KING OF COUNTRY

C.W. FARNSWORTH

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If you don’t like the road you’re walking, start paving another one.

DOLLY PARTON

CONTENTS

Author's Note

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Epilogue
Six Summers to Fall Excerpt
Acknowledgments
About the Author
Also by C.W. Farnsworth

AUTHOR'S NOTE

King of Country is a standalone novel. However, it features side characters from a previous release of mine, *Six Summers to Fall*. If you'd like to sample Drew and Harper's story, I've included the first chapter at the end of this book.

Happy reading!

xx,

Charlotte

KING OF COUNTRY

C.W. FARNSWORTH

PROLOGUE

KYLE

As soon as I see her, I stop walking.

She's wearing a black dress with a matching dark sash, her red hair twisted back with a few curls escaping. Proper business attire, paired with light-blue rain boots.

I glance past her, out the windows that take up most of the far wall of the small kitchen.

Not a single cloud in the sky. It's a bright, sunny morning.

A smile tugs at my lips as I watch her fiddle with the coffee maker, frowning the whole time, as if the machine personally insulted her at some point. After huffing out an exasperated sigh, she pours a stream of dark brown liquid into a mug, then returns the pot to its spot with a clang.

Suddenly, she spins, facing me.

"*Shit*." One hand flies to her chest while coffee sloshes precariously toward the rim of the mug she's clutching in her other hand. Her eyes widen, showing off a shade of blue that's startling against her pale skin, black dress, and vibrant hair. "*Say* something before you sneak up on someone!"

Before I can decide how—or if—to respond, she's in motion again, walking over to the fridge and grabbing a carton of creamer out of it.

I stuff my hands into the pockets of my slacks and continue watching from my spot in the doorway. Every motion is entertaining. Her tongue sticks out of one corner of her mouth as she pours the creamer. Her eyebrows furrow as she

scans the contents of the fridge before setting the carton back on the shelf. Then, she hip-checks the fridge door closed. There's poetry and chaos to each motion she makes that's hard to look away from.

Or maybe I'm just jet-lagged. Nine hours ago, I was in Vancouver.

Her eyes flutter closed when she takes a sip of her coffee, the bob of her throat swallowing mesmerizing. She sighs, and then she turns, refocusing on me.

Blinks rapidly, like she wasn't anticipating I might still be standing here.

"First day?"

I raise an eyebrow, thinking she's joking.

My career has expanded far beyond the promises made when I signed a contract in this building. By most measures, I'm considered a household name, but I don't walk around expecting every person I encounter to know who I am.

But here, at my *record label*? Yeah, I was kind of expecting recognition.

She sighs when I don't respond. "You're probably looking for Katie. She's head of HR. Go down the hall, take a left, and then—"

"Piper!" a female voice calls.

"What?" the redhead asks, looking past me.

I follow her gaze, glancing over one shoulder at the brunette woman who's appeared. She stills when she focuses on me, her lips parting slightly. And I see what I was just looking for—recognition.

"Kyle. It's so nice to meet you. I'm Harper Williams."

I shake her offered hand. "Nice to meet you, Harper."

Without permission, my eyes bounce back to the redhead.

Piper.

The name suits her, in a way I've never felt like either of mine have. I'm not really Kyle Spencer, the chart-topper and the heartbreaker. But I'm no longer Miles Spencer from Oak Grove, Texas, either.

I'm stuck as some hybrid of those two versions of myself, switching between them based on where I am and who I'm talking to. Mabel's the only one who calls me Miles anymore. Everywhere else, I'm Kyle or Spencer.

Harper nods toward the kitchen. "Help yourself to whatever you'd like. We also have refreshments set up in the conference room."

I nod, not revealing how the special treatment chafes. I'd rather grab stuff from the kitchen, like everyone else. "Great. Thanks."

Harper smiles, nods, then mouths something at Piper that looks a little like *Be nice* before continuing down the hall toward the central conference room.

I should follow her. Go grab sustenance from the spread that's been set up specifically for me.

Instead, I stroll deeper into the kitchen. "Coffee any good?"

Piper shrugs. "Depends on what your standards for *good* are."

I experience a stupid thrill from the way her gaze lingers on me as she continues to sip from her mug. Attention from strangers is nothing new. But my response to it is a first.

I go through the same routine I just saw her complete—pouring coffee into a clean mug and then adding a splash of creamer from the fridge.

"What's with the rain boots?" I ask, finally voicing the question that's been circling my head since I first spotted her standing here.

"Excuse me?"

I glance over, then deliberately down at her choice of footwear. "It's not raining. Doesn't even look like there's a

chance of it. So…what's with the boots?"

Piper drinks more coffee, obviously deliberating if she's going to bother answering my question. I'm not even sure why I decided to ask it; she can wear whatever shoes she wants. But for some reason, I'm certain it will bother me—never knowing.

A petite blonde woman walks into the kitchen before Piper decides about answering. She smiles at Piper, then flushes scarlet when she sees me.

More recognition.

I don't know why I'm suddenly keeping track of every person who recognizes me.

Except…it bothers me. That *she* didn't.

"Hi." The blonde's voice carries the breathy, awed tone I've heard many times before.

I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it though. It's hard to not hear it as the heavy weight of expectations. To not worry whether I'll ever live up to the ideal.

I stand onstage and sing for a living. And while I love it and feel lucky I get to, I've never understood the importance it's assigned. Most of the time, I still feel like a kid, looking for an escape from the crappy hand life dealt me.

Based on the way Piper's lips twitch, I'm not the only one who thinks I'm overrated.

"Hey there." I smile in an attempt to put the blonde at ease, and it has the opposite effect.

Her cheeks flame brighter, which I wouldn't have guessed possible. She wobbles a little on heels that still put her height shorter than my shoulder.

The woman breaks eye contact, looking at Piper instead of me. "Hey. How was the concert last night?"

"Amazing," Piper gushes in an enthusiastic tone that totally transforms her voice. "Their usual bassist was sick, so they had someone from the opening act step in on the fiddle. It

changed their sound completely. More Ghostland than Afternoon Daydream."

"Cool," the blonde says, sounding unsure that's the right adjective.

Piper rolls her eyes. "Mia! You said you would listen to the playlist."

"I tried to, at the gym. But I can't listen to sad, *stare out the window at the rain* music on the treadmill. It messes with my pace!"

Both women seem to have forgotten I'm in the room with them, which hasn't happened in a while. Maybe that's why I'm still standing here like an idiot, watching them bicker like siblings.

Until a loud exclamation of "There's my superstar!" fills the kitchen.

I startle at the unexpected sound, then turn to face the familiar voice. Carl Bergman, the head of Empire Records. The guy you want in your corner if you're trying to make it in music. The man collects talent like trophies.

He's beaming at me like I've made his whole year just by standing in the building. I make him a lot of money, and it sometimes feels like that's all I'm boiled down to—a commodity.

"Carl, nice to see you." We shake hands, and his bright smile somehow expands.

"One hell of a show you've been putting on," Carl congratulates.

I force a smile, not letting any exhaustion show. I'm four months into a ten-month tour with dates in cities across the US and Canada. Venues sold out in sixteen minutes, according to my manager.

"I don't want to disappoint anyone."

Carl chuckles. "You could stand onstage for a couple of hours, wearing a cowboy hat and holding a guitar, and every

person in that stadium would say they got their money's worth."

I laugh, too, because I'm not sure what to say in response to that.

Fans come with critics. I've seen and heard plenty of comments suggesting my success has everything to do with how I look onstage and nothing to do with what I'm singing. And, yeah, I'm getting paid regardless. Getting paid *a lot*. I could retire tomorrow, and my great-grandkids would be set for life.

He's complimenting me—I think—but it's a little insulting as well.

"You ready to get started?" Carl asks.

I glance down into my almost-empty mug. "Yep. Just need a little more coffee. Long night."

Carl claps me on the shoulder. "Completely understand. Take your time. Come down to the conference room whenever you're ready, and we'll get started."

"Will do."

He heads into the hallway while I walk back toward the coffee maker.

I shouldn't be chugging caffeine. My plan for after this meeting is to go back to the hotel and take a nap to make up for being up most of the night.

But I don't feel like leaving this kitchen. Not yet.

"See you at lunch, Piper."

"See ya," she replies.

The blonde—Mia—gives me a tiny wave, then hurries away.

I expect Piper to follow. But she walks over to me instead.

"Move," she instructs. All the enthusiasm from talking to Mia has disappeared from her voice, reverting to unimpressed.

I stare at her, not comprehending. "What?"

“Linda made the coffee this morning. And I love her to death, but she’s a terrible barista. If you want a decent cup, *move*.”

I slide to the right, watching her dump the rest of the pot into the sink and rinse it out.

“You don’t like me.”

It’s a statement, not a question.

Because I’m certain she doesn’t, and there’s something refreshing—and annoying—about it. It intrigues me, mainly because I’m used to being liked. Setting aside celebrity, I’m accustomed to being the easygoing guy who’s friendly with everybody. Once I grew up and got over myself, I realized it was easier to ride in the boat than to rock it.

“Not a country music fan.” Piper glances at me. “No offense.”

Considering my fans like to refer to me as the King of Country, we both know it’s plenty offensive. But instead of irritated, I’m more amused by her half-hearted attempt to temper the insult.

I cross my arms, ignoring the way the granite countertop digs into the base of my spine as I lean more weight against it. And the fact that I’m making my entire team—plus the most powerful man in music—wait so I can defend the genre I grew up on to a stranger. “What’s your issue with it?”

Her nose wrinkles as she measures out scoops of coffee grounds. “With country music? Lack of variety mostly. Every song is about broken hearts or pickup trucks or beer bottles.”

“Ghostland’s biggest hit is about a whiskey bottle, and it sounded like you’ve listened to their music.”

Piper’s hand stills mid-scoop. Barely, but enough to tell me she wasn’t expecting that response. That she assumed I didn’t know who the band was, just like Mia.

And I experience an overwhelming, unexpected thrill of satisfaction, knowing I surprised her.

“They don’t have a twang,” she tells me.

This time, I don't bother to hide my amusement. "A twang?"

"Yeah." Piper pulls in a deep breath. "*Howdy, y'all. Sure as heck looks like a beautiful day*."

Her "country music" accent is exaggerated and embellished. And nothing like my voice sounds. At least, *I* don't think so.

She glances at me, her voice returning to normal. "That kind of thing."

I raise one eyebrow in response. "A 'beautiful day' and yet you're wearing rain boots."

Piper rolls her eyes as she presses a button on the coffee machine. "Do they not have rain boots in Texas? You seem weirdly interested."

I *am* weirdly interested. But not in her rain boots.

Just like I'm strangely affected by her knowing where I'm from.

"So, just to recap, you don't like me because of my accent and my genre's unoriginal material?"

Piper's cheek twitches with what is *almost* a smile, and that feels like a victory in and of itself. The coffee maker glugs to life, the scent of freshly brewed coffee flavoring the charged air between us.

"Pretty much."

She steps away from the counter, grabbing her mug.

She's leaving, I realize.

"I can't do anything about my *twang*." My entire team tells me to play my accent up because *ladies love it*. I'm definitely not telling Piper that. "But I'll write a song that has nothing to do with beer or trucks or heartbreak, just for you."

Piper scoffs. Loudly.

Her detached disbelief is more invigorating than any form of caffeine. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I have

something to prove—something I *want* to prove—to this redhead who wears inappropriate footwear and makes snap judgments.

"You don't think I can?"

"I don't *care* if you can. Take the Cowboynova act somewhere else because I'm not interested."

I grin, and she glares.

"Thanks for the coffee."

Piper stalks out of the kitchen without saying anything else.

I stop and ask for a notepad and pen on my way to the conference room. My manager, Brayden, is the one who runs these meetings. I just nod along.

And I have a song to write.

CHAPTER ONE

PIPER

"Isn't this so fun?" Serena asks.

Flashing lights illuminate her animated expression, her black-rimmed eyes wide and eager as she takes in the commotion surrounding us.

Excitement is the complete opposite of how I'm currently feeling. I'm in the mood to shut the rest of the world out, to get lost in that indescribable sensation of listening to a favorite song for the first time.

Instead, I'm sipping a twenty-dollar cocktail and listening to a pop ballad that released five years ago.

I barely catch Serena's question over the steady pound of the bass pumping from the speakers, downing more of my cocktail once it registers. The sweet, slightly sour taste of peach margarita floods my mouth, followed by the warm burn of alcohol.

I try to channel some of Serena's enthusiasm into my shouted response. "*So* fun."

My voice comes out too flat to sound very convincing, but the music is loud enough and Serena is tipsy enough that it doesn't really matter.

We're out celebrating our third roommate, Lauren, receiving a major promotion at the marketing firm she works for.

Celebrating *minus* Lauren, who disappeared to dance with a tall blond guy about five minutes after we arrived. Out of the

three of us, she's the man magnet.

Serena is in one of those rare long-distance relationships that seems rock solid, complete with a shiny diamond on her left hand that's twinkling under the flashing lights.

And I'm on a dating hiatus, following a string of increasingly underwhelming attempts to date guys who were responsible, employed, well-dressed—and ultimately boring. Those three requirements, plus *not a musician*, have been my guideline ever since I found my college boyfriend in bed with the bandmate he'd told me not to worry about. He and I connected over music. Same with him and her.

After Harper, my closest friend at work, found her happily ever after, I was momentarily inspired to pursue my own. Unfortunately, they don't make men like Drew Halifax in bulk. That inspiration dried up fast.

So, I'm focusing on work, hoping that going above and beyond in my current role might mean an opportunity to do more than cater to artists' demands. Now that Harper is working remotely from Washington and Mia transferred to the marketing department, I take a lot fewer coffee breaks or long lunches.

I already know my productivity tomorrow won't be great though. We were supposed to celebrate Lauren's promotion last night, but Serena got called into work last minute. She's waiting tables in addition to logging ungodly hours at her internship so she can start paying back law school loans. Now that summer—also known as tourist season—is fully underway, the restaurant where she works is continually understaffed.

I take another long sip of my drink, mourning the glass that's nearly half-empty. I'm too old to show up to work hungover on top of being sleep-deprived. Plus, it's hard to justify the price.

Serena leans closer so I can hear her better over the loud music. This booth was the only one empty when we arrived, and I immediately discovered why—there's a speaker located directly above it.

“You’re still bummed about missing that concert?” she asks.

“Nope,” I lie.

I advocated for going to see a band in Brooklyn tonight instead of coming to this club. But it’s Lauren’s night, and she wanted to celebrate *without guys who think basic hygiene is optional*. Her words, not mine. Lauren grew up with money and makes a lot of it, so I’m not sure she knows that *starving artist* isn’t just a saying. That making a career out of doing what you love is the exception, not the rule.

Another large sip, and my drink is more than half-gone. “Not like I’d have been able to sign them anyway.”

“See!” Serena hears what I meant to mutter, slapping my bare knee enthusiastically. “It was for the best.”

“Mm-hmm.” I look down into my glass, swirling around the ice and inch of liquid.

When I was offered a full-time position at Empire Records right out of college, I was over the moon. I didn’t care that I was assigned to Artist Development, shaping and guiding the careers of artists who were already signed to the label instead of discovering new talent in Artists and Repertoire, or A&R. I was thrilled to have a foot in the door, to be receiving a paycheck for anything related to music. And scouting unknown bands was a fun hobby even if I lacked the power to offer them a record deal.

It’s a lot less exciting now. There’s no thrill when I think about heading into work tomorrow morning, especially since I’m the only one in the apartment who will have to be up early. Serena’s restaurant shifts don’t start until five p.m., and Lauren’s job is half-remote, so she works from our apartment on Mondays. They’re both eager for a wild night out, which I would usually be fully on board with. Except I have to take notes while an alt rock band whines about their sales numbers tomorrow morning when I really just want to tell them the only reason they have an album out is due to their antics on a reality television show, and not because they have any actual

talent. An unpleasant way to start the workweek under the best of circumstances, let alone hungover, exhausted ones.

My fingers rub against the condensation collected on my glass out of sheer boredom.

Everything about this evening feels predictable.

Everyone around me appears to be having the time of their lives—or at least putting on a very convincing act that that's the case.

"I'm going to the restroom," Serena announces. "Watch my drink."

" 'Kay," I reply, watching as she stands and quickly disappears into the crowd.

A cool breeze blows from the vent located beside our table, the cold temperature a welcome alternative to the heat lingering outside despite the sun's disappearance hours ago.

The music changes to a song by one of Empire's rising stars, Jason Martin. I was in a meeting with him about six months ago. Temperamental, impulsive, and cocky, but at least he has the talent to back his arrogance up. And a big part of his brand is his backstory—growing up surrounded by poverty and crime but overcoming that adversity to chase success.

Makes me feel a little foolish for giving up on my own aspirations as easily as I did. I let a few noes knock me onto a different path, convincing myself it wasn't meant to be. Partly because I didn't feel like I had anything important to say. I'm drawn to artists like Jason, whose struggles echo in their music. I would be acting if I sang one of his songs. I don't feel like I have anything special to share any more now than at I did twenty-two.

But sometimes—especially moments like now, when I'm second-guessing other choices—I let myself fantasize about what that would be like, being the talent instead of the machine behind the scenes.

With anything you love, there's an urge to be as close to it as you possibly can.

And also a fear of ruining it—for yourself and for others.

I take another sip, draining the remainder of my drink. Pull out my phone to scroll through social media.

A text from my mom appears at the top of the screen, reminding me about our monthly family dinner on Friday night. I like the message, used to hearing from her at odd hours. I'm usually the one asleep by now, not her.

My mom is a police officer. So is my dad. And all four of my brothers.

One of them is always working, and it's often a night shift.

I'm the baby of the family.

The unexpected surprise.

The *accident*, although everyone is careful to phrase that differently. My surprise arrival delayed my parents' divorce by a few years, but not permanently.

I'm…different. Not just the only daughter. I'm the Egan enthralled by music and art and creativity instead of dedication to public service.

My mom and dad didn't push any of us into their career choice. Noah, my oldest brother, decided he would become a cop at Career Day in third grade and never changed his mind.

And one sibling would have been fine. Understandable. Plenty of kids choose the same profession as their parents.

But *all* of my siblings? It's made dating difficult—with the few guys who have made it to the *meet the family* stage. Among other things.

Lauren reappears, leading the blond guy who approached her when we arrived over to the booth by their linked hands.

"Where's Serena?" Lauren asks, sliding into the booth.

"Restroom," I reply.

Her companion seems friendly enough, shooting me a small smile when he sits down beside Lauren before pulling his phone out of his pocket. A dark-haired man is right behind

him, taking Serena's empty spot on my other side and carrying the cloying scent of his spicy cologne with him. Ignoring the overpowering smell, I can admit, he's good-looking. Clean-shaven and wearing a suit tailored to his tall frame.

I'd bet my bank account he works in finance.

Go out a few times in New York, and you can spot the distinctive swagger blocks away. An easy task since I've lived here my entire life.

"Nice to meet you, Red," is his opener.

I arch one eyebrow, running a finger around the rim of my empty glass. "Red?"

"Yeah, you know." He tilts his tumbler of whiskey or bourbon toward my head. The amber liquid sloshes precariously close to the rim, suggesting it's not his first drink.

"Know what?"

He rolls his eyes, acting as if the conversation *he* initiated is now a waste of time. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Isn't *what* obvious?"

His expression turns confused, looking unsure if I'm messing with him or not.

I am.

Any attraction flees when I realize he can't tell.

I deal with enough inflated egos at work. I have no interest in voluntarily spending my free time around one, especially as part of some poorly executed act to pick up women.

I glance away, down at my sad, melting ice, *very* tempted to break my one-drink rule and order a fresh cocktail.

"Are you not a real redhead?"

Lauren snorts to my left. Sadly, we've gone out enough times together that she's heard some version of that question aimed at me many times before. *So what* if less than one percent of the population has blue eyes and red hair? I'd rather discuss the weather than my *natural* hair color.

I look up, meeting his superior gaze straight on.

I smile, and he smirks back.

Hook.

I lean forward, so his eyes drop to check out my cleavage.

Line.

"You know what I'm not?" I ask, sweet as sugar.

"What?" he says, smug.

Sinker.

"Interested."

That gets a guffaw out of the blond guy. Either the two men aren't friends or he switches sides easily. Not an appealing trait in my book, but I know Lauren can handle herself.

My unwelcome admirer takes the rebuff better than I expected—a scoff and a shake of his head the only reaction before he focuses his gaze on the dancing crowd a few feet away. A minute or so later, he stands, approaching a couple of women who flip their hair and giggle in response to whatever line he delivers.

Lauren and the blond guy are whispering to each other. There's no sign of Serena.

I slump in my seat, staring ahead and seeing nothing.

I'm lucky, I remind myself. This is everything I wanted, working in music and living in my hometown. With great friends and an amazing apartment, especially by New York City standards.

Dream job. Dream city. Dream life.

But I don't feel very lucky right now.

More…empty.

CHAPTER TWO

PIPER

The knock on my office door makes me jump. I glance up, my heart rate slowing when I glimpse Linda's familiar face on the other side of the glass. I was too busy transcribing scribbled notes from this morning's meeting to notice her appear.

I beckon for her to come in, immediately registering the absence of her usual cheery smile. Linda manages the front desk, greeting everyone when they arrive and overseeing everything that happens in the office. She brings in chocolate chip cookies every Friday and happens to be one of my favorite people on the planet.

She also rarely leaves her post in the front reception. I think she's only visited my office twice in the time I've worked here.

"Hi, Piper."

"Morning," I greet, pushing the pad of notes away. "What's wrong?"

"Carl wants to see you in his office. Now."

I push my chair back and stand, immediately running through a mental list of possible reasons why the head of the label is requesting to see me.

I come up blank—with one exception. "Am I getting fired?"

My muscles relax a little when Linda shakes her head.

"No."

“Then, is this about the demo someone slipped under his door? Because that wasn’t—”

Linda shakes her head again, the impatient motion so unlike her typically relaxed manner that I can’t help the rush of unease that reappears. “Come on. Eva said *now*.”

Automatically, I pull off the cozy sweatshirt I’m wearing —the office hovers at around sixty degrees all summer— swapping it out for the navy blazer hanging off the back of the chair. I slip the blazer on over my silk tank top and then follow Linda down the hall toward the biggest corner office.

My mind races at twice the speed we’re walking.

Today has been a typical Monday, albeit a slightly hungover one since I ended up ordering a second drink.

Last night was the final time of going out on a work night. I can practically hear my mom chanting *irresponsible* in my head.

But I wasn’t late to work. I barely spoke during the meeting with the alt rock band. Since then, all I’ve done is type up my notes to circulate internally. Nothing about this morning should have gained the label head’s attention.

Linda leaves me in the small lobby located just outside Carl’s office. It’s decorated with two couches and a hand-carved coffee table that likely cost more than my monthly rent.

Eva, Carl’s assistant, stands from her post just below the engraved nameplate boasting his important role. She waves me forward with a polite, practiced smile as she steps out from behind her desk.

We’ve only interacted a handful of times in the few years I’ve worked here since most of my responsibilities fall far below Carl’s pay grade and Eva’s job is to shadow him. The only times we’ve been in the same room were for important meetings with major artists, and I was simply there to take notes or refill water glasses.

When I enter his spacious office, Carl Bergman is on the phone.

I glance back at Eva for direction on how to proceed, but she's already closing the door behind me.

Hesitant, quiet steps bring me deeper into the huge space that shows off a prime view of New York's famous skyline.

Buildings that spark dreams and see failures.

To me, it just looks like home.

Carl catches my eye, pointing to one of the two chairs angled toward his desk. My slow strides quicken as I rush to comply with his silent instruction.

Once I'm seated, I tuck my clammy palms beneath my thighs, wishing they weren't sweating so much.

In the nearly four years I've worked at Empire Records, I've never been summoned to Carl's office. Despite Linda's assurance it's not for a firing, I'm worried it's still a possibility.

"Mm-hmm, that's right," Carl is saying. "No, I don't think we can do that."

My gaze wanders as he continues talking on the phone, admiring more than the office size.

This is a room where important decisions are made, in which careers are saved or sink. Music is a cutthroat, fickle industry, always moving forward, and continual relevance is rare.

The walls in here are decorated with framed album covers of the few artists who have managed to build lasting legacies. Whose fans show up for record after record regardless of who the new, shiny trendsetter at the time is.

That unwavering devotion has always intrigued me. People commit to an artist's music in a way they won't to a relationship or a career. It's a constant in their lives, no matter what else changes.

My earliest memories are of my parents dancing in the kitchen to Etta James. My mom listened to those same songs my senior year of high school, over a decade after they got divorced.

Carl hangs up the phone with a sigh and a loud *click*. My attention snaps back to him, and I watch as he shakes a painkiller into his palm from the bottle on his desk, pops it into his mouth, and swallows it with a sip of water.

"Can I get you anything?" he asks, nodding toward the fancy mini fridge filled with cans of seltzer and soda. A basket piled high with small bags of chips sits atop it.

"Uh, no," I'm quick to say. "I'm good. Thanks."

Carl nods and leans back in his chair. The leather squeaks as he folds his hands beneath his chin, studying me. "You've been here for five years now, Piper?"

"Almost four technically, full-time. I started as a summer intern back in college."

"Ah, that's right," Carl says, although I'd bet the paltry sum in my savings account that he had no idea of my employment history up until right now. "And you've been happy, working here?"

I shift awkwardly in my seat. Clear my throat. Wonder if someone submitted a complaint to HR and used my name as a joke.

"Yes?" It comes out sounding like a question, but Carl doesn't seem to notice.

He's focused on something past me, and I resist the urge to turn around and look too.

Eventually, he sighs and refocuses on me. "We have an artist refusing to sign a new contract."

Only my rapid blinks betray my surprise.

As a general rule, music is an industry people struggle to get into, not one they choose to walk away from after making the cut.

"Letting him leave isn't an option." Carl leans forward, his expression shockingly earnest. I'm used to seeing him professional and detached, not desperate. "He's made this label more money than most of our artists combined."

I suppress a sigh.

Of course it comes down to money. Many days, it feels like I'm the only employee who cares more about the music being released than the revenue coming in. Carl is a businessman, and the business he's in just happens to be music.

I get how the world works. I just wish it worked differently.

And while I'm no lawyer, I've sat in enough contract meetings to know this isn't a common situation. "*Can* he leave?"

Carl's exhale is annoyed, giving the answer away before he speaks. "Yes. His contract is out of option periods, and he's delivered on albums. We were supposed to start negotiations a couple of months ago, and his team put us off. He was on tour, so no one in legal thought anything of it." Irritation flashes across his face, and I wonder if anyone was fired for that oversight. "As of two days ago, he's under no obligation to this label."

"He's looking elsewhere?" I still have no idea why I'm here or who we're discussing, so I'm not sure what else to say.

Empire Records is considered one of the biggest and most successful labels in the country, but there are other prominent ones, and it's not unheard of for artists to move around.

"He's a once-in-a-generation talent," Carl replies. "Losing Kyle Spencer isn't an option."

There's no mistaking the note of panic in his voice. And it thoroughly annoys me as I think about the thousands of musicians in this city, praying for a big break.

Kyle Spencer had his shot. A decade's worth of them.

If he wants to step aside, I'll happily organize a retirement party.

There's a sudden sinking awareness in my stomach, like the swooping sensation of an elevator descending, as I realize whatever reason I'm here, it involves Kyle Spencer.

Based on the determination on Carl's face, he won't budge on letting Kyle leave.

Which means…

"I need you to go to Texas and change his mind."

My expression is too shocked to shift. I'm frozen, certain I misheard him.

"I know it's an unorthodox request. You'll be compensated generously in addition to all travel and accommodations being paid for."

I still don't move. Still say nothing.

"You've been part of Kyle's team here for the past few years. No one else is available to pick up and leave on such short notice."

I swallow, but that's the most motion I manage. I'm a nobody here, is what he's really saying. A glorified assistant, jumping in wherever and whenever I'm needed.

There's a glimmer of emotion on Carl's face as he leans back in his chair, but it's gone before I can tell if it's amusement or annoyance or something else entirely.

"When you return, I'm transferring you from Artist Development to A&R. You'll report directly to Fiona Wild, helping her scout and sign new talent."

My first thought? *Linda*.

She told Carl exactly what to offer.

While more money would be nice—New York is a ridiculously expensive place to live, and I'm still paying off student loans—this is the chance to do something more than scout artists in my spare time. This is the opportunity to decide what names will be up on these walls in the future. To feel like I'm making a difference. Reassurance that I chose the right path.

But it will come at the expense of spending time with the name already displayed the most.

And I'm not sure if it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

My interactions with Kyle Spencer have always been memorable, and I'm not really sure why.

Something about him…sticks. Irritates. He's too casual. Too confident.

Too…much.

I'm alone in that assessment. Everyone else is happy to fawn over him.

The past several times Kyle has come into the office, I've made a point to keep my distance as much as possible. A point I'm now regretting because I think Kyle noticed. Our last encounter was especially uncomfortable. He overheard what was supposed to be a private conversation with Harper and then went out to lunch with half the office after I feigned an emergency to get out of going.

At this exact moment, there's not a single other thing I can think of I'd like to do *less* than fly to Texas and ask Kyle Spencer for a favor.

Carl is staring at me expectantly.

"Um…" I swallow again, fresh sweat prickling my palms. "Can I think about it?"

"Of course," Carl replies. But the two words resonate with disappointment.

He never asked me a question. Never phrased it as a possibility. So, I'm seized with the sudden fear my hesitation will send me straight to the top of Carl's shit list—or worse, fired.

But I'm not brave enough to ask him if refusal will have consequences.

The phone on his desk begins ringing loudly.

Carl glances at it, then sighs. "I need to take this."

I immediately stand, taking the opportunity to leave.

I'm not sure what to say. *Thanks for the opportunity*? *Sorry for not saying yes*? *How long do I have to decide*?

“Think fast, Piper,” Carl says, then picks up the phone.

I nod rapidly, but Carl is already on the phone, so I’m not sure if he catches it.

Then, I rush out of the office *a lot* quicker than I entered it.

CHAPTER THREE

PIPER

As soon as the yellow door opens, I'm greeted by an eyeful of bare chest.

"Pipsqueak. What a surprise."

"The surprise is mutual," I grumble, stepping off the front porch into the blissfully cool entryway. "I know you're too cheap to get your own place. But you can't afford clothing now either?"

Seth shuts the door behind me. "Mom! Your *least favorite daughter* is here!"

I roll my eyes as I hang up my bag in the one empty cubby. "Where is she?"

"Upstairs. Folding laundry, I think."

"Yours?"

"I hope so. I'm out of clean shirts."

I scoff as I step out of my heels and pull the elastic to free my curls. In addition to being the only daughter, I'm the only one of my siblings who inherited red hair. Seth, like all my brothers, has straight brown hair.

You'd have to squint to possibly think we're related.

I take another deep breath, savoring the air-conditioning and the comfort of being in my childhood home. It's the same nostalgia of slipping into a well-worn sweatshirt—familiar and comforting. The whole house smells like old wood and the lavender cleaner my mom uses on everything. And…smoke.

I sniff the air. “Does it smell like something’s burning?”

Seth blanches. “Ah shit,” he mutters, then sprints down the hall.

I pad barefoot after him, pausing to run my fingers along the balusters, like I’m playing a harp. And to look at the family photo prominently displayed on the wall across from the staircase. It was taken at the last event we all dressed up for—my college graduation. I’m smack dab in the center with smooshed hair from my cap and wearing the black gown that’s probably boxed up in the attic somewhere.

The photo was taken right before my mother told me she was proud of me for graduating and prayed that I’d find a job. Voicing what I’m certain my whole family was thinking. They’ve always been cautiously supportive, like they’re collectively waiting for my foray into the fickle industry known as music to turn into a dead end and for me to find a better career. Never discouraging, but never *encouraging* either.

When I walk into the kitchen, Seth is shaking bacon from a skillet onto a paper towel. My nose wrinkles at the smell. It looks well done, but not completely charred.

Seth doesn’t hesitate before chomping on a bite.

“That’s what you’re having for dinner?” I ask, pulling out one of the stools from the island and plopping down on it.

“I just woke up. About to head into work. So…yep.”

“Is Alex here?”

“Nope. Working overtime.”

“Again?”

“Mm-hmm.” Seth is *way* more focused on his bacon than our conversation. He polishes off another piece before glancing at me. “Not all of us work nine-to-five, you know.”

“I *know*.”

None of my family members work nine-to-five, which is why I came all the way to Brooklyn after leaving Carl’s office

for a second time. Coordinating everyone's schedules is a Herculean task, and since my schedule is considered the least unpredictable, my attendance at family get-togethers is always taken for granted.

"He'll be at dinner on Friday night."

I grimace. "Well, I—"

"Hey, sweetie." My mom bustles into the kitchen, a stack of dish towels tucked under one arm. The scent of lavender trails behind her. "I didn't know you were stopping by today."

"Hi, Mom." I watch as she tucks the towels into the drawer next to the sink, chewing the inside of my cheek the whole time.

Despite best intentions, there have been dinners where one of us was missing. It's never been me though. And it's always been because of some big, important emergency I'm certain my trip to Texas won't qualify as.

She finishes storing the towels and turns back to face me, smoothing her hair with one hand even though it's unnecessary. The strands are the same auburn shade as mine, and we share the same half-wavy, half-curly texture too. Her hair is always pulled back in a neat bun though while mine reverts to its current wild state more often than not.

"Want anything to drink?" my mom asks.

I glance reflexively at the white coffeepot sitting on the counter. I started drinking coffee way earlier than I probably should have, thanks to my parents and then brothers. Keeping the odd hours of a big-city cop required an endless supply of caffeine, and so the pot was always at least half-full with an extra-strong brew. Turned me into kind of a coffee snob in addition to creating an addiction.

"I'm good, thanks." I have a long night of packing ahead, but I'm already plenty jittery. "I just came to tell you…" I exhale. "I can't make it to family dinner on Friday."

The shift from relaxed to serious is instantaneous. "What? You know how important it is to your father and me that we get all you kids together at least once a month, Piper."

Not for the first time, I wonder if that expectation is to blame for the limbo they've been in for the past twenty-odd years. My parents have what is either an *extremely healthy* or an *incredibly unhealthy* relationship. After their divorce was finalized, my dad moved out. But they continued co-parenting as if nothing had changed. Birthday parties, sporting events, graduations, vacations, holidays were all spent together, like the family unit was still intact.

As a kid, I was grateful for it. As a teenager, I was confused why they'd bothered getting divorced in the first place. As an adult, I've accepted that the tradition of monthly dinners is a conscious way to keep our family together and appreciate that effort. But I still question whether avoiding acknowledging their divorce *did* change things.

"I have to go on a work trip," I tell her. "There's a chance I'll be back by Friday, but probably not."

"A work trip? Where?"

"Uh, Texas. To go over some contract…stuff."

A loud guffaw comes from the direction of the stove. "You're going to *Texas*?"

I frown at Seth. "Yes. What's wrong with Texas?"

"Nothing's wrong with Texas," he replies. "I'm just having a hard time picturing you there."

"Dallas is a major city. So is Austin."

"And which one are you going to?"

"I don't know…yet." Linda is supposed to be sending me travel details later tonight. I'm hoping Kyle lives in Austin, but either city would be fine.

Seth raises one brow before turning back to his bacon.

"You've never traveled for your job before," my mom says.

I pull in a deep breath before looking over at her. "I know. But I was asked to go by the head of the label, and I agreed."

After panicking-slash-deliberating for thirty minutes in the restroom. “It’s important.”

I don’t mention my possible promotion.

My mother sighs and nods. “Okay.”

We might look alike, but our personalities are very different.

Maybe it’s a side effect of her career, but at home, my mom avoids conflict at all costs.

I can feel her disappointment still lingering in the air when I leave twenty minutes later. It feeds my own doubts, and I wonder what the hell I’ve gotten myself into.

CHAPTER FOUR

KYLE

Sweat rolls down my spine in lazy rivers as the Texas sun beats down mercilessly. I twist the hammer, sending another shingle flying down to the ground. Then another. And another. And another. It's endless, exhausting work, which is the point. The aged wood is brittle, most of the shingles splintering in half easily with each jerk of the curved steel.

Two rows later, I hear the distinctive shuffle of John's footsteps. He was in a bad car accident in high school, and his stride was permanently affected by his injuries.

"Phone for you."

I sigh even though my arm muscles are screaming for a break and my skin is coated with sweat. "Can you take a message?"

"It's Brayden. Says he's been trying to reach you all morning. And that it's urgent."

I exhale again, then knock up the brim of my hat so I can swipe a hand across my damp forehead. As far as I can tell, my manager has yet to encounter a situation he *doesn't* deem urgent.

"Okay. I'll be right in."

Slow footsteps shuffle away.

I clear the final few shingles from this row and then straighten, my stiff back protesting every movement. I'll be sore tomorrow.

Careful steps bring me back to the edge of the roof. I pause for a minute, surveying the progress I've managed to make this morning. Three hours of work, and calling a quarter of the roof cleared would be generous. At this rate, I'll be lucky to have it done in a week.

I climb down the ladder and round the side of the farmhouse, swiping my shirt from the porch railing and rubbing it across my face. Broad branches from the century oak planted years before I was born provide some welcome shade, lowering the air temperature by a few degrees.

The three stairs groan as I climb them—another repair that needs to be made. Same with the squeaky hinges that protest the screen door opening and closing.

It's cooler inside, but not by much. The air conditioners are installed in the upstairs bedrooms, some cold air carrying down during the day, but not enough to beat the heat entirely.

My dusty boots get toed off carefully before I head deeper into the living room.

The landline is tucked in the corner, next to the worn armchair that's probably as ancient as the shingles I've spent all morning splitting.

I remove my hat to run a hand through my sweaty hair, grimacing at the stickiness that lingers on my palm.

I pick up the receiver. "Hi, Brayden."

"Kyle! How are you?"

"Great," I drone. "Busy."

"Good, good."

There's a pause, and my apprehension grows.

Brayden is typically a *no bullshit*, *rip the Band-Aid off* kind of guy. If he's hesitating, it's because he's about to say something he knows I won't want to hear.

"What is it?" I ask, impatient.

My manager clears his throat. "I tried your cell."

“It’s dead. I was working outside. What’s going on?”

Brayden sighs. “Empire is sending someone tomorrow morning.”

It takes a few seconds for that to sink in. When it does…

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

“You’re a huge loss for them, Kyle. They’ll do whatever they think it will take to change your mind.”

“*Nothing* is going to change my mind. I told you that.”

“And I passed that right along. But I also told *you* they’d make this difficult. Take it as a compliment. Most singers are chasing labels, looking for a record deal. You’ve got the biggest label in the country chasing you, begging.”

“They can’t chase me *here*. This is private property.”

“If you want to get lawyers involved, we can. But it’ll be a bad look. Empire built your career. And it’ll draw attention. Once other labels find out about the situation…they’ll be hounding you as well.”

“I’ll turn those down too.”

Brayden exhales. “You’re twenty-eight, Kyle. I get your life has been *go, go, go* for over a decade. You’ve earned a break—no one would argue with that. Slow down. Step back. But think it through before you toss a lit match and burn every damn bridge. One day, you might look back and regret it.”

I say nothing.

Another sigh. “All right. I’ll contact your legal team. And I’ll fly down first thing to deal with whoever Empire is sending.”

More commotion. More circus.

“It’s fine. I’ll handle it.”

“Kyle—”

“I said *I’ll handle it*.”

“All right, fine.” A pause, and I know he won’t be able to resist telling me what to do. “Just let them make their pitch.

Say you'll think about it. And we can still share—"

My hand tightens around the phone receiver. "No."

"Carl has always given you special treatment. I'm sure he could—"

"I said *no*, Brayden. I make him twice as much money as anyone else. That's not special treatment; that's logic. Once the money is gone, it'll be the same with the special treatment. Besides, it's nothing he needs to know."

"Fine. I'll be in touch soon."

"Okay." I hang up the phone with more force than is necessary, then continue into the kitchen.

Mabel is standing at the butcher block island, chopping strawberries. It's all that's grown in the back garden John tilled for her. All the farm produces, aside from milk from the cows.

"Everything okay?" she asks, studying me too intently.

My aunt says little. She misses even less.

"Fine." I walk over to the cabinet and grab a glass out. Fill it with water from the tap while staring out the window above the sink, down the long stretch of dirt that serves as the driveway. "My record label is sending someone here tomorrow to talk me into signing another contract."

I can barely make out Mabel's hum over the steady slice of her knife. That was her same response when I announced I was done with music.

Quiet acceptance that reveals absolutely nothing.

John was similarly nonplussed.

And it's one reason I never minded the strict structure I know other artists consider suffocating. Mabel and John are the closest thing to reliable role models I have, and they let me make my own choices. After years of having no guidance in my decisions, multiple opinions were welcome. So was a team of people telling me where I needed to be and what I needed to do every minute of each day. The set schedule was a relief to rely upon.

Now, I'm back to making decisions without taking any outside input into consideration.

It's empowering.

It's also lonely. Especially since, this time, I'm having to hold firm against shoves in the opposite direction.

I gulp some water, feeling it trickle down my throat in a cool stream. It does nothing for the sweat coating my skin. Or the annoyance simmering in my veins.

"Cal Hastings did the Thompsons' roof last year, you know."

I drain the rest of my glass, wash it, and then set it on the rack to dry. I'm used to Mabel's conversation leaps. Once she's exhausted what little she has to say on a subject, it's on to the next topic.

"It's going fine."

Mabel hums again, and I hear her disbelief plain as day. The rare disagreement irritates me more than her usual apathy.

"I'm done throwing money at problems. I'm handling things myself."

"It wasn't your fault, Miles."

Exactly what she said when I first got home. It sounds as meaningless now as it did then.

I clear my throat and shove away from the counter, irritated and irrationally annoyed. "I won't be here for dinner. I'm going over to Hudson's."

"All right." Mabel's soft response sounds behind me as I head back outside into the heat.

I take a seat on the top of the stairs to pull my boots back on, watching John as he fiddles with something inside the open hood of his truck.

Once I have my boots on, I stand and walk over to him. "Something wrong with the truck?"

“Just changing the oil. Mabel and I are leaving early Saturday to see Dolores, Jim, and Cecilia, remember?”

“Yep,” I say.

It’s a lie.

Being back here has been a struggle, and my attention has been shot as a result.

There’s so much to do that I don’t really know where to start. That indecision has ended with things slipping through the cracks, evidently.

“You need help?” I ask, torn on what I want the answer to be.

A snort echoes from beneath the hood. “Hail could hit at any time.”

I sigh, then glance over my shoulder at the half-stripped roof. “Right.”

Clearing three-quarters of one side of the roof takes me the rest of the day. It’s more progress than I expected to make. But there’s no sense of accomplishment once more of the gray roofing felt is exposed, the material torn and worn in so many places that I know that layer will need to be replaced too.

By the time I shower, change, and am rolling down the winding driveway in my truck, there are only a few streaks of color remaining on the horizon that’s steadily darkening, some of today’s heat finally dissipating with the sinking sun.

I could drive to the Montgomery farm blindfolded. Hudson Montgomery has been my best friend since we started kindergarten together at Oak Grove Elementary twenty-three years ago. I made this trip by bike up until the day I got my license and the keys to the rusty truck I’m driving right now.

The truck’s ancient radio only has time to play one John Denver song before I’m turning up the paved driveway—the

first sign that everything about this property is nicer than the ranch I just left.

It prompted an inferiority complex when I was younger.

Even now, there's a lingering echo of it.

When I'm in Oak Grove, nothing I've accomplished outside of this town seems to matter very much. It doesn't matter how much money I've made or what awards I've won.

I love and resent it, getting stripped down to my insecurities and regrets.

Rediscovering who *I* am beneath the fame and fortune.

Hudson and Tommy are standing by the grill when I arrive, each holding a beer and wearing a content expression.

The dark cloud hovering lifts a little as I watch Hudson flip the burgers and then punch Tommy's shoulder. These guys have seen me through a lot. Their lives—staying in this town, caring for family—are what mine would have looked like if I'd never become Kyle Spencer. The nostalgia is bittersweet.

"Spencer! About damn time." Hudson points the spatula he's holding at me as I approach the smoking grill, the smell and sizzle of cooking meat wafting toward me in the slight breeze that's picked up.

"Sorry. Got caught up," I say, slapping hands with them both.

Immediately, I feel lighter. Looser.

The screen door that leads to the patio opens, and Morgan Townsend steps out. Her bright smile is as cheerful as every other time I've been around her, which is admittedly not much.

Hudson started dating her three years ago, shortly after she first moved to Oak Grove to teach at the high school. Considering Hudson's short attention span when it comes to most things, none of us expected for their relationship to go anywhere. But they still seem solid. About six months ago, she moved into this house, which Hudson built on the east edge of his parents' land. Her presence is obvious in the row of bluebonnets freshly planted along the edge of the patio. And

the artfully arranged charcuterie board sitting in the center of the glass-topped table on the patio. Last time I was over here for dinner, we ate cold leftover pizza straight out of the box.

"Hi, Kyle." Our unfamiliarity is obvious in the way Morgan addresses me.

All of my childhood friends grew up calling me by my last name, and it stuck through my rise to fame. Fitting, considering no one ever suggested changing Spencer.

"Hey, Morgan. Nice to see you."

"Yeah, you too," she replies, tucking a loose piece of hair behind one ear. "Been a little while. Not since…"

My smile freezes, and there's an awkward beat of silence before I recover.

Morgan's cheeks turn red, her eyes quickly darting to Hudson. "I didn't mean to—"

"It has been a while," I say. "Good to be home."

Morgan nods quickly. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"I'll take a soda. Thanks."

Another nod, and then she disappears into the house. The screen door shuts with a soft hiss, suggesting I should be taking construction tips from Hudson. He built a large portion of this house himself.

"You look like shit," Tommy comments, sinking down into one of the other chairs once I take a seat at the table.

I huff out a laugh, running a hand through my damp hair. *This* is home as much as the creaky stairs and open fields of the ranch. Getting shit from my friends instead of advice from people on my payroll.

"Long day. I'm replacing the roof," I tell him, shooting Morgan a grateful smile when she reappears and passes me a cold cola before taking a seat.

I crack the can open and take a long pull, not missing the *look* Hudson and Tommy exchange.

I know they're worried about me. Frankly, they'd be terrible friends if they weren't at least a little concerned.

But I also know I'm doing what I need to. Maybe it's a twisted form of penance. Maybe I am punishing myself for the years when I could have done more and chose not to.

Whatever it is, it's the only way I know how to handle things. I used music to escape this town, so perhaps it's only fitting I'm returning here to end that chapter.

"Maybe call in a professional, man?" Tommy says. "Cal Hastings did—"

"I'm handling the damn roof, okay?"

Over two decades of friendship, and Tommy knows when to not push me. He leans back, holding up both hands in a gesture of acquiescence. "Okay."

I exhale, hating how my long fuse has burned down to nothing lately.

My muscles ache from ripping shingles all day, but there's a relentless buzz just beneath my skin. An irritated hum that keeps me testy and irritable when I should be relaxed and exhausted. My most recent tour ended three weeks ago and lasted almost a year. Most of that time was scheduled down to the minute. Photo shoots, interviews, sound checks, performances. It was like a tornado around me that's suddenly dissipated, leaving me standing alone. I'm in the silence after a storm, relieved yet also accustomed to chaos.

"I'm sorry. I—"

Tommy shakes his head. "Don't apologize, Spencer. I'll swing by this weekend. See what I can help you fuck up."

I roll my eyes, but the smile appears easily.

It's not forced, the way so many have felt lately.

"How are Mabel and John?" Hudson asks, taking the chair beside Morgan.

Morgan beams over at him, and it distracts me for a minute.

It's so *obvious*, so different from how I'm used to seeing affection displayed. My aunt and uncle have a stable relationship, but I've never so much as seen them hold hands. They're reserved people who shy away from muss or fuss.

And my love life as of late has been a string of short, meaningless encounters. That's probably true of my love life, period. Seeing one of my best friends in a mature, committed relationship feels as foreign as my fame must seem to him.

"Uh, they're good," I answer. "Heading north soon."

"Oh, right. They're visiting Cecilia and her family?"

"Right."

"Gonna throw a rager?" Tommy teases.

"Nah." I grin though at the reminder.

Junior year of high school was the first time Mabel and John drove to California to visit their good friends and goddaughter. And being the hellion I was back then, I took full advantage. After my success with music, that party is probably what I'm best known for in this town.

"Too bad Chief Twain has a long memory," Hudson says, taking a sip of beer and then smirking in Tommy's direction. "Must make work a little awkward."

"Work?" I look at Tommy too.

"Yeah." He rubs the back of his neck. "Company got a contract to revamp the town's systems. Including the police department. Since I'm local, I'm overseeing the project."

"That's awesome, man."

"Yeah. Thanks."

I've never been totally clear on what Tommy's job entails. He works remotely for a big tech company headquartered in Phoenix. And instead of moving to Arizona or to a larger city, he's remained in Oak Grove.

Just like Hudson.

And like Danny DeLuca, the fourth member of our little crew, who shows up a few minutes later, carrying a six-pack and wearing a wide smile.

Danny talked us out of all our craziest ideas back in high school, although when I look back at how we spent those years, the bar was pretty damn low to begin with. He's now the town attorney, taking over for his pops after Danny Sr. had a health scare a few years back.

More and more people follow Danny's arrival until the yard resembles an Oak Grove High reunion. People I've only seen in passing, if that, during my short, sporadic visits here in the past ten years.

Hudson pitched tonight as a chill hangout, but I'm not surprised it's expanded into a giant gathering. The best and worst thing about living in a small town is the total lack of boundaries.

I answer an endless stream of questions about my latest tour and how Mabel and John are doing. No one mentions my mom. But plenty of people make predictions about how soon my next album will release or when my next tour will kick off.

I feel like a fraud, offering different versions of the same vague responses. Realizing everyone here sees the glamorous facade of my life and not the exhaustion beneath the shiny surface. I might not have to worry about money and have staff handling the ranch's daily chores, but I worked hard for that privilege. There's an immense amount of pressure that goes along with knowing tens of thousands of people paid a lot of money to see you perform. Especially after changing hotels in the middle of the night because fans shut down the street or waking up at the crack of dawn to do a radio show.

But that reality is nothing I can describe to the awed, impressed expressions aimed my way.

I'm the exception in Oak Grove, the guy who left and did so in spectacular fashion. My career easily could have fizzled. There are no guarantees when it comes to anything, but that's twice as true in music. Often, the brighter you shine, the faster you fade. I knew I was lucky, so I never complained.

It feels like I've talked to every single one of the forty or so people in the yard by the time I head inside to use the bathroom.

There are a few young kids drawing on the patio with chalk, which is bizarre. I'm nowhere near the point in my life where procreating has occurred to me as a positive possibility. The realization people my age—people I grew up with—have is strange. It makes me feel like an outsider in a different way. The same weirdness of seeing Hudson with Morgan earlier, like I fell behind without noticing. Skipped a step without realizing.

I use the bathroom and then end up in the kitchen. The leftover burgers are already stored and the dishes cleared.

My head is in the fridge as I grab a water when I hear Hudson's voice.

"Sorry, man."

I grip the plastic bottle and turn, shutting the door with my foot. "Don't apologize."

"It was *supposed* to be small. I only mentioned it to—"

I shake my head as I twist the top open. "It's fine."

"They're all proud of you, superstar."

I take a long sip.

I know people are proud of me. And it's stifling, pretending like my life is perfect.

"You doing okay?" Hudson asks. "Really?"

I swallow and nod. "Really. It feels good to be home."

"Any idea how long you'll stay?"

Guilt expands in my chest as I shake my head.

It's not a lie; it's not the truth either. But I need to figure out what I'm doing before inviting opinions. Too many people have enough thoughts about my choices already.

"Until the end of the summer?"

I glance at Hudson. "Why?"

He looks around the empty kitchen, then back to me. “I’m planning on proposing to Morgan.”

“Wow. That’s…wow. That’s awesome, man.”

I’m shocked and doing a poor job of hiding it.

Hudson tilts his head to study me. “You think?”

“Yeah, I do. She seems great.”

I have to say *seems* because I barely know the woman my best friend is planning to propose to.

Hudson exhales. Nods. “I want to do it before school starts and she’s back at work. I was thinking I’d throw an end-of-summer party. Do it then.”

I nod, like I have any insight into what makes a good proposal. It’s been years since I made it to a third date with a girl, much less contemplated a future. “That sounds good.”

“What about you?”

I should have seen this coming, and I’m tempted to walk right out of the kitchen without answering. “I’m not proposing to anyone this summer, no.”

He scoffs and leans back against the counter. “Have you even dated anyone since Sutton Everett?”

“Yes. And I told you, that was arranged by my label. Dating is low on my priority list right now. Not to mention… awkward.”

Uncomfortable under the best of circumstances, and celebrity isn’t that. Either women want me for my fame and money or they’re scared off by it. Lose-lose situation.

“Since you’ve been back, you’ve barely left the ranch.”

“It’s been a week. And buildings are basically falling down, Hud. I’ve got my hands full. Literally.”

“Hire someone then. It’s not like you don’t have the money to.”

I exhale, not sure how to explain that’s part of the reason I’m determined to do it myself. “I *want* to do it.”

Hudson shrugs, his expression making it obvious he thinks I'm being stubborn for no reason, but not wanting to argue about it. "Morgan said there's a new teacher at the high school this year. Let's hit up Wagon Wheel with her this weekend. Double date."

"Maybe."

Another sigh at my noncommittal answer, but he doesn't push it. "You going to play the fair this year?"

"Yeah." I'm dreading it, but I'll perform.

All I've done since returning to Oak Grove is cut hay, clear junk, and fix up the farmhouse.

And avoid calls.

Which reminds me…

"I'm going to head out. I've got a mess to deal with in the morning."

"The roof?"

I sigh. "Yeah. Among other things."

CHAPTER FIVE

PIPER

Welcome to Oak Grove, Texas.

The knot of doubt in my stomach tightens as soon as I spot the innocuous blue-and-white sign, decorated with a single star. Two flights, a forty-minute drive, and I'm almost there.

But there's no sign of the relief that typically accompanies successfully completing a task or making it safely to a destination.

I'm worried. Stressed. Out of my element in every single way.

Everything has moved at warp speed since I agreed to Carl's ask. Going to my mom's, packing most of my wardrobe to avoid making decisions, saying goodbye to Lauren and Serena, and then heading to the airport early this morning. Trying not to second-guess the whole time.

This is my shot to have the career I want, and I can suffer through one unpleasant task in order to make that happen.

At least, that's what I've spent all day telling myself.

Serena and Lauren were excited when I told them I was leaving on a work trip. Lauren told me to charge a spa day to the label. Serena hugged me and said to fly safe, but I'm certain she was internally cheering over having the bathroom to herself. We share one while Lauren's is connected to her bedroom.

