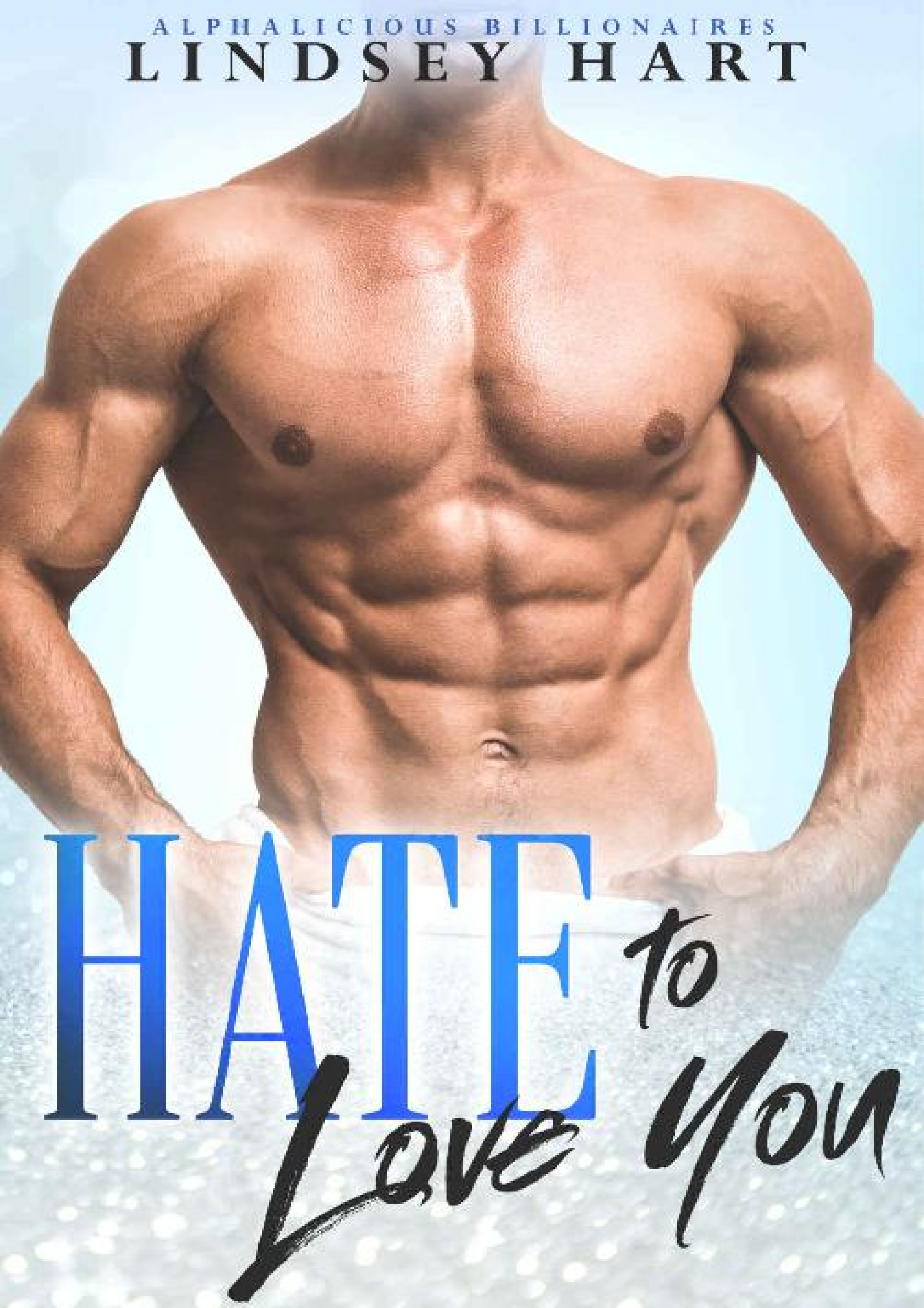


ALPHALICIOUS BILLIONAIRES
LINDSEY HART



HATE *to*
Love You

Hate To Love You

Alphalicious Billionaires



Lindsey Hart

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BOOK DESCRIPTION



It's gone.

The company my father took years to build.

He lost it all in a game of cards... To none other than Apollo
Easton.

My ex best friend turned billionaire tycoon.

But Apollo says he wants something else that has more value
than the company.

That there's something far more precious he desires.

And then came his audacious proposition: become his bride.

There's just a colossal hitch in his plans—I can't stand the
man.

PROLOGUE



Apollo

“My parents are getting a divorce.”

The thing about eleven-year-old girls, even Patience, who has been my best friend for as long as I can remember and is the least like anyone else I’ve ever met, is that they tend to exaggerate.

It’s why I don’t immediately take her seriously. It’s October, and the wind is screaming outside. What few leaves there are on this big sturdy tree that has housed our fort for the past five years shake and tremble and moan right along with it. Before she passed away a few years ago, on days like this, my mom used to say that it was going to be a long, brutal winter, and then she’d laugh and ask when are winters in northern Michigan not long and brutal?

God, I miss her.

“I don’t want to believe it,” Patience whispers as she flips over and puts her feet on the roof of the treehouse. We built it together a few years ago. I guess our dads helped out too. It’s not very well made since, of the four of us, I probably have the best construction skills, and they’re not great by any means.

“I thought they were in love.” It might not be the smoothest thing to say. My parents were so in love. They were always touching each other’s hands and kissing, even right in front of me. They were never shy about that. I know other people’s parents might not be like that, and Patience’s parents definitely aren’t, but that doesn’t mean they don’t love each other.

“I thought so too.” She taps her bare feet on the roof boards. The plastic blow-up chair and the bean bag beast are off to our left and right, but we wanted to lie on our backs, looking up at the roof. With her toes, and by only a few inches, she misses the shingle nail sticking through the boards where it must have missed something. “They always said marriage was sacred.” She says that with the solemn understanding of an eleven-year-old.

She turns and looks at me with that same intense expression. I’ve always felt that Patience was born knowing the world in ways I just don’t. Maybe in ways that most people don’t, no matter how old they are. I feel like she’s always been like this. There isn’t one thing I don’t like about her. I know we might have only turned eleven a few months ago, but sometimes I dream about growing up and marrying her. I think it would be nice for her to be my wife and for me to be her

husband. We wouldn't have to do all the kissy stuff all the time, but we could help each other. We could give each other advice like we do now. I can't imagine my life without her. Since our dads were best friends before we were even born, I've never known a time without her in it.

“My dad says marriage is supposed to come before anything.”

A sudden, horrible fear bites through me and chills me the way the wind that's shredding through the gaps in the boards in here can't. If Patience's mom and dad get a divorce, what does that mean? Would she have to move away?

She bites at the corner of her thumbnail. “But in private, my mom calls my dad a prick.”

That's jarring. I've never heard her use bad language before. She might not have much patience, which she finds funny because she's named after that very trait, but she never says foul things. “Sometimes people get mad at each other.”

She grimaces, and I feel like a dolt for just not getting it. “I'm sorry, Pace.” My dad must not know anything about this because if he did, he would have told me, wouldn't he?

Our dads aren't just best friends and haven't just been best friends since they were kids. They run a business together. I thought there wasn't a single thing they didn't know about each other.

This sounds serious. It sounds like something that can't be fixed. I'm already thinking ahead, with more than just a trickle of selfish panic. I can barely breathe. I don't think Patience's dad would leave. He's got his job here with my dad. But her mom? If she leaves... "Are you...you're not going with her, are you?"

Patience shakes her head. She drops her hand away from her mouth and sighs such a heavy sigh that her whole body heaves with it. "I don't know what's going to happen. I just heard them fighting last night, and then I heard my mom say divorce. Over and over again. My dad doesn't want it. He kept saying no. They were downstairs. They didn't know I was awake up there, listening. Dedind is my home."

Yes, we really live in a town with a population of a few thousand that sounds exactly like dead-end. But it's not. It's Dee-dind, named for the guy who founded it a long time ago.

We're both facing each other now. I don't remember twisting to her, but I did, instinctually. She puts her hand on

my shoulder, and her touch does something to me that makes me feel like I'm dizzy, but all over my body. "I'm not going anywhere," she states stubbornly like she has a say in it. "I don't want to think of a part of the world without you in it. I don't want to exist in that world."

"You won't have to. We'll be together forever. I promise. I'll do anything it takes. I'll even marry you myself one day."

"Ewww." Her nose wrinkles, but she doesn't laugh. It's not a joke, and she knows that. "I don't want to marry you. Gross. We're best friends. You're like a brother to me."

"But I'm not your brother. Maybe one day we'll fall in love. We'll go from friends to more. That's how my parents fell in love. They were friends and then high school sweethearts. Then, they got married as soon as they were done with college."

Patience normally knows just what to say when I talk about my mom. She doesn't get weird about her not being here anymore like some people do. "I don't want you as a husband. You can't be a husband *and* a best friend." Patience might be wise, but maybe for once, she doesn't know what she's talking about.

"Yes, you can."

She pulls a sour lemon face. “I would never want to kiss you. I don’t want to kiss anyone. Kissing is nasty. And the other stuff sounds so...scary. I don’t want to do that, ever. Not with anyone.”

“People get married for other reasons. Sometimes they get married because they have to.”

“That’s never going to be me. I’m never going to get married for any reason. I don’t want to date either. I just want to be me. I’m making a resolution right here and now.”

“That’s silly. You can’t make promises as a kid for the rest of your life. What if you change your mind? Are you going to hold yourself to some funny standard just because you said something wild when you were young and didn’t understand what it truly even meant? I used to say I’d never go swimming because I hated the water. I was scared of it.”

She nods, but it’s clear that she thinks swimming isn’t the same thing as marriage. “And now you swim every day,” she says anyway.

“Yes.” I swim because my mom started me in it. She loved it herself, and her love for it was passed down to me. My dad says she’s up there watching me, and when I swim, I think about making her proud.

“She gave you the wrong name, you know. She should have named you Poseidon.”

“I guess she wanted one of those catch-all gods. You know Apollo was the god of pretty much anything and everything.”

“She always said you were the light of her life. That’s why she named you Apollo. Because she knew when you were born that you were the sun.”

We’ve both heard that so many times, and even though my mom isn’t around to say it anymore, my dad makes sure to tell me often so I’ll never forget.

I turn my eyes back up to the roof of the treehouse as though I can see the sky and the sun beyond—the very sun I’m named for. I want to change the subject. I know there’s no sun out there today, and knowing it makes me sad. I guess thinking about my mom actually makes me sad. Not all the time, but it does right now.

“If you don’t want to get married one day, that’s okay. I’m still going to promise you that no matter what, I’ll always be here. That I’ll always take care of you.”

Patience can be bossy when she wants to be, but right now, I think we’re both feeling tender about things, so she doesn’t

put on her know-it-all face. She just traces a pattern on the floorboards. “I can take care of myself. And who would want to be with anyone anyway? Marriages don’t last because men are always walking around the house farting non-stop.”

I giggle, and she cracks a smile. “What’s wrong with farts? They’re natural.”

“They’re gross.” She used to think they were hilarious.

“I don’t fart on you.”

“No, but you fart at me, and it’s the same thing.”

“Sometimes you just can’t hold it in. You really don’t want to be with someone just because they might fart? Girls fart too.”

“Then guys shouldn’t want to be with them either. People are gross. I don’t want someone gross knowing about my grossness.”

“I know about your grossness.”

She blushes and shoves at my shoulder, then rolls away, flipping onto her back again. This is the first time I’ve felt her pull away from me. The first time there have been secrets implied between us, and something going on with her that I don’t know about. I can imagine because I know what happens

to girls when they get older. They go through changes, and things start happening with their bodies. It's not wrong or gross, but maybe it's happening to Patience, and she doesn't want to tell me about it. Maybe it's happened already, and she went through it alone. It stings if that's true. Because we've always been so close. We've been like one person, and she didn't tell me. I get it, but it's like the bottom of the treehouse has collapsed, and I'm the only one who has fallen through. I'm down there on the ground, winded and bleeding and full of rubble, and Patience is up here, looking down at me, her face closed off and shuttered, far out of my reach, as though I'll never reach her again.

"I'm never getting married," she repeats. "It's a silly thing to do, and it doesn't mean anything anyway. That's the promise I'm making here and now. It's my vow."

"More like an anti-vow."

"Fine. It's my anti-vow, then. I'll never get married. Ever."

"Ever is a long time."

"Yes," she whispers solemnly, her lips pressing into a thin line, her eyes luminous and sparkling like it's night, and she has all the stars contained within her universe. "The longest of times."

“Well...” I grab her hand, and she doesn’t pull it away. Her fingers are cold. The wind is too strong today, and her sweater isn’t thick enough. “Your anti-vow is not changing my promise. I’m still going to be here for you no matter what happens. Always.”

CHAPTER 1



Patience

My parents named me after the virtue I least possess. But patience isn't something anyone is inherently good at. It's something that comes with time and hard life lessons. It's something we all have to learn and cultivate.

Except that, if I were trying to grow flowers in my garden—metaphorical patience flowers—it would be full of weeds. I don't like waiting and not knowing. I don't like just standing back and letting life happen. I like *doing*. I like acting and taking control. I'm the driver of my own destiny, not whatever forces are out there, trying to suck the life out of us.

Which is why I really hate the expression on my dad's face.

I hate that he came home in the middle of the night, or more like the early morning, with that same look. And that instead of falling into bed like he sometimes does, to toss and turn and maybe dream about all the wrongs and rights of his life, he sat down at the kitchen table. He hasn't moved. It's been hours.

I tried getting up this morning and setting a cup of coffee in front of him. But he hasn't touched it. He hasn't even blinked. He looks like he's turned to stone. He's wearing the expression

I hate. It's the one that says, *I fucked up, there's no fixing it, and everything is fucked, fucked, fucked*. Triple fucked is bad. Triple fucked truly is unfixable.

He sat at this very table and wore this very expression fourteen years ago when my mom left.

He looked like this fourteen years ago when the divorce was finalized and two days later when my grandma called to break the news that my mom had eloped with someone else and hadn't even bothered to tell us.

He looked like this eleven years ago when he sat me down and explained to me that Apollo was being sent away to Europe. Sent away weren't the words he used, though. That's what I turned it into in my head after the conversation. He went over to London because they have good schools. Prestigious colleges. Because he was going to be a swimmer there and be all famous and amazing and go to college on a full ride.

He looked like this nine years ago when he told me about the falling out he'd had with Apollo's dad and admitted to me that he was going out on his own and becoming not a friend but a rival and taking a few employees from the company with him. Key ones.

It's been at least eight and a half years since I last saw that expression on his face. Not since I was fifteen. All these years, we've been muddling through this life, trying to find our way. I know my dad isn't perfect, but he's my dad, and I love him. We still live in the same house. Dedind is still our home. It's been just the two of us since Apollo broke his promise and went to London to swim. My mom left, and she never came back into our lives. Apollo's dad, John, and my dad don't talk anymore. He doesn't have very many other close friends here.

I finally force myself to sit down at the table and take my dad's hand over the scarred top. It's been worn down and beaten up over the years. My dad breaking and parting ways with John was the worst thing he could ever have done. It's been years and years of struggle, hardship, and barely getting by. The company always came first. That stress has probably shaved twenty years off my dad's life. He went from being strong and youthful to a withered old man with a head of grey hair and a permanently stooped posture. He still believes in what he does, and every single day, I still feel that excitement. I stayed partly for my dad personally but partly for him professionally too.

I gather my courage. Not talking about this isn't going to make the problem go away. "What happened?" The words still sound as strangled as my heart feels.

"I had to," Dad responds in a weak whisper. His watery blue eyes look right through me like he can see the future, or maybe the past, when everything used to be happy. Back when he was one part of a united front. There never was room in Dedind for two tech companies. One was more than enough. It doesn't matter that John manufactures tech for cars, and my dad believed the same diagnostics could be retooled and used for medical purposes. "I had to, honey. You know twenty people work for us. I couldn't just hand it over. I couldn't surrender it to him after we all worked so hard."

"Yes, of course, I know. I've been working with you for nine years." I stroke Dad's hand, trying to hide my alarm. So many times over the years, I've had to be the adult. I've felt more like a parent than a child. In fact, I haven't been a kid in a very long time.

Not since my mom left.

And not since Apollo was sent away and never even tried to text me, write me, email me, or anything else.

Two of the people I trusted and loved most in the world betrayed me. My brain refuses to connect any dots to what Dad is saying now. I refuse to believe he could be the third.

“What happened?” I have to prod him again despite my growing sense of dread. Not knowing is not better than knowing. I can’t fix anything if I don’t know what the problem is. “Where were you last night?”

“At John’s house.”

“What?” I reel back, dropping Dad’s hand. “Why?” He was with the enemy? In the late hours of the night?

“Playing poker. I’ve been going for years.” Those washed-out eyes finally make their way up to my face. Dad is finally looking at me, not through me. “I’ve hidden it from you.”

“What? That? That you’ve been playing poker with a man you profess to hate?” A man who was once closer than a brother? That isn’t so bad. Really, on a scale of *holy shit* to *we’re completely fucked, and the world is over*, that really isn’t so bad.

But that expression of his refuses to break. It wasn’t the poker game. What do people do when they play poker? They bet. And what does my dad have to bet? Nothing. There is

zero extra in our lives right now. There's been zero extra for a long time. Everything we have, including our time, hearts, sweat, hopes, and any extra finances, has been poured into the company. We don't have anything except...this house.

“Oh my god!” My hand flies to my mouth, and I instinctively bite down on the side of my thumb. It's an old habit, seeking that thumb nail to bite. “You bet this house? Tell me you didn't lose the house.”

The house is literally all we have, and even that was remortgaged and put up as collateral when my dad bought the building the company is in now.

“I did, but he didn't want it.”

“The *company*. He's taking the company back.” I've never felt so sick in my life. Bile rushes up my throat, but I swallow it back. I'm not going to barf here in this kitchen, and I'm not going to freak out or break down in tears. What good will that do?

I can do more. I *have* to do more. If he's done something, I have to find a way to undo it. I have to find a way to save us all.

“No.”

The word shoots through me like a shard of ice. I've had nightmares about being impaled on icicles. Don't ask me why. This is like one of them coming true. Bam, icicle right through the midsection. The fact that it's summer doesn't register in my analogy. I still feel like I've been run through with an icy shard of death.

It's that word. And the way Dad says it. *No*. So ominous.

If he didn't lose the company or the house, then what did he have to bet?

"You." He can't look at me. I feel like I didn't hear him right. He's the icicle. That word is the icicle. That word is doom. Still, I shoot a finger up and point at myself. It doesn't matter that I'm still in disbelief.

"But...but..."

"I lost to him, and he won you. He'll make a good husband, sweetheart. He's a good man. He'll take care of you."

Holy fucking sweet thunderous tarnation. Husband? What the hell?

"What are you..." This can't be real. This cannot be darned well fucking real. That word, *husband*, feels like a kick to the clit. There can't be anything worse than that, really.

This is worse than the dreaded icicle. It's worse than those scary movies I watched five years ago that still haunt me and make me want to sleep with the lights on whenever I get to thinking about them.

This is worse than the trashy dark romance novels I secretly love reading.

This is worse than the creepy dolls I love making and have stashed up in my room. I swear that some nights, they're going to climb the ceiling and start spinning their heads around in different directions, but it hasn't happened yet.

In real life, you can't just win *a person* because you can't *bet a person* in a poker game. "But John is...he...why would he want me?" Did I really just say that? Of all the silly, irrational things. I should be pointing out that I'm a person. That I have rights. That the agreement, or whatever, is void because you can't just give another person away. You can't force someone to do something like this. A person can't be used to pay a debt. This isn't the eighteen hundreds or any year after that. Women aren't just given away. We're not property. We're not things to be traded or to increase one's standing in society through an advantageous marriage.

“I didn’t lose to John.” Dad abruptly stands up from the table, looking like the hounds of hell are chasing after him, and...well, just...if he thinks he can do something as messed up as this, then maybe those hounds should be nipping and braying and bringing him back to reality and sense. “I lost to Apollo. As of three fourteen this morning, you’re engaged to Apollo Easton.”

CHAPTER 2



Patience

Holy baked beans on toast, that's Apollo?

There's no way. He's gone from being a tall, lithe teenager with streamlined, stringy muscle and a creepy stash that he sometimes refused to shave off because he felt like having a few hairs on the upper lip was something of a conversation piece to a tall, filled out, built, jacked up, muscular *man*. There are no hairs sprouting here and there that he can laugh about. More like a perma-shadow all over a jaw that looks like it's been carved out, just like much of the topography of the world was trenched out by icebergs in the past.

Icebergs. Not icicles. Although they both feel equally and terrifyingly awful at the moment.

Apollo didn't show up when Dad was telling me the straight-up foul and nefarious story about how he got carried away—how he and John both did—and all of a sudden, the company was on the table. Either one of them—once best friends, now enemies—could finally take it all. Then, Apollo stepped in, Mister Ol' High and Mighty God of Everything, and talked sense into his and my dad. They couldn't just battle

it out between the two of them and wager the company on a single hand. There had to be a third party involved—still a single hand. The winner takes all or names a prize equivalent to the company. Cooler heads obviously didn't prevail, and the bet was on. The hands were dealt.

And now, I'm standing here, living history.

Apollo won. But he didn't call the whole thing off. He didn't say poker games were silly, and he was stepping in to get our dads to see reason. He didn't laugh the whole thing off.

He didn't name the company.

No, he named me.

My hand in marriage.

Dad kept insisting he didn't have a choice. Either I marry Apollo as soon as it can be arranged—within a number of days probably—or he'll have to give up his company because that was the deal. To Apollo, though, not to his dad, though it's pretty much the same thing.

Anyway, so yes. There was no random and fated knock on the door right as Dad was explaining himself, wrecking my world, and throwing a wrench into my heart, which I'm sure is never going to beat properly again. I thought things were over

when my mom left. When Apollo left. But now he's back, and my dad gave me a warning when I talked to him hours ago that I had better get packed.

It's seven now, give or take a few minutes. Who needs time when the rest of one's life is going to be a wrecked wasteland beyond one's choosing anyway?

Dad let my once best friend in, and now we're across the room from each other, staring each other down. I haven't packed a single thing. I went and brooded in my room while Dad stewed out here until I heard the doorbell. I didn't want to rush out there. I wanted to throw open my window, climb out, and *run*. But there were a few problems with that option.

One, my window doesn't open all the way anymore, and I can't shove myself through a three-inch gap.

Two, even if I could, I'd probably fall off the steep ass roof with the steep ass pitch, and I don't need broken limbs adding to my misery.

Three, even if I made it safely to the ground without killing myself, choosing to leave would mean dooming my dad and his whole company. I wouldn't have a job either. I'd have nowhere to go. I'd be homeless. And maybe my dad would be too.

My dad.

Yes, he made a mistake. Alright, so it was one hell of a mistake multiplied by one million and eighty-two, but he's looked after me as a single dad. He's tried to be a good man, and he's taught me basically everything I know. If the roles were reversed, and it was him who had to give something up for me, he'd do it in a heartbeat. Even if I were the one who messed up, he'd pick up the pieces and find a way to go on.

Sitting in my room wasn't going to help anything, so here I am.

And here Apollo is.

Taking up the whole freaking house with his real-life presence. If I had a dollar for every time I've thought about him over the years, my dad's company never would have been in trouble in the first place. I hate that my face is getting hot. Cherry red. Glowing like an ancient stovetop element. I also hate that the whole room smells all good and *spicy* and *manly*, and it's all this *grown-up, adult man* who replaced the fun, funny kid I used to know.

The kid I used to love with my whole freaking heart in that special, wonderful way only children can love.

Dad finally clears his throat. It's been silent for six hundred years in here.

“Apollo. Thank you for coming. I think Patience has her bag packed. She's ready.”

She's ready? He doesn't sound sure, which is the only thing that makes this better. That and the fact that I can see how my dad is trying not to tear up, and his voice is wavering. There are no right words in a situation like this. There's no right anything.

“I guess this is where my happily never after starts,” I grunt. I literally grunt. Like a bear waking up on the wrong side of hibernation. Like a stick has just gotten jammed up my sphincter. That stick is *staying*. I might have to marry this jerk who thinks he can just take my life in a game of cards, but I don't have to like it.

Apollo does the awkward throat-clearing thing, too, just like my dad. “Thank you, sir. If it's possible, could you give us a few minutes alone to talk things out? We don't have to leave right away. There's no rush. I want to make this as easy for Patience as possible.”

There's no end to how relieved Dad looks. It makes my heart pinch, which only happens because I'm a long way from

being heartless, no matter how angry I am or what kind of a shock this is. I'm always going to love my dad. I'm not the kind of person who can hate anyone.

Not even my mom for leaving and never contacting me again. For forgetting I exist.

Not Apollo for abandoning me after he promised he would never do that.

It's different with my parents, though. My dad raised me, and my mom...well, maybe she needed space. I'm not going to pretend to understand, and I'm not going to make excuses. She did give me life, and I'll never hate her, no matter what decisions she's made.

I'm just never going to soften toward this beast of a man. He has my ire for life.

"I'll just be in the backyard, sweetheart. You take your time. Come and get me if you need anything." Then, Dad practically runs off. With the twisting circle of feet, I'm surprised his legs don't turn around on each other like those windmill things in gardens.

"Thanks, I'll be fine," I mutter, but he's already gone. He can't hear me. That's as rocky a reassurance as I've ever

heard. It's more like a question. Will I ever be okay?

Yes, I will. Because I'm strong. I'm strong as...as...as *fuck*, *thank you very much*.

I thrust my hands on my hips, mostly to make myself as big as possible—if it works in the animal kingdom, it might work for me—and glare at this Apollo in the man-body over here. “I hate you.”

He still smiles at me as though I've just complimented him on his very obvious muscles. “You're very unwilling. I see that now. I was hoping you might realize I did this to save you and your dad, but I guess...I guess maybe you don't realize it. I guess maybe saying you're unwilling to come with me is the least of it.”

“I'm always going to hate you.”

“I know.” He doesn't sigh. Instead, he looks so *patient*. Unemotional. Of all the reactions, that one drives me the most crazy. “But I made a promise, and I intend to keep it.”

A promise? A freaking promise? That is the richest of rich bull crap I've ever heard. “You've already broken it. You. Left. You never came back.” I give him my best *go-to-hell* scornful face.

He keeps trying to nice-smirk, which is more of a sweet smile, but he's an asshole, so I'll never admit his smile is sweet or even a smile at all. "I wouldn't say never. I'm here now."

Back when we were kids, back when I'd get mad at Apollo, I'd...I don't know. I don't know what I'd do because I don't think there was ever a time I was mad at him. I can't exactly throw a seven-year or eleven or fourteen-year-old style tantrum. "You might be here, but I'm not going anywhere." It's probably best to acknowledge the basics first. "You don't own me. And I'm not going to marry you. I don't need saving." Ooh, yes, I'm on a hang of a dang roll now. "If you're doing this out of some misguided sense of obligation, that's even worse." I let him take the full force of my hairy eyeball for a second before I start in on his name, which we used to have so much fun with. "Apollo, god of butt biscuits and everything and nothing."

His grin only widens. "Nice. What other biscuits are there?"

"Regular good biscuits! And has anyone told you to just go...go off and go have fun playing with sticks? In traffic. And rusty rakes. Where the butt biscuits come from."

“Has anyone told me to go fuck myself with a rake and play in traffic? Like at the same time or separately? Either way, I can’t say they have.”

Yikes! He’s so frustratingly and infuriatingly calm. He’s clearly enjoying my immature attempts to insult him. “Then let me be the first to say that too.”

It’s pretty hard to convince someone to do something they really don’t want to do when you’re grinning like a total d-bag, so he finally stops with that shit. His smile fades, but he has a resting smile face even when he’s trying to keep his smile flatlined.

Ugh. So much ugh.

“If you don’t marry me, or at least come with me, then my dad has every right to take your dad’s company. I did some looking into things before I got here, and I know his company isn’t in very good shape. He’s barely hanging on. He should have stuck it out with my dad and worked out whatever differences they might have had.”

He’s right, but is there any way I will admit that? Ever? Yeah, no. “Maybe your dad shouldn’t have tried his darndest to ruin someone who was once a friend and who just wanted to live his own dreams. They didn’t have to be enemies. He could

have wished him well. My dad worked hard to build what we have. And on top of that, he taught me everything because I...I didn't have the money to go to college like you did. I didn't get to go on a free ride." Oh no. My eyes are not burning. No freaking way. I'm not going to *cry* about this. Not now. Not ever.

Okay, they're burning because I sound like a jealous asshole, and my whole life is going to straight-up pot. Pot shit. A shit of pot. A potful of shit.

Apollo's hair is gorgeous. So dark and shiny and nicely cut. It looks expensive. The haircut and the hair itself, I mean. It looks like he uses nice shampoo. His dark eyes are pretty too. The rest of him...the jeans, the T-shirt...it all looks so comfortable. That's the word I'll use because comfortable is a safe word. No, not that kind of safe word. Just a word that is safe because it doesn't involve me thinking about the body wearing the clothes.

"If you come with me now, you'll be safe. That's why I did what I did."

"Oh, why thank you, noble knight. God of goodness. Apollo, the hero. All hail to the conquering savior of poor damsels in distress everywhere."

His eye twitches. Finally. “Not everywhere. Only right here. And not all damsels. Only you. I did what I did because no one should bet their whole life on a card game. It wasn’t right.”

“Obviously! So why didn’t you just laugh it off, get everyone a glass of water, tell them to simmer down, and send my dad on his way home? You could have convinced your dad not to have these silly poker nights anymore. You could have told him that women have rights, and one of our basic rights is freedom, which we cannot fundamentally lose in a card game because life no longer works like that.”

He did always have these sweet golden whirls in his eyes. They look all sunny now, like he’s captured the stuff straight from the sky, and it’s always burning in him. Of course, he’d live up to his name. He’s shattered every other expectation. “I wanted to take you away from all this nastiness.” He lowers his voice. “Maybe we can figure out how to get our dads back on a level where they can talk things out.”

“You’d probably have a better chance trying to get fire and water to finally mix,” I snap, but I’m listening. He’s set the hook, and I’ve swallowed it like the sad, chompy fish I am.

“I’ve seen some pretty amazing things done with that exact concept,” he shoots back cheerfully.

“Of course you have.” There’s no way I’m ever going to be chipper again.

“I have money. I can help you and your dad.”

Oh, so that’s the game he’s going for now. Those are the stops that are getting pulled out. No fucking thanks. I’m not going to be able to stay calm for much longer. I’m going to start losing my shit right away. For real. “I don’t want your crusty blood money.”

“It’s hardly blood money,” he scoffs. “My dad gave me some shares in the company years ago, and when it was doing well, I invested them in something people didn’t know much about at the time. Crypto. Need I say more?”

No. No, he doesn’t need to say more. Even I know what cryptocurrency is.

Does everything this donkey’s ass touch turn to gold?

“You think just because you’re rich, you can bring yourself back here and throw your weight around?” The Apollo I knew was humble. He’d never come back here like this, thinking he

was better than everyone else. He'd never think he could buy me.

“I don't think I'm better than anyone. The only thing I want to be is better than the person I was when I left.”

Ugh, how noble. Barf. Also, he's reading my mind, which isn't good. It makes me feel disgustingly transparent. “You were a great person when you left. I'm sorry to say, but I think it's been a backward landslide since then. The Apollo I knew wouldn't bet his best friend's freedom in a card game. The Apollo I knew understood that his best friend had vowed she would never get married at all and that love is just a ridiculous notion.”

“I know. I know all that. I did this to protect you. Truly. The marriage doesn't have to be real.” He stumbles over that part, rushing like he's playing a game of verbal hot potato, and those words are burning, burning, *burning* on his tongue. “I mean, yes, we would have to sign the paperwork and make it legal, but we'd know it was just an arrangement.”

I can't keep my hands on my hips forever. They're still there. I really want to lower them and do some wild gesturing that ends in one of the many super creative ways to flip

someone off, but I'm afraid I'd just look silly doing it. "To what end? I'm perfectly fine here."

"You're not. If we get married, we'll be in a place where we can maybe get both our dads to see reason. As I said, they need to sit down and talk things out. If their children are married, I don't think they'll hate each other that much. I think all this has just been a giant misunderstanding that's grown out of control."

"Or your dad has just been a huge dick."

"Maybe. And if that's true and neither of them wants to listen to us even if we're married, and they won't stop acting like children and start getting along, then I'll help your dad. I'll give him the funding I know his company needs."

I'm suddenly breathless. This is what all the horses feel like when they get that mother-fluffing carrot dangled in front of their poor velvet noses. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I believe in what he's doing. I believe in what my dad's doing too. I believe in both of them, and I loved both of them at one time. My dad, as my dad, and yours like a second dad. They were best friends, and I think people who were once best friends who do everything together, see so much of life

together, and make promises to each other, need to keep those promises, whatever it takes.”

“You’re talking about us again, and I don’t like it.”

“I know.”

“I’m never going to forgive you.”

“I know.”

My voice has a new edge. “I’m never going to let you be my bestie again.”

His has no edge whatsoever. “I realize that.”

“I’m going to hate you forever for coming in here and carrying me over your shoulder like a freaking Neanderthal claiming his prize.”

“I’m not going to do that. Not unless you want me to.”

“Argh! No. It was metaphorical!” What the hell is going on with me that the sort of sex joke he just made sends shockwaves of heat through my whole body? Whether I walk out with my head held high or whether he drapes me over his shoulder like a wilted sack, it’s not going to change anything. If he spansks me when I’m draped over his shoulder as I throw a massive fit...well...that certainly wouldn’t be hot. That would be horrible. Terribly wrong. Awful.

What the hell is wrong with you, brain? Get it together. Stop sending the rest of my body faulty signals. Apollo is ewww. He's always going to be yucky. Just seriously, no thanks.

“You’re beautiful. You know that, Patience?”

Real shock rockets through me again. My mouth drops open, and I have to force it shut. “Kindly refrain from making comments about me!”

“I’m sorry. I will.” He looks like he’ll keep that promise for all of five seconds.

