

**NOW
THIS
IS US**

A NOVEL



JENNIFER LEE

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*For Mae and Jim.
The first one's for you.*

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PROLOGUE

HARPER



Twenty-four years old

A thick ball of emotion wedged itself in my windpipe, and the bitter stench of antiseptics assaulted my nose, ramming itself down my inflamed throat. My chest rose and fell in pursuit of air, my lungs burning with each labored breath. My tongue was nothing more than a useless accessory lodged to the roof of my mouth, making it impossible to speak—much to the chagrin of the stout nurse towering over me as I lay motionless in the hospital bed.

Avoiding the pity in her exhausted eyes and her never-ending supply of intake questions, I focused on the bright fluorescent lights above and tried to ignore the fear hammering my bones, the dread clawing at my cold skin like a Freddy Krueger nightmare.

When I closed my eyes, I could still feel the cool night air against my blood-coated skin. Could still hear the pop of the gun, the screams of anguish, the wail of the sirens.

A chaotic scene, disorderly like the cadence of my heartbeat.

My spine tingled with a feverish chill, and I shivered, craving the warmth of a man who was so close yet completely unreachable.

The nurse grew angry with my apathetic behavior, but her questions started to grate...and what the fuck did she want from me? It was clear I'd live to see another day. Maybe she should run off and find someone else to help, someone else to save.

The universe was a ruthless bitch, hell-bent on reminding me she was in

control, and I was just a puppet on her invisible string. Just when I made myself at home in the forest of contentment, she came and burned that shit down.

And like a lovesick fool condemned to a loveless life, I constantly let my heart lead me down gold-laden paths of despair, hoping for a different outcome.

But this, this was the cruelest torture of all, knowing I'd caught a glimpse of my forever just to have it ripped from my bloody fingertips.

I felt it in my broken bones.

Saw it in the nurse's downcast eyes.

The universe was cackling with glee at the mayhem she unleashed on our small, close-knit town.

And after tonight, things would never be the same.

PART ONE

HARPER



Eighteen years old

“*W*hat in the actual fuck?” I gripped the brass doorknob so tightly that I envisioned it breaking in my hand.

“Harper, let me explain.” My boyfriend, Devlin King, stumbled around his room, bare naked, slurring apologies like they mattered. The musky scent of weed and booze permeated the air as he rifled through his underwear drawer, selecting a pair of red boxers. “This isn’t what it looks like, I swear.”

Did he really just utilize the most clichéd excuse in the cheating handbook?

Pathetic.

Why I decided to show up unannounced and surprise him with a gift on the morning of his high school graduation was beyond me.

I mean, I *knew* better.

Acting on impulse led to chaos, regret, or in my case, a maimed heart.

I should have just slept in.

“Let her go and come back to bed, Dev,” Camille Whitlock’s raspy voice cooed. She didn’t even have the decency to cover herself, her hard nipples saluting him like obedient little soldiers. Yet in a few hours, Miss Valedictorian would don a preppy Lilly Pulitzer dress as she took the podium, delivering a commencement speech that would surely give her parents something to brag about at the country club.

Devlin took a few hesitant steps toward me, but I held up my clammy

palm, and he stilled.

“Don’t call me. Don’t text me”—my expression hardened—“and don’t waste my time trying to explain yourself. We’re finished, Dev.”

I slammed his door shut, heartache combusting in the middle of my chest.

I knew it wasn’t love.

I could never open up to him, share my secrets, or give him the one thing I just wasn’t ready to part with yet.

Still, he *cheated*, and it stung.

Wiping the tears from my cheeks, I descended the elegant staircase, trying to make a hasty escape. While my modest home across town was full of warmth and love, the King McMansion was cold and isolating, intensifying the anxiety swirling around me. I often wondered if something sinister lurked behind its walls since I knew for a fact its youngest occupant, Jordan King, lacked a soul. If *he* witnessed my shattered state, things would only get worse.

It didn’t matter that once upon a time, he was my best friend.

Now, he was my tormentor, and he’d see to it this sordid gossip went viral within the hour. Everyone would form their own opinions on the Kelly/King cheating scandal before I even had time to fully process the pain myself, and I couldn’t let that happen.

The soles of my pink Vans squeaked against the shiny travertine floor as I rushed through the foyer. My freedom was within reach when a loud crunch halted my advance.

My shoulders slowly deflated as I turned and met a familiar blue-eyed glare.

Leaning against the opposite wall, Jordan lifted a shiny green apple to his full lips and took another bite. Juice dribbled down his chin, and he wiped his mouth along his forearm, his frigid gaze never leaving mine. Gray sweatpants hung low on his narrow hips, and because he just *had* to be shirtless, the ridges and valleys of his tan stomach were on full display.

Pressing off the wall with a smug smirk, he sauntered toward me, tossing the apple in the air and catching it with an obnoxious amount of arrogance.

Another bite.

Another *crunch*.

I crossed my arms over my chest and lifted my chin, willing myself not to break. Jordan was a shark, and my weakness was the blood he craved. One drop and he’d shred me to pieces.

Devour me.

Consume me.

“Leaving so soon?” He began circling me like the predator he was.

I didn’t utter a word.

His upper body pressed against my back as he leaned forward and whispered in my right ear, “What’s the matter? Can’t handle brother dearest dipping his dick in another chick?”

The lump of nervousness in my throat made it hard to swallow. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out, aware that was exactly what he wanted.

The tip of his nose brushed my hair as he moved to my left ear. “Guess you weren’t getting the job done.”

Red-hot anger clouded my vision. I swiveled around and shoved his hard chest. “Screw you, Jordan.”

A satanic smile spread across his face. He craned his neck, glancing up at the ceiling, then back at me. “How does it feel knowing you gave it up to a guy who feels no remorse for ruining your delusional fairy tale?”

A sob rose up my throat, eyes misted with unshed tears. “I didn’t give Devlin *anything*,” I growled, storming past him on unsteady legs, propelling myself to my car. When the ignition refused to turn over, I banged the steering wheel in frustration, and a sharp pain instantly shot through my palm and up my arm. My eyelids scrunched closed as I counted down from ten, breathing through the discomfort.

Ten.

Nine.

Eight.

A hard knock on my window startled me. “Roll down the window, Harper.”

I sighed, glancing over to find Jordan fogging up the glass. “Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

His gaze jerked toward the leather scrapbook sitting on the passenger seat, a photo of Devlin and me on the cover with *Happy Graduation Day!* inscribed in silver glitter glue beneath it.

I expected a snide remark, but he surprised me when his muffled voice said, “He’s an idiot, okay? You’re better off without him.”

Deep regret and a hint of kindness swirled in his eyes, and for a moment, I remembered the guy he used to be.

The ten-year-old boy who welcomed me to school when I was the awkward new girl from Seattle.

The preteen who accompanied me to the middle school dance when the boy I asked turned me down.

The punk rock enthusiast who took me to my first concert.

Fond memories tainted by one unforgivable act after another.

I gave my key another twist, and the engine roared to life. I cracked my window, making sure he heard my words loud and clear. “Step away from my car, Jordan...and stay the hell away from me.”

HARPER



Three Months Later

“Smile, Harper!” Kylie Jo Sullivan, my tenacious best friend, reached over my shoulder and held up her iPhone. “Now say, ‘senior year’!”

Nothing about the twinkle in my eyes was fake as she snapped a selfie, happiness flowing through me with the knowledge that our time at Fair Oak High would soon end.

“Oh, we look hot!” she said to herself as she strutted across the senior lot, her blond ponytail swaying side to side. “Like, hashtag-no-filter hot. Do I need your approval before posting it?”

I shook my head. “Post away, my dear.”

Other than the Facebook account I’d neglected for years, I didn’t bother with social media. Too much pressure to *look* a certain way, to *act* a certain way. And after Devlin and Camille went “Instagram Official” a week after we broke up, I decided the less I knew, the better.

Of course, Kylie still kept me well informed.

On the day it happened, she arrived at my house with a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream and a *Little Rascals* DVD and broke the news. “They’re together now, and he’s a total douchebag. Since you’re the Alfalfa to my Spanky, I’ll kick his ass if you want me to, but honestly, you’re way better off without him.”

She was right.

I was way too good for Devlin.

And okay, so *maybe* the first few weeks without him were difficult. I did the whole forgoing showers and binge-watching *Dawson's Creek* thing. Ate my weight in chocolate and observed in horror as pimple after pimple appeared on my jawline. Burned some of Devlin's things in my gramps's backyard firepit as a part of some cleansing ritual Kylie read about online.

But then I had that post-breakup epiphany. Devlin didn't just break my heart; he humiliated me too. Made a mockery of what we had the second he invited Camille up to his room and ruined everything. He didn't value me or recognize my worth. He took me for granted, and I had way too much self-respect to shed one more tear over him.

I was happy to leave him in the past.

Unfortunately, his brother was impossible to ignore.

"Freaking alphabetical order," I mumbled as Kylie and I approached the senior hallway. "I can join the Army and vote, and I can legally drink in other countries, but this hellhole insists on assigning lockers in alphabetical order like we're infants."

She linked her arm through mine. "I'd offer to share with you, babe, but you've got those thick smart-people textbooks, which definitely won't fit in mine. And I'm not swapping with you. I have my eye on this guy, and my locker is right beside his homeroom. I've formulated the perfect meet-cute." She waggled her eyebrows, and I laughed.

"It's fine. Last year, Jordan hardly used his locker. Maybe it won't be an issue."

"Mm-hmm." Her feet came to a halt as she nodded her head toward the end of the hallway. Two meaty football players bumped into us from behind, nearly knocking us over as they cursed under their breath. "You sure about that?"

I followed her gaze and grimaced. "Damn it to hell."

Surrounded by three sophomore girls and his two friends, Greg Fisher and Hurley Jennings, Jordan stood in the exact place I was hoping he wouldn't be. "It's like summoning a demon from the underworld. Say his name, and he shall appear."

Kylie giggled. "Well, as much as I want to see how this plays out..."

"I know. A gentleman awaits. See you at lunch."

She blew me an air kiss then turned left down a side hallway, getting swept away in the madness of the first day of school.

As if on cue, Jordan glanced my way, and a wave of dread rolled through

my stomach as his arctic eyes narrowed. He spoke to his friends while keeping his gaze locked on mine, and in unison, their heads canted in my direction.

Greg and Hurley sneered.

His female fan club appraised me with disdain.

And Jordan remained impassive, giving nothing away.

Great, so this is how we're starting the school year, I thought as I fidgeted with the strap of my cross-body bag. I wasn't easily intimidated, but I preferred to go under the radar—an impossible feat when you had the attention of Jordan King.

Jordan jerked his head over his shoulder, and the group dispersed on his command. He raked his fingers through the strands of his fashionably tousled black hair as he leaned against my locker, then he folded his arms over his chest. He appeared casual and cool in black jeans and a fitted black T-shirt, and an evil grin curved across his face as I approached.

“Harper.”

“Satan.”

His lips twitched. “I see you went all out for the first day of school.”

I glimpsed at my black Chuck Taylor All-Stars, cutoff shorts, and Bruce Springsteen concert tee and blinked in disbelief. “This is an authentic Tunnel of Love Express Tour T-shirt. It's vintage, and it took me a year to hunt down.” I motioned to his outfit. “At least I'm not dressed for a funeral.”

He placed his hand on his chest over his heart and winced. “She wounds me.”

“*She* needs to get to her locker.”

His right hand reached over his left shoulder, knuckles rapping against the red-painted metal. “Oh, this locker?” The warning bell rang, and he smirked. “What could you possibly have to stick in there already?”

I reached into my bag and pulled out three novels. “Summer reading for ___”

“AP lit. Right. But we don't need to bring those to class for another week.”

“No, but...” My words died on my tongue. One corner of his mouth lifted in amusement when he realized my brain finally caught up. I tilted my head back and released a sigh. “*You're* taking AP lit?”

I knew he was smart, but Jordan never actually *tried*. Even when we were inseparable, long before he became an unapologetic asshole, he'd assist me

with my honors homework but refused to take the courses himself. “Wasted potential,” my gramps used to say every afternoon when Jordan came over to help me study. Seems he decided to stop wasting that potential and start giving a damn just as our days in high school were numbered.

“Affirmative. And if my sources are correct, we have AP bio and culinary arts together, too. Should make for an interesting semester, don’t you think?”

Heat seared through me, scorching whatever patience I had left for his condescending bullshit. “You tampered with our schedules, didn’t you?” The question was rhetorical because I already knew the answer. “And what’d that cost you, huh? How much is my misery worth to you, King?”

He pushed off my locker, invading my personal space. My heart raced as the tips of his shoes pressed against mine, hoping the dirt on my well-worn Converse rubbed off on his sparkling white Air Force 1s. His minty breath washed over my face when he said, “Oh, Harper. What makes you think I care enough to drop a dime on you? Much like my big brother, your happiness, or lack thereof, means absolutely nothing to me.”

Before I succumbed to the pain instigated by his cruel words, I quickly moved around him and entered my combination, setting *King Lear*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* on the top shelf. I took a deep, calming breath before I turned back around, forcefully knocking his bicep with my shoulder as I walked away.

“Run along, little one. Don’t want you ruining your pristine record with a tardy on the first day.”

I didn’t entertain his goading with a response.

Once again, Jordan was trying to make my life a living hell.

It was time to toughen up and pretend he didn’t affect me at all, even though that couldn’t be further from the truth.

JORDAN



Her wavy taupe-brown hair was pulled back into an intricate braid that hung over her right shoulder, a few untamed strands escaping the loose hold. Her delicate chin was raised, moss-green eyes giving our English teacher her undivided attention as she absorbed his every word. Her small hands jotted down the occasional note, but for the most part, she sat completely still, unaffected by my nearness.

Harper Kelly was poised like a tightrope walker, and I couldn't wait for her to fall.

While Greg, Hurley, and I spent the rest of the summer celebrating my eighteenth birthday on my father's yacht in Saint-Tropez, Harper was free to mope around town and play the part of Fair Oak's heartbroken angel. But as soon as my family's jet touched down in Philadelphia, her false sense of security was revoked.

Without Devlin by her side, she was vulnerable and weak.

The perfect toy to play with until I grew bored.

Then I'd ruin her.

Tinkering with our schedules was easy. Mr. Warren, one of Fair Oak's guidance counselors, was a client of my father's, and *nobody* fucked with Conrad King. As the CEO of Conrad King Holdings, Pops was one of the slickest investment bankers on the East Coast and single-handedly secured Fair Oak's spot on the list of wealthiest small towns in America.

Mr. Warren had the opportunity to make a shit ton of money as CKH clientele, or he could seal his fate and work as a school shrink until he was

too old to wipe his own ass. After a short but assertive email reminding him of that, I was officially Harper's unwanted shadow for the fall semester, waiting for the moment I'd bring her to her knees.

Harper on her knees.

Ha, the image was laughable.

It turned out, Little Miss Ambitious was a prude—a virgin as pure as Mary. Dev admitted it when he sobered up that morning and dragged his ass out of bed, hours after Harper stormed out in devastation. I must say, I was surprised he dealt with a set of blue balls for six months when a mile-long line of girls waited to take Harper's place, Camille Whitlock and her dick-sucking lips leading the pack.

Was it possible he actually cared about her?

Irritation flaring, my hands clenched into fists, and a loud, sharp snap drew everyone's attention to the center of the classroom.

"Is there a problem, Mr. King?"

I shook my head. "No, sir."

The splintered number two pencil in my hand begged to differ.

Harper cast me a sidelong glare with a pointedness that was hard to ignore, annoyance rolling off her in heated waves.

Glancing away from her pissed-off frown, I hunched over my desk and tapped the shoulder of the girl sitting in front of me. "Hey, gorgeous," I whispered as she spun around. "What's a guy gotta do to get a copy of those notes?" I jerked my chin toward the notebook opened in front of her. A devilish grin crept slowly across my face, the kind that charmed the panties off most chicks.

Her cheeks grew crimson as she tucked a lock of deep-red hair behind her ear. "I'm sure I can think of something."

Nervous yet confident, a combination I could use to my advantage. "Hm, how about we talk after class?"

She nodded with a tight-lipped smile.

When the bell rang, I stood by the door, refusing to move as Harper rushed by, the back of her hand grazing mine as she did. Her gaze cut to mine, her expression unreadable as she joined the stream of students flowing down the hallway.

"So..." Big Red appeared by my side, cradling her textbook against her chest. "I've decided you can borrow my notes for the weekend...if you take me out tonight."

I didn't need her notes.

Didn't need to study to ace AP lit, either.

But I did need a plaything for the evening, so I indulged her.

"Walk with me," I replied, slanting my head in the direction of my locker. Big Red jumped at the opportunity as if she were embarking on the trip of a lifetime. Little did she know, our involvement would be a hasty voyage with a one-way ticket back to obscurity.

I nodded to a few of my boys and winked at a girl or two, not saying much as I pondered what the hell I was going to do with this chick.

I didn't date, I fucked, but I couldn't come right out and say that.

I had *some* decency, after all.

Harper's excited voice cut through the conversations transpiring around us as we neared our destination. "...want to get a spot near the stage, so we should get there early."

"Okay, my little punk rock princess. I won't be late," Kylie Jo said, pinching Harper's cheek playfully.

The smile that bloomed on Harper's face flattened into her infamous scowl as my flaming-red companion and I approached.

"You know, Mr. Allen's lecture was exceptional today." She pulled out two textbooks from her locker then knelt to place them inside the ugly cross-body bag she insisted on keeping, despite its decrepit state. "There's still time for you to drop the class and stop wasting his time."

I chuckled at the very idea, as if I'd concede that easily.

No, Harper was going to have to face me every day and remember what she'd done.

"It's fucking adorable the way you pretend you care about other people, Harp."

Her body went rigid, then with an indiscernible frown, she slowly rose to her full height. Her lips parted like she had something to say, and my pulse quickened as I prepared to spar with the enemy.

Instead, she released a sigh as she shut her locker and glanced at Kylie. "I'll see you later."

Kylie watched her walk away then wheeled around and pinned me with a hard look. "Be careful with this one, Jillian. He's nothing but a manwhore who's desperately in need of therapy."

I tilted my head to the side and snickered. "Don't take anything Kylie Jo says seriously. No one else does."

Kylie sneered openly as she shook her head. “I’ll never understand how someone like Harper was ever friends with someone as miserable as you.” With that, she pivoted on her heel and stormed off.

For a moment, vivid images paraded through my mind and an itchy sensation traveled up my neck.

Sure, Harper was friendly, polite, and maybe even a bit too kind, but no one knew her vindictive side like I did. No one knew she was too proud to admit when she was wrong, even if it was the sensible thing to do. No one knew she could never admit to her mistakes, even when it was crystal clear she fucked up.

“You were friends with Harper Kelly?” Jillian asked with a laugh, interrupting the thoughts swirling in my head.

“A long time ago,” I mumbled as I entered my combination, formulating the perfect plan as I grabbed my copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and my keys. “So Jillian,” I began, closing my locker and draping my arm over her shoulder, “about tonight...”

HARPER



“*P*ass the breadsticks, please,” I requested as I polished off a slice of cheese pizza and wiped my greasy fingers on a napkin.

Gramps leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on his belly, scanning the kitchen table with his eyes. “Breadsticks...breadsticks...”

“You know they’re right in front of you.” I pointed with a laugh. “You’re just worried I’ll finish them off.”

“Because you always do!” He chuckled as he handed over the bread basket. “Can’t even spare one for your dear old grandfather. The nerve, Harper Rae, the nerve.”

“Well, my dear old grandfather was told he needs to eat less carbs, or he’ll be taking diabetes medication soon, so maybe I’m just looking out for him.”

“And maybe it’s time to tell that doctor of mine to stop letting you sit in on my appointments,” he grumbled, taking a sip of water.

My stomach turned to knots as I picked apart my pizza crust, hoping his threat was empty.

As the retired police chief, Jim Kelly—lovingly referred to as Big Jim by those who knew him well—was one of the most respected men in town. The kind of man who knew everyone by name. The kind of man who would never cut a conversation short. The kind of man who’d take in his granddaughter because his daughter wasn’t cut out to be a mother.

After Gramps gained full custody of me on my tenth birthday, folks in town reminded me daily how lucky I was to have such a wonderful man in

my life.

They were correct, of course, which was why I needed Gramps to remain healthy and strong for a long, *long* time.

“I’m just bellyaching, Harper. You know I appreciate you looking out for me,” Gramps kindly reassured. “So who’s playing at The Riff tonight?” He swiftly changed the subject to the sixteen and older music club where Kylie and I spent most Friday nights.

“It’s Open Mic Night, so other than some local band Kylie’s been following on Twitter, I’m not sure.”

“They’re called Flight of Souls, and they’re amazing,” Kylie called as she breezed through the front door without knocking, waltzing into the kitchen wearing a plain black skater dress, a shiny pair of black Doc Martens, and a bright smile. “How’s it going, Big Jim?” she asked, patting his shoulder before reaching over and snatching the last breadstick from my hand. I shot her a glare, but the humor in her eyes remained. “You never share. I need to be forceful.”

Gramps’s pointed look said, *Told you so.*

I rolled my eyes and shrugged.

He shook his head with a grin, unfolded his brawny six-foot frame from his chair, and began gathering our dirty dishes. “Who’s driving?” he asked as he tossed our napkins into the trash.

“That would be me,” I replied with a raised hand, knowing the *Gramps Safety Warning* was commencing.

“Be sure to park under a streetlight, have your pepper spray ready, and drink—”

“Bottled water only,” I finished for him as I got to my feet, stealing a quick glance at Kylie who was pressing a hand to her mouth to hide her amusement.

It was the same routine every week. Between his profession and his experience with my hellion mother, Gramps worried about me—a lot.

“Curfew?” he inquired, though he knew I was *never* late.

“Midnight,” I answered, pressing a kiss to his scruffy cheek. “Love you, Gramps.”

“Love you too, kid.”

When we arrived at The Riff and approached the end of the line, a vibrant fire crept into my soul.

Anything was possible on Open Mic Night, which meant each experience

was unique and transformative.

And because there was no dress code, no one gave a shit about expensive clothes and chic brands. In distressed jeans, a white crop top, and my black Converse high-tops, my outfit was just as acceptable as the red leather miniskirt and fishnet stockings adorned by the vivacious woman standing in front of us...and I fucking loved it. Loved that it didn't matter what you wore, it only mattered how you felt.

Soon enough, we'd bob our heads to the same beat, have our hearts destroyed by the same lyrics, and leave with the same natural high from a night of musical therapy. The promise of that shared experience made my heart soar.

"Hey." Kylie nudged my elbow and held up her phone. "Grant's waiting."

Stealthily, we made our way around the back of the building, where Grant Whitlock stood by a propped open door. "Ladies." He winked.

"Grant saves the day again." I smiled.

"Seriously, you're the best," Kylie added, giving his bicep a squeeze.

He rolled his eyes like the compliment wasn't necessary, but his puffed-out chest and lopsided grin said he was proud to be our hero.

Twenty. Blond. Fit and tan. Grant definitely had that Abercrombie sex appeal going for him. Unfortunately, he was related to Camille, so dating him was out of the question.

Whenever Grant was working, he'd sneak us in early so we could secure a spot near the stage. I wasn't proud of our shady tactics, but Friday night was my time to unwind and release some of my pent-up frustration, and I found I did that best when I stood beside the speakers, drowning my thoughts in a riptide of pulses and rhythms.

"I need to get backstage, but I'll catch up with you later," he said as he ushered us in and relocked the door.

We walked down a dark corridor and entered the dance area. My gaze swept over the empty space as we crossed the lacquered floor to one of the many couches positioned around the room.

With dim lighting and an abundance of purple velvet and black leather, a newcomer might think they'd entered a lewd place full of debauchery instead of an informal club full of noise, sweat, and exuberance.

It was my asylum.

My haven.

My favorite place in the world.

I'd been a regular since my sixteenth birthday—a thrilling, delirious night that made my body buzz and my head spin in a way it never had before.

A euphoric feeling I'd been chasing ever since.

“Showtime,” Kylie motioned toward the entrance as the crowd began to pour in, snapping me back to reality before I sank into a feverish memory I tried hard to suppress.

The first act went on promptly at eight, an older band with raspy voices and a classic rock sound.

“They were good!” Kylie shouted over the noise of the applause.

“They were decent,” I shouted back.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You’re impossible.”

I knew she was joking, but her words still penetrated my skin. I didn't mean to be critical. I just craved the magical rush that came with a truly amazing performance. The rush I felt a little while later when our school's star quarterback, Jaylan Wilson, took the stage.

Commanding everyone's attention with complex lyrics that were pure poetry, Jaylan possessed the audience with his good looks and charisma, and by the end of his performance, we were all sweat drenched and bursting with energy.

“Now, *he* was good,” I pointed as he hopped off the stage, landing in the middle of the large group of football players there to support him.

“He was amazing!” Kylie clapped as she looked over at me. “And you're flushed,” she added with a smirk.

I plucked my shirt from my damp skin. “I'm going to freshen up before Flight of Souls comes out.”

As I walked past a table near the bar, a gruff laugh caught my attention, and my feet came to a halt. With tense muscles and a bitter taste coating my mouth, I glanced to my right, knowing an attack on my emotions was imminent. Knowing Jordan wasn't fucking around anymore.

The piercing blue of his taunting stare chilled my blood as Jillian Rosenfield straddled his right thigh, seemingly unaware of her audience as she licked the column of his corded neck. He twisted his fingers into her hair and held her tighter, and my stomach lurched at the salacious display.

He knew I'd be here, and he came to make me squirm.

I leveled him with a scowl and straightened my spine, but the infinitesimal twitch of his lips told me he was triumphant.

Son of a bitch, I thought as I turned on my soles and continued to the restroom, anger crashing through me like a derailed train. Uncontrollable and lethal.

Jordan was throwing down the gauntlet, and I was ready to fight.

JORDAN



As soon as Harper was out of sight, I pressed my palm against Jillian's forehead and pushed her away from my neck. She sucked harder than a vacuum—ideal if my dick was in her mouth, but any visible marks on my skin was a hard limit. I sure as shit didn't want to openly advertise my...*encounter*...with Big Red.

This date was a one-off.

A Friday night sacrificed in the name of revenge.

"Be right back." Standing, I bolted without waiting for her reply. She'd been blathering on and on since I picked her up, and I'd had about enough of her cartoonish, high-pitched voice—as did my punctured eardrums.

My plan to ruin Harper's evening was backfiring.

In this scenario, the only one suffering was me.

I trailed her down the hallway leading to the restrooms, her denim-hugging hips swaying to the beat of the song currently being performed on stage.

Threading her fingers through her hair, she pulled it up into a messy topknot, revealing her slender neck and a sliver of her black bra strap. She had no clue how many guys and girls were eyeing her up. How many people wanted to dance with her, leave with her.

Now, she looked even more fuckable. Innocent but somehow dirty.

Outside of the men's restroom stood a pale, skinny motherfucker with pockmarked skin and greasy hair. Angling his head, he unabashedly stared at her ass, lips parted like he wanted to devour her...and that shit wouldn't fly.

When Harper entered the women's restroom, he glanced over his shoulder and met my unrelenting glare. "She with you?" he asked, taking a cautious step back.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I propped my right foot against the wall beside the door. I knew Harper could defend herself. I bet she was even packing pepper spray courtesy of Big Jim. But no way in hell was I letting him get by me. "The short one with the permanent scowl?"

He nodded.

"Nah." I grimaced. "Not since she gave me this STD that causes my dick to..."

His beady eyes flared as his hand shot up, halting me right in the middle of my lie. "Forget it," he mumbled, vanishing quicker than a box of condoms at a frat house. The side of my mouth quirked upward when he turned the corner too quickly, and his elbow collided with the wall.

Fucking lurker.

Harper exited the restroom, eyes darkening as she breezed right by me. "You're not ruining this night for me, Jordan," she called over her shoulder.

I caught up to her in three long strides. "What makes you think I'm here because of you?"

Her feet stopped short, and she swiveled back around, stabbing a finger at me. "Because you haven't been here in a year. Because this is no longer your scene. And because you're punishing me."

"And just what would I be punishing you for, Harper?"

Her demeanor remained guarded, her expression impassive. Her eyes gave nothing away, and it drove me fucking mad.

"Say something," I demanded through clenched teeth, tension building in my neck and shoulders.

Fantastic. Another conversation with Harper that would require a call to my masseuse.

"What's the point?" she shot back, throwing her arms up. "Our differing versions of what happened last year will only cause more friction. I'd rather deal with your hatred than try to defend myself to someone who doesn't give a shit about me anymore."

Oh, how wrong she was. I remembered *exactly* what happened last year. The unpleasant memory was seared on my mind like a cheap souvenir. I was just sick and fucking tired of waiting for her to admit her part in it.

"Nobody likes a martyr, Harp."

“Nobody likes an asshole either, but you play the role well.”

I skewered her with a hot glare. “Do you think it’s fun? Using people to get what you want?”

She closed her eyes, pinched the bridge of her nose, and summoned a deep breath. “I don’t want to be your enemy, Jordan.”

I sniggered, finding it interesting how she evaded my question. “And I don’t want to be your friend.”

“What about a truce? We can coexist until graduation, then we never have to see each other again.”

“A truce, huh?” I clasped my hands behind my back, pretending to consider her proposal.

She nodded, eyes alight with something resembling hope.

I crept forward, close enough to count every freckle on the slope of her nose and every eyelash fringing her bright-green eyes. Close enough to smell the playful mix of flowers and sweat on her smooth ivory skin. Close enough to feel her hope shatter when I said, “You and I will never be able to coexist, Harp. Not until you’re honest with yourself. Not until you’re honest with *me*.”

Color spread over her face like red wine spilled on a white rug, a slow-moving stain of embarrassment and shame. Her nod fell heavy, final, and in a small voice, she said, “Kylie’s probably wondering where I am.” She ambled down the hallway, glancing back just before she turned the corner. “Nice hickey, by the way. Very classy.”

My hand shot up to my neck to the spot where Big Red’s lips were earlier. Rushing into the men’s room, I pushed my way to the mirror, avoiding the weirded-out glare from a guy washing his hands in the basin beside me. I leaned closer for a better look, turning my head from side to side, seeing nothing but unblemished skin.

With a faint smile, I gripped the edge of the sink and dropped my chin to my chest. “Well played, Kelly. Well played.”

Ironic how I was there to ruin Harper’s night, yet she held the upper hand.

She still knew how to provoke me, and it was messing with my fucking head.

JORDAN



“*Y*ou look like hell.” My mother’s four-inch designer heels clacked across the marble floor as she swept into the kitchen the next morning, bringing an aura of hairspray and floral perfume with her. “And you smell rancid,” she added as she opened and closed the refrigerator door.

I lifted my forehead off the island and squinted through the merciless sunlight streaming through the large window above the sink. “You’ve got to stop flattering me, Mom. It’s inflating my ego,” I rasped, my mouth drier than the toast I’d nibbled on earlier.

Like the quintessential ballerina she once was, she stood poised with her chin up, neck elongated, shoulders back. Black hair pulled into a sleek ponytail, expensive makeup smothering her face, and feline eyes that could cut you down with just one look.

At times, Serena King could be needlessly hypercritical, and right now, her sharp glare was aimed at me. “I hope you didn’t make a fool of yourself in public last night, Jordan. There are eyes on you everywhere you go. The last thing we need is a scandal before you graduate.”

Sentiments like this had been drilled into my head since I learned to talk. For my parents, appearances were everything, and that morning, I looked weak and exhausted, like a newly released prisoner of war.

“What are you implying? That I’m a sloppy drunk?”

Because I was.

“Of course not. I’m sure you make a lovely drunk, dear. Truly, I couldn’t be prouder.” She scowled at me and then at her phone as it pinged with a

notification.

I took the opportunity to slog to the counter and pour myself a coffee, hoping the caffeine would breathe some life into my aching body. But one glance at my mother's smoothie—a green, thick sludge prepared by her nutritionist with the promise of youthful, glowing skin—and my stomach lurched, suggesting my recovery would be an all-day process.

After I dropped off Jillian without the promise of a second date, I wound up at Hurley's, grateful that his father kept his liquor cabinet stocked with the finest shit. The anger in my blood still burned hot but shot after shot of top-shelf tequila seemed to water it down to a manageable level.

So Harper wouldn't break as easily as I'd hoped? Eventually, she would.

Oh, she most certainly would.

I lost track of her after our run-in at The Riff, but I ended up staying for two more sets anyway. I'd forgotten how it felt to have the maelstrom of deafening noise lash around me, blocking out everything else. I didn't necessarily miss it—that place always made Harper feel alive in a way I could never understand—but for a moment, being there again felt...*natural*.

My mother's large Louis Vuitton suitcase caught my eye. "What's with the bag?"

"Your father's attending a conference in Newport Beach this week, so I'm flying out for a few days. My skin could benefit from some California sun this time of year," she said, patting her cheek.

She was full of shit.

The only reason she'd fly to Cali was to make sure my father kept his dick in his pants. While I didn't think he had it in him to cheat, my father was a notorious flirt, and in places like Newport, he was even more desirable. Serena King was going to make sure the only woman who had her claws in him that week was her.

"We'll be home Thursday. Don't burn the house down or impregnate any girls while we're gone."

I wish I could say her warning was said in jest, but if my mother feared one thing, it was the sentence: "Jordan, you're the father."

"I'll try my best, but I make no promises."

She arched a meticulously groomed brow. "I know you're joking, but it's no laughing matter. There's a line of young women who'd love the opportunity to trap you, Jordan. Let's not forget about your brother's... indiscretion."

Devlin's *indiscretion* had a name but even uttering it was beneath her.
I wondered what she'd do if *I* released it into the space between us.

Would she let it float and evaporate, or would she strike it down with her iron fist?

Harper, Harper, Harper was on the tip of my tongue, ready to shatter her controlled facade like pebbles to glass.

Then her phone chimed with a message saying her driver had arrived. Two air kisses, another stern warning, and an extra spritz of perfume on her wrist, and my mother was out the door, leaving me to choke on Chanel No.5 and my adversary's name.

Harper, Harper, Harper, now ensnared in my mind, playing on repeat.

"Fuck," I groaned, rubbing my temples but finding no relief.

I thought back to the way she danced at The Riff. Glowing, confident, unburdened. Her movement fueled by the tempo, her body charged with passion and energy. Music was her sacred armor, her rhythmic escape. It'd been a long time since I stood by her side at a show like that, but I still recalled the way she buzzed with excitement, her intensity contagious.

God, I was pathetic.

I needed to get my head out of my ass.

Needed a distraction—someone to fuck, not wine and dine like Big Red.

Stumbling upstairs to my bedroom, I snatched my phone off my bed and sent a group text to Greg and Hurley.

Jordan: Party at my place 2nite. Spread the word.

My mother told me not to burn the house down.

She didn't say anything about throwing a balls-to-the-wall party.

So that's exactly what I did.

HARPER



“So what happened last night?” Gramps asked, banging his straw against the table, releasing it from its paper sleeve before inserting it into his lemonade.

“What do you mean?” I selected a sweet-smelling onion ring from the plate in the middle of the table and popped it into my mouth. My taste buds immediately burst with joy.

“When you came home, you weren’t your normal self.”

Gramps was a human lie detector, so there was no point denying it. “Jordan showed up at The Riff, and we had a tense conversation.”

His bushy eyebrows inched upward. “That must’ve been interesting.”

“That’s one way to put it.” I sipped my Coke and pretended like my encounter with the dark lord was something I could easily brush off.

Gramps stared at me with open humor. “So there’s no reconciliation for you two in the near future, then?”

I shot him a glare, knowing and hating that he still carried a soft spot for Jordan. “No talk of Jordan King at Maggie’s. Maggie’s is sacred.”

He shook his head and chuckled.

Maggie’s Diner was a small, charming, grease-filled oasis right off Main Street, with sticky black-and-white-checkered floors, turquoise vinyl booths, bubblegum-pink tabletops, and a long sit-down countertop straight out of the 1950s. Gramps and I had been regulars since the day my mother took off, leaving me behind in an unfamiliar town with a man I barely knew—a nightmarish incident I’d never forget.

With thick tears and cheap mascara running down her face, she wrapped her bruised arms around my waist and told me she wasn't equipped to be my mom anymore. *Anymore* implied there was a time when Lori Kelly actually *tried* to be a parent, but the lack of food in our grimy refrigerator and all the nights she didn't come home to our run-down one-bedroom apartment told a different story—one I was lucky to have survived.

Scared and confused, I cried all afternoon as I cradled the shabby teddy bear I'd found in Lori's childhood bedroom, hating her more than I ever thought possible. I couldn't blame my father for his absence—he died in a fatal car crash when I was two—but Lori's neglect and betrayal were unforgivable.

Gramps tried to get me to open up over dinner that evening, but I refused to talk or eat. I was used to cheap fast food and silence, not home-cooked meals and family dinner conversation. Finally, he gave up and drove me to Maggie's, where I devoured two cheeseburgers, slurped down a large malt shake, and decided maybe living with him wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Here you go, Jim," our server, Gina, said as she set down Gramps's gooey bacon cheeseburger.

Gina was a slender woman in her fifties with dewy hazelnut skin, short caramel hair with flipped-up bangs, copper eyes accentuated by sweeping eyelashes, and an affectionate smile that radiated warmth, instantly making you feel welcomed.

She also had a huge crush on my grandfather, but he was too oblivious to notice.

"And for you, dear." She set down a large bowl of broccoli cheddar soup, and wisps of steam billowed into the air.

"Thanks, Gina."

She winked then walked over to the counter, asking two men in trucker hats what they'd like to drink.

"Gramps, I think you should ask Gina out. She's clearly into you," I whispered, giving my eyebrows a wiggle.

A series of bored blinks was his only reaction.

I wasn't sure why he was so against dating. He'd been married to my grandma for three decades before she suddenly passed away in her sleep fourteen years ago, and he hadn't been with anyone since. He pretended he wasn't, but I knew he was lonely.

I spooned my soup and gave it a long cool-down blow. "You're what..."

sixty-five?”

“Sixty-four,” he replied dryly.

“Sixty-four, that's what I said. I think you'd enjoy spending time with her. She could be your...companion.”

"If I wanted a companion, I'd get a dog."

“Oh yeah, you should definitely do that.” I gestured a little too excitedly and nearly knocked over my soda.

“I was kidding, Harper.”

Dammit.

Of course, he was.

After dinner, Gramps strolled over to the hardware store while I headed to Kylie's, where she greeted me at the door with an uneasy expression. “What's got you all flustered?” I asked as she closed the door behind me and wordlessly pulled me up the stairs.

With three brothers and two boisterous parents, the sounds of shouting and laughter always filled her house, and she waited until we reached the quietness of her bedroom to respond. “I need a *huge* favor, and I know it's going to take some convincing.”

“Um, when have I ever told you no?”

“Never.” Kylie hesitated for a moment, absentmindedly combing her fingers through her hair. “But this is like the *biggest* best friend ask in the history of mankind,” she comically emphasized, “and I'm prepared to beg.”

“I can't believe I'm letting you drag me into the devil's lair.”

“I still can't believe it either.” Kylie drove past Jordan's house for the second time, searching for a place to park her Fiat. “You are by far the world's greatest wingwoman. If I don't land Mika Winters tonight, I'm officially giving up.”

“Mm-hmm. Sure.” I flipped down the visor and opened the lighted mirror to survey my makeup once more.

“Grab the MAC lipstick from my glove compartment, will ya?”

I did as she asked, but when I handed it to her, she shook her head. “Try it on. It'll make those lush lips pop.”

With a shrug, I applied the vivid-red shade and rubbed my lips together as

Kylie finally located a spot.

The first preview of fall twirled in the night, and my nostrils drew in the crisp air as I exited the car. It'd been months since I visited the neighborhood, but it still felt desolate, lifeless, and secluded with gated houses spread far apart, and neighbors closed off from one another, living as strangers.

As I smoothed down my blue cropped sweater, Kylie tilted her head, her gaze sweeping down my body as her sly smile stretched wide. "Well, aren't you a hottie with a tight little body?"

Heat sparked up my cheekbones and along the rims of my ears. I felt totally out of my element. "Are you sure this looks okay?"

"You look beautiful, Harper," Kylie said sincerely. She shimmied her hips as she fished out her phone from the back pocket of her skintight jeans and waved it in the air. "Selfie before we go."

Tilting her screen at the perfect angle, we lifted our chins and posed without smiling, attempting a sexy aloof look. I giggled at the absurdity just as Kylie snapped the photo.

"You sure you're okay?" she asked as we headed down the road.

My shoulders hitched. "A bit nervous, I guess."

She reached for my hand, lacing her fingers through mine. "Say the word, and we'll go."

We traversed the long driveway until a three-car garage jam-packed with people came into view. Music blared from expensive-looking speakers set up strategically in every corner, shaking the ground beneath our feet as Fall Out Boy encouraged everyone to "Dance, Dance."

Bodies thrashed. Heads bobbed. Arms flailed.

A suburban punk rock concert—entry fee: your soul.

Kylie's nose crinkled. "Retro music choice."

"Jordan's music choice."

"Right..." She dragged out the word for a beat too long. "Because you know him so well."

"No, I don't." I shook my head firmly. "Not anymore."

"Whatever you say." She smirked as she held my hand tighter. "Okay. You ready?"

"As ready as anyone can be as they pass through the gates of hell."

"That's the spirit." Kylie nudged my shoulder then tugged me through the throng of bodies until we found the door leading inside.

We roamed through the crowded kitchen and came to a stately dining

room where a rowdy game of beer pong was in progress.

“You ladies wanna play?” asked a portly guy with heavy jowls and foul breath. He ran his tongue over his tobacco-stained teeth and raked his sleazy gaze over our bodies as he waited for an answer.

“Yeah, no.” I cringed and reared back, my skin crawling from the predatory look in his eyes.

Kylie trailed me into the foyer as my eyes homed in on the front door. “I know that look. You’re ready to bail.”

Damn Gramps and his many lectures on safety.

I was such a buzzkill.

“I’m not ready to bail. This is all just a bit...” I flapped my hand in the air. “Much.”

“Let’s do another lap. If I don’t find Mika, we’ll go.”

“You do a lap. I’ll wait here.”

She planted a hand on her hip. “No way. I’m not leaving you alone.”

“I’ll be damned if you miss out on a night of teenage debauchery because of me.” Cupping her shoulders, I guided her toward the living room. A sexist eighties song that aged terribly played through the speakers, and people danced while belting out the well-known chorus. Two soccer players made out in the corner, and three girls from my history class were snorting lines of cocaine off a coffee table. I gave Kylie a slight shove. “Go.”

Tuning out the noise, I climbed to the middle of the curved staircase and sat down, opened the Kindle app on my phone, and scrolled through my library, selecting the latest romance novel from my favorite author. Her poetic prose caught my attention and didn’t let go for one, two, three chapters.

After twenty minutes, my ass went numb, so I stood and twisted side to side. Kylie still hadn’t returned, so I texted her to check in. Her one-track mind was her biggest flaw, and she failed to notice the time while on the prowl.

“Who the hell let *you* in here?” Dread mauled at my chest as the unmistakable sound of Camille Whitlock’s voice reached my ears. From the dining room threshold, her poison-tipped scowl struck its mark, and I shrank back against the railing. Decked out in designer clothes, flawless makeup, and a silky blowout, Camille craved attention like oxygen, and right now, all eyes were on us. “What’s the matter? Can’t speak?” She giggled into her red Solo cup as her friends crowded around her. “No wonder Devlin didn’t want

you and your virgin pussy. It still amazes me how you managed to land him in the first place.”

Waving a white flag in surrender, the last of my courage retreated into darkness.

The laughter below intensified as I took the steps two at a time and hustled to Mr. and Mrs. King’s bedroom. Shock and tears obstructed my breath as I closed the door behind me and lingered in the dark, begging my racing pulse to slow down. The thumping bass below did nothing for my frayed nerves, so I rushed to the bathroom and climbed into the claw-foot tub, closing the shower curtain around me.

I tucked my knees to my chest as tears trickled down my cheeks and nose. Sorrow—a hammer to my chest, knocking the air from my lungs.

Mind sluggish; vision blurred.

My panic attack was swift and suffocating.

The bathroom door squeaked open and closed, and heavy footsteps trudged closer and closer to my hiding spot. “Get out of the tub, Harper,” Jordan said in a low, tight voice.

I remained silent, my throat plugged with emotion.

He peeled the shower curtain back slowly. “Shit,” he mumbled as he crouched down beside me, pushing up the sleeves of his navy-blue Villanova sweatshirt. “Breathe, Harp,” he said, brushing my hair back from my sweaty forehead. I inhaled a stuttered breath, held it for five seconds, then released it. “Again.”

I did as he instructed.

Breath, hold, release.

Jordan’s face became my focal point. Dark, purplish under-eye circles. Skin gaunt and pale. Oily onyx hair in need of a thorough wash. The paradigm for self-destructive behavior grounded me as I rode out another anxious wave.

“You look like shit,” I wheezed, and his lips twitched with a hint of a smile.

“Is it that time of the month?”

“Oh, my god, you did *not* just ask that,” I fumed. “You find a girl crying, and you just assume...”

The words died on my tongue when his wide, teasing grin broke free. He rose to his full height and extended his hand. “It’s always so easy.”

“What is?” I asked, sliding my palm into his. Lifting one shaky leg at a

time, I climbed out of the tub, standing inches in front of him.

He continued to hold my hand when his dark gaze briefly dipped to my lips. "Pissing you off."

He's drunk, maybe even high, I told myself when his eyes blazed with something rare, something a little like need. It'd been a long time since someone regarded me in that way. It made my skin prickle and my brain fizzle.

Then he blinked, and the look was gone.

Pulling his hand from mine, he pushed back his hair and nodded to the door. "Ready to go down there and tell her off?"

I didn't ask how he knew what happened. Word traveled fast, and by now, I was probably the joke of the party. Plopping down on the floor, I leaned against the vanity. "So she can eviscerate me some more? No thanks. I'll hide here all night if I have to."

"I thought you were braver than that, Kelly." He dropped down beside me and bent his legs, resting his wrists on his knees.

I wrinkled my nose and tilted my head back, glancing at the ceiling. "Sometimes taking the high road is the bravest thing you can do."

"Oh, but taking the low road can be much more fun." He flung his arm over my shoulders and gave my body a tug.

"Are you on something?" I asked as the side of my face fell to his chest, his sweatshirt soft beneath my cheek.

A deep chuckle rattled his mammoth body as his chin rested on my head. "Maybe."

The simple action sent me back in time, reminding me of who we used to be—of how we once were. "What a weird night."

Jordan hummed. "A weird night, indeed."

JORDAN



Whoever said the devil wears many faces never met Camille. Fake as fuck and a royal pain in my ass, the blond witch was straight-up evil. Had I known she slithered her way into my house, I would've dealt with her immediately.

Instead, a certain brown-haired siren with bright-red lips stole my attention the moment she'd arrived. I followed her through the garage and kitchen like a hound trailing a wounded bird, blood pressure spiking as I prepared to cause a scene and kick her and Kylie to the curb, despite being impressed by her foolish bravery.

She was obviously uncomfortable as hell, toying with her hair as she worked up one of those fidgety smiles she tended to hide behind when she didn't know what to say or do. But when the gardener's creepy as fuck son ogled her from head to toe like he wanted to tie her up in his basement and keep her as his plaything, her gaze became frantic as she inched toward the front door.

I gritted my teeth as my eyes shifted from the taunting curve of the scumbag's lips to the spittoon bottle wedged between his plump fingers. The unsavory asshole made no attempt at hiding his lustful stare. A special place existed in hell for men who preyed upon innocent women, and this guy stirred something inside me that was ready to rage.

I felt demented—deranged—hands tightened into fists as they hung by my sides, ready to take a swing. But I checked myself when I noticed Harper was now standing there alone.

Why the fuck would Kylie Jo abandon her when she looked so unsure?
So vulnerable?

I took two faltering steps in her direction, then stopped when she steeled her spine and marched halfway up the steps. With her bottom lip tucked between her teeth and a faraway look in her eyes, it was clear she was reading a book, entranced by some bullshit story about love and happily ever after.

Fine. Whatever.

I decided to let the Rory Gilmore–wannabe hang around for a bit longer. At least until Kylie returned from wherever the fuck she went.

And yes, I was familiar with *Gilmore Girls*. Harper’s *I-wish-I-lived-in-Stars-Hollow* phase lasted all through middle school, and at the time, I actually gave a shit about her likes and dislikes.

I should have followed my instincts and kicked her out when I had the chance. If I had, Camille wouldn’t have humiliated her, and I wouldn’t be sitting on my parents’ bathroom floor, comforting her like derision didn’t rattle my bones whenever she was near.

She drew in a long breath as she lifted her head from my chest and swiped a finger under her eye. “I should’ve just stayed home tonight.”

“So why didn’t you?”

With her eyes downcast, she picked at the frayed denim around her bare knee. “Because I feel guilty whenever Kylie misses out on things because of me. You know better than anyone how socially awkward I can be. Sometimes, I feel like I’m holding her back.”

A twinge of discomfort crept into my chest, and I rubbed my sternum to soothe it. I wasn’t sure if it was her admission or the dejected look in her eyes that seemed to unnerve me, but I suddenly felt like the bathroom walls were closing in around us. “And you decided to prove it to her by showing up here, where you’re not welcome?” I asked as I climbed to my feet.

My insult struck its intended target, the blood draining from her face as she flinched. Reaching for the edge of the sink, Harper pulled herself up and squared her shoulders. “And we’re back to our regularly scheduled programming.”

I snorted a derisive laugh. “Coming here was a bad idea, and you know it.” I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror, my gaze homing in on my angry-red nostrils and cocaine eyes. “Still getting panic attacks, I see.”

Her dare-to-pity-me glare met mine in the mirror. “It’s been a while. I’m fine.”

“Didn’t seem fine to me.”

The lines of her smooth neck moved as she swallowed, green eyes tightening at the corners. She opened her mouth to speak, then snapped it shut when her phone started buzzing. She plucked it from her back pocket and glanced at the screen. “It’s Kylie. She’s probably worried.”

“Better answer it then.”

Harper tossed me the side-eye as she answered. “Hey, where are you?” she asked softly, then paused as Kylie replied. When her eyebrows reached her hairline and shock unhitched her jaw, I knew she’d discovered what I’d purposely kept hidden. “I’ll be right there,” she said before ending the call, a flash of outrage alight in her eyes. She returned her phone to her pocket, then thrust her hands in her hair, tugging at the roots. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you kicked Camille out!”

“Oops.” I shrugged. “It must have slipped my mind.”

One of Harper’s few redeeming qualities was her ability to drown out the imbeciles around her...making her an easy, unsuspecting target for girls like Camille. So the second Harper was out of earshot, I put Wicked Whitlock on blast and sent her on her way, then I targeted the greasy fuck who gave Harp the creeps and threw him out, too.

“We’ve been up here for twenty minutes. Do you know how bad that looks?”

I jammed my hands into the front pocket of my hoodie and grunted. “Like I give a fuck.”

“You need professional help.” Her response was laced with venom as she brushed past me to get to the door, the lilac scent of her shampoo trailing her.

“No, *you* needed help”—I wheeled around—“which is why I gave you a minute to calm the hell down. At least now when you storm out of here, you don’t look like such a train wreck. The puffy eyes and swollen lips weren’t helping your situation.”

A humorless laugh broke from her chest, bouncing off the bone-white subway tiles covering the bathroom walls. “I guess you expect me to thank you?”

“I don’t expect anything from you, Harper.”

Bold defiance clouded over her features like a shield, making it impossible to read her as she stood with her hand on the doorknob, drilling me with an unforgiving glare. So many words in one look, but she only uttered two. “Goodbye, Jordan.”

The tequila swimming in my stomach gave a sick turn.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind her, I fell to my knees in front of the toilet, and I puked.