The car keeps moving past all signs of civilization. I glance worriedly at the GPS, then back at the road. Slam on the brakes when I realize I'm about to rear-end a tractor. The airline-issued water bottle propped between my thighs flies forward, the contents soaking my legs and the footwell.

Damn it.

I grit my teeth as water drips down my bare calves, take the next left prompted by the cheery navigator, then continue straight.

More of the same scenery passes by—open fields and open skies.

So much flat land.

So much blue stretching overhead.

And then I'm instructed to take a right, one that will supposedly lead to my destination, and the air-conditioning blasting from the vents isn't nearly enough to counteract the moisture gathering on my palms.

There's no town. No neighborhood. No people.

Maybe I should've driven to the hotel first.

Linda arranged everything for me—the flights, this rental car, the bed-and-breakfast where I'll be staying.

I figured heading straight to the source was better than delaying the inevitable, but I'm now reconsidering that decision too.

A ball of panic expands in my chest as I angle up a dirt driveway toward a scattered collection of buildings.

Should've said no, I think. Sitting in my office sounds better than this. I can keep slipping demo CDs under doors. Keep finding little-known bands in bars with sticky floors and hoping they'll catch a big break from someone with the power to hand it to them.

But it's too late.

I'm here, the long driveway ending in front of a two-story house.

I'm committed.

And I refuse to back down.

Everything is run-down. The central yard is a large patch of dirt, a few overgrown tufts of grass sticking up in random spots. I follow treads that have already been imprinted in the earth, rolling to a stop alongside a rusted red pickup truck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The navigation system cheerfully informs me I've arrived at my destination.

I pull in a deep breath, then open the car door. A few final trickles of water slide down my ankles, but at least I missed soaking my dress.

The humidity hits me first, thick and sticky. Closely followed by the smell of animals and hay, beneath it the ripe scent of manure. I inhale deeply, reflexively, and I'm immediately transported to another place and time.

A slamming door distracts me. I turn toward the house, something strange getting stuck in my throat as Kyle Spencer appears on the porch.

It's been nearly a year since I last saw him, right before he departed on his latest tour. And it was under very different circumstances—in an office with lots of other people around. Phones ringing and fingers typing.

Not this heavy silence as oppressive as the Texas heat.

I wait.

For a smile. An acknowledgment.

Kyle Spencer has always been quick with both. I've seen the videos of him patiently indulging his fans, laughing and joking through every interaction. From a PR perspective, he's a dream client.

It rankled me, seeing that charm I was certain must be an act.

But I witnessed it in person, during four years of meetings when he was attentive and accommodating. That affability

bothered me too—for reasons I still can't make sense of.

So, this feels like a twisted karma, watching him lean against the porch baluster, wearing a serious, annoyed expression.

Ironic—how the one time he appears to be in a bad mood, it's aimed solely at me. No satisfaction appears from the thought that maybe I was right and *good guy* was an act all along.

Dread crystallizes, spiraling through me.

All my hopeful thoughts on the plane—one quick conversation, and I'll be headed back home to my important new job—drift away in the cloud of dust my rental car kicked up.

The hard flintiness in Kyle's expression makes it obvious my presence is unwelcome. Much firmer and much angrier than the reception I was expecting.

At worst, I thought he might make fun of our past encounters. Tease me about the time he overheard me begging Harper for dick details about her hot hockey boyfriend. Not look like I personally offended him by rolling up his driveway.

I swallow as I approach the porch, heat and nerves making my skin prickle with sweat. My heels sink into the exposed earth. The rippling air seems to thicken, becoming significantly more difficult to draw into my lungs. Dust coats my hair and clothes and tongue, leaving an unpleasant, chalky aftertaste behind.

Kyle doesn't move or react as I cross the yard that's mostly dirt, his posture tense and unyielding. His mouth is a terse line, and the worn brim of a cowboy hat shades his eyes. The distinctive shape should look ridiculous on him. The only other time I've seen someone wear such a wide brim was for Halloween. But it somehow looks anything but absurd, paired with a dirty pair of jeans and a T-shirt I think was originally white. He looks rugged and masculine and nothing like every other time we've met in person.

Ten feet from the front porch, I speak. “Hello, Kyle. I’m __”

He interrupts me with a clipped, “I know who you are.”

Oh-kay then.

There’s no crack in his stoic expression. No recognition. And still absolutely no sign of the easygoing, smiling guy who’s shown up at the label’s New York office.

Carl did say *refusing* to re-sign, I guess. I made the confident mistake of thinking me not wanting to be here wouldn’t equal him not wanting me here.

He’s a musician with an ego. I’m here to stroke it. I thought that would be a point in my favor, not against me.

I clear my throat, both because standing and staring at each other in silence is awkward and because I’m still suffering from dust inhalation.

Before I can manage a single word, he tells me, “My mind is made up. This is a waste of my time—and yours.”

I open my mouth to speak, although what I’ll actually *say*, I have no clue.

Kyle’s scowl doesn’t belong to a sympathetic audience, so I doubt mentioning a promotion is on the line will sway him toward signing a new contract. There’s nothing in it for him, and I’m certain he couldn’t care less about how it’ll benefit me. The hard line of his jaw doesn’t suggest he’ll welcome a sales pitch about how much money he’s walking away from.

Beyond those two angles, I’m at a total loss on what to say in response to his statement.

Three words. That’s all I’ve spoken, and I feel like I’ve already failed.

The screen door swings open again, and a middle-aged woman walks out onto the porch to stand beside Kyle. Her long brown hair hangs in a braid over one shoulder, threaded with strands of gray. She glances between me and Kyle, her weathered face giving nothing away.

Her scrutiny lands on me and stays. I resist the strong urge to shift under the intense attention as her gaze focuses on the sheath-style dress that looked cute and professional in the mirror early this morning. She's wearing worn jeans and an oversize T-shirt that swallows her petite frame with a red-stained apron over it.

His mom? She's about the right age.

"You from the record label?" the woman asks.

I stumble over a tuft of grass as I step forward, taking the question as the warmest welcome I'll receive. "Yes! I'm Piper!" My voice comes out too high and too cheery. I wince, the sound grating against my own ears.

Failure isn't an option. I didn't take two flights to turn around and head straight back to New York. I might be sweaty and dusty and unwelcome, but I'm no quitter.

Kyle scoffs, and it's the first time I've been grateful for the humidity hanging in the air since I stepped outside the air-conditioned sedan.

My skin is too flushed to reveal any embarrassment.

I'm the youngest of five with four older brothers. I don't embarrass easily.

And if you'd asked me up until right now, I never would have named Kyle Spencer as a person I'd be intimidated around. He's always just *irritated* me with his effortless charm and obvious affability. Seeing him in this sour, glowering mood—proving he's human, like the rest of us—is unpleasant. I'd rather consider him as one-dimensional, like his album covers.

I think I'm staring, and I'm not sure how to stop it. It's still difficult to reconcile the carefree, clean-shaven man I've met before with this scowling, stubbled version.

"KYLE!" a deep voice bellows to the left.

I squint in that direction, estimating it's coming from the massive structure with a pitched roof that I'm guessing is a barn. It's hard to make out more than the general shape while

the sun is burning my eyes. This is a *farm* farm, it appears, not just a big plot of land.

The call achieves what my arrival wasn't able to. Kyle abandons his looming position on the porch, climbing down the steps and pausing a few feet from me.

My muscles twitch with an urge to step away and put some more space between us. He's still looming, even with less of a height advantage.

"You should leave."

The qualifier doesn't reach his tone. The three words sound a lot more like one—leave.

I lift my chin, guessing where his eyes are beneath the shaded brim of his big hat. "You should sign the new contract."

Kyle scoffs, a low, irritated sound that has me cursing out Carl in my head. Because the clenched line of Kyle's jaw suggests Carl knew he was sending me off on an impossible mission. And the only thing worse than coming all this way is to do so and *fail*.

He walks off without another word, leaving me stewing in annoyance and anger. I suck in a deep breath and try to ignore all the spots where sweat is gathering beneath my dress, readjusting to the uncomfortable realization that I was a fool not to consider Kyle could react this way. I was so wrapped up in what this trip would mean for *me* that I never prepared for this possibility.

I pull another long breath in and then smile at the woman standing on the porch. "Nice to meet you."

I turn, trudging back toward the parked sedan.

"You're giving up?"

I still, surprised, then spin back around. Her expression hasn't changed, and that searching gaze hasn't shifted either.

"I have a hotel in town. I'll be back tomorrow." *Not that it will make much difference*.

Pessimistic. Also realistic. I'm not giving up. I won't, not until Carl tells me to. But I'm definitely not feeling great about my odds of success either.

Kyle is gone, but I can still feel the heavy weight of his disapproval lingering in the humid air.

"There aren't any hotels in town," the woman tells me.

I fish my phone out of my pocket and scroll through my email. "Lone Star Bed and Breakfast?"

She snorts. "That's forty minutes from here."

Fantastic. I'm looking at over an hour commute every day I'm stuck here.

I force a smile, refusing to show any unease. Something tells me she's not the coddling type. "Guess I'd better get going then."

"You can stay in the guesthouse."

"Guesthouse?"

All I see are barns, *a* house, and a few sheds. Nothing that resembles visitor accommodations.

"Miles is stubborn. You won't get far if you don't do the walking. But you've still got to kick the horse so it knows you mean business."

I shade my eyes with one hand, feeling sweat bead on my brow and trying to make sense of the mixed metaphor. "Miles?"

"You don't know much about my nephew."

It's not a question. And it's impossible to tell from her tone whether that's a good or bad thing. But it's a glimmer of insight into a mystery I need to solve if I have any chance of making this trip a success.

"You're his aunt? Does the whole family live here?"

There's no response to my questions.

"I'm Mabel. Dinner is at six, if you stick around."

And then she's gone, the screen door slamming shut with a resounding thud.

I look around and sigh, deliberating on what to do next.

I should leave. I trust Linda found the best possible place for me to stay, and aside from the commute, *far from here* isn't exactly a downside. A cool shower and room service sound like the best end to what has been a long day.

But…I have a nagging certainty Mabel is right. That I won't get anywhere with Kyle from the comfort of the Lone Star Bed and Breakfast. I'll be a lot harder to ignore if I'm camped out in his backyard versus sleeping forty minutes away.

I let out another long exhale, knowing what I'll do and already wishing I'd picked the other option.

I unload my two overstuffed suitcases from the car and trudge toward the nearest outbuilding, the strap of my purse digging into my collarbone and my suitcases banging against my shins every other step. The horizontal white siding matches the farmhouse, the yellow paint on the door peeling in most places. I drop my luggage down and try the handle, not surprised when it opens easily. I *am* surprised by the interior.

It's a music studio. Soundproofed. State-of-the-art equipment. I take a few steps forward, and I could be back in New York at a recording session.

The air is much cooler in here. Not quite the freezer temperature I'm craving, but there's obviously some climate control installed to protect the equipment.

I walk over to the cabinets that cover one wall, sliding open the wooden door.

Awards.

Row after row of shiny megaphones. Trophies that artists spend years—lifetimes—chasing, hidden away like they're something to be ashamed of.

It doesn't fit with anything I know about Kyle. He's the typical performer, happy to show off his accomplishments.

Loud and proud whenever he's onstage.

"Um, hello?"

I spin to face the figure standing in the doorway. He's tall, studying me with a quizzical expression. Caught somewhere between the end of boyhood and the beginning of manhood. I'd guess he's in high school, maybe college.

I clear my throat. "Hi."

His confused expression deepens. "Are you supposed to be in here?"

"I'm looking for the guesthouse."

At that, he laughs. "What guesthouse?"

I try to ignore the anxiety swirling inside of me. "Mabel sent me this way."

A little of the confusion clears, like clouds parting to reveal the sky. "Well, there's the old bunkhouse, but no one has stayed there in ages."

No one has stayed there in ages.

Whatever bonus I'll receive from the label in exchange for this trip, it won't be enough.

I paste a smile on my face and nod. "That must be what she meant. Can you show me where it is?"

He rubs a hand across his sunburned forehead, expression creasing with concern. "I should get Spencer and see—"

It takes me a minute to realize he means Kyle. Since no one has *called* him Kyle since I arrived here.

"No!" I quickly temper my tone since I sound ridiculously desperate. But I figure my odds of remaining on this ranch are much higher if Kyle discovers I'm staying here *after* I've unpacked and settled in. I'm banking on him being less heartless than his flinty expression earlier suggested. "I don't want to bother him with this. Mabel gave me directions. I'm just…bad at finding my way around."

I hold my breath, hoping mentioning Mabel again will help my case.

It does.

"Yeah, all right. This way."

I hurry to follow him outside before he changes his mind.

"So…how long have you worked here?"

He aims a strange expression my way. "A while. How do you know Spencer?"

I decide striking up a conversation might not have been the smartest decision. There's still a lingering note of mistrust in his voice that mentioning Mabel didn't fully erase. I'm an outsider, and something tells me that matters here in a way I've never encountered in the melting pot that's New York.

"Music." I decide to keep my answer brief. And honest. "I'm Piper."

"I'm Jamie." Jamie tilts his head as he studies me. "You writing with Spencer?"

It's news to me that Kyle has collaborated with other artists. He's always been a solo act. An attraction all in himself. Then again, all I really know about the guy is what's been covered in the meetings I've attended.

"Uh, no. I work for his record label."

Jamie grunts, giving no indication of how he feels about that response.

His strides pick up as we approach what looks like another shed. It's slightly larger than the converted studio we just left with an overgrown shrub planted right next to the front door. We pass it, and Jamie opens the door, gesturing for me to walk in first.

"Thanks."

The air inside is musty and still. Both walls house bunk beds, and straight ahead is a small bathroom that's attached to the rest of the space. A woven tapestry is tucked off to the side, presumably as a makeshift barrier between the bathroom

and the beds. It's all bare bones, nothing fancy or new. But it's clean. Better than I was picturing, based on Jamie's *no one has stayed there in ages* comment.

Jamie flips a switch that makes the overhead fan whir to life. "Open up all the windows," he advises. "It'll cool off at night. A little."

I swallow and nod, another bead of sweat dripping down my spine.

"I think Linnia kept all the towels and sheets in that chest." He nods toward a wooden rectangle at the base of the beds on the left.

"Linnia?"

"She was the housekeeper."

"But not anymore?"

I'm being nosy. I'm also desperate, needing any possible insight about what I've walked into. Movies and books always suggest small-town folks are chatty, but everyone here talks like they're being charged by the word.

"No." Jamie takes a step back. "If you need anything else, Mabel should be able to help. I've got to get going."

"Okay. Thanks."

He nods and then disappears outside, leaving me standing in the center of the room.

I drop my bag on one of the beds, my first priority being changing out of this dress. I decide to shower first, relieved the plumbing works well.

Once I'm dressed in more casual attire, I call and cancel my reservation at Lone Star Bed and Breakfast. I'm worried if I don't, I'll be too tempted to head for air-conditioning. I make up one of the lower bunks with bedding from the cedar chest and pull out my laptop, using the hotspot on my phone to check emails.

At six on the dot, I head toward the farmhouse.

Kyle is out on the front porch, standing in a position almost identical to the posture he adopted earlier, arms crossed and expression annoyed. He's showered, too, his hair tousled. Instead of jeans and work boots, he's in mesh basketball shorts and bare feet.

I force my steps not to falter, trying not to think about how different I look from every other time he's seen me. It's hard not to feel self-conscious with my damp hair and bare face. I'm wearing the T-shirt and jean shorts I put on after my shower, which is nothing like the attire I normally wear for anything work-related.

"I told you to leave."

I don't stop at the bottom of the stairs this time. I climb right up onto the porch so we're standing at the same level. He's still taller than me, annoyingly.

"No, you said I *should* leave."

"What's the difference?"

I exhale. "Look, Kyle—"

"I need help in the kitchen," Mabel's voice calls out, carrying easily through the screen door.

One of Kyle's eyebrows rises. I'm not sure if it's a challenge or if he's waiting for me to finish my sentence.

I take the offered out since assisting Mabel sounds far preferable to begging Kyle to let me stay.

I'm not going to make this easy on him. If he wants me to leave, he'll have to make me.

The interior of the farmhouse isn't what I expected. It's open and uncluttered, a well-worn woven rug covering most of the hardwood floor. A mismatched couch and a couple of armchairs take up most of the space with a wooden table and four chairs tucked away in the far corner. A staircase leads to upstairs, and the kitchen is visible through the opening next to the table.

I head into the kitchen, where I chop cucumbers for the salad and meet Mabel's husband, John. He offers me a friendly

smile, but not much in the way of conversation.

Kyle's a silent, glowering presence in the background, his attention burning holes in the back of my head.

Once all the food is ready, everyone migrates over to the table that stretches almost the full length of the kitchen wall. The wooden surface is gouged and scarred in spots by years of obvious use.

"Not at dinner," Mabel says, knocking at the brim of John's hat.

With a grunt, he removes it, revealing a full head of hair that's more salt than pepper. His brow is creased from years of squinting at the sun. He walks with a slight limp, steps slow as he joins us at the table.

I grab my water glass and take a long swallow, painfully aware I'm the outsider here. My job has never required me to eat dinner with strangers before, and I would have been fine with that staying the case.

Utensils scrape plates as everyone serves themselves. The food smells delicious. But hunger is replaced by dread as I stare at the ribs dripping with barbecue sauce. I'm already an unwelcome house guest, and I'm positive this won't help.

Mabel follows my gaze. "They're beef. From our own cows."

I force a smile. "That's great."

Kyle focuses on me now, his expression much more unpleasant than Mabel's. John is munching on corn, unbothered.

"You're not hungry?" Kyle picks up a rib, eyes on me as sauce coats his fingers.

I shake my head, tempted to sip more water but also refusing to show any weakness. "I don't eat meat."

"You don't eat meat."

His flat, disbelieving tone rankles me.

"You've never heard of being vegetarian?"

“I’ve heard of it. Just never met one.”

I can’t tell if he’s kidding or not. I’m not sure if this sour version of Kyle knows what a joke is.

“Well, now, you have.”

His gaze remains on me. “We eat a lot of meat around here.”

“I’ll manage.” I lean forward, using the tongs to transfer some greens and a cob of corn to my plate.

Kyle’s disbelieving scoff is the last sound he makes for the rest of dinner.

CHAPTER SIX

KYLE

I stare up at the ceiling of my childhood bedroom, listening to the low hum of the air-conditioning. The window unit is an improvement from summers growing up. I used to jump into the pond in the west field before dinner and then sleep directly in front of the fan as a kid.

Mabel and John never upgraded the years I was gone, but I only lasted two days back in Oak Grove before driving into town and picking up three air conditioners. They do a decent job of cooling the bedrooms.

But I'm not certain there are even fans in the old bunkhouse. When I was younger, I'd sleep out there with friends, but that was over a decade ago now.

I think Linnia used to clean in there in addition to the main house, but I'm not sure about that. Mabel didn't even tell me the housekeeper one of my assistants had hired moved back to her hometown until I came back. She and John always resisted any assistance I offered them. I would have insisted though, had I known the state the property was in.

And now, I'm lying in bed, wrestling with guilt because Piper Egan decided to show up at my ranch and she's more stubborn than I was expecting.

I assumed she'd scare easily. That she'd take one look at the run-down surroundings and hightail it back to New York. I figured she'd at least leave to sleep at a hotel. But she didn't. Piper thanked Mabel for dinner—more like the veggies she'd nibbled at—and then headed back to the less-than-luxurious

accommodations by the south pasture. I didn't even offer to walk her back, which Mabel's hard gaze judged me for until I left the table too.

I don't *want* her to stay, is the problem.

Had Carl Bergman consulted me on sending someone here, which he obviously didn't, Piper would have been my last choice.

Something about her—maybe the obvious disdain directed my way—has always intrigued me. That moment I first saw her standing in her blue rain boots on a sunny day has stuck with me, just like I knew it would.

And now, she's *here*, making a mess out of what was supposed to be an easy exit.

Making me feel badly for conveying she's unwelcome when that's exactly what she is.

Adding more stress to what was supposed to be a reset and instead has been nothing but a headache.

Irritated, I fling the sheet off and roll out of bed. Pull on the shorts I wore earlier since Mabel is an insomniac with a tendency to wander when she can't sleep.

She won't be embarrassed about seeing me in my boxers, but I'll be uncomfortable. It's an awkward reminder that I'm a twenty-eight-year-old multimillionaire, living with a married couple in their early fifties. I'm surprised Piper didn't have a snarky comment to share about the strange dynamic. I'm certain the only reason she didn't mention it is that she's hoping that I'll agree to sign if she's nice to me. Watching her struggle to come up with polite comments during dinner was the best entertainment I'd had in months.

Floorboards creak as I leave my room and walk the slanting hallway that leads toward the stairs. Despite its many issues, this house has a character that's been lacking in every place I've lived since leaving Oak Grove. I spent most of that time staying in fancy hotels or luxurious rentals filled with glass and chrome and marble.

Nothing soft or welcoming.

Nothing with memories, good or bad.

Halfway down the stairs, I hear a cabinet close in the kitchen.

I exhale, glad I grabbed shorts and bracing for at least one comment about Piper. I got the impression Mabel was disapproving of my decision—not so much that I'm leaving country music, more why—but there's only one way that Piper could have ended up staying in the bunkhouse. Mabel's interference says a lot more than anything else she's actually spoken about my choice to abandon my career.

But when I reach the bottom of the stairs and turn the corner, there's no sign of my aunt.

Piper is the one standing in the kitchen. She turns at the sound of my approaching footsteps, the plate she just pulled out of a cabinet clutched to her chest.

"*Fuck*," she breathes. "You scared me."

There's an immediate flash of déjà vu, back to the first moment I saw her in a different kitchen. I doubt that moment has stuck in her head the way it's remained in mine.

"You startle easily," I observe.

Piper rolls her eyes, spins, and opens another cabinet, rising up on her tippy-toes to peer inside.

It's one hell of a view. She's wearing a pair of cotton sleep shorts and a tank top. They don't match, which makes me smile for absolutely no reason, except it's weirdly endearing.

Any amusement fades as the gap between the hem of her shirt and the top of her shorts grows, revealing more smooth, pale skin.

With a quiet sigh, Piper sinks flat on her feet. I quickly direct my gaze upward right as she turns around.

The view is just as good—or bad—from the front. She's not wearing a bra, which becomes very obvious when she sets the plate down and folds her arms across her chest, tightening the thin fabric.

Unfortunately, I'm already aware of the fact that I'm attracted to Piper. That and the irritated expression she's aiming my way are the two things that haven't changed since the last time we faced off near a fridge.

"What are you doing?" I ask, walking past her and over to the shelf that stores glasses to grab one.

Piper sighs, then admits, "I'm hungry."

"Veggies less filling than you thought?"

I can't see her glare, but I can feel it. The stab of guilt in my gut is equally uncomfortable.

I hate being this guy. I hate contributing to negativity when it's already so prevalent in the world.

"Never mind. I'm going back to bed." She turns toward the front door.

"Wait," I say, even as I'm asking myself what the hell I'm doing.

Making Piper feel unwelcome is necessary.

The sooner she leaves, the better. She's not a guest to be catered to.

But her in my house, hungry, doesn't sit right with me.

I open the fridge door and glance over the contents. "You eat cheese, right?"

"Why am I not surprised you don't know the difference between being vegan and—"

"It was a yes or no question, Piper."

When I glance over my shoulder, she's hovering by the stove, twirling a curl around one finger.

She sighs. "Yes. I eat cheese."

"Great." I grab a block of cheddar out of the drawer and a jar of mayonnaise off the door, then shut the fridge with my foot.

"What are you doing?"

I don’t answer her as I head for the stove. Piper takes a step to the right, moving out of my way while I grab a skillet and turn on the burner. She gnaws at her bottom lip as she watches me slather two slices of bread with mayonnaise, then fold two thick slices of cheese between them.

“Butter okay?”

Piper rolls her eyes, which I take as a yes. I plop a healthy chunk into the pan, wait for it to sizzle, and add the sandwich.

“Where’d your meat aversion come from?” I ask.

She’s silent for long enough that I decide she won’t answer. The butter hisses in the pan as the bread fries, the only sound in the quiet kitchen. I grab a spatula out of the drawer and flip the sandwich, filling the room with fresh sizzles.

“When I was seven, I spent a week at a summer camp upstate. They had a bunch of farm animals, including a litter of piglets that were just a few weeks old. I named the runt Wilbur, from a book my mom read to me. I cried when my parents picked me up because I didn’t want to leave him. They promised me I could come back next summer and see him.”

I already know where this story is going. I know what happens to most boars.

Piper exhales. “Every time I ate any meat, I imagined it was Wilbur. So, I started refusing to eat it. My parents thought I would grow out of it, but I can be kind of stubborn. Pretty soon, my whole family was vegetarians.” She smiles, and it’s fond. “For a little while anyway. After my parents got divorced, my brothers went over to my dad’s for dinner a lot.”

“Your parents are divorced?” The question comes out without me consciously deciding to ask it, some reflex of curiosity.

She glances down at her hands, twisting her fingers together. “Yeah.”

Her voice is low, a tone I haven’t heard from her before. A vulnerability and a softness that’s new to me.

And I wish I'd never glimpsed it because it's making this whole thing even harder.

"You're not going to make fun of me? Say that's the circle of life?"

"Nope." I hold a hand out for the plate.

Piper hands it over silently. I plop the crispy sandwich on it, then pass the plate back to her.

"Thanks." Her tone is still soft. "*Miles*," she adds, the edge that twists my birth name sounding a lot more like the way she normally talks to me.

"Mabel spilled more than the bunkhouse location, huh?"

It's unlike her, and there's a flip in my stomach as I consider the possible reasons for her uncharacteristic chattiness.

"You could learn some hospitality lessons from Mabel," Piper tells me. "At least *she* offered me a place to stay."

She's propped her elbows on the edge of the counter, inhaling her sandwich at an impressive rate. It would be an endearing childlike pose, if not for the way her shirt gapes forward. I quickly avert my eyes before she catches me staring.

I meant what I said to Hudson last night. Dating is low on my priority list, beneath figuring out what the hell to do with the rest of my life. The allure of women interested in me exclusively because of my voice or my money or the way I look wore off a long time ago. So, it's been a while since I've had sex, and I'm reminded of *exactly* how long it's been as Piper's tongue darts out to catch some stray crumbs clinging to her lower lip.

"I made you dinner," I remind her, trying to keep our conversation going to distract myself from her proximity.

"So did Mabel," Piper replies, taking another bite.

"I made you a *vegetarian* dinner."

"Mabel didn't know I was a vegetarian."

I shake my head, but I sort of want to smile. This girl. Never gives me a single inch.

Like she's thinking the same, she gifts me a centimeter. "It's good," she tells me. Reluctantly, but it's still a compliment.

I nod. "Good."

"Thank you," she adds. Even more reluctantly.

But again, the words are there. And genuine.

"You're welcome."

"So…why change your name?"

I'm surprised she's asking, but I hide it with a shrug of one shoulder. "The publicist my manager hired suggested it. Back then, I was happy to do whatever it took."

More than happy, I was eager. Thrilled to leave Miles Spencer behind. And now…I kind of miss him. Wonder what his life would be like. If he would still have a mother.

"You're not happy to now?"

It's essentially a rhetorical question, considering why she's here.

I stopped jumping through hoops when it came to my career a long time ago. Now, I'm not willing to do even the barest minimum.

I'm done.

And the sooner Piper accepts that, the easier both of our lives will be.

"No." I inject my voice with a shot of steel, reminding myself—and her—that we're not friends enjoying a late-night chat. "I'm not."

She's here for her job.

I'm here for my family, to figure out who I would have become had I never accepted Hudson's dare and sang at the fair senior year.

“There’s more food in the fridge. Help yourself to whatever you want.”

I straighten and push away from the counter.

Piper’s gaze skates over my bare chest. It doesn’t feel like she’s checking me out, more like she’s curious. Like she’s a scientist gathering information about a newly discovered species. Or like she’s searching for something.

Without asking, I’m certain she’s trying to figure out why I’m done with music. I also know she won’t get the answer from me.

“Good night.”

I’m halfway to the stairs when she speaks again.

“Kyle?”

I still as soon as she says my name, having expected it somehow.

“Yeah?” I glance back, finding her in the same position, leaning against the counter.

Her empty plate sits next to her left hand, the few crumbs a reminder that I’m weaker than I want to be.

“I’m not leaving,” she says, the same hard tone I just employed reflected right back at me.

I swallow. “I’m not changing my mind.”

“*Why*, Kyle? You’re being offered everything—”

“I don’t owe you an explanation, Piper. It’s *my* life. *My* career. *My* decision. I’m not going to kick you out. I get this is your job, as screwed up as that is. And I know it’s the only reason you’re here—”

“What does *that* mean?” This time, she cuts me off.

“You’ve visited Texas before? Spent some time on a ranch? Planned to sleep in a bunkhouse?”

She’s silent.

“You’re only here because you had no choice. I’m sure you would have pawned this trip off on someone else if you

could have, just like you did with lunch. But I'll save you some time. I'm not changing my mind. I'm telling you, it's impossible. Stay or leave—I don't care. It won't make any difference."

Piper crosses her arms, the defiant gleam that's appeared at least once every time I've been around her showing up once again. "We'll see."

I shake my head and turn, heading up the stairs.

Hating how the lyrics to "Blue Rain Boots" are running through my head the whole climb.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HARPER: You're in TEXAS? With KYLE SPENCER?!

PIPER: I don't want to talk about it.

HARPER: Going that great, huh?

PIPER: It's not *going* at all.

PIPER: He's a stubborn cowboy who lives in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

PIPER: Not to mention a multimillionaire who doesn't have air-conditioning.

HARPER: I went in for $100 that you'd get him to sign a new contract. Don't let me down.

PIPER: Then, we're both screwed.

PIPER: What are my odds?

HARPER: You don't want to know.

PIPER: Y'all suck.

HARPER: You're Southern now?

PIPER: BYE!

Waking up in the bunkhouse is weird. If it had air-conditioning, it would be tolerable.

But it doesn't. So, I barely slept, tossing and turning on the tiny, too-firm mattress until enough light was in the sky to make it obvious that it was morning and the sun would keep me up even if the heat didn't.

Right after the monthly meeting—which my assignment here excused me from—ended on the East Coast, Harper texted me, confirming that the office gossip mill is churning and I'm unfortunately included in the latest batch of news.

Kyle Spencer has always been a popular topic at Empire despite rarely doing anything newsworthy.

Refusing to sign a new contract? That's newsworthy.

Me here to talk him into signing a new contract? Also newsworthy.

Especially to colleagues like Harper, who's a friend and also aware of the fact that Kyle Spencer is the last musician whose career I'd voluntarily assist. My feelings for the man and the genre known as country music—Kyle's fans refer to him as the King of Country, so the two are practically one and the same—are well-known in the office. A source of amusement and entertainment more often than not.

I never expected Kyle might mention noticing that nearly a year after the last time we saw each other.

My job is simply one small cog in the massive machine known as Kyle Spencer's career. Had I left the label anytime in the past few years, he would have kept chugging along just fine without me. Except now, suddenly, I'm *the* cog. Whether or not Kyle Spencer's career continues to exist seems to rely solely on me, and it's a responsibility I really don't want.

Worse is realizing that Kyle is aware I don't want it either. And at this point, I know he won't believe me if I claim otherwise or act like I've become a fan of songs featuring beer bottles and pickup trucks overnight.

Honesty is my best policy if I want him to trust me.

I tap the phone screen, switching from the conversation with Harper to the text thread with my mother.

I messaged her after landing in Texas, letting her know I made it safely. I send a vague response to her response, asking what the trip has been like so far, not wanting to get into how I'm chasing down a singer in the countryside. I'm sure she'd find it ridiculous.

And that's probably what most people would think.

It's certainly how Kyle feels, and I don't blame him at all.

This is a massive invasion of his privacy. But it was awfully naive on his part if he truly thought he could fade into obscurity without anyone asking questions. Setting aside Empire's obvious investment, Kyle has a reputation for interacting and engaging with his many supporters. Despite not seeing the appeal myself, I can't deny there's a massive fan base who will be devastated if Kyle really walks away.

I looked through all of his social media accounts before leaving New York. No announcements, no pauses in posting. Kyle obviously has a team running all of that for him. More members of the machine. And that team is either unaware of his plans to leave music or is choosing not to announce them.

I stare at my phone for another minute before tossing it on the bed. If I were braver or stupider—I'm not sure which—I'd call up Carl Bergman right now and ask him what the hell he was thinking, sending *me* here. Question why he informed the entire damn office that I'm here and why this morning.

It was only a matter of time until my absence was noticed and gossip spread, but I was hoping for more than one day. Especially now that I have a better sense of how challenging of an assignment this actually is.

No one in the office who's seen Kyle saunter into a meeting, wearing a relaxed grin and a suit with no tie, would believe the guy who greeted me yesterday exists. I'm pretty sure the poor odds Harper informed me of say more about my attitude than about Kyle's known affability.

"I'm not changing my mind."

Those words echo ominously in my head as I get dressed in the same outfit I wore last night and leave the bunkhouse.

I'm facing an uphill battle—so steep that the top isn't even in sight. But I have no choice, except to fight it until I succeed or fail.

Here's hoping for the former, as unlikely as that's looking.

Instead of heading straight for the house, I wander toward the closest fence line. A light-brown horse is standing a few dozen feet away, its back bowed and its tail swishing lazily. I click my tongue, and there's no reaction. He or she just continues grazing. I lean against the rough wood and scan the open horizon.

This place is *huge*.

I'm so used to walking down crowded streets, lined with towering skyscrapers. It's startling—looking ahead and seeing nothing but land stretching uninterrupted, straight and flat.

I step away from the fence, only to discover my shirt snagged on a nail. A tiny rip is visible in the cotton of one of the few T-shirts I packed. I swear under my breath as I walk back in the direction I came. Most of what I packed was work clothes—suit sets and blazers and dresses—that will be totally useless here. I thought I'd make a better impression, showing up to Kyle's house—his actual *house*, before I realized he lived on a ranch—in professional attire. Now, I realize it will only exaggerate how out of place I am. My comfort zone was left back in New York.

There are trucks and people visible near the largest building—what looks like an open-air barn—so I give it a wide berth. I'd rather not run into anyone and have to explain what I'm doing here.

I stop again at the recording studio. It's silent and empty, just like yesterday. But its existence is the most promising sign I've seen so far. Its construction is recent and its equipment expensive.

Based on the rest of the ranch, Kyle doesn't spend money excessively—or at all. If he invested in this space, he planned to use it. I just need to figure out what changed his mind so I can *un*change it.

My grumbling stomach pulls me toward the main house, in search of breakfast.

Mabel calls out a quiet, “Come in,” after I knock on the screen door.

There’s no sign of Kyle or John in the kitchen.

“Good morning,” I greet, twisting my fingers together anxiously as I approach the counter, where she’s chopping strawberries. There’s an impressive pile of them in a bowl beside her elbow.

“Good morning,” Mabel repeats, barely glancing up before resuming chopping. “You looking for breakfast?”

I nod, knowing my rumbling stomach will answer for me otherwise. The sandwich Kyle made me helped, but overall, I’m running on a major food deficiency.

“Breakfast would be great.”

“There’s cereal in the cabinet and coffee in the pot. And help yourself to some strawberries.” She continues chopping.

“Thanks.”

I already figured out Mabel doesn’t enjoy small talk. And I appreciate it right now because I have no idea what I’d say if she asked how I slept.

Maybe the dark circles under my eyes are answer enough.

I didn’t bother with any makeup this morning, and I want to laugh about how I packed my hair dryer and straightening iron. The thought of using a device that *produces* heat makes me shudder.

I help myself to a bowl of cereal and pour a cup of coffee, adding milk to both. Typically, I use an oat milk creamer in my coffee, but I don’t bother asking Mabel if she has any on hand.

She seems to want me here—or at least doesn’t resent that I am—and I don’t want to risk any goodwill. Mabel must know why Kyle is choosing to leave music. The fact that she knows and is encouraging me to stay gives me more hope than anything else that’s happened so far.

I eat quickly, then hand-wash my bowl and mug with the sponge sitting next to the sink. There's no sign of a dishwasher, but the other appliances all look fairly new.

That's another mystery—the state of the property. Did Kyle grow up here? Is he visiting? Does he plan to stay here? All questions I'm unsure about asking since the answers are none of my business and I'm sure Mabel won't be shy about telling me so.

"Do you, uh, do you know where Kyle is?" Embarrassingly, I stutter through the question. I sound like a teenager talking to her crush's mom, not the strong businesswoman I'm trying to project.

"Nope," is Mabel succinct answer.

"There was a lot of commotion by the barn earlier."

She nods. "Staff Miles hired. They handle the dairy operations. John has a hard time getting around. Got to be too much for him."

"How many cows do you guys have?" I ask, hoping the phrasing will cause her to clarify who owns the ranch.

"About a thousand." Mabel is as evasive as I'm curious.

"That's a lot."

"Bigger operations around," is the only response, accompanied with the steady thud of the knife falling.

A louder pounding starts on the roof, just as rhythmic as the slice of Mabel's knife. I glance at her for guidance, unsure of what's going on.

Mabel's eyebrows are high and bunched, the corners of her mouth pinched tight with disapproval. But she just keeps cutting, ignoring the concerning sound.

It continues for another minute with no sign of ceasing.

"Is something wrong with the roof?" I finally ask.

"God help us if it hails," Mabel mutters so low that I hardly catch the words. Then, she glances at me. "Grief never looks the same way twice."

I nod dumbly, having no idea what to say in response.

Last night, when I couldn't sleep, I thought about what might be the source of the certainty behind Kyle's firm words in the kitchen. I considered everything from a paternity lawsuit to burnout. Years in the music industry have taught me there are plenty of unfortunate side effects to fame. You don't have to experience them personally to comprehend there must be pitfalls to having your life on public display.

Tragedy didn't cross my mind.

For one, I assumed I would have heard about it. That if Kyle had suffered a loss, it would have been splashed across headlines.

And I don't think I'm an unsympathetic person—I don't eat meat because of a pig I knew for a *week*—so I'm not sure why my tendency is to never give Kyle the benefit of the doubt. To judge and assume first whenever he's involved.

Maybe because he's always acted like the type of person fate seems to favor.

Maybe because he easily achieved what I've seen so many others struggle for.

Whatever the reason, I'm contending with an unfamiliar pang of regret where Kyle is concerned. As if I didn't already feel uncomfortable enough about being here, it turns out that I'm intruding on someone while they're grieving. So, that's… awful.

Too much time has passed for me to respond to Mabel's comment. I'm still not sure *what* to say. Is she grieving too?

"Can I help with anything?" I ask, figuring I can at least make myself useful.

Mabel glances up, her eyes sharp and assessing. "You made jam before?"

I shake my head. "I'm a fast learner though."

"Grab the sugar out of the cabinet. And wash three lemons."

I rush to follow Mabel's instructions, turning her words over in my head while I grab the canister of white granules and rinse the yellow citrus fruit.

"Grief never looks the same way twice."

I grieved the end of having happily married parents.

I grieved not making it in music myself.

I grieved Wilbur, the sweet pig with a short life.

But I've never experienced the gaping loss Mabel seems to be alluding to. And it explains a lot—about the obvious changes between the Kyle I'd interacted with before and the sour man who stood on the front porch yesterday afternoon.

What it doesn't do is help my current situation.

I have even less of an idea of how to approach convincing Kyle to return to music now than I did five minutes ago.

"Add three cups," Mabel says, tapping the side of the large pan on the stovetop with a wooden spoon.

I measure out the sugar, carefully smoothing the top flat so the precise amount gets added. Follow the rest of her instructions just as exact, relieved to focus on a certain task instead of the many questions spinning around in my head.

Once all the ingredients are added to the pot, Mabel instructs me to keep stirring. I watch her wash a collection of glass jars, then dip them in boiling water, one by one.

"I didn't know," I say, still dutifully stirring.

For some reason, it's important to me that Mabel knows that. She's a stranger I met yesterday. But I care that she possibly thinks I'm a heartless suit here to suck more money out of her nephew during a painful time.

Mabel doesn't ask what I mean. She says, "I know," in a matter-of-fact tone.

And then we go back to making strawberry jam.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KYLE

"There's a woman staying in the bunkhouse."

My next swing of the hammer misses the post entirely.

I clear my throat, connecting with the nail on the next try. "Yeah, I know."

"She's hot."

I shake my head and swing again. "Jamie…"

He grins wide enough that I catch it out of the corner of my eye, even as I try to focus on the task at hand. "Don't tell me you didn't notice. Hard to miss that hair."

"Just hold the damn board. We're almost done."

"Yes, sir."

Jamie says nothing else, but I can feel his attention on me as I hammer in another nail and then shake the board, checking to make sure it's securely attached to the fence post. It holds steady, so I gesture to Jamie to hoist up the next piece of wood.

He does so easily, and my screaming muscles make me feel like an old man as I nail it into place.

I might be in good shape from the weights and cardio routine set up by a private trainer, but it's no help with manual labor. I'm already sore from yanking shingles, which isn't helping. Neither is the scorching sun.

“She’s here for her job. She works for my for—for my record label.” I catch myself before *former* slips out.

Aside from Brayden and the rest of my management team, Mabel and John are the only two people who I’ve told I’m planning to leave music.

“Uh-huh. Is she single?”

So much for dissuading Jamie. I decide it’s better to change topics than to answer, especially since the honest one would be *I don’t know*.

“Did you finish filling the holes already?”

“Yeah.” Jamie glances at his watch. “I should probably get going. I’ve got practice in an hour.”

I jerk my chin toward the driveway. “Get out of here.”

“You sure? I can stay a little longer.”

“I’m sure. You’ve done enough already. Focus on football and your future.”

Jamie rolls his eyes, which is exactly what I would have done at seventeen. “I can come back again before practice tomorrow. To help with that.” He nods his chin in the direction of the house.

I follow his gaze. “Why does no one think I can handle the roof?”

“I dunno. Maybe because you’ve never reshingled a roof before?”

“The roof is under control,” I tell him. “Get to practice.”

“Yes, sir.” Jamie mock-salutes me. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Next week? Wha—” I realize the answer to my question midway. “The fair. Right.”

“Mandatory setup.” Jamie grimaces. “Looking forward to seeing you perform, man.”

“Yeah.” I clear my throat, then hang the hammer on the fence so I can start cleaning up. “Thanks.”

Jamie grins before heading for his truck, totally oblivious to my apprehension about the event.

I mark the rails that are rotted and still need to be replaced, then move the ones we already took care of to the growing junk pile behind the milking shed, my back and shoulders protesting the whole time.

Ferdinand is waiting along the fence line when I make one last trip to grab the hammer and nails. I pull off my leather work gloves to rub the skinny blaze that runs between his eyes. He leans into my touch, snorting his appreciation. The old gelding has lived on this ranch longer than I have, enjoying a happy retirement that includes grazing all day.

One last pat, and then I trudge toward the ladder leaning against the left side of the house.

By the time I climb up onto the roof, the sun is shining directly overhead. I start where I left off yesterday, determined to get the rest of the front side cleared. I get into a groove of shingle after shingle, row after row, until my phone rings in my back pocket.

For once, I remembered to charge it.

I pull it out, grimacing when I see the name on the screen.

“Hi, Brayden,” I answer.

“Kyle! How’s it going?”

I sigh and sit down on ripped felt, rubbing a hand across my face to clear the sweat that’s gathered. “They sent Piper fucking Egan.”

A pause.

“Should I know who that is?”

I scoff, more annoyed with myself than Brayden. He’s attended every meeting at Empire Records I have. Yet he has no idea who Piper is while there wasn’t a single visit I didn’t notice her presence.

“No.”

“What did she say?”

“That she’s here to change my mind.”

“Anything else?”

“Not so far.”

“Not so far…she’s *still there*?”

“Yeah.” I kick a stray shingle away, watching it fall to the ground, where dozens of others lie.

“Is she refusing to leave?”

“Sort of.” I hesitate, then exhale. “Not really. I told her I’m not changing my mind. She stayed anyway.”

Brayden exhales. “All right. I’ll get on a flight first thing tomorrow and—”

“No, that’s not necessary. A couple of days here, and I’m sure she’ll be heading right back to New York.”

I stare at the shiny black sedan parked next to my truck, wishing I were as confident as I sound. So far, I’ve underestimated Piper’s stubbornness.

“Okay. Let me know if you change your mind. I was already planning on coming down for the fair next week. I could easily move my flight so I’m there sooner.”

“Thanks, Brayden.”

“Always. We’ll talk soon, all right?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

I continue staring at the sedan for a minute after we hang up. Then glance toward the old bunkhouse, its stretched shape distinctive from this vantage point. No sign of red hair. I blow out an irritated breath and then stand, forcing myself to get back to work.

CHAPTER NINE

PIPER

The second day of waking up in the bunkhouse isn't quite as jarring as the first. It felt cooler last night, or maybe I was just too tired to care. Either way, I definitely managed more than a few hours of sleep.

I roll out of bed and stretch before heading into the bathroom. There's no counter surrounding the sink, so I've lined up all my bottles on the tiled floor. I have to squat and then stand between each step of my morning routine. By the time I'm finished, my quads are burning.

I dress and head outside, squinting at the bright sun. I packed too quickly to remember essentials, like a hat or sunglasses.

After a moment of deliberation, I walk toward the long, low building I avoided yesterday. I'm up about an hour later than I was yesterday, so the staff Mabel mentioned must have already come and gone.

A pen located left of the barn contains the first cows I've seen since I arrived. There are easily a few dozen of them, swishing tails lazily to chase away flies as they stand huddled in the shade cast by the massive building. I click my tongue, and none of them so much as move. One eyes me suspiciously, broad head slightly tilted.

After carefully checking for nails, I lean against the fence, resting my chin on the top of one post. It's quiet and peaceful as I watch the relaxed animals, the shade a perfect temperature.

The buzz of my phone against my hip startles me. I straighten, pulling it out of my pocket and smiling when I see the name on the screen.

"Hey, Alex."

"Hey, Pipsqueak."

I've given up on asking my brothers not to call me by my childhood nickname. Partly as reverse psychology—I'm hoping they'll get bored of it if I act like it doesn't annoy me. So far, no luck. Coming from Alex, it's the least irritating. He's the youngest of my brothers and the one I've always been closest to.

"Mom told me you decided to miss family dinner so you could visit Texas?"

I roll my eyes. "It's a *work trip*, not a vacation."

"Yeah, I figured it was something like that."

"I told Mom it was a work trip. Nice of her not to pass that along."

Alex chuckles, then sighs. "You know how she is about our dinners."

"I know, but I'm missing *one*. I didn't tell her I'd never show up again."

He sighs. "She thinks she screwed us up by divorcing Dad and ruined our childhood. And that we're all too focused on work, so you missing dinner for a *work trip* probably wasn't reassuring."

I'm momentarily stunned. "She *told* you that?"

"No. I overheard her say something about it to her friends. Mom thought I wasn't home, but I was actually asleep upstairs. Or I was until they started shouting." Alex groans. "I really gotta get my own place. If it's not running into Mom's tipsy friends, it's Seth leaving his laundry all over the house."

"Why didn't you tell me about that sooner?"

"I haven't seen you in a while. Maybe I would've said something on Friday…oh, wait, you won't be there."

I roll my eyes, and Alex laughs like he can sense it somehow.

"She'll be fine, Pipsqueak. Her friends all told her she was being ridiculous. How long will you be in Texas for?"

I refocus on the cows, none of whom have moved since I answered Alex's call. A couple are swiveling their ears, like they're listening to my conversation.

"I don't…I don't exactly know yet. It's kind of open-ended."

"That's one hell of a work trip."

"Yeah, well, if it goes well, it'll be a big deal. I'll get a major promotion."

"That's amazing! Congratulations!"

I've never met anyone else who expresses their emotions as openly as Alex does. He's the sunshine in our family, amid a lot of serious and gray. Out of all my brothers, he was the one I was most surprised ended up in law enforcement.

"I haven't gotten it yet, Alex."

"I'm familiar with your stubborn streak, little sis. You'll get it."

I smile and pick at a splinter on the fence's top rail. "Enough about me. How are you?"

There's a creak, and I can picture him leaning back in his swivel chair at the station. "Eh. All right. Been working a lot of overtime to save up some more money. And I joined a pickleball league."

I laugh. "For real?"

"Yes, for real. What's your problem with pickleball?"

"I just…thought it was for the elderly."

Alex's deep chuckle makes me smile. "It's not," he tells me. "When you're back in New York, we'll play a game. See what you think then."

"Okay, sounds good."

“Sorry, sis. I’ve gotta go.” Alex’s tone has turned apologetic, but it’s better than the one time he got an emergency call at work while he was on the phone with me.

Scared the shit out of me for the three hours until he called me back to say everything was okay. Aside from often feeling like an outsider in my own family, that’s always been the worst part—the worry.

“Okay. Be safe.”

“Always. Love you, little sis.”

“Love you too.”

I slip my phone into my pocket and turn, my hand flying up to press against my racing heart. “Shit!”

“You lost?” Kyle asks as he approaches.

His eyes shift away to the crowd of cattle on the other side of the fence, no longer on me, so I steal the opportunity to study him.

I have a type. Or I’ve *dated* a type.

Professional, polished guys who wear polo shirts and majored in business. Who are tone-deaf and like to golf on the weekends. The total opposite of the scowling, rugged cowboy who smells like soap and sunshine.

At least, I *thought* that was my type.

Because I’m suddenly, *annoyingly* aware of how attractive Kyle is.

He glances over, raising one eyebrow. At first, I think he’s calling me out on checking him out. Then, I remember he asked me a question.

“Just looking around. Is that not allowed?” There’s a bite to my tone that I don’t mean to add, but can’t seem to temper. It’s not his fault I’m distracted by him, but I’m blaming Kyle anyway.

“Would it make any difference if I said no?”

I huff and look away. Sick of staring at the hard line of his jaw and the hint of stubble that suggests he didn't bother to shave this morning.

"Did you sleep okay?"

"Would it make any difference if I said no?" I parrot back.

Silence, during which I have to squash the strong urge to look over at him. I watch the cows and wish I could restart this entire conversation. If he would stop sneaking up on me, maybe I'd be better prepared for our interactions.

"Work call?"

"No. My brother."

No response, and I wonder if I should have lied.

"You know, the label is offering you—"

Kyle walks away, leaving me leaning against the fence. I stare after his retreating back, annoyed his rudeness isn't enough to keep me from appreciating the broad spread of his shoulders.

With a sigh, I turn and head for the farmhouse.

Mabel is in the kitchen, same as yesterday morning. Instead of strawberries, she's washing a massive bowl of blueberries, which she adds to an even larger bowl.

"Good morning!" I force a cheeriness I'm not feeling into my tone.

She offers me a small smile and a nod. "Morning."

I glance at the bowl. "More jam?"

"Muffins. A neighbor dropped these off this morning. They won't be ready for a little while."

I nod before helping myself to a bowl of cereal. The coffee is weaker than I like it, so I add less milk than yesterday.

I watch Mabel fill a tray of muffin tins as I eat my breakfast. Search for a neutral topic that might help me figure out a better plan than my current one—*hope Kyle magically changes his mind*.

“Have you lived here for long?”

She nods, focused on the batter. “Thirty years.”

“And it’s been in your family that whole time?”

Another nod. “My brother owned it the longest.”

“Kyle’s father?”

Mabel hesitates before answering, “In a sense, I suppose.”

Another mystery, one her pursed lips suggest I shouldn’t try to solve.

I finish my cereal and sip my coffee. “Can I help with the muffins?”

She glances at me, appraising. “They’re done. I’m headed outside, if you want to help.”

I’m apprehensive about the lack of further details, but I finish my coffee and wash my dishes. Mabel leads me outside, onto the front porch, and down the stairs. A huge tree shades half the house, its broad branches spanning wide and straight. Just past it, there’s a huge pile of old wood shingles I didn’t notice before. Mabel’s focused on them too.

“Bonfire?” I ask.

Mabel shakes her head, then glances up. I follow her gaze to the bent figure who’s pushing more shingles off the side of the roof. They fall in rapid succession, growing the pile even more. I squint, then quickly look away when I realize I’m looking at a shirtless Kyle.

“Oh,” I say. “That’s a big project.”

She lets out a snort that could be considered a laugh, then continues around the side of the farmhouse to a cleared patch of dirt. This section is intentional, not like the bare spots in the front yard, where it looks like the grass has been worn away. Neat rows of green plants stretch a dozen feet, dotted with spots of red. Turns out, the massive pile of strawberries she made into jam was only a small part of her harvest.

“Wow. I didn’t realize anything could grow so well in this weather.”

Mabel picks up a wicker basket waiting on the ground and hands it to me. “Anything can grow. It just takes some patience.”

She holds my gaze, like she’s trying to convey something more than gardening tips.

In the short time I’ve known Kyle’s aunt, I feel like most of what she says has a hidden meaning. It’s a little exhausting, searching for the subtext. Or maybe I’m imagining things.

“And water, right?”

Her face cracks into a smile. “And water.”

Then, we kneel on the dry ground and start picking strawberries to the soundtrack of falling shingles.

CHAPTER TEN

KYLE

Piper startles when I step into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from my eyes. I do a better job of hiding my surprise about how she's already awake. Not to mention in my kitchen.

I watch her fingers tighten around her fork. Her shoulders square, like she's bracing for a fight.

None of her body language makes any sense, considering we've barely spoken since she arrived. She's done who knows what the past couple of days, shadowing Mabel or tucked away in the bunkhouse.

It's almost like she's avoiding me, which is confusing, considering why she's here. I probably shouldn't have walked away yesterday. I should have let her make her pitch and *then* walked away. But I'm too tired to worry how I should or shouldn't act around Piper right now.

"Morning," I mumble, heading straight for the coffee machine. I'm surprised—and pleased—to discover it's already full.

"Good morning." Piper clears her throat. "You're up early."

"Woke up when Mabel and John left. Never really fell back asleep." I sip some coffee, nearly groaning aloud at the revitalizing richness.

"Mabel and John…left?"

I nod, drinking more of the best coffee I've had in years. "You brewed this?"

Piper ignores my question. “Where did they go?”

“Up to California. Their goddaughter lives in Orange County. They like to go visit a couple of times a year.”

“Wow.” Piper sounds stunned. A little lost, like the rug just got pulled out from under her. “That’s a long way away.”

“It’s closer than New York.”

She plays with her pile of eggs, moving them from left to right on her plate. “No one mentioned they were leaving.”

Piper mumbles the words, but I still catch the hint of hurt in them. Like she’s entitled to an itinerary when it comes to anyone else’s plans but free to show up, unannounced, herself. Had Brayden not found out Empire was sending someone here, I would have been totally caught off guard when she arrived.