“If we have to do this, I’m doing it for my dad and all those people who work for him. Not for you. Never for you. If I agree to marry you, it’s just what you said. A contract thing until we can work things out with our families. Then we can do what other married couples do and start living separate lives because we’re too busy to actually connect. We can appear to fall out of love, and no one would question that because, again, that’s how most marriages end up. Eventually, one of us can make a show of leaving, or we can just get a divorce. As a gesture of good faith, I want it written into the contract that the day I marry you, you give my dad’s company fifty thousand dollars as a loan to be paid back over a ten-year

period, and if at the end of ten years, it can't be paid back, you forgive it anyway. I'll sign a prenup or anything else you want saying I can't touch your assets. I think that's fair."

Fair? No. None of this is fair. I don't know what I'm even saying anymore.

"I can do one better." Of course he can. He's the god of pretty much freaking everything, including one-upping a person. "Fifty grand isn't going to give your dad's company the help it needs. That's just a short-term solution to pay off some of the bills and debts the company owes. I can give the company a two-billion-dollar loan."

"Oh my god. Why? You're...you're going to level up on me like this?"

"No. It's because I believe in what he's doing. He took my dad's software, and he's using it to help make medical advances. That's incredible and important. My dad's company just does programming. Your dad was one of the best he'd ever seen, and he had a dream. It wasn't to get rich. It was to make the world a better place. Both our dads want that, but what your dad is doing could save millions of lives. He just needs the money to go big. Honestly, he should look at relocating his company. He needs to get into doing more

testing and getting it done faster. All these years, he's been stalled out, and his ideas are *great*."

It's even more sickening to realize this man has done his homework. He knows about my dad. He knows about the company. Did he just stay up surfing the internet like a fiend, or did he already know before that poker game?

"Doesn't that make your dad a double asshole for trying to run us into the ground all these years?"

"Sometimes grudges and what people view as betrayal skew a person's vision and make them do things they shouldn't and would never do. My dad isn't perfect, and I'm not saying he's right. I'm not saying I was right to leave for all those years. I just...well...there's no excuse. If it helps things now, I didn't want to go, and then I was building a life and getting my master's and swimming, and it was hard to come back in the middle of all that. I got caught up in working for my dad. I didn't realize things were so bad here until I got back a few weeks ago."

"*Weeks?* You've been back for weeks?" How did I not know that?

At long last, there's a hint of discomfort on his face, but it doesn't come through in his voice. "Yes, thank god, or I

wouldn't have been at that poker game last night, and your dad's company wouldn't be a thing this morning because two men got emotional again and let their not-so-better judgment prevail."

"I hate you, Apollo."

"So you've said. Will you have me as your dearly beloved, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, anyway?"

"It will all be for worse." Snapping turtle me is coming out to play now. "What other choice do I have? I'm sacrificing myself for my family or my dad's company and I guess you're right about one thing. This feud has gone on long enough. It's ridiculous, and it has to stop. If this is the way to get them to see reason and save my dad's company and all the people who work for him and all their work and research, then how can I say no?"

"So, you accept?"

"I accept your proposal and your bloody money. That's it. But I don't accept you. I will never accept you."

"Okay."

“You’re not a part of my life anymore. And you’re never going to be a part of my life again in anything but the most rudimentary way.”

“Alright.”

“I’m bringing more than a bag with me. I’m bringing my whole stash of creepy dolls and all my creepy doll-making supplies.”

“Absolutely. I’ll make room and uh...order up some kind of exorcism if I have to.”

“Stop agreeing with me.”

“I’m sorry. Do you want me to fight with you?”

“No!” I’m pretty sure fighting shows that you care about something.

“I want to prove to you that I’m still that boy you trusted. I’m still that boy, and the promise I made to take care of you still stands.”

Ugh, why did he ever make that promise? Why does he think he can come back now and make good on it when it’s clearly never going to be made good on again? It’s beyond the point of making good.

Also, what choice do I have? None. I have no choice. Zero. This is bigger than me. It's bigger than both of us. It's not just for my dad's company or all his employees. I have to admit the idea of our dads finally working it out and going back to being best friends is somewhat appealing to my soft, squishy side that seems to dominate my entire life. Whatever. It's okay to feel that way about the parent who raised me. The one who got me through everything, including my awkward teenage years, first bras, sex talks, tampons, barfy nights, mall visits, learning how to drive, and everything else in my life.

I will never let the soft, squishy part of me dominate in any area where Apollo is concerned. For him, he only gets stick-in-the-bum me.

“Whatever. If we're doing this, let's just get it done and over with. The thought is so nauseating that I might barf all over whoever has the misfortune of marrying us.” That doesn't come out quite as mean as I want it to. I don't have very much practice at being a jerk. I can probably learn something from Apollo in that area.

He winks at me. “In that case, I'll be sure to bring a bucket.”

“You're such an asshole.”

“I know that too. Probably the king of them, in your mind.”

“No. Not the king. The god.”

“The god,” he agrees too easily. “Oh, and one other thing, Patience. One tiny detail I left out that I think you should know. You’ll be living with me. I built the most amazing, incredible, unique house, and I know you’re going to love it.”

No. Just straight up all the no’s. He didn’t. He did not build our ultimate fort. The fairy style, retro, best ever, childhood wishful-thinking house. He. Did. Not.

He reads my mind. “I did.” A nod. And that stupid, sexy grin that makes my heart pulse. In *revulsion*, obviously. “I live in a mushroom house.”

CHAPTER 3



Apollo

I really do live in a mushroom house. That wasn't just fancy talk or me waxing metaphorical. When the money started rolling in, and my investments paid off big time, I did the wise thing and invested again. And when that paid off, I invested again. The cycle went on and on. Blah, blah, blah. When I finally had more money than I knew what to do with—well, I guess I haven't reached that point yet because I've always found something to do with it—but when I had more than enough money, I paid an architect to make my childhood dream house come true.

Mine *and* Patience's dream house.

It's in the middle of my own private forest just outside Seattle. Why Seattle? Because the weather is good. It never gets too hot or too cold. It has a good forest, and the mountains in the background are a huge plus. I'm an hour away from the city, which means I'm nicely isolated and hard to find since the woods hide me fairly well, but also close enough that I can easily drive to the city whenever I want.

It's a great piece of land, and owning land is important. One day, I'd like to make the place completely self-sustaining, but it's a work in progress. I have a garden right now, and most of the house is green. I also collect rainwater, and I have fruit trees and berry bushes. Mostly, I like my privacy. I like the wildlife and the quiet. And mostly...*mostly*, I like that I built this place with the goal in mind that I would gift it to Patience one day because, really, this was her dream since we were old enough to start thinking of dream houses.

She always loved gardening. Even as a kid, she could make anything grow.

I've never seen anyone adore camping as much as she did. She loves the land, the wilderness, the sky, the earth, and all things living.

And right now, I can tell that no matter how much she's pretending to hate this place, scowling like her face has been crazy glued together in all the wrong spots, I know she's one hundred percent head over heels in love with my mushroom. House. Err...*the* mushroom house.

"No!" Her scowl darkens like she's about to rain down all sorts of shit on my parade. "You can't live in a mushroom house. I forbid it!" She kicks her suitcase for good measure.

It's a hard shell, and it makes a weird noise when her fancy ankle boot connects with it. *Thwomp*.

Despite herself, her eyes flick up and down. When I said mushroom, it's a real mushroom. Red roof, white spots, white curved body, arched wooden doors, and curved wood shutters with hearts carved into them. And an adorable stone chimney that is just for décor purposes. I went all out, going for the fairy tale picture book awesomeness that we dreamed of as kids.

“I already do, though.”

She doesn't appreciate me pointing that out. Her nostrils flare, and her green eyes get insanely green. Like gem-tone green. The kind of burning bright green that could incinerate a person like a lightning strike. If I should have been called Poseidon, she should have been called Zeus.

“You took my idea. You *stole* it!”

“You said you always wanted to live in a mushroom house in the forest. It was your dream. We used to talk about it endlessly. You wrote so many stories about it, and you drew it all the time.”

“Yeah.” Another wicked flash in her eyes. I’m going to get charred on the spot soon. I know those lightning bolts of Zeus caused some real problems, although I haven’t read up on my Greek mythology like you’d think I would have, especially given my name. “It belonged to me! My idea. My dream. Not yours. You took it. You...you...you god of unoriginal thinking. You thief. God of stealing. God of asshole assness.”

“Why don’t we go in?” I suggest kindly.

She goes as red as the roof, and that beast is cherry hued. “Why don’t we not? You can’t do this. You just can’t. This can’t exist.” She shakes her fist at the house.

“It’s real.” I motion to the house, and I must be giving her an odd look because her lips purse and her whole face twitch. “Designed by a legit architect who specializes in custom builds like this. It went through all the correct permit processes and due diligence. No one had a problem with a giant mushroom being built out here in the middle of the forest. The construction crews did a great job. It’s all especially green as well. I didn’t think it would make a whole lot of sense to design something that looked like part of the earth and every single childhood dream come true and make it not very self-sustaining. That wouldn’t be conscionable.”

“You’re unconscionable, you buttnugget.”

“Buttnugget?”

“Turdwaffle.”

“Ahh, I see where this is trending.”

“Fartflapper. Pissant of an assbutt of an assbrain of a cheeseass.”

So inventive of her, as always.

“Ugh.” She tosses her hair when she swivels her head. It’s so sandy. So long. And so soft looking. She doesn’t like that I’m trying to beat her at her own game. She gives me the same kind of heavily disdainful look that she gave me yesterday after she signed the documents in front of the JP and both our fathers, who served as witnesses, albeit surly witnesses who didn’t want to be in the same room together and kept giving each other extremely hostile looks. She shoved the ring back in my face when I tried to slip it on her finger. I had to tuck it back into my suit pocket.

I went all out and picked out a black suit. A black dress shirt. Black shoes. All brand new. Not custom-made, though, because it was last minute. I wanted something special. Something I didn’t already own. Something that would be my

wedding suit and only my wedding suit. For me, yesterday meant something. It meant I could save Patience and take her away from a town that was always too small for her. It was just one step on the road toward making things right with her. One small, fractional, ant-sized step toward redemption.

Anyway, I wore a spiffy suit and spiffed the rest of myself up too. Patience wore ripped-up jeans and a paint-stained tie-dyed T-shirt with a fuzzy purrmaid kitten on the front. She purposely didn't comb her hair. Or wash it. It was knotted, ratty, and a tad greasy. And her eyes were bloodshot because she obviously hadn't slept in the two days it took me to get the legal aspects of the wedding taken care of. She death-frowned and glared at me the entire time.

Honestly, she was going for the pissed-off Patience look, but she just looked beautiful.

Despite her anti-dress-up and anti-ring-wearing protests, she said the words of the vows with conviction as though she meant them, which was enough to convince the poor JP that I wasn't forcing her into the marriage against her will. Even if she didn't want it, she did agree to the plan.

With a huff, she wheels her suitcase up to the door.

I have to cut in front of her and unlock it. I have a security system, but for the door, it's an old-fashioned skeleton key, and it's the real heavy iron kind because, you know, dramatic effect. Patience's eyes widen, and she makes a disgusted snort because she *loves* skeleton keys. Every good story has a skeleton key, at least in her opinion.

I throw the doors open and let the full glory of all the mushroom goodness hit her as she stands there. It's late in the day since we caught an afternoon flight out of Michigan, and the sun is hitting the stained-glass windows on the back side of the house just right. That was the architect's idea, and it was great. There's nothing quite like all that radiant, colorful beauty. The sunsets are incredible out here, and these windows bring them inside at every hour of the day.

It even makes Patience audibly gasp.

And then.

And then, she spots Bitty Kitty.

“Oh my god! Ah—”

Bitty Kitty doesn't like loud noises, so I get my hand over Patience's mouth before she screams. Literally, right before. I feel the warm puff of air against my palm. Her body trembles

so very close to mine, and it makes my happy meat stick do a happy meat stick happy dance in my jeans. Not a good thing, and not when I'm so close to Patience. It's her proximity, the smell of crab apples in her hair, and the slightly masculine spice of her deodorant. It's also the heat of her body and then the way she drools all over my hand on purpose a minute later.

Bitty Kitty comes running, shaking her poofy tail at us. She doesn't stomp the ground, which she only does when she's upset. Not that it would do her any good anymore. I got her as a baby, rescued when I heard her crying in the woods after her mom was hit by a car on the side of the gravel road. I only found her because I was out for a bit of a hike, exploring my new property. I'll never forget the sound of those cries. I searched for her for three hours, not knowing where it was coming from. She was so little, and her eyes weren't even open yet. She was cold and covered in ant bites, so I stuck her in my shirt, giving her immediate skin-to-skin contact to get her body heat up. It was a long walk back to the house, but I held her there the whole way. Then, I filled up a hot water bottle, took a blanket, popped her in a box, and took her to the vet in Seattle.

On the way down the gravel road, in roughly the same area, I saw the skunk that had been hit.

I don't know if there were other babies. It seemed odd that she was alone, but I did search the entire area where I found her before I left, and there was nothing. No other cries.

"You have a skunk for a pet?" Patience spins on me. She doesn't appreciate that I didn't warn her. I should have. Maybe I should have told her about all this waiting on the other end for her.

"I...yeah." I rake a hand through my hair, then pat my thigh, and Bitty Kitty comes running. She basically leaps up into my arms when I bend down, and I scoop her up. She snuggles into the side of my neck, nuzzling me with her snout and giving me little licks all over. "Her mom died, and I raised her. The vet fixed her up and got me everything I needed to keep her alive when she was so tiny. I tried to find a rehabber, but everyone was so full. That tends to happen in the spring. The vet couldn't keep her there, and no one proper would help me out. I wasn't going to let anything happen to her, so I raised her, and by then, there was no way she could have gone back to being a wild skunk. There was nothing wild about her. I was her mommy from the minute her eyes opened. They're

more like cats than you'd think. You can get them de-skunked, so she can't spray anymore. She'll just stomp the ground when she doesn't like what you're doing."

"What's her name?" She's giving me the hairy eye while Bitty Kitty just gets dubious looks. That's Patience's reluctant speak for *your skunk is so super cute*.

"Bitty Kitty."

"Jesus, you named your skunk Kitty?"

"Well...yeah. I always wanted a cat." I shrug.

"But you were so allergic."

"I think I've grown out of that," I say in defense.

"You do know she's not a cat, right?"

"Of course. She's a skunk-cat."

"Oh my god." She sighs this incredibly longsuffering sigh. "You live in a mushroom house in the forest and have a skunk as a cat. How very *hipster* of you."

"We prefer the term *earthy*."

"I'd prefer the term *I'd very much like to be anywhere else on earth, including hell, than here*."

"I don't think hell is technically on earth."

“I think it is. Because this is pretty much it.”

“Hmm, no. You love it. You love the mushroom house. How can you not love the mushroom house? And there’s no one on earth who doesn’t love Bitty Kitty. She’s the sweetest.” I give her a kiss on the head, and she gives me a lick on the nose. Super sweet.

“You just left her when you were gone for weeks?”

“Nope. I paid a pet sitter slash house sitter to stay here while I was gone. Bitty Kitty’s nice to other people too. She just loves me best.”

Patience rolls her eyes so hard that they look like they’re those wacky-eyed glasses with springs attached to the back. “Then she has terrible taste.”

I kiss Bitty Kitty on the head again and put her on the floor. She jumps at my leg and paws me with her adorable little skunk hands and makes the sweetest chirping noises. Skunks don’t sound like cats. Most of the time. She saunters over, jumps onto her little hanging egg pet chair, gives the most adorable yawn, flips herself upside down, and watches us like that.

I know she'll fall asleep within a few minutes as she's a big sleeper. Her pet sitter just went home early this afternoon. He left the spare skeleton key hidden under the mat, which I have to check for. He loved the mushroom house, though the fact that I paid eight grand for three weeks of pet sitting probably helped him love the job a little extra. And he didn't mind at all that I had external and internal security that he had to sign off on. He was so good about giving me his number for video chats too. I got to talk to Bitty Kitty at least twice a day, every single day.

"This is your new mom," I tell my fur baby.

"No!" Patience shakes her head and rolls her eyes like googly eyes again. "No. Absolutely not."

"Don't hold it against her that she's a skunk. You'll love her in no time."

"I'm holding it against *you*," she claps back. "I won't love you or forgive you at any time. Definitely not in no time."

I knew there'd be an adjustment period when I made the offer of marriage at that stupid card game. It was out of control. This whole feud has gone way too far. No one should be trying to ruin anyone else, especially not two former best friends. Patience was going to get hurt. She was going to be

collateral damage, and I couldn't let that happen. I took a vow to protect her, but I failed to do that for years while I got my shit together. I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to move so far away. I wanted to come home every single day. That was what I'd told her dad. And then I just...knew I'd reached the point of no return, and there was no coming home until I had everything figured out. Until I could win back her trust and friendship. And I couldn't do that in any way that was at all short of spectacular.

I knew it had to be epic.

"I don't know about that." I have an obnoxiously sunny disposition when it counts. "I have theme rooms here."

"What?" She's adorable when she's shocked like this, and the anger is melting away despite how hard she's trying to hold on to it. "Ugh. Of freaking course you do. You thought of everything. You dream stealer, storybook copycatter."

"I think we should turn the anger into trying to figure out how to help our dads get back to being besties."

"I think you should shove it," she bit back.

"Alright, well, I can do that, but I still think that—"

"Apollo."

Dear sweet lord, the sound of her saying my name. It sends chills up my spine and down into my toes. My feet start to tingle, and I feel like I'm going to sneeze. That's how shivery I suddenly am. "Yes, darling wife?"

She stiffens, and her cheeks get red. Not in a blushy, sweet, good way. More in a *watch it, you're pushing all my fucking buttons* kind of a way. "I think I've had about as much as I can take for one lifetime, let alone one day."

"In that case, you should take the forest-themed room. Not only is the outdoors great for relaxing outside the house and inside it, but I'll convince Bitty Kitty to sleep with you. Pets are great stress relievers."

Spinning around with a huff, Patience grabs her suitcase and wheels off. Remarkably, she chooses the right direction. The other room is an under-the-sea theme, which is just as fun. My room is a secret for now, but it has its own unique theme too. The house has a movie theatre, a library, an art room, a state-of-the-art kitchen, and a large living room.

It's pretty much Patience-at-age-seven inspired.

And the outside? I guess that was my vision, but I'll get to that later.

For right now, I'll say she had good vision, even back then.

She was pretty much the best person. She's *still* pretty much the best person ever, even when she's busy hating me. But it's not her fault. I know what I did was an asshole move, even if I thought it was the best way to help.

And speaking of helping, my own dad was pretty darn livid with me after. He still hasn't cooled down yet, not when he found out I was planning on helping Patience's dad.

Everything will just take some time. Everyone will calm down, and we'll all forgive each other, talk it out, and become friends again.

I hope.

It might be ideal and idealistic thinking, which never got anyone very far, but I live in a mushroom, so that should tell you a lot about where refusing to be a realist gets you.

CHAPTER 4



Patience

I feel like the right, mature adult thing to do would be to suck it up at breakfast the next morning and figure out a way to make my nightmare of a life work.

I have this whole plan rehearsed by the time I get downstairs. Downstairs, I might add, is reached by a spiral staircase that is carved from wood and includes all sorts of vines and leaves. Coupled with the stained glass, the murals on the walls, the incredible light fixtures all made of blown glass in different formations, and the thousand other details like the super duper soft bed shaped like a lily pad that I spent the night in and the gauzy green curtains that look like a bunch of leaves sewn together, the trim in the room at the ceiling that has wooden squirrels and acorns all over it, and the unbelievable upholstered furniture in shades of mossy velvet...and yeah, okay, the place is starting to grow on me.

Ugh, who am I kidding? I love it. I love it so freaking much, and that's the most maddening part. I don't want to love it. I don't want to love any of this. I want to just keep on hating it, being ornery, and not wanting this. At least for one

more day. I don't want to give in and be charmed by this one-of-a-kind, fairy tale house. I don't want to have soft feelings about the not-cat skunk-cat.

At the table, which is freaking *carved out* in all sorts of scrolling vines and is shaped like a darned tree with a dark green glass top, I find that breakfast is already served.

I'm not used to anyone anticipating my needs.

For the last few years, Dad has been pretty preoccupied with work, so I'm the one who takes care of things at home. I make all the meals. If I didn't remind him to eat at the right times, he'd completely forget. There's no one else in my life to worry about me at this point. Not because I don't have lots of people who love me and who I love right back, but because I'm an adult, and I'm big into selling the whole *I'm fine* deal. Because I am. Fine.

I'm fine that Dad is probably telling our extended family some version of the truth and some version of a lie about this marriage. They haven't blown up my phone yet, but then again, I haven't turned it on.

I'm still fine.

I'm fine that all my creepy dolls arrived last night with my other things, packed neatly in boxes that look as immaculate as when I put my things into them, so someone clearly shipped them with care. I'm fine that my dolls look like they're enjoying their extra creepy selves in their new theme room because, god, who doesn't love the forest?

I'm fine that my life has become a dumpster fire where I have zero control.

Wait, no. That's not true. I do have some control. I do. And it's time I use it instead of pouting.

Apollo looks wonderfully chipper. *Asshole.*

I force myself not to notice his freshly shaved jaw or how his manly scent wafts throughout the kitchen and somehow both overlay but don't overpower the fluffy scrambled eggs, perfectly cooked ham bacon—because I hate the slices—and freshly cut tomatoes that look like they've come right from his garden. Or someone's garden. I didn't check out the backyard yesterday. I basically refused to come out of my room until he told me my boxes had arrived.

There are cheese, peppers—probably also homegrown—green onions, a whole bunch of herbs on everything, and a

dollop of orange sauce—probably something hot—on the side of the plate.

I also don't notice how when Apollo walks to the table, he practically saunters. Not in an arrogant, swaggering way. He just...floats. Glides. He looks like he brought all the freaking sun into the room with him, and he's glowing from within. Not gloating. Glowing. He's happy, and he wants me to be happy. He did this because he genuinely thought it would make my life better.

He almost reminds me of the little kid he was before he went away for greener pastures like really good high schools, college scholarships, and swimming in boatloads of money.

I'm not bitter. I'm not jealous. I'm actually happy he made it in life.

But the little girl in me is still deeply, deeply hurt that he didn't bother to check in on her all this time.

“So,” Apollo starts as he takes a seat. The chairs are the same soft, mossy velvet as the ones upstairs, but these all look like throne chairs with really tall backs and crazy arms that come out the sides at wild angles. “I think we should come up with a plan to get our dads talking again. If we force them to make that first step, maybe they'll be able to work things out.”

I pick up my fork and resist the urge to be spiteful and venomous. The skunk isn't around. I don't see her. But I wish she were around because I'd like to pet her. She looks soft, and she has a cute little skunk face. I also like her feet and the way she waddles when she walks. I like that Apollo saved her the same way he'd once saved broken, wounded animals every so often when they needed it, back when we were kids. At least he'd try.

I remember the way he was the only one who got me through my mom leaving.

It's too late. You left. You saved me, and then you abandoned me, and I'm not over it. I'll never be over it. Bringing me to your wonderful, fantastical mushroom house and trying to save my dad and his company and our whole lives isn't enough to make me forget.

"I don't think it's that easy." I even manage not to sound royally pissed.

Which I am, because when I taste the eggs...dear god, they're good. They're so, so good. I suddenly realize I'm starving.

"I know it won't be easy. That's why we need a failproof, beyond excellent plan."

“It will have to be one hell of a plan.”

“I vote that we wait three weeks and then tell them we’re pregnant.”

I choke and cough loudly. Eggs nearly come flying out of my mouth. And my nose. My eyes water. In the end, I force myself to swallow and then reach for the tall, perfectly chilled glass of water. “What?” I barely have any breath left to yelp it, but yelp it I do. “Are you insane? That’s the worst plan I’ve ever heard!”

“It’s a great plan. If we’re having a baby, they have to get along.”

“They don’t. They can just keep hating each other. Haven’t you ever heard that bringing a child into the world as a way to fix problems is the worst thing a person can do?”

“Naturally. But there wouldn’t actually be a baby.”

I can’t have this conversation. I can’t do this. I can’t sit here and talk about babies with this man. It’s making me hot under my skin and making me squirm in the chair. The velvet feels like extra friction, and I’m going to burst into flames. This house is probably equipped with sprinklers that go off at the first whiff of smoke, though, so I’d probably be okay.

Or not.

I feel like my nipples are going to combust. They're probably smoking right now. I imagine smoke seeping through the armholes of my T-shirt, so I quickly slam my arms over my chest. Just in case my nipples are peaking. There's always that too. The sprinklers would only make it more obvious. Damn him and his talk about babies because now it has me thinking about *his* babymaker.

It's not that gross. This isn't the friend who was once as close to me as a brother. That boy is long gone. In his place is a man I don't even know. A man hot enough to need sprinklers of his own.

"I know," I hiss. And then I realize. He's joking. He's making the world's worst joke, and I just reacted in the world's worst way.

I'm not rising to this. I'm not going there. I'm not going to make this about us when it's only about our dads. "I've tried everything over the years to get my dad to see reason. I'm sure you have, too, even if it was from *afar*." I don't even bother with disguising the edge in my voice. "Nothing is going to work. Even if we come at it from the way you cook chicken and go low and slow, it's not going to work. Fast and hot isn't

going to work either. They're just...entrenched in their silliness. My dad had some good ideas, and your dad didn't like them. My dad started it as a side hustle because he couldn't not do it. It's never taken off and become booming popular, but it works. His software is important. I feel like your dad might have done some poisoning of the well, so it's hard to get contracts. It's hard to get the word out there. No one will give him the time of day, and he's not so great at marketing. I've tried to get him to dedicate more money to that department, but he won't even hear of it. The company is so small and basic, and we've barely scraped by, but sometimes great ideas take a long time to come to fruition. All that time is needed to perfect them."

Apollo doesn't need to be convinced. His face tells me he already believes everything I'm saying. "That's why I want to help. I won't just give bailout money. I'll make sure your dad's ideas get out there. That they reach the right ears and the right people."

"I'm sure you have influence all over the world." Yes, I said it sarcastically. And no, I can't help it, even though I'm happy about this. I really am. Sometimes, it's just hard to eat

the humble pie because it tastes like mud and shite...and eating shite pie never did a happy person make.

“I wouldn’t say all over the world, but I do know a few people in different places, and they know a few people who would know a few more, so I think that’s a great start.”

Ugh, this man and his positivity, his skunk, his mushroom house, his plans, his contacts, his money, his delicious eggs, and his perfect everything else is really obnoxious because it’s so easy to want to...to want to enjoy this. Fractionally. Seriously fractionally.

Maybe it’s just that for the first time in years, I have this glimmer of hope. For my dad. I can do this for him. I can.

“Maybe we should invite them out here for a weekend,” I say, but immediately regret it because I was going to add *my dad would love this place so freaking much, and he hasn’t had a vacation in years. It’s been all stress.* I don’t want to give family secrets away. I don’t want to do anything that might betray my dad’s trust.

Everyone has an angle.

I haven’t figured out what Apollo’s is yet. This can’t just be about making up for lost time or keeping a childhood promise.

That hardly makes sense. He could just be playing me, for all I know. He could be trying to find out top-secret information to ruin my dad's company that way. My dad wouldn't have sold for all the money in the world, so Apollo couldn't have bought it or his technology. I know Apollo is rich, and it doesn't make a lot of sense, but hey. Never underestimate the power of wanting revenge, and John truly does hate my dad now.

“That's a great idea.” He picks up his fork and eats like he's relieved enough to have an appetite now that I threw that out there.

I've never seen anyone shovel so much food in so fast. It's not gross, though. He just eats like a hearty lumberjack who lives in a mushroom house and does foresty stuff.

“Where's your non-cat?” I ask as I try to take small bites. I don't want it to appear like I'm enjoying this, but every single mouthful is delicious, so it's hard. I guess small bites equal more secret savoring.

“Oh, I fed her breakfast an hour ago. She usually naps all morning, gets pretty wild and hilarious in the afternoon, has a snack, naps again, gets up, and then plays around the house all night.”

“Are skunks nocturnal?” How much wild stays in a wild animal, even one raised by a human mommy before her eyes were opened?

“They are, by nature. But she does sometimes settle down with me for cuddles for a few hours at night.”

There go my nipples, thinking about cuddling up to Apollo and all his muscles. Ugh. It's his manly body that's wreaking havoc on my senses. My own body is a big-time traitor. That might be part of his plan. Use his physique to seduce me into giving away my dad's secrets, maybe? Knowing Apollo, probably not, but I don't know him anymore, do I?

“That's...that's nice.”

“Cats often roam all night too. I don't think they're naturally nocturnal. Maybe I should get one to give Bitty Kitty a friend. They're supposed to get along great.”

“Cats and skunks?”

He shrugs. “So I've heard.” He starts to grin. “Have you seen that thing online where it pokes fun at the things that aren't cats? The skunks and raccoons and possums?”

“I have.” It's awesome, so awesome, but I don't want to show any excitement. I'm careful to keep things neutral or

scowly in order to keep my internal feelings just mine and out of reach.

“Maybe I should get a second cat. Except it will actually be a possum.” He hoots with laughter. Seeing him light up like that makes my chest constrict.

He’s so perfectly unselfconscious. I forgot how he could be that way. How he could just let go. How, half the time, he was goofy and funny just for me. I could never stay in a bad mood when Apollo was with me. We laughed. We laughed so freaking much back in the day.

Then he left.

And there were a bunch of hard years.

“Or you could get a real cat. Some granny cat that needs a home.” Granny cats have a special place in my heart. Or grandpa cats. The old ones that people tend to overlook or not want because they’re not as fun as kittens or they need extensive vet care. It’s sad. It actually breaks my heart.

I’ve wanted an old cat for a long time, but my dad just never wanted a pet. I stopped asking for things after my mom left. She wasn’t coming back.

“That’s an excellent idea!”

I don't want to participate in any ideas. I just want to get our dads back to talking, get Dad's company out of a bad place, bring goodness to the rest of the world, fulfill my obligations of this deal, and move on. I'm not going to give any bits of myself away in the process, at least bits that aren't mandatory. I'm not even going to lend them.

“Inviting our dads here is a great idea too! I'm going to call mine right now. I'll make it very obvious that your dad can't make it this weekend. You can call yours and make it equally obvious that mine can't make it.”

“And then they'll know we schemed, and they'll never trust us again.”

“They'll realize we schemed together, and if we can put aside our differences, maybe there's a way for them to put aside theirs. We have one good shot at this. Yes, they'll be mad. They might even want to leave, but we won't let that happen. We'll make sure they stay here, have a great weekend, and come out on the other side talking to each other at least. If they're talking, then that's the first major hurdle. I think they might even be open to something else we can all do together if we get this right.”

“It’s an important weekend, then.” If we get it wrong, I’m going to be stuck here forever. The only reason I agreed to this was for my dad, so if we get it wrong, I’ll be stuck here that much longer.

“Very important.”

“Has your dad seen this place yet?” I ask.

“He’s been here a few times over the years, but he doesn’t get it. He thinks it’s silly.”

“It’s not silly! It’s the most wonder—” I catch his smirk. “You evil poo pants! You tricked me into saying that.”

Magic. That smile. Pure. Magic. “Okay, I did. My dad thinks the house is a little bit odd, and he doesn’t get it, but he doesn’t hate it either, and he’s never said it’s silly. I just wanted to hear you say you thought it was great.”

“Admissions made under duress don’t count. Getting information by trickery doesn’t either.”

“Okay. Fair enough.” He pauses, scoops the last of his food off his plate into his mouth, and pushes back from the table. “I can’t wait to show you the pool.”

What pool? Duh. Duh, times a thousand. Obviously, he has a pool. The guy is a swimmer, and he’s rich.

“Let me guess. One of those mushroom things that waterfalls all over the place.”

His eyes go all golden and twinkly, and my tummy gets fluttery. “It’s just a regular pool, but it’s Olympic-sized, and it’s saltwater. You’ll love it.”

“I hate swimming.”

“You used to love swimming,” he points out.

Yeah, that was before it was the reason Apollo disappeared from my life.

I stand up abruptly. “I don’t anymore. I’m going to call my dad.” Time to get Operation *Get The Hell Out Of Here ASAP* into action.

CHAPTER 5



Apollo

The first few days are rough in the mushroom house. It's more like a mushroom malice instead of a mushroom palace.

Patience is pissed at me. She wears her resting *I'm never going to not be pissed at you* face at all times. Letting her guard down consists of her frowning, just not at me, or her face going utterly still and flat and pretty much straight-up unhappy. I don't like it when people are mad at me. It makes me feel that yucky, uncomfortable, trapped, and sick feeling.

I felt a lot of that when I left home. When I was across an ocean, apart from some of the only family I had left. I got over it because I had to get over it. Coming home wasn't an option. I needed to do well and get a scholarship, or I knew I'd be paying student loans for a very long time. Most of all, I knew my dad wanted it for me. I wanted to make him proud like I'd never wanted anything.

I also always kept that image of my mom up there in the sky as an angel watching me, even after I should have been older and pragmatic.

Maybe I was doing it for her too. Maybe I wanted to make her proud as well.

Anyway, I know why Patience is mad. I know she feels trapped, and I know she's frustrated. No amount of mushroom or skunk or wilderness goodness is going to undo those vows we both took. I'm trying, though. I'm trying to help her see the good in this, but I'm starting to have my doubts. Maybe this isn't going to work. Maybe none of it is going to work.

These are all the thoughts I'm grappling with. Pretty sure it's three-something in the morning, but I don't want to turn my phone on and check. Our dads are both getting in tomorrow. My dad in the morning. Hers in the evening. We didn't want to chance that they'd meet each other at the airport or end up on the same flight.

We aren't any closer to coming up with a plan as to how to ease them into talking again, forgiving each other, and coming to an understanding.

It makes sense because *we're* no closer to any of that either.

She's ignored me, avoided me, and acted like she was cast in stone these past few days. She's gone into the woods, but not far, and she's so quiet. She's clearly trying to hide what she's feeling and thinking.

We need a game plan for our dads. It's not enough to remind them that they used to be besties, they raised us as single dads, and they need each other. That they're acting like kids. We need more than that because they know these things. It just hasn't sunk in.

Whatever we do, it has to work. The angry, grouchy, hating each other, competitive, surly, gnarly dad situation has to be diffused. After that, we're going to need something enticing for both of them, a reason for them to stay. Something non-competitive and non-threatening. Something so awesome that they can't say no.