HARPER



Jordan and I didn't speak to each other for weeks, which was fine by me since every interaction with him lately left me feeling like I'd sucked on a poisonous lollipop, and my insides were slowly liquefying. One minute, he was a charming jerk whose main goal was to goad me, not hurt me. The next, he was antagonistic and cruel, slinging insults like sharp barbs that cut into my flesh, leaving me bloodied and scarred.

And *oh*, how quickly his mood would change.

A dark, sickening sorrow pinched my heart when I closed my eyes and pictured the ill-concealed powder beneath his nose, the bitter stench of alcohol on his breath, and his clammy palm in mine. He sought comfort in mind-numbing vices and terrible decisions, and concern crept through my veins, prickly and spiderlike, whenever I contemplated just how far he would ride his downward spiral.

I hated him more than ever, but each time I attempted to bury our expired friendship six feet in the ground and put it to rest, he'd remind me he still knew me, still understood me in a way no one else ever had. When my mind whirled, he knew how to slow it down, and that meant something, whether I wanted to admit it or not.

My first panic attack occurred at a PTA-sponsored roller-skating event that Jordan accompanied me to in seventh grade.

It began as one of those perfect moments that led to sweet-as-honey nostalgia years down the road. The skating-rink air was thick with the scent of stale popcorn and hot dogs, and the DJ played outdated songs that made

Jordan's nose crinkle and my hips sway. He was patient with me as I hugged the wall for the first fifteen minutes, but once I found my balance, I took off, zooming around the rink with a blissed-out smile and aching feet.

At the end of the evening, our classmates were picked up one by one until only Jordan and I remained, and Gramps was nowhere to be found. The rink manager called him over and over again, but when it kept going straight to Gramps's voice mail, the panic set in.

My legs began to tremble, refusing to function as I sat down on a gummed-up bench and gasped for air. Worry was a ruthless aggressor, wringing my heart out like a wet rag, leaving the arrhythmic organ feeling hollow and empty.

"He's not coming, Jordan," I quivered as he wrapped his arm around me and drew me to his side.

"I'm sure he's on his way, Harp," he said, gently rocking me, steadying me until Gramps *finally* arrived and explained there'd been an accident on Main Street that forced him to take the long way around.

If Jordan had questions or concerns about my behavior, he never voiced them. Maybe he knew my past was a padlocked secret that no one had access to—not even him.

Especially not him.

He was the golden boy born into a family of wealth and prestige, and his childhood was vastly different from mine. I couldn't tell him the truth—that as a young girl, I grew accustomed to staring out the window, watching skies change colors as I wondered where my mother went and if she'd ever return.

I began seeing a therapist shortly after the skating incident and took anti-anxiety medications until I learned to cope with my abandonment issues in a healthier way. And for the most part, I was doing well...until Camille's public criticism triggered something inside me.

I could recognize Jordan's struggle, could see he was toeing the line of no return. And while my brain told me to run, my fucking heart told me that maybe what he needed now more than ever was a *real* friend, someone who didn't see dollar signs or a hell of a good time when she looked at him.

I angled my head just enough and scrutinized his features as he slept in the middle of class.

The prominent slope of his cheekbones was alarming, and his skin was flushed. His hair was an inch longer and swept back except for one stray strand that drooped over his forehead. Masculine beauty clung to him like a

cloak, but in this state, all I saw was a lost teenage boy.

“Miss Kelly, since you and Mr. King seem to think today’s lesson isn’t important, you’ve both earned yourselves a bonus assignment.” Jordan woke with a start, dragging his forearm across his mouth as his weary eyes found mine. I held his gaze for a beat before snapping my attention to the front of the classroom, where our culinary arts teacher looked less than happy with us. “I’d like you to prepare three different desserts using the techniques I’ve discussed for the past hour and bring them to class on Friday. If you fail to complete the assignment, I’ll see you both in Saturday detention. Sound good? Fantastic! As I was saying...”

Jordan groaned and dropped his forehead to his desk.

At the same time, heat burned my cheeks from the inescapable scrutiny spearing me from all directions. I sank lower into my seat, wishing the ground would swallow me whole.

JORDAN

Harper tried making a hasty escape after class, but I barreled down the hallway right behind her. “Not so fast, Kelly. I’ll be over later so we can get this shit over with.”

She hoisted her cross-body bag farther up her shoulder and shook her head. “Harper, would it be okay if I come over later, so we can work on this unexpected assignment?” She mimicked me in her deepest voice, and I pursed my lips to hide my grin. “No, Jordan,” she continued, “but thank you for asking. How about tomorrow?”

“What’s wrong with tonight?”

She stopped at her locker and entered her combination. “I have plans.”

“Cancel them.”

She scoffed. “See, it doesn’t work like that. Other girls may ask how high when you say jump, but your egotistical ways won’t get you anywhere with me.”

“Point taken. I’m sorry. It’s just that homecoming is Friday night, and waking up for Saturday detention would kind of put a damper on my plans.”

She gave a half shrug. “Then I hope you show up tomorrow night ready

to work.”

She closed her locker and continued down the hall, and I cocked my head to the side as I watched her go. Tight black leggings outlined the curve of her hips and ass, and a gray sweater hung off her left shoulder, revealing pale smooth skin.

My stubborn legs careened after her. “You got a date tonight, Kelly?” I asked, falling in step beside her.

An authentic laugh parted her lips wide. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t,” I lied.

“Sure, you don’t.”

Pounding shoes echoed through the stairwell as we descended the stairs and headed out the door leading to the quad. It was unusually warm for an October day, and everyone seemed to be soaking up the sunshine as they sat at picnic tables and on benches during the lunch period.

Harper smiled and waved at some preppy-looking guy, and his quizzical stare darted back and forth between us.

“Don’t worry, we’re not together,” I clarified as we walked by his table.

“Oh, my god,” she huffed under her breath. “Why are you still following me?!”

“Because you never answered my question.” I smirked, not breaking eye contact as a scrawny freshman scurried between us.

“And you think that wasn’t intentional?” She located an empty bench and hustled toward it, dropping her bag on the empty space beside her.

“So evasive.” I tsked, turning my head at the sound of Kylie Jo’s heels as she approached with a lunch tray in her hands.

The snippy blond arched an accusatory brow and said, “Heard you got my bestie in trouble.”

“Actually, I’m the victim in this unfortunate circumstance.” I lifted my arms in innocence. “Harper was the one eyeing me up instead of paying attention in class like the good girl she is.”

Kylie’s gaze snapped in Harper’s direction, and a crimson blush scorched Harper’s cheeks.

Busted.

Of course, I knew she was watching me—because I was watching her, too.

Through the slit of my eye and a thick veil of lashes, I observed the way she tilted her head and bit down on her lower lip. The way concern marred

her features and etched itself on her forehead. The way she seemed transfixed on my inner turmoil. And fuck, just knowing Harper worried about me dampened some of my anger from within.

Kylie busied herself with her lunch, twisting the cap off a Snapple, then unwrapping her burger, but Harper's gaze remained pinned on me, bee-stung lips locked together in a sultry pout.

"Aren't you gonna eat?" I asked.

"Aren't you going to disappear?"

I released a dramatic sigh. "Fine," I drawled. "I'll let you off the hook for now, Kelly." I nodded goodbye and spun on the soles of my sneakers in the direction of my car.

"Wait, where are you going?" Harper called.

Her gentle-sounding voice anchored my feet to the pavement, a ghost of a smirk slipping onto my lips as I glanced over my shoulder. "Home."

"You're skipping the rest of your classes?"

I chuckled. "Don't worry, Harp. You can check me out all day tomorrow." I sent her a teasing wink, then headed for the parking lot, glancing back just before I reached my car to confirm I still held her attention.

"It's one in the afternoon." Devlin appeared above me with a bowl of cereal in his large paw, shoveling a spoonful into his mouth.

"Yes, it is, brother." I paused *Mad Max* and set the remote on my chest. "Glad to see that expensive university is teaching you all sorts of neat things."

His chewing halted as he tilted his head back, trying not to expel half-eaten food everywhere when he asked, "Why are you home, dipshit?"

"Tried to make it through the day, but alas, my need to beat off to visuals of bald Charlize Theron won out."

Devlin's gaze scanned the brown leather couch as he swallowed. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm joking, Dev. I skipped out early because I'm exhausted, and I already got caught sleeping through one class today."

"So you thought you'd lie around here instead?"

“Precisely.”

He rounded the couch and took a seat on the small sofa perpendicular from mine, crossing his leg over his knee, looking like a pompous asshole in khakis and a cream knit sweater. “Just so you know, if you’re going through something, you can talk to me. Mom thinks—”

“I don’t care what Mom thinks,” I cut in before he could finish. “Is that why you’re here? For some intervention-type bullshit?”

“I’m here because Coach asked last year’s seniors to attend Fair Oak’s homecoming game. But maybe this does need to turn into some intervention-type bullshit. You look awful. Mom’s worried. And Camille said you kicked her out of our house a few weeks ago? What’s that shit about?”

“Took you long enough to bring that up.” I winced as I eased into a sitting position. “She insulted Harper in front of everyone.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Harper was here?”

My stomach churned as I tried to discern the difference between shock and longing in his voice. “For a minute. She came with Kylie. Seemed totally out of her element but tried to hang in there until Camille humiliated her.”

He sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Yeah, do that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take a shower and beat off for real.”

“Sick fuck,” he mumbled as I tossed him the remote. I was halfway up the stairs when I caught him say, “I’m here if you need me, J.” I considered responding, then continued without a word, still too pissed at him to be anything more than civil.

In the shower, I rested my forehead against the wet tiles and fisted my straining cock, trying to conjure up images of Charlize and the other hot chicks from *Mad Max*.

But when I thrust into my hand for the last time and spurted all over my palm and fingers, only one name was on my lips.

Harper.

HARPER



“You’ll never guess what Mika just asked me,” Kylie beamed as she sat across from me in the cafeteria the next day.

“Does it have anything to do with a certain dance everyone’s talking about?” I tore open a packet of ranch dressing with my teeth and drenched my salad, leaving no green leaf untouched.

“It does!” she cheered. “Want to go dress shopping with me tonight?” I popped a grape tomato into my mouth and chewed slowly, giving her a pointed look. “Ugh. Baking duty?”

“Baking duty. But I’m free tomorrow.”

Kylie nodded, bit into a gooey chocolate chip cookie, and moaned. Her vocal pleasure was warranted since the cafeteria’s head cook, Mrs. Henderson, baked the most delectable desserts. “Too bad Mrs. H can’t help you out instead. You’d be done in no time.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Kylie Jo,” Jordan said, plopping down in the seat beside me, his knee brushing mine as he leaned forward. “Harper and I make an excellent team.”

The disgusting combination of cigarette smoke and peppermint assaulted my nostrils. “Did you eat an ashtray for lunch? I would’ve shared if you’re that desperate.” I nudged my salad in his direction jokingly, but before I could pull it back, Jordan grabbed my fork and shoveled a large portion into his mouth.

“Your salad is delectable, Harp,” he teased after he swallowed, and I openly gagged.

“Why are you even here?”

A smile played over his lips as he watched me clean my fork with a napkin. “Came to ask if I can catch a ride with you after school. Car’s in the shop.”

“And Uber’s out of your budget?”

Kylie glanced down at her lap and chuckled.

“No, but yesterday I bought the ingredients for two recipes which sound fairly easy. I figured we could swing by my house, so I can grab everything, then we can hit up the market for whatever else we need.”

Jordan taking initiative did something funny to my insides, and some of my icy indifference thawed. “Fine.”

A smug grin overtook his face as he rose to his feet. “Great. I’ll meet you at your car after school.”

Kylie twisted in her seat and watched him walk away, giving her head a slight shake when he dropped into the seat beside a cheerleader three tables over. “You’re in so much trouble, girl.”

The faintest hint of jealousy pinched in my chest, and I sighed. “Trouble, indeed.”

As promised, Jordan was leaning against my driver’s side door that afternoon, a pair of Armani sunglasses shielding his eyes from the late afternoon sun. He was the epitome of effortless confidence, so different from the boy he once was.

Tilting his head to the side, he lifted his sunglasses to the top of his head and narrowed his eyes. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

I hesitated, heart thumping wildly. “Just thinking about when we went to that blink-182 tribute band’s show at The Riff.”

A night I couldn’t forget but wished I could.

“What about it?”

I allowed my gaze to drift over his body before meeting his eyes. “You wore black Converse high-tops, black skinny jeans, and a T-shirt that said ‘I’m With the Band.’”

“You remember what I wore?” A thoughtful frown tugged at his lips. “Aw, Harp, I’m touched.”

“Gramps took a picture of us before we left that night, and it hung on the

fridge for months. Don't let it go to your head."

"Wouldn't dare."

As traffic increased in the senior lot, certain cars slowed down so classmates could point their phones in our direction. I wondered what they thought about their handsome leader and the quiet loner standing toe to toe, appearing way more connected than we'd ever let on. More gossip for the brainless who had nothing better to do than discuss Jordan's potential hookups, I'm sure.

"The old Jordan wouldn't be caught dead in sunglasses that cost as much as those." I nodded toward his feet. "And he would've laughed at your shoes."

"Wow, you must really have it in for Giorgio."

"Giorgio means nothing to me." I shrugged.

"Noted," he grunted. "Anything else you want to criticize, or can we go?" His tone turned cold—almost angry.

It was obvious I'd struck a nerve without even meaning to, and an apology sprouted on my tongue, but I swallowed it down.

Why should I apologize for speaking the truth?

Maybe, just maybe, he needed to hear it.

Digging around in my bag, I located my keys and held them out to him, a test to see if driving my dilapidated white Jetta was beneath him. He quirked his brow but took them without question, passing with overwhelming success. My face lit up as I climbed into the passenger seat but faded when he said, "You should be required to use a booster seat in order to drive."

As I buckled, Jordan adjusted the driver's seat back as far as it would go. "Not everyone tops out at six-five, and Uber is still an option if your tall ass has a problem."

He flipped me off.

I punched his arm.

He grabbed his bicep dramatically and winced in fake pain.

"Maybe I should accept the detention," I muttered.

He chuckled and pulled his sunglasses over his eyes before putting the car in reverse.

The drive to his house was quiet, the rattling under the hood the only audible sound. Jordan hurried inside and came out with two grocery bags full of ingredients, then he loaded up the trunk and returned to his spot behind the wheel. "Okay, enough awkward silence. Talk or music?"

“Music,” I replied. “Any preferences?”

“You pick.”

My car lacked XM radio and Bluetooth for streaming, but it had a six-disc CD changer, and my CD collection was kick ass. I picked up my CD wallet from the floor and unzipped it, bracing for his condescending remarks about my ancient sound system or the obsolete CDs I kept in pristine condition, but they never came.

My mouth twisted in thought as I browsed through my options. “Blink-182 for old times’ sake?”

He drew his lower lip between his teeth and nodded his approval. I turned up the volume as high as it would go, and Jordan drove twenty miles over the speed limit down the back road leading to Main Street, our heads bobbing to “All the Small Things” like we were sixteen again.

JORDAN



I parked near the market and exited the car before Harper even unbuckled, needing a minute to cool the blazing blood in my veins. It was so like her to force us down memory lane with songs that were basically the soundtrack of our friendship...before we went and fucked it all up.

She just couldn't resist pointing out how different I was from the kid I used to be. The naïve punk who thought he had it all figured out. The guy who thought he could do it all whenever she gazed at me with soulful awareness in her eyes—and look where it got me.

At least it forced me to grow the hell up.

Sometimes things can't stay the same—nor should they. It didn't mean I was immune to feeling like my chest was being crushed in a vise whenever she looked at me like some part of her missed those days.

Sorry, sweetheart. I don't associate with liars anymore.

“Jordan, can you wait?” Harper panted as she jogged to catch up, a flock of pigeons flying away as her white Vans stomped down the pavement.

I glanced over her shoulder and then back at her. “The car's like fifteen yards away, Harp.”

“What can I say?” She shrugged. “Running's not my thing.” She drew in a lungful of air and released it. “Okay...I'm fine.”

“You sure about that?”

“Mm-hmm. Let's go.” She tugged on my sleeve, pulling me past a parked police car on our left and a group of Lion's Club members collecting food for the food pantry on our right, releasing me once we entered the market.

I grabbed a cart from the return and followed Harper around the store for

twenty minutes while she gathered everything she needed. My gaze bounced between her perfect ass and my phone as I scrolled through my Instagram feed, the entire outing feeling a bit too domestic for my liking.

Every time she compared prices or took inventory of what she'd already placed in the cart, her dark eyebrows knit together like she was trying to solve a Rubik's cube or comprehend a Stephen Hawking theory, a look I would've found endearing if residual annoyance wasn't hovering around me.

"Don't you think we have enough?"

She twisted her lips in thought, eyes locked on the canned goods in front of her. "I'm just searching for—"

"King?" Hurley called as he sauntered down the aisle, a red shopping basket full of protein shakes in his hand. A curse escaped my lips as I gripped the cart tighter. "What are you doing here?" he asked, lifting an accusing eyebrow in Harper's direction.

"Culinary arts project," I replied as she stepped to my side, brushing her hair behind her ear as she set four cans in the cart.

"Nice. I figured I'd hit up the gym since I'm lying low tonight. I need to rest up for the weekend." I didn't miss the way he stole another glance at Harp. "Did you pick up your suit yet?"

"Uh...yeah. A few days ago."

"Right on. Savannah is fine as hell. You chose well, my man." He slapped my shoulder as he continued down the aisle. "Later, bro."

Harper's glare narrowed on Hurley's retreating form. "Smell that?" She glanced up at me and wafted the air beneath her nose. "It's the stench of overwhelming arrogance."

I flashed her a grin. "Not a Hurley fan?"

"You mean Mr. Sleazeball with the evil vibes? Um, no." She eyed me warily, then shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans and cleared her throat. "Ready?"

I nodded and followed her to the self-checkout line. When she attempted to pay, I seized her debit card and held it above her head, laughing as she jumped up and down, demanding I give it back while I waited for the register to print my receipt.

On the way out the door, Harper grabbed my wrist and tugged me to a stop. "Just a sec." She set her grocery bag down on the sidewalk, retrieved four cans of chicken noodle soup, and dropped them off at the Lion's Club donation table. "Have a wonderful evening." She waved to the group of

elderly men who were clearly smitten.

I tilted my mouth to her ear. “The one with the cane has a crush on you.”

“Think he’d go out with me?” she deadpanned.

“Totally.”

“Excellent, because I wrote my number on the side of one of those cans.”

A hearty, genuine chortle broke from my chest. “Go easy on him, tiger.”

“I make no promises,” she replied, something passing over her face that spiked my body with adrenaline and deflated my chest in defeat.

My conniving opponent was still my greatest weakness.

“I’m glad we managed to do this without causing a fire or murdering each other,” I teased as I slipped on my bomber jacket, preparing to head home later that evening after we successfully baked three edible desserts.

Harper smiled as she gave the kitchen table one final wipe down. “Who knew we had it in us?”

“Not me,” I admitted, gaze sweeping around the country-themed kitchen one last time. “It’s kind of surreal being here.”

“Oh, yeah?” Her eyebrows pinched together as she pushed in her chair. “How so?”

I shrugged. “Not much has changed, yet everything has. I never thought I’d set foot in this house again, not after you—”

“Don’t.” The fearfulness in her eyes pleaded with me not to finish that sentence.

I studied her downturned face and limp posture as I slid my tongue across my teeth. This was our chance to clear the air, to finally discuss what happened and move on, and she was cowering like the walls were slowly closing in. “Fine,” I conceded with a sigh of irritation. “Have it your way, Harper.”

I got the hell out of there before the resentment churning in my chest drove bitter and scornful words from my mouth. I’d hoped the night apart would cool the fiery liquid in my veins, but when I caught sight of her at school the next day, my anger still actively bubbled below my skin, and by Friday evening, I was ready to unleash hell.

The truth be told, I had no interest in attending the homecoming dance,

but my parents insisted I go, and since Hurley had already booked a limo stocked with booze, I decided one night parading around like I gave a shit about some stupid tradition wouldn't kill me.

My date, Savannah Pearson, had platinum hair, wolfish eyes, and curves in all the right places. She also blatantly admitted she was all too willing to go down on me the second we were seated side by side on the leather limo bench. By the way she eyed up the zipper of my black Dolce and Gabbana suit pants and licked her red-stained lips, I was certain she'd give head like a pro. Too bad I was more interested in a bottle of Grey Goose than her thirsty mouth on my cock.

As the vodka entered my bloodstream, my stiff posture began to ease, and by the time we entered the venue, the faces around me blurred like fun-house mirrors. Our group quickly dispersed, some heading to our table while others rushed to the dance floor. I chose to hang back, taking in the scene, hating it so much more now that I was here.

"So how did it go with Harper the other night? I begged her for details, but she wouldn't say much."

My eyes crinkled into a squint as I turned my head and examined the tall female beside me. "Kylie Jo?" I shouted over the music, rocking back and forth on the soles of my shiny black oxfords.

She rolled her eyes. "Do you even remember what sobriety feels like, Jordan?"

"Do you remember what it's like minding your own business, KJ?" She shook her head and rested her hand on her hip, drawing my attention to her dress. It was red and vintage, a classy throwback to the fifties, unlike my date's pink dress, which was so low cut, her tits threatened to pop out every time she moved. "Harper picked that out, didn't she?"

Her eyes narrowed as she glanced down at her dress then back at me. "As a matter of fact, she did."

My heart skittered as I wondered what Harper would wear to an event like this, then it dropped when I thought about her sitting at home in her pajamas watching television with Big Jim. I never once asked her if she planned on attending the dance, and even though I was still pissed at her, I kind of wished she had come. Bickering with her would've at least made this night entertaining.

"Where is your little friend tonight, anyway? Didn't want to show up alone, so she decided to stay home?"

“Six guys asked her, King. She turned them all down. Big Jim had a date tonight, so I think she wanted to see him off.”

Yeah, or she wanted to have the house all to herself, so her mystery guy from the other night could swing by.

“Interesting.” I tried and failed to mask the edge to my voice.

I glanced over Kylie’s shoulder, and my eyes locked on Savannah. She made no attempt at hiding her disgust as her glare ping-ponged between Kylie and me, and I released a string of curse words under my breath.

Kylie turned her head and groaned, sounding a lot like her pain-in-the-ass best friend. “Your life-size blow-up doll is waiting. Try not to get caught doing something stupid,” she said before she joined her date on the dance floor.

I reached for the flask I’d stored in the hidden pocket of my suit jacket and twisted off the cap, taking a generous swig of whiskey before tucking it away. Savannah took two steps toward me, then stopped, her eyes growing wide. I barely had time to register her reaction when the sturdy hand of Principal Sharma clasped my shoulder. “Mr. King, a word please.” I followed him into the coatroom, leering at a group of girls standing near the entrance. “Lose the smirk, King. You’re in some serious shit.”

“Serious shit? Sounds...serious.”

His forehead puckered. “Jeez, son, how much have you had to drink tonight?”

“Just a tiny bit.” I gestured with my thumb and index finger.

“A tiny bit, my ass.” He shook his head in disgust. “I’m calling you a ride, and you’re officially suspended.”

I didn’t deal with Sharma often, but I knew he wasn’t fucking around.

I opened my mouth, prepared to beg for mercy, when my unexpected savior chimed in. “With all due respect, Principal Sharma, may I suggest a different form of punishment for Mr. King?” I spun around to find Mr. Warren looking all kinds of pathetic in a camel-colored corduroy suit.

“What do you have in mind, Warren?” Principal Sharma asked.

“Thirty hours of community service. I believe Jordan could benefit from helping others. We both know his privileged ass will gain nothing from sitting at home for a few days.”

Did Mr. Warren just swear and call me out?

My head was spinning.

Principal Sharma nodded. “And you’ll oversee this? Make sure he

actually shows up and completes his hours?”

Mr. Warren nodded, his smug smirk sliding into place. “Absolutely.”

JORDAN



I realized community service was a hell of a lot better than a suspension, but thirty fucking hours was excessive. It's not like I initiated a massive orgy or set the glitzy place on fire. I might have been reckless, but there were other less than respectable ways to earn that type of punishment.

That was why I sauntered into Mr. Warren's office Monday morning to negotiate.

"Fifteen hours," I said, hands braced on the edge of his desk.

"Thirty," he replied, not even bothering to glance up from the email he was composing.

"Twenty."

He shook his head in reply, his fingers tapping the keyboard at a steady pace.

"Okay, fine. Twenty-five."

Finally, he met my gaze as he slowly, aggressively typed three more keys.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

"Thirty, Jordan. This isn't open for discussion. It's time to take responsibility for your actions."

I raked my fingers through my hair. "You bug the shit out of me, you know that?"

He leaned closer, propping his chin on his hand. "The feeling is mutual."

I stepped back from his desk and sighed. "Can I volunteer at CKH? My

father won't have an issue putting me to work for free."

Mr. Warren shook his head and slid open his desk drawer, pulling out a glossy pamphlet. "Helping the rich get richer isn't helping the community, Jordan."

He handed me the pamphlet, and I gave it a once-over. "And I can pick any of these?"

"Any and all."

I rolled my eyes. "Fantastic."

I was halfway out the door when he said, "And Jordan, don't even think about bullshitting your way through this. I have relationships with the directors of every one of those organizations. They won't hesitate to tell me whether or not you're actually invested in the work. You can play the embittered screwup all you want, but your transcript speaks for itself. You're smart, and you care. Do you really want a suspension this late in the game?"

Ignoring the tightening sensation in my chest, I glanced over my shoulder and chuckled. "Don't get carried away with your psychoanalysis, Mr. Warren. I'll accept my punishment and own my mistakes, but I quite enjoy being an embittered screwup."

After weighing my options, I decided to volunteer at the local soup kitchen, Our Daily Bread, since it meant I could start knocking out my hours that evening.

When I pulled into the church parking lot, I noticed a line of people wrapped around the tall white building, waiting for the bright-red doors to open.

It was hard to believe so many people in Fair Oak relied on the soup kitchen for their meals. Then again, I didn't journey outside of my affluent bubble often, and I didn't even know this small church on the outskirts of town existed until today.

I remained in my car for a minute longer, slowly becoming comfortable with the unease coursing through me before I stepped out. I crossed the lot with my head down, noticing sizable cracks in the pavement and faded-white parking space lines. The wind chased orange and red leaves onto my path of destruction, and I crushed them beneath my sneakers, kind of like my

optimism under Mr. Warren's fist.

All I could think about was that glossy pamphlet as I stepped onto the curb and followed the sidewalk around the building. The animal shelter was probably a better fit for me. There or the local library. Being immersed in unruffled silence while arranging books in alphabetical order sounded like a vacation compared to this.

That's exactly the point, jackass.

I was searching for a side door when I detected her familiar laugh, sweet and smooth like honey, sinking into my eardrums and humming through my body.

It didn't matter that we hadn't spoken in days and had yet to discuss what transpired last week. My nerves still danced in my stomach just knowing she was near.

I took a step back and shifted toward the sound, and for a moment, my gaze hung on Harper's face, on her smile, on her chunky black sweater and skinny jeans.

She tucked a long, loose strand of brown hair behind her ear as she handed out blankets, then she knelt to hug a little girl with lopsided pigtails, fist-bumped the preteen boy eyeing her up like candy, and waved to the families between.

She'd been here before—countless times, it seemed—and based on the light in her eyes, she enjoyed it.

I watched as a tall, bulky guy in a Steelers sweatshirt and ripped jeans ambled over to her, and she angled her head as he whispered something in her ear. Her face tipped up with a grin, and she shook her head from side to side, placing her palm on the center of his chest as she began to laugh.

Who the fuck was he?

I glared at him without blinking, hoping he'd look my way.

When he finally did, his expression hardened.

Harper's eyebrows twisted in confusion as she followed his gaze, and her shoulders sagged when she met my unrelenting stare. With her lips pursed and her eyes narrowed, she jerked her head in the direction of her Jetta, then she wheeled around and headed that way.

"You son of a bitch!" she whisper-shouted when we reached her car at the far side of the parking lot. "Did you follow me here?"

Seriously? How crazy did she think I was?

I tried being mature, but it was impossible not to laugh. "Why the hell

would I follow you?”

She linked her arms over her chest. “What other reason do you have for being here?”

“Community service. Got into some trouble at homecoming. Kylie didn’t tell you?”

She shook her head.

“Wait, why are *you* here?”

Her body tensed, and whatever light remained in her eyes dimmed.

I stepped closer and tipped up her chin with my finger. “You can tell me. You know I’m great at keeping secrets.”

Harper flinched and closed her eyes for a moment, then with a sigh of defeat, leaned her ass on the Jetta’s rusty white hood. “After your party, I started seeing my therapist again. She seems to think the only way to heal from my childhood trauma is to make peace with it, so that’s what I’m trying to do.”

My teeth clenched so hard, my jaw ached.

I’d always assumed I knew everything there was to know about her.

Evidently, I was a dumbass.

“I didn’t realize things were that bad,” I admitted, softening my tone.

“I was underweight and malnourished when I came to live with Gramps.” Her whisper had a pained, rough texture. “You really don’t remember?”

A familiar recollection of her willowy, frail frame shuffling into class on the first day of fourth grade filled my head, but I cast it aside.

I couldn’t admit I’d memorized every moment I’d spent with her, not when the deep crease of her brow told me she prayed I’d forgotten.

“I’ll tell you what I remember...” I leaned on the hood beside her. “I remember the way your blunt bangs hung over your eyes, and it took me a week to discover they were green.”

Her nose went all wrinkled, and she covered her eyes. “The helmet haircut.”

“The helmet haircut.” I chuckled.

“Thank God, I grew it out.”

“Or else you’d be in therapy for a whole other reason.”

She nudged my shoulder and rocked with silent laughter. “Thank you.”

I winked, then nodded toward the linebacker tossing worried glances our way as he held one of the red doors open for the crowd. “So who the hell is the guy you can’t keep your hands off?”

“That would be Trey. He and his *boyfriend* volunteer here every Monday and Wednesday night.”

I scratched a vague itch on my nose. “Say no more. I’m an asshole.”

She pushed off her car and rubbed her hands together. “I don’t think *asshole* is a strong enough term for what you are.”

I fell in step beside her and glanced at my watch. Our Daily Bread served dinner in ten minutes, and knowing Harper, she was brimming with restless energy at the prospect of being late. “I’m sorry for distracting you.”

“But are you really, J?”

“Of course, I am. I’m out of my element here, and seeing you caught me off guard.”

“Mm-hmm,” she hummed. “You want to make it up to me? When we go in there, be present. This isn’t about you. It’s about *them*. How many hours do you need to complete?”

“Thirty.”

She cringed. “Do me a favor...after tonight, volunteer somewhere else.”

She led us through a side door marked *Volunteer Entrance*, down a long narrow hallway, and into a large kitchen/dining area. Conversation buzzed throughout the room, and I leaned in closer to hear her say, “You’re serving dinner with me.” In elegant strokes, she wrote my name on a sticker and slapped it onto my chest. “You’re lucky there are children present. Otherwise, that name tag would *not* say Jordan.”

My lips twitched. “And just what would it say?”

“You’re smart. Use your imagination.”

She guided me to a stainless steel sink where we washed and dried our hands before putting on latex gloves, then we stood shoulder to shoulder in the serving line. Harper was on green bean duty while I was in charge of scooping helpings of creamy mashed potatoes onto the plates.

It was humbling to share smiles with strangers—some with deep tracks of worry carved on their faces and some with hope fanning from the corners of their eyes. And when Harper’s little friend with the pigtailed peeked up at me with a crooked-tooth grin and asked for seconds, I swear I felt my heart steal an extra beat.

“Hunger doesn’t discriminate,” Harper leaned over and whispered in my ear. Not sure what emotion she discerned on my face, but her small semblance of a smile told me she felt it too.

Time passed quickly with the simple operation, and before I knew it, the

room cleared out, and we began cleaning up.

Trey and I stacked the chairs against the back wall, then folded up the tables. “So you and Harper?” His voice matched his brawny build, and as I glanced down at his branch-like hands, I knew for certain he could kick my ass.

“Childhood friends turned enemies.”

“Enemies.” He chuckled. “Right.” He jerked his head toward the guy emptying the trash bins with Harper. “My boyfriend Kai and I are quite fond of her, and we’re also on probation for a bar fight that ended badly. Need I say more?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I think I got it.”

He nodded. “Excellent. So are you coming back on Wednesday? We could use the help around here.”

Didn’t he just threaten me?

Was this guy for real?

“Harper wouldn’t appreciate that very much.”

“Harper looks at you like she expects you to let her down...so don’t. Show up, work hard, then leave. There doesn’t need to be any more to it.”

I didn’t hate his suggestion. Something like pride flickered in my chest when I stood by Harper’s side that evening, a fleeting glimpse of a parallel universe where we made different choices and ended up happier.

I wanted to feel it again.

As she and Kai swept the floor, and Trey headed to the restroom, I slipped out the side door and made myself comfortable on the hood of her Jetta while I waited for her to finish.

Folding my arms behind my head, I studied the late-October moon until my eyelids grew heavy. Then I let them fall.

Harper

He looked like a god, lying there with the moon's glow accentuating his high cheekbones and full lips. His broad chest rose then fell in a steady rhythm, and a gust of wind laced its fingers through his unruly dark hair.

Lucky bitch.

“You know, a pretty boy like yourself should be more careful. You’re basically asking to be robbed right now.”

Jordan peeked at me through one eye and grinned. “I know. That’s why I’m on your car. Makes me less of a target.” I bit my lower lip to stifle my amusement. “Glad to see you’re leaving here with a smile despite my dickhead behavior earlier,” he added.

I spun around, braced my hands on the cold hood, and hoisted myself up beside him. “You didn’t complain once, and you put a smile on Adeline’s face. All is forgiven.”

“Adeline?”

I tugged at the ends of my hair. “The little girl with the pigtails.”

“Ah, yes. My mashed potato buddy.”

I nodded. “She’s such a sweetheart.”

“So do I have your permission to come back again? I know I have other options, but I kind of like it here.”

Icy jitters shot through my body, and I tugged the sleeves of my sweater over my reddened hands. I’d hoped he’d hate volunteering so he’d never return. Wished with all my heart that he wouldn’t succeed so fucking spectacularly at the one thing that could diminish my hostility toward him.

Too much.

He was just. Too. Much.

“Yeah, I think you should...if you really want to.”

His one-sided smile hijacked my ability to think straight.

At least that was what I told myself as I smiled back at him under a scattering of starlight on a chilly fall night.

That began four torturous weeks of spending almost every night with Jordan, watching him woo the hearts of children and make friends with people I never thought he would.

Watching him grow comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Watching him watch me with eyes that still robbed me of my breath.

JORDAN



I fulfilled my community service requirement by early December, just in time for the semester to end and the long winter break to commence. Over time, I grew to enjoy my evenings at Our Daily Bread, but the weirdness between Harper and me was starting to weigh heavily on my mind, and I thought we'd benefit from a few weeks apart.

Unfortunately, my Grinch-like tendencies meant the alternative wasn't much better.

I hated Christmas. Hated it since I was six years old, and the idea of magic became nothing more than a foolish notion. Hated it since I woke my father up at the crack of dawn on Christmas morning only to be met by his harsh scowl as he reached into his nightstand and handed me a check. He said it was time I realized everything I had was because of *him*, not some made-up fat guy, and I needed to appreciate it. Said I was free to do whatever I wanted with the money but noted my savings account had the best interest rate around. Like that could prevent the happiness in my heart from disintegrating, replaced with jagged bitterness.

Twelve years later and that familiar bitterness was creeping in once again, coating my insides like thick sludge as Devlin prattled on about the dude bros in his fraternity, delighting our guests with his relaxed charisma and witty anecdotes. "I slept like a baby that night, but boy, did I feel it the next morning." His good-natured chuckle inspired everyone else to join in.

I mumbled a grunt then finished off the rest of the rum and Coke I strategically concocted before everyone arrived.

"Don't slouch, dear," my mother urged from across the table as a hired

server spooned a dainty helping of fresh herb stuffing onto the elegant Versace dinner plate in front of her. “Oh, how exquisite,” she beamed, hands clasped over her chest as she glanced down at her full plate. There was no way in hell a carb would land on her sharp tongue, but her acting skills were impeccable.

My thoughts drifted to Adeline and her family, and I wondered if they were enjoying the holiday feast at Our Daily Bread that evening. It was the soup kitchen’s biggest night of the year, an all-hands-on-deck situation, and instead of helping, I was here, listening to stories *about* privileged assholes as told *by* privileged assholes.

I reached for a bottle of Cristal, filled my glass, and chugged it in one gulp, bubbles fizzing and popping in my head, inebriation the only thing that seemed to numb the sting.

“Easy, son,” my father hissed from the head of the table, dabbing his mouth with a crisp white linen napkin, probably pissed I didn’t sip it slowly as to appreciate the champagne’s essence like a snobby prick would.

Devlin snickered, and Camille twisted her lips to the side in a satisfied sneer. The fact that I now had to spend the holidays with her made this dinner even worse. How was I supposed to eat an entire meal with her in my line of vision, looking like Rudolph the red-nosed hooker in her ultrashort, frilly red dress and thigh-high boots?

I knew my mother found Camille’s wardrobe distasteful, especially at a table full of our extended family and a few board members. But money loves money, and a Whitlock could do as they pleased. It didn’t matter whether or not Serena King was fond of her, Camille would be an asset to my family, and in our world, that was what mattered most.

The spread before us would’ve made Gordon Ramsey weep with joy. The smell of rosemary and garlic filled the air, making my mouth water as my gaze swept over the golden-brown turkey, roasted lamb, and colorful vegetables in festive but tasteful serving bowls. Expensive wine filled the crystal goblets, staining the plump lips and white veneers of people who didn’t appreciate a single drop of the aged Bordeaux as they laughed at jokes that weren’t funny.

Another business meeting disguised as a holiday; another chance to kiss each other’s asses and lie to each other’s faces.

“So tell me, Jordan, did you settle on a major yet?” Kent Arthur, my father’s right-hand man, inquired as his fork dove into the vegan sweet potato

casserole, scraping against the porcelain dish.

My mother disguised her wince by bringing her glass to her lips, and I suppressed a chuckle.

Poor Versace.

“Business management, of course,” my father answered for me like I wasn’t sitting right fucking there.

Mr. Arthur nodded, his gaze bouncing between the eldest King and the youngest as if he sensed the storm brewing, unsure of who he should fear most.

I jutted my chin toward the end of the table, my voice a sharp bite of contempt as I said, “Father knows best.”

“Summer session at Villanova will put him on the fast track to his MBA,” my father continued without missing a beat, completely unfazed by my tone. “He’ll be completing the accelerated program, just like his brother.”

Un-fucking-believable.

I hadn’t agreed to any of that, but Conrad would disown me if I made him out to be a liar.

And so, with his public declaration, my fate was sealed.

Resentment spiraled in the pit of my stomach as I swallowed down a bite of turkey. The tip of Devlin’s loafer nudged the tip of my Nike as he peered at me with a slight shake of his head, warning me not to anger my father with an outburst, but the burning in my chest was impossible to ignore.

My patience for my father was a dried-up well.

I was out of fucks to give.

Dev had my best interest at heart, but I couldn’t control myself, the words leaping from my mouth almost of their own accord. “Screw this dinner.” Sliding my chair back, I rose to my feet and dropped my napkin on the table.

“What the hell are you doing? Sit yourself back down and finish your meal.” My father’s sharp glare might have made others squirm, but he didn’t intimidate me.

“No can do, Pops.” I kissed my grandmother on the cheek and shook my grandfather’s hand. “Merry Christmas, everyone,” I said with a mock salute, pulling my phone from my pocket and booking an Uber before I was even out the door.

Visible plumes of condensation burst from my lips as the cold air knocked the wind from my lungs. A layer of frost covered the long driveway, and I slowly trudged to the street on wobbly legs. Through the glow of the

streetlights, oversized snowflakes drifted overhead and dusted the street, and I regretted not grabbing a jacket before my abrupt escape.

I rubbed my cold nose against my sleeve as I glanced back and beheld the spectacle of lights and decorations my mother no doubt spent a fortune on. A pathetic attempt at convincing our neighbors we actually cared about the season. That we weren't coldhearted monsters who only cared about ourselves.

Doubt possessed the upper hand as a silver Ford Explorer rolled to a stop a few feet away.

As I climbed into the back seat, I contemplated changing my destination, but my desire to actually *feel* something during Christmas won out.

HARPER



We were baking cookies when the doorbell rang.

“Now who could that be?” Gramps asked as he lifted himself out of his kitchen chair and ambled toward the door.

I bit into a warm, buttery sugar cookie while reading over my grandma’s oatmeal raisin recipe when I heard Jordan’s deep, *slurred* voice say, “I hope I’m not interrupting, sir.”

“Not at all. Please, come in.”

I listened as he stomped his shoes on the welcome mat, willing my squirming heart to control itself. Jordan’s footsteps were hesitant as he trailed Gramps into the sugar-scented kitchen, and when he cast a glance my way, he couldn’t camouflage the sadness clouding those troubled blue eyes.

Winter’s cruel fingers had clawed at his skin, leaving it red and irritated. Snowflakes gathered in his hair, the distant contrast of black and white displayed under the fluorescent kitchen light. And in nothing but a fitted forest-green Henley, dark blue jeans, and white Nikes, it was clear he was underprepared for the harsh conditions that evening.

“I’ll make you a hot chocolate,” I mumbled by way of greeting, my body already in motion to distract myself from the anxiety coursing through my veins. His doleful gaze followed me around the kitchen, but I avoided it until I placed the warm mug in his large hand. “Extra whipped cream and marshmallows.”

“Thanks, Harp.”

When he brought the mug to his lips, my hand shot out and clasped his wrist. “Be careful! It’s hot.”

His eyes darted between my flexed fingers and my face, a blazing intensity in his stare as he shrugged my hand away, behaving like my touch burned him more than his drink ever could.

Rejection was a chaotic mindfuck unleashed on my brain as my tingling palm fell heavy by my side. We were so different from the kids we used to be that sometimes I wondered if the friendship I once held so dear was just an illusion. Sometimes, I wondered if I remembered it incorrectly, romanticizing something that never really was.

“Does anyone *really* like oatmeal raisin cookies?” Gramps’s voice drew our attention to the kitchen table as he poured a cup of sugar into the mixing bowl.

“Um, yes.” I raised my hand. “I do.”

“How about you, Jordan?”

He shook his head. “Can’t say I’m a fan, sir.”

Gramps’s eyes flickered to mine. “Hope you’re hungry, Harper Rae. These are all for you.”

Jordan chuckled as he pulled out my chair and motioned for me to sit. Once I did, he pushed me in and sat in the chair beside mine. The combination of his distinct scent and his simple act of chivalry had my head spinning. I blinked over to him just in time to catch him blow on his drink before sipping it, the column of his smooth throat rippling with a swallow.

He lifted his gaze from his hot chocolate and rolled his eyes. “I didn’t burn my mouth, Mom.”

It was torture, but I refused to broadcast the smug exuberance fluttering in my chest.

The guy I once adored was still in there somewhere...I just knew it.

“So how was your Christmas, Jordan?” Gramps asked as he cracked an egg on the side of the bowl.

“Just fine, Big Jim.” There was absolutely no conviction in his tone. “And yours?”

“Oh, it was wonderful. We had a nice, quiet morning here, then we volunteered at the soup kitchen this evening.”

I didn’t miss the way Jordan’s body tensed beside me.

I set a sugar cookie on a plate and slid it toward him. “Everyone misses you there, you know. Even Trey was asking about you today.”

A low grunt was his only response as he set down his mug and indulged in the homemade treat.

For the next hour, Jordan remained relatively silent while he helped us bake two more batches of cookies, but occasionally a glint of happiness would touch his eyes, and when it did, I felt it in my bones. My insatiable curiosity tried to decipher his actions, but he kept his emotions locked so tight that eventually, I gave up.

When all the dishes were washed and dried and the cookies were sealed in Tupperware, I realized I had *no* idea what was supposed to happen next. “So...anyone up for a movie?” I asked unsurely. “I think *Christmas Vacation* is on right now.”

Gramps glanced at the clock on the wall and yawned. “I’m gonna call it a day, but you two go ahead. And Jordan, there are clean sheets for the sleeper sofa in the linen closet down the hall if you decide to stay.”

My mouth slackened, and Jordan cocked a thick eyebrow in surprise.

Someone needed to dial 911 because my grandfather was surely having a medical emergency.

“Jordan, will you excuse us?”

“Yeah, sure.” He stood and reached across the table, shaking Gramps’s hand. “Thanks for everything, Big Jim.” He pointed toward the living room. “I’ll just...”

I nodded with a tight-lipped smile. “Be there in a sec.” Once he was out of earshot, I leaned in and whisper-yelled, “Are you crazy?!”

Gramps shook his head. “Boy had a rough night and doesn’t seem all that eager to leave.”

“How do you know he had a rough night? He’s hardly said a word!”

Gramps pressed his hands against the table and slid his chair back, rising to his full height. I craned my neck, hating how every man in my life was taller than me. “He came here on Christmas night, Harper. Cold and drunk and alone, this is where he paid someone to bring him. So no, I won’t send him home. We’re better than that. We have more compassion than that. Now, I don’t know what happened to make two best friends turn on one another, but for tonight, I’m declaring a truce.”

My stomach sank with understanding.

Like always, Gramps was right.

After taking a minute to compose myself, I joined Jordan in the living room, taking a seat on the opposite end of the sofa where a soft blanket was waiting for me. *Christmas Vacation* was playing on the screen, and warmth wrapped around my heart like a cozy scarf.

“I’m really digging those pj’s, by the way,” he remarked without taking his eyes off the screen.

My teeth dug into my bottom lip as I glanced down at my yellow-and-green long john pajamas, designed to replicate Will Ferrell’s ensemble in *Elf*. Until that moment, I hadn’t given my goofy attire any consideration. Jordan was probably used to girls wearing far sexier pajamas for him, yet somehow, I knew he was being sincere.

“Thank you. They’re a rare Christmas gift from Lori.”

He glanced my way and gave a one-shoulder shrug. “At least she remembered this year.”

“True,” I agreed. “Did your dad write you a check?”

He rested his head on the back of the couch and gazed at the overly decorated tree across the room. “Wouldn’t be Christmas if he didn’t.”

Maybe it was wrong to think it since my dad was dead and all, but Conrad King was a fucking dick. “Did you burn it?”

“Nah. I did that last year.” I noticed the way he pressed his lips together to hide his grin, something like pride gleaming in his eyes.

I felt myself leaning closer. “So what did you do with it?”

After a few silent beats, he looked at me and said, “Donated the money to Our Daily Bread.”

My sentimental heart beat wildly out of control, and the question I’d been dying to ask all evening dove off my tongue. “Jordan, why did you come here tonight?”

His gaze drifted to the television dismissively. “Let’s not do this, Harper.”

Anger flaring, I darted across the sofa, knees pressing against the outside of his right thigh. My hand slid under his clenched jaw, and I forced his gaze back to mine, the words *screw* and *you* locked and loaded if he ignored my question again. “Why. Did. You. Come. Here?”

He cracked his knuckles and released an exasperated sigh. “Because my dad’s an asshole...and because this is the only house I’ve ever been in that actually feels like a home.”

His admission was so unexpected, my hand fell away from his face as my shoulders sagged. “That may be the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Jordan patted my thigh, then allowed his hand to linger there. “I don’t need your pity, Kelly. In fact, it’s probably time for me to go.”

A thorny knot of emotion pierced me from inside as I shook my head.

“No.” I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the delicious tingles scaling my body, zinging low in my stomach. “Stay.”

Back and forth, his thumb stroked the inside of my thigh over my cotton pajamas.

Once.

Twice.

Three times before he pulled his hand away, leaving me wound tight and aching in places I shouldn't have been.

He gave me a curt nod, then grabbed the remote from the coffee table and turned up the volume.

I headed to bed a few minutes later, my hand drifting to my center as Jordan's face appeared beneath my eyelids.

I came twice that night, and by morning, he was gone.

JORDAN



Two weeks later, I pulled into the senior parking lot with a massive chip on my shoulder, and my excitement over the final semester was almost nonexistent. My feet crunched over day-old snow and ice that blanketed the pavement, and I almost slipped twice since the groundskeeper did a shitty job clearing a sufficient pathway to the main entrance.

Greetings were thrown my way, breaking through the sound of unzipped bags and slamming lockers, but I wasn't in the mood. Making a beeline toward the guidance wing, I twisted the doorknob and found Mr. Warren's unlit office locked. *Shocker...he's late*, I thought as I pulled my Amex from my wallet and used it to break in.

I made myself comfortable on a brown suede couch that probably saw more tears than a Planned Parenthood. No one went to Warren's office unless they had a serious issue. With the psychology degrees decorating his wall, I supposed the guy knew his shit. Still, I'd spend my money on a real shrink before opening up to him, and by the look on his pale, freckled face as he flipped on the lights, he didn't delight in the prospect of helping me either.

He dropped his messenger bag on the floor with a thud and nudged his wire-rimmed glasses up his small nose with his index finger. "I'm not tampering with your schedule again, Jordan. You get one class with Ms. Kelly this semester. That's it." He sat down in his cheap office chair and rolled closer to his desk with a piercing screech. "I could have a field day analyzing your infatuation with her, but that's above my pay grade."

"Fear not, Mr. Warren, I'm not here for your psychological services."

He powered up his computer and smoothed down his tie. "Why are you

here then?”

I grabbed the back of my neck and shrugged. “Because my father is totally fucking me over, and I need your help.” It wasn’t easy for me to admit, but there I was, pride be damned.

His body stilled at the mention of Conrad. I anticipated his connection to my father could pose an issue, but Warren was familiar with the ins and outs of the college admissions process, so I had no other choice. “What’s going on?”

I explained the Christmas dinner debacle, divulging the ugly bits but leaving out the part where I bailed on my family, headed to Harper’s house, and experienced the best Christmas of my life.

Memories from that night spun through my mind like a never-ending Ferris wheel. The way she bickered with Jim but smiled at him like he hung the damn moon in the sky. The way her eyes hooded when my hand met her thigh. The way I fell asleep with the most painful erection because I couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

No, I was certain Mr. Warren didn’t need to hear any of that.

Surprisingly, he seemed to sympathize with the parts of the story I *did* share. “What other schools did you apply to?”

“The University of Tennessee and Florida State.” He tossed me a knowing glance. Harper’s acceptance letter to The University of Tennessee arrived a few weeks ago, and there was no doubt that’s where she was going. “Yeah, okay, so I tried my luck at Tennessee just to see if I’d get in. It’s not like I actually want to go there. ’Nova has always been it for me, but now it feels like rolling over at my father’s command.”

He folded his arms over his desk and let out a long exhale. “Listen, does it suck starting school earlier than intended? Sure. But with the competitive nature of the job market, summer session has become more common. If I were you, I’d give it a bit more consideration before making any major decisions.”

A malicious sneer spread slowly over my face. “That’s right. I forgot where your loyalties lie.”

I moved to leave, but in a rare moment of authority, Mr. Warren raised his voice and said, “Sit back down, Jordan.”

Call it curiosity, but I did as I was told.

“Just so we’re clear, you don’t know anything about me or who I’m loyal to. If you really want to go to Tennessee or Florida State, I’ll help make that

happen. But do *not* confuse me for one of your father's money-hungry sheep."

"No? Then why'd you invest your money with him?"

He smiled proudly as he reached for a picture frame near the edge of his desk. He stared at it with affection for a few seconds before flipping it around to reveal the photo inside. A little girl—about five or six—with deep-red hair, freckles, and a crooked smile sat in a wheelchair as Mr. Warren knelt beside her, laughing at something she said instead of posing for the camera.

"My daughter, Julia." He beamed, adoration sparkling in his eyes. "She was born with spina bifida. Do you know what that means for her, Jordan?" I shook my head. "It means she has a team of doctors, therapists, and caregivers. It means unforeseen medical expenses that my second-rate health insurance barely covers." He nodded to the picture frame. "That little girl is my entire world, and as her father, it's my job to provide her with the best life possible. That's all I'm trying to do, Jordan."