“That’s why John and I were discussing the truck last night,” I tell her.

“I didn’t know talking about carburetors for twenty minutes was the Texas equivalent of *see you when we get back*,” Piper says tartly.

Annoyingly, I have to fight the urge to smile at her sarcasm. “Well…now, you know.”

She stabs a forkful of eggs. None of the concern clears from her expression. “They didn’t say goodbye.”

“Take it as a compliment. It means Mabel thinks you’ll still be here when they get back.”

“How is that a compliment?”

“That you’re stubborn enough to stick around despite me telling you to leave.”

Piper scoffs.

And I have to fight the strong urge to do the same thing because I share her irritation. It’s partially why I’ve been awake since four a.m., which is what time John and Mabel left.

We're at an impasse with no middle ground. We can't both get what we want.

If Carl Bergman had been brave enough to show up here himself, I'd have no issue sending him packing. But it's different with Piper. Disappointing her is more collateral damage from my career, and there's plenty of it already.

I glance at the clock above the stove, realizing I need to get moving.

All John has to do is glance around, and the guys jump into action. I'm not much of an authority figure. They view me as an older brother instead of a boss.

I drain the rest of my mug and then grab the container of blueberry muffins Mabel made yesterday out of the fridge.

"Want one?" I ask.

"I already had two," Piper confesses, then takes a bite of eggs. After swallowing, she adds, "Thanks."

I nod and head for the door. Her uncertainty is exacerbating mine. I can literally feel the dynamic between us shifting.

The buffer of Mabel and John is gone. And while neither of them is what I'd call overly communicative, they both talked to Piper a hell of a lot more than I have.

Since her first night here when I found her in the kitchen, we've barely spoken.

I was expecting an *in your face* strategy, where she refused to leave me alone until I caved on what she was here for.

Passivity has never struck me as Piper's style, and I hate that I've even taken the time to consider what her style is. Hate that I'm wondering why she might be avoiding me when it should be welcome news.

I spin, inches from exiting the kitchen, remembering why Mabel and John's early departure didn't wake me up quite as early as it otherwise would have.

“One other thing…you can’t stay in the bunkhouse any longer.”

“What? Why?”

“We’re starting the second cut of hay this morning.”

There’s a pause.

Then, “You know I have no clue what that means.”

“We’ll have another crop to store in the barn. That means the crap that’s currently in the hayloft needs to be stored somewhere else so the bales will fit. And that means, unless you want to live with a couple of rusty rototillers and boxes of vacuum tubing from the old milking equipment, you should find somewhere else to sleep.”

She exhales, long and irritated. “Like *where*, Kyle?”

“I assume you have a place in New York?”

Piper snorts and stands, carrying her empty plate over to the sink. She grabs the sponge and dish soap out of the cabinet underneath, like she’s done it a thousand times before.

“If you’re kicking me out, why’d you bother putting an air conditioner out there?”

I exhale, chiding the foolish part of me that thought she wouldn’t bring it up. “We used to store the overflow somewhere else. I…forgot it’d have to go in the bunkhouse.”

I don’t want to explain that the old storage shed got an expensive makeover into a recording studio that’s sitting unused because that will lead to more questions I don’t want to answer. And I definitely don’t want to discuss the stop I made on the way home from a run to the town dump to pick up another air conditioner or the twenty minutes it took me to install it once I was sure she was already here for dinner.

Piper opens a drawer and pulls out a clean towel to dry her mug. It’s bizarre, seeing her so comfortable in my childhood home. It suggests a familiarity we don’t actually share.

I’ve been avoiding *her*. I just didn’t expect her to make it so easy for me.

And I didn't know she'd be washing dishes instead of bugging me about signing a new contract.

I watch Piper pick the sponge up to suds the plate with rapid, messy movements, battling with myself. Inviting her to stay is a bad idea for a whole bunch of reasons, namely how it's the last thing I need. But I know the words will come, even before they actually leave my mouth.

"There's a third bedroom upstairs."

Piper spins around, foiling my plan for a hasty exit and pinning me in place with an incredulous stare. "You're inviting me to stay?"

"I told you I wouldn't kick you out."

She studies me for an intense, uncomfortable minute. So, I stand and absorb her scrutiny because I'm not sure what else to do.

I'm walking a very fine line here. I'm not encouraging her, not trying to give her false hope when I know my mind is made up. But I'm not going to be a dick to her. It's not how I like to handle things. And also…it's *her*, which makes more of a difference than I'll let myself consider, let alone admit to Piper.

"Where are you going?" she finally asks.

"I just told you, we're haying today."

"*You're* haying?"

There's a tone of surprise in her voice that's honestly offensive. What does she think I've been doing the past two days while she's been hanging out in here or the bunkhouse? *Relaxing*?

"Yep." My response is curt. "We've got four hundred acres to cut and bale. All hands on deck."

I leave before she can say anything else, letting out a long exhale as soon as I'm on the front porch.

It's not that hot out—yet. But there's a whisper of heat in the air that suggests today will be another scorcher. I'd love to

put off haying, but the weather for next week is looking iffy. If we skip cutting this week, there's a chance it'll be two before the fields dry.

Problem is, I also need to be working on the roof. What little of it currently remains is going to withstand any rain even worse than the fields will.

I exhale as I walk toward the group of guys clustered by the milking shed, rolling my head from side to side in an effort to relieve the tension that's built up in my shoulders.

Duncan, Luke, Kenny, and Blake are all leaning against either the fencing or the bumper of Luke's black truck. They're chatting with easy grins and sleepy eyes, ready for a long day of work. Spanning in age from seventeen to twenty-two, they've helped out around here in the summers since they started high school, supplementing the full-time staff I hired as soon as I could afford to. The only one missing is Jamie since he's tied up with football commitments.

"Morning." I hand Luke the container of muffins after snagging two for myself.

He grins and takes a couple as well. "Mabel make these?"

I nod, my mouth full of muffin.

"Sweet!" Kenny chimes in, helping himself as well.

"Mabel and John get off okay this morning?" Blake asks.

I chew and swallow, then confirm they did.

The rest of the guys are discussing the summer fair, which isn't surprising. Oak Grove's main summer attraction opens Wednesday and runs through Sunday. But opening night is always the biggest attraction. Partially because of…me.

Every year for the past decade, I've performed. A couple of years, when I was out on tour, I flew in just for a few hours to perform. I didn't even make it to the ranch.

It's expected this year will be no different.

And it won't be—from the outside. I fully intend to step onto that stage and run through my biggest hits. But this will

be the first time I'm performing since deciding to step away from music, and I'm more nervous about it than the very first time I performed for a crowd.

Not only does it feel like I'm carrying a secret—not announcing that this will be my final live performance—but it's also taking place on the stage where my career began. The only place my mom ever saw me perform. At the event that's the pride and joy of the town I've always called home.

So, yeah, I'm anxious about it.

"Who is *that*?" Luke suddenly says.

None of the guys are eating or talking any longer. They're all staring behind me.

I spin slowly, grappling with a rising sense of dread.

Piper is strolling toward the shed, wearing jean shorts that show off her long legs and a wide smile that's definitely not aimed at me.

I sigh and turn back around, hoping she'll continue walking toward the bunkhouse. "She works for my record label."

Kenny whistles long and low, and I glare at him.

"What? She's hot."

"She's basically stalking me," I bite out.

Harsh, but technically true. Who flies hundreds of miles and camps out in someone's yard for *work*?

"Fangirl?" Duncan wags his eyebrows.

Kenny asks if she's single.

Luke wonders how old she is.

"Piper isn't a fan of country music," I answer Duncan, but ignore Kenny and Luke since I'm not interested in continuing with this topic of conversation. Also, I don't know the answers to their questions.

There's a petulant edge to my response, one the guys don't catch because they're too busy ogling the woman in question.

But *I* notice it, and it bothers me. Because I really shouldn't give a shit if she likes my songs or not.

"Hey, guys."

Apparently, she's *not* walking to the bunkhouse.

"Hi, *Pi-per*." Kenny speaks before I have the chance to, giving away that we were discussing her when that's nothing I want her to know. "I'm Kenny."

I strive for the easy indifference of not caring what Piper does as I spin around to face her.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"You said all hands on deck," Piper replies, but she isn't paying attention to me.

She's studying the concrete aisle of the milking shed, just past the metal gate. Then glances up at the fans spinning above with a curious expression.

It's a foreign sight to her, I guess. Manhattan isn't much of a dairy exporter.

"I didn't mean *your* hands."

Now, Piper focuses on me, narrowing her gaze like I've somehow offended her.

Truthfully, I'm just trying to keep up.

It's Saturday. She has a car here. She could easily drive into town for the day. Hell, she could probably get Empire to fly her back to New York for the weekend.

Instead, she's volunteering to go *haying* when I'd wager she's never been on a tractor in her life.

"There's nothing for you to help with," I add, trying to soften the blow.

It's true. There are five tractors and five drivers. It only takes one person to cut row after row in the scorching sun.

"She could open the gates," Duncan suggests.

I shift my gaze to glare at him.

There are ten gates. It takes about fifteen seconds to jump down and open each one, another fifteen to go back and close it. Thirty seconds a gate. Three hundred seconds. A drop in the bucket compared to the hours it'll take to mow the fields.

Piper is beaming at Duncan.

There's a stupid spasm in my chest for the solitary reason that she's never once smiled at me like that. Smiled at me at all.

"Fine." My tone is curt, and Luke quickly shoves the last blueberry muffin in his mouth. "Everyone remember their assigned fields?"

Heads bob all around. They ran through this routine in May under John's experienced direction. But the worst that can happen is someone mows someone else's field. They all have to be cut anyway.

"Great."

The guys scatter, probably in response to my sharp tone.

"You're a fun boss," Piper comments.

I grind my molars. "Tractor's this way, if you were serious about helping."

I'm annoyed when she follows me over to the bay where the Kubota is parked. But I also catch myself looking over, watching her survey the ranch as we walk toward the barn. I wonder if it reminds her of the camp she went to. Wonder if she went back for a third summer.

But I don't ask any questions. I focus on grabbing a gas can and topping off the tractor's tank. Nothing worse than running out in the middle of a field.

To my surprise, Piper strikes up a conversation. "This morning, you said California is closer than New York."

"Check a map if you don't believe me."

I glance over in time to catch her eye roll.

"Empire Records has an LA office, you know."

I make an impatient *get to the point* gesture with my left hand before refocusing on the gas tank.

"Why were your meetings always in New York?" she asks.

"Because I was never coming from Texas and my manager lives in New York. Any more questions?"

Like hell am I disclosing the main reason since it has more to do with her than I'd ever admit.

I meant the last question as a rhetorical one, but Piper ignores my annoyed tone.

"Yeah. Can I wear your hat?"

I finish topping up the gasoline and screw the can shut. She's picked up my hat from the seat, running a finger along the ragged brim.

"No," I answer.

"Why?" She frowns before setting it back down. "I didn't pack one."

I lean past her and grab my hat off the seat, then plop it on my head. I'm tempted to grin at her pout. "You have a bad habit of trying to make *your* problems seem like *my* problems."

"Guess it's a side effect of being a stalker."

Instant regret, as I realize she overheard that comment. "I didn't call you a stalker."

"You said I was stalking you. What's the difference?" She throws my own question back at me, and I have no good response.

I bite down an apology and walk over to the door so I can roll it the rest of the way open. "You sure you wanna come?"

Piper twists her hair up into a bun on top of her head and nods.

She doesn't fit here, in the musty, hot barn, filled with an assortment of junk, even in her jean shorts and T-shirt. But my body reacts anyway as I walk over to the tractor, the awareness

that's unique to her humming throughout my entire body. No one else has ever captured my attention as completely and easily as Piper manages to do anytime she's in the same space as me.

"Need a boost?" I ask.

The wheels come up almost to her shoulder.

"No, I got it."

I watch. She struggles.

After a couple of minutes, "Fine. Give me a boost."

Any feeling of triumph is quickly eradicated by the sound of her quick inhale when my hand lands on her bare thigh, sliding down and around her knee to offer her support.

Unfortunately, her reaction only makes me more conscious of the reckless energy buzzing between us. Once she's perched on the side of the tractor, I swing up, too, focusing on getting settled and turning the engine on.

I head for the southern fields, trying to relax.

I don't hate haying. The smell of grass and sunshine and fresh air is a balm to the soul. Despite my complicated feelings toward this ranch, I love the land.

"So…" Piper speaks right as I spot the gate that will lead into the first pasture.

There's an immediate sinking sensation in my stomach that feels like missing a step.

I should have seen this coming from miles away. She gets me out here, alone and stuck with her, and that's when the badgering I've been waiting for begins. I can't walk away now.

"So *what*?" I don't bother hiding the edge in my voice.

"So…is this your ranch?"

Relief. A ridiculous amount of it.

"According to the deed." It's never felt like mine.

"What about John and Mabel?"

“What about them?”

“Are they like co-owners, or…”

“I own the land. They live here.”

“That’s…nice,” Piper says, and there’s something close to admiration in her voice. And I want it from her, but not for this.

Mabel and John stayed to keep an eye on my mom while I was off partying and performing. Letting them live here rent-free was the least I could do.

“Two of my brothers live with my mom,” she continues. “Saves them money on rent since they all work crazy hours.”

“What do your brothers do?”

“They’re cops.” She clears her throat. “My whole family is actually.”

I glance at her, surprised. “Your *whole family* is?”

“Yep.” She pops the P, then shakes her head. “It’s…a lot. What about you? Do you have any siblings?”

Piper asks that question with an earnest expression, which tells me she hasn’t read any of the articles about the little girl who attended one of my shows. *Years* ago, and there’s still speculation. It’s a reminder of everything I’m trying to get away from. Everything she’s here to push me back into.

I press the brakes—hard because she distracted me and I drove closer than I meant to. “Gate.”

Piper huffs and stands, her leg brushing against my arm. There’s not enough space up here to keep any sort of physical distance, but it’s the first time we’ve touched since leaving the bay. My fingers tighten around the wheel until all color flees from my knuckles.

“Just say you’re incapable of having a pleasant conversation next time.”

I exhale, watching her jump down and stomp toward the gate with long, angry strides. Most of her hair has already fallen out of the bun, red strands flying around.

My eyes focus on her ass without permission, so I drag a hand down my face to forcibly remove the sight since my eyes seem incapable of looking away on their own.

The chain clangs against the metal as she shoves it open.

And that's when it occurs to me that I'll have to get down and boost her back up again.

And that I'll have to do it at *every single gate*.

I drive through the break in the fence, keeping my eyes straight ahead. More clangs as Piper closes the gate behind the tractor. I exhale, then shift into park.

I cuss out Duncan in my head as I climb off the tractor. *Help*, my ass. What little time she might have saved with the gates has already been eaten up with this one stop.

Piper swings over the gate with impressive agility. If we were on better terms, I'd compliment her form.

But we're not, which is obvious when she stalks over and snaps, "I don't need your help."

"We both know you do." She isn't short, but the tractor is tall. It took me the summer before junior year to figure out how to smoothly swing up into the seat, and I'm a few inches over six feet. "So, we can stand here and argue about it until you admit that you do, or you can let me help you to avoid wasting even more time."

Her jaw clenches so tightly that it looks painful. "Fine."

She mutters something under her breath as I step closer to help her up. All I catch is *promotion*.

My eyes narrow as I pause. "That's why you're here. They offered you a promotion."

I knew it wasn't voluntary. But this stings more. Knowing that she was *bribed* to come here.

There's a flash of what looks like embarrassment on Piper's face. But then her chin juts defiantly. She glares at me. "Not all of us make enough money to retire before we hit thirty."

“If only someone *would let me* retire.”

Her eyes blaze, and all I can think about is what a brilliant blue they are. Clearer and brighter than the backdrop of the sky.

Until she starts talking again. “Listen, Kyle. I truly could not give a shit whether you retire or not. I just happen to work for someone who does. You say you’re done. Fine. I’m stuck here until my boss’s boss’s boss figures that out. So stop acting like I’m here as part of some personal vendetta to ruin your life.”

Then, she spins and starts walking away.

“Where are you going?” I call after her.

She doesn’t even glance over her shoulder. “You were right. You don’t need my help.”

I watch her climb back over the fence. Watch her until her hair is just a red dot among green, brown, and blue, exhale, then kick the tire.

This road leads right back to the barn. She’ll be fine.

And I should be relieved. I didn’t want her to come in the first place. But instead of any satisfaction, I feel like I should have kept my mouth shut and just boosted her back up onto the damn tractor.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KYLE

Hudson calls me while I'm cleaning the tractor's mower attachment. It's an unpleasant task, and I'm already in a shitty mood, so I abandon it quickly and answer.

"Hey, man." I hide my annoyance and imbue my voice with as much cheerfulness as I can muster because the last thing I need right now is more well-meaning concern from him.

"Hey. You free tonight?"

"How does Morgan feel about you asking me out on a date?"

He chuckles. "She's totally on board. Jealous actually."

"That doesn't bode well for your proposal."

"Well, you're a rich and famous singer–slash–sex symbol. It's kinda hard to compete, Spencer."

Hudson is joking as he says it, but I catch the kernel of truth to it. Know I'm lucky to have loyal friends who have never spoken a word to the press, even when papers have dug around. From the outside, my life looks pretty damn great. The inside is another story.

And it's also why I've never complained about my career to any of my friends. They think it's all fancy parties and women and five-star hotels. Letting them believe that is easier than admitting the past decade has been filled with a lot of loneliness and exhaustion.

Hudson keeps talking, oblivious to my thoughts. “Morgan will be there. Danny’s planning a get-together at Wagon Wheel tonight.”

I laugh, running a hand through my hair. “Of course he is.”

“Natasha will be there too.”

“Who’s Natasha?”

“She’s the new teacher I mentioned. Morgan really likes her, and she just moved here. Doesn’t know anyone.”

“This had better not be a blind date.”

“It’s not. Just a casual get-together. And if you two happen to hit it off…”

I sigh. “I told you I’m not looking to date anyone.”

“Yeah, I heard you. Because they go crazy over *Kyle Spencer*, right? Natasha is from Connecticut. I don’t think they listen to a ton of country music there. She probably doesn’t even know who you are.”

I snort, flicking a piece of grass seed off my knee.

“So…you’ll be there?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

It’s the answer he expects. And sitting around her tonight holds no appeal. Especially with Piper—*crap*.

I clear my throat right as Hudson is about to hang up. “I might be bringing someone.”

The five silent seconds of shock are almost comical. I’ve never brought a woman back to Oak Grove with me. Which means the last time I had a girl with me at an outing with my friends was back when we were all in high school.

“Wait. What? You got a girlfriend in the past forty-eight hours?”

I roll my eyes even though he can’t see me. “No. She’s here for some work stuff. She works for my record label.”

“You’ve never brought anyone who works for you out before.”

“She doesn’t work *for* me. She’s just…whatever. She might be there.”

“Okay…” There’s still a note of curiosity in Hudson’s voice, and I wish I’d never mentioned Piper.

Odds are, she won’t want to go anyway. I certainly shouldn’t *want* her to go.

I finish up in the barn and then head inside. It’s strange, walking into a quiet, empty kitchen. Mabel is usually clanging pots and pans around by now.

I glance inside the fridge, at the leftover lasagna we had for dinner last night. There’s a second smaller container for Piper without any ground beef. I shut the fridge door, sigh, and then head upstairs.

The stairs creak with each step, emphasizing the silence in the house. If Piper’s rental car wasn’t still parked out front, I would have assumed she left.

I hate that I looked for it as soon as I got back from the fields.

Stray pieces of grass seed itch my skin as I walk down the hall toward the spare bedroom that used to belong to my mom.

My steps are heavy, and it’s purposeful. I want her to know I’m coming.

I knock once, then hold my breath.

Absurdly, I’m nervous.

She’s staying at *my* ranch. Following *my* schedule. Waiting for *my* mind to change.

But for some reason, it suddenly feels like everything in my life is rotating around the decisions Piper makes instead of the other way around.

“What?”

I take the question as an invitation, twisting the handle and opening the door with a confidence I don’t feel.

It’s my house, technically. And she’s an interloper, not an invited guest.

Piper is sitting cross-legged on the quilt Mabel spent last winter making, frowning at something on her laptop screen. Her intense focus on the computer feels deliberate, and I’m certain it has everything to do with how our last conversation ended.

I clear my throat and force the words out. “I’m sorry.”

They taste strange.

I don’t apologize.

Not because I’m incapable of admitting when I’m wrong. Because I don’t push that far to begin with.

I’m easygoing. Accommodating. Understanding.

But something about Piper ignites an inability to back down when I’d defer with anyone else.

I *care* more, I guess. And that’s stupid and dangerous—for a whole bunch of reasons. Mostly because I’m sure she doesn’t give a damn about my opinion.

The apology hangs too long between us. It gives me the space to reflect on the last time I spoke those words. I wish I’d said them more often because the last thing I want to be doing right now is recalling standing in a cemetery.

“It’s fine,” Piper finally responds, jarring me back into the present.

There’s an awkwardness hanging between us that tells me she was anticipating my apology about as much as I was planning to make one.

“There’s a bar in town. Wagon Wheel, it’s called.” I sound nervous, and I feel uncomfortable.

I bite the inside of my cheek, welcoming the burst of pain.

She’s here for her *job*, which has been well-established, and I sound like an awkward teenager, asking her out on a date.

“Charming name.” Piper closes her computer, shifting her full attention to me.

My anxiety increases.

“I’m headed there with some friends tonight. You can come, if you want.”

“What a heartfelt invitation. I’ll pass.”

Amusement and annoyance war within me. Why did the label have to send *her*?

“Let me rephrase. Please come, Piper.”

Blue fixes me in place. I’ve been unable to figure out exactly what shade her eyes really are. Sometimes, they look light. Other times, they’re dark. Right now, they’re confused.

“Going to a bar with a *work assignment* isn’t very professional.”

Nothing between me and Piper has *ever* felt professional, but I decide pointing that out isn’t necessary.

So, I change tactics since I do feel badly about earlier, and going out while she sits here, alone in a town where she knows no one, has the same gut-punch effect as watching her search the kitchen for vegetarian options did.

“You’re here to convince me to sign a new contract, right?”

Hesitantly, Piper nods. She’s wary of walking into a trap.

“Is that more likely to happen here while you’re sitting all alone in your room like you’re grounded or at the bar where I also happen to be?”

“According to you, it’s not likely to happen *anywhere*.”

I smile because something about her petulant tone compels it. “Offer stands. I’m heating up leftover lasagna. You want any?”

She fumbles for her phone, glancing at the time. “Oh. I didn’t realize it had gotten so late.”

“You doing work?”

Piper shrugs, tapping her fingers on the smooth metal of her laptop. She's painted her nails since this morning—a light shade of pink that catches my attention despite their subtle color.

"It's Saturday night. Carl can't really expect you to be working?"

No clue why I'm pushing down this path. Work should be the *last* subject I bring up with her.

"I don't know what the hell Carl expects."

Piper slides off the bed and stretches. Then pulls her hair into a ponytail, which tugs her shirt up. It's a challenge to keep my eyes on her face. They want to roam. Explore.

"Haven't heard a damn thing since he sent me here. I thought this trip would last a day. Two at most. He had more realistic expectations, I guess."

Piper crouches down to dig through her open suitcase on the floor.

I swallow the urge to apologize again.

To explain that my team made it damn clear to Empire Records where I stood on signing a new contract and their failure to share that with Piper isn't my fault.

To remind her that this is an industry that wears away at every boundary you draw, if you manage to hold any to begin with. I'm protecting myself because I've learned no one else will do it for me.

I stay silent instead of saying any of that, watching her pull clothes out of her luggage and toss them on the bed.

Piper might have thought she was coming here for one or two days, but she packed for weeks.

"So…is that a no on dinner?"

She sighs. "It's a yes. On dinner and the bar. I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Okay," I reply, hiding the bizarre jubilance I'm experiencing. I *shouldn't* care that she agreed. But obviously, I

do.

I leave her bedroom and head into the bathroom.

The counter next to the sink is now covered with colorful bottles, labeled *serum* and *moisturizer* and *exfoliant* and a whole bunch of other labels I glance over, instead of just the lone bar of soap that's usually set out.

I decide Piper is an overpacker, period.

The mess doesn't really bother me. I'm more relieved she didn't leave to stay somewhere else, which was what I expected after our argument this morning.

I take a quick shower, scrubbing my skin harshly to finally wash off the sticky sweat, along with the layer of dust and hay seed that clung to it. My muscles are sore, and my body feels drained, but there's a feeling of satisfaction that goes along with manual labor that I missed while my sole form of exercise was going to the gym.

When I open the bathroom door, Piper is waiting in the hallway. She's changed into jeans and a tank top—casual attire that shouldn't affect me the way it does. I tighten the towel around my waist, praying she doesn't notice. That's truly the last thing this already-uncomfortable dynamic needs.

"Left my lotion in there," she says, quickly averting her eyes from my bare chest.

"I'm all set." I step out of her way, heading toward my bedroom.

"How many pieces?" she calls after me.

"What?"

"I'm heating up the lasagna. How many pieces do you want?"

"Oh. Two, please," I say before shutting my bedroom door.

The whole thing—sharing a bathroom, about to eat dinner together—feels oddly domestic.

By the time I get dressed and head downstairs, Piper has already heated up two plates of lasagna. She's sitting at the

kitchen table, scrolling on her phone.

When I take the chair opposite from her, she sets it aside. Immediately, it starts buzzing. She keeps eating, so I take a bite of my food too.

It continues buzzing.

"You can get that, if you want," I say, not sure if she's trying to be polite.

"I don't need to." She flips her phone over. "It's just my roommates. We have a group chat."

"How many roommates do you have?"

"Two. Serena and Lauren. We all moved in together after college. New York rent is crazy if you're not…" Her voice trails, cheeks flushing.

I'm positive she was about to make a comment about how much money I have again.

"Lauren works in marketing. Serena is about to start her last year of law school. Once she graduates, she's moving back to South Carolina. That's where her family and her fiancé live. They've been doing long-distance for two years, which is pretty impressive."

I blink, taken aback by the amount of information she just shared. And part of me resents it, realizing how cynical I've become. How I'm used to editing chapters of my life to make sure anything I say won't change the narrative my career has been carefully crafted around.

"Were you all friends in college?"

Piper shrugs before reaching for her water glass. The strap of her tank top slips, perilously close to the edge of her shoulder. "Sort of. We were friendly. Living together was more for convenience than anything. Neither of them is into music."

"And you are?"

Her eyes dart toward mine, surprise and irritation clearly reflected in them. "*Yes*."

It's my turn to shrug, then reach for my glass. Enjoying how she tracks my movements, as if she can't believe I have the audacity to hydrate after saying such a thing.

"Why would you think I'm not *into music*?" she finally asks, her tone indignant.

I swallow and set my glass down. "I don't know. You never seemed that enthused about sitting in on the meetings I was at. About *music*."

"Well, that's—that was…"

I raise one eyebrow as I cut through layers of cheese and pasta, enjoying listening to her stutter. Mostly because I know exactly what she's not saying—it was because of me. Because she doesn't think country should be considered music.

"I want to discover new artists," she finally says. "Find hidden talent. Not help singers who are already successful."

"Is that what your promotion is?" I ask, keeping my eyes on my plate. Wary this is a touchy subject.

"Yeah." Her answer is soft, just as tentative.

"Not everyone has what it takes."

"I know."

"You'll have to hand out a lot more noes than yeses."

"I know that too. And since I've actually heard noes, I think I understand what that means better than *you* do."

It's disappointing—but not surprising—that we've ended up back in this place where Piper's convinced she knows everything about me. Especially amusing, considering she didn't even recognize me the first time our paths crossed. Instead of accepting it the way I've always done, I push back.

"I've heard noes."

"You got signed after one audition. You were an overnight sensation."

"You work at a record label, and you think I was an *overnight sensation*? Come on, Piper. Months of work went

into that first album launch."

"That's nothing compared to the musicians who spend *decades* chasing success."

"So, you're trying to discover some new hits for retirement communities? Because if they've been trying for *decades*, something isn't working."

Piper exhales, setting down her fork. "Or they haven't had the right opportunity."

"I'm not denying resources matter. I'm saying if you've tried at something for decades and not gotten anywhere, maybe you should try something different."

"That's awfully cynical."

I laugh. "Guess how I got this way."

"Maybe that says more about you than about music."

I study her. "Who told you no?"

Piper shakes her head. "It doesn't matter."

It does matter—to me. But I don't push.

"Do Harper and Mia still work at Empire?"

Her eyebrows rise.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised you remember their names."

"I'm good with names," I lie. I'm notoriously terrible.

"I guess so. I wasn't expecting you to know mine when I showed up here."

There's a hollowing sensation in my stomach as she confirms what I've always suspected. Every moment around her has been stuck in my head like a record caught on a certain track while she was surprised I remembered her name.

I don't make any more attempts at conversation, just focus on finishing my food.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PIPER

Wagon Wheel is located in the heart of downtown Oak Grove.

Although *downtown* is a stretch to describe three blocks.

I focus on the storefronts passing by, attempting to ignore Kyle's presence on the other side of the gearshift.

We had a short, uncomfortable discussion about who would be driving tonight.

I was all set to take my rental sedan until he said, "Just get in," and did exactly that.

So, I did, too, and we've been driving in silence ever since.

Open fields gradually gave way to this collection of buildings that is apparently the totality of the town's center.

I shift nervously on the bench seat as Kyle pulls into the dirt and gravel parking lot. I was so taken aback by him apologizing, then inviting me somewhere, that I didn't really think through what this outing would be like.

HOWDY is painted on the exterior of the building, the letters large, uneven, and faded. A huge wooden wheel hangs off the front side of the building, directly above the front door.

The entire structure looks like a safety hazard.

But none of the groups loitering outside or headed inside show any apprehension. So, I school any from my expression as Kyle pulls the keys out of the ignition and spins them around one finger.

He says nothing. Neither do I.

I watch the laughing crowd in front of the bar—girls wearing short skirts and cowboy boots, guys wearing big belts and bigger hats.

Dry my sweaty palms on my jeans.

"None of them know I'm leaving music," Kyle finally says.

I glance over, only to find out he's staring straight ahead. I trace his profile with my eyes. Chiseled jawline, strong nose, messy hair.

"I won't say anything."

He glances over, and there's an electric jolt when our gazes connect. It feels like my lungs are being squeezed as he studies my face, searching for sincerity.

That's all he'll find.

I have no interest in spilling something he wants to keep secret.

Kyle nods and climbs out of the truck. Most of the people loitering outside glance over at the sound of his door slamming shut.

I pull in a deep breath. I might be accustomed to being around celebrities, but those encounters have always taken place in select, exclusive environments. Never out in public or in the midst of a crowd.

The door on my side suddenly opens.

I quickly unbuckle my seat belt, then turn to face Kyle, who's holding the door open while wearing an expectant expression. "What are you doing?"

"Opening your door," Kyle responds in a *duh* tone.

A blush burns my cheeks, and I'm sure the flush is telling him everything I'm not.

No guy has ever opened a car door for me before. In my exes' defense, we were usually in the city, taking public

transit. Opportunities were rare.

But there *were* opportunities, and not a single one of them took it.

I clear my throat, then hop down onto the dirt awkwardly. The cute wedges I wore don't help with my balance. I have to grab the door to remain vertical. "Uh, thanks."

"Uh-huh." There's a lilt to Kyle's voice that suggests he might be smiling, but I don't glance behind to confirm.

I stride toward the double doors that lead into Wagon Wheel like I've been here before, passing a huddle of people who don't look old enough to be at a bar and a couple of older men I avoid eye contact with. The cynical New Yorker in me, I guess. Cigarette smoke swirls around in the night air as I walk.

Once I'm inside the bar, I'm hit with a wave of activity.

The layout is simple. One long bar stretches the full length of the building. Hundreds of bottles are perched on the shelves installed behind, the top couple of rows covered with a layer of dust visible from here. Stools line the opposite side of the bar top, all of them filled. There's a band playing in one corner, a cleared section of hardwood filled with laughing, dancing couples. Tables are scattered around the remaining space, every single one of them occupied.

This is the place to be in Oak Grove, obviously.

More people are packed in here than I estimated the town population to be.

And every single one of them appears thrilled to be here. There's no sign of the aloofness or the posturing that filled the club I went to with Serena and Lauren last weekend. No agenda as everyone tries to figure out each other's intentions or present a certain version of themselves.

The shift in atmosphere is surprising. Nice.

Kyle passes my frozen figure, walking deeper into the bar with the easy assurance of someone who's done this many times before. After a beat, I follow, registering the eyes that swing this way.

Everyone in here had enjoyment in common.

Now, it's a focus on Kyle.

There's no stampede. No rush of activity.

It's a more subtle attention, a ripple of notice, like registering what the most popular kid in school does because they carry an innate importance, but not being brave enough to enter their orbit.

I'm so focused on taking in the surroundings that it's a surprise when Kyle stops at a table. I halt, too, curiously studying the group clustered around it. A mix of men and women, all smiling and exuberant.

Calls of, "Hey, Spencer!" and, "Finally, man!" surround us as the entire table's attention swings to the guy in front of me.

And I realize that Kyle *was* the most popular kid in school. Still is, it seems.

Energy shifts in the air to center around Kyle as he greets his friends. It's a large group, probably a dozen people in total. A blur of unfamiliar faces.

I'm not shy, but I keep a close circle. Outside of work and my roommates, there are only a handful of good friends I keep in touch with from high school and college.

The overwhelming sense of community that's practically stifling the air in here has never been part of my social life.

I hover in the background awkwardly, thoroughly regretting coming. A pity party is sounding better and better even if it makes Kyle's earlier comment about me acting like a grounded teenager sound a little too apt.

One by one, the group notices me. I smile hesitantly with no model to follow. The closest to this situation I've been in are album release parties thrown by the label with an exclusive guest list and fellow coworkers.

"This is Piper," Kyle says, taking one of the open seats. I sink down beside him.

He runs around the table, introducing everyone. The names become an immediate blur in my mind.

“Any refills around here?” A middle-aged woman appears, wearing a Longhorns shirt and an apron.

A couple of the guys around the table call out requests.

“Usual, please,” Kyle says.

Then, her attention lands on me. One brow rises expectantly.

“Um…” I hastily scan the table, trying to assess what everyone else is drinking. All beer, no cocktails or wine in sight. “I’ll have a beer, please.”

“What kind, honey?”

I want to grimace, both in response to the question and the sympathetic tone she uses for the nickname, but her kind smile stops me from reacting. “Whatever you recommend.”

She frowns. “Well, it depends if you want bottled or on tap. On tap, we have—”

“She’ll have a pint of Pipeline, Maggie.”

I glance at Kyle, then back at the waitress. Maggie. Nod an agreement because I have no better alternative and will just have to trust he’s not messing with me. “Pipeline sounds great.”

“All righty then.” Maggie scribbles something down on her notepad, then moves on.

The blonde sitting next to me leans forward. “I’m Ella,” she tells me, a wide smile forming.

I smile, too, although I’m sure mine is more uncertain. I appreciate her reminding me of her name since I would have had no clue what it was otherwise. “Piper.”

“Where are you from, Piper?”

“New York,” I reply.

“Really?” Her eyes practically sparkle with excitement. “I’ve never met anyone from New York.”

I'm not sure what exactly to say in response to that, so I just continue to smile. Friendliness practically exudes from her.

"Where are you from?"

She taps the table. "Here. Born and raised."

"That's nice."

"I guess so. Days when I love it and days when I hate it, you know."

I nod. "Yeah, I do know."

"You still live in New York?"

"Yep. Stayed for college and then got my dream job in the city. Never had a reason to leave."

I'm so used to calling it that—my dream job.

But I can't help but think about Kyle's words at dinner. *"You'll have to hand out a lot more noes than yeses."*

And for the first time, I wonder if I have what it takes. If it will be as inspiring as I've always imagined scouting new talent would be. Assuming I ever get the promotion, of course.

"Ooh!" Ella scooches her chair a few inches closer. "What's your job?"

"I work for a record label." I glance at Kyle, who's talking to the guy he's sitting next to. Again, I have no recollection of his name. "That's why I'm here. To, uh, go over a few things with Kyle."

Ella's eyes are wide and surprised. "You came all the way from New York just to meet with Kyle?"

I nod. "He's a valued artist at Empire Records." Not a lie, but the words taste strange on my tongue.

A woman across the table guffaws. At first, I think she's laughing at me. Then, I watch her lean forward and aim a mischievous smirk at Kyle.

"Hear that, Spencer? Sounds like you're a big deal."

“Just as shocked as you are, Julia,” Kyle replies, his gaze briefly colliding with mine.

I break eye contact first, right as Maggie arrives with the drinks.

She sets a glass filled with amber liquid down in front of me. I lean forward, carefully sucking off the thin layer of white foam before taking a tentative sip.

It’s better than I was bracing for. I think the last time I had a beer was at a Fourth of July barbecue I went to last summer, and this tastes less bitter and more citrusy.

Julia leans forward and holds out a hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Piper.”

“You too,” I say, shaking hers.

The warmth of the laughter surrounding me and the cold beer in my hand relax me some. I’m not sure what I expected from Kyle’s friends, but it wasn’t this welcoming atmosphere.

The second beer goes down much easier than the first. By the time Maggie sets down my third, I’m actually enjoying myself.

Ella and Julia are curious about New York, pelting me with questions faster than I can keep up. The rapid pace makes it impossible to think. To second-guess. As soon as the women pause in questions, someone suggests dancing. I’m buzzed enough to be the first to nod.

I glance at Kyle between sips of beer. He’s still deep in conversation with the guy next to him.

Based on the chatter I picked up around the table, I think his name is Hudson. The woman beside him has a casual hand on his knee. She leans forward and says something that makes both of the guys laugh.

Deep down, there’s a spark of what feels a little like disappointment. Since he saved my drink order, Kyle hasn’t said a single word to me.

The woman next to Hudson suddenly stands and waves. The whole table turns to watch a brunette woman walk over to

us. She's tall and willowy, her brown hair cut to a shoulder-length bob. The strands fall sleek and straight, unaffected by the humidity.

"I'm so sorry," she says. "I got lost. All the roads look the same here, and I still have no cell service." The woman glances around the table, her cheeks reddening when she notices we're all looking at her. "Hi, everyone."

Immediately, I sense a fellow outsider.

Hudson's girlfriend bounces over to her, giving the brunette woman a big hug. "I'm *so* glad you made it." She turns, presenting the newcomer like a game show prize. "Everyone, this is Natasha. Natasha, this is everyone!"

Natasha blushes and waves.

"Morgan keeps talking about you," Ella says. "It's so nice to meet you, Natasha."

Natasha nods and smiles, her cheeks still flushed.

I should be thrilled to have another stranger show up. Joining an established group is always awkward. And it sounds like Natasha is as unaccustomed to Texas living as I am.

But any goodwill disappears when I watch Hudson stand and take Morgan's seat, pulling his girlfriend down onto his lap.

"Grab a chair, Natasha."

The only chair in question is on the other side of Kyle. I watch him quirk a brow at Hudson, who grins. Kyle shakes his head and smirks.

Something clenches, sharp and unpleasant, deep in my stomach. An ugly twisting.

I chug the remainder of my beer and stand. "We still dancing?"

Julia and Ella immediately rise. Julia grabs my hand, taking the lead and pulling me away from the table into the dancing fray.

There's no sultry beat playing. The song is upbeat and distinctly country, filled with the croon of a fiddle and the pluck of a banjo. I look to the two other women for guidance on how to dance to it, but the general vibe seems to be that there's *no* right way to dance here. I spin and sway, letting myself get lost in the sound.

I'm sweaty and breathless by the time I point toward the bar, letting Julia and Ella know I'm grabbing another drink.

I find an opening and slip into it, waiting for the bartender to work his way down here.

"Hey."

"Hi." I smile at the guy on the stool next to me, taking in the jeans and the tucked plaid shirt with sleeves rolled up. He's one of the few not wearing a cowboy hat, revealing a messy head of black hair.

There's a boyish earnestness to his expression that's endearing and absent from most men I meet. It's certainly different from the annoyance and avoidance I'm used to getting around Kyle.

We smile at each other as I enjoy the warm buzz of life feeling simple and easy.

"I'm Jack," he tells me.

"Piper."

"Can I buy you a drink, Piper?" Jack's gaze dips down to my chest for a half second before it bobs back up to my face, making his interest obvious.

And…I'm tempted. *Very* tempted. It's been a long time since I had a guy between my legs. The most explosive part of my relationship with my most recent ex was our breakup, so it feels like it's been even longer than it has. Plus I'm craving a distraction from where I am and why.

But I'm not tipsy enough to forget who drove me here. Whose house I'm sleeping in. There's no way I'll be bringing a guy back to Kyle's ranch, and I'm not about to go to a stranger's house in a town I've visited exactly once. Not to

mention suffer the humiliating ordeal of asking him to drop me off at Kyle's after or, even worse, have to ask Kyle to pick me up. I very much doubt this town has a rideshare service.

So, I smile, shake my head, and then slip away. Weave around the stools until I reach an opening at the bar closer to the opposite end.

I turn and rest my elbows on the wooden surface, studying the crowd while I wait to be served. My attention snags on two girls huddled at a table in the corner of the bar.

They're not focused on me. They're looking at where Kyle is seated, the blonde of the pair shaking her head and blushing while her brunette friend elbows her. The brunette suddenly stands.

The blonde quickly grabs her arm and yanks her back down, her mouthed, panicked *No* obvious from across the room.

Her friend pouts and takes a sip of her beer while the blonde steals another peek at Kyle.

He's entirely oblivious to the drama around him—or at the very least, he's putting on a convincing act of it. He's talking with Morgan, Hudson, and Natasha. I glance away quickly.

There's no doubt everyone noticed his arrival, but I've yet to see anyone approach him. His presence appears to be a novelty at this bar.

I wonder if he doesn't come here much or if he's just reached the elusive level of fame where the appeal never wears off, not even in your own hometown.

"What can I get you, ma'am?"

I turn to face the middle-aged bartender. "Just an ice water, please."

He nods. "Coming right up."

I thank him and then glance back at the crowd. A flash of light hair recaptures my attention. The blonde woman is walking, approaching Kyle's table with sure steps. She falters

about ten feet away, glancing back at the dark-haired friend, who sends her a supportive thumbs-up.

I'm nervous for her, watching the rest of the distance between her and Kyle's chair close.

Nothing is more heartbreaking than watching someone put on a brave face and summon up their courage, only to get knocked down.

When I first started working at Empire, I would fangirl over many of the artists when they came into the office. After encountering a few who failed to say *thank you* or totally ignored my presence, any awe faded fast.

Fame exposes who you are. It doesn't change it.

To his credit, Kyle never acted like anyone in the office was beneath him. It's partially why his meetings were practically considered a national holiday among the female staff.

The rest has to do with the smile he's aiming at the blonde, nodding to whatever she's saying.

I was so certain the charm was an act, that he secretly strutted around. But that assumption has been slowly chipped away ever since I arrived in Oak Grove.

At this point, I'm essentially living with the guy. If he wore a mask, it would have slipped by now. The only time he seems to act anything but jovial and easygoing is…around me.

It's irritating. So is the realization that it bothers me.

Giving a shit about Kyle—how his career turns out, why he walked away, what fame has revealed about him—was not part of the plan.

It's complicating what was already a mess.

The bartender returns with my ice water. I thank him and take a long sip, savoring the trickle of cool water down my throat.

The back of my neck is sticky with sweat, my curls undoubtedly puffed up into a humid halo. Inefficient air-

conditioning seems to be a common theme in this town.

"Here you are!" Ella bounces into the spot next to me.

"We thought we'd scared you off," Julia adds, sliding in beside her.

I smile. "No. Not at all. I'm just tired. Long day."

"You have to work weekends?" Ella asks.

"No. I was out haying."

Julia laughs. "What? Why?"

I shrug. "I was curious. Wanted to see if I could talk Kyle into letting me help."

Ella's nose scrunches. "Why wouldn't he let you help?"

"He can be, you know…" I search for the right word, considering these are his friends. "Difficult."

"Kyle? Difficult?" Ella's smile widens into a grin. "You being serious?"

I hesitate, then nod.

"Huh. Maybe he's different with the music stuff."

It's obvious she's placating me, so I drop the topic. He's different with the *me stuff*, not the *music stuff*, but that's embarrassing to admit.

Ella and Julia talk me into chasing the water with tequila shots, which I realize is a mistake, even before the smoky alcohol hits my tongue.

By the time I return to the table with them, I'm sweaty and more than a little tipsy. And seriously contemplating kicking off my wedges and walking around barefoot despite the fact that the wooden floor looks like it was last washed before I was born.

Kyle looks sober, superior, and unimpressed as I slump down in the seat beside him, and I hate that I might care a little bit about what he thinks.

He was the one who invited me. And he's also the reason I had lots of nervous energy to burn off. My trip to Texas so far

hasn't exactly been a relaxing vacation.

Natasha is still sitting next to him, sipping delicately at a glass of water.

"Turns out this town is more fun than I thought," I say, picking up a napkin from the table and using it as a makeshift fan. It accomplishes absolutely nothing.

"What a sweet compliment," Kyle drawls.

I'm not drunk enough to miss the few glances exchanged around the table in response to his dry tone. Yeah, it's a me thing.

"I said *this town*, not you. All you've done is sit here all night."

"Some of us worked today, Piper."

"Sitting on a tractor isn't that hard."

Kyle tilts his head back, like he's silently praying for patience.

Natasha leans forward, aiming a small smile my way. "I heard you're from New York, Piper?"

"Yep."

Natasha waits. When I say nothing else, she asks, "Is this your first trip to Texas?"

"Uh-huh. First and last, hopefully."

Kyle growls beneath his breath, then pushes away from the table. "We should go. Thanks for putting this together, Dunc. Nice to meet you, Natasha."

"You too." She beams up at him, and my stomach churns unpleasantly.

"Piper. Let's go."

I heave out a sigh as I pull myself upward, my muscles loose and relaxed. Unfortunately, the alcohol isn't enough to dull the stabbing pain from my blisters.

I have to hobble toward the door after waving goodbye to everyone. Kyle sighs several times, making his impatience

with my slow pace known.

The crowd outside the bar has disappeared, leaving only a couple of other people in the parking lot. I have no clue what time it is.

Walking out into the night air helps sober me up a little, but not as much as I was hoping.

Halfway across the parking lot, I hear a male voice call out, “Piper!”

Kyle glances back, shakes his head, then continues walking toward his ancient truck.

I turn, realizing it’s the guy who offered to buy me a drink. I force a fake smile, searching my memory for his name. “Hey, Josh.”

“It’s Jack.”

A dry chuckle sounds behind me.

My molars grind together. “Jack, right.”

“You’re headed out?” he asks.

I nod, then hide a yawn with my hand. “Been a long night. Hopefully, I don’t feel like roadkill in the morning. It was nice meeting you.”

“What about tomorrow?” Jack asks before I can turn around to leave. “Are you free for dinner?”

My schedule here is nothing *but* free. Dating is not how I should be filling it though.

“I’m not.” I take a hasty step back, almost tripping over my feet. “I’m busy. Very, very busy. Have a good night!”

I start walking before he can say a word in response, throwing a wave over my shoulder and wincing as my wedges wobble on the pebbles scattered across the dirt parking lot.

Kyle is waiting in his truck with the engine running, tapping his fingers on the outside of the door through the open window.

I stumble my way to the passenger side and pull the door open, hauling myself into the cab with a huff and landing in a heap.

"Am I dropping you off at the Ransom place?"

I squint over at him as I struggle with the seat belt. "What are you talking about?"

"Seems like you hit it off with Jack Ransom. He's a good guy."

A *click* sounds, and I slump back against the seat, immensely relieved to no longer be walking. "You're friends with him?"

Kyle flicks on a blinker as he pulls out of Wagon Wheel's parking lot. "Sure."

I'm not sure what to make of that response. "I don't understand small-town dynamics."

"There's nothing to *get*, Piper. It's a small town. Everyone knows everyone. The end."

I hum, focusing my gaze on the darkness slipping by outside. "That sounds kind of nice actually."

"Really?" His tone is thick with disbelief.

"Yes, really. Trying new things is good for you. Healthy."

"Says the woman here to return my life to what it's been for the past decade."

"Sorry to hear being rich and famous was such a hardship for you."

"I'm still rich and famous."

I scoff loudly at the arrogance, then lean forward and flick on the radio.

In one hell of a coincidence—or maybe it's not, considering his antique radio probably picks up only one local station—a Kyle Spencer song starts to play.

Only a few seconds later, he shuts the radio off.

I glance over. "You're not a fan?"

Kyle doesn't crack a smile.

I roll my eyes and look outside again, letting my arm fall out the open window. The cool breeze slips between my spread fingers, the brush of air skimming my skin like a pleasant tickle. Tequila trickles through my bloodstream in lazy streams, making my eyelids heavy and my limbs loose.

"Your friends are nice."

"I know."

"Natasha is pretty."

"Yep." His tone is as short as his response.

"Is she a big country music fan?"

"Didn't come up."

"Why not?"

Kyle exhales, long and irritated. "It just didn't. Maybe it would have if you hadn't gotten wasted and we didn't have to leave."

"I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere, with *you*, and I have no clue when I'll be able to go home. *Obviously*, I got wasted."

"How fucking professional."

More of the haze fades. "Says the guy who invited me to a bar. You wanted me to sit alone in a corner, sober?"

"Pretty sure there's a happy medium between sober and tequila shots."

"Pretty sure you have *no say* in my decisions."

"Yeah, we've established you do whatever you want without considering other people, Piper."

My blood burns.

I'm drunk on a lot more than the tequila I downed to forget where I'm stuck for the foreseeable future. I'm tipsy on Kyle and the reckless way he makes me feel.

I'm pissed. But it's also a thrill, arguing with him.

“Like how you’re walking away from music for your fans? For your team? For your friends? If you’ve decided, why haven’t you told any of them?”

“For the thousandth time, it’s *none of your fucking business*.”

Kyle flicks the radio back on. Surprise, surprise, it does receive more than one station. But it’s playing another country song, and he turns up the volume until more conversation is impossible.

I shift as far away from him as possible and as close to the cool breeze coming through the window as I can manage.

As I stare out into the darkness, I retrace my list of mistakes tonight in my mind.

I shouldn’t have worn these shoes.

I shouldn’t have danced so much.

I shouldn’t have drunk so much.

Mistake, mistake, mistake.

And not a single one of them got me any closer to achieving the reason I’m here.

Success feels further away than ever.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KYLE

I was hoping to wake up in a better mood than I had fallen asleep in.

No such luck. I'm still pissed.

I blow out a long breath and toss off the covers, sitting up on the side of the bed and running my fingers through my hair.

Last night was supposed to be fun. An escape from reality. A throwback to high school days and fake IDs before any of us had adult responsibilities.

Instead of enjoying myself, I was on edge the entire night.

And it's completely Piper's fault.

Even after I was convinced she wasn't going to say anything about why she was really here, I couldn't relax. I kept catching reminders of her—hearing her voice, seeing a flash of red hair, smelling her shampoo—and it was impossible to completely ignore her presence.

Then, she decided to get drunk.

I *hate* being around drunk people. It dredges up far too many unpleasant memories I work hard to keep buried. And she was planning to drive herself, which makes me even more furious. I wouldn't have allowed her to get behind the wheel, obviously, but it still infuriates me. She's an adult woman, and I'm not her goddamn babysitter.

Most of all, I'm mad she distracted me. Mad I noticed the shots and the dancing and the guys looking at her. I'm not used

to having my attention split when I go somewhere; it's never happened to me before.

I get dressed in basketball shorts and sneakers, use the bathroom—glaring at the dozen bottles the whole time—and head downstairs. The sun has barely begun to rise, golden light glimmering along the bottom of the horizon.

I stretch on the porch railing and then start off at an easy jog that quickly escalates as I remember all the reasons I'm currently annoyed.

The pound of my shoes against the dirt driveway is reassuring, so I try to focus on that and nothing else, running past field after field until my breathing is labored and sweat is pouring off me. A few trucks pass me, the morning crew coming in for milking. I wave but continue running. My muscles are all sore from the manual labor I've put them through the past week, but I embrace the burn of pain.

When the house comes back into view, it's paired with an unfamiliar sight.

Piper is sitting on the swing on the front porch, her bare feet propped up on top of the railing. My stomach lurches like I'm falling forward, reacting to the sight.

She looks better than I'd expect, considering the sounds coming from the bathroom late last night. I'm pretty sure she drank her weight in beer and tequila at Wagon Wheel.

Ten feet from the porch, I slow my pace to a walk. I thought I'd have a few hours before seeing her, so I haven't considered what I'll say to her. Beneath the sweat and exhaustion, there's still a slow simmer of anger.

"You're up early," she comments when I reach the top of the stairs before sipping some coffee.

Internally, I cheer at the sight because that means she brewed a pot while I was out running, and her coffee tastes much better than mine for whatever reason. Most people would probably consider caring about that a low point. But it feels good, caring about the little things. For too long, I've

only been focused on the larger picture. Big goals, not small victories.

"I wasn't the one doing tequila shots last night," I respond, leaning against the railing.

A slight breeze ruffles the air, and it feels incredible against my sweaty skin. I watch the green leaves of the oak wave in the wind until Piper's voice pulls my attention from the tree back to her.

"You didn't drink at all."

I'm surprised she noticed, but I don't let it show. Her dig about me being no fun might have been unnecessary, but it was true. Ironically, I used to be the life of the party. I was young and reckless, told to look like I was having the time of my life because that would mean more streams and I was eager to listen.

"I was driving."

Piper pulls in a deep breath, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. "I'm sorry."

I cross my arms. "For what?"

She huffs a laugh. "For pretty much everything I said and did after we got to the bar. Everyone was nice, but it was weird, being around a big group of people who knew each other so well. I was…nervous, so I kept drinking. And I'm frustrated about being here. But that's not exactly your fault either. So, yeah, I'm sorry. It was highly unprofessional."

Fuck, I think.

It took me a couple of hours to fall asleep last night—I was so angry. I just ran for an hour in an attempt to get rid of the lingering irritation.

And it's all gone. Totally absent, like it never existed, just because she apologized.

A stunt that I might deem unforgivable were it anyone else.

I tell myself it's because she's right—we're stuck together—but I'm worried there's more to it than that.

"It's fine," I say, but I'm not sure it is. Concerned where these feelings could lead.

Piper takes a sip of coffee, then refocuses on me. "It's nice you've stayed so close with your friends. I didn't keep in touch with that many people I went to high school with, and I never left. I'm not famous either."

"I've always kept the two separate."