A start-up company? No. Better not talk about companies.

Picking out a cat? As far as I know, I'm still allergic, but I can work on that. Like take pills or meds or get shots or something. My dad never really liked pets in the house, and Patience's dad wouldn't let her even have a goldfish, so they probably won't want to do that.

The awesome pool might be hecking awesome, but it's not hecking awesome enough.

What about bribery? Gaslighting? Or telling them that they're hurting their kids with this anger, separation, and

distance, and they need to start working on healing their families because they're a single unit now?

Arrrrrrrrraaaaawwwwww!

Holy freaking god. What the fuck was that?

I don't just sit upright. I bolt upright. And the sheets go flying. It's a good thing Bitty Kitty isn't in here because the bed is a mess. I race to the door and fling it open.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Oh my god. It sounds like a panther is caught in the house. Or a fox is doing its blood-curdling scream. Something is being *murdered* in here.

I careen around the corner, heading toward the sound.

Arrrrrrraahhhhhhhhhhh!

Shit on a stick. There really *is* something wild in here. I'm the most all about peace and love a person can be, and I don't believe in owning a gun, even for protection out here in the woods. I don't have an axe for cutting firewood either because the house is high-efficiency, and I don't have a fireplace. I didn't want to cut down trees. The house has lots of solar technology going on, too, and complicated water systems. It's as eco-friendly as most houses could ever be. So yeah, no

wood. No axe. The kitchen knife block? If there's a panther in here, what am I going to do with a butter or steak knife? Because I don't dare get anything bigger. It would probably get turned against me.

Swift, tiny footsteps come racing swiftly around the corner, and a blur of pink and white nearly runs straight into me. I put out my arms and stop the blur mid-motion before there's a collision.

"There's something in the house!" Patience wails. She's white. Completely ghostly white.

"Mushroom House Manager, turn on the lights!" The house is really good at following my commands, and all the lights in the whole place go on at once. I like that it doesn't ask me if I just meant the hall light or what. Even my AI house software knows this is an *emergency*.

"Ahh!" Patience shoves away from me. Her face is all twisted up, and her eyes are huge and exceptionally green. They look like they're going to pop out of her head. She could probably use them as weapons against the animal invader.

God, what a thought. I don't think they'd be very effective weapons. Also...gruesome.

The screams go silent. The house is silent. Maybe the lights going on scared the creature. But there's still a wild animal in here. Patience is here, and I can keep her safe by putting myself between her and whatever is in here with us, but where's Bitty Kitty? I have to find her and make sure she's okay.

“Where the *hell* are your clothes?”

Shit. Oh, shit. All the shit.

I have this thing where I just can't sleep in clothes, especially not in the summer. I don't know what it is. I just find it so restricting. Gotch in the summer becomes sweaty easily, and they make the balls itch. Ball itch isn't fun. Going commando between the sheets is a nice relief, especially since no one wants itchy, rashy, sweaty junk.

But it would have been great if I'd thought to throw on some underwear before I went racing out of my room.

I quickly throw my hands over my package.

Patience is a fast thinker too. She rips off her pajama pants, leaving herself in a long T-shirt that goes almost all the way to her knees—it has a dancing corn on the cob on the front—and a pair of panties. I saw them. They're pink and flowery.

Her pants whip me across the face like a bitch slap that tells me to get my shit together. I forget myself completely, being so darn flustered now that I'm out of control, and try and *put her pants on*. They don't fit. But I don't realize they really don't fit, so I keep going. Suddenly, there's a ripping sound nearly as loud as the beast that's in the house.

I meet Patience's eyes, and she stares at me blankly like she can't believe I'm so dense for trying to fit in her clothes.

My brain catches up fast, and while my face goes scarlet, and her eyes rake over my body, including my junk, and quickly dart away like it was just an involuntary reflex, I fashioned the scraps of her pants around my waist like a pair of um...improvised gotch. Good enough. I tie them to one side. They'll hold together, and they'll hold everything in.

Now I'm free to hunt the panther down.

"I think we should call the cops," Patience hisses. "Whatever it is, it sounds dangerous. And it's not okay that it's inside. It could kill us."

Yeah, that's probably a better plan than me trying to shoo it out the front door. If not the cops, then some conservation something or other. But now, right now, where the heck did I put my phone?

I throw both hands on Patience's shoulders and wheel her around toward my room. I'm going to barricade her in the closet. That's probably the safest option. Then, I'll shut the door behind me after. She'll be okay in my room. She's shocked, so she stumbles, but I catch her, and her bottom bumps up against my very thinly clad crotch.

She gasps. I gasp.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

A black whirr goes flying past our faces. Patience screams, throws her hands over her head, and hits the floor. I duck but whirl around since I have pretty good reflexes. I still work out. Hard. I still train like I'm competing for something, even though I'm not. Old habits die hard, and these always made me feel really good physically. I do it now because I like it, not because I have to. I still swim in the morning and evening. And sometimes the afternoon, too, if I'm into it. The pool here is salt water, so it doesn't bother my skin the same way some chemicals would.

The black thing bumps into the wall at the end of the hallway and wheels around, flapping hard.

It's not a bat but a bird. A blackbird. Screaming its head off about being trapped inside.

“It’s just a bird,” I yelp, so relieved that I could pee my pants. Or rather, Patience’s pants?

“Get it awayyyyyyyyy!” she wails back. She’s still on the ground with her hands covering her head.

“I will. I’ll get it out of the house. Poor thing.”

“Why does it sound like it’s got the devil in it?”

“I’m not sure. Probably most birds sound that way in a confined space. They usually caw or cackle anyway.”

“Please, get it out! It makes my blood run cold hearing it,” Patience pleads.

It’s ten hot shades of terrible, that’s for sure.

I take one step, and Patience screams, “Look out!” She dives at me. I don’t know if she’s trying to save me or the bird. I just see a blur, and then there’s the hard *smack* of Patience making contact—her body against mine, soft, warm skin, the press of her breasts, her arms thrown around me. I think she was trying to take me down to the floor in a tackle. Except she’s small while I’m not. She presses up against me for a hot second, and then there’s an instant of rebound. It’s like she’s running straight into a concrete pillar. I put my arm out, grasp her around the shoulder as she’s floundering, and keep her

upright. My hand grazes along her arm, where I feel more soft skin, and a few wisps of the softest hair brush down the side of my bare arm. I'm still holding my makeshift bottoms with one hand while the other tingles from the graze of the only woman I've ever longed for.

The bird goes whizzing by and lets out another deathly scream.

Patience covers both her ears and shoots me a dirty look. "Do something!" she screams loudly as both her ears are covered and blocked. "But don't hurt it either!"

I'm not going to make any jokes about how she rather save the bird than me. That's probably true at this point. I'm hoping that, in the future, I can make a better impression. Sleeping with boxers on in case of an emergency would probably be a great start so I don't end up sunning her again.

Is it wrong that I'm just rooted to the floor, staring at Patience's startlingly wide green eyes, her flushed cheeks, the messy blonde strands that I ache to run my fingers through, and her angry, pouty mouth that I'd very much like to kiss?

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhrrrrroooooo!

That's the bird, and its scream has a new intensity to it. It wants to get the hell out of here. It's probably scared enough to have a heart attack right now.

We both duck as it comes careening down the hallway, flapping madly and flying a path that makes no sense. It bounces off the wall and hits the one across from it. Then, it resumes flapping and screaming in the other direction, toward the living room.

“Now!” Patience yelps. “Before it kills itself in here.”

The scene must look awfully funny—me going racing after that deathly screaming bird with Patience's shredded pajama bottoms looped around my waist and one hand keeping them from falling down and giving her a full view of my ass end this time.

The living room windows all have screens on them, but I wouldn't mess around with that anyway. It would take too much time. I want to get the screaming bloody murder bird out as badly as he wants to be gone from this place. I have no idea how he even got in here.

I throw open both doors, which takes a hot minute seeing as I only have one hand, and the murder bird gets the idea. He goes screeching and whooping right on by into the great black

beyond of the night. Warm air rushes in at me and hits me all over, the humidity already creating a fine sheen of sweat on my skin even though I'm only standing halfway outside.

A swim would be nice right about now. Well, you know what? Why not?

I quickly close the doors and turn around. I find Patience leaning up against the wall right where it arches into a curved doorway to go into the living room. All the doorways are curved here, not just the outside one. It's a mushroom house, and it has to look the fairytale part, so straight square doorways aren't a thing.

She's beautiful like that, in her extra long T-shirt and shapely legs on display, but only from the knee down. Her hair is so unruly that my hands ache to run through it and finger comb out the tangles. It still looks so soft. I want to press my fingers to her neck, to feel her wild pulse beating after that scare. I want to soothe her with my lips and assure her everything is going to be alright in a gentle whisper. I want to watch as her eyes close and her head falls back, giving me more room to lick and suckle her sweet skin. And I want to hear that final sigh of relief before her breathing changes and her heart starts to pound harder.

Yeah. Freaking. Right.

It's not going to happen. I don't think Patience really hates me like she says she does, but she's a long way away from forgiving me. And anything physical? I know some people would argue that it can be done out of rage or hatred, but that's not for me. I would only ever want to be close to her because she wants it too. She's more likely to cuddle up with the death bird than to come to me for comfort.

Ever.

I wanted so badly to save her. When I came back to town, I heard about everything that had gone wrong for her and witnessed my dad's animosity firsthand. I wanted to take her away from that and ensure her dad would be okay. That she would be too. I wanted to help them both. Give them a future.

But I only made things worse.

However, I can still make it right. I'm going to make it right. Even if it costs me everything, I will make sure Patience and her dad are okay. My dad too. I'm going to try everything in my power to make both our dads friends again. Which was what I was thinking about, that strategy or lack of one, right when the death bird went screeching like an alarm in the house.

Right now, we both just stand there. Patience bites down on her bottom lip while I'm frozen, half wearing her pajamas.

Bitty Kitty saunters into the room, making her adorable little chirping noise at me. She comes to me first and rubs herself on my leg. I bend down and scratch her head. She chuffs at me as if to ask what all the fuss earlier was about.

"It's all good now. The bird is gone."

"Thank goodness for that. Devil bird." Patience thinks I'm talking to her. And maybe I am, through the skunk. God, I've become a special kind of coward. I want to apologize for accidentally showing her my junk, but she makes a noise between her teeth and walks off.

I'm at the perfect angle to see her feet go out of my field of vision.

Tomorrow morning. I'll apologize tomorrow morning. And I'll figure out what to do about our dads. We both will. Together. Not like the old days, where we'd put our heads together and could dream up anything, but like the new days. The *good* new days.

"Looks like I owe her a new pair of pajama bottoms," I tell Bitty Kitty. "You hungry? I could use a snack."

She twists around my legs again.

“Skip the snack because it won’t sit right for a swim? Good idea. A very good idea. You’re going to come out and watch me?” I say to Bitty Kitty.

She won’t wander off, not even at night. She would never go into the woods without me. I like night swims. Maybe not in the middle of the night, but swimming in the dark is nice. Bitty Kitty loves to curl up on one of the lawn chairs. She’ll watch for a few minutes and then do her skunk guard by curling up into a tight ball and passing out, likely from boredom. It’s only so interesting to watch a dude swim laps for so long, I’m sure. Whenever I get out, she always wakes up and follows me in.

She looks at me like she’s telling me to remember to get changed first. It’s a great idea. Swimming in the nude is no longer an option. Not that I ever did that. Okay, fine, a few times, but hardly ever in my pool. More like in the lake with friends on skinny dipping dares and whatnot.

“Swim right now.” I scratch under her chin, where she loves to be scratched. “Tomorrow, Project Get Our Dads Not To Hate Each Other begins. You up for it, girl?”

She looks at me like I've lost my mind. Like there isn't any hope in the world that this is ever going to work.

She's probably right.

CHAPTER 6



Patience

I'm tired the next morning when my alarm goes off at seven. Apollo's dad will be at the airport, landing about now. Then, he'll rent a car and drive out and be here by eight-thirty or nine. He declined our invitation to pick him up the same way my dad did. No one wanted to inconvenience us.

I blink my grainy eyes at the ceiling. It's not fancy like some houses, but instead, it has stucco and is domed like a cave roof. It's not a low ceiling, but it does curve at the top. In the middle of the room, the most impressive light fixture of blown glass leaves looks like it's on as the sun plays over it. I wonder if that was intentional in the design. The windows here aren't stained glass like the one on the main floor, but they still let in lots of pink-gold early morning sunlight.

I keep watching the flickering lights on the ceiling as I think about last night.

I can still hear the horrible cry from that poor bird. I'm glad it got outside. I hope it's okay.

I hope *I'm* okay after getting an eyeful of *everything* Apollo. I missed this whole stage. Those awkward, formative

years when a guy goes from being a boy to a teenager and then to a man. I've said this before, but it was never more obvious than last night when naked Apollo appeared like a...god damnit...like a sun god, all bronzed, muscled, and hard.

Well, not like...everywhere. Not down there. But still. He was still...um...well endowed.

Okay, fuck, whatever. If you saw your one-time best friend's stick and berries out of the blue, it would haunt you too. And by haunt, I mean get stuck in your mind, not like a ghostly haunt, and not a creepy doll haunt. They're not frightening. His package is just a package, and I certainly have no interest in it, just like I have no interest in the rest of him, muscles and all.

I noticed a few things last night. He has a crescent-shaped scar on his left peck, and he has no ink that I can see. He's been carved out of the earth, just like this mushroom house. His skin is made of finely spun gold, and it looks terribly soft.

Jesus, god. Fuck on a mushroom.

My hormones are acting like how they would have acted if I had known Apollo in high school. I no doubt would have woken up one day and noticed that my bestie had turned out hot. I probably would have been the awkward one. I would

have gone through this embarrassing phase where I avoided him. He's a boy, and I'm a girl. It was bound to happen when we left our childhood behind, our bodies changed, and we slowly became aware of that.

I'm more than slowly aware now, thank you very much, middle-of-the-night dick sighting.

Ugh.

I cover my eyes with my hands now, but that makes it worse. The memory of the shape of...um, Apollo's body...is burned into my brain, so I focus on the sun instead. Maybe I can burn it off if I scald my retinas.

His dad is going to be here in a few hours. And my dad will be coming this afternoon. Today is the day if it's any day. I *know* it's basically today or bust. We get one chance, and that means working together. We haven't done that because I've been avoiding him at all costs. I guess he would say I have a stick up my arse, but at least I have something. I don't sleep in the nude or run out of a room in the nude when someone is screaming bloody murder in the middle of the night.

I suck a deep breath in through my nose and let it out through my mouth as I let my entire body sink into the big,

round bed. Yes, it's round. And no, it's not awesome or anything. Neither is this room. Or the rest of the house.

Or Apollo's body.

"Oh my fucking god." I leap out of bed. Action. That's what I need. I need to do something. I can't just lay here anymore.

My hormones are burning red hot despite the cold shower I give myself, no matter how much it sucks, especially since I never shower in anything less than scalding hot water. Those hormones still don't calm down while I get dressed.

They spike a new fever entirely when I get downstairs and find Apollo in the kitchen, standing at the counter and staring out the window. He's leaning on his forearms, facing away from me. His jeans are kind of riding up his butt just a little, which makes it look perfect and hard and manly. Wedgies can be sexy on guys.

No. No, they can't. They're not sexy on him. What the hell is going on with me?

I clear my throat, and he spins around. His eyes are doing that liquid caramel thing that makes me suck in air, and my nipples pucker under my T-shirt. I threw it on over my tank

top, but I regret picking shorts now. They're not short, but they feel like it. It feels like his gaze is incinerating me when it lands on me.

"I have an idea," he starts saying. "I couldn't go back to sleep, so I thought about it while I was swimming."

"When?"

"Last night. Early morning? I don't know if I could ever stop swimming."

Is it wrong that I hate swimming? That I hate the sport? That I hate how it took my best friend away from me when I needed him most? Yeah, it's probably time to let it go. It's kind of ironic how much I missed him, considering how I don't even want to be here right now.

"What's the idea?" I ask flatly. I grab a handful of wet hair and twirl it into a knot at the back of my head. It doesn't spin itself out even though I don't secure it with an elastic.

"I have shares in my dad's company. He sold them to me a few years ago. He wanted to give them to me as part of my inheritance and partly because he thought it would get me involved in his company and start taking an interest. They might be controlling shares."

My eyes go big. I feel like this is insider information. Like it's not something I'm really supposed to even know.

“I was hoping that instead of that bailout, which I haven't told your dad about or discussed with anyone other than you, you'd consider asking him to sell you shares in order to save the company, or at least better it to the extreme.”

Apollo must be extremely sleep deprived. Maybe he absorbed too much pool chemicals with all that swimming. No, wait. I don't think he uses chemicals. More like salt or something. I've refused to use the pool, partly because I hate pools on principle and partly because there was no way I was putting on a bathing suit or enjoying any single part of this house where he could see me doing anything other than hating.

“Why would I ever do that?”

“Because then we'd both own a controlling interest in rival companies. We could force a merger.”

“What?” I nearly fall over. “You're insane! That would kill my dad.”

“No.” His eyes sparkle, which is just another unfair low blow that I know he can't help, but it still pisses me off. How dare he look so freaking good without sleeping? How dare he

grow into this beautiful man who is so hot that it's nearly painful to even be in the same room as him? Painful for my body. "No, it wouldn't kill either of our dads. Because they'd be working for a corporation we designed and operated together. It would be the next generation furthering their legacy. We would make sure the company is large enough that they get to live out both their visions. That all their needs would be served and beyond. So far beyond. We would take things to a level they couldn't even begin to imagine. Software and technology have never been more important than it is now. Home security, medical, point of sales systems, programming for pretty much every kind of machinery there is...the options are pretty much endless. The company would have specialized departments, but it would be working as part of a whole. There would be no competition."

I snort the snort of all snorts. "You clearly haven't worked in a corporate setting before. There's *always* competition between departments. People don't like working together. They like being the star of their own show."

"Maybe. But what if we were all working together? What if we were there too?"

“What? That would involve going back. You seem to just want to be out here, living in your fantasy land and swimming in your pool of money day and night.”

His eyes crinkle. He looks way too handsome when they do that. I spin around, walk to the fridge, and grab the container of OJ. I hate juice in the morning, but whatever. Apollo doesn't know how it makes my stomach burn. *He* makes my stomach burn. This is the lesser of two evils. At least I don't have to look at him while I'm searching for a glass and pouring. Then, with the glass in my hand, I study the window after, pretending to be thinking.

“I like swimming,” he admits. “Day and night, certainly, but not in money. That would be deadly for papercuts.”

“Ha fucking ha.”

“Seriously. If you think it's our only chance of helping our dads get along, I'd be willing to temporarily move back to Dedind.”

“You used to say it was called Dedind for a reason. Because no one went anywhere there.”

“That was just me being a dumb kid. I didn't mean it. You can't hold what I said when I was like seven years old against

me.”

“How do I know what you think now? You live in this fairytale house. Of course, you’d think Dedind is disgusting, or at least beneath you. You thought everyone was beneath you. That’s why you never came back.” I don’t mean for that to slip out.

The room is both supercharged and utterly still. I feel like I just crash-coursed something I was always meant to stay away from. And fuck, it’s not a good feeling. I want to take it back. I feel so utterly vulnerable now. I’ve flayed myself open like a total tool.

I can hear the soft footsteps coming across the kitchen. Soft enough that, without looking, I know Apollo is in bare feet. His voice is just as soft, and it’s too close. He’s too close. I don’t move. I can’t move. I have to stand my ground, even if it’s the shakiest ground I’ve ever stood on.

He doesn’t make excuses. He doesn’t even comment on what I said. Instead, his words are gentle and even. “Our dads will be here soon. They were closer than brothers, and now they’re worse than enemies. They’re rivals. My dad wanted to destroy yours. That’s the most malicious thing from the most loving man I know. What happened at that card game might

not be fair or right, but we're here now, and it's up to us to make this work. Despite the past, can we do that? Can we be that unbeatable, unshakable, extremely awesome, possum, blossom, moss on 'em single unit of epicness that we used to be, even if it's just for a few hours today?"

He's using our childhood terms. Our code. He doesn't tell me that I'm being petulant or call me a problem. He doesn't call my dad a problem, even though he was the one who left to begin with and basically initiated this whole feud. It's not his fault, but he did take that first step.

I sigh with my whole body. It was inevitable that we both arrive at this point. We both want the same thing, and we'll only get it if we work together, like it or not, past or not, card game or not. We're here now. The past years have been ugly, to say the least. I know how much my dad misses his old best friend. No one understood him the way John did. They had a lifetime together, a history, years and years. Giving that back to him would be the best gift I could ever offer him.

I just need to get over myself.

I shut my eyes. This isn't surrender. It's just a temporary truce.

"Alright."

CHAPTER 7



Apollo

“No. Nope. No way. If he’s here, I’m *leaving*.”

All of Patience’s dad’s happiness evaporates into a cloud of ragey-rage the second he spots my dad out by the pool. Gerry’s outburst causes my dad to leap out of the zero gravity chair where he is sprawled out in tropical floral swim trunks and a T-shirt with a computer doing a jig on the front of it. I got it for him a few Christmases ago. Anything with tech-related objects doing a dance is pretty awesome in my books. His pineapple banana smoothie goes flying out of his hand, and it lands with a squishy plop on the concrete surrounding the pool.

“Dad...” Patience puts her hand on Gerry’s shoulder. “Please, just hear us out.”

“Never. Not if it means this.” He waves his hands madly.

My dad starts waving his hands around madly too. They’re both standing there, twenty feet away from each other, doing a windmill motion. If it wasn’t so tragic, I’m sure it would look funny.

Gerry spins around and shrugs Patience's hand off. "You planned this."

"Yeah," she admits. "We did. Because it's beyond time that you guys get this figured out. You need to make up. You need to figure out a way to be happy together."

Her dad is about as red as his plain red T-shirt, and that thing is the brightest cherry red in the history of red. He rubs his hands on his jeans and frowns at his daughter. "This isn't the way. Not through trickery. Two people have to want it. One person has to be sorry for being a pigheaded imbecile of a butthole."

In an instant, *my* dad turns equally as red. "That would be you, you blathering, betraying bastard."

"Betraying? I'm not the one who has done everything in his power to tank a company that is making a difference in the world for people who *need* it."

"No need to froth at the mouth, Ger. I haven't done a thing. You're perfectly capable of running that company into the ground with your own bad decisions as it is."

"You—you—"

"Skunk!"

Oh no.

I can't stop what happens next. My dad doesn't know I have a pet skunk. I knew he'd have something to say about it, so I just never brought it up. He'd lecture me about how wild animals belong in the wild, how I always was too soft and tender, and how I should just get a cat like everyone else. He would tell me that I should let nature be natural and not interfere. He told me that many times when I was a kid bringing home baby birds that had fallen out of their nests, a baby bunny that the neighbor's cat was running around with, a mouse who got its back foot caught in a trap and broke it, a rat the school caught in a live trap that literally kept coming back to the point where they didn't know where to release it, and an ancient dog I once saw online at a shelter—it really needed a home. I begged him every single time. And every single time, he told me no.

That makes him sound like an asshole, but I think he just didn't want to break my heart. Wild animals don't do well in captivity. They have a low survival rate. We had no wildlife rehabbers anywhere near us, and he wasn't willing to make a twelve-hour round trip for a mouse. And maybe his point about wild animals was valid. Kind of? But not really, since

the dog did get adopted by another family too. I kept calling the shelter to make sure. That one didn't make any sense.

When I went off to London, he told me it was a good thing I didn't have any pets that had to stay with him because I would miss them, and they'd miss me. It would have been heartbreak all around.

Now that I'm an adult, I think my dad has an aversion to grief. Don't judge him. Losing my mom nearly killed him. I didn't understand as a kid, but I do now that my emotions are more fully formed.

I've kept Bitty Kitty out of his way every single one of the few times he was here before, so he doesn't know anything about her.

My skunk-cat comes walking across the yard, all casual and happy, completely undeterred by the yelling. She might hate loud noises, but she's not easily scared off by our blathering dads, apparently.

Gerry takes off away from the poor girl, grabbing Patience's wrist in the process. He shoves her in front of him and shields her. She keeps trying to sputter out that the skunk is a pet, but he's not hearing her. He throws an arm around her shoulders and propels her forward, so she has no choice but to

run or get clotheslined from the back. I guess he temporarily forgets his animosity toward my dad because when he approaches the pool and my dad, who is frozen in place, he grabs him with his other arm and turns him right around.

It's a moment of blind panic. They're all running forward, but there's nowhere to run because the pool is right there. I yelp out a few sounds that don't even make sense as they try to stop. Gerry puts the brakes on, but it's too late. They careen off the edge of the pool. My dad is the only one dressed for it. Patience is in jeans, a T-shirt, and bright pink combat boots. She used to be what people would call a tomboy, I guess, although that term is so dumb and outdated, and I like that she still wears blue jean cut-offs, baggy T-shirts with funny sayings and pictures on the front, and those combat boots, which she just broke out this morning. The best part is they're tough looking, but they're also pink.

And now they're waterlogged.

All three of them surface, gasping and sputtering.

"You imbecile! This is about as good an idea as setting out on your own. Just utter ridiculousness!"

"Ridiculous! Ridiculous! I'll show you ridiculous, you malicious turd face!" Gerry takes one wide step in the pool

and literally tries to drown my dad by pressing his head under the water.

My dad is a great swimmer. He surfaces immediately, cursing and asking who Gerry is to be calling someone a turd, and then he's the one trying to drown Gerry, who isn't the best swimmer.

Patience swims to the edge of the pool and hauls herself out. She's crying, but not because she's soaked in all her clothes. "Do something!" she begs me with a sob. There are tears streaming down her cheeks, mixing with the beads of water. "They're going to *kill* each other!"

Maybe this is what they need to do to work it out for good, but I'm not taking any chances. I don't know how well Gerry can swim, and accidents are not a thing that happens on my watch. Dunking someone is one thing, but even good fun can turn into a disaster at a moment's notice. I'm very keen on not fucking around in the pool. I could never be a lifeguard as I'd be way too anal to let any kids have any fun.

It takes me a fraction of the time to dive into the pool. I grab Gerry around the waist since he's underwater and haul him up. Then, I make sure he has a firm grip on the edge of the pool before I grab my dad and swim him to the other end.

When I turn around, my dad is shoving at my chest, and he looks spitting mad. It's as if he were a cat that was just dunked. I see Gerry swimming for the stairs at the other end of the pool. He walks out and stands there, water streaming from his clothes.

They do an admirable job of glaring each other down, even with me in the middle.

Patience has hauled herself out, and she's sitting on the edge of the pool, her pink boots still just under the surface. They look huge down there, like monster clown shoes. Her chest is heaving, and I'm pretty sure she's still crying.

An insane bolt of rage rips through me. Not for anyone in particular, but okay, kind of for both our dads because she's *crying*, and she should not be crying. I want to tear the whole world apart if it will make her stop.

She doesn't need me to tear anything down or put anything back together. She swipes at her cheeks, then grabs her hair and twists it into a big knot. It looks so dark when it's wet. She wrings the water from it and tosses it over her shoulder before flinging her legs up over the edge and scooting back. Water gushes out of her boots. She stands up, and they make a wet *squish* noise. She shifts from one foot to the other and folds

her arms over her chest. Her clothes are more than clinging to her curves. I want to stop staring, but I can't.

“I would like both of you to get your butts in the house and dry off!” *Squeeeeeeee*. Her boots. They highlight the point hilariously as she steps back. *Squissssshhhhhh*. “I’m making egg salad sandwiches for dinner, and you’re both eating. Also, the skunk is a darned pet!”

“You have a skunk for a pet?” My dad doesn’t like it. I can hear the hurt in his voice, too, because I should have told him things like this.

Gerry looks slightly triumphant, but only because it’s clear my dad doesn’t know everything, not even about his own son.

Patience ignores them both. “I’m not taking no for an answer from either of you. And if either of you tries and leaves this house before you’ve both cleared everything up and stopped this absolutely ridiculous and childish feud, I will never speak to any of you again!” *Squissssshhhh*. *Squeeeeeeee*. “I mean it.” She looks like a goddess, dropped into a woman’s earthly body. She’s fabulous, furious, and fierce. “I’ve had enough. I’m not your parent, but you’re both acting like children. Grow up! If I’ve ruined my best and favorite pair of boots for nothing, I’m going to be so aggravated. I’m already

aggravated.” *Squish, squish, squeeeeeee*. Her shoes are singing the song of wet leather as she takes a few more steps backward and then whips around and points at the house. “Get in the mushroom. Don’t make us tie you up and haul you into the middle of the woods to force you to do a bonding exercise as you try and find your way back to civilization while fighting off all the dangers of the woods. I know what’s out there. Like mud, mosquitoes, poison ivy, toads with really loud and forceful ribbits, and, oh, bears. I’m sure there are super grouchy bears out there. And...and...big horned sheep. And moose. And killer pinecones, wolves, foxes, and murder death birds.”

My dad blanches, and he gives me the—*is she serious? Do you really live next to all that out here*—look. I turn my head and take in Gerry. He looks stunned, standing half in half out of the pool on the steps in all his clothes. His sneakers will probably dry out. I like that they’re the dad kind with Velcro straps, white with blue accents. I can see them shimmering under the water. They also look huge. It’s not the shoes that catch my attention, though. It’s how much Gerry has aged. I hadn’t seen him in years before the card game, over a decade, but I really didn’t notice the fine details that night because I was too focused on the hand I was playing, the dangers of

what was going down, and the anger suffocating the room like a toxic gas.

Maybe it's the water that clings to the deep grooves in his face or the sodden clothing on a shrunken frame that was once big and strong. Maybe it's the sadness in his eyes or the way his hair is plastered against his head, but I realize he looks old.

My dad too. I take in all those same details, too—gray hair, deep wrinkles, a frame that is smaller than mine when it once used to be so huge. I know that's part of growing up, how you realize your parents look smaller, but I think it's more than age that's stooped both our dads over. It's this stupid feud, years of stress, and losing our moms. The years and trials of life have worn them out. Neither of them ever found love again. And they wrecked their brotherhood over a disagreement.

I haul myself up, too, the water sluicing off my T-shirt and shorts. My hair is already starting to dry under the hot sun as I wipe the salty droplets of pool water from my face with a swipe of my hand. "Hatred isn't good for anyone."

Behind me, Patience tenses. She looks like she wants to run away, but not to the house. To the woods. She looks like she'd rather take on all the death birds and poison ivy in the world

than sit through trying to get our dads to agree to put aside their hurt feelings.

“It’s like cutting off your own arm,” she whispers. “Will you stop hurting each other and everyone around you with your anger, or will you work even harder to outdo each other? Will you try and vie for our affections now that we’re married?” That word is careful on her tongue. Like she thinks it’s dangerous. “Is this going to become a competition?” She pauses for a second. “Dad?”

He looks guilty. Sheepish. He won’t look at my dad, but he does look at his daughter. It’s obvious how much he loves her. “You know egg salad is my weakness,” he mumbles. “I might just have to stay for lunch.”

My dad doesn’t agree, but he doesn’t disagree either. Instead, he huffs and swings himself over the edge of the pool. Neither of them leaves. Neither of them goes for each other’s throats. I guess that’s about as good as it’s going to get at the moment.

CHAPTER 8



Patience

My mom told me something right before she left my dad. I might have been young, but the whole her leaving and me never seeing her again has basically made sure it's stayed embedded in my brain. I don't know if I've ever really understood it until now, even though I've tried to practice it my whole life.

You'll only ever get the kind of love you give.

Pretty much my whole life, I thought it was her fancy way of telling me that I would only ever get back what I gave. Everyone says that. You get what you give.

Dripping wet and leaning over the fancy-ass antique dresser, which somehow completes this forest-themed room because it's round and bubbly-looking while being elaborately carved with lion feet and a mirror that is at least eight feet tall and has two smaller side companions that are also round, bubbly-looking, and intricately completed at the top with scrolling detail, I realize I was wrong.

She wasn't saying you get what you give.

Why is it only now that I hear the rest of that statement? She'd bent down to me so we were eye to eye. She was so much taller. Blond and slim. So pretty. She always smelled like roses. That was her favorite flower. Mine have always been bleeding hearts and thistles. How fortuitous, except they're also remarkably beautiful. It doesn't matter that one is the national flower of not liking people, and the other is the emblem of funerals. I didn't know any of that as a little girl. I just thought they were pretty. I thought she was pretty—the prettiest woman in the entire world. There was no one more beautiful than my mom. No one I trusted more. When she spoke, I listened. It felt like she was imparting secret wisdom that day.

You'll only ever get the kind of love you give. And right now, it's better that I leave because you both deserve more than what I can give you. I'll always love you, sweetheart. Always. In my own way.

“In your own way means jack fucking shit!” I hiss under my breath at the mirror. My cheeks get pink with anger, and I can see the spitting rage in my eyes as they darken. My hair drips in slow, methodical streams, and my clothes do more than a slow drip. They're soaking the room, plastered against

my body. My shoes are the worst of it. They're now two wet, squishy, swampy sponges. "You never loved me enough to come back. You didn't even love me enough to call or write."

I never forgave her. I've been holding all this anger, watching it grow and build. The resentment often felt like it was choking me. I hated her for hurting my dad. I hated her for abandoning me.

I hated Apollo the same way. He abandoned me too. He made a promise just like she did. He promised he'd protect me and that we'd always be friends. That no matter what, we'd stick it out together. He lied. He lied. He left.

But then he came back.

He thought I needed saving, so he saved me.

He took me away to this silly mushroom castle of a house that he built for me like I was a princess. Yes, I'm married to him, but he promised it could always be fake. He promised to help, and he'll keep those promises. Both our dads are here, drying out downstairs while he tries to mediate because he wants to keep his word.

He could have just let his dad take the company. He could have let him crush my father. He owns a majority stake in the

company, so it really would have been him doing the crushing and owning. But he didn't. Instead, he asked for me. And now he has a plan that he thinks will work. He doesn't care about money, and I don't think it's because he has so much of it that he doesn't know what to do with it. I think it's because even if he didn't have the money, people would always come first. Family. Friends. Our dads. *Me*.

