do you have any other children?” I say instead.

His brows pinch again before he begins. “Jude, my son, is twenty-seven, and we typically don’t see eye to eye.” He pauses as he swirls his hot dog on a stick in the ketchup once again and his sudden quiet tells me there’s a story behind their battles. “My daughter Julia is twenty-four. She’s the one getting married, thus the need for a ride to California.”

At the mention of his daughter, Tucker’s entire face lights up. The gleam in those silvery-blue eyes is evidence Julia is everything to him.

“Yeah, about that. Why didn’t you just fly?” I chuckle as I ask. Jane hadn’t told me anything other than Tucker was averse to flying. Maybe he has a fear of heights but the edginess coming off Tucker doesn’t give the vibe he fears anything.

“I just don’t.”

If I thought mentioning granddads was an abrupt end to a conversation, the mention of flying slammed the door shut on speaking. Tucker clams up and the remainder of our meal is silent. Instead of savoring my greasy meat on a stick, I choke down the rest of my hot dog, willing away the prickle in my eyes. We had been one wiener on a skewer away from my passenger opening up to me, acting cordial even, but now, we are three bites back with no dessert in sight.

Playlist: “St. Louis Blues” - Louis Armstrong

[Tucker]

I am such a dick.

I’d cut off conversation again, when I was actually learning something about Mae. Although she’d proposed we share our life stories, suggesting we be friends, I’d dismissed the possibility. But after hours in the car with my off-key singer and curious sightseer, I am sensing there is more to Mae than I’d given her credit for and there is more I want to know about her.

When she mentioned her sons, she sounded sad; however, I hadn’t wanted to discuss Jude myself. The relationship with my oldest child is complicated and complex. He pulled away from me because of the lies he felt he’d been told, and he’d had a right to an extent. He hadn’t known the truth as a child. There wasn’t a need to expose him to it. Jude was an Ashford in more ways than one and he was also mine in all the ways that mattered.

I want to scream and rant and kick something because this trip is not only taking a painful amount of time, but it is as if I am traveling in reverse. We haven’t even left the state of Illinois and I’d already had two vivid memories of my grandfather—harmonicas and hot dogs. Collectively, a strange combination. Separately, they are powerful reminders of a relationship I once held dear and then dreaded.

Marshall Ashford’s father had been a powerhouse in the department store industry. His once catalogue-based company was equivalent to internet shopping before the internet was

even a thought. Grandfather turned his father's mail-order business into physical stores, separating departments by themes, specifically fashion and home furnishings. Ashford's provided babywear to formal attire, and kitchenware to bedroom sets. Coming to an Ashford's was an event, especially in an era when people dressed more formally for shopping excursions. We were a dynasty until the internet was born and a specific monopoly began selling quality items for less with direct delivery to a shopper's front porch. Online purchasing was the death of my great grandfather's dream.

"I'm guessing the world's largest ketchup bottle is out, as you're a self-respecting Chicagoan," Mae says interrupting my thoughts. My laptop is open once more, but this day feels like a bust. I haven't gotten a thing done other than my morning phone call to Mach and a few emails answered. Every time I'm back in a groove, Mae stops on this road trip from hell and my concentration is for shit.

"That would be a firm pass," I mumble.

With the window still cracked, the fresh scent of her wafts through this fucking Prius along with some ripe country air. We should be to St. Louis in ninety minutes and the location brings on another wave of memories. I've traveled throughout most of the United States. Rochelle's success took us to the four corners of this country and on some very exciting family vacations. However, I couldn't remember the last time I'd been in St. Louis. The first time, I was in a certain bar near the river.

Slowly, I smile to myself recalling the blues sound and the night some unknown band allowed an even more unknown kid—harmonica in hand—to grace the stage with them.

You got talent, kid.

I'd heard it so many times before and I had enough cocky confidence to believe what I'd been told. Despite what my father thought. Despite what my grandfather said. I was going to make it and make it big.

My smile falters recalling the failure. Squinting out the window, I watch the scenery shift as we near the border of Illinois. Eventually, Mae detours once more and I read the sign for Old Chain of Rocks Bridge.

“Where are we going?” I ask, like a petulant child. At this rate, I’ll be lucky to make California by a Wednesday in the next month.

“We’re going to walk to Missouri.” She must be kidding me, but the giddy sound of her voice tells me she’s not exactly joking. She’s rolled with the punches I’ve dealt today, and I give her credit for not dumping my ass a few times along the way. “Last stop before St. Louis,” she states when she stops the car in a parking lot.

“Seriously, what are we doing here?”

“Seriously. We are walking to Missouri.” Mae exits the car and stretches her arms over her head, then twists at the waist. She can’t possibly be sore. We haven’t sat in this car long enough in my opinion. However, I don’t miss a peek of her lower back, all smooth skin with a distinct dip of her spine disappearing into her shorts. She has nice legs, I’ll give her that. I’ve had to fight the pull that drew my attention to them on the numerous stops we’ve made. I also notice her backside—well-rounded globes filling out her jean shorts—as she bends forward to touch her toes, and that’s my cue to get out of Louie. Popping open my door, I step out and narrow my eyes in the direction of a bridge that curves over the Mississippi River. People on bike and foot make the trek up the bridge.

“You can’t be serious,” I state a little louder.

“You can stay in the car,” she says, as she did back at the museum. That was only this morning and yet it feels like days ago.

“Mae, this is ridiculous. We can’t keep stopping every hour. I need to get to California.”

“And I *need* to walk to Missouri.” She nods in the direction of the bridge and the land on the other side of the river. “Do you have something more appropriate to walk in?”

I’ve removed my suit coat and rolled up my shirt sleeves, but my hard-soled, Italian leather shoes will not be the most comfortable to cross a bridge in. I have workout clothes in my bag, and I’ll need to hit the gym hard once we stop at tonight’s hotel. The tension in me has built to volcanic proportions.

“I’m good,” I say, refusing to give in to another one of Mae’s whims.

She eyes me up and down and I wonder what she sees. Her expression is evidence of what she *thinks* of me. She wants to pitch me into that river and watch me drown.

“Suit yourself,” she mutters, as she did this morning. Then she shrugs and I hate that motion more than anything. The sign of indifference suggests she really doesn’t care about me or my opinion, and for some reason, the possibility pisses me off.

“Mae, come on. We need to keep moving.”

“We are. Over the bridge.” Mae moves two fingers in midair in a walking motion. She isn’t dressed in athletic attire herself, but the determination in her eyes says everything. She’s crossing that bridge with or without me.

“Mae,” I groan.

“Look, I’ll let you pick the stops in Missouri.”

This is not a consolation, but an idea sparks. I’ll skip the entire state, driving straight on for the next one.

“But we aren’t driving straight through.”

“Fuck,” I moan as she’s clearly read my mind.

Mae slowly smiles while she stares at me. Then she huffs and finally she chuckles, shaking her head. I don’t know what she’s thinking but whatever it is, I’ve made her laugh, and the sound is doing strange things to me. My skin prickles. My

heart beats faster. My fingers twitch. I've never wanted to run my fingers over piano keys as much as I do at this moment, hoping to chase Mae's laugh and match it to sharps and flats for a song.

Mae steps forward, interrupting the hum lingering in my head, and I spin on my hard-soled shoes, following her. Like a dog being taunted by a bone on a pull string, I'm starting to sense I might follow Mae anywhere, if she'll keep laughing.

+ + +

We take our time, especially as her flat shoes and my dressy ones are not conducive to power walking. The distance is a mile over and another one back, and we saunter among the other walkers and the bike riders. Mae stays quiet as we begin the ascent up the bridge. A placard by the entrance explained how the bridge was part of the original route. Due to necessary renovations, the historic landmark no longer allows motorized vehicles, only foot-powered ones.

"I grew up in Missouri," Mae says as we take our first step over the mighty Mississippi River dividing Illinois from her home state. "In a little town called River City in the southeast corner of the state. My mother still lives there."

"Next you're going to tell me we need to detour to see Mommy and Daddy." I exhale and slip my hands into my pockets. I do not have the patience for additional stops.

Mae gazes forward and narrows her eyes. "My dad left when I was a child, leaving our mother to raise us."

Shit. "I'm sorry, Mae. That was...insensitive." I can be an asshole, and this proves it once again. Mae shrugs in that manner I despise.

"It was a long time ago. Had Granddad as my father figure, but he's gone now, too." The sorrowful depth to her voice tells me she misses him.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, because what else can I say? Her sad tone hints she was close to this paternal figure, and I’m reminded once more of my grandfather. I shouldn’t ask. I don’t want to ask, reminding myself I don’t want to know more about Mae. I don’t want to cross the personal line, but I can’t fight the next question. “Besides Jane, how many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“We have an older brother, Garrett. Then comes Jane, me, and my younger sister Lindee.”

I’m the only legitimate Ashford heir, but I don’t mention it. The pressure was unbearable when I was young.

“Are you close with your mom?”

Mae sighs and squints into the distance. “My mother believes I should have stayed married to my ex.” Mae pauses, and I admit it’s not what I expected her to say.

“Why?” There were a hundred reasons why I thought my parents should have divorced when I was a child. First and foremost should have been their lack of desire to have a child —*me*.

“Adam had not only one affair but two, but it’s the fact *he* stayed. He never left me, so she believes I shouldn’t have left him. She thought I should have remained married to him despite learning about the second one. I disagreed.” Bitterness rings through Mae’s words, and I hear the hurt at her mother’s lack of support. For my part, I want to pummel the man. *Who cheats on Mae?* She’s been good-natured enough with my assholeness, plus she’s pretty, and those eyes... Plus, any man should be proud to have Mae smile at him like she does.

The thought presses on my sternum. Mae has smiled at me a few times today, and I’ve shot her down at every curve of those lips.

“Why did you stay with him after the first one?” I ask, not wanting to be intrusive but truly curious. My own mother stayed after repeated infidelity from my father, but I knew her reasoning. *Money*.

Mae shrugs again and I step before her, placing my hands on her shoulders to stop us from walking. “Don’t shrug this off. You shouldn’t have had to take one affair, let alone two.”

Mae looks up at me with those sky-blue eyes and my knees feel like the liquid rippling below this bridge.

“He made me promises and I was foolish enough to believe him.” Mae turns her head, but I grip her chin and force her to look back at me. “Fool me once, right? Shame on him. But fool me twice?” She shakes her head, and whispers, “Shame on me.”

“Shame on him again. He was the fool, Mae, and he shouldn’t have given you false promises. He should have kept his vow to love and honor you as his wife.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and she rapidly blinks, swallowing hard as well. “That might be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.” Her voice is small and her lids lower. A tear leaks out but she’s quick to swipe it away.

“I’m sorry that happened to you, sunshine.” I should tell her about Rochelle. I should admit the awful truth that’s been locked inside me for years, but I don’t. I stare at Mae with my fingers wrapped over her shoulders and my hand at her chin, desperate to pull her toward me and enfold her in my arms. The pain in her eyes mirrors the ache in my chest, but I don’t do anything to soothe her.

Instead, she speaks around a strangled giggle. “You called me sunshine.” Slowly, she grins again. Her eyes are brighter than ever with tears inside them and my heart thumps faster.

“Well, you are a ray among many,” I say and Mae scoffs.

“Now, who’s flirting with who?”

Ready to defend myself, Mae’s arched brow suggests she’s joking, and she pulls free from my hands, which kept her an arm’s length away.

“Let’s keep walking,” she says, brushing past me while I’m frozen in place a moment, missing the feel of her under

my palms and watching her step a few paces away from me.

No man in his right mind would let her walk away from him. No man should have ever cheated on her, hurt her, or made her feel unworthy. Those expressive eyes say it all.

Disappointment. Distrust. Disbelief in herself.

I see it because I recognize it.

It's how I've felt about myself.

+ + +

When we finally cross the bridge for automobiles leading to Missouri, Mae bypasses downtown St. Louis and pulls into a small motel just outside the city.

"What is this?" I ask for what I feel is the millionth time today.

"It's tonight's accommodations," Mae announces as I skeptically eye the brick houses that are no bigger than a king-sized bed.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope," she says with the straightest face before chuckling.

"I am not staying here," I warn her, tipping my head to glance out the window again.

"Suit yourself. I don't think that backseat will be comfortable, but you do you."

I glare back at her. "Take me to the Hilton downtown."

"I'm not a freaking chauffeur and I am not dropping you off someplace else."

"You don't have to drop me off. *We* can both get rooms there."

“*We* are not getting rooms there. I’m staying here.” Mae opens her door and steps out and I follow on the opposite side of the car.

“Mae, take me to a decent hotel.”

She scans the small buildings and stops her gaze on the sign which clearly states ‘motel’ on it. “I am not driving you to a hotel and then driving back here.”

“Exactly. We’ll both stay there.”

“No,” she adamantly states but I’m already cutting her off.

“Yes.” A heavy pause falls between us. “Is this about money? I’ll pay for your room.”

Her mouth drops open at my suggestion, but before she utters a word, she turns on her heels and heads for the front office, another low building detached from the rest of them. She has to be kidding me, but this doesn’t feel like a joke, and I stalk after her, entering the small office after a sharp yank on the front door.

“We’ll need two rooms, please,” I hear Mae state and the statement crushes my ire a second. *Of course*, we need two rooms. However, my head is arguing with other parts of my body. The part of my body that has no say in being Mae’s roommate.

I am not sleeping in the same room as her.

Based on the size of these buildings, I can’t imagine more than one bed fits in them anyway which leads to the argument...I am not sleeping in the same *bed* as Mae.

The thought of *not* doing it, has the thought of doing it springing to the forefront of my mind, and my eyes drop to Mae’s backside again. Her legs are short but toned and the backs of her knees beg for me to bend her there, bring her down to the floor and take her from behind.

The image almost knocks me back through the front door and I stagger a second. The subtle sway causes Mae to turn her

head in my direction, glancing over her shoulder at me, and another wave of images mixes with the first. Mae looking at me as she is, her hair draping over one shoulder, her chin aimed over the other. Her head on a pillow as I fuck her senseless from behind.

Jesus. I swipe a hand down my face as if it will erase the vision and calm the raging hard-on I'm suddenly sporting in my suit pants. I need to get away from this woman because I know the reason I want to fuck her. I want to drill some sense into her. We should not be staying in this dinky motel where I can't be convinced the sheets are clean. There isn't even turn down service or a coffee bar in the rooms.

My hotel snobbery is showing, and another memory comes to mind of three guys piling into one room, not too dissimilar from a place like this. We were high on music, women, and something not legal at the time. Laughter filters through my head. Lawson Colt and his rich Southern voice. Denton Chance and his soft Georgia twang.

Fuck.

Scrubbing two hands down my face, I reach out for a key Mae hands me. An old-fashioned metal key on a rhombus shaped, plastic fob with the motel name and room number stamped on it. Mae will be in number one; I'm in number four. Instantly, I don't like the distance between rooms but acknowledge the separation is for the best. Tugging the key from her hand, I turn for the office exit and cross the small lot toward Mae's car. I didn't offer my credit card, but I'll come back later. I need to get away from Mae and the memories this godforsaken road trip keeps bringing forward.

"Did you want to grab some dinner?" Mae asks, her voice sweet and quiet as she comes up behind me.

"No," I toss over my shoulder, waiting for the click of her trunk to allow me to open the hatch. Hastily, I reach for my bag. I should help her with hers and I grumble, "Which one of these do you want?"

“I can get my own bags,” she says in that huffy voice she has when she’s been offended by me. *Suit yourself*, I want to snap, mimicking her, but instead, I snag one suitcase and tug it forward. Dropping the bag to the ground on its wheels, I pull up the handle and Mae takes it from me. She doesn’t argue whether this is the case she wants or not. I close the trunk lid with a slam and notice Mae is already stepping away from me. I should offer to eat with her. I should explain why I don’t want dinner with her.

But mostly, I should get away from her before I follow her into her room and beg her to let me fuck her.

“Will you still go out for dinner?” The idea of her eating alone shouldn’t upset me.

Mae sighs, pausing several feet away, keeping her back to me. “You know, I’m not feeling so great after the dog on a stick.” She gazes over her shoulder again, making me think things I shouldn’t. Envisioning images I shouldn’t. “So, I think I’ll call it a night. I’m tired.”

The time isn’t *that* late. The sun hasn’t even set yet but we’re well past the dinner hour.

“Okay. See you in the morning.” I shouldn’t be holding my breath, anxiously waiting on her response. She’ll still be here in the morning, right?

“See you in the morning,” she mutters before continuing to her room, and the statement has no business doing what it’s doing to me.

Which is offering a hint of reassurance she isn’t ready to dump me. Yet.

10

Playlist: “St. Louis Song” - Erin Bode

[Mae]

After a check-in call with my boys, who hardly had more than a few words to say, my ex-husband took the phone and had plenty of remarks about my absence. Taking excessive deep breaths, I hang up on him and call my business partner, Pam, to check in.

Pam had worked at Mae’s Flowers as a second job but eventually became a good friend and my full-time manager. Once she married the love of her life, a writer of dark, scary stories, she had bought into the business. Her partnership has been invaluable in more ways than one. She’s one of the few people I trust in my life.

When Adam and I divorced there was no way to amicably share the business with him. Mae’s Flowers was under the umbrella of Eden Landscaping, originally owned and operated by my in-laws. The easiest way to claim the business I’d built from the dirt up was to buy out Adam’s portion of the joint ownership. Loyalty toward my in-laws had me biting my tongue about Adam and his shenanigans with business funds. I couldn’t afford to buy Adam out without loans or a deficit to the existing company, so Pam and a silent investor offered to buy in.

Next, I call Jane.

“How goes the road?” she teases after greeting me.

“I don’t know how you work for him.”

“Mr. Ashford?”

“Call him fucking Tucker. That’s his name.”

“Actually, at the office he goes by Ashe with an e from *Volde-Mach*.” How had I not known this nickname for Tucker? And why isn’t my sister calling him such a name? Then, I chuckle at another one of her labels for Mach.

“Anyway...” she drones.

“He’s so hot and cold.” Do I admit to my sister that one minute he’s flirty and the next he’s like a frozen pizza?

“He’s had a lot go on in his life.” Jane defends Tucker’s behavior.

“Haven’t we all? And just what does that mean?”

“I don’t think I should be the one to tell you. Just give him time. He’ll open up.”

Sure, he will and then he’ll slam the door in my face as he has with each hint into who he is.

“How is the trip?” Jane asks when I remain silent.

“Horrible.” We’ve bypassed so many places I wanted to stop and explore, not to mention my spirit trip to reflect on all things isn’t quite how I envisioned it going. Horrible might be too strong a word, but I am frustrated. “I just don’t understand him. Sure, he’s nice to look at, but how can he be so aloof underneath that pretty skin?”

“Oh, are we back to talking about Tucker?” Jane teases. “Careful Mae.”

“What’s there to be careful about?”

“Don’t go falling in love with him.”

I scoff. “Of course not.” I sound exactly like him. Love is the furthest thing from my mind. “I’d like to throttle him instead.”

“What was that? Thrust with him?” Jane laughs and the sister I recognize comes through the line. Not that passive

creature saying *yes sir*, and calling Tucker *Mr. Ashford*, but the lighthearted woman underneath her power suits.

I laugh as well and recall Tucker's reaction when I told him about Adam. I stayed married because I was afraid to leave, at first. I was afraid Adam and his family would take from me all I'd built. Mae's Flowers had my name on it. The garden center had my heart and sweat in it. I didn't want to lose my business even if I lost my husband.

And Adam wasn't only a liar and a cheat, but also a thief; however, I didn't share that part with Tucker. It was hard enough admitting my husband had not one but two public affairs. In a small town, news travels, but somehow, I hadn't gotten the broadcast. I'd had my suspicions of the first infidelity but never had proof. When the second one occurred, Adam wasn't half as circumspect. The red in our financials proved his doings. My then-manager Pam was the one to catch the discrepancies. She wasn't an accountant by trade and even second guessed herself at first, but she did the bookkeeping, and the bottom line was that Adam had stolen money from the company to pay for his extra-marital activities.

When Tucker told me I deserved better than Adam, the comment almost brought me to my knees, and on those knees, I'd have begged him to kiss me. For a minute, I thought he might meet my mouth with his, or at least pull me into a tight embrace, holding me against his firm chest. I would have settled for a hug. However, he didn't do anything but keep me at arm's length and give me sweet reassurance.

My eyes track toward the window where I have a view of Tucker's room. Narrowing my gaze, I notice a car parked before number four and Tucker steps out the door. He leans toward the dark car I can't distinguish and then hops into the backseat. *What is it with him and the backseat?* As the car circles through the small parking lot, I step back from the window but watch as the driver pulls onto the street.

Is he going to dinner after all? Is he going out on the town? Is he leaving the motel to stay someplace else? Is he

finding another ride to take him to California?

“Jane.” I choke on my sister’s name. “I think he just ditched me.”

“What? He wouldn’t do that. He just checked in with Mach.” Surprisingly, she calls Mr. Wright Mach behind his back but doesn’t do the same with Tucker. On that note, how does Jane know Tucker checked in and what is she doing with Mach this late at night?

“Are you still at work?”

“I just had a few things I wanted to finish up.”

“Jane,” I groan. My sister works too hard.

“He didn’t leave you,” Jane says. The wording hits me hard in the chest. There are psychology case studies on little girls and their daddy-abandonment issues. I don’t have those concerns regarding my father, but some might argue I do have anxiety for another reason. While Adam hadn’t physically left me, he’d left our marriage long before it was officially over. I didn’t like to think of my life that way, but the truth was there. I’d been sleeping with my husband, but he wasn’t really mine. He was the selfish one, doing what he wanted, when he wanted. He stole my heart and my hard-earned money.

“How do you know?” I ask, my weak voice cracking. Would Tucker leave the motel for a nicer place to sleep? Would he leave me here to continue on my own? Isn’t that what I’d wanted all along? I wanted to be alone. But did I really?

“I just know,” Jane says, interrupting my stream of unspoken questions.

Ideally, taking the trip I’m on would be more exciting if I could share the experience. If I had that husband to match his wife with our two children on a road trip to see the country. But I don’t have that husband. And I don’t have two children interested in sharing this adventure with me.

Why were all the men in my life so selfish?

Instantly, I regret the thought concerning my boys. They are children. Teenagers. Neither matters. They have their own lives to live as they should, and I have mine. That was the point of this trip. I was taking *me* back.

Exhaustion hits in a heavy wave. “I’m going to take a bath and head to bed.” I should probably eat something healthy like a salad to clear my belly, but the idea of getting back in the car and searching for a restaurant doesn’t sound appealing.

“You okay?” The apprehension in Jane’s voice reminds me she’s the worrier of my sisters. She’s the second mother filled with concern for her chicks.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell her. I always am. Somehow.

+ + +

To my surprise, I find Tucker outside my motel room bright and early. He’s wearing aviator glasses and leaning against my car. Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, he looks like a rock star and it’s not the first time my breath catches at his appearance. The hitch also comes with the shocking relief he’s here. I went to bed thinking he’d honestly disappeared, and I wouldn’t see him again. I’d slept horribly.

“Good morning,” he says, tipping the sunglasses to the top of his head as he stands straighter. A leather string sticks out near the collar of his shirt, and I wonder what he wears around his neck, hidden behind the cotton tee. He holds a to-go cup in each hand. “Mochaccino?”

Softly, I laugh. “Where did you find one of those around here?” He tips his head and I notice a coffee shop across the busy street.

“I had to tell them how to make it, so I have no idea if it will be any good.” He offers the cup and I take it.

“How did you know I drank mochaccino?” I typically don’t, but he wouldn’t know that either. He wrinkles his nose in that way he does.

“You smelled like mocha when we met.”

I laugh again. *Hardly an official meeting.* I’m doubly surprised he recognized the scent.

“Shall we?” He tips his head toward the car at his side.

“You’re the navigator today,” I state, reminding him he can pick our stops in Missouri but there must be stops.

“I don’t know anything about this highway or your plans.”

“No plans. That’s the joy in this trip. As far as the highway, it’s stop when you see something of interest.” Tucker stares at me, and slowly, the corner of his mouth curls as it does, one side hiking slightly higher than the other. Those silver eyes narrow on me.

“I’ll let you know when to stop then,” he says. *Did his voice just drop?* The tenor sounds deeper than normal, and I dismiss the gravelly timbre sending shivers up the inside of my thighs and landing on a spot that has no business throbbing.

Tucker pops the driver’s side door handle and holds the door open for me. He settles our bags in the trunk, and I wait for him to round the car, expecting him to climb in the back as he did yesterday. When he opens the front passenger door and slips in beside me, I stare at him.

“It’s Saturday,” he says, looking back at me.

It certainly is and Saturday looks so good on him. My eyes roam his attire once more and my mouth waters, but it’s not in anticipation of the chocolaty drink in my cup. That thigh-hugging denim. The tight fit of his tee. Even the bead and leather strip around his wrist. He puts sexy in a Saturday.

Pulling my gaze from him, I start the ignition and we re-route for the iconic highway. I’d double back for the famous

Gateway Arch, but I've been to St. Louis two other times for hockey tournaments for Wyatt, and both times the gate to the west was closed. While a third time might be the charm, I don't want to tempt fate. Besides, the hour is early, and I doubt the historic place is open. There's also a museum of transportation in the city, but this is a road trip and I'm letting the road be my education.

MISSOURI – DAY 2

Playlist: “The Thrill Is Gone” – B.B. King

[Tucker]

“You seemed surprised to see me this morning,” I eventually say as we barrel down I-44, which covers portions of the original route.

We’ve been quiet as we sip our drinks and adjust to sitting next to one another. Music fills the car once again and the smokey blues matches our pace. Although it’s Saturday and I typically put in a couple hours of work even on the weekends, today I let business slide. Besides, my early morning wake-up call from Jude put me in a funk.

“You cannot miss Julia’s day,” my son chided me.

“I’m not missing it. I’m on my way.”

“This is ridiculous, Dad. You need to get over your flying phobia.”

Oh, to be twenty-seven, fearless and carefree. Also, to be the insensitive bastard my son has turned into. For too long, I took the blame for, and brunt of, his attitude. He’d been lied to his entire life. He struggled with the truth, but I’d done what I did to give him the spoiled life he’s had, and I was over his ungratefulness.

“You left last night.”

My neck swivels so I look over at Mae. Today she wears a loose flowing shirt in thin material and another pair of jean

shorts. Flat strappy sandals cover her feet, and a low ponytail binds her chestnut-colored hair. She looks young for her age, and I marvel again that she has children who are in college. I didn't miss the hesitancy in her voice and the roll of her throat before I open up to her.

"I didn't leave. I went out." There's a difference, but Mae's face pinches as her fingers clench around the steering wheel. Rubbing a hand down my jean-covered thigh, I wonder for a second if I should share where I went.

"There's a place I'm familiar with in the city that's down near the river. We were so close I decided to Uber there." Once I'd learned that Strings was still open, I had to see the old place. It's exposed brick interior with low ceilings and fluorescent colored stage lights was exactly the same and yet entirely different than the place had been over twenty-five years ago. Time seemed to have stood still and it felt like only yesterday instead of half a lifetime.

"Was it fun?" Mae's voice is still quiet and I'm wondering what she's really trying to ask me.

"Yeah, I had a good time." Suddenly, I feel guilty for not asking Mae to join me. She said yesterday she wasn't familiar with blues music, but that doesn't mean she didn't like the sound, as her playlist holds several songs. I just wasn't certain she'd like the place. I wasn't certain I could enter Strings myself, but I had to see it. Like so many awakening memories, the old blues bar called to me.

Mae remains silent, and I decide to offer a little more. "I... There's a guy I once knew who used to play there. A band actually. Blues music is the forte of Strings, the place where I went, and I just wanted to see it again."

Mae softly smiles but it isn't reaching her eyes. The blue iris isn't flashing like those neon lights last night.

"Why?" I ask, puzzled by her quiet and the weak curve of her lips.

“It’s nothing. Just curious.” Did she really think I left her? I wouldn’t do that.

“Did you think something else happened last night?” I don’t know why I can’t let it go but something is on her mind, and I want to know what it is. Mae shrugs and I swear to God I want to demand she pull over. “Tell me.”

Mae turns her head for a second at my sharp command. Her fingers tighten on the wheel once more before her sight returns to the road.

“I thought maybe...” She exhales. “It doesn’t matter what I thought. Your business is your business.”

“Mae, come on. Tell me.”

“I thought you went out to sleep with someone.” Her eyes close for half a second and I’m grateful my coffee cup balances in my hand on my thigh or I’d be wearing coffee as I have two days in a row around this woman.

“Sunshine.” I softly chuckle. “I did not go out looking to get laid.” Would I have liked to fuck someone? Absolutely. But I have a strong sense that *that* someone is sitting next to me being all cute in her jealousy and anxiety over me sleeping with someone random.

Mae shifts in her seat. “Like I said, it’s not my business.” Her quiet tone sends a small current of regret over my chest. I should have invited her to come out with me. I should tell her the rest of the story. How amazing it was to hear live blues music. How energized I feel after the sound seeped under my skin, like a small, hidden cavern inside me has some light shining into it for the first time in a long time. Without thought, I reach over for Mae, brushing back hair that’s come loose from her ponytail and scooping the fine strands behind her ear.

“I wouldn’t leave you, Mae.”

She nods as she swallows hard and my fingers coast along the exposed column of her neck. Her skin is so soft and the tempting fragrance of her floats around me, invading my

nose as we sit beside one another. The tips of my fingers drift to her shoulder before slowly pulling away from her. I miss her skin instantly but as much as I want to linger, placing my hand around her nape and keeping it there, Mae seems sensitive this morning.

“What did you do last night?” I ask.

“I made some phone calls. Then took a bath and went to bed.” The thought of Mae naked and wet is like a jolt of caffeine, hyperextending a part of my body that’s desperate for attention. I’ve just had my first touch of her soft skin and now I imagine the rest of her, water lapping over her tan flesh, parts of her whiter than the rest. Her nipples are a rosy pink in my head and her pussy matches that tender color. Leaning forward, I shift my hard-on as best I can while sitting so close to Mae.

“Did you talk to Jane?” She answered Mach’s phone when I called last night. They were both still at the office. Mach will be attending Julia’s wedding, but he’s flying out next Friday morning. I should have braved my fear and flown with him. He promised to get me drunk and assist me on and off the plane, but I didn’t want to tempt fate.

“I did.” She acts as if that simple sentence covers everything. What did they talk about? Did they discuss the trip? Did Mae mention me?

“Are you close to your sister?” I didn’t have siblings in a traditional sense growing up, so the dynamic of them always intrigues me.

“Jane and my relationship has ebbed and flowed because we’re pretty opposite. As we’ve grown older, we’ve grown closer. Unfortunately, Jane and our other sister, Lindee, butt heads. They’re too similar in personality. Plus, Jane likes to play mother hen and that annoys Lindee.”

“You mentioned a brother.”

“Garrett? He’s the golden child. As the only son and oldest Fox sibling, he can do no wrong in Mom’s eyes. She’s

blind to the fact he basically left home and never looked back. He only visits once a year.” Mae huffs. “He has a condo in California actually, but he permanently resides in Georgia now.”

“That’s a big shift,” I say, chuckling at the extreme of one coast compared to another.

“He fell in love.” Mae’s smile grows more genuine. She’s happy for her brother and that smile suggests love is the answer to everything life altering.

“It happens,” I jest but my voice falls flat. Had I loved Rochelle? In some ways, I had. We’d grown together then shattered apart. I hadn’t so much as fallen out of love with her as I’d felt betrayed by her. When I think of what Mae told me about her husband, I realize she might understand the duplicity I felt. I don’t know how Mae could have taken her husband back after an affair, but I realize that pretty words spoken as promises can send mixed messages. Rochelle was only allowed to fool me once.

We continue on as the moody blues tunes fill the car before Mae skips a song.

“Does that say Meramec Caverns?” I point at the sign painted on the roof of a barn. Mae doesn’t respond but her smile grows. “We should stop.”

“What?” she laughs.

“We should see the caves.”

“They’re kind of commercial.” She side-eyes me and I recall her saying she grew up in Missouri.

“Have you been?”

“No. But if you’ve seen one cave you’ve seen them all, right?” Her voice hesitates.

Slowly, I smile. “You said I could pick where we visit in Missouri and I want to stop at the caves. What are you afraid of?”

“Bats. Small spaces. The dark. Your typical top three.”

“Bats?” I laugh. “They won’t hurt you.”

Mae shivers beside me. “When I was a kid, I was opening a barn door when a bat fell from the hinge and landed on my arm.” Mae extends her arm, keeping one hand on the steering wheel. Her forearm is upright, and I want to trace my finger down her skin again. “The thing flipped back and forth.”

Mae releases the wheel and slaps her other hand upside down and then palm side down to imitate the action of the bat.

“Sunshine,” I snap as the car veers left. “Hands on the wheel at all times.”

My errant driver laughs, clutching ten and two on the steering wheel once more, but she gives a full body shiver in her seat at the recall of her bat experience. I can’t help myself and I reach for those wayward hairs again, tickling my fingertips along her neck.

“Bats only go for here,” I state, running my fingers over her flesh, feeling her pulse near her throat. Legendary vampires would want a bite of her and so do I.

Mae laughs and tucks her chin to her shoulder, pinning my tickling fingers against her skin.

“No caves,” she says, her voice lighter than it had been earlier.

“Yes caves.”

“Oh, look a giant red rocking chair,” she announces at the roadside advertisement for it.

“After the caves,” I say, wiggling a brow at my driver and placing my hand on her wrist as if I’ll tug her arm to make us exit.

“Fine,” she grumbles but a smile still fills her voice.

Playlist: “Cars” – Gary Numan

[Mae]

The caves were pretty cool and chilly, and I wasn’t prepared in my thin shirt and shorts. Being with Tucker as he soaked in the hollowed spaces and dangling stalactites was like seeing a new person. He was different today, like an unfolded map, revealing more and more land as it opened.

Our stop also felt like a date, especially when he’d place his arm around me and tuck me into his side or rub his hands up and down my bare arms to warm me up. I tried to shake off the idea several times, but the thought just wouldn’t pass. We were two people sharing an experience, exploring caves, and learning their history, and it was the very definition of a date, especially when he touched me. He even took a few selfies of us together.

Adam and I hadn’t gone to typical places when we dated although we’d had our share of movies and dinners. Being from a small town surrounded by natural beauty, many of our dates included outdoor activities like snowmobile riding and downhill skiing in the winter and boating or hiking in the summer.

Of course, summer was our busiest season and with marriage, children, and a business, dates fell further and further down the list of things to do. Taking two weeks off during the summer had been no small feat this year, but Pam had insisted I needed time away.

“*You deserve this time. Explore. Seek. Renew.*” She sounded like a New Age pamphlet for spiritual revival, but

Pam also understood I needed to get away and no time would be the perfect time. I couldn't keep waiting for the right moment. "*Just go.*"

My best friend also knew I'd always wanted to take this great American road trip, and what a trip today's adventure was turning out to be. We took the cave tour but skipped all the extra stuff. However, I didn't want to pass up the gift shop. Once again, I couldn't decide on a souvenir and eventually walked out without making a purchase.

Traveling onward, we reach the giant red rocking chair within minutes of leaving the caverns. Pulling up before the Fanning Route 66 Outpost, I recount the history of this chair as we stand before it like I'm some expert tour guide.

"It originally was listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the tallest rocking chair. However, another one was built someplace else and took the title. For the longest time, this chair held the record as the second largest." I softly chuckle. "But I don't know why you'd brag about being in second place."

"That's cynical of you," Tucker says, and his comment startles me.

I'm not being cynical; I'm being honest. I'd been put in second place to Adam's interests. Business. Women. Second place was not worth bragging about.

"This chair needed to rock in order to stay on the record books but the owner or welder or someone, I forget who, was afraid the thing might tip over and crush visitors." I point to the braces that bind the chair in place. "Now, it's stationary and it's been painted red, giving this old icon a new boast as the red rocking chair on the route." I sound like a brochure.

Thinking of the new life breathed into this popular roadside attraction, a concept hits me. Some things are forgotten along the way. Other things are restored. This trip was my restoration tour.

"Restoration tour?" Tucker scoffs.

I hadn't realized I'd said that part out loud and I squint up at the rocker. "I just think sometimes you need a reboot, a new purpose."

Tucker glances up at the red structure. "And you got all that out of a giant rocking chair?"

"I got all that from what I want next in my life." A reset. I don't need to turn back the clock. My children are the number one reason I wouldn't go backward. The idea of erasing them isn't something I'd ever consider. But it's my time, and I need to start the timer over.

Tucker turns his head, staring at me for a moment like I've grown a second one, and once again, I decide he can't possibly understand. He's standing there all rock star handsome without a hair out of place and those silvery eyes, and I can't imagine he knows anything about reinventing himself. Starting over again. Rebuilding his life.

"Maybe you should let me drive a bit?" He holds out his hand for the keys, but I shake my head. "Come on, Mae. I promise not to run us off the road."

"You'll probably just keep us only on the road," I snark, letting go of my deep thoughts about change.

I'm holding the key fob in my hand, not having bothered with my bag as we only stopped for a quick photo. Tucker wiggles his fingers and I reach forward as if I'm going to give him the key and then retract. Tucker is fast, though, and he snatches my wrist. We wrestle a second like my boys do before I lift my arm and drop the keys down my shirt. The drop was all luck, and my breasts catch the fob on the edge of my bra where the suddenly achy globes are pressed together. Tucker freezes, glaring at my shirt which looks like I've grown a third boob because of the small bulge.

"You did not just do that," he says, tone flat. Shock fills his face before the corner of his mouth curves in that way it does, drawing one side higher than the other. "If you think I'm afraid to go fishing in there, you're sadly mistaken, sunshine."

I can't breathe. I can't even tease him, dare him. Words are caught in my throat as his eyes hold mine before they lower for the awkward spot where a key fob is stuck in my bra.

If I thought Tucker would just dip his hand through the wide expanse of my collar and tug out the keys, I am mistaken. Instead, he drops the wrist he's been holding and steps even closer to me. One hand lands on my hip, while the other goes for the hem of my loose shirt. Long fingers and a warm palm connect with the skin at my waist, and I suck in air. I'm not smooth and flat on my belly, and suddenly, I want this rocking chair to fall over and crush me as the builder once feared. Tucker cannot touch me where I'm lumpy and worn from the road trip of having children.

However, he ignores my sharp intake of breath and skims his hand higher underneath my shirt. My breathing accelerates, forcing my chest to rise and fall quicker. Any second, I'm going to be embarrassingly exposed to anyone close by and yet, I don't care. I want him to rip this shirt from me and cover each breast in turn with those large hands of his. I want him kneading each heavy swell and pinching my nipples...hard.

He continues to travel straight up the middle of my body and we both watch as his hand disappears under the loose material. Only his hand separates us from being chest to chest. His fingers hook over the center of my bra, and he gently tugs at the material, causing me to lean forward, almost knocking into him. With a kick of his fingers, the fob flicks upward and pops out of the wide collar, nearly clocking me in the chin. Tucker catches the key with the hand that had been on my hip, but that first hand...his fingers still hold my bra. One long finger skims upward along the edge of silky fabric, tracing back and forth, then left to right over the hint of cleavage exposed above the cups.

Tucker leans forward, bringing the side of his face against mine and his mouth near my ear.

"Mae." His voice is strained. "Don't tease me."

With that he releases his hold on my bra, drags his hand down my middle to my waist and steps back. He holds the fob up like it's a victory trophy and then tucks the key into his pocket. Stepping to the side, he waves out a hand for me to lead us to the car and a few seconds pass before my shaky knees can bend to walk me forward.

+ + +

We remain quiet after the key-fob-bra-incident and Tucker drives us along the iconic road until we reach Devil's Elbow Bridge, another bridge with a sharp turn in the middle but one that allows cars along the classic route. After crossing it, we weave along until we come to Munger Moss Motel, a mom-and-pop motel still open and operating to serve weary travelers. Being midday, we aren't ready to stop for the night, but I ask Tucker to pull into the parking lot anyway. A few classic cars sit in the lot, and to my surprise, Tucker is eager to walk around them.

"Now this is the kind of ride we should have for a road trip." His smile is wide as he inspects a car I only recognize as an Oldsmobile because it bears the name. The vehicle is long and wide, mean and classy in cheery red with black interior. Tucker's admiration brightens his face and for the first time he seems on board with our travels. "This is a car for cruising in."

Unfortunately for me, all I can think about is that extra spacious backseat and what I want this man to do to me against the long leather bench. My heart still races from his fingers on my skin. A phantom sensation of his touch lingers against the swell of my cleavage, and my nipples remain hard. Thankfully, my blouse is loose enough not to give away the peaks protruding against the silk of my bra, but my breasts ache.

I haven't been touched by anyone else in a long time. While I've gone on dates, nothing progressed further than an

occasional awkward goodnight kiss. Living in a small community, most men my age are married or simply not someone I'd be interested in long term. I tell myself it doesn't matter that I don't date often. I'm busy with Mae's Flowers, but some nights are lonely, and my battery-operated boyfriend doesn't offer the cuddle I expect after a good orgasm.

When we finally head back to the car—Tucker got caught up in a conversation with a classic car enthusiast—I hold out my hand for the key. “You’ve insulted Louie with your lust for that beauty.” I nod at the car that Tucker learned was a 1966 Oldsmobile 442. He’d circled the machine twice, nearly drooling on the sleek exterior, before breaking away to investigate a second beast of an automobile.

He slips his hands into his jean pockets, one of which holds the fob for the Prius. “Right, and you’re the one who named your car.” He glances at the bright blue, modern vehicle. The sedan isn’t actually mine, but I did name the thing, thinking it made more sense if I pretended to talk to Louie then talk to myself as I knew I’d eventually do on a road trip alone.

Again, I wiggle my fingers.

“Springfield is the next major city. Let me drive and I’ll take you to lunch.” He almost looks nervous as he asks. At the mention of food, my stomach rumbles. After skipping dinner last night, I am hungry. We have snacks, but you can only eat so many cherry-flavored Nibblers before you get a stomachache.

“You don’t need to pay for my meals,” I remind him. He bought lunch yesterday and coffee this morning. Despite being a pain-in-the-ass passenger, he isn’t along to cover my expenses, which reminds me I didn’t get a receipt from the motel last night.

“I know,” he says as he did yesterday, and we hold eyes in a staring match.

“Okay,” I acquiesce, and his forehead relaxes. His eyes brighten.

“I promise, you’ll love it.” His excitement is catchy.

Once we settle back in the car, and Tucker starts the ignition, I glance back at the neon sign for the motel.

“Traveling by day you’re missing the bright lights of these places,” he reminds me. We’ve already passed another historic landmark motel with quaint, stone cottages named Wagon Wheel Motel. I really wanted to stay a night there but onward we must travel so my companion gets to California on time.

I sigh. “I know, but I’m not good at night driving, and I didn’t want to drive alone in the dark anyway.” The plan was to be by myself and as a single female I didn’t think night driving on unlit roads was a safe idea. Day driving only was a concession I had to make in my trip plans. Streetlamps don’t exist along this older highway, not to mention, we aren’t exactly passing through populated areas. We’ve seen vintage gas stations and an old post office, both turned into tourist stops, but nothing that would be open in the later hours.

“You wouldn’t stay in a place like this, would you?” I comment. Tucker ducks his head beside me to gain a better view of the sign. He’s close to me again, leaning over me and I get a whiff of him. Sharp. Wild. Expensive

“When we first went on tour, these were the only places the budget allowed for, and I swore I’d never stay in a place like this again once I could afford not to.” He pulls away from me and I twist to face him.

His choice of words is curious. “What tour?”

Tucker looks straight ahead, over the steering wheel and out the windshield, as his brows pinch. “Did I say tour?”

“You did. Who was on tour?” And why did he have a budget?

Tucker glances at the gear shift and puts the car in reverse.

“I didn’t mean tour,” he says, gazing over his shoulder, avoiding his slip-up as the car moves backward. “I just meant when I’d been on the road.”

“What road? When you traveled to California the first time?”

Tucker nods as he shifts to drive and checks the main road before pulling onto it. “Yeah, that’s what I meant.”