Too separate probably. There's overlap between Kyle and Miles, but I've always treated them like two different people. Success and failure. Happiness and heartbreak.

I clear my throat just to break the silence. "I'd better go shower. Still have thirty acres to finish today."

"Are the guys coming over?"

"No. They've got lives."

"What could be better than spending the day with Kyle Spencer?"

I straighten, rolling my eyes. "I know that's sarcasm."

Piper shrugs, smirking a little. "I see a little of the appeal."

"You do?" I sound incredulous, and I'm not even teasing. What bothers me most is, I can't tell if she's serious.

Between bouts of irritation, I overanalyzed Piper's *Natasha is pretty* comment for far too long last night. It's the only indication that the attraction between us isn't one-sided I've ever gotten from her. If she was jealous at the bar, she hid it well. And I would know, considering my attention was on her, not Natasha, even when it should have been the opposite.

Piper doesn't reply. She stands and stretches, taunting me with a glimpse of the curve of her hip bone. She's wearing the same pajamas she had on in the kitchen her first night here, her red curls loose and spilling over her shoulders.

"Do you need a gate opener today?"

“What?” is my brilliant response.

Piper glances at the barn. “I know yesterday…didn’t go well. But I literally have nothing else to do, so…”

I’m so taken aback that it takes me a minute to respond. “Uh, I need to run into town first and get some stuff from the hardware store. Planning to take the tractor out later this afternoon.”

She hesitates, then says, “I like shopping.”

I lift one eyebrow. “For construction materials?”

I’m positive the answer is no.

Piper smiles. “No, but I’d like to see more than Oak Grove.”

“Really?” I sound incredulous, and she scoffs.

“*Really*.”

“Okay then. Let me get ready, and then we can go.”

Piper nods.

I nod back, then head for the front door.

“Hey, Kyle?”

I glance back. “Yeah?”

She smirks. “Maybe you underestimated me.”

I smirk back. “Maybe you misjudged me.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KYLE

Adler's looks the same as it did the last time I was here, about five years ago. The hardware store is busier than I expected, but a broad frame cuts through the crowd and around the paint can display as soon as the bell above the door rings.

"Hey, Deacon," I greet.

Deacon Adler grins, holding out a calloused palm for me to shake. His grip is firm. "Hi, Kyle. Good to see you, son."

"You too." I glance around the busy store, my gaze lingering on the redhead who stopped to look at the display of grills at the very front of the store. "Business looks good."

"It is good. Always something broken or that needs fixing around here."

"Don't I know it. The farmhouse needs a new roof."

Deacon's eyebrows rise an inch. "Big project."

"Yeah. I got the old shingles cleared, but the roofing felt needs to be removed and replaced too."

"You cleared the whole roof? Yourself?" Impossibly, his eyebrows inch higher.

I nod, then pull the piece of paper out of my pocket. "I have the measurements here for the new materials, but I wasn't sure how to calculate everything."

He nods. "I can help you with that. What were you thinking on materials?"

“Wood. Like it was.”

Deacon scratches at his beard. “I’d recommend metal. Lasts longer and weathers storms better. Plus, it’ll reflect the sun and keep the inside cooler during heat waves, like we’re having now. Only downside is the cost.”

I can think of another one.

“I have no idea how to install a metal roof, Deacon. Barely know how to install a wood one.”

“I can get a crew over to your place first thing in the morning.”

“Hastings?” I guess.

Deacon nods. “He’s got a lot of experience.”

I blow out a long breath, relief and indecision warring inside of me. The roof is a massive project. Exactly what I was looking for when I arrived. Something concrete to tackle. A clear task to complete after being gone for so long and only contributing money, which Mabel and John hardly spent. But there’s no shortage of other chores around the ranch, and this will take care of things a lot faster than I could manage myself.

“Okay, yeah. Thanks.”

“Anything else you need?”

I glance down at the list. “Shank nails, grass seed, and nitrile-coated gloves.”

“Nails are in aisle twelve, grass seed is in five, and all the work gloves are up by the register. I’ll give Cal a call, get him over to your place first thing.”

“Thanks, Deacon.”

He grips my shoulder, giving it a slight shake. “You’ve got a home here. Always.”

I nod, my throat suddenly thick.

Deacon claps my shoulder. “You need anything else, just let me know.”

“I will. Thanks.”

It takes me about ten minutes to pick up all the items I need and then check out at the front register.

Piper is still browsing in the front when I head for the exit.

"Do you have a grill?" she wonders, lifting the lid of a three-burner gas one as I stop beside her.

"I think there's an old charcoal one somewhere in the barn."

"Huh."

"Do *you* have a grill?" I ask since it's all I can think to say in this bizarre conversation.

"I live in a fourth-floor walk-up," she says.

"So…that's a no?"

"That's a no," she confirms, shutting the lid and heading for the door.

Tommy's parents are walking down the sidewalk as we emerge from Adler's. In Oak Grove, it would be impossible to visit downtown and not run into someone you know.

"Kyle!" Mrs. Sullivan gives me a hug, and Mr. Sullivan slaps me on the back. "So good to see you."

"Good to see you too," I reply.

"I'm so glad you're getting a break. I was seeing articles about your last tour nonstop," Tommy's mother tells me.

I nod and say, "Me too."

"How long will you be back for?"

I'm careful not to look at Piper as I shrug. "Not sure yet."

This is how ninety-nine percent of my conversations here go, it seems like. Everyone sees me as transitory, here for only a moment before I'm gone again.

I wonder what they'll all say when I announce I'm back for good.

After another minute of small talk, they continue down the sidewalk.

“We can’t wait for Wednesday!” Tommy’s dad calls over one shoulder as an afterthought.

“What’s Wednesday?” Piper asks.

Thanks, Mr. Sullivan.

I glance away from the Sullivans’ retreating backs. “Summer fair opens. I’m performing.”

“You’re *performing*?”

“Mm-hmm.” I head for the truck, purposefully ignoring Piper’s incredulous expression as she trails after me.

“And you didn’t think to mention that?” She’s practically jogging to keep up with me.

“What difference does it make?”

“What difference—you’re performing! You said you’re *done*, but you’re performing!”

I spin around to face her. “Keep your voice down, please.”

She rolls her eyes, but the next words are softer. “You didn’t tell me because you’re reconsidering.”

“No. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t think you’d *still be here*. You were right earlier. I underestimated you. I figured you’d run back to your fourth-floor walk-up after one night. I play at the fair every year, Piper. It’s a town fundraiser. Doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

I toss the plastic bag of my purchases in the back of the truck, the thud as the box of nails hits metal immensely satisfying.

She exhales as we stand, facing each other, both trying to figure out what else to say.

I’m just as annoyed as I was last night, and I can’t really figure out why. She’s like an irritating fly I can’t bring myself to swat away. And that makes no sense. I’m resolute in my decision; I have no interest in returning to music. But it won’t be a cause for celebration when Piper leaves. It’ll be back to a bleak, predictable routine.

She breaks eye contact first, looking away from me and across the street. “What were you planning on having for dinner? We’re out of Mabel’s leftovers.”

I blink, thrown by the sudden subject change. Not to mention the casual *we*. “The freezer is full of…” *Meat*, I realize. “We should get groceries.”

Neither of us discusses what that implies as we cross the street and head toward the supermarket.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a grocery store.

Mabel has continued to do the shopping since I’ve been back in Oak Grove. Prepared meals appeared in my fridge or were delivered to my hotel before that.

This was probably the last grocery store I was in. And it looks the same, red-and-white signs marking each aisle.

Piper doesn’t share my hesitation. She quickly grabs an empty cart and starts down the produce aisle, occasionally pausing to grab an item. I trail behind her, like a little kid roped into assisting a parent.

By the time we near the checkout, the cart is full. Most of it raw ingredients I would have no clue what to do with, so I really hope Piper does. I grab a bag of chips from the display at the end of one aisle as my contribution.

Lucille Evans is working as the cashier today. We make polite small talk as Piper unloads the full cart for Lucille to ring everything up.

Once everything has been scanned and bagged, Lucille announces the total. Piper steps forward, but I block her.

“I’ve got it.”

“I’ll pay. It’s stuff for me anyway.”

“What, you’re not going to share?”

Piper rolls her eyes. “Look, the label is giving me a stipend for every day I’m here. And I haven’t spent any of it so far. I can afford a few groceries.”

I'd consider the five bags of food in the cart more than *a few*, but I don't mention that. "So can I. As you keep pointing out, I'm rich."

Lucille is glancing back and forth between the two of us, watching like we're a tennis match.

"You're also un—" Piper cuts off mid-word, but we both know what she was about to say. "Fine," she mutters, putting her card away and stepping aside so I can tap mine against the machine.

And a few seconds later, a reluctant, "Thanks."

Somehow, a reluctant *thank you* from her means more than effusive appreciation from anyone else.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PIPER: Update: Things are going VERY badly with Kyle.

HARPER: Well, I'm not shocked.

HARPER: Did he sign with another label?

PIPER: No.

PIPER: I'm not talking about music.

HARPER: ???

PIPER: Don't say you told me so.

PIPER: He's not *quite* as bad as I thought he was.

HARPER: Well, you lasted longer than I'd thought was possible. He's been voted Sexiest Man Alive multiple times.

PIPER: Chances are, he'll piss me off again soon.

My second experience with haying goes more smoothly than the first time did.

Granted, the bar was *extremely* low.

Kyle didn't say much once we got back from the trip to town. He headed out to "fix some fences" after we unloaded the groceries. Then, I spied on him scattering grass seed on the

bare spots in the front yard between texting with Harper and Serena, who was wondering when I'd be back to alternate bathroom shifts. I had no good answer.

I wasn't expecting Kyle to come back inside and ask if I still wanted to hay with him, but he did.

So, I'm back perched on the side of the seat after successfully opening and closing three gates. There's nothing else for me to contribute, just like Kyle said the first time I offered to help, but this time, neither of us has mentioned that.

He handed me my very own cowboy hat before we left, an old one he said was Mabel's that came out of a box with a thick layer of dust on it. I didn't ask him why the initials inside the band didn't match her name because I'm tired of putting him on the offensive. I'm letting him drive—literally and figuratively.

The wide brim shades my face, but my arms are turning pink under the constant glare of the sun. Sunscreen was another essential I didn't think to pack. Usually, I spend most of the summer inside, only venturing out at night when it's a little cooler.

Kyle's arms have already tanned to dark brown, which I'm reminded of every time his shifting muscles catch my eye.

Which is every time he turns the wheel.

Which is frequently.

We're not touching, but we might as well be. We're close enough that I can smell him. Close enough that I can see the steady, even pulse of his heartbeat just below his jawline. Close enough that I keep noticing his hair is unruly and overdue for a trim, the ends curling up beneath the worn brim of his hat.

He knocks the front up with his forearm and then swipes away some sweat. The threadbare T-shirt he's wearing rides up an inch, flashing more tan skin and a thin line of hair that disappears into the waistband of his dirty jeans. My eyes trace the distinctive V without permission before I jerk my gaze

away, grabbing my water bottle from the cupholder and guzzling some.

Years of eye rolls and shrugs are coming back to haunt me.

I'd laugh when other women in the office would show up, wearing heels and lipstick, on the days Kyle Spencer was supposed to come in for a meeting. Say *he's just a guy*.

Harper told me I protested too much.

And…maybe she had a small point.

I'm not laughing now.

I'm sunburned and sweaty, struggling to stay focused on anything except Kyle. The scenery isn't interesting enough to hold my attention.

Gray clouds are steadily rolling across the sky, blotting out most of the blue. And we're in the middle of a sea of beige, one side the waving stalks and the other half cut down to a couple of inches.

The barren landscape allows me too much time to think.

To notice.

To wonder.

I'm tempted to ask Kyle some questions, but also mindful of how our last trip out here ended. And it's also…nice, sitting without saying anything. It's a reflection of the endless land around us, steady and constant—so different from the frenzied pace my life usually consists of—which I thought I would hate but am actually kind of enjoying.

The sun has disappeared, but the humidity still lingers in the air.

It starts with one fat raindrop. Then another. And another.

Suddenly, the skies open up.

I've never fully understood that expression before. But that's exactly how it feels. One second, it was barely raining, and the next, water is falling in endless sheets, like it's being poured out of a bucket, directly onto our heads.

The uncut grass flattens, stalks caving to the heavy deluge. The dust disappears, sinking into the damp earth. Wet denim clings to my legs as my clothes instantly become drenched, the fabric soggy and sticky.

Kyle swears.

I start laughing.

Maybe it's a nervous reaction.

It took us about fifteen minutes to drive out to where Kyle started mowing, and we're long past that point now. We won't be getting back to shelter anytime soon since we're surrounded by flat land as far as I can see in every direction.

Kyle is already turning the tractor around, heading back the way we came from. He's also looking at me with a strange expression, like he has no idea what to make of my reaction.

"Bet you wish you had those rain boots now," Kyle calls out.

It's hard to hear anything over the falling rain. But he's close enough that I catch those words, and it feels like they're lingering in the wet air.

Water soaks the ends of my hair and streams down my arms as I stare at him. "You remember that?"

Kyle laughs, but it's not really an amused sound. There's something else hovering beneath, something I'm missing. "Yeah, I remember."

"I hadn't gotten much sleep."

"What?"

"You asked why I was wearing rain boots when it was sunny out. I hadn't gotten much sleep. My youngest brother, Alex…we were on the phone during one of his breaks, and his unit got an emergency call. It was hours before I heard he was okay. So, I hadn't gotten much sleep and literally grabbed the first shoes I found on my way to work. Probably why I was a little…prickly that morning."

One corner of Kyle's mouth lifts. "And what about every other time I had a meeting?"

I'm pretty sure I'm blushing. Hopefully, between the hat and the rain, he can't tell. "You always seemed…I don't know. Too perfect. It annoyed me."

He chuckles, but there's an edge to it. "I'm a long way from perfect, Piper."

"You're different here. There's no act."

"There was never an act. Everyone there was working to make me a success. I wasn't there to be a dick about it."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"Wow. *Two* apologies."

I roll my eyes and tug down the brim of my hat so it protects more of my face. My cheeks are getting damp despite the cover.

"So, that's your type? *Im*perfect?"

"At the moment, no. I'm focusing on me. Work."

"Good for you."

"I do miss sex," I blurt out.

In the pouring rain, that feels like an acceptable thing to say to a famous singer I'm attracted to.

Now, I'm *definitely* blushing.

"Me too."

I summon the courage to look over at him, discovering Kyle appears nonplussed by the topic.

I've never had a close guy friend. Maybe this is normal to discuss. Not that I really consider Kyle a friend, but I'm more comfortable around him than I am most people. He's seen me at my most unpleasant, so there's no pretense to hide behind.

"Having a hard time finding someone who's interested?" I tease.

Everyone in Oak Grove seems to be a Kyle Spencer admirer. And I'm not even sure it's because he's a celebrity to the rest of the country. It seems like he's his own brand of famous here.

He smiles briefly. "More like it started to bother me that I couldn't tell which guy a woman wanted."

"Miles or Kyle?"

Something warm lightens his expression before he looks back at the field. The rain is still falling, but it's turning to a drizzle. "Yeah. Exactly."

"What about Sutton?"

"What about her?" The half of his face I can see appears confused.

"You guys dated."

Now, he looks at me. "You were in the meeting where that got decided."

I was. It was the same morning we've already discussed. Which made all the speculating and swooning over Kyle all the more ridiculous since I knew he'd soon be considered off the market.

"They discussed you guys *pretending* to date for positive publicity. You're seriously telling me nothing *actually* happened between you guys?"

"I liked that she was famous. Beyond that, we weren't that compatible."

"You *liked* that she was famous?"

Kyle shrugs. "I liked that I knew what she wanted from me."

"That's kind of sad."

He nods. "Tell me about it."

We finally arrive back at the barn. The rain has eased off entirely, but we're both soaked. Kyle immediately glances toward the house, his brow furrowed.

“You’re worried about the roof?”

There’s a flash of surprise on his face as he looks over at me. “Yeah. Was stupid to strip it without a plan to replace it.”

“Why did you then?”

A ghost of a grin curls up one corner of his mouth. “Because I do stupid shit sometimes.”

I hop down from the tractor first, and Kyle follows.

I think his eyes might dip down to my chest for a millisecond, but I can’t tell for sure. He’s subtler than the guy at the bar was.

Kyle clears his throat. “You should go change.”

“Of course I’m going to change. I thought you’d want help with…the tractor first.”

I’m not sure what there’s to do. But I wasn’t planning to run off as soon as we got back either.

“I don’t need help. Head inside.” His tone is more brusque than before.

But I keep pushing, setting aside my pride. “I can’t get any wetter at this point. Let me help.”

My cheeks warm at the unintentional innuendo. But Kyle doesn’t so much as smirk before disappearing into the main section of the barn and returning to the side shed with a faded plaid button-down.

He tosses it to me. “Fine. Put that on then.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “I’m not cold.”

The rain and lack of sun have cooled the air temperature some, but definitely not to the point where layers sound pleasant.

Kyle heaves a sigh, like this entire conversation is an inconvenience. “Your shirt is fucking see-through, Piper.”

I swallow before glancing down.

Not that I think he’s wrong, but more that I’m hoping he’s mistaken.

He’s not. My favorite pink bra is on full display.

I take the shirt.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kyle walks into the kitchen while I'm grating the tomatoes.

I try my best to ignore his presence—his wet hair and bare feet—but I feel my cheeks burn from what I'm affectionately referring to as Bragate. I've been on a beach in front of strangers, exposing a lot more. But that felt different from being underdressed in front of Kyle, especially unintentionally. Worse was how unaffected he was by it. Covering me up like a gentleman and making it obvious any attraction was one-sided.

Kyle walks over to the window first, peering outside toward the barn. The rain left everything coated in a light layer of water that hasn't fully dried. It'll probably be hot and dusty again in the morning, but for now, it looks serene and clean.

"Any water in your room?" he asks.

The tomato slips, and I almost grate my finger instead. "Uh, no. Not that I saw."

I look up in time to catch his nod as he walks toward the island.

"Good. Roof held up better than I'd thought. A crew is coming tomorrow to get a new one on."

I nod. "Okay."

He clears his throat. "What can I help with?"

"Oh. Uh, nothing. I'm good."

“You’re not going to let me help prepare the food I paid for?”

“Still hung up on that, huh?” I relax a little since he seems to have forgotten about earlier.

As if reading my mind, he says, “Not really. You flashing me made more of an impression.”

I go back to grating, focusing on the task like I’ll be graded on it later. “You’re probably used to it.”

“Has happened before,” he confirms, which annoys me for some unknown reason.

If I *had* to name it, it’s probably misplaced jealousy.

The water starts to boil, so I dump the fettuccine into the pot and then toss the tomato skins in the compost.

“Well, it was unintentional, so I don’t think it counts.”

Kyle chuckles. “It was also the most memorable.”

There’s a kernel of pride in my chest, which is absolutely ridiculous.

Getting soaked on a tractor isn’t any sort of accomplishment. But it’s the second time today Kyle has suggested I’m notable to him in some way.

Unexpectedly recalling our first interaction from years ago. And now offering up what I guess is supposed to be a compliment. Maybe it’s the competitive spirit in me from being the youngest child, but I like knowing I stood out to him in some way.

I push the half stick of butter, the grater, and a bowl toward him. “Grate that in there.”

I turn before I have the chance to see if he’s following my instructions, rummaging through the fridge until I find the basil and Parmesan. I grab a clove of garlic and the press before turning back toward the stove.

Kyle is grating dutifully, twin lines between his eyes as he focuses on the assignment. It’s cute. Hot. Whatever. My

attraction to Kyle has been established. Admitting to a problem is the first step toward overcoming it.

I focus on stirring the pasta and chopping the basil.

"You cook a lot?"

"For every meal," I drone.

"New York has a lot of good restaurants."

"Good restaurants with not-so-great vegetarian options," I reply. "At least the ones I've been to. Easier to just cook for myself."

Cheaper, too, but I'm sick of pointing out our separate tax brackets.

I drain the pasta and add in the grated tomatoes and butter, plus some salt and pepper.

"Smells good," Kyle says.

It's weird, having him standing only a few feet away while I stir.

Cooking has always been a solitary activity for me. I've gotten used to making my own meals ever since I got to college and discovered the dining hall was sadly limited in its meatless options.

Lauren and Serena always make their own food separately, and no guy I've ever dated has made any effort to adjust to my diet. One brought me to a steak house for our fourth and final date after I mentioned I was a vegetarian several times.

"I put some ground beef in the fridge earlier. It's probably still frozen, but if you take it out and run it under some cold water, it should—"

"It's fine," Kyle says.

I glance at him, continuing to stir the pasta so everything combines. "It'll be good in this. Just—"

Again, he cuts me off, "I'm good with it like this. Really."

I stare at him, unconvinced, but decide it's not worth arguing about. "Okay."

Kyle gets two bowls out of the cabinet. I divide the pasta between them, then sprinkle the cheese and basil on top.

We end up sitting out on the front porch, which Kyle suggested. Rain is still dripping off the edge of the stripped roof, beading on the railing below.

"Have you heard from Mabel and John?" I ask, blowing on a forkful of pasta. Steam curls upward in twisted columns.

"Just a text that they arrived safely. John doesn't have a cell phone, and Mabel isn't much of a texter."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised by that."

Kyle smiles.

"Who are they visiting again?"

"Their goddaughter, Cecilia, and her parents."

"How old is Cecilia?"

"Uh, around our age probably. She got married a couple of years ago. Her husband is in the military."

"Weird."

"The military?"

"The marriage. Sometimes I forget I'm old enough that people my age get married."

To my surprise, Kyle agrees with me. "It is weird." To my even greater surprise, he adds, "Hudson is planning to propose to Morgan at the end of the summer. I'm happy for him—them. But it's bizarre. We were like brothers, growing up, and I barely know her because I've spent so little time here since graduating."

"You've got plenty of time now, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"How did they meet?"

"At Wagon Wheel. She was new in town, and Hudson offered to show her around."

"How thoughtful of him."

Kyle chuckles. “Yeah. I’m positive there were ulterior motives.”

“You gonna pull the same move on Natasha?”

I regret the question as soon as it’s out of my mouth. And even more when it’s followed by a long pause.

“No,” Kyle finally answers. “I’m in no shape for a serious relationship.”

It’s the closest he’s come to mentioning what Mabel told me—he’s grieving.

Based on the way Natasha was looking at him, I’m pretty sure she’d be up for something more casual. For anything if he was involved.

But I shut my mouth and set my bowl on the porch floor, leaning back and resting my feet on the damp rail.

“Wanna play cards?”

I glance at Kyle. “I probably don’t know how to.”

“I’ll teach you.”

The swing shifts as he stands, then reappears a minute later with a pack of cards in one hand. I straighten, tucking my feet beneath my legs so I’m sitting like a little kid. Kyle attempts to explain the rules to me as he shuffles and deals, and then we start playing.

We argue throughout most of the game.

But it doesn’t feel mean or spiteful.

It’s kind of…fun.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KYLE

Tommy shows up about an hour after Cal Hastings arrived with his roofing crew.

I'm busy clearing the final remnants of the old pile of shingles away but straighten when I see the familiar pickup coming up the driveway.

He parks by the barn and then hops out, walking over with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Hey, man," Tommy greets.

"Hey. How's it going?" I pull off my right glove and punch his shoulder.

"Feel like I should be asking you that."

I raise one eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"I dunno. Just wanted to make sure everything is okay."

"I'm doing fine, Tommy. I've come back before."

He nods. "Yeah, but this is the first time since…" Tommy's voice trails off as he notices half the reason I'm standing out in the yard.

Piper headed out on a run right after brewing coffee this morning, saying she felt gross from all the pasta she ate last night. I refrained from telling her she looked perfect since I can't seem to get compliments right around her.

Who tells a woman their tits are *memorable*?

Me, apparently.

It was a poor choice of adjective, but it's not a lie. More like burned into my brain.

And rather than eat breakfast alone in the empty kitchen, I came out here because the shingles *did* need to get moved.

"Morning." Piper gets the word out, then leans forward, bracing her hands against her knees as she sucks in deep breaths of air.

"You okay?" I ask, half-concerned, half-amused.

She straightens and nods.

She looks good sweaty. Thankfully, that's a thought I manage to keep to myself.

Piper makes a face, running a hand across her forehead. "My gym is air-conditioned."

I snort.

Tommy grins and holds out a hand. "Tommy Sullivan. We met the other night at Wagon Wheel."

"Right. Of course." Piper shakes his hand, then lifts her hand to shade her eyes from the sun. "Piper Egan. Nice to see you again."

"I didn't realize you were staying here." Tommy glances at me, and I know I'll hear about that. "Would have made myself a little more presentable."

He's wearing an old college tee with the sides cut out, which is what he wears ninety-nine percent of the time. I don't say so, but I'm tempted to call him out on it.

"It's fine. I'm not an Auburn fan."

Tommy glances down at his *Roll Tide* shirt. Grins. "You know your football rivalries."

"Four brothers. I wasn't given much choice in the matter."

He laughs.

Piper's attention lingers on him for a few more seconds, then slides to me. "I could really use a shower. Nice to see you again, Tommy."

"You too, Piper."

Tommy watches her walk inside, and I have a pretty good idea of what he's going to say before he opens his mouth. I've heard some iteration of it from every single guy who's met her, and it irritates me more every damn time.

"She single?"

"No idea," I lie, and I have no clue why. Well, maybe I have *some* clue.

"Are you and she…"

"*No*."

"She's staying in your *house*, Spencer."

"Mabel invited her to stay here instead of a hotel. Then left, so I'm stuck with her."

Tommy raises both eyebrows. "Poor you."

I shake my head. "What are you doing here?"

"I said I would help you with the roof."

"You did? When?"

"When you said you were working on it. Although doesn't look like you're doing shit at the moment."

I exhale, then glance at the crew that's busy replacing the roofing felt. In an hour, they've almost finished the front side.

"I went to Adler's this weekend to get materials. Deacon suggested I should hire professionals."

"Huh. I seem to remember suggesting the same damn thing."

I can't explain to Tommy that I wanted to do it myself as part of my plan to live here full-time again since he doesn't know that's the case. So, I settle for an eye roll. "I appreciate the offer of help even if it's turned into a *told you so*."

"You're very welcome." Tommy squints past me. "Nine-guy crew and metal roofing? Fancy shit. Next thing I know, you'll be driving a six-figure sports car around town."

“The truck runs fine still. The roof was one storm away from blowing off.”

“I’m kidding, man. We all know you have the money. Nice to see you spending it even if it’s on something so…practical.”

I shake my head. “Want to come inside for some coffee?”

“I’d love to, but you were one stop on a dozen things I’ve gotta do today. Now that I know you’re not about to break your neck up there, I should get going.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you at the fair, yeah?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “Yeah.”

Tommy drives off, and I go back to moving shingles, not realizing I didn’t put my right glove back on until a stray nail manages to tear the side of my thumb open.

“Fuck.” I watch the blood swell to the surface, thoroughly annoyed with myself for being so careless. It doesn’t hurt yet, but I’m sure it will.

I head straight inside, holding my hand under the kitchen faucet and then wrapping my thumb in a paper towel before heading upstairs.

The bathroom door is shut, but that’s not what stops me in my tracks.

It’s the voice, audible over the rush of water through the creaky pipes in the walls.

I add *singing* to the list of things Piper Egan is really good at, placing it right above *affecting me*.

I stand and listen to her belt out a Ghostland song, even as my hand starts to throb. It’s their biggest hit, the one about a bottle of whiskey.

The water shuts off, and the singing stops too.

I pull in a breath, then knock.

“Yeah?”

“Hey. It’s Kyle.” I close my eyes. *She knows it’s you, idiot*. “You almost done in there?”

“Uh, yes. Why?”

“I cut my hand, and I need—”

The door swings open, and Piper is standing there with wet hair and a towel wrapped around her torso. Water is dripping down her arms and the ends of the long strands, forming tiny puddles on the floor.

“What do you mean, *you cut your hand*?”

She’s already reaching for it, blanching when she sees the red stain that’s formed on the makeshift bandage.

“It’s not that bad,” I say even though, yeah, it looks pretty bad.

“You have a medicine kit in here?” Piper heads for the sink, opening the cabinet above it.

I close the seat to the toilet and ease onto it. “I think so.”

Bottles clank as she rummages around, the towel clinging to her torso precariously. The towel she’s naked under. I let myself focus on that since it’s the only thing distracting me from the persistent pain in my hand.

Piper squints at a tube of antiseptic cream. “There’s no expiration date.”

“Just use it. I’m sure it’s fine.”

The paper towel is totally soaked through now. I’m not particularly squeamish, but the sight turns my stomach.

“Wait, here it is. Okay, it’s good until next year.”

Piper’s beside me all of a sudden, dripping water on me too. The scent of her shampoo surrounds me, familiar but more potent than usual.

“What happened?”

“I was moving the old shingles. Caught my hand on a nail.”

“You need a tetanus shot,” she tells me.

“Probably,” I agree.

She unwraps the paper towel and tosses it into the trash, grimacing, then starts dabbing at the cut with the cream.

“I can do it.”

Piper ignores me and continues dabbing. “Are you going to be able to perform?”

“For someone who’s not a fan of my music, you sound awfully concerned.”

“I never said I wasn’t a fan.”

“Right. You just hide it *really* well.”

“It’ll be my first Kyle Spencer concert. I’m looking forward to it.”

As if I wasn’t nervous enough, especially when I think about my plan back when “Blue Rain Boots” first released.

“I’ve played through worse.”

She rips the bandage open and sticks it to my hand, covering the wound.

“I didn’t know you sang.” The words are out before I could fully think them through.

Pink stains Piper’s cheeks as she stands and tosses the wrapper away. “Eavesdrop much?”

“I was injured and looking for medical attention.”

She huffs a laugh, then turns to wash her hands. “I don’t really.”

“You’re good.”

One shoulder lifts, then falls. Not arguing, but not agreeing either.

“Did you ever pursue it?”

“I submitted a demo to a few places back when I was in college. Never went anywhere. So, I decided being an artist wasn’t for me. Focused on the other side of it.”

“You should consider—”

“I’m going to get dressed, and then I’ll drive you to the doctor. Is there a hospital in this town, or is it someone’s house?” She’s out of the bathroom before I can say another word, making it clear it’s not a subject she wants to discuss any further.

I sit for another few seconds until the dizziness fades, then stand and head downstairs to wait for her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PIPER

I ’m almost finished getting ready for the fair when my phone rings. I finish swiping a layer of lip gloss across my lower lip and grab the buzzing device, expecting it to be one of my brothers or roommates. Instead, it’s an unknown New York number.

I swallow nervously, then answer. “Hello?”

“Piper? Carl Bergman here.”

Shit. I swallow again, backing up until I can take a seat on the edge of the bed.

“Hi, Mr. Bergman.”

“Carl, please. How are things going down there?”

My anxiety level skyrockets. “I haven’t given up.”

“That bad?”

“He’s…”

I glance out the window, watching Kyle shake hands with the roofing crew as they depart. It only took them three days to install the shiny metal roof. Mabel and John are in for a surprise when they get back. I wonder if I’ll still be here to see it.

“Decided,” I finish. “Honestly, I don’t think he’ll change his mind. He’s been clear where he stands.”

“Does he seem upset? Confused?”

“Uh…not really.”

A disappointed exhale is the only response at first. “Kyle has always been so amenable,” Carl says, almost to himself.

“I guess everyone has their limit,” I reply. “He’s performing tonight.”

“He is?” There’s a new, excited note to Carl’s voice that immediately makes me regret mentioning it.

“There’s a local fair in town. He’s the main attraction from what I’ve gathered. But I don’t think it’ll change anything. It’s just a community event and fundraiser.”

“Still, a promising sign. Kyle’s a performer. Reminding him of that is a great idea.”

“It wasn’t my ide—”

“I have to run to a meeting. Keep me updated.”

He hangs up without providing any instructions on *how* to update him.

Am I supposed to send him daily emails? Set up another phone call? How long does he expect me to *stay* here, waiting for Kyle to possibly budge?

Maybe I should have delivered a bleaker summary, but it’s not like I was overly optimistic to begin with.

I shove my phone and lip gloss into a small crossbody bag, then scrutinize my appearance in the mirror.

I’m not sure what to expect from tonight. Kyle hasn’t been very forthcoming, so most of what I’ve learned about Oak Grove’s annual fair was from searching online.

The closest I’ve been to a carnival was a trip to Coney Island with my family when I was five or six. It’s a fuzzy memory of hot dogs and riding on a carousel and sticky hands from cotton candy.

I settled on wearing a black cotton sundress and sandals. By far, it’s the most dressed up I’ve gotten since I arrived here. I’d consider it casual by my usual standards.

I wish I’d thought to ask Ella or Julia for their number at Wagon Wheel so I could ask them what they were wearing

tonight. But I didn't, and when I met them, part of me was expecting to be gone by now.

Kyle is still outside talking with one of the roofers when I walk onto the front porch. He glances my way at the sound of the screen door's bang, then quickly returns to his conversation.

My palms start to sweat—and not just from the warmer temperature.

I approach the two men slowly, not wanting to interrupt their conversation.

The roofer looks my way first. He's about my dad's age, I'd guess. "Hi, ma'am."

"Hi." I offer a smile and a small wave before he holds a rough hand out.

"Cal Hastings."

"Piper Egan."

"Pleasure to meet you."

"You too." I glance at the house. "The roof looks great."

Cal's smile crinkles the corners of his eyes as he thanks me.

I experience an immediate pang of homesickness. His broad shoulders and proud posture also remind me of my father.

This is the longest I've gone without seeing any of my family members in several years. And past trips that took me away from New York were always with friends. I feel very alone here—because I am. No matter how welcoming *almost* everyone has been, it's hard to ignore that loneliness.

"I'd better get home," Cal says. "Looking forward to your performance tonight, Kyle."

Kyle nods and thanks him.

"Does the whole town go to this fair?" I ask Kyle as Cal heads for his van.

“Pretty much. You ready to go?”

“Depends. How do I look?” I execute a small spin in the dirt, trying to displace the nerves with the movement.

“You could use some cowboy boots,” he says.

“You could use some better compliments,” I tell him, then head for his truck.

His low chuckle follows.

The sound of it fizzes in my stomach, somehow both comforting and thrilling.

I tuck the folds of my dress under my thighs to keep them from touching the hot leather, then yank at the ancient seat belt.

Riding in here is no longer a jarring experience.

What will be strange is being in a vehicle with an automatic transmission and new-car smell again. I’ve gotten used to the gearshift and the scent of old leather.

Kyle climbs into the driver’s seat, which has also become oddly familiar. He starts the truck, which rumbles to life with a distinctive roar.

I study the new roof more intently, surprised by the difference the shiny metal makes to the whole property. Surprised by how much the sight of it getting fixed up affects me.

There’s already a notable difference from when I first arrived, the lawn neatly trimmed and the pile of old shingles gone. Kyle finished clearing them after we got back from urgent care despite me telling him it was a bad idea. At least he remembered to wear both gloves to avoid further injury.

“Piper?”

“Yeah?” I glance over.

“You look really nice.”

My heartbeat thunders in my ears as our eyes connect and the compliment registers, the truck’s cab too small to contain

the awareness humming between us.

I swallow, then clear my throat. “Thanks.”

The radio plays quietly as Kyle drives down the road.

It’s not one of his songs—or at least, I don’t think it is. I was surprised I recognized his song when it came on the radio on our way home from Wagon Wheel. For years, I’d done an excellent job at avoiding anything related to him. Since I arrived, I’ve been tempted more than once to listen to some of his music. I thought it might give me some needed insight into his career. Into him. But I haven’t, and I’m not really sure why.

I guess, at a certain point, I unconsciously decided I wanted to learn anything about Kyle directly *from* him.

Oak Grove’s town website boasted this fair as *the event of the summer*, and I’m not disappointed. It’s a spectacle; hundreds of cars are parked in rows as Kyle turns off the road onto flattened grass.

And this is the turnout early in the evening.

Dusk is only just beginning to darken the sky.

We follow the crowds through the front gates and emerge into even more chaos. Running kids, sauntering teenagers, ambling adults.

I trail after Kyle since he seems reasonably certain of where he’s going. Sure enough, I spot the group of his friends up ahead by one of the many food trucks. The smell of buttered popcorn and fried dough wafts through the air as we walk.

Everyone greets me warmly, although not as enthusiastically as they welcome Kyle. Julia and Ella give me hugs, and Tommy tips the cowboy hat he’s wearing my way. But I don’t miss the few curious looks getting tossed around that suggest they’re all surprised I’m here. That I’m *still* here.

And the surprise is mutual when they all move on quickly, leaving me and Kyle standing alone.

“I thought they liked me a *little* more than that,” I say, attempting to cover up my uncertainty with humor.

“It’s not you; it’s me,” he replies. “I told everyone I wanted some time alone before performing. Been a minute since I was up onstage.”

“Oh.” I glance around, trying to figure out where I should go. “Got it. I’ll just—”

“I didn’t mean you.”

I nod slowly, not sure what to say. *Thanks?*

I settle on, “This is…fun.” I go to shove my hands in my pockets, then realize my dress doesn’t have pockets and end up awkwardly patting cotton.

One corner of Kyle’s mouth lifts in what could *almost* be considered a smile.

It’s soft and slow, and it wreaks havoc on my insides. I’m also immensely relieved to see it.

The quiet, introspective mood he’s in is throwing me off. I thought we’d broken through a little of the barrier. That we were making progress. That we were friends-adjacent—or at least past having uncomfortable moments around each other. His serious expression and detachment feels like two steps back from any progress.

“Glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

I blame Carl’s call for the next sentence that comes out of my mouth.

“Would be even better if you signed the new contract.”

Kyle’s jaw flexes. I catch the movement out of the corner of my eye, and something twists and tightens in my stomach in response to his reaction.

I’m sure he has reasons for leaving music. Good ones, according to Mabel. But it isn’t my job to care what those are. And it’s feeling more and more necessary to remind myself exactly why I’m here. The more time I spend around Kyle, the easier it is to pretend I’m in Texas for reasons that have nothing to do with my job.

“My answer won’t change, Piper.”

I hate how he uses my name. How he makes it sound like he's turning *me* down, not the money-making machine I work for.

And I especially hate the hint of regret in his voice, like part of him wishes he could give me a different answer.

"Then, I'll keep following you around like a puppy dog until Carl calls me off."

He snorts at that, then glances at the Ferris wheel.

"Wanna go for a ride?" Kyle tilts his head toward the flashing lights.

I stare at him, the realization of what he's asking hitting me slowly, like falling rain.

The absurdity of this moment—the two of us standing here in the midst of excited shouts and him suggesting that we ride a Ferris wheel—is more of a sudden shock.

I laugh once. Short and surprised. Waiting for him to take the offer back and follow his friends, turning this back into the group outing I expected it to be.

But he doesn't move.

He just stands there, staring at me with uncomfortable intensity and making this feel even more like a date.

I break eye contact to glance up at the looming shadow of lights and activity above us. I promised myself I wouldn't back down on this trip. That I'd do whatever it took to make it a success.

And…I'm very tempted to break that promise.

This is blurring the line. This has nothing to do with music or my job.

I don't have any means of comparison for this trip. Everything about it is unorthodox, and it's become more and more confusing, the longer I've been here. But the goal is still constant, and it entirely hinges on Kyle. No matter how unlikely it is that he'll change his mind, it's not truly over until I'm on a plane back to New York with an unsigned contract.

So, I ignore the little flip in my stomach and how the humidity in the air feels extra oppressive. Remind myself what's at stake. That I'm not a quitter.

"Sure."

Kyle starts walking like that's the answer he expected all along. It quells a little of the nerves coalescing in my stomach, seeing his nonchalance.

But the *no big deal* chant dies off when we reach the front of the line and I'm suddenly squished into a space that's way smaller than the cab of Kyle's truck. I can't move without brushing up against some part of him. I shift an inch, and our legs connect. Sit back, and my elbow hits his biceps. My eyes stay straight ahead, hoping he'll attribute my burning cheeks to the heat that lingers in the air even though the sun is rapidly fading.

Gears grind as the chair begins to move, propelling us upward. But we only make it a few feet before we suddenly stop, the suspended seat swaying.

I lean forward and look down, watching a teenage couple climb out of the chair and two women take their place. The entire exchange takes about five minutes. Then, we're moving again, slowly ascending. Only a few feet. Another change takes place.

My stomach sinks as I realize what I thought was going to be a quick trip around the wheel will likely be a lengthy journey instead.

I steal a glance at Kyle, who's gazing toward the dark fields that surround the busy, brightly lit fairground.

I rub my palms against the cotton material of my dress in an attempt to clear the sweat from them, searching for something to say.

"You come here a lot?"

I cringe at what comes out sounding like a cheesy pickup line. Then quickly hide any embarrassment from my face as Kyle's attention swings from the field to me.

He smirks, and it sets off an uncomfortable fluttering sensation in my stomach, which has become way too common around him.

I've seen Kyle smile plenty of times before. But it's rarely aimed at me and contained any genuine amusement. And he's never been *touching* me while it happened, which is a crucial difference.

"To the *annual* carnival? Once a year."

I nod, refusing to react to the teasing tone of his voice. Refusing to acknowledge how the flutters have been joined by giddiness. I feel like a middle schooler whose crush just passed her a pencil.

We've only moved another dozen feet. We're not even halfway to the top yet.

I look up at the sky, praying we'll move faster. I feel silly, like a burden he's having to entertain.

"It's why you're here."

My attention moves back to Kyle as my mind spins, trying to figure out what I missed in our conversation. After a few seconds, I give up. "What?"

"This carnival. It's why you're here. It's where—how—I got discovered. Got drunk and got onstage as a dare, and a music exec happened to be in town, visiting his in-laws."

"Oh," is all I manage in response.

I still don't know very much about Kyle. I've only gotten glimpses during the time I've been here. And I know nothing about how he got into music, except what he just shared. If I'd guessed, I would have assumed he pursued it. Learning he stumbled into stardom is a surprise.

The revelation prompts questions, ones I have no business asking him. Because while gaining Kyle's trust should be a goal, I wouldn't be wondering from the perspective of an Empire Records employee. I'd be asking him as Piper. And I'd be admitting that Kyle intrigued me.

“Is that why you don’t drink?” The question comes out without permission. Another little mystery about Kyle Spencer, one I’ve spent more time wondering about than I’d ever admit.

“Because it got me a record deal?” There’s amusement in his voice, but also an edge. “No. That’s not why.”

“Why don’t you drink then?”

“I just don’t.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“That’s *my* answer.”

“Just say you don’t want to talk about it.”

“Piper.”

I look at him, my heart fluttering erratically in my chest as our gazes connect. “What?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I exhale, letting the disappointment out with the oxygen. I thought—hoped—he was going to say something else.

I fuse my lips together, determined to keep my mouth shut. A glance upward reveals we’re creeping closer to the top. Nearer to the end of this ride.

“What about you?”

I swallow and glance over, meeting the intensity that’s already waiting. “I *do* drink. Just ask your upstairs toilet.”

A smile tugs at both corners of his mouth. I experience a startling surge of satisfaction at the sight. He’s smiling at—because of—me, and that feels like a big accomplishment.

“Did you *really* try to get a record deal?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

I rear back as far as possible in the small space, which is a couple of inches, offended. *That’s* what honesty gets me?

“You spent your weekend haying because you’re so determined to get me to change my mind. And you expect me to believe you took no for an answer when it came to your own career?”

“This *is* about my own career,” I snap. “I told you, Carl promised me a promotion if I get you to re-sign. I’ll finally be able to scout and sign artists. Make an actual difference instead of babysitting divas!”

Kyle raises one eyebrow. “I’m a diva?”

“You’re uncooperative!”

“I’ll come to New York and try to talk you into something you don’t want to do sometime, and we’ll see how much you enjoy it.”

I exhale an irritated sigh. “Most people don’t consider a multimillion-dollar contract to be such an inconvenience.”

“Most people haven’t experienced what it’s like to live in hotels for months straight and not be able to walk down the street by yourself. Fame sucks. But I didn’t complain. For years, I dealt with the stalkers and the craziness and the exhaustion. Because part of me did love it. But now, I’m done. That chapter of my life is over, and it’s my decision to make.”

“Fine. I won’t mention it again.”

“Fine,” he says. “And while we’re being honest, I think you want that promotion so you can give others the chance you wish someone had given you.”

“You’re wrong.” My response is immediate, but I know it’s something I’ll contemplate later. Because I’ve never considered it that way, and he might have a small point.

Kyle shrugs, like my motivation doesn’t matter to him. “Fine.”

Finally, we reach the top of the wheel. The entire carnival is spread out below, a maze of flashing lights and a crowd of bodies. Kyle looks out at the dazzling sight, his expression contemplative.

“What was your plan?” I ask, forgetting I’m annoyed with him.

He glances at me. “My plan?”

“If you weren’t pursuing music. If you hadn’t gotten signed. What was your plan?”

“I’d be exactly where I am now, working on the ranch.”

“No college? Girlfriend?”

“School wasn’t my thing,” Kyle answers.

“What was your *thing*?”

He shrugs. “Spent most of the time hanging out with my friends and drinking beer.”

I scoff. “You were *that guy* then? The popular one?”

“I was the guy who thought he had a lot to be mad about.”

Irritation boils over. “You say a lot without ever actually saying anything, you know that?”

He grins suddenly. “If I hadn’t won a few songwriting awards, you’d do a real number on my ego.”

I roll my eyes, registering we’ve finally reached the bottom. I stand right as the cab suddenly swings.

“Sorry!” the attendant calls.

I barely hear him over the sound of my racing pulse. I didn’t fall, so my body should be relaxing.

I should feel relieved.

Instead, my heart rate is thundering at what feels like a thousand beats a second, reacting to the warm, solid press of hands holding me upright.

“You good?”

I clear my throat, attempting to regain a little composure and remove the lump that’s lodged there. To will away the flush creeping across my skin like wildfire. I can’t remember the last time someone’s touch affected me like this, and I’m certain I don’t like it.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

His hands drop away, but I can still feel them. Kyle’s touch lingers like a phantom brand, the skin beneath my dress tingling.

I carefully climb out of the chair, relieved to be on solid ground and screaming at my body to settle the hell down.

“Kyle!”

We both turn to watch a middle-aged man approaching.

I’m surprised to realize I recognize him.

“Hey, Brayden. Good to see you.”

Kyle shakes hands with his manager, who’s already focused on me with raised eyebrows.

“Hello there. I’m Brayden Matthews.”

“Hi.” I hold out my hand for him to shake. “Piper Egan.”

“*You’re* Piper Egan.” Brayden glances at Kyle, who shakes his head almost imperceptibly.

I’ve obviously been a topic of conversation between them before.

“Yes.” It wasn’t really a question, but I answer it anyway.

I glance at Kyle, who’s now typing something on his phone.

“You’re here for the fair?” I ask Brayden.

He’s still staring at me intently, but he nods. “Well, for the performance. And Kyle and I have a few things to discuss that I thought would be best to talk about face-to-face.”

I nod, having a good idea what those things are. “Have you been to Texas before?”

“A few times. You?”

I shake my head. “First time.”

“Hey! I’m here!” Kyle’s friend Hudson appears, a little out of breath.

“Great.” Kyle slaps his shoulder. “This is my manager, Brayden.”

“Nice to meet you, man,” Hudson says, shaking hands with Brayden.

“I’ll see you after the show.”

All of a sudden, I realize Kyle is talking to me. Realize Brayden is already a few steps away, clearly eager to get moving. And that Hudson is here for me, like when I was a little kid getting passed between parents with shared custody.

“Oh. Okay.”

And then Kyle and Brayden are gone, swallowed up by the crowd.

Hudson’s looking at me, watching me watch Kyle walk away.

His eyebrows rise. “We’ve got about an hour before he goes on. You hungry?”

“Yeah, um, yes.” I clear my throat. “Yep.”

One corner of his mouth lifts as Hudson shakes his head a little. Whatever he’s thinking, I’m certain it’s complimentary of Kyle and not that flattering of me.

I’m acting like a teenager.

A fan.

And not of the music…of the man.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KYLE

Backstage is an empty tent.

It's refreshing. My last tour was thirty-three cities. Sold-out stadiums that averaged about sixty thousand seats. Hundreds of people working to ensure everything ran smoothly.

This is just me.

Until Brayden walks in, munching on a piece of pizza. He holds a second slice out to me.

I shake my head. "No thanks. Not hungry."

My stomach feels like it's on the teacup ride set up next to the stage, spinning round in rapid circles. Churning with nerves and anxiety and uncertainty.

Brayden stares at me, munching away at his pizza. "So… Piper."

The last topic I feel like discussing when I'm already on edge like this.

"Don't make a thing about it."

"I'm not. I'm just recalling the time that I told you the label wanted you to duet with Sutton Everett and you asked me who that was. But you said Piper Egan showed up here, like I was supposed to know *exactly* who she was."

"The meetings at the label aren't attended by that many people. She's been at all of them the past few years. And I'm a

solo artist. You know I don't pay attention to all the craziness of other people's careers, including Sutton's."

"Sutton knew who you were."

I exhale. "What's your point, Brayden?"

"My point is, you were threatening to sue Empire when you found out they were sending someone. Then, this woman shows up, and I barely hear from you. And I get here to find you riding a Ferris wheel and having your friends hang out with her. I'm trying to figure out if she's going to change your mind."

"*Nothing* is going to change my mind," I stress. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you that."

"They sent over one hell of an offer, Kyle. We should talk it through, just in case—"

"Tell them no."

"Kyle…"

"I mean it. You think Piper has changed anything? She hasn't. I'm *done*."

Brayden shakes his head but agrees. "All right."

I wait, but there's no regret. No uncertainty.

But I *do* think about how this might be Piper's last day in Oak Grove. Once the label decides to accept my departure, she'll be gone.

"Great." I hesitate. "Make sure you mention her by name when you turn it down. Say she pitched it well, something like that. I don't want her career to suffer just because I'm done with mine."

I'm expecting Brayden to have something to say about that, but all he does is nod.

I open my guitar case and pull out my Gibson, taking a seat on one of the folding chairs that's been set up and glancing over the set list taped to the table as I tune my guitar. It's almost identical to last year's with only a couple of songs from my latest album making the cut. Releasing an album

while I was out on tour wasn't the smartest marketing ploy, but it was the only way I could ensure the label had no claim on my contract.

"Blue Rain Boots" isn't on the set list.

It's never been on the set list. I've never performed it live and never planned to.

When I made that stupid comment about Piper needing her rain boots when we got caught in the rain, I thought she would look at me like I was crazy. I wasn't expecting her to remember that morning. And now that I know it's tied up in a painful memory for her, I feel even weirder about it. Especially since I've avoided every possible opportunity to tell her about the song. I've had dozens of chances to mention it and avoided every single one.

I wrote the song as an inside joke. Out of annoyance.

Songwriting has always been about random sparks for me, and my first conversation with Piper was more like an inferno in my imagination. And while "Blue Rain Boots" might be based on a moment of reality, most of it is fantasy. Selling a story. The longer I go without mentioning it, the stranger it'll seem.

I promised myself I'd play it live if she was ever in the audience.

Because I never thought she'd *be* in the audience. Never thought I'd possibly have to follow through on that decision. Never thought she'd be sleeping under my roof, making me coffee every morning and driving me to get a tetanus shot. Never thought she'd be more than a fantasy.

"Hey, Kyle." Hank Reynolds steps into the tent, letting the flap fall shut behind him.

The tent is doing a better job of muffling the commotion outside than I realized.

I stand, setting my guitar down and shaking his hand. Hank is on the town council and one of the main organizers behind the fair. A role he takes very seriously, as evidenced by

his neatly combed graying hair and the button-down that looks freshly ironed.

"Band's all set, and everything is set up. Just wanted to make sure that you're ready?"

I nod. "I'm ready."

"Fantastic." He claps my shoulder. "I'll let the band know and introduce you."

"Sounds good."

"While I have you here…do you remember my youngest? Jeremy?"

I nod even though I'm not sure I do.

"He's gotten into music lately, and he—well, he booked a gig in Mayville on Friday night. The Wilkie place, Whiskey Cowboy, you know? Anyway, if you're around and feel like stopping by, I know it would mean a lot to Jeremy."

"I'll try to swing by."

Hank beams. "Appreciate it. I'll see you out there." He waves at Brayden, then disappears.

"Maybe this kid will be the next King of Country," Brayden comments, standing from his spot in the corner.

I blow out a breath. "Brayden…"

"You're walking away. I heard you. I get it. Life's a bitch. Just remember…" He pauses beside me. "People pray and beg and lie and cheat and steal and sacrifice to get where you're standing. I get the view isn't always great. But is it better anywhere else?" He raises one eyebrow, then steps out of the tent, leaving me standing here.

A few seconds later, I hear Hank's amplified voice greeting the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, do we ever have a treat for you. Please welcome to the stage Oak Grove's very own and the king of country music, Kyyyyle Spencerrrr!"

I pull in a deep breath, grab my Gibson, exhale, and then step out of the tent. I pass Brayden and walk up the stairs onto the stage, shaking Hank's hand and then lifting mine to wave to the crowd. The lights onstage are blinding, so much brighter than I remember them being.

Some view, I think.

But I heard Brayden's point—a little. I might have quite literally stumbled into this career, the way I told Piper earlier, but that doesn't mean I haven't worked for it. Haven't fought for it. Didn't prioritize it. I missed what turned out to be the last years of my mom's life because I was so busy being the fucking King of Country.

I reach the center of the stage. "How y'all doing tonight, Oak Grove?"

The answering roar is deafening.

I grin. "I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you guys. I said, *how y'all doing tonight, Oak Grove*?"

The response is still ringing through the air when I slip in my in-ear monitors and signal to the band. It's strange to be performing without my usual crew, but they're all enjoying a well-deserved break. It wasn't worth flying them all here for a few songs even if this is the last time I'll perform live.

I launch into the opening verse of one of my biggest hits, "Texas Moon," and the crowd knows every single word. I can see mouths moving past the glare of the lights even though the earpieces muffle the sound to keep me on key.

Creating comes with a unique thrill. Making something that wouldn't exist if you hadn't coaxed it into fruition is a high.

Listening to a song you wrote play on the radio.

Holding a record in your hands.

Playing in a sold-out stadium.

Performing in your hometown.

And I admit—to myself—that I'll miss it.

Just a little.

It takes me about an hour after stepping offstage to get through the crowd outside the tent, requesting autographs and selfies, and reach the spot where Hudson texted they were waiting.

It turns out to be the mechanical bull.

Danny spots me first and ambles over. “Hey, Spencer! Great show!”

“Thanks,” I say, distracted.

I’m focused on the redhead standing by the ride’s entrance. Morgan gestures toward the fake bull, saying something to Piper that she smiles at.