I saw this man, this man who had everything, and I was blinded with rage. I'd been that way for a long time. It sucked, holding on to it. All the shitty things that happened to me after Apollo left, I was mad at him for that too. I was mad that I didn't have my best friend to grow up with. That I didn't have him to talk to. That he was the one who went to college. That I worked my ass off at my dad's company, learning everything I could in place of me going to college because we couldn't afford it. That I stuck around and supported my dad because he needed me, and the company needed me after a few years, too. I blamed my sometimes anger about that on Apollo too. I felt so stifled and smothered. I wanted more than to live in a small city in the middle of nowhere. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to do everything I couldn't. I wanted more, and I hated myself for wanting that because I felt like a traitor. I felt like my mom.

But maybe I misjudged him. Maybe Apollo isn't the man I made him out to be.

He pulled my dad out of the pool first, like he knew my dad was the shittier swimmer. He was grinning the whole time, which only encouraged our dads to stop spitting and hissing for a second. He's downstairs with them now, doing god knows what.

Shower: I need to shower. I need to shower and get into clean clothes and stop moping around.

The bathroom in this room is insane.

It's also insane getting out of wet boots, jeans, and a clinging T-shirt.

Somehow, I manage.

I throw myself under the hot rain shower head spray. It glows a ton of different colors. The floor is a mosaic made of tiny little tiles and colored stones, and it looks like a big tree with leaves jutting all over the place. They go halfway up the walls. The toilet is bright blue, and the sink is made out of stone. The shower is also tiled totally out of little pebbles that don't look like anything. They're just pretty.

I refuse to think about Apollo naked in the hallway last night. Or his...um...stuff. Package. I don't think about how he looked, climbing out of the pool, soaked and muscled for miles. Powerful. And how he looked twice the size of our dads, twice as powerfully built. Long and lean, soaking wet, and completely at home. The god of water, screw Poseidon.

My body only gets hot because the water is steamy, and my fun zones only feel fun because they were cold earlier, and now they're hot, and it makes them tingle. My skin is now free from clammy clothes, and it takes time to adjust. That's why it feels sensitive all over.

I've just lathered up a bunch of really good-smelling shampoo into my hair when I hear the knock at the door. And then my name in that slightly rough voice. "Patience?"

I yelp and immediately get shampoo in my eyes, which makes me yelp again. I dive under the spray. "What?" I sound testy. It's only because this shampoo burns like I just sprayed myself in the face with an entire angry science lab *and* kitchen combined.

"Can we talk for a second?"

Blinking eyes that are now tearing up, I rinse the rest of the suds out of my hair and shut off the water. The bathroom came

fully stocked, so there are bottles of leave-in conditioner on the counter. I quickly wrap the world's fluffiest red towel around myself and take a second smaller one for my hair.

Damn fluffy cloud-like towels. They just have to be so fluffy and perfect, don't they?

"Just a minute."

I towel my hair and rub the conditioner through it. I freeze when I stare at the pile of sopping clothes on the floor. And at my ruined pink boots. I didn't bring anything clean in here. Nothing dry. The options are to squeeze back into wet jeans or go out in a towel.

"I don't have anything to wear," I finally whisper back, going to the door. "We'll just have to talk like this."

"Do you want me to get you something?"

My mind immediately goes *there*, which makes all my lady bits tingle again. Total change in temperature. The towel that's too soft. Those are easy reasons that *totally make sense*. Apollo. Touching. My underwear. My bras. My clothing.

"No, I'm good. Just...tell me whatever it is."

"I convinced our dads to stay the night."

I just about drop the towel right off of myself as my jaw drops too. “How the hell did you do that?”

I swear his voice has a hint of laughter in it. “I just asked them. I think the speech you gave outside was more than enough to guilt them into it.”

“That wasn’t guilt. It was the truth.”

“There’s just one problem.”

I think there’s more than one, but I go icy inside. “What’s that?”

“I only have three bedrooms.”

Yup, I go there. Me. Apollo. His bed. Tangled sheets. Heavy limbs. Salty muscle. My mouth. His mouth. Illicit things. These are not friendly thoughts. They’re not fake marriage thoughts. They’re not even sensical thoughts. My brain is clearly waterlogged, and it refuses to operate. It’s as mushy as my pink boots. I give my head a shake, and water goes flinging off my wet hair.

“How is that a problem? Give my dad the other spare room, your dad can take yours, and you can have the couch.”

He laughs. “Alright. That’s a good solution.”

What was he going to suggest? That we share a room? Share a bed and sleep in our clothes with a pillow wall between us? Or did his mind go to the place mine just went? I haven't seen him so much as look at me that way once. I've had tingly thoughts, I've had tingly parts, I've noticed he's a grown man in a grown man's body, and my hormones have gone wonky, but his? He's been as cool and collected and about as non-hormonal as it gets. There have been no sidelong glances, no lingering looks, and no awkwardness on his part. The only time I saw him flustered was when he realized he was naked, and that was only because I freaked out first.

He's totally not into me.

“Well, now that you have that figured out, can you leave? I'd like to get dressed and figure out how we can keep our dads from tearing each other apart, getting into wild arguments, or starting secondary or third-ary feuds.”

“I'll leave. Absolutely. That's a good point. Spending the night is just the first step. They might wake up in the morning and still want to kill each other. I'll make sure the pool is off-limits so there aren't any more near-drowning incidents. Plus, I'll be sure to cook a really good breakfast. It's harder to be angry when you're not hangry.”

That's the kind of logic Apollo would have used as a kid. It nearly makes me smile.

I listen for a few minutes and hear nothing. It's weird, that vacuum of silence. When Apollo clears his throat, I nearly jump out of my skin. Again.

"Oh my god, are you still there?" What was he waiting for? Me to come out in a towel and then shock me? No. He wouldn't do that. I know he wouldn't do that. I have to admit that I don't really think there's a creepy, dishonorable bone in Apollo's body. He's grown into the kind of man his mom would be proud of.

That makes me sad. Really freaking sad. Like the burning in the eyeballs all over again kind of sad, but at least the tears can cleanse the shampoo residue out.

I miss my mom. Yes, I'm mad at her, and I hate her for leaving. I hate that she abandoned my dad and me and never looked back. But I miss her.

It would be nice to have a mom to talk to right now. To talk things out with. How many times did I wish for that over the years? For both my mom and Apollo?

Maybe he wished for the same thing.

Even if he was the one who left, maybe he wished he never had. Maybe he wished himself back in bumfuck nowhere, going nowhere, or that I was overseas with him. Maybe. I don't know. Probably not. No doubt he missed his mom, but he probably had a full enough life over there that he didn't need his childhood best friend. Former best friend. We have pretty little in common now. We probably would have grown apart as teenagers anyway.

“I'm still here.”

His voice gives me full-body goosebumps, followed by a full-body shiver, followed by full-body heat. His tone is so full of...longing? It's deep and husky, whatever it is. Maybe that's just his regular voice. It could be that he swallowed too much pool water pulling our dads out, or he's getting a summer cold. Perhaps I have shampoo in my ears, too, and it's making me hear things. Or it's going to my brain and making me imagine things.

“Why?” I snap. It's easier to be snappy than to be vulnerable. I'm feeling way too much right now, and it's not cool.

“I just wanted to say I'm sorry about your boots. I can buy you another pair.”

“I don’t need another pair,” I bite back.

“Patience?”

I’m quickly running out of it, that’s for sure. “Can you just go make sure our dads haven’t killed each other in some creative manner down there?”

A heartbeat of silence, then he mumbles, “Sure. Yes, I’ll do that.”

This time, his footsteps leaving are unmistakable. I brush the tears out of my eyes and give my wrecked boots a glance that makes a fresh set of tears pool up. There’s probably very little shampoo left in there now. I swipe at my eyes and get my determined face on. This bathroom is so freaking perfectly perfect that the mirror isn’t even steamed up after the shower, and the vent fan is silent. I don’t remember turning it on. It’s probably an automatic thing. A smart fan for a smart shower for a smart house.

I don’t have time to be sad. Not when both our dads are here, and my job as a peacemaker and friendship fixer and... bro matchmaker has just begun.

No. Not just *my* job.

Our job.

Apollo is fully in this with me too.

CHAPTER 9



Apollo

I decide what's best for our dads is a team-building exercise. I got the idea when Patience threatened to put them out in the woods and make them navigate back to the house on their own so they learn teamwork, trust, and reliance on each other.

Trust-building exercises are garbage. Literally, no one in the history of the world has liked them, even if they're on good terms with each other. I remember doing them in school. Garbage. College. Hot garbage. At work after. More garbage.

For the sakes of both our dads, I spend a few hours in the middle of the night rearranging the fridge and cupboards until they make no sense.

Over breakfast, when Patience is silent, and so are our dads—because they keep glaring unholy hellish glares at each other—I make my announcement.

“While Patience and I tackle the garden outside, which really needs some work because I was gone to Dedind for three weeks and the weeds are taking over since my housesitter wasn't much for pulling, plucking, or caretaking

outside, I really need you guys to work together to clean up the fridge and cupboards. They're a real mess too."

Gerry and my dad give each other another round of glares. They're hostility incarnate. They know what this is about, but I'm not sure either of them has the strength to protest after what Patience said yesterday. They both saw how hurt she was. They've realized this feud is doing more than just damaging each other. There are other people getting caught in the crossfire too.

"Alright," Gerry grumps. "Fine. I'll tackle the fridge. He can do the cupboards."

I was afraid this would happen, so I planned ahead. Patience looks out the window. "I'd really like it if you could both do the fridge together. It needs to be taken apart and cleaned out too. Things need to be thrown out. It's going to be more than a one-person job. We're going to pick some stuff from the garden, and I'm hoping to make a rhubarb crisp. I don't know where anything is right now, so if you could find the stuff we need and set it aside from the cupboards, that would be great."

Dad huffs and stuffs a piece of bacon into his mouth. "Gosh darned fridge."

“God danged fridge,” Gerry curses at the same time.

They glare at each other and stare more murder daggers. Dad looks at me like he’s thinking about writing me out of his will. I would never glare back with a look that equally says I’m going to change my main beneficiary to Bitty Kitty. My dad and Patience are in my will right now, split fifty-fifty. But she doesn’t know that.

“I can’t work with this...this...” My dad starts making air quotes for no apparent reason, looks at me again, studies Patience, and drops his hands. “Alright. Alright, we’ll clean it out in some kind of orderly fashion where we have to work together as little as possible.”

I made sure everything was such a mess that it was going to take them more than a little while. It won’t be possible to not work together.

“Okay.” I manage to keep a straight face.

Patience still won’t really look at any of us.

When we’re done with breakfast, we leave our dads inside and head out together. The garden really is a mess. It’s half overgrown and half weeds, and it’s hard to tell which is which.

Patience has seen the garden every time she's gone outside. She's seen the pool. She's seen pretty much everything. She shades her eyes from the bright sun, rolls her shoulders back in her vintage T-shirt with alien bats on the front, and shuffles in her flip-flops and cut-off shorts. Then, she smacks a fly or mosquito with the back of her hand.

“You did it, didn't you? Messed up the fridge? I thought I heard someone downstairs raiding for a snack last night, but it was you, wasn't it?”

“It was. My dad is enjoying the enchanted worlds theme room way too much to get up for a midnight snack.”

“And my dad says he likes the volcano in his room. He says it's epic, even if it's just painted on the wall. And he likes the leaf bed.”

We both pause at the edge of the garden. “Do you think they'll tear each other apart?” Patience bites down on her bottom lip, which sends a shower of sparks through my blood. It feels a lot like adrenaline and a pretty obvious boner that is getting harder with every passing second. I did the jeans and T-shirt thing and threw on a pair of rubber boots so the bugs wouldn't chew me alive out here. And thistles. They're in the garden, and they're rancid.

“I hope not. If they start throwing pickles and condiments at each other, I’ll rush in and put a stop to it.”

“You didn’t bring your phone out here to monitor the security.”

“I can tell the Mushroom House Manager to shut the place down.”

Her lips twitch at the corners, which is an improvement over the eye twitching that normally happens when she’s worried or annoyed.

“I think we’ll hear them yelling and carrying on. I left all the windows open, and sound carries out here.”

“Hmm.” She gives me a weird look, which makes my dick even harder. She quickly looks away—not from my dick, from my face—but it’s like she knows what’s going on in my jeans. Her cheeks flush slightly.

She stalks through the garden and stops at a huge thistle plant. “I like these. Can they stay?”

“They’re not really the friendly kind of thistles. They’re more like the move-in and take over the whole place kind of thistles.”

“Oh. Well, I didn’t see any flower gardens. You should make some. Get some real thistles. Some of the globe ones. And bleeding hearts.”

She still loves those flowers. I didn’t forget. I just didn’t want to presume, either. I thought I’d let her figure that out for herself later. She’d be great at making flowers grow around here.

“Is there actually rhubarb, or do we need to run to the store somewhere or find a farmer’s market and get some?”

I point to the far corner of the garden where I can see the epic huge leaves just sticking out above the weed line. “It’s over there.”

“Thank goodness. I didn’t want to have to go anywhere. Not when the chance of catastrophe is massively high.”

We pick our way between weeds, thistles, and the stuff that is supposed to be growing and go over to the sprawling patch. The rhubarb is already going to seed. It grows all spring and summer. I tried to plant it in a cool part of the garden, where the huge trees on the far end of the yard give a little bit of shade at certain times of the day. It’s really grown like crazy, creeping along the far edge of the garden.

I know some people hate rhubarb, but I don't understand that. Rhubarb is the spice of life. It's good raw, put in baking, made into muffins, stewed, turned into sauce, reduced to spreads or jams, and probably a thousand other things I don't even know about.

"I'm planning on doing a separate team-building exercise later when we bake the crisp. It's going to be a collaborative effort."

I'm used to Patience looking at me like I'm crazy. "You really have hope that this would work out? They seemed ready to tear each other new assholes all of last night, and this morning they got into a fight about which style of eggs were the best even though we both know they like their eggs every which way to Sunday."

I knew our dad's voices would carry across the yard, but we both froze when we heard my dad. "This bloody fridge!"

Then there's Gerry, and he sounds like he's in agreement, which is perhaps the most shocking part. "I can't find a damn thing!"

"It's the same with this pantry!"

"There's no order to anything."

“How could it get like this?”

“Who makes a mess like this?”

I cover my mouth with my hand to keep my laughter from going in the other direction and reaching them. Patience sucks back a grin, which makes her look so adorable.

“We should probably pull some weeds and then pick some of this. I can’t see it taking them more than an hour. They both have analytical, problem-solving minds. Putting them to work on organizing like that was a great idea, but you don’t want the fridge over-organized. You’ll never find anything that way, either. We’ll probably have to go in and rescue it from their combined efforts.”

I never thought of that. “You’re a smart cookie.”

“Nah.” She waves my compliment away but bends over to start picking weeds randomly here and there without any semblance of order. I think it’s so I can’t see her face.

Unfortunately, she’s giving me a perfect view of her incredible bottom, so I move away before my dick gets too much blood flow with the boner to end all boners, and I have a fainting spell.

I set a timer on my phone for an hour, then pull out the paring knife I tucked into my pocket before we left the house—the one with the little cover over it because pockets and sharp things shouldn't mix—and go tackle the rhubarb.

When the timer goes off, we both walk back to the house. We're significantly sweatier than when we came out since the sun is unmercifully hot today, and the humidity is no joke. We're both grimy. I don't comment on the dirt smears Patience has all over her bare legs, her shorts, or her face, and I don't think about cleaning her up when she says she needs a shower. Instead, I agree to take charge with our dads.

They've got the fridge and cupboards put right orderly, but thank goodness we came in when we did. They're already discussing sub-categories of sauce and starting to argue about the eight varieties of pickles I ordered from this great place online. They make some sensationally different flavors, and the best ones have to be the bubblegum ones. Don't tell me bubblegum and pickles don't mix because these people work miracles and make masterpieces.

I put the rhubarb in the sink, pull up a recipe on my phone, and very cleverly excuse myself to take a shower as well. Although, it's not really an excuse. I'm drenched from the

humidity outside, and I'm sure some very real stinking is imminent.

I'm as quick as I can be, and no, I don't take care of the boner problem, which is now *Boner Problem 2.0*. Even that would take too long, and I'm not willing to sacrifice my kitchen if all unholy hell breaks loose down there.

The clothes I put on are probably equally as wet as the ones I took off since I yanked myself into them so fast that I barely dried myself. My hair drips water all over the back of my neck and down my forehead and temples. I keep swiping at it as I race out of the bathroom and down the stairs.

“Fuck. The shower.”

Yes, I really did forget to turn it off, so I race back to the bathroom and quickly crank the knob off. I'm such a knob. God. Who forgets to turn off the shower when they get out? Good thing the water in here is recycled, for the most part. Smart house and all that.

I wince when I remember I could have asked my Mushroom House Manager to get the shower for me. AI is a scary, wonderful thing.

There's no sign of Patience yet. She should be able to enjoy a relaxing shower. I'm not going to go banging on the bathroom door, asking what she thinks the next step in our *get our dads to go from murderous intent to liking each other again* plan should be.

Closer to the kitchen, I hear the telltale signs of an argument. I hear Gerry first. "You've cut too much. That's not how it should have been chopped at all."

"I'll show you chopping! You added too much sugar. It's better with a sour edge. It's supposed to be tart. It's rhubarb, for the love of dingleberries."

"It's not supposed to be so tart that your face sucks into your arsehole. Then we'll all walk around looking like you."

We didn't hear any of the fridge or cupboards rage, but I'm hearing the rhubarb rage now. It's time to step in.

I round the corner and clear my throat. "Dad, I'm sure the crisp is going to turn out fine. Thank you both so much for pitching in to help with the fridge and cooking. We really appreciate it."

Gerry looks a smidge guilty at the insult to my dad that I very clearly overheard. My dad, on the other hand, is steamed

like a teapot. His face isn't red from the heat since it's perfectly chilled in here. I'm not going to take sides, even if I think rhubarb should always be tart. But it's good when it's sweet too. It's basically the one food I would eat forever if I could only ever eat one food for the rest of my life.

Gerry opens his mouth to say more, but I rush forward and inspect the crisp. They've worked miracles in the short time I showered. My dad was working on mixing up the rhubarb filling, and Gerry took over the crisp topping with the oatmeal, brown sugar, and flour.

"This looks so good, and we haven't even baked it yet." I snatch a piece of rhubarb, loving how my mouth and tongue immediately go fuzzy with it. The sweet taste hits first, then the bitter and sour when I crunch down.

"Feral," Gerry comments. "Eating it raw."

"Don't call my son feral, you dithering bonehead!"

"Enough," I protest, still chewing. They both look like they're ready to go at it again, so I clarify. "Enough doesn't mean insulting each other more."

We all hear footsteps at the same time. I don't have to tell my dad or Gerry to get on their best behavior because they

both do it automatically for Patience. It's remarkable to see the way they change. Her dad stands up straighter and puts on a smile, while my dad looks less feral himself and more friendly and open. I know they're just trying to please Patience after she was so upset. They're trying their best. It's obvious from the fact that no new assholes were torn during this team-building process.

Patience looks fresh and clean. She smells fresh and clean, and she's flushed from her shower, her hair dripping wet like mine. She put on a floral maxi dress that flows all over the place and has a line of buttons from the top to the bottom. There are little ties in the back, and it looks entirely country. In her arms, she's holding the world's scariest doll. The thing was made to look like it's been gardening. The dress is a matching mini to the one she's wearing. When I look down, I realize her dress has been shortened and hemmed at the bottom. Did she borrow fabric from it for the doll's clothes? It sure looks that way. The hair, though. Always the hair. This one is ankle-long. It looks real, but as in a really awful wig. The doll is pasty white with little pink spots on her cheeks and drawn-on large green eyes. Somewhere, Patience found a tiny set of glasses, a little garden trowel, and a miniature book. She's sewn all of them onto the doll.

“I wanted to show you my latest creation in honor of the gardening and baking we’ve been doing.” She thrusts the thing out proudly. “Her name’s Gretchen the Gardener. I just love her! She turned out so well!”

Gah. Glerp. Gulp. “Well” isn’t the word I would use. I mean, yes, she’s well-made. But she’s lovely in a nightmarish sense.

Gerry gulps like I just did. “She’s beautiful, honey. I love the little finishing touches you put on her.”

My dad’s eyes shoot to me like he’s asking me if I knew about the dolls before, how many are in the house, do I have extra locks for his bedroom door at night when those dolls start walking, do they shapeshift, and can they get under the cracks, rendering the locks useless?

I shoot a look back at him, saying yes, I knew about the dolls, and yes, I’ve slept soundly every night, and no, I haven’t woken up to one slithering the walls. The only night-time disaster we’ve had so far was the bird that somehow got in here and screamed its head off about it.

“I’ll just...get this finished and into the oven,” my dad says about the crisp. He quickly turns around.

Gerry shuffles his feet a little and nods. “That’s right. Crisp. Finish. Oven. Yes.”

Like a miracle, our dads work together, throwing all their effort into the dessert.

Patience watches them, the slyest grin turning up the corners of her mouth. I realize the doll was no mistake. She came down here with it, not just to show us her latest creation, but because she knew it would motivate our dads into behaving. Patience is good and sweet, and I don’t think she’d ever turn our dads into dolls, but the possibility is there, hanging over them like a threat.

I want to laugh. I want to race over and hug her and tell her she’s brilliant. I want to lift her up and swing her and that wretched doll around and kiss her. Fuck, now I’m rocking Boner 3.0.

I settle for a grin instead. One that I hope conveys how thankful and hopeful I feel about this day.

CHAPTER 10



Patience

“I know it’s been a hard few days. I have something I want to show you.”

I think this is a terrible idea for several reasons. Firstly, the way Apollo says it has his eyes glistening and his feet shuffling. He totally shifts from one foot to the other, which makes him look like a little boy. It’s not the least bit charming. Not at all. I do not get sucked in. No, not at all. I don’t want to find out what this ultra-mysterious surprise is. Not at all.

Secondly, he’s wearing his freaking T-shirt and shorts combo, and the shorts are like the khaki kind that shouldn’t be hot on anyone, and the T-shirt has a kitten face on the front, which also shouldn’t be hot. Cute, yes. Hot, no. But he looks unreasonably attractive, and he smells unreasonably good. My hormones are currently doing unreasonable things. Thirdly, it seems like this surprise is going to take me out of the house, and I don’t want to go anywhere alone with Apollo. He used to be good at surprises. Really good. Now he has unlimited amounts of money, so there’s no telling what he planned.

I’ll probably like it.

But I don't want to like it.

I don't want to like him.

I don't want to be attracted to him.

It's too late in the day for surprises. It's evening already. That would make the surprise seem a touch too romantic because the sun is so low and golden, and in a few hours, it will be sunset time. They're so glorious out here. I don't want to be charmed by them. Surprises can be *dangerous*.

"I don't think it's a good idea to leave our dads alone. They need constant supervision." That might be true, but it's also true that after a few days together in the house, we all could use a break, even if it's just for a few hours.

He does the casual shoulder-shrug thing that looks so natural on tall guys. He actually pulls it off as though he means it, not like it's a gesture that says *you're probably right*. *If we leave, who knows what will happen here?* "They're getting along."

"Extremely doubtful. They might end up in the pool again."

"If they do, it will only be for a swim."

"They might engage in another card game," I counter.

"I've removed all cards from the house."

“They might...get a sunburn while tanning outside and then blame each other for it and start another decades-long feud.”

He doesn't sigh in my face. Is it even possible to make this man lose his composure? He's still all twinkly-eyed and hopeful. And then he grins at me, and it seals my fate. It's not a grin at my expense. It just promises all sorts of fun that I'm going to one hundred and ten percent like.

“I just don't want to.” There. I say it. I push it out, and I even manage to make it sound legit.

It doesn't work. Apollo bats that away with a swat of his hand and a blink of his eyes. He knows I'm as good as a cat right now, and my curiosity is killing me. I always said I hated surprises.

I have a surprise.

“Why do I feel like this is actually a trap?”

“Live a little, Patience. Take a chance. You might just find that there are good things left for you in this life after all. So many good things.”

“The best thing is yet to come.”

His brow curls up. Now he's on guard. “What's that?”

“The day we end this fake marriage.”

“That’s great.” He rolls his eyes and sighs at me, but he’s back to grinning in three-point-seven-eight seconds. Damn it, it’s like he knows me. Adult me and childhood me and everything in between that he couldn’t possibly know. It’s like he knew before he even walked in here that I’d end up saying yes because I couldn’t not end up saying yes.

My face is probably doing funny things. It’s probably doing the transparent thing where it lets everyone read every single thought and emotion I’m having. I frown, wince, pull odd expressions, try and channel my inner demons, and summon up a whole lot of shade. Negative, negative, Nancy. I don’t want to be excited. I don’t want to look like I’m excited. I don’t want him to see that it matters to me that he’s apparently done something even the slightest bit special.

Growing up was hard without him. High school was hard without him. After I graduated, I worked with my dad, and every single day was hard. When you own a business, you don’t work nine to five. You work twenty-four hours a day. And you’re always worried about it. You live it constantly, without breaks.

“It’ll be *fun*.”

Gah, the magic word. Fun. My life hasn't had a lot of that in it lately. Or for, like, the last decade. I can barely suppress a shiver.

"I'd have to—"

"Everything's taken care of," he reassures me.

"I was going to say have a shower, change, and get myself together." I've been quite...frazzled while our dads have been here. Looking good wasn't high on the list of priorities. Putting myself between murderous glares, starey staredowns, and simmering tempers hot enough to roast a person clean out of their skin in a matter of seconds has been my regular sunup to sundown for the past forty-eight hours, and I'm exhausted.

"You're perfect just the way you are."

"I'm not going out like this." I pull on my T-shirt. It's vintage, and I love it, but it does have a stain near the bottom at the back, and I know for a fact that I tore a giant hole right above the knee of my leggings today when I caught them on the edge of the patio table outside.

"We're not going out."

"The surprise is in here?" I ask flatly. "Or is this some kind of a joke? Because my capacity for fucked up humor is

seriously limited at the moment.”

If there’s one thing I can’t hold up against, it’s compassion, and Apollo’s face gets all soft and *understanding*. “Our dads are going to be fine. I’ve already talked to them. They both agreed we need a break, and they need time to talk.”

“What? They said that?” I gasp.

“That we need a break?”

“No, that they’d talk.” I can feel my insides crumbling, but it’s a crush of utter joy. Maybe this is the surprise.

“They did say that. They both agreed on me giving you this surprise. They know you’ll love it.”

“They know what it is?”

“They do. It’s not a secret. Just a surprise for you, so you can’t know what it is. But they agreed. That’s the important thing. I think it’s going to be okay. This is the first real glimmer of hope I’ve seen yet.”

I don’t want to feel hopeful. I want to keep holding on to my guardedness because it’s the only thing that keeps my heart from getting totally crushed. A little bit crushed is one thing. Obliterated is another. Mine has been obliterated too many

times for me to count, and it's getting harder and harder to put it back together.

“Will you let me show you what it is?”

This is the Apollo I can't deal with. The sweet, gentle, happy, caring man. But still. I'm not going to just give in. He doesn't get to be forgiven just like that and farge on his surprises and his trying to win me over with them. I'm glad our dads finally agreed on at least one thing, but it doesn't mean I have to cave. It doesn't mean I have to like this.

When I got really upset, my dad sometimes used to tell me to put things into perspective.

So, to put things in perspective, I'm in the world's most amazing house. Our parents are under the same roof, and they haven't ripped each other to shreds yet, verbally or in any other way. No one has made any threats about farting on the other in one's sleep. I'm kidding. I don't know why I just thought that. I just remember how, when I was a kid, everyone was saying that and making threats about pink eye. At the time, I thought it was the worst thing I'd ever heard. You don't want to mess with pink eye. It's nasty, scary, and appalling. What could be worse than waking up with a gummy eye and

having the whole world know that someone night-farted in your general direction?

Anyway, just because the house is my dream brought to life, everything is a work of art, I'm out in the woods in the middle of nowhere, my dad's company is going to be okay, and I've had a bit of a vacation for the first time in a very long time, there are also some serious drawbacks.

I'm married to a man I used to know and love like a brother, and he's now pretty much a stranger. Plus, there's the whole bad feelings that are still very much alive and real for me. I'm not a grudge holder, but I don't have to forgive the shittiness, the leaving, and the forgetting where he came from, either. I don't have to forgive the fact that he might have been trying to protect me, but this marriage still wasn't a choice for me. I'm here because it was the lesser of two evils. Well, okay, so I like his not-cat too. I guess that's another positive.

But there are more negatives too.

And it's all playing with my head. Plus, our dads. Enough said.

I'm nuttier right now than a squirrel with a big old pile of nuts. Which, ha freaking ha, is exceptionally nutty.

Unfortunately for me, Apollo gets his begging face on—big eyes and everything. They might be kind of absurd, but then, what about this isn't?

“You can't make up for all those years with a single surprise,” I grouch. It's easier to be grouchy and snappy than it is to let my hurt leach out all over the place or melt into a puddle of goopy-goo, which for some reason, I really want to do.

He doesn't stare blankly at me when he replies, “I know.”

“Do you?”

His mouth parts, and he nods his head. He's got his dead serious face on right now. “Yes, I know.”

“Because if that's what you're trying to do, it's not going to work.”

“Okay.”

God, I wish he could stop being so *nice* all the time. It's really making me hot in all the wrong places. Again. I hate that when I'm around him, my body goes haywire. He brings out the inner cavewoman in my hormones. Not cool. I don't want to comment on what he does to my panties, but if they vanish in a burning ball of fire, it's not my fault.

His smile is enough to light up the entire room. Who needs light bulbs? Who needs solar? This man is the sun. Damn it, he's always been the sun. It would just be so much easier if he weren't. If he was mean, if he left us to our fate, and if he didn't have the coolest house, the cutest skunk, and the softest heart. It would be so much easier if he didn't act like his life goal was to make the world a vastly better place. And if he didn't act like he wanted to make my *life* vastly better.

It makes me want to snarl. My guard comes right back up. He can't possibly not want something. No one does something nice just for the sake of doing it, and if they do, well, I can't say I've ever experienced it.

I step forward and point an angry finger in Apollo's direction. I have to stop my forward motion since he doesn't step back, and I'm afraid of what touching him would do to me. *Panties going poof* would probably be the least of it.

That doesn't piss me off as much as it used to when I first got here, which is a huge red flag. "You have no idea what it was like when you left. I never had another best friend. I was this unmoored kid who was just...the girl without a mom. The girl with the funny dad. The girl who didn't fit in and didn't belong to anyone or anywhere. Do you have any idea how

lonely that was? What's wrong with you that you never called me or wrote me or freaking got online and sent me a message? It was there. It was always there. And you never used it. You just went off and lived a better life and left me to it.

“High school is a special kind of hell for everyone who has to go through it, but for me, it was ten times worse. I wasn't the popular kid, the strange kid, or the athletic kid. I wasn't the brainy kid, the good girl, the anything. I was basically nothing. No one cared to get to know me, so I was just invisible. And I was so *fucking alone*. I could have done better, made more of an effort, got over my shyness, and participated in more shit. I could have, but I didn't. I missed my mom, I missed having a whole family, and I missed you. Some days, it was *crippling*. Even my dad barely saw me. He was so consumed with work most days, even before he started his own company, and then, when he did, he lived and breathed it. He did the best he could, but if you...if you were there, I swear things would have been fractionally better, and it would have been *bearable*.”

I know I'm scowling. I know I'm glaring. I know if I don't have this mask of sheer anger on my face right now, I'm going to get the scrunchy face look, and then I'm going to start bawling.

I think scowling works a lot like smiling. If you scowl, then you feel all dark and broody. There is no room in my life for anything except that. No room for making it up to me. No room for softening and tenderness. And no room for letting my guard down, only to be smashed to pieces again. There is no room for trust that has been broken over and over again.

Apollo's jaw works. He's lost that usual big smile of his, and the room feels like a far darker place for it. The whole world is probably a darker place. His eyes are a darker place, darker and mistier. He's not going to...he's not tearing up, is he?

"You're not allowed to do that!" I whip around so I'm not facing him anymore. I need something to look at that isn't him, so I decide on the window. There are trees out there to stare at, mountain peaks in the distance, and a whole lot of cloudless blue sky. I wrap my arms around myself and stare out at the backyard. The pool looks so placid. The evening probably hasn't cooled at all, but the sun is riding low and golden, and it's shimmering off the surface. Even I, who hate swimming on principle, find it inviting.

"I'm truly sorry, Patience." His voice is so husky. Yup, he's going to cry. That's not fair. He didn't get to have a hard time

leaving. He didn't get to miss home. Right now, he doesn't get to make mistakes or be human or relatable or make me want to turn back around and tell him to just forget it and beg him not to be sad because I can't bear it.

How. Fucking. Aggravating.

I give him the most middle school response. "It's over now anyway."

"I'm sorry you still feel broken about these things. I'm sorry you had so many hard years. And I'm sorry I wasn't there for you and that I hurt you."

"It wasn't just hurt. Some of it was legit me hating you." That was true. At the time.

I angle sideways a little so I can do more sideways looking. I can see that Apollo's forehead is all wrinkly, and his brows are furrowed. He has such strong brows now as an adult, but as a kid, his brows used to do the same thing. He was never afraid of getting emotional. He cried all the time. In fact, he still looks like he's going to do that. I used to tell him jokes, make funny faces, and try and stand on my head. I used to tell him that the world could eat turds, and whoever it was who had hurt him would get theirs because karma was a thing, and whatever poo those poo pants spread around would come back

to haunt them eventually. I used to be silly just to cheer him up. I want to say something silly now, just for the sake of history, but that's over too.

Maybe it's all over.

Still.

I've hurt this man's feelings. This man, who has been nothing but kind to me—the kind of kindness that was completely lacking in my world. He did something amazing for me. He stepped up and tried to save me. He did the kind of thing I wished someone would have done for me *all those years*. Seeing him hurt now inspires some messed-up protective feelings inside me.

I guess I need to protect him from myself, which suits me just fine.

“I'm just tired,” I say by way of apology. I don't want to hurt anyone. The last thing the world needs is more douchebaggy things done by douchebaggy people. “Can we do the surprise another day?”