Only, he’s not convincing, and I wonder what I’m missing.

Playlist: “Let the Good Times Roll” – The Cars

[Tucker]

Shit. I hadn't meant to hint I'd been on any kind of tour. I could have covered the slip by saying it had to do with Rochelle's conference schedule, but we haven't talked about my wife, and I don't want to discuss her. Mae hasn't even implied she knows who I was with Rochelle or my life before her.

Over a quarter of a century has passed, and while the guys thought we'd made it big then, we really hadn't. Still, every once in a while, our most famous song hits the radio. I almost always turn it off.

I'm not ready for Mae to know more about me. I'm not certain I'll ever be able to share everything there is to share. There's just so much baggage, and it isn't pretty luggage with designer names and rolling wheels, but the kind that's duct taped with faded stickers and a broken handle.

Despite the moment of weakness where my hands roamed under her shirt, Mae and I have had a great morning. The caves were cool. The ride over the bridge was kind of special, and the stop at the old motel with classic cars had been interesting.

The last thing I want to do is explain to Mae who I once was, because I'm not him anymore. I haven't been him for twenty-plus years.

Springfield is the next major city, and the place is another reminder of where I've been and how far I've come. The area

has some great diners and coffee shops, and there's one place I think Mae might enjoy.

As we've driven along the route, I've noticed some of the rundown places along our path and imagine, as I suspect Mae has, that these locations were once spots for travelers to stop over night or fill their tanks with gas.

"It's kind of sad," Mae says as we pass yet another building that looks like it once was someplace special sometime in the past. Now the structure is unidentifiable as to what it used to look like. It's simply an abandoned shell with lost history.

"I live in a small town, and small towns really lost out when people started to bypass them because of the interstate," Mae offers, keeping her eyes toward the window.

What affected those mom-and-pop places, like the one we stopped at with the classic cars, were high-rise hotels built more specifically for railway travelers. Then, hotel conglomerates courted traveler bliss, specializing in resort-type visits. Chain motels took over, along with franchise opportunities, and gone were the simple locations offering a warm bed and a night's rest. I fondly recall a few places the band slept when I was on the road with Lawson and Denton. We were three men trying to make the most of a dollar and sell our sound.

That was another lifetime, and I hadn't meant to hint at it.

Mae chatters as we drive into the large city, explaining the history of Route 66 up to this point. She's telling me how Springfield is considered the birthplace of Route 66, and this is a crossroads of some sort. I'm actually content to drive and give her this portion of our travels to explore. Her head whips around, glancing behind us at places we pass, or she reads signs as we near them, offering tidbits here and there. She's a roving tour guide and an encyclopedia of information. She's done her research and disappointment rings out once in a while when her internet searching seems to lead to a dead end.

“So where are we going again?” she asks once the route merges with the major interstate around this larger city.

“You’ll see.” My voice lifts at the potential surprise and my heart patters. I hope she likes this place. I discovered it about ten years ago when Rochelle was on a conference tour. We’d bussed through ten Midwestern cities that summer and I had escaped to this place for a much-needed hour alone.

When we pull up before the coffee shop that specializes in classic rock music, Mae smiles.

“Coffee?” she says, twisting to look at me.

“Lunch.” I press open the driver’s side door. Mae’s quick to open hers and I should have asked her to wait for me. I could have gotten her door for her. I hate that she accused me of not being a gentleman. I’m all for women’s equality and the right to open their own damn doors, but I still want to do it for Mae. Quickly, I stop her from reaching for the coffee shop entrance and tug the door open for her. I don’t miss the hint of a smile as she steps inside, and we’re enveloped in classic rock music. The philosophy here is that not all coffeehouses are quiet, and this one prides itself on noise.

At the counter, we order sandwiches and take a seat allowing the atmosphere to surround us.

“This place is so cool,” Mae says taking in the replica memorabilia and pictures of classic rockers. “You asked me about blues music. Are you a music enthusiast?”

“Something like that,” I say. “You have quite an eclectic playlist. I thought you might like this place.”

“Music is a universal language. Everyone understands it.”

My hands freeze as I reach for my sandwich, and I lower them back to my lap. I consider what she’s said and feel those words deep in my soul.

“You mentioned how some things fade away while others are preserved or given new life. Music is the same way. An old song can be revived by a new band’s rendition. Other songs

just remain classic in their original state. There are fads but music never fades. When you hear a song, it conjures a memory or when you hear one for the first time, it builds a new one. Popular music shifts and changes over time, just like notes on sheet music and yet it's something every person can read. Maybe they don't know how to play an instrument or sing a tune." I arch a brow at Mae, and she chuckles. "But we love a good beat. Music evokes emotion, and our bodies respond."

I pat my chest over my heart in an iambic beat for emphasis. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.* "It's how people know how to dance."

"Spoken like a true music lover." Mae gives me a broad smile. "But I don't dance." She glances around the coffee shop once more.

"What do you mean you don't dance? Everybody dances." The argument is weak coming from me. I can't remember the last time I did. Perhaps dancing is the wrong word. Our bodies react to rhythm. We sway. We tap. We nod in tandem to a beat we appreciate. Music feeds our souls.

And I wonder how I've ignored the hunger in mine for so long.

Looking around the space myself, noting the posters of famous rockers and bands, I acknowledge there was a time I wanted to be among them. Dreams die, though. Some things are preserved. Some repurposed. And others just disappear with time.

Mae's been watching me, and I weakly smile at her before lifting my sandwich and taking a bite. We listen as we eat and Mae nods at songs she recognizes, grinning between bites of her sandwich. She knows nothing about music history, and still gets most lyrics wrong, but her enthusiasm for a song or a burst of memory when one plays brightens her face. Those blue eyes gleam. That smile sparkles.

I should tell her.

“You mentioned you live in a small town. I feel guilty but I don’t even know where you’re from exactly,” I say.

“Elk Lake City. It’s a small town on Lake Michigan in Michigan.”

“How did you end up there from Missouri?”

“Marriage,” she says as if that explains everything. “What about you?”

“What about me?” Mae already knows I live in Chicago.

“Marriage. You mentioned your kids, but what about your wife?” Her voice lowers, hinting that she knows I’m a widower.

“What did Jane tell you?” My tone is defensive. Mae’s sister has been around long enough to know a few things but not the full story. The office once indulged in speculation, but Mach was always the first to shut that shit down.

Mae is equally quick to defend her sister. “Jane didn’t tell me anything. All I know about you is you own Impact with Volde-Mach. She mentioned you were a widower and *you* told me you have two children. You live in Chicago. That’s it.”

“Isn’t that enough?” I question, knowing full well it’s not.

“Because we can’t be friends,” Mae states, with a huff and a weak grin.

Are we friends? I don’t even know what that would mean, but we’re definitely something. I’ve touched her breast. I’ve wanted to kiss her. I want something from this woman, I just don’t know what.

“I’m an ass. I get it,” I chuckle.

“Yeah, well, that and you have a nice one.”

“What?” My face heats although I’m not prone to blushing.

“And that wasn’t hitting on you. It’s just an observation.”

Has Mae been checking me out? I've warned her not to hit on me but is she actually attracted to what she sees?

"Volde-Mach?" I change the subject, fighting the warmth in my face.

"Machlan Wright."

Ah. "Jane doesn't like him?"

"Oh, she likes him alright." Mae's eyes widen as the words slip out and she covers her mouth with her hand. Mumbling between her fingers, she says, "You did not hear that."

"Hear what?"

Mae watches me, wondering if I'm kidding or playing along. Jane wants to be partner one day, but our firm isn't there yet. She would definitely be a candidate, if we offered the position, but an affair between Jane and Machlan couldn't happen. We don't forbid office romances, but we don't encourage them either. Mach and I are the exceptions. No fraternizing with employees is our personal policy. *None*. Ever.

When we finally finish our lunches, I take a phone call from Mach before we re-enter the car. Mae has already told me the next leg is ninety minutes or so on the road. For many portions of our drive, the original route has been covered by interstate highway, but Mae has us pull off where we can.

The next section veers through small town after small town, and Mae is quiet. With the windows down and the music up, her bare feet rest on the dashboard. If this had been my car, I might have told her to take her toes down, but I like Mae's enthusiasm and her free spirit. She doesn't give a shit about some things. She definitely isn't all over my money.

We fought only briefly about lunch and while I was on the phone with Mach, she learned I'd covered our rooms at the motel last night.

"The hotel issued me a refund. Do you know anything about this?"

I simply shook my head.

As we travel, Mae eventually talks more about her small town and mentions again her business, telling me how she grew it from the dirt up, as she puts it. She doesn't mention her ex-husband, but she does talk a bit about her boys. They sound loyal to their mother, if a bit aloof, being teenagers.

"Sounds like you have a good relationship with them. I was close with my mother, too." Some might say I was a mama's boy, but I didn't mind. I loved Hestia Ashford with everything I had. She was in my corner against my father and his disapproval of my love of music. He wanted me to be a sports man.

"Are your parents still around?" she asks.

"They died in a plane crash."

Mae's head turns so fast, I'm worried she might have hurt herself. She stares at me, but I keep my eyes forward, focusing on the road. My hand swipes over the leather braided band on my wrist before reaching for the metal on the leather strap around my neck.

"Tucker, I'm so sorry."

I don't want to discuss my parents' tragic death or the reasons they were on that plane in the first place. They were coming to see me. A million scenarios have run through my head at what they might have wanted to discuss with me. I'll never know now what kind of conversation they intended to have, but I have a strong suspicion.

Instead, I turn my head briefly toward Mae. "You know, that might be the first time you've said my name."

"It was?" She pauses. "I guess in my head I've called you tons of names." She weakly huffs and I smile. I can only imagine.

"You can call me Ashe if you wish. My friends do."

I don't have to look at her to see the smile breaking out on her face. It's lighting up the entire car and heating my skin.

It's also setting flame to my heart, and I might like the burn.

Playlist: “Route 66” – Chuck Berry

[Mae]

Ashe.

Ash with an “e,” he explained, but I am still basking in the glow of him calling me his friend. Or at least lumping me in with his friends and allowing me to call him Ashe. While the name seems fitting, I’ve grown accustomed to thinking of him as Tucker. Maybe calling him the more formal name will make me stand out from his favorite people.

He deflected the bomb he dropped about his parents, but I let the announcement slide and return to random yacking about our route so far. I’m honored he took me to the classic rock-themed coffee house and paid for another lunch. Along with covering the expense of last night’s motel, he also paid for our visit to the caves.

Today has been a much better day than yesterday, and as I thought earlier, Saturday looks good on him. He’s slightly more relaxed and looks damn sexy driving Louie, even if he isn’t a fan of the Prius. His long arms stretch for the steering wheel, letting his wrist do the driving at times, dangling over the upper curve. Once again, I check out the leather braid and beads around one wrist, wondering if they mean anything other than that he likes ornamentation.

Mid-afternoon, we pass another historic landmark—the Route 66 Drive-In in Carthage, Missouri.

“Ever been to a drive-in?” I ask, imagining him too busy feeling up a date in the backseat to watch a flick on the screen.

Tucker scoffs. “Can’t say that I have.”

My head turns in his direction. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope.” He pops the *-p* in his signature way.

“We must visit one,” I remark. Being the middle of the day, this location is not possible, but maybe somewhere else along our travels. We could find one near our next nighttime stop. Of course, that sounds like a date, but I’m only offering him the experience.

We drive through the small town and turn the corner as the GPS guides us. As we near another nostalgic looking motel, I squeal in delight. “We must stop.”

The squat white building looks like an old trailer diner and in pictures I’ve seen the lights around this structure illuminate bright green at night. For some reason, I really want to see it in the dark, in its glory with the neon glow around the flat roofline. The place is so classic motel-looking and on my list of potential overnight stops. Not to mention, I have sudden visions of what Tucker and I could do inside one of the rooms.

Maybe his hand could actually cup my breast, pinch my nipple and relieve the pressure within the achy swell. Maybe his fingers could skate lower, between my thighs and quell the ache that’s been building to volcanic proportions today. Maybe he could simply kiss me, fusing his mouth to mine, fueling the wattage of my desire.

Maybe I could wake up from my daydream and realize these things will never happen with him.

Tucker shakes his head as he often does at me, and we pull into the lot. “It’s too early to stop for the night.”

He’s right and yet everything in me wants to give this place my dollars. *It’s so cute*. Instead, I settle on another picture. Tucker has become quite the photographer and I don’t know how he does it with the filters on my phone. He catches every expression, often narrowing in on my face. My smile is crooked. One eye droops a bit, but my eye color is bright in the sunshine. My complexion looks good. He’s definitely playing with the filters.

We continue for the next twenty-five minutes turning left here, turning right there, as announced by the GPS until we enter downtown Joplin. The original route runs right through this town, and we find Mural Park, commemorating the old thoroughfare. Tucker indulges me once more with a picture before a partial car, embedded against the brick wall painted with a giant map of the journey to cross eight states over two-thousand miles.

“You mentioned your son likes art,” Tucker says as I stare at the large design.

“He does. Penciling is his medium. He loves to draw, not paint.”

“Do you have any examples?”

“I do actually. In my phone.” I’ve taken pictures of Owen’s sketches to share with my sisters. I’m proud of his talent. As Tucker holds the device, he helps himself to my photos and I scan the giant map one more time. We’re a little less than halfway on the trail. We’ve covered quite a distance though, and I feel less aggravated about the sightseeing experiences today compared to yesterday. Tucker has settled into being a decent travel companion. Perhaps it’s because he’s driving.

“He’s really good,” Tucker states, holding out my phone for a second so I can see one of Owen’s images. The detailed drawing isn’t some coloring book sketch. Owen has edged the art up a bit, making the lines harsher, crisper, not soft and delicate. We’ve sold some of his prints—Owen’s Originals—in our garden center gift store.

Tucker’s brow pinches and I step closer to him, wondering what he’s looking at next. Glancing over his arm, I notice he’s stopped on an outline of me. Owen needed a portrait for his art class in high school and I sat for him. Saying I look seductive in the drawing sounds silly, especially since I’m his mother, but I was gazing at him over my shoulder for this sketch. A window in the background highlights my profile and Owen captured every detail, every

shade, in the drawing. My lowered lids. My downward nose. My slightly upturned lips.

Tucker swipes the screen, and a second image appears of me staring out the window as if I'm longing to go outside. I spend a lot of time outdoors. I love the smell of wet soil, cut grass, and of course, fresh flowers. Maybe I was yearning to be freed from the confines of my house. The sketches are roughly five years old, shortly after my divorce from Adam.

"You're really beautiful, sunshine." His voice drops as he speaks, continuing to stare at the drawing captured on the screen.

"Thank you." My throat thickens and my voice cracks.

I'm not ever called beautiful as a compliment, and compliments in general make me slightly uncomfortable. Tucker sounds genuine enough in his statement, but I don't know how to accept it. I haven't felt beautiful in a long time and I'm not being self-deprecating. I'm being honest with myself at my age after living with a man who hadn't loved me for years. It's difficult to feel beautiful in such a situation.

As if Tucker knows this, he lifts his hand and brushes back hair loosened from my ponytail. His fingers linger around my ear and down the side of my neck as they did earlier today. *Was that only this morning?* When I was driving, I thought he might keep his hand on my skin, cup the back of my neck, or hold on to my shoulder, but he slowly released me then as he does now.

As we stand by the mural, a man with a guitar saunters over and begins singing the iconic "Get Your Kicks (on Route 66)." Tucker slips my phone into his pocket, grabs my hand, tugs me to him, and wraps his arm around my back. Swaying us left then right, he rocks to the music, and I laugh. I can't dance, and I struggle to keep up with his lead. My laughter only adds to my lack of rhythm, but Tucker doesn't give up. He presses me outward and pulls me back. We sway again before he twirls me, and I twist away from him. Snapping my

arm, he tugs me back and I roll into his chest. In broad daylight, we dance in a parking lot to this street musician.

And I've never laughed so hard or felt so beautiful.

KANSAS – Still Day 2

Playlist: “Home” – Phillip Phillips

[Mae]

After Joplin, we exit Missouri and it's straight on to Galena, Kansas. The path through the sunflower state is the briefest, only fourteen miles and roughly thirty minutes. Being such a short distance, and the fact it's late in the day, Tucker asks if we can shoot for Oklahoma before we stop for the night.

When I agree, Cars on the Route is the next attraction on my list of must-sees. The white stucco structure with a bright red logo was a former Kan-O-Tex service station. The place has held many names, but its present name is a tribute to the Disney movie *Cars*, a favorite of my sons when they were younger. I'd be in denial if I said that animated film wasn't part of my inspiration to travel this old road through forgotten towns. Unfortunately, the location is closed but still a fun stop with more photo ops and I send a few images to my boys.

Neither Owen nor Wyatt responds, and I hope this means they are working hard at Mae's Flowers.

Only a few minutes down the road, we stop again at Eisler Bros. Old Riverton Store. This squatty building with red cedar siding is also on the National Registry of Landmarks and a quaint spot featuring a deli, souvenirs, and a variety of garden flowers and hanging pots. The sight of such items has my heart longing for my garden center, which is ten times bigger than this location. I promised Pam I wouldn't let guilt nibble at me, but it takes a bite at this roadside attraction.

Had it been selfish to travel alone? Should I have invited my sons?

I stare at a small collection of bright red geraniums warring with myself.

“You want a plant?” Tucker asks over my shoulder, curious about my staring at the terra cotta pots filled with the cheery reminder of home.

“Just a little homesick, I guess.” I shrug because it sounds silly. This trip is something I wanted for me, but I suddenly miss my boys and my shop. To my surprise, Tucker runs a hand up my spine and squeezes the back of my neck.

“Maybe we should stop soon?” We already agreed to keep going, though.

“No, we can press on until Oklahoma.” He needs to get to California. He’s opened up a little bit more about his daughter’s wedding. She’s marrying someone he’s only met twice.

“Don’t you want to know more about the man dedicating his life to your daughter?”

“I trust my daughter’s decision. She’s grown into a smart woman with a good head on her shoulders. And a big heart. Plus, I’ve met him. There’s no doubt when I look at him. He worships my Julia.”

I remember once thinking I was a smart woman with a big heart. How foolish I’d felt once I’d learned how duped I’d been by Adam. Pam would tell me it wasn’t my head I overruled but my gut. My instincts told me something wasn’t right with my marriage, but I ignored the hint, or avoided the signs. I was so focused on the flower shop and my growing children, I dismissed what my heart suggested. My husband no longer loved me. Honestly, I no longer loved him either.

We’d been young and *so in love*, and everything happened quickly. College graduation. Marriage. Babies. And then the flower shop. That generous gift from his parents.

“I’m going to use the restroom,” I tell Tucker, just needing a minute to collect myself.

“I’ll do the same and meet you at the car.”

Once I handle my business, I stand beside Louie waiting for Tucker. After he exits the store, he picks up a potted red geranium and walks up to me.

“Did you just steal that?”

“I’m a terrible thief if I did,” he jokes. He cracks his throat like a police monitor and throws his voice. “Officer in hot pursuit of a potted plant poacher. Man wanted to give a beautiful woman some flowers.”

I look at him as he hands me the pot.

“I don’t want you to miss home.” He drops the officer act and softens his voice.

Taking the pot from his hands, I lift the flower to my nose. Geraniums don’t really have a fragrance other than earthy but clean, but I lower my lids to hide the sudden prickle of tears welling in my eyes.

“This was so sweet of you.”

“They aren’t exactly roses,” he scoffs, but his gesture is more precious than an entire bouquet. “I hope they don’t mean a bad omen, like death or despair.” He grins extra wide after speaking.

Chuckling, I blink back the lurking tears and lift my face. “Actually, they mean hope. My son read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school, and he thought it was cool that a character named Mayella had a name similar to mine. I’m Mae Ellen. He told me how she planted red geraniums and he learned they were a symbol of hope and beauty in her unhappy life.” How metaphoric I’d found his explanation. Maybe I surrounded myself in beautiful blooming plants to disguise the ugly unhappiness in my marriage.

“But actually, they are considered a protective plant in some cultures, according to legends.” I peer up at him. “And

that's probably more than you wanted to know about geraniums."

Reaching for my hair again, he scoops the loose locks behind my ear. "Whatever they mean, I just want to make you smile." His eyes avoid mine while he continues to wrap my hair over my ear.

With his words, my smile grows wider, and I giggle like a teenager. *What's happening to me?* And what's going on with him? He's been sweet throughout the day, and I can't dismiss the concept of a switch being flipped. Was his visit to that blues bar last night a turning point for him? He spoke rather passionately about music during our lunch. Whatever it is that has shifted his mindset, today's been a good day, and he has made me smile often.

I set the plant securely in the back seat, fastening a seat belt around it to keep the pot upright and smile once more at the gift. Tucker chuckles at my attention to the flower before we both climb back into the car.

There's one last place to visit in Kansas. We head for Brush Creek, where the Rainbow Curve Bridge goes over a marsh. Still a single lane road open to cars, we decide to park in a small lot and walk across it instead.

"Another bridge to cross." He arches one brow at me.

"Another bridge." Other than the physical ones, we've crossed several between the two of us and this white arched structure feels symbolic. A rainbow is a symbol of hope just like a red geranium.

After the brief walk—we agreed it felt good to stretch our legs—we continue on our drive, eventually taking a sharp left turning us due south until we connect with an alternate route labeled Highway 69. There are a thousand jokes waiting to be said here but I bite the inside of my cheek, fighting off naughty thoughts of Tucker, our bodies flipped and exploring one another. Mouth. Lips. Teeth. The struggle against my

physical attraction to Tucker has grown triple-fold throughout the day, but I keep my flirtatious behavior in check.

Baxter Springs is the final destination suggested in Kansas, but we bypass the visitor center as it's closed.

“Fun fact. I think the name Radiator Springs in the movie *Cars* came from this town. The owner of Old Riverton Store was interviewed for the movie as well.” Several locations we'd already hit and more to come are represented in the movie, and once again I think of Wyatt and Owen. How quickly they've grown. How close to being men they are. How much further they still need to blossom before becoming thriving adults.

“We need to find a place to stop for dinner before all these places close, and maybe we should find a hotel,” Tucker eventually says.

“Motel,” I remind him, emphasizing the *m*. We aren't near any major metropolis and although we've seen advertisements for commercial hotels ahead, I'd still like to find another mom-and-pop place. To my surprise, a quick internet search comes up with only chain hotels and limited availability.

“There's only one with two rooms.”

“Book it,” Tucker states, and I click the reservation. With the night's lodging settled, we park on Main Street and walk to a café. We decide on burgers, review our day, and chat a bit about his work. He already knows I own the flower shop and garden center, and I've explained its background. He finally offers more about his company.

“Impact was born from necessity. I have extensive history with marketing and media, and Mach had been working in the industry for years as well. We decided to combine our efforts and open our own office when I was thirty-five.”

“And how old are you now?”

“I'll be fifty soonish.” He cheekily grins, brushing off the exact date. “Anyway, we had a major client but took on

several others, working with them on branding and social media influence specifically. It's a market that's boomed in the last decade."

"What drew you to marketing?" Everyone has a reason they were attracted to an industry, but Tucker hesitates as if contemplating his answer.

"Family business. I had experience in their marketing department first."

"But eventually, you wanted to break out on your own?" I ask, putting words to his past.

"Something like that." He drops the French fry he'd been holding in his hand and reaches for his glass of water. Drinking half of it in one hearty gulp, he sighs afterward. "We need to drink more water as we ride."

"If I drank more water, we'd be stopping even more frequently for bathroom breaks."

"I can't imagine us stopping any more than we already are," he mocks, sarcasm deep in his throat while his crooked smile lets me know he's joking.

Still, for a moment, I wonder if he's regretted our day when I've enjoyed it. "You didn't have fun today?" I hate that I'm holding my breath while I wait on his answer.

The corner of his mouth tips upward even further and he meets my gaze. "Yeah, I had fun."

If Saturday has been a good look on him, *fun* pushes him from handsome to stunning.

+ + +

When we arrive at the hotel, there's a problem.

"What do you mean you only have one room? I made the reservation for two."

“Yes, two people in one room,” the clerk tells me.

“No. Two people. One in each room,” I clarify. My potted geranium sits on the counter. Tucker dropped me at the door and said he’d bring in our bags once he parked. Glancing over my shoulder, I see him walking up behind me. After he paid for my room last night, I figured I’d cover his accommodation tonight although these rooms are much more than what he spent yesterday. With this mix up, it’s half the predicted cost, but going to be double the trouble.

“What’s wrong?” Tucker asks, stopping behind me.

“They only have one room,” I say, huffing in frustration.

“You only reserved one room,” the clerk clarifies again. “And it’s the only room we have left.”

Tucker stands so close behind me I feel his exhale against my neck. I cannot share a room with this man. His scent has been intoxicating. His change of attitude a wicked shot. I’m drunk on him today and need to sleep off a potential hangover.

“Tell me there are two beds.” I’m practically begging the young clerk who isn’t at fault for my inability to read a freaking reservation tab.

“It’s a king.”

Of course it is.

“Just give us the room,” Tucker groans as my shoulders sag. His arm reaches around mine and a card is presented to the clerk.

“No, I got it tonight,” I say, wielding my credit card before the hotel clerk. However, Tucker is quick to pluck the plastic from my fingers and tuck it into the front pocket of his jeans. There’s no way I’m digging in there like he reached into my shirt earlier, so I guess I lose again.

Once we enter the room, we both stare at the single king-sized bed.

“I think I’ll shower. Wash off the road,” Tucker says, still studying the bed. Those silver eyes of his narrow, and if *he* thinks this is awkward, he has no idea how *I* feel. I can’t imagine lying next to him in my heightened state of arousal. I’ll never sleep.

“I’m going to step outside and call home.”

Tucker peers at me, his brows pinching. “Don’t go far, okay?” Outside is dark but the time is not extremely late. I need a minute to wrap my head around this sleeping arrangement and I want to check in with my boys. However, neither answers their phone when I call, and I return quicker than expected to the room. Uncertain what to do with myself, I sit on the edge of the bed fighting images of Tucker naked and wet in the shower. My imagination does nothing compared to the sight I get when the bathroom door opens and a rush of steam releases around the towel-clad man.

Beads of water still cascade down his bare chest, which hosts a smattering of hair near his pecs and a darker trail leading beneath the thin, white terry cloth hanging low on his hips. His abs are a washboard I want to scrub my undies against, but they won’t come away clean. His short-cropped hair is darker when wet, making him look only slightly younger than he is but giving him an edgy appearance, dangerous even.

Yeah, dangerous for my libido which has been absent for years and decided to show up unannounced for a visit.

Scrubbing his hand over his hair, flicking water here and there, he dips his head and lowers his eyes. I notice the leather strap around his neck. A medallion of some sort lays against his chest.

“How are your boys?” he asks, but I swear he said breasts as mine tingle and ache, and I choke in response.

“What?” Then I realize what he said. “Oh, they didn’t answer.”

Tucker nods and a painfully awkward silence falls between us. His hand lowers to his chest and his fingers tug at the medallion. I can't look away from him. I'm trying. It's embarrassing, but I cannot force my eyes to move.

"You mentioned a bath last night. You can take one, if you want."

My lids finally close. I cannot sit in a tub, naked, and knowing all of *that* is outside the door. Standing in the shower will be difficult enough, and I immediately know what's going to happen to me. My body can't take all the stimulus of him dripping wet, in a low-slung towel, his hand dropping lower to rest on his hip. How is it possible to have that V-dip at his age? My mouth waters. I've never seen a man up close with this kind of body. I assumed men like him were touched up in images, placing their heads over younger bodies, but this is reality and Tucker is—

"Mae?"

"Yeah." I blink. "I mean. Yes. No. I don't need a bath. I'm not dirty. You're dirty. I mean, I'm going to shower." I stand quickly from the bed, tripping on feet that don't want to hold me up and stumble forward. Tucker reaches out for me but stops short and I'm grateful we don't connect because my entire body hums. I've never been so turned on without contact and I'm afraid I'll combust if he touches me.

"I'm. Shower. Yeah." I snort. I actually snort, and if I wasn't already mortified, that just killed me. I fumble through my suitcase, grabbing an assortment of I don't even know what and my shower bag. On shaking legs, I enter the bathroom and close the door a little harder than necessary. Within seconds the shower is on, and I strip off my clothes, finding his piled on the floor. I can't take anymore.

Stepping into the shower, the hot water doesn't even register on my over-sensitized skin. I slip fingers between my legs and find the nub thumping and throbbing in need. My body drips with desire and within seconds I'm coming so hard, my knees give. I fold to the bathtub floor, fingers still working

my trigger spot. With my thighs spread, my hips thrust against my fingertips, chasing a second orgasm on the tail of the first.

“Oh God,” I whimper, shocked at myself and unabashedly getting myself off despite my travel companion on the other side of a flimsy bathroom door.

It's all his fault. My hips rock and my fingers press, and another earth-shattering release steals my breath. Falling forward to one hand, I catch myself, closing my eyes as my body trembles and my chest heaves.

“What was that?” I whisper to myself, trying to focus on the porcelain underneath my palm. Shakily, I press my body upward and stand. Dipping my head back under the shower stream, I close my eyes once more and let the heat of the water calm my racing heart.

Playlist: “Simple Man” – Lynyrd Skynyrd

[Tucker]

Mae exits the bathroom in a halo of steam wearing a loose T-shirt. *Does that have a fraternity insignia on it?* And a pair of short, floral print pajama shorts.

“I forgot something.” Her gaze sheepishly darts to me and away before she scrambles across the room for her suitcase. With something tucked into her fist, she returns to the bathroom and shuts the door once again. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and for a second, I think that’s what she forgot, but when she opens the door a second time, I can’t visibly see anything, other than those lush breasts I traced with a fingertip earlier. Free from confines and perfectly outlined despite the oversized tee, their shape is exactly what I imagined as I took care of myself in the shower.

Clenching my dick in a tight fist, I only tugged three times before my fingers were covered in milky-white substance. I’m still semi-hard imagining Mae lapping up the mess. While the release left my body, I’m still in need of more.

Everything about Mae has had me on edge all day. Standing before that red rocker, I wanted to kiss her senseless, strip her of her bra and fondle those lush tits. Every fucking time she smiles, I want to reach for her and press my mouth to hers and capture the curve. And that laugh. That fucking cheery sound of delight I want to swallow whole and then make her repeat it over and over again. Maybe even feel it against my cock.

Wearing a pair of workout shorts, I've been sitting on the bed because it's the only place to sit. My mattress tonight might be the nasty rug and I'm hoping Mae will at least let me nab the spread off this thing. I move to stand to allow her the bed when her phone rings. She rushes across the room again, fumbling in her bag for it, and answers breathlessly.

"Hello." She pauses. "Hey baby." Her face lights up, and for a second, I wonder if she has a boyfriend she hasn't mentioned. Seems like his name would pop up in our conversations, but I've only caught her ex's name, Adam, and her two boys, Wyatt and Owen.

I settle back against the pillows I was propped up against on the bed for another second.

"I'm sorry. Did you check your bag?" Immediately, Mae's shoulders lower and her body sags forward. With a hand on the dresser opposite the bed, she holds herself upright and I watch her reflection in the mirror over the furniture.

"Well, how about your drawers? Maybe the top one where your socks should be."

Another pause.

"Okay, well...I don't know about blueberries. Look in the fridge. Second shelf, left corner. Or check the freezer. There might be frozen ones there that work."

After a breath, she speaks again. "Why are you at the house? You should be at your dad's."

As if Mae isn't already hunched forward, she lowers her elbows to the dresser and pinches at her forehead before meeting my eyes in the mirror. Immediately standing upright, she takes a step back and collapses on the edge of the mattress. Her eyes avoid mine in the mirror while I watch her in the reflection.

"Wyatt, I can't help you from here. Ask him." Her tone turns firm, going into mom-mode. From what I've surmised, she's a good mother. Good mothers miss their children as she did today. Good mothers talk about them like Mae does. Pride

rings in her voice when she mentions Owen's drawings or Wyatt's achievements on the ice.

"Okay," she huffs, scrubbing at her forehead again. "Is Owen around? I tried to call him, too."

Another pause.

"Hey honey," she greets, and her smile is restored. She listens a while and then speaks. "So today we went to a few places that reminded me of the movie *Cars*. We saw a— Yeah, I'll hold."

Shaking her head, I see her eyes close through the mirror. "Okay, yeah." *Pause*. "No, it's fine. I'll call you tomorrow night."

Mae waits a beat, but even when she says, "Bye," the word is cut short. She clicks off the phone and holds it in her lap, staring down at the device.

Eventually, looking up, she meets my eyes in the reflection once more. She shrugs. "They're busy and they're teens."

I don't like her weak smile and I nod once in sympathy. "That's only code for they're assholes." Through the mirror, I grin back at her, and she softly chuckles before tossing the phone onto the dresser where it clatters against the geranium's clay pot.

As I've been sitting on the bed, I swing my feet to the floor and balance on the edge. "I can take the floor." There's a sliver of space between the bed and a wall with a window, and another strip between the foot of the bed and the dresser. Neither offers much space plus the floor looks rather uncomfortable.

"Look, we're both adults. We aren't married to others. We aren't in relationships." Mae pauses, waiting on me and I nod. I've been on random dates but nothing serious since Rochelle. "It doesn't need to mean anything. I can stay on my side of the bed."

“What are you saying?” I question, glancing at her over my shoulder.

“We can sleep together.” Her face turns bright pink, and although I know what she means, I like the color on her skin. “I mean—”

I hold up a hand to stop her. “I know what you mean.”

Mae offers a tender smile to accept the *sleeping* arrangement and I pat the bed behind me and wiggle my phone which I hold in my other hand. “I need to check on a few things.” I quickly ease back against the pillows I propped against the fake headboard and stretch my legs, crossing my ankles.

Mae distracts me as she climbs up her side of the bed. My gaze focuses on her position, the kitten-like crawl and the curve of her ass in the air clad only in those shorty pajamas. I swallow the dryness in my mouth and try to pull my attention from her, but I can't.

She was too adorable in her flustered babble when I exited the bathroom. She's attracted to me on some physical level, and I'm attracted to her. My fingers had a mind of their own today, reaching out and touching her on occasion. I wanted to touch her more, stroke over that soft skin and confirm it's even softer in other places. I've only had a hint of the soft spots on her neck, her breasts, her belly.

“What could you possibly be checking on a Saturday night?” she pokes fun at me.

But I don't answer, watching as she pulls back the covers and kneels. Sweet Jesus, I want her kneeling before me. Thighs spread. Shorts rising. She has so much leg on display and the tee covers her bottoms, giving the impression she's wearing only the shirt. If Mae wore only a T-shirt to bed, there'd be a serious struggle to keep my hands to myself. Whether she believes it or not, I am a gentleman, but I'm at the end of the tempting rope that's Mae.

I remain where I'm seated as Mae slips under the sheets and lays on her back. "You don't talk much about your son."

The comment surprises me. I've told her more about Julia and the upcoming wedding, but she's right, I haven't mentioned Jude much.

"What should I say?"

Mae rolls her head on the pillow to look over at me. "You mentioned you don't see eye-to-eye with him. Is this a new development or a phase he didn't grow out of when he was finished being a teen?"

She's only asking because she has her own set of boys on the cusp of twenty and I weigh how much I want to share with her. I've only known her for two days, and while I didn't trust her with a cup of coffee forty-eight hours ago, there's something about her that says I can confide in her on a deeper level. Then again, we are only riding companions, and in a few days, I won't ever see her again. The thought instantly causes melancholy. Does she really need to know things about me? So much of my history isn't pretty.

I glance up at the red geranium sitting on the dresser, positioned as if placed with pride. Hope, she said earlier. The cheery flower symbolizes an emotion I haven't felt for a long time. The sensation of trust. The concept of anticipation. The desire for something. My eyes drift to Mae, catching her watching me with those big blue eyes. *Is she hope?*

Instantly, I decide whatever I say to her, she won't judge me.

"When my wife died, Jude discovered he wasn't my biological son."

Mae's eyes widen but she remains quiet.

"He was resentful. Not that I am his father, as I've been there since his birth, but angry that he hadn't known the truth."

Mae's continued silence opens the door for the rest of the story.

“My own father wasn’t a good dad or even a decent man. He had multiple affairs on my mother, which led to several illegitimate children.”

“So, you have siblings?” The question surprises me for some reason.

“Yes.” How deep do I go into that history?

“And your parents died in a plane crash,” Mae states for clarification. “How old were you?”

“Twenty-three.” My entire life crashed that year. “Within months of their death, my grandfather discovered my father had gotten a young woman pregnant.”

“How young?” Mae asks, her voice holding a hint of concern as it should.

“She was just nineteen.”

“Oh God,” Mae whispers.

“Yeah. Well, Grandfather couldn’t let that mishap go. She was a family friend’s daughter, and she went to him when my father died. Dad promised to take care of her. She didn’t know what to do.”

I remember the call I’d received from Grandfather. Rochelle and I had been friends our entire lives. I didn’t understand at the time how she could have fallen for Dad’s seduction. I even worried at first that he hadn’t seduced her but simply taken what he wanted. She’d threatened to tell her parents about her condition and how it happened. Back then, I hadn’t known what the big deal was. *Let her parents know the truth.* My father was scum.

There was more to the story, though.

“Grandfather asked me to come home and marry her.”

“Where were you?” Mae asks, and I pick at the spread beside me.

“I was in California.” The band was on its way. We’d had a few hits, although our second album wasn’t selling like the

first. We needed something that made us unique. Made us different. Although, I didn't want to sell out and become something I wasn't. I'd already tried that.

“And you went home, to Chicago.”

I shrug, mimicking my new friend. “I married her.” Simpler said than our marriage was in reality. I hadn't done it for money. I did it for Grandfather. Her father was a potential investor in Ashford's, and they needed the capital to continue to grow, to continue their worldwide expansion. My father had been key in acquisitions and development of properties. Upon his death, Grandfather panicked. His son, a chief business developer, was gone, and he'd impregnated the daughter of a major investor as well as a long-standing family friend.

Field Stevens would not have appreciated the infidelity his friend committed with his precious daughter. It was bad enough he thought I'd slept with his princess out of wedlock. He never put together the fact I was in California while she was in Chicago, but we stuck to the story that I'd slept with her in my grief around the time of my parents' funeral service. Her father was none the wiser when Jude was born too early to match up with the timing.

“And you gave up a dream to be a father.”

“Something like that,” I state, staring down at the black screen of my phone.

“What else could it be?”

There was so much more to the story. How I'd always admired my grandfather. He believed in me, and I trusted that faith. He thought I could be someone special in the music industry. When he asked me to come home, I misunderstood it as a temporary setback, not a permanent end.

“What was your dream?” Mae asks.

I close my eyes a second before opening to meet her eyes. She's only asking for the truth. She won't even recognize who I am if I share the details with her.

“I was in a band. We were on our way.” I lift a hand, mocking myself as I wave it like the upward trajectory on a graph.

Mae perches on an elbow, facing me. “You were a rock star?”

“Something like that,” I say again, scoffing as *star* might be a little bit of an exaggeration, but we were definitely rising, up-and-coming according to the charts. We had a decent mix, a distinct sound, but one that wasn’t unique enough.

“That makes sense,” Mae suddenly says, dipping her eyes to my naked chest and the medal I wear.

“What makes sense?”

“You have the whole rock star vibe going on here.” She waves a hand up and down at my upper body and I chuckle. Mae isn’t starstruck, but she’s ogling me, and heat creeps over my skin. Her appraisal is a nice sensation. She isn’t looking at me because she knew, she’s looking at me because she didn’t.

“So, you quit the band,” she clarifies.

“I quit the band.” I struggle to control the wobble in my voice.

Instantly, I remember saying the damning words to Lawson and Denton, both of whom stared at me in shock. In some dingy recording studio, when we could not have splurged for a nicer one, I spilled the news. Our second album wasn’t selling. We’d agreed to merge with Lawson’s sister and hire on a young drummer named Hank Paige. Everything was happening so fast, but we hadn’t had a single practice together as the new group.

I quit.

They didn’t need the details. It was too complicated to explain. In hindsight, I was only twenty-three. I recall the pressure in my chest and the lump in my throat like it was yesterday. Saying the words nearly broke me. I never expected music to leave me, but it did. I swore I’d never quit anything

again. Not my marriage. Not fatherhood. Not future business endeavors.

“When did your wife die?” Mae asks, interrupting the memory.

“Three years ago.”

Mae remains quiet another second, and I expect her next question to be, how?

Instead, she simply says, “I’m sorry that happened to you.” She hesitates and her eyes roam down my body. If ever I thought Mae might hug me, this is the moment. I almost see her struggle. She wants to reach for me. Or maybe I just want her to pull me into her. Strangely, I want her comfort.

“There’s still time to mend the relationship with your son,” she says next, as if I haven’t mentioned the band or the details of Jude’s birth.

“Your boys will come around, too.” Isn’t that how this conversation started? Mae only wanted reassurance her boys will grow out of a phase, and I’d exposed more than she asked for. My father certainly hoped I’d grow out of the phase that he believed music was for me. His wish was granted, only he’d gone about destroying that dream in ways I’d never anticipated.

Mae waves a hand and pffts. “They’re just assholes.”

“Yeah.” I weakly smile at her sympathizing grin.

Sons can be that way. I remember when I was one.

OKLAHOMA – DAY 3

Playlist: “Blown Away” – Carrie Underwood

[Tucker]

To my surprise, I felt a little lighter than I expected sharing what I shared with Mae. The topic was heavy but telling a stranger hadn't been as difficult as I thought. Maybe because Mae was still a stranger in so many ways, her opinion of my tale didn't matter. Then again, deep inside, I realize that I do care what Mae thinks of me.

While Mae promised she'd stay on her half of the bed, I wake with her body molded to my back and a hand on my ass—inside my shorts. Laying on my stomach, her cheek presses into my shoulder blade while one of her legs is hitched over one of mine. She shifts to rub her nose against my spine and absentmindedly presses a kiss to my back before settling into position again.

Softly, I chuckle, and she stiffens. The air stands still before Mae yanks her hand free of my shorts and pulls away from me, rolling onto her back. I lift my head, moving it on the pillow so I can face her. Remaining on my belly, I press the hard length of my dick into the mattress in hopes of keeping it from Mae's attention. He'll need his own special attention once I can slip into the bathroom.

“Good morning.” I greet her.

“I was not hitting on you.” Her declaration comes so fast the words rush together and panicked eyes meet mine before flicking back toward the ceiling.

On our first day together, I'd accused her of hitting on me, where she made it clear she wasn't. I hadn't wanted that kind of behavior because of my past, but I also wanted Mae to know *me*. I wanted her to like me. Not the former husband. Not the widower. Not the businessman. Not even the failed rock star. Just me. And I was convinced she wouldn't once she learned more about me.

"I don't know why I did that." She says to the ceiling, refusing to look at me. "I'm used to sleeping alone. I only sleep on one side of the bed. I never move around."

I know what she means but I'm not complaining. I'm not even suggesting she was attempting something with me. Her body against mine felt nice, comforting and warm, safe and... hopeful. Subconsciously, I might have known she was there because I slept like a rock. After spilling my guts to her last night, I thought I'd fight the memories and wrestle the regrets, but I slipped blissfully into sleep after only momentary thoughts of the past.

I couldn't change what my father did.

I couldn't change what my grandfather had asked of me.

I couldn't change my decisions either.

"Don't worry about it." My eyes roam the topography of her body, noting the hills of her breasts and the curve of her hips. Next, I focus on her lips. Mae has lips begging to be kissed. She said last night sharing a bed doesn't need to mean anything and it doesn't. *It shouldn't*. But I can't shake the feeling inside me that we're crossing more than bridges, one slow step at a time.

Mae rolls to her side and scoots off the bed, still avoiding a glance at me. "I'm going to get dressed." The statement says everything. We need to keep moving. We shouldn't linger, especially in bed.

But her lips need to be kissed and I want to be the lucky bastard who kisses her.