I sip some more water, staring. Ella and Natasha are standing nearby, both watching with wide eyes.

Thinking, *There’s no way she’ll do it*.

Piper glances my way, like she sensed my presence and can hear me doubting her. Pink darkens her cheeks when she realizes my attention is already on her.

Without really thinking about it, I take a few steps closer.

More people notice me, calling out and congratulating me. I’ve never been more irritated by the attention. Wished for anonymity as much.

I acknowledge them, but my attention is fixed on Piper as she kicks off her shoes and walks across the inflatable ring.

“How’d you talk her into that?” Hudson is asking Morgan when I reach where they’re standing.

“It was her idea.”

“Maybe you underestimated me.”

Maybe I keep doing it because I’m looking for flaws. For reasons she’s wrong for me.

Piper manages to jump into the seat on her first try, tucking her dress beneath her thighs. The ride attendant says something to her. Piper nods, then grabs the strap with her left hand and holds her right in the air.

I hold my breath as the ride starts to move.

Her posture remains relaxed, her feet forward.

"She's a natural," Morgan says.

The ride amps up to a higher speed, and my grip around the water bottle tightens. Hudson gives me a strange look when he hears the plastic crinkle.

The padding in the ring doesn't protect from everything. Back in high school, Brett Andrews broke his wrist after taking a nasty tumble. All it takes is a split second and an awkward angle.

Piper doesn't appear concerned about that possibility.

Her cheeks are flushed, and her red curls are bouncing as the ride amps up another degree, moving faster and faster. Her posture doesn't change, her hips rocking in time with the motorized movements, but a grin appears on her face as the crowd around the ride begins to cheer for her.

And I'm imagining her moving the same way…above me.

My jeans tighten uncomfortably as thoughts I shouldn't be having run wild in my head.

She's here for her job. Part of an attempt that probably—hopefully—ended when I turned down Empire's latest offer earlier.

They're a big, powerful label. No matter how much money I've made them, they'll move on at some point. They have plenty of other artists to focus attention on.

And Piper will get her promotion some other way. She deserves it, and if Empire doesn't see that, then she should work somewhere else. She'll go back to New York—to her big, law-abiding family and her roommates and her *life*—and I'll remain here, trying to figure out what mine is going to look like, going forward.

It stings for some reason. Like missing something I didn't know I had.

It feels like a loss, watching Piper ride the mechanical bull like she's done it a dozen times before.

This would be a hell of a lot easier if she were standing off to the side with her arms crossed, whining about how hot and dusty it was here. If she hadn't agreed to come at all.

The bull stops moving. Piper slides off it, flashing a triumphant smile around once her feet hit the inflated plastic.

She tucks her hair over one shoulder as she walks over, giggling as the inflated ground shifts with her movements. Piper reaches Morgan and Julia first, who both jump around and congratulate her.

Then, she's in front of me, one brow arched in challenge.

"You didn't think I could do it," she says, reading me right —I'm not sure when she gained that ability.

"I didn't think you *would* do it," I correct.

Piper rolls her eyes, but her broad smile doesn't dim at all. She looks happy and proud, and it twists something inside of me.

"Better than you could do," she teases.

I grin. "Wanna bet?"

Her eyes scan my face, like she's trying to decide if I'm serious. "Is this one of your stupid decisions?"

I grin before polishing off my water and tossing it into the nearby recycling bin. "We'll see."

I take off my hat and plop it on top of her curls, smirking at her shocked expression.

"I thought I wasn't allowed to borrow your hat," she says.

"Never said that. Besides, it looks better on you."

Fuck. I'm flirting with her.

Piper's blue eyes widen as she registers the same.

She looks good in anything. But wearing the beat-up hat I've had since high school?

She looks like *mine*.

I walk away before I can say anything else I shouldn't, heading for the ring right as a guy who looks to be in his mid-thirties gets thrown off. His buddies jeer and boo as he gets to his feet, grimacing.

This *is* stupid.

I rode Ferdinand a lot when I was younger. And there was a bar with a loose carding policy and a mechanical bull a couple of towns over that I used to go to with the guys back in high school.

But that was a long time ago.

I step into the ring as soon as the other guy exits.

"Good luck," he mutters to me as his friends crowd around him.

One of them whispers, "Dude, that's *Kyle Spencer*!"

It's a reminder that more than my age has changed since I last attempted this.

People—and phones—are everywhere, and I don't love the idea of the announcement of my retirement from music being accompanied by a video of me falling on my ass. But I can't back down now. I don't want to.

Hoisting myself up goes smoothly, so I settle into the seat and grip the strap. Nod at the ride's attendant, and it immediately starts rocking. I force my body to relax instead of tensing, following the movements. It's a machine, not a mammal, so it's fairly predictable. But the speed gradually increases, making it challenging even though I already know where it's moving.

I'm distantly aware of the commotion around me, the occasional holler or whoop breaking through my concentration. But I don't look toward the crowd until the bull is motionless and the ride is over, sliding off and shaking my

hand a couple of times. There's a good chance I irritated the cut on my thumb.

I forget about the dull throb when I step out of the ring and am surrounded by activity. The crowd around the ring has tripled in size, so it takes me a few minutes to spot Hudson and Tommy. They're both grinning broadly.

"Hell yes, Spencer! Haven't seen moves like that from you since high school." Hudson punches my shoulder.

I grin back. "I've still got it."

Then glance around. Duncan is standing a few feet away, talking to a couple of girls, but there's no sign of anyone else.

"We lose some people?" I say when what I really want to ask is, *Where's Piper?*

"Yeah." Hudson glances at his phone. "A bunch of the girls went to the restroom. Guess the lines were really bad earlier."

I nod, oddly deflated Piper didn't watch, which is ridiculous.

"Morgan is going to text me when they're finished. Come on. You deserve some ice cream after that performance."

"Which one?"

Hudson laughs. "Both of them. Let's go."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"You have fun?"

"Yeah, I did. Thanks for…inviting me."

I'm not sure he explicitly did actually. It was just a forgone conclusion that I'd come—the same way I've tagged along every time he's left the ranch lately.

Kyle nods an acknowledgment as he shifts the truck into drive.

I clear my throat just to break the silence that lingers, slipping my feet out of my sandals and tucking them under my dress. Sneak a glance at his impassive profile. He's been quiet for the past hour, barely even smiling when I returned his hat to him. All I can figure is, he was coming off a postshow high, and now, he's defaulted to barely tolerating me.

The words are right there—*Your performance was amazing*—but they won't come out.

So, I settle for the next best thing.

"You weren't bad on the bull."

He glances at me, appearing confused. "You watched?"

"Uh, yeah."

Although I was tempted to leave a couple of times, listening to the suggestive comments that were thrown his way. It was an easy yes when Morgan suggested heading to the restrooms as soon as Kyle dismounted.

“And *not bad* is the best compliment you could come up with?”

“Uh-huh.”

I’m relieved to see the corner of his mouth creep up into a half-smile. Which is confusing because I’m not sure when Kyle’s mood started to affect mine.

Him smiling shouldn’t be the sole source of this sudden warmth in my chest. It shouldn’t be responsible for me thinking that as long as he’s grinning, everything is okay. Giving someone the power to affect your mood is just as dangerous as handing them something else.

I look away, out the windshield at the dark road, telling myself my heart is safe.

The other headlights that left the lot at the same time we did all headed in the opposite direction. The endless expanse of empty asphalt is soothing in a way I’ve never considered before.

I’m used to commotion and activity. Never knew anything different until I came here. Never appreciated a slower pace.

And now, I’m not sure how much of it is Texas…or how much of it is *him*.

“Little different from New York?” Kyle’s question echoes my thoughts.

“I know you’ve been to New York before, so you should know the answer to that,” I say, keeping my eyes straight ahead.

I’m aware enough of his proximity without needing to look over and confirm how close he’s sitting.

“You must miss it.”

I shrug, glad he didn’t phrase it as a question that would require more of a response.

I miss my family, crazy and chaotic as they are. I miss my bed. I miss the bodega outside of the office, where I often get

lunch. I miss standing on sticky floors, waiting to hear a new band so I can decide if they have *it*.

And I guess all of that combined is New York for me.

I guess I do miss it.

But I *know* when I'm back in New York, I'll miss this.

I definitely don't say that though.

Fat patters of rain begin to hit the windshield, running down the glass in rapid rivers. At least we're not out in the middle of a field this time. But it feels just as intimate as that moment did, tucked together in the dry cab as thunder rumbles in the distance.

"We get a lot of summer storms here," Kyle comments.

"I guess so," I say, not sure what else to say. "Think the new roof will hold?"

"I didn't install it. So, probably."

I laugh.

"That's where I went to high school," he says suddenly.

I squint out the rain-streaked window at the sprawling brick building that takes up most of the block we're passing. "It looks bigger than mine."

"Yeah? You went to school in the city?"

"Yep. It was an arts school I had to apply to get into. My brothers all went somewhere else because they wanted to play sports."

Kyle smiles.

I sigh. "You played sports, didn't you?"

His grin grows. "Football is big here."

"And you were the star player with the letterman jacket all the girls wanted to wear, right?"

"Until I got kicked off the team."

"You got *kicked off* the team?"

“Uh-huh.”

“I can’t picture that.”

“Found out I was going to be a big brother. I didn’t handle it well.”

“Oh.”

He glances over, one corner of his mouth curling upward. “You can ask.”

“We don’t have to talk about it. It’s none of my business.”

Kyle exhales. “My mom was…complicated. I never knew my dad, and I don’t think she had a clue who he was either. She settled down with Carter Spencer when I was three. He legally adopted me and got sick about a year later. Was gone in a few months, and he left us the ranch. Fast-forward to high school. She shacked up with one of my teachers. Got pregnant and relapsed into drinking as soon as the baby was born. The father got full custody and moved to Tennessee.”

I manage to get out, “I’m so sorry, Kyle,” through the lump in my throat.

“Pretty sure you had nothing to do with it,” he says, attempting to lighten the heavy mood.

“Still, sorry you had to live it.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“What…what about your mom?”

He said she *was* complicated.

Does that mean she’s no longer complicated or no longer…

“She got drunk and wrapped her car around a telephone pole six months ago. Died instantly.”

I pull in a surprised breath, even having some sense of where this story was going. You don’t deliver a happy ending wearing the pained expression Kyle is.

Sorry doesn’t seem like enough, but it’s what I offer him again.

“I paid for her rehab. Paid for her car. Paid for people to run the farm. For years, I just threw money at the problem.”

“People have to want the help, Kyle. You did everything you could.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I could have done more, and I chose not to.”

“It was her job to take care of you, not the other way around.”

Kyle is silent, but I hear the disagreement in it.

“My mom isn’t why I’m leaving music,” he finally says. “It’s a fucking miracle the press didn’t dig up the story—and probably only because we had different last names. But I feel like I lost sight of…*everything*, you know? Got so caught up in accomplishing something, and it ended up feeling like it was a whole lot of nothing. It was a wake-up call, I guess. A refocusing.”

“That makes sense,” is my unoriginal response.

“You’re not going to tell me I’m making a mistake and my mom would want me to keep performing?”

“Would your mom want you to keep performing?”

Kyle sighs. “I have no fucking clue. She never saw me play anywhere, except the fair, even when I sent tickets.”

A pang ricochets in my chest as I think about the guy looking out in the crowd for his mom. Adored by thousands and missing one.

It’s a reminder of how we all share the basest of instincts, even when we have different backgrounds and different circumstances. For all their faults, my family has always shown up, and I’m immensely grateful for that.

Instead of offering more empty words, I move closer. It’s easy in the close confines of the truck cab to shift a few inches across the bench seat. I squeeze his arm without thinking it all the way through, offering him the comfort of physical touch.

Kyle glances at me, confusion flashing in his eyes before he looks back at the road. “Thought you’d try to talk me into signing a new contract again.”

“Nope.”

“They made me another official offer. I turned it down.”

I swallow, painfully aware relief isn’t what’s swirling around in my stomach.

I know what he’s really saying.

This is ending soon.

“Okay.”

Kyle turns into the ranch driveway, the truck’s suspension groaning as we hit a dip in the dirt.

The rain has slowed to a mist.

It coats my hair, skin, and dress as I tumble out of the cab, the ground dark and uneven.

“Don’t break anything,” Kyle says, closing the door behind me.

It’s still foreign, having him open doors for me like I’m an invalid, but strange in a special, unexpected way.

“I can’t see anything.”

“I moved all the shingles. There’s nothing to trip over. Just head for the house.”

“Yeah, I know you moved all the shingles,” I grumble. “How’s your hand, by the way?”

“It’s fine.”

I stumble again. “Crap. Your yard has it out for me.”

Kyle chuckles. “Just walk straight.”

“I *was*,” I insist, but I take the hand he’s offering anyway.

He doesn’t let go. And I don’t pull my palm away.

I swing our interlocked fingers like we’re little kids, tilting my face back so the falling water hits my skin straight on.

This feels like one of those rare, effortless moments where time is suspended and the rest of the world doesn't really exist. I don't have to worry about what Kyle is thinking or wonder what it means that *I* don't want to let go.

His steps slow, and mine do too. We're both getting wetter than we need to, walking at the slowest pace possible.

"Glad the rain is easing off," Kyle comments.

I glance at him. He's looking at the shiny metal roof, a wrinkle between his eyes.

"I get it," I say.

"Get what?" He's still focused on the roof.

"Get why people are obsessed with your music. You're really good."

He looks at me then, his expression shifting to incredulity. Laughs once, short and surprised and disbelieving. "Is this your newest tactic? Act like a fan so I can feel guilty about letting another person down?"

I shake my head. "No. And I'm not *acting*. I'm finished trying to talk you into re-signing. It's your decision. This is me telling you what a lot of people would love to say to your face because I have the chance to and they don't. I loved seeing you perform tonight, and I'm probably more shocked by that than you are. But I get what that executive saw. If you'd been there tonight as just a guy with a guitar and I was in A&R, *I* would have signed you."

I'm expecting a smile or a *thanks*. Maybe some teasing about me liking country music.

What I'm *not* expecting is for Kyle to drop my hand and storm inside the farmhouse, leaving me standing alone in the rain.

By the time I walk in the front door, he's no longer in the living room.

I hear the fridge door slam shut, and then he's looming in the doorway, a dark brown bottle gripped in the hand that was just wrapped around mine.

“Are you *drinking*?” I ask, horrified.

Kyle’s sobriety is still a partial mystery to me. I’m assuming it’s because of what he just shared with me about his mom.

I’ve seen him in enough situations where alcohol is rampant that it’s obvious his abstinence is a conscious choice. The possibility he’s breaking his ban because I *complimented* him does not sit well with me at all. It feels like anything I say to him is the wrong thing. That I can’t win, even when I try to.

He moves his fingers so I can see the label.

It’s root beer.

“Oh,” I say, relieved.

He scoffs and heads upstairs.

I drink a glass of water in the kitchen and then follow slowly, totally confused.

His bedroom door is shut when I reach the top of the stairs, and I’m not sure whether I should knock.

This has nothing to do with the reason I’m here, the reason that’s rapidly coming to an end. If Kyle turned down a second offer, the chances that I’ll soon be told to return to New York are extremely high.

So, after a moment of indecision, I head straight into the bathroom, going through my typical night routine of cleansing my face and brushing my teeth. I pee, wash my hands, and then open the door.

He’s there. Waiting. Leaning against the opposite wall with his hands shoved into his jeans and his damp cotton shirt clinging to his chest.

Looking way better than he has any right to.

My stomach goes through an acrobatic routine as I watch his head lift to look at me. Even his frown is attractive. It’s an expression I’ve only seen aimed at me, so I’ve formed some fucked-up attachment to it.

Energy crackles between us, the hum steady and consuming.

I hesitate, still trying to figure out what's going on.

We were good—great. He gave me his hat at the fair. Opened up on the drive home. And now, all of a sudden, it feels like I'm standing in the yard and he's looming over me from the front porch all over again.

I decide to apologize because I don't want to leave on poor terms and I'm not sure what else to say.

"Sorry if I took too long in the bath—"

Kyle pushes away from the wall, advancing on me like a predator stalking prey.

There's no sign of the passivity that used to define our encounters in his expression, back when he was clearly ignoring me in the hopes I'd go away. It's all intensity, just like when he was performing earlier.

I don't step back even though my instincts are screaming at me to.

"What the hell are you doing here, Piper?"

"I…I'm…" Words are hard to get out. They're stuck in my throat, thanks to the intensity in his expression. "You know," I finally manage to get out.

Kyle is already shaking his head. "No, I don't. I know why Empire Records cares if I don't step onstage again. But I have no fucking clue why *you're* here. Why you're standing in the hallway of my house right now."

"I'm here so I can keep earning a paycheck!" I snap. "Some of us can't just *decide* to stop working!"

I can't ignore the way Kyle's jaw clenches. Or the pang of guilt in my chest.

We're standing in the hallway of his childhood home, decorated with mismatched furniture and threadbare rugs. He didn't grow up with money. Didn't buy himself a country music career. He drives a twenty-year-old truck and appears to

own exactly two pairs of jeans. Whatever millions he's made, they aren't funding a flashy lifestyle.

I clear my throat. "I'm sorry."

Kyle closes his eyes and exhales. "What *is* this, Piper? Phase five of the plan to make me lose my mind?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. There's *no plan*!"

He shakes his head. "You're fucking infuriating, you know that?"

The words are angry. They're also…affectionate. Filled with layers of emotions that I know I'll lie awake later, trying to identify.

"What have I done that's so terrible, Kyle? If you didn't want me to go tonight, you should have just said so! I can't—"

I stop talking when he kisses me.

I stand, silent and stunned, as his tongue traces my bottom lip.

Words—forming them, let alone speaking them—are no longer possible. I'm not even thinking. Everything has stalled, so all I can think about is the warm glide of his tongue as it slips inside my mouth.

Kyle Spencer is kissing me.

Those five words run on repeat through my head.

And they sound insane.

But it feels right.

Kissing Kyle feels like coming home. Like slipping into a favorite pair of jeans and then climbing onto a roller coaster. Comforting and thrilling.

He tastes like root beer, and it mixes with the mint flavor lingering in my mouth.

It's gentle and tentative at first, then quickly turns frantic and heated. I'm pushed against the wall right next to the bathroom door as Kyle kisses me with a desperation that's as

unexpected as him kissing me at all. That suggests maybe he has noticed me in the same way I've been focused on him.

We're both breathing heavily when he pulls away. But he doesn't go far. Remaining close enough that I can memorize new details in the face that's already familiar, like the freckle above his left eye and the faded scar in the center of his chin.

"What's that from?" My pointer finger traces the old cut lightly, avoiding the penetrating weight of his gaze.

Asking about old injuries is easier than discussing what just took place between us.

He leans one hand against the plaster behind my head, studying my expression before he answers me. "I crashed my bike riding over to Hudson's in third grade. Eight stitches."

"Was that the last time you were allowed to ride your bike over?" I tease.

Kyle's expression darkens, like a cloud passing over the sun. "No."

My hand moves, running along the line of his jaw and down to his tensed shoulder. Offering silent sympathy because that's the only kind he might accept.

"Did you mean it?" he asks.

"Mean what?"

"What you said earlier, about my performance."

"I've never lied to you," I whisper.

He nods slowly, like he's considering that.

"Why are you mad at me?" I ask.

"I'm not mad at you."

"You stormed in here. Then told me I'm 'fucking infuriating.' It sure seems like you're mad at me."

"I'm mad at myself."

"*Why*?"

“Because I’ve never needed anybody and I feel like I need you.”

I stare at him, stunned.

“I’m so tired…of everything. But the most exhausting thing is trying to pretend like I’m not thinking about this—you—all the time.”

I’m not sure who moves first, me or him. But we’re kissing again. And it’s shocking, but not *as* shocking, so I can relax into it more. Savor the slow sweep of his tongue and the way he leans forward so I’m caged between his hard body and the wall. He steps closer, his knee sliding between my legs like it belongs there, and sparks skitter across my skin at the friction.

This is a situation I’d usually be overthinking and second-guessing. A situation I *should* be overthinking and second-guessing. But any alarm bells are blissfully silent. It feels like reaching the top of a mountain, knowing there’s only one way down. Seeing the first domino fall and already knowing the fate of the last one.

Inevitable.

We stare at each other, both breathing heavily.

“You sure?” he asks.

“Yes.” I’ve never felt so sure, but that sounds too honest.

And I *shouldn’t* be this sure.

This is Kyle fucking Spencer. He’s not just a hot guy with a cowboy hat and a sexy voice, and he’s not just part of my job. The artists who walked into Empire Records, acting all high and mighty and too important for *thank you*, didn’t have a tenth of the fame he has. He’s a superstar who sells out stadiums and has screaming fans. Who has success in an industry that makes it hard to find.

It shouldn’t make any difference in a situation like this.

But I’m picturing all the gorgeous women he’s undoubtedly been with as I walk into his bedroom, wondering how I’ll measure up and hating that I’ve created a competition in my head.

It smells like him in here, wood and leather and laundry detergent. Spicy cologne.

Nerves prickle in my stomach as I approach the bed. It's the only furniture in here, aside from an armchair in one corner. The only sign of habitation are the two shirts slung over one arm. The bed is neatly made, the floor bare.

I climb onto the mattress and then roll onto my back, watching Kyle approach.

He left the bedroom door open, the yellow light from the hallway spreading across the hardwood.

His steps are deliberate. I rise up onto my elbows to gain a better angle, swallowing hard when I watch him unbuckle his leather belt, one-handed, then tug it free from the loops and toss it onto the floor. The *clang* of metal hitting wood makes goose bumps rise on my skin. His shirt disappears next, revealing the ridges of his abdomen I've already ogled at every opportunity. Without the belt, the waistband of his jeans slips lower, the carved V impossible to miss.

Every action looks practiced and purposeful, but I banish all thoughts of his experience from my head.

If I'm going to do this, I'm going to enjoy it. Not compare myself.

Also…because caring about Kyle's past suggests caring, period.

And this is just sex. Scratching an itch.

I think.

I can't overanalyze what he meant by *needing me* when he's half-naked and right in front of me.

He pauses at the edge of the mattress for a few seconds, and then it dips. Heat spreads across my skin like spilled water, steady and never-ending, as he crawls over me, forcing me to lie back down. My thighs spread, creating a space for him right between them. His mouth finds that spot between my shoulder and my neck, pressing a gentle kiss that sends shivers down my spine.

My hands run up his back, feeling the ropes of muscle shift and stretch.

"It's been a while," I blurt out.

Hazel eyes are suddenly peering into mine. "How long?"

"A year. Ish."

"Is that why you were asking your friend about her boyfriend's dick size?"

"Feel free to never mention that humiliating moment again."

His laugh shakes the bed, and I can't help but smile at the sound. He tugs one of my curls straight, then lets it go.

"It's just like riding a bike," he tells me.

I laugh. *Have I ever laughed in bed with a guy before?* I don't think I have.

"Really? Because I've *never* heard anyone say *It's just like having sex* before."

"It's a new saying. I'm working on trademarking it."

"Yeah, I'm sure you'll have a lot of luck with that…"

I lose track of what I'm saying when his hand slides up my thigh and teases at the lace of my thong.

"You wet for me, Piper?" Kyle asks it so seriously that the truth spills out without me thinking twice.

"Always."

He likes that answer because he rewards me. Immediately, I feel the rasp of his calluses brushing across more of my skin. Tugging my dress up and ghosting a finger along the damp material of my underwear. The tease of friction is excruciating as he barely brushes the lace.

I lift my hips, seeking more, and Kyle chuckles.

"So impatient."

There's the same affectionate note to his tone I heard when he called me infuriating. I didn't expect to be lying beneath

him when I heard it again.

One yank, and I'm naked from the waist down, rough denim rubbing against the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

It's thrilling and terrifying to have Kyle's whole attention on me.

It's a shocking contrast to watching him command a stage. To seeing a huge crowd beg for a simple acknowledgment.

I've never felt so *seen*.

He's hovering above me all of a sudden, rough fingers pulling my thighs farther apart. Soft, teasing kisses soothe the rasp of denim, and I squirm beneath him, the sensation the same unbearable feeling as being tickled.

His tongue is where his fingers just were before I can fully register what's happening.

My hips lift, silently begging for more. More friction. More pleasure. More pressure. Just…more.

Kyle's grip tightens on my hips, angling them exactly where and how he wants.

And it feels so *good* that I can't be self-conscious.

I moan, rolling my head to the side so I can watch his head between my thighs. So I can memorize exactly what Kyle Spencer going down on me looks like.

"Fuck, Kyle, I'm…"

He tries a new angle with his tongue, and my brain melts into mush. My fingers twist the bedding.

"*Fuck*."

Pleasure grows brighter and bigger, and I'm torn between chasing the high and wishing this cusp would last forever.

His hand lands on my thigh, spreading me wider. I writhe against his mouth, and his grip tightens, holding me in place. His tongue delves deeper, and I'm gone. Shot into a stratosphere of pleasure from the perfect pressure, coming harder and longer than I ever have. So relieved to finally

shatter and disappointed when the blissful waves begin to wane.

When I come back to reality, Kyle's hovering over me, wearing a smug expression.

I slide my hands down his stomach, enjoying every ridge of his abs. For a man who's made a living standing onstage and singing, he's ridiculously fit. And I'm embarrassingly eager to see more of his body. To tease and to please him. His hands glide over every inch of my skin, like he's memorizing each dip and curve.

"The things I've been dying to do to you, Piper Egan."

I flush, heat spreading across my skin. "Do them," I challenge.

His hands slide up until I'm no longer wearing my dress. Spread beneath him, wearing only a black lace bra that's completely see-through. His warm palms cover my breasts, cupping and squeezing. Then, my bra is gone too.

The air conditioner hums in the corner of the room, the cold air caressing my skin and lifting goose bumps.

He's looking at me like this matters, and I'm not sure how to process that.

I slide my hands down his chest until I find the waistband of his jeans, tugging at them impatiently. I manage to pull them down a couple of inches before Kyle backs away, standing at the edge of the bed and stepping out of them. His boxer briefs do little to hide the size of his erection, but I'm still shocked—and intimidated—when his cock bobs free.

He's huge. He's also so hard that it looks painful.

And there's a thrill that races downward when I see him that turned on because of *me*. Everything clenches as I imagine how it will feel to have that thick, long length inside of me.

I didn't think Kyle Spencer was my type.

Now, I'm having a hard time picturing anything *but* this as my fantasy.

There's a distinctive crinkle of a condom wrapper. Then, he's back over me, hot skin rubbing against mine instead of stiff denim. His knees slide under my thighs, propping me up and spreading me open. And then I feel him *there*, the brief brush enough to make me gasp.

"Fuck. This view."

He can see everything. But I'm too turned on to register any self-consciousness or second-guessing. And there's no doubt Kyle likes what he sees—the lust is obvious on his face.

He grips his erection and swipes it through the wetness gathered between my thighs, rubbing my clit with the tip and then probing my entrance. He pushes in an inch, then pulls back. Teases me again.

I can't stop moaning. Or trying to rock my hips. His grip tightens again, forcing me to accept the slow pace.

I'm grateful for it when he actually thrusts. I can feel my body stretching, the slight sting reminding me he's bigger than any other guy I've been with. I'm absolutely not mentioning that to Kyle. His ego is big enough.

The twinge of pain quickly gives way to undiluted pleasure.

He leans down to kiss me, the tangle of our tongues as wet and desperate as the rest of our bodies. My breathing quickens, and so does my heartbeat.

Kyle pulls away, moving my leg and shifting the angle so he slides even deeper. I moan, my hands moving from the sheets to my breasts. Kyle swears—loudly—when he sees me start to play with my nipples. His thrusts quicken into rapid strokes that send me flying over the edge. He fucks me through my orgasm, groaning when he finds his own release.

It feels so good that I can push away all the thoughts about what a big mistake it probably was.

Because if I thought leaving was going to be difficult before, I'm certain it was nothing in comparison to what it will be like now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KYLE

Piper is fast asleep when I wake up.

I stare at her, in my bed, for way too long.

Red curls spread in a wild halo across the pillow.

Peaceful expression.

Perfect tits, nipples pebbled from the cold draft wheezing out of the air conditioner.

I pull the blue sheet up to cover her chest and then slip out of bed, yanking on the same pair of jeans Piper pulled off me last night, along with a clean T-shirt from the dresser. Walk downstairs, not sure exactly where I'm headed while also realizing the destination is inevitable.

Since its construction was finished, I've been in the recording studio exactly once. It was a costly installation that's become a waste of money and a painful reminder of past plans. Before my mom died, I was planning to prioritize spending more time in Texas. Rediscovering more of Miles rather than being Kyle all the time.

And then I got the call that she was gone, and the whole thing felt like a sick joke.

Some people might say she got what she deserved. She was a selfish absentee parent who chose alcohol over me not once, not twice, but dozens of times. Who could never shake her demons, even when she tried. Who decided to get behind the wheel when she had no business driving a car and became another statistic as a result.

Piper's the first person I've told voluntarily. Mabel and John were the ones who got the call from the local police. An officer called me once they got my number. I told Brayden and a few other members of my team out of necessity so I could come back for the burial.

And more terrifying than the physical line Piper and I crossed last night is that emotional one. The realization that I told her about my mom and my past because I want her to know *me*.

People know *a* version of me.

Everyone in Oak Grove sees me as Miles. They might know I'm a famous singer and see me perform at the fair every year, but none of them have any comprehension of what that part of my life is really like.

And those who do know have no sense of what my life here is like. Who *I* really am beneath the celebrity and the success.

Piper is the only one who's seen both sides. She knows exactly what my life here is like, what the past was and what the present is. And she's also part of the music industry. She sat in the meetings that discussed sales and tour dates. Album marketing and fake dating another artist.

And I tell myself *that's* why it feels different around her. Being myself without worrying they wouldn't understand one side of me or the other isn't a luxury I've allowed with anyone else.

I couldn't explain to Mabel and John why I was stepping away from music because they had no sense of what that part of my life was like. That fame can be the worst and best thing that ever happens to you.

I couldn't explain to Brayden why I wasn't shaken by my mom's death, that it was a call some part of me had been expecting to get for years because I never shared that part of my backstory with him. As far as he knows, her death was a tragic accident, not a powder keg that was sitting and waiting to explode.

The door creaks when I open it, but that's the only signal the building is old. From the inside, the studio looks brand-new. I splurged on state-of-the-art everything.

I ignore all the recording equipment and take a seat on the leather couch, grabbing the old Fender I found at a yard sale in high school from the stand. This is the guitar I learned to play on back when music wasn't even a hobby, just an occasional distraction. The weight and scratched wood feel more comfortable in my hands than any other guitar ever has.

I fiddle around with a few different chord combinations, then start singing the words that have been scratching at the back of my mind since I woke up.

Red hair, blue sheets,

White lies, pink cheeks.

Another creak, as the door opens.

My fingers fall from the strings, and I silently pray the soundproofing means Piper didn't hear anything.

She appears a second later, wearing her dress from last night. The black cotton is wrinkled—from the floor and from my hands. There's an immediate tug of lust as soon as I see her, red hair wild and pink lips swollen.

"Hi." Piper stops as soon as she spots me, hovering just inside the doorway, like she isn't sure if she should take another step. There's a crease on one cheek from the pillow.

"Hey." I set the Fender down, rubbing my suddenly sweaty palms on rough denim and shifting to the right, making a little more space on the couch.

"Didn't think anyone came in here," she says, walking over and glancing around.

"Didn't know you knew it existed."

A ghost of a smile. "I snooped accidentally when I was trying to find the bunkhouse. And then I came back to take a closer look."

She takes a seat beside me, the soft dip of the cushion oddly comforting.

"Not sure how the Academy would feel about its precious awards being kept in a closet."

"I didn't realize *closer look* meant you'd scoured every inch of the place."

Piper huffs a laugh, then leans back against the cushions. The fabric of her dress rides up another inch, revealing more thigh. Quickly, I avert my eyes.

"Do you always sneak out?" There's no anger or disappointment in her voice, just curiosity.

"No." I lean back, matching her pose. "That would require spending the night."

"Ah. So, you're *that* kind of rock star."

"I guess. Was easier to separate things that way."

She breaks eye contact, looking around the studio. "This place is really cool."

"I built it…before."

"Yeah, I figured."

We're dancing on a delicate line. Last night, I let go. Let her in.

In the bright sunshine of morning, reality is harder to hide from.

She's leaving.

I'm staying.

Those two truths, plus so many others, practically make me and Piper an impossibility.

"New song?" she asks, glancing at the guitar.

"Not really."

"Well, I should—"

I lean out, grabbing her arm and keeping her on the couch before I've consciously decided to move. "Piper."

“What?”

Blue burns me, intense and devastating, as she meets my gaze full-on.

I swallow. “I didn’t mean for you to wake up alone. I just —”

“It’s fine, Kyle. It was just a onetime thing.”

I let go of her arm, sinking back against the stiff cushions. Absorbing how that stings.

There are red scratches on my back that suggest she enjoyed herself, but there’s a flare of insecurity I work to hide.

“I’ve never been with a woman I considered a friend. I don’t know what the rules are.”

One eyebrow rises. “We’re friends?”

“I hope so.”

Piper nods once, then stands. “I need some coffee.”

“I put the leftover from yesterday in the fridge.”

“I need fresh this morning. Since, you know”—she glances at me—“I didn’t get much sleep.”

“I remember.”

Before she turns away, I catch the way her cheeks flush.

I give her a fifteen-minute head start, then close up the studio and head for the farmhouse. The milking crew is just beginning to arrive. I wave at the trucks as they pass by, headed toward the shed. Then almost trip over the pink bike lying in the grass a few feet from the stairs.

I stare at it for a few seconds, uncertainty churning in my gut, then start up the stairs.

“…actually wear cowboy boots?”

“I thought the same thing,” I hear Piper say. “But everyone was wearing them. I don’t think you’d stick out.”

I inhale deeply, then pull the screen door open, knowing its slam will give my arrival away. Sure enough, both female

voices are suddenly silent.

I focus on Bailey first. The last time I saw my little sister in person was four years ago, when she came to a show in Nashville.

Since then, we've communicated exclusively through stilted phone calls and generic cards. My publicist picks out the gifts that get sent for her birthday and around the holidays.

As if our fifteen-year age gap wasn't enough of an obstacle, Bailey's father can't stand me. I can't say I entirely blame him, considering my behavior back in high school. But it's a grudge that's never faded. One I'm sure Bailey is aware of.

She has a stepmom and a little brother in Tennessee. A whole other life, separate from everything her father left behind here when she was only a few months old. He didn't allow her to return for our mother's burial. I'm certain the only reason Bailey is in Oak Grove is to visit her grandparents—and that her dad has no clue I'm in town.

"Hi, Bailey."

I catalog the many changes in her appearance. I got a Christmas card last winter, but she looks even older than she appeared in that.

She looks like my mom.

I wonder if that's contributed to how fiercely her father has kept her removed from this ranch. From me.

I experience a rare twinge of sympathy toward the man. It can't be easy, staring your mistakes in the face every day. He tried to fix my mom, and when he failed, he abandoned her. I did the same thing. I just came back a few times out of obligation or hope or dependence.

My sister's glance barely lifts from the glass of orange juice Piper must have served her to greet me with a quiet "Hey."

I should hug her. Smile. But I'm too stunned she's here—on a ranch she's never been to and, I'm sure, she isn't

supposed to be at.

"You're visiting your grandparents?"

A nod, which feels like a regress. One word to none.

"Do they know you're here?"

Bailey's chin sets stubbornly—a trait I also inherited from our mother.

I'm not winning any brownie points. But her dad dislikes me enough. If her family is out looking for her, I need to know.

"I told Grandma I was biking into town."

There's an insolent edge to the answer. A challenge.

I glance at Piper. She quickly looks down, focusing on measuring the coffee grounds. She's changed into shorts and a T-shirt, her hair pulled up in a messy bun.

"This isn't town," I say as gently as possible.

"Okay. I'll leave." Bailey slides off the stool she was sitting on.

I take a step forward. "You don't have to leave. I'm happy you're here. I just wanted to make sure Oak Grove's police department isn't out searching for you."

"They don't expect me back until dinner," Bailey says.

"Oh." I'm at a loss for what else to say or do as the coffee maker begins to *glug*, filling the kitchen with the pleasant aroma of fresh coffee.

It feels wrong to have her here when the adults who are responsible for her have no clue where she is. But I'm glad—shocked but glad—she's here, and forcing her to leave won't convey that.

"Bailey's going to the fair tonight," Piper says, surprising me. "I was just telling her how much fun it was last night."

Bailey nods, giving Piper a much more enthusiastic look than any she's aimed at me. "I've never been to a fair before."

“Maybe you should call your grandparents,” Piper suggests. “Check on what time they’re expecting you home before you head to the fair. And let them know where you are, in case they need to reach you before then.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bailey agrees, adding to my shock.

She slips a pink cell phone out of her pocket—something I did not realize she had since I’ve always called the landline—and wanders toward the stairs with it pressed up to one ear.

“Thank you.” My voice is low and fervent.

Piper smiles as she pours herself some coffee. “I babysat a lot when I was younger. Toddlers and teenagers were always the trickiest. I hope I didn’t overstep.”

“You didn’t. I’m *really* glad you’re here.”

“Well, well, well. Words I never thought I’d hear.” Her smirk turns teasing around the rim of the mug.

Words I wasn’t expecting to say.

And words that have nothing to do with Bailey, if I really think about it, but this isn’t the right time or place to share that sentiment.

I’m not sure that right time or place will ever exist since we were a *onetime* thing.

I walk over, pouring myself a mug of coffee. “Our relationship is…complicated.”

“I gathered, from what you said last night.”

“*Nonexistent* would probably be a better descriptor. I just…” I blow out a breath. “I have no idea what to say to a thirteen-year-old.”

“Imagine if she was *famous*.”

I nod slowly, registering her meaning. “You’re right.”

I don’t doubt Bailey is in a similar predicament; it just complicates everything even more. Her showing up here today is the only time she’s given me any signal she’s curious or interested when it comes to me.

“Uh, do you have Ella’s number?” Piper asks.

I raise an eyebrow, but don’t ask why, sliding my phone out of my pocket and scrolling through my Contacts until I find Ella. I hold the phone out to her with the number pulled up.

Piper pats her pocket, then frowns. “Crap. I think I left my phone in my—” She breaks eye contact. “*Your* room.”

“Just use mine.” I hand it to her. “I should check on a couple of things…outside. Can you let Bailey know I’ll be back soon?”

She nods before I walk into the living room.

Kick the screen door open, so it slams shut like I left.

But I linger instead of heading straight outside because I’m unreasonably curious as to why she’s wanting to talk to Ella.

I know they got along, dancing and laughing at Wagon Wheel, but from what I saw, they only talked briefly at the fair. If Piper is going to tell Ella what happened between us last night, it’ll spread through my entire friend group by noon. I need to be prepared, and I tell myself that’s why I’m eavesdropping.

Only a few seconds pass before I hear her voice.

“No, it’s Piper actually.”

A pause.

“Oh, no, Kyle is fine. Everything is fine.”

More silence on her end.

“It was fun, yeah. And that’s actually what I’m calling about. If I go back to the fair for a second night, I’m not sure what to wear. I didn’t feel like I…blended in.”

I’m completely confused, praying Bailey doesn’t reappear before I can listen to the end of the conversation. If Piper wasn’t sure what to wear, why didn’t she call Ella yesterday? And I absolutely shouldn’t have made a joke about her outfit, but I had no clue she would take it as anything more than teasing.

“Mm-hmm. Thanks. And…is that what you wore when you were younger too? Like at thirteen?”

Realization bolts through me like lightning. Piper isn’t asking for herself. She’s finding out for Bailey.

I open the screen door again, this time carefully. I hold the frame until it’s back in place, the hinges barely squeaking. Then walk over to the railing and grip the wood, staring out at the wooden fencing and the distant silhouette of a windmill.

Out of my many regrets when it comes to my family, my relationship with Bailey—or lack thereof—is high on the list.

Mabel and John are in a good place. My mom is gone. But my little sister…it’s complicated. I have no idea what to do with or say to a thirteen-year-old who’s practically a stranger. And I’m wary of dragging her into the circus that’s my life. When she came to my show in Nashville, the headlines about me having a secret daughter were constant. Having people think I’d fathered a child at fifteen wasn’t ideal, but slightly better than if they’d dug up the truth.

I’ve always acted—and felt—like an only child, as terrible as that sounds. Partly out of convenience. Partly out of fear. Partly out of uncertainty because I’ve never known how to change anything.

I didn’t even know she was visiting this week.

And with one phone call, Piper managed to do more for my sister than I *ever* have.

I stare ahead, not really seeing, until I hear the screen door open again. I turn, watching Piper step out.

“Whatcha checking on?” There’s a lilt to the question that tells me she’s not expecting a good answer. That even if she’s not calling me out on eavesdropping, she knows I made up an excuse to come out here because I’m feeling overwhelmed about the whole situation.

“Uh…”

“Bailey’s grandparents said it was fine for her to stay. They just want her home by six. I had her tell them we would drive

her home."

We.

A little of the tension dissipates as soon as I hear it. Such a small, short word, packed with so much significance. For years, I had a team. But I wasn't part of the team.

"So, she's staying." Uncertainty and excitement fight for space.

Piper hesitates. "She was asking me what to wear to the fair tonight. I could take her into town, look for something special? I assume there are clothing stores? *A* clothing store at least?"

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You're *not* asking. I'm offering."

"And I appreciate it. But you don't have to—"

"Piper?"

"Porch!" she calls back.

Bailey's silhouette appears in the screen door a few seconds later. She steps out slowly, exacerbating the annoying squeak. Her eyes dart to me, then away. "What's going on?"

"Kyle was just talking about the chores he has to take care of this morning. This ranch has a thousand cows on it—did you know that?"

Slowly, Bailey shakes her head.

"A lot to keep up with. So, I was thinking you and I could head into town for a little bit, give Kyle a chance to get everything done."

Bailey's expression lights up. "Can we look at cowboy boots?" she asks.

"As long as it's okay with your brother. He might need help shoveling cow sh—I mean, manure."

I give Piper a *look* that's more amused than the scowl I was aiming for.

"Kyle, can I?"

I clear my throat, a little stunned that Bailey is actually asking me for permission. I figured she'd laugh before doing that. "I—yeah. Of course. As long as Piper doesn't have anything she needs to be doing instead."

Bailey bites her bottom lip, her expression hopeful as she focuses on Piper like she hung the moon and the stars.

One thing I have in common with my sister.

Pretty sure I look at Piper Egan the same exact way.

"Totally free today," Piper says, smiling. "You ready to go now?"

Bailey nods rapidly.

"My car's the sedan. I just have to grab my phone and my keys."

Once Bailey is walking toward Piper's car, I pull my wallet out of my pocket. I slip a card out and hold it toward Piper, who's already turning to head inside.

She stalls in place. Glances at it. "What's that for?"

I know it's not a literal question. "Do you prefer cash?"

"I don't want your money, Kyle."

"Piper, this isn't food you're going to eat. No way am I letting you buy my sister—"

She cuts me off, "I'll take the card on one condition."

"Okay…"

"Meet us in town for lunch."

I glance at Bailey, who's waiting beside Piper's rental car. "She'd rather just go shopping with you."

Piper steps closer. "She didn't know I would be here, Kyle. She came to see *you*."

I exhale. "What do I talk to her about? Do some kids like talking about school? Because I hated talking about school, so I—"

She interrupts me again. “I don’t know any restaurants around here. Where’s best for lunch?”

“Acre 85 is the most popular, but it’s mostly barbecue. I don’t know if they’ll have any vegetarian…”

She’s already backing away, heading for the door. “Acre 85. Perfect. We’ll meet you there at twelve thirty.”

I try again. “Piper—”

“Careful opening those gates by yourself, farm boy. Some of them are harder than they look.”

She winks, then disappears.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PIPER

"Are you dating Kyle?"

That's the softball Bailey decides to launch at me first while we're still rolling down the long driveway that separates the farmhouse from the main road.

I talked a good game around Kyle because we couldn't both be nervous about this. But my babysitting experience was mostly supervising homework for a couple of hours between when school ended and parents came home from work. I've never *entertained* a child. So far, my brothers have all prioritized their badges over babies, and none of my close friends are married yet, let alone procreating.

I'm vastly out of my element and terrified I'll mess this up for Kyle somehow.

"No," I answer, focusing on flicking on the blinker like it's an important task. Although, considering I've barely driven since I got here and I never drive in New York, it feels like it is.

"But you live with him?"

"I don't *live with him*. I'm just staying at the ranch for a… for a little while."

I don't know if Bailey knows about Mabel and John, so I'm not sure I should mention them. And saying Kyle and I haven't been alone together the whole time sounds like I'm stretching the truth. Which I am, I guess.

We've mostly been alone.

And it's mostly felt like living together.

"Why?"

I read Bailey very wrong, I'm realizing. She seemed shy and unsure when she knocked on the screen door. Now, she's all assessing eyes and endless questions.

"I came here for work."

Twisted sheets. Lingering kisses. Whispered words.

My fingers tighten around the steering wheel as snapshots from last night flash through my mind.

"You work for Kyle?"

"*No*. I work for his record label."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'm here to discuss some work stuff with him, and then I'll leave."

"Did you know my mom?"

I swallow the lump that's formed in my throat before shaking my head. "No. I never got to meet her."

"Me neither."

"That sucks. I'm sorry." I make a mental note to call my own mother tonight. We've exchanged texts, but I haven't spoken to her since I left New York.

"My dad never talks about her."

"Is that why you came to see Kyle?"

"I guess," she says. Then hesitates. "I told a friend at school that he was my brother. She didn't believe me."

"That's a funny thing about famous people. Lots of people think they know them. But they don't believe anyone actually does."

I carefully maneuver down Oak Grove's main street, then successfully manage to parallel park in front of a bank. "So… cowboy boots?"

Bailey nods eagerly.

And thankfully, that's one item of clothing that Oak Grove stocks plenty of. The first store we step into has them in stock. So does the second. And the third. That's where Bailey finds a pink pair that she loves enough to wear out of the store, her sneakers tucked in the square box that she carries around as we continue exploring the small town. It's a little larger than I realized, the main downtown section stretching almost four blocks. The trips to Wagon Wheel and the fair were both at night. Plus, I was distracted by Kyle.

The last store we go into contains a surprise.

"Piper!"

"Julia! Hi!"

I'm slow to return the hug, caught off guard by the exuberant greeting. By the realization I *know someone* to run into here.

"I wish we'd had more time to hang out last night," Julia says. "But you had fun, right?"

"Yeah, I did." I know she's talking about the fair, but I'm not. "I didn't know you had a store."

"My aunt's technically, but I work here some days. Most days. Are you guys looking for anything in particular?"

"We were looking for cowboy boots, but we already found some." I nod toward Bailey's feet.

Julia's eyes widen. "Wow. *Love* those."

Bailey beams, and I smile too.

"Bailey, this is Julia. Julia, Bailey."

Julia's smile tightens a little, the subtle shift letting me know the name is familiar. And reminding me this town is a small one.

I'm not entirely clear on the dynamics among Kyle's group of friends, but I know they all grew up here. All attended elementary school and high school together.

I'm guessing Julia knows just as much of the story about Kyle's family as I do now, if not more.

“Nice to meet you, Bailey.”

“Well, we should get goin—”

“You know what you need?” Julia asks me.

I hesitate. “What?”

Julia’s grin grows. “Cowboy boots.”

Spareribs, beef brisket, pulled pork, country-roasted chicken.

Based on my first scan of the menu at Acre 85, my only option for lunch is the simple salad with vinaigrette. Even that comes with a grilled chicken breast I’ll have to request be left off.

“Do you know what you want?” I ask Bailey, taking the opportunity to scan the half-empty restaurant.

The interior is nicer than I expected. A mix of metal and distressed wood that’s both industrial and cozy. Picnic tables serve as the seating.

No sign of Kyle.

“Probably the burger,” Bailey replies, systematically shredding the napkin at her spot.

She didn’t say much when I told her that Kyle was meeting us for lunch. Between her nerves and Kyle’s tardiness, I feel my own anxiety level rising.

“Are you ladies ready to order?” The waitress who led us to this table appears, notepad in hand.

“I think we need another few minutes. Thanks,” I tell her.

She shrugs, fills the water glasses, and then walks off.

“This place is cool, huh?” I say, looking at the longhorn skull on the wall that I hope is fake, but probably isn’t.

“Yeah. I didn’t know what to expect here. I’ve never been. Grandma and Grandpa always come see us.”

“Aside from the fair tonight, do you have anything fun planned?”

“Not really.” More napkin pieces flutter on the table. “They don’t really know kid stuff.”

“Kyle might have some ideas,” I say. “He grew up here not *too* long ago.” I wait, but no smile. “He knew about this place.”

Bailey nods. “It’s nice.” She glances around. “What are you getting to eat?”

“Oh. Uh, probably the salad.”

“My stepmom only eats salads. But you’re already thin.”

“I’m not trying to lose weight. I just, uh, don’t eat meat.”

“That’s cool,” Bailey says.

The restaurant door opens, and Kyle steps inside. I exhale a subtle sigh of relief. It turns into amusement when the older couple seated closest to the door immediately stands to talk to him.

It takes Kyle another five minutes to reach our table. He apologizes as he steps into the seat beside me, sitting much closer than the large picnic table requires.

“Sorry I’m late. Ran into a few people outside who were… chatty.” He focuses on Bailey. “How was shopping?”

She glances at me. I nod.

Bailey climbs out of the bench and holds one of her feet up in the air so Kyle can see above the table.

“Whoa! Those are awesome!” he exclaims.

He’ll be a good dad. The thought occurs to me out of nowhere, and I wash away the weird way it makes me feel with a hasty gulp of water.

“Piper brought me to four stores to find them,” Bailey announces.

“Can’t rush finding the right pair of shoes,” I say.

“She got some too,” Bailey tells Kyle, regaining some of the chattiness I witnessed all morning.

“Really?” I feel his eyes on me, but it takes me a few seconds to muster up the courage to meet his gaze. There’s something burning there, and it’s smoldering in his voice too. I don’t think I’m imagining the added twang to the word.

“They’re in the car,” I say stupidly. Like he’s waiting for me to whip a leg out from under the table the way Bailey did. “We ran into Julia at her aunt’s shop. She talked me into getting them.”

Under the table, Kyle’s thigh presses more firmly against mine.

“Y’all ready to order now or—oh my *God*.” Our waitress reappears, quickly registering the addition to the table. “Thought Margie was messing with me,” she adds. “Wow. I’m such a *huge* fan,” she gushes.

“Appreciate that, ma’am.” Kyle’s voice is even and relaxed, but we’re sitting close enough that I can feel the sudden tension emanating off of him.

Bailey scowls at the waitress.

“Bailey, you know what you want?” I ask.

“Yeah. I’ll have the burger with no pickles and American cheese, please.”

Reluctantly, the waitress looks away from Kyle and scribbles down her order. “That comes with corn, cornbread, coleslaw, or baked beans.”

“Corn, please.”

“Anything to drink?”

“A Coke.”

“Got it.” The waitress looks to me. “And for you?”

“I’ll have the salad without chicken.”

The waitress’s eyebrows climb her forehead, but she doesn’t comment, just asks me what I want to drink. I stick

with water.

Kyle's order takes the longest. For every decision he makes, she comes up with two more questions to ask. There are multiple barbecue sauces that come with the pulled pork he orders. And they have two types of coleslaw. Four kinds of bread for the bun.

"Guess I'll order the burger next time," Kyle jokes once the waitress is out of earshot.

"Piper's a vegetarian," Bailey says almost accusingly.

Kyle glances at me, then back at his sister. "I know."

"This is a *barbecue place*." Bailey rolls her eyes, then continues shredding a napkin.

I hide my smile behind my water glass, then decide to bail Kyle out. "I wanted to come here. I'm not that hungry yet anyway. I had a big breakfast."

I had *no* breakfast actually since Bailey showed up while I was making coffee.

"Does everyone always stare at you like this?" she asks Kyle, glancing around the restaurant.

"Oak Grove is a small town," he says. "People like to know each other's business."

"So, it's not like this when you go other places?"

"No, it is," Kyle admits.

"Do you know other celebrities?"

"Um, maybe?" Kyle scratches the side of his neck, clearly unsure. "I'm not really sure who you'd know…"

"Sutton Everett," I supply, guessing Bailey will know who the pop star is.

"You know *Sutton Everett*?" Bailey gapes at Kyle.

"He dated her," I say without thinking.

"What?" Bailey gasps.

"Barely," Kyle says quickly. "Which Piper knows."

“How do you know?” Bailey asks me.

I shoot Kyle a *Thanks a lot* look. “I’ve met her a few times. For work.”

“You work a lot,” she comments.

Kyle chuckles beneath his breath.

Our food arrives a few minutes later. My salad wouldn’t win any culinary awards, but it’s not bad. Kyle slides his coleslaw toward me, and Bailey donates her corn to the cause too.

I hand Kyle back his credit card when the waitress sets down the bill, not wanting to get in an argument about paying in front of Bailey. He slips it into his wallet, pulling cash out to pay instead. The bills get set on top of the receipt, not quite covering the *Call me!* scribbled at the bottom above a number.

I look away, doing my best to ignore the silly tightening in my stomach.

He’s not mine.

And he never will be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KYLE

“Happy birthday!”

“Yeah. Thanks, man.” I clear my throat, picking at a splinter in the post. Mist is burning off the fields, dissipating in the sunshine.

“Am I the first one who remembered?” Hudson asks.

“Mabel called around five. Left a message.” No matter how many times I explain texting to her, she continues to act like it’s a foreign concept meant to be avoided.

“They getting back soon?”

“Monday, I think.”

“So, are we hitting up Wagon Wheel tonight to celebrate?”

“Actually, I was thinking about heading up to Mayville instead of staying in town. Hank Reynolds said his son is playing at Whiskey Cowboy tonight.”

“Sure, that sounds fun. I’ll send a group text out, let everyone know.”

“Sounds good.”

“Pick you up at eight, okay?”

“You don’t have to drive.”

“You’re on the way. It’s not a problem.”

“Okay, thanks.” I focus on the SUV rolling up the driveway. “I gotta go. Someone’s here.”

“Okay. See you later.”

“Bye.” I hang up and shade my eyes, trying to see who’s in the car.

Jamie climbs out of the passenger seat, wearing a grim frown instead of his usual grin. His right arm is resting in a navy sling.

“Hey,” I greet.

“Hi.” Jamie’s tone is glum.

I nod toward his arm. “What happened?”

“Got hit in a scrimmage. Fell funny and ended up with this.” He gestures toward the sling, a disgruntled expression on his face. “Don’t think I’ll be any help around here for a while.”

“Don’t worry about it. Once you’re back to a hundred percent, you can swing by, and we’ll talk.”