I swallowed to clear a knot of emotion from my throat as he returned the frame to its rightful place on his desk.

"CKH has allowed me to breathe a little easier knowing I have extra money in my bank account." He leveled me with an impenetrable glare. "But make *no* mistake, my loyalties lie with my family and with my students. They sure as hell don't lie with your father."

For once, I was speechless, and when the bell rang, I was grateful.

He tipped his head toward the door. "Don't break into my office again. If you'd like to schedule a meeting with me, then do so. But don't assume your time is more valuable than the other students waiting to see me." I nodded in understanding as I stood and slinked toward the exit. "Oh, and Jordan, have fun in poetry."

A grin of challenge emerged on my face.

The son of a bitch might have fucked with my schedule, but I wasn't even mad.

It turned out, Mr. Warren was kind of a great guy.

HARPER



“Since when are you interested in poetry?” I whispered as I passed Jordan a copy of the syllabus.

He plucked the sheet of paper from my hand and smirked. “Since I realized reciting Shakespeare is an easy way to get laid.”

Tar-like jealousy coated my heart, and I hated myself for it. Something dark and tragic still lurked under Jordan’s skin despite the recent return of his humanity, and I needed to be mindful of that.

“While Bill’s wordy sonnets about class struggle and sexism are *super* erotic, you might want to take a peek at the syllabus.”

His eyes flashed wide. “Fierce Female Poets?”

I tried and failed to bite back a grin. “Is that going to be a problem, lady-killer?” I teased. “Guess you’ll just have to impress your victims with your knowledge of Maya Angelou or Sylvia Plath instead.”

He leaned in so close, I could smell his minty breath as he snatched my pencil off my desk. “Discussing Plath’s suicide usually doesn’t turn girls on, and if it does, then they’re into some freaky shit that even *I* can’t handle.”

“A visual I never wanted or needed.”

He uttered a gravelly laugh as he began doodling in a black-and-white notebook. As he concentrated on the faint markings, his tongue stroked his bottom lip, and instant lust buzzed through my body like static.

My brain fizzled.

My chest warmed.

And a torturous ache settled between my legs.

I knew it would be a *long* semester if I couldn’t get my body and mind in

check, but as the weeks went by, it became impossible to deny something was shifting between the two of us.

Don't get me wrong, Jordan didn't transform into Prince Charming overnight.

In fact, for the most part, he still carried on with his sullen, broody, no-one-understands-me routine.

But then he'd do something surprising, and the dumbfounded organ in my chest would thrum wildly out of control.

Case in point, on a dreary Thursday morning when the sky outside the classroom window appeared grayer than a prison wall and exhaustion blurred my weary eyes, Jordan swaggered into class with a coffee in each hand and gently placed one on the corner of my desk.

The sweet aroma of lavender engulfed the air around me, and my gaze shot to his. "You bought me a latte?"

He thrust his free hand through his freshly cut hair, tousling the longer-on-top strands. "Before you left school yesterday, I overheard you tell Kylie you'd be up all night cramming for a physics test."

My mind was sluggish, but I did recall mentioning that to her. However, I didn't think Jordan was listening, what with half of the girls' volleyball team encircling him.

"Thank you." Shuffling in my seat to sit upright, I tugged the sleeves of my thick cream sweater up to my elbows and reached for the warm to-go cup, bringing it to my lips and sipping down the flavorful coffee.

Pure heaven, I thought as a soft moan escaped my mouth, and my eyes rolled shut.

When I reopened them, Jordan's bottom lip was tucked between his teeth as his gaze raked over my face. The force of his darkened stare was almost too much to handle as it scorched my skin and spread like wildfire.

I tried to play it cool, but I was certain he knew *exactly* what I was thinking.

Leave it to the bell to break me from his spell.

Our teacher spent the entire hour reviewing for an upcoming exam, and I was thankful for the coffee's energy boost, because otherwise, I wasn't sure I could keep up. Jordan jotted down a few notes but appeared utterly confused, and as we walked out of class, he admitted as much.

"Yeah, I'm screwed. Any interest in studying together tonight?"

My eyes darted to his. "Sure...if you want to. Gramps has a date, though,

so it'll just be us.”

Did that sound like a proposition?

I barely managed to stifle a wince.

Jordan rubbed his lips together and studied my face for a moment, and *oh*, there was that torturous ache again.

I wouldn't be surprised if he perfected that look to test me—*taunt* me—like I was a toy handpicked for his wolfish amusement. Too bad I seemed to enjoy this particular game a bit too much.

He finally broke the heated tension with his rough voice. “Six o'clock work for you?”

Slowly lifting my gaze from his mouth, I nodded. “Six o'clock it is.”

Jordan

Harper shut her notebook and tossed it onto the coffee table. “I give up. I mean, are you *purposely* getting the answers wrong?”

Yes.

“No.”

“I know you understand the symbolism in Dickinson's poems, Jordan,” she went on, tugging up the sleeves of her sweater and then massaging her temples like her head ached.

Understandable since I *was* kind of wasting her time. Obviously, I was going to ace this test, but if she knew that, I wouldn't be here.

The truth was, one hour a day just wasn't cutting it.

I missed her...a lot.

Missed her lighthearted heckling, her honest critique, and her cute as fuck expressions like the one she wore now—a tiny pucker of concern pulled at her brow, and her lips pressed together in a frown.

I ducked my head and met her eyes. “What's with the look?”

Her ass shimmied down the couch, and she held out her hand. “Let me see your notes.”

I masked the panic in my chest with a dry chuckle. “No can do, Kelly. I didn't take any.”

“You're lying. I've seen you writing in that thing for weeks.” She reached

for my notebook, so I quickly wedged it between my back and the couch, and she arched a black brow. “Hand it over.”

“Nope,” I said smugly, popping the *P*.

“Fine,” she relented with a dismissive shrug, then without warning, she lunged forward, hands pressed flat to my chest as she pinned me down. My mind whirred, accompanied by the boom of my eager heart as I inhaled her flowery scent. Ignoring my stomach’s free fall was impossible with her incredible body sprawled over mine, whispers of longing nipping at me like an arctic blast.

Her hair fell around us like a curtain, and her smile faded. Silence stifled the charged air between us, making it hard to breathe as she gaped at me with this strange intensity that both confused and intrigued me.

“Now what?” I asked, gripping the edge of the couch to keep from touching her.

As much as I wanted to, I refused to make the first move—not this time.

Her throat rippled with a gulp as her gaze drifted to my lips. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, the ball’s in your court, Harp, but if you’re challenging me to see what I’ll do, you’ll be disappointed.”

Her laughter was shaky and devoid of humor as she sat up and raked her hands through her hair. “It wasn’t a challenge, Jordan. It was a foolish impulse.”

Discomfort seeped into my chest as she inched back to her spot, her face drawn with something akin to embarrassment and self-disgust—a look I was all too familiar with.

Exhaling a long sigh, I reached behind my back and tossed my notebook into her lap.

I wouldn’t surrender my control, but for her, I’d surrender my words.

She glanced at me with a puzzled expression before she opened it and scanned the first page. “*You’re a pulled, loose string—a temptress, my undoing. An effervescent champagne high too messy to be dignified,*” she read aloud, eyebrows knitted together.

I cracked my knuckles and glanced out the living room window at the gray moon nestled between the clouds. I could feel her gaze on the side of my face, but I couldn’t brave whatever emotion lurked inside her eyes.

“*You’re the soundtrack to this endless winter—cruel memories that taunt and linger. Your soulful, aching melody, now a haunting, wistful elegy.*” Her

silky voice nearly killed me as she breathed life into my writing.

With a weighty sigh, she slammed the notebook shut, rose to her feet, and stood between my knees. Her hands were warm on my cheeks as she cradled my face. “Look at me, Jordan.” I cleared my throat and slowly lifted my gaze to hers. “Is that how you really feel?”

I ran my tongue across my teeth and shrugged. “What do you think?”

“I think your actions contradict *everything* I just read.” She gave her head a slight shake and took in every detail of my face with an intense focus. Then with an edge to her voice, she said, “But I also think you should put your goddamn hands on me.”

And with a low, soft growl, my composure snapped.

I gripped the back of her thighs without hesitation and tugged her onto my lap. My hands immediately began to wander as every curve of her body commanded my attention, and heat curled around my spine.

“This won’t end well,” she murmured to herself as her hips bucked forward and her cheeks flushed.

I dragged my lips up the smooth column of her throat. “Probably not. That a problem for you?”

“Hell no,” she breathed, sinking her impatient hands into my hair. With a small yank, she tilted my head and claimed my mouth with hers.

It was a clash of tongues and teeth and greedy fingers as we licked and nipped and clawed at one another. Wild, brash, and laced with relief, our kiss was an open floodgate for the things we’d denied for too long. And even if it was the stupidest fucking decision we ever made, for one single moment, we felt *right*.

Harper’s breath hitched in surprise when I snaked my arm around her waist and rolled her to her back. “When will Jim be home?”

“Soon. He usually doesn’t hang out at Maggie’s for too long.” She pressed her lips to the hollow of my throat.

“I thought you said he was out with someone named Gina.”

She face-palmed and sighed. “Maggie’s is an amazing restaurant on Main Street, not a person.” She fisted my shirt and brought my mouth back to hers.

My hand slipped under her sweater, and my fingertips grazed her rib cage. “I think you should tell me to stop.”

She locked her legs around me, a defiant smile blossoming on her lips. “Jordan, *stop fucking talking*.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Playfully, I ducked my head and nibbled the cotton-soft

skin of her neck, and she shuddered.

As my deft fingers smoothed over her stomach, then toyed with the zipper on her jeans, thorns of apprehension prickled my skin.

Like a pissed-off ghost with a grudge, I knew this moment would haunt me forever. Yet I was already well-acquainted with my demons, so why not befriend another?

Kneeling between her legs, I owned her gaze as I slowly removed her jeans, then I trailed kisses from the inside of her knee to the apex of her thigh.

I glanced up the length of her body and admired the fucking goddess before me.

Mussed hair and swollen lips.

Eyes hooded and glazed with need.

A cream-colored sweater that hugged her tits perfectly and a pair of lacy white panties.

Perfection.

I pressed my nose to her center and inhaled, and my pulse beat fiery blood straight to my cock. “I want to taste this pussy, Harper.”

Her lips curled like scarlet flames. “Are you serious?”

“Dead.”

We’d already crossed too many lines to count.

If this was a mistake, I’d ensure it was the greatest one I’d ever make.

“I’ve never...” She trailed off nervously, and I reached for her hand.

“I’ll go slow, okay? If you’re uncomfortable, we’ll stop.”

She nodded, and I kissed her hip bones before peeling her panties down her legs and dropping them to the floor.

Under the soft yellow glow of the lamp beside the couch, she glistened—so damp and so ready. “Fuck,” I grunted as I spread her wet folds with my fingers and lowered my mouth to her like a man starved, licking her slit in lazy strokes.

For years, I’d wondered what she smelled like, tasted like, and now that I was here, I’d savor it.

“This okay?” I asked, hoping like hell it was.

She licked her lips and closed her eyes. “God, yes.”

As I flicked her clit with my thumb, she whimpered and clenched my hair in her tight fist. Spurred on by the sharp sting in my scalp, I growled against her and plunged my tongue deeper as she rolled her hips and rode my face.

“Keep doing that,” she moaned as her thighs began to tremble around my

head.

Was that a command?

Damn, this girl.

I dipped and curled my finger inside of her while I continued to lap up her most sensitive spot, finally pushing her over the edge. She let out a shaky breath, her soft sounds a rhythmic melody permeating my brain.

“Jesus.” She covered her eyes with her forearm and grinned. “That was incredible.”

I pressed a chaste kiss to her inner thigh, then slid her panties back up her legs.

“Come here,” she urged with a tug on my shirt, bringing my face back to hers like she wanted to kiss me.

“You sure? Most girls aren’t into that...afterward.”

Her expression darkened as her tongue skimmed the seam of my lips, and my cock saluted her confidence.

“Fuck, Harper.” I recaptured her lips, and my tongue swept into her mouth, hot and relentless. “Do you taste it?” I asked, dropping my forehead to hers as my chest rose and fell. “Your sweetness with a dash of sin? Your darkness and your lies?”

She scanned my face with soulful eyes as she cupped my jaw with her hand. “Jordan, I—”

Her words broke off as bright headlights flashed through the window, and a car pulled into the driveway.

Harper jolted off the couch and attempted to get her jeans back on before the front door opened, but she wasn’t quick enough.

My pulse raced as I stood in front of her, blocking her from Big Jim’s view.

But when the front door opened, it wasn’t him standing at the threshold... it was Harper’s mother.

HARPER



“*H*e was cute!” Lori said, dropping her duffel bag to the floor with a thud as she darted to the door and brought her eye to the peephole, watching as Jordan’s Audi sped away. “What’s his name?”

My breath rushed out on a sigh. “Jordan King.”

“A King, huh?” Her syrupy voice turned distant. “Is he as high maintenance as the rest of ’em?”

“Yep. Maybe even more so.” I rose to my feet and moved toward the stairs, unable to meet her gaze after the intimate moment she had just interrupted. “And don’t get any ideas, Lori. He may be legal, but it’s not happening.” God only knew which age bracket she was targeting those days.

Not that I was staking my claim on him or anything...

Hurling into my bedroom with the momentum of a hurricane, I slammed and locked the door, sat on the edge of my bed, and buried my hands in my hair. Of all times for my deadbeat mother to roll into town, it had to be when Jordan’s tongue was surveying all areas of my body.

Gah! Just thinking about it made me cringe.

It’d been almost two years since her last drop-in, but she looked more put together than I remembered. Her long brown hair was now cut into a blunt bob that suited her oval face, and her blemished skin was now smooth and clear. Decker in a white blouse and printed trousers, her wardrobe was more PTA chic and less Narcotics Anonymous, also a complete one-eighty from the woman I used to know.

Too bad I saw right through her calculated facade.

“Harper.” Lori’s voice broke through the door. “Honey, we need to talk.”

Honey? Was she out of her fucking mind?

“Go away,” I groaned as I rolled to my back and stared at the white ceiling fan above, wishing my mattress would swallow me whole.

“Fine. We’ll talk later—when your grandfather is home.”

Check. Mate.

Three long strides propelled me to the door. “What do you want to discuss?” I barked as I swung it open. “Why you’re here? Or perhaps why you sprang your suffocating presence on me without warning? Those are pretty much your only two options because I’m sure as hell not discussing Jordan with you.”

The idea of sitting down for a mother-daughter heart-to-heart with her was downright laughable. She was in no position to dole out life advice, nor was she in any position to parent. While I was relieved Gramps wasn’t the one to catch us, I would’ve preferred his wrath over Lori’s fake concern.

“Since when did you become such a spitfire?” A pleased smile moved across her face. “You might look just like your father, but your personality? All me.”

“Fantastic. I’ll be sure to work on that.”

A soft chuckle broke free from her throat as she pushed her way into my room and glanced around. “Damn.”

Following the advice of Marie Kondo, I’d recently erased all traces of my mother from her childhood bedroom since Lori Kelly definitely did *not* spark joy. The assortment of retro clothes and shoes she left behind all those years ago were donated to the local shelter. The large stuffed bear that once sat in the corner was tossed in the garbage. And the mixtapes she made with her friends in high school had been burned.

I swapped out the faded Nirvana poster over my bed for a printed canvas featuring lyrics from Twenty One Pilots. The bookshelf in the corner, the one that once housed a collection of dust, now overflowed with my collection of thrift books. And bright-yellow walls were now painted gray with white dandelion silhouettes.

This room represented *me*, not Lori, and as she stood there with her mouth gaping open like a fish on a hook, I wondered what was going through her head.

Was she feeling nostalgic?

Was she pissed I got rid of all her shit?

Did she regret not knowing me?

Did I really care?

I pinned my arms over my chest and sighed. “Why are you here, Lori?”

A combination of a wince and a frown crossed her face. “Can’t a mother visit her daughter without needing a reason?”

“It depends on whose mother we’re talking about,” I sneered. “So what happened? Bad breakup? You get fired from your latest job?” I snapped my fingers once, twice, three times, then pointed at her. “I know! You’re on the run.”

Lori was as restless and unpredictable as the sea. She rushed into my life as quickly as she rushed out, leaving me with nothing but her excuses.

“I quit my job, Harper. It prevented me from finding my purpose and figuring out what I really want to do with my life.” She picked a piece of lint from her sleeve and exhaled. “And, honey, you can goad me all you want, but I’m not gonna bite.”

I low-key wondered where she’d been living when I detected the twang in her voice, but I quickly elbowed my curiosity back into submission.

This time, her vortex wouldn’t suck me in.

From its charging spot on my nightstand, my phone buzzed with an incoming text, and I rushed to retrieve it, thankful for the distraction from this nightmare of a conversation.

Jordan: I can still taste you on my tongue.

His boldness prompted my heart to jostle against my rib cage at an abnormal rate, and I nibbled on the side of my thumb as I read his text over and over.

Was this sexting? Or was this a complaint? And how the hell does one respond to this type of message?

“Be careful with that one,” Lori warned, inching closer to the door. “He’s got heartbreaker written all over him.”

Oh, if she only knew.

I shrugged one shoulder. “What makes you think it’s a message from Jordan?”

There was melancholy in her half smile when she said, “Because you look like a distracted daydreamer when you read his words. Your dad used to put the very same look on my face, and let me tell you, heart-break-er.” She rested her temple against the doorframe, and her shoulders dropped with a

heavy exhale. “Gramps knew I was coming, Harper. I asked him not to tell you so you didn’t have time to bail and head to Kylie’s.” I opened my mouth to speak as heat burned in my cheeks, but she held up her palm. “I plan on staying for a week. I won’t pry, and I’ll stay out of your way. I’d love for us to spend some time together while I’m here, but I’m not expecting anything.” She nodded to the phone in my hand as she reached for the doorknob. “Now, sort things out with Casanova, then get some sleep.”

I didn’t sort things out with Casanova.

In fact, I ghosted him that night and ignored him in class the next day, too, opting to allocate all of my attention to my schoolwork instead. I headed to Maggie’s right after school, ordering a juicy burger, greasy fries, and a chocolate shake—the side of AP psych, free of charge. The deadline for my research paper on developmental psychology was quickly approaching, and the irony of my mother’s unexpected appearance was not lost on me.

I couldn’t begrudge Gramps and his big heart for offering her a place to stay, but dammit, Lori always seemed to resurface at the worst times. And walking back into my life at the exact moment Jordan awakened an animalistic need deep inside me with his wicked mouth was the *worst* of times, indeed.

Lori said she’d only be staying a week, and while velvet-smooth lies slid easily off her tongue, I didn’t for one second doubt her. She had no drive, no desire to do more with her life. She wanted the freedom to roam, content on wandering from city to city without roots holding her in place, falling in love with strangers yet growing bored with them just as quickly.

Security? *Hard pass.*

Stability? *No, thanks.*

And her blithe attitude toward her employment status? *Mortifying.*

As if people weren’t living in poverty all across the country, vying for the opportunity she so casually took for granted. But hey, at least now she could *find her purpose*, whatever the hell that meant.

Was she really my biological mother? Did we really share the same DNA? I contemplated those questions briefly before remembering the one constant sunbeam in my otherwise cloudy existence: Gramps.

*Every good thing about you came from him.
Don't ever forget it, Harper.*

The chiming bell above the door sliced through the fog in my brain, and I refocused my attention on my assignment. Wrapping my lips around the paper straw, I slurped up the last bit of the rich, toasty shake while opening my notebook to a clean page. Just as I pressed the tip of my ballpoint pen to the paper, a familiar hand reached across the table and snatched two golden french fries off my plate.

“The hell?” I mumbled, wide eyes following Jordan’s movements as he popped the stolen food into his mouth and chewed, working the same stubbled jaw responsible for the brush burns between my thighs. His heated gaze dipped to my lips, then made a swift journey north, bouncing between my eyes as he licked grease and salt from his fingers, probably recalling the same filthy memory.

“Right this way,” Gina called, walking past my table with menus in her hand, pulling Jordan and me from our dirty-minded haze. His blue eyes twinkled with amusement as he winked and followed her lead, leaving behind the heady scent of citrus and clean linens.

Gina sat him and his crew two booths over, throwing me a look of confusion as she walked back to the drink station to fill six glasses of water. It wasn’t every day the prince of Fair Oak mingled with the diner crowd at Maggie’s. The country club must’ve been closed for renovations. Or maybe hell was freezing over.

I tried to focus on the influences of nature vs. nurture instead of the way my body tensed as a leggy blond climbed onto Jordan’s lap, but my defiant, hammering heart refused to be ignored.

“Ew, these seats are so sticky!” Beach Barbie squealed, clinging to his neck like an aggressive koala, his shoulder squashed between her perky tits.

His chuckle was deep, raspy, and fake as hell as he weaved his arm around her waist. He knew exactly what he was doing. Knew I’d be here to witness whatever point he was trying to make. But I refused to play his game. Refused to give him what he wanted.

My curiosity.

My anger.

My jealousy.

I slammed my notebook shut and shoved it into my bag, flagging down Gina as she rushed by. “Gina, I’ll take my check whenever you get a chance.”

“We just had a spill over at table two, hon.” She held up two white rags and nodded behind me. “It’ll be a few minutes. Hang tight.”

Hang tight.

Easier said than done when the guy who made my skin prickle with his cockiness and my insides melt with his kiss sat ten feet away being mauled by another girl less than twenty-four hours after his tongue ventured to the one place on my body no one else ever had.

His cruelty was a powerful sucker punch to my pride.

A malicious ploy with the intent to make me ache.

A crippling blow to my self-esteem.

Nearly knocking the empty shake glass to the floor, I abruptly stood and darted to the bathroom as an undertow of humiliation pulled me under, allowing myself to break down once the door clicked shut behind me. Tears leaked from my red-rimmed eyes as I took in my appearance in the cloudy mirror, hating the weakness in my reflection.

The confusion.

The vulnerability.

Filling my cupped hands with cold water, I closed my eyes and splashed my face, desperate for the pang in my chest to subside. I gripped the edge of the sink and dropped my chin, water dripping off the tip of my nose as a calming breath slowed my pulse to its normal rhythm. Using a scratchy paper towel, I patted my cheeks dry and wiped the mascara from beneath my eyes, turning to toss it in the trash bin as someone entered the restroom, the kitchen’s commotion growing louder then softer as the door opened and closed.

I recognized the heavy footsteps immediately, the slow and steady gait of a hunter stalking his prey. I steeled myself and glanced over my shoulder, my mouth going dry as he advanced toward me, his sexy smirk sending my heart into a tailspin.

The wolf wanted to play, and I had nowhere to run.

JORDAN



“You can’t be in here,” Harper stammered, then flinched in a surprising moment of weakness.

Did she really think a sign on a restroom door would keep me away from her?

When it came to the things I’d do for Harper Kelly, basic rules did not apply.

Ignoring her pointless warning, I continued to slink toward her as my eyes coasted over her blotchy face, studying her features in the dim fluorescent light. “Were you crying?” Her eyes fixed on the scuffed-up linoleum, thick black lashes fanning over rosy cheeks, and *dammit*, if guilt didn’t consume me from within.

Pinching her chin between my thumb and forefinger, I forced her gaze back to mine. “I didn’t come here with her.”

She jerked her chin back and scoffed. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“It’s true.” I shrugged. “I came here alone. Wanted to scope out the place and see what the big fucking deal is since you and Jim seem to love it here so much. Greg and Hurley spotted me as they were leaving Java Bean and decided to join me.”

I’d lived in Fair Oak my entire life and never set foot inside Maggie’s because my parents brainwashed me into believing pit stop diners were beneath me. But Harper didn’t care about Michelin stars and status. She was drawn to good people and simplistic beauty, and Maggie’s Diner was the ultimate throwback to a time when those things were still appreciated.

Leave it to Greg, Hurley, Savannah, and two other chicks I vaguely

recognized to stroll by at the worst possible moment and invite themselves to tag along. It was the kind of intrusive shit that normally made my caustic temper flare, but as soon as we stepped inside, my gaze landed on Harper, and my body immediately hummed with a different energy.

I had no idea she'd be there since she'd barely acknowledged me at school. Pretending I didn't care was a hell of a lot easier than admitting that shit stung, but like a torchlight guiding my dark, dark heart to her temple, my feet careened toward her without a second thought.

Her long, shiny brown hair was draped over one shoulder as she leaned over her notebook, neglected fries there for the taking. She looked pissed as hell by my intrusion, but I was ushered to my table before she had the chance to snap at me.

“So Tits McGee just happened to make a move on you the second your ass touched the booth, and you didn't see it coming?”

Wow. Someone was feisty.

“Okay, I *may* have expected it by the way she was eye-fucking me.” I didn't even try to mask my grin as Harper's nostrils flared. Hooking my finger into the waistband of her distressed jeans, I grazed her skin with my knuckle in a back-and-forth motion. “But my patience expired the second her artificial nails scraped across my neck like I was hers to fondle.” I captured her wrist with my free hand and softened the harshness in my tone. “These are the only hands I want on me, but you stormed off before you witnessed me shut that shit down.”

Harper offered nothing but a heated glare and tight-lipped silence.

Fuck me...she was going to make me work for it.

Leaning in close enough to smell the chocolate on her breath, I glided the tip of my nose along her soft cheek before drawing back with a smirk. “Are you jealous, Kelly?”

“No.”

“No?”

Her green eyes rolled and darkened. “God, you're an asshole.”

“Never said I wasn't, sweetheart.”

A low growl escaped her mouth, and she pushed against my chest. Relinquishing her space, I took a few steps back, fighting like hell to keep my smile in check.

A small crinkle etched between her brows. “I knew I was just a game to you...I just never thought it would hurt this much.”

I scratched my jaw and studied her face for a moment. While I got off on our argumentative banter, I wasn't as heartless as she thought, and the somberness in her eyes told me it was time to reel it in. "You're not a game to me, Harper."

She folded her arms over her chest, nails drumming against her biceps as she narrowed her eyes. "Then what's your goal, King? What do you *really* want?"

Anticipation stirred through my body as I stepped closer. "I want to kiss you...and go down on you again."

She swallowed hard, her face gleaming with embarrassment. "That was a momentary lapse in sanity."

"Sure, it was." I chuckled, taking another step toward her. "So you're saying you regret it?"

She took a step back. "I can't stand you ninety-nine percent of the time."

"That's not what I asked." I inched closer.

"And there's no way this"—she gesticulated—"would ever work."

Her back collided with the wall, and I ran my tongue over my top teeth as my gaze wandered up and down her body. "Harper," I whispered, closing the gap between us as I planted both hands on either side of her head, caging her in. My mouth dropped to her ear, her warm breath panting against my cheek, her chest rising and falling against mine. "Do. You. Regret. It?"

She glanced up at me with a desperate plea in her eyes as she fisted my sweatshirt, the answer I craved finally spilling from her lips. "Not one bit."

An all-out smile broke through the tension on my face.

Cupping her neck with both hands, I greedily consumed her lust-filled gaze as she toyed with the string of my hoodie. Then my lips settled on hers, reuniting after twenty excruciating hours apart. Her soft hums incensed my blood, and her chocolate-coated tongue tasted like nirvana. I got lost in her kiss, momentarily forgetting all the reasons I was supposed to stay away.

Breaking our connection, I tilted my head to the side and dragged my thumb along her plump lips, trailing the motion with my eyes. "Harp, you're so hot for me."

"Says the creep who followed me into the women's restroom," she retorted in a breathy voice.

I chuckled, bringing my forehead to rest against hers.

So much about us didn't make sense. I didn't understand how she robbed me of my breath but also helped me catch it. Didn't understand how she was

everything I wanted but also the last person I should need. Didn't understand how she could pick *him* over me.

As I ruminated on it, a sharp pang of jealousy pierced through my gut.

"We should probably get back out there before someone catches us again."

"I'm really sorry about that." She frowned. "My mom is a turbulent storm disguised as a woman."

Yeah...like someone else I know.

"Don't sweat it. Not the first time I've been caught fooling around with someone, and it probably won't be the last."

A pain-filled wince crossed Harper's face. "Yeah, probably not." Her expression hardened as she slipped out of my reach and sent a worried glance toward the door. "I'll go out first. Wait a minute or two, so no one sees you."

The bitter taste of my words lingered on my tongue like a strong shot without a chaser. An apology was eager to escape my mouth as I watched her leave, but I swallowed it back down.

Why should I apologize?

Things were better this way.

At least, that was the lie I told myself.

Hurley had people over later that night for a "hangout" that quickly veered into a full-blown rager, and I had no idea why I was still there. I wanted to unwind, but this scene was getting old, and my patience was dangerously thin.

"Yo, J, you could totally nail Savannah tonight."

I slowly rolled my head to the left and squinted, discovering Greg slouched on the other end of the expensive velvet lounge with some girl sitting on his lap, texting away on her phone. "When the fuck did you sit there?"

"Same time you did, bro." A broad smile met his bloodshot eyes as he tipped a beer bottle my way. "Tiffany brought some strong shit, am I right?"

I bobbed my head, having no fucking clue who Tiffany was or what shit she brought. The only person to thank for my feel-no-pain condition was Johnnie Walker and his blue label.

Correction: Johnnie Walker and my father because I stole the Blue Label from his wine cellar before leaving the house to come to this...messy situation.

At least I was numb.

When I was sober, I felt *everything*.

When I was sober, I felt *her*.

Now, Savannah's thirsty gaze was pinned on me as she lifted her hair and rubbed her body against her friend while they danced on the opposite side of the room, some horrendous song by The Chainsmokers blaring through the expensive portable speakers.

Harper hates The Chainsmokers.

Harper hates The Chainsmokers, and I hate Harper.

"What was that, man?" Greg scrunched his eyebrows while his lap buddy continued her assault on her phone's screen.

"Nothing," I mumbled, staggering to my feet. "I need to piss."

It appeared as if a tornado had blown through the living room. Discarded cups and beer bottles littered the floor, and crushed potato chips laid waste beneath my sneakers. I didn't envy Hurley and the hefty cleaning bill he'd have come morning.

As I stumbled past the kitchen, the clink of crystal and high-pitched feminine cackling registered in my ears.

"Yo, King! Get your ass in here!" Hurley shouted from somewhere in the mix, a hint of depravity in his voice. "Got an interesting question for you."

Obviously, the sneaky prick was up to something, so why keep walking when I was feeling *extra* tense and combative?

Pivoting to my left, my gaze roamed over the nameless faces before landing on Hurley and the fickle redhead sitting on his lap, his motives suddenly clear. "What's up?" I asked, jerking my chin in his direction.

"Jillian here was just telling us how you used her to stalk Harper Kelly at The Riff last semester." Hurley cackled.

Fucking Hurley and his antics.

Harper mentioned he gave her bad vibes, and I was starting to understand why.

"So what's the fucking question?" I clipped, his laughter dousing my last bit of restraint.

Silence enveloped the room as all ears tuned into our exchange.

A scornful smile gleamed in his eyes. "Wait, you're not even gonna deny

it?”

“Do I ever confirm or deny rumors that reek of desperation?”

“I’m not desperate.” Jillian scoffed, climbing off Hurley’s lap, then flipping her long hair over her shoulder. “It’s true. You left me alone at that loud, obnoxious club, so you could chase down your brother’s ex and do whatever with her in the restroom. I didn’t want to believe it at the time. I mean, *her over me?*” She stuck out her tongue and gagged. “But Tiffany *just* texted me and said you’ve been mumbling about Harper all night.”

Fuck Tiffany.

And fuck Greg for fucking Tiffany.

“Didn’t realize you were into sloppy seconds, J.” Hurley’s words thwacked their intended target with an iron fist.

When the crowd around us hissed and hooted, my legs tingled like they were vanishing beneath me, and I leaned against the island to stay upright. “You sound a lot smarter with your mouth closed, man. I mean, you’re currently hitting on *my* sloppy seconds, are you not?” I winked at Jillian, and Hurley sprang to his feet, his stool falling to the floor with a crack.

“What the fuck’s your problem, King? You’ve been acting like a little bitch lately, kind of like the chick whose pussy you’re apparently chasing.”

“Enough,” I snarled through gritted teeth, rage searing through every vein. He could say whatever he wanted about me, but Harper was off-limits.

Tapping his chin as if thinking something over, a smug grin perched on Hurley’s lips like an ugly vulture. “I wonder whose cock she prefers more, Devlin’s or yours?”

My fist connected with his jaw without warning.

As he staggered back, Jillian screamed.

And every phone in the room was raised and recording.

Greg rushed in, eyes darting back and forth between the two of us before he leaped into action, tugging me back by my shirt. “What the hell, Jordan?”

“I’m tired of his shit,” I slurred, trying but failing to shrug him off me.

“Tired of *my* shit?” Hurley pointed at his chest, advancing toward me. “Go to hell, asshole.” He delivered a blow to my face that sent lances of pain through my skull, and the ringing in my ears steadily increased in volume. Blood oozed down my cheek, the metallic scent ramming itself up my nose, and seconds passed before my vision cleared.

With one glance around the room, I felt the impact of what I’d done, and a manic laugh broke through my lips. “You and me”—I motioned to Hurley

—“are fucking finished.”

HARPER



“*H*arper!”
Clink.

My eyelids fluttered open, Jordan’s drunk shouting pulling me from my sleep as he continued his assault against my window.

Clink-clink-clink.

“Harper Rae Kelly, I know you hear me!”

I flung my fluffy white comforter off my body and sprang to my feet, bounding across the room in a flash of fury. I heaved the heavy window open and peered out at the stumbling idiot below. “What are you doing?” I whisper-shouted. “You’ll wake up Gramps and Lori!”

“Better come down and let me in then,” he challenged, taking a wobbly step out of the shadows with a drunk grin molded to his lips.

In the brilliant light of the moon, I noticed blood trickling from a gash below his left eye. “What the hell happened to your face?”

Grimacing, he touched his injury, then frowned at his blood-coated fingertips. “Shit.”

I clenched the windowsill with both hands, my head falling between my shoulders as I groaned.

Just once.

Just once, I wanted him to be someone else’s problem.

I inhaled the cold night air, then released it with an exhausted sigh. “Wait there, Jordan.”

I tiptoed down the stairs and ambled to the back door, opening it slowly to find him leaning against the doorframe, a lazy grin on his bruised and

battered face.

With hooded eyes, he indulged in the unobstructed view of my purple satin camisole and matching shorts. “Nice pajamas. Chilly, are we?”

I motioned to my face in a circular motion. “Eyes up here, perv.”

The asshole winked.

The asshole also looked good. *Too* good for a casual night out. I wondered where he was coming from and who he’d been with, then mentally kicked myself for caring.

“Ladies,” he hiccuped, nodding to my breasts as his chest brushed against mine, turning my nipples into taut peaks as he stepped inside the house. A rush of heat spread through me, curling around my spine and sinking low in my stomach. I hated the way my body betrayed me; hated the way I craved him as much as I despised him.

I closed the door with a quiet click, then wheeled around and glared. “You reek. Please tell me you didn’t drive here.”

“Took an Uber,” he mumbled, propping himself against the fridge, probably so he didn’t fall over.

“Well, come on.” I sighed, jerking my head toward the stairs. “We need to get you fixed up before you bleed all over the place.”

Wordlessly, we ascended the stairs to my bedroom, Jordan’s breath and body a warm presence at my back that made my nerves hum. I closed the door behind us and led him to the bathroom, then I rifled through my vanity, shoving curling irons and makeup aside until I located a first aid kit. I opened it on the countertop and selected a gauze pad, soaking it with tap water while Jordan sat on the edge of the tub, watching me with his searing gaze.

Standing over him, I began dabbing the pad around his wound. “Who did this to you?”

He chuckled, but it lacked humor. “Who says someone did this to me? Maybe I tripped. Maybe I walked into a wall. Maybe I—”

“Jordan.” I pinned him with a knowing look, tossing the bloody gauze into a nearby trash bin without breaking eye contact.

“I got into it with Hurley.”

“Over what?” I asked, reaching for a Q-tip and the antiseptic ointment.

I slathered his cut with the salve as he said, “Stupid shit. Just guys being guys.”

The clumsy and unconvincing lie set off the warning bells in my mind. I knew with absolute certainty he was lying to protect me—but from what?

He was drunk enough for me to press him for more information, but I wasn't that diabolical, not when he was injured and defeated with his head hung low and sleep threatening to pull him under. I crouched between his sprawled legs, gently cupping his jaw and angling his face so I could finish bandaging him up.

He blinked slowly, looking down at me with a perplexed frown, and my cheeks flushed.

"What's wrong?" I asked, smoothing down his bandage with the pad of my thumb.

His intense gaze roamed over my face. "You're magnificent, sweetheart."

There it was again.

Sweetheart.

My words felt sticky in my throat, and I swallowed hard, the gulp audible to my own ears. "Yep. You're definitely concussed."

With my hands on his knees, I hoisted myself up and moved toward the messy sink, but he quickly laced his arms around my lower back, holding me in place. My arms dangled by my sides as I fought the urge to touch him, my heart brimming with longing as a series of suppressed memories crashed through my mind.

The hardest part about witnessing his vulnerability was the fact that I still couldn't let *my* guard down. Still couldn't apologize for the wounds I'd inflicted on his tarnished heart.

He dropped his forehead to the center of my stomach and leisurely rolled it side to side. "Can I crash here tonight, Harp?"

My self-control was standing on a rocky ledge, and my heart was hell-bent on flinging it to its untimely death. I squeezed my misty eyes shut and raked my fingers through his soft hair, nodding silently for a beat as one lone tear rolled down my cheek. "Yeah, King. You can stay."

His arms squeezed me tighter.

I let him hold me for a moment as I continued to drag my fingernails over his scalp. As his breathing steadied, I peeled myself out of his arms and helped him to his feet, leading him to my bed, where he collapsed on his back with a thud. I removed his shoes, then plunked a waste bin next to my bed, desperately hoping he wouldn't need it.

I locked the door, turned off the lights, and after spending a few minutes deliberating over where to sleep, decided to crawl into bed beside him. I set an alarm on my phone so I could kick him out before Gramps awoke, then I

listened to the rise and fall of his steady breathing as I stared at the ceiling, my brain overcrowded with too many thoughts.

Was it a mistake to let him stay?

I could have sent him away in an Uber, but I didn't like the idea of him passed out in the back of a stranger's car. If he wound up dead and naked in a ditch, I'd feel somewhat guilty, and I didn't need that kind of karma.

But where did we go from here?

In a couple of hours, he'd wake up sober and leave as if nothing happened, but I didn't have the luxury of forgetting that we toed the line between vengeance and forgiveness tonight.

Ugh! Why did he have to be fifty shades of fucked up to show a sliver of weakness?

And if he were sober right now, would he inch closer to me?

Drag his fingers down my arm?

Hold my hand like he did before?

Before.

I closed my eyes and winced like the word physically attacked me, sending me back in time to the night everything changed; to the night everything was ruined.

No, this wasn't the first time I shared a bed with Jordan.

We'd been there, done that.

Once.

But that night had a very different ending...and I was still paying for it.

HARPER



Seventeen years old

“*P*ark around the block, then cut through the backyard, okay?”

Jordan sighed over the phone. “Seriously, Harp? I thought you said Big Jim was away all weekend.”

“He is. But I’m pretty sure he’s got the police force keeping an eye on the house. Do you know what he’d do if he found out I invited a guy over?”

He’d kill me, that’s what.

Gramps afforded me lots of freedom, but coed sleepovers were a hard limit.

“Aw, come on...he loves me. If you told him I was sleeping over, he’d call off the stakeout because he knows I’d protect you.”

“Um, no, he wouldn’t...because you’re a seventeen-year-old horndog.”

His car door slammed shut. “True...but not when it comes to you.”

My skin instantly prickled. “Ouch.”

I could hear the sound of sticks and twigs snapping beneath his feet. “Shit, I’m sorry. That came out wrong.” He paused for a moment. “I meant you’re my best friend, so there’s no need for him to worry about that happening with us.”

As if that softened the blow.

Sometimes, I wondered if he underestimated me, trying way too hard to shield his virginal best friend from the scary world of fornication—which was frustrating *and* kind of sexist.

My virtue didn’t need protecting.

In fact, I was content with where things stood in that department.

But we compartmentalized our friendship, and by keeping certain things like sex and hormones out of it, we managed to keep its innocent charm alive.

There was the rest of the world...and then there was us.

We clicked in a way that required no explanation—friends with no strings attached.

Other girls got his money, his parties, his dick.

I got his thoughts, his smiles, his heart.

“No need to apologize.” Rain started battering the kitchen window, drawing my attention to the clock on the wall. “Shoot. Hanging up now. See you soon.”

I hurried to the oven and removed a tray of warm, gooey brownies just as Jordan burst through the back door, shaking drops of water from his hair. He wore jeans and a soaked Phillies sweatshirt and smelled like wet earth. “It’s fucking pouring, and you forced me to traverse through your neighbor’s yard like a creep carrying two pizzas and a duffel bag. The neighborhood watch has probably been notified.”

I covered my mouth, fighting a giggle.

“Oh, you think that’s funny, Kelly?” He set the pizza boxes on the kitchen table, then allowed his bag to slide down his arm and fall to the floor. “Hopefully, dinner isn’t ruined.”

I opened the top box, the smell of tomatoes, cheese, and garlic wafting into my nose. “Mine looks fine. I’ll share with you if your gross Hawaiian pizza’s inedible.”

He nudged me over and opened his box with a smile. “Pineapple and ham, babe. Nothing better.”

I sat down while he grabbed two sodas from the fridge. “I hate when you call me that,” I said, eyeing up the proffered Coke and Sunkist in his hand. I settled on Sunkist.

He arched a brow in confusion. “Call you what?”

“Babe.” I eyed him over the can and took a swig. “You call every girl that.”

“I do not.” He chuckled.

I responded with a semi-irritated glare, and his maddening grin diminished.

“Okay...maybe I do. So what nickname do you prefer instead? Sweetheart?”

I shook my head and swallowed a bite of pizza. “*Sweetheart* is a term of endearment reserved for the great love of my life. I can’t let you take that honor away from him. Sorry.”

He rolled his eyes. “Reading too many romance novels has warped your brain.”

“It has nothing to do with the books I read. Gramps used to call my grandma that, and I guess it just filled me with this intense hope that maybe a love like that is out there for me, too.”

A frown pinched Jordan’s lips as he observed the faint smile on mine. “Sounds a bit cliché if you ask me.”

My good mood plummeted. “Yeah, well, I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you don’t care about romance or relationships, and that’s fine. I don’t judge you for your choices, so don’t judge me for mine.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched as he cleaned his greasy fingers with a napkin and tossed it to the table. “Love isn’t a choice. It’s a curse.”

A pang of sadness twisted behind my breast.

Jordan wasn’t one to mask his derision, but it was *never* directed at me.

“Wow,” I scoffed. “Someone swallowed his bitter pills this morning.”

Leaving his spontaneous tantrum behind, I got up from the table and headed to the living room, but he was quick to follow. Throwing his arm around my shoulder, he tugged me so close that I could feel his lips brush my hair as he whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“As you should be.” I canted my head and met his gaze. “What’s your problem tonight?”

“Must’ve overdosed on those bitter pills.” He smiled, and a hint of arrogance glimmered in his eyes.

I rolled mine and shook my head as I ducked out of his hold.

“So what movies did you decide on?” he asked as he plopped down in Gramps’s leather recliner.

“*Across the Universe* and *8 Mile*,” I replied, claiming my spot on the couch. “Oh, don’t give me that look,” I warned, noticing the twisted expression on his face.

“You *always* pick *Across the Universe*.”

“And you always picked *Almost Famous* because of your Penny Lane obsession, and I *never* complain.”

“Kate Hudson is hot.” He shrugged.

“She’s hot. You’re a pig. Let’s start with *8 Mile*.”

We watched the movie in comfortable silence.

Afterward, Jordan went to cut the brownies, and I stretched out on the couch, making myself more comfortable.

“I forgot to tell you, but Dev is coming with us to the Green Day show in Philly next week,” he said, returning with a plateful of perfectly cut squares and two glasses of milk.

“Oh, really?” I asked nervously, lifting my legs so he could sit, then bringing them to rest on top of his thighs.

I didn’t know Devlin well, but Jordan idolized him, and because of that, I desperately craved his stamp of approval.

Jordan squeezed my ankle in reassurance. “It’ll be fun, I promise. Now, try this.”

He held out a brownie square, and I pushed up on my elbows to bite it, humming in delight when the chocolate collided with my tongue. “Not to brag, but those may be the best ones I’ve ever made.”

He nodded in agreement, a satisfied smile on his face as he shoved the rest of the square into his mouth.

By eleven o’clock, my exhaustion was impossible to ignore, as was Jordan’s animated phone.

Text after text lit up his screen from people probably asking where he was and what he was doing—not a damn soul suspecting he was with me. With his head down and his thumbs tapping away, his attention was no longer mine.

Leaving him downstairs without a word, I headed up to my room and prepared for bed. Brushed my teeth, washed my face, and slipped into a tank top and shorts in under ten minutes. I was crawling under the covers when a soft knock landed on my bedroom door, Jordan entering in nothing but a pair of dark-gray sweatpants.

His quick change of clothes was both impressive and disconcerting.

My gaze drifted over his tall body, starting with his bare feet, lingering on his tight abs and bulky chest, before finally connecting with his inscrutable stare.

“Can I join you?” he asked in a low voice, jerking his chin toward my bed.

I arched a questioning eyebrow in his direction, but his expression

remained blank.

I assumed there was an unspoken agreement he'd crash on the couch, but I was wrong.

"Um..." I cleared the nervousness from my throat. "Sure."

He nodded once, shut the door behind him, then lifted the comforter and climbed in. We curled onto our sides, staring at each other but not saying a word, his thoughts camouflaged by a blank expression and a series of blinks and sighs.

As his eyelids grew heavy, I averted my gaze, knowing this visual would frequent my dreams for the rest of my life, reminding me of the night the most gorgeous guy slept in my bed and nothing happened because he viewed me as pure and innocent and *far* from sexual.

"Night, J." Rolling over, I extinguished the light of my dimly lit lamp, tucked my hands under my cheek, and closed my eyes.

"Night, Harper," he whispered, his body inching closer until his warm chest met my back.

The rain beat against the roof.

The neighbor's wind chimes clanged.

But inside the four walls of my bedroom, the silence was the loudest sound of all.

His fingertips slowly traced the length of my arm, from my shoulder to the back of my hand, and goose bumps remained in the wake of his featherlight touch. My skin tingled with nervous energy and sparks of electricity, and I felt weightless.

Giddy like a caffeine buzz.

Totally intoxicated.

His fingers laced through mine, fitting together like puzzle pieces.

Locks and keys.

Guns N' Roses and nighttime drives.

I didn't want to return to a time when Jordan didn't hold my hand.

And then I felt it—his erection, pressed firmly against my ass.

My mind was fogged by a potent concoction of confusion and curiosity, so I acted on impulse and surrendered to my body's urge to move. I rocked my hips back and forth, and he gripped my waist with a groan. With each wavelike motion, his fingers dug deeper into my skin, his hips arching and his stiffness prodding. A thick, heady feeling swirled in my stomach, my desire for him evident in my now-damp panties.

His name escaped my lips in a lustful sigh, but he misinterpreted it as a warning and quickly pulled away, leaving my ravished heart aching.

With his right hand splayed across my stomach, Jordan rolled me to my back and rose on his left elbow. He blinked down at me with a heated flush on his cheeks, his dark brows drawn together in a stunned expression.

I was relieved to see I wasn't the only one reeling.

"So that just happened," I joked like it was something we could just laugh off. Making light of the situation seemed like the best defense mechanism when our entire friendship was on the line...easier said than done now that I knew what he could do to my fully clothed body.

He didn't smile, though. He continued to stare, his gaze bouncing between my eyes and my mouth. Finally, he broke the dense silence with five words that lit me up from within. "Can I kiss you, Harper?"

My astute brain warned me to stop and analyze the situation, but I was tired of overthinking and constantly worrying.

For once, I just wanted to *feel*.

So I nodded my consent and held my breath, bracing for the world to implode.

He lifted his hand from my stomach and brought it to my cheek, cupping it gently in his palm. His blue-eyed gaze locked on mine with an intensity I'd never seen before. He looked awestruck—maybe even nervous—and my mystified heart drummed faster in my chest.

His thumb brushed back and forth over my cheekbone as he lowered his head, its descent slow and deliberate.

I knew exactly what he was doing. Knew he was giving me time to change my mind and stop him.

But I didn't.

His pillowy lips pressed against mine, sweet and soft and safe. A kiss that could uplift a hopeless heart, make a forsaken soul feel cherished, and inspire the faithless to believe.

He pulled back with a boyish sort of grin, his look of adoration rousing a need I'd ignored for far too long. My hand brushed over his head and settled on the nape of his neck. I took possession of his mouth once again, and his irrepressible moan reverberated through my core as his tongue caressed mine.

After a while, he repositioned himself between my thighs, and his hips rolled in sync with mine. "That feels amazing," I murmured as he breathed against my neck, heat searing through my veins and warming me from the

inside out.

“*You* feel amazing,” he whispered, curling my hair behind my ear.

My breath hitched in my throat when he tugged my earlobe between his teeth, sending delicious shivers through my body.

That was the moment I decided having sex for the first time with someone else just wouldn't be the same. That if anyone would take care of my body and my heart, it would be Jordan.

I shoved on his chest, and he sat back on his haunches, confusion marring his features. Keeping my gaze fixed on his, I reached for the hem of my tank top and yanked it over my head, tossing it to the floor. My breasts were bared, nipples hard from the cool air...but he didn't even glance down.

Instead, he breathed out a curse as he twisted away and sat on the edge of the bed, dropping his chin to his chest.

I was overcome with humiliation and embarrassment, and shame attacked me from within.

A moment ago, commanding his attention was effortless.

Now, he wouldn't even look at me.

As tears coated my lashes and sadness tore through my chest, I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing my body was made of helium so I could float from my bedroom and drift away in the wind.

“Harper, please don't cry,” he begged, placing my discarded shirt in my lap.

I opened my eyes and quickly tugged it over my head, feeling so damn self-conscious.

“It's not that I don't want to...” He trailed off, plunging his fingers through his dark hair, leaving it a chaotic mess. His cheeks billowed, and he sighed. “All that stuff you said earlier about finding the right person and falling in love...that's the guy you should finally have sex.”

Hot tears streamed down my cheeks and dripped off my quivering chin, and I cursed the unreliable organ in my chest for allowing me to be so stupid.

“What the fuck have I done?” he asked himself in a pained voice. “Please, *please* say something.”

“So were you just curious?” I sniffled. “Or horny too?”

His jaw clenched. “You know me better than that, Harper.”

“Do I? Because right now I feel like I don't know you at all.” He reached for me, but I skittered back against the headboard and tucked my knees to my chest. “You need to leave.”

“Harper.” My name passed over his lips on a strangled whisper, and his face crumpled with agony.

“Jordan, go!”

It was too painful to watch him walk away, so I rested my forehead on my knees until I heard my bedroom door click shut.

Once he was gone, I let myself shatter completely.

My best friend annihilated my heart in the most devastating fashion, and I wasn't sure I'd ever recover.

I ignored his calls and texts for a week. I wanted to blow off the Green Day concert too, but Kylie insisted I go. She assumed it would put an end to the weirdness between Jordan and me, but it only intensified.

It was evident the childlike innocence we'd clung to had vanished. There was a striking distance between us that wasn't there before, and I was too hurt to figure out a way to reassemble our connection.

Devlin's presence that evening was the buffer we never anticipated we'd need, and he made it easy to forget that I *really* didn't want to be there. His hypnotic charisma inspired me to laugh and sing, and when he dragged me out of my seat and persuaded me to head-bang to an explosive riff, my vindictive plan was born.

I flirted.

I giggled.

Then I asked for his number.