While she heads for the bathroom, I shift to my back and scrub two hands down my face before reaching for my phone. Picking up the device before I even leave the sheets is a terrible habit. If I were home, I'd hit the gym and rid myself of the tension under my skin. I also need to ward off the raging hard-on I have. Mae had her hand on my ass, but her nearness alone brings on desire and raises my dick to full mast. Her scent lingers beside me, and I want to turn into her pillow, inhale her floral scent and whack off on these sheets.

Instead, I groan once more, toss down my phone and rise from bed.

+ + +

The hotel offers breakfast, but Mae and I decide to stop at a coffee shop for a quick cup and something light. We had enough food on bread yesterday—a sandwich, a burger—and I'm hoping I can convince her to pick up the pace on our journey and have a decent steak later when we arrive in Texas, today's destination.

“Look, it's one of those leave-a-book, take-a-book shelves.” Mae points to the bookshelf as we wait for our coffee order. I nod with disinterest and Mae picks up a book. Doing a double take, I instantly recognize the title and the woman on the cover.

Mae runs her hand affectionately down the jacket of the hardcover. “I've read everything she wrote.” Admiration fills her softened voice. “She really helped motivate me to take charge of my life and quit taking Adam's bullshit.” Her palm rubs once more over the paper covering.

“So sad how she died.” Her head pops up and there's a look in her eyes. One that is tender but puzzled. Her brows pinch. She drops her gaze back to the book, flipping it over. There's another image on the back plus a brief biography of the author including her path as a motivator, an influencer, a

supporter of women, and her devotion to her family which included a husband and two loving children.

“Rochelle Ashe was an inspiration,” Mae offers, speaking affectionately to the book.

“She was a liar.” The harsh truth escapes before I can contain the words.

“Ashe,” the barista hollers, calling out our order. “Ashe with an e.”

I step forward to swipe our to-go cups from the counter and turn back toward Mae. She’s still planted by the bookcase.

“She died in a plane...” Mae’s voice falters and her head whips upward. Her eyes meet mine, confused, questioning, clicking together the puzzle pieces.

“We need to hit the road, sunshine.” I fight to keep my voice steady. There’s no flirt in my tone or hint of an answer to what she’s wondering. Without looking back at Mae, I carry both our cups and a bakery bag out to the parking lot and Mae follows, the slap of her sandaled feet quick behind me. She’s wearing another pair of jean shorts and a body-hugging T-shirt today. Her hair is down, but I expect her to tuck the pretty strands into a messy bun eventually. The air here is humid and warm.

“Tucker.” Her tone questions me as we near the car. “Was she your wife?” Exasperation—or is it astonishment—rings from her interrogative while I place the to-go cups on the roof and hit the fob to unlock the car.

After setting the cups inside in the cup holder, I start patting my pockets. Back pockets. Front pockets. I brush past Mae who remains standing near the driver side of the car and pop the trunk. I open my laptop bag, frantically searching within the multiple pockets for my phone.

“Tucker,” Mae’s voice softens, and a hand comes to my wrist. “You can tell me.”

I'm still leaning over the trunk, hands in my bag when I stop. I do not want to talk about this. "Why would you think such a thing?"

"Ash with an e?"

I could deny I was married to the famous influencer. I could pretend I've never heard of her, but I'm certain Mae must have known. Why wouldn't she? Jane knew I was married to Rochelle Ashe, who had taken my stage name as her own.

Placing my hands on the edge of the trunk opening, I exhale. "It's not like you didn't know, right? Jane told you. That's why you were hitting on me that first day."

"What?" Mae's mouth falls open. "No, I didn't know anything."

She'd given me the short list of what she did know about me, and widower was on it. She must have known the truth of who my wife was.

"Jane told you."

"She didn't." Something begs me to believe Mae, but my steamrolling thoughts overrule.

"Yes, Rochelle Ashe was my wife. She died in a plane crash and what people don't know is she was leaving me to run off with her boyfriend."

What they also don't know is that I'd caught onto her affair months earlier, and I'd asked her for a divorce weeks before that fateful plane trip. Before the plane when down with my still-wife and her lover on board.

"All those Liven Up Thursdays were bullshit. We fought constantly. *I love my husband more than anything—*" I throw my voice in a mocking feminine sound and toss my arms up into the air. "It was all for show. *Family is everything.* She was a terrible mother." I have no idea why I'm telling Mae any of this, but I can't seem to stop myself. "She didn't believe in equality for women, either. She believed in her own bottom

line and the adrenaline rush she got when people loved on her.”

Rochelle was an attention whore and she learned it well from her father. He was a charismatic man, but so was mine, and perhaps that’s what attracted my eventual wife to sleep with my father before I married her. She became pregnant with dear old dad’s child, who I claimed as my own. I was the father of my brother, technically, but I’d never thought of our situation that way. Jude was my son. *My son.*

“I’m so—”

“Don’t.” I snap, turning on her. “Don’t say you’re sorry.” I reach for the trunk lid and slam it in place.

“I lost my phone,” I bark as if that’s the issue at hand instead of the revelation of one more secret to this woman. I don’t know why I’m suddenly so angry. Maybe I just didn’t want Mae to know this piece of my past. This drowning weight suffocating me along with so many other things.

I recall the look Mae was giving that damn book. The one where psychologists wrote the details and Rochelle claimed the information as her own philosophy. What started as simple blogging led to a movement, and I bought into the appeal. I believed in the power of Rochelle and the message we spread to others, only it all backfired on me.

“We can go back to the hotel.”

“What?” I don’t understand Mae’s suggestion.

“For your phone. Maybe you left it in the room.”

In the room, where I want to rewind, and pretend I never mentioned Jude’s birth or my failure as a rock star. Then we’d never be here, where Mae learns about Rochelle. None of my thoughts make sense, and I’m not being fair, but I can’t see further than hitting this highway and getting the fuck out of here.

Doubling back feels like a waste of time but we’re only five minutes from the place. Without a word to Mae, I step to

the driver's door, and she circles the back of the car. I start the ignition before she's even entered, and her seat belt is hardly on when I slam into reverse and turn back for the hotel.

The girl working the desk has to escort me back to the room, which hasn't been cleaned yet, and I search the dresser, the nightstand, and finally the rumpled sheets on the bed before finding the damn device.

Taking a final glance at the bed, I pause with visions of Mae pressed to my back, her hand on my ass. Her soft kiss to my skin. She'd done it all subconsciously. Not because it was me, but because I was a warm body, filling in for someone else, as I'd always been.

+ + +

When I return to the car, Mae holds her phone.

"Messaging all your friends to tell them what a fake your idol was?" I sneer.

Mae turns to me, horrified. "I would never do that to you." Her shrill voice says it all. She wouldn't. She's not like that and in only two days, I know better. I know her, and I instantly regret what I've suggested.

"And if you must know, Mr. *Assford*, I was texting my son who found time to chat with me while I waited for you."

Fuck. She's... This isn't on Mae. This is all me.

As she sets the GPS on her phone, I start the car, and we pull out onto Route 66. Within minutes it rains, and the weather feels fitting. The weight of the air outside the Prius is heavy and humid, but the temperature inside is cold and still. Mae and I don't speak. I owe her an apology, but I don't know what to say. She deserves to know more, but not yet. Not until I can settle my nerves and right my mood.

We detour to what's called Ribbon Road, a thirteen-mile segment of the original road remaining in Oklahoma. I want to curse this trip and the history it continues to bring forth. I'm starting to think all these byways are scams and I just want to hit the highway and speed along, skipping every fucking mile of this memory lane. Damn the reminiscences of other people taking vacations and seeking destinations, as Mae calls it. What a fallacy.

Search within for inspiration. Be your own motivator.

Rochelle's conference voice rings through my head and I hate myself for how I'm acting toward Mae. More honestly, I hate Rochelle.

Keeping my thoughts to myself, we rumble down the gravel-covered road as it ripples under the hard rainfall.

Mae eventually opens her mouth, holding it agape like a child, allowing the vibration of the vehicle to force a rumbling, bopping sound from her throat.

Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah.

Unable to help myself, I laugh without humor. *Is she kidding me?*

Mae turns to me, mouth still wide, while the repetitive sound reverberates out of her. As if having a will of its own, my mouth mimics hers, popping open, and allowing the jiggling of the car over bumpy road produce the strangest music with Mae.

Suddenly, I feel better than I have in a long, long time.

Playlist: “Drive” – The Cars

[Mae]

Rochelle Ashe was his wife.

As a powerhouse in the industry of self-motivators, especially for women, her books inspired many. *It's Your Life* was about her struggle to be responsible for her own well-being. She proclaimed that she wanted to help others find their worth, as women, as mothers and wives, and business owners. I believed her. I drank all the Kool-Aid she passed out and I cheered on her success. I wanted the best for her and was even envious of the life she lived. Her world looked picture perfect.

Glancing over at Tucker, I realize I've had the same thoughts about him. He looks pulled together and packaged all pretty, but underneath that fine-lined skin and those silvery eyes is just a man, and I remind myself of that. He's been hurt as I have, as many people in marriages have been, and he suffered a double whammy with her infidelity and then her death.

Did he love her? He'd told me last night about his son and how he gave up his dream to return home and marry Rochelle at his grandfather's request. That's a big ask and I wonder if Tucker's grandfather appreciated the sacrifice his grandson had made.

Whether he loved Rochelle or not, he had another child with her, assuming Julia is biologically his, and he stuck out his marriage. Maybe sticking with it became easier if he loved her. He's obviously upset by her affair and her untimely death, and rightfully so in both respects. I recognize the pain of

finding out your spouse cheated, since it happened to me, but then to lose his wife as he lost Rochelle—it's devastating.

Tucker's sour mood continues as the rain dampens the spirit of our trip, and I let him be. I don't know what to say. There's no comfort to offer in this situation.

+ + +

One thing I do not want to miss in our travels is something called the Blue Whale of Catoosa.

We veer off the highway to find the structure built of pipe and concrete on private property. Parking near the attraction, I'm once again giddy to see something from the original route.

"Did you know this was an anniversary gift from the husband to his wife?" I toss out the question as we exit Louie, even though I know Tucker didn't know about this gift.

The air is muggy and hot, and the pond where the whale structure perches gives off a pungent scent. "For their thirty-fourth wedding anniversary, he gave her this." I wave out a hand at the open-mouthed sperm whale replica.

"Fool," Tucker mutters but I'm not letting his mood ruin this moment.

"This is a grand gesture. It's so romantic." Large and slightly obnoxious, the whale makes a statement, especially when you learn the history. The man loved his wife.

Glancing over at Tucker, I realize small gestures can speak volumes as well, like giving a girl a red geranium because she misses home. The potted flower is buckled once more in the backseat. I'd consider the gift romantic, but based on Tucker's mood today, he's anything but interested in romance. Yesterday, he was only being nice, generous even, as he's been so far on this trip by paying for meals and our overnight stays.

Today is another story.

The rain begins again as we travel toward Tulsa, driving into the center to be greeted by a welcoming sign over the highway. At the Tulsa Expo Center, we see the Golden Driller, a seventy-two-foot statue that puts the Muffler Men to shame.

“I bet he has one big drill,” I mutter, comparing the potential in his pants to the Gemini Giant’s rocket. Tucker doesn’t even crack a smile at my joke, and between the heavy rain and his sour mood, my enthusiasm dampens as well.

Eventually, we stop at a diner in Stroud and have lunch. The waitress recommends we stop at a nearby vineyard, and I ask her questions about the Great Dust bowl and *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck’s famous book about people moving west from this area. Tucker snorts like I’m ignorant, or maybe the pleasant waitress is, in his opinion. His assholishness from our first day together is returning. Still, I ask him to take us to the recommended winery, where I buy several bottles of local wine, one of which I plan to drink in its entirety tonight.

When I request that we stop for the third time along the route leading to Oklahoma City because I need the restroom, Tucker doesn’t contain his irritation and I’m done.

“What is your problem?” I snap.

“This is stupid.”

“What is stupid?” I ask wanting clarification.

“Us taking this road trip based on other people’s journeys.”

That’s it. He can insult the Blue Whale. He can huff at a waitress. He can even hate me but I’m not putting up with his attitude anymore.

“Isn’t that what you did? Took a journey down someone else’s path for you?” I don’t know why I say it like I do, but it hits me so hard. He gave up his dream, lived someone else’s, and now that the truth is between us, he’s taking it out on me. I

don't mention his wife's name, but he must know who and what I reference. She became famous. He didn't.

While it's totally out of line for me to speak as I am, I'm pissed. "Are you upset you disrupted your life for her?"

He gave something up to gain something else. He became a father, a husband. They were a success as a couple and he's successful in his own right with Impact. This I know from Jane. My sister is financially well off.

"Hadn't you done the same thing? You said you followed your husband."

"It was called love. I made a sacrifice."

"And how'd that work out for you?" he snaps.

"How'd *that* work out for you?" I already know the answer. She was having an affair. It happens. It isn't right. It isn't easy to accept, but it happens. If he loved her, that hurt. Even if he no longer loved her, the betrayal still stings. Then she died, and he mourns her death. No one wishes death on someone, no matter how betrayed they feel about that person.

But he's angry with *her*.

The car fills with heated breaths and we pull into a service station because this confrontation started from my need to use the bathroom. When we stop, I hastily open the door but then I turn toward him.

"Give me the keys."

"What?" His head snaps in my direction.

"Give me the damn key fob."

"Why?" His forehead furrows.

Because I don't trust you. I almost say the words but staring back at him with his arm draped over the steering wheel and his body positioned to face me, I realize I'd be lying. In only two-plus days, I trust him more than I ever trusted Adam, which makes no sense. I hardly know Tucker Ashford and Lord knows he's full of secrets.

Are they secrets, though? Or is it just his life, and these things are private? He didn't have to share with me about his son, his band, or his wife. Even though he accused Jane of telling me about him, she hadn't hinted at his son issues, his rock star history, or his marriage troubles. She once gave me a personalized, autographed copy of Rochelle's book and I didn't even question how she got it. She never revealed to me that one of the two men she works with was the husband of my idol.

Without thinking, I make a suggestion. "We're almost to Oklahoma City. Maybe we can find you a flight and you can fly the remainder of the way to California."

Tucker's mouth falls open. Color drains from his face and then his expression hardens. "Didn't you need the bathroom?"

I do need to pee, and badly, but I'm worked up and with his crappy attitude, I'm worried he's going to steal my car and leave me in the middle of Oklahoma.

"Mae, go."

I shift from the seat and slam the car door. My heart races and my bladder aches. Rushing to the restroom, I barely make it to the toilet. I'm shaking from our altercation *and* the need to relieve myself. I should not have said what I said. I should not have worded my thoughts as I did. And I definitely should not have suggested a flight.

He did make sacrifices, too. He returned to Chicago because his grandfather asked. He married a woman because of obligation. He stood by her when she became a name.

And he can't take a plane ride because so many people in his life have died in them.

Returning to the car, I enter Louie full of regret. Tucker sits stone-still with his arms wrapped around the steering wheel. He doesn't peel out of the lot as I expected. He doesn't gun it for the expressway.

"I'm sorry," I say, although he's said some hurtful things as well.

Not addressing my apology, he says to the steering wheel, “Maybe I should just get in the backseat. I have work to do.”

“It’s Sunday.” As if that explains anything. If Saturday looked good on him, Sunday looks lost. “You don’t need to get in the back,” I mutter.

“Yeah, but I should let you drive. It’s your car. Your trip.” He pops open the driver’s door and I stare after him. Without exiting the front seat, I climb over the center console and settle into the driver’s position. While it’s only been one day, this space feels foreign. Louie is not even my car, but Tucker doesn’t know that yet.

“He didn’t mean anything, Louie,” I say to the dashboard, giving the dark curve a rub like a favorite pet. Tucker opens the front passenger door, shoves back the seat to accommodate his longer legs and folds into the seat. Immediately taking out his phone, he faces the screen while I back out of the lot, and we return to the route.

Shortly, we near Oklahoma City. There’s much to be seen here but I don’t want to stop. Instead, I continue around the state capital and veer onto I-40 straight west to Texas.

Texalo is a city on the edge of Oklahoma before entering the Longhorn State and I don’t want to miss the place. The heavy rain and the silence in the car for the last two hours sets the mood to enter this ghost town. The area is depressing. The effects of the major highway caused travelers to bypass this now-forgotten community and wiped this place out. Rundown buildings abound, one of which is even a historical landmark with nothing remarkable about it. The shell of a building covered in rust and surrounded by dried weeds hints at history long forgotten.

And isn’t that the way of some things in the past? They are best left behind to rust and rot and disappear. Restoration is frivolous. There is no point in bringing up the could-haves and the should-haves. We make a decision, and we can’t go backward. We can turn around, start again, but we can’t ever change the original direction. The hint of the first path will

always remain, worn with divots and ruts, whether visible or not. Maybe under weeds. Maybe turning to rot. The path is there, though, but the journey is done.

Even traveling the same route twice isn't quite the same. You can't ever duplicate that first pass. Something is markedly first because of its originality, creativity, or thrill. The first kiss. The first sexual experience. The first marriage. These are things that cannot be replicated. However new experiences on an old road can happen. A first kiss with a new person. A first sensual encounter with another human. A second chance in a different marriage. We can only look toward the future, despite our powers to glance in rearview mirror.

As for the history of this place, it's haunting. Someone knows the truth. Isn't that what ghosts do? They scare us with what they know and what they've seen. They are the revelations and regrets we hold deep within us. And we need to face those phantoms, that past, that history, before we can let them go. Before we can be set free to live our lives for now. And maybe love again.

I reach for Tucker, wrapping my hand around his wrist, hoping he'll feel in my touch how sorry I am. Sorry about his wife. Sorry about my husband. Sorry that people have to take shit in their marriages. Love is hard work, but that doesn't mean it should whittle a person down to nothing but shavings. Yet, it happens. Someone else can strip you to your bones and you'd still give them your femur. That's sacrifice. That's what love is.

When Tucker doesn't respond to my touch, I slip my hand from his warm skin.

In less than a thousand yards, we cross into Texas, and the weight of hurt and heartache in this car is as heavy as the rain pelting our windshield less than half an hour ago. We've put in three days, and I need a break from Tucker and this front seat.

"Let's stop in Shamrock," I say, breaking the code of silence between us. Maybe the name alone will bring us some

luck.

Tucker doesn't respond at first. His attention remains on his phone until finally he announces he found availability at a commercial hotel chain. He books us rooms for the night.

Two. Separate. Rooms.

Playlist: “Free Fallin’” – Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

[Tucker]

What the fuck am I doing? Why am I blocking her out? This is all me and as soon as we head to separate hotel rooms, I hate myself all over again. Today has been fire under ice. The constant downpour has been a damper on everything including my mood, which already was a thunderstorm.

Everything from Mae’s admiration of Rochelle to her discovery that Rochelle was my wife has been on my mind. When Rochelle passed, the divorce papers had been drawn up and were in my desk. She would be served upon her return from a trip to Montana, but the private plane went down, and all were lost. Pilot. Attendant. Rochelle. And Marty Hagen, her literary agent. They’d been together almost a year when I discovered their more intimate relationship. Rochelle told me she’d end it. We’d seek couples’ therapy. Hell, we hosted couples’ retreats on marriage and stoking desire. I hated how fake we were. Everything I’d left behind when I went to California, I had become. Pretending to be someone I wasn’t.

With thoughts overwhelming and energy under my skin, I can’t stay in the hotel room all night alone. I’d love a good gym, but this place doesn’t have more than a treadmill and I need something that allows me to roam. I walk a main street and find an old bar. Motorcycles are parked outside the place, but inside is a mix of patrons. Families. Couples. Groups of friends.

I wander to the bar and order a Heineken, then immediately notice a piano tucked into the corner of what looks like a dance floor. The parquet floor isn’t much more

than a square, maybe nine by nine, near the end of the L-shaped bar counter. Maybe the area is a makeshift stage. I noticed a sign on the door boasting live music on occasion.

After handing me a beer bottle, I tip the male bartender and ask, “Mind if I sit at the piano?”

“Have at her,” he mutters in a soft Southern drawl as he nods at the lone instrument.

Sitting on the wobbly bench, I take a deep pull of my beer. My attention falls to the keys—fifty-two white and thirty-six black. The perfect combination. Closing my eyes, I picture my hands moving over ebony and ivory, playing songs from memory, writing new ones. Lawson was a good songwriter, guitarist, and singer. Denton played guitar and sang back-up. I didn’t consider myself much of a singer, but I could harmonize, and I was versatile. Guitar. Drums. Harmonica. But the piano was a focal point in the living room of my childhood home. No one forgets their first love. I was prodded to play the instrument to entertain guests at dinner parties my parents hosted. Being musically talented was acceptable when the skill benefitted Jonathon Ashford.

When I selected music I wanted to play, Dad disapproved.

“What is that fucking racket?”

When his father gave me my first harmonica, Dad wanted to toss the gift away.

“I’ll only buy him another one,” Grandfather threatened.

When I got my first guitar, I practiced when Dad wasn’t home, which was often.

“That’s lovely, baby. You could be a star one day,” my mother cooed.

My fingers hesitate. Curled at the knuckles, they bend and quiver, eager to touch the eighty-eight keys that I walked away from years ago. I gave up the band, my friends, and California. I became a father and a husband, instead. So many

times, I wonder why I did it, and deep down inside I know the answer. I was twenty-three at the time. I wasn't a child, but I wasn't adult enough to make good decisions. My parents had died. Grandfather called. Rochelle needed me.

Sacrifice, Mae called it. *Love*, she said.

There was a time I thought I loved Rochelle. We eventually had Julia. I worked in the marketing department of Ashford's. She stayed home and raised our children. I never faulted her for Jude's paternity. He was mine. He had my blood through my father. The Ashford line was intact, and Jude would inherit the company one day. Only, with a downturn in department store patronage, the company was sold minus one location shortly before Grandfather's death. His life's work was gone. Maybe that's what led to his fatal heart attack.

I don't trust myself to touch these keys just as I don't trust myself with Mae. There's nothing I want more than to bury myself inside her and wipe away all the memories for a little bit. That wouldn't be fair to Mae, though. I've been unfair enough today.

The piano rests within eyesight of the long bar counter and the scattering of tables in the center of the place. Booths line the wall near the dance floor and curl around the L formation to the front door. Glancing up, I notice when Mae enters. She's wearing a dress and she wobbles, suggesting she has on heels of some type. Her hair is down but flattened a bit as it must be raining again. She walks to the bar, clutching at her crossbody bag, and takes a seat, hesitating a second to look around her. The bartender greets her, and she gives him that smile. The one I want only for me.

My fingers fall to the keys, and an ominous sound thuds into the bar. The overhead music drowns out the sharp clunk and Mae doesn't notice me in the corner tucked beside the counter. From this vantage point, I watch her as she orders a drink and casually sips from the straw, still glancing over her shoulders once or twice before turning back toward the

television behind the bartender. Eventually, a man in a leather vest approaches her, and I'm close enough to hear their conversation.

"New around here?" The worst pick-up line ever.

"Just passing through," she offers.

"Aren't we all?"

"I'm hoping with a name like Shamrock, some luck with rub off on me."

Oh sunshine. I shake my head and watch as a devilish grin curls the biker's lips. I can almost predict what he'll say next.

"I'd like to do some rubbing on you, pretty lady."

"What?" Mae says, giving a nervous laugh and lifts her glass for another drink. Her lips close around the short straw, and I watch the biker watch her. He's picturing those lips wrapped around a body part of his, just as I want them wrapped around mine.

"Runnin' the route?" he asks.

"On a road trip," she offers and I'm shaking my head again. She's giving him too much information.

"On a bike?"

Mae lightly chuckles. "In a Prius."

The biker gives a hearty laugh in response. "You need to spread your wings and fly, baby. Back of a bike is the only way to enjoy this road." He pats his chest, and I see what he's doing. *He's* the road he wants Mae to ride. When he reaches out to brush her hair over her shoulder, that's my cue to intervene. No one's touching her but me.

I stand and grab my beer, and that's when Mae notices me. Her eyes fix on me, holding mine as I stalk around the bar and stand behind the biker.

"Babe, whatcha doing?" I ask.

Her brows rise and her eyes shift to the biker. He's leaning on the bar with his back to me and he turns his head, peering at me over his shoulder. He's bigger than I am, broader and wider, but Mae is not leaving with him.

"This your girl?" he asks, keeping his profile to me.

"Yes, she is." My eyes latch onto Mae's, and her brows hitch higher. I'm waiting for her to deny it, but she doesn't.

"Shouldn't be leaving such a pretty thing unattended," he warns.

"Went to play her a song when you stepped up." There's a warning in my voice. I'd never leave such a beautiful woman alone and yet I did, didn't I? I booked her a separate room and headed to my own because I'm angry at someone no longer alive and not worthy of my resentment.

"Didn't see your claim." His message is clear. He noticed Mae the second she walked in, and I wasn't with her.

"He's the one who owns the Prius," Mae interjects. Her eyes sparkle at the admission although it's not the truth.

Shifting to eye me better, the biker's gaze scans me up and down and he mutters, "Pussy car." I'd like to agree with him, but I don't in order to keep the ruse with Mae. I could add some snide comment about getting pussy in that car, but I don't say that either. I hold his gaze. Dark eyes narrow on mine. One punch and he'd take me out. My last bar fight was a long time ago, and even then, it was only the one time. But I'll take the hit for Mae if that's what comes of this encounter, because only over my dead body is she leaving with this man.

"Got it," the biker huffs, tipping up his chin and dismissing me. He glances over his shoulder at Mae. "Make sure he takes care of you, sweetheart."

Mae's gaze returns to me. "He does," she lies. The fib is like a stab to my chest. I've been an awful person today, and I should explain myself, but I can't. I don't know what happened.

Biker Dude pushes off the bar and stalks back to wherever he came from, and I pull up the stool beside Mae. My eyes roam the side of her body. The dress wraps around her, accentuating her curves. She's wearing thick wedges, and the strap on the shoes matches the color of her dress. She's overdressed and out of place in this small-town bar, but her appearance is also making her stand out. She's a ray of sunshine in this dark haven.

"Come here often?" I ask, and she chuckles.

"That was almost worse than his line," she says.

"But you were falling for his line, weren't you?"

"It's nice to be hit on." Her eyes lower to the counter and her fingers run along the side of her tall, thin glass before she looks up at me again. "I didn't see you when I came in. Were you playing the piano?"

"No. I used to play but I don't anymore."

"Why not?"

I glance over at the instrument. "I just don't, I guess. When I moved home, I tried but it felt like every note was a reminder of what I'd given up. What I quit. I hated being a quitter. I didn't own a piano. I had a harmonica and I'd steal out back to play it until I lost the instrument." I could have gone to Grandfather's home for a piano. I could have returned to my parents' condo on Lake Shore Drive, but I didn't want to go back.

"Harmonica?" She smiles.

"I'm full of a lot of hot air."

She chuckles.

We silently sit at the bar for a minute until I ask, "Would you have really left with him?"

Mae turns her head, peering over her shoulder in the direction of Biker Dude and friends. "I might have been in a little over my head with him." She weakly smiles back at me.

“But it was nice to be hit on,” I comment, an edge to my voice.

She shrugs and I want to still those shoulders. “It’s nice to feel wanted by someone, even if it is only a flirty pick-up line. I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by talking to me.”

“Mae,” I groan. “You’re beautiful. He meant all his innuendos about road trips on him.”

“Road trips on him?” Her brows rise.

“Come on. I heard it a mile away. Riding the road on his bike. He wanted you to ride him.”

Mae tips her head and shifts her eyes in his direction. “Really?”

I scoff. “You can’t be that gullible.” The word upsets her and those blue eyes cloud over. I’ve hurt her again.

“And how would you hit on a woman?”

“I wouldn’t,” I quickly retort.

Mae watches me and I don’t like the way she’s looking at me. “Is that why you’re always telling me not to hit on you?” Her voice lowers, cautious and curious.

Swiping a hand over my head, I shift on the bar stool to face Mae. “Women used to hit on me all the time when I was with Rochelle. She’d be giving a conference about female empowerment, and her speeches made women bold as her words intended, but many took that boldness to a new level. Maybe they wanted to tempt the unobtainable. Maybe they wanted to push at my devotion to Rochelle. I have so many come-ons in my memory, I could write a book.”

This makes Mae lightly chuckle. “What would they do?”

“What didn’t they? Room keys. Napkin notes. Strong suggestions. I even had a woman slip me her underwear with her phone number on it.”

“No.” Mae laughs, horrified at the same time.

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ll make sure to keep my undies on.” Her laughter continues and she arches a brow. “And you would have never done those things, hitting on woman in such a manner, when you were in your band?”

“I didn’t need to. Women love a man in a band.”

Mae smiles large but she goes quiet at this statement. Our eyes meet.

“I wouldn’t know how to come on to a woman, Mae. I haven’t had to do it in a long time.”

She shifts in her seat and faces me. The stools are close, and I spread my thighs to allow her knees between my legs.

“Practice on me.” She sits up straighter, flips her hair over her shoulder and braces her hands on the tops of her legs. She looks like she’s ready to be schooled in the art of pick-up lines or preparing for battle, which might be the same thing.

“I’d start with an apology.”

Her shoulders lower a bit. “That’s a terrible opening line.”

“It’s honest. I’m sorry about earlier.”

Mae stares at me a second, her gaze roving over my face, before she waves a hand dismissing me. “Water under the bridge, and we’ve crossed several of them.” I chuckle at her remark, and then she says, “Now, try again.”

Keeping my eyes on Mae, I search for the right comment to pique her interest. To hint that I’d be interested in her for a night.

“I’d say something like, you’re a ray of sunshine beneath the clouds.”

“That one sounds familiar,” she says, pursing her lips and tilting her head.

“Then I’d add, I felt your warmth from across the room. You’re the match to my soul and the spark to my heart. You light me up.”

Mae slowly grins. “Okay. That’s... wow, that’s nice.”

“How about my heart is an hourglass and yours is the sand, but I won’t let you slip away.”

Mae dramatically fans her face. “I’d say I might be interested in riding *your* bike.” She bursts out laughing and I smile back at her. Our eyes lock and I want to reach for her. I’d waste no time if I were really hitting on her. I’d touch her, giving off the physical hints of how much I want her. Fingers on her neck. Tucking back her hair. A kiss to the corner of her smile.

“If you really want to apologize, you don’t need to hit on me, though.” She clears her throat, and her tone turns less playful. “I want to hear you play the piano.”

“Mae.” Her name is a quiet plea. *Don’t ask this of me.* Her eyes watch mine dart away from hers. I glance over at the piano in the corner. I can’t. I can’t do this, not even for her.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to do it. It’s kind of a grand gesture.” Mae pauses. “I wonder if that biker knows a tune.”

“Oh, you play dirty.”

“Dirt is my thing. How’s that for innuendo?” She slowly smiles. “Besides, I thought we were only practicing your pickup lines.” There’s a question in her voice. Was I hitting on her? Was I genuine or was this just pretend? My opening come-hither line was an I’m-sorry-statement. Playing the piano seems to be the only way to let Mae know I’m sincere. I meant it—all of it—pickup lines and apology.

A grand gesture. Mae mentioned such a thing earlier today as we stood by the giant blue whale attraction propped in a pond. I don’t remember the details of the structure other than a husband built that whale for his wife, confirming his love for her. At the time, I scoffed. Who wants a silly cement whale as a gift? But I recall Mae saying something about the

couple's children and grandchildren enjoying the thing for years. When a man loves a woman, he gives her what she wants. He proves himself with something as simple as a red geranium or as giant as a replica whale.

Or playing the piano because she asked.

Slipping from the stool, I turn from Mae and head to the piano once more. My body hums. My heart hammers. I jiggle my arms. I can do this. I can do it for her.

I slide onto the bench as my mind runs through tunes. I'm so out of practice this could be an epic fail. Like walking away from the band. Like giving up on a dream. I glance up at Mae. Her elbow is bent on the bar, her chin propped in her hand. She's giving me the dreamiest look and I imagine playing the piano for a woman like her back when I was in my twenties. When I was young and didn't need to hit on women because they hit on me. Mae would have been the type of girl I should have come on to. She would have been the right woman for me.

A song comes to mind and I'm curious if I'll remember it correctly. Placing my fingers on the cool keys, I press down. The trill notes vibrate into the bar where overhead music and the chatter of patrons still rings higher than the sound. I ripple my fingers over the keys as a warmup, and a current of energy prickles up my arms. Adrenaline surges through me and my blood flows like rapid rivers. I feel alive like I haven't felt in a long time, and I repeat the rumbling down the length of the keys before settling in place.

Hitting the first note, the harmony comes back to me. Lawson and I wrote this song about not letting go of the woman of our dreams. I don't know if he ever found his. He'd been best friends with his sister, and the relationship was one I didn't understand. I thought she'd hold him back. I was wrong.

As the notes flow and the rhythm falls into line, I'm transported back in time while fully present where I sit—a dark bar in Texas trying to apologize to a woman I hardly know, and yet who knows more about me than anyone at this

point. The melody leaves my fingertips and floats over the keys, stirring up a swirl of dust coating my memories. The song carries on and when I hit the last note, I'm almost melancholy to finish. Staring down at my fingers, bent over keys I haven't touched in over twenty-five years, something swells in my chest and my vision blurs.

Damn, that felt good.

I blink and look up, registering that a few people closest to the piano clap. Mae remains at the bar, a hand over her mouth. Her eyes wide.

"That was so beautiful," she says on a whisper when I return to my stool. "The song sounded so familiar, but I can't place it."

"It's old. It's called 'Sand' by Colt45." Our band name stumbles off my tongue, sticky and unfamiliar. I don't talk about them often. I say the name rarely.

"Oh my gosh, I loved that song when I was younger." Mae hums off key and I'm certain she has the lyrics wrong in her head as she does with most songs. Only, she opens her mouth, and the words fly out.

"I'm an hourglass. You're the sand. I won't let you slip away." She's close but not quite. Still, she continues. "Fragile but strong, this can't be wrong. I'll hold you close. I won't let you slip away."

Her eyes widen as she looks at me. "You used song lyrics to hit on me?" She shrieks before laughing and slapping my shoulder. "That's cheating."

It might have been, if that song wasn't mine. Written almost thirty years ago, the lyrics are more appropriate than ever. I don't want to let Mae slip away.

TEXAS – DAY 4

Playlist: “Deep in the Heart of Texas” – Gene Autry

[Mae]

Shit. I drank too much. I hadn't been sloppy drunk or ready to vomit but those margaritas had been strong, and I downed them too fast. When we eventually walked back to the hotel, my limbs were heavy, and my body swayed. I might have been slurring my words. There's also a heavy weight at the base of my spine as I lay flat on my belly on a diagonal across my hotel bed. Opening my eyes, I glance down the side of my body to find Tucker next to me, his head on my lower back. One arm drapes over the backs of my thighs. He's scrunched up into a corner of the bed, holding onto me like a life preserver of sorts. I'm still wearing my dress from last night, minus my bra somehow. Everything else feels intact as I'm certain we didn't do anything, not even kiss.

What I'm slightly shaky about are the details of him being in my room. With the marching band in my head, I can't recall all that was said last night.

Reaching awkwardly for his head, I brush over his short hair and he startles. Lifting his head, he stares down at my covered backside. His hand coasts up the back of my thighs, and over my dress, before his head twists. He notices me gazing at him over my shoulder.

“Good morning,” I croak, my throat dry. My tongue feels like I licked a cat.

“Hey.” His greeting cracks and he shifts, flipping himself to his back in the sliver of space on the bed. “How are you feeling?” He rolls his head and rubs a hand down his chest. Last night, he wore a dress shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, and a pair of suit pants to the bar. Presently, he’s still wearing his pants, minus his shirt and belt. His firm chest is on display. His leather strap necklace rests on his sternum. He was overdressed for the small-town tavern, drawing attention to himself with his good looks. *Or was it the music?* He played the piano last night and I’d held my breath at his rendition of “Sand,” a sultry ballad song about someone slipping away and someone else not wanting them to go.

“I definitely overindulged,” I grumble, tipping to my side and placing a hand over my forehead. I’m an idiot, because riding in a car today with a hangover might be a nightmare, not to mention that even though I’ve slept, I don’t feel rested. “How did you end up in here?”

I’m horrified that I might have coerced him into my room. *Did I hit on him?* He explained what happened in his past—all those women wanting him despite his faithfulness to his wife. He even explained how it wasn’t me so much as a gut reaction when I asked for his number on the street that first morning.

“*You’re making up for having my suit cleaned with this trip.*” That made me laugh.

Did he open up more about Rochelle being unfaithful to him in the end? I’m certain he did. He told me he’d filed for divorce before she took that trip with her lover. His use of the word would be almost comical, except I don’t know how else to describe a person one has an affair with. He or she is not a spouse. They are not the person one took vows with, made promises to, or hitched a life around.

“I was worried you’d get sick. After I walked you in here and you passed out on the bed, I went back to my room and grabbed my things. Brought them back here.”

I sit upright and notice his bag in the corner of the room.

“I’m sorry you lost out on that money.”

He rolls to his elbow and peers at me. “It was worth it.” Those silvery eyes flicker with mischief and I see that man women would have hit on over the years.

Hesitantly, I lick my lips. “Did I hit on you?” I close my eyes.

“Sunshine, I’d like to play this up and say that you did, drawing out the torture, but you’re looking a little green already and I don’t have it in me to torment you today. We’re good.”

“Oh...good.” *Thank God.* I don’t want him to lump me in with those other women, even if he no longer has his wife. I don’t want to be just another woman hitting on a hot man slipping him my room key. I’m certain I would have been disappointed. He wouldn’t have been here this morning...or even participated in a *last night*.

“Let’s shower and get something to eat.” The statement catches me off guard and he must sense my unease. “Unless you aren’t hungry?”

Food isn’t the issue, but the first directive implied we’d shower *together* which is ridiculous. Why would he shower with me? Why would he want to shampoo my hair and let me soap up his body and then allow our skin to slip and slide together? I need to clear my head of all sexual thoughts about this man when he’s been nothing but sweet toward me.

He apologized for yesterday. I accepted his gesture. He played the piano.

“No. I’m hungry. You can shower first.”

“Are you sure?” When I nod, he easily rolls in the opposite direction and slips a hand in his pants. I shouldn’t take a peek, but I can’t miss what he’s trying to disguise behind the silky fabric. *It’s only morning wood*, I tell myself. A phenomenon all men experience. I close my eyes again and slip lower on the bed, smoothing a hand down my wrinkled dress and wait for Tucker, trying not to picture him taking that

bulge in hand, soaping himself all up and yet getting dirty in my shower.

+ + +

Shamrock is full of Route 66 nostalgia. A restored Magnolia gas station graces a street corner as the building sits on an angle next to an old hotel that had been converted to the Pioneer West Museum. The once popular Tower Plaza and U-Drop Inn Café with its iconic Conoco lettering on a tower was another inspiration in the animated movie *Cars*. Visually restored to its earlier glory, the location offers a modern-day charging station and I plug in the Prius when we arrive there for breakfast.

We move in slower motion this morning, or maybe that's just me with my dull hangover. I'm not as young as I used to be, and I don't even try to pretend I'm not hurting. Tucker found ibuprofen for me, and we seek greasy breakfast food to help soak up the alcohol still swimming in my stomach.

It won't take us long to travel through Texas and we agree to go as far as we can into New Mexico. As I-40 covers most of the iconic Route 66, following the original path closely, we stick to the expressway and pull off where we can for attractions.

We drive through McLean, which boasts that it is *the* heart of Texas.

We pass a Phillips 66 gas station, which looks more like a small house, and I jump out to have my photo taken hugging yet another historic gas pump.

On our way to Amarillo, the next major city along the route, my phone rings through the car's speakers. Because it's Monday morning, I'm assuming the call is one of the boys before they go to work. The caller ID on the dash reads Wyatt and I press accept.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” I say more cheerful than I feel.

“Mae?” My ex-husband’s voice fills the car.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath and feel Tucker’s head turn in my direction. “Let me pull over and take this.” I click on the hazard lights and slow to veer onto the shoulder. I’m driving this morning because Tucker admitted he needed to do a few things related to work. However, he’s sitting in the front seat beside me instead of the back where Gemma the geranium is securely buckled. As I begin to merge onto the shoulder, a firm hand takes the steering wheel and forces the car to stay on the highway.

“What the heck?” I mumble, quickly glancing over at Tucker who shakes his head. We aren’t pulling over for this, his wagging head says.

“Are you talking to yourself?” Adam snaps. I don’t respond as I click off the hazards and accelerate. I’d rather not have a conversation with Tucker listening, or any conversation with Adam for that fact. “You stole my car.”

“It’s not your car,” I argue back. “It’s Wyatt’s.” My teenage son wasn’t happy with the dad-mobile, as he called it, he received upon graduating from high school. Although the distance to Wyatt’s college wasn’t far, Adam didn’t want to drive back and forth, moving Wyatt in, or bringing him home for visits, so he bought our son transportation. I’d always been curious where Adam got the money.

“And you stole from me,” I remind him, sheepishly shifting my eyes to Tucker and back to the road. Tucker’s head takes a sharp twist in my direction. “Now we’re even,” I lie.

“I should send the cops out after you,” he threatens.

I’m immediately angry. I’m hungover. It’s Monday morning and I don’t need this old argument with him. “You wouldn’t dare, or I’ll have you in court for embezzlement.”

Adam had been stealing funds from the landscaping business and garden center, alternating between the two to

disguise what he was doing—having affairs with other women. I have the financial records to prove it, and in another foolish agreement with him, I decided not to press charges. He would owe me the money. *Stupid, stupid woman.* It's a miracle he kept up with child support, but as Owen turned eighteen before his senior year in high school, that ended. Adam and I are supposed to split college tuitions and the money I would earn from driving Tucker is going to cover my share of this year, at least for Owen, who will be a freshman.

The line goes silent for a second before Adam mutters, "Let's not do this."

"Yes, let's not." I pause. "You know what's sad, Adam? It's Monday and you just noticed I have this car." I'd called home on Thursday evening and somehow got Adam on the line after speaking with the boys. He hadn't even mentioned Wyatt's car then. My eldest son wanted a new truck, but it wasn't economical or practical. I own two for Mae's Flowers, one of which is a beater and Wyatt prefers to drive that around town. *It's chill*, he tells me which I think is code for some concept I probably don't want to know the meaning of.

"I was busy this weekend," Adam huffs.

I bet he was. He has a new girlfriend after the one he *didn't* leave me for got tired of waiting for him. Wyatt informed me on Saturday night how he and Owen went back to my house because their father said he had out-of-town plans for the weekend. At eighteen and twenty, they were old enough to be alone, but I thought it'd be good father-son bonding time to stay at their father's house for two weeks like they had each summer after the divorce. As my boys approached manhood, I was wrong once more about Adam.

"Adam, be a father. Step up for them."

"I don't need this from you," he mocks and beside me Tucker speaks up.

"Hang up," he demands, his tone sharp and commanding.

"What was that?" Adam asks.

“It’s—” *No one? Nothing?* I don’t want to deny Tucker sitting beside me, but I also don’t need to explain myself to Adam. Quickly catching Tucker’s eyes, he shakes his head again, warning me not to clarify.

“Mae?” Adam shrills through the line.

“I gotta go.” I reach forward and press end on the call and the car falls into heavy silence. Tucker continues to stare at me, waiting on an explanation, and I shrug.

“He stole money from our joint businesses. His own, the landscaping side, was easier to disguise because I didn’t have access to the books for that division. However, Adam had access to the accounts for the flower shop and garden center, and admittedly, I’ve never been good at the accounting. It’s one reason I hired on Pam as my manager at first.” Tucker knows Pam is my business partner. “She caught what she thought were errors. When we took everything to an accountant when separating the businesses in the divorce, I learned the truth. It’d been a little bit here and a little bit there. Nothing large enough to be noticed, but the dollars added up. I always wondered how he bought this car for our son, but I honestly don’t think the money he took was to save up for Louie.” I stroke a hand over the dashboard.

“Mae, you should have pressed charges.”

“I’m a sucker for promises.” My voice is bitter. *Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.* Fool me three times? There isn’t even a saying for that. It renders one speechless by the sheer stupidity.

“You still can.”