“Aren’t you leaving soon?”

Usually, I would be. This is the longest I’ve stayed in Oak Grove since I was Jamie’s age. “No,” I answer. “I’m sticking around awhile.”

“Oh, wow. That’s awesome.”

I smile. “Glad you think so.”

Jamie looks away. “Always thought I’d get to see a little more of the world. Nice to know this place is worth coming back to.”

I ignore the funny twinge in my chest. For a long time, I didn’t think that. And even now, my decision to stay here has little to do with Oak Grove itself. “What’s the verdict on the arm?”

“Dunno yet. My mom’s driving me to see a specialist. Doc said it’s a bad sprain and to avoid using it. If I can’t play for more than a few weeks, my scholarship chances just go to shit.”

Jamie could have easily called to let me know about his arm. He’s here for reassurance, I realize, and I’m not sure I have any great advice to offer him.

“Don’t think like that, Jamie. It’s not broken; you’ll be back before you know it.”

“Even if I *can* play this season, there are no guarantees.”

The thud of the screen door, which I still haven’t fixed, slamming closed has me glancing toward the farmhouse and squinting at the flash of red that appears.

“That’s true with anything.” I refocus on Jamie. “And you might be surprised by what life has in store for you. Sometimes, when you least expect it, exactly what you need will come along.”

“I can’t sing, man.”

I laugh.

He glances at the house, brows raised. “She your girlfriend now?”

“I don’t have one. Now, get outta here.”

Jamie rolls his eyes but listens, climbing back into his mom’s SUV and leaving me to fiddle with the baling attachment, which is what I was doing when Hudson called.

Once I’m confident the hitch is secure, I head for the house. If Piper is up, that means the coffee is brewed, and I had a shitty night’s sleep.

I tossed and turned, alternating between wondering what to say to Bailey when she comes back to the ranch on Monday for a second visit and wishing that Piper were in my bed instead of on the other side of the wall.

Since our conversation yesterday morning, neither of us has mentioned what happened after the fair. Which would be fine—great and uncomplicated even—except I can’t stop fucking thinking about it.

She’s leaving any day now.

I’m in the midst of upending what’s been my life for the past decade.

Considering calling what happened between us anything more than sex is a really bad idea. But the temptation is there,

especially when I climb the front porch steps to find Piper sitting on the porch swing in what's become her daily routine, bare feet propped on the railing and tangled hair suggesting she might have slept as poorly as I did.

"Hey," she says.

"Morning."

"You're down a worker?"

"Sort of."

Truthfully, the full-time staff handles all the essential operations, like feeding the calves and milking the cows. My guess is, John hired the high school and college guys who rotate through here in the summers because he knew they needed the money and he liked the company.

"It's a sprain. Should heal fast."

"He looked upset. Must really love working here."

I can't tell if she's teasing or not.

"More bummed about missing football."

Piper shakes her head before taking a sip from her mug.

"I talked to Hudson earlier. He's planning to come by tonight to go to a bar in Mayville. It's about twenty minutes from here."

She nods. "Okay. Hope you guys have fun."

I shake my head. "You're *invited*, Piper. I mean, you should come. If you want to."

"You should go out with your friend. I have some work stuff I should tackle anyway."

She doesn't elaborate on what the *work stuff* is, and I don't ask her to.

We haven't discussed her job at all since Piper told me she was done talking to me about signing a new contract. And true to her word, she hasn't brought it up again.

I have no clue if she's had conversations with Carl or anyone else at the label about me. No idea how soon they'll

pull the plug on her being here.

"There's a local band playing. Unsigned."

I catch the interest on her face before she quickly wipes it away.

"And it's not just me and Hudson going. Julia and Ella will be there too. So will Tommy and Morgan and Danny. Same crowd as at Wagon Wheel probably. Maybe more."

"*More*?"

I smile at her surprise. "Small towns have big communities."

"I guess so."

"And…" No way it won't get mentioned tonight. "It's kind of a birthday thing too."

"Whose birthday?"

"Mine."

Piper coughs a little, mid-sip. "It's your *birthday*? *Today*?"

"Uh-huh."

"Were you going to mention it?"

"I just did."

She exhales a laugh. "Um, okay."

"Hudson will be here at eight," I say, then head inside.

There's a smoky smell in the air when I walk into the living room, sweaty, dusty, and exhausted.

"Piper?" I call out, quickly kicking off my dirty boots and rushing into the kitchen.

The smell is stronger in here, but nothing looks amiss. Clean counters, nothing burning on the stove.

"What?" she shouts back.

I walk over to the stairs so I can hear her better. “Are you cooking something? It smells like smoke down here.”

There’s a loud swear and an even louder thud, and that’s the only warning I get before Piper comes flying down the stairs.

I stand, frozen, as she runs past me into the kitchen.

By the time I turn around, she’s pulled a pan out of the oven, and she’s eyeing it.

“The timer didn’t go off. But I think it’s done?” Piper sets the pan down on the counter with a clatter and peers into the oven. “I think some of the batter just spilled out. I must have overfilled it.”

She looks at me then, and I try to relax. Act normal.

Unsuccessfully.

Her brow wrinkles. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh-kay.” She pulls a fork out of the drawer and stabs the pan’s contents.

“So…you’re coming tonight?”

“Yeah, I stopped at Julia’s store after I got groceries. She talked me into going. And this dress.”

Now, I know who to kill…or thank—I haven’t decided yet.

“Isn’t it cute?” She twirls the hem of the dress on her way to drop the fork in the sink, flashing more thigh at me.

Piper appears oblivious to my struggle. That, or she’s having fun torturing me.

“Yeah.”

Cute is not the first adjective coming to mind. Or the twentieth.

All that’s running through my mind is *Holy fuck*.

Her dress is low cut in the front and dips even deeper in the back. It’s also made from some light, gauzy material that

almost looks see-through.

"I've gotta finish getting ready. You said Hudson is coming at eight, right?"

"Right." I glance at the stove, realizing I'm cutting it close on getting ready myself. But the hay is baled and stored in the barn, which is a huge relief. "You done in the bathroom?"

"Yes!" Piper calls as she jogs back up the stairs.

I drag a palm down my face, exhaling. Then walk over to the pan Piper left on the counter to look inside.

Its contents look a lot like a cake.

Piper's sitting on the couch, pulling on one of her new cowboy boots when I walk downstairs.

"Hey," she says, then grabs the other boot.

"Hey." Water is still dripping down my forehead from my hasty shower, but at least I'm clean. And dressed.

"So?" She stands and spins. "Not missing cowboy boots this time."

"You look gorgeous," I say honestly. More honest than I meant to be.

"Thanks." Her tone turns soft. Almost shy, which is not an adjective I usually associate with Piper.

Outside, a horn honks.

"Hudson is here," I say, adjusting my belt for absolutely no reason, except I'm not sure what else to do with my hands.

"Okay." Piper walks over to the coffee table and grabs her phone. "I'm ready."

I walk toward the door, patting my pocket to make sure I have my phone and wallet.

Danny is hanging out the window in the back seat of Hudson's truck. As soon as I appear, he starts hollering, which

is apparently the signal for Hudson to begin blasting "Happy Birthday." I hang my head and shake it, laughing under my breath as I continue toward the truck.

"There he is!" Danny pops the back open, jumping down and wrapping me in a bear hug. "Practically *thirty*."

"You're three months *older* than me, DeLuca."

"Yeah, yeah…" His voice trails off, and I know without looking behind me that Piper has appeared.

I shove him toward the truck. "Get in so we can get going."

It's caveman of me, but I'd rather squeeze in the middle than have him sit next to Piper. Danny quirks a brow, but doesn't comment before climbing into the back seat. I follow, and Piper gets in a minute later. Morgan and Hudson exchange a glance in the front seat that reminds me I probably should have mentioned Piper was still here. Was coming.

Jamie showing up distracted me.

But it's *my* birthday. And sitting with Piper's thigh pressed against mine is the highlight of my day so far.

It takes twenty minutes to get to Whiskey Cowboy. Music blasts the whole drive, making conversation impossible. Hudson, Danny, and I sing along to all the classics that come on, making Morgan laugh and Piper smile. Danny has always been tone-deaf—and overly enthusiastic—but Hudson has a decent voice. We used to fool around on our guitars a lot back in high school. He was the one who dared me to get up onstage and quite literally changed my life.

I wonder if he's ever thought about what my life would look like if he hadn't. Because I sure as hell do.

Whiskey Cowboy is packed, which isn't surprising. Mayville is about four times the size of Oak Grove. It smells and looks the same as about every other bar I've been inside, and I'm more focused on guiding Piper through the crowd. My hand falls to the center of her back automatically, like I've done it before.

The song that was playing ends about a minute after we walk inside, and a man's voice replaces the music.

"We were planning to cover this one tonight anyway, but let's move it up in the set list. Now that the king himself is here, I'll just get more nervous. Thanks for coming, Kyle!"

"So much for an inconspicuous entrance," I mutter to Piper.

"At least he's not playing 'Happy Birthday,' " she whispers back.

I glance at her and smile as the opening notes for "Texas Moon" begin to play. I'm excellent at acting like I enjoy being the center of attention, but I rarely enjoy it. And tonight in particular, I was hoping to take an evening off from being the King of Country, which is a nickname I've always disliked.

"Kyle! Hey!"

I look at Jack Ransom, who's appeared with one of his buddies, beer in hand. Mike, I think his name is. Hopefully, it won't come up since I teased Piper about recalling Jack's name and I went to school with the guy. They were both a grade behind me, which means they're Piper's age.

"Hey, Jack."

He's not paying any attention to me. He's focused on Piper, who offers him a small smile.

"Didn't think I'd see you again," Jack tells her, smiling.

"Yeah, well…" She lifts a shoulder, then delicately drops it. "Sticking around for the time being."

I overanalyze her words, having no clue what that means. Ever since I turned down Empire's offer, I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop. Does *sticking around* mean something, or is she just making small talk?

By the time I tune back into their conversation, Jack is asking if he can get Piper a drink.

It bothered me, watching him chat her up at Wagon Wheel. But that was a tiny flare of irritation. Nothing compared to the

blaze of anger when I realize he's hitting on her right in front of me. Jealousy curdles in my stomach, ugly and undiluted.

"She's all set, Jack." I slide my hand from Piper's back to her waist and tug her toward me possessively.

Am I being a dick? Yeah. But I'm also uninterested in seeing guys drool over her all night, and if Jack wants to spread the word that she's off-limits, then that'll make my night.

"Oh. Yeah. Right." Jack fumbles, and it does make me feel a little bad.

"Good to see you." I send him a tight smile he can probably tell is fake, then keep moving through the crowd.

Hudson, Morgan, and Danny already made it to the bar, and I can see some of our other friends hanging around there too.

"What was that about?" Piper asks—shouts.

"Texas Moon" is still playing, and it gets louder, the closer we get to the stage.

"What was what about?"

"You acting jealous."

Instead of denying it, I tell her the truth. "I wasn't acting."

We reach my friends before she has the chance to respond. And she's pulled away by Ella and Julia immediately, who whisper and giggle over her new dress and cowboy boots. And then the first fan approaches me, and I lose sight of her completely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

My phone chimes with another text from Harper. I turn the screen over.

I've avoided all her messages since I confessed my feelings about Kyle had shifted. Part of me thought writing it in black-and-white letters would be a wake-up call. Instead, I slept with the guy.

It hasn't happened again, but not because I haven't wanted it to.

And Harper's text is just the most recent notification. There are dozens of other messages from my roommates and friends. From Andy, my most recent ex, wondering if I want to get drinks sometime soon. From my mom and brothers. An email from my dad, who refuses to text.

My life in New York hasn't forgotten about me, which is comforting.

But it's confusing—how easily *I've* forgotten about *it*.

I miss my family and friends. Linda's cookies and my apartment.

I know, once I'm back, I'll miss this though. Drinking coffee on the ranch's front porch. Going out in clothes I'm comfortable in. Picking strawberries. Eating dinner with Kyle. Lots of things about Kyle.

"Slow service, huh?"

I glance at Ella, who's appeared beside me. Then at the bartender, who's taking his sweet time at the opposite end of

the bar. “Yeah.”

She slides onto the stool next to me. “You okay?”

“I’m good.” I force a smile. Sneak a look at Kyle.

He’s still surrounded, just like he’s been since we got here. Just like he was while the band we came to see performed.

No one in my life has ever shared my love of music. My family accepts it. My friends go along with it. My coworkers are more focused on sales than what we’re selling.

And I never ever would have guessed that Kyle Spencer would be the person who appreciated—understood—an experience like this the same way I do.

But I saw him while they were onstage. I watched as he talked with the band afterward, shaking hands and signing autographs.

He wasn’t supposed to be…this.

Finally, the bartender appears. “What can I get you ladies?”

“Tequila shot, please.” This doesn’t feel like a *sip your drink* night. I’m celebrating. Or drowning my sorrows, knowing this is probably my last time I’ll be in a Texas bar. Me of two weeks ago would have laughed hard at that.

Ella flashes me a thumbs-up before she orders a gin and tonic, then shifts her gaze right back to me. “He keeps looking over here, you know.”

I down the shot, then suck on a lime. “Who?”

She laughs, then sips her drink. “I had a feeling, you know, after Wagon Wheel. Never seen Kyle act that way before. Morgan was convinced he was into Natasha, but…” Ella flashes me a cheeky grin. “Called it.”

I toss the lime on the counter. “I’m going to the restroom. Be right back.”

She raises a brow at my deflection but agrees with a cheery, “Okay!”

I weave through the crowd, heading toward the opening with a bucking bronco above it that I'm hoping leads to the restrooms. This place is twice the size as Wagon Wheel and even more crowded.

The heavy wooden door creaks as I push it open, revealing a three-stall restroom. There's no line, shockingly, but there is a group of women huddled around the mirrors. I offer them a small smile as I skirt around them and walk into the first empty stall.

"It's a sign, I'm telling you! We were listening to 'Texas Moon' in the car, the band played it, and now, he's *here*."

My stomach drops to my brand-new cowboy boots as I realize who they're discussing.

"I'm going to need to drink a lot more before I consider having the confidence to pull Kyle fucking Spencer, Robin," a female voice responds.

"Well, we're in a bar, Annie! Let's go!"

Lots of giggling and commotion, and then the door shuts.

"I'm not acting."

I'm not either. The lead weight in my stomach is very real and very unpleasant.

I lean my head back against the plastic and pull in a deep breath.

It's not that I'm concerned Kyle is going to hook up with a fan tonight. It's how affected I am by the hypothetical possibility. The sudden crater in my chest is an uncomfortable reminder that my feelings for him have sprouted roots and seem to be flourishing like Mabel's strawberry garden. Suddenly, I recall what she said about things growing with patience. Wonder if she was talking about me and Kyle. If she saw all along what I'm only just realizing.

Ella is no longer at the bar when I walk out of the restroom. I head for the crowd clustered toward the center of the bar instead. Straight toward the guy I've been stealing

glances at all night. He's talking with Morgan and Hudson, but his attention is on me.

Our eyes catch and hold as I approach.

Kyle shifts to the left, opening a spot for me right beside him.

"Everything okay?" he leans over to ask, whispering in my ear like he's sharing a secret. "You were gone for a while."

"I'm good. Long line in the restroom." I try not to notice the implication behind his question—that he was paying close enough attention to notice me leave and keeping track of how long I was gone for. Try and *fail*.

Hudson and Morgan are talking to Ella now, leaving us to have our own private conversation. He angled toward me at some point, cutting us off from the rest of the crowd.

All I can think to say is, "I didn't get you anything for your birthday."

His smile is amused and a little indulgent. "I don't need anything."

"Do you *want* anything?"

It's not an innocuous question. It comes out all sorts of seductive, and I wish I could shove the suggestion right back in my mouth. My only focus is supposed to be what *I* want—getting Kyle to sign a contract so I can get the hell out of here and back to my life. Except I've given up on that, and now, I'm stuck here until the label gives up too. Waking up early every day to check my email and messages, then battling relief when I realize there's nothing from the label.

I wait for Kyle's response, my heart pounding so loudly in my ears that I'm not sure I'll be able to hear his answer.

He glances toward the front of the bar, then refocuses on me. "I want you to sing."

I laugh, startled. "What?"

Kyle tilts his head toward the stage. After the bands performed, it changed to karaoke. Right now, a couple in their

thirties is onstage, enthusiastically belting out lyrics to a song I've never heard before. Most of the bar is paying them no attention, the music fading to white noise.

"I want you to sing," he repeats.

"You've *got* to be kidding me."

He grins. "Nope. You gonna give me what I want?"

We're talking about music.

I know that.

But it feels like we're discussing other things too.

His arm brushes against mine. My heartbeat becomes a chaotic, unpredictable rhythm, rapid pounds registering the warmth. Familiar and foreign and *consuming*.

Kyle Spencer is consuming.

The more time I spend around him, the more space he takes up.

In my thoughts, in my fantasies, in my emotions.

"I don't think that's how gifts work. You're supposed to accept, not *demand*."

I reach past him, snagging the half-empty glass on the table in front of him. My throat feels dry at the prospect of getting up onstage. The last time I performed in front of a crowd, I was in college. Shortly after deciding I didn't want it enough to pursue it, I stopped singing anywhere, except the shower.

"It's just soda," he tells me, watching me drink.

"I know." I down a healthy gulp of it, the bubbles burning my throat. Exhale. "Okay. Fine."

I savor the surprise—the pride—that appears on Kyle's face before I turn and push through the crowd until I reach the side of the stage. A woman with a pink bob is standing next to the karaoke machine, snapping her gum.

"Hi. I'd like to sing a song," I tell her.

She hides a yawn behind one hand. "What song?"

“Uh, can I see the options?”

A thick binder is passed to me. I flip through the laminated sheets quickly, trying to decide what I might be able to pull off and conscious of my audience. I want to sing something the crowd will know. I settle on a song right as the couple who was performing walks offstage to short, scattered applause.

“You’re up,” the woman says, then snaps her gum.

I inhale a deep breath, trying to pull in some courage with the smoky oxygen. Whiskey Cowboy might no longer allow smoking indoors, but they clearly did at one point.

The shouts start as soon as I’m up onstage.

“Woo!”

“Go, Piper!”

“Hell yeah!”

My cheeks burn at the attention, but the support feels good too. I pray I’m not about to embarrass myself as I stare out at the hundred or so expectant faces, wondering how the hell Kyle performs in front of audiences so large that they fill up stadiums.

The music starts playing. It’s a little better once I start singing. There’s something to focus on, to distract me from the eyes on me. I start to enjoy it, the few minutes passing faster than I expected.

When the last note dies, the applause sounds louder than the lukewarm reception most of the other performers received, mostly coming from the back tables.

I smile and execute a small curtsy, then hurry to hand the microphone back to the woman and weave through the crowd.

A few patrons smile at me, clearly recognizing me from the stage.

“That was *amazing*!” Ella shouts when I reach the back of the bar, throwing her arms around me. “Tequila shots to celebrate. We’ll make a country girl out of you yet.”

“I’m responsible for the boots,” Julia says.

I let them pull me toward the bar.

Don't look back, I tell myself.

Don't look back. Don't look back. Don't look back.

But I do.

And in the middle of a crowded bar? He's totally focused on me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

KYLE

I ’m kicking myself for mentioning coming here to Hudson.

He might have bitched about not going out on my birthday together, but he would have understood if I’d told him I’d rather celebrate another night. Most years, I’ve been long gone by the time this date rolled around. It’s not like we have an established tradition.

But we all came together, and I’ve been stuck ever since. Stuck acting like my focus isn’t entirely on Piper because I’m not sure I want my friends to know about us and I’m guessing she doesn’t either.

And it’s excruciating.

I want to touch her, talk to her, and everyone else keeps calling for my attention. I signed a couple dozen autographs shortly after we arrived, then slunk to the corner so any fans would have to push through my friends to get to me.

I hate acting ungrateful. I wouldn’t have a career without all the strangers who have supported me. One three-minute interaction might be an inconvenience to me, but a core memory for them.

But my patience whittles away to absolutely nothing when Ella and Julia pull Piper toward the bar after her performance.

She sang for me.

And seeing her up on that stage affected me more than I had expected. She’s the person I seek out in any room now, but I was totally transfixed, watching her perform.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and type a quick text. Mutter something about the restroom to Danny, who's closest to me. He nods, more focused on the beer he's holding and Natasha.

I push through the crowd as quickly as I can, hoping it'll mean no one stops me. Rush past the restrooms, relieved the women's doesn't have a line out the door. Then prop open the delivery door just past it and step out into the back alley. This is how we used to sneak in here when we were all underage.

I lean back against the brick wall, propping my foot up on a discarded box and staring up at the stars. All the commotion inside is muffled, and the sudden quiet is soothing and jarring after being inside the crowded bar. We're on the outskirts of Mayville, but the distant hum of traffic is audible. It's not the complete silence of the ranch, and I kind of miss it. I spent years in the midst of huge cities, surrounded by people, and felt completely alone. It's illogical that this is the place where I feel the opposite.

The door opens again, and Piper steps out.

I don't think it through; I just kiss her. It's a reflex, as natural as breathing.

See her, kiss her.

The satisfaction when she immediately kisses me back is heady and addictive.

I devour her mouth, finally releasing some of the pent-up emotion that's been suffocating me all night.

"You sang," I say as soon as our lips separate.

She giggles, glancing away. "I know. I can't believe I did that."

"I can't believe you knew the words to a *country song*."

"Dolly Parton is a cultural icon. And…the words were on the screen."

I chuckle before covering her mouth with mine again. Her hands slide into my hair as I press her against the wall.

The chaos in my head quiets, all my attention narrowing down to her. The attention tonight is nothing in comparison to the havoc when I've gone out other places, but there was never anything I was dying to do and couldn't those times. I've never been more aware of—or irritated by—my celebrity than I am right now.

My lips move to Piper's jaw, gently kissing down the column of her neck. Her fingers find the waistband of my jeans and then brush lower, spreading heat through my veins.

"You're hard."

The whisper sounds surprised, and it makes me smile.

"Happens around you. Always."

Her hand moves even lower, deliberately rubbing against my throbbing erection.

My grip on her hips tightens as I try to repress the groan crawling up my throat. I'm close to coming in my pants, like a teenager. "Piper."

"What?" she whispers back.

"I—fuck." She's working at my belt, and I can't think straight. "Are you sure?"

I barely recognize my own voice. It's rough—with a desperation that's difficult to identify the origin of.

I've had sex behind a bar before—too many times to count. Back when I first started out, I rode the high of performing right into this exact situation.

But it's never been like this.

She grips my erection, making me hiss. "Do you have a condom?"

"Yeah."

Piper smirks. "Want another birthday present?"

I chuckle. "I'll take any damn thing you wanna give me. How drunk are you?"

“Drunk enough to do this.” Her fingers find my cock, fisting the base and moving toward the sensitive tip.

This time, I can’t stop the groan.

“You did *this* sober,” I tease.

“Two tequila shots.”

I tasted it on her tongue, smoky and salty.

I slide a hand up her leg and between her thighs, finding the wet strip of her underwear. “You’re soaked.”

“Happens around you.”

I manage a low chuckle before kissing her again, stroking her through the lace until I’m out of patience. I slip one finger inside of her, then two, groaning when wet heat clenches around them. Piper moans, her head falling back and her breaths quickening as she rocks her hips against my hand.

“*Fuck*. You’re so good at this.”

I grin. “Thank you.”

She rolls her eyes. “Like you haven’t heard that a million times.” There’s a ripple of insecurity—of uncertainty—beneath the words that I can’t decide if I’m imagining or not.

“I haven’t fucked a million women.”

Another eye roll, and I sort of wish I’d said what I’m really thinking.

I can’t imagine fucking anyone, except you.

Once was supposed to get her out of my system.

Safe to say that didn’t happen.

I pull the condom out of my pocket and roll it on. Then thrust into her, groaning at the tight fit. The clench and the wetness tell me she’s as affected as I am. I fill her over and over again, responding to her begs of more.

I fuck her harder and deeper, and it never feels like enough.

She calls out my name—loudly—when she comes, and some caveman part of me hopes someone hears us. But the rest of me is aware that could have consequences neither of us wants. So, I kiss her again, silencing her cries and savoring how she's pulsing around me. I keep thrusting, prolonging her high until I let go and find my own release. My cock pulses as her nails dig into my back.

I haven't seen Jack since we first got here, but I've seen other guys checking her out.

And it's pissed me off every damn time.

Even after we've both finished, I keep kissing her.

I'm not sure what to say to her. Where to go from here.

There's too much I want to share and nothing that sounds right. I'm terrified that I'm misreading the secret smile she gives me before pulling away and fixing her dress. Her lips are swollen from my kisses, and her hair is messy from my hands.

She looks like *mine* again, and I want her to be—more than I've ever wanted anything else.

Her life is in New York. Her job, her family, and her friends.

And I feel like I have absolutely nothing to offer her.

All I have is fame and money and a ranch in Texas, and none of those are things Piper wants.

"You ready?" she asks, nodding toward the door.

"Yep." I force a smile, then follow her back inside.

I guess we aren't talking about what just happened.

Again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I refresh my work email while I'm eating lunch, more out of habit than anything else. Then experience an immediate sinking sensation in my stomach as a new unread message pops up.

> ***To:*** *piper.egan@empirerecords.com*
>
> ***From:*** *linda.parker@empirerecords.com*
>
> ***Subject:*** *Urgent*
>
> *Piper,*
>
> *We need you back in the office on Monday. I'll send flight details shortly. A car will be waiting for you at the airport. Call if you have any questions. See you soon.*
>
> *Linda*

No relief. No thought of *finally*. No excitement.

Just dread.

And the realization that I have no idea how or what to tell Kyle.

We haven't discussed what happened behind Whiskey Cowboy. Or how we ate his birthday cake and played cards when we got home, like an actual couple.

Part of me thinks it's mature, and the rest of me finds it childish. We're two single, consenting adults with a mutual attraction. If we want to have protected sex, who could that possibly harm?

Me, is the answer to that. Because it's not just sex for me, if it ever was.

I *like* Kyle. More than like him.

He makes me feel more myself, and I didn't even know that was what I was supposed to be looking for. I *wasn't* looking for it—definitely not with him—and that makes finding it even more shocking.

And rather than face it, I'm avoiding it.

Ever since I got here, I knew this was coming. For a while, I wished it would happen sooner.

My time here was always temporary. I never expected I'd wish that weren't the case, and I tried to ignore it once I realized it was. Past Piper decided that was future Piper's problem, and now, I'm having to deal with it.

To distract myself, I spend all afternoon cleaning the farmhouse. Vacuuming, washing dishes, reorganizing the fridge. I start to pack some, too, folding my clean clothes and putting in a load of laundry.

As soon as five rolls around, I head toward the kitchen, deciding to cook an elaborate meal in the hopes that it will help distract me. I check my phone and find another email from Linda. My flight leaves at seven a.m. I text Lauren and Serena, letting them know I'll be back tomorrow. Then shut off my phone, wishing I could do the same thing to my brain.

At five thirty, I hear the screen door open.

I take a deep breath, telling myself it doesn't matter what he says. That nothing more than sex and friendship would ever work between us, not when our lives are so fundamentally different.

When I glance up, Kyle isn't the one standing in the doorway.

“Hey, Piper.”

“Oh. Hi, Danny.” I do a poor job of hiding my surprise at Kyle’s friend showing up in the kitchen.

“Smells good in here,” he tells me.

“Thanks.” I dry my hands on a dish towel, glancing at Danny uncertainly.

“Kyle will be right in. He’s just finishing up a project. Guy’s got one hell of a work ethic, if you haven’t noticed. Doesn’t stop.”

I smile. “I’ve noticed.”

I barely recognize the ranch from when I first arrived. Every day, there’s something new. The grass is filling in out in the yard, the screen door’s hinges were repaired, and all the random piles of debris have disappeared.

“Can I get you anything? Water or—”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.”

I nod. A minute later, I hear the screen door again.

Kyle’s smiling when he walks into the kitchen, but it drops when he sees me standing at the counter.

“Crap. I didn’t realize you’d already started cooking,” he says, looking apologetic as he surveys the mess on the counter.

Even before he continues talking, I have a feeling I won’t like what he has to say.

“I should have come in sooner. Hudson’s dad downed a huge buck this weekend and gave Hudson some steaks. He wants to have us over for dinner tonight. Guys’ night.”

“Oh.”

Sorry, Kyle mouths to me.

He’s spent every night here since I arrived. I don’t begrudge him spending time with his friends. But tonight is now my last night here, and he has no idea.

I force a smile onto my face and say, “Have fun!”

Maybe this is better. A start to our separation. A preliminary crack before the clean break.

I'd like to at least tell him, but I don't want to have the conversation in front of Danny. I have no idea what Kyle has told his friends about us—if he's told them anything at all.

"I'll see you tonight," Kyle says, winking at me when Danny isn't looking.

Despite the dread and uncertainty, the implication makes me blush. We spent last night together. And he was still there this morning.

"Okay." My smile stays fixed in place.

And then they're leaving.

As soon as they're out the door, I let my happy expression collapse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

KYLE

Hudson sinks down into the chair beside me with a satisfied groan. “Hard to beat this, huh?”

I nod an agreement, picking at the damp label on the bottle of beer. It’s rare that I ever indulge. I don’t think I have an addiction, but I know it’s ingrained in my DNA, and so my tendency is to avoid alcohol.

Tonight, grilling venison steaks with my oldest friends and just shooting the shit on a summer night felt like a good occasion to crack one open. And as much as I’m enjoying tonight, neither the company nor the beer has gotten rid of the gnawing worry in my stomach.

“Any idea when you’ll head out yet?” Hudson asks me.

I pick at the label harder. The paper is almost gone, just the sticky residue beneath it remaining.

I’m sick of getting that question. So, I tell him the truth.

“I’m not.”

He glances over at me, startled. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not leaving. I’m done.”

“Done…with music?”

“Yeah. I had a good run. It had to end sometime.”

Hudson laughs once, incredulous. “Maybe when you hit fifty and no one cares what you have to say anymore. But, man, you’re *huge*. No way your career is anywhere close to

over. Why would you walk away now?" He pauses, as if considering his own question. "Because of your mom?"

"No. I just need a break from all of it. My contract is up, and the timing makes sense." I blow out a breath. "That's why Piper is really here. My label sent her to talk me into signing a new contract."

"I'm surprised you haven't already caved."

I side-eye him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He huffs a laugh. "As long as I've known you, girls have gone crazy over you. Since you got famous. Back in high school. Hell, remember when our eighth-grade class drew straws to decide who got to ask you to semiformal? Every guy in town got your leftovers."

I roll my eyes. "You're exaggerating."

"Not really. But my point is, it's always been about girls wanting you. Never seen you want a girl. It's been entertaining, honestly."

"I didn't think you'd noticed."

Hudson chuckles. "Morgan might have been the one who said something first. But we all saw you two disappear for twenty minutes at Whiskey Cowboy. Were you talking about *your contract* in the back alley?" He smirks when I'm silent. "Yeah, didn't think so."

I blow out a long breath, staring at the unlit firepit. Tommy and Danny are off grabbing wood. "When were you sure about Morgan?"

He shrugs. "I don't know if there was one moment really. Just the more time I spent around her, the more time I wanted to spend around her. Until it became a lot easier to picture my life with her than it was not to. Just made sense." He grins. "That doesn't sound that romantic, I guess. I'll work on something better before I propose."

I tilt my head back, studying the star-strewn sky. "No, it sounds good. Logical. Inevitable."

"You going to share or make me ask?"

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

“So, what’s the problem? She’s clearly into you.”

“The problem is, she wants the one thing I can’t give her. I’m done with music for now—probably forever. My plan was to come back here and figure out what my life would have looked like if I’d never gotten onstage at the fair that night. And her life is in New York. She’s bored here. I’m a story she’ll tell one day.”

“Are you sure you’re done with music? I mean, you’ve got it pretty good.”

Ever since I found success, I’ve made an effort to never complain. To suck it up and accept the bad with the good. I don’t want to seem ungrateful. And that goes double when I’m in Oak Grove. This place, this community that knows me. That’s proud of all I’ve accomplished and would actually care if they knew how miserable fame could be.

“Parts of it are great. Parts of it really suck.”

Hudson’s eyebrows fly upward, suggesting I’m a better actor than I thought.

For years, I’ve swept in and out of town like a hurricane, bringing back stories of parties and gifting season tickets for professional sports teams. I’ve shown one side of my life while also keeping Miles and Kyle completely separate. My friends have a good idea of what the situation was like with my mom from growing up, but none of them know how bad things got toward the end. That I got the call she was gone and then had to go put on a show for seventy thousand people because it was a sold-out venue, and when you’re Kyle Spencer, you can’t just send out a replacement with a guitar.

“It’s supposed to look easy and amazing because that’s what sells albums and tickets. But, man? I can’t go out in public without bodyguards, and I still get swarmed. Streets get shut down. My last tour, I slept in a different bed every night for months. Sat alone on a bus for months. A girl snuck into the hotel I was staying at in Los Angeles, and so I had to switch hotels in the middle of the night. On the ranch, there’s

always stuff to do, but I don't *have* to do any of it. Kyle Spencer barely has any control over his own life. If I want to have sex with a woman, someone on my team makes her sign an NDA. It's"—I blow out a breath—"a total circus."

"I had no idea. I mean, I figured it wasn't always easy, but you made it sound…"

"Yeah, I know."

"Do you hate me, for daring you to get up on that stage?"

"Of course not. Things here were tough. I wanted that escape route. Hell, I probably needed it."

Hudson leans forward and taps his beer bottle against mine. "Well, for whatever it's worth, I'm thrilled you're moving back. It sounds like you made the right decision."

"Thanks." I mean it, but there's an uneasiness too.

Distant voices sound, suggesting Danny and Tommy are coming back from the barn.

He glances at me. "How soon is she leaving?"

"I don't know."

"Are you going to say something before she does?"

I exhale. "I don't know."

It seems selfish when I'm offering her nothing. I'll run out of projects on the ranch eventually, and then I have no clue what I'll do then. And I know Piper is already bored with sitting around. She's used to a way more exciting life, the sort I'm sick of.

Danny and Tommy return, tossing the wood inside the stone circle and pulling out matches. A minute later, the fire flickers to life, crackling and spitting flames.

And I lean back in my chair and enjoy bantering with my best friends, telling myself I have time to decide.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

PIPER

A truck rolls up the driveway, a cloud of dust trailing behind it. But it's not the one I'm waiting for.

I set my last suitcase inside the trunk of the sedan and close it, forcing a feigned smile on my face as I turn to greet Mabel and John.

"Hi! Welcome home!" My voice is too high. Too cheery. Too fake. Exactly how I sounded when I first arrived.

But neither Mabel nor John seems to notice.

Mabel climbs out first—more nimbly than I've ever looked when descending from a truck cab, I'm sure. She looks around like she's been gone for decades, not a little over a week.

It *feels* like she's been gone for decades. Feels like I've lived a different lifetime since they've been gone.

John tips his hat toward me once he's out of the truck as well, a small smile curling up the corners of his lips as he, too, takes in his home like it's a long-lost family member. His eyes widen visibly when he spots the shiny new roof, black metal glinting in the sunshine.

"You leaving?" Mabel abandons John to pull out their luggage from the truck bed and strolls over to me.

"Yeah." I fiddle with the keys in my hand, rough metal scraping against my palm. "The label decided it was time. Lot longer than I'd planned on staying."

"Told you Kyle was stubborn."

“You did,” I agree. “And…I understand why a little better now. I think he’s making the right decision, walking away.”

Mabel’s eyes flash to mine. In the short time I’ve known her, I’ve never seen her look more surprised.

“He told you about Ada.”

It’s not really a question, so I don’t answer it. I didn’t know that was his mom’s name.

“Did you have a nice trip?”

“We did. Long journey but a worthwhile destination. Easy to forget there’s a big ol’ world out there when you’re tucked away on a place like this.”

A short time ago, I would have strongly disagreed with that statement. But now, I find myself nodding along because I understand exactly what she’s saying. This place feels like its own universe.

“Well, I should get going…”

Another cloud of dust appears, this time behind the truck I spent most of the evening and all morning peering through the windows for. Now that it’s here, that I know he’s not lying in a ditch somewhere, a pulse of anger works its way through me.

Mabel follows my gaze as Kyle parks his truck by the barn and climbs out. His shirt is wrinkled, and his hair is messy, but otherwise, he looks fine. Healthy. Normal.

He stops briefly by John’s truck to greet his uncle but keeps glancing this way. I busy myself with rearranging the trunk and running through a mental checklist to make sure I have everything.

And then he’s here, wrapping Mabel up in a hug.

“It’s good to see you,” she says affectionately.

I wrap my arms around my waist, staring at the ground. Dig a tiny hole with the toe of my boot.

It’s stupid I’m wearing them, but I am. A final farewell.

Doubt I’ll get much use out of them in New York.

“Could I talk to Piper for a minute?” he asks Mabel once they’ve caught up.

“Of course. John could use some help unloading.” Mabel looks to me, her wise eyes probably seeing more than I’d like her to. I’m shocked when she steps forward and gives me a quick squeeze. “Safe travels. Those boots look good on you.”

I smile and thank her, then go back to hugging my midsection.

Anger has faded, leaving a host of other emotions behind. I’m nervous now that he’s home. Here. Right in front of me.

“I’m so sorry. I fell asleep and—”

“It’s fine,” I say quickly. Allowing him to elaborate makes it seem like I’m entitled to an explanation. I’m not. “I’m just glad you’re…okay. Considered calling the police.” I try for humor and fall spectacularly short.

Kyle’s expression twists with fresh guilt. “I *am* sorry. Especially about worrying you.”

“It’s fine,” I say again even though it feels anything but.

He exhales, glancing at the loaded car and then back to me. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah. Label called.” I lift a shoulder, then let it drop. “I need to be back in the office today. Took a lot longer than I’d thought it would.”

“Must be a relief to be headed back home.”

Kyle studies me closely, like he’s testing my reaction to that statement.

I bite the inside of my cheek and nod.

He exhales, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out, glancing at the screen. A text from my mom, celebrating I’ll be home soon. I don’t reply, but I do note the time.

“I’ve gotta go. Or I’ll miss my flight.”

Kyle takes a step closer. “Look, Piper. I—”

I cut him off, “Did you change your mind?”

“What?”

“Did. You. Change. Your. Mind?”

His hand drops, and his jaw sets as he registers my meaning. Suddenly, our position feels less intimate and more like squaring off. It feels exactly like when we stood in this yard and he told me I should leave.

“No,” he finally answers.

“There’s nothing left to discuss then.”

He sucks in his bottom lip, nodding slowly and then looking down. The step he took is followed by one back. “I guess not.”

I wanted to create distance, but now that it’s there, I sort of regret it.

“If you’re ever in New York…” My voice trails off after I leave an open invitation. For what, I don’t really know.

“Unlikely,” Kyle says. Not in a rude way. Just…matter-of-fact. Resolved.

I nod, having expected that answer. “Right. Good luck with…everything.”

“Text me when you land, okay?”

Like you texted me last night? I think. I spent most of the night lying awake in his bed like a fool, waiting to hear his steps on the stairs.

I say, “Okay,” because it’s easier.

I want the closest thing to closure we can manage, and acting like a clingy girlfriend with hurt feelings isn’t going to accomplish that.

There’s also a small kernel of warmth in my chest because he wants me to check in. Kyle is more considerate than most guys I’ve met. But the list of people he cares about seems to be really short and include people he’s known for most of his

life. That I might have a spot on it, even if it's far down, is more than I expected.

"You have everything?"

"Yeah." I'm confident I do, but it feels like I'm leaving something behind.

A little of myself maybe. The woman I discovered who likes wearing cowboy boots more than heels and who can stay on the back of a mechanical bull.

Kyle exhales. "Okay then."

He's letting me go. And even if it's what I expected—what part of me wants—it still stings.

I nod, quick and jerky. Hug him before I can overthink it, one that's meant to be quick and impersonal but that stretches for a lot longer after his strong arms band behind my back. Inhale the scent of leather and wood and soap and something that's just *Kyle* before stepping away.

"Don't forget, Bailey is supposed to come over later."

He shoves his hands in his pockets and takes a step back. Nods. "I didn't."

"Okay." I offer him a small smile and send a wave in Mabel and John's direction. Round the rear of the sedan and climb into the driver's seat, keeping my gaze straight ahead the whole time. I don't let it stray to the rearview mirror once, not when I turn on the car or when I start down the driveway.

By the time I finally do, a few miles from the ranch, my eyesight is too blurry to really see anything.

No one in the Texas airport gives my boots a second glance.

It's a different story once I land in New York.

Some of the looks are confused, others amused. I ignore all of them.

A car is waiting for me past the baggage claim, just like Linda said. It feels strange, tucked in the back seat of an SUV that smells brand-new, rolling past looming skyscrapers at a snail's pace. Familiar yet also foreign. Same with arriving at the label's offices. Waving hello to Jasper, the security guard, and then swiping my badge to get past the gate and reach the elevators.

My foot taps out an uneven rhythm as the doors close and the elevator ascends, trying to expel a little of the nervous energy. My fingers grip the strap of my purse tightly.

I have no idea what to expect. Linda's email didn't provide much information—or assurance.

I failed. I was supposed to get Kyle to sign, and I didn't.

Will Carl call me into his office and chew me out? Are they giving up on Kyle, or are they sending someone else to attempt what I couldn't manage? Is it possible I'll still be transferred to A&R, or will I be stuck right where I was before I left for Texas with a bruised heart?

The doors open on the label's floor. Linda glances up from her desk in the center of the reception area with a prepared smile that turns genuine when she sees me. The knot in my stomach loosens a little. For the first time since the plane wheels hit the tarmac, I feel like I'm home.

"Piper!"

"Hi!"

Linda stands, rounding the side of her desk to give me a warm hug. "You look different," she says, still smiling.

"Throw a city girl in the Texas wilderness, and that'll happen." The words are light, but my mood isn't. It still smarts when I think of the scene I pulled away from this morning.

"You impressed Carl," she tells me. "Not many people would have been willing to do what you did."

My exhale is relieved since that doesn't sound like I'm going to get fired.

“I failed,” I remind her. The words taste bitter on my tongue.

Linda shakes her head, making her gray bun wobble. “Everyone knows what a challenge you were handed. The team of lawyers Kyle Spencer sent made it quite clear where he stood. The whole office heard.”

“Does that mean you bet against me then?”

Her eyes twinkle. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh. I’d better get changed before anyone else sees me.” My outfit of jeans, a T-shirt, and cowboy boots might be normal apparel in Texas, but definitely not here.

“I’ll walk with you. There’re a couple of other things we need to discuss.”

“Oh-kay…” Just like that, the knot in my stomach tightens again.

We start down the hallway, passing a couple of other employees. They both give me warm smiles and my outfit questioning looks.

“Jason Martin passed away,” Linda says softly.

Shock surges through me as I recall the up-and-coming rapper with all the bluster and cockiness of a twenty-two-year-old who was thrust into fame and the fortune that often comes with it. He was young. *So* young.

“What? How?”

“Car accident. He was home, visiting family in Michigan. Out at a bar with friends. Jason died in emergency surgery. He had a friend in the car, too, who survived. The other driver didn’t.”

“Was Jason at fault?”

“No. He was speeding, but the other car crossed the median. They haven’t released the toxicology report yet, so no idea if she was high or drunk or texting. Doubt it’ll matter to Jason’s family or fans.”

“That’s awful.”

Linda nods. “It is. News hasn’t leaked yet since the car was in such bad shape that they couldn’t identify him at the scene. Once it does come out, it’ll be all hands on deck around here. Management is planning a tribute event. Sounds like it’ll be a fundraiser with proceeds going to the charity organization of the Martins’ choice. Several Empire artists will perform.”

“Okay.”

We stop outside my office, although *office* is a generous term. Most of this floor has an open layout, so it’s more like an enclosed cubicle in full view of a dozen other desks.

“Carl wants to meet with you. I put him on your calendar for three.”

An hour from now. Plenty of time to freak out about it.

“Got it.” I manage a tight smile.

Linda squeezes my arm. “You’ll be fine. Like I said, everyone is impressed by what you did accomplish.”

I want to ask *what* I accomplished, but I’m distracted by the blonde who suddenly appears and gives me a huge hug.

“Piper!”

“Hi, Mia.” I hug her back, inhaling the familiar scent of her floral perfume. I’m sure I smell like fast food and recycled air.

Linda laughs. “I’d better get back to reception. Give you girls a chance to catch up.”

Mia pulls back and scans me up and down. Her nose wrinkles. “What’s with the rodeo shoes?”

“They’re called cowboy boots.”

I head into my office, and she follows behind me.

“So? You’ve barely responded to any of my texts! What was it like? Did you meet any hot cowboys? What was the hotel like? I’ve never been to Texas, but I’ve heard it’s hot.

Was it hot? I hope Carl isn't going to make visiting artists a normal thing, you know. Like, that's *a lot* to ask."

I yank off my boots while she's talking a mile a minute, pulling the heels I packed in my carry-on out, along with the dress that managed to travel mostly wrinkle-free.

Mia keeps babbling until she realizes I'm not answering.

"Piper!"

"What?! I lost track of your questions."

Mia rolls her eyes, but smiles. "Okay. Harper is flying in on Thursday to help with the event this weekend. We can get dinner, and you can fill us in on everything that happened. And…" She waves her left hand around, and I finally catch what I was too distracted to spot right away.

"Dax *proposed*?"

Mia nods, waving the diamond ring around like a sparkler. "Saturday night. At Blackbird. Guess he was listening when I was talking about how much I was dying to go there after Hannah Kensington posted about it."

"Wow, I—*congratulations!*"

"I'm getting married! I can't believe it!"

"That's so exciting!"

I'm thrilled for Mia. Just like I'm happy for Harper, who followed love all the way to the West Coast. But when I started working here, we would all go out together on the weekends with no obligations until work on Monday. I'm a year younger than both of them, so maybe it's natural they'd move into this next phase of their lives first. But it also feels a little like getting left behind.

I've prioritized work over relationships since my last breakup, and it hasn't gotten me very far. Plus, I have the sinking suspicion that it'll be hard to date anyone and not compare them to Kyle. Laughable, considering how I felt about him when I left for Texas. Hopefully, being back in New York will make those feelings easier to shake.

Mia beams until her phone buzzes. Then, her happy expression melts into an annoyed one. “Crap. We had another last-minute meeting just get scheduled. I’ve got to go.”

“Is the meeting about Jason Martin?” I ask.

Mia’s expression shifts to somber. “Yeah. It’s so awful.”

“He was *twenty-two*.”

“Only the good die young, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so. He had a long career ahead of him. A whole life.”

“Well, if the rest of the department listens to my ideas, we’ll raise a lot of money in his honor. Label isn’t sparing any expense. It’s going to be the hottest ticket in town.” Her phone buzzes again. “Crap, I really gotta go. Talk to you later!”

“Bye,” I say.

She’s already halfway down the carpeted hallway, blonde ponytail swinging.

I carry my bag into the nearest restroom, quickly changing into the dress and applying a light layer of makeup. Once I’m satisfied with my appearance, I catch up on emails that have piled up this morning.

I did a decent job of keeping up with everything while I was in Texas, mostly because Carl must have made sure I wasn’t directly tapped to handle anything. That’s changed. I have a full plate of tasks by the time my computer dings with a notification that my three p.m. meeting with Carl Bergman is in five minutes.

My palms dampen with sweat that the air-conditioning chills as I walk down the hall toward the largest office. Eva is waiting in the same spot she was last time I came to Carl’s office, her hair swept up in a neat chignon and her manicure flawless. In comparison, I feel very much like I took two flights this morning and changed in a public restroom.

“Hi, Piper. Head right in. He’s expecting you.”

“Great. Thanks.”

I try to project a confidence I don't feel as I walk into the large office.

Carl isn't alone. There's a woman already sitting in one of the chairs across from his desk. She glances over one shoulder, and I pull in a surprised breath.

Fiona Wild is a force in the music industry.

From my first day interning at Empire Records, she's been the person I looked up to. She makes careers. Decides fates. She's a respected powerhouse in an industry that's male-dominated.

"Hello, Mr. Bergman. Miss Wild."

"Call me Carl, remember?"

I flush as I walk forward, nodding. No matter how many times he tells me, it still feels strange to call him by his first name.

"Please, call me Fiona." Fiona holds out her hand and shakes mine. Her grip is firm and sure. "It's nice to meet you, Piper. Carl has been singing your praises."

That's surprising, considering he barely knew my name the last time I was in his office and I didn't manage to complete the task he'd asked me to. But I smile and nod instead of saying that.

"And I was just boasting some more," Carl says. "Not many employees would have flown to Texas at the drop of a hat. Impressive work, Piper."

"Thank you." I swallow. "I wish I'd been successful."

"You did better than most, including me. Kyle hasn't returned a single one of my calls or voice mails. And Kyle's manager spoke highly of your efforts. You certainly did something right."

"Brayden *spoke highly* of me?"

I'm…shocked. We spoke for three minutes, if that, at the fair. The only way he would have said something about me

was if Kyle had asked him to, and I ignore the way that makes me feel since I don't have time to deal with it right now.

"Some artists fizzle out," Carl continues. "It happens, and it's why we have Fiona—so there's always fresh blood coming in." He glances at Fiona, then refocuses on me. "How would you like to help out with that?"

"You're still transferring me to A&R?"

I was so worried about the potential consequences of not managing to get Kyle to sign a new contract that it never occurred to me I still might get a promotion. Carl has never struck me as the generous type.

He nods. "Assuming you're still interested."

"I—yes. Very interested."

"Great. I'll—" There's a knock on the door. "Come in," Carl calls.

Eva appears. "Carl, they're hoping for your opinion on a call in the main conference room."

Carl stands and buttons his suit jacket. "One moment, ladies."

Fiona glances over at me as soon as the door shuts again. "Nice to meet you, Piper."

"You too," is all I manage in response.

I'm still in a state of shock. *Years*, I've waited for this moment, and now that it's here, I can't fully process it.

"You heard about Jason Martin?"

I nod. "I did."

"Everyone will be focused on that for the rest of this week. Come Monday, it'll be back to business as usual. We can introduce you around then, get you up to speed on how things run in the department."

"That sounds great."

She smiles. "Unless some new sensation comes up and we decide to leap on it. You never know."

I hesitate, then decide I have nothing to lose. “I saw an unsigned band perform in Texas while I was there. They were good.”

“Does that mean Carl will get a new CD now that you’re back in the office?”

I feel my cheeks redden. Most artists submit digital demos, but I couldn’t exactly email the label head. For years, I’ve left CDs anonymously instead. Hoping one would land in the right hands and make a difference. “No.”

Fiona smiles. “I love the initiative. But I threw out my CD player eight years ago, so those all ended up in a drawer in my office. Do you have a *digital* clip of this band?”

I’m surprised Carl gave the demo CDs to her. Disheartened she never listened to a single one.

“I do actually.”

“Let me see it.”

I pull up the video from Whiskey Cowboy and hold my phone out, buoyed.

Fiona watches the clip for about twenty seconds, then hands it back with a shake of her head. “Keep looking.”

I open my mouth. Close it. Open it again. “They’re good.”

“I’m not looking for good. I’m looking for electric. Not everyone can make it in this industry, Piper. That band is cute, but I’m betting they practice in a barn and never miss church on Sundays. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing I can work with either. Nothing I can *sell*. You’ll learn to spot the true talent. Not every frog you find will turn into a prince after you kiss it.”

“Sorry about that.” Carl strolls back into his office, settling back down at his desk. “The Jason Martin news broke.”

“No problem,” Fiona replies. “It gave me and Piper a chance to get to know each other better. I can already tell she’ll be an amazing addition to the department, but I’ve got to get to a meeting. We’ll talk soon, Piper.”

I nod, having to force the cheer in my voice. “Sounds good.”

Fiona walks out, leaving me and Carl alone.

I clear my throat awkwardly. “Thank you again. I really appreciate the new opportunity.”

“You’re welcome.” He’s staring at me with a speculative expression. “How is Kyle?”

I pass awkward and veer into extremely uncomfortable.

For some reason, I thought leaving Oak Grove would be like flipping a page. Reverting or returning to a life that Kyle Spencer has no place in.

He’s no longer an artist here. He’s just a guy who lives in Texas.

“He’s, um, he seems fine.”

Carl waits expectantly.

“There’s a ranch—a dairy farm, I guess—where he lives. Lots of cows. Cute town.” I stop talking, realizing he doesn’t care about any of that. “I know you’re focused on the label from a business perspective. But I think, for Kyle, leaving was the right decision.”

“Hmm.” Carl’s expression doesn’t change, giving me no indication of what he’s thinking.

Possibly, it’s that the praises he sang weren’t deserved. I was supposed to convince Kyle to come back to music, and here I am, saying he shouldn’t.

His phone rings, startling me.

Carl studies me for another second, then reaches for it. “That’ll be all, Piper.”

I nod, then quickly walk out of his office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

KYLE

Bailey's grandmother brings her to the ranch exactly at ten, which is the time we agreed on when Piper and I dropped Bailey off at her grandparents' last week.

Part of me was expecting for that plan to fall through. For Bailey to change her mind about coming over again. For her grandparents to change their minds about allowing her to.

But Bailey's grandmother waves merrily, accepts Mabel's offer of homemade strawberry jam, and then drives off after promising to pick Bailey up after lunch.

"Where's Piper?" is the first thing Bailey asks after greeting me.

Mabel slants a glance my way. I ignore it.

My aunt has been her typical tight-lipped self since returning from California, only asking a few questions about what they might have missed while they were gone. Observing the changes to the ranch.

But I've felt her gaze on me frequently ever since Piper's rental car disappeared from sight, and I'm sure she's drawn plenty of conclusions about what happened while they were gone that I haven't shared.

"She had to head home."

"That sucks," Bailey replies, which sums up my feelings about it well.

I'm still kicking myself that last night—of all the nights—was when I decided to fall asleep on Hudson's couch. I keep

telling myself it was for the best, that this morning would have gone the same way anyhow, but I haven't managed to convince myself of it yet. I missed *hours* with her.

"This is my aunt Mabel," I say. "And my uncle John."

Bailey studies them curiously, then offers a small wave. "Hi. I'm Bailey."

"Very nice to meet you, Bailey," Mabel says.

John nods his agreement.

"Feel like looking around the ranch a little bit?" I ask.

There's not much else to do here. Her last visit was brief and mostly spent with Piper in town.

Bailey shrugs. "Sure."

Mabel heads back inside while John hobbles toward the barn. I lead Bailey toward the milking shed. We pass the bunkhouse first. I avert eye contact from the building. Having Piper stay here was a bad idea for a realization I'm only just experiencing—the ranch is filled with reminders of her. I feel echoes of her presence everywhere.