I could blame my calculating choices on my bruised and busted confidence, but the truth was, something was irrevocably broken inside me.

My mother didn't want me.

Jordan didn't want me.

But for a little while, Devlin did.

JORDAN



Eighteen years old

*M*y parched lips and throbbing head reminded me of the whiskey. My stinging cheekbone reminded me of Hurley's right hook. And the floral scent drifting into my nose reminded me of Harper.

Yawning, I cracked open my eyes one at a time and glanced to my right, throttled by the breathtaking view.

Hair wildly tangled. Lips parted. Eyelids fluttering while she dreamed. And the satiny top she slept in did little to conceal the swell of her creamy tits. As she breathed in and out, I marveled at the way they strained against the thin fabric, threatening to spill out.

Beyond her shoulder, dust particles danced in the light streaming through the window, and I squinted in anger at the sun's audacity to rise way too fucking early. I inched up into a sitting position and waited for the wave of nausea to subside, grinding my teeth together to keep from groaning and disturbing the peacefulness on Harper's half-turned face.

Blowing out a long exhale, I set my feet on the floor and eased to my full height. I hauled myself to the bathroom on heavy legs, weighed down by a combination of disappointments, lies, and one hell of a hangover.

I stationed myself in front of the mirror, trying to make peace with my haggard appearance.

Red eyes.

Disheveled hair.

A blood-soaked bandage stuck to my cheek.

Pieces of a blurry puzzle falling into place.

Not only did Harper allow me to crash at her place but she also tended to my drunk ass, and my idiotic heart jolted at the sudden revelation.

I switched the old bandage for a new one and gargled some mouthwash before returning to Harper's room. She was awake now, leaning against her headboard, glancing everywhere but at me.

I didn't cross the threshold, just leaned against the doorframe and waited for her cue. Tension was thick in the air as she pursed her lips and picked the black nail polish off her thumbnail. She was prepared to unleash hell, and I couldn't wait to hear it. I got off on her lectures and her anger. Even while berating me, she still turned me on more than anyone else ever could.

"We need to talk," she whispered, voice pained, eyes glistening.

I fought through the fuzziness of my mind, trying to remember all the jumbled details from the night before.

The booze. The fight. The phones.

The phones.

Guilt flooded through me as unease coiled around me, and my idiotic heart dropped. Harper didn't have skin thick enough for controversy, and I kept hauling her into it. Her unshed tears propelled me toward her, the mattress dipping under my weight as I sat on the edge of her bed, knowing her words would destroy me before she even spoke.

I reached out and cupped her chin when she tried to turn away. "At least look at me when you open your mouth and slay me wide open." She flinched, and one errant tear traveled down her cheek, caressing my palm. "Go ahead, Harper. Tell me how much you hate me."

"I don't hate you," she uttered under her breath.

It'd been a year since she admitted that, and hearing it this way, in a voice thick with emotion, was agony.

I scrubbed a hand up and down my face. "Then say it."

Silence.

"For God's sake, Harper—"

"When you accused me of using Devlin, and I told you I wasn't...I lied. I wanted to get back at you, to pretend your rejection didn't sting and what happened that night didn't absolutely wreck me." She lifted her chin, green-eyed gaze affixed to mine as her expression twisted in remorse. "And I'm so disgusted with myself."

I stared at her intently, recalling the catastrophe that was my St. Patrick's

Day party last year.

Cornering her in my basement when my brother went to grab her a beer, I finally had her alone for the first time since she'd started dating him. Compared to the other girls, she was dressed modestly in skinny jeans and a clover-print sweater, and when she glanced up at me all cute and innocent-like, something inside me snapped.

My composure, my patience, shattered into pieces like broken glass at her feet.

I accused her of punishing me—of using Dev—and as she denied, denied, denied, anger clawed through me, digging its nails into my flesh deep enough to leave scars I swore would never heal.

Did she think I was a fucking moron?

That I didn't know *exactly* what she was doing?

That I couldn't see that underneath the surface, she was just as dark and twisted as me?

Now, as she refused to shield her eyes or cower as tears dripped off her trembling chin and onto her chest, I realized I was wrong. As Harper owned her confession while it ripped her apart, whatever anger lingered under my skin seemed to diminish.

I inclined my head an inch from hers and smirked. "Bout time you admitted the truth, Kelly."

"I'm sorry. I should have—"

I cradled her face in my hands and silenced her with a kiss that spoke the truth—a kiss that healed.

She cared about Dev because he was comfortable and safe...like a goddamn Labrador puppy. Didn't mean she should've been with him. She never should have doubted *me*. She never should have doubted *us*.

"Does anyone else drive you wild..." I dipped my head and licked the thumping pulse in her neck. "Here?"

She shook her head repeatedly and swallowed hard.

"Or get you wet..." I slid my hand up her smooth thigh and cupped her pussy over her shorts. "Here?"

"Jordan," she whimpered, tugging me forward by my shirt as she lay back, gazing up at me with earnest desperation in her eyes.

My idiotic heart beat wildly.

"I love when you say my name like that," I murmured over her parted lips.

Using the heel of my hand, I pressed downward on her mound, and her eyes rolled shut. She began rocking against my palm in a sensual rhythm, searching for the friction she craved but couldn't find with a barrier of clothing in the way.

"Screw it," she mumbled—more to herself than to me—as she grabbed my wrist and slid my hand below the waistband of her panties. And *fuck*, I loved seeing her take charge like that. Loved seeing her chase what she wanted—what she needed—without feeling a single ounce of shame.

I pushed downward again, this time letting my fingertips drift lazily over her entrance, her arousal coating them with each back-and-forth swipe.

My dick wanted inside her more than Zuckerberg wanted world domination, but I wasn't going to fuck her after a hazy night of partying. Wasn't going to fuck her quietly, either.

My gaze bounced back and forth between her hooded eyes. "You okay?"

She gripped my shoulder, her fingernails digging into my skin through my shirt. "Never been better."

With my free hand, I cupped her cheek and claimed her mouth again, her silky tongue brushing against mine as her slender thighs parted wider. I dipped my index finger into her tightness as she continued to rub her clit against my palm, loving the soft sounds she made as she started to unravel.

I dragged out my lust-coated finger and licked off every last drop of her sweetness, my gaze fixed on her the entire time.

Her pupils were dilated, eyes wild.

She was almost there.

"Again," she demanded in a husky voice.

"Pushy," I teased with a sly smirk.

"Bossy." She glared.

She barely got the word out when I thrust two fingers deep inside her, pumping in and out as she trembled beneath me. She writhed against my hand as I curled my middle finger in a come-here motion, reaching the magical spot that had her nerve endings firing, her back bowing off the bed, and her walls pulsing around my fingers.

I was hypnotized, absorbed by her soft sounds, her sweet smell, her feathery touch.

Witnessing Harper get off on my fingers was my new favorite thing, and I needed it to happen again.

Soon.

Often.

Once her breath steadied, I rolled to my back and tugged her to my side, wrapping my arm around her waist.

Finally, I had her right where I wanted her.

HARPER



I used to dream about lazy mornings spent in bed with a guy who made my heart do wild, crazy things inside my chest. He was always faceless, this dream man. An unidentifiable phantom of my imagination planting silly ideas of love like seeds inside my head, brainwashing me into believing such a thing was possible.

Fooling around with Jordan that morning wasn't a dream come true, and it wasn't love.

It was a muddy stumble, dirtying me up in the best way.

"Shouldn't we be worried about Jim?" he murmured against the base of my throat, licking his way up to my jaw, unable to keep his hands and mouth off me. "He's not going to burst through the door any minute, is he?"

"He might," I said with a steady voice and a straight face. An anxious frown flashed across Jordan's face, and a quiet giggle burst from my mouth. "The door's locked, and he always knocks first. Not sure how we're going to sneak you out of here, though."

When I found Jordan's side of the bed vacant that morning, I deflated.

Of course, he took off, I thought, raking my fingers through my hair. He only came here for your help. No other reason.

Then he opened the bathroom door a minute later, and although I couldn't meet his eyes, I was aware I held his attention, heat instantly curling up my spine and scraping over my skin.

I should have insisted he leave while we still had time, but Jordan made it impossible for me to think clearly.

"I'll climb out the window if I have to," he said, brushing my hair back

from my eyes then dropping a kiss to my forehead. “I’m coherent now.”

He was trying to make light of the situation, but the fact that I still didn’t know what transpired between him and Hurley gnawed at me. “About that...” I pushed him and his lengthening dick off me and sat up, tucking one knee to my chest. “Are you ready to explain what really happened last night?”

“Are you ready for me to get you off again?” he deflected, his panty-melting smirk incinerating my patience.

I glanced at the ceiling and blew out my cheeks in frustration. “When we were friends, we had great communication. Now, we suck at it. If we can’t be honest with each other, what’s the point of all this?”

Jordan’s eyes shined with apprehension like he wished I’d leave it alone, but like a child poke, poke, poking at a painful bruise, I couldn’t.

“Well?”

He scratched his scruffy jaw and sighed. “Hurley said some things about me and you that pissed me off.”

A cold shiver of dread scaled my body. “What did he say?”

As he opened his mouth to speak, my phone vibrated on my nightstand, three texts coming through one after the other.

Kylie: Holy shit, did you hear about last night?!

Kylie: Probs not since you live under a rock.

Kylie: You need to watch this...

“Harp,” Jordan warned, cracking his knuckles as I clicked on the video she’d sent, gaping in horror as his night unfolded on my screen.

The ugly accusations.

The cruel remarks.

The physical altercation.

When it ended, I immediately deleted the recording, then I tossed my phone across my bed as hot, silent tears flowed down my cheeks and lavalike acid burned my throat. Phrases like “little bitch” and “sloppy seconds” replayed in my mind as shudders racked my body, hurt cracking my bones from the inside out.

All I ever wanted to be was invisible.

If no one noticed me, no one could judge me.

It turned out, they were judging me anyway.

Jordan pulled me onto his lap and pressed his lips to my hair. “Screw what Hurley says. He’s a sleazeball, remember?” He was trying to lighten the mood, but his sad voice said it all. He pitied me.

“It wasn’t just him. It was Jillian too,” I sniffled. “Is that what people really think of me?”

“Fuck, no.”

I released a heavy sigh. “Would you really tell me if it was?”

“Yeah, I would. This is just some petty weekend drama you got dragged into. In a few days, everyone will have something else to gossip about.” He spoke with conviction even though we both knew this would be the topic of conversation for weeks to come.

As for the video...

“You swung first.”

He nodded.

“Because of what he said about me, you, and Devlin.”

Not a question, an observation.

Yes, he was angry on my behalf, but the comparison between Devlin and him was what pushed him over the edge.

“This is never going to work, is it?”

He shifted me in his arms and glared with a mixture of fury and pain. “Why the hell not?”

“Because you may want me, Jordan, but I’m not sure you can ever forgive me.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m not going to let you do this, Harper.”

My adamant response was queued up on my tongue when a swift knock on the door startled us.

I catapulted to my feet, and my gaze roved around the room. I gesticulated frantically toward the closet, and Jordan headed in that direction when Lori shouted, “Open the door, Harper! I know Casanova’s in there!”

My feet crashed to a halt, and my eyes widened.

This isn’t happening.

This isn’t happening.

This isn’t—

“Now, Harper Rae,” Lori commanded, a surprising air of authority in her voice.

Jordan cupped my shoulder as he headed toward the door, taking the initiative when my feet refused to move. “Good morning, Miss Kelly,” he

greeted with his devilish grin, totally unfazed by his *second* awkward encounter with my mother.

Lori looked tired, irritable, and so not impressed.

“Save it.” She held up a hand, eyes narrowed like she was aiming a gun, and Jordan was her intended target. “Because of your drunken display last night, it is *not* a good morning. I was up all night pacing the hallway in case my dad woke up, or you”—she poked his chest *hard*—“aspirated on your vomit. Way to put my daughter in that horrific position, by the way. Also, word of advice, next time you lob rocks at someone’s window, Romeo, make sure you’re tossing them at the correct one.”

I face-palmed. “You threw rocks at Lori’s window, too?”

“I was seeing double. My aim might have been off.” A sheepish grin tugged at the corners of his lips.

“You think?”

He shrugged.

“Way off.” Lori yawned and jerked her head to the side. “Dad just left for the market, which means it’s time for you to leave too, Jordan.”

I cocked an eyebrow in surprise.

Lori was probably the master of sneaking guys out of the house when she was my age, but I never thought she’d help *me* sneak one out, too.

Hands clasped behind his back, Jordan tipped his chin in farewell, a faint smirk on his irresistible lips. A smirk that vanished when Lori seized his elbow. “Hold on...” Her head whipped around, her inquiring gaze dancing over my face. “Why was my daughter crying? I swear to God, Jordan, I’ll cut off your—”

“Lori! It’s not like that.”

I suffered many embarrassing moments in my life, but this one might have been the worst.

“You sure?” She stared at me, unblinking.

“I promise.” I glanced over her shoulder and noticed a host of emotions flickering in Jordan’s eyes.

See Harper, not a dream come true. A filthy mess.

“I’ll call you later,” I lied.

His curt nod said he knew I wouldn’t.

As soon as he left, Lori sat on my bed, then crinkled her nose. “Do I want to be sitting on these sheets?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you’re too smart to give it up to him when he was undeniably wrecked.”

“Give it up to him?” The mattress squeaked as I sat down beside her. “Are my virgin vibes that strong?”

She shook her head. “No, but from what I recall, you’ve been pining for that boy for years. Can’t imagine anyone else sweeping you off your feet when your feelings for him are that strong.”

“Because women are supposed to wait for love. Otherwise, they’re whores?”

She chuckled, then sighed. “You know what I meant. You’re just twisting my words to pick a fight with me. I sure as hell didn’t wait for love, honey, but you’re nothing like I was at your age.”

I didn’t understand why everything she said made me defensive. Lori never preached or lectured me, and I knew she wasn’t doing that now. She might have been thirty-six, but I got the sense she still remembered what it was like being eighteen, and maybe, just once, she was the one person who could actually relate to what I was going through.

So I cleared my throat and confided in her for the first time in my life, telling her everything that transpired between Jordan and me over the past few years.

From start to finish, she didn’t utter a word, lips pressed into a firm line as she listened without interruption. Tension trickled from my body like blood from a wound as I unleashed all the secrets I kept locked inside my cluttered mind.

“Oh, Harper.” Lori’s voice cracked, unshed tears softening the harshness of her face. She lifted her arms slightly as if she might hug me, then she reconsidered. “I take it back. We’re more alike than I realized.”

I scrunched up my face. “Doubtful.”

“Doubtful, huh?” She wiped her eyes and straightened her spine. “Let me tell you what I’ve learned from experience. Fair Oak’s a heartbreak town built on failed dreams, rigid opinions, and narrow-minded beliefs. People treated me poorly simply for loving a man they didn’t think I should. Your father and I caught so much shit for running away but starting over someplace new sounded a hell of a lot better than being trapped here.”

This was the first I was hearing of the sordid details of my parents’ infamous getaway. Gramps didn’t like to discuss it, and Lori and I never talked about anything more than school and the weather. I didn’t realize how

badly I craved this information until I was offered a tiny taste. “No one thought you and Dad should be together?”

A deep-set frown carved little worry lines between her brows. “Well, our age gap was quite the scandal.”

“But you were eighteen. Five years is nothing.” I knew enough to know my dad was twenty-three when he knocked up my teenage mother, but it wasn’t like she was underage. They were two consenting adults.

“Honey, five years is everything when you’re young.” She let that sink in for a beat. “Your dad was seventeen when his father, Edwin, had a paralyzing stroke. Edwin’s wife, Marg, lost her battle with cancer years earlier, so your father was the one who cared for Edwin, giving up what remained of his youth to tend to Edwin’s needs. He was also the only one capable of running the family’s auto repair shop, which is where I met him.” She smiled fondly at the memory. “I brought my car in for an oil change one afternoon and stayed until curfew that night.” I gave her a pointed look, and she shook her head. “We only talked, Harper.”

I was immersed in her story and begged her to continue.

“Beau steadied me in a way I didn’t know I needed, and I filled him with a fresh energy he’d lost over the years. He admitted he always wanted to be a paramedic, and I told him I wanted to change the world. When Edwin’s second stroke claimed his life, your dad was finally ready to sell the shop and chase his dreams. One month later, as we were packing up the car, a strong bout of nausea turned my stomach.”

“Me.”

“You.”

“So I ruined everything?”

Her eyes flashed with shock and anger. “How could you even ask that? Of course, you didn’t ruin everything. In fact, you made it easier for us to hightail it out of here. We wanted more for you, and Washington pays paramedics really well, so that’s where we headed. Your dad was two months away from completing his training program when the accident happened.” Lori’s despair transformed her voice, her posture, and her expression as she squeezed her eyes shut.

My body felt numb and empty at the same time, and my heart was clogged with grief and heavy with sorrow.

I reached for Lori’s hand and squeezed it, not in forgiveness, but in compassion.

She drew in a lungful of air, tears slipping from the corners of her eyes. “Not being with the one you love is like wandering through a dreadful nightmare, honey. If Jordan wants to be with you, why put yourself through that?”

“Jordan and I have some fucked-up attraction toward one another and a stale friendship, but it’s not love.” I released her hand and rubbed my palm against my sleep shorts. “Besides, I don’t want the negative attention.”

“I think you should go easier on yourself,” she went on. “Self-destruction lies dormant in our blood, and a broken heart is its hairpin trigger.”

While I appreciated her being there for me, she was steering the conversation toward a territory I wasn’t ready to explore. Hearing about my dad lifted my spirits and healed broken parts of my soul. Discussing Lori’s downward spiral hardened my lungs like concrete and suffocated me.

It was time to wrap this up.

“That’s how you operate, Lori, not me,” I reminded as I made my way to my dresser, grabbing fresh underwear, a comfortable pair of yoga pants, and a baggy hoodie, preparing to take a hot-as-hell shower and hibernate for the rest of the weekend.

She threw me a skeptical look and rose to her feet. “If you say so. Just don’t let unwanted criticism sway your decision to be happy, Harper. I think you should give the busybodies in this town something to talk about. It makes life way more fun and a lot more interesting.”

I didn’t miss her smug smirk as I swung the bathroom door shut.

Later that day, Kylie FaceTimed me to check in.

“It just doesn’t make sense.” She paused to slurp an iced latte. “I mean, I know once upon a time you were besties with Jordan, but that’s ancient history. Why would Jillian and Hurley accuse Jordan of being into you *now*?” I opened my mouth to speak, but she continued, “Anyone who knows the two of you knows you don’t look at each other with anything more than indifference. You’re too smart to fall for another King brother. Those boys are prideful assholes, and you deserve better.”

She finally stopped to catch her breath.

“Let me guess, that Java Bean coffee in your hand is laced with one,

maybe two, extra shots of espresso?”

She held up two fingers and made a goofy face, and I snorted a laugh. “While I appreciate you having my back, I’m not stressing about it. I’m not into Jordan, so what’s the point in defending myself to people who’d otherwise give zero fucks who I dated?”

This was the first lie I ever told Kylie, and it tasted like a jagged razor blade against my tongue.

I sipped my own coffee before I accidentally blurted out the truth.

But what was the truth exactly?

When it came to Jordan and me, things weren’t black and white. We existed in a world as gray as a rain cloud and as stormy as the sea. Alarmingly beautiful until it swallowed us whole.

“Loving that attitude, bish. Screw ’em all.” Her eyes lit up with a wry grin. “Seriously, I think you need to get laid. It helps with the whole *not stressing* thing.”

“Is that why you never stress about anything? Ever?”

“Some people take uppers. My drug of choice is sex.” She flipped her hair and shrugged.

“Forget PR. You need to find a career in motivational speaking, Ky.”

JORDAN



“What’s this I hear about you getting into a fight with Hurley?”

I muted *The Office* and set the remote on my lap as my mother rounded the couch. “How the hell do you hear about these things? Do you have a Finsta or something?”

“What in the world is a Finsta?” she asked, tugging at her diamond-studded earlobe.

“A fake Instagram account primarily used by basic bitches and stalkers.” She arched a manicured brow and pursed her lips. “And by intelligent, successful women.”

I flashed a charismatic smile, coaxing an unexpected laugh from her.

“Nice save,” she said, repositioning a decorative stack of books on the coffee table. “I heard about it this morning over country club chitchat. Jordan, haven’t you learned your lesson? And to get upset over a silly little rumor about Harper Kelly?” She scoffed, already halfway out of the room. “No more of that, love,” she called over her shoulder with the flick of her wrist, leaving me to sit with the restless, angry energy she ignited in my veins.

Lori Kelly might have been an absent mother with a miles-long record of fuckups, but the way she threatened me with her parental glare told me she was not to be messed with when it came to Harper. She cared about her kid, and she wanted her to be happy.

Serena King, take notes.

I wasn’t aware I’d been vacantly staring at the muted television while brainstorming ways to make things right with Harper until Netflix asked me if I was still watching. I powered it off and checked my phone for any missed

messages, finding none.

“Fuck it,” I mumbled, raising myself to my feet with a loud grunt as the soreness in my body and ego lingered.

I’d invested too much time and effort getting back to this place with Harper to squander it.

I was done with the drunken nights and random hookups, the mixed signals and poor communication.

Tonight, the madness reached its end.

I rang the doorbell, then blew on my reddening hands, my breath billowing from my mouth like small, misty clouds, the night air as bitter and numb as me. I adjusted my black Carhartt beanie and shook out my flannel-covered arms as nervous jitters rattled my bones, making it impossible to stand still.

This is it, asshole.

If she turns you down again, move on with some dignity.

“Jordan!” Big Jim shouted in surprise as he swung the door open, wearing the wrinkled grin of a man totally at ease and not the angry scowl of a grandfather who somehow discovered I spent the night in his granddaughter’s bed. “Come in, come in.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said with a nod as I crossed the threshold into the living room. On the TV, Villanova was beating Providence, fifty-four to thirty.

“I was expecting a close game, but I think ’Nova’s gonna win this one,” Jim said as he made his way back to his recliner. “Their shooting guard can’t be stopped tonight.”

“Don’t sleep on Providence.” I shrugged off my flannel, hung it on the coatrack, then tugged down the sleeves of my black Henley. “There’s plenty of time left for them to make a comeback.”

He chuckled. “Some Wildcat you are.”

“Not a Wildcat yet, sir.” The sound of Lori and Harper bickering in the kitchen met my ears, and I slipped him a curious glance. “Do I want to go in there?”

“Son, it’s been going on since dinner.”

I eyed my watch. “It’s nine.”

Jim rubbed his forehead. “Exactly. Can’t even fix myself a snack because I’m afraid I’ll get roped into it again.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Lori didn’t skip a beat when I entered the kitchen. “Jordan, please tell my daughter DC Comics are better than Marvel.”

“He’s the one who got me hooked on the Marvel movies in the first place.” Harper rolled her eyes, looking all kinds of gorgeous in yoga pants and a Captain America hoodie that was two sizes too big, no doubt the catalyst for this debate. “I know for a fact he’s Team Marvel.”

Lori waved away Harper’s statement. “No way! He’s got the dark, brooding thing going for him like Batman.”

“So because he looks like Bruce Wayne, he’s automatically a fan?” Harper countered.

“Do I get to answer or...?” I chimed in.

Harper bit the inside of her cheek, but finally relinquished a smile. “Why are you here, Jordan?”

“To talk.”

She crossed her arms and lifted her brow in challenge. “Only if you tell Lori who your all-time favorite superhero is.”

I crossed my arms, mirroring Harper’s stance, and grinned. “Sorry, Miss Kelly. Ironman’s the man. Team Marvel all the way.”

Lori grunted. “Obviously, he’s going to side with the girl whose bed he woke up in this morning.”

“Shhh!” Harper and I whisper-shouted at the same time.

Lori’s fake diabolical laughter followed her out of the room as I headed for the pantry and opened the door with a creak. “Sure, help yourself,” Harper teased from behind me as my eyes landed on the Doritos.

“They’re for *your* grandfather.” I plucked the bag from the shelf. “He’s got the munchies.”

She trailed me into the living room, then giggled against my bicep to muffle the sound. “Maybe he *did*,” she whispered, looking up at me through a thick curtain of black lashes before returning her gaze to Big Jim.

He was sound asleep in his recliner, mouth agape as soft, measured snores escaped him. Lori held a finger to her lips, then jerked her chin toward the stairs as she reached for the remote.

“Nice to see the two of you getting along tonight,” I commented once Harper and I were locked behind her bedroom door.

She nodded as she kicked off her faux fur slippers and settled on her unmade bed. “I guess I have a little more patience for her since she told me more details about my dad today.”

“Damn.” I plopped down beside her, unable to mask the shock on my face. After sifting through all the questions I wanted to ask, I settled on the most important one. “How are you feeling?”

“Weird but good.” She lifted her left shoulder in a half shrug. “She’s leaving in three days, so it doesn’t change much, but at least now I think I understand her better.”

Harper collected pieces of her past, knowing it was a puzzle she’d never complete, not when it was shrouded in lies and secrecy. But this, this is what she’d been waiting for.

“Also, it got me thinking about us...” Her words trailed off as her gaze dropped to her lap, and every muscle in my body went rigid.

“Before you finish that thought, I need you to hear me out.”

Though she still wouldn’t meet my eyes, a smile overtook her face. “But what if you’re going to like what I have to say?”

“I sure as hell hope I do, but you told me I needed to work on my communication, so here I am”—I extended my arms—“ready to work, baby.”

“Fair enough.”

“I’ve wanted you for years, Harper,” I admitted as I threaded our fingers together.

She lifted her chin in defiance. “Really? Then why did you turn me down last year?”

And there it was, the question I’d wished she asked before she threw it all away.

She feared I didn’t want her, and her foolish assumption was the exact reason I *wouldn’t* take her virginity. Not when she had zero faith in me—in us.

“Because you didn’t look at me then the way you look at me now.”

“And how do I look at you now?”

“Like you hate how much you want me.” I brushed a piece of hair off her forehead. “Last year, you still saw me as the boy who chased you around on the playground, not a guy who could set your world on fire.” She swallowed hard; her eyes locked on my lips as I continued. “I’m not that kid anymore, Harp. Haven’t been in a long time. And God, I want to fucking devour you, but I also want to watch a movie with you, take you to The Riff, and hold

your fucking hand.”

“I want those things too.” She conjured up a smile, but it quickly fell into despair. “But I don’t see how we can have them.”

“Because this town sucks.”

She nodded in agreement. “Devlin, Kylie...”

“Hurley, my mother...”

“Exactly.”

I rubbed my lips together and studied her face for a long moment. “So what if we didn’t tell anyone we were together?”

“Are you suggesting we keep us a secret?”

“Yeah.” I scratched my neck and shrugged. “We only have a few more months left until graduation. Why not make the most of it? I want to be with you—”

“And I want to be with you, too.”

“So what do you say? Will you be mine, Harper Kelly?”

Angling her head, she pretended to think it over, then nodded, pulling her lips into a grin. She hooked a leg over my waist and laced her arms around my neck. “Only if you’re mine and *only* mine.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely.”

Happiness blossomed on her face, the incomparable beauty of her grin a reminder of what I could lose if I fucked this up.

Then she kissed me.

Soft and unhurried, like we had all the time in the world.

“And just to be clear,” she began as our lips parted, “as soon as you kissed me that night, I knew you weren’t that kid anymore. Maybe I wasn’t ready before, but I’m ready now.”

The weight of her words hit me square in the chest and settled around my heart. It felt so wrong to accept what she was offering, but like the selfish prick I was, I finally had the chance to get what I wanted, so I took it. “Then let’s give this a shot, sweetheart.”

HARPER



“*I*’m almost there,” I moaned against Jordan’s neck as I straddled his lap in the back seat of my car, wearing nothing but my white bra and floral panties.

“I’ve got all night, baby,” he said in a thick, lazy voice as his skillful fingers delved into my softness, making my body quiver.

My breasts grew heavy.

Every single muscle in my body tensed with anticipation.

Then a kaleidoscope of colors burst behind my eyelids as wave after intoxicating wave rolled through me.

When I came back down to earth and my vision cleared, Jordan stared at me in stupefied silence, his eyes burning with desperation.

“You can’t mask your emotions with that hard, handsome face of yours.” I drove my fingers through his disheveled hair. “What are you thinking about?”

“Feeling your soaked pussy throb around my fingers is the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever felt, and watching you come is the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.”

My jaw slackened, my tongue nothing more than a useless accessory failing to form words. I hated his vulgarity, so why did hearing him say that do funny things to my insides?

Damn him and his sexy, dirty-talking mouth.

Jordan wrapped his arms around me as my racing heartbeat settled, my damp chest pressed firmly against his as the steady sound of his breathing became a soothing melody in my ear. The balmy scent of arousal

encompassed the interior of my car, and the thickening fog of condensation on the windows evidenced how hot we were despite the brisk March night. If we were caught, there was no denying what we were up to.

“Another night in the Jetta,” he whispered, his tone mostly humorous with a trace of disappointment.

“Another night, indeed,” I replied with my own regret.

Those special moments when a meaningful embrace shifted into a frantic dance between greedy lips and tongues grew hotter every day, and the thrilling possibility that someone might discover our secret only stoked the flame. We were shameless in our quest to be alone. Stealing kisses in empty school hallways. Sneaking out in the middle of the night. Meeting in places we knew no one would catch us, our restraint crumbling each time we pushed each other toward the most delicious oblivion.

The problem was that it was beginning to feel like we were prolonging an illusion instead of building something real.

While the rational part of my brain recognized that Devlin moved on with Camille without giving me a second thought, the critical part cackled and said, “Girl, everyone will judge your ass for dating his younger brother.”

Fucking double standards.

Maybe if I didn’t live in a town that despised my mother, I’d act like my backbone was made of steel and pretend I didn’t care. Square my shoulders, hold my head high, and proclaim Jordan King was mine—haters be damned. But in Fair Oak, I wasn’t granted that luxury. I’d be labeled *Lori Kelly 2.0* in an instant, the spawn of the town pariah following in her mother’s footsteps like a predestined harlot.

As frustrating as it was, our relationship was safe when it was confined to the dark.

So when Jordan kissed the crevice of my neck and said, “That’s it. I’m taking you out on Saturday night,” it took me a minute to process his declaration.

Pushing back on his shoulders, I blew the hair from my face to see him clearer. “Are you serious?”

His unblinking eyes said it all. “Dead,” he replied, gripping my waist tighter. His erection pressed against my center, and my thighs tightened around him as my hips rolled on instinct, starving for more but knowing the time wasn’t right—not yet, anyway.

When he continued to grind into me, a strained protest left my lips. “We

can't...go out...this weekend."

He sighed and halted his steady rocking, the crust of his guarded demeanor splitting in two. "I'm tired of hiding, Harp." My heart clunked and fell with a bang. "We can leave town. Go into Philly for a while. Explore more than just each other's bodies."

I rested my dewy forehead on his as my fingers caressed his stubbly cheeks, trying not to laugh at the way he said that last sentence with such sincerity. "Like a real date, huh?"

"Like a real date," he replied, placing a soft peck on the tip of my nose. "I just want one night away from Fair Oak."

"Me too," I agreed with a nod. "But don't assume that pulling out all the stops will charm my pants off."

Jordan's sexy, bad boy grin chased away the lingering shadows on his face as his hands slid down my back and squeezed my ass. "You mean a bouquet of roses and an expensive dinner won't grant me access to this?"

I pinched his square-cut chin. "Nice try, Romeo...but no."

"What about this?" He pressed his thumb against my clit through my damp panties, sending powerful tingles through my core. "How do I gain full access to this?"

My throat rippled with a hard swallow. "I-I don't know."

I imagined myself melting to the floor like liquid honey at his feet. My want for him was all-consuming, but whenever I stepped closer to the edge, fear swallowed me whole.

I was slick with need but struggling to voice what I wanted, what I craved.

Passion.

Wildness.

Exhilaration.

My first time didn't have to be special in a clichéd way. Candles, rose petals, or an orchestral serenade to my hymen were *not* required. I simply wanted to fall without a safety net, yet one remained around my hardened heart from his previous rejection, and erasing the painful memory wasn't as easy as I'd hoped.

"Hey," he murmured, gently cradling my face in his hands as his eyebrows cinched together. "What's wrong?"

"Why would anything be wrong?"

Other than the fact that my insecurities just killed the mood.

“Um, for starters, I’m all-too-familiar with that frown of yours.” He tipped his chin down, and his probing gaze bore into mine. “And you freeze up whenever I broach the topic of sex.”

Bitter emotions twisted in my gut. I didn’t want to engage in this conversation while I was draped all over him, mostly naked. But how the hell could we move past something if we didn’t talk about it?

The answer was we couldn’t.

“Alright, fine. I keep thinking about the time I offered you everything, and you took nothing.”

His shoulders dropped with a long sigh as he scrubbed a hand down his face. “And you’re scared I’ll do it again?”

I nodded in long, contemplative lines.

Yes.

Yes, I was.

“Well, there you go flattering me again, baby.”

He reached for his shirt flung over the rear dash, but my fingers wrapped around his wrist, stopping him. “You can’t be upset with me for expressing how I feel.”

“I’m not upset with you,” he said in a low, harsh voice.

“Then why are you pouting?”

“I’m not pouting.”

He was totally pouting.

I arched a brow and crossed my arms.

“Fine, I’m pouting, but only because my girlfriend...which is what you are, by the way, whether we go public with it or not...doesn’t trust me.”

Heart meet blender.

“Of course, I trust you.”

He shot me an incredulous look and shook his head. “Not completely. You don’t see how much I want you because sneaking around like this makes it impossible for me to prove I’m all in.”

“You knew what you were signing up for.”

His jaw clenched. “Yeah? Well, so did you.”

We were locked in a staring contest, and neither of us was willing to concede.

Easing off his lap, I fell to the seat beside him and gathered my clothes from the floor. “Do you see my shirt anywhere?”

Jordan cleared his throat, and my gaze flicked in his direction, noticing

my gray sweater dangling from the tip of his index finger. I reached for it, and he pulled his hand back. “Allow me.” I leaned forward, and he tugged the thick material over my head. When my face reappeared, he was only a breath away. “I’m not pressuring you,” he whispered, twisting a lock of hair behind my ear. “I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

His words were like a bullet to the heart of my doubts, his reassurance just what I needed so that when the time was right, I’d know for certain I wasn’t making a terrible mistake. I’d know that enough time had passed for wounds to heal and fade to scars, and the man who administered those wounds could actually be forgiven.

With my eyes fixed on his, I slid my arms into my sleeves, then wrapped them around his neck. “I know how much you want this. I just need a little more time.”

He raked his teeth over his bottom lip, wistful thoughts written all over his face as he nodded. “Then time is what you’ll get.”

We got dressed in silence, our rendezvous about to expire as my curfew quickly approached.

While the tension might have faded, Jordan’s unease remained, and I refused to let the night end on a sour note. “Jordan?” I asked, ready to put the poor guy out of his misery.

“Yeah?” he rasped as he zipped up his jeans.

“Will you do me a favor?”

He gave the hem of my sweater a tug, and his blue eyes tightened at the corners. “Anything.”

“Kiss me a little bit longer.”

Like two criminals on the lam, we fled town that Saturday evening, driving an hour to experience our first date without judgment—much like my mom and dad.

I realized I was a damn hypocrite, and yeah, I hated myself for it, but I also couldn’t ignore the inferno raging in my soul.

So what if we were living in delusion? It turned out it wasn’t such a terrible place to reside.

In fitted jeans, a navy-blue dress shirt, a tailored blazer, and a pair of dark

loafers, Jordan exemplified business casual with a dash of panty-dropping magnetism. Like he was making some sort of effort but also gave zero fucks about what anyone thought. Even his messy, textured hairstyle became a safety hazard every time a rogue strand fell across his forehead and obstructed his vision. But when he swept it back with his long fingers, he resembled a man who could walk into a boardroom and make shit happen.

Me, on the other hand...

Glancing down at my simple knee-length black dress, long gray cardigan, and vintage black suede shoes, I hoped I was dressed appropriately for our destination.

“I wish you would’ve told me where we were going.”

Jordan brought my hand to his mouth and placed soft kisses along my knuckles. “Quit stressing. You’re fucking stunning.”

His expression was genuine.

His words were, too.

“Even though I look like a rebellious kindergarten teacher while you look like a trendy badass?” I asked, plucking at the hem of my dress.

Jordan’s gaze darkened as I drew his attention to my smooth thighs. “Doesn’t matter what you wear, baby. You still get my dick harder than anyone else ever has.”

I pressed my free hand to my chest and sighed. “You say the sweetest things.” I twisted my lips and tapped my chin. “I wonder if Hallmark is hiring.”

The roll of his eyes couldn’t conceal his delight whenever we bantered like we were still enemies. “I’m honored to be taking the *real* you out, not some fake-ass version. Accept the compliment, Harp. I promise, you look amazing.”

If flattery was poison, Jordan King would be the death of me.

Outside my window, vibrant street art reflected common threads that connect people across cultures and time. Some spread awareness. Some demanded justice. Some whimsical, others hopeful. Every single one shook me to my marrow and ripped strips from my heart.

My mother was right—life was so much bigger than Fair Oak.

Life was so much bigger than us.

All at once, I felt lighter than I ever had, hopefulness blooming inside my chest like the vines of silky honeysuckle in summer—sweet, sturdy, and dense.

“Okay, daydreamer, we’re here,” Jordan said as he parked in a parking garage off Broad Street, breaking me out of my musings.

“What’s going on, King?” I asked, unbuckling my seat belt and glancing around. Instead of responding, he climbed out of the car, closed his door, and headed toward the exit. “Dammit,” I growled, chasing after him and launching myself onto his back. “Why are you being so evasive?”

“Because getting you fired up is my favorite thing to do.” He chuckled, giving my ass a teasing slap. “Hop down, little one, and I’ll tell you what we’re doing.”

Once my feet hit the concrete, he reached into his back pocket and proffered two tickets. I bent forward to read the small bold font, and my lips parted in shock. Plucking the tickets from his hand, I brought them to my face for a better look, still not believing my eyes. “Is this real? Please tell me I’m not dreaming.”

“You’re not dreaming, baby.”

I bounced on my toes, a full-tooth grin pulling at my mouth. “*Wicked?*” I marveled, jumping into his arms and peppering his face in kisses.

A heated thrill surged through my body when the warm air from his deep laughter fanned over my lips, knowing this would be a memory I’d tuck away and reminisce about for the rest of my life. A night that charmed like magic and felt like a miracle, glittering and radiant.

As we departed the garage, we passed a group of twentysomethings vacating an idling bus, the smell of diesel fumes and the sound of their laughter and fake screams giving a chaotic pulse to the vibrant city, the night alive with a palpable energy unlike anything I’d ever felt.

We located a casual Italian restaurant and grabbed a bite to eat, filling up on sautéed calamari and spaghetti primavera before arriving at The Kimmel Center just in time for the show. An usher guided us to our plush, red orchestra seats only yards away from the stage, and as the lights began to fade, Jordan captured my hand with his and placed a kiss on the inside of my wrist.

“Good first date, Harp?”

“Great first date.”

A heart-melting grin overcame his face. “Then mission accomplished.”

HARPER



I was leaving school on a Monday afternoon when my phone rang, eyes narrowing in suspicion as I read the name on the screen. “Hello?”

“Hey, kid. Do you have a second?”

She sounded lucid, but Lori had to be high to call me out of the blue. “A second. What’s up?” I asked, unlocking my car and sliding inside.

May finally arrived, as did warmer temperatures and abundant sunshine, and the interior of my car sizzled. Since my air conditioner was unpredictable, I prayed it worked as I turned my key in the ignition.

“I’m calling because I just invited Dad to visit this weekend, and he accepted. I want to show him where I live, spend a few days exploring the Great Smoky Mountains and Asheville, that sort of thing.”

So she has been living down South.

My stomach sank. If she gave Gramps false hope then failed him again, I would *never* forgive her. “Sounds fun, Lori. I hope he has a great time.”

“Well, I was kind of hoping you’d like to join us too,” she rushed out before I hung up.

Even though she couldn’t see it, I shook my head.

How could she deduce that our fractured relationship magically repaired itself after one—*one*—adequate visit? I was glad she was turning her life around, I really was, but she was living in an alternate universe if she assumed I’d forgotten all she’d done.

“I can’t, but thanks for the offer.”

Glancing through the windshield, I squinted against the intense white

sunshine and witnessed person after person swivel their head to check out *my* boyfriend as he crossed the parking lot.

For some reason, Jordan's sex appeal was at an all-time high that week.

Maybe it was the carefree smirk that replaced his impassive sneer. The pep in his cocky swagger. Or the fact that he was suddenly unattainable, and everyone was dying to know why he stopped fucking around.

"Because of me!" I wanted to yank on the ends of my hair and scream. *"Because he's mine!"*

Right before he climbed into his car, his hawkish gaze covertly slanted in my direction, and a teasing smile touched his lips.

The pulse between my legs throbbed enthusiastically...until Lori's voice broke through the haze. "Honey? Are you still there?"

Shit.

"Sorry. What did you say?"

"Never mind." She sighed, sounding genuinely disappointed. "Have a good evening, Harper."

Was I a coldhearted monster for choosing to avoid the center of her chaos and confusion?

At least in Fair Oak, I had sturdy walls of protection.

Visiting her turf felt dangerous—overwhelming—and I simply wasn't ready.

It didn't dawn on me until I was almost home what heavenly gift I'd been given.

Gramps was going away for a long weekend.

And Jordan and I could *finally* be alone.

"I have déjà vu," he joked as we cuddled on the couch watching *Sons of Anarchy* that Friday night, hours after Gramps hit the road.

"I was just thinking that. Hopefully this night doesn't end with an epic fight and lots of tears."

His expression tightened. "Too soon, Kelly. Still too soon."

I kissed his cheek and smiled. "You have nothing to worry about, dear. In fact, I was just about to suggest we turn this off and head upstairs."

His eyebrows shot to his hairline. "Yeah?"

I bit my lower lip and nodded.

“Hell, yes,” he said as he rushed to his feet, powering down the television and hoisting me over his shoulder. He carried me to my bedroom, then tossed me onto my bed, a roguish look in his eyes as he hovered over me. “It’s actually unfair how fucking gorgeous you are.”

“You don’t have to woo me.” I yanked off my shirt and flung it over his shoulder. “I’m already yours.”

“Fuck yeah, you are.” His dark, greedy eyes gaped at my chest in awe. “May I?”

“If you don’t, I will.”

He grunted in response.

With tentative fingers, he unfastened my sheer bra, then cupped my breasts, marveling at the way they fit in his palms. “These tits are perfect, Harp.”

My stomach clenched tight. “That mouth of yours.”

He dipped his head, licking and tracing my left nipple with his tongue before moving to the right. “What about my mouth?”

“It feels too damn good to be so wicked,” my raw voice rasped.

We kissed and touched and kissed some more, stripping off different articles of clothing until we were completely naked.

Adrenaline surged in my veins as my hand traveled between us and stroked his hardness. “I want you inside me, Jordan. I’m ready.”

“Are you sure?” A strand of dark hair tumbled over his crinkled forehead, and he brushed it back with his fingers. “Just because we have the house to ourselves doesn’t mean...”

I smirked with self-assurance as I gripped him tighter, and his words faded as he dropped his mouth to mine. His hands caressed every part of me in a fervor blur, my skin burning from his skillful touch. It was desperation and disorder and ecstasy, how I’d always imagined it would be.

I retrieved a condom from my nightstand, and he rolled it down his length before lining himself up with my entrance. His focused expression was almost *too* cautious, and I tried not to giggle at the seriousness of it all. Sex didn’t have to be perfect. In fact, I fully expected it to be imperfect in all ways but one: in the way he took care of me.

If I told him to stop, he would.

If I asked him to slow down, he would.

If I begged him to take me from behind, he would—and that trust, that

safety, was all I ever wanted for my first time.

His first thrust sent lances of pain through my core as I stretched around him, and my breath hardened in my lungs. “Jordan,” I gasped, my fingernails digging into his biceps as I waited for the burning to fade.

He immediately stilled. “Shit, are you okay? Should I stop?”

I shook my head, the thunderous gallop of my pulse whooshing in my ears. “No,” I breathed. “Don’t you dare.”

He claimed my mouth with slow, tentative kisses, and as he continued to rock back and forth, the pain lessened to a dull ache. He was buried inside the deepest part of me, filling me with feral need while handling me with gentle care, and my affection for him only grew.

“You feel amazing,” he murmured, lust glinting in his eyes.

I brushed my hand across his cheek. “So do you.”

My bed squeaked beneath our weight as his pace quickened. His breathing turned jagged, nostrils flared, and jaw clenched as he neared his release. He was devastatingly beautiful, like the amber glow of a small hurricane, fast moving and fierce, and when his hungry expression went tense, I knew he was there.

Because of the lingering discomfort, my orgasm was too far out of reach. Still, with my arms wrapped around his shoulders and his hard chest pressed against mine, I felt content.

Jordan dropped his forehead to mine and released a shuddering breath. “You did amazing, sweetheart. Amazing.”

My pulse whirred in pace with his while my fingers roamed the rippling muscles of his sculpted back. Skin to skin, heart to heart, I hoped he’d never move.

But move, he did.

He retreated to the bathroom to dispose of the condom, then returned with a warm, wet washcloth, his eyebrows pinched together in concentration as he gently wiped the inside of my tender thighs.

I felt it light me up from within, the flickers and flashes of a love so intense, I struggled to catch my breath.

“Do you want to shower? Or we can go to sleep...”

“I want food,” I blurted, then inwardly cringed at how unsexy that sounded.

A smile tugged at his lips. “Food?”

“Don’t judge me.” I laughed. “Let’s order food and watch a movie. We

have one weekend to do normal couple things, and dammit, we're going to take advantage."

His full-blown grin broke free. "Then food you shall have. But I am *not* watching *Across the Universe*."

"*Pitch Perfect*?"

He shook his head.

"*Sweet Home Alabama*?"

He grimaced.

"*Remember the Titans*?"

"Now, you're talking."

Jordan ordered Thai with a food delivery app, then we got dressed and went downstairs to wait for it to arrive.

"Thank you," I said as I cuddled up beside him on the couch and draped a blanket over our laps.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and rolled a strand of my hair between his thumb and pointer fingers. "For what?"

For what?

For his patience...

For his tenderness...

"For everything."

HARPER



Jordan tugged my shirt over my head and pressed a soft kiss to my cheek. “Are you alright?” I nodded as I dropped my forehead to his bare chest, an uncontrollable yawn escaping my mouth. “Please tell me that was the yawn of a worn-out woman and not a yawn of boredom.”

“How could I be bored when I just had sex in the back seat of a car for the first time?”

He beamed with pride, showing off his bone-white teeth. “Yeah, you did.”

He was smiling now, but he was definitely going to be sore tomorrow at graduation.

In order to fuck me properly, his large frame bent and twisted into positions I didn’t think were possible. Why couldn’t we just enjoy a nice and slow woman-on-top scenario? Was it normal to be *that* consumed by each other? So consumed that even when it was enough, it still wasn’t enough?

“Such a cocky asshole,” I mumbled as I rolled off his lap, my thighs wet and sticky as I leaned over and snatched my panties from the front seat.

How did they even get there?

“Speaking of cocks and assholes...”

Jordan’s teeth nipped my ass cheek, and my eyes bulged. I swung around and slapped his arm with my panties. “Not happening, King!”

He brushed my hair back from my face and cupped my cheeks, then he skimmed the seam of my lips with his warm tongue, a move he knew drove me wild. “One day, baby. One day.”

He reached for his discarded boxer briefs and began wiping his release

from the apex of my thighs like he always did. I reached out and skated the tip of my index finger down his cheek, then hooked it under his chin, forcing his crystal-blue eyes to mine. “Your aftercare is exceptional.”

“When I dirty you up, I clean you up.”

“And why is that, King?” I asked with a fluttery feeling in my stomach.

Jordan’s hand stilled, his underwear falling to the floor as a nerve quickened in his jaw. The fierce sharpness of his stare penetrated to my core, and the full force of unspoken words weighed heavy in the air.

I drew in a shaky breath, the thoughts I needed to vocalize clogging up my throat, clouding my vision with tears. “Goddammit,” I muttered, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes.

I was terrified.

Terrified to relinquish my whole heart with the risk of its ruination.

Terrified of who I’d become when we met our tragic fate.

And I knew we would.

Only in fairy tales do hopeless romantics end up with kings.

Pulling my hands away, Jordan pressed his forehead to mine, a crooked smile settling on his lips. “I love you, Harper Kelly. So fucking much.”

My heart thumped wildly in my chest as my gaze cataloged every last detail of his magnificent face. When I left for college, this would be one of the moments I held on to, and I didn’t want to forget a thing.

There was a desperate plea in his eyes and voice when he said, “Say something, baby. *Please.*”

I blinked back the last remaining tear and smiled. “I love you, too, J. So fucking much.”

He was on me in an instant, his hungry mouth taking possession of mine, melting my insides like chocolate, and his strong arms wrapped around me—tight and safe and *right*.

Breaking our kiss, I cradled his face in my hands and shook my head. “How are we going to say goodbye, Jordan? How am I going to walk away from you?”

“We talked about this, Harper. No goodbyes. We’ll make it work.” He inclined his dark head and sealed his promise with another blistering kiss, a kiss we got lost in until the milky glow of the moon was replaced by the indigo blue of dawn.

Naïve wishes and silly dreams of forever blazed in my heart—the hopeful organ snug and warm in Jordan’s clenched fist—completely unaware that

when cruel reality set in, those wishes and dreams would decompose, and the evidence of my heart's annihilation would be on Jordan's hands.

HARPER



“*K*elly and King, forced together one last time,” Jordan joked under his breath as we crossed the lush green football field and found our assigned seats on the forty-yard line.

“See this?” I pointed at my wide, cheesy smile. “This is because I’m finally getting rid of you.”

He chuckled as he inclined his mouth toward my ear. “I bet you wish that were *actually* true, baby.”

Feeling energized and optimistic, even the heavy gray clouds hanging in the sky couldn’t break our spirits. In front of a jammed-packed crowd looking on from the bleachers, it was time to say goodbye to Fair Oak High.

Over my gold graduation gown, Jordan’s hand came to rest on my thigh, then slid toward my center, and I giggled, pushing his touch away. “You’re insane. Stop fondling me and help me find Gramps and Lori.”

Yes, Lori showed up for my graduation.

And yes, it made my cynical heart happy.

As I scanned the crowd for my other favorite guy, Jordan jerked his head to the left. “Doting grandfather and absentee mother, nine o’clock.”

Wedge between the Sullivans and Lori, Gramps donned a tropical flamingo shirt and held up a large homemade poster that read, “Way to go, Harper Rae!”

I recognized the writing as Kylie’s and instantly loved my best friend more.

While Gramps whistled and cheered, Lori remained seated and offered a small wave. Haunted by ghosts living and dead, she couldn’t mask the

discomfort she felt in this place, yet she came anyway...for me.

As the ceremony began, Jordan brazenly laced his fingers through mine, holding my hand in public for the very first time. No one was watching—all eyes were on the stage—but I felt his proclamation in my bones.

A silent *I love you*.

A silent *I'm yours, and you're mine*.

"This is it, Kelly." He smiled down at me as Mr. Warren stepped up to the podium and began listing our names. "The end of an era."

"But the start of a better one." I smiled back.

Glancing over my shoulder, I found Kylie in the third to last row, her big brown eyes sparkling with joy. She puckered her glossy lips and winked, and I returned the gesture.

And then, it was time to graduate.

"Harper Kelly." My name crackled through the stadium speakers, but all I heard was the ear-splitting whistle of the enthusiastic old man in the crowd, the one with a smile spread across his wrinkled face while he pumped his fist in victory.

"Love you, Harper Rae!" Gramps cupped his mouth and shouted as I walked to the stage.

I blew him a kiss as I ascended the stairs, and my heart fluttered with pride as Jordan's name was called next.