Maybe if I can keep putting it off, the “another day” will never come.

I can keep putting distance between us.

Even if I let the past go, it doesn't mean there's going to be a future.

If our dads just work things out, then maybe we can call this whole fake marriage off. It was really just about them, anyway.

“Yeah.” Damn it, he's giving me the *hurt Apollo* tone of voice. “Sure. I'm tired too. I think we all are. Maybe what we really need is an early night and a good sleep.”

“Probably.”

“Okay.” His voice is still rough, and it sends shivers through me. My cavewoman hormones still haven't chilled, and now I've got protective hormones going on and the parts of me that still want to know what the surprise is. I feel like I'm being torn in half by invisible medieval-style torture implements.

“Thanks. I'm probably just...going to read or something, then go to bed early.”

“Sounds good. I'll make sure I keep our dads busy...and not in the—*let's throttle each other and compete with each other until we're both blue in the whole body or rage about*

everything from the fridge to the rhubarb planted in the backyard—style they've perfected."

I nearly laugh. "Rhubarb rage. That was quite unexpected. I sometimes rage at my fridge at home, but that's only because the tray falls apart every single day, sometimes five times a day, and dumps sauces everywhere." It's not my home anymore. Not right now. Going back to it will feel...a little bit empty.

"If I knew, I would have ordered your dad a new one."

"I think he's okay. We've all become pretty used to it," I reply.

"Well, at any rate, I'll go make sure they aren't raging down the house or at each other over every little thing."

"Maybe a walk."

"Walking rage. I like it," he says.

I bite my tongue because I'm trying not to laugh again. I half wince, half snort, half send a spit shower out of my mouth when I laugh. I clap a hand over it right away, horrified by my wet lips. I wipe at my mouth with the back of my hand and wince. I hadn't done that since I was a kid, back when Apollo made me spit drinks out all the time. No one could ever make

me laugh the way he did. Unexpectedly. All the time. And so freaking hard. He was the only one who could ever make me do the pants-peeing, eyes-tearing-up, face-turning-red, belly-aching laugh.

“Give me a little bit of time, and maybe I’ll join you.”

“I’d like that.”

I stay turned to the window for a long time. Minutes later, I turned and faced the empty space where Apollo was standing.

“I might like it too,” I whisper into thin air.

Ugh, *might like it* rage.

CHAPTER 11



Apollo

“I hope you trip and crack your thick head open, you turdlinger of an old fool, the ass end of an ox, donkey ass, pig-headed, dundering douchebag!”

Gasps. There are gasps from all of us.

“Dad!”

Patience stares at her dad, her mouth agape like she can't believe he just said any of that. I'm pretty shocked too. I didn't know Gerry and my dad knew the word douchebag or were willing to put it out there. Turdlinger. That's inventive.

I don't know what happened. Last night, we all went for a walk, and everyone seemed fine. It might have trended more to the quiet side, but then everyone had an early night, and I thought sleep was the answer.

Well, sleep was *not* the answer.

I woke up to yelling downstairs. Patience and I nearly crashed into each other in the hallway a second time, but this time, we were both dressed. I would have appreciated how ironic it was that we both looked like we'd thrown our clothes

on in three and a half seconds, and our hair was messy, but I was too busy sharing aghast expressions with her.

We couldn't get downstairs fast enough. Our dads had already moved outside, and we're all out here now, standing in the front yard.

I still don't know what happened, but it's clear my dad has had enough.

I don't think he's ready to leave, but he storms down the driveway toward his rental, kicking at imaginary rocks on the cobblestone driveway. He's not going to disappear for good. Maybe just take a drive to cool down. He doesn't have his bags with him, and he's too economical to ask me to send them later, no matter how much money I might have. He keeps on scuffing the front of his shoes at nothing at all on the cobblestone driveway, but you can only kick cobblestones so hard before disaster strikes. He catches his toe on the corner of a rock—virtually impossible, but I guess not completely *impossible*. He stumbles, and we hold our breath in another collective gasp, but that's it.

Nothing major happens. My dad doesn't fall, he doesn't pitch forward, and he doesn't skin his hands or knees. No other chaos happens. No blood.

I let my breath out slowly and noisily.

“Thank god,” Patience whispers beside me. “Dad!” she exclaims. “What were you thinking?” It sounded to all of us like Gerry was *cursing* my dad.

Shit. My dad is storming back over, and he looks the extreme opposite of happy.

“You!” Oh god, here we go with the finger-pointing. Now he has cursed rage. Driveway rage. Old feud rage. “You! You cursed me! You actually muttered curses out loud, and I stubbed my toe. I could have died!”

Gerry rolls his eyes. “That’s a little extreme.”

“Still,” Patience mutters. “That was rude, Dad. Apologize.”

“I won’t apologize for anything! Nothing. Nevvvvarrrrrr! That’s pirate speak for never.”

“Ahhhh!”

Before my dad can close in on Gerry, I grab him around the middle, and Patience steps in between the two.

“Dad.” I block his view, and since I’m bigger than him now, I can do that quite effectively. “Come on. Let’s go inside and relax for a minute.” Coaxing him doesn’t work as he looks around me and shakes his fist at Gerry.

“You stick-up-the-ass, cursing crazy old coot!”

“Dad.” This four-year-old behavior is becoming exhausting.

Patience was tired before. But now the sigh she lets out sounds like it comes from the bottom of her soul.

“You evil, spiteful bastard,” my dad growls.

Gerry goes pale. “I didn’t mean it,” he admits. “You tripped over your own feet. Curses aren’t even real. Plus, spiteful? Evil? You’re a—”

“Enough!”

Sorry to go there again, but Patience is out of patience. If Patience is a virtue, it’s one she no longer has. Her arms spread out widely, and she cuts them through the air in a lashing motion. I’ve never seen her cheeks so scarlet with anger. Maybe shame too. She looks like she could either go full-on dad rage or burst into tears. She stomps on the cobblestone with her flip-flops that she’s been wearing since her boots met the dust. I’m going to buy her a new pair just as soon as I can sneak a peek at the brand. I know they’re still in her room. I just don’t want to be creepy and go snooping

around her personal things when she doesn't know I'm doing it.

“Just straight up enough. There's no hope for either of you. I'm done. I'm so tired of it. I'm tired of all this.” Now she points at me, and it's not a good feeling. I'd rather face down a bear who's angry about getting his nuts trapped between two boulders and having to slowly wrench them out bit by bit in a more than close shave. “You're the reason I'm in this mess. Both of you. I'm *finished*.”

She doesn't just storm off. She *storms* off.

We all just watch her go, united in our hopelessness and helplessness.

I've never seen my dad or Gerry look so stunned, embarrassed, or ashamed.

“Let's go inside, Dad. I'll come back out and go after Patience.”

“You should go right away,” Gerry says. “We'll be okay. She doesn't know the woods. I didn't take her camping enough. Her survival skills aren't just questionable. They're non-existent. She's scared of everything, including dandelions and chipmunks. Don't even get me started about bunnies.”

We went camping a few times as kids, and Patience loved it so much. He's wrong. She's not scared of anything, but he's also not wrong in that the woods can be a dangerous place. I don't want Patience to get lost in there.

"I'm not going inside," my dad protests. "If I do, it's only to grab my suitcase. I think I should leave. I think we should both leave. It's time."

I don't start taking deep breaths or offer up another hugely sarcastic sigh. "You don't have to leave. Neither of you have to go. Patience is just having a moment."

"One that we caused." Gerry's lost some of the red, but he looks entirely sheepish. He's worried about Patience. He keeps looking off toward the woods, where she stormed off. They come out of nowhere in the front and sides, so she only had a few paces before it was trees, trees, and more trees. We would have seen her walking for a while if we'd been in the backyard. "I'll go after her. It's my fault."

"It's both our faults," my dad cuts in.

Gerry shoots him a filthy look like he can't bear to agree with him on anything. Patience is right. This is beyond tiring, but I'm not ready to give up. I'll never be ready to give up. Not when it comes to the two men who raised us. They're

worth fighting for. But it also doesn't mean my ears aren't bleeding with all the traded insults, and my brain isn't trying to turn my ears off so it doesn't combust itself into a brainy pile of goo inside my skull.

I'm about two seconds away, I think. Patience had to go for a walk to get rid of her frustration before she said something she didn't want to say. I think I need the same.

"Really, it's okay. I'll go after her. I know the woods. I'll find her in a few minutes, I promise." I stare Gerry down, then turn to my dad and give him the same no-nonsense hairy eyeball. "If you could both go inside and stay in separate rooms, I think that would be best."

"Never mind."

Gah, *what? Patience?*

I think she's got us all acting in unison. We turn our heads around like a bunch of owls and find her at the front door. Behind us. Like a freaking ninja of awesomeness.

"I circled around the house and came back through the path." She points at the trees, and yes, they're so close to the side of the house that we didn't see her. I left the yard as wild and natural as I could. The backyard had to be cleared for the

pool, but I tried tree relocation instead of just bulldozing everything down. Anything that could be moved was moved, and we did site planning ahead of time when the architect was just starting to think about drawing the whole thing to make the best use of the land. I wanted my new house to be as unobtrusive as it could be.

“You don’t need to find me. I figured you’d be needed here.” She gives me an apologetic look like she’s sorry for blaming our dads for her being here. She doesn’t have to be sorry. This isn’t her fault. It was the shittiest way to have to marry someone. I can see how she doesn’t think of it as being saved or chosen. I know I fucked up. I tried to make it up to her with the surprise, but she didn’t want that either.

Maybe I should just tell her the truth. That this house is for her and how I never spent a single day apart from her where I didn’t think about her. How, for years, I regretted being such a coward and how I promised myself that I would make good on my promise. And since it was a double promise, and I screwed myself over making one, first to her and then to Gerry, I pulled out all the stops as soon as I found out she needed me.

“I’m fine. I’m freaking fine. I just...need a *minute*.” With that, she walks inside and slams the door.

I think we're all here having a—*well, shit, this is all my fault*—moment.

“I’m going to talk to her,” Gerry finally says.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” my dad advises.

I don’t think it is either, at least not yet, but I don’t get a chance to say anything because Gerry turns an evil eye on my dad. “What would you know about raising a daughter? What would you even know about raising your own child? You sent him across the world and never wanted him back.”

I’m setting a record for the number of times I’ve gasped this morning, and here goes another.

“Excuse me?” Dad puffs out his chest.

This isn’t good. This seriously isn’t good.

I put a hand on his shoulder. “Gerry, I’m not trying to take sides or start a fight, but respectfully, that’s not true. It was hard on my dad to have me so far away. He sacrificed a lot to make it possible for me to achieve everything I wanted to do in my life and more. We missed each other a lot. He didn’t just send me there and forget me. He worked tirelessly to make it happen. He worked hard here to send me the money I needed because scholarships don’t cover everything. Even from over

here, he was always my biggest fan and biggest supporter. And Dad, you don't need to respond to that. Gerry is worried about Patience, and it's coming out as anger. I think we just need to give her some time before we talk to her. And please, for the love of god, if you both could just set aside your differences for a few hours, we'd both be eternally grateful."

Gerry just looks worried, and it ages him ten years on the spot. "I'm sorry, Apollo. You're right." He won't apologize to my dad. There's no way. "I've been rude, I've been a terrible guest, and I've hurt my daughter with this nonsense."

My dad stays stubbornly silent, but at least he's not hurling anything back or agreeing with Gerry in that sassy, snarky way that is just turning insults around or giving backhanded compliments or whatever it might be called.

"I'll go to my room and grab a book," my dad says. "Just come find me when you're ready."

"I'm going to the pool." There's absolutely no way in hell I'm going to try and disturb Patience's peace for a good while yet. Her dad should talk to her first. It's his right. He's her parent, while I have zero right to her time. She owes me nothing.

But still. I still find myself wanting to give her the surprise or at least tell her that the house is hers. It's not the right time, though. She'd be pissed, and she wouldn't want it. Instead, she'd probably take her dad and leave. And I wouldn't stop her. She's free to make up her own mind. This was never about holding her hostage. It really was just about trying to give her a better life.

It was me trying to win her back. As a friend. In the most imbecilic of ways. This whole thing was wrong. I've been so focused on our dads that I couldn't see how wrong it was, which makes what I've done worse than any feud or insult.

I'll wait until she's cooled down, and then I'll tell her everything. I'm not leaving again, at least not unless she wants me to. If she wants anything more to do with me, I'm not going to make the same mistake I did before. I'll still be her friend.

I'll always be here for her if she wants me to be.

But I don't think she does.

I don't think I'm going to be able to convince her that she should want me to be.

I'd like nothing more in the world than to be able to do that, and okay, quantified by our dads getting along and all the usual stuff people would change about the world if they could change just one thing.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 12



Patience

We all stay in our separate corners of the house for most of the day. No one leaves. I haven't talked to my dad yet, so I don't know what the fight with John was about this morning. I'm not sure I want to know.

I expect to find Apollo outside when I go looking for him before dinner. No one has started anything yet, and I'm getting hungry. I imagine everyone is. I don't want to sit in my room and work on dolls anymore. I don't want to read a book I can't focus on. And I don't want to sit and think about all the things I might never be able to fix. There are some things I can fix.

Apollo wanted to show me a surprise, and I told him no. I hurt him, so I want to make it right. I haven't asked—not once in this whole thing—if he's actually *okay*.

I don't want to be that person—that person who is thoughtless and heartless. I've been angry with my dad and John for keeping this silly feud alive, and then I've refused forgiveness over and over. I'm being just as stubborn as my dad. Hearing him utter those curses that weren't full-on curses, but were enough, shocked me. I didn't realize the depths of his

hatred went so deep. I didn't realize he was so bitter after all these years. I thought he could just let it go.

As I sat in my room and brought another doll to life, I realized I had my own crap to un-crap. I needed to get my shit sorted.

Apollo isn't out by the pool. He's not in the backyard at all, that I can see. I search the front yard too, and there's nothing. He's not in the house. I checked before I came out here.

"Dang it!" I slap a mosquito off my arm and head to the backyard again.

Maybe he's in the woods. If that's true, I'm not going in there after him. I decided that this morning when I circled around the house. I knew I'd probably get lost and eaten if I went in there alone.

"Good lord!" Another two slaps, one on my leg, since the beast just bit through my dress, and one on my shoulder.

"Patience?"

I swear my skeleton nearly leaps clean off my skin when Apollo sits up in the garden. "What are you doing in there?"

"Just thinking." He has four huge welts on his forehead and one on his jawline that I can see.

“I think the mosquitoes are pretty thick.”

He pats the patch of weeds beside him. “Want to join me?”

What the hell? I guess I do. It doesn't matter if we're standing, sitting, or lying down. The bugs are just furious this time of night.

As soon as I lower myself down on the weeds and look up at the sky, which is changing from a deep blue to the haze of evening, I feel my body start to burn. It's not from the low riding sun or the weeds at my back. I didn't just sit on a patch of poison ivy, either. It's that I'm nearly brushing Apollo's arm with my own. My heart starts to skid and thunder dangerously.

“Bitty Kitty is in her bed. I checked on her before I left the house.”

“She'll probably get up for her night-day soon,” Apollo says.

“Our dads are being too quiet.”

“Yeah.”

“I think it might be the quiet before another storm.”

If we can't fix this, does it mean we've failed? Does it mean our dads will stay enemies forever? Does it mean we'll have to stay fake-married forever? Apollo would never ask

that of me. I know he'll let me leave if I truly want to. He'll undo the marriage anytime I ask. I know that. I just...there's a part of me that doesn't like admitting defeat. About our dads. This was basically a last-ditch effort, and if it doesn't work, is this going to be their lives forever?

It makes me sad thinking about it. But it makes me even sadder to think about going back to Michigan and leaving this place that is so clearly un-magical.

God, I'm such a liar. I'm a total freaking liar pants.

This place is *great*.

We're both silent, but for once, it's not a silence we feel like we need to fill. I want to apologize. I just don't know where to begin. There's so much history, so much past, so many things we've shared, and so many things we didn't.

We both study the sky. Around our heads, a black cloud of mosquitoes forms. They sometimes touch down on us, but we've been pretty successful at just brushing them away.

Suddenly, Apollo starts talking out of nowhere. "If I could go back in time, I'd call you. It would be the first thing I did. I'd call, and I'd tell you that it's okay you're mad, but it won't last forever. Then, I'd do everything in my power to keep in

touch. I'd make pen pals cool again. I'd make emails cool. I'd rock the shit out of a long-distance friendship. But you wouldn't want it. You'd be mad, and you wouldn't want to listen. You'd feel betrayed. I did the worst thing I could have done. I did what I promised I'd never do. I left you all alone. I'd make you see you weren't alone, though. I'd make you see that we still had each other, and we could be friends, even if we weren't there in person."

My heart hurts. All of me hurts. "It's...okay." That's not what I want to say. It's so lame and inadequate. I can't put into words all the things the deepest parts of me want to say. "You didn't come back home after, though." It was three years between the time Apollo finished college and now.

"No. I made my choices. They did pay off, but at what cost? I want to take it back, but there isn't any going back." He shifts, pushing up on one arm. I can't breathe. I can't breathe because my chest hurts so badly, but also because he's so freaking close now. He's so warm; no wonder those mosquitoes are attracted to him. His eyes are so soft and brown, so intense. He's always been the sun. Freaking always. "We're not ancient. Our lives aren't over. Will you give me another chance?"

“I...” This isn’t about chances. He doesn’t have to earn his way to forgiveness. That’s not right.

“I thought about you every day. And I asked my dad about you every time we talked. But I didn’t keep tabs on your social media, as that would have been like constantly plunging a knife into a wound and expecting it to try and heal. I wanted to be back here, but I knew I couldn’t be, and that meant hardening myself. I knew if I followed your social media closely and looked at your photos and life, I would have been back here in an instant. There was nothing that could have made me stay in London. God, that came out wrong. I don’t want to be weird and creepy. I just mean that I missed home so much, and it never went away. It was a constant ache.”

“And yet, you moved here. To this lovely mushroom house hours and hours away.”

“Only ever a short plane ride away.”

“Why now? Did you think you could only ever come back if you made something of yourself? That you had to be this loaded-up rich guy to have value?”

“I...I wanted to succeed. I wanted to make something of myself. Even if it was just doing well in swimming, getting a

scholarship, and graduating, I wanted to do it. I wanted to get it right.”

I know that pressure. I know the feeling of wanting to do it right, and I also know the feeling of wanting to get away, but for Apollo, his was the opposite. I never left Dedind, whereas he felt like he couldn't come back.

“I didn't get it right. I stayed, and yes, you sacrifice some of your dreams, but you gain others. I could have gone. I could have left my dad. I could have taken something online too. I just didn't have time or money. One class at a time just felt so silly. Like I'd be throwing money away because I'd never do anything with it. When would I ever use something like that? But that's my problem.” It feels shortsighted now. Like I didn't even try. “You worked so hard, and you've accomplished so much. We started in the same place, and look at us now. You have a mushroom house, probably a freaking nine-figure bank account, shares in corporations, investments, and god knows what else. You're educated, you've probably traveled, and you're this force to be reckoned with. You're a great catch. Anyone would be lucky to have you, and yet you fake married *me*.” I've gone too far. I know it.

“All I could do was come back and make good on my promise. I didn’t want to fake-marry you. I wanted it to be possible to really marry you, but not like this. I should never have done this. But this is why I brought you out here. I wanted to show you this and tell you that it’s all yours. Zero strings attached. Zero obligations. If you want it.”

I jerk upright, leaving a patch of squished weeds that slowly spring back to life. They’re so much more resilient than I am. I must have heard him wrong. “What...what do you mean?”

Gold. His eyes are like shining gold. So much kindness and far too much glitter. He meant what he just said. “I built the house for you. It was literally your dream house. I did steal your ideas, but only because I wanted to give it to you, and I wanted it to be perfect. If you don’t want it, it’s fine. You could always sell it. I tried to choose a place that felt a little bit like paradise. Somewhere like what you described—in the middle of the woods, by the mountains, somewhere with wildly colorful skies. The only thing I couldn’t make happen was the unicorn, but I guess it’s true that money can’t buy everything. I know I lived in it first. I just wanted to make sure it was absolutely right. I was also trying to figure out how to

convince you to come and see it. I knew you wouldn't want to. I knew if I just showed up and gave you the deed, you'd probably tear it up and tell me to shove it where the sun doesn't shine, and I really don't want papers shoved so far up any place that they'd require surgery to remove."

"It wouldn't have been literal!" No. Straight-up refusal is best. This can't happen. This *cannot* be for me. Who does something like that? It can't just be out of guilt. Not with Apollo.

"You're exasperated."

"I just need to sit down," I mumble.

"You are sitting down," Apollo points out.

That's right. I *am* sitting down. "It's too much." I reach out and run my fingers over a leaf that looks awfully ferny. I'm not sure why that would be growing wild in the garden. "This isn't something itchy, is it?"

"No. It's just a fern."

"Deadly?"

"I don't believe so."

"I'm so woefully unprepared for how to deal with all this."

This had to be the surprise. The surprise I turned down was

that Apollo was going to tell me that all this was mine. But it can't be. He couldn't have done all this just to keep a childhood promise. "You can't give me a house." What does that say about the rest? *Don't read anything into it. Don't. Just don't. Control it.*

A deep, ragged sigh. Apollo's eyes are still honey and gold. He looks wistful and lost, like we're both living in a dream moment right now. Moments only last for sixty seconds, and I'm torn between needing this to end and not wanting it to ever, ever stop. He's looking at me in a particular way, and I know. I finally, finally *know*. People don't look at other people like that. Like they don't want to...to...mean something to them.

"I want to give you the house. And all the land too. It's all yours to do whatever you want with it. You can sell it if you like. Go to college, donate it, or live here. Anything you wish."

"Then where would you go if I took your home? Which I'm not going to because it's way too much, even if you have more money than you know what to do with."

"I always seem to know what to do with it."

“I can’t take this house or the land. I can’t take any of it. I didn’t do anything. It’s yours, even if you borrowed my idea. That’s okay. I don’t really mind. It’s nice that you took something wild and imagined—a fairy tale—and made it into reality. No one would ever do that. It was...it was very special, and I’m glad I’ve seen it.” My body is leaning toward his, but I can’t stop. I can’t make any of this stop.

“It’s still yours, even if you want to give it away.”

“Fine. I’ll give it back to you,” I tell him.

“I don’t accept.”

“You have to accept.”

“I don’t have to accept. It would be a shame for such a lovely place to sit derelict,” Apollo throws back.

“Gah! You’re immensely frustrating, do you know that?” I shoot up out of the weeds and out of the garden. The mosquitoes follow me, descending on me at different angles. It would be undignified to turn myself into a slap fest, so I try to just brush them away gently.

Apollo follows me and fans the pesty bugs off me. He’s standing too close. It’s too hot, too much, too *everything*. This

is the boy who was my past, and now he's the man who is my present.

“I know you probably hate me, but would you ever consider kissing me anyway?” Damn it, why did I say that? Why, why, why? Right. Because all the parts of me that haven't been under control for a single second since I saw Apollo again are coming out now.

“Hate-kissing really isn't my thing. Besides, I could never hate you. I've been trying to say the exact opposite all this time and—”

I turn to him, grab his shirt with both my hands, and kiss him hard. The kiss lands half on his mouth and half on his cheek, but he angles his face into it, and then we're truly kissing. It's not a fairytale kiss. It's not one of those nice, sweet first kisses people share and then talk about how good it was for the rest of their lives. This kiss is angry. It's painful, it's nasty, and it's like a war, but then it softens out. It's me softening against him, leaning into him. It's my body meeting his, borrowing his strength. It's my hands sweeping over his shoulders and muscles, exploring and learning and wanting more. It's me making desperate, breathy, wanton noises into his mouth.

No. This isn't right.

"I...I need to go," I pant. A mosquito lands on my bare arm, and this time, I give it a slap to end all slaps, smushing it into a mess before flicking it off. "I need to go home. Where I belong. My dad still needs me."

"What he probably wants is for you to live your own life."

"What he wants is for me to be happy." Damn it. That sounds an awful lot more like an argument in favor of me staying.

"Are you?" Apollo asks softly.

"Yes, I'm happy. I *was* happy." Even I know that's not true. I was living a safe life where I never took chances. I used every excuse not to leave Dedind. Granted, some of them were legit. My dad needed me. He would be alone without me. Also, I didn't have the money. But legit or not, all those reasons were excuses.

My dad might have missed me, but I didn't have to go far. I could have taken courses online. I could have had a degree by now if I'd taken out student loans, and then I could be doing something else. Something I truly wanted to be doing. Have I ever known what that was? Or is that just an excuse as well?

“I...I can find happiness, and so can you.” Excuses or not, I can’t stay here. “I don’t need this house to do it. I don’t need your money. If you want to buy some of my dad’s company shares as an investor, I’ll convince my dad to sell them. That would make sure we have breathing room. If our dads could just get along again, or at least be civil, that’s all I need as well. Not...not all of this.” I look toward the house. The house of mushroom magic. But that’s what it is. It’s magic. Magic isn’t real. “I shouldn’t have thought of accepting your help in any other way than that before. This whole idea, it was a nice idea, but it’s not going to work. We just have to accept defeat and move on. But this place really is incredible. Maybe you could turn it into a wildlife rescue of some kind. I think any rescue would love to have a building like this. And helping fellow non-cats like possums, skunks, and raccoons is a good thing. All the others too. It’s the right location, that’s for sure.”

“It’s a great idea, Patience. You should do it when you take ownership.”

I don’t remember Apollo being this stubborn. And I don’t remember him being the guy who would ever kiss his best friend, either.

“It’s not going to happen. I’m going home, Apollo. Will you send me the papers when you have them ready?”

“For the house?”

“The divorce papers.”

“Do you think we could ever be friends again?” Apollo asks.

I close my eyes as that question rocks me back a step. “Not childhood besties style. Not the kind of friends we were. We were kids then. We’re adults now. It’s not the same thing.”

“It doesn’t have to be the same thing or the same style. I’d love it if it were a more mature friendship.”

“Not that kind!” I can feel his kiss on my lips. I can feel it all over my body.

“No, not that kind. I didn’t mean that kind,” he stammers. “I meant an adult friendship between two people who respect each other and go to each other when they have problems, who talk to each other and comfort each other, give each other advice, and help each other out. Ones who hang out because they have common interests.”

“Beyond our dads, I don’t think we have much in common anymore.” I carefully wet my bottom lip. I can still taste him.

That kiss is going to haunt me forever. That kiss that was no fairy tale in front of this fairy tale house in this fairy tale place. He's right. Short of the unicorn we used to talk about, it's everything I dreamed of. All this is going to be embedded in my brain for an eternity.

“I'd like to prove you wrong about that.”

I came here to apologize, and it's turned into this. I can't accept the house. I can't accept that kiss. “You can start by getting those papers drawn up and signing them. I'll talk to my dad about letting you invest in the company. That way, you'll get a return for your money. It makes way more sense to do it that way since he would never accept a donation.”

“His company is a non-profit.”

“Yes, I know all the money goes into paying salaries and into the research and more development, but we don't...we don't...”

“I can do it as an investment. It's fine.” The hope in his eyes is killing me.

“And the papers?”

He wants to convince me to stay, but it's wrong. None of this was right. It was the wrong time in the wrong way. I never

wanted this marriage in the first place. I don't care about possessions or money. He didn't do this to impress me, but I don't want to be the kind of woman who needs saving. I want to be able to save myself. And Apollo? He's the salt of the earth. He's the salt of the earth down to his feet, rooted in it, in this place that is undeniably his. I feel like I'm breaking his heart, doubly so right now, but we can't just fall back into a friendship. We can't fall into anything more than that.

"You don't need to..." I want to say he doesn't need to earn my forgiveness, but my throat is too hot and thick to get the words out. I want to tell him I'm not holding on to years of hate and resentment. I want to let it go. I want to make a life for myself, not have it made for me.

"I'll have the papers drawn up back home. I'm going to leave with my dad. I'll make sure whatever very tenuous, slippery, and elusive peace we've found here doesn't just evaporate."

What? He's coming back to Dedind? When did he decide that? Just now? Before this?

"What will you do with the house? What about Bitty Kitty?"

“If we drive, she can come with me. I’ll get a housesitter to take care of the place while I’m gone.”

“That’s really not necessary. I...we could just sign the paperwork.”

“I know we could, but I want to come back. I’ve been gone for a long time. It’s my dad. It’s your dad. Both companies are family-run.”

I don’t want to leave you again.

I can hear it. I feel it as though he actually said it, and the unspoken words tear me apart.

“Okay...just as long as you know that I can’t accept anything more than a share sale for the company. That will be more than enough, and it will be very much appreciated by me and everyone else there. I’d enjoy the peace for our dads, too, if it could be managed. And...and I’ll always think about what you did for me out here or what you tried to do and wanted to do.”

“I’ll always think about that kiss,” Apollo whispers.

I wince on instinct but then force my face placid to hide any trace of emotion. I want to be the old me—the old Patience who wasn’t afraid to say what she was thinking. I haven’t been

that fearless girl in a long time. “I’ll probably always remember it too. Even if it should never have happened.”

He gives me that ghost of a smile—the one so charming and sweet that it makes me want to change my mind. I want to taste that smile on his lips. I kissed him. My childhood best friend. My fake husband. I freaking kissed him, and I don’t wish I could invest in a brain scrubber, a mind eraser, or a time machine to undo it.

We’re going back to Dedind, probably at different times, but we’ll be there *together*.

I know Apollo thought our time out here would be different. So did I. But it hasn’t been the worst. Far, far from it. Does that count for anything at all when I’m still leaving?

“Can I walk you back to the house?”

Why do I feel like that’s Apollo’s way of not taking no for an answer?

I nod. If it gets any thicker out here, the mosquitoes might legit carry me off or suck me bloodless. I need my blood if I want to figure out what I’m going to do with my life from this point forth.

CHAPTER 13



Patience

Jesus. Apollo never said he *liked* me, but we kissed.

Now that I've been thinking about it, I have to wonder when it happened.

It's perfectly normal to have a childhood crush on your childhood best friend. Kids feel love differently. That would be cute. But now? You can't feel something like that for someone you don't even know. And Apollo? He's known me for a hot minute. A few days. He can't like me that way. He can't even feel proper infatuation. He's confused. He feels this sense of duty and obligation, and it's all mixed up with the sweetness of childhood nostalgia and the burden of a promise. Even just thinking he finds me attractive is enough to send me spiraling in ways I don't want.

I need to talk to my dad about going back home, which also means talking to him about the business and the shares. He's not going to like it, so I'm going to have to help him see reason. It seems like a good conversation for the plane as we fly home together. This wasn't the vacation he thought it was going to be, and he hadn't taken a break in years. Neither of us

has. That alone makes me feel guilty, never mind anything else.

When I got back to the house, he was already in his room. John was holed away, too, so at least there was a modicum of silence in the house.

Apollo walked back with me, and it was the most awkward walk of my life. We were both so quiet even though our thoughts screamed and echoed like wounded animals in the night. He didn't come in with me. He said he was going to stay out there for a bit, and since I'm not into betting—I wasn't, even before the whole stupid poker game that changed my life overnight—I'm not going to say I bet he's swimming out there.

My mind goes straight to him out there in the pool—hard strokes taking him from one end to the other while he's battling his thoughts, trying to forget, and trying to make peace, the water offering comfort, like an embrace around his strong, muscled body.

Great. That really helps.

I need to find my dad instead of sitting here and letting my brain get out of control with out-of-control thoughts that get my out-of-control hormones fired up.

I creep into the hallway and knock on my dad's door. It's not that late, so I know he's not sleeping. "Dad?"

"Come in, honey."

I open the door and slip inside. This room is all about the tropics, with lush foliage painted all over the wall. Palm trees, blue skies, even bluer waters, and fluffy clouds flow through most of the room, and on the far end, a huge volcano is painted above the bed. It's a massive thing, carved out with four posts and a soft green canopy that billows around it. The bedding is also tropical-themed, with various sizes of palm trees splashed across it.

"We're going home tomorrow," I announce. I don't want it to be up for debate. I don't want there to be room to change my mind.

Dad's always been able to read me. He raised me, and we always work together. We also live in the same house, and we don't spend time away from each other. It's why he lifts a brow at that. "Okay," is all he says in response.

"We're going back *home*."

"Yes. Okay," he says again.

“I know you’ve been worried about the company, and I know you didn’t want to leave it. Leaving someone else in charge is hard, but you haven’t had days off in years. I’m sorry this wasn’t the best vacation in the world.”

He walks over and hugs me hard. Dad’s hugs have always melted me. He’s never been afraid to give them. “It was perfect because it was with you.”

“It was far from perfect,” I scoff, pulling away. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that John would be here.”

“I’m sorry we’ve acted so immaturely these past few days and for so many years. You and Apollo shouldn’t have to bear the brunt of that.”

“You’re right. We don’t. But I’m sorry I lost my mind this afternoon. I was just exhausted by all this.”

“You’re not staying?” The light fixture in here is every bit as amazing as the ones in the rest of the house. It’s made up of glass fronds layered on top of each other, and it looks so real that if there were a breeze in here, it would probably sway with it. Although, on second thought, no, they wouldn’t. They’re too heavy for a gentle wind. Kind of like my soul at the moment.

“I’m not. I can go home with you,” I tell him.

“But you’re—”

“It’s okay, Dad. That’s over. Apollo is going to do up the papers. We’re officially getting divorced. We never should have gotten married in the first place. We both knew it wasn’t going to be a real marriage, but we hoped if we went through with it, you and John would eventually make peace and come around to being friends again because we were together.”

Dad’s face falls. He walks over to the bed and sits down hard, right on the canopy. There’s enough fabric that it doesn’t tear the top off. He hunches over and puts his head in his hands. I rush over and set a hand on his shoulder.

“This wasn’t your fault.”

“How can you say that?” He looks up at me in pure misery. “I played that stupid card game and put the company in a perilous position. I haven’t run it properly all these years, or we wouldn’t have been in a situation like that in the first place. I was the one who fought with my best friend, the one who kept it up all these years. I’ve been stubborn, and you’re paying the price for it.”

“No. Seriously, just no. I don’t care how we got here. It’s going to be okay. I don’t have to stay here. We’re going home, and I’m coming back to work with you.” I swallow hard and force myself to explain the rest to him.