Next, we pass the recording studio.

"What's that?" Bailey asks, pointing at the small building.

"Used to be an old shed. Now, it's a recording studio."

"Can we look inside?"

"Yeah, sure."

Once we reach it, I open the door and gesture for Bailey to walk inside first. Based on her expression, it's more impressive than anything else she's seen on the farm.

"Whoa," she breathes, looking over all the shiny equipment.

"I had it built so I could get some work done while spending more time here."

Bailey glances at me. "Before Mom died?"

“Yeah.” It’s the first time I’ve heard Bailey refer to our mom as *Mom*, and it affects me more than I expected. I figured her stepmom held that title. “She was a big music fan, you know.”

Bailey shakes her head. “Dad doesn’t like to talk about her.”

I sigh. “Mom was…difficult sometimes. She made a lot of mistakes, especially where you were concerned. I’m sure she hurt your dad. But I know she loved you, and I hope you know that too.”

She looks away, back at the soundboard.

“Are you still going to use this studio?”

I walk over to the couch and take a seat. “Probably not. I’m taking a break from music right now.”

“Why?”

I blow out a breath, debating how much to share with her. It’s hard to describe drugs and depression and paparazzi to a kid.

“No specific reason. Mom’s death made me reconsider a few things. Shift my priorities around a little. But I also felt like making a change. Music got to be overwhelming at times.”

Bailey considers that for a minute. “What will you do instead?” she asks.

“I have no clue,” I reply. “Live here, I guess.”

“Dad said you’re rich though, right? You don’t need to work?”

“I’ve got some money saved,” I say, smiling.

Bailey walks over to my old guitar and picks it up.

“You play?” I ask, leaning back against the leather cushions.

She shrugs, plucking at a couple of strings. “A little bit. I found out what you did, and I was curious about it. So, I asked

for a guitar for my birthday."

"I wish I'd known. I would have bought one for you."

"The one I have is getting kind of small. And it's pink."

"Nothing wrong with pink. I'd play a pink guitar."

Bailey rolls her eyes. "If you buy me one, please don't get a pink one."

I chuckle. "Okay." Then pat the spot beside me on the couch. "Bring it over here. I'll teach you a few chords."

The excitement on Bailey's face is unmistakable as she carries the beat-up guitar over.

It's the first time I've felt like I've done something right with my sister, discussing something other than school or Tennessee or any of the other topics I've grasped at over the years, trying to figure out what interested her.

Maybe I focused on all the ways we were different instead of some of the ways we might be the same.

Maybe our sibling relationship isn't the lost cause I always thought it was.

And despite all her flaws and mistakes, I think that if my mom were here, watching this, she'd be smiling at us.

I don't turn around as the screen door shuts. My focus remains on the dark yard as I watch mosquitoes buzz around the porch light. I fixed the door's hinges so they no longer squeak, but the door itself is still rickety.

And I know who it is since John was snoring on the couch in the living room when I came out here and Bailey left several hours ago.

"You fixed the door."

"Mm-hmm."

I keep looking ahead, listening to the cows move around. They tend to come up closer to the barn in the evenings to sleep and to be close by for the grain that goes along with morning milking.

"And the roof."

"That wasn't me. I hired Cal Hastings." I glance over. "Which you already knew, I'm guessing."

Mabel's smile is knowing. "Violet mentioned she saw you at Adler's."

"Of course she did."

Mabel's best friend is as nosy as Mabel is tight-lipped. But not sharing an opinion has never kept my aunt from not enjoying town gossip.

"With Piper."

And…there it is.

"Yep."

"I like her."

"Yeah…I do too."

"But you let her leave?"

I exhale. I should have said nothing. "I did not *let* her do anything. She's an adult who can make her own decisions. And she *decided* to leave because she has a whole life back in New York. Why would she have stayed?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Miles Spencer. I saw the way you looked at that girl once you stopped scowling. What difference does New York make? You kids have all your fancy devices these days to keep in touch."

"I didn't sign a new contract. She lost a big promotion because of me. And I…" I sigh. "Technically, I'm unemployed. As soon as I announce my retirement from music, I'll lose a lot of fans. It feels like I'm seventeen again and I have nothing figured out. Not exactly a great time to start a relationship. I don't even know if she…I don't know."

“The strawberries that ripened while we were gone got harvested before they went bad.”

My brow wrinkles. Even by Mabel’s standards of sudden subject changes, this one is extremely random. “Um, okay?”

“Figured that wasn’t you.” She pauses for effect. “Does that sound like someone who only came here for a promotion?”

I keep staring ahead, seeing nothing.

Mabel sighs at my silence. “When we were up in California, John and I got to talking. Cecilia’s husband is headed to Germany for a year, and they’re looking for someone to keep an eye on their place. They asked us if we were interested, and we decided we are. Next month, we’ll head back up there, this time for a while.”

I look over at her, shocked.

Mabel grew up on this ranch. Moved back when her brother’s health started to fail and basically inherited me with the property when he died and my mom turned back to alcohol to drown her sorrows.

She and John have lived here ever since, managing things themselves and then overseeing things once I was making enough to hire help.

Them leaving Oak Grove never occurred to me.

She smiles at what I’m sure is a stunned expression. “This property is yours, Miles. You should do whatever you want with it without a couple of old quacks hanging around.”

“You’re not old.”

She pats my cheek. “Bless you for lying to me.”

“But I came back to…”

“I know why you came back. But John and I aren’t Ada. There’s a difference between caring about someone and caring for them. I know your mother had her demons, and I’m not discounting them. Addiction is an ugly disease. But it’s not your burden to bear. Any of it. Whatever decisions you make,

don’t let them be about your mother. Or me and John. Or your music. Or that sweet little girl who visited today. Make your life into what you want, and the right pieces will fit.” She pauses. “Unless a smart New York man snatches it up first because he realizes it’s a special one before you do.”

I scoff. “Subtle.”

“We could all use a knock on the head sometimes.” She yawns, then stands. “I’m going to hit the hay. Long day.”

“Okay. Good night.”

“Good night.”

The door slams, and then I’m alone again.

I’m about to head inside to avoid the mosquitoes starting to swarm me when my phone buzzes. I pull it out quickly, then deflate when I see the name. I was hoping it might be Piper, elaborating on the *Landed* text she sent hours ago.

I simply liked it because I wasn’t sure what else to do and Bailey was still here at the time. It wasn’t exactly an invitation for a longer conversation, and I never came up with anything else to say.

“Hey, Brayden,” I answer.

“Hi, Kyle. Sorry to call so late.”

I prop one boot up on the railing. “It’s fine. What’s up?”

“Jason Martin died yesterday.”

A rock lands in my gut. He opened for me on tour a couple of years ago.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. He was twenty-two.”

I exhale. “When’s the service?”

“I don’t know yet. But Empire is putting on a benefit concert this weekend. A fundraiser with all the proceeds going to an organization that works to prevent drunk driving. Offering free rides home, training for bartenders, distributing breathalyzers, stuff like that.”

“He was drunk?”

“No. The other driver was.”

“Damn.”

“Look, I know things are tense with Empire right now and that you’ve made your thoughts on it all clear. But it’s a good cause, and considering *what* cause it is, I wanted to make sure you had a chance to participate, if you want to. They’re asking for a three-song set.”

“This weekend?”

“Yeah. Plan is to hold it outdoors in a park. Trying to make it a big festival with major headliners. Sutton Everett is already confirmed, and they’ve got a bunch of other big names lined up.”

“In New York?”

“Yes.”

I think about it. Then decide faster than I expected to.

“Okay. I’ll perform.”

“You will?” Brayden doesn’t try to hide the surprise in his voice. Or if he does, he doesn’t manage to do so very well.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll make the arrangements.”

We say our goodbyes.

And instead of heading inside, I continue sitting there, staring at nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTY

PIPER

"Mom, I *promise* I will be there."

"You'd better be, Piper. Wells and Norah said they have a big surprise!"

"Yeah, I heard you the first time. And I got all five of your texts."

I'm assuming Norah is expecting, and so is everyone else. Which is why I'm going to have to cram everything that I need to get done today into normal working hours so I can book it to my mother's house in Brooklyn in time for family dinner and the announcement.

If they are having a baby, I'm thrilled for my second oldest brother and sister-in-law. I'm also expecting I'll have to answer lots of questions about my trip to Texas, which I'm much less enthused about. I've done plenty of that this week with my coworkers.

Thankfully, everyone has been so busy preparing for the benefit tomorrow that all of the interrogations have been brief. Harper arrived yesterday, but aside from a quick lunch that was mostly centered around Mia's engagement, we haven't had the chance to talk. Which is a relief since she's the one person who has any clue there was more to my trip than an unsigned contract.

I hang up with my mom and am alternating between sipping my third cup of coffee and typing out a response to an email about final arrangements for the benefit concert tomorrow when there's a knock on the open door.

I glance up.

“Kyle!” I shoot to my feet, knocking my coffee mug off my desk. It doesn’t shatter, but it does make enough commotion that everyone in the immediate vicinity is suddenly staring this way.

I grab a handful of tissues from the box on my desk and kneel to blot the puddle of coffee on the floor, feeling my cheeks burn.

Kyle leans down, too, grabbing the now-empty mug and setting it back on my desk. I toss the wet tissues into the trash bin next to my desk and stand, wiping my hands on my navy skirt as I wobble unsteadily in my heels. Play with the worn hem of my sweatshirt and wish he’d shown up before I swapped my blazer out for it.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” I’m tempted to poke him to make sure this isn’t some hallucination or my imagination.

But his scent is already permeating the small space, replacing the aroma of lemon cleaner and coffee.

He leans a hip against my desk, looking like he’s been in here a thousand times before. It’s unfair—how he’s so at ease in my world when I literally stumbled my way through his. And that he’s so nonchalant about seeing me when I’m obviously a fumbling mess.

“I’m in New York to sing at the fundraiser. I’m in the office to meet with Carl. And I’m in your office…to talk to you.”

“Oh.”

I clear my throat.

Uncross my arms and cross them again.

Since he’s no longer signed to the label, he’s under no obligation to perform at the fundraiser. It never occurred to me that Kyle might choose to, and I’m shocked I didn’t hear that he apparently is.

“I, uh…I thought about you. When I heard the news.”

“I didn’t know him that well. When he opened for me, he kind of implied I was a subpar singer. I agreed with him, and I think he assumed I was messing with him. We didn’t talk much after that.”

I smile briefly. “I mean, I thought about you when I heard how he died.”

Kyle nods slowly, amusement slowly slipping off his face. “That’s why I decided to perform. It’s a good cause.”

“Yeah, it is.”

He glances around my tiny office, gaze settling on the three boxes piled in one corner. “You moving offices?”

“Yeah, actually. I start in A&R on Monday.”

“You got the promotion?” The naked excitement in his voice makes my chest ache.

“I got the promotion,” I confirm. “Apparently, Brayden had some nice things to say, and you not answering a single call of his convinced Carl I managed some Olympian feat by talking to you at all. So…thank you.”

His gaze is intense. “Don’t let anyone else take the credit, Piper. This was all you.”

I swallow the lump that’s appeared in my throat. “Thanks.” I chew on the inside of my cheek, trying to decide what else to say. “So, you’re meeting with Carl?”

“Nothing’s changed. I just thought I owed him the courtesy of a meeting after all the calls I dodged.”

“How long are you in town for?”

“I don’t know. I booked a one-way ticket.”

I booked a one-way ticket.

My heart leaps, taking off at double time.

“Really? There’s no third cutting of hay that needs your attention?”

My favorite smile appears—the one that only curls up one corner of his mouth and always reaches his eyes. “Nah. The

ranch will be fine without me."

"Oh my God."

I look across the hall, and Kyle does too. Lilah is frozen in place, staring at Kyle.

When she realizes she's captured his attention, she slaps a palm over her mouth. "I can't believe I said that out loud. I'm so sorry. This is super unprofessional. I just…wow, I love your music so much. My roommates and I drove five hours to see you play in Miami. Blew all our food money on tickets and ate ramen for a month. Totally worth it."

Something acidic burns my throat.

Witnessing people—women—fawn over Kyle in this building is nothing new. Being annoyed by it is nothing new. But this time, the annoyance isn't rooted in incredulity. I'm not wondering why they're acting this way around him.

I'm…extremely jealous.

Kyle smiles, but it's one that doesn't reach his eyes. "I'm flattered. I hope you enjoyed the show."

Lilah nods emphatically, then rushes into her office and closes the door. She only started working here a couple of months ago, so I guess she's not as jaded around celebrities as I am. Then again, I've never seen her fangirl over anyone, except Kyle, so maybe it's just him.

"You could throw a stone and hit a Kyle Spencer fan in here, I guess." I speak before he can, trying to make light of the encounter.

Kyle raises one eyebrow. "Are you threatening my fans?"

"That doesn't sound like something I'd do. I'm more of a pacifist."

"Is that related to being a vegetarian?"

"Probably."

He smiles. "So, I—" His phone rings. Kyle swears under his breath, then answers it, pinching the bridge of his nose as he nods along to whatever the caller is saying. "Yeah, okay."

He hangs up, his expression now apologetic.

“You have to go.”

Kyle nods. “Brayden is already in Carl’s office. I’m holding things up.”

“Okay. I’ll, uh, see you tomorrow.”

He studies me, something unsettled in his expression. After a minute, he nods and turns, disappearing down the hall.

I exhale for what feels like the first time in hours. Sink down into my chair and suck in a few deep breaths, painfully aware that everyone in the immediate vicinity can see into my office. Then try to refocus on what I have to get done today and avoid thinking about how he’s right down the hall instead of in Texas, like I thought.

My phone rings around noon.

It’s Linda, and she tells me to come up to reception.

I send the email I was working on, change into my blazer, and then hurry down the hall, trying to figure out why she called. Typically, Linda signs for all the packages, and I’m not expecting anything to be sent here anyway.

As soon as I reach reception, the mystery is solved.

Kyle is standing by the elevators, studiously ignoring all the stares aimed his way. His attention snaps to me as soon as I appear, no sign of the usual softness I got used to seeing in his expression.

His face is set in a stony mask, and my stomach knots as I wonder what could have happened in his meeting.

“Do you have a minute to discuss some questions related to the fundraiser?” His tone is brisk as he hits the Down button, matching his stoic expression.

I’m confused, but nod. Linda gives me a sympathetic, puzzled look as the elevator arrives. I follow him inside, glancing at the ground instead of the looks aimed in this direction.

As soon as the doors close, Kyle turns toward me.

“Sorry. I had the woman at the front desk call you instead of coming back to your office because everyone who works here is staring at me like a zoo animal and it was kind of freaking me out.”

I exhale, incredibly relieved nothing is wrong.

“Carl’s fault. He told the whole office why I was in Texas __”

I’m suddenly sandwiched between Kyle and the elevator wall, his warm mouth covering mine. It takes me a split second to work through the shock, and then I’m kissing him back, moaning as his hands slip beneath my blazer and grip my waist. We’re frantic and frenzied, tongues tangling and breaths mingling.

He suddenly steps back. Exhales. “Shit. Sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

I arch a brow.

Kyle shakes his head, smiling a little. “I mean, I’ve been dying to do that since you dropped the mug. But I didn’t mean to do it like that. Here. I—” He glances at the buttons, then pulls the red one.

Immediately, the elevator stops moving.

My mouth gapes. “What the hell are you doing? I’m pretty sure that calls the fire depart—”

He kisses me again.

And I sink into it again, the part of me that was secretly hoping for—craving—this ever since I saw him flaring to life. A few days weren’t long enough to clear him out of my system. I’m starting to worry what length of time *will* be enough.

Kyle pulls back, both of us panting for breath. “I’ve always wanted to pull that button. Does it actually call the fire department?”

“I don’t know! I’ve never done it!”

He grins. “Have dinner with me tonight.”

“Like a date?”

He nods, turning serious. “Exactly like a date.”

I fiddle with the buttons on his shirt, avoiding his eyes. I’m painfully aware of each thud in my chest, my heart protesting the words I’m about to say. “I can’t. My mom is having my whole family over for dinner tonight. In her words, attendance isn’t optional.” I glance up, registering the disappointment in his expression. “I’m sorry.”

Kyle quickly wipes the disappointment away. I know him well enough to tell that his smile is forced. “Sounds like a scary situation. Oak Grove has fewer police officers than are in your immediate family.”

I smile at that—at the reminder that Kyle knows me. *Really* knows me.

And it makes the next words fall out effortlessly when they’ve always been a struggle before.

“You…you’re welcome to come, if you want. My mom always makes way too much food. And most of it will have meat in it. I’m the only one who stuck with vegetarianism.”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“I lived on your ranch for almost two weeks. If you want to talk impositions, I definitely have you beat.” I smile. “My brothers bring friends to dinner all the time. It’s not a big deal.”

“I’m a friend?”

“I thought so. Did that…change?”

Kyle sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Nothing’s changed.”

From his tone, I can’t tell if that’s a good or bad thing. Maybe he doesn’t know either.

“Is that a yes on dinner?”

He nods, a half-smile appearing. “Can’t recall the last time I said no to you.”

“I can,” I whisper.

Kyle shakes his head. “Music and us are two different things.”

“*Us*?”

“Yeah. Guess we can talk about that after dinner at your mom’s.”

He leans past me and pushes the red button, and the elevator continues descending.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

KYLE

The last time I met a girl's parents was in tenth grade, and it wasn't intentional. Amber swore her parents were in Dallas for the night, and turned out, they weren't.

This feels different. For one, my interest in Amber didn't last past that night. And the stakes tonight feel much higher. Because not only is meeting Piper's family intentional, but I also very much care about how it goes. I wasn't nervous when meeting with Carl Bergman earlier, and he's the most powerful label head in the country.

And it really doesn't help that they're *all* cops. I thought Piper was kidding when she first said it.

Then, I thought it was funny.

Now, I'm extremely anxious about what I might be walking into.

The car stops in front of a two-story brick house with a black metal gate separating the small front yard from the street. Piper climbs out first. I thank the driver Brayden arranged to chauffeur me around the city and then follow behind her. My grip tightens on the bunch of flowers I brought as we walk. I thought maybe they were silly, but Piper seemed impressed by the gesture. Hopefully, her mom feels the same way.

"My parents bought this place when they got married," she tells me as we approach the open gate and start up the walk. "My mom dated a realtor a couple of years ago, and he gave her an estimate on what it's worth now. She still brings it up."

“Good investment.”

“Don’t mention that to my dad. His building raises the rent on his apartment every year.”

“Your dad is coming?”

“Yeah, he always attends family dinners. Why?”

“I just assumed since you said it was dinner at your mom’s that he wouldn’t be here.”

“They get along well.”

I’m more worried about how I’ll get along with her dad than how he’ll get along with her mom, but I don’t mention that.

“Got it.”

Calm down, I tell myself.

Piper and I aren’t dating. She’s even more tied to New York now that she has her promotion, making any possibility of a relationship between us less feasible.

I’m still nervous.

The front door, painted a cheery shade of yellow, opens before Piper even has a chance to knock. A woman with the same shade of vibrant hair rushes out, wrapping Piper up in a huge hug.

“Hi, Mom,” she says, her voice muffled.

“It’s so good to see you, sweetheart.”

Piper smiles, then glances at me. “Mom, this is Kyle. Kyle, this is my mom, Dakota.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Dakota appraises me for an uncomfortable moment, then steps back and waves an arm toward the open door. She’s dressed in jeans and a blouse, her hair pulled back in a tight bun. “You’re last to arrive, of course.”

“I told you I would be here at seven thirty. It’s seven thirty-*two*. And there was traffic.”

“There’s always traffic,” Dakota replies.

“You have a beautiful home,” I say, glancing around the small entryway.

There’s a row of cubbies stuffed with random items—hats and cases of water bottles and empty shopping bags—on the left. The stairs to the second floor are straight ahead.

“Thank you. Craig and I bought it when we were just starting out. You would not believe what it’s worth today.”

I hide a smile and glance at Piper.

Told you so, she mouths.

“These are for you, Dakota.” I hold the flowers out.

She takes them from me tentatively, stroking the delicate petals. “Well, aren’t you sweet. I’ll go put these in some water. Everyone’s already in the living room.”

I follow Piper down the hallway, glancing toward the right first. It’s a dining room, the long table surrounded by chairs and covered by a linen tablecloth. The room to the left is filled with people. It’s overwhelming, especially when they catch sight of Piper and all start cheering. Probably how she felt when we showed up at Wagon Wheel.

I know Piper is the youngest, and it’s obvious in the affectionate, protective way her brothers greet her, passing her around for hugs. Three of them call her Pipsqueak, which makes me grin and Piper flush.

The gray-haired man in the armchair by the fireplace rises last. Her dad. There’s an air of authority that makes his choice of profession obvious.

He says something to Piper that has her nodding her head and smiling, and then she turns toward me.

“Guys, this is my friend Kyle.”

She didn’t use the friend title when she introduced me to her mom, and I’m not sure if that was intentional or not.

I lift a hand in what I hope is a casual *I’m not intimidated* wave. “Nice to meet you all.”

I wait for the recognition or the challenging stares, but it doesn't come. Just friendly handshakes all around before I take a seat on the couch next to Piper.

Piper's brother Alex is on my left. "You work with Piper?" he asks me.

"Not really."

He raises a questioning brow at that response, but moves along the conversation without clarifying. "Did you just move to the city?"

"No, I'm just here for a visit."

"Where do you live?"

"Uh, Texas."

Based on his expression, he's putting some pieces together. I'm not sure if that's a good or a bad thing. What Piper might have shared about her work trip to her family.

There's commotion in the doorway as Dakota reappears along with a brown-haired woman. They're both carrying plates of appetizers. Two of Piper's brothers stand to help transfer the food to the coffee table. I've forgotten both of their names already.

Once the food is settled, everyone, except Dakota, sits down. The living room is larger than I would have guessed based on the size of the house, a comfortable assortment of furniture providing plenty of seating. Family photos line the walls.

"Kyle? Piper? Can I get you two anything to drink?" Dakota asks.

There's a quiet inhale from the couch across from me.

"Just water, Mom. Thanks."

"Holy shit," a woman's voice whispers.

"Water is fine for me too," I say.

One of Piper's brother's glances at the brunette. He looks like he might be the oldest, but I'm not sure. "What?"

“That’s *Kyle Spencer*,” she hisses back.

“I know. I just met him. How do you know him?”

“*Kyle Spencer*, Wells.”

“I know! Why do you keep saying his name?”

Everyone is looking anywhere but at me. Except for Alex. He glances over and smirks. I’m guessing he’s already figured out I’m famous.

“We can all hear you guys,” Piper says dryly.

“I’m sorry!” the woman exclaims, then scoots forward to offer me her right hand. “I’m Norah.”

“Kyle.” I shake it.

“I know. I mean, nice to meet you. Sorry. You must get so sick of people making a scene around you or saying they love your music.”

“That’s why we all pretended not to know him,” Alex says. “You ruined it, Norah.”

“Wait. You guys knew who he was?” Wells asks.

One of the brothers whose name I can’t remember scoffs. “Alex is full of shit. He can’t even remember which nights he’s on duty. It’s posted on Mom’s fridge, like he’s in kindergarten.”

“That’s *for* Mom, Seth,” Alex replies. “Otherwise, she calls me and asks whether I’ll be home for dinner.”

“Sure it is,” Seth says, rolling his eyes. He glances at me. “What kind of music do you play, man?”

“This is *so* embarrassing for you,” Norah says. “You’re asking *Kyle Spencer* what kind of music he plays.”

“Do you think you’ve said his name enough times?” Wells asks. “There are a lot of singers out there, okay?” He glances at me almost apologetically. “I’m sure you’ve done really well. I don’t listen to much music. Just whatever is on the radio.”

“He’s on the radio *all the time*,” Norah says. “And one of his songs was on our wedding playlist.”

“I liked the playlist,” Wells replies. He looks at me. Grins. “Guess I’m a fan.”

“Appreciate it. Been trying to make an Egan a fan of my music for years.”

I get a few questioning stares for that comment, but it’s only aimed at one person. Piper elbows me in the ribs.

“In our defense, we didn’t know Piper worked with *actual* celebrities,” another brother says. “All she mentions are garage bands no one has heard of.”

“You mean *undiscovered talent*, Noah,” Piper says.

“Is it undiscovered if no one *discovers* it?”

Piper exhales, and I hear the frustration in it.

“She’ll be the one discovering it now that she’s in A&R,” I say.

Questioning glances turn Piper’s way, confirming what I already guessed—she didn’t tell her family about her promotion.

“A&R?” Wells asks. “What does that mean?”

“Artists and repertoire,” Piper answers. “It’s the label’s department that handles scouting new artists for the label to sign.”

“Is that a big deal?”

“It’s a big deal,” I say, realizing Piper won’t brag about herself. “And the head of the label offered it to her himself.”

“Wait,” Alex says. “Is this the promotion you were talking about?”

“Yeah,” Piper replies.

Alex grins. “I told you that you’d get it!”

“Get what?” Dakota reappears, passing me and Piper our drinks and then settling in an open chair.

“Piper got a promotion,” Norah says. “She’ll be discovering new artists, like she’s always talked about.”

A wrinkle forms between Dakota's eyes, then gradually smooths out as she looks at her daughter. "Oh, that's wonderful, honey. Congratulations."

"Thanks, Mom."

I feel like I'm missing something in their dynamic, but I'm not sure what.

"Well, while we're sharing big news…" Wells glances at Norah. "We're moving to Alaska!"

You could hear a pin drop in the silence that follows.

"What?" Dakota finally says. The dismay on her face is obvious.

"*Alaska* Alaska?" Alex questions.

Wells nods. "We've always wanted to visit, and Norah got a job offer at a hospital there. Once I get through the training, I'll be working as a park ranger. Before we really settle down and have kids, we wanted to try something different. You all are welcome to visit, of course."

No one seems to know what to say. For a family that's this close-knit and has always lived within miles of each other, this must be a massive shock.

"That's awesome," I say, breaking the silence. "I went salmon fishing with some buddies up there a few years back. One of the prettiest places I've ever visited."

"Thanks, Kyle," Wells says, shooting me a grateful look. "If you're ever back up there, make sure to look us up."

I nod. "I will."

The short exchange seems to jolt Piper's family out of their surprise. Soon, the room is filled with chatter and laughter again as Wells and Norah get pelted with questions about their upcoming move.

Amid the commotion, Piper's hand finds my knee and squeezes it.

"Thank you," she whispers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The door swings shut, and I lock the dead bolt.

"Nice place," he comments.

"Thanks." My heart pounds so loudly that I'm worried he can hear it as I toe off my shoes and drop my keys in the bowl by the door.

Kyle wanders deeper into my apartment, looking around the living space. It's entirely open concept with the kitchen, eating nook, and laundry to the left and the couch and television to the right.

"Want anything to eat? Drink?" I walk over to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water out for myself.

"I'm good, thanks." He's studying the spines of the books on the shelves. They're mostly Serena's thick law volumes.

It's weird, having him here. Not weird in a bad way. Just… weird.

I didn't think he'd fit in earlier, clustered around the dining room table my dad had found on the street in mint condition and hauled back to Brooklyn forty years ago. Just like I didn't think I'd miss waking up to a wheezing air conditioner and drinking my coffee on the front porch while watching the cows in the field.

I was wrong on both accounts.

"These for light reading?"

I smile and shake my head. “They belong to my roommate in law school.”

“Ah, that’s right. Makes sense.”

“She’s the one from South Carolina. She’s back home for the weekend.”

“What about your other roommate?”

“She went to the Hamptons.”

A relief because I never told Serena or Lauren my work trip was to see Kyle Spencer, and I’m sure they’d have a lot of questions about why he was in our apartment if either of them were home. Questions I don’t have answers to since we haven’t discussed what it means that he’s here.

After a few sips of water, I muster up the courage to say, “My bedroom is this way.”

Kyle’s attention snaps to me.

I walk toward the half-open door, assuming he’ll follow.

His fancy SUV picked me up outside my building to go to my mom’s for dinner. Dinner was chaotic and crazy, like usual. We laughed about it on the drive here, and he nodded when I asked if he wanted to come up and see my place. The elevator ride was silent, brimming with awareness and tension.

For the first time, I’m aware Kyle is famous.

Does he do stuff like this? Does he meet parents and tour overpriced apartments in the Village? Or does he have one-night stands with models and actresses in five-star hotels? Get blow jobs from groupies after shows?

It was easier in Texas. That part felt more natural, separated from the real world and following his lead.

All I know about his romantic past is that he was very popular in high school, he would sneak out instead of spending the night, and he dated Sutton Everett. Even though he said his relationship with the gorgeous pop star was totally fake, I have a hard time believing it. Not just that he wasn’t into her, but that she wasn’t interested in *him*.

As far as I can tell, there's a very short list of women not attracted to Kyle Spencer.

And I'm not on it.

"Why is this *exactly* what I imagined your bedroom looking like?"

I glance at Kyle, who followed me in here and is grinning at my walls. "Why were you imagining what my bedroom looked like?"

"Been bored since you left."

He says *that*, then goes back to inspecting the vintage concert posters I have framed on my walls. They're the center of attention, a mix of colors and typography that stand out against the cream walls and white furniture.

"How'd you get all these?"

"*Years* of looking. Some of the online listings were scams. Some sellers didn't bother packaging them right, and they got damaged in transit. There are still a few I'd love to find, but haven't been able to."

"I can get you a Kyle Spencer one. Cheap."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, that's what I want on my bedroom wall. Your face."

He turns away from the frames, smirking. "I've been reliably informed lots of women have my face on their bedroom wall."

"Probably to pretend it's you they're fucking. *I* have the real thing."

I blame the two heavy pours of wine I had at dinner for that coming out of my mouth.

At least I have Kyle's full attention now.

"You do, huh?"

I lift one shoulder, feeling the fabric of my shirt slip precariously as I let it fall. Kyle tracks the movement as he takes a step closer.

I shove his chest gently, pushing him in the direction of the bed. Kyle's eyes snap to mine, all the amusement disappearing from them.

I step between his legs as soon as he sits on the edge of the mattress, tipping his head back to maintain eye contact as I run my hands up his arms, over his shoulders, and into his hair. His Adam's apple bobs with a swallow as the silence between us seems to thicken, everything we're not saying colliding with what we're about to do.

His calloused hands creep up my thighs, tugging me closer to him. Until I'm in his lap, straddling him, biting my bottom lip when I feel the hard ridge of his erection.

I want this to happen.

Badly.

But I'm also aware this will possibly be the last time. Kyle is here because of tragic, extenuating circumstances that he has a personal connection to. He didn't come to New York for me.

I pull away, catching the disappointment in his expression until it shutters to neutral. Then the blaze of heat when he realizes why I slipped off his lap and am down on my knees, working at his belt.

I'm too impatient to pull his pants down far enough. They're past the bottom of his boxer briefs. I'm too eager to touch him. Taste him.

I'm also nervous. I've never had any complaints, but I'm sure Kyle has gotten a lot of blow jobs. I want this one to be the best.

The cotton of his underwear is easier to pull than the denim. His cock springs free, just as huge as I remember. Maybe bigger from this angle. The last time we were intimate was in a dim alleyway behind a bar. The lighting in my room is much better.

I fist the base, my grip light as I move my hand toward the tip. I lean forward, licking a circle around the flared head.

Kyle groans loudly enough that my roommates would hear if either of them were home.

His hips jerk forward as I move away, asking for my mouth. His jeans restrict his movement, so he tugs at them until they fall on the fluffy rug. His boxer briefs follow.

I run my hands up his bare thighs, the light hair tickling my palms. His skin is hot, muscles flexing under my touch as I get closer to his cock.

There's a distant scream of a siren, but my room is so quiet that I can hear the shift in his breathing. It goes from shallow to rapid when I take the first suck, hollowing my cheeks and breathing through my nose so I can take him as deep as possible. The head bumps against the back of my throat, and he's still not all the way in.

Kyle doesn't thrust, giving me time to adjust. His fingers thread through my hair, tugging gently.

I moan around his dick, a persistent pulse fluttering between my legs as I swirl my tongue.

"*Fuck*, Piper."

I dig my nails into his thighs, bobbing my head to take him again. I taste the salty tang as he gets closer to coming.

Suddenly, he pushes me back and stands.

"Bend over, baby."

There's a rough, unhinged tone to his voice that has me quickly complying. That promises the rough, dirty sex I'm craving.

I can't see him very well with my face half-pressed to the mattress. But I feel the rasp of denim as he tugs off the pants I changed into for dinner. Hear the rip of my thong as he yanks at it impatiently and the crinkle of a wrapper as he covers himself.

And then he's pushing inside of me, the sudden stretch so satisfying that I want to scream. He's so deep, his hips pounding against mine as he fills me. I push back against him, moaning and begging. Chanting his name.

Who knows what gibberish is coming out of my mouth? I just want him to keep going.

We're racing along at a hundred miles an hour, the pleasure growing inside of me like a fire repeatedly getting doused by gasoline. I start to spasm around him, and I know Kyle feels it too.

His grip on my waist tightens, fingers pressing into my skin so hard that I'll probably have bruises.

And then I shatter, the pleasure incredible and devastating and consuming. His hips keep moving, prolonging the ecstasy. I'm barely aware of him coming, too, the way he groans my name immensely satisfying.

I collapse against the mattress, boneless and breathless.

Roll over once my breathing is closer to normal.

Kyle smirks down at me, then leans over and plants a soft kiss on my lips.

Something about that juxtaposition—the wild sex and the gentle gesture—makes my heart ache.

"Are you staying?" I ask, then hold my breath as I wait for him to answer.

"Do you want me to?"

"Yeah."

"Then, I'll stay." He kisses me again, then pulls away to head into the hallway.

A minute later, I hear the bathroom sink running.

I turn on my back, limbs spread like a starfish on the soft cotton of my comforter. I have no desire to move. I just want to lie here, savoring this moment.

My eyes close, not opening again until I feel the mattress dip with his weight. I roll over so I'm half-splayed on his chest. His arm comes up to wrap around my waist, tugging me even closer.

“How did it go with Bailey?” I ask, drawing tiny circles on his chest with my pointer finger. I almost texted him to ask, then talked myself out of it.

“Okay, I think. She asked about you. We explored the ranch a little. She met Mabel and John. Fed some of the calves.”

“Wait.” I sit up. “Calves. Like adorable baby cows?”

“Uh, yes. We have to breed them to milk them.” There’s an insulting *duh* tone to his voice, like I might not understand how that aspect of the dairy industry works.

“I *know* that, Kyle. Where were they? I never saw them.”

He blinks at me. “The calf barn is past the milking shed. I guess you never walked that far?”

I huff, then lie back down. “I guess not.”

“If you’re ever back in Texas, we’ll have more.” Kyle keeps talking, like he’s not ready for me to respond to that open invitation. “And it turns out, Bailey is interested in music. I gave her the guitar I’d taught myself on. She’s supposed to learn a song before she visits next summer. When I call her next, I’m hoping there will be a little less dead air.”

“There will be.”

“We’ll see.”

His fingers glide up and down my arm in a light touch. I’m swollen and a little sore, but suddenly tempted to start all over again.

“How come you didn’t tell your family about your promotion?”

I sigh. “I don’t know. They’ve never gotten me and music. I mean, they didn’t even know who *Kyle Spencer* was.” His fingers pinch my side, and I smile. “I guess I got tired of trying to convince them that it mattered. They all have a job meant to save lives and protect people. Caring about a band who plays in a dive bar isn’t as important.”

“There’s also more to life than speeding tickets and arrests. I’m not saying what your family does isn’t important. But if more people cared about bands playing in dive bars, maybe there would be less violence in the world. Discovering a band wouldn’t just change their lives. It’d change the lives of everyone who listened to their music. Get them through the hard times and the good ones.”

“Play at their wedding?” I tease.

The side of his mouth I can see turns upward. “I’m surprised you allowed that.”

“It was their day. I wasn’t going to make a scene about it.”

“Uh-huh.”

I trace more tiny circles along the ridge of his collarbone. “I played the band we saw in Mayville for Fiona Wild. She’s the head of A&R at Empire.”

“Yeah, I know who she is. What did she say?”

“That they have nothing she can work with or sell and I’ll learn how to spot true talent.” I exhale. “You were right about handing out noes. It sucks, even when they’re not there to hear it.”

“It hurts because you *care*, Piper. And that’s a good thing. Not something to be ashamed of.”

“Fiona made it sound like it is. She said not every frog I find will turn into a prince after I kiss it.”

“Well, that’s a weird metaphor.”

I laugh, snuggling closer to his chest. Kyle’s fingers continue running up and down my bare arm, the comforting motion making my eyelids heavy. He shifts us so the pillows are beneath us before tugging the blanket at the end of my bed over our bodies.

“Fiona is trying to keep her job. She has people to answer to, and her head is on the chopping block if the label invests in an artist who doesn’t chart. She *can’t* care, but you can.”

He fits, I think.

Somehow knows exactly what to say, exactly what I want to hear.

"I told Carl you made the right decision. I just…wanted you to know that I think that."

His hold on my waist tightens.

"I missed this," I say, chickening out on replacing that last word with *you*.

He doesn't.

"I missed you."

I fall asleep with a smile on my face, deciding all my confusion will still be there in the morning.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KYLE

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the King of Country, gracing us with his presence."

I turn to look at the brunette woman approaching me. She's dressed casually in shorts and a T-shirt, and she's holding a clipboard.

"Hi, Harper. How are you?"

One of her eyebrows rises. "You remember my name. Good memory."

"You've been at most of my meetings."

"Yeah, but you were always focused on Piper."

"*She* never noticed."

Harper smiles. "Yeah, well, Piper's never been a big country music fan."

"Well aware."

"I think she might be developing a new appreciation for it though."

"She said that?"

I'm fishing, and Harper's smirk calls me out on it.

"More like what she *hasn't* said. She's been uncharacteristically tight-lipped about her trip to Texas."

Someone off to the side calls her name.

Harper glances that way, then back at me. "See you later."

“See you,” I say, then look back at the stage.

I’m nervous about this performance for a whole host of reasons.

I lay awake last night long after Piper fell asleep on my chest, contemplating what I was going to say onstage today.

I’m determined not to take the coward’s way out this time. She’s no longer living on my ranch, trying to convince me to return to music. We’re not stuck in the same place if this all goes to shit. She has a choice in the matter, and while it makes doing this no less terrifying, I know I’ll regret *not* doing it just as much.

Just like I’ve summoned her with my thoughts, Piper appears. She’s talking with two other women, one who’s blonde and looks vaguely familiar.

She spots me and offers me a small wave.

A few minutes later, she wanders over, smiling shyly as she tucks a curl behind one ear. “Hey.”

“Hi.”

I haven’t seen Piper since I snuck out of her apartment early this morning, but I woke her up before I left so that she knew I’d actually spent the whole night.

“You okay?”

“I’m good. Just…I’m planning to play a song I haven’t performed live before, and it’s”—*about you*—“nerve-racking.”

Piper nods, her expression serious. Then, she leans forward and says, “You’ll be fine. Just remember, it’s just like having sex.”

The smile spreads, slow and sure, so I only register I’m grinning when she winks at me. I’ve never experienced this feeling before—this warmth that’s spreading everywhere. I want to grab her hand and pull her back close to me when she steps away to answer someone else’s call.

I take a deep breath and then weave my way through backstage, nodding at everyone who greets me, until I reach

the VIP section along the right edge of the stage.

Sutton Everett is onstage, performing right now. I shake hands with her husband, Teddy, who has a cute baby strapped to his chest. He has tiny headphones on and everything.

It's a little weird, seeing her family.

Sutton and I never crossed the line between friends and more, but I thought about it.

It seemed to make sense, being with someone who understood the industry and was part of it. Someone who could commiserate over paparazzi and appreciate the songwriting process. The duet we cowrote was one of the few collaborations I'd ever participated in, but it was by far the most enjoyable. But that's the confusing thing about chemistry. It's illogical. Difficult to explain or escape.

Sutton wraps up her set, and then it's my turn.

I give her a hug as she steps offstage, briefly catching up before I'm announced.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boy, do we have a special treat for you. A surprise guest even though you all know who it is. Make some noise for the king of country music, KYLE SPENCER!"

I walk out and wave.

It's been a while since I was in front of a crowd this big. The last crowd I played for—at the fair in Oak Grove—wasn't a tenth of this size.

The cheers climb to a fever pitch when I reach the microphone at the center of the stage, the excited faces a jarring contrast to the somber reason we're here.

I wait for the applause to die, then speak into the microphone.

"Thank you, guys. I'm so happy to be here with you all tonight. But I'm so devastated by the reason—that Jason left this world long before it should have been his time. We're celebrating his life tonight, and we're also fundraising to

prevent another tragedy like this from happening to anyone else. And I—"

I inhale, taking a brief moment.

"If you've followed my career at all, you've likely noticed I like to keep my personal life private. But I want you all to know this loss hits home for me. Six months ago, I lost my mom in a drunk driving accident."

There's a wave of whispers in the crowd, which I ignore.

"Unlike Jason, she was the one making bad decisions. It became a fatal one, getting behind the wheel of a car when she shouldn't have been driving. And it could have cost someone else their life, the way Jason lost his. I hope you're here, enjoying the music. But I also hope y'all remember that life is short and precious and that you hug your loved ones a little tighter tonight. And on a lighter note…I have a special treat for y'all tonight. A song I've never performed live and wasn't sure I ever would."

The whispers start up again, a quiet hiss in the background.

"I wrote this song about a girl—"

Immediately, there's a cheer that drowns out my voice.

"And I promised myself if she ever came to see me perform, I'd play it for her. Last time, I chickened out. This time, I won't."

I smile, then start strumming the opening chords to "Blue Rain Boots." I glance to the right before I start singing, but Piper isn't watching from the wings.

Maybe that'll make this easier. No matter where she is backstage, the sound crew did an incredible job with the acoustics. If she's in a mile's range of the stage, she'll hear this song.

The first two lines are the hardest. I keep singing, surprised by how many people in the crowd know the words since this isn't one of my biggest hits.

I launch right into a hit to continue my set, the rush of being onstage replacing my nervousness now that the song is

over.

However Piper feels about it, it's out there. I can't take it back, and nothing in me wants to. If she had any doubts about how invested I am in us—in her—this is my answer. I'm *in* this even if she isn't. And I hope it'll mean more, offered in the medium we both appreciate.

I finish my third song, wave at the crowd for a final time, and then head offstage. Catch up with a few other artists I haven't seen in a while until I spot Harper standing off to the side, talking to a middle-aged man, and I make my way over toward her.

"Have you seen Piper?"

Harper's expression is unsure. "Um, she left."

It's a million times worse than when I thought she didn't watch me on the bull. My stomach drops, sudden and abrupt.

Harper's expression shifts to sympathy as she takes a step closer. "I'm sure that she—"

I'm already walking away, the rest of her words lost in the commotion backstage. Shrugging off the few other people brave enough to approach me. I'm guessing my expression resembles a thundercloud right now.

Brayden appears. "That was incredible, Kyle!" my manager says. "The crowd loved—"

"Book me a plane ticket. I'm going home."

I keep walking, past his surprised expression and everyone else who's now looking this way.

Away from the stage for the final time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

PIPER

Linda rushes over to me right as I'm heading toward the stage. Sutton is on her third song, which means Kyle is about to perform.

"Piper! I need you to grab the backstage passes out of my closet." She presses a cold metal key into my palm. "I forgot to grab them last night, and I just realized. We need to hand them out before the after-party so security can keep track of who's granted access. The crowds are crazy, and we can't take any chances."

"But I—"

I glance toward the stage. Sutton's last song is over, the male announcer's voice echoing through the park.

"If you go now, you'll make it back before the end of the show. Kyle Spencer is up next, and we all know how you feel about country music." Linda smiles. "I'm sparing you."

I force a smile onto my face as I hear some version of what my colleagues have joked about a thousand times.

I really need to work on keeping my feelings off my face, I guess. For a while, I was amused by how everyone noticed and teased me about Kyle. It was a way to stand out and fit in at a new job, and everyone found it funny.

Except for me. I'm not laughing now.

But this is my job, and Linda is technically my superior.

"They're in your closet?"

Linda nods. “Top shelf, clear box. I stashed them up there after they were delivered.”

“Okay. I’ll be back soon.”

I cast one last look at the stage, then turn and rush toward the exit.

Of course, the traffic is insane from the commotion of the event. It takes twenty minutes until I’m anywhere close to Empire’s offices. I pay the driver and climb out instead of waiting out the last few blocks, braving the heat to save a little time. The weekend security guard is a stranger to me, different from Jasper’s usual smiling face.

I tap my foot impatiently as I wait for the elevator, hurrying inside as soon as the doors open.

It feels like it takes forever to reach the right floor.

I head straight for Linda’s desk, setting my phone and access card down on the ledge and patting my pockets for the key she gave me. I walk into the main office and open her closet door. It hits the edge of the heavy glass door that separates reception from the rest of the offices. With an annoyed huff, I shut it, then reopen the closet. I’m trying to be fast, and so it feels like everything is taking twice as long. I locate the bin of passes, lock the closet door, and realize I just massively screwed up.

How many interns have left the office on their lunch hour and forgotten their card, only to find Linda gone from her desk and that they’re locked out?

Rookie error.

One I just made.

I try the handle anyway, hoping for the impossible. When it doesn’t budge, I press my forehead against the cool glass, leaving a mark on the immaculate surface.

Fuck.

I can see my phone and key card sitting on the ledge of Linda’s desk, taunting me.

I weigh my limited options.

Someone will come into the offices eventually. Everyone's working today. Plus, I know a cleaning crew comes through here on Saturdays from other weekends when special events have come up. But the concert is chaotic. It will be a while before anyone notices I haven't returned with the passes and before anyone is headed back here after it ends.

I rap my knuckles against the glass, testing its thickness. I have no idea how much force it takes to break a solid panel like this. I'm not sure I'm physically capable of it, and I have no clue how expensive it would be to replace. It's not like I'm fleeing from a fire and desperate to escape. There's food, water, and a working bathroom. Couches. Internet. Breaking the glass sounds drastic. Not to mention, I'm picturing myself falling through and landing on a pile of sharp edges.

I glance at the phone sitting on the nearest desk, considering if I should call 911. That's literally the only number I have memorized. I imagine one of my brothers—or worse, my mother—showing up, ready for an emergency, only to find me sitting, looking sheepish. I decide that's a last resort too.

Which leaves me with nothing to do, except walk through the empty hallways and pray for a minor miracle.

I don't make it back to the park until after six, over an hour after the fundraiser was supposed to end. I was *so close* to calling the police after all when the cleaning crew finally showed up and opened the door.

"I'm so sorry," I say as soon as I find Linda in the milling crowd backstage.

A tent has been set up with drinks and hors d'oeuvres for the lucky few invited to the after-party.

"I had to shut the reception door to open the closet door, and I'd left my card on your desk. So, I was—"

“Locked out,” Linda finishes, realizing. “It’s all right. Been a crazy day for all of us. I’ll get these to security. Carl was looking for you, by the way,” she calls over one shoulder before rushing away with the box of passes.

I scan the crowd, looking for Kyle. All I find is Carl Bergman.

He tilts his head toward one of the exits. I swallow and follow him over. I’m set to start in A&R on Monday. And while my enthusiasm was definitely dampened by my first encounter with Fiona, I’ll be very upset if he’s changed his mind.

We step outside the tent, and Carl leads me around one of the trailers set up behind the stage. No one else is around, all clustered in the tent or disassembling the stage.

“Kyle Spencer’s mother died?” His tone is low and deadly. No preamble.

“I—what?” Of all the things he might have said, I wasn’t expecting *that*. “Where did you hear that?”

“He announced it onstage tonight!”

“He *what*?” I’m shocked. Totally floored.

“I sent you to Texas to find out why he wasn’t re-signing. And you came back with half-baked excuses about how he was making the right decision when there was a legitimate reason I needed to know. Are you incompetent, Piper, or did you purposefully withhold information?”

“It wasn’t for me to share. It was irrelevant for the—”

“Wasn’t relevant?” Carl shakes his head, exhaling loudly. “Get out of my sight before I fire you. You never should have received that promotion in the first place.”

Cold fear snakes down my spine. I’m finally about to achieve what I’ve spent years working toward, and he’s threatening to take it all away.

Still, I have no regrets. It was Kyle’s to share, not mine.

And I’m tired of his agenda.

“Why do you care so much if Kyle re-signs?” I ask. “Is it really all about the money? Because there are plenty of other artists who make you a profit.”

“I have a job to do. Answering your questions isn’t one of them.”

“I’m the one who got sent to Texas. I did what you’d asked.”

“And you *failed*.”

My frustration builds to a breaking point. “He wants to walk away! Why won’t you let him?”

“Because he’s my son!” Carl blanches as soon as he says it. His whole demeanor shifts, shutting down. He smooths his tie, his expression relaxing too. When he speaks, his tone is eerily calm. “That stays between us. Or I’ll make sure you’re blacklisted from every reputable label in the country. Understood?”

I nod, too stunned to react in any other way.

Carl walks away, leaving me standing alone.

I run through the little Kyle told me about his biological father, basically just that his mother didn’t know who he was. If that’s true, it doesn’t narrow down any possibilities. Do I tell Kyle? I can’t come up with any reason Carl would be lying about it, but he could be mistaken.

I’m still leaning against the trailer where Carl left me, processing, when Harper appears.

“*Finally*.” She exhales, slumping against the trailer next to me. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

“I needed a minute to…think.” I sigh. “Have you seen Kyle?”

“I’m here about Kyle. Did you see his performance?”

I shake my head. “Linda sent me back to the office. I just got back. But I heard…I heard what he said.”

“*And*?”

“I already knew about his mom.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “I’m not talking about his mom. I’m talking about *you*.”

“What?”

Harper swears and digs her phone out of her pocket. She taps on the screen for a few seconds and then holds it out to me.

A video of Kyle onstage earlier is playing.

I expect to hear him talk about his mom.

Instead, he’s saying, “…wrote this song about a girl—”

Loud cheers drown out his voice for a minute.

“…promised myself if she ever came to see me perform, I’d play it for her. Last time, I chickened out. This time, I won’t.”

I look up at Harper, who’s glancing back and forth between me and the screen, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth. She looks nervous and giddy, and I can’t figure out why.

On-screen, Kyle starts playing the guitar, a slow melody that gradually speeds up into a quicker tempo. “This is called ‘Blue Rain Boots.’ ”

“Bet you wish you had those rain boots now.”

My heart squeezes.

Then, he starts to sing.

I thought I knew what I was looking to be mine,

But then I saw you and still think about that time.

Everything I’m wondering is a haze.

You spin me into a never-ending daze.

Because you’re ready for rain on sunny days,

Tell a country singer’s twang to rephrase.

Unfamiliar with second-guessing,

Let that red hair do the expressing.

And I don't remember what the search was for.

Seems like second best after watching you pour.

The clip ends abruptly.

I cover my hand with my mouth, then pull out my own phone and type *kyle spencer blue rain boots* into the search bar.

It was released three years ago.

I skim the lyrics.

"He left, Piper."

I look at Harper. "What?"

"I didn't realize…he came over to me after he performed, asking where you were. I said you'd left since that's what Linda had just told me. I figured you guys could talk at the after-party, but then Mia told me he was gone. I came to find you as soon as I could."

I exhale. "Okay."

"Okay? Piper, you should at least call him and—"

"I'm not going to call him. I'm going to Texas."

Harper looks stunned for a second, and then she smiles. "Need a ride to the airport?"

I yawn, the potholes I keep hitting and the espresso I chugged when I landed the only two things keeping me awake. I'm back in the same black sedan I returned a week ago, bouncing along a country road on the same journey that feels like another lifetime.

The last time I passed the *Welcome to Oak Grove, Texas* sign, I was arriving with luggage, wearing makeup and a cute dress. This time, I'm driving an empty car and sporting a coffee stain on the clothes I've been wearing since yesterday morning. The only similarity between the two trips is, I'm

once again anxious and not sure what to expect as I turn up the long dirt driveway.

There's a comforting flash of familiarity when I take in the fencing and open fields.

A feeling I didn't experience when I landed in New York and yet another sign that what I consider home might have shifted.

Kyle's truck is parked in its usual spot, and I exhale a sigh of relief. Hopefully, that means he's home. This would have been a wasted effort if he had skipped the after-party but stayed in New York. Or had flown somewhere else.

I stop the sedan in the same spot as I parked it before and turn off the ignition, letting out a long exhale before I climb out of the car to face whatever comes next.

There's no sign of activity in the house or in the barn. I knock on the screen door, and no one answers. I head for the barn next.

Kyle appears with the group of young guys who helped mow the fields when I'm halfway across the yard. All the dirt patches are gone, filled in with fresh growth from the seed he planted.

Whatever he's saying, they're all listening attentively. At least until they hear my approach. One, then two turn their heads. Then all of them.

And finally, Kyle looks over.

There's a flash of obvious shock on his face as I stop a few feet away. "What are you doing here?"

"Funny." I spin my keys around one finger, injecting my voice with a jovialness I'm not experiencing. "I was going to ask you the same thing since you'd told me you'd booked a one-way ticket. I thought that meant you'd stay in New York for more than a day and a half."

Kyle's jaw works as he stares at me. I can't read anything in his expression. "Could you guys give us a minute?"

The group of guys disperses quickly, leaving us in the barn's big shadow, standing alone.

"I knocked at the house," I explain unnecessarily. "No one answered."

"They're at church."

"Oh." I've been up most of the night, so I forgot it's Sunday. I suck in a deep breath. "You left."

"I had to get back."

"Bullshit."

He flinches before his mask reappears.

"You said you were staying for a few days."

"Yeah, that was back when I thought there was something to stay for."

This time, I'm the one who winces. But I press ahead because I didn't come all this way not to. "I don't count?"

Kyle exhales. "We both know where we stand, okay? No reason to delay the inevitable."

"And you didn't think I deserved to hear that from you? You just…left?"

"You left first!"

"I was *working* yesterday, Kyle. I had to go back to the office for something Linda had forgotten. When I got back, Harper told me you were gone."

He finally makes eye contact with me, the surprise clear in his eyes.

"I didn't want to miss you playing, but I didn't really have a choice."

"Oh."

"That's all you have to say? *Oh*?"

"Fine, I overreacted."

I close my eyes and exhale. "Why didn't you tell me about the song?"

When I open my eyes again, he's studying me closely. "Thought you'd missed my performance."

"Harper showed me a clip." With a staggering number of views.

The news about Kyle Spencer's secret love and his mother's death was plastered across the magazines I walked past in the airport this morning, but I don't mention that.

"I told you I'd write a song about something besides beer, trucks, or heartbreak."

I scoff-slash-laugh. "Yeah, but that's different from actually doing it. *Releasing* it."