After we threw our caps in the air, our families made their way down to the field, Gramps and Lori on one side, Conrad, Serena, and Devlin on the other.

"So I'll see you at Maggie's at six?" I asked before we went our separate ways.

His mouth twisted into a wide grin. "I'll be there, baby."

"Why do you keep glancing at the door?" Lori asked as she wiped her hands on her napkin then pushed her empty plate to the side.

"I'm not," I lied, setting my untouched cheeseburger back on my plate.

"Oh, but you are," she tittered. "Are you waiting on Casanova?"

I shot Lori a stern look.

Did she really need to use that nickname?

“Who?” Gramps frowned in confusion.

His flamingo shirt was so bright that I couldn’t help but smile despite the sinking feeling in my stomach. “Jordan, Gramps.”

“Ah,” he drawled. “Yes, I guess Casanova does suit him, doesn’t it?”

Lori belted a laugh, and I elbowed her arm.

It wasn’t like Jordan to be late, and on the rare occasion he was, he’d send a text explaining himself.

My gaze dipped to my phone resting on my lap.

Nothing.

“Are you worried?” Lori asked, her eyebrows knitting together, the humor draining from her features.

“Kind of,” I admitted with a shrug. “It’s not like him to say he’d be here and then not show up.”

Lori lifted her chin in the direction of the door. “So go check on him.”

“What? No.” I shook my head. “This is my graduation dinner. We’re celebrating.”

“You’ve barely touched your food.” She motioned to my full plate. “We’ll take this to go, then we’ll meet you back at the house for cake.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, but I was already sliding out of the turquoise booth.

“We’re sure. I hope everything is okay.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Me too.”

There were cars parked everywhere, and animated laughter drifted through the evening air. While I was worried and waiting, Jordan was throwing a goddamn party, and he couldn’t be bothered to tell me.

As I strode up the long driveway in my red skater dress and white Converse, the sharp fangs of anger and disappointment sank into my skin. It was the warmest night of the year, but my body felt cold—a stubborn winter descending upon my heart.

I rang the doorbell and waited.

When no one answered, I let myself in.

The scene was familiar chaos, except this time, I was too pissed off to care.

“Harper?” Mrs. King glided into the foyer and allowed her gaze to slowly sweep over my attire in open displeasure. “Can I help you with something?”

Translation: You weren't invited.

I steeled my back, trying to ignore the nervousness swirling in my stomach. “I’m looking for your son.”

Translation: Fuck off.

She placed her hand on her slim hip and scoffed. “Which one? You’ll need to be more specific since you’ve been known to toy with both.”

Not that it mattered anymore, but I refused to be shamed by this woman. “Funny, the way I remember it, Devlin cheated on *me*.”

“Like hell I cheated on you.” My head whipped to the side at the sound of Devlin’s voice, and my heart stilled. He lingered near the dining room entrance, confusion plowing his brow as he stepped closer. “Who told you that?”

Multiple images pinged through my mind. “I-I saw you that morning...in your bed.”

Devlin closed the distance between us and reopened the front door. “Let’s go outside,” he whispered, glancing at his mother as he placed his hand on the center of my back.

He was protecting me, shielding me from her wrath.

That was the Devlin I remembered.

As soon as he closed the door behind us, he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I thought I was past high school drama.”

“Yeah, me too, but here we are,” I threw my arms out wide. “It might have been a year ago, but I remember what I saw, Devlin.”

“I know what you saw, too,” he clipped with a somber expression. “I got bombed with Jordan and his friends the night before, and I passed out... alone. When you showed up, Camille was in my bed, and we were both naked, but she’d only arrived fifteen minutes before you did, and her thirst trap didn’t work. I’m a lot of things, Harper, but I’m not a fucking cheater.”

His explanation fell from his lips like stones, rippling through the stillness within me.

“Jordan,” I choked out as my heart stuttered, “Jordan made it sound like you slept with her.”

He snickered. “I’m not surprised. You two never seem to care about the victims in your twisted games, which is why I moved on...happily.”

Happily? With Camille?

To each their own.

I hugged myself as my eyes clouded with tears. Even though it would hurt like hell, I needed to suffer through the truth. “Did Jordan know you didn’t cheat on me?”

He stroked his jaw as his head shook. “Yeah, I’m not doing this.”

“Hey, man.” Jordan rounded the house. “I need you to cover for me so I can—”

“So you can what?” I interjected through the wedge of anger in my throat.

He cursed under his breath and advanced toward me. “Harp, I’m so sorry. My mom threw me this surprise graduation party, and I can’t find my phone, and—”

“You lied to me.” My voice was so cold and controlled, I hardly recognized it.

“That’s my cue.” Devlin clapped his hands together and retreated inside.

“I didn’t lie to you.” The words jolted nervously from Jordan’s mouth.

“No?” I growled. “*What’s the matter? Can’t handle brother dearest dipping his dick in another chick?*” I quoted him word for cruel word. “You knew what you were doing! You were fucking with me, just like you always do.” Then it dawned on me. “Oh, my god, you let Camille in that morning, didn’t you? You *wanted* Devlin to cheat on me.”

“Harper, I’m so sorry.” His expression was drawn in agony, for his pain and mine. “You two didn’t belong together.”

Bitter disappointment sagged through me. “No. *We* don’t belong together.”

I turned to walk away, but he clung to my wrist, his eyes pleading with me to stay. “What can I do? Tell me how I can make this better.”

It was like we were stuck in slow motion, thinking we were moving forward but really, we weren’t going anywhere. I thought he had changed, but his heart remained the same.

Hardened.

Hollow.

Hopeless.

“Nothing.” I rubbed my sternum, attempting to suppress the ache in my chest. “There’s nothing you can do to make this better. We lied to each other. We used other people. Hell, we lied to ourselves.” I slowly backed away from him as my eyes bore into him. “This is over, Jordan. So fucking over.”

This time, he didn’t try to stop me when I walked away.

I plucked Halsey's Badlands CD from my holder and skipped to "Colors," cranking up the volume as I drove to Kylie's. The heavy burden of heartache charged in for an attack as the lyrics struck a chord inside me, and my eyes glazed over with tears as I pulled into her driveway.

Concern marred her delicate features when she answered the door. "Harper? What's wrong?" she asked, stepping out onto the porch in leggings and a baggy T-shirt. She was spending graduation night with her family, watching movies and playing board games, exactly what I should've been doing.

Instead, I ditched Gramps and Lori for a stupid, stupid guy.

"It was a lie," I whispered as a tear rolled over my lips, guilt cresting over me. "It was all a fucking lie."

"Babe, you're scaring me." Her voice broke with worry. She guided me to the porch swing and forced me to sit. "What was a lie?"

"Me and Jordan."

"You and Jordan?" She frowned.

I wiped my nose on the back of my hand and sniffled. "We've been together for a few months, Ky."

"Like *together*, together?"

"Together, together," I confirmed. "And I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. We thought it was better to keep it a secret, but it wasn't. It was so foolish. *I* was foolish, but it's over now. We're done."

"Well, damn." Her eyes grew wide as she used her feet to make the swing sway. "I gotta hand it to you. I didn't think you had it in you," she mused, head tilted slightly.

"You're not mad?"

"I'm shocked, but I'm not mad, Harp. If you kept your relationship to yourself, I'm sure you had a good reason."

Even when I couldn't stand the person I'd become, Kylie loved me anyway.

I hugged her tight and cried on her shoulder for long minutes, releasing all the hurt and anger that clogged my veins as I came to terms with the bitter truth: the blindness of my stupid heart ruined any chance I had to rescue it from Jordan's sharp claws.

Once he secured his grip, he twisted and tugged, my blood dripping off his knuckles and cascading down his wrist as he pulled the life from my body, drawing me closer to the sweetest death.

Once he invaded my brain with his words of passion, his smooth-as-silk whispers of devotion, and the promises he uttered in the dark, I became a fool in the name of love.

And I hated myself for it.

Broken and bare, I pulled myself together and headed home.

Kylie must've called to warn them I was in bad shape because the porch lights came on as soon as I parked, and Gramps and Lori rushed to my side. Gramps pulled me to his chest while Lori ran her fingers through my hair, and I murmured the same two words I'd been repeating during my journey home.

A prayer. A declaration. A promise.

“Never again. Never again. Never again.”

JORDAN



*M*y head pounded as each minute ticked by, tension weighing heavy on my shoulders as I paced around my bedroom, calling and texting Harper to the point where my aching fingers began to cramp. I'd been at it for hours, and still, I couldn't stop.

The devastated look on her face when she walked away from me knocked me on my ass.

I was a fucking idiot to think she wouldn't ever find out what I'd done.

Now, I needed to explain myself.

At sunrise, I pounded an espresso, tugged on a Phillies ball cap, and headed out the door wearing the same clothes I'd worn yesterday. I didn't go to Harper's because I knew better than to assume she wouldn't slam the door in my face. And just the thought of witnessing Big Jim's disappointment was like a swift kick to the balls. His granddaughter was his whole world, and I let her down, therefore letting him down.

Instead, I headed to Maggie's and parked myself in Harper's favorite booth. She wouldn't start her Saturday without an omelet and greasy hash browns no matter how upset she was, and I'd wait as long as it took to get the chance to speak to her.

I placed an order with Gina and turned my gaze toward the window, massaging my stiff neck as I watched the sidewalk traffic pick up and cars filter into the empty parking spaces along the street. The café soon buzzed with lively conversation, the line of people waiting for a table growing longer and longer.

"Here ya go," Gina said as she set a mug of black coffee and a cup of

bright fruit in front of me.

“Thanks, Gina.”

I popped a grape into my mouth, and the sweet juice bursting on my tongue reminded me of Harper. Suddenly, my temples pulsed with pressure so intense, my ball cap felt too tight on my head. I yanked it off and raked my fingers through my hair before replacing it, but the pressure continued its ruthless assault.

After just one day without her, I was already feeling the physical effects of breaking her heart.

The bell above the door chimed, and I glanced up to see a blur of blond hair head to the counter. “Order for K. Sullivan.” Kylie smiled at the cashier and handed over her card. She rocked back on her heels while she waited for her receipt to print, rearing back when she turned her head and finally noticed me, a dagger-sharp scowl overtaking her face.

I expected her to leave once the server handed her a brown paper bag. Instead, Kylie marched right over to my table and slammed her fist down. “You selfish son of a bitch,” she hissed, bitterness dripping from every word.

“Can’t even argue with you on that one, Kylie Jo.” I snickered as I pulled the to-go bag from her hand and peeked inside, seeing a box labeled **extra cheese omelet s/o hash browns** in permanent marker. My heart clunked against my ribs. “How’s she doing?”

She crossed her arms and arched an accusing brow. “How do you think she’s doing, Jordan? She’s inconsolable. I mean, I knew you were an asshole, but manipulating her to believe Devlin cheated on her? That’s a whole new low.”

“I’ve been calling her. Texting her. I just need to explain...”

“Her phone died, and she hasn’t bothered charging it. She doesn’t want to speak to you. Hell, *I* don’t even want to speak to you. I just thought you should know you made the biggest mistake of your sad, pathetic life.”

“Once again, I can’t argue with you.”

Her lips thinned as her gaze swept over my wrinkled polo. “Weren’t you wearing that at graduation?”

I smoothed a hand down my chest and nodded. “Rough night, KJ. Kind of blew it with the girl I’ve been in love with for most of my life. Trying to speak with her trumps menial tasks like changing into clean clothes.”

“Like you know anything about love,” she huffed, her words cutting into me like a serrated knife.

I shot her a hostile glare. “I know Harper’s all I ever think about. I know there’s nothing in this goddamn world I wouldn’t do for her. I know that she’s the only stable thing in my life, and without her, I don’t know who I am or what the hell I’m doing. If that’s not love, then you’re right, I don’t know what the fuck is.”

A slight but audible gulp jerked her chin, and she combed her fingers absentmindedly through her hair. I didn’t know Kylie all that well, but the wistful look in her eyes gave me hope that maybe, just maybe, she believed I wasn’t messing around. That what I felt for Harper was real.

She dipped her chin, pinched the bridge of her nose, and shook her head. “F-M-L,” she muttered under her breath before she dropped onto the bench across from me. “She’s waiting in my car on Sweeney. You have five minutes.”

I was moving before she even finished. “I owe you big time, Kylie Jo,” I said, throwing a twenty on the table and sliding out of the booth like my ass was on fire. I pushed my way through the crowd and tore the café door open, barreling down the sidewalk and around the corner toward Kylie’s cherry-red Fiat.

When I climbed into the driver’s seat, darkness instantly clouded Harper’s features. “Nope. This isn’t happening,” she fumed, moving to open the door and flee. I reached for her arm on instinct, and her gaze shifted to my hand on her skin, then up to my face. Even with a sea of tears glimmering in those bright-green eyes, she looked beautiful.

“I wanted to tell you. I swear I did, but—”

“But what?” she demanded. “But you weren’t man enough to own what you did?”

“But I didn’t want to hurt you! Maybe he didn’t cheat, but Devlin wasn’t completely innocent. He was drunk off his ass and flirting with every girl that night. Camille crawled into bed with him that morning all on her own. When you got there, I knew it looked bad, but I thought maybe you’d finally see how wrong you two were for each other.”

“So you were doing me a favor then?” A cynical laugh rippled through her. “I was honest with you. I told you everything before this even started because I *knew* our lies would ruin us. Do you have any idea how much it hurts knowing that you not only hid the truth but you also orchestrated this whole thing?”

“I didn’t orchestrate this.” I frowned. “This is real, Harper, and you know

it.”

“You manipulated me, mocked me, and made a fool of me.” She ticked off my sins on her fingers and snorted in disgust. “If this is the real us, I’m grateful this is over.”

“I’ll drown without you, Harp,” I rasped, but the words seemed to catch in my throat. My hands took hold of hers, but she quickly tugged them back.

“Don’t touch me, Jordan.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks and shrugged, something between a laugh and a sob escaping her throat. “My infatuation with you was infuriating, blinding even, and for that, I will take some of the blame. We were so focused on what other people thought, we caged ourselves in and concealed us from the world. This relationship was doomed to fail from the beginning.”

“Sweetheart, please don’t do this,” I bellowed. My arms ached to hold her, to feel her against me, but reaching for her again would further prove what a selfish asshole I really was.

“Don’t.” She held up her palm. “Don’t fucking call me that.”

Her pain-soaked tone diminished any hope I had of fixing what I’d done.

Our love was burning at our feet, and I couldn’t do a damn thing to save it.

Just then, Kylie strode down the sidewalk, tapping her wrist. Waiting for me to get out of her car, she posted up against the brick exterior of Mr. Dunne’s sandwich shop, the red-and-white Help Wanted sign hanging on his door taunting me. “Looks like our time’s up.” I sighed.

Harper sniffled and turned away, letting her forehead touch the window. “Looks like it.” Accepting defeat, I reached for the latch on the door, but my body stilled when she said, “I knew falling for you would annihilate my heart, and like an idiot, I let it happen anyway.”

I glanced over my shoulder, the impact of her tortured stare knocking the air from my lungs. “I knew loving you would destroy me too, Harper. But as soon as I kissed you, I abandoned the idea that I was capable of loving anyone *but* you.”

She sat up straighter in her seat and drew in a long breath. “Yeah, well, yours is the kind of love I can live without.”

Numbness and dejection infused my body.

I felt worthless.

Weary.

Weak.

“Please, don’t do this, Harper,” I begged. “Please.”

She held my gaze for a beat, her lip snatched between her teeth. I thought she’d change her mind, maybe give me one more chance, but I was wrong. “It’s time for you to go, King.”

On the drive home, my insides churned, and my chest heaved. Perspiration pricked my body, and dizziness made it impossible to see straight. I managed to pull over and exit the car just as my stomach revolted. When I stumbled too close to the road, an angry truck driver honked and yelled, “Watch it, asshole!” through an open window, and I scrambled backward, placing both hands on the warm hood of my car to steady myself.

After all those years of guiding Harper through her panic attacks, I finally understood what she was going through.

The loss of control.

The confusion.

The inability to breathe.

It was scary as hell.

Only, that feeling didn’t last minutes. It lasted days, weeks.

When I was packing up my shit for college, it finally hit me that it wasn’t a panic attack at all. It was the excruciating hazard of falling for my best friend.

One that didn’t come with a warning label.

One that didn’t come with a cure, either.

HARPER



It was a Friday night in June, and Kylie and I were dancing our asses off at The Riff, shimmying in our denim cutoffs, bobbing our heads as an indie rock band reminiscent of Florence + the Machine owned the stage.

“There’s that smile I know and love,” Kylie shouted over the drumming, her warm, damp hands drifting up to my cheeks. “Wasn’t sure I’d ever see it again.”

It’d been a month since Jordan ambushed me in her car. A month of tears and anger and watching every single episode of *Gossip Girl* on streaming, thanks to a bout of insomnia.

Time became a suggestion. Minutes felt like hours and hours felt like days. And the days spent grieving the end of a relationship were like being trapped in shackles of your own making, binding you to the past instead of allowing you to move forward.

But I was fighting, and I was thriving, and although happiness still hovered out of reach, as each day passed, I was closer and closer to reclaiming it. And with people like Kylie and—wait for it—Lori sticking by my side, I knew I’d recover eventually.

Loving Jordan was an accidental stumble, but here I was, finally getting back up on my feet.

“Me either,” I shouted back in a scratchy voice, mouth drier than cotton.

A large, sweat-soaked body knocked into me from behind, shoving me into Kylie. That, combined with the full weight of the moisture in the air, made my head spin. I jerked my chin toward the bar and gestured that I

needed a drink, so Kylie took my hand and led the way.

I claimed a stool at the bar and gained the bartender's attention, holding up two fingers. She nodded as she towel-dried the glass in her hand, set it on the rack, and retrieved two bottles of water. I guzzled mine down in one breath, my parched lips grateful for the refreshment.

Kylie grabbed hers and twisted off the cap, then twisted it right back on. "I'm gonna find Grant and say hello. Be right back."

"I see how it is," I said over my shoulder, twisting in my seat to find she was already gone.

Sighing, I freed up my stool and headed toward the restrooms. As the next band prepared for their set, the dim lights grew brighter, illuminating a couch in a darkened corner and the familiar body sprawled across it.

Jordan's eyes were unfocused, and his head hung low. My feet carried me directly to him, and I cradled his face in my hands. His skin was chalky and gray like dirty milk and cool to the touch, and I was torn between wanting to scream at him or comfort him.

"Harp?" His eyes grew wide as he snaked his arms around me and dropped his forehead to my chest, his warm tears dripping onto my skin. "God, I'm so fucked up without you." His gruff voice trembled like the arms he held me with.

Beneath his signature citrus scent lay the more ominous odors of weed and whiskey.

The smell of self-loathing and moral decay.

He glanced up at me then, a moment of clarity bleeding through his confusion and sorrow. "I called Hurley. Asked if he could hook me up with something strong. He showed up with a blunt and some chick. I only accepted the blunt."

Fucking Hurley.

"Shouldn't you be at school?" I asked.

"It's so quiet there, Harp. So quiet and isolated and all I do is think."

He began to cry again, and I rocked him gently. "Shhh."

The lights began to fade, and the crowd began to cheer. I managed to pull my phone from my pocket and fire off two texts, one to Kylie and one to the only person I could think to help in this situation.

As the low strum of a bass guitar incited the roar of the crowd, I got to my feet and held out my hand. "Come on, baby. Let's go outside."

An almost-full moon and radiant starlight glimmered on us as we located

an empty bench and sat down. “We claimed the moon as our own, but we never learned how to touch the sky,” I uttered to myself, recalling all the nights we hid beneath those very stars.

Jordan must’ve heard me because he whispered, “I always said you’d be my undoing.” His voice was thick with emotion, and helplessness clouded his eyes.

I brushed his hair back softly with my knuckles, a wedge of anger mixed with grief filling my throat. I had so much to say, but I trapped the words between my teeth and checked the time on my phone, praying this would all be over soon.

Finally, a green Camry rolled to a stop in front of us, and Lori rushed out in jean shorts and a T-shirt, her keys clasped in her hand. “Is he coherent?”

I nodded. “He just seems tired.”

“Let’s get him to my car.”

Together, we hoisted Jordan up and laced his arms around our necks. With a heavy sigh, his head moved drowsily against my shoulder, forcing me to bear most of his weight. Lori opened the back door, and we managed to ease him down without his head colliding with the doorframe. I sat with him on the way to the Kings’, my fingers delving through his soft hair as his head rested in my lap, unshed tears fogging my vision.

For Jordan’s well-being and my own, this aching madness needed to end.

Lori

I could never comprehend how some women believed they were born to be mothers. Like their only purpose in life was to reproduce then raise babies, willingly giving up their unique identity.

Even on the day I gave birth, I felt disconnected from Harper.

“Is something wrong with me?” I’d sob against Beau’s shirt, smearing it with tears and snot while he did his best to hold me together, running his fingers through my greasy hair as he hummed our favorite song, the vibrations in his chest soothing my aching heart.

Insomnia prevented me from sleeping, but I couldn’t leave our bed.

My stomach begged for food, but I couldn’t bring myself to eat.

The doctors called it postpartum depression; I called it defeat.

It took some time, but with the right combination of medication, I was finally able to hold Harper in my arms without crying. I was finally able to get through the day without feeling like the world might cave in.

Beau's death sent me right back to that dark, empty place, and without his hands to hold me, without his voice humming our song, my world really did implode.

It didn't matter that I still had the best gift he ever gave me—a living, breathing piece of him to hold on to. Even Harper couldn't pull me from the black tunnel in my mind that seemed to have no end.

Some called me selfish, others called me neglectful, but as I glanced at the amazing young woman in my rearview mirror, I knew I provided Harper with a wonderful life when I entrusted her to my dad. Because of him, she was loyal, fierce, and so damn strong, proving my painful decision was the best I'd ever made.

“Everyone okay back there?”

Continuing to gaze out the window, Harper bit down on her lower lip and nodded.

The King McMansion was just as I remembered it.

I'd only been there once—another lifetime ago—but it still represented wealth and prosperity in a way no other home in Fair Oak could.

I parked on the circular driveway and glanced at the massive front door, and the fine hairs on the back of my neck itched beneath the collar of my threadbare gray T-shirt. Serena King could be critical and cruel, but I knew she was fiercely protective of those she loved.

Still, this conversation wouldn't be easy.

I twisted in my seat. “Wait here with Casanova. No point in waking him if no one's home.”

Harper glanced down at Jordan, then back at me. “His mother won't be kind.”

I unbuckled my seat belt and opened the door. “She never is.”

It took me twelve steps to reach the door, the symbolism not lost on me. I rang the doorbell and listened to the crickets chirping in the sultry summer night while I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

When the bright porch lights flicked on, my posture firmed, and I

squeezed my hands into fists by my sides.

Serena opened the door with a pageant smile that evaporated the instant her eyes collided with mine. “Lori.” My name sounded sour on her tongue. “What are you doing here?”

Her superior tone wasn’t anything new. Even at this late hour, Serena was dressed like Victoria Beckham at a fashion show while I looked like Mary-Kate Olsen going on a coffee run, and as her reproachful gaze skimmed over my attire, her judgment pricked like tiny needles along my skin.

“Nice to see you too, Rena.”

“Do *not* call me that,” she warned, stepping outside and closing the door behind her as if my wretched presence alone could infiltrate her home.

I knew the nickname would piss her off, which is why I used it, but witnessing her smooth skin crinkle in annoyance was an added bonus.

“Although I hate repeating myself, I’ll ask you once more.” She tucked her black hair behind her ear. “Why are you here?”

It’d been sixteen years since we’d last spoken, and I thought maybe time would cool some of her burning hostility toward me. Clearly, I was wrong, but I couldn’t find it within myself to care. She had her reasons for disliking me, but ultimately, this wasn’t about us. It was about her kid.

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. “I brought Jordan home. He had an incident at The Riff.”

“Jordan’s in town? He’s supposed to be at school.” Her eyebrows slanted down, her voice taking on a softer tone. “What sort of incident?”

“The kind he won’t remember in the morning.” She took a step toward my Camry, but I blocked her path, and her eyes narrowed. “I know you don’t give a damn about my opinion, but I think he needs help, Serena.”

“My son is just fine,” she clipped, her disbelieving expression drawn tight.

“Your son is self-medicating. He has been for a while now. Luckily, Harper was there to help him tonight, but what if she wasn’t?”

Her measured gaze traveled to my car, then her feet carried her in the same direction. “Why should I take motherly advice from *you*?”

Her question stung, but something told me the pain and anger lurking in her bones were vital to the woman Serena had become—the sharp matriarch of her powerful family.

I rushed to her side, pain funneling to my heart as she pressed her hand to the window and scrutinized Jordan through the glass.

“Because I *wish* someone had offered to help me in my darkest moment.” Her gaze snapped to mine, and some of the starchiness in her frame dissolved. “Look, I get it...you still think you’re better than me.” I motioned to the vast house behind me. “You may be rich as hell, but that doesn’t mean your son isn’t struggling. I’ve learned that being a good person—a good mother—is a choice. Do you want to get Jordan the help he needs or wait to see how far he falls? Because I’m warning you, he’s on the brink of something truly dangerous.”

Chances were slim that *my* words would have any effect on this woman, but I needed to try.

I held my breath, dread swirling in my gut as I waited for her response, until she finally mumbled, “Shit,” and her thin frame wilted. Her hand jutted out, and she braced herself against the door as she cried soft, almost inaudible tears. I pressed my palm to my chest, trying to suppress the sorrow that rattled within, trying to hold back tears of my own as this strong woman broke right before my eyes.

It didn’t matter that our history was complicated. She was a mother, and her son was in pain, similar to what I felt for many, many years.

“What do I need to do, Lori?” she asked, swiping at the moisture on her cheeks, desperation written in her eyes.

I released a long exhale. “Let’s get him inside, and we’ll figure it out.”

“You okay?” I glanced over at Harper sitting cross-legged in the passenger seat as we drove home later that night.

She shook her head and frowned. “I knew our love would change my life, then shatter me. I just never thought it would break him, too.”

“He’ll get better.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“With acceptance comes healing.”

She let my words resonate, then rolled her eyes. “So poetic.”

“So true.”

I learned many lessons in rehab, but that one was the most profound. My sponsor liked to reiterate it on days when I was particularly interested in reliving the past, and it always seemed to center me. Serena and I agreed

Jordan probably didn't require the same treatment I did. What he needed was a constructive way to battle his demons and accept life for what it was.

Until he did, he wouldn't be good enough for my daughter.

As she glanced out the window, Harper pulled at her bottom lip, a move I knew all too well.

"Your dad used to do that."

Her head swung in my direction, and her eyebrows pinched together. "Do what?"

"Tug on his lip when he had something on his mind."

A small smile softened the harshness of her mouth. "I like when you casually mention him like that."

"I like casually mentioning him." I signaled with my blinker and turned right onto Dad's street. "So...what's on your mind?"

"I feel like I failed him," she murmured, her eyes downcast as she picked at her thumbnail.

My heart sank. "Harper, you can't fix someone who's broken."

"I know. Doesn't make it hurt any less, though."

I pulled into the driveway and turned off the ignition, but neither of us moved. "Care for some advice?"

"Sure." She shrugged.

"I think you need to change your mindset and stop allowing Jordan to get the best of you. You're going to college in a few weeks, and your life is only just beginning. Give yourself the chance to enjoy it."

A look of wistfulness flashed over her face, then she nodded. "You're right," she said, encircling her arms around my neck and hugging me. "Thank you, Mom."

Mom.

A sob caught in my throat as I wrapped my arms around my girl, hugging her back for the first time in years. "You're welcome, honey," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

It took a while to get here, but the long journey was worth it.

I knew the road ahead would still have its share of bumps and detours, but for the first time in a long time, I was looking forward to the drive.

PART TWO

HARPER



Twenty-three years old

“Open your eyes, babe. I know you hear me.”

I lay motionless, frozen in place on an itchy old couch that smelled like mothballs, hoping if I didn’t move, Kylie would grant me a few more minutes of silence.

“Honey?” Lori’s fingertips brushed across my forehead. “If you don’t want to go through with it, everyone will understand. But you need to let us know now.”

I peeked one eye open. “No...” I sniffled “...I need to do this.”

Pushing myself up into a sitting position, I glanced around the dusty storage room, wondering how many others found solace in the small space.

How many broken hearts bled all over the floor?

How many ghosts haunted the walls?

My boyfriend, Cal, appeared in the doorway. “The funeral director’s getting antsy. I can stall a little bit longer, but—”

“We’ll be right there.” Kylie knelt in front of me and patted my cheek with a soft tissue. “Ready to honor Big Jim?”

I nodded once as I rose to my feet.

“Love you, sweetheart,” Lori said, tugging me into a hug.

“Love you too, Mom.”

Lori was the only family I had left, and I needed her more than ever. Not only for the connection to Gramps but also for the days when I felt lost and confused and she knew just what he would say to make it better.

It had been a whirlwind of a year, to say the least.

In the fall, Gramps suffered a minor heart attack, prompting Lori to put her life in North Carolina on hold and return to Fair Oak indefinitely. She accompanied him to every doctor's appointment, took care of the yard work, and even managed to work from home as a medical transcriber. I offered to take time off graduate school as well, but she and Gramps insisted I stay put.

We thought we had more time.

We thought with a healthier diet, rest, and relaxation, Gramps would make a full recovery.

Then five days ago, a second heart attack—*the widow-maker*, as his doctor called it—claimed his life.

And I never got the chance to say goodbye.

Lori and I walked down the long corridor hand in hand. Our matching A-line chiffon dresses swayed around our knees, the deep-blue fabric reminiscent of a cloudless sky. Gramps never wore black to funerals because he said life should be celebrated in color, not mourned in its absence, so we requested all funeral attendees dress in their brightest attire.

As we walked into the memorial service, the sea of color before us confirmed what we already knew. Jim Kelly had touched *many* lives.

Lori took a seat in the front row beside Cal, and as his eyes locked on mine, I smoothed down my dress and glanced away.

I should've been grateful to have such a charismatic and dependable boyfriend.

Instead, I was starting to feel suffocated.

I was too inconsolable to communicate what I needed, and Calvin seemed to be doing *everything* wrong. Hugging me when I didn't want to be touched. Urging me to talk when I wanted to cry in silence. Telling me I'd get through it when it felt like my world was ending.

Gramps's passing was the hardest test we'd faced as a couple, and *I* was failing miserably.

When I took my spot at the podium near Gramps's casket, panic set in.

Nervousness churned in my stomach.

Small tremors rattled my bones.

And my sweaty hands gripped the wooden edge so tightly that I feared it would splinter.

"On behalf of my mother and me, I want to thank you all for coming today. We appreciate all of the kind words, home-cooked meals, and

beautiful bouquets we've received over the past few days. Your hospitality is a true testament to the man my grandfather was."

A bead of sweat trickled down my spine, and blood whooshed in my ears. I smoothed down the sheet of notebook paper I'd written on and focused on the jet-black ink.

"The greatness of Jim Kelly cannot be defined by a single role. Sure, he was a wonderful husband, father, and grandfather. But he was also Chief Kelly, the man familiar with every single family in this town. Big Jim, the man who handed out full-size candy bars at Halloween. And if you've ever seen him out on Blue Creek Lake, you'd know him as The No-Luck Fisherman, the man who could never get those fish to bite."

The crowd chuckled, and I took the opportunity to inhale a shuddered breath, air whizzing between my teeth and into my lungs.

"He was a rule follower, my gramps, but he also recognized some rules were made to be broken, and certain matters required a different approach. And I think...I think that's why so many people loved him."

My voice trembled as the sudden weight of my emotions threatened to crush me.

I'll never hear his voice again.

I'll never see him smile again.

I'll never hear his laugh again.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, and when I reopened them, my gaze landed on *him*.

Sitting a head taller than those around him, wearing a bumblebee-yellow button-down shirt and an impassive expression, Jordan became my focal point. His watchful eyes held mine, then he licked his pillowy lips and mouthed, "You've got this," with a slight nod. And like a life preserver, his encouragement kept me afloat, preventing me from drowning.

"His patience was steadfast. His kindness was authentic. His love was immense. I can say with absolute certainty that every single person he crossed paths with was better for knowing him. *I'm* better for knowing him." My gaze slanted to Jordan once more. "Thank you."

I took a seat between Cal and Kylie and listened as Lori said a few words. Cal's hand offered no amount of peace as it covered mine, and each time his thumb skimmed over my skin, I suppressed a wince. After six months together, I should have felt comforted by his nearness. Instead, it illustrated all the ways he was wrong for me.

At the end of the service, Lori and I stood near the exit and greeted everyone in the receiving line.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Warren,” I said with a small smile and a handshake.

After all these years, Fair Oak’s favorite guidance counselor still looked the same.

“Of course, Harper. Your grandfather was a wonderful man.”

“He sure was,” I rasped, throat clogged with emotion as I tried to hold it together.

A familiar awareness scattered down my spine as a demanding presence in a bright-yellow shirt entered my peripheral, and my stubborn heart beat out of cadence.

Mr. Warren clasped his hands behind his back and turned to address Jordan. “I’ll meet you at the car whenever you’re ready.”

When Jordan glanced my way, I quirked a brow, and he shoved his hands into the pockets of his smooth khakis, shrugging his shoulders in a boyish sort of way.

Huh.

Standing before him reminded me of how massive his body was. I drank in his broad shoulders, large chest, and narrow hips before my gaze darted to the contours of his veiny forearms visible below his rolled-up sleeves.

What the hell was it about those arms that made me melt like warm butter?

Sure, they were drool-worthy and *oh*, so fun to stare at...but it was more than that.

They were reliable, trustworthy, and protective. And when he held me with them? I was untouchable.

Jordan cleared his throat, and I lifted my gaze in time to see his jaw twitch. His left hand came to rest on my waist, scorching my skin through my dress. Electricity coursed through my veins, jump-starting my heart like it’d been asleep for years.

I hadn’t heard from him since that fateful night, but updates on his situation were impossible to ignore, especially when they came from my own mother.

Apparently, Serena decided school could wait, and Jordan skipped the summer term in order to take care of himself. He started therapy and did some sort of intense detox, and from what I’d gathered, he was happy and

healthy and the newest employee of CKH, a decision emboldened by Conrad and Devlin, no doubt.

“Your speech was beautiful, but I thought for sure you were going to pass out, Harper.”

It was the way he said my name—low and smooth—that did me in.

Two syllables that vibrated through my entire body.

I felt them *everywhere*.

“Public speaking was never my forte,” I replied with a voice-roughening whisper, my gaze roving over his eyes and lips.

He seemed at odds with himself, battling a grin before surrendering to it. “I remember.”

His hand slid up to my side, giving it a soft squeeze before he released me. I swayed forward, my body chasing his touch of its own accord, the magnetic pull between us stronger than ever.

“Thanks for coming, Casanova,” Lori said beside me.

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” he replied, stepping aside to give her his full attention.

I greeted the next person in line—Grant Whitlock—and thanked him for coming, only catching the tail end of Lori and Jordan’s conversation.

“It’s not an inconvenience at all,” Jordan said, massaging the back of his neck.

“You’re the best, hon.”

He lifted his chin in farewell, his blue gaze lingering on my face for a bit too long before he walked away.

“What was that about?” I asked as soon as he was out of earshot.

“Oh, I just need some help with Dad’s finances. No biggie.”

No biggie?

“And there’s no one else on the planet who could assist with that?” I lowered my voice. “You know, maybe someone who isn’t my ex?”

She sighed as she twisted to face me. “I didn’t think it would be an issue. You’re heading back to Tennessee tomorrow, right?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Then I don’t see the problem.” She glanced down at my heels. “God, those things look painful.”

“They’re seriously the worst.”

“So take them off.”

I glanced down at her bare feet. “You’re the only one with enough

confidence to do that here. Also, nice deflection.”

She grinned as she threw her arm over my shoulders. “It worked, didn’t it?”

I rolled my eyes but leaned into her, breathing in her sweet honeysuckle scent. “I suppose so.”

HARPER



“*I* feel like an extra on *The Walking Dead*,” I grumbled, stumbling into the living room and falling into Gramps’s recliner.

Lori placed a bookmark between the pages of the thick paperback and set it on the coffee table. “Couldn’t sleep last night?”

I shook my head. “I tossed and turned, then finally gave up at dawn and watched the sunrise from the patio. Also, I couldn’t help but notice the backyard’s *Better Homes and Gardens* transformation. Who knew you had a green thumb, Mom?”

The breathtaking view still blew me away.

Grass as green as emeralds and impeccably mowed.

Rows and rows of red and yellow geraniums.

And in the middle of it all was a brown pergola swing adorned with yellow outdoor throw pillows.

Lori smiled with pride as she picked up her phone and glanced at the time. “Harp, don’t you have a flight to catch?”

“About that...” I grabbed the throw blanket off the back of the chair and draped it over my legs, suddenly chilly in my pajama shorts and tank top combo. “I’ve decided to extend my stay by a few hours. I’m on the last flight out tonight.”

Her forehead knitted in confusion. “Not that I’m complaining, but is there any particular reason?”

“Yes. I broke up with Calvin last night.”

Lori’s eyes grew wide. “Ouch.” She twisted her hair up into a messy bun, making her look much younger than forty. “No spark?”

I shook my head. “No spark.”

I didn’t intend to end things when I drove Calvin back to his hotel after the funeral, but when he cupped my cheek and kissed me, I just sort of blurted out that it was over.

With us, we had no passion.

No uninhibited loss of control.

I knew it wasn’t fair to compare the two, but Jordan’s touch alone sent shock waves to my core. And sure, Cal had the good guy routine mastered to perfection, but it was hard for me to trust someone so flawless. Sometimes, I yearned for the messiness. The highs and lows and the delicious between. The bickering that led to scorching kisses, the arguing that led to the most intense orgasms.

My libido was in high drive, and sweet, sweet Cal just wasn’t cutting it.

Before yesterday, I hadn’t spoken to Jordan in five years, and I wasn’t holding out hope that he was still *the one*. But I couldn’t seem to find the same sexual chemistry with anyone else, and it was really starting to piss me off.

Lori rose from the couch and gave her back a stretch. “Since you’re staying for dinner, I’m going to run to the market. Any suggestions?”

“Grilled burgers?”

She smiled. “Sounds perfect.”

As soon as she left, I downed a cup of coffee, hoping it would breathe some life into me.

A hollow void settled in the pit of my stomach when I almost left my empty mug in the sink, remembering the way that used to drive Gramps crazy. I washed it as quickly as possible, set it in the drying rack, and gripped the edge of the sink for balance.

“Goddammit,” I cried out as I turned and slid to the floor, leaning against the cabinet with my legs stretched out in front of me. My eyes flickered around the kitchen, feeling Gramps in every inch of the space. The olive-green paint. The photographs on the fridge. The framed cross-stitch of a cardinal hanging on the wall.

Lord, this won’t be easy.

The click of the back door lock startled me. I remained still as the door creaked open, my stomach giving a curious twist as I watched Jordan step inside. He toed off his running shoes on the doormat and set his hands on his hips, blowing out a long breath while glancing up at the ceiling. “How ya

doing today, Big Jim?”

As his words registered, air abandoned my lungs.

Jordan always found ways to leave me breathless, but this, this was different. This was affection and longing and warmth filling up the cracks inside me like glue.

I chewed on my bottom lip, waiting for him to realize I was there.

When he finally did, his jarred expression was priceless.

“What the fuck, Harper?!” He fumbled in reverse, colliding with a kitchen chair.

I didn’t say a word, just bit my lip and waited for him to calm the hell down.

When he finally did, he stepped closer, his cautious eyes narrowing at the edges. “Why are you giving me that look?”

“Why are you breaking into my home?”

He held up a golden key. “Not sure it’s considered breaking and entering when the owner of said house granted me a key.”

I pinned my arms over my chest, trying to disguise the fact I wasn’t wearing a bra. “And why did said owner bequeath this key to you?”

He ran a thumb across his bottom lip, trying to prevent the amused twitch of his mouth from becoming a full-blown smile. “Bequeath?”

I shrugged. “Seemed fitting for the tone of this conversation.”

He closed the distance between us and nudged the arch of my foot with his toe. “You look rough.”

I slid my bare legs back and tucked my knees to my chest. “You look...” I paused and sized him up. “Sweaty.”

I didn’t add that in white basketball shorts, a tight black T-shirt, and an Adidas snapback, he also looked like the star of all my future wet dreams.

Hiking up his shorts and bending at his knees, he lowered, hovering inches from my face. His gaze delved deep, and I wondered what was going through his mind. His musky, citrusy scent invaded my senses, and I breathed him in so deep, I could taste him on my tongue, pungent and tangy.

“You’re still here.”

“Boy, you don’t miss a thing.”

He licked his lips, eyeballing me with a skeptical squint. “Where’s Ken?”

“Cal.”

“My mistake.”

“I’d imagine he’s at the airport right now.” I pushed against the slab of

concrete he called a chest. “We broke up yesterday.”

His tongue ran across his teeth, and he stood to his full height. “Sorry to hear that.”

I climbed to my feet and dusted off my ass. “I’m sure you are.”

He chuckled under his breath as he rooted around in the fridge for a bottle of Gatorade, then shouldered the door shut, strangely comfortable in my home.

The thick tendons of his tan neck and the way his Adam’s apple bobbed with each gulp entranced me, and I wondered when the hell his throat became so arousing.

The sweat-scented air around us sizzled and billowed, and I milled around the kitchen, wiping crumbs from my toast off the countertop and into my hand to distract myself.

“You still haven’t told me why you’re here,” I said as I dumped them into the sink.

“I come by twice a week to help with housework and mow the lawn.”

I spun around and stared at him in fascination, nerves rippling low down in my stomach. “You’ve been helping Gramps?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

“Why?” he parroted in an indignant tone.

“Did Lori ask you to do that?”

Darkness crossed his stormy eyes as his features shifted into an angry glare. “She didn’t have to. I’ve been doing it for years, which you would know if you bothered to come home more often.” He lowered his head and rubbed the nape of his neck. “Fuck. I didn’t mean that.”

A mirthless laugh escaped me. “No, I’m pretty sure you did.”

His accusation flayed me wide open, but he wasn’t wrong. I’d become a self-absorbed workaholic, throwing myself into school and work and summer internships instead of making frequent trips home.

The worst part was, I was months away from completing my MBA and still had no fucking clue what I was doing with my life.

“Really, Harp, I shouldn’t have said that.”

I waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry about it. I mean, it’s true. I should’ve made more of an effort to see him.” I needed to change the subject. Otherwise, I’d turn into a blubbering mess. “Anyway, tell me more about your handiwork. What did Gramps have you doing around here?”

“Lots of things.” He jerked his chin toward the kitchen table and pulled out my chair before lowering himself to another. “I fixed the roof on his shed, then cleaned it out and organized it. Then I started coming over every weekend to mow and help with yard work. He even let me spruce up the scenery a bit.”

My heart beat faster. “Wait, you’re the one who did all that?”

He nodded.

Lori Kelly was a filthy liar.

“So Gramps called you out of the blue one day and asked for your help?” That didn’t sound like him at all.

Jordan shook his head. “Nah. I bumped into him outside of Maggie’s while running one morning. We got to talking, and it just happened from there. Warren said I needed to find a hobby and surround myself with better people, and I guess you could say Big Jim checked off all the boxes.”

My head was spinning.

I had so much to process.

“Warren...as in Mr. Warren?”

He nodded. “I’m not allowed to call him my therapist since it’s a conflict of interest. I guess he’s more like a confidant.”

Suddenly, their weird interaction yesterday made sense.

“Wow. From what I remember, you two used to drive each other crazy.”

He chuckled. “We still do, but he’s stuck with me whether he likes it or not.”

“And did he help you...you know...back then?”

“He did.” He rested his elbows on the table, fixing me with an inscrutable look. “I’m sorry I put you through that, by the way. I’ve wanted to say that for years, but you changed your number, and I got the hint.”

I swallowed hard and tucked my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. “It’s all in the past, and I’m glad you’re doing well.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I watched him closely as he took another swig of Gatorade, noting the small and subtle differences in his demeanor. It was in the way he presented himself, in his tender manner and softer voice.

The boy I knew was long gone, replaced with a gentler, dignified man.

“You know it’s rude to stare,” he remarked, a fragment of humor showing on his face.

The side of my mouth quirked upward. “I wasn’t staring.”

“Liar.” He laughed, flashing his polished white teeth. The sound scraped across my skin like taunting fingers, coaxing goose bumps to the surface.

My chair skittered backward as I scrambled to my feet, aware of the warmth in my cheeks and the dampness in my panties. “Well, you better get to work. It’s going to be a hot one today.”

It’s going to be a hot one today?

I cringed.

“You’re right.” He nodded. “It’s going to be a...hot one.” His mouth tilted at one side in an ill-concealed smirk.

“Right. So I’ll be in the shower, but Lori should be home shortly if you need anything.”

With a reserved expression, he gave me a clipped nod.

I could feel his warm gaze anchored to my back as I hightailed it out of there.

JORDAN

“I’ll be in the shower.”

For Chrissake, did she really need to tell me that?

My nostrils flared as I glanced up at her bedroom window, thankful her curtains obstructed my view.

With the back of my arm, I wiped the sweat from my brow and refocused on the lawn.

Yeah, Harper, it sure is a hot one, but the haze of heat and gasoline is not what’s causing my temperature to rise.

I could’ve put this off for another day or two, but why should I modify my weekend routine just because Harper decided to break up with Ken doll and stick around? I had a job to do, and I kept my word.

“Springsteen” by Eric Church played through my AirPods, and I turned the volume up, my heart pounding just a little bit faster because the lyrics reminded me of Harper. By the time the song ended, I was putting the mower away and locking up the shed, testing the doorknob to make sure the lock really latched, just like Big Jim always told me to do.

As I reentered the kitchen, Harper stood on her tiptoes reaching for a

glass, wearing a soft-yellow sundress that showed off her smooth, lean legs. Her wet hair was pulled up into a bun, and her skin was still red from the warmth of her shower.

I hated how she still captured my attention without trying, my fascination with her making me edgy.

“Done already?” Lori asked as she closed the pantry door.

I had no fucking clue she was there.

“Guess I was in the zone today.” My gaze drifted back to Harper just as she glanced over her shoulder, and a flush of heat and annoyance crept up her cheekbones.

“Do you need a drink? Harper, get Jordan a drink,” Lori ordered before I could respond.

Rolling her eyes, Harper reached for another glass and filled it at the tap. “My Lord,” she muttered as she bowed her head and placed it in my hand.

Raw lust tinged my blood and jetted through my veins, creating a frenzied storm beneath my skin as I envisioned her calling me that while down on her knees, doing that thing with her tongue that still got me hard whenever I thought about it.

Harper’s skeptical gaze scanned my face, and I cleared my throat, quickly bringing the glass to my lips.

“I’m glad the two of you are here, actually.” Lori folded herself into a seat at the table. “We need to have a family meeting.”

“But Jordan isn’t family,” Harper muttered.

“Sure, he is.” Lori winked.

At first, my relationship with Lori centered around my struggles. While I was never dependent on certain mind-numbing substances like she was, I did need to learn how to deal with my issues in a healthier way, and Lori and my mother rallied around me while I figured it out.

After dealing with my complicated ass for many years, I guess we kind of were a dysfunctional family now.

Harper sighed and took a seat. “Okay, family meeting it is.”

I sat beside her, my bare knee sliding against her thigh as I inched closer to the table.

“It’s about Dad’s will.” Lori linked her hands together and let her words sink in, her gaze bouncing between Harper and me.

Harper’s body stiffened, and on instinct, my hand reached for hers. Her voice was thick with emotion when she asked, “What about it?”

Lori got right to the point. “Dad left you the house, honey.”
I could feel Harper’s panic erupt as her hand squeezed mine.
“And Jordan,” Lori continued, “he left you the contents of his shed.”

Well, shit.

Before his doctors told him to ease up, Big Jim taught me how to use almost every piece of machinery in there. Building and fixing things gave me a sense of pride and purpose, and Jim ensured I had the tools—literally—to hold on to that feeling.

I wasn’t going to cry, but fuck, I was a bit choked up.

“There’s more,” Lori went on. “I’ve decided to move back to North Carolina and finish school. That means you need to decide what you want to do here, Harper. Sell the house or keep it. The choice is yours.”

It was a charged battle of stares between mother and daughter as reality sank in.

Harper expelled a swoosh of air. “Build a life for myself in Fair Oak or sell the only home I’ve ever known... talk about an easy decision.” She shook her head. “What about school? I couldn’t move back right now even if I wanted to.”

“You could rent it out, make a little extra cash,” I interjected. “Or I could maintain the property until you decide what you want to do.”

Her response was swift and sharp. “I don’t want a stranger living here.”

Can’t say I liked the idea all that much either.

“But I don’t hate the idea of you managing things around here while I’m gone.”

Warmth instantly spread through my chest, and I raised a brow in disbelief. “Really?”

“Really.” She nodded. “You’re basically taking care of the place anyway, and you already have a key,” she teased, a smile playing on her lips.

I found that smile more hypnotic than I should have, and I needed to get out of there before she fucked with my head and stirred feelings in me that I’d long ago abandoned. “Great, just email me the specifics, and I’ll do whatever you need.”

And I would.

Not because I wanted her back, but because this was my chance to repay her for all that I’d done.

“Where are you going?” Her voice softened as I rose to my feet.

“Home.” I chuckled. “I have things to do.”

“Oh.” She twisted her lips. “I’m leaving tonight, so I guess this is goodbye.”

I let my eyes drift over her features, indulging in her beauty one last time. “I guess it is.”

She stood and laced her arms around my neck, her chest pressing lightly against mine. “Thank you...for everything.”

Disappointment snaked around my chest and squeezed when I realized that time hadn’t changed a fucking thing, and walking away from Harper Kelly was still torture.

I swallowed down the ache in my throat and held her a bit tighter. “Later, Kelly.”

HARPER



Twenty-four years old

The barest touch of a mid-May breeze filtered in through my open window, tousling my hair and caressing my cheeks, sweet smelling like tulips and peonies. Familiar roads guided me home while a Tim McGraw song faintly drifted through the speakers, and my crushing grip on the steering wheel loosened as I rolled up in front of my house, admiring the lush green lawn, freshly painted red shutters, and sparkling white siding.

It was beautiful—picturesque—and my stomach flipped with the knowledge that the handsome phantom from my past was responsible for making it look so good.

Overflowing with anxious energy, I put my car in park and quickly dialed Kylie's number.

"Airport security is the fucking worst," she said by way of greeting.

"What happened?"

She sighed. "They had an issue with the vibrator in my carry-on bag."

"A little in-flight entertainment, yeah?"

"Don't ask questions you really don't want the answers to."

I shook my head and chuckled. "You're incorrigible, Kylie Jo."

"I like what I like. Now, please don't tell me your neurosis is causing you to have second thoughts about this."

"What makes you say that?" I asked, gripping my phone tighter.

"Because I can hear the self-doubt in your voice."

I wiped a hand down my face as restless energy swarmed inside me. "I'm

not changing my mind, but what if I'm making a huge mistake?"

"You're not, Harp."

I wanted to tell her she was wrong. That returning home without a plan, without direction, felt like the biggest mistake of my life. I sacrificed my time with Gramps to earn my degree, and for what? I wasn't a businesswoman hell-bent on climbing the corporate ladder. I was a lost, curious soul...just like my mother.

Now, I was stuck on the wrong path with no way off.

"Just take a deep breath, crank up Taylor Swift, and keep your eyes on the road," she continued. "What's your ETA?"

Gazing at my house, I puffed out my cheeks and released a long breath. "Just arrived. I drove through the night."

"Dammit, Harper!" She shouted over the noise of the airport. "You told me you wouldn't do that! You're lucky I'm on the other side of the country, and I have a long flight to cool down." She sighed and softened her tone. "Although I guess there's no point in lecturing you now."

"Exactly," I drawled.

"Shit, I think they're starting to board my group. I'll text you when I land. Love you."