I expect him to be mad or to fight me when I talk about the shares, but he just seems surprised that Apollo is willing to help us out even after all this. I can’t tell him what Apollo said to me out there. I can’t tell him that he wanted to give me this house. I will never tell him that I kissed him. I can’t tell him I used the business to hide behind because I was terrified. My dad’s life work is my first priority. I have to protect that. We’re not in a position to refuse the help. I just couldn’t accept what Apollo was saying, and I couldn’t accept a house and land. I couldn’t continue a sham marriage. The shares seemed like the least I could offer. It wasn’t just helping my dad and everyone working for him. It wasn’t just because I believed in his work or that losing the company would ruin him. I’m ashamed to say I accepted the offer because making a big deal about it meant I could avoid making a big deal about the rest.

“I agree,” he says numbly after I’m done.

That blows me away. He agrees? Just like that? Was it because of what happened with the card game, the marriage,

me coming out here, and him thinking it was all his fault?

“Dad?”

Yeah, that’s exactly what he thinks because he goes on to say, “You sacrificed yourself for the company once. You gave up your freedom and your future. Not just with this marriage but long before that. I kept you with me and made the company your life. I was selfish, and I told myself it was for the best, always for the best, but what best? My best? This thing has consumed my life, just like my grief consumed me, and I made you live like that. I was careless in my anger, and I’ve been careless for years. I made mistakes, and you paid for them. If you can leave now, through your choices, so we can do this to save the company and continue the work we do, then it’s a great thing. I will accept it without any conditions and think of it as a blessing I don’t deserve.”

Dad winces, and now I’m on high alert. It looks like something is seriously wrong. Like, life-ending kind of wrong. I know this marriage was a terrible thing in his mind. I know he blames himself, and he’s upset, but this is *more* than that. It feels like a punch in the gut when I see the regret in his eyes. He’s anything but joy and happiness, anything but the tough and strong—*we can get through anything, forever and always*

—dad I grew up with. Instead, he just looks like a defeated man, an old man, a man for whom the world is anything but the beautiful place he always tried to make better through his work.

It rocks me back on my heels. “Dad?”

“It was me,” he whispers. He can’t look at me. The floor is hardwood in here with a green shag rug, and the long tendrils look like grass between my toes. My body is in instant tension.

“What *was* you?”

“Your mom. When she left, I was shattered, but I told her she couldn’t be in and out of your life. I thought it was best for you. You were just a kid. You needed a stable environment. I told her that if she was leaving, she couldn’t drag you across the country to spend a weekend here or there with her. She couldn’t just pop back in because she wasn’t welcome. She couldn’t confuse you like that. She was gone. She was choosing not to be a mother or a wife. She was leaving us both behind, and she didn’t deserve to be there for you on her terms. She quit on us, and that was...that was that. At least, I thought so at the time. But I’ve realized for years that I’ve been wrong.”

“Dad!” I can’t handle this. I can’t handle this kind of confession. Especially because for *years*, I suspected that’s why my mom hadn’t contacted me. It was just so strange. She loved me. I knew she did. She might have been leaving, but that didn’t mean she didn’t want to be in my life or know me any longer. “I...why would you *do* that?”

I know why. Because when one person gets their heart shattered, it hurts. It makes them become like a wrecked animal beyond rational thought. Sometimes the only way to survive something like that is to harden yourself so fully that you become a changed person. It wasn’t all for my benefit. I can see that. His expression says it all. Some of it was revenge and anger, some was bitterness, and yes, a whole lot was to protect me.

There isn’t one answer as to *why*. It’s a stupid question—a question that’s as old as time, people railing against the unfairness of life and the injustice in the world.

“How *long* did she try?”

Dad didn’t tell me any of this before, but he’s not going to lie to me now. He wants it all out there. Has this been eating away at him all this time? It obviously has. He looks like a beaten man, like the way people look when they have nothing

left, right before they realize they're going to lose the things they tried so desperately to hold on to.

“She’s still trying,” he mutters weakly.

“No!” Instant tears fill my eyes, and my body feels like it’s boiling. The room feels like it’s going to start melting away, the palm fronds bubbling and sliding down to the floor. “No. I’ve been an adult for *years* now.” At the same time, so has my mom. Yes, Dad tried to cut her off. He might not have let her call, and he might not have given me her letters, but that doesn’t mean she couldn’t have shown up. We didn’t move. He didn’t go into hiding. We’ve been in the same place all along. Feeling unwelcome isn’t enough to—

“I got a restraining order.” We know each other too well. Dad can read everything I’m thinking so well that it’s like I screamed it. “She couldn’t come to the house, or she would have been arrested.”

Would that have stopped me from seeing my own child? Or would the fear of being arrested in front of my daughter, and the way it would no doubt traumatize her, prevent me from being rash?

“Jesus Christ!” *Why would you do that? By punishing her in your bitterness, you were punishing me, too. Did you ever*

think about that? Yes, you did. You did, yet you did it anyway. She left you, not me. She didn't want to be married to you anymore, but she still wanted to be my mom. I need a walk. I need a walk so Dad can't see my face. It's not fair or mature to voice any of this. Things said in a rage aren't okay. They're damaging, and the damage is for life.

Just like Apollo leaving, it's already done. The only thing to do is live with it and move on from here.

Just. Like. Apollo.

"No." I one track that word on repeat from the doorway, where I've frozen. Still facing away. Because I can't bear to turn around. I'm afraid of what's going to come out next. "You didn't. Not Apollo too."

"I'm sorry, Pay. I asked him not to call you or write to you before he left. I said it would only hurt you past what you could bear. Your mom was already gone, and if he was leaving, then he didn't need to cause you more pain." Remorse. I've never, ever heard my father sound this close to defeat. He sounds like a *stranger*. The man who would do these things isn't the parent I know.

"You didn't think I was old enough to make that decision for myself?"

“You were just a little kid. You were in so much pain from losing your mom.”

“I didn’t have to lose her, though,” I bit back in response.

“She’s never been stable. She’s moved from place to place. And there were things you didn’t understand about your mom’s mental health.”

“I would never have had to live with her, Dad. I just wanted to hear from her. I needed her so badly. A visit, a card, a call... it wouldn’t have hurt. If you think it would have ruined my life or damaged me to hear from her, then I’m not sure your mind was in the right place either. Or your heart. What you did was cold and heartless. It was more about payback than about keeping me safe. I understand the motivation behind it, or at least half understand, but it didn’t have to continue for years. And certainly not Apollo. You punished him too. You might have wanted to protect me, and yes, it hurt to lose him, but it would have hurt a lot less to have been long-distance friends. I needed him. I needed my best friend, and I needed my mom.”

“They both would have let you down.”

I’ve never been someone who smashes things when I get angry. In fact, I’m not someone who usually gets angry at all. But right now? I’m angry enough to go full-on rage tornado.

To be fair, I wouldn't pull anything in this house apart. I wouldn't slam a door in my own place, let alone in someone else's home, but the thought is there in my mind. I imagine myself slamming something, breaking a dish, and yelling. It's satisfying, even if it's in my own head, which is pretty darn scary in itself.

I don't want to be that person.

I still want a relationship with my dad because he's my dad. He's a father, but that never made anyone perfect. And my mom? I need to undo whatever it is that's been done all these years, starting with that restraining order. I'm an adult now. All that's left for me to do is to make my own decisions.

And Apollo?

Ever since I came out here, I've been punishing him for something he didn't have any control over, either. He obeyed my dad, an adult he trusted. He listened to my Dad when he said it would cause me pain. He didn't want that.

He came back. He tried to help us, tried to help me. He tried to give me a freaking house, which he built from my childhood dreams. He told me that he *liked* me as a kid. Maybe this was entirely about asking for my forgiveness in

extreme, wild ways, but he doesn't have anything to apologize for.

“Patience? Please don't hate me. I'm sorry. I didn't believe I was wrong, but I should have told you when you were eighteen.”

“You should have told me sooner.” My tone of voice is snappy. I need to get out of here, but I'm not going to leave things this way. I just can't. It's not an acceptance of his apology, which I believe is sincere, but it's an acknowledgment that I'm going to think about it and will not punish him forever because I don't want to destroy the rest of our lives. “You shouldn't have done any of it. I just...I can't go home with you now. I need time to think, time to undo this, and time to reach out to the people I've unknowingly hurt. You have the company to run. You've always done an incredible job, and your work truly does matter. I love every single person there. Just because I'm not there doesn't mean it's not important. It's safe now, so please go back and do the amazing work you've always done.”

I can't bear to look at Dad right now because I'm scared of what I'll see. I don't want to look at a broken man. It's not a pride thing for me, but I want to salvage his. “We'll say

goodbye in the morning before you leave. I still love you. I'm always going to love you, and we'll figure out a way to repair our relationship too. You're always going to be my dad. That's never going to change. I don't need to find it in my heart to forgive you because I already do. I think the last thing you need is to be alone. I lost my best friend for years, and you have as well. I'm going to find a way to work it out, and I think you need to talk to John as well. Keep trying to talk. Don't let it go. Don't let him go because friendship matters. Sometimes, it's all that keeps us going. The people we loved and still love matter."

"Patience..."

"Goodnight, Dad. I think we just need to talk in the morning, okay?"

I think he knows I've been pushed about as far as I can be pushed. I'm trying to handle this with maturity and grace. But it doesn't mean I'm not bloodied, horrified, deeply saddened, and steaming mad.

The tension in the room is going to kill me. At this rate, I'm going to suffocate.

"Okay," he sighs. "We'll talk in the morning."

I want to offer some words of comfort. Something to make the long hours of the night and all those thoughts he's going to be battling with better, but I just have nothing. I don't know how to make this better for myself, but I do know what I can do to make it better for one other person.

CHAPTER 14



Apollo

I can't think of a single time when I haven't been able to lose myself in the water. It's so corny to say that it washes all the shit away, and I guess it doesn't, but at least it usually clears my mind for the moment. If I concentrate on pushing myself, timing my breathing, achieving the perfect stroke on my time, feeling the burn in my muscles, denying my body, and pushing myself further and harder every single time, then that's a pretty good way to clear my mind.

I'm not competing. I haven't for a while now. I swim for the love of it, and there's no way I can get into a hardcore-focused rhythm tonight, no matter how hard I try.

Half of me keeps thinking about that kiss. And the other half is the small voice that nags at me the way it's nagged for years. It's the little tickle in my brain that keeps saying I told Patience everything I could, but it wasn't nearly enough.

I don't know how many laps I've swum out here, but I can't tire myself out. I can't get my brain to shut it, and my body is so far from being worn out. I have endless breaths, and it just keeps coming. Fresh bursts of energy whenever I alternate

between anger at myself, life, the house, my decisions, our conversation, and then that kiss.

Maybe offering to go back with Patience was a mistake. Well, no, I didn't really offer. I didn't give her a choice. I built this house and married her without giving her a choice. It's not fair to her. She's going to think I'm a borderline psychopath. I keep having these thoughts, and then I keep pushing her harder and harder, trying to get close to her.

The right thing to do is to give her space.

When I reach the end of the pool and get ready to push off, that's when I see her standing there.

My body goes into instant overdrive, and I get another burst of energy that translates into adrenaline. I could probably swim all night at this point.

I shake water droplets out of my eyes. I don't think I'm imagining the tension in her face. Her jaw looks like it's locked right up, and she's half sad, half angry. A total mystery. Beautiful. Beautiful as the stars above us and the water surrounding me, buoying me up. The mountains are back there, behind her, and the woods too, but even though this is one of the prettiest spots I have ever found, it has nothing on her.

That kiss. I shouldn't be thinking about it. I'm in no danger of drowning, but getting out of the pool without her noticing the giant erection I'm sporting in these boxers is going to be impossible. No, I didn't want to go into the house and change after we talked. I just wanted to swim. And yes, I kept the gotch on since I have people over. No nudist swim nights for me right now.

I let go of the edge and swim to the middle of the pool and start treading water. I never take my eyes off Patience, and the whole time, she says nothing. She's not giving me a murderous gaze, but she doesn't blink either. Her gaze is scalding, but it's the wrong kind of heat. She didn't come out here to fling off all her clothes and join me in a nearly nighttime dip.

I wonder if our dads have been at it again in the house, but I don't think so. She would have said so by now if they were. She's so oddly silent that it feels like she's going to become part of the near dark itself and evaporate right before me.

"Patience?"

She starts, which is extra creepy, given the way she's had her eyes locked on me the whole time, and then she finally blinks. I let out the smallest sigh of relief.

“My dad lied to me all these years.”

Holy fuck, he told her?

“And so did you.” Those words aren’t an accusation, and they’re not filled with the fire I’d expect.

I nod, still bobbing up and down.

“You could have told me.”

“That would be betraying another promise I made. Your dad asked me for my word, and I agreed. I thought I would hurt you. He said you’d been left by enough people who loved you.”

“I know what he said. He told me. But it’s not okay. You were just a kid. He should never have done that. He put a massive burden on you, and he let me be angry with you all these years. Wait, no. He didn’t *let* me. He didn’t make me angry. I stayed angry all on my own. I told you that I didn’t care and I was over it, but I’m not over it. I’m not over leaving, and I’m not over you coming back. I don’t want you in my life, but I also can’t imagine it without you now.”

Holy banana trees. What?

I bob up and down a little too hard and get a mouthful of water. I’m pretty sure I just lost all my swimming prowess. I

feel like I could—

“Fuck! Ow!”

I’ve never had the kind of cramp that takes a person under, but I know they can decapitate even a skilled swimmer. Both my calves lock up at once, and then the pain shoots through my thighs. White hot isn’t even the right color. This pain doesn’t have any color. It’s a vicious animal churning through me, its claws and teeth out, shredding my muscles. I can’t move my legs. I beat my arms hard at the water, not panicking, but not breathing either. I can’t think through this. My legs. Fuck, it hurts.

Float. You’re good. Just turn yourself upward and float.

But I can’t. Not when those teeth are devouring my skin and tearing into my bones.

I’m still good for now, though. I still have my arms.

Until the cramp spreads, right in the middle of my shoulder blades.

There are no words. I don’t have time for them. I can’t move. My whole body is cement, and it’s a living entity I don’t recognize. I’m strong, but right now, I have nothing left.

Nothing at all. The water comes for me, and I inhale just enough air to hold my breath as I go under.

I have extremely good lung capacity, so I can probably last for a good long while and—

Right then, the pain slices me apart. It's a dagger coming at me from every angle. My breath is nothing as it all shoots out of me. The next inhale just fills me with water, and I'm slowly sinking, which isn't a problem if I can get something to work. I've spent so many years in the water that it doesn't scare me anymore. I know I'm going to be okay if I can somehow get through this. The cramps are going to let up at any time. They're going to let go, and I'll get something working. Even if I don't, I'm going to force myself to kick. Reach up. In just another second, I'll get my brain to go from a screaming ball of fiery agony to something that obeys my commands. I'll get my body to function.

I don't even realize I have my eyes open until a dark shadow plunges into the pool right beside me. Black clothing, bubbles, hair, and arms, reaching for me. They're tiny, but they close around my waist, and then Patience draws up right beside me. The pain is explosive, and it's moving into my lungs now. I don't have any breath left. There are already

black spots at the corners of my vision, but I keep my eyes open.

I stare right at her as those tiny arms of hers close around my shoulders, locking her torso to torso with me. I didn't realize I was already at the bottom, but then I felt her use it to push off. I didn't know she was so strong or such a good swimmer, but she was kicking as though our lives depended on it, reaching for the top.

I don't fight her, but I also can't help her. Anyway, she doesn't need my help.

As soon as we break through the surface, we both take huge gasping breaths. The air feels so good in my lungs. It clears away the black spots, but the thousand candles burning under every inch of my skin are still there.

"I can't...I don't think I can get us all the way over to the side," she pants.

"I can float."

"That's bullshit! I'm not letting you go. How could you sink like that? You've won medals and shit!"

"I'm sure it happens to everyone. Muscle cramps."

“I thought you’d know how to deal with that. This can’t be the first time.” She’s panting as she treads water, but we stay afloat. She’s not going to let me go. She might be small, but I can feel the strength in her arms. And it takes all my concentration not to lean into her. That’s saying something because most of my brain is still focused on how much this *hurts*.

“It’s the first time everywhere has cramped up at once.” I was pushing myself too hard out here. I’ve been swimming for what? Over an hour? And I didn’t take a single break. I was so focused on what I didn’t want to think about, trying to banish it from my brain, that I lost track of time. I lost track of everything.

“Good god, your cramps are everywhere? Then there’s no way I’m letting you go.”

“You can let me go. I’ll float.” At least, I hope so.

“No way. Do you know how much effort it took to go down and bring you back up? We’re lucky we even made it. For a guy who swims so well, you sink like the worst stone in the world. You might as well be a boulder.”

“Do I feel like a boulder?”

She shoves at me, and I almost go under, but then she yelps and grabs me again. “Let’s get out of here. I’m not a good swimmer, and I hate the water. I can’t do this for much longer.” Her breathing is strained, and her words come out choppy. She’s right.

“Kick over to the side. I’ll try my best to float.” I do try, and the cramps do all their cramping all at once again. I let out a wheeze of pain because it’s undignified to shriek and start crying. Not going to happen. I bite down on the pain instead, which means biting down way too hard. Gah, I don’t need a fat lip on top of this.

Patience obeys. She might say she hates swimming, but she’s good at it. She saved my sorry, sinking, cramped-up ass. She even gets us to the side of the pool. It takes an insane amount of effort, but with her help, I get both my arms up on the side and push. I get myself half up and then flip myself over. Was I really worried about pool boners a second ago? Now my only thought is the fiery demons that have taken up residence in my legs and back.

“Ohhhh, that hurts. Fuck.”

She hauls herself up beside me and sits there, her clothes streaming water. She sighs as she starts unlacing a purple pair

of combat boots. “This is the second pair of boots I’ve ruined. I’m officially out of fun-colored footwear.”

I’m dying here, but I still feel bad. I feel bad about her boots, about her finding out what her dad told me when I was a kid, and about not telling her, missing her, and wishing I could go against her dad’s wishes about my behavior. Somehow, though, we’re here. The cramping pain is more than I can handle sitting like this, so I flop onto my stomach and gasp like a fish out of water. It’s probably not my best moment, but fuck it, it’s not like I actually care at the moment.

Agony. Pins and pricks and pain. Is it ever going to end? I lay my cheek against the concrete surrounding the pool. It’s abrasive and still holds the warmth of the sun.

“I’ll...buy you—”

“I don’t need a new pair. I don’t want you to buy me anything.” The tears glistening on her pool-wet eyelashes and shimmering down her cheeks when she angles her face are a bullet to the gut. They hurt worse than the cramps that almost drowned me. “I hate my life. That has nothing to do with you. It was easy to take my anger out on you when I saw you again. Easy to blame you. The truth is, it has nothing to do with you. I have no friends. I’ve made my whole life my dad’s work. I

know it's important, but I never wanted that for myself. I didn't dream of staying at home. I wanted to go and do things. Even if I was broke and had so many student loans, I should have done it. I could have made my way in the world. I could have made friends and found people to share my life with. It could have been better than being alone and lonely. I'm an adult now. I'm going to move out and find my mom. My dad might have a restraining order against her, but I don't. I'm going to get to know her. And I'm going to get to know myself."

The night air feels like a power pole just dropped into the pool. It's all static. I don't know what to say. I don't even know if I can. The burn all over my body and the power pole in my own muscles constantly zapping me into a state of near-freaking unconsciousness kind of prevents speech. Even breathing is tough, and every single breath sounds shredded like half-coughs.

"Stay?" I pant.

"No."

"I can...move out. Find somewhere...else. You could rent the place."

“Thanks, but no. I’ll find an apartment. Somewhere close to my mom. I want to find her and then be there in person. I’ve lost so many years thinking she abandoned me.”

“Your dad?” I ask.

She frowns. “I don’t know. I’m just mad right now, and it’s not a good thing to make decisions while mad, but he’s my dad. I’m going to forgive him. I want to find a balance. Live my own life and still be in theirs. I should have done this forever ago anyway, at least where he was concerned.”

All the pain melts out of my shoulders, but it shoots straight down into my legs. I think it’s making up for it there. “God!” I double over on my side, turning into a C shape, and grab both my legs.

Patience scrambles onto her knees and hovers over me. “What’s happening?”

“I’ll be okay,” I rasp. “In a minute.”

“Whenever I get a cramp, I rub it out. Like this.”

My brain is too broken from the pain in my legs to make a rub-it-out joke. I wouldn’t, anyway. I’m too much of a gentleman. Somehow, through the tangle of my limbs, her hands find my calves. Her fingers start to knead. And darn it, I

turn into the softest, most pliable dough she could ever want. I'd let her knead dough me forever.

Oh! Oh, that's good. And it's working. My legs are no longer two fiery rocks of terrible pain sucking the life and breath out of me. I feel like they're no longer two instruments of murderous murder trying to take me out. My muscles are just muscles, not doom calves, and some of the fire releases. I go limp on the concrete. I feel drained. It's just nice to collapse on it, soak up its heat and allow Patience's hands to work away the rest.

Now that I can get functioning thoughts into my brain, I feel all the rage I should have felt at what she told me. I want to call her dad a prick to his face, even if I get why he did what he did. Well, actually, no, I don't get it. Cutting off someone's mom? What he made me promise was bad enough, but I'm not Patience's mother. Okay, at the time, I wanted to call her dad a prick too. I've thought of a thousand variations of the word over the years. I might have thought the words, but each time, I let the anger go. I tried to understand. He wanted what was best for Patience, while I wanted my best friend to be happy. I couldn't have everything, and if I had to trust that he would protect her, I wanted to believe he did that a hundred percent.

That he cared about her happiness more than anything in the world because that's what he made me believe. I still want to believe it. I know it's not simple. I know people are human, and fathers make mistakes. I'm just so pissed that, in this, the person who was hurt the most was Patience.

“Let me help you find your mom.” My voice is still about three octaves higher than it should be. These leg cramps are just about as bad as getting booted in the junk.

“Apollo...” Her hands don't stop working, and she can't disguise the excitement in her voice. “You don't have to do that. I've made you feel like you owe me something, and you don't. I haven't been nice. I haven't said a single kind thing. I like your house, okay? I like everything about it, I like your skunk, and I like the spot you chose. I also liked having a breather in my life, I liked the change, and I liked...kissing you. That's why I should leave.”

I can't breathe. But it has nothing to do with the pain still in my legs or the water I should be coughing out of my lungs.

I turn my eyes to Patience's face. Bent over me, her hair like a curtain, I can barely see any of it. I glimpse her nose, peeking through, and the curve of her lips. Suddenly, I don't feel those cramps anymore. All the pain evaporates. I watch

her shoulders and arms, the muscles there working as her fingers try to banish the ache I know is still there. I just can't feel it because I'm floating. Right up off this cement. Levitating and probably glowing like a straight-up flashlight too.

I've wanted to take care of her since the minute her dad *didn't* fight me when I asked to marry her so his company would be safe. I hadn't even met her since I came back, but I *sensed* she wasn't okay.

Saving her was the wrong thing to do, though, because she could save herself. She knows that now, and I'm so proud of her. I hate the pain for her, but I'm so proud she can already say she'll find forgiveness. That she'll get past it. I'm so proud of her determination and strength, her resolve to find her mom.

I want to help if she'll let me.

I don't want to help because of that kiss. Or because being close to her is the very thing I've craved since I left. The caveman in me isn't the only reason I want to protect her. I didn't want to make her mine with this marriage because I knew she was her own person. Even if we were married, for real, she would never belong to me. One person never owns

another. One person loves another, which means giving yourself over, not exerting domination.

“Our dads will figure it out,” she says softly, her voice coming from far away. She brushes all the wet, dripping hair out of her face and leans back on her heels. “They’ll be okay. Or they won’t. But that’s not on us. The company isn’t on me. He’ll accept your shares. I feel like everything back home will just be...that it will be alright. If I leave, I can forgive myself for it too.”

She rubs her eyes, and I realize how much she’s carried around with her all these years. How much she’s still carrying around. I want to get up. I want to hold her. In a friendly way. The way I could have done...back when I was younger, and we had an uncomplicated friendship because we were kids, and loving your best friend with your whole heart didn’t mean anything other than that.

I try to push up, but I can’t. My body has suddenly turned into melted cheese. Delicious as that might be, it’s highly unhandy. Patience offers her hand, and I slip mine into hers. The bones are so small, and her skin is slightly cold from being soaked in the cold pool water. She has to half throw herself backward to get me into a sitting position, but the

momentum carries me up and stops her from falling completely on her back.

It lasts for about a second before I tilt backward. I'm not liquified cheese. I'm one of those poor earthworms that get caught out in a rainstorm. Or comes out in a rainstorm and then doesn't go back. I used to pick them up and try and make sure they were okay. Even in the city.

Patience squeals as she gets sucked back with me. She tries to keep me upright, but she's no match for how much weight I have on her. I get my other arm up to brace her as she flies forward. She straddles me and winces as her knees make contact with the cement.

No. No, no, no. I've hurt her. "Your knees. Jesus, that had to hurt."

"It's okay." Her hands are locked in mine. She curls them around but shifts her weight so she's no longer touching me. "I've had worse."

Her heat is everywhere, even though we're barely touching. I think about what this—her on top of me—would look like to our dads if they came out. Mine would just turn around and walk back inside. He'd be embarrassed. And he'd think it was none of his business. He never did talk to me about stuff like

this. I was too young before, and then I left, and someone else had to do it. Mostly kids in school. When is it ever not kids in school?

I just have my boxers on. They're wet and tight enough, but no match for the way my dick reacts to Patience being so close. I want to lift her off me because I'll die if she notices. An errant boner touching my once bestie who just saved my life isn't the thanks I want to give her. I get my hands on her waist and try to lift her up. Shit on a stick, I could really use my strength back right about now.

Her soft green eyes change. Maybe it's the dark, the cramps coming back, or the fact that I just about drowned, and my brain is affected. Maybe it's the pain. I swear I see heat in them. I check the rest of her face, but she's not wearing a mask anymore. She's not closed off. She's more open now.

“Pa—”

“Shh.” She covers my mouth with her hand. Now I really need to lift her off me. That's ridiculously hot. I want to taste her palm. The saltwater from the pool and her essence. That's what all of her would taste like. Her neck. Her lips. Her—
nope.

Not going there.

Please go there, my dick urges.

I don't want to wish a cramp on the fucker, but that would at least get him to obey.

I want her mouth where her hand is. I want her hand to always be there. I want the taste of her, the scent of her, and the heat of her wrapped around me forever. Even like this. Even when I'm mortified at my own lack of strength, being a champion swimmer and almost drowning my ass in my own pool, and not knowing my limitations, especially when it comes to her. Her hand slowly moves away.

“There's something I never told you. But I don't talk about it. I half understand why my dad did what he did and kept doing it, not with you but with my mom. Because I almost died once.”

“What?” I jerk upright, and this time, my arms go around her. This time, it's all adrenaline taking the place of my missing strength. I would never have let that happen. If I had been there, I wouldn't have. No matter what age I was, I would have protected her. The fire rages through my veins, and then the ice. Hot with rage at whatever happened and then freezing cold. Because she said *almost*, but almost is far too close, and to think she might not be here with me now is the

worst thought I've ever had. It makes my mouth sour all over the back of my tongue. The taste of acid. The taste of fear. "What are you talking about?"

I'm not imagining it. Her eyes are dark and liquid, like grass in the morning dew as the sun just starts to rise. It's not emerald. That's a watered-down word. She's so, so much more beautiful.

"I'll tell you, but not now. Tomorrow. When our dads leave. Once mine heads out, I'm sure yours will too. But if not, it's okay. I'm not forcing anyone out."

"I know where we can go. I still want to give you the surprise," I tell her.

I need to know what happened, but I'm going to have to wait, even if it's going to kill me.

She allows the smallest smile. She's here right now, and she saved *me* tonight. She's okay. I can take a breath, but it still feels like acid all around the back of my throat. "Or, if they're gone, we can talk at the house. I'm sorry again that I didn't tell you before how great it is out here. Only you would build this."

“It came from your imagination, so technically, you built it.”

“No. I dreamed it, but you brought it to life.”

I can't read her expression before she shifts off me, stands up, and squelches her way back into the house in her unlaced wet boots.

I can't move. The cramps are gone, but they're not the only thing that's wrung me out. I can't believe any of this happened tonight. As soon as I can move, I know what I'll do. I'll shower if I can, and then I'm going to make some calls. I'll do everything I can to find Patience's mom. I've messed up pretty much everything else, but that's not even close to the motivation that's going to drive me to do everything I can, spend every dollar it takes, and use up every single resource until I exhaust every avenue. It's not guilt or atonement.

I have all the money in the world, but seeing Patience happy would make me a rich man.

CHAPTER 15



Patience

A treehouse.

He freaking built an enlarged model of the treehouse we had as kids, and he got all the details right as much as he could, even down to the crappy construction, so it's still safe.

It's hidden out in the woods. This is his surprise.

I said I didn't want it, but I very much do want it.

My dad left this morning. He went home without me. I still cried when he pulled out of the driveway, and even though I was mad at him, we didn't part with angry words. I never want to leave with anger between someone I love, and I do still love him.

John is still here. I'm not sure when he's going back to Dedind, so we came out to the woods, and then Apollo revealed this place to me.

If I thought this whole deal was a fantasy before, then this treehouse makes it seem even less like reality.

All the details are accurate, down to the skylight on the roof that opens with a rope and a hook and latch. The wood is even

kind of crudely cut along the edges, which I find hilarious. Some tradesmen had to build this to make it look like the kind of thing that would be constructed by a couple of kids and two dads who didn't know what they were doing when it came to building anything because technology was their forte, not construction.

My mom lent me a cross stitch of a duck, and Apollo brought a cat poster from his bedroom for the walls. The treehouse was at his place, so I know these are the originals. Either he asked his dad to save them, or John did it on his own. I imagine it was Apollo who took them down before he left. I don't want to imagine him doing it as a kid because that makes my heart sore, and it's already painful enough right now.

Apollo is sitting on the black bean bag chair over to the right. I know that one isn't original because it's missing the giant, taped-up hole the old one used to have. He looks hilarious in it. And about ten times too big. I bet he can feel the floor through it. I'm in a blow-up chair, which is also hilarious because who the heck has blow-up chairs anymore? It's also not original. The real one died after we got into a

jumping contest and popped it. Not the brightest idea, but we were seven. What can I say?

“I don’t even have the words to describe any of this.” I want to flip over and see if my legs will reach the ceiling so I can plant my feet there like I used to.

Apollo is quiet, and I think about my dad again. I also think about my mom, who I don’t even know, and who has been trying to contact me and have a relationship with me for years. Who never stopped loving me.

This morning, when my dad left, he and John shook hands like they were agreeing to an uneasy truce. I could tell John knew something was wrong between us.

I heard Dad get up around six this morning, so I walked quietly to the kitchen to have a cup of coffee with him. I told him I would work on not being mad, but I needed space, and I wouldn’t be coming back home with him as I was going to try and find Mom. I think he expected as much. I also told him that I knew how much what happened scared him. That, even before that, he was just trying to protect me. He never forced me to stay with him after I graduated. He was a good dad. He always listened, and he always tried. He more than tried. He was always there. Maybe I should hold it against him that my

mom wasn't there when I needed her more than anything, but I won't. I won't because it's useless, and I hate feeling bad. I hate things eating me up inside, and I don't want him to spend every day feeling that way, either. It still felt tense between us when I hugged him goodbye, but he knew I loved him. He knows I'll always love him, and space doesn't mean *forever*. It just means I'm an adult, and I have my own life. He's going to have to accept that, and it's going to take time for both of us.

Apollo has been the patient one tonight. We came up here fifteen minutes ago, climbing up the wooden slats nailed on the tree—albeit a heck of a lot sturdier than our old one—and ducking down to even fit in here. I think the walls are a good three feet higher than our childhood treehouse because there's no way Apollo would fit in here at all if they weren't. Also, it's probably wider. Way wider. I honestly can't remember. It's been too many years, but I imagine my childhood perceptions of the place saw it as being bigger than it was—like how all adults look like giants because they're two or three times your height.

It's just after eight right now. Apollo's been patient all day. He hasn't tried to force me to answer all the questions burning in his eyes. Instead, he hung out with his dad this afternoon

while I read a book and then went for a walk around the house. Both of them gave me space. They played cards, and then I heard them discussing the rules of backgammon. He even made dinner. He wasn't stiff at the table, and after dinner, he cleaned up.

I'm not sure if he said something to his dad, but John said he was turning in early—real early—and he told us to have a good night.

Oh, and he was taking Bitty Kitty to his room since he wanted some skunk cuddles.

“I made some calls,” Apollo says, breaking the silence. I think he knows I don't know how to start. “Last night. I don't have weird PI people at my beck and call or anything, but I think I found a guy. He's going to look for your mom.”

He doesn't have to do this. I won't ask him to, but I also won't stop him. I want to find my mom, and I don't have the resources on my own. I don't have words to thank him for this either.

“I wanted to ask my dad where she is. Where the letters came from, when he last got one, and how long it's been, but I just didn't feel comfortable. I didn't know if I could trust him to tell me the truth.” I run my fingertip over the clear plastic

arm of the chair. “Maybe I just don’t want to hear that the last time she tried to contact me was ten years ago. I don’t want to think she ever gave up. That’s silly, isn’t it? Refusing to admit the truth?”

“I think you’ve been through enough hurt. Your dad, too, in his own way. I told you last night that I would help you, and you know I’ll do anything. You know I have the money to do it. Trusting in that, in people who know how to find people, is easier than trying to have that conversation with your dad when things are completely raw. I think you half wanted to spare him, and half just used logic.”

“Maybe I just wanted to fully spare myself.” It sucks putting this out there.

“If you did, it’s not wrong, Pay. It’s okay. Most people don’t go through things like that. I don’t think there’s a set of rules when it comes to the steps you should take and how you should feel about it.”

“I think most kids *do* find out that their parents have lied to them. Just not like this. And not at this age.”

“Making up the tooth fairy and Easter Bunny doesn’t compare.”

I laugh weakly. “I was pretty pissed when I found out Santa wasn’t real. That was bullshit.”