“Actually, I don’t think I can. It’s been five years and there’s some statute on the timing.” I don’t know the details, but after Adam was legally removed from any connection with the flower shop and garden center, I didn’t care to follow through with my investigation. He had his business. I had mine. We had to grin and bear it with the community, putting up a false front that we were a united, professional team while

we hated each other. Adam didn't always purchase his flowers from me for his landscaping jobs and that was his loss. I didn't have a say in how he did business. Many of my customers were do-it-yourselfers and for those who wanted additional help, I'd allow my staff to be hired on the side for a small service fee. We weren't exactly competing with Eden Landscaping, just beating Adam at his own game.

"I can have someone look into this for you," Tucker offers, and his concern is welcome but not necessary.

"My brother is a financial investor. He checked things out as well and offered the same thing. He knew a guy." I drop my voice to sound gangster-ish. "He also gave me some of the capital to buy Adam out and remove him from the business." Paying Adam made me sick, because he'd taken money from me, but funds needed to be exchanged in some manner, so the sale was on record that I purchased his share. "Garrett owns ten-percent just to have his name in our books. Pam owns a forty-percent, and I own the rest." Pam's husband was happy to invest whatever amount she needed as a wedding present when they'd married.

Tucker swipes a hand over his head. "What a fucking asshole."

"Yeah."

"And what a schmuck to call with your son's phone."

"He does that sometimes because I have him in my phone as Sperm Donor."

Tucker laughs before reminding me, "He wasn't worthy."

The statement warms me. "Right again, but I wouldn't trade my boys, so there is that." It's hard to fault Adam a thousand percent because he's the one who gave me Wyatt and Owen. At least, *his sperm* helped me conceive them.

"We developed Impact because of something similar." Tucker narrows his eyes toward the windshield as he speaks. "At first, Rochelle and I had been partners while I worked in marketing for the family business. As she grew, we formed a

corporation, and I became chief executive officer and head of marketing while she remained president. Ten years in, she was even bigger than we ever anticipated. Machlan and I formed Impact and made Rochelle a client. Some days I'm so grateful for the twist in my life."

It sounds like another story, but I'm still focused on how easily he's opening up to me.

"She was just such a—" The car jostles and a tire *thump-thumps*.

"Oh my God." My hands grip the steering wheel tighter, struggling to keep the car steady. I'm afraid to remove my hands from the wheel and Tucker hits the hazard lights. Cautiously, I take my foot off the accelerator, steer toward the shoulder on a lopsided car and slow until I feel comfortable tapping the brakes. One thing Granddad taught me was never slam the brakes or you'll spin out of control. Once I cut the engine, we both take a moment to exhale in relief. I shift my gaze to the rearview mirror; thankful another vehicle didn't run into us as we slowed.

"Are you okay?" Tucker's looking at me, but I can't seem to turn my head. My eyes remain on the road before us, grateful we're off to the side.

"I'm fine," I lie. Going seventy miles an hour when the tire punctured has my heart racing.

Tucker warns me to stay in the car before he pops out the passenger door, but I'm opening the driver one as well. The car rattles as a semi-tractor trailer truck speeds past us and Tucker and I meet at the trunk.

"What did you hit?" he asks, not accusing me, but curious. He glances down the highway for something.

"I have no idea." I don't see anything either. I *hadn't* seen a thing in the road, but the left back tire is shot.

Tucker reaches out for my arm and runs a hand down it. "Okay. I can fix this." He pops the trunk and starts removing our suitcases. The spare is in a hatch underneath them. With

our luggage on the side of the road, he hikes the spare tire out of the well and I remove the jack. There's a funny-looking crossbar tool that looks like a giant X and while I know it's for removing the lug nuts, I twirl the metal tool in my hand.

"I should have been a baton twirler," I say over the roar of more vehicles whizzing down the highway. Tossing the lug wrench into the air once more, I overshoot, and the heavy metal tool flips out toward the asphalt and bounces away from us. I step forward onto the highway pavement.

"Mae!" Tucker hollers at the same time I hear the harsh horn of a semi-truck. Hands on my hips drag me backward and slam me awkwardly against the open trunk.

The heavy weight of a fast-moving tractor trailer whizzes past the car, shaking us in its wake. Tucker's hands cup my face before cupping my shoulders and slipping down my arms. Then I'm pulled into him, colliding with his firm chest as the tightest embrace circles me. Awkwardly, I lift my arms and curl my fingers into his T-shirt just above his lower back. His arms squeeze tighter before one hand coasts to the back of my head, fingers dipping into the base of my messy bun. The other hand palms my back, skimming downward to rest at the top of my backside, pinning me tightly against his chest. His heart races and matches the galloping of mine.

We don't speak.

Tucker continues to hold me, breathing heavily near my ear. The hand inside my hair slowly lowers to my nape before curving to the side, nearly circling my throat. The other hand slips under my tee, smoothing up and down my warm skin, soothing me as if I'd been hurt. However, this desperate embrace feels like it might be comforting him as well as me. I lift my own hands, scrubbing up his taut back and palming his shoulder blades, clutching at him. His wandering hand stops moving, pausing on the clasp of my bra. He breathes in. He breathes out and I follow his lead. Our chests heave together, against one another before his hands move once more.

Fingertips skitter down my spine while his other fingers work their way back into my hair.

His face joins the movements. His cheek rubs against my jaw. The stubble that's been filling in over the course of the last few days is sharp but tickles. A shiver ripples up my spine, and he brushes his jaw against the side of my face before lowering for my neck. I twist my head to allow him better access to my skin and he continues to paint my neck, my jaw, and my cheek with that scrubby scruff. A breath whispers over my ear as we remain plastered to one another, clinging to one another.

I've never been so turned on from a hug in my entire life.

"Mae," he whispers at my ear, continuing to move his cheek and stroke my back. There's so much said in my name, but I can't comprehend anything. Is he asking me something? Is he telling me something? Is he simply confirming I'm standing here before him?

I'm desperate for him to press me against the side of this car and kiss me like I've never been kissed before.

The thought causes me to place my hands on his shoulders, needing him to release me before I do something stupid like attempt to kiss *him*.

"Not yet," he hums at the soft push I give his upper arms. The hand in my hair slips lower once again and skims the side of my neck. His palm on my back moves to the edge of my waist and he rocks his hips forward. The long, hard shaft behind denim wedges against my lower belly.

"Mae," he whispers again, keeping his hips forward, his erection against me. His hand on my throat moves lower, my heart races in my chest and his forehead meets mine. I close my eyes and his nose swipes against the tip of mine.

"If it isn't coffee, it's a busy street," he mutters, rolling his head against my own. It takes me a minute to remember he tugged me off Adams Avenue when I was looking for my dropped phone and taxi horns blared.

Pulling back, he presses a kiss to the tip of my nose. The touch is so soft it's like a whisper of air. Next, he kisses my forehead, and another tractor trailer whips past us, laying on his horn. I flinch and Tucker tightens his hold once more.

"We need to get off the side of the road," he says, but his voice is quiet and deep. He's speaking to my lips.

I nod to agree with him, but I don't want him to let me go and he must feel the same because he draws me back against him. One more stroke of his palm up my spine. One more dip of his fingers into my loosened bun. His cheek moves against mine and then he's gone, stepping back, his hands slowly slipping free like he's releasing a ribbon. He presses the bulge in his jeans against me one final time, not even hiding the fact he's hard. He extends his arms and takes a step back before he swipes a hand down his face. He's been drained of the tan coloring in his cheeks. I scared him as much as I frightened myself.

I open my mouth to apologize. I don't know what I was thinking other than trying to lighten the mood between Adam's call, Tucker's confession, and the flat tire. However, he turns, giving me his side, and checks the road. The lug wrench is in the second lane farthest from us and Tucker checks the coming traffic once more. Sensing he's clear enough, he races for the tool and returns to me.

"You stay here." He points at me with the wrench, and I accept his demand with a nod. I'm not arguing with him about another thing because he just saved me from being roadkill on Route 66.

Playlist: “Unchained Melody” – The Righteous Brothers

[Tucker]

Fuck. I’m shaking. The spare tire is in place. The old one tossed in the back and we’re on the road to Amarillo again, but I can’t stop the tremble in my hands. All I saw in my head was Mae being flattened on that road, much like the nightmares I have in my head of Rochelle and Marty during a plane crash. Much like my parents in the same manner.

Once I pulled Mae from the highway and the near miss of a semi-tractor trailer, I couldn’t get her close enough to me. I wanted her under my skin, and I didn’t want to let her go. Still, we needed to get off the edge of the highway and now we need a new tire. We find a tire shop with a few hours’ wait in Amarillo, and we’re directed to historic Sixth Street, a business district reminiscent of Route 66. I don’t feel like shopping. I can’t concentrate on anything, but Mae and I walk the blocks to stretch our legs and calm our hearts. At one point, I grab her hand because once again, I’m afraid to let her go.

We aren’t looking at anything specifically, just walking hand in hand when Mae finally says to me, “Aren’t you hot in those jeans? We should buy you some shorts.”

I have shorts with me, but I’d been saving them for Napa. I also have workout shorts, but I wouldn’t wear them traveling.

“It’s not like there’s an Ashford’s around here,” I blurt without thinking and she chuckles before she stops. Still holding her hand, I take a step forward and turn to face her.

“Wait.” Her eyes meet mine as they so often have with questions. “Like the department store? Ashford’s in downtown Chicago?” Mae’s brows crease and she tips her head to the side, staring at me. “Your last name is Ashford.”

“Yes.” I state the obvious as Mae puts things together.

“Are you... Is that your family business?”

“It was.”

Her hand slips from mine and I instantly miss it. Reaching out for her fingers, I link mine with hers, holding the tips more than her hand. I don’t want this to change things.

“Sunshine,” I plead.

“You’re so full of surprises.” Her brows sternly pinch, or maybe that crease is because she’s confused. “How many more secrets do you have?” Her voice lowers, the tone hurt. I’m not holding out on her, it’s just that I’ve already shared so much.

“That might be my last one.” I’m so bare to her, raw even. The only thing left is telling her more about the band, but I’m not certain those details are necessary. I failed as a rock star.

Mae shakes her head. “So what? You’re the heir or something.”

“Jude is the heir. He’s the CEO with forty-nine percent in the only store.” The original flagship store is the only location that remains as the place where it all began. A buyout happened with another department store chain, converting most locations to their brand. Jude wasn’t happy to see his inheritance chipped away and it’s another grievance he wants to lay on me. However, the decision to sell came from his great-grandfather and the board of directors. Maybe Grandfather wanted Jude to start from scratch. Maybe he wanted Jude to rebuild. Or maybe he wanted Jude to stop acting like a spoiled brat. I was just like Jude as a kid.

“It’s another reason I started Impact. I needed something that was mine. Not Rochelle’s. Not my son’s. Not the family’s.”

Despite all I’d done, Grandfather left that one store to Jude in his will. He liked to tell me I’d always been able to forge my own path, which was such bullshit. I’d given in to his, married a woman to save a business agreement and the family name. Grandfather didn’t live to see the day when things began to sour with my wife or how much my son would come to despise me.

“What is love, son? We come from families that merge.” My grandfather held such an antiquated philosophy, but twenty-seven years ago what could I do? Like Mae said about her sperm-donor husband, she wouldn’t trade her kids. I wouldn’t give up Jude even though we disagree on almost everything.

“So, you are an Ashford, as in Ashford’s department store. You were in a band. You were married to Rochelle Ashe, influencer phenom, and you now own your own media company specializing in influencer branding and social media marketing. Do I have that right?”

“Sounds about right,” I say. Rather than sounding impressed, though, Mae looks upset. Her hand tugs free of mine again and she begins walking.

“Mae?” I follow her, my stride lengthening as her pace quickens.

“What the hell are you doing with me?” she barks, waving out her arms and turning on me. “You could afford a private jet. You could cross the country in your own fancy vehicle. You could have found another driver and paid them triple.”

“Please don’t make this about money and you know why I don’t have a private jet.”

Mae huffs and turns her back on me once more. Her sandals flap on the cement sidewalk and her ass sways as she

stalks off. I race after her again, catching her arm and gently forcing her to stop.

“Mae. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing and it has nothing to do with money. Why are you keeping so much from me?”

Why would I open up? The words tingle the tip of my tongue, but I don’t say them because I have already told her so much. She knows my secret about Jude. She knows the reason behind my grandfather’s request. She knows I quit a band. She knows I wanted a divorce from Rochelle.

“I’m not. Mae, I’ve told you more than I’ve told any single other person ever. Even Mach. And I’m happy I’m on this trip with you.”

“You are not,” she scoffs.

“Don’t say that.” My voice turns harsher. My tone serious. I’ve enjoyed our time. It’s been a rollercoaster ride, but I’m glad to be on this trip with her. I’m excited to share this experience with her. In fact, I might be happier than I’ve ever been. “I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather cross the country with.”

“Taking other people’s journeys,” she mocks of words I tossed at her only yesterday.

“No, Mae. Taking our journey. Making this ours. Yours and mine.” I point between us. “We’re making a new history here.”

Mae turns her head, then lowers it. She shakes it side to side and blinks.

“Sunshine?” I reach for her chin and tip her face up. Her eyes close.

“Look at me, sweetheart.” Her lids lift and liquid fills them.

“You can be kind of sweet sometimes,” she says, so softly, so quietly, and once more I want to kiss her. I’d longed

to put my mouth against hers and kiss her with everything I had as we stood on the side of the highway. Now we are standing on a sidewalk, and if my mouth presses hers, I don't think I can stop there. I want to brush my lips over every inch of her. I want to run my tongue over her skin. I want to savor her, devour her, and then I want to enter her, joining us as only two people can. I want to make history, as I said. Hers and mine, together.

“Let's get some lunch,” I say instead before I kiss her along this route we're traveling. I'd press her up against a building just as easily as her car, but I want us to be alone when I do. I want to take my time with her because like that song I sang last night, she's grains of sand, and she'll slip through my heart if I don't hold on tighter.

+ + +

With the setback of a flat tire, we delay even longer when we experience The Big Texan, a touristy restaurant in Amarillo known for a seventy-two-ounce steak. A giant bull statue stands outside the place and Mae has her obligatory photo taken, commemorating one more stop along our travels. I can't tackle a seventy-two-ounce steak, but I'm ready to eat hardy. I'm starving as the adrenaline rush of nearly losing Mae settles down.

Eventually leaving Amarillo, I'm so protein full, I need a nap. Mae asks me to drive, and I wonder if she's still shaken from earlier. Outside Amarillo, we find Cadillac Ranch, an iconic stop on a frontage road. Ten Cadillacs dating from 1949 to 1963 stand half buried in a field with their tailfins upright, or what would have been tailfins if they hadn't been removed as souvenirs over the years. The draw to this location is the fact you *can* deface the vehicles, which have been here since 1974. Mae tells me all this as we near what is considered roadside art.

“Graffiti is encouraged, I don’t have spray paint,” she explains. “But I have a permanent marker.”

Permanent ink will make such a small mark on these classic Cadillacs, but I follow Mae’s lead. The stench is acidic with both animal droppings and aerosol, but we make our way to the first car and Mae hands me a marker. Wandering from car to car, she finds a small space on each one and signs her name adding a quote from a notebook she pulled from her bag.

Though she be but little she is fierce.

Nevertheless, she persisted.

The words are motivational, and while the first is classic Shakespeare and the second is modern women’s movement, Mae also has a few song lyrics. One of them I recognize.

“I’ll find you on the open road.” *Wait for me* is the next line and Lawson Colt’s voice echoes in my head.

“Why did you pick this one?” I ask Mae wondering if she had a crush on Lawson as many girls did when we were in our early twenties.

Mae shrugs as she does. “I like that song.”

The idea strikes to write other lyrics.

My heart is an hourglass and yours the sand,

but I won’t let you slip away.

Time stands still as I long for you,

but I won’t let you slip away.

You’re the song in my head.

You’re the hope I hold for one day, one way.

And I won’t let you slip away.

Stepping back, I stare at the lyrics, wondering what inspired me to write them. What had I been thinking at nineteen when the song came to me? Why had I forgotten it? Is it possible I wrote this song for this very moment, for this very woman? The thought seems absurd and a bit deep, yet I

stare at the words before looking at Mae, smiling to herself as she moves on to another Cadillac. I don't need to mark them all. I'll only mark this one that was the year of my birth, a time when cars were big and people took road trips, searching for something. Or maybe someone.

Mae comes back to me and stares at the words I've written. I step forward and sign my name, the once-familiar autograph returning. The scribble is almost illegible with a capital T and a swooping A.

"If you could leave your mark on the world, what would it be?" she asks, staring at the cars covered by decades of graffiti. Somehow, I don't think she means literally decorating old vehicles but something more monumental. Something long lasting.

"I'd want to write a song that everyone sings."

Mae smiles. "Music is the universal language. Not everyone needs to sing your song. If you only touch one heart, you've made your mark."

I turn to Mae, who is so good inside. She deserves my final secret and I nod at the car.

"I'm Tucker Ashe. I was in the band Colt45, and I wrote that song." I turn away from her, staring at the lyrics, now permanently printed on a classic Cadillac. "The one I played last night, called 'Sand,' I haven't played since I quit the band."

Mae looks up at me, staring with her mouth agape before she punches my arm. "Get out."

I turn my gaze back to her. "It's true. My stage name was Tucker Ashe. Ash with an e. Not very original and not inconspicuous enough to distinguish me from my family, but that's who I was when my father got a girl pregnant, and my parents died. When my grandfather called, I left my rock star dreams behind."

Mae continues to stare at me, eyes wide then brows pinching.

“That’s my last secret, Mae. There aren’t any more.”

When she doesn’t say anything, I tip up my chin. “I’ll meet you by the car. Take your time here.” If she wants to mark every one of them, if that makes her feel memorialized forever, she can have her time in the limelight. I had mine for the blink of an eye.

Playlist: “Kiss Me” – Sixpence None the Richer

[Mae]

I’m still stunned at what Tucker tells me is his last revelation. To prove himself, he pulls up the song from his phone when I return to Louie, and he points out his voice as the song plays. He harmonizes in the background and quietly sings over the lyrics.

“Holy shit,” I blurt as I shift in the passenger seat to face him. We’re still parked outside the Cadillac Ranch as the melody fills the car. I watch Tucker hold his phone like the device holds all his secrets and he moves his lips while harmonizing with the lead singer.

“I cannot believe you are a freaking rock star. You said you were in a band, not Colt45. That was more than just some band. You hit charts. You made headlines. You were on the cover of teen magazines.”

Tucker chuckles. “It’s not a big deal. Not anymore.”

“Are you kidding me?” I shriek. “Here I’m running around writing quotes on old cars, and you’ve already made a mark on the world. Your song touched more than one heart. I’m certain of it. It touched mine.” I poke my chest.

This is unbelievable. I might not have known his name. I might not remember his face, but I remember the song. Like he said, hearing music evokes a memory. In my head, I see myself when I was young, googly-eyed for love ballads and rock stars, and hopeful of meeting a man someday, falling in love with him because he’d been waiting for me.

“Wow.” I sigh. I don’t know what else to say. “You’re going to tell me you’re royalty or something next, aren’t you?”

“No, Mae.” He laughs again. “I’m just a man.”

He’s so much more than a man. He’s complex and incomplete. There are still holes in his story, and I want the voids filled in. Thankfully, he gives them to me as we drive toward our last stop before leaving Texas.

“Everything seemed to be happening at once. We’d put out a second album, but it wasn’t selling like the first. I wanted to chalk it up to beginner’s luck on our first one and dismiss the second. It was only one album in a long list of what we had planned. Then, Lawson was pushing for his sister to merge with us, and my parents died. Kit had lost her husband and had a kid but was on the brink of making it big. Girl-lead bands were hot. Lawson didn’t mind singing with his sister. They’d been raised singing in the church choir together, and Kit had a smokey, seductive sound despite that gospel training.

“Anyway, he wanted to join her. She had an agent while we were indie, which wasn’t half as popular as it is today. We’d be Kit Carrigan and the Chrome Teardrops. Lawson and his cousin were onboard for the change. I wasn’t happy. They hired some young guy to be a drummer and I felt pushed out. I played drums, but also the piano, guitar, and harmonica. But how many guitarists do you need? And her sound didn’t call for a keyboard.”

Tucker sighs. “Then my grandfather called, and I don’t know...maybe I took it as my sign to leave. It was my escape from them, but I didn’t go out on my own or join up with another band like I thought I might. I fell into fatherhood and the business world as I’d been destined. As I’d never hoped to be. And *they* went on to be famous.”

Kit Carrigan was a rock goddess. The kind of woman every girl wanted to be as a teen—edgy, seductive, enticing. She had a smokey voice like Tucker said and a hot guy band behind her. I didn’t know about this transition from Colt45 to Chrome Teardrops. Their sounds were distinctly different.

And I'm sorry for Tucker's loss. Sometimes things just aren't meant to be, but no one wants to hear that when such a big dream has gone goodbye.

"I'm sorry you felt pushed out or that you had to leave them, but you were still a star in your own right. You had your time and it's never too late to have it again."

Tucker snorts. "I *will not* be going back. Those guys didn't know what to say when I left, and I left. I mean, I walked out and never looked back, but they didn't either." There's an edge of regret along with bitterness mixed in his voice.

"You never know," I offer. "Maybe they missed you. Maybe they want to reconnect and don't know how. There's a second chance at everything." Then again, sometimes people come and then go from your life, but still serve a purpose in the time they shared with us.

"Yes, and sometimes a second chance isn't necessary."

I don't like the sound of that statement although I understand. The philosophy is the same as saying sometimes things just aren't meant to be.

+ + +

We stop before a sign that states we are at the midpoint between Chicago and Los Angeles and snap another picture. Tucker takes a selfie of both of us, journaling more and more how together we are on this trip. Not *together*-together, just sharing the experience. His hug from earlier is long gone, almost a memory like the road behind us. He hasn't held my hand since we got the car back with fresh tires—because I couldn't just replace one but had to balance the upgrade with a replacement of the other rear tire. I consider his earlier handholding as a sort of aftershock of my near demise on the road.

“Will we make it by Wednesday?” I ask, suddenly concerned for him. He needs to meet his daughter there, where they plan to drive from L.A. to Napa. Julia actually lives outside Pasadena, but his original car service was taking him to a location in downtown Los Angeles. “I can take you to Pasadena. Our route runs right through there.”

I don’t want to intrude, and I don’t need to meet his daughter, but I can deliver him directly to her. He’d miss out on the final stop—Santa Monica and the Pacific Ocean—but I’m not certain he wants to complete the full journey. His destination is different than mine. All along, his expectations have not been the same as mine.

“What’s next for you, Mae?” He rubs the leather bracelet on his wrist. “What will you do once you drop me off?”

I have some vague plans in my head but nothing concrete yet. “I’ll just return to Michigan.”

Tucker glances momentarily over at me. “I don’t like you driving alone. What would you have done if you were alone when that flat tire happened?”

He sounds like Jane, and I shrug. “I would have figured something out. Called AAA probably.” I can change a flat tire but practicing the skill in the driveway and dismantling a wheel on the side of a busy highway were two different things.

“And last night? That biker was hitting on you. That could have gone wrong fast, sunshine,” he chides, but I like to think I could have handled myself there as well. The man was only being friendly, flirty even, but he wouldn’t have wanted to take me for a ride on his bike or otherwise.

“Mae, it’s like I can read your thoughts and you’re wrong. You’re too fucking beautiful for your own good.”

I laugh at the vehemence in his compliment and brush it off. “Well, I appreciate your concern, but I’m a big girl. I take care of myself.”

Tucker purses his lips, not liking my answer but letting the discussion drop.

We drive through another ghost town, this one on the edge of Texas before entering New Mexico. Evidence remains of what once was here, like the final town we saw in Oklahoma, and once again I consider the ghosts that haunt us through our lives.

Like Tucker and his band—his once friends who he left behind, and who equally left him to move on and become world famous rock stars. He's lost so much while gaining just as much. He doesn't see the balance, or perhaps it's difficult to understand the equation as he traded one thing for another and doesn't feel he had a choice. No one wants to be stripped of their dreams. Just like these old towns, the decision to put in a major expressway stripped them of dreams once held by business owners. They were everyday people who just wanted to leave their mark, and did, for a little while.

+ + +

Into New Mexico we go, and I'm excited. I don't know what to expect but I'm imagining a lot of Southwestern bright colors and Mexican-inspired buildings. However, the map leads in two directions, one an original route and the other an alternative. In order to stay on schedule for Tucker, I mention skipping the road to Santa Fe. The cut saves an hour and spares sightseeing extras including a trip along the High Road to Taos and the Turquoise Trail, both meanderings through deserts and mountains. I keep my disappointment contained as I promised to get Tucker to his daughter in a timely manner. I still don't see how Wednesday will work but we've covered considerable ground every day.

Most of the other attractions listed for Route 66 in New Mexico are hotels and pit stops, and as much as I hate to bypass them, even I'm growing weary of every rundown or restored gas station.

“I promise I’ll bring you back to New Mexico someday. We can see the entire state,” Tucker says. The suggestion is a pretty promise and I’ve had too many of them in my life, so I don’t take to heart his words. Instead, I smile weakly, knowing after this road trip I might never see Tucker again and how awkward will that be because my sister works for him.

We decide Albuquerque will be our stop for the night. As a major city on the route, I sense Tucker is desperate for a high-end, commercial hotel and not a roadside motel. The concession is another I make because he’s been a good sport at my constant calls to stop and he’s really opening up to me.

When we pull up before a large building that screams expensive rooms and lots of luxury, I’m immediately worried about cost and even suggest he stay here alone.

“I can pick you up tomorrow,” I tell him.

When he parks under the entrance canopy, awaiting valet parking, he turns to me. “Mae, we aren’t staying in separate locations. We aren’t even staying in separate rooms.” He stares at me, waiting for me to challenge him. His silvery eyes are like ancient jewelry and warn me not to argue with him, confirming he wants us together.

“This will be my treat.” He’s hopping out the driver door before I can argue this last statement. He’s already paid for every night’s lodging, even losing out on a second room last night to share mine. Still, he’s gone to check-in while I wait in the car, staring up at a building I’m certain I couldn’t afford to enter let alone rent a room within. When Tucker returns to me, he’s all business-like, opening my door and helping me out of Louie. He opens the back door for Gemma the geranium, handing me the plant and my large bag.

“The bellhop will bring up our luggage.” The trunk is popped, and a man steps over to retrieve our suitcases, placing them on a cart. Tucker leads me inside with a hand on my lower back, and for just a moment, I see how the other side lives. He’s in his element here while I’m sorely out of mine.

“We can order room service,” he says, although I can’t imagine eating since the steak at the Big Texan. We take an elevator to our floor, and our bags arrive shortly after us. Once Tucker tips the bellhop, the door closes, and the silence is almost deafening.

I stand near the end of a king-sized bed while a rectangular table serves as both desk and two-person table. There’s an oversized dresser with a bar inside one cabinet and a refrigerator with snacks in the other. A flat-screen television hangs over the large furniture.

“Mae,” Tucker hesitates, swiping his hands up and down his thighs. “We can do as little or as much as you want. It’s your call, but after today, after earlier, I just want to hold you tonight.”

“Don’t you think you should kiss me before you decide how far you want to go with me?” I surprise myself with the bold question.

Tucker steps up to me, cupping my cheek with one hand. His thumb strokes over-heated skin. “I’m going to kiss you, Mae. But the rest is up to you. Your call for what we do. Or don’t.” His eyes search my face before dropping to my lips where his thumb strokes over the upper bow then curves along the lower.

“And if I want to go all the way?” I whisper, finding myself even bolder than I was a second ago.

“Then I say, thank fuck,” he whispers before his mouth crashes into mine. The kiss isn’t soft and tender, but one that claims me, marks me, warns me. I’m never going to be the same after tonight.

Playlist: “Come Away with Me” – Norah Jones

[Mae]

Our mouths meld together, exploring one another before his drops to my jaw, to the side of my throat, to that sensitive place close to my clavicle. When he nips me there, my knees give out, and an arm catches me around my back. His mouth returns to mine but his fingers tug at my T-shirt, lifting the material up and over. When our lips separate, his eyes drop to my breasts, heavy and full in a light blue bra. He absentmindedly tosses my shirt and flattens his palm on my chest. Watching the movement of his hand, he slowly drags it over my skin before cupping me, squeezing the achy swell. He seems fascinated and the thought is both strange and empowering.

“It’s been a long time,” I whisper.

“Since you’ve had sex?” His gaze leaps up to mine.

“Since I’ve been kissed.” My voice cracks and his brows pinch but his lips return to mine, sweeter, softer, taking his time while his hand palms my breast and squeezes me hard over the silky material. Within seconds, he has my bra unclasped and I’m exposed to him, feeling more naked than ever.

“You’re so beautiful.”

I shrug.

“Mae, if I see you shrug again, I’m going to spank you.”

My mouth falls open. “You wouldn’t.” I lightly laugh but those silver eyes lock on mine and I see he just might punish

me. I don't know how I feel about the possibility although I understand it's pretty common in the new age of dating. I don't understand it. I don't *have to* understand it. My body reacts and I'm almost tempted to shrug again. But I don't. I don't want to stop the direction he's going, taking things slow as he kneads and massages, lowering to lift one large globe and latching onto it with his mouth, sucking at the swell before sweeping to the nipple and twirling his tongue around the hard nub. He does the same to the other breast, then returns to my mouth, kissing me hard and intensely.

I slip my hands under his shirt, sliding the soft cotton upward until he pulls back and tugs the collar from behind his neck, removing it in that way only men can, making the move sexier than any motion has a right to be. And I'm already turned on more than I've ever been in my life. My body hums. My skin tingles. I'm so wet, it's going to be embarrassing when he finally touches me.

When my breasts connect with the heat of his chest, I hum into his mouth which has returned to mine for another searing kiss. He's branded on me, forever inked, leaving his permanent mark with unspoken lyrics. I'm never going to be the same after this trip, this night, this man.

Next, he removes my shorts and underwear in one slick motion as he lowers to kiss my belly and nip at my sides, sucking at the fleshy parts that typically embarrass me. He abruptly stands and tugs down his jeans. He's still wearing that medallion on a strap and the leather band at his wrist, plus his dark blue boxer briefs, but evidence of his excitement is hardly contained. The outline of him is long and large, but I only get a quick look before his mouth is on mine again and he's lowering me to the bed. I sit first until he breaks free of my mouth and presses me back by my shoulder. He dips over me, kissing me hard once more before traveling down my body—chin then throat then chest.

“You're the route I plan to travel tonight,” Tucker says into my skin as he moves to my belly. Pulling at flabby flesh

once again with his lips, making me self-conscious while feeling worshipped at the same time.

“Route forty-three,” I anxiously joke.

“Route Mae and me.” His head moves lower. His mouth sucks at my hip. My hands cover my belly with its tire rut effects of having children. Without looking up, Tucker forces my hands off my stomach, holding them at my sides while his head dips between my thighs. My legs dangle off the bed and he’s kneeling between my knees. I lift my head but fall back when the first lap hits me. He doesn’t even start gently with the tip of his tongue but goes full force, using the flat of that strong muscle to swipe up me. The next shock is the tip, twirling at my clit, and my eyes roll back. I can’t remember oral sex, but I’ll never forget this moment.

My legs twitch and his tongue moves. A finger joins the band down there where I throb and I seep, and I want this man more than anything.

“Give me one of those orgasms that are all yours, sunshine.”

I scoff because I plan to. He can take them all for all I care as long as he doesn’t stop sliding his tongue through my slit. My knees lift and my hips rock and his hands clap over my thighs, holding me still. The tension builds and I mutter incomprehensible words of *right there* and *ohmygod*.

Tucker hums against me. Another lap. Another lick and I shatter. More than a crash, but a break of my body occurs. I’m tiny fragments of myself. My head lifts. My hands clutch behind my thighs. I want to pull Tucker inside me and live in this mess between my legs. I’m wrecked and panting when he drags back, pressing a kiss to my inner thigh before nipping at my flesh.

He stands tall before me and it’s almost unfair how perfect his body is. Those abs. That smattering of chest hair. The trail leading into those briefs, which lower and expose him to me. His cock stands at attention, thick and ready.

He steps over to his bag and returns quickly with a few packets. Tossing one on the dresser, he opens the other, and I wonder if this means I'll get him more than once before I've even had him the first time. Once will never be enough, and if anyone ever called me selfish, this is the moment I might agree. I want him all to myself on repeat.

I scoot up the bed, and he follows me. When my head hits the pillows, he guides himself between my spread legs, swiping the tip of his dick up and down through the moisture at my center.

"Still good with this?" he asks.

I could comment that we've passed the point of no return, but I don't. Sarcasm has been stripped from my vocabulary as have all words. There is no going back. No U-turn. No turn around.

"You're so wet," he moans next.

"You did that." His mouth was heaven down there.

"And you loved it." He's teasing me, flirting with me.

My voice drops when I respond. "I do." I could love this man, which is a silly thought to have in the position we're in. *This is only sex.* This is only one night, or maybe the remainder of this road trip, but it won't ever be more than a moment in history. Tucker and me. I don't allow myself to digest that further because he is sliding into me.

"Mae." My name catches in his throat, and he swipes hair back from my face as he enters me slow and easy, taking his time to fill me. I'm stretched in a way I haven't been in half a dozen years and him inside me wipes away the only one before him. There's no doubt Tucker is going to teach me about my body tonight. He will replace all my memories of sex before this moment. And just like this road trip, I'll be able to say I traveled him well once.

He pauses inside me, brushing his fingers on the sides of my face. "Still good?"

So good. I nod and he moves. Rhythm I'm certain is automatic in a man who loves music takes over. He rocks his hips, and my body responds. His shifts one way, my body follows. He leans back, looks between us, and watches as he glides in and out of me. I risk a glance. We're really doing this. With lights low in some swanky hotel, I'm having sex with Tucker Ashford. *Ash*. The name suits him because he's been born again and again from dust.

And he's reviving me.

My heart races and blood flows only to one place in my body.

"Tucker," I warn, questioning myself. The only time I've had a multiple orgasm was the other night in the shower. I've read about them, heard about them, but my body typically doesn't give me another turn. Maybe that has more to do with my past, and I instantly erase the thought. This is me. This is Tucker. And I'm going to come again.

"That's it, sunshine. Give me another one of those precious orgasms." I have no idea what he means, but the way he's bent his knees and my lower body balances against his thighs, he's rubbing me right where I need to set me off once more. My hands clamp on his face but he's not lowering to kiss me, instead concentrating on the way we move together.

"Get there," he demands and I'm on my way as he moves faster, rubs harder.

"Ohmygod," I cry out as I feel everything rushing, rippling, reaching only one spot and I burst. Colored rainbows of light sparkle around me. Tucker speeds up, slapping his hands under my backside and squeezing me hard as he pummels into me until he abruptly stills. Holding us pressed together, as close as we can be, he pulses inside me. His neck strains. His eyes close. He's the most beautiful man I've ever known.

When those silver eyes open again and fall on mine, he slowly smiles, giving me that grin where one side rides higher

than the other. We don't look at one another long before he lowers to kiss me just as intensely as before. His kiss is a full body sensation, not just an experience of lips joining, and I treasure the feeling after what we just did.

"I'll be right back," he quietly says. After slipping free from me, he rushes to the bathroom but quickly returns with a washcloth. I need a minute and excuse myself for the bathroom. Returning, I find Tucker under the covers, his bare hip exposed, and I hesitate between grabbing pajamas and staying naked. I don't typically sleep in the nude, but Tucker is giving me a look that says *get in this bed* and I climb up beside him. When I slip my head to his chest, he rotates to his side and within minutes, we're wrapped together like some twisted knot. Legs entwined. Arms around each other. I nuzzle his neck and fall asleep in a position I'd never imagined sleeping in.

NEW MEXICO – DAY 5

Playlist: “Chasing Cars” – Snow Patrol

[Tucker]

In the morning, our upper bodies have drifted apart while we slept but our legs remain entangled and I’m hard as ever. I wake finding Mae already eyes wide open, staring up at the ceiling, and I wonder what she’s thinking, what she’s feeling.

Last night had been amazing.

Rochelle and I had an active sex life despite our troubled relationship. Being young when we married, we’d given in to the youthful ease of sleeping together. She was a spitfire and sometimes sex was the only thing to settle her. The connection reminded her I was there for her. I was the one present. She hadn’t mourned my father and admitted the affair had been a mistake. A young woman taken in by the attention of someone older, someone experienced.

The lusty behavior led to Julia’s birth, and I’d fallen into the path forged for me of fatherhood and working for the family company. Her father invested as Grandfather wanted. Rochelle was a stay-at-home mother as she wanted to be. Life moved forward. However, she grew restless, which led to blogging about her daily life, which turned into a college degree in modern women’s study and a master’s in psychology, all for a woman who originally only dreamed of staying home and raising kids. She crossed the line to working mother and balancing everything. I was her partner, her lover, her best friend. Or so she said to the world.

We were anything but behind closed doors.

Still, sex happened. How else can you profess Makeout Mondays or Liven-Up Thursdays unless you practice what you preach? And as much as we'd grown stagnant, we still tried to follow her rules. It hadn't helped. We were two separate entities sharing a home. When Julia moved to California for college, the empty apartment was the end of everything. Rochelle's platform had shifted from young marriage to motherhood of older children. *When your kids become your best friends*, she'd profess. Julia had been close to her mother, but they weren't the same people, and my daughter hated the spotlight.

My eyes remain on Mae with these thoughts. She's more like my daughter in that manner. She doesn't need limelight. She didn't need fame or attention.

What does she need? Would I be enough for her? The question seems impossible to answer. I've never been first in another person's life. The thought feels like another unfulfilled dream.

"We should probably get moving," I say. We have miles to cover today. Yet, I don't want to leave this bed. Today is Tuesday and we still have the rest of this state plus all of Arizona and California to cross. I don't foresee making it to Julia by noon on Wednesday. I'm not even certain I'd make midnight, and suddenly I don't mind. We have wiggle room as Mae said when we started our journey.

But then what? I lose Mae. I don't like that thought.

"Yeah," Mae softly replies, rolling from the bed. But I'm on my knees on the mattress before I know what I'm doing, reaching out for her wrist and stopping her retreat.

"Wait." Kneeling as I am, I'm fully on display, cock stiff and pointing at her. It knows what it wants. Mae and I meet eyes. "We don't need to rush."

With our eyes still on one another, hers drop, scanning my body. Her perusing gaze is like a soft caress as she dusts

over my chest where her fingers played with the coarse hair last night. She eyes my abs, and I suck in a breath, emphasizing them further for her inspection. Finally, her sight lands on my cock, hard and stiff and so ready for her, longing for her. Morning wood is a blessing and a curse, and right now I want her to use *ohmygod* on me in both manners.

“It isn’t fair,” she whispers and my brows pinch wondering what she means. “That body is a weapon. Maybe not of mass destruction but...” Her voice falters. Does she think I’ll destroy her? She’s already ruining me. I didn’t know it could be like this. This yearning to be with someone has consumed me, especially since yesterday. Riding out the remainder of the day in the car with her was too much. I just wanted to pull into one of her roadside motels and book a room for the afternoon, bury myself inside her to keep her close and off the fucking roads.

My face heats at her assessment of me. I’m a vain man on a good day, but the appraisal from a woman like Mae is extra sweet. As I tug at her wrist, she lurches forward, catching herself on the mattress but I continue to gently pull her, forcing her back up on the bed. I fold to my back, hinting at what I want. Mae crawls over me and straddles my dick. She’s already wet and so warm, cradling me in that soft spot on her. Her hands come to my chest and coast over the tight skin, solid muscle, and coarse hairs with a hint of white in them. I’m coming out of said skin as I want her again.

“Kiss me,” I demand.

“I have morning breath.” She giggles as she rubs forward and back over me.

“I don’t give a shit.” I jackknife upward and take what I want from her. Cupping her cheeks in both hands, I kiss her as I did yesterday. Mae kisses back, fierce and hungry, just as I’d hoped she would. She said it’s been a long time and I can relate, and I’ve missed kissing like this. Guiding her down over me, I lean back, keeping her connected to me with this kiss. Her wetness coats me, and the heat of her folds against

the length of my cock feels amazing. I want to slip into her bare but I'm practicing safe sex here.

Breaking free from her lips, I tip my head and reach for a condom I'd placed on the nightstand last night. Mae watches me as I roll it on. Her blue eyes are wide and bright, and hunger fills them once more. I want her mouth sucking me dry but right now, I want to be inside her more than anything. Once I'm covered, Mae tips up on her knees and I hold myself in position. The anticipation is too much and already I feel my lower back tightening. My balls hitch and suddenly I'm surrounded by Mae.

"Fuck," I ground out as she takes me deep, sliding to the hilt. She didn't waste any time, just dropped, and I'm inside, and damn, I want to stay here. I'm desert and she's sunshine, and she's going to scorch my heart.

Immediately, Mae moves, bobbing up and down on my length. Her breasts jiggle. Her fingertips claw at my chest. I love watching her, but her eyes are closed.

"Look at me, sunshine." Her eyes pop open but too quickly, they close again. "Keep them open."

Mae opens once more, but she fights the battle. "It's hard to look," she whispers, and I wonder why. Did she always close her eyes during sex? I don't want to think about her with that dick ex, but I want an answer.

"Why?"

Mae keeps moving, slipping up and back on me but she answers. "It helps me fantasize."

Now, I can take that two ways. I'm not doing it for her, and she needs something playing out in her mind, or she's used to having sex that way, where she needs to pretend. Where she needs to visualize something else, hear something else, sense something other than what she's actually doing.

"Fuck that," I mutter. "Play out the fantasy on me."

Mae falters a bit, but I clap my hands onto her hips and rock her back and forth. In and out I slide, holding myself at bay until she gets what she wants from me.

“What do you need Mae? Keep your eyes open and tell me.”

Her eyes widen and she continues to ride me. She shifts so her clit hits my pubic bone. Her pace hastens.

“Need dirty words, sweetheart?” I question. “Want me to tell you how much my cock loves your pussy?”

“Jesus,” she mutters, and I’ve hit one target.

“That’s it, sunshine. Fuck me hard.” As she moves faster, I’m gritting my teeth. I need to come. She has no idea what she’s doing to me, rocking my world as she is. She reaches for my hand and draws it between us. I know what she wants next, and my thumb finds that nub, driving her harder to the finish.

“Mae. I gotta come. I wanna come so deep inside you, but I want another one of those pretty orgasms. One where you drip all over me.” *Make me yours, Mae.*

She asked about making a mark on the world, and I mentioned some damn song. But her—*this*—she’s leaving a mark on me, and it’s going to rest there indefinitely.

“Tucker,” she whines, calling me by my formal name and riding out the syllables. Her eyes shift in color from sunshine blue to passionate indigo. Her sweet mouth hangs open as she mutters *ohmygod* and *so good* on repeat. Her breath hitches and then she’s shattering. With her pussy closing around me, clenching, clutching, she pulls from me the release I’ve held back as long as I can. I jet inside her while she’s squeezing me, and I swear it’s only prolonging the pleasure. I’m never going to be the same after this woman, this road trip, and a fucking car named Louie.

Eventually, Mae collapses over me, and my arms fall to my sides. My heart races and my chest heaves. I just need a moment as silver dots speckle before my eyes.

Mae shifts but I catch her, lifting the heavy weight of my arms and wrapping them around her back to keep her in place over me. I just want to hold her as I told her last night. I just want to hold on a little bit longer to whatever it is this woman is doing to me.

ARIZONA – Still Day 5

Playlist: “Under New Mexico Skies” – Syd Masters

[Mae]

“If we bypass Los Lunas, it gives us an additional forty minutes,” I suggest once we’ve grabbed a quick breakfast. We’ve been looking at the digital map. Tucker’s getting anxious. He was supposed to meet his daughter by noon tomorrow but that’s out. We have too much distance to travel.

“I told Julia I’d keep her posted on my travels, but she should go ahead without me.”

He’s driving once again, and I crane my neck so I can look at him. “What are you thinking?”