"Love you, too. Safe travels."

For the past year, Kylie worked as a personal assistant for Ron Simon, a well-known talent agent in LA.

After she DM'd him listing all the ways he could improve his celebrity clients' social media reach, he flew her to California for an interview and hired her on the spot. He put her up in a small but luxurious apartment and paid her to fetch him coffee, field his calls, and imitate his clients on Instagram and Twitter.

As soon as I told her I was moving home, she resigned and applied for jobs in Philly, claiming to be over the LA scene. She secured a job almost immediately as an assistant to the director of digital and social for the Philadelphia Eagles and found a cute townhouse just outside of Fair Oak.

I wasn't sure how it would pan out, our return to a town that was both a familiar comfort and a graveyard for buried dreams, but I was grateful to have my best friend along for the ride.

My stomach grumbled loudly, reminding me it'd been hours since my last meal, though I wasn't sure a bag of Cheetos and a flat Sprite from a run-down gas station in Virginia actually counted. I shifted gears and headed

toward Main Street, killing time before I set foot in that quiet, empty house.

I arrived back at six o'clock sharp to find a black-on-black Range Rover parked in the driveway, the tailgate open and the trunk full of boxes. It was so unlike me to give up control as easily as I did, but when Jordan offered to maintain the house while I finished school, it sounded like my best option.

From the outside looking in, it appeared I made a wise choice.

I slammed my car door shut and ambled slowly up the pathway, nostalgia clenching my heart in its fists as my throat tightened with emotion.

Was it even possible for that house to feel like a home without Gramps around?

I sure as hell didn't think so.

I wrung my hands and glanced at the Rover. Waxed and shined, I could see my reflection clearly in the passenger side door. My ponytail was coming undone, purplish rings framed my deep sunken eyes, and in black leggings and a wrinkled pink hoodie, I appeared as weary as I felt.

Just as I reached the screen door, Jordan nudged it open with his hip and stepped outside, holding a large box in his powerful hands. Dressed in a tailored black-and-white pin-striped suit, he resembled a Roaring Twenties gangster, and my pulse detonated.

The last time I saw him, he was coated in sweat and smelled like exhaust fumes, nothing like the man before me now, who embodied magnetism and defined trouble.

"You're early," he muttered as he continued toward his SUV without a moment's pause.

I rolled my eyes and pivoted on my heels, walking beside him. "I figured, why pull over and rest when this magical town awaits?"

He deposited the box in his trunk and wiped the back of his hand across his brow. "Sounds safe."

"I survived, didn't I?" I asked with a half shrug.

"It appears so." He caressed me with his soulful blue eyes. "But you look fucking exhausted."

I pressed a hand to my chest and canted my head. "Aw, King, you flatter me." I rolled my eyes and nodded at his trunk. "What's all this?"

“Some stuff Jim left me. Tools and such.”

“Tools and such,” I parroted in a deep voice, provoking him in an attempt to widen the chasm between us.

By the grin tugging on his cheeks, all I managed to do was beckon his humor. “Come on. Let me help you with your things.”

He insisted on carrying my heavy boxes, leaving me with a measly duffel bag and a canvas tote full of books.

“What the hell do you have here, Kelly?”

“Clothes and such,” I sassed as I held the door for him.

“Ha ha ha,” his deep voice trilled.

As he started to venture upstairs, I shouted a bit too frantically, “You can just leave those there!” and motioned toward the living room floor.

For some reason, being alone with Jordan in my bedroom felt...*risky*.

Returning to Fair Oak was stressful enough, but our impulsive dynamic would surely push me over the edge if I allowed it. Maybe there was no foolproof way to ignore our connection, but we *could* avoid situations that bred sexual tension.

He narrowed his eyes as he set down my things. “You know I’ve had free rein of this house for months. What makes you think I haven’t been inside your bedroom countless times?”

“Have you?” I asked, pinning my arms over my chest.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

I knew he was joking, but his evasiveness caused another thought to pop into my head. “Have you ever spent the night here?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation. “But for justifiable reasons.”

“And those are?”

“Well, last Halloween, some punk ass teenagers were going around egging houses, so I spent the night on the couch to keep watch. When I heard them out front, I chased the fuckers down the street with the wooden bat Jim kept in the coat closet, wearing nothing but my boxer briefs and sneakers.”

I burst out laughing. “That did not happen.”

“Oh, it most certainly did.” He tossed a nod toward the kitchen. “Then in February, the back door started leaking, and it took forever to get a contractor out here to fix it, so whenever it rained, I stayed to make sure the kitchen didn’t flood.”

My heartbeat raged out of control, and I cleared the emotions from my throat. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Wasn’t that big of a deal.” He shrugged, his voice cool and even. “Anyway, I don’t think I’ll be needing this anymore.” He pulled a key from his pocket and placed it on the coffee table. A heavy weight settled in my stomach as he severed the symbolic connection. “I’ll stop by in a few weeks for the rest of my tools once I figure out where to store them.”

“No rush.”

He nodded with pursed lips and headed for the door.

“Hey.” I tugged on his wrist before his hand touched the doorknob. “Thank you.”

He glanced over my head and gave a slight shake like he didn’t know what he should and shouldn’t say. For a guy whose mouth could make the devil blush, he seemed uncharacteristically uneasy, and that made *me* uneasy.

He scraped his teeth over his bottom lip a few times before he said, “Don’t mention it, Harp. I’ll see you around.”

Thoughts jabbed and hooked like vicious punches to my brain as I watched him drive away, wondering what was going through his mind. Years of love and friendship reduced to sad songs, broken hearts, and a loss of words, and if I ruminated on the things he didn’t say for too long, I’d drive myself crazy.

No, I needed to stay focused and do what I came back to do.

If only it were that simple.

JORDAN



“*H*ey, you,” Rachel said, opening her apartment door with a bright smile. She kissed my cheek and continued to uncork the bottle of wine in her hands. “Grant’s in the shower, but he should be out in a minute.”

I loosened my tie and plopped my ass down on her couch, gaze zeroing in on the score of the Phillies game on her TV. “You two make this arrangement official yet?” I asked, glancing over at the kitchen.

She tilted her head from side to side as she stood behind the island, pouring herself a glass. “You know Grant. That man is wild and reckless, and I can’t get enough, but I know it’s going to end badly.”

I massaged my forehead and chuckled. “Story of my life.”

When Rachel Summers moved into my apartment complex six months ago, I debated for weeks whether or not to ask her out. When I finally did, I brought her to The Riff, where she instantly caught Grant’s attention. No harm, no foul, though. As great as she was, I wasn’t ready for another woman to ensnare my heart and haul my ass to the dark side, otherwise known as L-O-V-E.

With long auburn hair, hazel eyes, and a curvaceous figure, the woman was a knockout with a carefree personality, making her the perfect match for my friend. Too bad he was a pussy who couldn’t just admit he had real feelings for her.

She sat down beside me and cradled her glass in her hands. “How did it go with the one that got away?”

It took everything for me to maintain a blank expression. “Does Grant tell you everything?”

She tapped her chin in thought. “I doubt it, but he told me your ex moved back to town today and that you’d probably show up here looking like hell, and voilà, here you are.”

“Yep. Here I am.”

“So...” She sipped her wine. “Spill.”

My tongue went rogue, and I told her everything that transpired within the past hour.

“So you had an uneventful reunion.” Her eyes narrowed. “What am I missing?”

“He wants her back, but he’s not supposed to,” Grant chimed in, walking through the kitchen with a towel wrapped around his waist. He opened the refrigerator and snatched a beer from the door rack, cracking it open and taking a swig, looking right at home in Rachel’s apartment. For someone who claimed to be a commitment-phobe, he basked in domestic bliss.

“Why aren’t you supposed to want her?” Rachel asked, drawing my attention back to her.

“Because Jordy used to struggle with addiction, and he put that poor girl through hell,” Grant responded, taking a seat beside her.

“Jesus Christ, Whitlock,” I snapped, leveling him with a glare.

Rachel’s eyes grew wide as she glanced down at her wine. “Oh, my god, Jordan, I had *no* idea.”

Her ass was halfway off the couch when Grant planted his hand on her waist. “Relax, Rach. He’s fine. Aren’t ya, man?”

“All good,” I assured, gripping the arm of the couch a little tighter as silence fell over the room.

Rachel glanced down at me with pity written in her eyes before she sat back down, and I suddenly regretted stopping here on the way to my apartment.

The problem was, I hated discussing Harper with Devlin, and if I went to Warren’s, it would turn into a therapy session I didn’t want or need. Grant and I grew closer over the years, since our siblings were now married, but he sucked at doling out relationship advice on account he’d never actually been in one.

It was troubling, knowing the only friend who ever understood me now despised me...because I fucked it all up.

“So how about those Phillies?” Grant asked, and I laughed at his lame-ass attempt to break the tension.

“You’re a fucking moron,” I said with a shake of my head.

“Oh, most definitely, but it doesn’t take a genius to know Harper’s one of those special women who really is as great as she seems.” Rachel arched a brow, and Grant dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I’ve known her since she was sixteen. You’d like her too, trust me.”

“Trust you? Ha,” she scoffed and downed another sip of wine. She smacked her lips together and tapped my knee. “Do you still love her?”

A chuckle left my throat. “Damn, Rachel.”

“What?” She shrugged innocently. “It’s an easy question.”

“With an impossible answer,” I pinged back. “Either way, I’m screwed.”

She shook her head as she set down her glass on the coffee table, then twisted in her seat, tucking her knees beneath her. “As someone who’s had quite a few near misses in the love department, I’m here to tell you that if you’re still into her, you can’t ignore that.”

“Yeah, but Grant’s right—”

“Damn straight, I am—”

“I put her through too much.”

“So you don’t think you deserve to be forgiven?” Rachel pressed.

“No...I guess I don’t.” I shifted my gaze to the window that overlooked the parking lot, getting swept up in a fog of memories. I used to need Harper like water and air, but she never really needed me. I took and took, but what did I give? Sure, we were beautiful, but we were also so damn tragic. “We had something others spend their lives dreaming about, but it’s over now.”

Rachel released a long, exasperated sigh. “So you’re giving up?”

“No, I’m letting go.”

She climbed to her feet and shook her head as she ambled toward the kitchen. “Just remember, you can run from love, but eventually, it’ll chase you down and make you pay.”

Later that night, I thought about what Rachel said.

There really was no escaping Harper now. Her presence was everywhere, a familiar radiance like the sun and just as pitiless. I could embrace the burn or go down in flames.

After a long shower and a glimpse at CKH’s monthly budget report, I climbed into bed and stared at my phone for fifteen minutes before gaining the courage to text her.

Jordan: It’s ten o’clock...did Mrs. Cleary’s poodle start barking yet?

Harper responded almost immediately.

Harper: YES!!

Harper: I love dogs, but that four-legged demon needs to take an Ambien and call it a night.

I let out a laugh and rested my head on my pillow, holding my phone above my head as I replied.

Jordan: Mrs. Cleary should be calling him in soon.

Harper: Fingers crossed.

As difficult as it was, I mustered the strength to end our conversation there. I plugged my phone into my nightstand charger, switched on the TV, and browsed Netflix. Finally settling on *Criminal Minds*, I selected an episode from an earlier season just as my phone buzzed.

Harper: For the record, Cheerios are the WORST.

As I reread her message, a smile settled over my face. In my hasty attempt to remove my things from her house, I neglected the stash of food I kept in her pantry for the mornings I stopped by to do some yard work.

Jordan: Let me guess, college turned you into a Lucky Charms kind of girl.

Harper: Cinnamon Toast Crunch. Duh.

Jordan: A sugar coma for breakfast? I take it back, not much has changed.

It took her a few minutes to respond.

Harper: No, Jordan, some things definitely have.

My smile slipped, and my grip on my phone tightened.

Harper: Night, King.

Jordan: Night, Kelly.

HARPER



The late-morning sun was merciless as its rays scorched my exposed skin, sweat pooling under my arms and rolling down my spine as I veered down Main Street and jogged toward the market.

“Ah, Miss Kelly’s finally gracing us with her presence,” Mr. Walsh, the owner of the hardware store, joked as I gradually came to a stop in front of him.

As my labored breath regulated itself, I hunched over with my hands on my knees and watched as he swept the sidewalk in front of his store.

Since my return, I’d avoided Main Street as best I could, intent on dodging unwanted questions from the Fair Oak gossip brigade who exhibited way too much interest in my personal life.

So where are you working?

So are you seeing anyone?

So do you plan on curing cancer and ending global warming?

Okay, so maybe that last question didn’t come up often, but the other two sure as hell did. It was like standing beneath a hornet’s nest praying I didn’t get stung—idiotic and best to avoid at all costs.

“You know, people are calling you a mirage, young lady. They say they’ve seen you running around town, then they blink” —he snapped his fingers—“and you’re gone.”

I dragged my forearm across my forehead and chuckled. “Those folks are giving me too much credit. I’m not *that* fast.” I winked. “Have a great day, Mr. Walsh.”

I continued to the market and made a beeline for the refrigerated

beverages. A burst of frigid air fanned over my skin as I swung open the freezer door, and I allowed myself a moment to bask in the chill, lifting the hem of my purple fitted workout top to wipe sweat from the column of my throat.

“Sure is a hot one today, huh?”

The deep timbre of Jordan’s voice lured goose bumps to my skin as my head swiveled to the left, finding him propped against a candy bar display.

Following his gaze to my exposed stomach, I swiftly dropped my shirt as an unwelcome flush warmed my cheeks. “You could say that.” I reached for a bottle of water and let the door fall shut. “Is this where you come on your lunch break?”

His forehead crinkled. “Lunch break?” He shook his head. “No, you see, I’m finishing up my eleven o’clock run, as well.” His synthetic frown collapsed, replaced with a breath-stealing smirk—a smirk that still made the traitorous spot between my thighs tingle.

“Smart-ass,” I uttered on a breath, my gaze subtly admiring his spiffy attire.

He demonstrated sophistication in his navy suit and polished brown oxfords, but his intentionally unkempt hair and the stubble coating his sharp jaw said he still enjoyed provoking his father and brother with his rebellious side.

Jordan brushed his thumb across his bottom lip as he openly appraised my legs. “You used to hate running.”

“I used to hate a lot of things that I enjoy now.” His gaze darted to mine as his brows shot to his hairline, and I rolled my eyes. “Things like running and red wine and *The Bachelor*, not whatever image you currently have in your perverted mind.”

He sauntered toward me and plucked the water bottle from my hand, twisting the cap off and taking a long swig, his throat bobbing as he swallowed. “You’re right,” he said as he recapped the bottle and handed it back. “What I’m picturing has nothing to do with running and red wine and *The fucking Bachelor*.” My throat was too dry for a rebuttal, and by the smirk clinging to his full lips, the smug jerk noticed. “So it’s been two weeks. How does it feel being home?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Odd? Like I still belong here...but also don’t.”

I inwardly shuddered as the unguarded admission dripped from my

tongue.

Unguarded admissions in his presence were a bad idea.

We were a bad idea.

Jordan burned our bridge to the ground, and my mind couldn't let my heart forget that we'd be fools to venture across a new one. Besides, after breaking up with Cal, I turned the page on relationships. Love made me blind, and fate made me stupid. I relished my independence and the freedom to do as I pleased, and I was through with settling.

"Earth to Harper," he said, bending at his knees, his eyes level with mine. "Where'd you go just now?"

"Sorry"—I shook my head—"just dehydrated." It was my turn to uncap the bottle, tilt my head back, and take a large gulp of water, his gaze trained on my mouth as it touched the same place his had been.

Watching him watch me shouldn't have turned me on...but *fuck*, it did.

And *fuck*, I needed to get far, far away from him because our downfall was our chemistry, and our chemistry was still a sizzling, volatile inferno.

"So listen, if you don't have any plans on Friday night..."

"I do," I blurted before he could finish his sentence, pain instantly marring his iceberg-blue eyes.

He waited for me to elaborate, but when I offered no explanation, he scratched his cheek and nodded. "Alright then." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I better grab something to eat before Dev sends my secretary to hunt me down."

"We wouldn't want that, would we?"

He tilted his head to the side and allowed his thirsty eyes to roam over my body once more. "No. No, we wouldn't."

Crossing his right ankle over his left, he spun around and headed off in the opposite direction, tossing a goodbye over his shoulder without looking back.

I glanced down at the empty bottle in my hand and squeezed it tightly, the crinkled plastic doing nothing to ease my sexual frustration.

I knew Jordan just envisioned me naked, and I hated how much I liked it.

JORDAN

In my rearview mirror, I watched as Harper resumed her run, her ponytail swaying side to side as she exchanged smiles and waves with the postwoman delivering packages to the used bookstore.

Funny how she believed she didn't belong here, yet everyone she passed recognized her.

I call bullshit.

Something was definitely going on in that beautiful mind of hers, but her existential crisis had absolutely nothing to do with Fair Oak.

Heading back to the office with a semihard dick was uncomfortable as hell, but I couldn't stop thinking about the beads of sweat dripping down Harper's chest or the way her lips wrapped around the rim of that lucky bottle. If I didn't have a jam-packed schedule, I'd blow off my clients and blow a load in my hand to ease the tension coursing through my body. But as much as I wanted to, I had responsibilities I couldn't avoid.

"Nice of you to rejoin us," Devlin snarked as he followed me into my office.

As I rounded my desk, I underhand tossed him the protein shake he requested and fell into my high-back chair. "How 'bout you kindly fuck off, big brother."

"Hm," he hummed. "You return late...in a foul mood...with your tie loosened..."

I glanced down at my chest.

When the hell did that happen?

I squeezed the sides of the knot and slid it back in place.

"All telltale signs you ran into Harper, and now your head is totally fucked."

I chuckled halfheartedly as I tore the lid off my made-to-order garden salad. "I ran into Harper, but my head's fine."

He guffawed. "Right. And how did that go? Did the rest of the world fade away when you gazed into her big doe eyes and begged her for another chance?"

"Cute, Dev," I said around a mouthful of lettuce. "You need to chill out with those lame-ass Hallmark movies you enjoy so much."

"Hey, Hallmark movies are the shit." He set his shake down on my cherrywood desk and sank into the chair across from me. "You *need* to move on, Jordan. What about that hot chick from Villanova? Caitlin."

"Kaylyn."

“Father was a politician; mother was a lawyer. She was perfect for you.”

Like a ventriloquist dummy, Devlin’s words didn’t sound like his own—they sounded like my father’s. Conrad gave me so much shit for ending things with Kaylyn, but I wasn’t going to waste my time—or hers—pretending we were something we weren’t.

“She had no personality and banging her was a snooze fest. Missionary followed by a shower, then lights out by nine. You’re telling me you’d settle for that for the rest of your life?”

I’d tried to fuck Harper out of my system during my time at Villanova, but no woman was ever worth keeping around come morning. It was always the same thing—boring dates leading to boring sex leading to quick goodbyes. Kaylyn and I had certain things in common—mainly the twisted need to please our parents while simultaneously despising them—but after two months of trying to pretend it was more than it was, we called it quits.

“Gorgeous women are usually more work, J.”

I stabbed a grape tomato and grunted. “Harper wasn’t.”

“Harper wasn’t,” he mimicked, plucking at the cuff of his shirt. “Do you actually believe the two of you will end up together? Your future is CKH, and her future is, well, I don’t even know what the hell hers is. Word around town is she’s unemployed with no prospects.”

“Word around town?” I cocked my head to the side. “Since when do you socialize with anyone south of Main Street?”

“I hear things...see things too. What’s with all the running?”

I pointed my fork at him. “That I don’t know.”

But I intended to find out.

“Well, keep me in the loop.” Devlin glanced at his watch as he rose to his feet, then rubbed his hands together like a Bond villain. “Alright, time to make more money, so I can keep living the dream.” He snatched up his shake and swaggered out of my office, the ominous stench of self-importance trailing him out the door.

“Living the dream, my ass,” I mumbled as I glanced down at my fresh-pressed suit and caught a whiff of dry-cleaning solvent, outwardly wincing.

My brother’s dream was abundant wealth.

My dream didn’t have a price tag.

Loosening my tie once again, I swiveled around to face the floor-to-ceiling window. The afternoon sun shone from its highest point in the sky, offering an unadulterated view of the town below. It was impossible to locate

Harper from there, yet I tried. Tried because even when nothing else made sense, we did—a fact she might have forgotten, but I never would.

Standing abruptly, I pressed the intercom button and told my secretary to cancel my afternoon meetings, then I grabbed my briefcase and keys and bolted out the door.

I didn't believe my eyes at first, so I rubbed them vigorously then blinked a few times for good measure, but the human starfish that lay in the front yard remained. I climbed out of my car and crossed the driveway in slow, measured strides so as to not disrupt the mythical creature in her habitat.

A layer of sweat covered her forehead, and her shapely chest expanded against her tank top as she inhaled a deep breath.

At least she's not dead.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked, nudging the bottom of Harper's sneaker with the tip of my oxford.

"Sunbathing," she deadpanned, opening her eyes as my shadow blocked the sun from her face.

"Is that code for having an asthma attack?"

Her lips curled up. "Bingo."

I glanced around to see if anyone was watching, then I eased myself to the ground and sprawled out beside her, mirroring her position.

She swiveled her head to face me, lifting her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes. "You're going to ruin your expensive suit."

"What's your point, Kelly?"

"I guess I don't have one." Her face brightened, and she shook her head. "What are you doing here, Jordan?"

An acceptable question, yet I didn't have a concise answer. I abandoned my responsibilities without considering how it affected my clients and my brother. My father would lose his mind, and Devlin would pay the price, all so I could what? Check that Harper made it home safely? We lived in fucking Fair Oak. Of course, she did.

I sat upright and twisted to face her, crisscrossing my legs. Her gaze darted to my navy-blue socks with pink polka dots, and her mouth twitched.

Yeah, Harp, the guy you used to know hasn't disappeared completely.

“Do you ever get the sense we’re always doing what other people tell us to do, but never what we want to do?” I answered her question with a question of my own.

She pressed up on her elbows and released a heavy sigh. “All the goddamn time.”

I tipped my chin to the blue sky, feeling the warmth of the sun on my skin as I ran my hand through my hair and pondered her honesty.

Was that what we were missing all those years ago? The maturity to simply be honest with each other?

We pretended we knew it all, but we had no fucking clue.

“Did you move back for you or for Jim?” I asked, dropping my chin and meeting her gaze.

She furrowed her brow and worried her bottom lip as she mused it over. I wanted to point out that it wasn’t meant to be a question that required much thought, that she was basically answering with that haunted look alone.

“A little bit of both, I suppose. Nothing was left for me in Knoxville, but I’m not sure there’s anything for me here either...besides the house.”

Her words sliced through my chest in unforgiving strokes, but my discomfort didn’t change my reality. We weren’t together, and I wasn’t even sure where we stood in the friend department, so what did I expect?

“You say there’s nothing here for you, but you don’t seem to be making much of an effort,” I noted as kindly as possible. If the truth stung, it was only because Harper struggled to accept it. “When you’re not running, you’re cooped up in your house like the girl from *Tangled*.” She arched a brow in question, and I clarified, “Warren’s daughter, Julia, made us watch it a few times.”

“Isn’t she like twelve now?”

“It was a few years ago. The movie stuck with me. Give me a break.”

She licked her lips and smiled.

“All I’m saying is your situation is as negative as you perceive it. And right now, Harp, your perception sucks.”

I heaved myself up and extended my hand, helping her to her feet. As she wiped off her ass, her gaze narrowed, and she stepped closer. “Mrs. Cleary is totally watching us right now,” she said in a secretive hush.

I subtly glanced over my shoulder and eyed the elderly woman standing beside her mailbox. “No, she’s not. She’s checking for mail.”

“Um, no...the sneaky minx already collected it this morning.” She shook

her head. “Nothing ever changes around here.”

“Yeah, but I kind of like the predictability.” I twisted my torso and waved. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Cleary!”

Her mouth molded into the perfect O shape, and she quickly shuffled back up her driveway in her fluffy purple slippers. “Good afternoon, Jordan! Harper!”

Her screen door slammed shut, and I twisted back around, shoving my hands in my pockets with a shrug.

“You’re so different, Jordan King.” Harper peered at me with unconcealed fascination.

I tried not to let that look cut me wide open. “How so, Harper Kelly?”

She lifted her shoulders, then let them fall. “You just are.”

“Some say change is a good thing.”

“I tend to disagree, but in your case, maybe they’re right.”

A grin spread across my face as my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

Devlin: I can’t believe you’d allow your poor judgment to jeopardize your career.

Devlin: I can distract Dad for fifteen more minutes.

Devlin: Get your ass back here NOW!

“It appears I’m being summoned.” I pocketed my phone as my good mood shattered into pieces, then gave Harper a two-finger salute as I started toward my car.

“The Jordan I knew would’ve told Devlin to fuck off,” she called out as my shoes slapped across her driveway.

“I changed, remember?” I shouted back as I rounded the hood, my chest tightening because *dammit*, she was right.

She folded her arms over her chest and twisted her lips, her poised veneer fracturing a bit. “Your life is just as important as Devlin’s and Conrad’s, you know.”

I chuckled as my heart stuttered. “Tell you what, you figure out what you want from your life, and then we can discuss mine.”

As I backed out of the driveway, she waved goodbye with a sad smile, and a heavy weight settled in the pit of my stomach.

HARPER



“Let me get this straight...he came to check on you, lay beside you in the front yard, which, for Jordan, is actually super sweet, then bolted the second Devlin beckoned?” Kylie mused the next morning as we headed out of the market with brown paper bags in our hands.

“Yep. It’s insane, right?”

“One hundred percent.” She nodded as we meandered toward her car. “Do you think you two would’ve performed the horizontal rodeo if he’d stayed?”

A string of laughter rattled my chest. “No, because that’s not happening. I’ve moved on, and I’m certain he has too.”

It was a fake-it-till-you-make-it moment. A chance for me to sample my lie and decide whether I was partial to its taste, and I ignored the way my heart flailed in my chest by mustering a less-than-assured smile.

Kylie gave me a sidelong glance and hoisted her bag higher on her hip. “If you say so, Harp.” She unlocked her car and popped the trunk, and we loaded up our groceries. “Feel like walking to Maggie’s and grabbing a coffee?”

“Sure. I could use the jump start since I’ll be sending out résumés all afternoon.”

Kylie looped her arm around mine. “You’ll find something amazing. I know it.”

We headed to the corner of Main and Sweeney and approached the dark, desolate café.

“What the hell?” Sorrow stirred inside me as I pressed my forehead to the

glass door, trying to survey the space through the film of grime covering the window. A comforting place brimming with memories of Gramps reduced to a dirty, vacant hole. “I can’t believe this.”

“Me either. This has to be a joke.” Kylie’s eyes skimmed the For Sale sign on the window.

“This was *our* place.” My voice caught in my throat, fading to a whisper as I repeated, “This was our place.”

My sadness didn’t stem from nostalgia or a broken heart.

Every time I glanced in the rearview mirror, *another* chunk of my past was tainted.

I clung to hope like a fraying rope, but after this discovery, it unraveled, and down, down I fell.

“Sucks, doesn’t it?” a breezy voice asked from somewhere behind us. We twisted around to find a stunning woman with reddish-brown hair and an ample figure strolling our way, smiling like she knew us, which I was certain she did not. “Each time I walk past this place, I die a little inside. They built a Starbucks across town, but where’s the small-town charm in that? Even Stars Hollow understood the importance of Luke’s.”

I swung my head to Kylie as I tried to discreetly wipe the emotion from my eyes. “Did she just reference *Gilmore Girls*?”

“I did,” the bubbly stranger laughed and extended her hand. “I’m Rachel Summers.”

Kylie shook it with a small, tight smile. “Kylie Sullivan.”

Lately, Kylie seemed to manifest a bit more...cynicism, though I didn’t think Rachel noticed.

I followed suit with a handshake of my own. “Harper Kelly.”

Rachel’s eyes widened in recognition. “Oh, my god...you’re Jordan’s girl.” I felt the blood drain from my face with the impact of her words while Kylie began to cackle. “Shit, not like you’re *his*,” Rachel clarified. “Just that you’re...you know...*The one* or whatever.”

Kylie’s laughter intensified, and Rachel winced.

I really needed that coffee.

Or a shot of tequila.

“I doubt I’m *The One*.” I laughed nervously, trying desperately to appear composed as my eyes skimmed over her features. It wasn’t my style to deliberately recognize flaws in another female to feel better about myself. If a woman was gorgeous, I acknowledged it, and Rachel was hot. “I’m sorry,

how do you know Jordan?”

“Oh, he lives in my building,” she said with a flip of her wrist. “He was so kind and welcoming when I moved in. He even invited me to The Riff one night to introduce me to some folks in town.”

Jealousy eroded my insides like rust, and I could feel Kylie’s body stiffen beside me.

“The Riff, huh?” my best friend asked when words failed me.

Rachel nodded. “Yep. It’s where I met the guy I’m seeing. He’s the owner, actually.”

Last I remembered, the happily married Mr. and Mrs. Glendale owned The Riff. Mr. Glendale had to be well into his sixties now, and he didn’t seem like a man who could handle a vivacious woman like Rachel, but what did I know?

“You must have great taste. The Riff was my favorite place to go as a teenager.”

“Well, you should totally swing by tomorrow night. Grant arranged for Flight of Souls to perform some of their new songs for their hometown fans before their next album drops.”

“Grant Whitlock?” Kylie and I asked simultaneously.

Rachel’s mouth tilted up at the edges. “The man, the myth, the legend.”

Now, Kylie was stunned into silence.

“I can’t believe Grant bought The Riff. I mean, I can totally picture it, but that had to be hard for him. He doesn’t have the most supportive family.”

“You’re telling me.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “I only met her once, but his sister is a real bitch.” Kylie and I shared a knowing glance, one that Rachel didn’t miss. “Shoot, you’re friends with her, aren’t you?”

“Hell, no.” I smiled, waving away her statement.

“Camille is *not* good people,” Kylie added.

Rachel beamed. “Okay, it’s settled...you two are definitely coming out tomorrow night. We’ll sing and dance like no one’s watching. What do you say?”

Kylie glanced my way, and I nodded.

Rachel clapped her hands with glee. “Awesome, I’ll add your names to the VIP list. See you tomorrow!”

Once she rounded the corner and vanished from our view, Kylie spun on her heels and glowered in silent warning.

I’d never been on the receiving end of her scrutiny, and my skin suddenly

prickled. “What’s with the withering stare?”

“Please tell me this isn’t a *keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer* scenario.”

I would have laughed if not for her tight-lipped expression. “You know me better than that, Ky. I think she’s genuine, and we could really use a night out. Plus, The Riff apparently has a VIP list now, and we’re on it.” I shimmied up to her, trying to lighten the mood, but she kept her smile locked away. “Okay, something...or someone...else is on your mind. Grant Whitlock, perhaps?”

“It just would’ve been nice if he told me he was seeing someone.” She bristled.

Nope. This was definitely not about me.

Kylie and Grant developed a strong connection when we were younger, but she hadn’t mentioned him in years.

While I liked Grant, he tended to do things full throttle, almost to the point of recklessness. He lived on the edge, always taking things further than he should. And any woman who got into a relationship with him understood it wasn’t based on practicality, it was based on physical need and a whole lot of lust.

“Have you two been in touch?”

A flicker of embarrassment shone in her eyes. “On and off since Big Jim’s funeral.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. “And did you expect it to lead somewhere?”

She released a defeated chuckle as we started back toward her car. “We both know how Grant is. I just don’t like being lied to. Not that he lied,” she clarified, “but he definitely omitted the truth. Rachel seems great, and he conveniently forgot to mention her.”

“Or in his mind, she wasn’t worth mentioning.” Kylie swung her head in my direction, a frown of puzzlement scrunching up her smooth brow. “I’m just playing devil’s advocate,” I shrugged. “Grant *is* a fuckboy, and she didn’t actually call him her boyfriend...”

“That’s true.” We waited for the light to change, then we crossed the street. “You know what we need? A relaunch.”

“A relaunch?”

Kylie nodded as we approached her car. “Look how many times it worked for Miley Cyrus. Out with the old, in with the new, ya know? Fuck

those first-class jerks—”

“And their godlike bodies—”

“And their obtuse minds.”

“They’re bad news, and we’re better off without them. Tomorrow night, we’ll embody Miley’s confidence and barge into The Riff like a wrecking ball.”

I punched the air in front of me for emphasis, and Kylie’s expression went blank.

Seriously...she didn’t so much as blink.

“Too much?” I asked.

“Just a little.”

My cheeks flushed as I climbed into the passenger seat and buckled up.

“I was thinking more like a day of self-care followed by a night of dancing to one of our favorite bands,” Kylie went on. “Does that work for you, Hannah Montana, or does thrusting your pelvis at unsuspecting victims still sound better? Because honestly, I’m down for almost anything, but I’m not sure I’m on that level.”

I glanced out my window as I flipped her off, and she laughed as she pulled out of the lot.

The next day, we headed to the salon spa at noon and paid for *the works*.

Manicures. Pedicures. Waxes. Blowouts.

If the service was offered, we subjected our bodies to it.

Afterward, we stopped at Sephora to buy new makeup, then we hit up Nordstrom to buy new dresses—a sheath black minidress for me and an asymmetrical red cocktail dress for Ky.

If beauty was survival, we were goddamn warriors—if only for one night.

We arrived at The Riff promptly at seven and offered our names to the doorman. As promised, Rachel added us to the VIP list, and a tall, fierce woman ushered us to a roped-off section near the newly renovated bar.

“I think that’s Gal Gadot,” I whispered-shouted in Kylie’s ear over the booming house music.

“I think she’s way hotter than Gal,” Kylie pinged back as her stunned gaze remained affixed to Wonder Woman.

Rachel waved us over from her spot on a purple velvet circle sofa, and Kylie and I joined her just as a bottle of champagne arrived at the table.

“We need to celebrate your momentous return to The Riff.” Rachel smiled as she extracted it from a bucket of ice.

Kylie's eyes were transfixed on the label. "Damn, girl. I'm not sure I can even afford to be in the same vicinity as that bottle."

"Oh, neither can I." Rachel giggled. "But Grant owes me after what I allowed him to do to my body last night."

Well, damn.

I held my breath and awaited Kylie's reaction.

It felt like minutes ticked by when it was only just seconds.

Then Kylie laughed, hearty and long, and the nervous tension retreated from my body.

"Let's pop that bottle and get this good time started," Ky cheered as she uncapped a tube of red lipstick and reapplied the shade to her lips, her gaze roaming around the dark and glamorous venue.

I loved The Riff before, but Grant elevated the atmosphere to a whole new level.

"Do you mind if we hold off for a few minutes?" Rachel asked. "Grant and Jordan should be here soon."

With one sentence, my I-don't-give-a-fuck confidence crinkled like faded old wallpaper.

JORDAN



Grant was waiting for me at The Riff's back entrance with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Not gonna lie, when you said you were skipping out on a business dinner, I didn't believe it. Devlin must be shitting himself right now."

I brushed past him and turned into his office. "I didn't stick around to find out, but I'll venture a guess and say he's not too thrilled." I jerked my chin toward a shabby tan couch/bed in the corner. "The fuck is that?"

"A futon."

He folded up a wrinkled quilt and set it on top of a pillow, making room for me to sit. I shook my head and wordlessly declined, pondering how many bodily fluids lingered on the surface.

On a second glance, I noticed a small television mounted in the corner and a few wrinkled shirts spilling out of a desk cabinet.

Was he living here when he wasn't at Rachel's?

Grant ran a hand through his elaborately coiffed hair, a slight frown flitting over his brow. "Lose the judgmental glare, King. It's safer to sleep here than it is to drive home at two o'clock in the morning after a show."

"I'm not judging you, but if you need some help..."

"I don't need fucking handouts," he snapped, effectively cutting me off.

Last year, the Whitlocks disowned Grant after he depleted his trust fund to buy The Riff when the Glendales retired. He'd always been the black sheep of the family, but his decision made him a pariah, a blemish tarnishing their name.

In a way, I could relate.

My family's superiority was shaping a future I didn't want, but unlike Grant, I didn't have the balls to do anything about it.

I patted his shoulder like he was a child in need of consoling. "Calm down, Whitlock."

He lit a cigarette and inhaled deep, blowing a cloud of smoke into the space between us. "Sorry, I'm just so fucking high strung about tonight."

When Flight of Souls agreed to perform a one-night-only show in the small venue they once frequented, I was thrilled for my boy. It was great PR for both the band and The Riff, and Grant was the brilliant mastermind behind it all.

"What's there to be tense about? It's sold out, man. You did it."

"Thank fuck," he said on a heavy sigh. "I really needed this win." Perching on the edge of his desk, he crossed his legs at the ankles and smirked. "So I shoot you a text saying Harper's coming, and you drop everything and haul your ass over here. Are you rethinking your stance on letting her go?"

I gripped the back of my neck and shrugged. "Let's just see how tonight goes. When I tried asking her to come here with me, she blew me off, so this might not go over well."

I never expected Rachel to be the ace up my Ralph Lauren sleeve, but here we were.

Grant chuckled. "You're sure not afraid to make a fool of yourself, are you?"

"For Harper? Not one fucking bit."

We shouldered our way through the enthusiastic crowd and arrived at Grant's reserved table, my eyes adjusting to the darkness as I zeroed in on Harper. As my gaze coasted over her sleek hair, brilliant smile, and skintight dress, my breath escaped me in a slow, steady hiss.

I was a man of many vices, but this woman was by far the most destructive.

As I sat down beside her, her signature scent reached my nose, delicate and floral, and a slight tingle rippled over my skin. I turned my head, my lips grazing the shell of her ear as I whispered, "You're a fucking goddess." When I drew back, a feverish flush accentuated her cheekbones, and a grin played at the corners of her mouth.

"Real discreet, King," Kylie huffed beside her as she tucked her lipstick back inside her clutch and closed it with a snap. When she glanced up, her

sharp eyebrow uplifted, highlighting her bold defiance.

“Kylie Jo, you look like you want to punch me. What’s it gonna take to rectify that?”

“Perhaps a lobotomy?” She twisted her lips and tapped her chin with a flicker of impatience in her eyes. “Or you could just let me...punch you, that is.”

A teasing smile crossed my face as Harper squeezed my knee beneath the table in warning.

“Champagne anyone?” she asked, her voice jumping when I squeezed *her* knee in retaliation.

“Hell yeah,” Rachel hailed, passing the bottle to Grant. “Will you open this for me, gorgeous?”

Grant rolled his eyes but obeyed like a good boy, and the girls shimmied in their seats as he poured everyone but me a glass.

Harper slid a bottle of water my way and winked, and if I wasn’t a fool for her already, that move would’ve done me in.

“Cheers to Kylie’s and Harper’s homecoming,” Rachel beamed, lifting her champagne glass.

“Cheers,” the rest of us toasted in unison, and the night took off from there.

The ladies polished off the bottle rather quickly, then got the brilliant idea to dance on the table when “Raise Your Glass” by P!nk resonated through the club. I sat back and nursed my water, ensuring Harper didn’t fall and break her neck.

Fixated on her tipsy smile and swaying hips, I suspected she needed this outlet for many reasons.

I understood what it was like having the voices in your head telling you you’re destined to fail. Listening to them day after day like a horrible song stuck on repeat was fucking exhausting. I’d learned how to live with them instead of silencing them, but Harper, well, she wasn’t quite there yet.

Pandemonium ensued as the house music cut out and Flight of Souls took the stage. Rachel and Kylie climbed down from the table without effort and made their way to the dance floor, but Harper wasn’t as graceful.

“Easy there, sweetheart,” I said as she used my shoulders for balance, her hair falling forward, shielding our faces.

Her throat bobbed with a swallow, and her mauve-painted lips parted.

Great. Not only was she drunk but she was horny too.

“Hi, King.” She giggled, then hiccuped and slapped a hand over her mouth.

“Hi, Kelly.” I grinned as my hands caught her waist, easing her to the seat beside me.

She glanced up at me from beneath a canopy of big black lashes, but she didn’t speak, just drank me in.

I slanted my head and stared right back. “Are you checking me out?”

She rolled her made-up eyes and scoffed. “You wish.”

I bobbed my head to the beat and hummed. “Come on.” I flipped my palm up and wiggled my fingers. “Let’s dance.”

Her gaze shifted between my face and my hand. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Too late. I was already sliding out of the booth. “It’s just a dance, Harp.”

“It’s never just a dance with you,” she mumbled to herself as she slipped her hand into mine, and I led her to the back of the crowd, where it was less rowdy.

I positioned myself behind her and swept her into my arms, and her body instantly tensed, overpowered by second thoughts and doubt.

I brushed the hair away from her neck and rested my chin on her shoulder. “Just relax.”

“You make that impossible for me to do.” Nervousness hung in her breathless voice, and I took a step back to give her space, but she clung to my arm and fastened me in place. “That doesn’t mean I want you to let me go, though.”

Grant’s words replayed in my mind.

Are you rethinking your stance on letting her go?

How could I when she said things like that?

I held her tighter, and her body relaxed into mine.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Kylie step into the darkened corridor leading to Grant’s office, and my blood turned cold. I liked Rachel, and I fucking hated cheating. But as the hostess, Sasha, followed her into the shadows, relief washed over me. Grant could be an idiot, but I had a feeling Rachel would be the one to tame his wild ass...as long as he didn’t fuck it up.

We clapped as the song came to an end, and I anticipated Harper pulling away, but she didn’t.

Luck was on my side because the next song was deep and melodic, and the entire crowd began to sway in a slow rhythm.

“This reminds me of your sixteenth birthday,” I whispered in her ear.

Harper turned her neck as far as she could, undisguised recognition in her warm gaze. “The blink-182 tribute show. It was the first time you touched me like I was more than just your friend.”

“And my heart pounded so hard, I wondered if you could feel it against your back.”

A smile glinted at the edge of her mouth. “I could.”

My fingers splayed across her stomach, and I pulled her body flush with mine. Her breath hitched as I brushed my lips against her temple, a combination of lust and agony controlling my every move. I hated that I couldn’t hold her whenever I wanted to, but she was in my arms now, so I’d make the most of it.

“Jordan?” She breathed as the song came to an end.

“Hm?”

“I need some air.”

She extracted herself from my arms, and my body immediately felt heavy from the loss.

She managed to outdistance me on the dance floor, and once I burst through the doors, it took me a few seconds to locate her in the darkness. She sang the lyrics to “Wonderwall” by Oasis as she staggered down the sidewalk, and I caught up to her in five long strides.

“I should’ve known you’d follow me,” she murmured on a sigh.

“Because I’m so chivalrous? Or because wherever you go, I go?”

“You and that lethal charm of yours.” She was coherent enough to glance in both directions before crossing the street. “I bet it works on all the ladies.”

“Yeah, I’m not taking that bait.” I chuckled as I shoved my hands in my pockets. “Where the hell are we going, anyway?”

“We’ll be there soon.”

We walked a few more blocks and arrived at Maggie’s.

“Well”—she hitched a thumb over her shoulder—“what do you think?”

“I was a big fan...when it was in business.”

“I mean, what do you think about the building...about the location,” she replied with an indignant fold of her arms.

“Great location, but I’m not sure it’s up to code.”

I knew it wasn’t—because I owned this space.

Well, CKH owned it, and my father was being a nasty motherfucker about selling it. It had something to do with a deal gone bad and sticking it to

the previous owners who screwed him over.

To be honest, I tuned him out most of the time.

Harper visibly inhaled, then sighed it out. “Fuck. You’re probably right. I tried to sneak a peek inside yesterday, but the windows are too dirty to see much. I can’t believe the Fair Oak preservation society allows it to remain this way.”

I could—because my mother was on the board.

“What’s with the sudden interest? You thinking of buying it?” I joked.

Her cheeks billowed. “Don’t laugh, but I had this idea pop into my head yesterday, and I’ve been ruminating on it ever since.”

“Well, go on, Kelly. I’m intrigued.”

“What do you think of an artisanal café and bakery that also benefits the community? A trendy spot for coffee, breakfast, and lunch, but every evening, the prepared food that doesn’t sell goes to Our Daily Bread or a local shelter. I could honor Gramps but also give my life a...I don’t know...a purpose? I’m tired of figuring things out. *This* I feel passionate about.”

Her enthusiasm took me by surprise, and for a moment, my tongue refused to set my words free.

She twisted her hair behind her ear and shook her head, interpreting my silence for disapproval. “Never mind. It’s a stupid idea.”

I reached for her hand as she started back toward The Riff. “It’s a brilliant idea. I’m just not sure this spot will do.”

“Well, I’ve searched around town. Nothing beats this location. And besides, Maggie’s is my inspiration. I won’t feel this way about some random space, Jordan.”

“It’s probably expensive as fuck.”

“I’m sure my inheritance isn’t up to your standards, but Gramps did pretty well for himself.”

God, this was killing me.

The truth never hurt so damn much.

“CKH owns the building, Harper, and my father is hell-bent on watching it slowly deteriorate like the sadist he is.”

Remorse surged through my chest and extinguished the vibrant buzz I’d been floating on all evening as I watched the hopefulness fade from her green eyes.

I’d finally caught a glimpse of the old Harper, just to watch her shimmering, sparkling light diminish completely...all because of Conrad

King.

HARPER



G ramps once said that decisions are avenues leading to new possibilities.

If what he said was true, then I stood at a busy intersection, praying I headed in the right direction.

I never imagined I'd set foot in CKH, but after a week of careful consideration, a shit ton of research, and a whole lot of therapy running, here I was, doing something so out of character, I wasn't even sure I recognized myself anymore.

Armed with my portfolio, a plateful of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies, and a half-cocked plan, I marched across the parking lot like I was going into battle with the enemy.

And in a way, I guess I was.

The last time I saw Devlin, I admitted to him that I'd always loved his brother.

It was probable he'd reject my proposal immediately, and I can't say I'd blame him.

When I entered the sterile lobby, the judgmental glare of a blond-haired woman sitting behind a curved glass desk greeted me. She clearly didn't approve of my tan blazer, white T-shirt, denim shorts, and beaded sandals, but nothing in my wardrobe was up to CKH standards, so laid-back chic it was.

"Hi there!" I smiled through the tension, my presence an obvious nuisance to her otherwise titillating day in the world of investment banking. My guess was Camille monitored her husband's schedule and warned this

woman about me. Told her I wasn't deserving of a normal, friendly welcome. Maybe even urged Devlin to cancel altogether.

Luckily, I wasn't turned away.

"Mr. King," she spoke dully into a small intercom, "Miss Kelly has arrived."

"Wonderful, Tracy. Send her in."

She pointed at a hallway on the right side of the reception area, then turned in her swivel chair, dismissing me.

Devlin greeted me at his office door with a breezy smile. "Harper, nice to see you," he said, motioning for me to enter with the tilt of his head. He jammed his hands into his suit pockets and strolled around a pompous-sized cherry oak desk, whistling under his breath as he took a seat in a brown executive office chair. The confining space reeked of leather and arrogance—nothing like Jordan's warm, soothing scent. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

I seated myself in the uncomfortable chair across from him. "I won't keep you long—"

"I'd appreciate that since you scheduled this meeting for"—he glanced down at his shiny gold watch—"six o'clock on a Friday evening."

To be clear, his hoity-toity secretary scheduled my appointment, but it wasn't the time to get defensive and point fingers. "Well, to say thank you for squeezing me in, I baked cookies," I said with a syrupy smile, sliding the plate his way. "They're vegan, so Camille should approve."

He glared at the cookies like they insulted his grandmother. "We both know why you're here, and my wife's not the one who can give you what you need." My eyes went wide, and he chuckled. "Maggie's Café, Harper. You're here to negotiate the sale of the café."

"Oh...right. Yes." My dry mouth made it impossible to form an articulate response.

I sounded like a woman you *definitely* didn't want to do business with.

"Well, I don't eat vegan, so you're already off to a terrible start." I flinched at his bluntness, my confidence dwindling by the second. I considered walking out right then, clinging to whatever dignity I had left, when a wide grin slid across his mouth. "Oh, this is going to be fun. You should see your face right now."

Irritation and impatience coiled around me. "You're not gonna make this easy for me, are you?"

“Not so much, no,” he said with a grin.

“Look, I’m aware your father has something against the previous owners, and he’d be content seeing the space sit empty for eternity, but it’s in a prime location, and it would be shameful to let it go to waste. I brought my business plan if you’d like to review it.”

I held out my portfolio, but he waved it away. “That won’t be necessary.” He put his feet up on his desk and leaned back. “I think Jordan needs to be included in this conversation. Have you spoken to him recently?”

Heat crept into my cheeks as a torrent of guilt washed over me.

Jordan texted daily, but I couldn’t bring myself to respond.

“Not exactly.”

“And why is that?”

Because it absolutely terrifies me that part of me still yearns for our imperfect love.

“Because I’ve been busy.”

Devlin snickered. “Busy, huh? Busy like he was for the past year when he busted his ass around this office and still found the time to take care of *your* property like some middle-aged househusband? Come on, Harper, the guy just needs a fucking wedding ring because he’s basically already married. Grunt work and no rewards? Sounds like wedded bliss to me.”

It was like his words grew legs, booted me swiftly in the gut, and drove all the air from my lungs.

I stood abruptly, embarrassment stirring within me. “Well, this has been fun, Devlin. Truly. Thank you for your time.”

I made it halfway to the door when he said, “Stop ignoring him, Harper.” I met his gaze over my shoulder, an unlikely kindness shining in his eyes. “He deserves better than this.”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Good girl.” I narrowed my eyes, and he held up his palms. “Kidding. Is there anything else I can do for you, or are we done here? There’s a bottle of fifteen-year-old single malt scotch waiting for me at home.”

Funny, he wasn’t in a rush to get home to his wife.

Getting drunk probably made Camille more tolerable, but what a way to live.

“That’s everything, Dev.”

I paused with my hand on the doorknob, then pivoted back around.

I actually did have something else to say, and it was long overdue.

“I’m sorry about the way we handled things...back then.”

“Teenagers do stupid shit.” He shrugged. “Besides, I’m just as much to blame. Asking you out, knowing Jordan was into you, wasn’t the smartest decision on my part. I shouldn’t have inserted myself into your situation.”

“Yeah, well, Jordan and I aren’t exactly an ideal match, so.”

“Jesus, Harper, cut the high school bullshit. Jordan’s pined over you for years, and you continue to tug him around by his balls, knowing full well he’ll allow it. Either lock him down or set him free.”

Thunder growled and rumbled above as I walked out of CKH in a fog of anger and confusion, the musky scent of an impending storm permeating the air as I headed to my car. Climbing in just as heavy rain assaulted the earth, I tossed my portfolio on the passenger seat and then shook the steering wheel in frustration.

“Stupid King boys,” I muttered to myself.

Devlin’s erroneous accusation seeped into my mind like an infection, consuming my thoughts as I drove off.

He didn’t know what he was talking about. Didn’t know how much I *enjoyed* being around Jordan. Didn’t know how much I admired his hard work and valued his input and hoped his take-no-prisoners attitude would rub off on me.

Hoped other things would rub off on me too.

My attraction to Jordan was like a hypnotic drug. Whenever we were together, lust pulsated like a drumbeat in my veins, clouding my mind and hindering my judgment—and *that* was the real problem.

I drove home at a steady pace, wipers on full speed but still not doing much to clear the water off my windshield as the intense storm grew stronger.

I should have been concentrating on the road, but my mind kept wandering back to that damn conversation.

My heart was caught in a tug-of-war between the future and the past.

My troubled thoughts were disorienting.

My focus was off.

Out of nowhere, a black dog darted across the road like a missile just feet from my Jetta. I hit the brakes and jerked the steering wheel to the right, the car skidding off the road into a dark, empty field.

My chest burned from the seat belt’s tight hold, but other than that, I was fine.

I just prayed I could say the same for the dog.

Grabbing an old flashlight from the glove box, I yanked open the door and hopped out. Squinting to see through the rain, I scanned the field with a dull stream of light, landing on two eyes glowing eerily in the dark.