“I agree. I fully agree. But this? This isn’t going to be bullshit. I’m going to find your mom. *We’re* going to find your mom. Together.” He sounds so sure, and his face leaves no room for doubt. I still don’t know why he’s helping me and why he’s so *kind*, though. “Yeah, I know I’m coming on too strong.” He notices me watching him, and he thinks what I’m seeing is a bad thing. I see him trying to tone it down. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not coming on too strong. I appreciate it more than I can say.”

The expression on his face—all that softness and all that hardness—makes me want to get out of this stupid air-filled plastic chair, leap across the room, and...hug him. It makes me want to be close to him, closer than I should be. It’s not just a hormonal reaction this time. And it’s not just my body that wants this. It’s something more. Something that goes so much deeper. It half scares me because I’m not ready to feel things like this.

Things that make me remember that wild and impulsive kiss I gave him out of nowhere. I shouldn’t have done that. If

anything was going to confuse things, it was that, but I didn't think about it. I just did it. I did it because I'd been looking at his mouth, watching his lips, watching the rest of him, and *longing* for days. I wanted him in that moment...more than I could comprehend. I wanted to be close the same way I now want to be close. With every bit of me. I want my hands in his hair and on his skin. Rough and soft.

I touched him last night. I thought he was going to drown. I even massaged the cramps out of his legs. All night, I thought about his body beneath my hands. I don't know if I've ever been as scared as when I saw him go under and not surface. My heart stopped. I've been scared so many times in my life, but nothing compared to last night. I don't know if he would have kicked to the surface on his own. I think he scared himself too. I wasn't going to take chances.

It's not right that I keep thinking about the way his muscles felt under my fingertips. I hated that he was in pain. I wanted to save him from that too.

I said I was going to leave, but I haven't yet. We're going to find my mom, and we have to do it together. I *want* to do it together. I don't have another place to go yet, but I'm going to find one. I'm going to because if I stay, I'm going to feel the

way I do now. Flipped inside out. Like I'm powerless to stop what my body wants. I feel like I'm on the edge of desperation, and it's way too much.

Maybe I just don't want to leave because the mushroom house is so awesome. It comes complete with a pool, mountains, fresh air, the woods, one stellar treehouse, beautiful night skies, and an adorable skunk-cat. That makes it pretty tempting to want to stay. It's not like it's Apollo at all. He's not the reason.

He's not *just* the reason.

And it's not like I think about him constantly.

Fuck, I *do* think about him constantly. I've thought about him constantly for years. He's been a part of my life my whole life. I want him. I'm scared of wanting him, but I do, and I can't stop.

He could have died last night. I've had a close call too. I know life isn't forever. People aren't forever. His mom passed away, and his dad still misses her, I can tell. Then my mom left. She and my dad weren't forever either. Maybe there's no right time. Maybe...I'm just so tired of hiding myself from everyone, probably even from *me*.

I stand up, and the plastic chair gives off a weird squeak and lets out a sucking noise. It's hot, I'm wearing shorts, and my legs are kind of suction-cupped to it. I slowly pull my T-shirt over my head.

“Garrpppppahhhhh!” Apollo chokes on his saliva.

I'm wearing a sports bra, and it's less revealing than most bathing suits. Grey and built to keep the ta-tas tucked in tightly while actually doing sports, it's one of those hugely intimidating bras that look overbuilt and overengineered for just about any body type. My point is that it gives away nothing and covers way more skin than most regular bras.

I turn slowly because the scars don't start or stop under the bra. They start on my shoulders and go all the way to my butt.

Apollo lets out another gasp, but it's not one of disgust. It's one of outrage.

“What happened?” Apollo is on his feet faster than I can turn around. I tug my shirt back on. I'm not self-conscious, but I can see that he's angry and scared. More scared and also stunned.

This is why I never changed in the changing room with the rest of the girls. I'd go hide in the bathroom stalls. I was

always so guarded and paranoid that someone would see. It was silly, but back in school, it felt like a big deal. I didn't stop caring until my last year, and by then, I was so used to covering up and hiding that it was just second nature to keep doing it.

“I had a really scary moment when I was eleven. I was riding my bike, and this guy...he was just a kid too—he'd just gotten his license—well, he blew through a stop sign. He didn't see me until he was pretty much on top of me. He did brake, but he hit me...well, mostly my bike, but I was dragged under it. It was so, so scary, but it happened so fast. It was worse after when I looked up and was staring up at the undercarriage of the car. It was actually a truck, which was lucky because there was room for me under it. I wasn't seriously hurt, but I did have an insanely bad road rash. It was another reason my dad was so protective. He went up another level after my back got peeled like a carrot.”

“That's not funny, Patience,” Apollo practically growls.

“Sorry. Yeah. Gross.”

“It's not gross.” Apollo looks murderous again. Dangerous. He looks like he wants to find that kid and rub him on the pavement like cheese on a cheese grater.

“Apollo. It was a long time ago.” I lose my breath at his protectiveness. It’s not weird. It’s not...it’s not out there or suffocating. It just feels like having someone in my corner. Like having my best friend in my corner, but it’s more. He’s hot. He’s hot, and I want him, even though I’m trying not to.

“It left you with the scars. They’re not...you’re...they’re beautiful because they’re part of you, but I can’t imagine the pain or how scary that was. I wish I had known.”

“They’re not beautiful. You don’t have to say that,” I mumble.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I didn’t mean that they’re beautiful. I wasn’t trying to patronize you. I meant that *you’re* beautiful. You’re always going to be beautiful.”

My heart pounds harder than it should. I’ve scared him. He’s so pale. “I shouldn’t have said I almost died once. I didn’t. I just had to spend a while in the hospital, and everyone was worried about infection. I didn’t need a skin graft, but everyone’s hopes for me healing without many scars weren’t realized. I guess some people just don’t heal well. My body healed me, but it was messy and bumpy and not clean the way other people’s bodies healed them. Anyway, it still healed well. I didn’t have any problems after the itching, pain, and the

whole long process was over, but my skin was never going to be right again.”

“How long?” Apollo asks, his voice rough.

“I can’t really remember. Months? Time seems so different when you’re young. I just remember my dad bringing all my homework to the hospital. He was employed with your dad at the time, and the insurance covered all of it.”

“My dad never said anything.”

“I’m sure my dad asked him not to. He probably told your dad that you didn’t need to worry, or he maybe even flat-out told him no. Because you said you asked your dad, and he told you about me sometimes.”

“Yes, he did. But not that. I hate that it wasn’t that. I would have come—”

“Home?”

He breaks off, his face reddening. If he was angry before, he’s livid now. “That couldn’t have been his motivation.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t.” I don’t want to drive a wedge between him and his dad. I don’t want him to be angry at all. “It was a long time ago. I’m just telling you because...because...I don’t know. I guess because last night scared the shit out of me. I

was more afraid last night than I've ever been, and I had this happen to me." I point over my shoulder at my back. The silence in the space is more like the scream of unheard tension. I've never been able to *hear* it before, but it has some kind of noise—a crackly noise, just like the way it snaps and hisses. And you can *feel* it. "I keep wanting to leave, I keep wanting to find my independence and make my own way, but I don't want to leave you." I don't realize I've said it out loud until his body snaps so straight that it's like every bone in his body has been stacked perfectly, one on top of another. "I said I hated swimming, but I just hated that it took you away. I hated that you wanted it more than you wanted us. I hated that it gave you a life when it took mine away. It's so ridiculous now, so dumb. I spent years being so dumb, so stubborn. Such a turd. And then I watched you sink down to the bottom of your pool last night."

"It wasn't really all the way to the bottom, and I think I would have been fine. You didn't have to worry, but I'm so thankful for the help, and I want to say I'm sorry again about your boots and for scaring you and—"

I can't take it anymore. I launch myself at him. I'm all wild need, but I stop myself. I don't throw my arms around his

neck, and I don't cling to him. I wasn't in control the last time I kissed him. I acted on impulse, and I can't do that again. This time, my palms land on his solid chest and his warm, soft, white T-shirt. It lands on the fuzz of the logo, which is a hamburger dancing. Vintage. The cotton is old and worn in, and the body underneath is solid, like the concrete we both collapsed on at the side of the pool last night and melted into with exhaustion, pain, and relief.

I look up at him, looking into his soft, startled eyes. "I missed you." I bring one hand up and thump his chest like I'm angry, but I'm not. We've shared so much time together, or at least we did when we were young, but it suddenly feels like we're alone for the first time, standing so close like this, me with one palm flat and one palm curled, our bodies close enough to connect at every single point. The moment feels entirely private, and not just because no one else is watching.

Apollo makes a sound like he wants to say something, but the words get stuck in his throat. I watch his eyes, twin soft caramels, and I think maybe it's him trying to muffle a sob. They look wet.

"I'm okay," I whisper. I need to tell him. I need to keep telling him. Have I asked him? Have I ever thought of how

hard it was for him? All I've ever imagined was him having this golden, blessed life. Behind all the money, the scholarship, the success, and leaving Dedind, he was just a kid. He was a kid making it in another country. He was the kid who lost his mom, who was tougher than any other guy I knew, but also sweeter too. "Are *you* okay?"

"Honestly, it's going to take me a hot minute to recover from knowing you went through all that pain, but I...I think so. I've tried to be," Apollo answers.

"All you've done is think about how to make other people's life better since your own good investments paid off."

"I just wanted to make your dreams come true too."

"If I kissed you again, what would you do?" I whisper.

He doesn't pale this time. Instead, he goes completely bloodless. "Well, you wanted to leave. But I want you to do whatever you want. I don't want to cause any anguish or confusion."

"I don't want to cause you any anguish or confusion either. It's not just me. Your feelings matter too, Apollo. I've been so rude and unkind. But you do matter. Besides my mom, you're the only person I've never been able to stop thinking about and

wishing for. Maybe we weren't in each other's lives like we were supposed to be, but we have right now. Maybe if I do leave, I won't go far."

"Maybe?" Apollo sounds hopeful.

I suck in air like a hiccup. Fragile. That's how I feel. Like how I felt when my dad confessed everything to me. No, that was bad. This is different—a different kind of fragile. More like the pieces being glued back together and held tenuously instead of being shattered apart. My life, my wishes, my heart being reassembled.

"Not maybe. For now, I'm firm on that," I tell him.

"For now?"

"If I can find my mom, I want to live near her. If she's here in the States, then I want to do more than just visit. I want to be close by, so we can rebuild our lives."

"You know I can go anywhere in the world, right?"

Right. He has money. That does make sense. I let out a small squeak. I don't know what it's supposed to pass for.

"You just have to say the word, and I'll be there, trying to rebuild our friendship," he adds.

I'm still clinging to his shirt. I want a friendship, but I also want more. I want this. I don't want past Apollo. I want present Apollo. This gorgeous, handsome, solid, dependable, kind, creative, and unbelievably sexy man with the most unbelievably beautiful heart.

"What if I say the word now?"

"You'd have my friendship now, too," he tells me with a small smile.

"What if I want to kiss you?" I ask.

"I just—"

"What if I said I was *sure* it wasn't a mistake? What if it wasn't a mistake the first time?"

"That's a big what if," he says.

"Okay, not what if. It's not. It wasn't. Will you kiss me now?"

"Is it a definite sure?"

I'm beyond certain, and he can see that. It shocks both of us, though it's not as shocking as the fact that I realize I'm close enough to smell him. I don't know where it comes from, but all of a sudden, his scent is everywhere. He smells like he just stepped out of the shower. I want to put my face where my

hands are. I want to breathe him in. I want him to be without his soft old vintage T-shirt. His pants too. My body heats up, and my face feels like it's five million degrees. I want him without clothes on, and I want to stare and blush and say fuck the blushing, and then I want to put my hands and mouth all over him. I want to learn him with my fingers. With my tongue. With other parts of me.

Yeah, that would be a definite *sure*.

But I know he needs it to be said out loud, not just locked in my head, since a blush doesn't mean anything. Even if he can see my nipples piercing through my shirt—holy shit, I hope he can't because that's mortifying—it's not words.

“It's a definite sure,” I confirm.

He cups my face, and all my nerves go from nervous to straight-up hot spiking adrenaline.

I want a bruising kiss. I want a kiss hard enough to erase the past. I want a little bit of pain and all the pleasure, a promise, and no more apologies. I want us both to forget about all that and create something new. I think that can only come from the kind of kiss that is so hard it nearly involves teeth. All burning passion that comes with half a fraction of violence.

But this kiss? This kiss is slow. His lips barely brush mine. They don't part, and mine don't either because I'm not going to be the random fish kisser here.

How is it possible that the world's most G-rated, closed-mouth kiss can be this hot? How can it give me everything I want and more?

The pad of his thumb traces my lower lip while I stand there, shocked. It's like he's painting me into existence or assuring himself this is real, and then he leads me again in the slowest, hottest, and sweetest kiss. This time, I'm ready. This time, I know it's going to be everything I need.

CHAPTER 16



Apollo

Her kisses are wild. They're all passion. Like they come from the bottom of her scrotum. Err, I mean sternum. My brain is scrambled, and I can't think.

"I haven't done this in a while." Her teeth sink into my bottom lip.

"Yeah, me neither."

"Okay, that's okay. That's good."

"Okay." I reach for her shirt just as she grabs my hands and thrusts them under it, her motions quick and jerky and desperate.

"I...I'm on the pill," she mumbles.

Her shirt goes flying. It leaves her body just as quickly as my soul leaves mine. That's what her kiss does to me. In a good way. I think it doubly leaves me when I look down and study the bra she has on. It's not a regular color. It's freaking tie-dye. Wait, no, it's not. That's not what it is. It's ombre. Yes! Score one for me.

She takes my hands and guides them to her fabulous bra. My fingers splay over the pink that turns to purple that turns to blue. Jesus, I'm dead. I'm so dead. Her breasts are so perfect. Fabulous. Fantastic. Goodorama fabtastic.

“I just thought it made sense. I never wanted to be in a situation where I got carried away, and things happened. You know, unplanned things. I didn't want to bring a child into the world if I wasn't fully prepared to love them with a hundred percent of my devotion. I didn't want to be like my mom. Like...like what I thought she was, I mean. I didn't want to abandon my own child because I just couldn't do it anymore. I didn't know she didn't choose that.”

My hands are still on her boobs. It feels awkward while talking about sad things, so I shift them to her waist. She leans into me. “We'll find her,” I promise. I have absolute certainty in that. If money is good for one thing, it's for hiring people who are ridiculously good at their job, and the PI I hired is excellent. Not like five-star online rating kind of excellent, but word-of-mouth, do-your-research, and get-into-some-pretty-dark-areas-of-the-internet excellent.

“Thank you.” She kisses me again.

Wild again.

I feel wild too. I *am* wild. She unleashes something in me when she bites my bottom lip. Something that reminds me I'm here right now, and so is she, and whatever came before this moment is just the past. I'm obviously not the little kid who had a crush on his best friend, or the teenager who pined for her, or the man who dreamed about her and thought about her endlessly. I'm not even the same person I was when we started all this, and neither is she. She detested me, but that's changed. At least, I hope so. Erm, maybe I should double-check on that because hate sex has never been on my to-do list.

“You're sure about this?”

“Heck, yes, I'm sure.” She sinks her teeth into my bottom lip in a bite that hurts but also revs my blood up like I'm cranking cold amps made of motor oil and electrodes.

That bite does something to me and makes me pick her up and carry her to the blow-up chair. It's something that tells me setting her down on it and stripping every bit of clothing off her and licking her for eternity is a great idea.

As I said, my brain is in that awkward stage of working but not really working, and then I make one wrong miscalculation.

Pop!

She ends up on the floor in a deflated mess of plastic. I've got my hands on her leggings, and I'm ready to rip them off. They're still there, but I've frozen. Obviously. We just burst the blow-up chair, and that thing was real legit nineties vintage. Probably why it didn't last. Thirty-year-old plastic isn't a great idea, apparently.

My eyes travel up, afraid she's going to be mad because the blow-up chair just burst under her ass, and it couldn't have felt great. But I'm relieved to see her eyes are laughing, and then the rest of her follows suit. She giggles. Then giggles harder. In a minute, she's laughing so hard that she's snorting real snorts. Loud ones. Air dragged through her nose kind of snorts. She laughs so hard that she has to do the double-over thing to survive it. It makes me laugh too. Infectious and contagious, pretty soon I'm bending in half with tears in the corners of my eyes.

"That...poor...chair," Patience gasps. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry."

"You didn't do anything. It was just old. Probably not a great idea to keep it in a tree fort that's not perfectly temperature controlled. And probably not a great idea to set you down on it so hard either."

She takes my hand and pulls me to her. I'm athletic enough that when she falls back, she doesn't succeed in pulling me on top of her or even off balance. I do shiver, though, because she keeps pulling me until she's lying flat on the ground.

"I want you to do things to me." It's a different kind of breathing she's doing now. A different kind of panting. It's a wonderful breathlessness.

"What kind of things?" I ask.

She's the one who basically rips off her pants right in front of me, then nearly kicks me in the chest while trying to get them all the way off. To help her, I grasp them by the ankles and start pulling.

She's not wearing any panties. No thong, no seamless variety, no lady boxer things. Nothing. So that's why she didn't have any panty lines in those leggings.

"These kind of things," she croaks.

I've never heard her sound so desperate. And the way she tore at those leggings...if I wasn't hard before, I'm screaming hard now. I guess they call it that because you're so hard that it hurts. It makes you want to scream because you can barely contain all your *wants* and *needs*.

I have to hesitate. I have to stop this before it starts because she has to know the truth—the entirety of it. I tried to tell her already but then mucked it all up. I have to be clear now because she matters too much to me to give her anything less. “If we do this, I don’t want to just be...that one-night person. I’d rather not do this than do it and have you never want to do it again.”

“Ahh. You want to be the person who wrecks me for anyone else ever again because it’s so good with you that I’ll never not want it with you.” She narrows her eyes at me. “That’s a mighty high opinion of your skillset.”

“No. I want to be the one who does this with you now and in the future because you choose to do it again and again. I want to be the one to please you. I want this to mean something. I don’t just want to be that one summer night’s fuck in a treehouse because the treehouse is amazing, and you’re feeling sentimental or just horny. I don’t want to do this for the sake of just doing this. I want it to mean something.”

“Um, said no guy ever,” she says with a laugh.

“I think lots of guys think this way. We’re just afraid to say so.”

Her eyes soften, and the rest of her follows. “I’m choosing to do this with you because it means something more to me already. I don’t want anyone else. I was just kidding about your skills. You have nothing to prove to me. I already know that, with you, it would be good. Probably nearly perfect. I know that after you, that will probably be it for me. I know what I’m signing up for. I can’t promise it will last forever, though, because who can?”

“Dreamers. Forever can be a thing.”

“It just takes work, right? But what if work isn’t enough? What if dreaming isn’t enough? What if love isn’t enough? People get divorced. They promise each other forever, and then they leave, and one gets a restraining order and doesn’t tell their daughter, and it makes her think she’s been abandoned and...sorry. I shouldn’t be talking about such baggage. I just...I can’t promise something I don’t believe in, and I don’t believe in forever.”

She gives me such a sad, destroyed look that I’m finished. She’s half-naked in front of me, and I’m not focused on that. I’m focused on how she has been feeling. How she feels right now. How afraid of the future she is.

“People also die,” I say carefully. “I understand promises only go so far, and people can only do so much. Also, sometimes, things don’t work out. The best we can ever give is a hundred percent on any given day, and sometimes we can’t even give that because we’re human. I’m not expecting miracles. I just don’t want to be a one-night deal.”

She pulls a face like she just stepped in a pile of doo and sunk down knee-deep. “If you knew me at all, you would never think that about me,” she says with a frown.

“I *do* know you. And I don’t think that about you. I just want to be upfront about what I want so no one gets offended, no one gets hurt, and our hearts stay intact. I think we’ve both had enough confusion and hurt to last a good long time.”

“Yes. We both have. I thought you’d know from what I said before that this is the last thing I’d do with you if I didn’t mean it. I promise to try, I promise to keep an open mind, and I promise to stay. It’s not a test. I just don’t know if we’ll work. I’m going on faith and how I feel right now, and I promise that the fact that my vagina has wanted you from the very start isn’t skewing my opinion. If you don’t want to do this now, we don’t have to. Sex isn’t a tool, and it should never be used like that by anyone. Me or you.”

“Dear god, I’ve really bungled this up, haven’t I?” I sigh.

“No.” She strokes my jaw, and I can feel the genuine affection in her touch before I even see it mirrored in her expression. “No, dear. I still want you just as much. I’m wet and throbbing for you, and I feel like I’ll die if you don’t fix that for me, but I can wait. I can keep dying a little. I’d rather go into the house and take care of myself right now than ever hurt you.”

“You won’t. You haven’t,” I say reassuringly.

“Even if, in the end, this doesn’t work out?”

“If, in the end, it doesn’t work after we’ve both tried our hardest, that’s just how life sometimes goes. I promise I will never hate you. I promise I will never have regrets. I promise that I will live to fulfill both those promises each day.”

“Okay.” Her fingers thread through my hair. “Then *please*, make my vagina’s fantasies come true.”

“Only if they’re the rest of your fantasies too.”

“They’re all my fantasies. All of me. You.” She huffs out a frustrated sigh. “I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore. I just know hurting you would be the last thing on my list. I also know I want this between us. I want this...this feeling of

being close to you. Closer than anyone else has ever been. Closer than I ever thought possible. I want to know every part of your body and your soul.”

“Okay.” That’s the most romantic and amazing thing anyone has ever said to me. “Okay.”

Her eyes are already dark, but when I trace a line of kisses from her ankle up to her knee, they get even darker. I take her hips and lift her completely away from the burst plastic mess and shift her gently to the bare floor. It’s perfectly soft, sanded, and stained wood. It’s not possible for it to be splintery, but I’ll still take all the care in the world.

I lift her hips and take care with the kisses I plant on her inner thighs. She puts both her hands back in my hair, and I love that twisted-up around her fingers feel that makes my scalp burn. I probably look like she does—out of control, raw, sexed up. Her vagina wanted me? If we’re talking about body parts, then all of me wanted all of her since I saw her again as well. My cock is practically a stone column in my jeans right now. It wants to be buried inside her to the hilt. It wants to fuck her into nonsensical pleasure. And it wants to do anything and everything that will turn her on.

“Tighter,” she whisper-screams as my hands go to her hips again. “Hold me tighter.” I curl them a little bit more. “Like hard enough to leave marks.”

“Jesus,” I growl.

She flushes. “I saved your ass, literally. So if I ask you to bruise mine a little, then don’t be worried that I don’t know my own mind. I have this fantasy playing over and over in my head right now where you lift me clean off the floor, thrust your face into my pussy, and eat me until I’m a hot mess. I want you to fill me with your tongue, fill me with your fingers, and then fill me with your cock. I’m not some delicate flower. I want to *feel* you.”

Well, if I wasn’t done in already, that about finishes me off.

I give her what she wants. I curl my fingers into her lovely, curvy ass and do my best to make good on what she just asked for, even if blood flow to my cock and brain have been simultaneously cut off by each other. Err, my jeans might have something to do with that.

She’s soaked, and she smells divine as I give her my tongue first. Her clit, my tongue. She’s dripping wet, and I have to taste every bit of her. I don’t think I’m the world’s best kisser, but I’m going to world’s-best-kisser her vagina right now. She

thrashes against the floor and against me. Her hips buck into my face, and her clit pulses under my tongue.

“Yes. More. Please. Your tongue is amazing,” she moans.

I play with her clit a little bit more until she’s *panting*.

“I want to squeeze your ass,” she suddenly confesses out of nowhere. “I’ve thought about licking it too.”

“What the fuck?” I gasp.

“Not like literally licking it. Just the cheek,” she clarifies.

“Oh my god.”

“Whatever. Like you haven’t thought about licking mine?”

“I’m a gentleman,” I reply with a slight smirk.

“Well, don’t be. Not right now. Give me your fingers.”

“We’re talking—”

“Oh, no. Not that. I’m not ready for that.”

“Okay. Just needed to confirm.”

I tease her clit while I double up my fingers and push them inside her. She makes a startled noise and then moans in pleasure.

“Yes. Please. It feels so good.”

Good isn't good enough. I need other words. I want her to come. I want her shaking and coming on my fingers.

I pull them away, not so she can beg me, but so she can see me lick them clean. She tastes like heaven, pleasure, and all the good things in the world wrapped up into one. My whole body is screaming at me to feel her throbbing around my cock, but I use my fingers instead, pushing them inside her again and thrusting into her tight passage. I use my tongue on her clit until her head is lolling on the floor and her hips are pumping up and down.

My cock is *really* screaming at me now. He wants to be buried deep inside her. He wants her to ride him, put him in her mouth, and destroy another plastic chair I don't have because, right now, she's so wild. He wants her over and over again, but only because she wants it too. He wants her to tell me that she wants to feel me inside her for days after we're done here.

I've never thought of thoughts like this in my life. She's not afraid to tell me what she wants, and that's hot as hell. I guess it has unleashed something equally unabashed in my brain.

I reach up a little further, and her breathing changes. It's not just circling her clit that's doing it. It's what I'm doing inside

her as well.

“Oh god,” she rasps with what sounds like the last bit of breath in her lungs. “I...oh shit. I...*Apollo*.”

“Are you going to come, Patience? Are you going to come in this treehouse, on my face, and on my fingers, writhing on the floor like a lusty goddess?”

“Ew, but also, that’s kind of hot.”

“Are you? Are you going to come harder for me than you’ve ever come in your life?”

I hit that spot inside her again, and I feel how wet she is. She’s wet enough that she’s soaking my whole hand. Her teeth start chattering, and her knees try and lock together, but since I’m between her legs, that’s not happening. She does ride my face, though. Wildly. I’m never going to forget a single detail about any of this. She’s so fucking hot, and she’s so hot when she’s fucking. Ha. How’s that for a tongue twister? But it’s still nothing compared to what I’m doing with my tongue at the moment.

She likes it, and I can tell she’s going to shatter. But I want to hear her say it.

“Are you going to come, Patience?” I ask again.

“That depends on how good you are,” she tosses back sassily, her voice wavering.

“I think I’m pretty good at this,” I respond confidently.

I attack her clit and work my fingers harder until I can feel her starting to come apart. “Yes,” she moans. “Yes, I’m coming. *Apollo*. Please. I—”

“Apollo?” a sudden voice calls out.

“Garp!” Patience frantically claws at the floor and tries to kick me away. Then, she shoots up and tries to grab her leggings in the next second.

I can’t think of a single moment when my dad has had worse timing.

“Answer him!” she hisses right next to my ear in her lowest, panic-stricken, most mortified voice. “Freaking answer him, or he’ll come up here. He’ll know what we’re doing!”

I point to the floor where the trap door is. I’ve locked it. “He can’t get in.”

“He’ll know what we’re doing for sure then! No one locks a door unless they’re fucking,” she tells me, her voice filled with urgency.

“I’m pretty sure just about everyone locks doors for other reasons.”

“This is a tree fort, and he couldn’t hear us talking. He’ll... oh my god, what if he heard me just now? I’m going to die, Apollo. I’m going to die of embarrassment.”

“You’re not,” I tell her firmly.

She stands up and pulls her leggings on so hard and rapidly that I swear they could rip in half. They protest, but they hold.

“Apollo? I thought I heard a gunshot,” my dad calls out from the outside.

Good god, that was quite a while ago. Patience points at me, which basically means her finger goes straight into my chest because I’m so close. “Don’t look at me like that,” she whisper-yells. She’s good at that, whisper-yelling under her breath. “Don’t look at me like your night was just totally ruined. I was the one who was mid-coming.”

She’s only a breath away, and she’s *furious*. Her cheeks are flushed, and it’s all I can do not to grab her and crush her lips with mine. Instead, my hands circle her waist, and I haul her up against me. I make sure my extremely-hard-to-the-point-of-probably-falling-off cock hits her extremely-sensitive-to-the-

point-of-nearly-coming clit. She gasps, gives me the dirty eye, bumps against me again, and claps a hand over her mouth to stifle the sexed-up sigh that escapes her.

“We’re okay, Dad. We’re good. It was just the blow-up chair. I sat on it wrong, and I was too heavy for it, so it popped.”

“I wouldn’t recommend doing that,” Dad advises.

“I can see why now. Anyway, it’s okay. You can go back in. Nothing’s happening out here.”

“Okay, just wanted to check. You never know what might be going on in the middle of the woods, in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, up in a treehouse. Someone might be up to no good.”

Patience looks like she’s going to strike out for real. I clap a hand over her mouth this time and barely stifle her laughter on time. I have to clamp my lips shut to keep mine inside too.

“If you’re sure, then I’ll go back in and resume my skunk cuddles,” Dad says.

“I’m sure. Thanks. We’ll be in right away. We just wanted to stay out and watch the stars and talk. We’re kind of having one of those serious conversations and need a bit more time.”

“Right. Yes, uh, okay. I’ll see you in a bit.”

We listen to his steps fade. I can literally hear when he opens and closes the door to the house.

Patience licks my palm, and I yank my hand from her mouth because her eyes are snapping fireworks at me. “He totally heard us. He freaking did. Oh my godddddddddd, no.”

“He didn’t. It’s all good,” I say comfortingly.

“I was saying I wanted to lick your butt, telling you to put body parts into my body parts, and telling you I was coming. How long was he out there for?”

“Probably not long. He heard the pop and then listened for screams, sat there for a few minutes deciding what to do, talked himself out of coming outside, and then came outside anyway just to double and triple check because he has that kind of engineering mind where he can’t let it go and needs to follow up with a whole process. And part of that process is just not being able to help himself. Also, dad instincts. He had to make sure we weren’t in danger.”

“That better be true.”

I hope so too, and I answer instead by kissing her.

CHAPTER 17



Apollo

My dad leaves two mornings later, super early. He gets a hug from both of us, even though Patience is scarlet whenever he's around now. I carefully hold back tears, and he also carefully holds back tears. We both pretend we aren't carefully holding back tears. And if he heard anything a few nights ago, he pretends he didn't too.

After he's gone, Patience finds me in the kitchen. I only just turned on the coffee pot since Dad assured me he didn't need any before he got on the road back to Seattle. The house feels very quiet, and Bitty Kitty misses our dads. She's curled up on her bed in the living room, but she did an aimless circle right after Dad left.

"It's quiet." Patience uses an equally quiet voice, like she's afraid to disturb the silence.

"Well, the birds are giving 'er outside, if that counts." They are. I absolutely love their chitter. Even the ravens and crows, when they get to their cawing out there, have a unique sound. I love watching those birds. They're so freaking intelligent. I've never found their calls ugly or annoying.

She leans on the counter with both elbows and looks out the window. “You’re right. It’s pretty.”

“Do you want coffee?” I ask.

“I think I’ll have tea this morning.”

We slept in our separate bedrooms last night, obviously. Both of us tried to pretend nothing was happening since Dad was still here. I still thought about her to the point where it felt like my balls were going to explode, and then, right when I was going to get up and have a shower, and you know, do things in there to relieve the pressure, I must have fallen asleep because the last thing I remember was my nuts aching so fiercely that I wondered if it might be a legit medical emergency.

“I can fill the kettle for you,” I say.

“Don’t worry. I can do it.”

We’re doing that thing—being awkward and making small talk. I don’t know how to not be awkward or make small talk, but Patience is braver than I am.

“I know some people genuinely want to be alone, but I’m not one of them. I just want you to know that.”

Wow, that's so much more than a sentence while I still don't know what to say. I do make eye contact, though, because it's respectful, even if I'm out of words and flustered. Patience is always going to be the most beautiful woman in the world. This morning, in her flowy tank top with little hearts and her jeans, she makes my heart stop. To be fair, anything she wears—or nothing at all, especially nothing—will have the same effect.

“I just wanted you to know that. I wanted to say it because last night, I said some things in the heat of the moment, and I wanted you to know that...that it didn't make them any less legit for me.”

Should I offer her breakfast? Eggs? Toast? Ham? Should I tell her I'm the one who is ruined for anyone else after one single taste of her? Should I tell her I'd build a million mushroom houses and burst a thousand blow-up chairs if she wanted me to? Should I tell her I've been falling for her and longing for her in different ways for as long as I can remember? Wait. I already did tell her that. All of it. Multiple times.

That's not what she needs to hear. That's not why she's looking at me with a sudden dark heaviness in her eyes. And

that isn't why she's focused on my lips.

“Okay.” Even that one word is strangled and gasped out. I need to chill, mellow down, and be as cool as that cucumber that is somehow always going to be the benchmark for chill vegetables the world over. It doesn't matter that my heart is grinding to a slow halt or that my pulse is all over the freaking place.

“I think, deep down, we're all afraid things will go wrong. That we're just going to be something or someone that doesn't mean enough to someone. It's natural to have those fears. No one wants to get hurt, and thinking ahead is a way to protect ourselves. I think, throughout most of my life, I've overthought everything. I haven't acted, though, because overthinking makes me paralyzed. I didn't say what I wanted, even when I did know. It's going to take some time to get used to putting it out there without feeling extremely selfish.”

“No. Don't feel selfish. You're the least selfish person I know.”

“That's odd because you know yourself.”

I should fill the kettle, get the eggs out, pour coffee, and do something with my hands instead of letting them hang awkwardly against my sides, but the way Patience is looking

at me says she likes my awkward hands. She's still focused on my lips, and her gaze is smoldering, to say the least. Just by looking at her, I get hot and flushed and tingly all over.

“You're also the most beautiful person I know,” I blurt.

Her nose wrinkles, and then her lips twitch like she's going to sneeze, but oh wait, it's a small grin. It turns into a smile, and making her smile is pretty much my new life goal because it's so *beautiful*. “That's odd because you know yourself.”

I'm still not entirely sure this is even happening. I think I might wake up and find that our dads are still here, there's still all this rhubarb and fridge rage, and things are still a mess between them. Things still *aren't* perfect between them, but with the way Patience is looking at me right now, I'm sure I'm not dreaming it. I'm sure she's got that look on her face telling me we're alone now, and she'd like to kiss me again and maybe break a few pieces of furniture in here by accident. We'd have to really try at that because they're all very sturdily constructed.

Fuck, that thought goes straight to my balls.