He scoffs. “I’m thinking anytime tomorrow isn’t possible. We can’t make it that fast and still see the sights.”

I feel bad about yesterday and the lost time with the flat tire. While it wasn’t my fault, we were hours off-course due to the tire change. I’ve already given up the original path through New Mexico, and figure one more small concession won’t matter. New Mexico is a bust. We’ll stick to I-40 most of the way until Arizona. I’ll just have to return some day, and I say as much to Tucker.

“I’ll make it up to you. We’ll come back.” I don’t believe his promise to bring me to Santa Fe sometime in the future, but the thought is still sweet to hear. There isn’t a future for us. We are only the here and now, and last night is already history—not one I’ll soon forget, though. My clit still pulses, and I’m

wet again. It's going to be a long uncomfortable day because I want him so much.

He's like spicy food you crave but shouldn't eat. You want the dish regardless and devour it anyway.

Keeping to the interstate highway, we're bypassing the sights, which is just what the modern expressway did, and pinches of guilt sprinkle over me. I'm cheating my trip. Tucker told me how great Albuquerque is as a city and suggested we should explore it a bit, but this trip isn't about major locations. The forgotten small towns are my passion. Their livelihood and their mystique are the spots I want to visit even if they've been stripped of their magic. Once I reached the Southwest, I wanted to explore the natural wonders in this portion of the United States, but I'm only speeding by the beauty outside my window as we rush through the desert landscape.

I've hinted at seeing the Grand Canyon with no response from Tucker. The national treasure isn't located on Route 66, but it's so close, I don't want to miss it. I could suggest we don't need to stop, but I've been enjoying us doing everything together and the last thing I want to do is cut this trip in half or circle back without him. I don't want to reverse and fill in the holes by myself which is a million miles from how I felt when we started out four days ago. I've enjoyed sharing every experience with Tucker and the thought of a U-turn without him is depressing.

In addition, I argue with myself that I'm *not* doing what I've always done. I'm not letting something else, or in this case, *someone* else, dictate my schedule and sabotage my plan. This is my trip, but I've made a secondary pledge to Tucker to deliver him to his daughter. With all he's revealed to me, getting him to Julia feels like a new priority. While our timing is now off, I still intend to keep my side of the bargain, especially knowing why he doesn't fly.

Before leaving New Mexico, we pause in Gallup. I get another look at a Muffler Man, this one called the Cowboy Muffler Man, complete with cowboy hat and a gun. I mention

to Tucker how I'd wanted to take a picnic on this trip. Classic, cold fried chicken was the perfect meal, and I should have stopped to pick some up at the various recommended restaurants back in the Midwest. We're too early for lunch when I mention this, so a break at Red Rock Park is out. Tucker suggests we stop somewhere in Arizona and have an authentic southwest dish instead. Again, I acquiesce.

We make another pitstop at a Native American shop, filled with knick-knacks and jewelry and I break down to buy my first souvenir—a silver cuff bracelet with turquoise stones. While not a traditional souvenir, I don't want the typical. I want something that will conjure a memory, a moment, and I assign the bracelet to last night and this morning. While New Mexico isn't getting a fair shake from me, this beautiful state gave me quite the generous memory. Glancing at the bracelet will always remind me of the past twelve hours.

I pass on a matching pair of earrings, which dangle like teardrops. They're pretty but I don't know when or where I'd wear them. My line of work doesn't call for fancy attire and I don't date, so there's that. Tucker offered to buy me the set, but I refused. Something like a bracelet and pair of earrings feels like a gift, and I don't feel right accepting the gesture.

When we return to the car, Tucker wears another leather braided band on his wrist with rough turquoise stones interwoven, and I'd like to say we match, but it's just too cheesy to consider.

+ + +

Crossing into Arizona, my breath is taken away immediately. The setting is gorgeous and bright, rich in red color just as I imagined it might be. We'll follow I-40, as my research into the trip shows most of Route 66 in Arizona is covered by the modern expressway. The landscape is beautiful, and it's the only sight I want to see right now.

Since Tucker has given up arriving in California tomorrow, he suggests a visit to the Petrified Forest National Park. We both agree we could use a walk to stretch our legs.

“But first, I need to get out of these jeans.”

If I thought that was code for getting naked in the backseat, I’m wrong. He needs some shorts. However, Tucker has been more than affectionate today. He’s held my hand or touched my thigh as he’s driven. He’s kissed me quick but often when we’ve stopped for breakfast, gas, and our mini-shopping trip. With his mention of stopping once more at the Tee Pee Trading Post in Lupton, Arizona, he lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles before scraping his teeth over them. It’s more affection than I’d had my entire marriage.

Inside the trading post, I wander while he finds something to wear. If I expect him to suddenly look like a tourist, I’m wrong. He steps out of the dressing room in olive green walking shorts and a gray tee that says Arizona across it. He could be a spokesman for the state and their outdoor adventures, and once more I shake my head at his good looks.

“You know, being a marketing man, you should whip up something for Prius. Instead of this poor car having a bad rap as the dad-mobile, you could show them what the modern dad looks like.”

Tucker chuckles. “And what’s that?”

I wave a hand up and down before his body, focusing on the heavier scruff of silver and ink on his face, and the tightness of his body. He’s one hot DILF and I’m happy to have done him. Prius would sell a ton of automobiles if they used his image for their campaigns. *Hot dads do it eco-friendly*. He cares about the environment and his body.

He laughs again as he spins to look at himself in the mirror. “Look alright?” he asks, smoothing a hand down those firm abs under body hugging cotton.

I hum in response, and he glances around before tugging me into the fitting room. With the curtain closed, I’m against

the wall and he's kissing me senseless. His mouth ravishes mine before he moves to my jaw.

“You make these little sounds when you come. Just like that hum.”

He might make me come kissing me like he is. Hungry lips and a twirling tongue make my knees go weak. Too soon, he finds the willpower to pull back; however, I remain slack against the wall a moment, trying to catch my breath.

His hand caresses my face, and he stares at me, smiling that crooked grin before taking my hand and exiting the small space. I wish I could read his mind and know what he's thinking when he looks at me. Can he see in my eyes how I feel about him? Only five days and I'm falling so fast there isn't a safety net that could catch me. And I'm going to need catching. I'm going to need something to cushion the crash when this man and I inevitably part.

Playlist: “Take It Easy” – Eagles

[Tucker]

Our next stop is Winslow and for the life of me I can't think of why that name sounds familiar. Mae has been wiggling in her seat and I'm wondering if she needs the bathroom. She cannot sit still as she reminds me for the third time we need to stop in this small town.

Pulling into the area, a giant Route 66 emblem covers the brick paved corner of Route 66 and North Kinsley Avenue. A statue of a man stands on the corner with a brick façade behind it that reads: Winslow, Arizona.

“Just park anywhere,” Mae says, her voice rising with excitement. As we cross the street near the statue, I see a bright red truck with a flat bed and wooden gates on the side.

“Is that a flatbed Ford?” As soon as I say the words, the song hits me. “Take it Easy” by the Eagles is a famous song about a man on a road trip with worries on his mind. He's standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona when he meets a woman who propositions him, wanting to know if love can save him.

“Here.” Mae hands me a small brown bag, folded over at the top and I question her with a look before opening the package.

“Mae,” I whisper, staring inside the bag.

A harmonica.

“A guitar is probably more appropriate for the corner, but I had no idea if you played. But you mentioned the harmonica

and there was so much heart when you spoke about it. I just thought—”

My arms are around Mae and I’m crushing my lips to hers, kissing her despite other tourists on this corner. Pulling back before I take this moment to the level of indecent exposure, I rest my forehead against hers.

“This might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever given me.” I still have one arm around her as Mae beams up at me.

“I didn’t know if there was a certain kind or whatever but —”

“It’s perfect.” I cut her off again. “But where did you find this?”

Mae sheepishly smiles and all she offers is, “Along the way.” My own smile grows large enough my cheeks ache.

“Mae Ellen Fox, if you tell me you own a flatbed Ford I might have to marry you.”

Her face pinkens, and I realize what I’ve said. I’m teasing her, of course, and she turns her head to glance at the truck parked on the corner, playing up the motif of the nostalgic song. She doesn’t answer me but peers back at me with a tighter smile.

“You should play something,” she says, her voice quiet.

“Right here?” I laugh.

“Standing on the corner, definitely.” She slips from my arms, and I stare back at this incredible woman who bumped into me on a street corner in Chicago with coffee in her hand. Who would have known five days later, I’d be road tripping across the country, and she’d give me this gift? A gift I’m nervous to play as it’s been so long.

“I don’t know if I remember,” I say, holding the instrument in my hand.

“I bet it’s like that piano,” Mae softly says. “You didn’t forget. You’re just out of practice.”

There are so many things I'm out of practice at and could use a good teacher. Mae might be that mentor who restores my faith in things like hope and love and loyalty.

"Try it," she whispers, easing back another step as if I need the space to play such a small wind instrument.

With shaky hands, I lift the four inches of metal to my mouth and blow. The first shot is sharp, and I flinch at the crack of noise so close to my face. Mae chuckles nearby and I close my eyes, bringing the instrument to my lips once more. On the second try, I'm better.

The song flows outward a bit rough and a little scratchy but eventually, I'm at the refrain and it comes smoother. The melody is not meant to be played in entirety, but the chorus works, and Mae sings off key before belting out the final *crazy*. She breaks into her own rendition of an air guitar solo, and I add my sound to her silent mix. When I end, the tourists near us clap, and I laugh harder than I have in a long time.

A couple offers to take a picture of Mae and me, and then I ask them to take one of us by the flatbed truck because this girl really is going to save me.

When we leave Winslow, I know what I have to do. I've already told Julia it's going to be a day-by-day thing on when I can arrive, and I'd update her. I'll never make tomorrow at noon, and a selfish part of me is glad. Although I don't see Julia unless she comes to me, and we could use some father-daughter time, I need these additional hours with Mae. I need to do right by the woman driving me to my daughter. I just need to be in Napa by Friday afternoon.

"Let me check in with Mach." In the early afternoon, I'm two hours behind Chicago's time zone. I haven't conducted a stitch of business today. However, the call is a ruse. I search the internet instead. My heart races. I'm not certain I can do what I've planned for Mae, but I need to try something, as much for her as for me. It's time.

We decide to skip a meteor site but at the same exit is a strange-looking geodome building and Mae looks up the history of the building. Another inspiration for the movie *Cars*. Basically, Route 66 is running parallel to the original road or underneath where we currently drive, and my big-hearted driving companion obsesses over things we pass that are lost and forgotten on the side of the route.

“That’s not art,” she complains of a former diner and gas station covered in spray paint. “That’s vandalism in comparison to the Cadillacs.”

I don’t disagree with her and let her ramble.

“And why aren’t those two arrows moved to the casino on the opposite side of the highway?” Two giant metallic arrows—literally named Twin Arrows—stand parallel to one another as markers of someplace once important in time. “They could be a historic landmark and a point of interest.” They’ve obviously captured *her* interest.

Eventually, the landscape changes once more from dry, flat desert to a mountainous terrain of evergreens. Road markers tell us our elevation has increased.

“What is that?” Mae asks, as if she doesn’t recognize a mountain off in the distance or the obvious snow at the top. We’re nearing Flagstaff which can be forty degrees cooler than the southern portion of Arizona on any given day. My tour guide looks up the mountain—Humphrey’s Peak—and reads me information about it. “It’s breathtaking.”

She’s used the word to describe numerous things we’ve passed, and in my opinion, *she’s* the attraction stealing my breath. I’m still not certain what she expected to happen on this trip of hers, but I know what’s happening to me. I’m falling in love with her. In five days, I feel freer than I’ve felt in twenty-five years and it’s damn refreshing.

When we near Williams, I exit the highway and Mae twists to look at me. She’s been admiring the landscape shift

from desert to mountain, lost in her own thoughts for a moment.

“Bathroom break?” she questions.

“Something like that.” I sheepishly smile at her as I’m certain she read the sign that mentioned the Grand Canyon. Off the highway on a two-lane road leading north, Mae continues to stare out the window as the land is flat and empty.

“You know, it’s sad to put it this way, but you could bury a dead body out here and no one would be the wiser.”

I laugh at the assessment of the large, flat, open space. “Thinking of committing murder?”

“I’ve considered it,” she teases. “I bumped into this guy on a sidewalk in Chicago and he was such a flirt. He hit on me.”

“Did he now?” I smile, wondering where she’s going with this.

“And then he conned me into giving him a ride across the country.”

“Conned you, huh?”

“And I gave in, but man, I wanted to toss him in the trunk on occasion. I could have buried him out here and no one would miss him.”

“You might not be wrong about the missing part.” I’m not certain who would miss me if I were gone. The thought is morbid but I’m playing along.

“Eventually, though, I decided he wasn’t so bad.”

I reach for her hand, which I haven’t been holding because of her internet searches in the last hour, and I pull her fingers up to my lips, kissing her there before scraping my teeth across her knuckles. I can’t wait for another night with her and seeing this vacant land gives me another idea, but I need to get us through the first stop. I need to *live* through the next one.

“I’d miss you,” Mae whispers with her hand at my lips.

I close my eyes for the briefest second while I drive, feeling the same way.

I’d miss you, too, sunshine.

+ + +

The closer we get to our destination the more nervous I grow. Mae has gone quiet as the signs advertise more and more about the Grand Canyon—tours, camping and helicopter trips—and I have no doubt she knows where we’re headed. She was so disappointed when we had to skip Santa Fe and the drive to Los Lunas, but she put on a brave face. And I haven’t missed her hints about the Grand Canyon. While the location is not on the route, the destination was a point of interest for old-school 66 travelers and we were too close to bypass such a national treasure.

“They say a helicopter ride is really the best way to *view* the Grand Canyon,” she emphasizes. “To experience the canyon, you need to hike it, but I don’t know how I’d do at camping in it.”

“Ever been camping?” I ask.

“Only kind of vacation I ever had before this one.”

The comment startles me. “You’ve never been in a hotel before?”

“Oh, I have. I’ve just never been anywhere on a vacation that warranted a hotel.”

“Never?” I can’t believe it. Surely, she’s been somewhere other than her home state.

“Went everywhere in a camper or stayed in camping cabins. Been in an Airbnb but not a hotel for an extended stay.”

I'm stunned. "This must have been a huge risk for you then. An adventure to stay in roadside motels and such." It's not really a question, just an observation. Mae is curious. She needs to travel. She needs to experience places and I feel guilty once more that we cut a few stops out of her trip. But I'm hoping our next excursion makes up for some of the loss, at least a little bit.

Mae shrugs even though she knows I hate it. It's her way to dismiss something serious.

"Life is full of risks, but I got tired of never taking any."

I swallow a lump in my throat and consider what I'm about to do. "This trip was really brave of you, Mae."

Her neck cranes so she faces my direction. "I thought it was stupid?"

She teases me but also questions me. I'd said it. Plus, her sister told her the trip wasn't smart or safe. I'll agree on the safety part. What would have happened to her if she'd been alone on the road with that flat tire? Or worse, been taken in by a biker in a bar? But unsafe and unsmart do not compare to the courage she has to risk this trip anyway.

"No, sunshine. I think you are very brave."

Softly she smiles, turning her head away from me and staring out at the scenery around us.

When we pull off the road leading to the Grand Canyon, Mae spins to me once more, a question in her expression. When she sees the helicopters in the near distance, her mouth falls open.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to be brave like you."

Her hand comes to my wrist as I pull into the parking lot. "Tucker, you do not need to do this."

"Why not?"

“Because I know how you feel about flying and I would never push you to do something that made you uncomfortable.”

“You aren’t pushing me.” I pause. “Or rather, maybe I need a push, Mae. I can’t be scared my entire life.”

“But flying is a big deal.”

“And it’s the best way to view the Canyon.”

“I was just saying—”

“And I’m just saying... we’re going to see the Grand Canyon and we’re going to do it the right way.”

Mae glances toward the building and the row of helicopters on landing pads.

“It’s not in the budget,” she whispers. I admit, the expense isn’t cheap, but I wouldn’t have expected Mae to pay the amount even if she could splurge on the fee. Twisting back to me, her eyes search mine. “I don’t want you to do this.”

“Why?” We lock eyes a second. “Because of the money?” She wouldn’t let me buy her the new silver bracelet she wears, and we’ve fought over every hotel expense and dinner bill. She’s not paying for this, though. “It’s my treat.”

“It’s too much.” Her hard glare tells me she doesn’t mean the money. She’s worried about me and her tightening clutch on my wrist says as much.

“If you don’t want to do it, we don’t have to.” I’ll admit my heart is racing and I’m having second thoughts, but I won’t chicken out unless she’s adamant she wants to pass.

“Aren’t you afraid?” she whispers.

“I am, Mae. I’m frightened out of my mind, but I want to do this. With you, I want to do this.” I reach for her cheek and pull her to me, brushing my lips over hers. “Not going to lie. I’m going to be squeezing the crap out of your hand, but with you, I’ll be safe.” Everything in me says I’m speaking the truth.

I'm safe with Mae.

She softly chuckles. "You know I can't assure you of that, but this is almost too exciting to pass up." Her enthusiasm slowly climbs again.

"Then don't pass. Do this for me. Do this *with* me." I'm giving her this gift because she deserves it. She's already given me so much and that damn harmonica, now in my pocket, is the best gift I've ever received. But I also want her to do this with me even when I know I need to take this flight for myself. I need to brave my fear of flying, if only in a helicopter. I hate being afraid and she said it so perfectly. I'm *tired* of not taking the risk.

Playlist: “Bulger’s Dream Olympic Fanfare” – performed by
John Williams and The Bands of HM Royal Marines

“The Star -Spangled Banner/National Anthem” – performed
by Whitney Houston

[Mae]

I’m stunned. By his insistence. By his gift. Tucker is nervous. The stiffness of his body hints at his unease, but as we walk along a mural inside the waiting area, I silently point out to him the chopper company’s safety record. Only six deaths in seventy years. The odds seem in our favor. When our name is called, we’re introduced to Troy, our pilot, and then led to the helipad. Instructions are given about the harness belt and safety regulations, then we’re told to sit back and relax. I’m between Troy and Tucker as we sit in the front of the copter. The bubble glass windshield is perfect for viewing.

“Have your phones ready,” Troy cheerfully suggests. I do hold the device in my hand, but with my other hand, I’m clutching Tucker’s. Admittedly, I’m anxious as well. I’ve never flown in something like this, and I talk myself out of *what goes up must come down*, reminding myself of the safety record of the company. I also say a silent prayer of gratitude for this opportunity. I never in my wildest dreams imagined I’d be taking a helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon. And it’s all possible because of Tucker. He’s braving his fear for me.

I squeeze harder at his clenched fist which is white knuckling my fingers. “Doing okay?” I ask him despite the earmuff style headphones protecting us. It’s also the mode of communication with the pilot and a soft audio-recording plays us the history of the forest beneath as we approach the canyon.

Troy explains our flight pattern and I marvel at the steadiness of his control.

Tucker stiffly nods and keeps his eyes forward. Troy already explained where the airsick bags were located and emphasized using them if we felt ill. "I've seen it before. I repeat, do not be afraid to use them." He laughed.

Eventually, music fills my ears and Troy warns, "This is the best view." The music reaches a crescendo of drums, and the helicopter pulls off the cliff and over the canyon. My heart drops, but it isn't fear. It's the grandeur and the beauty of this country, my country. The land looks untouched by time although erosion and climate change have had some effect on the canyon environment. This place is truly a wonder and it's hard to believe such a beautiful space exists when people live on top of one another in large cities. There is still so much area uninhabited on our planet.

And this right here is the pinnacle of my spiritual road trip.

I wanted something to wow me, overwhelm me, and it's right before me in the majestic, rich red and soft pink rock formations. Turning to Tucker, I check on him and realize he's also been a huge part of this soul-searching journey. I can no longer imagine taking this trip without him, and I'm grateful once more that I didn't have to. He's been beside me through it all and I'd never change this new piece of my history.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I say to him, yelling over the noise of rotating propellers. Tucker slowly turns his head to me, eyes wide and dry.

"So beautiful," he says, keeping his gaze on me for a moment. His hand is clenching mine so hard it's possible I might bruise from his hold, but his touch will be worth every purple mark.

"You're doing it," I tell him, smiling large. *He's flying.*

Slowly, his mouth crooks. The corner lifting only slightly. *Thank you,* he mouths to me or at least that's what I think he

says.

I grin again and turn back to the view. As best I can, I try to take pictures one-handed. We've already established I'm not great at selfies, but it hasn't mattered. Even if I had both hands, phone cameras could never do justice to what's before us.

Eventually, I drag Tucker's hand to my lap and squeeze. "Keep it right here," I say to him, trying to slip my hand free for a steadier hold of my phone. Tucker nods but his eyes show panic and I wait for him to make the decision to release me. Cautiously, his fingers come free and quickly slip to my thigh, clutching my muscle there instead. I snap as many pictures as I can before we move forward, and I take Tucker's hand again.

The entire flight lasts forty-five minutes and we land effortlessly, like buttering a biscuit. Troy takes a picture of Tucker and me outside the helicopter and we thank him for the ride.

"So, what did you think?" I ask Tucker, who has been suspiciously quiet. I don't want to push but it's almost like I feel his thoughts rotating like the propeller of the copter. He's spinning in circles inside his head, and I'm worried the flight was too much.

"I think we need to check into a hotel."

Not the answer I was expecting, I watch him as we cross the parking lot for Louie. Tucker hands me the keys and I silently take them. He tells me the name of a place where he booked us a room for the night, and I remember passing the hotel on our way here.

He remains so quiet, I'm freaking out by the time we reach the lodge and check in. He's resorted to one-word answers with the clerk at the desk and I silently follow Tucker to the room. If he's having a panic attack, he isn't letting on. Maybe he's having a delayed reaction to the experience. He definitely held it together in the air. No sickness. No

perspiration. No breathing issues. I really expected all those things from him, but he didn't react other than squeezing the blood flow out of my hand.

He opens the door to our room and allows me to enter first. I've hardly set Gemma down on the desk when the door slams shut, and I hear his suitcase drop behind me. I turn to face him, but I'm stopped by his hands at my hips and his mouth on my neck. We're both sweaty from an earlier hike at the Petrified Forest and the intensity of the helicopter ride, but Tucker does not seem to care. He's sucking at my skin and shoving my T-shirt upward.

"That was incredible," he mutters into my neck.

Holy shit! My entire body relaxes after that comment. My shoulders lower, releasing tension I didn't realize was pressing on me. Off comes my shirt, and next pops my bra. Allowing it to slip forward, Tucker's hands cup both breasts, massaging and squeezing. Pressing them together and pinching the already taut nipples, his mouth moves along my shoulder and back to the side of my neck. He's devouring me and my skin ripples with goosebumps.

"Tucker." I lightly laugh his name as his eagerness turns to urgency.

"I need you, Mae." One hand lowers to my shorts and releases the button. Hastily pushing the material over my hips, he forces me out of them. I reach for the dresser to steady myself as I kick off my shoes and step out of my shorts. Tucker tugs off his T-shirt and spins me to face the dresser. Our eyes meet in the mirror. He lowers his gaze and reaches for my underwear, pushing it down my legs until the material drops to the floor. The distinct unzipping of his shorts fills the room, and he barely has his shorts and briefs to his hips before he's bending me forward and rubbing his hard length between my thighs.

"You're so ready for me, sunshine, and I need to be inside you. I need to feel you surrounding me."

I'm not certain where this sudden rush is coming from but I'm thinking it's the adrenaline surge from his flight experience. Instead of being in shock, he wants sex. He needs to feel this connection with me and I'm willing to give it to him. Shock will come next, along with a crash, but for now, his release is my goal.

"Take me," I demand, and he slams into me. He's long, and the sudden rush forces me forward, hips hitting the edge of the dresser as he fills me.

"Mae," he strains, jackhammering into me. There's nothing slow or gentle about the rapid rhythm he sets. The dresser bangs against the wall and I hold on as he surges into me on repeat from behind. Risking a glance toward the mirror, I see my breasts jiggle uncontrollably. My hands struggle for something to hold onto on the smooth surface. Tucker's eyes are lowered to watch himself enter me. Sensing my eyes on him, he looks up. His expression is intense.

"You fit me, Mae. How is it that this happened?" His question is full of disbelief. He almost sounds angry as his hips thrust and the gentle slap of us coming together echoes after his words.

I don't answer him. He's not looking for an answer. He's chasing something and I'm offering myself as an escape. When his fingers come forward to stroke over my clit, I'm not certain I can reach where he wants me to go as fast as he's moving.

"Just you," I mutter to him, attempting to brush his fingers away from me.

"No," he commands, pulling out and turning me to face the bed. He guides me forward until I have nowhere to go but bending toward the mattress. He guides both my knees to the edge of the bed and with my ass in the air, he slams into me again. I cry out as he holds my hips, tugging them toward him while he fills me to the hilt. There's something about this position that opens me more to him. I feel exposed and wild in

equal parts and when his fingers dip back to that sensitive nub, I give in to the growing flutters in my belly.

“I will not go without you.”

There’s so much intensity in his statement. So many ways I could read into his words. For now, I only feel him and the command of his body to bring mine to the same place as his. We’re heading for a cliff, cresting the edge, and with a final flick of my clit, he sends me tumbling over with a long, lone groan. He pulls out of me, laying his sticky length against my rear cheeks and jets off on my lower back. His fingers still work me, and I continue to cry out as the release pours from me. I’m dripping with desire and unable to stop myself. I’ve never experienced anything like this, and it’s embarrassing while thrilling.

While still breathing heavily, I mutter a curse and press back as if I want to leave the bed. Tucker holds me in place. “You’re okay,” he says as if he’s read my thoughts.

I almost can’t think it. *Did I just wet myself?*

Tucker answers me before I ask. “You squirted.”

“I what?” I shakily scoff, collapsing to the bed on my stomach.

“The intensity. It caused your body to react. It happens.” Why don’t I know anything about this sensation and why did that feel so incredible?

“Stay here,” Tucker says to me. I can’t move anyway. I’m certain my legs won’t carry me. Tucker stumbles behind me and I assume he’s heading for the bathroom. Then, it hits me he wasn’t wearing a condom.

When he returns to the room, he mentions the same thing. “I pulled out.”

I could argue with him that isn’t the safest method. “I have an IUD.” I don’t know why I offer the information. I don’t want to delve into his sexual history or provide mine. I

appreciate the condoms he wore yesterday because I don't know who else he's been with since his wife's death.

"I'm always careful, Mae. I wouldn't have done that if I wasn't safe." The assurance is a small consolation to a bigger elephant in the room. What just happened? What came over him and why did I love it so much?

He sits next to me on the edge of the bed and swipes at my back. I remain on my belly as he speaks.

"That was so intense." While I'd like to think he means the sex, I believe he means the flight.

"You did good," I remind him. I don't want to point out the obvious—he survived.

"Thank you," he says softer, still stroking my lower back where he's cleared the mess. "I couldn't have done that without you."

"You could have," I say. "You were ready." He could have flown at any time, but he needed the right motivation. Perhaps seeing the Grand Canyon was inspiration enough. The experience cannot be replicated. The only way to see the immensity of the canyon is to fly over it.

Tucker slowly nods beside me. "I'm exhausted," he admits as everything comes to a crash.

The flight.

The sex.

He falls to his back, tossing the towel to the floor and turns his head to look at me. "Let's nap," he whispers, and he stretches out an arm to tuck me into his chest. He presses a kiss to my head and quickly falls asleep while I lay there listening to his heartbeat.

He's a survivor. He's going to be okay after we separate.

Me? I'm not so certain.

+ + +

We sleep for a good ninety minutes before rising and showering. We could have prolonged the intimacy by showering together, but Tucker suggests I go first. He wants to check in with Mach and Julia. He hasn't conducted any business that I know of today. His daughter is another story. I feel awful he won't make it by tomorrow, but he assures me once I exit the bathroom that it's fine. As long as he gets to her by Friday, he's not concerned. He's told me more about his relationship with his daughter, explaining how proud he is that she followed her own path and became a baker instead of an internet celebrity. He admits there's still time for her to do anything she wants in life, and right now it's making cupcakes.

In what seems like typical father of the bride fashion, he knows nothing about the wedding ceremony, other than the cost. A vineyard resort has been rented out. He's met his future son-in-law only twice and has the typical concerns for their future. How will they support themselves? Will his future son-in-law always deserve his daughter? He admits Julia has a large inheritance and with the strong head on her shoulders, he hopes she'll keep that financial gain in perspective. He doesn't have any hint that her husband is after her for the money.

"Rochelle died before they were engaged but Chopper seems committed to Julia's heart more than anything." The sentiment is sweet. I don't question the name Chopper. Tucker informed me it's a nickname for Charles Henry.

Once we've showered, Tucker suggests dinner. The sky is shifting in color, and the time is late. We eat at a diner near the lodge. When we finish, Tucker drives, pulling out of the lot, turning south instead of north.

"Where are you going?" He's headed in the wrong direction.

"I have somewhere I want to show you." Quietly, we drive down the highway leading away from the Grand Canyon

area. I watch the sky as if I can see the earth rotating and the day shift to night. As the overhead succumbs to darkness, Tucker leads us down a dirt path and cuts the lights. We stop in the middle of the desert where I joked you could bury a body.

“Let’s get out,” he says, already opening his door and rounding the car for mine. He pulls a blanket I had on the floor in the backseat out as well and drapes it over the hood of the car. After helping me climb up, I lean back on the windshield and look upward.

“Wow,” I whisper when he climbs up next to me. He places both hands behind his head, eyes aimed at the sky. We’re quiet for a moment, observing stars popping here and there, coming into view as the sky darkens. The moon is off in the distance, and a soft glow hovers around the nighttime jewel.

“Was I too rough earlier?” he quietly asks as if he’s afraid to break the silence around us.

“No.” I softly chuckle. “I liked it.” Rolling my head, I see the corner of his mouth curl.

“I’ve liked everything we’ve done together, sunshine.” He gives me a quick glance but then turns back to look at the heavens.

“Me too,” I whisper back to him. Waiting a minute, I finally ask what I’ve been holding in since we landed. “Was today difficult?”

“Not as difficult as I thought. I was freaking out if you couldn’t tell.” I could and I couldn’t. “My heart raced and for a second before we took off, I almost asked to be let out.”

Oh boy.

“But then I remembered what you said. I didn’t want to be afraid. What was the worst that could have happened to me?” He turned to look at me. “We would have died together.”

With sadness in his voice, something more lingers. I'd like to believe if death by helicopter is how my demise is intended, there wasn't anything I could have done about it. I could avoid so many things and still die from a slip in my own bathtub. Being cautious and being ridiculous are too different concepts. It wasn't like I planned to never bathe because there was a risk in my own shower.

"I don't want to die yet," I say for some reason.

"A man isn't dead unless he's forgotten," Tucker whispers.

I'll never forget you.

"We aren't going to die, Mae," he adds. "We have a lot of life still to live." That certainly sounds positive but sitting under the stars feels ominous. We are only small specks in the universe around us. We don't matter in the grand scheme of things, but we matter in the little ways. We matter to our families, and our friends, our businesses even, but most importantly, we matter to each other. In this moment, on the hood of a car, we matter here, on this day, in the time we shared in a helicopter ride and a hotel room.

We continue to watch the moon rise and the sky fill with more stars. I only recognize a few constellations, but my knowledge is enough. I don't need to know them all. I don't need to know everything that will happen in my life. Whatever is planned next for me will just happen. I will control what I can, accept what I cannot. The most important thing is I don't waste a minute of right now.

Shifting, I settle into Tucker's chest, and he lowers one arm to wrap around my back. He kisses my head as he'd done earlier.

"This is better than any drive-in," he says, reminding me of my excitement to experience one and my shock that he hadn't ever been. He is right in some ways. Who needs a movie projected on a screen when nature has so much to show us? And in the soundtrack of the night, I hear the dialogue of

the universe telling me to treasure life...and never forget this road trip.

Playlist: “Born to be Wild” – Steppenwolf

[Tucker]

God, her pussy is sweet. Mae drips against my tongue as I spread her out on the hood of the car. Eventually, our stargazing turned to a heated make-out session, and I need her again. She’s given so much to me but giving me her body is the ultimate gift.

She told me when we started this trip her orgasms are all real and all hers. There’s no doubt in my mind about the realness of them. The evidence is on my lips. As for being all hers? I want to claim every one of them. I never want her to experience one alone unless I’m watching. Selfishly, I want them all.

Mae cries out in the night, a howl at the moon, as she gives herself over to me and comes on my tongue. When she finishes, I slip her lower on the hood and loosen my jeans.

“Here?” she questions.

“What better way to experience a drive-in?” She chuckles until my tip hits her wet center. Her legs wrap around my hips, and I slide into her without hesitation. She’s wet perfection, and since I know about the protection in her, I’m bare again. I want to feel her warmth surrounding me, and my eyes roll back at the heat as I’m seated within her.

“Tucker,” she strains, looking around me, and I turn my head only enough to notice headlights aimed in our direction.

“Shit.” I pull out of Mae and reach for her hand, tugging her upright. She slides off the hood, struggling with her shorts wrapped around one ankle and I grab the blanket. We race for

the car doors. Once inside, I can't judge the distance of those lights but notice them bounce on the rough terrain ahead and sense the vehicle coming in our direction. I don't hesitate. Starting the car, I hit reverse without the lights on. Turning around as best I can on the trail, I do a three-point and gun it down the gravel path. Pebbles kick up behind us and I speed in the direction of the main road.

"Oh my God," Mae shrieks, glancing over her shoulder. She has slipped up her shorts, but they remain undone at her waist. She only has on one sandal. "Do you think they saw us?"

I'd like to think they were too far away, but I don't know where they came from.

"I don't know." I'm out of breath and my heart is racing. We could have been on private property for all I know, and I wouldn't have cared if I got to finish what I started with Mae. I have a serious case of blue balls and a semi-hard dick weeping in my pants. "I need to turn on the lights."

The illumination will give us away, but I can't see without them even though my eyes have adjusted to the dark and the moon offers only a dim glow. With a click, the beams go on and I swear whoever is behind us is gaining on us. The reflection of light in the rearview mirror blinds me. As we near the main road, I should slow down, but I want us on something paved and stable. Thankfully, there's no car coming in the direction I intend to turn, and we pop onto the highway running toward the Grand Canyon. Mae jostles beside me as her Louie isn't equipped for a car chase. As we head north, the vehicle behind us, which I can see is a truck from the height of its headlights, follows us. Our lodge is nearby, but I don't want to lead them there; however, we need to get off this road.

I bypass our place and holler at Mae. "Hang on."

Cutting the lights again, despite being on the highway, I slow only enough to make a sharp turn into another hotel parking lot and circle around to the back of the building. There I pull into one of the farthest parking spaces between two other

vehicles and cut the engine. Mae breathes heavily beside me. Twisting in her seat, she's been watching out the back window. I tip my head and then roll it on the headrest to glance out my window.

“Did they follow us?”

“I think they're gone.” Her voice chokes around a breathy laugh. “Maybe *we* scared them.”

I start to laugh, really laugh. Maybe our situation was nothing, but I did have my cock buried in her and she was in a compromising position on the hood. The other vehicle's appearance was so out of nowhere and exactly how this entire trip has been. I couldn't have predicted where we've been and the adventures we've had. Nor the ones I still want to take with Mae in the future.

“You owe me a sandal,” Mae says, breaking into my thoughts, and I laugh even harder while she joins me. The sensation of deep laughter feels good after my first flight and the fast fuck in our hotel room.

“I'll buy you a closetful.” I reach for her, cupping the back of her neck and tugging her toward me to kiss her like I can't get enough of her. I'll give her an entire wardrobe if she wishes. In only days, she's become everything to me.

Mae makes me feel. For the first time in a long time, I'm alive, renewed, revived. She sees who I was, and who I am, and accepts that I'm a combination of the past and present. She makes me want to dream again, to hope in what lies ahead. I want to ignore expectations—ones imposed upon me in the past and unwarranted ones I've placed on myself for the future. Mae gives me the permission to be free to be that person who loves music. I am allowed to explore my history and open the pathway for a return to a long-suppressed passion. Every mile we complete, my path becomes clearer, and I want Mae on the remaining road trip of my life.

And I tell her this with my lips on hers as we kiss like reckless teens until I need to take her back to our hotel room

where I can show her better what she means to me.

CALIFORNIA – DAY 6

Playlist: “Arizona” – Josh Kerr

[Tucker]

It's Wednesday and we are three hours away from California.

Julia was understanding when I told her on Monday I wasn't going to make it, but I'd be at the vineyard on Friday if I had to hitchhike my way there. I hadn't asked Mae to take me to Napa. The deal was as far as Los Angeles. She continues to avoid discussing her plans after she drops me off, and I'm beginning to grow anxious about what is next for her.

Would she want to see me again?

I want to see her. I don't want us to part ways like this trip never happened. But I'm not convinced we can continue what we have during this trip once we return to our respective homes. Our lives are very different. She is a small-town girl; I'm a city man. We each own a business and have obligations. And the one thing I swore I'd never do again was give up my life for a woman.

Still, my current journey is following Mae's path and it leads us on a brief jaunt off I-40 to return to Route 66 near Seligman through Peach Springs to Kingman, where gift shops and restaurants call to travelers. The buildings are worn from the desert heat and sun. After a stop for breakfast and a picture before a famous east-west chart in Kingman, we continue onward.

The drive toward Oatman, another ghost town on the edge of two states, is narrow and curvy and rising in elevation. Once we arrive in the old mining town, Mae squeals with delight.

“They really do have wild burros wandering the street.” She explained how once the miners exited the area, they turned their burros loose to go rogue. “Oh, I wish I could take one home,” she coos.

I just shake my head. She’s adorable.

From Oatman to Needles, California, it’s a thirty-minute drive and while I can say I made it to California by Wednesday, I’m nowhere near my final destination. Our drive through the Mojave Desert is filled with gorgeous landscape once again and my driving companion marvels at the beauty of our country. Mae is so in awe of everything she sees.

“For a woman who loves plants, you seem to love the rocks and dirt just as much,” I joke.

“Give me rocks and fields, or something like that Jane Austen once said, and I’ll be content.” Mae weakly smiles to herself as she stares out the window.

I’ve held her hand as much as I could until the switchbacks along the road needed my attention when we exited Arizona. With us officially in California, Mae grows quieter. We continue to pass rundown buildings and former hotels, but she isn’t asking to stop for photos. Her head stays turned to the side, watching the landscape go by out her window, but I’m wondering what is on her mind.

Absentmindedly, I stroke my fingertip up and down her inner thigh. She’s wearing a short dress today made of light material and giving off a 1960s prairie vibe. She had another pair of sandals in her bag, but I’m still committed to replacing the shoe she lost. I chuckle to myself with thoughts of last night. I really wanted to fuck her on the hood, underneath the stars, but we made up for the loss when we returned to the

lodge. The endorphin rush of being with Mae isn't subsiding. It's growing every second we're together.

As we drive down a particularly empty stretch of road, my fingers wander up her thigh, forcing her dress to lift and Mae eventually glances down at what I'm doing on her leg. Her head pops up and she looks at me, but I only catch her out the corner of my eye. My fingers slip higher, and Mae spreads her legs.

Sweet Jesus. I can feel the heat coming from her and my fingers brush over the wet strip of her underwear.

"Mae," I groan, frustrated with myself that she's ready for me. I can't get a good angle at her with my hand while I'm driving, but I try, cupping her and rubbing at the sensitive spot covered in cotton. Eventually, Mae pushes my hand away from her and slips her own between her legs.

"What are you doing?" I stammer, fighting to keep my eyes forward. "Are you trying to cause an accident?"

I can't watch the road and watch her, but somehow, I think that's what she wants. She wants to taunt me from the seat beside me.

"Don't tease me," I groan, choking when Mae's fingers slip between her thighs and her head tilts back. With the heat index outside this car, within minutes of pulling over and shutting off the engine we'd be drenched in sweat. The idea of stopping to fuck her in the backseat is too dangerous to risk. Not to mention, the backseat is too small.

"Mae?" I groan, peering to the side again, watching her fingers move over her center as her dress rises up to her hips. I don't know what she's thinking but I don't want her to stop. This scene will be one more in my memory box of this trip and Mae.

Her smile. Her touch. Her scent.

As Mae's fingers rub faster and her legs spread wider, my cock hardens, and I loosen my shorts by popping the button.

“I want to taste you, Mae. I want my tongue on that sweet pussy.”

Her back arches and she groans, fingers slipping inside her.

“That’s it. Let me hear you have an orgasm. Give me another real one, sunshine.”

Her mouth curves, knowing what I reference.

“Even though you’re doing this to yourself, you like teasing me, don’t you? But you’re letting me have this one like all the others. Like when my mouth is on you, or when my dick is inside you.”

“Tucker,” she cries out as her head tips forward. She comes undone in the passenger seat.

With my attention forward, I reach for her, dipping my fingers between her legs and touching that ripe wetness. Pulling my fingers free, I slip them in my mouth, sucking at her essence. Mae opens her eyes and I sense her watching me. She quickly unbuckles, kneels on the passenger seat, and then reaches for my zipper.

“Mae, whatcha doing?” I struggle to keep my foot steady on the accelerator and I’m grateful not another car is near us, but we still don’t need to veer off into the desert landscape or stop beside the road.

Within seconds, Mae has freed my cock from my shorts and boxer briefs, curling her fingers around the hard shaft and tugging at the stiff length.

“Fuck that feels good.”

Mae swipes her hair over one shoulder and lowers her head, her tongue coming forward to lap at my tip, seeping with need for her.

“Mae. *Fuck*. Mae.” I can’t form a sentence as her mouth opens and she tries to take me deep, despite my shorts in the way and the steering wheel beside her head.

And then, I see it. A police car up ahead.

“Sunshine,” I warn, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Mae stop! There’s a cop.”

She releases me. Her head popping up just as we pass him. I’d checked my speed, but I had no idea how fast I was going or if I was staying in the lines as I approached him. Sure enough, he pulls out behind me. After a quick glance in the rearview mirror, I then shift my gaze to Mae.

“Where did that come from?” I anxiously chuckle, trying to catch Mae’s eyes but she faces forward.

“Welcome to California, Mr. Ashford. Our estimated time of arrival at your destination is five hours.”

“Mae,” I chide. I reach for her, cupping the back of her neck as I did last night in this same position, only Mae tugs back and I don’t like it. She’s retreating from me before we even reach the end of the road.

Then it hits me. *I* need to be somewhere, but Mae doesn’t. She could drop me off in Pasadena as she suggested and carry on in her travels. Only, I’ve already told Julia I won’t arrive today, and she should leave without me. My daughter has a gaggle of women looking out for her, supporting her, and they can get her to the resort by this evening.

I just need to be there in time to walk my daughter down the aisle.

Which isn’t exactly true, but I’m struggling with Mae pulling away from me.

“Don’t do this.” My eyes shift right, catching her settling her clothing and then tucking her hair up into a messy bun.

“Do what?” Mae questions, still fixing her hair.

“Say goodbye before it’s time.”

Mae rolls her lips and nods slowly, keeping her gaze trained on the windshield. A siren fires up behind us and we

both look toward the back window. Within minutes we're lying about Mae dropping her phone and my swerving as she searched for it.

And the farce feels too real, like she hadn't done what she just did, and I feel Mae slip away from me a little more.

Playlist: “California Dreaming” – The Mamas & the Papas

[Mae]

We travel through the Mojave Desert. Louie is not meant for off roading, so we admire the landscape as we pass rich, sandy soil and a variety of cacti. As much as I hate to admit it, I can't take the dry heat, so a side trip to explore is skipped. We should have stopped for lunch near Ludlow, but I'm not hungry and we stick to snacks, prolonging our drive until Barstow. The sky overhead is vast and a solid bright blue, and another moment of feeling small and irrelevant overwhelms me. The world is so much bigger than me.

We've passed a few more ghost towns, and while I nostalgically marveled at them in the beginning of our trip, the depression of these ruined towns and forgotten byways is hitting me.

Don't say goodbye yet.