“It’s okay, I’m not gonna hurt you.”

Fat raindrops battered the ground, splashing mud onto my shins as I crouched down, and the dog tucked its tail between its legs and cowered.

“Please come here,” I begged in a dejected voice.

Eyeing me with suspicion, the animal slowly approached.

Extending my palm, I allowed it to take a cautious sniff, which seemed to ease its fear.

It sat back on its haunches and placed its mucky front paws on my shoulders. “So you’re a boy then, yeah?” I giggled as he licked my cheek. “Okay, pooch, enough of that. Let’s get out of here.”

I scrambled to my feet and ran back to the car, losing my shoes to the thick sludge in the process. As I opened the door, the wet pup hopped right in and curled up on the passenger seat, soaking my portfolio.

“Eh, a lot of good it did me anyway,” I smiled as I turned the key in the ignition, but when I revved the engine, my tires just spun in a slick rut. Panicking, I shifted into reverse and gave it more gas, but my tires sank lower into the ground.

“No, no, no!” I cried as a violent barrage of thunderclaps rattled the windows, and the dog began to whimper. “I know, boy. I don’t like this either.”

Though I was stranded and frightened in the middle of nowhere, I refused to call the only person in the world who could soothe my nerves.

Not after Devlin’s heated warning.

JORDAN



J'd just stepped out of the shower when my phone rang.

Wrapping a towel around my waist, I wondered which incompetent, ass-kissing employee needed a sharp reminder not to call me after six. Nothing irritated me more than people assuming I was like Devlin. When I left the office, work was not to follow.

I walked to the sink and eyeballed the screen.

Kylie.

“Hello?” I answered in a hesitant voice, unsure why she’d be calling, since our relationship was barely civil and certainly didn’t warrant a Friday night gossip session.

“Jordan! Thank God,” she spoke frantically. “Harper’s stranded on the side of Garvis Road behind the Bennett farm, and I’m stuck in traffic on I-76.”

Panic twisted in my gut as I peered at the raindrops pelting the bathroom window. “What do you mean she’s stranded?” I barked, rushing towards my dresser to grab a t-shirt and a pair of running shorts.

“I don’t know the whole story. Cell service is bad out there on a good day, and it’s even worse during a storm.”

“I’m on it.” I hung up before she could reply and rushed to get dressed. I slipped my feet into my running shoes and sprinted out the door, not even bothering to lock up. Nothing in that apartment meant more to me than Harper. If someone wanted to steal my shit, they could take it.

I raced to my SUV, clothes drenched in under thirty seconds. Spinning out of the parking lot, it didn’t take long before the savage storm and low

visibility had my foot easing off the gas, and my muscles tensed when an ambulance sped by in the opposite direction with its red lights flashing.

“She’s fine,” I reassured myself. “She’s fine.”

When I reached Garvis Road, I slowed to a snaillike speed, squinting out the windshield as I searched for Harper through the rain and thick fog.

There, about ten yards from the road, sat her piece-of-shit Jetta.

“What the fuck did you do, baby?” I pulled over and flashed my blinkers.

As I ran towards the chaotic scene, the Jetta’s tires spun in reverse, digging a deeper hole as she held her foot on the gas, and I tried but failed to avoid the muddy spray.

I wrenched the door open and, by the sound of her soft shriek, scared her shitless. “Jordan?” She sniffled, brow crinkled in surprise as tears shone in her eyes.

My gaze raked over her body and landed on her bare feet. “Where the hell are your shoes?”

Her bottom lip trembled as she nodded to the field beyond my shoulder. “They got stuck in the mud.”

“Guess I’m carrying your fine ass out of here,” I yelled over the rain drops pounding against the hood.

“Can’t you go find someone else to save?” She shot me an indignant look.

Red nose.

Watery eyes.

Wobbly lips.

Something else was happening here.

“What’s going on with you?” As she remained silent, my patience waned. “Fine!” I threw my hands in the air. “I’ll sit in my car all night and watch you try to get yourself out of this mess, but I’m not leaving you.”

I turned on my heel, ready to make good on my word, when her defeated voice reached my ears. “I can’t leave him. Will you...will you carry him?”

Carry him?

I glanced back to find a soggy, medium-sized dog in her arms. “The fuck you doing with a dog?”

“He ran in front of my car. I couldn’t leave him.”

Curbing my asshole tendencies was at the top of my to-do list but rescuing a flea-infested stray seemed a bit too pussy whipped for someone who wasn’t getting any pussy. What if the mutt decided to go *Cujo* on my

ass? Sure, he was a shivering ball of fur now, but what if he was biding his time, waiting to attack?

“P-please, Jordan?” She shivered.

My name was a whispered plea from her lips, and I was hit with an uncontrollable need to hear her say it again—preferably while she was naked and writhing beneath me but just as wet.

I snapped into action, snatching up the dog before the three of us made a run for it.

As we drove to her house, Harper wiped her face with a napkin she found in the glove box then glanced over her shoulder. “Please don’t kill me when you see what he did to your backseat.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Yes,” she winced. “I’ll pay you back, I swear.”

“And how do you plan on doing that, Kelly?”

I cast a sideways glance her way, and she tossed me one of her haughty glares. “With money, you fool. If you’re expecting sexual favors, you can drop me off right here.”

I slowed down, pretending to pull over, and she nudged me lightly in the shoulder with a laugh.

When we arrived at her house, she opened the garage door while I retrieved the dog and carried him inside. “If you insist on keeping this thing, he’s sleeping out here tonight.”

A tiny indent appeared between her brows. “Why?”

“Why?” I echoed. “Fleas, ticks, rabies. Shall I go on?”

“Please don’t,” she rolled her eyes and lowered the squeaky garage door behind me. “I’m going to get some blankets and a bowl of water.”

“I mean it, Harper,” I called out. “Until you get him checked out by a vet, there will be no cuddling with your new friend here.” I gave him an *I’m watching you* gesture before I followed her into the house.

When I joined her at the kitchen sink, she glanced up at me with a disgruntled frown.

“Don’t give me that look.” I added three pumps of soap to the center of my palm then added a fourth for good measure. “You don’t know where that dog’s been.”

She cocked a brow and dipped her chin, gaze narrowly assessing my junk through my shorts. “I don’t know where you’ve been, but I allowed you into my home.”

I dried my hands then pitched the yellow hand towel onto the counter behind her. “Out of all the places I’ve been, this...” I plucked the waist band of her shorts with my index finger “...is by far my favorite.”

Scarlet heat skimmed her neck and cheeks as a flash of her white teeth scraped her bottom lip.

It was cruel, the way she lit a fire in my soul with one look, and my brain became an optimistic weapon, torturing me with the silly notion that maybe things could go back to the way they were.

“Blankets,” she murmured with a strange note to her voice. “He needs blankets.”

As I watched her walk away, my biggest problem wasn’t the ache in my balls. It was the disappoint I felt knowing I couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

We set up an area in the garage for the mutt to sleep, then we fed him some lunchmeat, since that was all Harper had in her fridge.

“What should I name him?” She asked as she rolled up a slice of ham and offered it up in her hand.

I watched him closely, but he was surprisingly gentle as he ate it right out of her palm.

“I wouldn’t name him anything until you know he’s sticking around.”

“How very practical.” Her mouth twisted sarcastically as she dragged her hand down the length of the dog’s back. “How about Bandit? Do you like that name, bud?”

His wet snout sniffed her bare legs in response.

We stood in silence for a few beats, listening to the rain beat against the roof.

“So, I met with Devlin tonight to discuss the café.” She yanked a black hair tie off her wrist and pulled her hair into a messy bun. “Do the two of you have a competition going to see who can be the most condescending? Because I think he might be winning.”

“Oh, he definitely is. Such a prick, right?”

Her eyes gleamed with amusement. “Absolutely.” Her gaze hung on my face for a moment, her smile fading. “He’s convinced I’m taking advantage of you.”

“He’s an idiot.”

“Is he?” Her throat wrenched down with a swallow. “You’re the one I’m always running to. You’re the one always saving me.”

“Is that what happened tonight? You didn’t want me to rescue you, so

you called Kylie instead? Fuck, Harper. How many times have you saved my ass, too? Why is it such a bad thing that we rely on each other?"

"Because what happens when you're not around anymore, and I don't know who I am without you?"

Just like Lori.

"Sweetheart, we're not going to end up like your parents."

Her expression darkened with pain. "All my life, I've tried to do the right thing, so I didn't turn out like her. But look at me," she threw her arms out wide, "I'm just like her."

"You're *nothing* like her," I grit out.

She gave a small derisive chuckle. "Oh, but I am. I'm selfish and I'm... I'm...so fucking lost."

She was battered.

Broken.

Defeated.

A version of Harper I was unfamiliar with; a version I couldn't fix.

Closing the gap between us, I linked my arms around her and drew her near. "Harp, you've got to talk about what's bothering you, otherwise it's going to eat you alive. You can't hide your unhappiness, and you can't run from it either."

I should know.

I tried to do it for far too long.

She tipped up her chin, green eyes piercing my goddamn soul. "I miss him, Jordan. I miss him so much it physically hurts. I wanted to make him proud, but I feel like I'm letting him down instead. How am I supposed to make these grownup choices when *my* grownup isn't around to guide me? I don't know what I'm doing, and I need him to tell me what's right. I...I just need *him*."

She fisted my t-shirt and dropped her forehead to the center of my chest as silent tears racked her body.

"I know, Harp. I know." Grief pounded my nerves, my composure, my resilience as I tipped my head forward, brushing my lips over her hair.

Harper believed Jim could reattach petals to a wilted rose and shoo away a tsunami with the wave of his arm. Her father, grandfather, and hero all rolled into one, and even if I knew what to say, sorrow would still imprison her aching heart.

So, instead of offering her solace with my words, I showed her with my

actions.

I led her into the house and up the stairs.

Stripped us of our clothes and helped her into the shower.

Took my time washing the dirt and grime from her hair and body.

Then I guided her to bed, cradled her in my arms, and rocked her to sleep.

The next morning, we took Bandit to the animal hospital to get him checked out.

No fleas.

No ticks.

No rabies.

No home.

The vet barely made it out of the examine room before Harper was up dancing, an uncontrollable smile curling on her mouth because the mutt was hers to keep.

The tension that swirled inside her the night before had downgraded from an F5 tornado to a dying wind drift, and I wasn't sure if it was because of the dog, or me, or a combination of both.

All I knew for certain was there was a physical shift in the universe when I awoke with her in my arms, like I finally had my life back after years of being held hostage, and I wouldn't allow anything to fuck it up again.

We headed to the market afterwards, so she could buy Bandit food and all the other shit he needed, then we stopped at the tow shop to check on her car.

While the vet was the bearer of good news, the mechanic, not so much.

"At least you still have Jim's truck," I appeased as I opened my passenger door for her, trying to sound regretful while knowing full well the Jetta's demise was a blessing in disguise.

Good riddance, death trap.

"That's true." She twisted in her seat and scratched Bandit's chin. "I'm not really sure how I feel about driving around in a truck that's older than I am, but at least it's reliable."

"Unlike the Jetta," I mumbled to myself as I shut her door.

We had one more pitstop to make, and I wasn't sure how it would go over with the stubborn woman beside me. Harper contemplated things, while I

acted on impulse. It was the way we worked since we were kids, and yet my stomach felt heavy with lead as I drove towards our destination.

“Why’d you stop here?” She asked as I parked in front of Maggie’s.

I turned off the engine then twisted to face her, resting my forearm on the back of her seat. “I’ve done a lot of stupid shit in my life—”

“Yes, I know. I was there for most of it—”

“Which is why I want you to know this isn’t some careless decision I made without consideration. Jim’s biggest concern wasn’t his house, or his money, or even what you did with your life. He wanted you to be happy.” I twisted a lock of her hair behind her ear. “He wanted you to have all good things.”

“Jordan...” her throat dipped nervously “...what did you do?”

“Gave my father an ultimatum. Either he sold you the building, or I quit. Since he cares more about appearances than this place, I got what I wanted. Even negotiated the price, so you’ll be paying next to nothing.”

Confusion dug a groove in her forehead. “And how do you know I can afford it?”

My fingertips caressed her shoulder, and her dark lashes fluttered. “I helped Lori sort out Big Jim’s finances after he passed away. Made sure your inheritance was in order, made sure there weren’t any outstanding debts... that sort of thing.”

She gave me a pointed glare. “That’s what Lori was discussing with you at his funeral.”

“Who else was she going to ask?” I smirked. “I’m fucking brilliant with numbers.”

“So damn arrogant.”

“So damn confident.”

She glanced over at the building she was a few signatures away from being hers. “And you don’t think I’m making a terrible mistake?”

“Not one bit.”

A brief laugh broke from her lips. “I own a café?”

“Only if you want to.”

A warm wave of satisfaction spread through me as she laced her arms around the back of my neck and pulled me into a hug. “Thank you, Jordan,” her voice drifted on a whisper. “This means everything to me.”

HARPER



At twenty-four years old, I didn't fully possess the courage of a business owner, but I hated the idea of Maggie's going to waste or, worse, Conrad transforming it into something completely different.

Worry claimed my weekend as I came to terms with my new reality, but when Monday rolled around, renewed energy crackled and popped beneath my skin as I returned to CKH to close the deal.

After Jordan and I spent all of Sunday sifting through bank statements and paperwork in preparation for my meeting with Conrad, I felt at ease in the presence of the King patriarch and his massive ego. Jordan sat directly across from me at a long glass-top table in a brightly lit board room, fingers steepled and eyes alight with humor as I asked a million and one questions before I signed my life away.

For the first time in a long time, the unknown offered a sense of thrill and excitement instead of dread, and my stomach didn't churn in despair when I contemplated the future.

"Congratulations, Ms. Kelly," Conrad said with a firm handshake before he slipped out of the boardroom with his phone pressed to his ear.

"Yes, Ms. Kelly, congratulations," Jordan mimicked, pressing his chest against my back. He smelled delicious and familiar—like soap, citrus, and temptation—and my body felt restless with longing.

I spun around and released a smirk. "My armpits are sweaty, and my heart is racing."

"High-stakes banking, baby." He leaned his ass against the edge of the table and folded his arms, eyeing me with laser-like intensity. "Do you know

you're incredibly sexy when you harness all that confidence? When you stood up to my father halfway through the meeting, I almost took you right here on this table." He knocked on the glass top, and a jolt of energy tingled my spine. He tilted his head to the side and licked his bottom lip. "Have dinner with me tonight."

"I can't. I promised the girls I'd celebrate with them." The frown that played over his forehead had a brooding quality, and I tried to bite back a grin. "But I'm free tomorrow."

He pushed off the table, sweeping his long fingers through the strands of his ink-black hair as his feet drew him closer. "Tomorrow works."

I held my breath as he came to a halt before me, inches from my face, and when we locked eyes, I was done for.

"I'll take you anywhere you want to go." He dragged his thumb across my bottom lip, then inspected the red lipstick on the pad of his finger. "Or we can skip the meal altogether, and I can spend the night feasting on you. It's been far too long, baby. I'm *starving*." A betraying flush of warmth crept up my neck, and a smug grin pulled his mouth to the side. "Are you picturing it, Harp? My tongue buried deep in your tight little—"

I smashed my lips to his to shut him up.

"Mh-mh-mh," he hummed against my mouth as he plowed his fingers into my hair, fisting it near the nape of my neck.

The sudden bite to my scalp elicited a soft moan from the base of my throat. "J-Jordan," I breathed, clinging to his pattern silk tie, "this is so unprofessional."

"Good. Let them fire me." He brought his lips back to mine, his hands all over me.

My heart beat so fast, it made me feel faint and breathless. His kiss was like a pill I shouldn't swallow. Like one more drink when I was already drunk. A bad decision that felt too damn good.

"Look at the two of you...picking up right where you left off." Devlin's voice cut through the heated moment, dumping a bucket of ice on my libido. Still wrapped up in Jordan's arms, I twisted my head, sizing up the Henry Cavill wannabe leaning against the doorframe. "Doesn't this just warm my frozen heart?" He patted his chest and stuck out his bottom lip.

"You have a heart?" I scowled. "I thought Camille devoured it."

Devlin's mouth slackened, and Jordan dropped his head to the crook of my neck with a chuckle.

“Oh, this is going to be fun. You should see your face right now.” I threw Devlin’s words back at him, and a delighted grin climbed up his cheeks, activating his dimples.

I realized in order for this dynamic to work, we needed to be mature adults. But I also recognized good-natured bickering was a huge part of Devlin and Jordan’s relationship, and I appreciated their brotherly bond. So if throwing low-blow punches at Devlin’s ego was necessary for my acceptance, I’d take one for the team and insult him every chance I got.

Devlin glanced at his watch. “Don’t you have a business to run? Rumor has it you’re aiming to be up and running by Labor Day.”

“Headed there now, Clark.”

“Clark?”

Kent.

“Never mind.”

I glanced up at Jordan as he released me from his suited arms. His head angled downward, like he wanted to kiss me goodbye, but my high-heeled feet did a clumsy, backstep scramble. The heat that engulfed us moments ago was undeniable, but for some reason, a gentle kiss goodbye felt a lot like disobeying my heart.

If I dismantled the safeguard, what would stop him from breaking it again?

I collected my briefcase and did an awkward bow-nod combination. “I’ll, uh, see you tomorrow.”

“Calvin wasn’t *that* bad in bed,” I lied, then quickly sipped my wine to shut myself up. Kylie’s right eyebrow crept upward in disbelief, and as the Chardonnay warmed my belly, I conceded. “Okay, fine...he was terrible.”

I covered my face with my hands, and Rachel and Kylie giggled in unison.

We sat around Rachel’s kitchen island, nibbling on cheese and grapes while listening to an early 2000s playlist on my phone and drinking wine.

All the wine.

“What about you, Rach? Got any good stories to share?” I popped a grape into my mouth and wiggled my brows.

The more I got to know Rachel, the more I liked her. She was open and brutally honest, but she also had a soft, nurturing side that reminded me of Gramps.

She gathered her hair over one shoulder and sighed. “My list of failed relationships is a mile long. If a guy is fatally flawed, I’ll find him, and I’ll most likely fall for him.” She looked down her nose at her stemless wineglass and guided the tip of her finger around the rim. “I actually ditched Philly because the last guy I dated became too much to handle.”

Kylie frowned. “Like you’re running from him?”

Rachel’s shoulders drooped. “Let’s just say I didn’t stick around to see what his horrible temper would drive him to do next.”

A chill crawled down my spine, and my skin tightened over my bones.

The look in her pain-filled eyes, the dread mixed with fear, said whoever this man was, he was capable of doing terrible things.

“I’m sorry. I’m such a downer.” Rachel sipped her wine, visibly uncomfortable with the topic of conversation.

“You’re not a downer.” Kylie shook her head. “I think it’s brave of you to talk about it. And no matter your reasons for being here, we’re glad you are.”

“Thanks, Ky.” Rachel smiled softly. “I know it sounds crazy, but I’ve found this peace in Fair Oak that I never felt before. I was born and raised in Philadelphia, moved to Manhattan for a little while, then returned to Philly. City life is all I’ve ever known, but when I moved here, it was like I caught my breath after running the longest race of my life.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’m being so dramatic. Here, take this away from me,” she finished, nudging her glass in my direction.

I carried it to the sink and poured the rest of her wine down the drain. “I know what you mean. I spent so many years wishing I could leave that I never appreciated what it offered. Comfort, safety—”

“Sex.”

My eyes widened.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Kylie went on, “aren’t you talking about Jordan right now?”

I grabbed a grape and threw it at her chest. “I hate you.”

“I love you...which is why I only speak the truth.”

“Which is?”

“You love him. He loves you. Get over yourself already and do something about it.”

She handed over my phone and quirked a brow.
There were two messages from Jordan sent two minutes ago.

Jordan: I can't stop thinking about that kiss.

Jordan: Stop freaking out. It's finally our time.

Rachel came around the island and glanced over my shoulder. "Harper Kelly! Go upstairs right now and put that boy out of his misery."

"It's late."

"It's nine."

"I don't know which apartment's his."

She shot me a grin. "Good thing I do."

"I've been drinking. I can't make a habit of him seeing me like this."

"You have one hour to sober up," Kylie replied. "Then you're out of here."

Butterflies took flight in my stomach as I knocked on Jordan's apartment door.

When he answered, so did the Lord because I'd spent *years* praying Jordan would rock a pair of gray sweatpants in my presence again, and holy hell, there they were, a sight to behold.

My gaze fixed on his defined abs before trailing the vertical strip of hair running from his belly button to the waistband of said pants.

"I think I just came."

He coughed out a low, raspy chuckle. "I'm sorry...what?"

I shook the perversion from my mind. "Nothing. Hi."

He gripped the doorframe and poked his head out into the hallway.
"Where are the girls?"

"Watching *Legally Blonde*. Or prank-calling Grant. It's basically a middle school sleepover down there, so anything is possible."

He stepped back and swung his arm, inviting me inside.

I stood in the middle of his living room and glanced around. His place was cold and sterile, like CKH. And he *hated* CKH. "This apartment needs a warm hug."

“A warm hug, huh?” His voice was closer than I expected, and my muscles flexed in anticipation as I spun around to face him. Placing two fingers under my chin, he tilted up my head and examined my eyes. “Have you been drinking, Kelly?”

“We were celebrating with wine and cheese, but I promise, if I had to walk a straight line right now, I could.”

“Okay then. Let’s see it,” he challenged.

His fingers were still on my skin.

His bare chest was so warm that he made *my* skin burn.

And the suddenly strained line of his sculpted mouth turned my insides to mush.

Lust was an electrical storm, and my entire body sizzled.

“Actually, I think there are better ways to demonstrate how clearheaded I am.”

A forceful swallow worked his brawny throat. “Harper, I won’t fuck you when you’ve been drinking.”

I let my hands explore the peaks and valleys of his torso as I lowered to my knees. “Then don’t fuck *me*...fuck my mouth.”

He stared at me intently, eyes blue as steel and just as hard. My heart jerked against its tethers as I waited to see what he’d do, the fear of rejection crashing upon me.

With his gaze on mine, he took out his cock and fisted it. “Is that all you want?” he asked in a tight voice. “For me to kiss you? Fuck you? Nothing more, nothing less?”

My mouth watered as he swelled in his hand, the angry blood in his veins making him harder. I pulled my eyes away and met his unrelenting glare. “No. Starting tomorrow, I want *everything*.” The tip of my tongue flicked the tip of his length, and his eyes hooded. “But for tonight, I want to make *you* feel good.” I replaced his hand with mine and licked his shaft before I drew him into my mouth, sucking gently as his hips bucked forward.

His broad chest rose and fell with his erratic breath, and I released him with a pop. “Jesus, Harper.”

I licked my lips and smiled. His pleasure started and ended with me, and I felt like a goddamn queen. “Does that mean I’m free to continue?”

“God, please, yes.”

His plea died on his lips as I sucked and pumped, and I watched in awe as his head fell back with a steady hiss, the tendons of his neck bulging with

tension.

My comfort.

My safety.

My...everything.

Eyes watering, I took him all in and moaned.

“Baby,” he choked out. “It won’t be much longer.”

I appreciated his warning, but no way in hell was I stopping. I want him to fill my mouth. To claim me in a way no one ever had. To mark me in the dirtiest fashion.

“Harper.” He warned once more, and like the stubborn woman I was, I cupped his ass with both hands, keeping him right where I wanted him.

I watched in utter fascination as his eyes closed and his lips parted, his ripe taste coating my tongue. I was struck by how natural it felt, connecting with him on that level after so much time, like his pleasure was mine and mine was his.

When his eyelids fluttered open, his gaze brimmed with longing and adoration, and my tender heart shot into overdrive while the rest of me went still.

“I love you,” I proclaimed, the words dragging themselves past my swollen, cum-coated lips, raw and so fucking messy—like us.

He cursed under his breath as he placed his hands under my arms and hauled me to my feet.

He didn’t look angry. He looked *livid*.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, the corners of my mouth turning down as a sudden tightness seized my chest.

He doesn’t feel the same.

He doesn’t feel the same.

He doesn’t—

“I refuse to look down on you when I tell you I love you too.”

Oh, sweet relief.

His hands rose to my cheeks, and I gripped his wrists, feeling his rapid-beating pulse beneath his hot skin—on fire and so alive. “I love you, Harp, and I promise, this time, we won’t fuck this up. No lying. No hiding. Everyone in this fucking town will know we’re together.” He bent at his knees, bringing his eyes level with mine. “Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“I’m not sure I’m ever ready for you, King, so why keep fighting it?” I

smiled as I pressed my forehead to his.

He replaced his severe expression with a sexy grin. “That’s my girl.” He laced his fingers through mine and led me toward his bedroom. “Come on. Let’s see how much dirtier we can get tonight.”

JORDAN



“Devlin invited us to a barbecue at his place on Saturday,” I mentioned a week later as I set down an omelet in front of my sluggish girlfriend, an irrepressible yawn nearly breaking her face in two.

Harper dragged her plate closer, her lips curved down in a frown. “What about Camille? Won’t that be awkward?”

“She’ll be away all weekend.” I took the seat perpendicular to her as Bandit trotted into the kitchen and sat beside her.

I gnashed my teeth at him before I bit into my toast, and his ears perked up as his head slanted to the side. Annoying fucker needed to use the bathroom five times throughout the night, and guess who got up to let him out?

Answer: me.

Harper pointed her fork at me in warning. “Be nice to my dog.”

Then she yawned—again.

She’d been spending long hours at the café in preparation for her end-of-summer opening, then at night, we’d prioritize sex over sleep.

Exhaustion brought out her dark side.

It was time to put my foot down.

“I know you can’t get enough of this body, baby...” I swept a hand over my naked torso. “But I’m cutting you off until you’re fully rested.”

Words I never imagined I’d say.

She narrowed her eyes and brought a mug of black coffee to her lips, taking large gulps of the warm, bitter fuel. Her gaze softened when the caffeine entered her bloodstream, and she raised a brow as she set the mug

back down. “You’re cutting me off?”

By her smug smirk, she assumed I was bluffing.

I was not.

“Yes. My dick is off-limits for the next few days.”

She rubbed the inside of her foot against my calf and angled her head, watching me closely. “So you’re saying that after waiting six *long, torturous* years, you’ve gotten your fill of me in seven days?”

I shoveled a forkful of egg whites into my mouth and bobbed my head. “Yes,” I mumbled, chewed, and swallowed. “Because we need sleep, and this”—I gestured back and forth between us—“is more than sex.”

She removed her foot from my leg and rested an elbow on the table. “Is it, though?” she teased. “I mean, without sex, what else do we really have?”

“Everything, baby. We have everything.”

“Do you believe in second chances?” I asked the guys that weekend as I squeezed ketchup onto my burger, the faintest hint of a warm June breeze doing nothing to cool the heat on my neck.

From across the patio table, Devlin and Warren groaned while Grant nodded.

“At least one of you has my back.” I tipped my soda can in his direction. “Thanks, Whitlock.”

“Anytime, man. The sky’s the limit when your heart is in it.”

“Congrats, J. The stoner believes you and Harper have a real shot at love.” Devlin rolled his eyes and sipped his beer.

“I really need to hang out with people my own age,” Warren mumbled under his breath as he waved to Julia across the yard. Bandit hadn’t moved from her side since she arrived, and by the smile on her face, she was rather fond of him too.

Harper and I locked eyes at the same time, and an oversized smile settled on her gorgeous face, her fingers fluttering with a wave. She perched on the edge of the pool with Kylie, Rachel, and Warren’s wife, Sam, appearing more relaxed than she had all week.

Grilled food, decent music, and Harper in cutoff shorts and a curve-hugging tank top—life was fucking amazing.

“It’s hot as hell out here. Why aren’t we in the pool?” Grant asked, plucking his shirt from his sweaty skin.

“Be my guest. Someone should make use of it since your sister insisted we have one but never sets foot in it,” Dev clipped with a rough edge to his voice.

The girls’ heads canted toward Rachel as she spoke animatedly, and I nudged Grant’s arm. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

He glanced over my shoulder and chuckled. “Oh, hell yeah.”

“You two are idiots,” Devlin mumbled as he surged to his feet. “I’m getting another burger.”

“Count me out.” Warren shook his head. “Sam would kill me. Word of advice, fellas, never intentionally piss off your wife.”

Grant and I shared a knowing smirk as we tugged off our shirts, then stalked toward our prey. Sam was the first to catch on and subtly slipped away from the group, and Kylie was quick to follow, flipping us the finger as she headed toward the house.

Without warning, we cannonballed into the pool, drenching Harper and Rachel as planned.

“Jerks!” Rachel shrieked as she squeezed the water from her saturated hair and sulked off toward the lawn.

Grant shuddered with laughter as he climbed out of the pool and chased after her. “Please don’t get upset, Rach,” he begged before they disappeared inside the pool house

“And then there were two,” I teased, treading water as Harper stared at me with a mixture of humor and defiance in her eyes, torn between wanting to berate me or join me. “What’s it gonna be, Kelly? You in or out?”

With a shadow of a smirk, she pushed herself to her feet and plunged into the cool water with a splash, and when she came up for air, her full smile broke free.

I loved that she didn’t care about her wet clothes and hair. Loved that she was living in the moment—with me.

Encircling her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist, she kissed me and whispered, “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“The water?” I asked, moving us to the shallow end, farther away from our friends.

“Being happy,” she beamed right before she pressed her hands to the top of my head and dunked me.

I reemerged with a shit-eating grin, wiped the water from my eyes, and captured her mouth again.

“Jordan!” Warren yelled, skewering me with a glare while Sam flicked her wrist and mouthed, “It’s fine.”

Sam was a saint, but I couldn’t blame Warren. If I had a daughter, I’d probably be the same way—protective, wanting to shield her from motherfuckers like me.

“Come on.” I laced my fingers through Harper’s. “Let’s go find some towels.”

We reached Devlin’s back door just as Kylie emerged with a neat pile in her hands. “Devlin thought you might need these,” she said, holding them up.

My eyes narrowed on the expansive kitchen beyond her shoulder. “Where is he?”

“On the phone with Camille.” She lowered her voice, so only I could hear, “And he doesn’t sound happy.”

Her message was clear: Wicked Whitlock was up to no good.

I swathed Harper with a towel, then wrapped one around my waist. “Wish me luck.” I winked before I headed inside.

I followed Devlin’s voice to his office and hovered at the threshold, his back to me as he sat in a swivel chair facing the window. “You know what, Cam, this is my house too, and I won’t apologize.” He paused. “Right, because dinner parties with *your* friends are so fucking enjoyable.” He softened his tone, “I’m sorry, okay? Please don’t get upset.” He sighed. “Yes, Camille. I promise, she only came inside to use the bathroom...okay...fine...bye.”

For the record, injecting myself into Devlin’s marital issues was never my intention, but as soon as my brother threw his phone to the side and growled, I couldn’t check myself.

“First of all, what the fuck?” I stepped fully into his office. “And second of all, what the fuck?”

When Dev swiveled around, darkness clouded his eyes. “She saw Kylie through the security app on her phone and freaked out.” He chuckled humorlessly. “I mean, I hardly know that chick. She was only thanking me for the food and shit, then asked me where the bathroom was. And the kicker? Camille could be out there doing God knows what with God knows who, and I’d have no clue.”

“Kind of an unhealthy dynamic you two have, don’t you think?”

He rose and plucked his phone from the floor. “Pot, kettle.”

“Oh, I’ll be the first to admit Harper and I aren’t perfect. But that’s just it. We’re a work in progress, not the final product. You’re married, Dev.” I flung my arms to the side. “This is it. This is your life. Are you honestly happy with it?”

There was no way he was—he’d just gotten good at pretending.

Perfect wife.

Perfect life.

Perfect facade

“Your therapist is right outside.” He pointed his phone toward the door. “Go talk psychology with him.”

“You’re not allowed to call him that.” I lowered my voice. “It makes him feel weird.”

He rolled his eyes. “While I appreciate your concern, J, you have no fucking clue what my life is like.”

Disappointment socked me in the stomach, but I wouldn’t beg him to confide in me. How he lived his life was his choice, and if he became a bitter, emptier version of himself, well, he’d have to get right with that.

I maintained a blank expression as I backed out of the room. “If that’s true, whose fault is that?”

Later that night, as Harper and I cleared the kitchen table and washed the dishes, it struck me how much I delighted in the mundane.

A barbecue with our friends.

A stroll around the park with Bandit.

A night spent reading side by side on the couch.

The domestic life I once frowned upon now got me rock hard for the woman beside me.

I dropped my mouth to her shoulder and bit her playfully as I tickled her sides, and her wild laughter echoed through the house as she tried to wiggle out of my hold. “Jordan, stop! I’m getting soap everywhere!” She giggled, rubbing her ass against me, feeling what she did to me. “Aw, honey.” She pouted, glancing down at the bulge in my pants. “Too bad I can’t do anything to help with that.”

“Too bad,” I rasped, my hands squeezing her hip bones as I rested my chin on the top of her head. She smelled like sunscreen, chlorine, and now, thanks to me, dish detergent.

Twisting in my arms, she flashed me a grin of challenge. “Or we could break your stupid no-sex rule.” She lifted onto her toes and brought her mouth to my ear. “I’ll even let you fuck me on the table.”

I studied her with piercing scrutiny as carnal energy prowled through me. She knew what she was doing, and it was working.

Without breaking eye contact, I unzipped her shorts, slid my hand under the waistband and her panties, and dragged my middle finger through her wet slit before I thrust it into her. A soft moan fell from her mouth as her eyes closed briefly, and a flush of heat kissed her face.

“Lose the clothes,” I demanded in a controlled voice.

Her eyes sparkled with want and victory as she quickly undressed. As the evening light enveloped her knockout figure in a golden glow, a torrent of emotions knocked me on my ass.

Standing before me was my past, my present, and my future.

I wanted to share her bed, share her home. Lock her down with a wedding ring and fall for her more and more each day until we were buried side by side.

Didn’t matter that we’d only just gotten back together—our love was an inescapable fate.

Linking our fingers together, I led her to the kitchen table and jerked my chin. “Have a seat, Kelly. And remember you asked for it.”

HARPER



The creak of the table was the only sound in the room as I complied, a familiar warmth spreading through my chest as his gaze coasted over my naked body, adoration and gratitude in his eyes.

“I’ve fantasized about you riding my face all week,” he admitted as he hovered over me, his sinewy forearms caging me in.

My Prince Charming, ladies and gentlemen.

My heart swooned.

Lowering his mouth to the crook of my neck, he peppered kisses from my clavicle to my breast, and tingles rippled along my sun-kissed skin. He teased and tasted my nipple, and my back arched off the table as my desperate fingers delved into his hair, my grip relentless. “Are you trying to get me off by playing with my tits?”

“Why? Is it working?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

With a smirk, he drew back, pushed down his shorts, and kicked them off. “Spread ’em,” his rough voice commanded, and I parted my thighs without hesitation. “Fuck, baby, you’re glistening.” He flung my left leg over his shoulder and nudged my clit with his nose, inhaling deeply. “And your scent drives me wild.”

Like a firefly, his lewdness lit me up from the inside out.

I leaned back on my hands, glancing down as his tongue swept through my slit in long, slow strokes. Watching me closely, he added one finger, then another, toying with me until I was quivering and begging, my aggravation his triumph.

So what if he was on his knees? We both knew who was in charge as he took me to the edge of euphoria only to drag me back from the brink. “Jordan...” I shrieked, my breath catching in my throat as my walls throbbed around his fingers, determination in his crystal-blue eyes as the sweetest pleasure swept through me.

He fisted his cock and drove into me, a loud moan erupting from my throat as my softness engulfed his hardness, the lingering ripples of my orgasm clenching him in an iron-like grip.

Deciding to get back on the pill when I returned to town was the best decision I ever made. Feeling Jordan inside me without a barrier between us was like seeing a classic black-and-white movie in Technicolor.

Vivid.

Transformative.

No going back.

He lowered onto his forearms, kissing my lips, my cheeks, my neck as my hands slid down his sides, nails digging into the muscle of his toned ass as I met him thrust for thrust.

“Harder...J,” I begged, and he complied, pushing up on his hands and angling his hips, eliciting a curse from my lips as he collided with that magical spot.

“You drive me fucking crazy,” he ground out in a strangled voice. My throaty giggle faded into a soft moan when he gripped my jaw and dragged his lips across my cheek. “So sweet. So *mine*.”

My body and mind hummed as I neared my release, and I inclined my head, nipping his bottom lip. “So grumpy. So *mine*.”

I kissed him and came, and he was quick to follow.

He collapsed with his head on my chest, and I stroked the sweaty hair at the nape of his neck as our pulses steadied. “Jordan?”

“Hm?”

“I think you should know, I’ll want you more tomorrow than I did today.”

He pressed up on his arms and frowned. “Did I do something wrong today?”

I cupped his cheek and smiled. “Not at all. I just wanted to make it clear I want all of you, not just your cock, and no celibacy streak will change that.”

His gaze bounced back and forth between my eyes. “I’ll want you more tomorrow than I did today, too.”

His release dripped down my thighs, and my battered back ached, but I

didn't want to move, to leave our bubble of infatuation.

Unfortunately, Bandit didn't give a damn about what I wanted.

He scratched at the back door and barked, and I giggled when Jordan growled in response.

"I need to walk him." I tapped his chest, so I could sit up, and he dropped to his feet.

Peering down at my naked body, he snickered. "Not like that, you're not." He pulled on his shorts. "I'll do it."

"Don't lie." I lowered myself to the floor. "Bandit is winning you over."

"He's not winning me over. His existence just irritates me less."

My mouth curved into a smile, and I placed a kiss on the center of his sweaty chest. "Liar."

As soon as they left, I got dressed, grabbed my phone, and went outside, meandering toward the pergola swing as I pulled up my messages.

Lori: I have to postpone our Sunday phone call by an hour. I have a brunch date tomorrow!

I smiled to myself as I responded.

Harper: Did the science teacher finally ask you out?

She hadn't dated in years, but a man in her building had recently caught her eye, and she wouldn't stop talking about him.

Lori: Yes! It only took him two months to gather the courage.

Harper: Some guys like to take their time.

Or nail you quickly on a kitchen table.

Lori: I'm going to pretend that wasn't laced with innuendo.

Damn, she knew me too well.

Lori: Love you, kid. Talk to you tomorrow!

Harper: Love you too, Mom.

While I missed her, I was glad Lori was thriving in the world. Once she finished nursing school, she could make a difference, like my dad inspired her to do.

As the swing rocked softly, I admired the orange and pink hues in the sky, a breathtaking effect of the setting sun. The sultry summer heat might have been brutal during the day, but the night was filled with gentle warmth and a blaze of hope.

Jordan opened the gate and released Bandit from his leash, and the black fur ball barreled toward me.

“Did someone have a good walk?” I asked as I scratched behind his ears.

Jordan sat down beside me and draped his arm over my shoulder. “He sure did.”

“And how about Bandit?”

He tried to contain a smirk, but his eyes lit up. “Smart-ass.”

Bandit brought over a stick and set it on Jordan’s lap, and he tossed it across the yard, the pup chasing it like a predator on the hunt. Such an ordinary moment, yet affection swelled inside my chest.

As I leaned into him, encompassed by the sweet scent of flowers and the heady smell of sex, I wondered what life would be like if we hadn’t found our way back to each other. If he moved to Philadelphia or I stayed in Tennessee. If Gramps didn’t leave me the house, and I had no obligation to this town.

The good news was I didn’t have to find out.

Because we were here, and we were happy.

JORDAN



“*I* don’t understand why you’re keeping me from her. I don’t bite.”

I stepped to the side to allow an elderly couple to pass me in the aisle, then I continued toward the back of the market. “*You* don’t bite, but your words do.”

“Ha ha ha,” my mother trilled over the phone. “You’re living together, so I think it’s time she and I...talk.”

“Hold that thought.” I placed my hand over my phone and ordered my regular soup and salad combo at the made-to-order counter. “We are *not* living together.” I came back.

“That’s interesting because earlier at the club, Ann Cleary’s daughter, Jessica, mentioned seeing your Range Rover parked in Harper’s driveway *every* morning this week.”

Harper was right. Mrs. Cleary—and her daughter, apparently—needed to get a fucking life.

“A sleepover is different than cohabitation. I’m not living with her. We’ve only been together for two months.”

My mother scoffed. “For two months? Try half of your life. I won’t be kept in the dark this time, Jordan. She and I should clear the air sooner rather than later.”

“See, Mom, when you say things like ‘clear the air,’ all I hear is ‘power move.’”

“No, ‘clear the air’ means I’d like the chance to redeem myself.”

She sounded sincere...which is exactly why I didn’t trust her. My mother had the ability to smile to your face while poisoning you with her words, and

I wouldn't subject Harper to that unless I knew for certain she had pure intentions.

Now that we were back together, I was fiercely protective of what we had. Just because we weren't in hiding didn't mean I'd willingly throw Harper to the wolves...or, in this case, Serena.

"Number twenty-two! Order's up!" The man behind the counter held up a brown paper bag and glanced my way.

"Mom, I've got to go."

"Either make this meeting happen, Jordan, or I will."

She hung up before I could respond, always needing to claim the last word.

Distracted by my mother's mic-drop moment, I almost left without grabbing Devlin's protein shake, so I backtracked to the health and wellness section and scanned the shelf for the brand he requested.

"King?" a croaky voice chimed as heavy footsteps slogged my way.

A numbing chill crawled down the length of my tense spine as I pivoted to my left, eyes anchored on the unwelcome intrusion from my past.

Time had not been kind to Hurley Jennings. With a narrow, needle-like frame and eyes dark and empty like an open grave, it was clear drugs were still his favored companion. "How's it going, Jennings?"

"Good." He nodded, licking his dry, cracked lips. "Good."

The last time I saw Hurley, I was high off my ass on some laced shit he supplied me with. The rumor was his parents sent him to an expensive rehab in New York City shortly after that, but from the recent track marks on his arms, his sobriety was dead and buried.

"What brings you to Fair Oak?" I probed as I blindly selected a protein shake off the shelf. If Devlin didn't like it, he could fuck off. My only concern at the moment was getting away from the strung-out user before me.

He scratched his forearm and rocked on his heels. "Family business."

Family business, my ass.

His father and sister were respected lawyers, and his mother was a judge. They preferred to deal with their son discreetly, and if they had it their way, he'd stay far, far away from the legacy they'd built.

He had no appreciation for the life his parents gave him or the opportunities they offered.

Another spoiled rich kid who shit all over this privilege.

"Well, good luck with that family business, man." I slapped him on the

back as I walked by, and the acrid stench of smoke and sweat assaulted my nostrils.

My heart jackhammered as I rushed to the registers, and I didn't once look back.

"How about now?" Harper asked as she adjusted a decorative sign on the shiplap wall of the café.

"I still think it's crooked." Kylie tilted her head to the side. "A little more to the left." She gestured with her hand.

Harper lowered her gaze to her feet and blew out a breath. "One second ago, you said it was *too* far to the left."

"Yeah, well, now it's *too* far to the right."

I chuckled as I walked to the wall and adjusted the sign. "Better?"

"Perfect," the girls said in unison.

That night, Kylie and I ambushed Harper with dinner and our help at the café since she was running herself ragged and its grand opening was quickly approaching. If we thought she was a workaholic before, becoming a business owner ratcheted up her passion and drive to a whole new level, and we worried she was close to burning out.

"So back to Hurley." Harper's forehead creased with worry as she folded her arms over her chest. "Do you think he'll stick around?"

I raised my shoulders and let them fall. "I hope not, but either way, I promise you have nothing to worry about."

Considering everything that had transpired in high school, her fear was warranted. But things were different. *I* was different. I cut Hurley out of my life for a reason, and I'd fuck shit up if he came near Harper.

Kylie walked up behind her and massaged her shoulders. "Don't stress, babe. I mean, look at this place. It's a snap-happy influencer's wet dream. Screw Hurley."

Kylie was right, Harp's café was uniquely photogenic, but it also had the coolest vibe.

Eclectically decorated with plants, wallpaper, different styles of chairs and tables, and a selfie wall that read: *But first, coffee*, anyone with a social media presence would get a hard-on for the aesthetic alone. And with sweet

and savory options, the menu was just as enticing—a draw for the older crowd.

Cute and cozy—her words, not mine—it was the perfect spot to get coffee with friends, grab a quick bite, or post up at a table and do some work, and I was so fucking proud of her.

“I listed positions on a couple of career sites, so hopefully, people apply.”

“They totally will.” Kylie nodded.

“And if not, I’ll quit CKH and come work for you.”

Harper laughed, but as the words left my mouth, I didn’t hate the way they sounded.

I pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head as she wrapped her arms around my middle. “You’re almost there, Harp.”

She drew an audible breath and sighed it out. “I’m almost there.”

HARPER



Even though I begged it to slow down, summer whirled wildly out of control, and before I knew it, the café's grand opening was one week away.

I wish I could say I was managing everything with a decent amount of chill, but *many* nagging questions nipped at my brain.

What if people hated it?

What if I wasted all of my money and time?

What if I failed?

I told myself worrying was useless. That I managed a successful renovation without any unforeseen issues or costs. That I hired staff that I genuinely liked being around. That Gramps would be proud.

Still, the fears and doubts remained, and I was fixated on ensuring every last detail was perfect.

I was in the café's kitchen on a Thursday night when the bell above the door chimed, startling me. I usually didn't mind being there alone, but as I crept toward the shadows, the pitter-patter of my panicked heart quickened.

I held my breath as the kitchen door swung open, then released it when I saw my favorite people standing on the other side of the threshold.

"I told you we were going to scare her," Rachel remarked as she folded her arms and gazed at my face. "I'm sorry. I suggested we call first."

"What's the point of surprising someone if we call first?" Kylie rolled her eyes.

"Exactly," Devlin agreed, his eyes trained on his phone.

"Rach hates being startled, so she feels guilty scaring someone else."

Grant came to his girlfriend's defense as he pulled her close and kissed the side of her head.

Jordan pushed through the group and smiled. "Look at this place. It's perfect."

"I agree," Kylie chimed in. "We brought dessert, and we're forcing you to call it a night."

I arched a brow. "Dessert, huh?"

"Cake and ice cream." Jordan tugged my hand. "Come on. You deserve a break."

Cake and ice cream turned into a spontaneous Spice Girls karaoke party—minus Devlin and Jordan—then an hour spent reminiscing about all of our crazy shenanigans in high school.

"I used to sneak these two into The Riff *all* the time." Grant laughed, pointing at Kylie and me from across the large booth we all packed into. "I'm surprised we never got caught."

"And now *you're* the big man in charge," Kylie noted with a smile.

"I wonder how many people your employees sneak in without you knowing," Rachel mused, leaning her temple against his shoulder.

"Well, shit..." Grant's grin faded. "I never thought about that."

Everyone laughed.

"Better look..." I shielded a yawn behind my hand "...into that."

Jordan squeezed my knee under the table and inclined his head. "You about ready to head home?"

Home.

Did he think of my house as our home?

My heart delighted at the very thought.

Curled into his side, I was comfortable but ready to call it a night. "Yes," I drawled, rubbing my tired eyes. "I'm exhausted."

After a speedy cleanup, my friends spilled out onto the sidewalk and headed toward their cars while I locked up. It was then that I felt the change in the air and noticed an ominous presence lurking under the awning of Mr. Walsh's hardware store.

"I've been searching for you everywhere."

His voice was eerily calm, and as I angled my head in his direction, his dead-eyed stare was almost inhuman.

“Hurley?” I gasped out, letting my keys fall to the ground while dropping one foot back on instinct.

He scratched his head, his mouth lifting on one side in a hateful sneer as he inched closer. “Did you think you could move to *my* hometown and start fucking some guy, and I wouldn’t find out?”

I followed his focused gaze to the terrified woman behind me.

Rachel.

Fear hammered my bones when I remembered her account of the man with the temper. The man who was too much for her to handle. The man she was running from.

In her attempt to hide from Hurley Jennings, she led him right home.

“You’re not allowed near me.” Her voice wavered as she retreated a few steps, opening and closing her fists by her sides.

Down the block, Kylie and Devlin neared the corner, and Jordan and Grant were almost to the Range Rover. I kept my eyes locked on their retreating shadows, wanting to run, to scream, but fear gripped me by the throat.

“Why? Because my parents say so?” He mocked. “Fuck them.”

Because my parents say so?

My narrowed gaze jumped to Rachel in confusion, and a wince of regret and guilt flickered across her face. “Y-Yes,” she responded. “B-Because they promised I’d be safe here.”

His bottom lip pulled down in a mock sullen pout as he stalked nearer. Gripping her by the jaw, he kissed her forehead, then dropped his mouth to her ear. “The prettier the lie, the uglier the truth. You can’t escape me, bitch.”

JORDAN

I unlocked the Rover with my key fob, then wheeled around to check on Harper—and my heart froze midbeat.

I promised she had nothing to worry about, but I was so fucking wrong.

Unease slashed through me like a cold, black torrent as my feet

obliterated the space between us. “Get the fuck away from her, asshole!”

I recognized Grant’s footfalls, his booming voice yelling, “Rachel!” as he raced behind me.

Hurley’s eyes were cold and combative when he turned and glared at us, then in one swift motion, he drew a pistol from his waistband and waved it in the air.

A rush of fear mingled with my blood, and my feet came to a halt. Harper clasped a hand over her mouth as her body lurched into the café door, and Rachel released a horror-stricken scream.

“Put the gun down, Hurley.”

The tight line of his mouth curled with sadistic enjoyment. “Fuck off, King.”

A cold sheen of panic trickled over my skin as I held my arms in the air and stepped closer. “What do you want, man? I’ll give you anything.”

He aimed the pistol at my chest, and my heart pounded in my throat as Harper’s sobs flooded my ears.

I wanted to kill the asshole simply for inciting her painful sounds. No one made her cry like that and got away with it.

“You want your girl?” He gave a small, manic laugh. “Go get her.”

“Don’t do it, J,” Grant warned, and a quick “no” had Harper jerking her head.

Did I trust Hurley? Fuck no, but I crept forward anyway. “It’s okay, baby. I’m coming.”

“Hurley! You need to let me go...” Rachel broke off as a scowl of warning darkened his face.

“Shut up, Rachel!” he barked, scratching his temple with the barrel of the gun. “Just shut up!”

With three more quick steps, I reached Harper and curled my body around her, protectively holding her tight. “I got you, sweetheart. I got you.”

She peered up at me with tears in her eyes, and I pressed my forehead to hers.

And for a moment, the world went still.

DEVLIN

As soon as Jennings drew the gun, I pulled Kylie against my chest, spun us around, and pinned her to the street, using my Tesla as a shield.

“Devlin.” Her voice quivered as she exhaled a series of short, panicked breaths.

I shoved her blond hair away from her face and held a finger to my lips. “Shhhh...”

Trembling with fear, she pinched her lips together and nodded.

Slowly, I slid my hand into my pocket, dragged out my phone, and dialed 911. When the dispatcher answered, I gave her the information she needed in hushed tones, then prayed like hell Fair Oak PD hauled ass to our location.

I pressed up on my hands, about to go after my brother, when Kylie gripped the collar of my dress shirt and held me in place, the worry lines on her face deepening in sudden dismay. “Don’t leave me,” she rushed out. “Please.”

Alarm battered my insides as Hurley raised his voice. “Kylie, Jordan needs me.”

She squeezed her eyes tight and swiftly nodded. “Right. Right, okay. Go.”

I pressed up on my hands again, but I was too late.

Two muffled pops rang into the night and reverberated through my bones, and Kylie’s desperate gasp clipped the air between us.

Then we heard Harper’s bloodcurdling scream.

JORDAN

Pain sliced through my flesh.

The air stalled in my lungs.

Angry spots as black as the sea at night clouded my vision.

And in the distance, the wail of sirens shattered the stillness of the night.

HARPER



“Male. Twenty-four. GSW to the shoulder and flank. Hemorrhaging.”

The ambulance doors slammed shut, silencing the officers’ voices.