Her eyes get darker. She blinks, and every time her lashes flutter, there are new shadows in them. Darker desire and more want. When they shift a fraction lower, sweeping over the rest

of me, my knees get weak, my dick punches against my zipper, and language deserts me yet again.

“Last night was pretty amazing,” she whispers. “Well, minus me not being able to ever look your dad in the eye again.” She takes a step, and that turns into a few more, and suddenly, she’s in front of me, taking my hand in both of hers. “I never thought I’d have mind-blowing sex in a tree fort.”

“We...didn’t...” Cough, cough, sputter. I sound like an ancient beater car backfiring.

“I distinctly remember your mouth on my pussy, so I think it counts.” Her tongue sweeps out and wets her bottom lip. My entire body becomes one big goosebump, which seems at odds with the volcano currently brewing under my skin. “I guess it wasn’t that mind-blowing for you because we never got to the parts where you could actually enjoy—”

“I enjoyed it.” I never thought this would be real. Not with her. I’ve waited half a lifetime to be here right now, which makes this feel even more dreamlike. “I enjoyed it so much.”

“I think, to be fair, you should kiss me again. I should kiss you again. And we should get to the part where you can truly enjoy yourself.”

“I truly enjoyed myself,” I say hoarsely to her.

“Like more enjoyment.”

“More?” *Quork*. I sound like those crows or ravens calling each other when they’ve made an exciting discovery like bread crusts or compost or bird seed in a new place.

“I’d like to kiss you, Apollo. Would that be okay?”

Her hands run up and down my arms like she has to chase away a chill in the air. I think I might be a little in shock. I think my dick might be so hard, and my balls so blue, that the medical emergency is real after all.

“Yes.” Wait, it’s working. “Yes, that would be fine.”

“So polite.” Her hands are at my neck now, her fingers twisting through my hair. Her eyes are so freaking dark. “Do we have to go back to the treehouse for the dirty talk?”

“We can have the dirty talk in the mushroom.”

“Good. Because I never thought I’d have mind-blowing sex in a mushroom either.”

“Aren’t you placing too much emphasis on my skills?” I tease with a smirk.

She's not afraid to give me a wicked, sassy grin in reply. I'm going to blow my load in my jeans just seeing her look at me like that. "Not after last night, I'm not."

I can't not kiss her anymore because it's the only thing that makes sense right now. It's the only thing that's ever made sense to me, especially when she has that grin on with the twin dimples and the light in her smoky eyes.

The very second my lips meet hers, it's a rush like nothing I've ever known. She's better than any thrills I've had in my life, any medals I've ever won, and any high I've ever gotten from the physical exertion of swimming and training. She kisses me just as eagerly, and then she thrusts her tongue into my mouth, taking me by surprise.

It's a good surprise—a very good one.

I'm glad she doesn't want this kiss to be slow, gentle, and romantic. I'm glad she wants it pulse-pounding, all hard action, adrenaline junkie style, almost teeth, and at the frantic level I need.

I've known I was in trouble ever since I saw her again. I knew this fake marriage wouldn't work because I'd want her too much, but I was still willing to do it if it meant saving her. I never thought I was the one who'd need saving, but here I

was. She's saving me like this, and I'm losing myself in her. My hands are in her hair, hers are locked at the back of my neck, and I'm getting swept away.

Last night, I thought it was proper if I took the lead, but this morning, she seems to be the one who wants me to follow, and that's okay with me too. I'm perfectly happy with letting her show me, tell me, and teach me what she wants. I'm also extra freaking happy to do anything and everything she desires.

Right now, she desires to kiss me like a passion tornado while bumping against my painfully hard cock with her sweet curves every couple of seconds. I've never been so hard in my life, so it's doing things to me I almost didn't know were physically possible. My blue balls times a thousand that I've had on since last night probably have something to do with that.

"Oh god," Patience pants and groans. "Apollo..." She tries to rip open my jeans.

She gets a handful of denim and buttons and the zipper, and between the hard tugging and utter desperation in her hands, she gets them undone. Then, she shoves them down and grabs my ass with both hands—a handful of my butt cheeks in each.

"You have the nicest butt," Patience purrs.

“Uh, thanks. I think,” I reply, turning bright red.

“I want to dig my heels into it while you fuck me on the counter.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I'm going to die. I'm going to die right now.

It finally occurs to me that maybe I'm not the only one who has blue balls. In like a metaphorical sense. We were going to have crazy wild animal sex up in that treehouse last night, but we never got to finish. Just because I gave Patience an orgasm didn't mean it was good enough or that she didn't want more.

I want to pick her up but realize she has jeans on. And while mine are half off, and that's okay, hers need to go. I'm pretty quick at stripping them off her. She's wearing panties today, little peach ones with tiny blue flowers. They're not lace, but they're silky. I appreciate them for basically one point seven nine seconds before I nearly tear them off her body and toss them aside.

Then, I pick her up and set her on the counter. Her eyes are kind of hazy, and her pupils are huge. It's nice that she looks entirely sexed up already, and we haven't even started yet. It means I've done something right with those kisses so far. I like

knowing she takes pleasure in my body, and it blows me away to see how much she wants this.

“Dirty talk to me,” she hisses, spreading her legs for me on the counter.

“I...” My mind blanks. It’s kind of hard to think of something other than how perfect and pink and wet she is because she’s showing it all to me. I want to get on my knees and worship her with my mouth again. And I’m nearly there when she grasps my arms.

“No, I don’t want that. I want you. Inside me. Now,” she rasps.

“I want to be inside you now, too,” I respond just as raspily.

Her brows arch up, and she gives me another sexy-as-hell wolfish smile that includes full-on dimples. “Do you?”

“I do,” I say with certainty.

“How much?”

“This much.” I take her hand and guide it to my boxers through my jeans that are gaping open.

“Oh.” Her fingers close around my shaft. “*Oh*,” she adds.

“Take me out.” That’s pretty much the extent of dirty words my brain can think up right now. All I can think about is how good her hands feel on my throbbing dick, how I’m so hard, so hard, so hard, how I need to fix this, fix this, fix this, and how good she’s going to feel when I push my hard cock into her and fix it for both of us.

She follows my commands, pushing my boxers down and taking my cock out. My balls are kind of trapped inside the elastic waistband, which hurts a little but also feels oddly good. It wouldn’t feel good at any other time, though. It only feels good right now because a little bit of pain equals so much more pleasure. But then she yanks it all the way down with her other hand, freeing them, and okay, I lied. This is better.

She does what she said earlier about her heels and wraps them around me, digging them into my butt, which is now half-naked because my jeans and boxers are barely half-on.

“Whoa,” she exhales, then flushes like she didn’t mean to make the sound. Not when she’s pumping her hand down my dick and watching with utter concentration, spreading the moisture from the tip down the rest of my length. Her hand is incredible. It’s so incredible that I could probably come just from a few more pumps.

“Need you...”

“Yes. Please. But you’re...really...big.”

I’m not that big. Like, not *that big*. But I’m also not that small. “I’ll go slow,” I promise her.

“How disappointing,” she teases, grinning.

“I’ll go as slow as you like.” I need something else. Something dirty for her. “Touch your boobs. Pinch your nipples. I want to see you pleasuring yourself when I enter you because I’m going to watch every single second of it.”

“Holy shit. What if I watch too?” she croaks.

My dick pulses so hard in her hand that she has her clear answer. She guides me to her, shimmies forward on the counter, and opens her legs wider. Then, she palms her breast with her other hand above her shirt and finds her nipple with her fingers. She must just have one of those lacy bras on. Or a camisole with no bra.

I’m panting now.

I need to slow down. But I don’t know if it’s possible, though. What would make it possible to be less hard? Hmm, creepy dolls. Oh lord, those creepy dolls. I slowly think about each one of their monstrous faces, but Patience put hard work

into those. She made them a masterpiece of terribleness, and there's an art form in that which is hard not to appreciate, even if they scare the shit out of me with their horrifyingly soulless stares.

Ahhh, yes. There we go. At least that bought me a few seconds. I'll have to thank them one day.

Patience is warm and inviting, slick and hot. With a low groan, I slowly push my dick inside her. *She's* the most at home I've ever felt or been anywhere in the world. Control isn't currently a word in my sex-cabulary, but I force myself to do it for her. I watch her, just like I said I would, and the way her eyes practically roll back in pleasure, and the way her cheeks flush and her breathing bottoms out, slowing way the hell down, all help me roll my hips in slow, slow motion.

She catches herself and presses her nipples through her shirt. I know she hits the right spot because she gasps and starts panting harder. Her eyes close tightly as I push all the way inside.

"Wow," she breathes. "Wow, you weren't lying about your skills at all."

"I hope I wasn't, but I haven't done anything yet."

“You’re stretching me to kingdom freaking come, and you haven’t done anything yet?” Her tongue wets her bottom lip. I surge forward and kiss her, which pushes me even deeper inside her. “I don’t think it’s natural to be endowed with a salami for a dick.”

Oh. My. Fucking. Goodness.

“That’s very nice of you,” I groan.

She wriggles against me and lets out a tiny whimper while I steal another kiss. This time, I don’t let her go, and I don’t stop until her hands are raking my hair. I’m moving inside her because she rolled her hips against me first.

“Yes,” she chants against my lips. Her hips buck up and down and backward and forward. I can’t imagine what it would be like having her on top of me, losing control like this. Actually, I can at least imagine part of it, and it’s a good thing she’s panting and wild and nearly there because I’m about to lose it.

I thrust to meet the way she’s rolling her hips until we’re a perfect match. I scrape her lip with my teeth and angle down, suckling at her neck. Her shirt has to go, so I make it go. Easily. Her bra is just a delicate little fabric that is so lightweight that it’s sheer. It’s more like an ultra-tiny tank top

rather than a bra at all. I bury my head in her breasts and suckle her nipple until the fabric is soaked, and then I move to the other nipple. I don't look down again until they look like they're going to rip right through the fabric.

“Good.” She rakes her hands through my hair again and grasps my shoulders tightly. Her heels make a renewed effort to grasp my ass. “So good,” she moans.

She looks wrecked like this, and I love it. I know if she opened her eyes, I'd look the same. I'd look wrecked for her because I am. I'm also right on the edge. It's a product of the blue balls from last night, but it's also a product of how much I've wanted her...and for how long. Those find-out and fuck-around graphs—it's pretty much the same concept. I only ever believed I'd make her life better, give her all her dreams, and atone for the choice I made to stay away. I know it wasn't all me, but it didn't change the level of guilt or what I wanted to accomplish once I had money. I just never imagined she'd want me back. Dreamed? Yes, absolutely. But those dreams felt like an impossibility.

“Beautiful.” I stroke her cheekbone. “You're beautiful, Patience.” I fuck her harder, and she clings to me harder too.

Her breasts bounce prettily in her little top, her nipples visible through the fabric I reduced to sheer.

Then, her face changes, and I can feel how she goes still in that inner way, even though she's still moving through it. She grasps me tight with her hands, her hips, her heels, and her walls around my dick, and I'm done.

She's done too. I can feel her coming. Gah, that sounds so silly. She's not coming. She's finding something amazing and life-changing, and she's dying a little and going wild and tumbling straight into the abyss of pleasure.

"Apollo..." She moans my name when she doesn't say anything at all, and that's what pushes me over.

I come inside her, and it doesn't stop. It feels like I'm coming forever. I can't stop even if I try because I can feel her clenching around me over and over again, and it makes me want to keep coming and coming. We're both coming and coming and spasming and rocking and shaking and dying a little. I know this is possible because of my balls, but I seriously think it's coming from somewhere else because there's no way it should last this long. I feel like I'm coming from the tips of my fingers, the top of my head, and the soles of my feet.

I open my eyes a few seconds later because I want to watch her come down. I want to watch all that bliss and pleasure moving over her face. I want to—

My phone is on the counter right beside Patience.

And when it suddenly goes off, it's jarring and awful.

She shrieks.

I shriek.

I fumble for it, still inside her, and we're both still wild and not nearly on the downward trend of sweet afterglow yet. I just want to shut the thing off and maybe pitch it into a corner, never to be found again, but the name on the screen stops me.

I put it to my ear. This is one call I can't miss, even if it's just an update. But it's not. This guy doesn't mess around.

"We found her." Nelson DeBandry's deep voice spills into my ear. "We found Genevieve Jonesboro."

CHAPTER 18



Patience

There's no point in saying I've thought about my mom more times than I can count. It's been endless over the years. Thoughts that number more than the stars. Even the thoughts I haven't consciously thought of have been about her.

She's still an older version of me as she walks through the front door, more so now than when I was a kid because I'm presently a grown woman. All I had was a photo album of pictures. I think Dad organized them all into one album for me, which I guess he was gracious enough to do even though he got that restraining order. Maybe it was a guilt project. I had some of my mom's photos of her as a baby, her as a young girl, her as a teenager, and then way more of my parents together and ones with me in them. I knew what she looked like years ago. Just in case my memory ever started to fade, I'd refresh it with those photos. I used to spend hours and hours with that album.

The moment my mom steps through the curved wooden door, that's the first thing I notice. How much she still looks the same. I'm blown away that her light blonde hair is still the

same wheat color. I know it's probably impossible that it's not dyed, but whoever did it made it look just like her old shade—the shade I could never, ever forget, even if I didn't have the album. Her eyes are still the same light green, with the darker spokes flooding her irises.

I'm frozen. I planned this moment in my head to the point where it became like a unicorn in my mind. A fantasy. A dream world. Apollo has his arm around my waist, and he's probably the only thing keeping me upright at the moment. I think he knows that. It explains why he leans in until my shoulder is bracketed by his. I can't fall with all his strength at my side. It's comforting, and in a rush of tornado-crazy emotions, it's nice to have such a solid, dependable comfort I can pick out of everything else I'm feeling and put my faith in.

It makes it easier to breathe.

Especially when my mom's husband—a tall, slim, athletic-looking man with iron-grey hair, a dark shadow on his jaw, and dark brown eyes—follows her into the house.

Apollo opened the door when they clanged the cowbell, and then he immediately stepped back to my side. Other than his smile and his few words of welcome and *come in*, no one has said anything.

Jonesboro. Her last name isn't Pullen anymore. She has a husband. And a new life in New York, where she started over again. The wedding ring set on her left hand is massive, a big chunky diamond catching the light.

My mom's eyes fill up with tears a few seconds after she clears the door. Mine have been going that way pretty much constantly for the past four days—ever since we got that call from the guy Apollo hired. He gave us my mom's phone number and address, and I called her immediately, even though I didn't know what to say. It turned out that just hearing her voice was enough, and it didn't matter that we cried together without words for a good solid five minutes before she begged to be able to come and fly out to see me.

I'm stiff and awkward now. It's a rank state of shock, but I feel like if I move or blink, this might turn out to be undeniably not real.

Apollo runs his hand down my arm, flooding me with warmth, and then he steps forward and offers his hand to my mom's husband. Will. His name is Will. She said that on the phone. They exchange a handshake and a clap on the shoulder. I don't know if I'd ever be able to move if Apollo hadn't

moved first, but I'm moving now. I nearly trip over my rushing, churning feet as I hurtle myself at my mom.

She opens her arms, and *oh my god, Mom. I've missed you so much. Please let this be real.* She's solid against me, and she holds me like she used to do when I was little. Mom hugs don't change with age, and I'm never going to be too big for them. She smells different. She's even dressed differently. She looks like a businesswoman with her skirt suit on and the designer bag hanging from the crook of her arm. She also smells like expensive perfume and her exotic life in New York.

I don't want to cry all over her good clothes, but I cry anyway. I can't make it stop, but I angle to the side so my tears drip all over me instead of all over her.

I've waited an eternity and a half for this. My mom's chin wobbles, and then she presses her index and middle fingers to her bottom lip just like she always used to do.

There's something to be said for realizing my mom is the same person she was back when I was little. That she never abandoned me. That she never stopped trying to be in my life. That as soon as the PI gave me her number and we could be reunited, she dropped everything, got on a plane, and came out

here immediately. Even though she's done well for herself, and even though she has super nice clothes, a huge diamond ring, and probably lots of money, she still has the same smile. She still presses her fingers to her lips the same way, her chin still wobbles when she's trying to bite back her emotion, and she still has those same dimples when she smiles. They look just like mine. Or rather, mine look just like hers.

I hug her harder. "I've missed you," I breathe, and that's all it's going to take, but then Will gasps, and we both get distracted, so the bawl fest doesn't immediately happen.

"A skunk! You have a pet skunk!"

Bitty Kitty waddles into the room with her tail lifted high, proud as can be of herself. I'm so glad Will didn't leap out the window or turn the coffee table over to hide behind it. I know how much Apollo doesn't want another pool incident. We've had a few too many of those lately, including the night when I almost lost him to muscle cramps.

My heart gets super tight thinking about that, and fear shoots through me like jagged little pinpricks of ice.

"Yup, I do have a skunk as a pet," Apollo says.

"And you live in a mushroom," Will adds.

“We do live in a mushroom.” I don’t miss the word ‘*we*.’ He’s including me. This man, who is still so down to earth and grounded no matter how much money he has. This man, who was willing to fight for me. “We have a great pool outside. Would you like me to show it to you? We could have lunch right after.”

Will looks at my mom, and they share one of those silent, meaning-packed looks that couples who *know* each other well can communicate with.

“That would be great,” Will says.

It takes me only a few seconds of watching Apollo’s broad back retreating to the patio door with Will in tow to miss his warmth and heat and the certainty I feel when I’m around him. I step back from my mom, suddenly feeling awkward and not so confident.

I’m extra nervous now, and I’m sure it shows, but my mom ignores it. She takes my hand, which makes my heart leap around in my chest like a frog going mad in there, and leads me to the couch.

“I really do love that you live in a mushroom,” she tells me. “I remember Apollo. He was a sweet boy—one of the sweetest. I’m so happy you stayed friends all these years, and

now you're together. That's an amazing story. The best love story."

No matter how painful it is or how much it sucks, I have to correct her. I want her to know the truth, so I tell her everything, starting with when she left. I don't hold back on my feelings, but I do let her know that I realize it wasn't her fault. I watch as her face goes white and then florid and flushed, and then as tears start streaming down her cheeks. My eyes aren't dry, either. I don't think there's a dry spot on my face at all. I tell her everything about Dad's feud, the poker game, Apollo saving me, how mad I was at him for being just another person who left, and how I didn't want to forgive him even when he was the one who came back and offered me everything. I didn't want to forgive him until I almost lost him, and how horrible that was on my part when it took something like that to get me to open my eyes. I talk way too long, and I briefly wonder what Apollo and Will are finding to do in the backyard. Bitty Kitty must have followed them out because she's not in here. Maybe they're hunting bugs with her. She loves that.

"I'm so sorry, baby," Mom says, stroking a strand of my hair back behind my ear when I'm done. My face is dry and

crusty from all the tears, and it literally feels like my skin could crack from that salt bath.

“Don’t be sorry. You have nothing to be sorry about,” I reassure her.

“I’m sorry you were hurt. I knew you would have been. That’s why I tried so desperately to reach you. I’m sorry I was the one who left,” Mom says softly.

“You shouldn’t have to stay in a marriage you were unhappy in.”

“Your dad and I...” She sighs, and it’s such a painful sound. “We were in love at one point, but we tried to break up before we got married. I tried to tell him I wasn’t in love with him anymore, but he cried and spent all night convincing me to give us another chance. I thought maybe things could work and that maybe it was just me who needed to work on myself. I don’t know. For a while, it did. And I thought I was happy. But then we got married, and I just felt...trapped. You were a surprise, honey, and you were the very best surprise. You were always the best part of my life, and I tried so hard after you were born. I tried and tried to make it work because I wanted to be a family. I wanted you to have a mom and dad who were together, but I just couldn’t do it. I was selfish, but—”

“You’re not selfish for having to leave to make sure you’re okay. Your mental health is important too. I can’t imagine being in a relationship for years and years and the guilt that leaving would cause but also suffocating to death, going insane, and being so desperately unhappy and unfilled on the inside.” Actually, I can imagine.

They were entirely different circumstances, but what I was doing back home, working for my dad, staying for my dad, not going to college, and not having dreams of my own...it wasn’t living. That was being scared to live. I felt guilty, too, thinking about him all alone. I wasn’t brave enough to leave until that poker game took me away.

“Your dad is an interesting man,” Mom says. She sounds like she means it too. She’s not the slightest bit bitter, that I can tell. She just looks so happy to be sitting across from me. Like she’s looking at her own personal unicorn the same way I’m looking at mine. I love that we can sit here and unicorn out together. “I wasn’t entirely surprised that he did what he did. But it’s a small area, and everyone knows everyone. I tried to reach out and get messages to you, but John refused, and the few other people I asked refused too, and that was it. I didn’t know anyone well enough to ask. Whatever your dad

told them about what happened with us was enough to make them change their minds about helping me contact you.”

“Oh, Mom, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” she says soothingly.

“I’m sorry that for years, we’ve both felt this hurt. I’m sorry Dad made those choices. I’m trying to forgive him for that and for other things, but it’s going to be a long road.”

Mom sets her hand on my shoulder, and her chin wobbles again. She blinks hard. Her eyes are lighter than mine, and they’re already red-rimmed from all the crying earlier. “I’m so glad you’re choosing forgiveness because bitterness is a terrible thing to carry around with you.”

Yes, I carried it around for too many years.

I don’t want to sit here and cry all day, so I stand up instead. “I’d like to show you my room. It’s a theme room, and it’s super cool. Plus, I make dolls. Creepy dolls. I think you’ll like them.”

And she does. She loves them. Upstairs, she holds one up and turns it around, studying it from every angle. “This is great. They all are. I would love to take one back to New York with me if that’s okay. I have a whole bunch of clients who I

think would be happy to purchase your dolls. If you want to sell it, that is. I could just use it as a demo model. They could place orders if you do custom work, or they could place an order for whatever you're willing to make."

I'm holding another doll right now, and I stroke her lovely, horrifically horrifying hair. "I don't know. I'm not sure these are good enough to sell."

"They're more than good enough. There's such a good market for unique things."

The first conversation we had on the phone—where Mom told me where she was living and asked me how I was doing and where I was, and we both bawled—she told me she was a photographer. That's what she does in New York. I haven't even asked her about Will yet.

I set the doll down. "How did you and Will meet?"

She suddenly blushes, and she looks so young and pretty. I could look at her all day. I'm probably crap with a camera, but I'd really like to take her picture. More for the album that I'll never give up. It's sitting packed away in one of the boxes of things Apollo had shipped out here from Dad's house. My mom is one of those older women who is always going to be stunning, no matter what age they are.

“After I left, I made my way here and there and ended up in New York. I was taking evening classes for business because I wanted to finish my degree since I’d need something to get a good job to live off. I should have gone somewhere cheaper, but having a lot of roommates is okay too. It was never lonely, and goodness knows I needed the company.”

My throat gets tight. “I’m glad you weren’t alone.”

“I never was. I was hurting, and I missed you like crazy, but I threw myself into my classes. I did finish, but I found working in an office so stifling. Except, I met William there. He wasn’t my boss, but he was one of *the* bosses. I was an admin assistant, and then I worked my way up to an executive assistant position for someone else. One day, Will’s assistant got sick, and they needed someone to sit in and take minutes for him in his meeting. I’d never even seen him before that day, and I’d worked at that company for nearly eight months. I think it was pretty much one of those love-at-first-sight things...if that even exists.” Her blush gets blusher and redder, and it’s so freaking cute on her. She strokes my doll’s hair, thumbing the bright red curls over and over. “Or at least attraction at first sight. He’d never been married, but he was ten years older than me. He didn’t think he was looking for

someone, and I certainly wasn't, but we found we had things in common. He'd made a good living working there over the years, and his job was important to him. He really loved what he did. We could have kept it a secret, but I really wasn't happy working in an office. I wanted more freedom.

"I know everyone on earth wants to be a photographer now, but Will knew people who knew people, and all I had to do was pick up a camera. It was always a hobby, but when I started putting in the time and effort, it wasn't hard for Will to arrange a show for me, and also, just like that, I started getting jobs. I opened a studio, sold images, and took bookings. It had very little to do with my own talent and much more to do with Will and all the people he knew supporting me at first, but I'd like to think people hire me now because they love what I can provide."

"Of course they do, Mom."

I want to say that over and over again. Mom. Mom. Mom.

She blinks back tears and looks at me with so much love and pride. I think she could stand here and hear that word over and over again. "You're always welcome to come to New York with me."

“Thanks.” I have to set the doll down on the dresser because I don’t want to keep playing with her hair and wreck it. There’s only so much handling that poor stuff can take. It was mighty decrepit when I used it in the first place. “That really does mean everything to me. I told Apollo that if I ever found you, I’d want to move out wherever you were and be with you. He said he’d follow me if I wanted him to. That we could go anywhere. But I’m just not sure I’m ready for New York. I wasn’t even sure until a few days ago that I wanted to stay here, but I think this is what I want. I want to take a chance on my wounded heart healing and still have lots of love to give. It’s so beautiful out here. I love Bitty Kitty. I love the mushroom house. I love these silly rooms. And I love the tree fort outside and the yard and the mountains. I also love the garden and the flowers and the woods. I’m not even sure what I want to do with my life yet, but I’m taking small steps. There’s one thing I’m sure about, though, and it’s that I want a relationship with you, Apollo, and Dad. I know it’s a complicated thing to work out, but I’m going to figure out a way. I need all of you in my life. I need all of you in my heart.”

“Oh, baby. I’m so, so proud of you,” Mom gushes.

We fling ourselves at each other, crush-hug the crap out of each other, and bawl some more.

“You have no idea what it means to me, hearing you say that. Hearing it in person, I mean. I just want to hug you forever.”

“Me too, sweetheart. Me too.”

We stay like that for a long time. Long enough that, for anyone else, it would be awkward, but not for us. We finally let go and head to the window because something catches our attention. I don't know when Will had the time to change. He must have raided the trunk of whatever their rental was because no one came into the house. I would have heard them unless they were super stealthily quiet. Apollo is out there, too, stripped down to his boxers.

They don't yell anything. They just take off from the far end of the yard, sprint as fast as they can, and leap off the end of the pool. We both gasp as they make perfect cannon balls with giant splashes, and we release our breath at the same time when they both surface.

Mom and I look at each other. “Do you think...” she asks.

“That we should go outside and give that a try?” I finish.

“I did bring a bathing suit.”

“And I have one here, too,” I say.

“It does look fun. And it would be pretty refreshing.”

I don't tell her I hate swimming or that I detest water because I don't think that's true anymore. I don't hate something as abstract as all the pools in the world for taking Apollo away from me in a way. Because I haven't lost him, and he's not gone anymore. He's right out there, laughing wildly, climbing out the side of the pool alongside Will, and getting ready for another round of cannonballs.

“You live in such a magical place. Your house, your skunk, your pool, and your mountains. I can see why you wouldn't want to leave.”

I'm pretty sure she's watching Will while I'm watching Apollo. I can think of another reason not to leave. Even if he said he'd come with me, he seems the most at home out here. Just like Mom would never want to leave New York if Will's heart wasn't in it, I don't think Apollo's would be in moving to a big city like that. Not saying it won't be that way in the future, but right now, I think we've both found a measure of real happiness, and that's rare in the world.

It's compounded a thousand times by the fact that I now know my mom. I've met her again. She's going to be in my life from now on, and I'm going to be in hers. I'm going to find a way to forgive my dad, and Apollo and I will support the company from a distance. Anything is possible for me in the future.

Anything is possible for *us* in the future.

I wrap my arms around my mom again. "Yeah, it took me a while, but I think I'm finally where I was meant to be a long time ago."

She nods, tears in her eyes again. "Let's go get our bathing suits."

EPILOGUE



Patience

It wasn't that I wasn't ready for New York. It was just that I realized I was ready to admit to myself what I'd known for a long time.

I wanted to be where Apollo was.

It felt a lot like taking the chance of a lifetime at the start, but it was never either of us putting the other on trial or one or the other afraid that we'd be left with the ashes of something that was once wonderful. I only use the word chance because we took a chance on ourselves. Both of us. We made that decision together. Taking a chance can sometimes just be another word for dedication and commitment or a new start. It doesn't always have to mean a gamble. Not like that poker game that brought us back together, even if now I look back on that night differently.

We worked hard at it, and we worked at us. Now this place isn't just a cool mushroom surrounded by one of the country's most beautiful natural settings. Now this place feels like home.

“Cannonball!” I just happen to be good at these now. And I also happen to love swimming.

I leap off the side of the deep end, tuck my legs under, and make an epic amount of splash as I plunge under the surface.

I have goggles on because that's the other thing I love. I love opening my eyes underwater. So I watch as Apollo cuts from one end of the pool toward me. He's such a freaking good swimmer. It's like watching the natural channel down here, but instead of a dolphin or a whale, it's him.

My favorite mammal.

I make myself laugh underwater and have to surface before I inhale some of it up my nose. It burns, especially when it also goes down my throat.

Apollo surfaces to the top near me. "What's so funny?" He wipes water out of his lovely caramel chocolate eyes. Anyone who says they would not like to eat their significant other up... well, I just don't understand the sentiment. I want to taste him at all times.

I swim over, and he extends an arm and pulls me in. He's so good at keeping us both balanced that I just float right into him. He tastes like salty pool water when he kisses me, but he's also spicy and manly. I would say if there were a cologne made up of just Apollo's natural scent, I'd want to bathe in it daily, but lucky for me, I don't have to. I have the real thing,

smelling like heaven, the woods, the fresh mountain air, the salty pool, and the loveliest man in the world, right here.

Bitty Kitty suddenly appears at the pool's edge. She makes her little skunk noises and watches us. We swim over together, and she backs up, uncertain about the salty water streaming off us. With a huff, she walks over to one of the pool chairs and curls up under it in a little skunk ball.

Apollo guides my face back to him and kisses me soundly. He makes my entire body warm in the cool pool water.

We've been dating for over a year. I'm only ever going to need this man, but the life he built out here is glorious too. It's still his. Maybe when we get married for real, I'll let him put my name on the title. I couldn't accept it back then because it wasn't right. I never wanted him to feel like he had to give it all to me to pay for something in the past. I know he didn't do it for that reason, and I know he didn't feel that way, but I always want him to know that he himself is enough.

I wasn't very kind to him when we first met, and I wasn't considerate. It took me forever to make up my mind and know myself. But he's never made me feel like I had to pay for any of that, either.

Apollo makes this place a fantasy. He makes this place beautiful. *Him*. Without him, it would just be a mushroom house in the forest. Still pretty and cool, but empty and lonely. We're not making up for lost time here together, and it's never felt like we're still paying for regrets or apologizing to each other.

"I think I should pull you out of this pool, carry you straight to the shower, then take you to bed."

"Ooh, I like it." Middle of the afternoon sexy time is a good time. I have classes in the evenings that I have to be online for. They start at seven and go until ten, but I often have work to do after, or I'm so exhausted that all I can do is fall into bed.

I finally got to see Apollo's room. Now it's our room. His room isn't any one theme. It's just all the things he likes: antiques, cats, classic cars, and skunks. There are so many skunk things in there. You'd be surprised what you can buy in skunk form. His bed? It's the best one in the house. Yup, you guessed it. It's a giant skunk, complete with a big bushy tail sticking out. The bed makes up most of the body where the back would be, the tail is the headboard, and the face is the footboard. It's quite ingenious. He had to special order it, and

what a special order it is. It would have been so fun putting it together.

I keep all the creepy dolls in their own room now because it's the room I use for crafting. We converted one of the bedrooms into a crafting room slash office. It means I get to stare at their encouraging and awesomely creepy faces when I'm online at night. And when Apollo is working, he also gets to stare at them. He's never complained. He even sometimes has suggestions for what doll I should make next.

My dad's company has really taken off with Apollo's help. Even Dad and John have reached a tentative truce, and they don't actively hate each other anymore. They might not be friends, but they're civil to each other. I hope that, with time, we can get them back to being kind to each other and friendly. I know they're never going to be best friends again, but being just some sort of friends would be nice.

Mom and Will love New York, but they visit us out here a few times a year, and we've gone there twice. I love the city, and it's a great place to visit, but I can't see myself living there. I video chat with both my mom and dad so regularly that I don't feel like I'm any less close to them than if I were living right next door.

Mom did show my doll to her clients, and I had a ton of orders within a few weeks. She had to start telling people to get on my waitlist, which they did. I've been cranking out dolls, but not at a pace that would make it not fun for me. It's just a hobby. It's never going to be my job.

I'm just taking general classes right now until I decide what I want to focus on. Apollo says I'll fall in love with something if I keep sampling everything. I think he's right. So far, I've really enjoyed my history classes, but I've also surprised myself by loving economics. We'll see. Maybe I'll do a business major with a minor in history.

"I like it too." He pushes himself out of the pool, treating me to a full display of delicious Apollo muscles, tanned skin, and general god-like manliness.

I push up, too, completely unselfconscious in my bathing suit that shows all my scars. Apollo doesn't care about them. I mean, he does, but only in the way that we both sometimes see them and think about how short life can be. There's no time for regrets or bitterness because that's just wasted time. It's so much more rewarding to make up, work hard for our friendships, and fall head over heels in love.

He wasn't joking about sweeping me up. He picks me right up, soaking wet, and kisses me like he's never going to come up for air. He's a swimmer, so he can hold his breath for a loooooong time, lucky for me.

Bitty Kitty comes running after us when we start walking, and I watch her over Apollo's shoulder, laughing at her sweetness as she comes tumbling in. She heads straight to her bed in the kitchen and curls up again. She'll be tearing through the house in a few hours, no doubt.

Apollo carries me straight to our room before he catches himself. "I've forgotten our shower, it seems."

"I'm all salty," I tell him.

"You were salty when I first met you again, too, and I liked you just fine."

I thump his shoulder lightly. "I'm physically salty now. But if you're into that, then..."

"I'm into that. I'm always into you." He carries me into our room, and I laugh as soon as I see the big skunk bed waiting for us. "I love you, Patience. Salty or not salty, you're always going to be perfect in my eyes."

"I love you, Apollo. God of everything. God of my heart."

I haven't said it before. Not the I love you, but the god of my heart part. It was too cheesy to even consider at first, but you know what? The smile that breaks through—brighter and better than any sunrise over the mountains or any of the crazy sunsets out here—makes a little cheese more than worth it.

The End.



AUTHOR'S NOTE



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