Will Tucker forget me? Will this trip be another memory he wants to disappear? He dismisses his band life like it happened a million years ago. He acts like he's forgotten how to play an instrument, which clearly isn't the case. He doesn't want to talk about Rochelle, or their life together, and it's one more omission from his past.

Will he erase me next?

At Barstow, I-40 ends, and we bypass I-15 to stick to the original route. Tucker doesn't seem in any hurry to reach his final stop, although we get closer by the mile. He told me he told his daughter to go ahead without him. We haven't discussed how he's getting to Napa. We haven't talked about

what I'm doing next. We're avoiding the obvious. We'll be reaching his original destination soon and then we part ways.

When we stop at Elmer's Bottle Tree Garden, I try to muster the emotion I had at the red rocking chair back in Missouri. These old glass bottles are being repurposed into art and it's another example of taking something no longer useful—empty soda and beer bottles—and making something beautiful with them. Of course, the glass is not all clear soda and brown beer containers, but an array of colorful greens and blues. The designs give me an idea for a garden art project. Pam designed programs at Mae's Flowers where we offer a garden project class once a month. Snapping a few pictures, I send them to her as a suggestion of something we could offer in the future.

"I should have collected more things along the way," I say for no reason. I'm not a collector by nature. I'm more the type that if something no longer has a use, I let it go. I don't like clutter. But I still should have purchased more souvenirs or tokens to remind me of where I've been. Absentmindedly, I reach for the silver cuff bracelet I bought back in New Mexico.

"You'll have all the memories," Tucker says beside me. We've grown quieter since my little side-seat show. I don't know what came over me. He was stroking my leg and I was imagining us last night on the hood of the car. While we didn't get to make love properly under the stars, I wanted him to take me under all this sunshine. The heat here is a serious deterrent, though. Still, I couldn't shut down my body. I've *never* acted the way I behaved. Touching myself. Climbing over him. Desperate to give him road head. The behavior was so unlike me, like so many things have been on this trip.

"Memories can fade."

"That's rather pessimistic of you," he huffs, but he's the master of letting memories slip away. He's going to forget everything. He's going to forget me.

I shrug but he grips my shoulders, squeezing at the tops of my arms.

“Stop it,” he demands.

Stop what? I want to snap. Stop thinking about us ending? Stop thinking about him? Stop my heart from feeling? I can't turn it off like a switch. I'm not wired that way.

“I'm not doing anything.” I sound like a petulant child.

“That's exactly it. You're acting weird. We have hours to go, and I don't know where your enthusiasm went.” His silvery eyes search mine and I'm tempted to shrug once again but I can't with his hands on my shoulders.

Funny how days ago, *it was days to go*. Now, we are down to hours. “I'm just getting weary of the car.” We've been confined for six days on what was intended to be a fourteen-day trip. I didn't exactly volunteer to shorten my plans, but I still did it, if not begrudgingly at first. Originally, I'd been wanting to slow the pace, take my time. With Tucker's need to get to California, everything has been a rush, including this relationship we've developed.

“Do you want to stop visiting attractions? Or take a break?” Tucker's voice lowers, his hands slipping down my arms and circling my wrists. This touch is the first he's given me since the car sex-show. He hasn't kissed me since this morning. I don't know why any of it bothers me or why I'm even thinking of such a thing.

“No, we should just keep going. We're almost to the end.” *We need to finish this trip.*

Tucker's hands slip away. Staring down at me, he stands taller and slides his hands into his pockets. He's wearing the shorts he bought only yesterday with another tight-fitting T-shirt. This one is white and his leather strap, normally tucked inside his shirt, hangs outside the collar today. He told me the medal is St. Benedict. Tucker admitted he wasn't particularly religious, but the medallion belonged to his grandfather. The memento was intended to remind him there are things he can change and things he can't, and he needs to accept the difference.

“Mae.” Tucker says my name, pausing as if he’s about to say more. His head turns to the left, and he squints in the sunshine. Slowly, he shakes his head once and turns back to me. “You’re right. Maybe we should just keep moving.”

He spins and stalks toward the car while I take my time, giving the glass bottle art one more glance. I take another mental photograph hoping the memories won’t fade but shine as brightly as these containers reflecting under the sun.

Near Victorville, we’re back on the interstate, which covers the original route, and we weave our way south to San Bernardino. The landscape changes once more and we let the road trip soundtrack be our tour guide. We could cheat and cut off San Bernardino but route 66 does lead in that direction before taking a sharp turn west and heading straight on to the ocean.

I don’t want to cheat, and I say as much to Tucker. “Let’s just keep to the route as best we can.”

We near a Wigwam Motel, similar to one we passed in Arizona, and notice a giant orange stand that looks old and authentic. Next, we see a sign for the original McDonald’s.

“That is not the original,” Tucker defensively argues. “I’m a Chicago man, and it started near there.” He goes on to give me the history of Ray Croc, and how the original hamburger stand was in a suburb of the big city. McDonald’s headquarters is actually outside Chicago as well. It’s more information than I ever thought I’d learn about the world-famous fast-food franchise and might be one of the first times our entire trip that Tucker is full of random facts. His enthusiasm for their history, along with the reality of this thought combine, and I start to chuckle, breaking some of the tension I’ve held since morning.

When I smile at Tucker, he smiles back.

“There she finally is,” he whispers, reaching out to cup the back of my neck while he drives. He squeezes and keeps

his hand on my skin as long as he can before he needs both hands on the wheel again.

“I met Lawson Colt in a small dive bar outside L.A.,” Tucker says, surprising me. “I was newly eighteen, full of piss, and ready to live my life. I didn’t want to be under the confines of Ashford’s. I didn’t want to go to business school. I wanted to play music. My dad was so angry.”

Tucker pauses and I hold my breath. He hasn’t shared any of this with me before.

“Lawson’s cousin was also in the band. His name is Denton Chance, and he understood my anger. His father had been some small-town mayor and he didn’t want his son playing music either. Fortunately for Denton, he was at least the athlete his father wanted.”

“Denton Chance?” I question. “My sister in-law is named Dolores Chance. Her brother’s name is Denton.”

Tucker’s head turns sharply toward me. His voice is full amazement. “Get out.”

“I’m serious. She’s from a small town in Georgia named Blue Ridge.”

Tucker’s mouth falls open and his eyes shift to briefly glance at me. “No fucking way,” he mutters under his breath. Vaguely I remember that Denton was once in a band, and I don’t know why I never put it together. Tucker and Denton had been in *Colt45 together*.

“Mae, this is unbelievable.”

“Yep. Denton went back to their small town and gave his sister his car to drive to California. She fell in love with her brother’s neighbor, if you can follow that, who was Garrett, *my* brother. Now they’re married and live in Blue Ridge. He started a vineyard there.” Because we came from a small river town, and our grandfather worked in a local factory, our Granddad’s dream had always been to own some land. Garrett wanted to fulfill that dream for him.

“Anyway.” I wave a hand. “Continue with your story.”

Tucker clears his throat. “So, I’m eighteen and playing in a bar. I don’t know anyone out here and these two guys come in. Roughly the same age as me. They say they like my sound and my talent and want to know if I’ll play with them. Lawson could sing. Denton played guitar. I could play whatever they needed. Piano. Drums. Guitar.”

“Don’t forget harmonica. You’re really musically talented,” I interject, noting the number of instruments he has mastered. He brushes off the compliment and continues.

“Colt45 was a name Lawson loved. He thought it sounded badass, old-school metal rock, but we’d have a twist on it.” Tucker bitterly chuckles. “Then we couldn’t get a break. That second album. His sister showing up. Her husband’s death. My parents’ death. Rochelle. Everything piled up.” He sighs and swipes a hand over his hair. “Maybe I gave up too easily.”

I smile weakly at him. “Or maybe it wasn’t your full journey. That isn’t always easy to hear, especially as you started out on that path. But you weren’t meant to end on it, or you would have. I believe in that. Everything happens for a reason, and we don’t always get to understand those reasons.” I softly chuckle. “If only we did, it’d be so much easier to accept some things or avoid situations completely.” Like a husband who cheats in your marriage or steals money from your business. Like falling out of love with the person who swore commitment to you. Or like meeting a man on a road trip and falling in love with him.

“Yeah, probably,” Tucker says, his head tipped to his fist while his elbow balances on the door. I reach for his arm, wrapping my hand around his wrist near the original leather band he wears and the new one he purchased. “We almost match,” I say, as my left wrist nears his right and I tinker with the new strap on him.

“I bought it, so I’d always remember.” He glances at me and takes my hand, lifting it to his lips and lingering as he

kisses the back. “You’re not going to be easy to walk away from, sunshine.”

And everything in me wants to tell him not to do it.

But I don’t.

Playlist: “California Soul” – Marlena Shaw

[Tucker]

Something in my chest—my heart or my soul—thrived in California and I’d left that piece of me behind. The emptiness inside me was deepest every time I’d returned to the area. This time was different. The vacancy behind my ribs wasn’t there. The space, once full of air, feels fuller, peaceful, almost content. Maybe what I needed was coming back here to find what I’d lost. Turning to look at Mae, I wonder if I’d ever lost anything. I had my heart the entire time. I just needed the right person to remind me. Remind me of the harmony of attraction. Remind me of the powerful rhythm of love.

As we near Pasadena, memories return like harsh waves against beach boulders. One after another crashes through my mind. I’d been to California since first leaving. Rochelle held a conference or two here, and Julia eventually moved into the state. But I didn’t visit often. I could count the total number of times on one hand. With Mae beside me, I ponder what she’d think. Maybe all I got was my fifteen minutes of fame. No more, no less. Moving forward with the guys wasn’t meant to be. Being a part of Colt45 was a blip on their radar but maybe being with them was a blip on mine.

Eventually, Lawson Colt got all the accolades for talent, and there was no doubt he was talented. In my heart, I knew I was better. I had more skill than just the guitar and a voice, but then again, our skills were simply different. Again, no more, no less.

When we near South Pasadena, I suggest a stop I hadn’t paid enough attention to when I visited Julia once. *An ice*

cream treat in celebration, I tell Mae. Fair Oakes Pharmacy and Soda Fountain is an original Route 66 attraction, and Mae agrees to the destination. Upon entering, she finally smiles one of those genuine grins I've missed throughout today.

"Ice cream could spoil our dinner." She gives me her best mom voice, but she's too cute to pull off stern and reprimanding in her excitement to be among the music and memorabilia here.

We haven't made plans for dinner actually, but it will be part of the conversation we have once we reach the pier. *What next?* The question is the first thing on my list to discuss. I want to see her again. I don't want this to be the end, as she hinted earlier. I meant what I said, she's going to be hard to walk away from, so I don't want to walk away. This time, in this place, I'm making my own choices, and I choose Mae.

"I only want to spoil you," I say and Mae blushes.

Her sweet rosy cheeks warm me, and I rub a hand up her back before leading her to the counter to order ice cream. Mae has dreams of grandeur about what life must have been like on this iconic road. The travels. The stops. The dates along the way. Couples sharing experiences, she called it, explaining drive-ins and diners. Sitting here eating ice cream at an old counter with bright red stools and lots of chrome around us, I envision what she meant. This is a classic date, and I can't recall ever going on one like it. Just a guy and his girl, sharing an ice cream sundae.

I've eaten so poorly on this trip I've probably gained ten pounds, and I'll take every ounce of them, if I get to keep this woman. Watching Mae savor the chocolate ice cream at one end of the sundae, I take another mental photo of her. She mentioned how she should have collected things along the way when we stopped at the folk-art bottle garden, but I've been collecting. The memories. The snapshots. The pieces of my heart that she's put back together.

Leaning forward, she shows me a picture she took of our sundae.

“Ice cream with my guy. That should be your caption,” I tell her. Like the selfie pro Mae has become on this trip, she plans to post the photo like a true foodie. Her personal social media chronicles our adventures, but we made an airdrop folder for images, and there are ten times as many in the file.

Mae snorts at my suggestion and I wonder what would be so wrong about saying I’m hers. We started this trip with rules and crossed every boundary, but maybe she isn’t interested in something long-term. Maybe she’s just been melancholy that her trip is nearing the finish line, not that *we* are at the end of the road for us. Like going to summer camp where the time will pass, and people will go their separate ways when summer is over.

This isn’t some damn band camp, though.

When we finish our ice cream, our journey will be delayed further by the lateness of the day and Los Angeles traffic.

“My daughter’s cupcake shop is around Pasadena somewhere,” I say as we idle along with the other cars on the overcrowded highway that feels like a parking lot.

“Should we have stopped?” Mae asks.

“Could you eat a cupcake on top of that ice cream?”

“There’s always room for a cupcake,” she teases, restored to sweetness after our sugary treat.

I laugh. “There are actually two locations now. Because Cupcakes is owned by her future mother-in-law. Julia’s inheritance covered the investment to open a second location.” I pause, recollecting Rochelle’s upset that Julia enjoyed baking instead of public speaking.

“You’re returning women to the kitchen,” Rochelle barked.

“I’m learning how to run my own business,” Julia argued back.

My sweet girl had slowly learned how to hold her own with her mother.

“I’ll make certain to find the place after the wedding.” After the wedding, when I come back to the area and what? How am I getting home from here? A secondary car service was booked for my return to Chicago leaving on Monday. Knowing the track record of the transportation company coming west, I should confirm my eastward plans. However, I’m still hoping I can convince Mae to share a ride back to Chicago. We can take the highway I drove to get here all those years ago and I can show her all the places I discovered along the way. I’ll be the tour guide this time.

“How are you getting home?” she asks, and I don’t know whether I’m relieved or nervous to discuss this topic.

“I was hoping to convince this incredibly annoying driver with a car named Louie to return me to Chicago.”

Mae’s brows lift. Surprise is written across her face. “Really?”

“Absolutely.” I pause. “Look, I didn’t really want to have this discussion in traffic, but I don’t want you to go back across the country alone.” I want to be your man, going with you.

“Oh,” she says, her voice faltering.

“What’s *oh*? I can’t read *oh*, sunshine.”

She shakes her head. “It’s nothing. You know I planned this trip alone in the first place.”

I arch a brow and side-eye her. “And how’d that work out for you?”

She fights a slow smile. “This annoying man weaseled his way into a ride, and I’ve been stuck with him for six days.”

I laugh as I inch forward in the mess of cars. “That bad, huh?”

She shrugs, and for the first time, I take that action from her. “It hasn’t been awful.” A smile fills her voice.

“Maybe I can make it up to you.” Wiggling my brows, Mae lightly laughs at me.

“What did you have in mind, Mr. Ashford?” A full wattage smile brightens her face.

“You’ll see.”

+ + +

When we arrive at Santa Monica Pier, the area is crowded as I’d expect for the end of a summer day. We finally find a place to park and walk to the famous pier stretching into the Pacific Ocean. Just like in Chicago, the starting point for Route 66, the Santa Monica area has had several official ending points. Mae warns me she read it can be a bit anti-climactic, so she’s focused on the pier as her formal finish line. To our surprise, an unofficial sign stands on the entrance of the pier.

Route 66. End of the Trail.

Mae actually hugs the post and I take several pictures, plus selfies of us, before bringing her in for a tight hug.

“You did it, sunshine. You drove Route 66.” The feat is quite the accomplishment, and while I technically drove a portion of it, *we* did it together.

“How do you feel?” I ask next.

Is she inspired? Is she restored? Does she have vision and purpose as she thought she would? Laughing at these ideals like I first did when she told me about them no longer feels appropriate. I’ve had my own epiphanies on this adventure, including reminders of what I’ve lost, but also what I’ve gained. Holding Mae tighter, she’s the gift I’ve received on this trip. Her smile. Her laugh. Her touch. Even her orgasms. But I want her heart.

“I don’t know,” she says, her voice bewildered. “Maybe it hasn’t hit me that it’s over yet.” Her eyes leap up to mine and the trepidation I saw earlier today returns.

“Well, it isn’t over yet. We need to celebrate. A ride on the Ferris Wheel. Or a trip round the carousel. Then dinner and the sunset.”

Mae stares up at me. Her mouth falls open and then snaps shut.

“Not getting rid of me yet, sunshine,” I warn, attempting to keep my voice light. *Don’t say this is the end.* “What were your plans for tonight?”

“I told you my brother has a place here. I was going to stay in his condo for a few days.” The few days is news to me, but good news all the same.

“Come with me to Julia’s wedding,” I blurt.

“What?” Her forehead furrows.

“Come with me. Meet my kids. Be my date for the wedding this weekend.” We can work out later how we will fill every weekend after that.

“You just want a ride to Napa,” she jests lacking humor, her shoulders falling within my embrace.

“I do.” I admit. “But I’m also not ready to say goodbye. Spend the day with me tomorrow. We can do anything you want. We can go to the observatory or tour Hollywood. We can lounge at the beach. Anything that doesn’t involve riding in a damn car.” And allows me to touch her all day, freely, continually. I rub both hands up her back and press her tighter against me.

“Let me stay the night with you and spend the days with me,” I plead. I’m almost begging, and I’m not opposed to getting down on my knees if I need to. I’m not ready to give her up.

With a slow jostle of her head, Mae grins and that’s my answer. I’m so relieved I kiss her with everything I can against

the post that marks the end.

Only, I want this to be a new beginning.

Playlist: “Wildest Dreams” – Taylor Swift

[Mae]

We eat a late dinner at an overpriced seafood place near the pier. Then we return to the beach, lay out the blanket from Louie, and watch the sunset. All around us I notice people stopping to pay homage to the glory of the sun dipping toward the ocean. It's a beautiful night.

Tucker and I remain quiet, each lost within our private thoughts. My head is fuzzy with wine and things I don't want to think about. Tucker lies back on the blanket, a hand behind his head while the other hand absentmindedly rubs at the base of my spine as I sit upright beside him.

We're at the end of a long journey and it's been a long day, but it doesn't feel like the end as much as it did this morning. Maybe I've accepted our fate is to part or maybe it's that he asked for more time. Tomorrow. The wedding. How long will we prolong our goodbye?

As the sun lowers and darkness falls over us like a heavy blanket, Tucker sits upright. Bumping me in the shoulder, I glance over at him. His face is close and his smile crooked. The creases around his eyes accentuated.

“Kiss me.” His eyes hold mine and I smile. “Kiss me like you'll miss me, Mae.”

Twisting, I clamp my hands on his scruffy jaw and devour his mouth. I pour everything into that kiss because I *will* miss him. I will miss this trip and his presence. I will miss his mouth and his crooked smile. His laugh and the teasing shake of his head when I've gotten excited over the simplest

sight along the way. I'll miss the sweetness of a potted geranium and the chivalry of diner dinners.

I kiss him with a road map of memories that will never leave me and yet reflecting on them will never do the recollections justice.

The reality of Tucker is what I want. His touch. His presence in my life. Just him.

My wishes scatter, though, when he tips me backward, positioning his body partially over mine, and we make out on a public beach as the sun sets on our adventure.

+ + +

"This is some place," Tucker states as we enter Garrett's condo along the beach, north of Santa Monica. My brother has lived in California since he left home after college, but I haven't been to this specific location.

"Garrett's rich." There's no reason to sugarcoat his financial status. He owns an investment company. He's like *Shark Tank*, the television program where investors agree to take on new products or put capital into existing companies to help them level up. Garrett is always investing in things to either grow them or dump them until the next investment comes along. "Denton Chance lived across the hall for years."

Tucker stares at me as we stand on either side of the large kitchen island that separates the modernized kitchen from a sitting area. A large sliding glass door and balcony are beside the living room portion. The view will be breathtaking in the morning when we can see the ocean.

Eventually, Tucker shakes his head. "I still can't believe how small the world is." He lightly chuckles referencing my connection to his former band member. "And your brother left here for Blue Ridge to build a winery."

“He left for Dolores. He made a sacrifice.” *It’s called love.* I don’t need to repeat my words from when Tucker and I argued. However, I feel the need to defend my brother’s actions. He gave up this place in order to fill his heart. And he didn’t leave it. He still owns the condo, renting it out on occasion, keeping it available at other times.

“I didn’t mean anything by that,” Tucker defends in return and my shoulders fall.

“I know. I’m sorry.” I’m tired. It’s been a rollercoaster of a day and a long one at that. I’m also on edge from our make-out session, which I wish had turned into more. Despite our sexy antics over the past few days, though, I’m not really into exhibitionism.

Tucker rounds the counter and cups my face. “You’re giving me tomorrow.” He isn’t asking but a question still lingers.

“Tomorrow,” I whisper.

“Let’s just take it easy all day. Stay in bed or hang at the beach.”

I nod to agree with him. We need a day of nothing. No maps to follow. No sights to see. Just us.

“Why don’t you take a shower? I’ll go after you. We need some sleep.” He’s right. I know he’s right and yet I’m afraid to sleep. I’m afraid to lose precious minutes with him, but I acquiesce.

Eventually, I’m grateful for the precious, solitary moments in the shower. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Condition. Shave. I use the time to allow the warm water to wash my worries down the drain. At least for a little while.

As I pull down the sheets of the bed in Garrett’s guest room, Tucker takes a shower. I’m wearing a fresh T-shirt I found in my brother’s dresser. Tucker finds me lounging against a stack of pillows against the headboard. He’s wearing only a towel around his waist as he peers down at me.

“How tired are you?”

“I found a drawer of sex toys,” I blurt, my face heating at the discovery I don’t think I was meant to see in my brother’s nightstand. I have no intention of using or borrowing those things, but I can’t seem to keep this secret. Tucker drops the towel at his waist and narrows his eyes at me.

“I have a sex toy for you.” His voice is completely serious, but I break into giggles. I’m exhausted, but the sight of him is awakening parts of me that won’t rest without his touch. There’s a collection of candles on the stand next to my side of the bed and Tucker lights them, then he turns off the lamp and crawls over me. Within seconds, the tee I’m wearing along with my underwear are removed and we lay beside one another as we did on the beach. Only Tucker’s hands roam, coasting along the length of my arm and the curve of my hip. He travels back up my stomach and over a breast.

His hand curls around my neck and he kisses me deeply before slipping his lips to my jaw and along the column of my throat. He’s taking his time, marking me, outlining me with his mouth. Tonight will be about making more memories as Tucker goes slow, and sweet, and softly down my body. He sucks at my breasts and licks the nipples. He kisses my belly and nips my thighs. He trails all the way down to one ankle and back up the other leg before he focuses on my center, ready and dripping with need.

“You have the sweetest pussy,” he says before his tongue flattens to swipe over sensitive folds. Then the tip of his tongue narrows in on my clit and two fingers take their time to dip in and out of me. Every moment is measured and paced, and the languid delay is both torture and tease. The anticipation is building like a lazy wave.

“Give this to me,” he says at my center. “Give me everything.”

He has no idea what he’s asking and how much I want to give him my all. My heart, my soul, my *everything* as he says, but he only means my orgasm which comes on a slow crest

and lasts long like an idle tide. When I can't take anymore, he presses a kiss just above my pubic bone and returns to my mouth for another deep kiss. Gently, I press at his shoulders, forcing him to roll over.

With him on his back, I take my time as he did. With his thick shaft in my hand, my mouth graces every inch of his skin over his chest and along his waist. While I kiss him everywhere, my fingers stroke his stiff length, gently tugging and teasing as he'd done to me. He groans and hisses, and I recognize he needs more. My tongue brushes the tip of him before I open wide and drag him deep. This is so much better than the roadside head I attempted to give him only this morning. I lap and I lick until he begs me to stop. Hollowing my cheeks, I suck hard until I'm suddenly pulled off him.

"Enough," he growls, flipping me to lie flat on the bed. He crawls over me once more and easily slips into me without preamble. He didn't need to warn me. I wasn't going to reject him. My legs spread and hook over the backs of his. His hips rock, moving his dick deliciously in and out of me. My hands rub up his back. His fingers massage my breast. We aren't in a rush as we continue to touch and explore until our bodies can't hold off anymore.

"Sunshine," he strains, signaling his patience is at an end and with his finger at my clit I tip easily over the edge again, giving him the orgasm he asked for. Instantly, he stills his hips but pulses inside me and I have a new definition of making love. *I love him.*

Tucker doesn't immediately pull out but lingers over me, kissing my nose and my eyelids before the soft brush of his lips meets mine. Then he holds me, and I clutch at him, afraid to let go too soon of one more memory.

Unplanned DAY 7

Playlist: “You Matter to Me” – Jason Mraz and Sara Bareilles

[Tucker]

We sleep in and Mae makes us breakfast with eggs that look freshly purchased and bacon left in the freezer. It feels good to eat something home cooked and linger on her brother’s balcony with our coffee. Garrett’s place is swanky, and the kind of condo I’d hoped to own one day, had I stayed in California. The place has a perfect view of the Pacific Ocean. In Chicago, my condo has a view of Lake Michigan, and while I am reminded of home being here, this isn’t the same. Thinking of home reminds me I want to discuss a few things with Mae.

“Come with me tomorrow,” I say again, implying my daughter’s wedding. I’m asking for one more day. Actually three, as I want her attendance for the entire weekend. I’m only putting off the inevitable, but I’m also hoping I can convince her to give us more time. Like a person who has room for a cupcake even after an ice cream sundae, I’m not full of Mae. I crave more.

“I can’t,” Mae immediately states to my invitation.

“You can,” I argue.

“No.”

“Yes.” We fight often like this. Two simple words with opposite meanings and yet Mae and I have come to so many agreements along this trip.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” Mae points out.

“You’re beautiful. It doesn’t matter what you wear.”

She waves a dismissing hand at me. “You’re the father of the bride. You’ll be in a tux.”

“It’s a suit, actually.” Stating the details isn’t helping my case but Julia’s wedding is rather casual despite being at a winery rented in its entirety for her celebration. Her fiancé isn’t a fancy guy, she’d told me, and they’d opted for light gray suits for the men in varying styles.

“Well, it matters to me what I wear, and I don’t have anything.”

“*Well,*” I exaggerate. “You matter to me, and I want you there.”

Mae blinks at me from across the small table on the balcony.

“I can take you shopping for something if that’s what will convince you to attend this wedding with me.”

She breaks the hold my eyes have on her and peers out toward the ocean.

Somehow, I’ve said the wrong thing. While I watch her, I recall her telling me about her brother and his wife. He was almost fifty and had never been married when he met Dolores, Denton’s sister. I’d asked Mae yesterday for more about their relationship. If he owned a business here, how did it work for him to be in Georgia? The question felt silly after all that happened back in 2020. The world learned to work remotely from anywhere during a major pandemic.

Could I work somewhere other than Chicago and still give my all to Impact?

“I’ll drive you to Napa, though,” Mae states, interrupting my thought. I don’t miss how she isn’t agreeing to accept my invitation to the wedding, but this is a small step in getting her closer to attending. “But it’s going to cost you extra,” she teases, turning back to me.

“I’m good for the money.”

Mae will receive payment for driving me. I want to see her well compensated for her time and the gas, but the concept leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. *This wasn’t only a business arrangement.*

My response has Mae tipping up her head once and glancing back out at the view. I’ve said the wrong thing again.

With our conversation already open about driving, I decide to keep pressing. “How are you getting home?”

Mae laughs almost bitterly. “The road is my goddess. She’ll lead me where I need to go.”

That’s not the answer I want to hear. I don’t like her traveling alone. And I want to be with her.

“Come to the wedding,” I ask again. “We can drive back to Chicago together.”

Mae’s head lowers, and her fingers fiddle with the hem of her T-shirt. The one she wore last night before I stripped her naked and made love to her.

“It’s too much,” she whispers. “It’s too important of an event for me to barge in and meet your family. This should be family time,” she emphasizes.

Join my family. Mae is sad with hers. Her divorce. The behavior of her teenage sons. The separation from her sisters. She can be part of my family. We can be one together.

I have no idea where these thoughts come from, but I’ve been thinking so much about the band and how I might have let them down when I left. They were my family for a short while and they’d been important to me. How had I let those relationships slip away when I once cared so much for those guys?

I had all the answers, but the bottom line rested with me. I hadn’t looked back any more than they looked forward at me.

I won’t do the same thing with Mae.

“Mach will be there,” I try to assure her.

“I don’t know Mach.” She doesn’t. She knows of him, from what her sister tells her, and from what I’ve learned, that includes Jane having a major conflicting crush on my business partner.

“Let me introduce you to Jude and Julia.” I’m nearly begging, and I reach for her hand across the small space separating us. I want to take us wherever the road leads, and hopefully that’s meeting children and figuring out how to be together somehow.

“I’ll think about it.” Her quiet response isn’t a no but it’s also not a yes. It’s like her dismissive shrugs. It’s a way to end this conversation and I concede for the moment. But I’m going to convince her.

Something tells me I need her to be there with me.

+ + +

Mae and I cuddle on the couch after a long afternoon of sunshine and a delivered dinner. We found a bottle of wine in her brother’s extensive collection and popped the cork, hoping it wasn’t something he was saving for a special occasion. Mae also found a series of classic movie DVDs and put one on. With our bodies spooning, I’m eager for her within minutes.

I don’t want to waste a second we have together talking about things heavy and hard, but I need to know why Mae is pulling back from me. Even held within my arms, I feel her slipping away.

“What would it take to keep you forever?” I whisper at her ear.

“Trust.” She doesn’t even hesitate in her answer.

The directness stiffens my spine. “And you don’t trust me?”

Her head tilts, and she looks at me over her shoulder. “I trust you.” Her brows pinch, surprised that I’d ask such a thing. “I trust you with my body.”

My mouth falls open, ready to ask her what part she doesn’t trust me with, but I think I know.

Her heart is fragile as is mine.

Tickling my fingers up her arm, I mutter at her neck again. “Then give me your body.” If she isn’t listening to my words, maybe she’ll feel my emotions in our joining. I want us to be together for more than a few days on a highway.

My hand moves to her loose pajama shorts, and I remove her underwear along with them. Next, I press at my own shorts, quickly freeing myself as well. My heavy dick falls against her ass, and I rock forward. Mae presses back. While laying on our sides, I wedge my leg between hers, spreading them so she hikes her thigh over my hip. My fingers easily find Mae wet and ready, and I stroke her a few minutes before slipping into her. Keeping my fingertips on her clit, I set a steady pace until our skin slaps and the scent of us coming together fills the room. Mae’s clutching the cushion and I’m clutching her hip, and together we dance.

Eventually, I pull out and Mae whimpers at my absence. I guide her forward to the floor, keeping her face to it. Once we wedge ourselves between the low table and the couch, I hitch Mae’s ass in the air. She’s on her knees, elbows bent, and I slide back into her. Stroking a hand up her spine and back down, I bring my thumb between her crack.

With just the slightest of pressure, I tease her here. Mae whines with a low moan of tension and curiosity. Her body’s natural reaction is clenching to hold me out while she’s open to letting me in.

“What will it take for you to trust me with more?” I ask, still playing at that pucker as my hips rock and my dick dips deep within her.

“Are we really discussing this now?” She scoffs then groans as I tap the spot within her to set her off. My upper body straightens as I surge forward with a hand on her hip and one on her ass.

“I want everything from you, sunshine.” I thrust forward again. “Come to the wedding with me.”

There’s so much more in my invitation. *Be mine, Mae.*

“No,” she groans again but her body reacts. The hand on her hip slides forward and I pluck at her clit while I tease her back hole. Mae breaks with a sob, and a jumble of words. “So good. So big. *Ohmygod.*”

“The wedding, Mae. Be my date,” I demand.

“Tucker,” she hollers, still coming over me. The intensity of her tips me over the edge and I slam into her, holding her at the hips to keep me to the hilt. I spring like a faucet and tilt my head back as the release escapes me. Spots of silver dance before my eyes and I blink to focus.

“Be mine,” I whisper as I collapse over her. We’re tucked between furniture which isn’t the most romantic location but my desperation to be inside her overcame me.

I want her body and her heart. Her soul and her thoughts.

I don’t need her past. I want to be her future.

Playlist: “Blackbird” – The Beatles

[Mae]

I couldn't believe I agreed to drive him to Napa. I don't know why I am prolonging things, but when we can't make it to the bedroom, pausing in the kitchen before he has me against the island counter, kissing me like I'm the air he needs to breathe, I accept that leaving this man will take willpower I'm not certain I have.

I'm a contradiction. One moment I'm clutching at him, hoping he won't walk away from me. The next minute, I'm pushing him away out of fear he'll too easily leave me behind. I'll be nothing more than a glance in his rearview mirror.

How long do we do this dance before the song ends?

Staying would only prolong the inevitable.

He doesn't need to introduce his children—at his daughter's wedding no less—to some strange woman who gave him a ride across the country. I'd like to think there could be another time, a better time, for such introductions. But all I have in my head is how Tucker lives in one place and I live in another, and we both own a business and have adult children, or in my case, nearly adult.

We'll say goodbye eventually and dragging out that end date does nothing but widen the gap his absence will leave in me.

Declining the invitation to his daughter's wedding feels like the only control I have left over this situation. I need to protect my heart, but it becomes extremely difficult to follow reason and emotion when he hitches my body up on the

countertop, spreads my legs wide and settles his face between my thighs. He should have been a singer. His tongue is insane and my body hums for him with each pass over my sensitive folds.

“You’re my road goddess, Mae. Don’t leave me alone on the journey of life.”

Sweet Mother, my eyes prickle at the tenderness in his tone, the plea wrapped in the passion. His tongue laps. His lips kiss. He’s delicate while demanding as he encourages the storm raging inside me. The tension is unparalleled. I hardly recognize my own body. The things I’ve done with this man. The things I’ve offered him. None of it makes sense yet I don’t want to question any of it. I just want to enjoy him in the few hours I have left. I just want to *feel* in the minutes that remain.

“Tucker,” I curse his name as I come to the edge once again. How is it possible to have so many orgasms in so few days? I’ve never been like this—desperate, ravenous, unquenchable. The open road has been an aphrodisiac, but we are no longer driving. This is the final rest stop only I don’t want to rest.

I don’t want this feeling to stop.

Within seconds, my body breaks again, crashing like the ocean on the beach outside this condo. Tucker is quick to pull away and pummel his shaft greedily into me. My eyes roll back. My orgasm wasn’t finished and his entrance into me prolongs the sensation of rolling waves and foaming waters. I’m a mess between my thighs. He does this to me. He makes me wild for him.

“Your body is my road map, sunshine.” His hands coast up my belly and cup both my breasts, squeezing them together as he rocks into me. “I’ll never be lost again.”

The tears threatening to fill my eyes blur my vision. Why is he being so sweet? Why is he doing this to me? Can’t he see I’m struggling enough as it is?

My legs dangle off the countertop. His hands grip my hips. I'm a ragdoll to his ministrations and then he stills. Only his cock jolts deep within me. My head rolls to the side as he leans back. He's as seated as he can be. Then he collapses over me, catching himself on his forearms beside my shoulders. Leaning forward, he kisses me, long and slow. He takes his time until we separate. Our eyes lock and everything is said between his steely grays and my light blue ones.

Stay.

I can't.

Don't leave.

I must.

Did I trust him?

Fear lives deep inside me. I need to believe he wants more than an additional ride and a date to his daughter's wedding. Otherwise, a major pothole will remain where my heart used to be. Each day will be one more day driving the wedge wider and wider. But with his body blanketing mine, and his eyes searching my face, I am almost willing to risk a crack in my surface.

Hesitantly, he pulls back and holds out a hand to help me sit upright. I need a shower, and he reads my thoughts, leading me to the primary bathroom where we take our time to soap and shampoo one another. No words pass between us. This moment is for memorizing one another. Inhaling the scent of our combined shampoo and body wash. Imprinting the feel of our flesh and the shape of our bodies. Internalizing the taste of tongue and lips and skin.

The moment is almost too much until he has me pinned against the sliding glass door to the balcony within minutes of exiting the bathroom. My shower-warm body presses into the air-conditioned cool panes and my sensitive breasts peak against the windows. With the lights off behind us, no one can see what he's doing to me. I'm certain this is something no one else wants to witness, and yet all my inhibitions are gone. I'm

naked and spread, plastered to the window while his hands explore my back, my hips and my ass. His mouth sucks at my neck.

“Keep your hands up.” I’d laugh at the directive if my body had a will of its own, which it doesn’t. I’m completely at his command. He slips a hand between my legs, toys with my clit and I respond like I haven’t been touched there repeatedly in the past few hours.

“You want me,” he says. “Let the rest of you have me.”

My head taps the glass before me, and I roll my forehead back and forth. He has no idea what he’s saying, what he’s asking.

He doesn’t rush but strings me along, flicking at the sensitive nub, drawing me closer and closer to the proverbial edge. Once I’m almost there, as if he can read my body, he slips inside me from behind again. His fingers remain on my clit while his thickness glides in and out, the tempo slow and measured. He wraps one arm around my waist and bends his knees to accommodate the height difference between us. He keeps the pace of steady taps while he plucks the trigger spot on me. The heat of his chest, the chill of the glass, the touch of his fingers, and the drag of his cock drive me into sensation overload. Then I’m coming again, spilling over him and down my thighs. My cheek presses on the window and my breath fogs the pane as I moan in a way I’ve never sounded before. Pleasure and pain. Passion and penance. My skin squeaks against the window until he stills, jetting off inside me once more.

My eyes close as we remain against the window, chests heaving, breaths heavy.

I’ll never be the same and everything I said to Jane when she convinced me to drive Tucker across the country was wrong.

I would end up needing him. I just don’t know how to keep him.

+ + +

Daylight comes too soon. We've miscalculated the distance to Napa Valley from the Santa Monica area, and it will take us seven hours straight up I-5 instead of six. I drive while Tucker rides beside me working on his computer once the time zones align. In so many ways, our position reminds me of when we started on this journey a week ago to the day, only he was sitting in the backseat, stewing over my annoying need to stop every so many miles.

"Sunshine?" He breaks into my aimless thoughts. The soundtrack of our trip has fallen in rhythm with the wheels on the road, and I'm numb to the sound.

"Huh?"

"Want to stop and grab breakfast? Maybe more coffee?" We hadn't eaten anything this morning because it was early. Gas station coffee had been our only option.

"No, we should keep going." My voice is hollow. My mind empty for the moment.

"Mae, we should talk."

I don't like the sound of that. *What is there to say?*

"Let's not." I swallow around a sudden lump in my throat. "You work."

His laptop is open, but he hasn't been typing. He's been looking out the window more time than not. Sneaking a peek at him, I turn my head back to the windshield just in time to see something large and low coming at the front of the car.

"What the—" Something collides with the front of Louie. "Oh my God. *Oh my God.*" With shaky hands, I reach for the hazards.

"What happened?" Tucker asks as I continue to shriek.

“I think I just hit a bird.” My voice ripples with panic and my body shivers. I steer the car to the side of the road, and for a moment, I’m reminded of pulling over for our flat tire. Was that only a few days ago? How different Tucker and I are now, compared to hundreds of miles and three states away?

Once stopped, we both exit the car at the same time and round to the front. Sure enough, a giant blackbird is wedged into the front grill. I bend at the waist, clutching my kneecaps and closing my eyes. I feel sick. Not like I’m going to vomit, just gut-curdling sick.

I killed a bird!

“This is a bad sign,” I mutter to the gravel under my feet.

“What? It’s a bird. A dead bird, not a sign.”

“Did you know that a dead bird is a sign...of death.”

Tucker softly chuckles. “Well, yes. He’s dead.”

I stand to face him, hands on my hips. “Oh my God,” I whimper again, before risking another glance at the poor thing, flattened against the silver grate.

“Mae—”

“No,” I say, stealing his words. This is a sign of the end, just as Tucker and I will be. We are over.

“Sunshine.” Tucker steps up to me, cupping my shoulders before tugging me to his chest. We’ve hardly touched this morning. I’d considered the absence a reaction to all our affection being used up yesterday. His lips press to my forehead. “A dead bird can also be a sign of rejuvenation.”

“How?” I mock. “He’s dead.” My forehead presses into his sternum.

“Well, he could rise up from the ashes.”

I pull my head back and look at him. *Ashe*.

“He could be a symbol of being born again,” he adds.

Taking another peek around Tucker's arm, I'm certain that poor thing isn't rising up from anything. "We should bury him."

"What?" Tucker glances down at me.

"We need to return him to the earth."

Tucker stares at me, his arms slipping from my back. "Oh yes, let me grab the shovel and coffin out of the trunk."

"Tucker!" I shriek. "I cannot keep driving with a dead bird stuck to the grill."

He hangs his head. "Do we have a plastic bag or something? I'm not risking some bird disease by touching a wild animal."

I'm instantly relieved he's offering to remove the blackbird because I don't think I can touch the poor thing without freaking out. Searching the backseat, I find plastic grocery bags left over from snack purchases and double them together. After holding out the bags, which Tucker begrudgingly takes, I stand to the side of the car while Tucker rounds to the front. With both his hands inside the wrappings, he leans forward, extending his arms as far as he can without getting too close to the wedged bird.

To our surprise, the thing flaps and squawks, one wing spreading as Tucker tries to contain him. He unintentionally drops the bird, which is larger than it appeared against the grill. Within seconds, the bird attempts flight but doesn't get too far, before dropping into the grasses on the side of the road.

"Should we try to catch him? Find a vet or something?"

Tucker glares at me as he rolls the plastic bags into each other. "I need some serious hand sanitizer, and no, we need to let nature take its course here. He'll mend on his own or become one with the universe as all wild things do."

Glancing up at him, I fight a sudden smile. "That was very a hakuna-matata of you."

“Ha-na what?” He looks over at me with the plastic rolled into a tight ball.

“*The Lion King.*” When he continues to stare at me, I shake my head. “Never mind. We have a winery to find.” I could use a good glass of wine or an entire bottle, but that isn’t the mission. Moving forward, I need to get Tucker to his daughter as I promised.

For some reason, I take another glance toward the bird, or at least in the direction of where it disappeared.

Was it a sign? Does it mean a new beginning...or the end?

DAY 8

Playlist: “Say Something” – A Great Big World, Christina Aguilera

[Tucker]

“Dad? Where have you been?”

My daughter rushes me, quick to contain me in her arms when we finally arrive at The Vineyard Inn. How do I explain the wild week I just had trying to get here for her wedding?

“You’re three days late,” she admonishes me as we embrace outside the quaint winery resort. The entire place has been rented for this intimate occasion. The owners were happy to accommodate us and Julia’s desire for a fairytale wedding.

I’ve made it here in time for the rehearsal dinner tonight but not the prior days’ activities of wine tasting and vineyard tours. The additional festivities did not exactly seem to fit my future son-in-law.

Still, as I stand here, I’m conscious of the woman behind me, leaning against the car we just spent an entire week trapped inside together. I should introduce her to my daughter, but I’m frozen in time when Julia pulls back and stares up at me with her mother’s eyes.

Her gaze, so like Rochelle’s, haunts me in an unsettling way.

“It took a little longer to get here than I thought,” I admit. My meaning is multi-faceted. It took more time to cross the

country than I expected, but it also took years to arrive at the decisions I've made in the past seven days.

"Are you okay?" my daughter questions, still clutching my upper arms like she's afraid to let me go.

"I'm fine." The statement feels true for the first time in years. I really am better than I've ever been. I hadn't known how bad off I was, and I owe it all to the ray of sunshine behind me.

"I wish your mother could be here." The statement holds truth, but it's equally false. Rochelle loved our daughter more than most things, but not quite as much as her business plans and her social media following. For Julia's sake, Rochelle should be here because no woman should celebrate her wedding day without her mother. As my daughter has kept me up to date on everything, I understand that Chopper's stepmother, Lily, along with a contingent of other women—Edie, Midge, Ivy, and Ester—have been tremendously helpful in the planning of this weekend. I haven't met any of them but cataloged their names.

On the other hand, it's a relief Rochelle isn't here as it's been a struggle over the last few years to reconcile what she did and how things ended. Her death was unfortunate. Her betrayal, however, was the unparalleled grief I didn't think I'd recover from. Only the past week has proven I am healed. I am better. I am whole. I no longer want to give my thoughts to Rochelle.

I turn to glance over my shoulder, relieved Mae is still here.

"How much does he owe you?" Julia asks, breaking out of my hold and approaching the beautiful creature waiting next to the vehicle. A fucking Prius. I might have thought the car atrocious when we took off from Chicago seven days ago, but in time, Louie has grown on me. I bite my cheek to stifle the chuckle at the nickname this crazy, adorable woman gave our transportation.