Promises and despair intermixed with the salty tears rolling down my cheeks as a paramedic checked my vitals. “W-Will he be okay?” I croaked, raising my hand to inspect Jordan’s blood caked on my fingers and underneath my nails.

“He’s in great hands,” the paramedic assured half-heartedly with a downcast expression as he wrote something on a clipboard.

I grimaced, feeling a pinch in my arm as I tried to inch up on the gurney. “And Hurley?”

“In police custody.”

“M-My best friend...Kylie Sullivan...has anyone seen her?”

“Blond hair? Feisty?” I nodded. “She tried to get to you, but the police wouldn’t allow her through. Some bulky guy carried her away before she got herself arrested. She sounds like the kind of friend we’d all be lucky to have.”

My tears streamed faster down my face. “You have no idea.”

KYLIE

Because Fair Oak PD refused to let me near Harper, Devlin offered to drive me to the hospital since he was rushing there anyway. It was a nice gesture,

but as soon as we were cloaked in the silence of his car, my adrenaline gave way to shock and grief, and I wished I was with someone a little less... disconcerting.

I swallowed hard, trying to untangle the words in my throat, but all I managed to say was, "Thank you."

Devlin's brawny shoulders tensed, as did his grip on the steering wheel. "You're welcome. I didn't, um, hurt you, did I?"

Did his two-hundred-pound body hurt me when he used it to shield me from a gun?

"No." I shook my head. "I'm okay."

He gave a clipped nod and didn't speak for the rest of the ride.

When we arrived at the hospital, I checked in at the ER desk while Devlin called Camille and Mr. and Mrs. King. Since no one would disclose any information because of some bullshit privacy laws, I sulked through the waiting room and found a seat near the window, observing an ambulance approaching the ambulance bay. I wondered who was inside. If they were fighting for their life. If they knew today would be the day everything changed.

"My parents are on their way," Devlin's deep voice chimed.

My gaze lifted and collided with his. Towering over me, he made me feel small with his gigantic frame—and I *never* felt small. "The nurse wouldn't give me any information on Harper, but maybe you'll have better luck with Jordan."

After inquiring about his brother's condition, Devlin stopped at the vending machine and returned with two waters.

"Thanks," I said, accepting one, then taking a generous gulp. "Any updates?"

"He's in surgery."

His tone was dull and apathetic, and I couldn't help but ask, "Are you okay?"

He nodded once as he shook off his suit jacket, and his lips clamped in an injured frown. "Here"—he handed me the jacket—"you look cold."

I was fucking freezing.

"Thank you." I slipped my arms into it. "Of course, you're a Calvin Klein guy."

His brow furrowed. "I beg your pardon?"

"Eternity for Men? Your cologne? I smell it on your jacket."

What the hell did he think I meant? His underwear?

“Oh.” His frown deepened. “That would be correct.”

He was so restrained, so tactful in the way he spoke, that I wondered if maybe Mr. Macho was in a bit of shock himself. Since I didn’t know what to make of him or his personality, I decided mindless chitchat was the only way we’d get through the nervous tension while waiting for answers.

“So what’s wrong with you?” He arched a brow at my question. “You were in pain when you handed me this,” I clarified, extending my arms as his jacket sleeves drooped over my hands.

“Oh. I think I fucked up my shoulder.”

“Because of me?” I wrinkled my nose.

He shrugged.

“Well, see, the thing about hospitals is they treat ailments like that. Why don’t you get it checked?”

“I’m fine.”

“Devlin.”

“Kylie.”

The brunt of his hard stare might have intimidated others, but it took all of my willpower not to chuckle. “Do you always get your way?”

“Usually, yes,” he admitted in a cavalier tone as he kneaded his shoulder.

I glanced heavenward. “Of course, you do.”

“Kylie Sullivan,” a nurse called. “Miss Kelly is asking for you.”

I slipped my arms out of Devlin’s jacket and rose to my feet. “You don’t want to get that shoulder looked at, *suit* yourself.” I underhand tossed him his garment and headed toward the nurses’ station.

“Was that supposed to be a joke?” he called across the waiting room.

“Why?” I swiveled and began walking backward. “Do you find it funny?”

“No.”

“Then I guess it wasn’t a joke.”

I followed the nurse through a labyrinth of narrow and endlessly long corridors until we finally arrived at Harper’s room.

Another nurse wheeled out a portable vital signs monitor, a brittle expression on her round face as she left the door ajar and aimed her steps

toward the nurses' station. "I'm just trying to do my job." I overheard her rumble, indicative of Harper's mood.

Harper's anger emerged from her vulnerability, and if she was being a difficult patient, it was due to her emotional state. I propelled my weary feet forward and eased the door open, my breath solidifying in my chest. She appeared frail and distraught, hooked up to monitors and IV fluids, and I wanted so badly to return to the hallway and regroup, to be dependable in my bravery like she needed me to be.

The mattress dipped as I sat by her side and glimpsed her injured arm.

"The splint is necessary because I sprained my wrist. The rest is excessive," she grudged.

"Hospital protocol, I'm afraid."

Her eyelids fluttered shut with an uncontrollable wince and a heavy weight settled on my heart. I grabbed her uninjured hand and squeezed. Nothing but small bones and skin, but when she squeezed mine back, I felt strength emerging from destruction.

"He's in surgery," she cried. "He lost a lot of blood."

My skin prickled with goose bumps. "What the hell happened, Harper?"

"Grant tackled Hurley, and Hurley started shooting."

"But what possible reason could Hurley have for going after you?"

Her expression turned frigid. "He wasn't there for me. He was there for Rachel."

RACHEL

Mr. Jennings met me at the police station and sat by my side as I gave my witness statement, and as soon as I was free to leave, he drove me to the hospital.

"I'm so sorry, Rachel," he apologized in a somber voice as he pulled up to the ER entrance.

Tears coated my eyelashes as I unhooked my seat belt and opened the door. "It was a great plan, Mr. Jennings, but he was bound to find me."

His bushy eyebrows pulled together. "I'll make sure he goes away for a long time, I promise."

I angled my head in his direction, my entire body trembling with outrage. “Yeah, but at what cost? It shouldn’t have come to this.”

His shoulders sagged with a heavy sigh. “The system is flawed. Broken. My wife and I, we’re doing all we can to fix it.”

I stepped out of the car and gripped the edge of the door. “I know that, but tonight, an innocent man was injured because of *your* son. Instead of being a lawyer blaming the so-called system, how about you ponder tonight as a father? Because the ones affected by this are people you know personally, and that’s a jagged pill to swallow. Good night, Mr. Jennings.” I slammed the door shut and pivoted toward the ER doors, not feeling an ounce of remorse for the hard truth I delivered.

Entitlement breeds entitlement, and while I believed Hurley was responsible for his own decisions, I also understood that for most of his life, Mr. and Mrs. Jennings gave their precious baby boy whatever he wanted.

Were they actually shocked that he became the depraved man he was? Or were they feeling guilty, knowing they turned a blind eye to his sickening behavior for far too long?

At the check-in desk, I gave a woman my name and chewed on my cuticle as she called Harper’s room, informing her she had a visitor.

“Rachel Summers,” the woman said through the phone, and I held my breath, preparing to be turned away. When she hung up and motioned for me to follow her, a small fragment of tension left my body.

Kylie was sitting in a chair by Harper’s bed when I entered, and her frosty glare of suspicion was impossible to ignore. “Did you know he knew us?” She bit out as she rose. “Tell us you had no idea.”

Guilt flowed through my veins, turning my blood into thick sludge. “I had no idea.”

“Then how did this happen, Rachel?” Harper asked in a defeated voice.

I rounded her bed and sat in an empty chair, resting my elbows on my knees as I leaned forward. “Hurley and I met when I lived in New York. I knew he struggled with addiction in the past, but he was clean and sober for a year when we got together. After six months of dating, I wanted to move back to Philadelphia to be closer to my family, and he offered to come with me. At first, I thought it was a sweet gesture, but that’s when everything changed.” I shook my head, fighting the urge to throw up. “He started hanging out with his old friends, started using again, so I left him.”

“And he didn’t like that,” Kylie stated.

“Not one bit. He started stalking me, calling me constantly and showing up everywhere I went. Three different judges refused to grant me a protective order because he never laid a hand on me or threatened me with physical violence, but I knew...” I gasped out. “I knew what he was capable of.”

“So Judge Jennings offered to help?” Harper asked, connecting the dots.

I nodded. “I know it sounds ridiculous, but I believed she could protect me. I didn’t think Hurley would come here. I didn’t think he’d find me, and I’m so terribly sorry he did.”

Harper’s face twisted with pain so great, I felt it bone deep.

As she wept into her hands, Kylie’s lips spread into a grim line. “I think Harper’s had enough for one night, don’t you?”

Her message was clear; it was time for me to leave.

The wooden chair creaked as I shifted to my feet. “I never wanted this to happen. If I could travel back in time and warn myself to stay away from Hurley, I would. Again, I’m so sorry.”

I held my tears at bay until I fled Harper’s room, my heart nothing more than a desolate organ cowering behind ribs.

It was a shitty way to say goodbye, but it was all I could manage.

HARPER



In the middle of the night, a nurse shuffled into my room to check my vitals.

“Trouble sleeping?” she asked in a gentle voice.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. “It’s impossible with this restlessness setting in.”

“I can ask the doctor on call to give you something to help with that.”

I thought of Lori and the sleeping pills she used to take when I was a child. “That won’t be necessary. Can you tell me if there are any updates on my boyfriend? Jordan King?” She chewed her lip and busied herself with my fluid bag, and my stomach tightened. “Please?” I begged, needing her to give me *something*.

She glanced at the door then lowered her voice. “He’s in stable condition.”

Stable condition.

Alive.

Jordan was alive.

For the first time in hours, my lungs finally felt like they were working again.

DEVLIN

“He’s in stable condition,” Jordan’s surgeon said in a drab, impassive tone

that made me want to punch him in his face.

My mother released something between a sigh and a sob, and my father remained silent, though I noticed the near-permanent frown waver on his brow.

“We retrieved the bullet in his shoulder without any issues,” the surgeon went on. “We found that the second bullet entered right below his rib cage, luckily bypassing his vital organs...”

I didn’t hear anything else after that, the weight of the last few hours finally hitting me. I excused myself and stepped outside for some fresh air, my chest rising and falling as I fought to catch my breath. The movement of the light breeze carried the scent of cigarette smoke in my direction, and I pivoted to find Grant leaning against a parking lot lamppost, looking like a dirtier version of James Dean.

“Got another?” I called.

“I do, but not for you. My sister would kill you.”

I kicked a pebble across the sidewalk, then closed the gap between us. “Camille said since I’m fine, she’d prefer to wait for me at home because hospitals freak her out. I think it’s safe to say I don’t give a fuck what your sister thinks tonight.”

Grant cursed under his breath and dragged his free hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, man. She’s unbelievable.”

He tapped the ashes to the ground then offered up the poison stick, but I waved it away. “Jordan’s out of surgery. Now, we wait...and I hate fucking waiting.”

“Feel like taking a ride then?”

“Where to?”

He dropped his cigarette to the ground and stomped it out. “Back to Harper’s café. There’s something I need to take care of.”

GRANT

I wasn’t one to think things through.

I acted on impulse, and it made me a hotheaded motherfucker.

Wanted The Riff, so I bought it.

Wanted Rachel, so I stole her from Jordan the night he introduced us.
Wanted to protect her, so I lunged at Hurley when I thought her life was in danger.

I expected to take a bullet for her—not Jordan.

Why?

Because I didn't think things through.

Because I was a hotheaded motherfucker.

Because I acted on impulse, consequences be damned.

Now, my best friend was fighting for his life—because of *me*.

And that shit cut deep.

Parked in front of the café, I climbed out of my truck and walked toward Mr. Walsh's store just as he appeared at the mouth of his alleyway.

"What the hell are you doing, Whitlock?" Devlin whispered beside me.

"Making amends," I replied as I shook Mr. Walsh's hand.

"Hopefully, this one does the trick." He held up a neon green hose. "It's the longest one I have. Two hundred feet."

"Should work. It's all hooked up?"

Mr. Walsh nodded back to the dark alley. "You're all set."

Hose in hand, I started my trek down the sidewalk, and Devlin rushed to keep up. "Trigger warning, Dev, the scene ahead ain't pretty."

His gaze darted between me and the café. "What the fuck are you doing, Grant?"

My feet stopped in their tracks. "What do you think I'm doing? In a few hours, this sidewalk will be brimming with people getting their morning coffee or heading to work. You really want them stepping over your brother's blood while doing it?" I shook my head. "Tonight, things changed whether we like it or not, but it shouldn't be the entire town's burden to carry as well."

I continued toward the café and shouted over my shoulder, "Let it rip, Mr. Walsh!"

As water shot from the hose, I aimed it at the blood-stained sidewalk, watching as the red puddle grew, then flowed toward the street.

Agony purged from the deep cracks.

The erasure of a horrendous deed.

A slate wiped clean.

Devlin slapped my shoulder and squeezed. "Alright, Grant. Alright."

My hands were shaking.

My vision was clouded.

I was fucking sobbing, and I didn't even realize it.

While I stood there coming to terms with my anguish and grief, Devlin pulled the hose from my iron-tight grip and bravely finished what I started.

JORDAN



They said I was in and out of consciousness for two days, but I didn't remember a thing. I guess it was for the best since what really mattered was what came after.

The recovery.

The healing.

The second chance.

Like a guard dog, my mother barked orders and followed me everywhere I went.

Quiet and contemplative, Devlin stopped by the hospital every morning on his way to work but never said too much.

And while my father was still a self-important snob, he'd phone the hospital twice a day for updates on my condition and stop by every night with expensive takeout from my mother's favorite restaurant.

Then there was Harper, my tough-as-nails girlfriend who, despite her own pain and suffering, helped nurse me back to health while my mother judged her every move. Harper bit her tongue and disguised her surly expression as best she could, but whenever she reached her limit, she'd slant me an exasperated look, and I'd give my mother an errand to run so that Harp and I could have a few minutes alone.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm trying so hard to be patient with her."

"Don't apologize," I'd say with a smile, beckoning her to my hospital bed, so I could hold her until my mother inevitably returned. "We're almost through this."

And we were.

One week later, on what should have been the café's grand opening, I was discharged from the hospital.

"Thank you all for your exceptional care," my mother cooed as she wheeled me past the nurses' station. Her praise was genuine, and there was no doubt in my mind Serena King would be making a charitable donation to Fair Oak Hospital in the near future.

"Yes," I agreed with a small smile. "Thanks for everything."

As I trailed Harper, my gaze clung to her pear-shaped ass, looking exceptional in snug black cutoffs. Still on the mend, I figured it'd be a minute until I got to play with her body again, but *fuck*, a guy could fantasize.

"You should see what I've done with your old bedroom. It's going to be so nice having you home," my mother stated when we arrived at the elevators.

Harper's body tensed as she pressed the *down* button on the elevator panel, and when she spun around, an intense frown gathered above her eyes. She cut me a glare, and I knew if I didn't speak up, she would.

"Actually, Mom, I'm going back to Harper's."

It happened quickly, but I swear the muscle under my mother's right eye twitched. "Are you sure that's a good idea? You've been through a lot, and rest is crucial to your recovery."

What did she think we were going to do, fuck like rabbits the second we walked through the door? My body ached all over and my sutures itched, not to mention Harper's frame of mind. We lived through something traumatic, and I wasn't under any illusion that things would go right back to the way they were.

"I'm sure." I held out my hand, and Harper laced her fingers through mine. "My girl will take great care of me."

For the first time in a week, Harp's gorgeous grin peeped through the sadness, chasing the lingering shadows from her face.

"I see." My mother's mouth pinched as she rummaged around in her purse. "You're going to need this then." She handed Harper a neatly folded sheet of paper.

"What's that?" I asked as Harper opened it.

"A list of your medications. When and how to clean your wounds..."

"And the phone number at the bottom?" Harper pointed.

My mother glanced down at me with something like helplessness on her face, an emotion she was unfamiliar with. "It's Mr. Warren's cell, in case I

needed to get in touch with him. I just thought, with all you've been through, you may require more help than I could offer."

Because you're afraid I'll go back to the dark place.

I wanted to reassure her I was fine, but Warren and Lori both insisted I never make those kinds of promises, not when I was supposed to live my life one day at a time.

The elevator doors pinged open, and my mother jumped into action, both of us grateful for the interruption. She pushed me inside while Harper tucked the paper into her bag, and down we went, none of us uttering another word.

"I want to repair the fence."

"I want you to stop saying idiotic things."

"Not right this second, Harp, but soon. It's rotted in some parts. Needs fresh paint in others. I think we should just tear it down and start fresh."

She placed the paperback she'd been reading for the last hour on her lap and turned to face me on the couch. "You've been home for two days, and you're already going stir-crazy, aren't you?"

"Little bit." I indicated with my thumb and index finger.

She rolled her eyes. "As soon as your doctor gives you the okay, go for it, sweetheart."

"As soon as my doctor gives me the okay, I'm going to be tearing into other things."

"Oh, really?" Her lips quirked into a smirk. "What kinds of things, may I ask?"

"Your mouth. Your ass. And that beautiful, slick slit between your legs."

I didn't know why I was torturing myself. I was getting hard just talking about it, and there wasn't a damn thing we could do to remedy that.

All day long, images of what I wanted to do to Harper looped through my mind, not in some horny teenage boy fashion, but as a man who wanted to make love to the woman I could have lost.

That night changed me.

Fucked me up, but not in the way my mother, Warren, and Lori feared.

I didn't want a drink. Didn't want to get high to forget.

I wanted to hold Harper. Touch her. Feel her on the inside and out,

knowing she was living and breathing and mine.

“Hey.” She cupped my cheek, eyebrows tugged down. “What’s wrong?”

I licked my lips and shook my head, then I cupped her cheek as well. “What if I wasn’t there? What if it was you instead?”

“Baby,” she said on a broken whisper. “Why even think about that? The *what-ifs* don’t change a damn thing. I’m here. You’re here.” Bandit ran into the room and dropped his tennis ball at my feet. “Bandit’s here.” Harper giggled softly as moisture built in her eyes. “When I was in the hospital, waiting to hear how you were, this is what I thought about. How I just wanted to take you home so I could live a simple life with the man whose soul mirrors mine. And here we are, baby. Here we are.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn’t find the words.

“Come here,” she said, pressing her lips to mine once, twice, three times before she pulled back and smiled. “Stay with me. Here. Forever.”

“Harper Kelly, are you proposing?”

“No,” she scoffed. “I’m simply asking you to move in.”

“Move in, huh?”

She bit her lower lip and nodded.

“Okay. I guess I can do that.”

“You *guess* you can do that?”

“Not good enough?” Her eyes narrowed as she pursed her lips, and I grinned. “How’s this? Kelly, sweetheart, when I walked through that door with you two days ago, I never planned to leave.”

She beamed. “See, was that so hard?”

“Something’s hard, but it isn’t that.” I wiggled my eyebrows.

She slid back to her side of the couch and returned her attention to her book. “Such a fucking charmer.”

HARPER



“They have no idea what they’re doing,” Kylie said with a laugh as she glanced out my bedroom window at the yard below.

“Nope,” I replied with a pop of the *P*, sliding the glass up an inch, making it easier to eavesdrop.

Jordan, Devlin, and Grant were sweaty and irritated with an array of tools scattered at their feet. Wood panels and posts were stacked in the middle of the yard like a bonfire waiting to happen, and by the look on Devlin’s face, he was minutes away from pouring the gasoline and striking the match himself.

“Just hire someone to do this shit and call it a day,” he said with a flippant wave. “All we’ve done is stake the perimeter, and it’s already noon.”

“No,” Jordan said with a firm headshake and a stony face. “Doc says I’m cleared to do whatever the fuck I want, and this is what I want. I’ve been sitting around the house for a month, waiting to be useful, but I can’t do this alone. Now, get your ass over here and start digging the last hole for the corner posts.”

My heart swelled with pride as Jordan hoisted a bag of gravel off the ground, the prominent veins in his forearms doing funny things to my lady bits.

“Why am I not surprised Dev is down there whining in his khaki chinos and Sperry Top-siders?” Kylie rolled her eyes.

While Grant and Jordan dressed like they’d planned to get dirty, Devlin’s look was best described as country club chic. To be honest, I wasn’t sure he owned any other type of attire. It amazed me how the same blood coursed

through their bodies, yet the King brothers couldn't be more different.

"He's so basic. That is probably his grungy look." I pressed my nose against the glass and watched Jordan pour the gravel into a hole, his muscular thighs bulging from his wide stance.

"Careful not to smudge up the window with all that drool, Harp," Kylie teased.

"I'm not drooling." I touched my chin to be sure. "Jordan just looks so fucking delicious right now."

Devlin shook his head, and Grant chuckled.

"Um, we can totally hear you, babe." Jordan anchored his eyes on me as he lifted the hem of his shirt to wipe his forehead, revealing his taut stomach and his deep white scar.

Kylie and I clasped our hands over our mouths and slinked away from the window, doubling over with hilarity once we were out of view.

It felt good to laugh, to let a minute or two pass without thinking about *the incident*.

Sometimes, I wondered if guilt prevented us from fully embracing moments of pure happiness. Grant barely smiled anymore, and nobody knew if it was because Rachel took off in the middle of the night or because he was nursing wounds none of us could see. Devlin didn't say much but *always* seemed to be around, and even Kylie started acting strange, flying back to LA often without giving a reason.

"So how's therapy going?" she asked as we headed down to the kitchen.

Thanks to Mr. Warren, I was now a patient of Dr. Melody Brandy.

Dr. Brandy was blunt, honest, and kind of a bitch—in a good way. Her methods weren't for everyone, but they worked well for me. My head was clearer than it'd been in years.

"Amazing. Dr. Brandy is a queen. She thinks I'm ready to face my fear and finally set foot in the café. Jordan and I are going over tonight after we help out at Our Daily Bread."

"Babe, that's huge!" Ky smiled, throwing her arms around me in a tight hug. "I'm so proud of you."

Jordan waltzed in through the back door and tossed two envelopes and a take-out menu on the table. "Mail's here."

Kylie pulled away and turned to face him. "You've assembled one hell of a work crew."

Jordan chuckled, swaddling me in his arms and earthy scent. "Are you

ladies done spying on us?”

“For now.” I pecked his lips.

“Get a room,” Kylie grumbled, tugging her phone out of her back pocket. “I’m ordering from The Egg Bowl Roll on DoorDash. If anyone wants in, it’s on me.”

Jordan’s eyes went wide. “Thanks, KJ. I’ll let the guys know.”

He strutted off, taking his alluring pheromones with him.

“Well, wasn’t that kind of you, Kylie Jo.” I smirked.

“Don’t you start.” She sat down and reached for a rose gold envelope. “Well, doesn’t this look fancy?”

“Whatcha got there?” I asked, plucking it from her hand. With a customized stamp and elegant black calligraphy, it reeked of money and arrogance, and a tendril of panic seized my chest when I read the return address. “It’s from Serena,” I said in an off-pitch voice as I slid my finger under the flap and slid out the rustic, lace-patterned card stock. “Fuck.”

“What is it?”

“An invitation to a tea luncheon at the Kings’.” I glanced at Kylie’s face and frowned. “Don’t smirk! This isn’t funny.”

What started as a tiny curl to her lips morphed into outright hysteria. “You? At tea? That’s hilarious.”

“This has disaster written all over it.”

“Harper, do you fancy a cuppa?” She mocked in a fake British accent with tears streaking her cheeks.

I drew in a frustrated breath and fell to the seat beside her. “Not helping, Ky.”

“I’m sorry.” She cleared her throat. “Okay, let’s try this again...what do you think she wants from you? Do you think it’s a setup?”

Unease trundled through me as my forehead dropped to the table. “That’s what I’m afraid of. Jordan and I are in *such* a great place. We finally have the relationship I’ve always wanted us to have, but his parents—”

“Are fucked up?”

“Are *a lot*.”

She nodded in agreement. “So don’t go.”

While I didn’t hate her suggestion, I couldn’t do that to Jordan. He’d been through so much recently, and I refused to add to his stress. He was at a crossroads in his life, more determined than ever to figure out his own path instead of continuing down the one that was thrust upon him.

Realizing life is just an hourglass of borrowed time was a wake-up call for all of us, but my guy seemed to be struggling with what direction to take. His only certainty was us, and we couldn't make the same mistakes that jeopardized our relationship in the past.

"If we keep what we have in a bubble, it's a well-constructed daydream like before." I shook my head. "No, I need to go. This time, I need to make it real."

HARPER



An arrowhead of sunshine shot through the gap between the bedroom curtains and hit me square in the eyes, and a groan escaped my lips as I rolled over to Jordan's empty side of the bed. I'd hoped he'd wrap me in his arms and hold me, but from the sound of running water coming from the bathroom, he was already in the shower.

I stumbled into the bathroom, tore the lid off an ibuprofen bottle, and popped two into my mouth. My stomach was in knots, my heart sprinting faster than an Olympic gold medalist. In a few hours, I'd be attending Mrs. King's luncheon, and my anxiety was already taking over.

Jordan pushed the shower curtain back, revealing his soapy abs and sudsy hair. "Care to join me, gorgeous?"

Hell yes, I did.

"Let me brush my teeth first."

"You know I don't give a shit about that." His grin was sinful. "Take those tiny pajamas off and get over here."

"Um, want to try that again?" I asked, planting a hand on my jutted hip.

He shook his head slowly, a predatory look in his eyes. I took a hesitant step back and quickly undressed, and he was on me in a flash. "Time to get wet, baby." He gripped my ass as he lifted me up, a soft whimper escaping me as my legs wrapped around his waist, and his hard length prodded my entrance as hot water rained down on us.

Lust and gratitude whispered through me, igniting a fire in the pit of my stomach. Jordan was a beautiful distraction, the antidote for my spinning mind. His body smelled like fresh air and a day spent by the sea, soothing

yet hypnotic, and as my hands traveled up his biceps and over his broad shoulders, I couldn't wait any longer. "Make me come so hard, I forget my own name."

With a determined expression and blazing blue eyes, he lowered me down. "Turn around," he demanded in a dominant tone that made my core tingle and throb as I obeyed.

His right hand skated down my slick stomach toward my center, then he started fingering me while he wrapped my wet hair around his left hand and tugged my head to the side. He licked and sucked the water from my neck, and I shivered and moaned, feeling his erection between my ass cheeks.

Releasing my hair, he slapped the wall beside my head, bracing himself as he entered me in one hard thrust. My breath caught in my throat while Jordan hummed against my ear. "So perfect. So tight," he whispered, pressing his lips to my shoulder. "Now, hold on while I fuck those worry lines off your beautiful face."

I spent an hour curling my hair and applying my makeup using techniques I learned on TikTok, then I slipped on a red floral dress with fluttery sleeves and paired it with a pair of bright-red heels that made me three inches taller.

After our dirty shower, Jordan reminded me for the thousandth time that I didn't have to go, but like Dr. Brandy said in therapy that week, avoidance only prolonged my stress. It was time I addressed Mrs. King and cleared the air. Otherwise, the tension would only grow.

Undeniably, Serena was pretentious and meticulous, but she was also loyal and resilient, and without her blessing—or at the very least, her acceptance—there was a chance that one day, Jordan would resent *me* for not trying. So I'd throw myself to the wolves and pray I returned in one piece.

Bandit greeted me at the bottom of the stairs, black tail wagging. I patted his head and scratched behind his floppy ears. "How do I look, boy?"

"Stunning," Jordan replied, drying his hands on a dish towel as he walked in from the kitchen, gaze lingering on my red heels for a bit too long. "Fucking stunning." He whipped the towel over his shoulder. "Forget this tea bullshit. Let me carry you back up those stairs and make love to you all over again."

I pressed the pad of my thumb to the center of his lips. “As great as that sounds, I didn’t spend all morning applying this makeup just to have these lips ruin it.”

He smiled against my finger as he hooked an arm around my lower back, tugging me closer. “Can’t blame a guy for trying. Call me if you need *anything*,” he emphasized. “And the second you feel uncomfortable, leave. No one who matters will judge you if you want to come home. Bandit and I will be here waiting.”

Bandit and Jordan and *home*.

My heart kicked up its own red heels at the notion.

At the Kings’, I parked on the street and hobbled up the driveway like a baby fawn taking her first steps.

If Jordan could see me in these heels now.

I smiled to myself, some of the tension in my body dissolving with just the thought of him.

“Harper?”

I looked up from the pavement with narrowed eyes, then a wide smile nearly cracked my face in two. “Gina!” I threw my arms around her in a warm hug. I hadn’t seen her since Gramps’s funeral, and I missed her terribly. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been well. Retirement’s for the birds, but hopefully, I’ll start enjoying it soon.” She waved a dismissive hand as if she didn’t quite believe her own words. “That’s why I’m here. At this point, I’m looking for any excuse to leave the house.”

“Well, if you ever want to get back to work, even part time, I’d love to have you at Sweet Steam Café.”

Especially when half the staff quit because I delayed the opening by a month.

“I might take you up on that. Do you have a business card?”

“Not with me, but I can give you my phone number.”

Her eyebrows shot up as she pulled her phone from her small clutch. I rattled off my number, and she tucked her phone away. “You do know Serena’s tea luncheon is basically a networking opportunity, don’t you? This is the event to be at if you’re starting a small business in this town. I assume that’s why she’s invited you here...” She trailed off, her face scrunched up in worry.

“I-I had no idea.”

“Oh, boy.” Gina laced her arm through mine and steered me toward a white stone pathway wrapping around the house. “These old biddies like to keep things professional, so if anyone asks if you have a business card, lie and say you just ran out, then ask if they have one instead.”

I took a calming breath and sighed it out. “Anything else I should know?”

“Nervousness is your weakness, so stop frowning and start smiling.” I flashed her a smile that showed off all my teeth. “Eh, a little less scary.”

I laughed and squeezed her arm tighter. “Thank you, Gina.”

“You’re welcome, hon.”

The Kings’ backyard was a dazzling display of whimsy and horticulture with decorations, lighting, and bright flowers at every turn. Around the edge of the yard were small well-decorated tables for drinks, appetizers, and desserts. An outdoor dining room consisting of a beige rug, a large rectangular table, and vintage chairs was set up in the far-right corner.

“Go have a look around,” Gina said in a breezy tone as my head swiveled in awe.

She didn’t have to tell me twice.

With the excitement of a little girl on Christmas morning, I headed right for the dessert table. With a lavish spread of pink macarons, scrumptious-looking cupcakes with pink icing, and ice cream pies with edible pink flowers, it was a sugar addict’s dream. Saliva pooled on my tongue as my tastebuds yearned to devour one of each.

Beside the desserts stood a DIY lemonade station with a large glass pitcher of strawberry lemonade, glasses, garnishes, and a bucket of ice, surrounded by two bouquets of pink roses, their vases wrapped in silky pink bows. I grabbed a glass and poured myself a drink, sipping it through a striped pink-and-white paper straw as whispers and giggles fluttered freely in the warm afternoon air.

Lemonade in hand, I ambled to the table as more guests arrived.

Personalized place settings written on rose gold tags were wrapped around white napkins with twine, so I circled the table to locate my assigned seat. I lowered into my chair and admired the three-tier serving tray before me, finger sandwiches, savory mini quiches, and glazed scones tempting me to sample them all.

“They look delicious, don’t they?”

The sound of Camille’s honeyed voice made my shoulders go rigid as I twisted in my seat, finding her gaze deadlocked on mine. “They certainly

do,” I clipped, not batting a lash.

She stepped closer, her lilac midi dress swaying around her knees. “Take some home if you need to,” she whispered with the flap of her hand like she was giving me permission to shove a cucumber sandwich in my purse.

I knew a better place she could shove it.

“Enough, Camille.” Mrs. King’s no-nonsense tone had us whipping our heads in her direction. She looked stunning in a beige maxi dress with sheer long sleeves and a front slit revealing her toned left leg. “Harper, thank you for joining us this afternoon.”

I rose to my feet and smoothed down my dress with long, nervous strokes. “Thank you for having me, Mrs. King. Everything looks delicious, and your decorating is impeccable. I feel like I’m in a fairy tale.”

“Thank you, dear. And I see you’ve already found the drinks.” She nodded to the glass in my hand.

Was that an observation or an ambiguous criticism?

With her impassive tone, the woman gave *nothing* away.

“I did.” I swallowed hard. “The lemonade is delicious.”

“I’m afraid that’s my only contribution to all of this.” She looped her finger in the air with a disarming smile. “Everything else is catered, even the tea. Cooking was never my forte, yet both of my sons are naturals in the kitchen. Oh, but I’m sure you’re aware.”

My lips tugged into a smile as I thought back to the savory chicken bruschetta Jordan prepared for dinner last night and the cookies he burned afterward that set off the smoke detectors. “Jordan’s an amazing cook, but a terrible baker.” I giggled.

A glint of humor touched Mrs. King’s eyes, while Camille rolled hers and released a bored sigh before wandering away.

“She has no business being here today,” Mrs. King admitted in a detached voice. “Every woman here contributes to making Fair Oak the wonderful community it is, but my daughter-in-law hasn’t done a thing.”

I dug deep inside and found the courage to speak freely. “With all due respect, Mrs. King, Camille’s been like that for as long as I’ve known her. Her behavior shouldn’t come as a shock to you.”

“Some people change,” she replied, her gaze hardening.

“And some people believe they never have to.”

Lifting a contemplative chin, she pursed her lips and eyed me with an inquisitive stare. “Harper, will you join me in my office for a moment?”

Her question was unexpected, but I found myself bobbing my head in acceptance, my curiosity fueling my movements as I followed her inside.

“I realize this makes me a terrible hostess,” she said over her shoulder as she led me through the kitchen, her gait determined, steps purposeful. “But I’m afraid this can’t wait any longer.”

I followed her into her Tiffany-blue office and watched as she unlocked the bottom drawer in her sleek black desk. She sifted through some paperwork and retrieved a brown picture frame, spinning on her heels and holding it to her chest. “I’m not sure Conrad and Jordan will ever repair their relationship, but I will *not* let my relationship with Jordan crumble as well. In order to do that, it’s time I apologize to you.” Her shoulders dropped with a sigh as she slowly extended her arm, offering me the frame.

It took a few seconds for me to realize who I was looking at, what I was looking at. My eyes widened in disbelief as I clamped a hand over my mouth, trapping a sob in my throat as tears stung my eyes and coated my lashes. Trapped beneath the glass was an old Polaroid of my father...and Serena. Bright eyes and warm smiles, my dad’s arm thrown over her slender shoulders in a carefree embrace.

“What is this?” I choked out, dragging my index finger over the glass.

Mrs. King’s desk chair creaked as she lowered herself into it. “Your father was my best friend, Harper,” she admitted in a somber tone, her mournful gaze never leaving mine as the heart-stopping truth burst from her mouth.

“Were you two...?”

I didn’t need to fill in the blanks for her to understand my question. “I loved him—as a friend.”

“Because of my mom?”

She shook her head. “I moved to Philadelphia right after high school graduation, and Beau stayed in Fair Oak to take care of his father after his first stroke. Eventually, I joined the Philadelphia Ballet as a soloist, and after seeing my performance one evening, Conrad waited around to ask for my phone number. The rest, as they say, is history. Five years later, I moved back to town with a husband, a baby, and another on the way while Beau was wrapped up in Chief Kelly’s eighteen-year-old daughter.” She paused and sighed like uttering that sentence was a struggle for her. “I’m not going to lie to you, Harper. I was wary of Lori. Beau was a dreamer, and so was your mother. He’d ramble on and on about the big plans they had, but neither of

them had the money to do it. And when he found out Lori was pregnant, I was terrified for him, for her, for you.

“The night before they left for Washington, I hugged him and told him not to stay away from Fair Oak for too long. Lori and I didn’t see eye to eye, but I couldn’t imagine my life without Beau.” Tears sprung to her eyes, yet she held her head high, wearing her grief like an expensive string of pearls. “That was the last time I saw him.”

My heart thrashed in my chest like a caged animal, and my stomach sank with dread. She lost her best friend, but I lost my dad. In a competition of whose pain was worse, I decided victory was mine. “You have fond memories of a man I never got to know, yet you blame me for his death?”

“Of course not, Harper. Your father’s accident was just that...an accident.”

“Then why?” I nearly shouted. “Why have you made it so damn hard for Jordan and me to be together?”

“On the first day of fourth grade, Jordan came home from school with a huge smile on his face, telling me all about his new friend, Harper Kelly. You were all he would talk about, and for years, that didn’t change. He adored you, held you on a pedestal, and it reminded me of what I had with your father. It gave me hope, and in a way, it made me feel close to your dad again.

“Then you started dating Devlin, and I watched Jordan retreat into himself. Self-destruct and act out.” Her mouth spread into a grim line because Jordan’s dark days were a painful memory for her, too. “You broke my son’s heart, a mother’s worst nightmare. After that, I viewed you as selfish and flighty, like your mother.”

I couldn’t say her blunt declaration didn’t sting, but she was speaking the truth. I wanted to hurt Jordan, so I used his brother to do it. How could I be upset with his mother for her justifiable anger?

I knotted my arms over my chest and nibbled on my bottom lip, waiting for the guilt that seized me to release its tight hold. “I love Jordan, and I don’t plan on ever stopping. We’ve *both* made mistakes in the past, and we’ve made peace with that. But with all due respect, you don’t know a goddamn thing about my mother. She adored my dad, and losing him nearly killed her, like losing Jordan would destroy me.”

“Which is why I’m apologizing, Harper. I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you, and I’m sorry I misjudged you.” She rose from her chair and

crossed the room, her delicate hand reaching for mine as I took in the pain-filled expression lining her normally smooth face. “Your dad would be proud of you,” she said in a meaningful voice, and warm tears trickled down my cheeks. “A part of those big plans of his was to help people. Make a difference somehow. Exactly what you’re going to do with your café.”

Make a difference somehow.

I was more like my father than I ever realized.

“Thank you for saying that,” I hiccuped. My heart filled with gratitude, not realizing how much I yearned to feel connected to my dad until I actually did.

Mrs. King released my hand and dabbed under her eyes with the pads of her fingers. I was certain she wasn’t one to cry often, and the fact that she shared her vulnerability with me enhanced the magnitude of the moment. “We better get back out there before Camille alienates all of my guests and they decide to leave.”

“As painful as an afternoon with Camille may be, no one’s leaving before tea and lunch are served. Have you seen those desserts?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Do you think I went overboard?”

I tapped my chin, pretending to think it over. “Definitely. But I have a man at home who would love a doggie bag if there are leftovers.”

The most genuine smile broke free on her face, activating a small dimple on her cheek. “For him, you can take it all.”

HARPER



The music was a bit too loud, but I didn't have the heart to ask Grant to lower the volume. He seemed to be drowning out the voices in his head with old-school Bon Jovi, and while the faraway look in his eyes remained, he was there and that made me happy.

"This seat taken?" I asked as I sat on the barstool beside him, resting my elbows on the rustic walnut plank countertop.

"You're the owner. Do you really need to ask?"

"No, I guess I don't." I nudged his arm and smiled as I glanced over my shoulder.

Lori and Serena bobbed their heads to "Living on a Prayer." Mr. Warren and Jordan were having a heart-to-heart in the corner booth. Kylie, Sam, and Julia sampled the food, and Devlin was chatting with my head chef.

Sweet Steam Café would be open for business in the morning, and while my nerves were frayed, tonight's friends and family preview was a success.

"I'm proud of you, Harp. This place is something." Grant nodded to himself, staring into a large blue coffee mug.

The café's barista, Taylor, was on hand to whip up her signature lattes, and Grant was on number three.

"Thanks, Grant." I tapped my foot against the stool to the beat of the song. "So how have you been? I haven't seen you in a few weeks."

He stroked what looked to be the start of a beard and shrugged. "The Riff's been keeping me busy."

I didn't believe him, but if he felt the need to lie about what he'd been doing, I wouldn't push him for details.

Sometimes, we had to hide behind our secrets until we were ready to admit the truth.

“Any luck on the Rachel front?”

He shook his head. “No. She changed her number and deleted her social media accounts. It’s like she never even existed.”

I hated the way things ended with Rachel. Understanding and forgiveness came easier now that more time had passed, and I wished I could go back in time and redo our last conversation.

“Maybe she’ll come back on her own.”

Grant scoffed. “Doubt it, Harp.”

“Mind if I steal this goddess for a moment, Whitlock?” Jordan asked, lacing his arms around my middle and dropping his chin to my shoulder.

“What would you do if I told you yes?” Grant pinged back.

“Tell you to fuck off.”

Grant lifted the mug to his mouth and said, “That’s what I thought,” before sipping his latte.

I shook my head with a smile as Jordan offered his hand and assisted me off the stool. “You really do look stunning tonight,” he whispered in my ear as he led me to Mr. Warren’s booth.

In an attempt to reclaim dominance over my mind, Kylie and I spent all day getting ready.

In a teal romper and tan wedged sandals, professionally styled hair, and a light coat of makeup, I was going for a wow factor that would elevate my wavering confidence and subdue my edginess, and so far, it seemed to be working.

“Thank you.” An irrepressible smile clung to my lips as I sat down. “So what’s going on? You two have been chatting all night, and Jordan is wearing his up-to-no-good grin.”

Mr. Warren chuckled as Jordan rolled his eyes.

“I’ll let you tell her,” Mr. Warren said, and my body stilled.

“Tell me what?”

Jordan cracked his knuckles and twisted to fully face me. “You know how I’ve been thinking about leaving CKH?”

“Yes. It’s all you’ve talked about lately.”

Ever since *the incident*, Jordan’s restless energy went into overdrive. When he wasn’t fixing something around the house, he was volunteering or brainstorming ways to improve Fair Oak. Because of Serena’s connections,

he was able to meet with members of the community and discuss their needs, but he'd been struggling to come up with something that would also fill the hole inside him that yearned for more.

“What do you think about Warren and I partnering up to open a community center? A place for after-school programs, club sports, dance classes—”

“—grief counseling, AA, divorce support groups,” Mr. Warren interjected. “We don't have nearly enough mental health resources in this town.”

“Every time I look in the mirror, I feel like I'm staring down the man I used to be. It's time to be the man I've always wanted to be, but I won't make any big decisions without your input.” Jordan's eyes sparked with optimism. “So what are your thoughts, baby?”

He stared at me with the vulnerable intensity of a man with a beautiful, fragile heart. Of a man who for most of his life, was told *who* he should be, *what* he should be. Of a man impassioned, hoping to make the world a better place.

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. “I think it's brilliant.”

Jordan flashed me a grin. “Yeah?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He couldn't take his eyes from my face as he moistened his lips and moved closer.

Mr. Warren cleared his throat. “I'm going to check on my girls,” he said, excusing himself.

I couldn't blame him; the tension between Jordan and me was hotter than the baking heat in the desert sun. In his charcoal Tom Ford suit and black tie, I'd been thinking about all the things I wanted to do to him since he arrived at the café hours ago.

Jordan's warm fingers stroked my cheek. “I love you, you know that?”

“I love you too, stud.”

“Once I give my father my signed resignation, there's a huge chance he'll disown me.”

I glanced over at Serena as she laughed at something my mother said, and joy bubbled inside me. “Your mom won't let that happen.”

“Maybe not, but if he does, I'm going to be putting every last dime into the community center. You might have to support us for a while.” He winked.

“Then we better pray tomorrow goes well.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind it will.”

When we were kids, I never anticipated the depth and span of his love for me.

Now, I couldn’t imagine my life without it.

I linked my fingers through his and smiled. “You know what we need to do?”

“What’s that, sweetheart?”

“Dance.”

I dragged him over to our friends as they belted out the lyrics to “Always,” sounding tone deaf compared to Jon Bon Jovi’s transcendent voice but not giving a shit.

“Didn’t peg you for a fan, Mom,” Jordan shouted over the music as he grabbed Serena’s hand and spun her around.

“Are you kidding? I saw this band five times in the nineties,” she beamed.

Lori laughed and wiggled her hips. “Rena is a Bon Jovi fangirl.”

Serena rolled her eyes. “I thought we agreed you were done calling me that.”

A shrug rolled over Lori’s shoulders. “Old habits die hard.”

“Okay, I have to ask, what’s with the nickname?”

“Your dad used to call her that to annoy the shit out of her.”

Serena tried but failed to prevent a grin from curving her mouth. “So I called him Beau-Beau to annoy the hell out of him.”

It still blew my mind that Mom and Serena loved the same man.

Different types of love, sure, but they both instantly lit up whenever they mentioned him.

Hope fluttered in my chest that maybe, just maybe, their newly formed friendship would grow even stronger over time.

As the beginning notes of “Bad Medicine” played through the speakers, I noticed Kylie tug on Devlin’s sleeve, pulling him to the dance party. I shimmied over to Grant and claimed his hand, and even though he protested, he finally caved and joined us. Warmth and affection blossomed on Sam’s face as Mr. Warren pulled out some sweet John Travolta moves, and Jordan danced with Julia while Grant twirled and dipped me, doubling my laughter.

Our group was sweaty.

Exhilarated.

Happy.

We knew tomorrow wasn't promised. Knew hardships awaited and at times, we'd feel unsteady on our feet. Knew that sometimes, we'd feel regretful and misunderstood.

But our camaraderie had beauty—a closeness that came with trust, faith, and loyalty—and because of that, I knew we'd make it through anything.

“Proud of you, babe,” Kylie shouted as her hips and slicked-back ponytail swayed.

“Thanks, Ky. It's bittersweet after what happened, but I'm grateful we're here.”

“There's nothing wrong with moving forward, Harper. We're different, but we're still amazing. That's life, right? Constantly evolving, constantly growing. Forget who we used to be. Now, this is us.”

“You're right, Ky. We'd been through hell and back, but we refused to give up.” I pulled her into a hug as tears stung my eyes, and she squeezed me tight. “Now, this is us.”

EPILOGUE



JORDAN

One Year Later

“Can someone please get this mutt away from me?” Devlin asked dryly as he glared down at Bandit.

The dog sat back on his haunches and tilted his head to the side, giving my brother *the look*.

“He’s hoping you’ll accidentally drop one of those steaks you’re grilling. He’s not dumb.”

“Did you just compliment him?” Devlin flipped over a burger and topped it with a slice of cheese. “Thought you couldn’t stand him?”

“We’ve agreed on a truce.”

Dev sipped his beer. “Meaning Harper told you to suck it up because the dog isn’t going anywhere?”

I shoved my hands in the pockets of my light-blue shorts and shrugged. “That’s one interpretation of how the conversation went down.”

Dev chuckled and began plating the food.

Harper and I were hosting a midsummer cookout for our friends and family, but as soon as he arrived, Devlin took over at *my* grill like he owned the place. I wasn’t sure if it had something to do with his control-freak tendencies or his impending divorce, but he seemed more on edge than usual lately.

I carried the tray of burgers into the house and set it on the counter. “Burgers are ready, but Dev’s being meticulous about the steaks.”

“Just like your father,” my mother huffed as she bent down and patted Bandit on the head.

I couldn't ignore the unwanted pinch of resentment in the pit of my stomach. As predicted, my father wasn't pleased with my resignation. While he didn't write me off completely, he also wasn't going out of his way to be supportive of my new endeavors. I guess Conrad would forever be an unapologetic asshole, and I would forever be the wayward son.

“Didn't peg you as a dog person, Serena,” Lori commented as she grabbed a plate and started preparing her cheeseburger.

My mother unfurled to standing. “I'm not, but Bandit is too cute to resist.”

“It's those ears. He knows how to use them.” Lori chuckled, squeezing ketchup onto her patty.

Harper waltzed into the kitchen and set down a stack of games on the kitchen table, a smile burning bright on her mauve lips. “Okay, I found Pictionary, but I refuse to be on Kylie's team. She's too aggressive.”

“The lies you tell.” Kylie glared as she stole Grant's ball cap off his head and placed it on top of hers before she sauntered out the back door.

“Tell Dev to hurry up!” I called after her, and she brushed away my statement with the flip of her wrist.

Lori made her way to the kitchen table and claimed a chair. “Did you hear from the zoning board yet?”

“Still waiting, but I know they'll come through.”

“They'd be stupid not to,” my mother snipped.

For the past year, Warren and I worked diligently to bring our vision for the Fair Oak Community Center to life. We'd recently found a property large enough for all we wanted to accomplish, but we needed approval from all the right people to finally make it happen.

I gave a half shrug. “We'll see.”

With the corners of her eyes crinkling with her smile, Harper crossed the kitchen and placed a soft kiss on my cheek, happiness reflecting off her in shimmering colors, breathless in its clarity. Two weeks ago, she promoted Gina to assistant manager and started taking weekends off—something she hadn't done since Sweet Steam Café opened—and let's just say, Harper was more relaxed than ever.

“What do you say we sneak upstairs and repeat what we did this morning?” I whispered in her ear so only she could hear.

A bloom of color painted itself over her cheekbones. “Will you stop!” She swatted my chest and gave her head a slight shake as she glanced around, making sure no one heard.

They didn’t.

Devlin carried in the tray of steaks and set it beside the burgers on the counter, and Kylie winked at me as she leaned against the refrigerator, her mouth sliding up into a smirk. Trying to ignore the nervousness hammering my bones was impossible with friends like ours.

Harper’s slender fingers linked through mine, and I focused on her softness, on her warmth, on her flowery scent as my heart thumped like a piston against my chest. “You okay?” She giggled. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

Lori and my mother shared a knowing look, and Grant burst into a laugh.
Fucking Whitlock.

I buried my lips in her hair. “All good, baby,” I lied as a sheen of sweat formed on my skin.

I patted my pocket once more, feeling the small box nestled inside. I would’ve asked Harper to marry me the day I was released from the hospital, but Devlin convinced me to wait until after Hurley’s trial to propose, so Harp and I didn’t have the weight and darkness lingering over our shoulders.

Since he pled guilty to all charges—security cameras mounted on shops along Main Street made it impossible for him to deny what happened—Hurley’s hearing wrapped up quickly, and last week, he was sentenced to thirty years in prison, a relief for all of us, but especially Rachel.

We’d hoped she’d stick around this time, but she decamped to God knows where as soon as the trial ended. Grant’s heart broke all over again, although Kylie seemed to take on the role of his loyal confidant, so maybe he’d rediscover his spark sooner rather than later.

Now, in front of the most important people in my life—minus Warren, Sam, and Julia, who were on a hard-earned family vacation—I’d finally ask Harper to be my wife.

Gulping down a steadying breath to calm my rowdy pulse, I slid the velvet box from my pocket and lowered to one knee.

“Oh, my god,” Harper uttered, pressing her palms together, then bringing them to her lips, the depth of her green gaze bottomless.

“For as long as I can remember, all of my plans have started and ended with you. The first time we kissed, you robbed me of my breath and seeped

into my veins, and even when I was your biggest mistake, you didn't give up on me. We've repaired what's been shattered, accepted the scars, and fell deeper in love, and I know with absolute certainty that you and I have what it takes to do this forever." I opened the box, revealing a platinum three-stone engagement ring. "Harper Kelly, will you please put me out of my misery and say you'll finally be my wife?"

She pressed a hand to her chest and nodded, soundless words cascading from her eyes. "Jordan King, I will absolutely marry you."

I slid the ring onto her finger and fought to my feet as our friends clapped and cheered.

Cradling her face in my hands, I crashed my mouth against hers, putting everything I had into that kiss.

A kiss that felt like home and tasted like eternity.

THE END

I hope you loved the Fair Oak crew as much as I did!

In fact, I loved them so much, I wasn't ready to let them go.

Coming Fall 2022, Fair Oak Book #2!

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Whether you loved *Now This Is Us* or not, reviews are crucial for self-published authors to do what we do. It would mean the world to me if you would consider leaving one before you go.

XO,

Jenn

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Lee is an emerging author of angsty romance. She grew up reading every romance novel she could get her hands on and earned a degree in English from a small Pennsylvania college no one's ever heard of. When she isn't writing, she is a dedicated swim mom and a Netflix addict.



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