"What does it matter?"

"*Dammit*, Kyle." I step closer, hoping it'll impact the wall it feels like was erected between us. "I flew all this fucking way, and you're asking me why it matters?"

"I flew all the way to New York!"

"For the concert, not for me."

"*Of course* it was for you, Piper." He shakes his head, like he can't believe I'm being this dense. "I could have written a check, and I did. I went to see you because I can't get you out of my head."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Because I have *no clue* what you're thinking. No idea where things stand between us. This is my life right now." He waves at our surroundings, the huge barn and the open land.

"You want a long-distance relationship? I was on the road for a decade. I want roots. I want to see Hudson propose to Morgan. I want to be able to go out without getting mobbed. There's nothing in New York for me, except *you*. So, where does that leave us?"

I swallow thickly. "I didn't know what you were thinking either."

"I know. Which is why I went out onstage and poured my fucking heart out."

My step forward is hesitant, but my words are sure. “I’m going to quit.”

Kyle’s startled eyes flash to me. “What?”

“On Monday, I’m giving two weeks’ notice.”

“Why would you do that? You just got the promotion to A&R.”

“Because I don’t like Fiona very much. Because I’m not sure if I’ll be any happier in A&R than I was in Artist Development. And because I can’t work for Carl. He was… upset last night because I hadn’t told him about your mom. He pulled me away as soon as I got to the after-party, wondering why I hadn’t shared that as the reason you weren’t re-signing.”

Kyle’s jaw tightens. “None of his damn business.”

“I agree, and I told him that.” I hesitate. “*He* told me he’s your father.”

“He *what*?”

I nod. “Your biological father. I have no idea if it’s true. He didn’t give me any details, and he told me not to tell anyone. Obviously, he doesn’t know about…” I gesture between us.

The shock fades slowly from Kyle’s face, turning resolute. “As far as I’m concerned, my father died when I was four. True or not, what Carl told you doesn’t change that.”

I nod. “Okay.” Then glance at the ground, trying to figure out what else to say.

“Want to go see the calves?”

I look at him, an involuntary smile forming. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

“I also sorta have a surprise for you.”

Kyle turns and heads into the barn without saying anything else. My eyebrows rise as I follow him, immediately intrigued.

I’ve never been inside the central section of the barn, just the outdoor bay, where the tractor is parked. It’s filled with an assortment of junk, and it smells like hay.

He leads me to a far corner. The sunlight streaming in from the open door barely reaches all the way back here, the air stagnant as well.

There's a soft snuffling sound that grows louder the closer I get to the small pen that's been set up, constructed of a few wooden boards and a stack of straw. I stop and peer inside, my eyes widening as soon as I spot the tiny piglet sniffing the wood shavings that line the bottom of its enclosure.

Its skin is pink with a few gray spots decorating its back.

"Farmer down the road had a litter of them and was trying to get rid of some. This guy was the runt no one wanted." Kyle pauses. "I've been calling him Wilbur."

My eyes prickle.

I told him that story what feels like forever ago over a grilled cheese. And just like my obsession with discovering bands no one has ever heard of, my decision to not eat meat is a part of my life that's always felt like something others acknowledged, but never fully accepted.

Except him.

Kyle keeps talking, oblivious to the emotions swirling inside of me.

"He's cute and tiny now, but he'll get huge. Four, five hundred pounds. No clue where I'll keep him. I'll have to build him a shed out in one of the south—oof."

He's not expecting me to leap on him, obviously. But Kyle recovers quickly, his arms tightening around my back as I wrap my legs around his waist.

"Thank you," I whisper into his neck. "No one has ever done anything like this for me before."

"Bought you a pig? I'm not surprised."

I laugh, then pull back so I can see his face. Trace the small scar in the center of his chin. "Gotten me," I say. "No one has ever *gotten* me. Not like you do."

His expression softens, then turns serious. “It’s probably because I’ve been a little bit in love with you ever since you told me you hated my twang.”

My breath hitches. “You’re a little bit in love with me?”

He smiles. “No. I’m so crazy in love with you that I don’t know what to do with myself.”

I smile back. “I’m really glad to hear I’m not the only one.”

I press my lips to his and think the same thing I did the first time we kissed.

Like coming home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

KYLE

My father lives in a huge house.

It's strange to know that. To know *anything* about the man who contributed to my DNA. I know the head of Empire Records is rich and successful. But it's different, realizing that also applies to my biological father.

Piper's grip tightens around mine as we walk up the path of pavers. It was selfish of me to ask her to come to this dinner with me, considering not only is this an awkward family situation, but it's an awkward family situation that also involves her former boss.

I'm not sure I even would have made it this far though if she wasn't right next to me.

Carl is spending the long weekend at his Hamptons estate, which means this massive mansion isn't even his primary residence.

I might have money now, but I didn't grow up with it. Extravagance makes me uncomfortable, and I'm already on edge. I wonder if Carl grew up with money or if he just acclimated to being rich better than I have. I know nothing about his childhood. About his parents—my grandparents. If I have aunts or uncles.

"Roof looks solid," Piper comments, studying the house. "Do you think he installed it himself?"

I glance over, and she winks. The tension in my chest loosens a little.

“I’ve never gotten the sense he’s one for manual labor.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

We reach the top step. Piper squeezes my hand as I fiddle with the knot of my tie. It feels way too tight, strangling my neck.

“Ready?”

“To get this over with? Absolutely.”

I’m not sure why I’m here.

I owe him nothing. Not as an absentee father and not as a label head.

But I have questions, ones only he has the answers to.

At the very least, this evening will hopefully give me some closure.

Piper rings the doorbell, and the white door swings open only a few seconds later, like someone was waiting on the other side.

A slender blonde woman stands in the doorway, wearing a navy dress with a matching cardigan.

Carl’s wife, I’m assuming. Prim and proper and polite, about as opposite from my mother as a person could possibly be.

She says nothing, just stares at me.

“Hi. I’m Kyle Spencer.”

Piper waves. “Piper Egan.”

She starts, like she’s waking from a daze. “Yes, of course. I know who you are. Nice to see you. And you, Piper. I’m Celeste Bergman.” Celeste sweeps an imaginary piece of hair out of her face, then steps back to open the door wider. “Please, come in. Carl is out on the patio.”

You could fit the whole farmhouse inside the soaring foyer. A huge piano sits in the very center, a spiral staircase winding around the room.

“Beautiful piano,” Piper says. “Do you play?”

“No. The boys did when they were younger.”

I know Carl has two sons. If I’m remembering the small talk we’ve made over the years correctly, they’re both younger than me. One lives in Los Angeles, and the other goes to school in Boston. It’s bizarre, realizing those strangers I’ve heard about are my brothers. That I *have* brothers. At least with Bailey, I knew she existed all along. Held her as a baby and saw school pictures every year.

Celeste leads us through French doors and out onto a massive stone patio. There’s an outdoor dining table with eight chairs, a full kitchen, and a pool, overlooking a sprawling yard. The Atlantic is visible off in the distance.

Carl is seated in one of the Adirondack chairs along the pool, his cell phone pressed to one ear.

My teeth grind as I watch him talk and grin. Carefree, it appears. Unaffected and unbothered about how this evening might go.

When he spots me, the smile quickly falls off his face. I take a little satisfaction in that at least, especially when he hangs up the call and walks over. We’re right on time, but I’m not surprised he prioritized work over greeting us.

“Good evening, Kyle. Piper.”

If he’s surprised I’m showing up with one of his former employees, he hides it well. Then again, Carl has always had a good poker face.

“Carl.” Piper’s tone is cool.

I don’t bother responding.

“The hydrangeas are on their final blooms, but they’re still beautiful this time of year. I can show you around the gardens, if you’d like to see them?”

Piper’s eyes flash to mine. Celeste’s focus on her makes it obvious that the invitation is only meant for her. Equally unsubtle is the intention behind it—to get me and Carl alone.

I nod.

Talking to him alone was the whole point of coming.

“Sure, that sounds lovely.”

Piper follows Celeste down the steps and into the backyard.

Carl passes me and heads toward the fully stocked bar, plopping one giant cube of ice into a glass tumbler and covering it with a splash of amber liquid.

“Mmm, that’s good. Always been a whiskey man.”

He pours a second tumbler, then walks over and holds it out to me.

“No thanks. I don’t drink.” I stuff my hands in my pockets.

Carl nods, setting the second glass down on the table. “Can I get you something else?”

“I’m good.”

Silence falls.

“My mom was an alcoholic. Did you know that?”

“I…no, I didn’t.”

“Where did you meet her?”

“At a bar in Dallas. I was visiting some college buddies. Ada was waitressing there for the summer. Sang with the house band for a couple of songs. I hadn’t decided I was going into music at the time. When I did, it was more because I was drawn to the business side of things. But your mom…she had a voice that could stop traffic. Hard to forget.”

“Did you know she was pregnant?”

“No.” His head shake is emphatic. “I never saw her after that night. Never got her last name or her number. Had I known, I would have taken responsibility. Financial support and such.”

He wouldn’t have raised me as his own, he means. He would have shelled out money like a crooked politician covering up a dirty little secret.

“When did you know?”

“I wondered if Ada would ever come up as a star. Like I said, a voice like hers…” He trails off. “Your mother was very talented.”

“She was very troubled too.”

His nod is slow. “I didn’t know. She mentioned she was from Oak Grove that night. The name stuck in my head all those years. When you walked into my office the first time and mentioned the town, I immediately thought of your mother. I had a PI poke around a little, just out of curiosity. Wondering what were the chances that two of the best singers I’d ever heard were from the same tiny town in Texas. I found out she had a son. The dates matched up. So, I took the glass you’d used the next time you came in for a meeting and had it DNA tested. Turned out to be a match.”

“That’s probably illegal.”

“Probably,” he agrees.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You weren’t a kid who needed help. You were already well on your way to becoming a household name. I knew you had plenty of money. A whole life. You were already signed to the label, locked into a contract. It seemed like the best I could do was make sure I did everything possible to make your career a success.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit, Carl. You were protecting *your* interests, not mine. *Your* family. *Your* success.”

“I didn’t know about your mother’s struggles, Kyle. As far as I could see, you were succeeding. And it wasn’t about the money or the uncomfortable conversation with Celeste. I didn’t want you to know because I was worried you’d have another label buy out your contract or do something drastic. And I wanted to play a part in your career, no matter how minor. I wanted to see your success up close, and I was worried that wouldn’t happen if you knew the truth. I was *proud* of you, son.”

“You knocking up my mother does not make me your *son*, Carl.”

“Doesn’t change the sentiment, Kyle.”

We stare at each other, locked in a silent face-off. I don’t see any resemblance between us, which is somewhat reassuring. I used to look at some of the men in town when I was younger, wondering if one of them was my dad. My mom always maintained she didn’t know who he was, and I guess that was true. It sounds like she knew as little about Carl as he knew about her. Or maybe she was with other men that summer, too, and considered any of them potential sperm donors.

“Carl! It’s rude to serve yourself and not guests.” Celeste reappears, her tone chiding as she chastises her husband.

“I offered,” Carl replies.

“I’ve got fresh lemonade and appetizers in the kitchen. Let me grab them. Some help, Carl?”

It’s amusing, after years of seeing Carl command a boardroom, to watch him get bossed around by his petite wife. I might like Celeste Bergman, I decide. Certainly more than her husband.

Piper walks closer once Carl and Celeste are both inside. Her hands slide up my chest, clasping behind my neck.

“How were the hydrangeas?” I ask.

“Blue.”

I smile.

“How was the talk?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Her fingers play with the ends of my hair. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“Yeah.” I exhale. “I’m sorry I dragged you into this mess.”

“Hey.” She grabs my arm, turning me toward her. “I would have been pissed if you *hadn’t* dragged me into this. The biggest drama in my family is that my mom is still freaking out about Wells and Norah moving to Alaska.”

I huff a laugh.

“Did you tell him about the label?”

“No.”

About a week after Piper left her job and moved to Texas, I mentioned the idea of starting a label with her. I had the money and the connections, and she has the business knowledge. It took a lot of long conversations and a ton of paperwork to get the whole thing set up, but Blue Rain Boots Records signed its first band—the one we had seen at Whiskey Cowboy—a couple of weeks ago.

I came here for answers about the past, not to give Carl a glimpse into my present. And I doubt he’d care. Beyond biology, we have nothing in common. Music, for him, is all about the money.

She steps closer, giving me a tight hug.

“Here we go.” Celeste’s cheery voice sounds behind me, and Piper quickly pulls away.

I grab her hand before she can get too far, keeping our fingers linked as we walk over to the table that’s now laden with trays of fresh veggies and grilled bread.

“So,” Celeste says as we all sit down, “how long have you two been dating?”

Carl looks bored, swishing whiskey around in his glass.

Beneath the table, Piper squeezes my hand three times.

I exhale.

She’s here.

I can get through this meal.

Through anything.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

PIPER

"I now pronounce you husband and wife!"

The crowd claps and cheers as Drew dips Harper in a dramatic sweep.

They're both laughing when they finally separate to face the celebrating onlookers, Harper's cheeks pink and Drew grinning proudly. I watch as he whispers something to Harper that has her shaking her head, then scan the sea of faces until I find the one I'm looking for.

Kyle is easy to spot, smack in the middle of the bride's side and exclusively surrounded by women. His gaze is focused on me though as I grip the arm of one of Drew's hockey teammates and follow the newlyweds down the aisle.

Harper decided to have her wedding in Washington, which she confided to me felt like more of a fresh start than the lake where her sister had gotten married.

"I'm sick of living in the past," she told me. "Time for a new beginning."

It feels like I'm in the middle of one of those too.

It's been eight months since I packed up my tiny bedroom and moved to Texas with no job and no plan.

Serena and Lauren were able to find a new roommate easily, so I didn't feel too badly about leaving them. And Serena will also be moving out soon. We're going to her wedding next month.

And my family accepted my departure better than I had expected. Wells and Norah's move had helped pave the way. I think my mom is finally accepting that us moving apart isn't a bad thing. That physical distance is different from the emotional kind. Alex has already come to visit the ranch once, and my dad and Seth are planning a trip too.

Once we're all at the end of the aisle, the neat couplings fall apart. Mia hugs me as we watch Drew and Harper share another kiss before he gets pulled away by his buddies.

"I'm so happy for her." Mia sniffs.

"Me too. Is this giving you wedding fever?"

Mia has yet to set a date for her wedding because all the New York venues she's interested in are booked up about five years in advance. She's determined to have a high-society affair. I'm pretty sure it means she's seen too many television dramas set in the city. Last we talked, her top choice was a swanky hotel on the Upper East Side.

"Me? How about you?"

I glance at Kyle, who's patiently talking with a couple of Harper's friends.

"It hasn't come up."

"You moved to *Texas* for the guy. The least he could do is propose."

I laugh. "It's not that bad. If you ever visited when I invited you, you'd know Oak Grove is cute."

Mia wrinkles her nose, and then we're both distracted by the bride, headed our way. We both hug and congratulate Harper. Mia slips away after a few minutes to find Dax.

"The ceremony was perfect," I tell Harper. "And this place?"

The lavender farm Harper found looks like something out of a fairy tale. They got married in a gazebo, and a massive tent has been set up past the chairs where guests watched the ceremony, waiting to host the reception.

Harper's smile is relieved. "I was so nervous something would go wrong. Drew promised me we could elope if I wanted, all the way up until the ceremony."

"The perfect man."

"Well, he's never written a song for me, so…"

I roll my eyes. "If that's his worst flaw, I think you chose pretty well."

"Yeah." Harper smirks and looks over at her new husband. "I think so too. So, when will you be the one walking down the aisle?"

"You sound like Mi—"

A warm palm slides around my waist. "I didn't know couples got that question *before* they were engaged."

"Hey, Kyle." Harper leans forward to hug him.

"Beautiful wedding."

"Thank you. Ten months of planning. No big deal." She glances around. "I didn't want it to be bigger than Amelia's, but…"

"You also wanted it to be bigger than Amelia's," I finish.

Harper's relationship with her younger sister has had lots of ups and downs over the years, some of which I've been privy to. They're closer now than they were for years, but they're also sisters with strong opinions. Makes me glad I only have brothers.

Harper grins. "Exactly. So, when *are* you guys walking down the aisle?"

I say, "Harper!" at the same time Kyle says, "Soon."

I glance over at him, trying to determine if he's serious.

Harper laughs and bails, leaving me wide-eyed. "I'll look for you when I toss my bouquet, Piper!"

I roll my eyes as she walks away, then look at Kyle again. His expression is smooth and even, no hint of teasing. I clear

my throat. “I, uh, I didn’t know marriage was something you’d…thought about.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’ve never talked about it? Your parents didn’t get married. Mine are divorced. I just…wasn’t sure.”

“Piper!” Mia calls. “We need you for photos.”

“Go.” Kyle presses a kiss to my temple. “We can talk later.”

By the time the pictures are taken and the food has been served, dusk has fallen. The twinkling lights that wrap around the whole tent turn on, adding to the magical atmosphere.

Harper’s sister, Amelia, gives her matron-of-honor speech, which is followed by her friend Olivia having an extremely loud, highly entertaining argument with Drew’s best man, Troy, about who gets to speak second.

I pull Kyle away from a conversation with Harper’s stepdad and Drew’s uncle, and we head down one of the gravel paths that leads to the trees in the distance. The lavender stems sway in the wind, looking like waves of purple. We stop and sit at one of the benches lining the path.

I stare at the tent, now just a spark of light in the distance. “What a beautiful wedding. The food. The scenery. And Harper’s dress was perfect.”

“I didn’t really notice.”

“Yeah, right. You hit on her every time you came into the office.”

Kyle chuckles. “That had nothing to do with her and everything to do with you.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. Only way I could get you to pay any attention to me.”

I blink at him. “Seriously?”

“Uh-huh. Pretty sure you were the only one who didn’t notice. Harper definitely did.”

He tugs one of my curls straight, then smiles as it bounces back into place. “Don’t see anyone else when you’re in the room.”

I lean my head against his shoulder. “You were gonna get laid tonight regardless. No need to get all mushy.”

A laugh rumbles through his chest before his lips press against the top of my head. “Just being honest,” he whispers.

“I’ve thought about it,” I say.

“Thought about what?”

“Our wedding. Marrying you.”

“And what were the thoughts?”

“That the field to the left of the house could be mowed for a big tent. Midnight Rebellion could perform at the reception. And Jamie and some of the other guys could hook up the hay wagons to shuttle guests from—”

“You want to get married at the ranch?” Kyle’s voice is all surprise, no sign of what else he thinks of the idea.

So, my response is a little hesitant. “Yeah. Unless you don’t.”

“You just did it again,” he whispers.

“Did what?”

“Made me love you even more.”

I grin. “I didn’t even mention that I’m planning to wear blue rain boots under my wedding dress.”

“Even if it’s sunny?”

“*Especially* if it’s sunny. I have to be *ready for rain*.”

He chuckles, then pulls me closer. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

Kyle kisses me with what I’m sure he means to be a quick peck.

The lavender fields surrounding the meadow where the main tent is set up are sprawling. Chairs and tables and benches are arranged all the way to the woods. The sounds of music and laughter are faint, nothing closer or louder.

I climb onto his lap, deepening the kiss.

"Here?" The word is half-amused, half-surprised.

"What kind of bridesmaid would I be if I didn't have sex at my friend's wedding?"

"I had no idea that was a bridal party requirement."

I roll my eyes as I balance on my knees, rearranging the fabric so I can reach his belt and zipper. I tug his suit pants down just enough to free his cock, pull my underwear to the side, and then slowly sink down. We both groan, Kyle's hands finding my hips below my dress and pulling me even closer. The long fabric of my dress fans across the bench, covering everything happening beneath. I hope it does at least.

I can't see him filling me, but I can feel the delicious stretch. Our faces are inches apart, both of us struggling not to make too much noise. I roll my hips, and he pushes deeper, finally bottoming out. I savor the feeling for a few seconds, then start to move, finding a rhythm that quickly has heat pooling low in my belly. It's so easy to get there with him. Even now, when we're out in public, I want it to last forever, and I can never hold off as long as I want to.

Kyle's expression is taut with pleasure, the tendons on his neck raised as he clenches his bottom lip between his teeth. His cock thickens and pulses inside of me with each movement, his unwavering attention driving me higher and higher. I love when his focus is on nothing but me. It has all the warmth of a spotlight, but none of the uncomfortable glare. I feel cherished and *seen*.

A woman's voice carries this way, closer than the more distant babble of sound.

Anxiety races through me, but there's a thrill too. The threat of discovery is a high in itself, more arousing than I'm expecting.

“We have to be fast,” I whisper, giggling like a teenager.

“Won’t be difficult,” Kyle rasps. “I’ve been hard ever since I saw you in that dress.”

His thumb finds my clit, rubbing firm circles that have my back bowing and my toes curling.

“You know what I was thinking about that night you rode that bull at the fair?”

“What?” I breathe.

I don’t know how he’s talking in complete sentences. I’m so close to coming that I can taste it, all the pleasure and heat that’s been building swelling together, so close to shattering.

“I was picturing this. You bouncing on my cock with those wild curls and red cheeks, taking me this well. Seeing these perfect tits”—he tugs one strap of my dress down, palming my left one—“move as I fucked you so hard that you felt it for a week.”

I moan loudly, as turned on by his dirty mouth as the thick dick I’m grinding against.

Kyle smirks. “You’re supposed to be quiet, baby.”

He tugs me closer and collides our mouths, biting my bottom lip and then slipping his tongue inside. It’s urgent and heated, filled with so much love and lust that my entire body sings. He fucks me harder, gripping my hips and setting an even faster pace. It’s always like this—desperate—no matter how many times we have sex. All the excitement of a first time and the frenzy of a final one.

“Come on my cock.”

I tip over the edge, the rush of release immediate and consuming. The warmth seeping into me so satisfying.

Kyle doesn’t let go, holding on to me tightly, even as our bodies still.

He presses a soft kiss on the side of my neck, running his thumb along my jawline. “Good girl.”

“You like it when I’m naughty,” I tease, pulling back and combing his hair with my fingers. My hands did a real number on the strands.

“Is that what we’re calling sex on a bench at your friend’s wedding? Naughty?”

“Better than a brick wall.”

He chuckles, then presses a quick kiss to my lips. “You loved the brick wall.”

“Yeah, I did,” I agree.

His hazel eyes flash with a mixture of humor and heat.

I don’t want to move. I want to sit like this, hidden away from the rest of the world, as close as two people can possibly be.

But I also don’t *actually* want to overshadow Harper’s wedding with a scandal about Kyle Spencer getting caught having sex. Just because I can forget he’s famous doesn’t mean everyone else does. I’ve gotten comfortable with the stares and attention. Used to them at the very least. But I also adore these moments—when he only belongs to me. When he’s mine.

Reluctantly, I shift back, pulling the strap of my dress up and mourning the loss of contact. Kyle fixes his pants and tucks in his shirt, still looking a little mussed but presentable. I’m sure my lips are swollen and my face is pink, but we have the whole walk back to the tent.

“Ready?” Kyle asks.

“Yeah.”

He takes my hand, and we start to walk along the gravel path, the fragrant scent of lavender swirling in the cool night air.

“I’m considering returning to music,” he says suddenly. “I…miss it. More than I thought I would. The creative outlet and performing.”

“Would you re-sign with Empire?”

Kyle shakes his head. “I can’t. It’s too weird with my… dad.”

“He’d have your best interests in mind. For business at least.”

“Well, I’m interested in a different label.”

My brow furrows. “Pacific?” They’re Empire’s main competitor.

He chuckles, then squeezes my hand. “You need to work on pitching yourself to potential clients.”

“You want to sign at Blue Rain Boots?”

“The label is named after one of my songs and headquartered in my house. Don’t sound so shocked.”

“But…you wouldn’t make any money. Or if you did, you’d be paying yourself.”

“When have I ever cared about the money, Piper?”

“I just…we don’t have resources. We have two bands, neither of which have played to a crowd of more than two hundred people. You’re…*Kyle Spencer*.”

Kyle laughs. “I know.” He glances over at me. “If you think it’s too much, working together, I—”

“No, it’s not that.”

“I was going to call Brayden, see what he thought about coming on board. He could help expand everything, hire new people, set up an actual office…” He glances at me. “Would you really be okay with it? Me going back to music?”

I smile. “If you recall, I came to Texas and worked really hard to *get* you to return to music.”

He smiles back. “Yeah, I remember.”

I know what he’s really asking.

We weren’t a couple then. I was working in the label’s interests, not mine. Not his.

“I want you to be happy. If that’s performing for sixty thousand people, I want you to have that. If that’s spending

three hours fiddling with the tractor instead of hiring someone who could fix it in half the time, then I will stop teasing you about what a terrible mechanic you are."

His hand tightens around mine. "I *am* happy, Piper."

Butterflies flutter in my belly when I register the way he's looking at me.

There's a glowing warmth in my chest I only experience around him. It feels like being in the perfect place at the perfect time.

With the perfect person.

"Me too," I whisper.

EPILOGUE

KYLE

Today has been a total disaster.

Months of discussions.

Months of planning.

Plenty of second-guessing.

And now…catastrophic chaos.

"You can't prepare for everything," Brayden reminds me.

I grunt an acknowledgment, but the true statement doesn't reassure me very much. My gaze remains on the stage, watching the roadies rush around.

"There's been a bug going around. And better the fuse blew now than during the show."

Again, I grunt.

My opening act coming down with the flu is inconvenient. Electrical problems are a major issue when you're dealing with thousands of dollars' worth of sound equipment. But neither of those problems has anything to do with why I'm tense and fidgety right now.

Brayden grips my shoulder. "Walk around, grab some water. We'll be up and running for sound check. Trust me."

I nod and exhale because I do trust him. There's no one more experienced. I was massively relieved when he agreed to return as my manager and join Blue Rain Boots Records as well. He runs the main office in New York, which works well for Piper to return once a month to see her friends and family.

Backstage is a little less hectic than the stage was, but not by much. I have two opening acts on this tour with me, and there are boxes of equipment lining both sides of the hall. People are rushing around, holding clipboards and speaking into headsets.

Kicking my return to music off in New York might have been a mistake. Typically, you don't open with your biggest venue.

"Kyle!"

I turn just in time for Bailey to collide with me, squeezing her back as she hugs me. "Hey! You made it!"

"Of course we did."

I glance past her, where her dad is standing with his wife and son. I sent them all tickets, not sure if they'd allow Bailey to come, let alone all show up. I nod at him, and he nods back. Just like with Carl, there's probably too much in the past for us to fully move beyond. But it's a big step forward that he brought Bailey and the rest of his family.

"Where's Piper?"

I smile at my sister, amused by the way her obsession with my girlfriend still rivals my own. She and Piper talk on the phone for even longer than she and I do. We've also moved to video calls so we can have some virtual guitar lessons.

"She's getting dinner with a couple of her friends. She'll be here for the show."

"We should get to our seats, Bailey." Frank appears right behind his daughter, expression passive but stern.

"Okay, Dad."

I'm surprised when Frank holds out his hand.

"Thanks for the tickets."

"You're welcome. Thanks for coming."

"Bailey has really been looking forward to it. She's got the music bug—that's for sure." He looks down at Bailey affectionately, but there's a hint of regret in his voice that

makes me think he might not have minded if his daughter focused on other interests. It reminds him of my mom, I'm guessing.

"Bye, Kyle!" Bailey says, then follows her dad over toward the exit.

"Bye," I call after them, then head toward my dressing room.

I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and then pace around, calling, "Come in!" when there's a knock on the door.

There's a rush of relief as soon as I spot her red hair.

Piper walks in, a wide smile on her face. "Hey! It's crazy out there."

"Yeah. There have been a few tech issues." I shoot her a wry smile before leaning down and kissing her.

"I meant outside the stadium. What's wrong with the tech?"

"Nothing Brayden can't fix." *I hope*.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm great. How was dinner?"

"It was really good. I had homemade pasta." She glances at the water bottle in my hand. "Did you eat?"

"I had a granola bar a little while ago. I'll eat after the show."

There's another knock on the door.

"Come in!" I call out again.

A minute later, a woman wearing a headset is poking her head into my dressing room. "Hi! Sorry to interrupt. Brayden sent me. They're ready for sound check."

"I should go get changed anyway." Piper kisses my cheek, then spins toward the door. "Alex is picking me up from the hotel in an hour."

Her whole family is coming tonight. Wells and Norah even coincided a visit here with my show. They flew in last night,

which makes me think Piper's father might have said something after I sweated my way through asking him for his blessing.

I pull her back to me, leaning down and kissing her long enough that she's blushing when she steps away.

"What was that for?"

"I missed you."

She smiles. "See you after the show."

I nod, even knowing she'll see me before that. Then, I leave my dressing room and head for the stage.

The next couple of hours are a blur of activity. Which is good. It keeps my mind occupied and my nerves at bay all the way until I step out onto the stage.

The last time I performed in front of a crowd this size, I was just as nervous as I am right now. And as uncomfortable as it is, I also appreciate it. Before I stepped away, before I met Piper, music stopped meaning as much. It was an excuse, not a passion. I was going through the motions without appreciating any part of it.

Anxiety is better than apathy.

The first few songs flow easily. My body remembers this routine, resettles into it better than it recalled manual labor when I returned to the ranch.

And then I reach her song, strumming the opening chords.

This is the first show of the tour, so the crowd doesn't know the set list yet. They're screaming and enthusiastic already, but it reaches a fever pitch I can hear through my ear monitors. Muffled but noticeable.

They know this song.

After I played it at the benefit concert, it became my most streamed song in a matter of weeks.

I glance offstage, and she's there. Standing right next to Brayden, wearing a sparkly blue dress and a huge smile.

“Actually, before I play this song, there’s one thing I’d like to do.”

There are a few screams and shouts, and then the din dies down a little as I continue talking.

“Piper, can you come out here?”

When I glance over, her smile is gone. She’s glancing around, looking at Brayden, who shrugs helplessly. They’re the two people most integral to making this tour happen, and this is one thing I know is going according to plan, but they have no idea about it.

Finally, she steps forward. Pauses when there’s a loud reaction to her appearance onstage, but continues walking until she’s right in front of me. I pull off my guitar and set it in its stand, turning to face her and pulling out one earpiece.

“What are you doing?” It registers as a whisper, but I’m pretty sure she’s shouting.

“I wanted to give you one last chance.”

“One last chance for what?”

“To change your mind.”

“Change my mind about what? And why are we having this conversation now?” She laughs, glancing out at the massive crowd and then back at me.

I pull her closer so I can speak directly into her ear. “I want you forever, Piper. I’ve wanted you since the first second I saw you standing in that kitchen. You’re the reason I’m standing on this stage because you reminded me of all the reasons I love this. But I know it’s a lot—it’s *this*—and I only want to do this if you’re with me. So, this is your last chance because if you say yes, I’m never letting you go.”

Her head turns, her face pressing against my neck.

The commotion around us is like a wall of noise. I’m causing a spectacle, but I’m not focused on anything, except her and the words she whispers.

“I don’t want you to ever let me go.”

I pull back enough to see the smile on her face, then sink down onto one knee.

Piper's hands fly up to cover her mouth, her expression more shocked than any of the times I accidentally startled her.

We've discussed marriage. It's been on the table.

But I guess she wasn't expecting for *this* to be how I proposed.

I meant what I just said though. If I retire next year or in a decade, this spectacle will always be part of my life. Anywhere we go, I'll be *Kyle Spencer*. And it's a lot to ask, having her be okay with that. Most of the time we spend together, tucked away at the ranch, I get to be Miles. But this part—the screaming crowd and the flashing cameras—is part of me too. I've finally accepted that, finally melded the two versions of myself into one. And I need her to know that. Be okay with it.

"Will you marry me?"

I keep it short and simple, aware of our audience. Everything else I want her to know, I tell her every day.

She nods and smiles, gifting me with the *yes* I was hoping to hear.

It feels like the stage is literally shaking.

I've never been in front of a louder audience, or maybe it's just that everything is heightened in this moment. I picture Bailey cheering. Piper's family celebrating. Mabel and John smiling, watching this in California. And my mom somewhere, looking down.

It takes a while for the cheers to die down after I slip the ring onto Piper's finger and she walks back offstage. Thankfully, "Blue Rain Boots" is more than halfway through my set. I'm enjoying myself, but I'm also eager for the show to wrap up.

The last song ends, and I wave at the crowd, savoring this moment.

"Thank you, New York! Good night!"

And then I walk off the stage, straight toward her.

THE END

Continue reading for an excerpt from Harper and Drew's story (Six Summers to Fall)!

Six Summers to Fall

Six summers. Six chances. One week spent pretending.

Ever since her younger sister's engagement was announced, Harper Williams has been dreading the wedding. What should be a joyous, sun-drenched affair is sure to be filled with plenty of awkward moments, thanks to Harper's strained relationship with her only sibling. Awkwardness enhanced by the wedding's location—a lake in Maine, swimming with painful memories of their late father.

Running into Drew Halifax—her childhood crush, who grew up to be the golden boy of hockey—is a surprise. Not nearly as shocking as his offer to be her plus-one is though.

She expects him to back out. He shows up. She's looking for a distraction from the past. He's killing time until his season starts and he can chase the championship. She's guarded yet outgoing. He's easygoing yet focused.

They hardly know each other. Until one week of sharing secrets, pretending to be in love, and sleeping in the same bed changes everything. Feelings that were supposed to be fake start to feel very real.

Problem is, neither of them is looking for a relationship. At most, they're meant to be a summer fling. Definitely not a happily ever after.

But when it comes to falling? You have no control. Once you start, it's impossible to stop. And sometimes…it takes six summers.

SIX SUMMERS TO FALL
EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

HARPER

Rain slides down the windshield in steady streams, turning the house I'm parked in front of into nothing but a blob of yellow. Even blurry, I can picture the sunny structure perfectly.

White shutters. Crooked railing. Front porch swing.

The same bittersweet nostalgia of encountering any connection to childhood hits.

A feeling that's both familiar and reassuring. Also sad. It's looking back at a suspended remnant of time you'll never get back, tinged with the dissatisfied realization that you didn't appreciate simplicity when you should have. Coupled with the knowledge that everything you anticipated—adulthood, independence—isn't as glamorous or satisfying as you thought it would be.

Wipers swipe, clearing the water steadily collecting on the windshield. For a few seconds, every detail of the house's exterior is clear, its yellow paint and the neat row of blooming blue hydrangeas lit up by the bright glare of car headlights.

It looks friendly and cheerful.

A welcoming escape.

Proof that appearances can be deceiving.

I turn the key in the ignition, shutting off the engine. One of the upsides of living in lower Manhattan is how easy it is to navigate the city without driving a car. My ancient Jeep barely leaves the garage but runs reliably when it does, so I have no

reason to replace it with a newer car that starts with simply the press of a button. Not that I would abandon this car even if it stopped running.

Metal teeth press into my palm as I grasp the key tightly, pulling in a final inhale of air-conditioning before opening my door. Damp humidity immediately seeps inside.

The wipers froze in the middle of the windshield. For a few seconds, I contemplate turning the car back on to switch them off in the correct spot, then decide it's not worth the extra effort of doing so. All it would be is a stalling tactic.

Steady drizzle saturates my hair as soon as I step out of the car onto the clamshell driveway. My hair clings to my temples as water starts rolling down my face and the exposed skin of my arms.

The cool glide of falling rain feels good.

Cleansing.

Grounding.

I inhale deeply, trying to suffuse my lungs with the scent of Port Haven, Maine. It's a melancholy smell. Sunny days and stormy nights. Easy flirting and unrequited crushes. Happiness and heartbreak. All mixed with pine and pure oxygen.

A growl of thunder rumbles in the distance.

I've always loved storms, especially in the summer. They have an energy to them.

A power.

An intensity.

My life lacks all three. Lately, it's been nothing but dread and predictability.

Rather than head in the direction of the house—or unpack the two bags stashed in the back of the Wrangler—I start walking down the sidewalk. Clamshells crunch beneath my Converse as I navigate around the puddles that dot the driveway.

Port Haven is a tiny town. When I was a kid, traveling here from a subdevelopment in suburban Connecticut, arriving always felt like an overflow of character.

Every house I walk past is something different, not an endless stretch of cookie-cutter colonials. I'm surprised by how many of the residences haven't changed at all from my teenage memories.

The McNallys' cottage, three doors down, is still painted a shocking shade of red. It stands out like a shiny apple against the backdrop of a stormy gray sky. Across the street, three bikes lean against the picket fence that separates the Garretts' front yard from the pavement. No locks in sight—another indicator that I've left the bustle of the city behind.

I shove both hands into the front pockets of my jean shorts, cringing at the uncomfortable chafe of damp denim against my knuckles. But the scrape anchors me in the present, which is what I was hoping for. This stop is about moving forward, not reminiscing about the past.

But just being back in Port Haven makes that nearly impossible. It transports me to a time that appeared practically perfect, but was nothing more than a pretty illusion.

This used to be my favorite place on earth. That familiarity and happiness are still here. They're just cloaked with darker emotions that are too easy to drown in. Storminess similar to what's swirling in the sky above me.

Maybe Port Haven hasn't changed in the last decade.

But I have.

Walking down the quiet, peaceful street is like ripping off a bandage to assess the wound underneath. Mine should look scarred yet healed. But now that I'm actually peeking underneath, it still appears pink and raw.

Time only heals if you acknowledge its passing.

Grief has no finite measure.

The end of Ashland Avenue dead-ends into the unoriginally named stretch of Main Street—the center of Port

Haven's small downtown section.

My destination sits right on the corner, fluorescent lights shining through the rain and darkness like a lighthouse's beacon. Main Street Market serves as the town center. Memories of purchasing Popsicles to suck on down at the lakeshore and picking up hot dog buns for a cookout creep into my mind as the automatic doors slide open. Happier, simpler times.

Harsh lighting and the acrid scent of chemical cleaner greet me as my wet sneakers squeak across the linoleum.

Port Haven's only grocery store hasn't changed the arrangement of its aisles since I was last here. Produce is up front, the waft of additional refrigeration raising goose bumps on my skin. The meat counter is located in the very center, mostly displaying cuts of fish and emanating a continual gurgle from the lobster tank. All the alcohol is tucked against the far wall, so you have to cross the entire store to reach it.

I grab a couple of limes from the basket of green citrus set up beside the bananas before weaving my way down the chip aisle. Following a brief debate between cheese puffs or potato chips, I pick up a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips to serve as a late dinner. Then, I beeline toward the back of the store and make a quick selection.

One bottom-shelf bottle of tequila later, I'm in line for Express—the only open checkout lane. The market is close to empty, which is hardly surprising. It's past what most of Port Haven's residents would consider appropriate shopping hours and too late in August for there to be much of a tourist influx lingering in town. There's only one man in line in front of me.

Water drips from my soaked clothes as I study the final flecks of coral still sticking to my toenails and wait for the other customer to pay. No doubt my mom and my sister, Amelia, will have something to say about their chipped state.

I'd rather endure comments about my poorly polished nails than have them delve deeper than the surface level of my appearance. That's always been my strategy when it comes to interacting with my family. The more obvious I make our

differences—my shortcomings—the more civil our conversations are. The more superficial subjects there are to discuss, the less likely painful topics will come up.

A fading pedicure is nothing in comparison to my lack of wedding date or disappointing choice of career.

I'm twenty-seven years old. Long past the point where my family should dictate my life choices. And I know their comments come from a place of love—it's just heavily disguised by judgment and dismay. By my mother mentioning which of her friends have single sons and my sister saying many of her former law school classmates are in their mid- to late-twenties. I have as much interest in dating an investment banker or attending law school as I do in leaving this store empty-handed.

None.

My phone begins vibrating in the back pocket of my jean shorts. I'm guessing it's my best friend and roommate, Olivia—there's no one else I can imagine calling me this late. She's an ER nurse with a hectic schedule that I can't keep track of even though we live together.

I fumble for my phone, dropping one lime in the process. The green fruit rolls away slowly, like it's taunting me with its departure.

"Shit," I mutter.

I can't lean down without dropping either the chips or the tequila—precious cargo I'm not willing to part with. So, I ignore my ringing phone and step closer toward the register, stopping next to the guy who's taking a ridiculously long time to pay for groceries that have already been scanned and bagged.

"Is it okay if I just—"

My intention is to ask the cashier if I can set my items on the empty stretch of counter next to the credit card machine. But for some unknown reason, mid-question, I decide to glance at the guy holding up the line.

Or maybe the reason *isn't* unknown.

Maybe it's a remainder of the urges my thirteen-, fourteen-, fifteen-, sixteen-, *and* seventeen-year-old self fought for the five summers he lived next door.

Just as stubborn as an adolescent, I was bound and determined not to be the cliché who lusted after the hot guy every girl had a crush on. The guy who went for a shirtless run every morning. The guy who turned out to be more interested in my younger sister than he ever was in me.

Drew Halifax smiles at me from beneath the brim of his beat-up ball cap, and my silly heart skips a few beats. A collision of nostalgia and hormones can cause palpitations, I guess. My throat goes dry and my palms turn sweaty.

I swallow, suddenly intensely aware of my ragged appearance. Faded T-shirt that could possibly be see-through now that it's soaked, muddy sneakers, and wet hair. Never have I imagined what running into Drew as an adult might be like. But an ideal scenario would look nothing like this—clutching cheap liquor and dripping water, like I just took a shower while wearing clothes.

I try and fail not to feel self-conscious about my appearance as water continues to streak down my face like tear tracks. If my hands weren't full of alcohol and junk food, I'd attempt to make improvements to my appearance. But it's probably a lost cause at this point.

"Hi," he says. "Remember me?"

With another guy, I'd play dumb. Call this a self-absorbed power play. A *look at me now* way to get me to acknowledge I know who he is. So I can stroke his ego by admitting, after ten years, I still recall too many details, including that brief moment we shared—once. So I can admit that I'm aware he's now a famous athlete who graces magazine covers and makes millions.

He takes my stunned silence to mean I don't. "Drew. Drew Halifax. My parents own the place next to yours."

My head nods automatically, the motion jerky and uncomfortable. Stiffened by surprise. I wasn't expecting to run

into him here—or ever. And I absolutely wasn't expecting him to recognize me.

I clear my dry throat. "Yeah, I remember."

Drew was seventeen the last time I saw him in person. Even if I hadn't searched his name and scrolled through some articles over the years, usually after a drink too many, I'd recognize him. His hair is a dirty shade of blond that used to be shaggy and is now just long enough to run fingers through. All the shorter length does is emphasize the way Drew's features have hardened and sharpened. All man, no boy.

His eyes haven't changed at all—magnetic and mossy. They pull me in as successfully as they used to.

He's *stupid hot*, as Olivia would say.

I clear my throat again, in some hasty attempt to regain my composure. "You're sort of famous, you know."

I say it as a test, wondering how much of the guy who used to shift in response to praise remains, following years of fame and adoration.

Drew grins, an easy expression that simultaneously manages to put me at ease and make my heart race. The smile creases the corners of his eyes and exposes a devastating pair of dimples. "Only *sort of*?"

He's looking at me like he's happy—*elated* even—to see me, which is strange and unexpected. Drew and I were never close as teenagers. We simply coexisted as part of the same group of summer kids whose parents had transplanted them to Port Haven from early June until the end of August.

Both before and after his ill-fated romance with Amelia fizzled out, Drew and I spent barely any time together. Nothing significant ever transpired between us.

Time around him was memorable—only because of my stupid crush on him. A stupid crush that never fully faded, apparently, because I feel his smile *everywhere*. It douses me as effectively as the water falling from the sky did, charged awareness skittering across the surface of my skin.

“How have you been, Harper?” he asks, *still* looking happy to see me. It doesn’t falter the way fake masks do.

“Fine,” I answer quickly, expecting that to be that. Pleasantries exchanged, moving on with our separate lives.

Drew was always a genuinely nice guy. Sincere in a way few guys I knew in high school were. Sincere in a way few guys I’ve *ever* encountered were.

My teenage self was drawn to more than his good looks. It’s nice to know fame hasn’t changed that about him. Comforting, the same way this town seems to be stuck in time.

“Are you here for long?”

To my surprise, Drew seems interested in extending our conversation beyond the obligatory acknowledgment. Which wasn’t even obligatory. He could have said nothing to me.

I shake my head. “Just tonight actually.”

Drew’s eyes skim my expression and drop down to my outfit. There’s no interest or disapproval on his face. It’s more like he’s searching for something.

A more robust answer maybe. On why I’m back and why my visit is so short. If he’s visited Port Haven with any regularity since high school, he must know I haven’t. And why.

It’s depressing, I guess—how I assume everyone I encounter is only interested in the bare minimum exchange. Even sadder how it’s almost always the case.

“Are you?” I ask, shifting my grip on my groceries. It feels rude to only answer his questions and not ask any in response. “Here for long?”

“Not sure. I got in a week ago and still have some time before preseason starts up. Was hoping my folks might be able to come up like old times, but…” Drew rubs his forehead, knocking his ball cap up and then tugging it back down. “My dad had a stroke a year ago, so it’s harder for him to get around. He and my mom basically stay put in Boston now.”

“I’m so sorry about your dad,” I say.

My memories of Aiden Halifax are fuzzy at best. But what I do remember of him, he was always jovial and smiling. A bright, happy presence and as hockey-obsessed as his son. Drew's mother, Rebecca, was always just as cheerful. She was the type of parent who baked chocolate chip cookies and made homemade lemonade. The polar opposite of my mom.

Foolishly, I feel like I should have known about his dad's health. But it's a misguided notion.

Drew and I haven't kept in touch. It's a private family matter he's obviously chosen not to share with the rabid fan base obsessed with his slap shot and his six-pack. He never posts anything personal on his social media. And my mother basically cut this town off years ago. I'm certain she hasn't kept in close touch with Mr. and Mrs. Halifax.

"Thanks." Drew rubs his jaw with one hand, drawing my attention to the sharp angle and dusting of stubble there. He's uneasy with sympathies. We have one thing in common, I guess. "And…I'm really sorry about your dad. I wanted to go to the funeral, but I was at school and—"

"It's fine. Thanks," I cut him off, distantly aware of how my voice has turned sharp and brittle, nearly cracking in the middle of *fine*. I mistook his uncertainty as being associated with his family, not mine. And while it's *not* fine, it's also nothing I want to discuss with him. Especially not here.

Drew nods once. For someone sincere, his serious expression is difficult to interpret. I can't tell if he's uncomfortable or understanding.

I exhale. "Sorry. I just—"

"It's okay. I shouldn't have brought it up."

A large lump forms in my throat as I manage a nod. What I'm acknowledging, I'm not really sure.

A decade after his death, Drew's condolences still sting like my dad passed yesterday. But they don't bother me the way some people's do. Or did. Most people seem to assume there's an expiration date for grief. That after a set amount of

time, you should no longer experience it. Nothing in Drew's expression says that.

"Your total is sixty-three forty-five."

I jerk, having totally forgotten we're standing in the checkout of the supermarket. Mostly alone, but not entirely. Drew recovers more gracefully, nodding at the cashier as he pulls out a credit card from his wallet and taps the machine to pay.

The cashier—a gangly guy who looks to be in high school—alternates between glancing at the computer screen and at Drew. I steal a look as well, only to find out Drew's eyes are already on me.

Quickly, I glance away, my cheeks warming without permission.

He's just nice, I tell myself. I got my hopes up about Drew Halifax once before. Then, they crashed as I watched my little sister hang all over him. Being back here is messing with my head.

"Thanks," Drew says as his receipt is handed over.

"Can I get an autograph?" is the response. The question comes out more like *can-I-get-an-autograph*, a rushed exhale that sounds like a burst of courage. And that also explains the slow speed of the line.

"Of course."

I'm unsurprised by Drew's answer. He seems like the sort of celebrity who would see fans as a responsibility instead of an inconvenience.

I watch as Drew grabs the pen from the weekly specials clipboard and scribbles his signature on the back of the receipt. "What's your name?"

"Dustin."

Drew adds *To Dustin* above his signature before handing the slip of paper back to the boy.

The cashier takes the receipt like it's a breakable object. "Thank you *so* much."

Drew smiles before leaning down. Too late, I realize what he's reaching for.

The wayward lime that I forgot about as soon as I saw him.

"I can get—" I step forward at the same moment he straightens.

Suddenly, we're close—*too* close. I can find the small freckle just to the left of his bottom lip. Spot the slight bump on the bridge of his nose that, if I had to guess, was put there by a hockey puck. Smell his cologne, some heady combination of sandalwood and cedar.

Drew sets the lime on the counter. I hurriedly step away from him and glance at the green fruit. I doubt the linoleum floor is cleaned very often, but the citrus appears unscathed. Winding my way back through the store to grab a new one doesn't sound appealing. Tequila will get me drunk either way.

"Thanks."

Drew nods, the corner of his mouth curling up as he takes inventory of the other two items I'm clutching. His purchases are already bagged, so I can't return the favor. I doubt *he's* just buying alcohol and junk food, though.

I don't know much about hockey.

I *do* know it's not played professionally during the summer.

But despite being out of season, Drew's physique is impressive. He's wearing a pair of mesh basketball shorts, a T-shirt, and sneakers. None of it covers the definition of his calves or the bulge of his biceps, which make it obvious he's in excellent physical shape.

I add the second lime, bag of chips, and bottle of tequila to the lime already set on the counter. The cashier rings up my items slowly, distracted by glancing at Drew, which is terrific for my ego.

Drew picked up his bag of groceries, but hasn't walked away. I steal peeks at him while my purchases are scanned. He's looking at his phone, which he must have pulled out of his pocket, brow furrowed as he swipes at the screen.

And…*waiting* for me? Maybe?

I can't come up with another explanation for why he's loitering around—unless he thinks the guy working is looking for a second autograph.

The cashier cards me for the tequila. I'm tempted to roll my eyes. There's no chance I could pass for twenty or younger, even if I am dressed like a sloppy teenager. But I hand my driver's license over without comment and pay before grabbing the brown bag.

Drew follows me outside. Rain is still falling steadily from the dark sky, dripping off the store's overhang and bouncing off the pavement.

We both linger outside the store, but it's not awkward, like I expected. More unfamiliar. Uncertain. I have no idea what Drew is thinking.

"Did you walk here?" Drew asks.

His voice and question are both casual. Unaffected, like us running into each other at the Main Street Market is a normal occurrence. It soothes my anxiety. Removes the inclination toward making up some excuse to leave. Stopping here was the start of a lot of unknown, and any glimpse of normal—even feigned—is welcome.

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah." Drew tilts his head toward the left, in the direction of Ashland Avenue—where we are both headed—green eyes drilling into mine in a silent question.

I nod and shoot him a small smile, tightening my grip on the bag I'm holding as I walk into the rain.

It's not that I don't want to spend more time around Drew—the opposite.

But I'm apprehensive about the prospect.

I'm in a melancholy mood, lost in the past and worried about the future. No part of me is prepared to flirt or to smile or to act like I have my life together in the present.

Normally, I have no problem appearing bubbly and poised and assured.

Not tonight. Not here.

Exhaustion weighs me down as we walk along the rain-drenched sidewalk. All I really want to do tonight is drink tequila in my pajamas without worrying about how my hair looks. I know that won't be possible around Drew. His presence is impossible to ignore. It lingers like a silent shadow next to me as we start down the street, walking side by side over cracked pavement.

Drew says nothing as we stroll.

I'm the one who speaks first. The falling rain prevents total silence, but it still feels strange to walk with someone I hardly know without speaking a word.

"I don't know a lot about hockey. But one of my friends from work is a big fan. She was super impressed to hear that I swam out to a floating dock with you when I was fourteen."

He glances at me. Half-smiles. "What do you do?"

"Hmm?"

"For work. What do you do?"

"Oh." I tighten my grip on the bag I'm carrying. God, do I hate this question. "Answer phones and pick up coffee, mostly. I'm trying to figure out what else to do with my life." I force out a light laugh.

"You need to do something else?"

I don't do a great job of keeping the surprise off my face. I've gotten that response before. But only from people I've given the bright and shiny version of my responsibilities to. The ones who have heard, "I'm an executive assistant at Empire Records, managing artists and tracking album sales," and imagined me rubbing shoulders with celebrities and

having a say in their careers. And none of them have achieved an iota of the success Drew has.

"Some people seem to think so." *Including my family.* Bitterness seeps into my tone.

"Seems like *your* opinion is the one that should count."

"Yeah, it should," I respond.

Spoken like a multimillionaire, I think.

It's awfully simple to follow your heart when you don't have to worry about paying bills.

Not that I resent Drew's success. It's just easier to be brave with a safety net in place. One I don't have and he does.

Our steps slow until we stop in front of the yellow house. My eyes trace the familiar outline of the cottage my parents bought when I was in seventh grade. Lots of summers in rentals—mostly on Lake Paulson—and then five here.

It's annoying—how easy it is to recall what we're hoping to forget, but how hard it is to remember what we're desperate to. I tear my eyes away from the cheerful yellow, glancing at the Halifaxes' blue house next door and then at Drew.

"My evening plans begin and end with drinking tequila." I blurt out the sentence. "If you feel like hanging out, I have plenty…" My voice trails as I glance down, watching water as it continues to drip from my hair in a steady stream onto the bits of gray and white shells.

"I need to put these groceries in the fridge. Then, I'll come over." Drew's response is immediate. And sincere, it seems.

But I try not to focus on those details. I try to act like his response doesn't matter to me one way or the other, even as I feel relief erase uncertainty. Drinking alone no longer sounds like the ideal evening, if the alternative is his company.

"Okay," I say.

"Okay," Drew echoes.

Then, he's walking away, toward the blue house next door.

I trudge toward the yellow cottage, in no hurry despite the ongoing downpour. Walking toward a moment you've actively avoided isn't an easy task. I've been dreading this as much as Amelia's wedding. For years, I've known there would be a moment where I'd walk inside 23 Ashland Avenue again. I'm just unprepared for it to be *this* moment.

I pass my parked car and approach the front stairs, my steps slowing the closer I come until I'm at a standstill a few feet from the first step. I study the front door for a few minutes, barely aware of the rain dripping down my face and soaking my shirt. The paper bag I'm holding is damp, liable to disintegrate soon.

But I don't move.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've wanted to write Kyle Spencer a book ever since I finished *Heartbreak for Two*. He originally played a much larger role in Sutton and Teddy's story that I decided to scale back so I had more space to craft his character later on.

While I was working on *Six Summers to Fall* and brainstorming what Harper's career would be, I decided having her work at a record label would be the perfect segue back into the music world. And as soon as I came up with Piper's character I knew she'd be the perfect fit for Kyle. I loved writing their journeys both individually and as a couple, even if it meant having to come up with lyrics for "Blue Rain Boots." Those ten lines changed more than any other portion of this book, so please don't judge it by my songwriting abilities (or lack thereof)!

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