“Oh, he...already paid in full.” Her eyes meet mine, and I swallow around a sudden lump in my throat. She hasn’t been paid yet.

“Julia, this is Mae Fox.”

Julia extends a hand, ever the proper and polite woman she was raised to be, although not as assertive as her mother. “Nice to meet you. Thank you for driving my dad across the country.” She chuckles softly. “I hope he wasn’t too much trouble.”

Mae’s eyes meet mine again after she shakes Julia’s hand. “He was tons of trouble.” The gleam in those blue eyes hint at the issues I caused, and I want to remind her how much of a pain in the ass she was at times as well. Instead, I fight the smile at the memory of the type of trouble we caused together.

“Are you staying for the wedding?” Julia asks, and my mouth falls open ready to answer on Mae’s behalf when she answers instead.

“No,” she states as I interject, “Yes.”

Julia’s gaze swivels from Mae to me and back to my reluctant driver. “Are you staying at the resort?”

“No,” Mae says again while I command, “Yes.”

Again, Julia glances between us. Her mouth opens and then shuts. “How will you get home if Mae doesn’t stay?”

The question is legitimate. I’d already cancelled the car service despite not having assurance Mae would return me—*us*—to Chicago.

“I’m afraid I was a one-way ticket,” Mae says. I step forward, ready to argue with her, but Julia’s unexpected hand on my arm stops me.

“I’m just glad you’re finally here. I was getting worried.” The softness in my daughter’s voice reminds me that she has already suffered a great loss, and I hate that I’ve caused her additional concern, especially as this weekend should be a

highlight in her life. Hopefully, she'll find the happily ever after I didn't have.

"I should..." Mae hitches both her thumbs, one pointing more aggressively at her car covered in dust and splattered with bugs. Bird feathers are still caught in the grill at the front. I fight the smile caused by memories from our trip. Sadness also fills me. I don't want her to go.

"Stay," I whisper, breaking from Julia's hold.

Mae's eyes shift from me to Julia behind me. "I don't think that's a good idea," she mutters.

I know her concerns, but my hands clutch at her shoulders. Our eyes lock, and I soak in the warmth of her looking at me, while reluctance laces those bright eyes.

"Dad?" Julia's tender voice is like an ice bath, reminding me why I'm here.

"Congratulations," Mae states to my daughter, slowly slipping her arms from my grasp. "You're very pretty, and you'll make a beautiful bride."

Glancing back at my daughter, I note her red hair and pale skin is nothing like her mother's, and yet every feature is somehow one-hundred percent Rochelle. After Rochelle died, I boxed up all her photos, sending what I thought Julia might like to her and storing the rest. Mission number one upon my return home will be to get rid of those images.

Mae makes her way around the car.

"Where will you stay?" I question. We fought almost every night we stopped for lodging, and I paid the bill. As she opens the driver door, I call out her name, "Mae."

"I'll find some place nearby for the night." Her voice drops, and I circle the car.

"Don't do this." My own voice lowers as I near her open door, positioned like a shield between us. Cognizant that my daughter is watching me interact with this stranger to her, I struggle with what my heart wants most.

“Mae,” I warn again. She can be so stubborn.

“Enjoy your wedding and congratulations,” she says glancing over the car, addressing my daughter before slipping into the driver’s seat and tugging the door closed. Firing up Louie, the engine purrs to life, and I want to throw myself against the hood to stop her from leaving me.

Instead, I step back, and Louie glugs forward.

“Dad, who was that?” Julia asks, stepping up to me as I watch Mae pull away.

“She was...” My cross-country driver? My new friend? My whole heart?

“Dad?” I blink at Julia’s voice. Turning to face her, I fight the sudden ache in my chest and the desire to lash out, calling Mae a mistake.

“She’s nobody,” I lie, wrapping an arm around my beautiful girl, who has grown into a confident woman. “Now, where is that future son-in-law of mine?”

The term is strange on my tongue, although I’m hoping in time, I might get to know a little better the man who has captured my daughter’s heart.

“He’s inside with a few of the others.” Julia hesitates. “Daddy, I have a surprise for you.”

I’m not certain I can handle any more surprises after the week I’ve had. Mae was the surprise of a lifetime. Peering once more at the now-vacant spot on the drive before the entrance, I exhale.

“What’s the surprise, Jellybean?”

She smiles at the endearment. “You’ll see.” Her anxious smile does nothing to reassure me, but she slips her arm around my waist and leads me forward. Everything in me fights the pull to take one more glance over my shoulder. I release one final hope into the universe, wishing on geraniums and rainbow-arched bridges, that Mae might change her mind.

She might come back to me, but as we cross into The Vineyard Inn lobby, I accept that Mae is gone.

And my heart just drove off in a vehicle named Louie.

Playlist: “Look Away” – Eli Lieb, Steve Grand

[Mae]

The moment I saw the beautiful, young redhead pacing outside the entrance, I knew who she was and who she was waiting on...and I couldn't stay. I don't know why I couldn't say yes, but I couldn't intrude on this special occasion when Tucker needed to be reunited with his children. He hadn't seen Julia in almost a year. Her wedding is precious time they should spend together. Tucker also needs to regroup with his son who sent a scathing text yesterday when he learned his father wasn't in Napa already as planned.

Be mine, he'd said last night. Doesn't he know I already am his? In heart and mind, body and soul, I belong to him. He'll always have pieces of me as I'll have slices of him, but I don't see how we'll work.

I should have left him yesterday in L.A. and continued on my way, but I'm weak. I couldn't be the one to go. He needed to walk away from me, and the winery was the perfect place to make our separation happen.

I'm reminded of how I'd clung to Adam. I didn't give up on our marriage even though he had. I'd stuck with him during promises and pretty words, and I'd been a fool. I told myself I'd never do it again, and yet I was. I was hanging onto hints of a future when things said might have only been sweet words in the heat of passion.

You're a road goddess, Mae. Don't leave me alone on this journey of life.

There's a long winding drive leading up to the winery, but I can't see through the tears clouding my eyes. I brake where I am and give into the ache in my chest. The sobs rattle out the open window and my body rocks back and forth. I grip the steering wheel in an effort not to turn around and to hold myself still. I've told myself I can take eight minutes to cry, one for each day we were together, and then I need to quit. I need to stop crying over things I can't have, like a man who isn't mine.

"Mae?" I turn my head toward the feminine voice softly calling my name. "Mae, is it really you?"

I'm puzzled to find Mati Harrington, now Mati Chance, standing beside the car. With her lion-red hair pulled into a ponytail, and dressed in workout clothing, my sister-in-law's sister-in-law stares at me.

"Mati? What are you doing here?" My voice cracks and I'm painfully aware that tears are running down my face.

"I'm wondering the same about you, but I'm more *concerned* about you. Are you alright?"

Staring back at Mati, I'm immediately ready to state my standard answer but fight the phrase I too often say. *I'm fine*.

I am not fine. I am anything but fine.

"No," I whisper as the tears fall harder and I grip the steering wheel tighter. "No, Mati. I'm not." I glance up at her, for some reason willing her to let me explain everything that's happened. I need to tell someone. I need someone to hear the entire story just to confirm it happened. I fell in love with a man on a road trip and I don't know how I'll survive the wreck in my heart.

"Why don't you park, and we can talk, okay?" Mati hesitates and I slowly nod. I set Louie into drive and pull into the back of the lot beside a large winery truck. Mati helps herself to the passenger seat and I shift to face her. She lifts her phone.

“Give me one second to tell Denton where I am. Then I’m all ears.” She sends her text and then for the next I don’t know how long I tell Mati everything. The spirit trip idea. The coffee accident. The con of my sister who talked me into taking a man across the country. The stops. The fights. The connection.

Mati’s expression shifts throughout my expounding. She smiles softly. Her bark-brown eyes open wide. Her forehead furrows, and then she gives me a sheepish grin.

“You know, Denton and I were supposed to take a road trip once upon a time and he left me behind.” I vaguely remember hearing this story at Dolores and Garrett’s wedding. “We didn’t get to take that trip for almost thirty years.”

“That’s a long time to wait.”

Mati chuckles. “In many ways, I didn’t wait. I lived my life but when the opportunity arose to reunite with Denton, I took the chance. We can’t always understand the paths we’re led on in life, Mae. Sometimes the road leads in directions we thought were right, and they were for a while, like having the children you have. You wouldn’t trade them, correct? But at some point, we need to turn back. U-turn on the road. Whether it’s to make amends with family or find an old love; reconnect with forgotten friends or stick it out with a new one.” Her voice lowers. “Some roads are endless.”

“And some are dead ends.”

Mati laughs once again. “I don’t think this one is, though.” She reaches for my wrist. “The man is Tucker Ashford, right? He’s the father of the bride.”

I nod. “Are you here for the wedding?” I hadn’t known Mati would be here. I didn’t know anyone invited to this celebration and it was another reason not to attend. The spotlight didn’t need to be on the father-of-the-bride’s new... lover? Driver? Friend?

“It’s a funny story, actually,” Mati begins, and I listen as she explains the plan the bride and groom have in store for

four long-lost friends.

“And Tucker has no idea?” I ask.

“From what we learned when we arrived yesterday, I don’t think so.”

“Oh my God, this is amazing and terrifying. He could hate this.” I stare out the windshield a second, collecting my thoughts.

“He could.”

“Or he could love it.” I’ve seen how his eyes glow when he plays music. How he’s so lost in his head and the music is all he feels. He’s missed it. Without ever saying as much, I can sense how much he has missed playing instruments, and how deep down he has missed his old friends.

“That could be true, too,” Mati teases, squeezing my wrist. “But either way, I bet he’d love for you to be here with him. He’ll need you, Mae.” *Didn’t Jane say something similar?* “Because I bet there will be all kinds of questions, and issues and emotions he can’t tackle on top of his daughter getting married.”

“Why would Julia do this? Why would she plan something like this during her wedding?”

Mati shrugs as I often do. “I don’t know, other than she wanted to do something special for him.”

Well, special is certainly one way to put it and suddenly, I know what I need to do. I start the ignition on Louie and put him in reverse.

Playlist: “What Hurts the Most” – Rascal Flats

Tucker

I follow Julia’s lead into The Vineyard Inn. The resort is attached to a family-owned winery, once run by an older couple who came to America as young immigrants and settled into their homeland’s heritage—making wine. Julia loves the romantic tale of the two, who died within twenty-four hours of each other. When the wife fell sick, the husband came to tell her goodbye. She passed within the hour. He died peacefully the next day. Now the place is run by their granddaughter, who is also the local doctor, and married to a former MMA fighter. They have three small children.

My daughter loves the romance of this place, although I’ve been told it had a reputation in the past for clandestine affairs. Rock stars would hide out here. Movie producers would lure young actresses to this place for illicit trysts. And there were years when a group of Hollywood women celebrating their divorces arrived as a sort of support group, called the First Wives Club. The new owners sought to rid themselves of that stereotype, as they themselves were married and in love. They didn’t wish to promote adultery on their premises.

And my daughter was about to have a fairytale wedding in a beautiful vineyard while my heart took off down the drive. Entering the lobby, I stop when I see Jude coming toward us. I hear voices chattering off in the distance and a huge sense of loss hits me.

“Wait,” I say too loud. Holding up a hand, I stop my son’s quick approach. “I forgot something.” I begin to pat my

pockets. I need to call Mae. I need to beg her to come back. I need to find out where she's staying. Only I can't find my phone. *Dammit.*

"Dad, what's wrong?" Julia asks.

"You look like you lost your phone," Jude adds, as I'm anxiously patting my pockets while I spin in a circle. Then I reach for my bag and frantically search the inside.

Fuck it. I turn for the door as if I can catch Mae, as if she hadn't driven away. I watched her go. Still, I rush back out under the portico, and stare down the drive leading out to the main road.

Nothing. She's really gone. I hang my head and stare at my feet, covered in flip-flops I didn't expect to wear other than in my room. I'm not really dressed as father of the bride in my casual shorts and a T-shirt Mae gave me from her brother's condo. Fox Investments, it says across the back. I'll be looking into his company when I return home.

"Dad?" Julia calls out once more from behind me. "What are you doing?"

I turn my daughter who looks nothing like her mother and my son who looks everything like my father, and stare at them together. So many thoughts race through my head—all I've done for both of them. I love them more than anything, but I recall what Mae said on our trip. Now was her time. Her kids were grown. Her marriage over. Her business a success. She could live a little and that's what the road trip was to her. I should tell them about Mae. I should explain everything and how differently I feel having met her. How I don't want to let her go, but it doesn't appear I have a choice. She's gone.

"I think I left my phone in the car," I say instead.

"We can call the service. Maybe she can bring it back to you."

Bring my heart back? I shake my head and consider how Mae isn't a transportation company. She is a beautiful woman who went out of her way to get me here as fast as we could go

without sacrificing her entire trip. Sacrifice, she said. That's what love is. I glance up at my children once more and remind myself I made the right decisions. All those years ago, I did what I felt I had to do. I went home.

If I lost my phone, I'll need to ask Mach to contact Jane who can get ahold of Mae. Will she come back? Or is she too far away? Not enough time has passed for her to travel a great distance. I could still catch her. With renewed hope, I step toward the lobby once more. "I need to find Mach."

From our check-in last night, he made his flight and arrived yesterday evening. He must be around here somewhere. I head for the lobby and Julia follows me.

"Why is he acting like a psycho?" Jude mutters behind me but I ignore him. I don't need his attitude right now.

"I need to find Mach," I repeat.

"He looks different," Jude keeps mumbling more to Julia than to me. "Tan even. Did you take a vacation before you got here?"

"It's called relaxed," I snap, suddenly feeling anything but; however, the last few days I've been more at ease than I've been in years. In the moment, I'm as tense as I've always been.

"Dad, I have a surprise for you. People I'd like you to meet." I pause at Julia's hesitant tone. I should finally meet Chopper's father. His name is Brutus, and he owns a restoration auto-garage where Chopper works. While their last name is familiar sounding, it was too much of a long shot that they'd be related to a man I used to know, and I never inquired. I hated when people asked me about being affiliated with Ashford's, even though I was one.

"In a few minutes, honey. I need to talk to Mach."

"You've had all week to talk to Mach, and you are two days late," Jude interjects. "You need to be present for Julia."

I spin to face my son and bite my tongue. “I am here for Julia. I just need a minute.”

“It’s fine,” my daughter says, turning from her brother to me. “It can wait a few more minutes. We’ll find Mach first.” She hesitates as she looks back at Jude.

“You’ve already been waiting. This is bullshit. He can go now and find Mach later.” I’m not surprised at my son’s tone, but I am surprised he’d brush off Mach. He has an affinity for him. He is his uncle after all, and we share a strange bond between the three of us.

“It’s okay,” Julia says, patting her brother’s chest while giving me a second cautious glance. Taking a deep breath, I exhale.

“No, it’s fine. You’re right. Show me your surprise, Jellybean, and I’ll find Mach in a few minutes.” I figure the sooner I get this over with, the faster I can get to Mach. Then, I’ll politely excuse myself and get Mach on the task of stopping Mae from driving too far away. Julia leads me into a small wine bar with a scattering of tables. I hear the bellowing laugh of a man where a few tables are pushed together and then see the face of someone I haven’t seen in almost thirty years. A few heads turn at the table as well and I stare directly into my past.

Seated there are Lawson Colt, Denton Chance, and Hank Paige...my old band.

+ + +

I just stand there and stare, uncertain how to address them or what to say to them or why they are even present.

“Lawson?” I question first. With hair slicked back and down his neck, he looks every bit like himself only grayer, fuller but more solid than fat. He stands and holds out a large hand.

“Long time, Ashe,” he states, his Southern drawl apparent. “And I go by Tommy Carrigan now. Just me being me.”

I blink as we clasp hands and shake. He pulls me into a hug and the unfamiliarity of him has me stiffening when I don’t mean to. He releases me and steps back allowing me a look at the next man.

“Tucker,” Denton Chance says formal and tight. He holds out a hand as well and we shake, more businesslike. He looks as he did when we were eighteen with his model-worthy cut cheeks and bright eyes. He’s also more solid or has he just filled out from the lanky stage of teenagers? His hair is lightened as well. We’ve all aged.

Finally, Hank Paige stands. He looks almost exactly the same with a solid frame and a powerful smile. He is slightly younger than us and I remember considering him a kid when I was all of twenty-two at our first meeting. “Don’t know if you remember me?” he states, holding out his hand next. Our time together was short in the transition from Colt45 to Chrome Teardrops. I hadn’t played with the shifting band when Hank had been a new hire.

“What are you all doing here?” The vineyard is rented for the sole purpose of the wedding. Everyone present is supposed to be from the guest list, which is relatively small. The intimate collection mainly includes Chopper’s family, which is bigger than ours, and the couple’s friends.

The men look at one another as they clearly know something I don’t. “Well, Chopper is my nephew,” Hank explains first. “Julia is going to be part of my family.”

I hear what he’s saying, but I’m struggling to comprehend. All this time, my daughter has been around him. He’s the man I never inquired about and here he is. It’s all surreal.

“Hank and I reconnected a few years ago,” Lawson—*Tommy*—adds, clapping Hank on the shoulder and squeezing

him. “Our wives are good friends.”

“You’re married?” Of course, they’d be married. It’s been twenty-something years. Still, the dots are difficult to connect as Tommy was a self-proclaimed bachelor and Hank was in love with Tommy’s sister, Kit Carrigan. *Their* lead singer.

The memory of Kit hits hard. She died too young of breast cancer. I remember it making the news. Rochelle had been a fan of her female-empowerment movement to never marry. The father of her child had an overdose when Kit was practically a child herself.

“Got married four years ago last New Year’s,” Tommy proudly states.

“It will be four years this August for me.” Hank clarifies. He nods at a man standing off to the side. He’s not as bulky as Hank and his hair is solid white but he isn’t much older than us. I instantly see the resemblance to Chopper who has been standing nearby as well.

“Brut.” He offers. “Brut Paige, father of the groom.” He smiles and I introduce myself in the same manner as father of the bride.

“Groom,” says his son, patting his chest while smiling at me with a goofy grin and pride in his voice. The idea he’s getting married, and to my daughter, practically makes his tattoos glow. He steps forward, greets me, and tugs me into a hug.

“Don’t be upset,” he whispers next. “She did it with love.”

In the moment, I both appreciate his words of support and his attempt to relieve tension, but I’m also still confused. Chopper releases me and steps over to Julia, circling his arms around her from the back. They’re cute together and I’d focus on them more if I could wrap my head around these other men being present.

“I think Dad is a little stunned,” Julia says, her voice high and tense.

Stunned does even begin to describe how I'm feeling. "I still don't understand."

"Brut is Hank's older brother. And I know you didn't play in their band officially, but you did play with Tommy and Denton," Julia clarifies my own history to me. "And as they're friends—Brut, Hank, and Tommy—we spend a lot of time with them. Denton and Mati live in Blue Ridge, but I thought it'd be nice to reunite you all. For my wedding."

Blue Ridge. The town is so familiar, but I suddenly can't place it.

Julia licks her lips nervously. "And play something."

"What?" I snap. This is unbelievable.

"We're getting the band back together," Hank chuckles and slaps me once on the shoulder blade.

Only, I shrug away from him. Fingers pressed to my forehead, I scrub at the onset of a headache. It's all too much. Mae leaving. The band present. Julia's wedding. I just need a minute and I need to find Mach. Suddenly, my best friend is the perfect excuse.

"Can you excuse me a minute? I need to find my business partner, who is around here somewhere." I scan the small selection of tables as if I'll find the man, as if I'm willing him to appear.

"Sit. Have a drink," Tommy suggests, waving at his table. I'd love nothing more, but I need to find Mach. I need...Mae. Like I'm taking that first flight once more. I know I can do this as long as I have Mae by my side. I need her sunshine. My hand slips into my pocket and I find the harmonica she gave me, and while I'd like to pull strength from the gift, it isn't enough. I need her here with me.

As if the universe is both working for and against me, Mach enters the small wine bar. After quick introductions, I pull him aside, explaining my urgency to find Mae.

“We’ll just order you a new phone. It can be here in a day, and we’ll transfer everything.”

I don’t care about contacts and social media apps. All my photos are on that phone. Then I remember Mae and I airdropped a folder together. But still, I need access to *her*.

“It’s not about the fucking phone,” I say, my voice rising, and I glance over my shoulder to see my old band and new in-laws staring at me. Turning back to Mach, I tell the truth. “I need Mae.”

Mach eyes me before a slow smile curls his tight lips. “Interesting.”

“Mach,” I groan.

“Okay, okay.” He reaches for his phone and sends a text to Jane. I wait, staring down at the device in his hand. He shakes his head. “She likes to play this game when she’s pissed at me and not answer right away.” He chuckles to himself, and I wonder what kind of game he plays with her. I’m reminded that Mae suggested Jane has a crush on Mach. Does he feel the same way about Jane? *Whatever*. I don’t have time for this kind of office scandal.

“Tell her it’s about Mae.”

“I did. Chill.” He laughs again at my frustration, and I swipe a hand down my face.

I glance once more at my daughter waiting patiently with her fiancé and his family. His family’s friends who happened to be my former band.

Play something, Julia said. She cannot be serious. While my children know I was once in a band, they also know I don’t like to talk about those days. We eventually had a piano in our home but neither child played well, and I ached when I listened to them. My fingers itched to touch the instrument, but the reminder was too painful.

I scrub at my head again.

“Relax. Maybe you need a drink.” Mach is the second one to offer the suggestion. What I need is some air. It’s all too much too fast.

“Yeah, just...I need...” I don’t even finish, just point toward the hallway and head toward the exit of the small lounge. In my rush to put space between myself and my thoughts, I turn the corner too quickly and slam into someone. Wine splatters across my chest and I reach out to right the person, clutching at feminine shoulders to stop her from falling back at the impact. The glass drops to the floor and shatters as our eyes connect, and I inhale, taking my first real breath in the last hour. Relief washes over me as wine seeps through my T-shirt.

“Sunshine.”

Playlist: “Good As You” – Kane Brown

[Mae]

Wine soaks my shirt and I glance down at the glass I dropped. The shattering made quite the noise. Strong hands cup my shoulders, pressing me back while holding me steady. We collided hard into one another, but I look up once I hear my nickname said in breathless relief.

“Tucker,” I whisper.

“You came back.” His voice cracks. His eyes are wild, and he places one hand on my cheek.

“I didn’t get very far,” I admit, still embarrassed that Mati found me sobbing in my car on the driveway. She’d been out for a run she told me, keeping up with her personal conditioning as a women’s volleyball coach at the college level. She is a little thing for a volleyball player, but she has intense drive and passion for the sport.

“I need you,” he says.

On those words, his mouth crushes mine and I’m clutching at him. Wet, wine-covered shirts plaster us together, but I don’t care. It’s only been an hour or so, but I missed him. I couldn’t drive away after telling Mati everything and hearing what was next for him. Hearing him say he needs me, I was exactly where I should be—in his arms. With one securely at my back, the other tightens around my shoulder. His fingers dig into my hair. We kiss like we don’t have an audience, which we must, because clapping occurs around us.

Slowly, Tucker pulls away, and I tuck my head into his chest. He waves out at the people surrounding us, but the

person I'm most worried about is the female voice softly questioning, "Dad?"

"So, I brought back your phone," I state a little too loudly, as I step back from him, and awkwardly search through my cross-body bag which also bears the burden of our collision. Wine seeps into it. I pull forward the device and Tucker chuckles before wrapping his arm around me and tugging me into him again.

With his chin on my head, he says to his daughter, "This is Mae. She's more than my driver."

"We noticed," a rough voice says at the beautiful redhead's side, and I instantly see the resemblance to Tucker.

Despite what I know of Jude's parentage, I imagine he's exactly as Tucker looked at twenty-seven. Even down to the edge on his face, reminding me of when I first met Tucker and he was a tight cannon on the verge of exploding.

"Jude," Tucker sharply addresses his son. "This is Mae Fox. She's my—" He pauses unable to explain who I am to him, and I should pull out of his arms again. Instead, I reach a hand toward Tucker's son.

"*She's* happy to meet you," I mock. Jude stares at me before accepting my handshake.

Tucker releases his strong hold, and he glances at me. "We're a mess." He chuckles and I laugh as well. We certainly are, in more ways than just wine on our clothes and the tear stains around my puffy eyes.

"This is Mati, by the way." I wave at where she stands beside me. Her husband stands at her side. Tucker glances between them. "Remember I told you Mati is married to Dolores's brother. Dolores is Denton's sister. They all live in the same small town together."

Tucker laughs harder. "I can't keep up." He shakes his head.

“Why don’t you two go clean up and meet us back here in a little bit?” A man with a smooth, rich Southern drawl states. “We’ll be waiting on our girls to get back from the spa.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s where I should be,” Julia says, glancing up at a nice-looking, younger man with tattoos covering his arms. She tips up on her toes to kiss him quick and eases away, but he catches her by the elbow and pulls her back to him. He gives her another kiss, a little longer, a little deeper, before releasing her and she giggles. Then she turns and walks in the opposite direction of our audience.

“If you’d all get out of the way, we can clean this up.” A hard masculine voice comes from behind me, and I turn to find another man with heavy tattoos and thick arms crossed over his chest, arching a teasing brow at our collection of people. I’d forgotten about the broken glass, and I lower to pick up the pieces.

“I’m sorry about this.”

“Mae,” Tucker groans at the same time the tattoo man crouches and catches my wrist.

“I got it, beautiful. Go take care of yourself and him.” He nods in the direction of Tucker, and I stand again, noticing the deep stain of wine on Tucker’s T-shirt. Mati had poured me the glass from a sampling bottle on the front counter. The gift welcomes people as they check in. I hadn’t taken a sip before colliding with Tucker.

“I don’t have a room,” I state, and Tucker groans my name.

“Where are your bags, sunshine?” he asks.

“In Louie.”

Tucker laughs again, light-hearted but too high for him, and tucks me back under his arm. “Be back in a bit,” he says over his shoulder as he leads me to the parking lot for my things.

+ + +

Once we enter Tucker's room, we've hardly settled our bags when he's on me. Fingers in my hair. Tongue in my mouth.

"We should talk," I mutter against his lips.

"Talk with me inside you."

Okay then. My shirt is peeled off and his comes next. Then Tucker lowers his mouth to my neck, licking at the sticky wine mess on my skin.

"I could pour an entire bottle on you and drink you up," he says into the crook of my neck and shoulder.

"Please don't." I laugh at the thought and then a small thrill runs up my center, imagining him trailing wine down my body and chasing the spill to lap at each drop.

I'm in the headspace now and I make quick work of his shorts, where the waistband is soaked with wine as well. Off go our shorts and underwear before I'm falling back to the bed, Tucker coming down with me. He wastes no time touching me, dragging the head of his cock through folds already seeping for him. When he slips inside me, we both groan in relief at the connection, and he pauses when he's buried deep.

"Are you sore from last night?" We'd made love three times, desperate to hold onto every last minute. The only thing aching on me is my heart but for now it races. I shake my head.

"You feel good," I whisper.

"You make me better." The statement doesn't exactly match what I've said but I don't question him when he begins to move and our hips dance in a pattern I've learned with this man. With a hand at my hip and his other behind my neck, we're quick to roll with one another until he's begging me to get there, and my fingers find my clit. I crash over him, crying out his name, until he stills and pours into me. He collapses

over me, wrapping his arms around my back and rolling to his side but keeping us connected.

“I’m so happy you returned,” Tucker says.

“I knew you’d miss your phone,” I tease.

“I missed *you*, sunshine. I already missed you.” His voice softens while the words run deep and he kisses me once more, keeping me close for a little longer.

Eventually, we slip apart, and he lays on his back telling me all that happened. Then I tell him what I learned from Mati in the car. I’m on my belly, pressed up on my elbows while his fingers lazily toy with my hair.

“It’s all so surreal,” he says glancing up at the ceiling. “The guys are here, and Julia wants me to play something at the wedding. It’s too much.”

“Maybe she knows you’ve been missing something important inside you. Or maybe she knows you need this to finally heal.”

“Heal from what?” Tucker asks, his question sharp.

“A lost dream. Or the betrayal of Rochelle.”

“She died,” he says, his brows pinching.

“She had an affair.”

“Julia doesn’t know that.”

“Are you sure?” This wasn’t something I’d expect father and daughter to discuss, especially in the early days of Rochelle’s death. Tucker wanted to protect his daughter from all things negative surrounding Rochelle. Maybe he’d held back but a mother might not have. Rochelle might have told her daughter what she planned to do. How she was leaving her father, for whatever reason she might have given. Mothers and daughters share things. Fathers only try to protect their little girls. At least, that’s what I’m told. I never had a father who made me feel safe like Tucker wants to do for Julia.

He looks away from me again and I reach for the medallion at his chest, fingering it against the strap. He covers my hand, flattens my palm against his skin, keeping his over mine.

“Sunshine.” He swallows. “I need you to stay the weekend with me.”

When his eyes meet mine, I’ve never seen such raw honesty or such desperate desire. I couldn’t pull myself away again if I tried and I slip up to kiss him, assuring him I won’t leave him behind again. We’ll figure out the future somehow. For now, it’s only another three days. I can give the time to him. We have wiggle room.

Playlist: “Harvest Moon” – Neil Young

[Tucker]

Mae squeezes my hand as I lead her to the wedding rehearsal. Of course, she has to let me go so I can practice walking Julia to the magical vine arbor designed for the service. The early evening wedding will be outside, and the reception will include a wine tasting hour next to a river on the edge of the property, followed by dinner in a new ballroom constructed inside an old barn no longer used for preparing wine. Miniature tea lights dangle from the ceiling, decorating the old worn structure in a shabby-chic country vibe.

Rochelle would have hated it, but Julia beams as I walk her down the outdoor aisle and practice the pass off to Chopper. My heart crashes and shatters and comes back together as this is the natural progression of things. A man wants his daughter to find a good person who loves her and respects her, and I’m confident Chopper does. He’s a dreamer like her, but he’s also solid and she deserves that.

Once the rehearsal finishes, the party takes over the small bar again, sharing a meal with only immediate family at our table. Mae and I have met Lily, Brut’s wife, and their two children under four. I can’t imagine starting over near fifty, but I quickly learn how Lily and Brut are reunited lovers.

“She’s the one that got away,” Brut teases, pulling his wife close to him and pressing a kiss to the short honey-blond hair at her temple. “Got her pregnant so I didn’t lose her again.”

He's teasing. I've learned the complicated backstory to their relationship. Brut raised Chopper as a single father his son's entire life. Lily and Brut's renewed relationship leaves me with questions. Could I start over so late in life? Could I commit to someone like Brut and Lily are committed to one another? Rochelle and I had been in our own worlds for so long, the adjustment to her passing wasn't what one might expect. The idea of her being gone was more upsetting than her absence. We hadn't been together for a while.

I reach out for Mae's hand under the table and squeeze. Getting her pregnant to keep her won't be happening, but I'm trying to figure out how to make things work between us.

Hank also sits in the room with his wife, her three teenaged sons, and their daughter, also under age four. So much has changed, as it should, but I'm still struggling to wrap my head around all the connections and the fact that the men from my former life are present.

Tommy and Edie, and Denton and Mati join us shortly after we finish eating, since the evening activities include all those present at the resort. Julia and Chopper have a small, tight circle of friends, ranging in ages, so it's an eclectic group. Jude remains sullen and on the edge of the crowd. He loves his little sister. He's protective of her, but he doesn't like this scene and too soon he's absent.

"We should practice something," Tommy eventually says, sauntering up to me. He holds a whiskey in his hand while Hank's hands are suspiciously empty.

"Need something?" I say to the former drummer, nodding at his empty fist.

"I abused the privilege, so I'm good."

Wow. I'm proud of him for getting clean. Being a rock star can be hard on the body, and sex, drugs, and rock and roll are no joke. Alcohol is its own demon and I'm glad he's tackled it.

“So...practice?” Tommy says, his Southern drawl thick. “It’s been a while.”

“We just played together last October,” Denton interjects. My brows pinch. *They’ve already gotten back together?* Then why do they want me? I quickly remind myself this reunion isn’t their wish but that of my daughter.

“I was obviously thrown off when I saw you guys, and I didn’t have anything to do with this plan. So, I understand if this isn’t really your gig. You don’t need to do this.” With the four of us huddled together, Brut joins us on the tail end of what I’ve said.

“Julia wants it,” her soon-to-be father-in-law reminds me.

“You know, I never thought you liked me, so if you still don’t want to play with me, after all this time, just say it,” Hank says, his voice deep as his eyes narrow at me.

“Not like you? Are we kids in a schoolyard again?” Tommy scoffs, chuckling to keep the sudden tension low.

“Hank, you promised no bullshit,” Brut adds.

“It’s not bullshit. We have some unresolved shit and maybe we should resolve it before tomorrow,” Hank states, glaring at me.

“There’s nothing unresolved,” I point out.

“The hell there isn’t,” Denton interjects next. “You quit. We were just getting our feet wet with Kit and you bailed.”

“I—” I was twenty-three. More than a kid but not really an adult. I had a grandfather I loved who’d made a request to save the family name and I honored it, while I owed my father nothing. How do I explain this to them? Do I even need to?

“Haven’t you done anything you regret?” I retort to Denton.

His eyes cross the room where I see his wife looking up as if she senses him watching her and she softly smiles at him.

Yeah, I remember his tale about leaving behind his true love. Took him twenty-seven years to find her again.

“We don’t need to do *this*,” Tommy says, pointing a finger in the space between us. “Rehash the past. We’ve all had our issues over the years.”

“You aren’t going to do this,” Brut adds next. “For Julia and Chopper, you’re going to play your damn instruments and make nice. She wants this and Chopper wants her happy.”

I like my daughter’s future father-in-law. He’s a good man.

“My leaving had nothing to do with you, Hank,” I say to him, giving him a firm look. “Nothing. It was all family bullshit.”

“Know about that,” Denton mutters beside me, which reminds me that he and I connected the best when we were younger. We both had shit fathers and came from backgrounds in the public eye. Whether his was small town and mine wasn’t didn’t matter. We understood each other then.

“We’ve all had family bullshit and made decisions accordingly.” Tommy claps Hank on the shoulder and a private look occurs between them. I don’t understand what it means, and I don’t need to know. There’s no sense in turning back the clock. We can’t change the past.

“For Julia and Chopper then,” I say, holding up my glass of wine.

“For Julia and Chopper.” A crystalline chime rings out as Brut taps his glass to mine. The others follow suit while Hank holds up a fist on the edge of our collective glasses. We drink.

“Now, what the fuck are we going to play tomorrow?” Tommy says with a deep laugh and the tension breaks. A new anxiety hits. I have no idea what song my daughter wants to hear.

I'm definitely feeling the buzz of good wine and renewed memories. The guys and I shared stories from the past for hours, skipping over the drama of me leaving, and the tumultuous relationship Hank and Kit eventually had. We talked about gigs and old names in the business, and in some ways, it was like I never left. In others, it was a reminder of all that I'd missed. Then I'd look up at Julia smiling at Chopper and him kissing her nose, and I knew I'd do it all again as I'd done it.

Mae's also tipsy. She easily got along with all the wives—Eddie, Midge, Lily, and Mati. Mati especially wanted dirt on Garrett to take home and tease him about. From the sound of things, Mati and Denton are close with Dolores and Garrett back in Blue Ridge.

I'm still stunned that all these old connections have made new ones with my daughter, and the past few years they've circled her, included her, and now she'll be family with them. Was I not paying enough attention? How did I miss these people in her life? I can't recall Julia ever mentioning Tommy or Hank, but then again, I didn't know Tommy as anyone but Lawson.

Eventually, Mae and I stumble into my room, and I kiss her neck. "Still want to pour that wine over your body," I mutter into her skin.

She purrs and we knock into the side of the bed. Mae's wearing the dress she wore on our last day of road trip travel. She washed all her things at her brother's place, and she had nothing to worry about as she fit right in with the casual affair tonight.

"Have fun with your friends?" she mutters to my mouth, struggling with the buttons on my shirt.

I did have fun in a strange sort of way, but I don't want to discuss them.

“I want to have fun with you,” I say to her, slipping my hand to the hem of her dress and skimming her outer thigh underneath it. The room is cozy, and the lamp on the bedside table is on, but I can see the moon through the uncovered window. It reminds me of the night we were on the hood of Louie.

“I didn’t get to fuck you under the moon,” I say, and Mae pauses.

“So, what did you have in mind?” Her hand coasts inside my shirt which she finally has open.

“Slip off your underwear.”

Mae stares at me a second, before doing a slow tease of removing her panties without me seeing anything. She dramatically drops them on the bed, and I reach for her hand. After grabbing the half empty bottle of wine we started drinking earlier while we got ready for dinner, I lead us outside. The space around the main building is low lit. There are gardens and the wedding area, but off to the side of one barn-like structure, we find an outdoor swing. An honest-to-goodness wooden swing hanging from a large tree.

“Is this private property?” Mae whispers as if anyone can hear us.

“Guess we’ll find out.” The moonlight highlights a section just outside the tree line and I pull Mae against me. We kiss standing upright, swaying under the lunar light a second before I pull her toward the swing. I take a sip of wine straight from the bottle and set it on the ground, then lower myself to the wooden platform. I removed my belt in the room, so I loosen my pants and pat my lap. “Straddle me.”

We chuckle as Mae tries to slip her legs over mine between the rope holding the swing. Eventually, we’re tangled together.

“Spider cradled,” she says. “It’s how we’re sitting on this swing.” Her legs dangle behind me. With my feet on the ground, I use them for leverage to push against her. Her hands

hold onto the rope chain. Gently rocking, I nudge my stiff length at her center. My fingers fist in the back of her dress and tug it upward. The scent of her sex wafts around me.

“Take me out,” I mutter to her neck, returning my hands to the rope.

Mae strokes me through the opening near my zipper. Pressing on the ground, I rock us back and forth again, not fully swinging, but subtly swaying. Finding the tip wet, Mae uses what I seep to moisten me. I continue sucking at the column of her throat while we gently move.

“Tucker,” she whimpers.

“That’s it, sunshine. Put me inside you.” I still the swing so she can lead me to her entrance. Then I release my feet and slide into her as the swing rocks. Mae cries out at the intrusion and wraps her arms around my neck.

“Did that hurt?” I mumble against her skin.

“Do it again,” she whispers, and I lean back to meet her eyes.

I repeat the process, stilling my feet and Mae slips back to release me. Then she settles at my tip, and I drop my hold and rock into her again. With her arms around my neck, she tips back her head.

Her eyes drift closed. “This is incredible.”

I bite her neck and pull back once more. It’s such a rush to fill her like this but I can’t take much more. The need to really move, to capture the necessary friction, has my body humming. I swing into her again before curling my arm around her lower back and keeping her pinned to me. Using only my feet to press the swing back and forth, I hold her on my lap, allowing the gentle motion to aid us in coming together. Soon enough, her fingers dip to her clit and she V-s them in a way my cock feels her fingers, adding a second piece of tension as I glide in and out of her. We clutch at each other, the risk of slipping off the swing enough to heighten the need to hang on.

“Gonna...gotta...ohmygod—”

Mae breaks, and I follow as her channel clenches around me. I go off inside her, draining myself in her heat. Within seconds, she rocks back and forth with my length deep inside her.

“Another one,” I choke, recognizing the signs that she could go again.

“I...it’s never...I’m going...” Her stammer is adorable but what’s sweet is how she comes undone a second time. Dropping her head to my shoulder with her arms wrapped around me, she squirms and squeezes until she’s replete. I slide both my hands up her back and cup her shoulders, like a human backpack on her.

“Thanks for coming back, Mae,” I whisper to her.

“Thanks for road tripping with me,” she says before kissing me under the moonlight.

Playlist: “Yours” - Ella Henderson

[Mae]

The wedding is beautiful. Julia beams. Chopper stands in awe and Tucker appears as the proud father he is. It's a perfectly sun-filled early evening and the vineyard feels like it's in extra bloom just for this occasion. The rows of grapevines remind me of my hometown and the multiple wineries in the area. Homesickness hits, but not as hard as it did the day Tucker bought me Gemma the geranium, which sits in our room.

I smile to myself when we pass the swing in a train of golf carts leading us to a special wine tasting hour by a river on the edge of the property. Under white tent canopies, we stand around and savor various wines along with appetizers. The river looks refreshing for such a warm day, and for some reason, I imagine couples making love here in celebration of marriages.

When we return to the main winery, and enter the new ballroom inside an older structure, once again I think of home. The inside reminds me of a hometown favorite called Red Barn Table, owned by a good friend. We've had numerous celebrations there over the six years it's been open.

I've been in contact with my boys, learning on Thursday when Tucker and I spent the day in Santa Monica that Adam was spending the weekend away from them again. I didn't like the sound of that but didn't have a say from here. I'd asked Pam to send me proof of life photos to prove the boys had eaten, slept, and possibly showered. In the heat and dirt of working with plants all day, I assumed that they had. My thoughts briefly drift to home, but I dismiss them and enjoy

the wonderful dinner eventually served. To my surprise, I've been added to the main table, where Julia and Chopper chose to sit with Lily, Brut, and Tucker. They didn't want a sweetheart table where they would be the center of attention.

"Another new suit," I tease Tucker, reaching for his lapel as we sit for dinner. I'm wearing the dress I wore the night he played the piano for me. The first night he fell back in love with the instrument once so vital to his life.

"Keep the coffee away from this one," he jests back before slipping his arm around my shoulder and leaning in to kiss my temple. I glance up to find Julia watching us. A slow smile curls her lips.

"You should talk, Mr. Wine Accident."

"How did you meet again?" Lily Paige asks, lightly chuckling.

We've already explained the circumstances. His transportation company canceled, and my sister works for his firm. I was coming to California anyway.

"She was looking for a sign," Tucker says, and I laugh.

"I was looking *up* for an actual sign that marks the beginning of Route 66."

"And then she bumps into me, spilling coffee all over my new suit."

"It wasn't everywhere," I clarify, as most of it ended up on me.

"I was so pissed. The transportation company had just canceled on me for this trip." Tucker smiles at me. "I think it was a sign my life was about to change."

I stare back at him, dumbstruck.

"And when I spun around, my tongue froze. A ray of sunshine was beaming at me, like the heavens opened and said *pay attention here.*"

I softly laugh. "That's dramatic."

“That sounds romantic,” Lily sighs.

“I suppose it is if you like wearing coffee more than designer suits,” I say, slightly uncomfortable with all eyes on Tucker and me.

“I’d let her spill coffee on everything I own as long as she looks at me like she did that day.”

Lily turns to Brut, and they share a secret smile, and I risk another glance at Julia who swipes under her eye. Chopper rubs a hand up her back and leans in to kiss her neck, and I turn back to Tucker to find him still looking at me.

“You are my sign, sunshine,” he says softer, only to me.

“A sign for what?” Instantly, I recall our discussion about that poor bird that flew into the car grill.

“A sign of everything I knew was missing but didn’t think would ever happen for me.” With his hand on the back of my neck, he pulls me to him, kissing me softly and quickly before releasing me. My face heats. Today is his daughter’s wedding but I feel like the blushing bride on the eve of a life-changing moment.

+ + +

As the night wears on, Tucker and the guys get closer to their big reunion performance. They had a practice earlier this morning, but Tucker is nervous, and I have an idea. Excusing myself, I head back to the room, remembering what he’d placed on the dresser. When I return to the barn, I’m almost to the entrance when I’m stopped outside by Jude.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he says without greeting.

He’s been eyeing me on occasion throughout the day, but I’ve ignored him, brushing off his behavior as a spoiled twenty-seven-year-old. I haven’t missed the sneers he’s given his father before shifting into tight smiles on behalf of his

sister. He doesn't seem to comprehend all Tucker did for him, but that's the way of children. They never appreciate the sacrifices of parents until they are parents themselves. In his case, Jude's entitlement might never allow him to see the light.

"Excuse me?" I say.

"He loved her, you know. That's why he was upset. He didn't want her to run off with someone else. He wanted their marriage to work." His statement is in complete opposition to what Tucker told me, but I don't share that with his son.

"What happened in your parents' marriage is between them." Children aren't necessarily privy to all that goes on behind their parents' door. My own boys weren't blind to how their father and I didn't always get along, but they also didn't pay enough attention to notice how truly unhappy I was with their dad.

"But it wasn't. They were a very social, visible couple, and he loved her. She loved him, too."

If she did, I don't understand why she'd have an affair, but I don't mention that either. Adam told me how much he loved me, yet he still slept with multiple other women. The lies people tell don't always make sense.

"Again, that's between them." I don't need to remind this young man that either way, his mother is deceased, and his father is free to conduct himself in any manner he wishes. It didn't mean his heart felt any more or less for his once-wife.

"He'd had an affair first." The words hit me straight in the chest, but I don't want to believe him. I *don't* believe him, but a niggling of doubt settles in. Could Tucker have done that? If he was unhappy? If they had been so estranged like he said?

"He couldn't fight the ghost of my father."

A sick gleam forms in Jude's eyes and I wonder if he understands that his biological patronage came from a sperm, in a man who no longer lives, who shouldn't have been with a near-child like his mother. His *dad* was the man inside the

barn. The one he isn't defending but attacking with his words. Tucker is the man who raised him, took care of him and his precious mother, and Jude should be grateful. Tucker could have turned his back. He could have told his grandfather to go to hell. He could have been so many other things than this spoiled child's *dad*.

"I don't think that's true." There's no way Tucker felt unequal to his father and I'm confident in my defense of Tucker on this matter.

"She loved him more."

I scoff. At nineteen, did his mother recognize that a man twice her age with a wife wasn't in love with her? He'd used her young body for his own purposes and got her pregnant. Working with the assumption Tucker told me everything, as I believe he has, Jude has some nerve assuming *I* know the truth of his birth. Perhaps this was a test, to see how open Tucker has been with me. Either way, it's a cruel joke for Jude to speak so openly about something Tucker tried to protect. He did what he did to prevent this very thing from happening—damaging the family name with their history.

He has no idea what he's talking about regarding his parents, but now isn't the time to set him straight.

"I don't think we should be discussing this." I step left, but Jude blocks me, and the clang of instruments floats out to us. The music fades out and I recognize it's only a sound check. "Don't do this."

I hate to beg or plead with this man-child, but I need to get to Tucker. I don't care about his son. I care about the man inside about to take a giant risk to his ego and his past.

"Go home."

"Excuse me?" He has some nerve.

"You'll never measure up to her. And he'll never love a... *chauffeur*." Jude blocks me further, arms crossed and shoulders back. Tipping his head, his gaze roams up my body and he sniffs with disgust.

This trip had certainly become much more than just me hauling Tucker to California. It had become something larger. I draw a long breath, ready to put this misinformed, spoiled twenty-seven-year-old in his place when my phone rings in my hand. Assuming it's Tucker wondering where I am, I answer it without thought.

"Hello."

Owen's voice cracks through the phone. "Mom. It's Wyatt...it's bad."

Spinning away from Jude, I take a few steps to the side of the barn. "What happened?"

"He was at work. And the table collapsed. Mom, you need to come home." His breath falters through each choppy statement.

"Okay. Okay," I gasp. My hand covers my mouth and fear fills my gut. "Where the hell is your dad?"

"Not here," Owen's voice cracks again. *Is he crying? Shit. Shit.*

"Where's Pam?" To be honest, she'd do a better job of shepherding my boys through this situation than their father would.

"She's with Wyatt in the ambulance." He sniffled.

Ambulance? My stomach cramps around the growing knot in it. "I'm in Napa but let me get to an airport. I'll take the first flight out."

"Come right to the hospital, okay Mom?" The panic in his voice along with the sudden sob reminds me of when he was a little boy. He's struggling with his emotions, afraid to let his fear show, but unable to control being a sensitive boy.

"Okay. I'll let you know my flight information as soon as I know it." Hanging up I take only a second to process what's happened. My children need me.

Spinning back toward the open barn door, Jude is no longer in sight, but I find Brut at the edge of the entrance.

“Mae, where have you been?” A second later, he’s holding both my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not,” I admit and quickly tell him there’s an emergency at home. “I need to go, but I can’t tell Tucker. He needs to be focused on Julia. Please, Brut. He can’t know until later, after he plays for her.”

Brut glances over his shoulder at the men gathered on the low stage. Laughter surrounds them. Tucker needs to be here for his daughter, but more importantly, he needs to do this for himself. He needs to prove to himself that music is still inside him, yearning desperately to come out. It’s an absent part of him he no longer needs to deny. Julia asked him for this gift, because she knows...somehow, she knows he’s been missing this part of himself.

And I need to get to my sons.

“Can you give this to Tucker? He’ll need it before he plays.” I hold up the harmonica I saw him slip from his shorts and set on the dresser. Maybe he wanted it with him today. Maybe he didn’t. But the sentimental gift might bring him luck tonight. He played beautifully on the street corner in Winslow. He can do it again.

“You should just tell him. He’ll understand,” Brut encourages me, but I see he’s torn. Brut’s admiration for his now daughter-in-law has been apparent all weekend. He doesn’t want to hurt her, and I’ll never forgive myself if Tucker follows me instead of playing for Julia.

“You can tell him later. For me,” I say.

Brut’s brows pinch. “I don’t like this.”

“Brut, I need to get to my boys.”

His shoulders fall. He’s been a single father most of his life. He knows the position I’m in. My children need me, and I have to go.

“How will you get home?”

I explain how I'll Uber to the airport. I can leave Louie for Tucker, or better yet, I'd always planned to sell the car when I got to California. Flying home was on the original itinerary. The spirit trip was one-way. “My ex-husband bought it with borrowed money.” I choke around the lie. “And my son doesn't want it. I might need the money for his medical expenses anyway.”

“We could have it shipped to you,” Brut begins but I'm already shaking my head. The expense is one I can't afford, nor do I want. “Okay, I run a restoration garage. I can unload it for you. Leave the keys at the front desk and text me when you get to the airport.” Brut lifts his phone and takes my number, adding it to his contacts and texting me his. “Are you sure about this?”

I'm not. I should talk to Tucker. But not now, as I need to get home.

“I've got to go. It was a beautiful wedding.” I press up on my toes to kiss Brut's cheek and race back to the room, gathering my things like a runaway bride and escaping the resort before doubt settles in.

Playlist: “In My Life” – The Beatles

[Tucker]

My palms sweat. My heart races, and Mae is nowhere to be seen. She excused herself before we started our sound check, saying she'd be right back. Only a few minutes ago, I noticed her by the barn door entrance, lingering in the doorway with Brut. From this distance it was hard to tell what they were talking about, but Brut held her shoulders at one point. I didn't like it. Although I know he's a happily married man, I don't like the sight of someone else touching her. Mae is mine.

As Denton strums a guitar and Hank raps out a few beats on the drums, I stare at the keys under my fingers. Tommy taps at the microphone, and I glance up, seeking Mae. Brut walks with determination toward the stage.

“Mae asked me to give you this.” He hands over my harmonica and I'm stumped.

“What? Where is she?”

Brut holds his head still. “She went to your room.” The struggle on his face hints there's something he isn't saying.

“Should I check on her?” I shift to stand.

But Brut holds up a hand. “She doesn't want you to miss this moment.” Brut stares at me, keeping his eyes on mine but I can't read what he isn't saying. The guys are waiting behind me and despite sensing something is off, I accept what he says. Still, my chest pinches at her absence. Mae would want to hear what we have planned. My road trip lover with her giant playlist of songs will appreciate our set.

“Everybody having a good time?” Tommy bellows, gripping the mic. “We want to thank Julia and Chopper for including us in their special day and giving us this opportunity to reunite. We can’t promise we’ll be great.” He pauses to chuckle. “But these old guys still have talent, and I wouldn’t want to be on any stage with anyone else.”

“Hey,” a voice calls out in the crowd, and I recognize Gage Everly, the lead singer of Collision, the band Tommy now manages.

“You’ll get your turn tonight, kid,” Tommy jokes of his charge, who is also his nephew by marriage and not a kid at over thirty. Julia volunteers at his wife’s music therapy school. My daughter has such a generous heart.

“We thought we’d start out with a Beatles classic in honor of the lovely bride and per Chopper’s request.” Tommy pauses. “Here’s ‘Julia.’”

As we begin the song, Chopper leads my daughter onto the dance floor, and they curl into one another. The love between them fills the room and I wish Mae was here to witness this moment. Still, I fall inside the song and let the music wash over me, a baptism of sorts to be on this small stage with these guys again. Maybe the sensation is more rising up from the ashes, as I’ve felt less than whole for so long, and this moment seems to be restoring the fire inside me.

We continue on, playing a song request from Julia for Chopper. Tommy still has a growly tone when he sings but admits he can’t hit the high notes he once did. His rendition of “Patience” is more Chris Cornell than Axel Rose. I’m not certain I understand the depth of this song in connection to the newlyweds, but Julia and Chopper began dating shortly after Rochelle’s death, and Julia has hinted that Chopper has the patience and willpower of a saint.

Eventually, we play “Wait for Me,” our signature single as Colt45 and I desperately want Mae to hear the words. The ones she wrote on the edge of a Cadillac in Amarillo, Texas.

As we fade off on that one, we nod at one another with sheepish smiles. It's been a long time.

"We have one more song to sing, although we didn't practice it. We're hoping this guy still has his memory of it," Tommy teases as he points at me. "He should. He wrote it. This is 'Sand'."

My eyes leap to Tommy and then out at the crowd where my daughter's mouth falls open. I scan the guests once more wishing for Mae to appear so I can sing this song for her. Instead, I sing it for myself, closing my eyes and visualizing the notes.

I'm an hourglass and you're the sand,

but I won't let you slip away.

Fragile but strong, this can't be wrong.

I'll hold you close.

I won't let you slip away.

As we finish the sultry sound with Tommy's voice doing it justice just like he did nearly thirty years ago, I immediately know what I need to say to Mae. I need her to know I'm in love with her.

I hit the final key and stand. We take goofy bows as the guests applaud for us, and then I hop from the stage. We'll be taking a little break and then Gage Everly promised to sing a song he wrote just for Julia and Chopper as their wedding gift.

"Dad, that was incredible," Julia says, rushing to me once I'm on the dance floor. "You never mentioned writing a song, only being part of the band."

I softly smile at her, reaching out for her face. "Wasn't worth mentioning," I say brushing off the accomplishment, although it was our *second* famous hit. Back when hitting charts and ranking were important to us. Then finances and fame got in the way, and Tommy wanted more. He deserved more, as did the rest of them, and they joined with Kit and skyrocketed to the top, earning money and accolades.

“We have our dance coming up,” Julia reminds me, teasing me, as I’d struggled to pick a song for our father-daughter moment.

“I won’t miss it, Jellybean,” I assure her. “I just need to find Mae.”

Julia smiles. “I really like her, Dad. She’s good for you.” My daughter’s approval gives me the extra boost I need to tell Mae how I feel tonight. I don’t want one more day to pass without her knowing I love her.

“I’m going to look for Mae but save that dance for me.” I lean forward and kiss Julia’s cheek then head for the barn entrance.

As I near the exit, I find Jude lingering. “Hey, have you seen Mae?” I ask him.

Despite Brut’s telling me Mae went to our room, I’m unsettled by her disappearance. She missed our little concert.

Jude grips my arm to stop me from continuing forward toward the inn. “I sent her away.”

“You mean you sent her to the room.” My brows pinch, puzzled by the edge in Jude’s tone.

“I mean, I told her to get lost,” Jude clarifies. “I told her to leave.”

“You what?” My body tenses as I face my son. A man who is a mirror image of me and my own father—*our* father. His attitude suggests he’s even more like the old man than I’ve considered.

“You don’t need that kind of woman, Dad.”

“And just *what kind of woman* do you think Mae is?” I snap, not really concerned about my son’s opinion but curious all the same. I’m certain he hurt Mae’s feelings somehow.

“Someone after your money, after the attention, after the fame.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” Jude grew up in his mother’s limelight like Julia. A puppet in her performance as perfect mother and ideal wife. He bought into her act as she spoiled him, but Julia was her favorite. Julia didn’t conform, which drove Rochelle to desire more connection with our daughter.

As for Mae, I don’t believe my Prius-driving, stop-at-kitschy-locations, experience-the-road, and save-the-bird lover is after anything other than...my heart?

“Mach told me how you paid her to drive you here.”

“I—” I did do that. But she could take all my money as far as I’m concerned. The only commodity I want is her heart in return for mine.

“And now she’s gone, as she should be. She took your money and ran.”

I don’t believe him. That can’t be true. “You don’t know what you’re saying.” Mae would never do that. She hasn’t been paid yet and she wouldn’t leave me behind. She wouldn’t leave me *again*.

I reach for the harmonica in my pants’ pocket. She offered her gift to me, through Brut, as silent support. That was my Mae. Considerate. Loving. Dedicated.

“You don’t need that kind of trash.”

“You watch your fucking mouth.” With fists clenched, I step up to my son. I’ve never touched my child in a physical manner but I’m on the verge of punching Jude, who’s an adult with a sour attitude.

“You don’t need someone like her.”

“You have no idea what I need, kid,” I mock.

Jude is jaded. He lost out on his inheritance. He’s scrambling with a department store under an antiquated name. He’s resentful of the firm I built with Mach instead of returning to Ashford’s, and he’s pissed at his paternity without

realizing it never mattered. It shouldn't matter. I *am* his dad, although not his father.

“You'll throw everything away just like you did with Ashford's,” he warns me as if he's so wise. “She won't be good for you.”

There's so much to tackle here. “Are we having this argument again? Ashford's was never going to be mine. It's yours now. You do with it what you will. As for Mae, who are you to decide whether she's good for me or not? It's not your call. It's my choice, and I choose Mae. She's better than anything I've experienced. And I'm not throwing anything away.”

“You're willing to sacrifice everything for some car driver you paid to bring you across the country?”

Sacrifice? I glance back at the guys huddled near the stage. Julia and Chopper are still standing with their arms around one another on the dance floor. My attention returns to Jude, and my gaze roams up his body. The one I didn't create but that shares so much of my DNA.

“I know all about sacrifice, Jude. I've done it multiple times, but one time in particular stands out to me.” I narrow my eyes at him. “And it was love.” I pointedly stare at him, long and hard. I'm not certain my son will ever comprehend the depth of what I gave up for him, what I did for him, and that's on him now. He's an adult. I won't coddle him. I won't cave for him.

I'm also not about to lay some convoluted blame on him for decisions I made, even if I felt at the time, they weren't my choices. Maybe Jude will understand one day when he's a parent, if he ever gets to that point in his life. He'd have to be open to love and accept the meaning of family—love *and* sacrifice. I'm not certain he'll ever get there.

As for Mae, I'm not giving up anything. Mae is love and I'll be going after her.

+ + +

Before I make it out the door, a call for the father-daughter dance rings out, and I return to the dance floor to take my daughter in my arms. Gage Everly sings a slow country song about wishes for my child and the happiness I hope she finds in life.

“I’m so happy you’re here, Daddy. Thank you for everything.”

“Anything for you, baby girl,” I tell her, squeezing her hand in mine. “I wish your mom was here.” It isn’t a lie. Julia should have had her mother present, although the influence of Lily and company has been everything I could hope for in strong, kind women to befriend my daughter. Lily’s touch is everywhere in the details, and so is that of Ester Banks, an older co-worker at Because Cupcakes. They both took Julia under their wings in the industry and in life, and I’m grateful to them.

“It’s okay, Dad. You don’t have to miss her.”

I still, shocked at the statement. “Why would you say such a thing?”

Julia shrugs in my arms, reminding me of Mae. “I know things. I just want you to be happy. I don’t think I can recall you smiling as much as I’ve seen you smile with Mae. It’s a reason I wanted to reunite you with the band.”

I stare at my daughter.

“Mom loved you. She did, despite what she did.” A heavy pause falls between us, and I’m reminded of what Mae suggested. Julia might have known of her mother’s affair. “But she always said a piece of you was missing. A piece she couldn’t fill and kept you separate from her.”

“Jellybean—”

“Let me finish, please.” We both wait a beat, and she continues. “Maybe being with your old friends will bring the

music back to you. Maybe that's the piece you held back. You never played the piano in the house. You'd stare at it like it would hurt you to touch it, but I think that look was really longing. You'd given up so much for us. For Jude. For Mom. Even me."

"I didn't give anything up," I defend, swallowing around the thickness in my throat.

"You walked away from them,"—she nods in the direction of my former band members—"and the timing adds up to Jude's birth. I'm so sorry you didn't go back. Whatever happened, I'm sorry you didn't return to your dream."

I'm reminded of what Mae said. It took a ray of sunshine and a cross-country trip to learn that dreams don't change, but sometimes the paths do. We're led down one road but it's not the road we're meant to finish our journey on.

"I've been fortunate to have other dreams instead," I say, staring down at my little girl who is now a beautiful woman.

"I want you to have all the happiness in the world like I have with Chopper."

"I do, too, Jellybean." And I will, once I find Mae.

When the dance ends, I press another kiss to Julia's cheek. "I love you, baby girl." I cup her face and rub my nose against hers as I did when she was just a child and then I step back, accepting that she's a woman, with a husband. One day she'll have a child of her own, and she'll understand all the more how the roadmap changes and detours happen, and sometimes, the path never circles back.

+ + +

I finally get a chance to escape and check on Mae once Chopper dances with Lily during the mother-son dance. The dance is a token of his love for his stepmother, who has only been his stepmother for a few years. He had a friendship with

Lily prior to Brut finding her again and the story is quite the tale.

A hand catches my sleeve as I'm attempting to step away again. "Hey, I need to tell you something." Brut stills me.

"Brut, I really need to check on Mae." Frustration sets in as it's been more than half an hour since she disappeared.

"That's what this is about."

Instantly the hackles on my neck rise. "What about her?"

"She left."

"As in went to our room?" I clarify, tipping my head and lowering my voice with a calm I don't feel.

"No, she left. Her son had an accident, and she went home."

"What happened to him? Will he be okay?" Concern for her child races through my head.

"She didn't have all the details, just that it was bad and he's at the hospital. She went to the airport. I got a text from her that she found a late-night flight. She'll be boarding soon."

She went to the airport? "Why the fuck didn't you tell me earlier?" Mae needs me. She's been here for me, and now she needs me, right?

"Because she knew tonight was important. Julia needed you to sing with the guys. Maybe you needed it too." He pauses and arches a brow. "The harmonica?"

It's a question I can't answer now. "I need to get to Mae."

"She's gone. On an airplane." Brut gives me a sympathetic look. They all know I rode across the country because I have a fear of flying. The guys even remember how I freaked out after my parents died and we needed to catch a flight to make a gig. I practically needed to be tranquilized to get on that plane. I drank so much I'm surprised the airline let me board, but back then security wasn't half as strict as it is now.

“What about Louie?” That damn Prius. My chest aches with fond memories of that car.

“She wants me to sell it.”

“What?!” I bellow. “Why you?” But I quickly remember Brut owns a classic car repair shop. “Why sell it?”

“She said she might need the money for her son.”

I’m still puzzled why Mae didn’t just come and tell me she was leaving.

“She left the keys at the front desk for me, and her plane takes off any second,” Brut adds.

I’m caught between anxiety for Mae’s child and my own emotions. My heart beats in sympathy for Mae and I hope her boy is okay, *but she actually left*. There’s no reverse here, no U-turn. She’s really gone this time. I still can’t wrap my head around her leaving without a word to me.

Did she believe whatever Jude said to her? I’m not buying it. Mae is stronger than spiteful words from an arrogant man. Hell, I’m proof of her strength. She handled me across two-thousand miles and seven days.

Then again, a simple goodbye wouldn’t have been enough. There are so many more words to be said between us.

THE NEXT DAY

Playlist: “Scars” – James Bay

[Mae]

“Wyatt, stop fidgeting,” I warn my son as he sits on the hospital bed, his leg lifted in traction.

While Wyatt’s broken leg is certainly upsetting, it wasn’t quite life threatening like Owen led me to believe. Unfortunately, I had not been able to reach Pam while I raced to the airport. She had extensive medical training from her previous work as an EMT, and a simple phone call with her would have explained his condition. She had been with Wyatt when he was taken by ambulance to the hospital. In a second attempt to reach Pam, she’d been in the surgical unit when I called.

I hadn’t bothered to reach out to Adam.

It wasn’t until after I boarded the plane that a text came through with minimal details. We use wooden pallets on cinder blocks to hold up the plants, like bookshelves. Wyatt went to lift the corner of one pallet where the cinder blocks were precariously leaning due to excessive rain. His foot slipped in the loose gravel under the pallet. The cinder blocks tumbled over, and he lost his grip. He was nearly in the splits when the pallet came down on his upper thigh. The pressure of pounds of plants, along with the angle of the fallen pallet, chopped at his bone. I wouldn’t have expected Wyatt to be so brittle, but an accident is an accident and a break a break.

“We need to get you out of this bed and back on the ice. You’re missing valuable training time,” my son’s father says from the other side of Wyatt’s hospital bed.

The insensitivity of my ex-husband should not astonish me, but it does. I shake my head at him.

“What?” he drones. “I’m just saying—”

“Adam, stop talking.”

He shakes his head at me.

“Where were you?” I ask.

“I was out.” As if that explains his absence. It’s late Sunday and he’s finally shown up.

I’ve been at the hospital for hours. I made an overnight flight to Chicago and caught a second flight to my small-town airport in the morning. Jacob Vincentia, Pam’s husband, was kind enough to meet me at Cherry Capitol in Traverse City and drive me to the hospital. I haven’t slept. I’m still wearing the dress from the wedding although I dug flip-flops out of my suitcase to replace the wedges I’d had on.

I’d give anything to have Tucker here with me. When I arrived at the local airport this morning, I sent him a text. With the time difference, I expected he’d still be sleeping. My hope was he had an amazing night with his old friends and his daughter’s new family. He needed to reconnect with those people. I also hoped he’d let me explain myself and then want to reconnect with me. The reminder that I’ve left him once more is a struggle. But he needed to stay behind for his daughter. I needed to be here for my son.

“You should have been here,” I say.

“Oh yeah, and where were you?” His gaze roams my dress.

I don’t want to fight with Adam, but his explanation isn’t good enough. I left my boys to be with their dad for two weeks. Two weeks out of fifty-two, and this is what happens.

“I’m not doing this with you,” I mutter, turning back to our son, hating that he’s a witness to another fight between his parents. He looks like hell although the pain is subdued by meds. He has a long recovery ahead of him and hockey may not be in his future. In a snap, his dreams might be shattered, and I’m reminded of Tucker again. How he had plans and hopes, and his path was cut short. We can never predict where we will go. We can’t assume the final destination exists. We can only make the best of every trip.

Briefly, I wonder if that’s what Tucker did with me. I can’t seem to shake his son’s words. Does Tucker think he was a means to an end? Does he believe that he paid for a service? What about the *extra* between us? Our connection felt so real. I want to refuse negative thoughts of him taking advantage of me, but standing across from my ex-husband, old doubts return. I hate that Adam has that power over me.

“You look different.” My ex-husband’s eyes shift to me once more.

“I am different,” I say, defensively. Dammit, Adam should have no power over me. That was the point of my spirit trip. To find myself. To restore myself. To rev my engine. I almost chuckle at the notion. Tucker definitely started the ignition and accelerated all my sexual energy. He took me on the best ride of my life.

“What’s different?” Adam asks, eyeing me as if he can visibly see on the outside the changes that have occurred within.

“*I’m* different,” I say again.

I can’t go back to being complacent about Adam’s lack as a father or the fact he had two affairs and we ended in divorce. I also can’t define myself by Adam’s actions. I’ve learned better. I’ve had better, and it was in Tucker Ashford. *Ashe*. He made me feel alive. He also made me feel special. And even if it was a lie—and I haven’t accepted that it was—it was real to me. *Our* road trip changed everything.

“You said that,” Adam comments. He tips up his chin, eyes still leering at me. “We should grab a drink sometime.”

He can't be serious. I stare back at my ex-husband. I don't need to explain myself to him. I couldn't, even as I accept I shouldn't. He'd never understand this feeling inside me. This new energy burning within. Despite Adam, I've learned I can love again. I love Tucker and I desperately want to tell him.

“Never gonna happen, Adam. Save that line for someone else.”

“When can I go home?” Wyatt groans on the bed between Adam and me.

“Soon, baby,” I say swiping at his hair. He needs a shower, but he'll only be allowed baths for a bit. He's a big kid and I could use Adam's help maneuvering my son, but like everything else surrounding my ex-husband, I'll need to fend for myself. I can do this. I'll figure it out as I always do.

“You're coddling him,” Adams says.

“I'm comforting him, Adam. There's a difference.”

“Stop fighting,” Wyatt groans and I'm chagrined by my child. We shouldn't be literally arguing over him like this. Our son needs either a united front between his parents or two separate camps under a cease fire, not Adam and I at war.

“Where's the Prius?” Adam suddenly asks.

“I sold it.”

“You what?” His voice cracks as it rises.

“Yay Mom,” Wyatt mutters in his drugged-up state.

“You'll give me the money back,” Adam demands.

“I'm giving the money to Wyatt.” Louie was his car, and he wanted a truck. He can buy what he wants with the funds. While I told Brut I might need the cash for medical expenses, I don't. As for the money from Tucker, Jane still has it. I'm not

accepting payment for the pleasure I took in my time with Tucker.

“You can’t sell it without my consent.”

“Wyatt’s an adult and he owns the car. I can do it with his.”

“I approve,” Wyatt murmurs, a dopey grin on his face. I smile down at him, and he winks at me. “Hey Dad?”

“Yeah, son?”

“Can you get out? You’re killing my buzz.”

I stifle a laugh while Wyatt gives his father a goofy grin. However, something in his expression must tell his father he’s serious. He wants him to leave.

“I’ll visit when your mother isn’t here,” Adam huffs and pats Wyatt’s good leg.

“Or don’t,” Wyatt mutters as Adam leaves. I’m shocked by Wyatt’s behavior toward his father.

“Wow, you must really be high to kick out Dad,” I tease.

“He’s a buzzkill and he’s wrong.” Wyatt rolls his head on the pillow. “You look good, Mom. I like the dress and I’m sorry I ruined your trip.”

I smile at the compliment. “You didn’t ruin anything, honey. You know I’ll always be here for you.”

“You always are, which is why Owen and I wanted you to take the trip. You deserved it.”

“I did,” I admit. I deserved the time off, but now I’m back. Devoted mother once more.

“Did you have fun?” he asks, his lids lowering, his grin drooping.

“It was the best trip I’ve ever had,” I tell him.

“Yeah?” He gushes. “So is this one.”

He giggles and I get it. But I'd argue love is a much better high than the one he's on.

+ + +

When I don't hear from Tucker for three full days, I try not to panic. I hold off on calling Jane to see if Tucker returned to Chicago. He'd asked me to drive him, and I wasn't there to do it. Brut sold Louie and sent me the money electronically. I was a little surprised how fast the sale happened, but he told me he had an eager buyer.

Who wouldn't love Louie? I was heartsick at the loss of him for the memories the car held but I'd never be able to enter that car again because of those memories. Louie wouldn't be the same without Tucker.

Late on Tuesday, I'm at Mae's Flowers trying to catch up on some things. Although my vacation was supposed to be two full weeks on the road, I'm home early and it seems as if that's a blessing. Summer really isn't the time for me to take off.

"There's a package for you," Pam hollers at me as I cross the gift shop and head for the stairs leading to our office. *We have a corner office*, we joke, which includes two desks at ninety-degree angles, each looking out a window over the garden yard. When I enter the small space, a box sits on my desk with a cup of coffee next to it.

"That's strange," I say to no one. I didn't have a to-go cup of coffee earlier. When I reach for the cup to move it aside, I notice that it's hot and the heat-protecting slip around it reads, Sunshine, in marker print. My heart races at the name and I set the cup aside. Next, I open the box, which isn't sealed or even labeled with a mailing address.

Inside the cardboard, I find a note in crisp handwriting. *A road trip of moments.*

Underneath the note is a miniature red-rocking chair, like an ornament. Missouri is written on a tag attached to it. Next is a magnet of a bridge. Kansas is imprinted under the rainbow arch. A bottle of wine is also inside the box from the winery in Oklahoma. A medallion on a short string wraps around the neck. It's St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. Texas is tagged on the medal.

A small jewelry box contains the turquoise earrings to match the silver cuff I bought, and I smile as I touch the bracelet on my wrist. Turns out the color matches the dress I wore to the wedding. The earrings would have been a nice accessory.

A flat package at the bottom is a model kit of wood pieces to build a replica of the helicopter we took over the Grand Canyon.

A small hourglass with a grain of sand is next, stamped with California on the bottom of it. A note is attached.

My heart is an hourglass; yours is the sand. I will not let you slip away from me again. Not this time.

My vision blurs. The last item in the box is a picture of me standing before that hotdog-holding Muffler Man. The image where I assumed Tucker must have played with the filter because I'm smiling, and my eyes look bright. Flipping over the printed picture, an inscription is on the back.

Illinois – but I'd like to be your gift from that state.

On that, I collapse to my desk chair and cover my face, crying into my hands.

“Don't cry, sunshine.” The strong masculine voice has me spinning in my seat. I blink through tear-filled eyes and try to focus on the man leaning against the open door.

“Tucker,” I whisper.

“Hey, Mae. You forgot something in California.” He pats his chest.

I weakly chuckle but tears still fall. “You didn’t respond to my text.” My voice cracks. I thought maybe he didn’t want to hear my explanation after all, about my son, about the money.

“Would you believe I lost my phone somewhere at the winery?”

“Actually, I would.” I laugh a little harder since he has a habit of leaving it behind, especially if his thoughts are elsewhere.

Tucker turns his head, chewing at his lip a second. His arms are crossed and he’s casually leaning against the door jamb.

“I’m so sorry I left like that. I didn’t know what else to do. Owen called and said Wyatt was in an accident. I couldn’t get ahold of Pam, and I didn’t want to ruin your moment with Julia.” The words tumble out in a hiccupping mess. My eyes lift, locking on his as I remember what his son said to me. *A chauffeur*. “And I didn’t take the money.”

“I wouldn’t have held it against you if you had. But Jane told me you refused to accept it.”

“I didn’t want it. It didn’t feel right after—”

“After what?” Those silvery eyes dance as he pushes away from the door jamb and straightens, staring back at me.

“After I fell in love with you.”

Tucker smiles, slow and crooked, as he steps into my office. “I’m sorry for what my son said to you. He had no right —”

“He was only protecting you.”

“Well, I don’t need protection.” His eyebrows lift and the twelve-year-old inside me giggles. “You know what I mean,” he teases.

“I do,” I say. “But I don’t want you to ever think I did what we did for some ulterior motive. I—”

“Mae,” he stops me, dropping to a squat before me where I remain seated. “I love you, too.”

Another tear trickles down my face, relief washing over me.

“Does that make you sad?”

I shake my head, unable to find the words to express my happiness at first. Then another deluge of hiccupping statements fumbles from my mouth. “I’ve just missed you so much and I was scared you misunderstood why I left. Then I was afraid you won’t want to see me again. That the trip was just over, and I hadn’t had the chance to tell you what I wanted to say.”

“And what did you want to say to me, sunshine?” His voice lowers as his thumbs swipe the tears on my cheek.

“I wanted to thank you. Thank you for letting me drive you. Or you riding with me. Or however you want to look at sharing this trip. I found so many parts of me I didn’t even know were missing and you helped me discover them. You are the only souvenir I want from this journey.”

“Sunshine,” he whispers, leaning forward to land on his knees and brushing at my face with both hands. “It was an honor to travel with you. You helped *me*.”

“I’m sorry again I left so abruptly,” I mutter.

“No apology needed. I understand why you did it, but Mae, you can’t leave me like that again.” He cups my face, forcing me to look directly at him. “You took my heart when you left.”

He pauses while my heart hammers. Then he continues. “*We* aren’t leaving us behind. This is our time. Mine and yours. And we’re living it together, sunshine. We’re loving it together because I love you. I want to be with you. Today, tomorrow, forever. The future is our highway, Mae. You are the road I want to travel. Take the ride with me.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Ashford.” I laugh swiping at my liquid-filled eyes. Slowly, deliberately, I smile, and his crooked grin matches mine. He pulls something from his back pocket and holds it up between us.

“It’s a sign.” He twirls a blackbird feather between his fingers. “A sign to set the past free and only look toward the future.”

I nod, agreeing with him.

“You know what else is a sign? You have a flatbed Ford out there, Mae. Do you know what that means?”

I shake my head this time.

“I’m going to marry you someday.” I recall him saying such a thing on the corner in Winslow. Assuming he was only teasing me, I didn’t have the heart to admit then I did own a flatbed truck.

“But first, I’d like to take you on a date. I found fried chicken. How about a picnic?”

I burst out in both laughter and another sob. “Think it’s okay to eat a fried bird?” I don’t wait for his answer, cupping his face in my hands, I bring him to me, mashing our lips together. Through the salty liquid on my lips and his eager kiss, my heart calms and the sobs subside.

When we pull apart, resting our foreheads together, Tucker speaks. “How about that picnic? I have Louie outside.”

“What?” I press back from him.

“Yeah, this annoyingly beautiful woman left him in California. I mean, who could forget a bright blue Prius sedan? I had to drive him all by myself and it took me fucking forever without my navigator.” Tucker slowly stands, holding out at hand for me. “She left Gemma behind, too.”

My geranium. I couldn’t bring a live plant on the plane. “I left her to brighten your day. And so maybe you wouldn’t forget me.”

“Mae.” He sighs when I stand before him. His arms circle around my back, tugging me to him. “Only *you* brighten my day, sunshine. And I’d buy you a whole field of geraniums, but I see you already own quite a few. How about a tour of Mae’s Flowers? Then that chicken dinner and a tour of your bedroom?”

I like his way of thinking, but... “I have two teenage boys at home.”

“Then it’s time for me to meet them,” he says. “I noticed a local motel. I could book a room.”

“Oh, you don’t want to stay in a motel...” My voice drifts as I see he’s teasing me once more. He doesn’t like motels. He’s a resort kind of man.

“You’re right. I don’t want a motel. I want to be with you, but I respect that your boys are home.”

“I can still make room for you,” I say.

“That’s exactly what I want to hear.” He tugs me to him, slipping his hand around my neck and kissing me once more.

“Let’s skip the tour of the garden center. I know the perfect spot for that picnic dinner. We can even take the flatbed,” I offer.

“I have a blanket in the car,” he suggests. The same blanket we spread on the hood in Arizona and I’m hoping it will get more use than just for picnicking. We both have the same thought and the corner of his mouth tips up as it does when he’s grinning at me. Then we kiss again as reunited lovers do because lovers we are.

Epilogue

3 MONTHS LATER

Playlist: “Bless the Broken Road” – Rascal Flats

[Mae]

Tucker stayed with me for a week after coming all the way to Michigan. He'd been the one to purchase Louie, and I tried to return the money. Instead, Tucker traded in the car and got Wyatt a used truck. I paid off the difference with some of the money from the original sale. Of course, Tucker met my boys and helped out quite a bit with Wyatt in that first week adjusting to home and bedrest. His bigger body was too much for me to maneuver and Tucker took the lead, which was more than I ever expected. As he stepped up, I saw the man who made the decision to leave a band and dedicate his life to a family instead.

We talked a lot about Rochelle and Adam, and all the things we didn't want to happen to us in this new relationship. For now, we agreed to let the future take the wheel and see where the journey would lead.

We both owned businesses, but Tucker admitted his job was easier to work remotely from. Eventually, he spent more of his time at my place. He used Garrett, my brother, and his relationship with Dolores as his guide.

“Love shouldn't feel like a sacrifice, Mae. I'm not giving anything up except my heart if I don't stay with you.”

When he returned to Chicago for business, I'd often take the days off to go with him.

We loved the mini-road trips, sometimes taking out time to explore US-31, the coastal drive down the west side of the state of Michigan. The shorter drives were always a reminder of that first trip. Where an annoying, unwanted passenger in Louie became the thing I needed most to heal my soul and make whole my heart. I'm not one of those women who will say a man did this for me. The *experience* did it. The adventure of traveling alongside Tucker, through some sticky situations and some simply fun ones, restored me. Sharing our time, our history and our hurts mended both of us, renewing our spirits and perhaps our dreams. Especially the one that includes a future of love as an endless highway.

By autumn, both my boys went to college, although Wyatt no longer had hockey and was considering quitting school all together. I didn't like the sound of that, and once again, it was Tucker who spoke to him about dreams shifting and paths changing. Wyatt didn't like that his hockey future was over, but he was sticking with college in the end.

With the boys gone, Tucker and I didn't need to be sneaking around the house, and we shared my room every night together. He also bought a piano and a guitar, and evenings were a serenade of new songs.

"I went on a road trip with this awful woman," he sings one night. "And she had the most irritating playlist." His fingers ripple down the keys of the piano. "She gave me a harmonica. Is there anything that rhymes with harmonica?"

He makes a face that strains his neck and I laugh.

"She must have really loved you," I joke back, sitting beside him on the piano bench. "Giving you a harmonica and all."

"Oh, she gave me her all." His fingers dance over ebony and ivory once more. "She gave me her luscious body. Her beautiful heart. And her loving soul. And I fucking love her as well." He winks as he looks over at me.

"Yeah, she loves you, too."

He abruptly stops and shifts on the piano bench. “Come show me how much.”

I slip over his lap as he pushes the wooden seat away from the instrument. Our mouths come together, and we kiss, long and sweet, like a new melody. We are a playlist. One that includes every love song. We’ll be using it as the soundtrack of this continual road trip called life.

Epilogue 2

[Jane]

Playlist: “Road Less Traveled” – Lauren Alaina

“Mr. Wright, you have a delivery,” I announce through my boss’s open office door. He hates it when I call him Mr. Wright. I hate how ridiculously handsome he is.

With artfully sculptured hair in a perfect palette of chrome and ink, the same combination lines his firm jaw. His mouth wears a permanent smirk that could either tease you into submission or cut you to the quick. Despite his typical attire of business suits or starched dress shirts and crisp ties, there’s an occasional hint of color on the skin of his hidden arms. The same arms which often bulge underneath the stiffness of his professional wear.

And I hate how attracted I am to him.

“Have Rebecca sign for it.” Mr. Wright—*Machlan* Wright—mentions his assistant without even glancing up at me. He never looks directly at me, and I suppose it’s for the best. If he did, my tongue might freeze under the glare of those earthy-brown eyes. Another part of me never ices over when he looks in my general direction, though. That area is all heat and pulsing thumps of unrequited desire for a man I equally loath and lust.

“She’s at lunch,” I remind him.

He peers at his watch. Flicking out his arm, he bends his elbow just right to turn his wrist and sexily gaze at the oversized silver band like a practiced male model. He works

excessively hard, and it isn't surprising he doesn't realize it's lunch time for the rest of Chicago.

“Just have it brought up.”

This is not my responsibility. I'm one of the top account executives at Impact, a media marketing company, and I've been working my ass off under this man for eight years in hopes of becoming a full partner one day.

However, I seem to never say no to my infuriating boss.

“Sure,” I mutter, although I'm anything but happy. From the moment Machlan and his partner, Tucker Ashford, hired me, I set out to prove my worth. Marketing is not a stagnant field, especially with the boom of social media. For a woman with no life outside of work, I've easily adapted to the changes over the past two decades. At the ripe age of forty-five, I've been in the business for a long time. I would have eventually retired from my previous employer if it hadn't been for a huge snafu that I swear will never happen again.

My pride and my heart cannot take another Ripley Edgar incident.

When I call down to reception on the ground floor of our Michigan Avenue building, the security man Pete, informs me the item is too large for the elevator.

“Is it a freaking elephant?” I laugh into the phone. Pete and I have good rapport. That tends to happen when you're the first one in the building or one of the last to leave at night.

“Nope, but close. Mr. Wright needs to come down to sign for it.”

Curiosity has the best of me and knowing Mach—as the rest of the office calls him—won't take a break long enough to accept his own package, I decide to ride down the thirty-four floors to see for myself what's too big for an elevator.

Mach, pronounced like the industrial truck with a hard *k*, fits the man who is a little smug and a lot tough.

“Hey Pete.” I give a little wave as my heels click against the pristine white tiles in the all-glass lobby. I love this building. I love this city. Chicago is a heartbeat and a far cry from the small town where I was raised in southern Missouri.

“Hey, beautiful.” The portly, older man smiles at me while tipping his head toward the revolving door. “His *Mach-esty*’s item is out there.”

I grin at the nickname I often use to describe my boss—along with His Royal Pain in my Hiney-ness; and sometimes just He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named, otherwise known as *Volde-Mach*.

Over the years, there’s been all kinds of special deliveries for Mach. Bottles of alcohol with seductive messages. Once, a dozen balloons intended to be popped, revealing sexual suggestions inside. My favorite was the woman dressed like an elf who turned out to be a stripper. She already had carnal knowledge of Mach from a Christmas event he hardly remembered attending.

I strongly dislike how easily women flock to him, making me one of his many sheep. *Darn his charisma*. Then again, giving myself away to the shepherd is never going to happen again. I’d been the route of a lost lamb found and then tossed aside by a man who really could have had a bigger staff.

I learned my lesson. Beware of the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Keep my lust to myself.

My tumultuously attraction to Mach is more volatile than puppy-love. I waver between deep displeasure with my boss’s work ethic, which ironically matches mine, making me work too hard, too often without appreciation, and an overabundance of sexual attraction including fantasies of him taking me on his desk, showing me his gratitude for my tenacity. Most days, I want him to work me harder in ways that have nothing to do with client needs and market assessments.

Glancing through the immaculately clean glass, I don't see a package the size of an elevator lift. "What am I missing, Pete?" I crane my neck.

"That." Pete points and my gaze lands on something one would rarely see on the busy city streets of a major metropolis.

"That?" The item certainly is too large for an elevator. Not that it should be brought up to our offices. *That* belongs on the road but not traffic-packed pavement. *That* screams dirt, dust, and sweat; sunshine filtering through trees on back roads; and feet on a front dash with windows rolled down.

Staring at the delivery for Mach, I can't help but consider the contrast between it and the man upstairs, sitting behind a glass-surface desk in a corner office overlooking Lake Michigan. Between the black leather couch in his space and the sharp business suits he wears not one speck of his persona coordinates with the item atop a flatbed Ford on the avenue waiting for his signature.

"That," Pete confirms with a large grin.

And I laugh.

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Want more Tucker and Mae? Click here for a [BONUS SCENE](#)
of when they return to New Mexico.

Up next in Road Trips & Romance: [Merging Wright](#)

– Jane and Mach's story.

You can meet the whole gang of [sexy silver foxes](#), especially Chopper's father, Brut Paige in his story [Restored Dreams](#).

Or read about Mae's older brother, Garrett Fox and his love, Dolores in [Wine & Dine](#).

Mae's best friend Pam Vincentia has a story (where you first meet Mae) in [Fight From The Heart](#).

I hope you've enjoyed each of these series starters.
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Small mountain town, silver foxes. Brothers seeking love over 40.

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Silver Mayor

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When sexy silver foxes meet the feisty vixens of their dreams.

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Tales of the Winters sisters set in Green Valley.

Love in Due Time

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About the Author

www.lbdunbar.com

L.B. Dunbar loves sexy silver foxes, second chances, and small towns. If you enjoy older characters in your romance reads, including a hero with a little silver in his scruff and a heroine rediscovering her worth, then welcome to romance for those over 40. L.B. Dunbar's signature works include women and men in their prime taking another turn at love and happily ever after. She's a *USA TODAY* Bestseller as well as #1 Bestseller on Amazon in Later in Life Romance with her Sterling Falls, Lakeside Cottage, and Road Trips & Romance series. L.B. lives in Chicago with her own sexy silver fox.

To get all the scoop about the self-proclaimed queen of silver fox romance, join her on Facebook at Loving L.B. or receive her monthly newsletter, Love Notes.

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