

Star-crossed



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**KERRIGAN BYRNE
& CYNTHIA ST. AUBIN**





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Special Thanks

As a native, Marty Bluewater is the only person allowed to live on Protection Island, the wildlife sanctuary off the coast of Discovery Bay.

We wanted to thank him for the in depth conversations we had while writing Cypress Forrester. We chatted about romances of the past fetishizing native men and how to avoid in the future. He is supportive and encouraging about the need for responsible representation of Indigenous people and their place in fiction.

All you need in life according to Marty Bluewater?

A respect for nature, and a sense of humor.

*Marty Bluewater is a local artist and wildlife photographer.
You can find his photos here:*

<https://www.facebook.com/Martybluewater>

Dedication

One of our favorite things about writing representation romance is all the amazing humans these stories end up bringing into our orbit. So when the feedback for Bazaar Girls rolled in bringing a tide of late-diagnosed women who finally felt seen, we were delighted, but not surprised. Because we know exactly how that shit feels. Both diagnosed with AuDHD within months of each other in our late 30's/early 40's, we've spent the years since unpacking our matching emotional baggage, one ruffled feeling at a time. Frustration. Isolation. Grief. Anger. A lot of anger, it turns out. And if there's one thing that seems to make society's collective sphincter pucker, it's an angry woman. Quickly labeled, frequently overlooked, and easily dismissed.

They call us the Lost Girls. They, being the medical/scientific/psychological/statistic-studying community who've come to recognize that a large swath of girls with neurodivergences go undiagnosed until well into adulthood. Because as girls, we're pretty much taught how to mask from birth. Be kind. Be pleasant. Be productive. Behave, basically. And we mostly do. Until we can't anymore. Until the mask begins to break, and we go looking for answers. Sometimes, those answers come from another woman/girl/femme presenting human who has hurt like we've hurt and helps us understand huge chunks of our lived experience in a dizzying flash.

In constructing Lyra's side of this love story, we're sincerely hoping to shed just that kind of light. Because the brighter the light, the more of us Lost Girls can find each other, and thereby, find ourselves.

Acknowledgments

Our eternal and undying gratitude to:

ALLISON!!!, beautiful writer, avid supporter, and magical siren who single handedly made both of us weep super salty tears of joy with a beautifully crafted email of thanks for writing this series—which is in no danger of stopping anytime soon, BTW. Breaking a curse has never been more fun. Hardcore Whores forever!!

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Are you interested in extras?

If you're interested in becoming one the lovely superfans who receives scads of illicit bonus content by supporting our scribblings, scamper on over and check out our [Ream](#) page! Bonus boning scenes, NSFW artwork, and endless extras, oh my!!

ONE

Witch

A WOMAN THOUGHT TO HAVE MAGIC POWERS.



WHY ARE YOU SUCH A BITCH?

Lyra chewed on the question just as furiously as her gum.

“Why *am* I such a bitch?” She tapped on the small cleft in her chin as she pretended to give the question the credence lent it by the waxen-faced, weird-smelling customer on the other side of the cash register.

“Why am I such a bitch? Let’s see... Could be because a few months ago I was on my way to being a hotshot New England criminal defense attorney engaged to one of the most sought-after rising stars in the financial sector, who turned out to be a cheating, lying, malignant narcissist with disgusting mother issues.”

She leaned over the register, planting her elbows on the counter, and set her chin on her palm.

“Or it might just be due to the fact that very recently, some family member was in a fresh state of crisis, and so I let them talk me into moving my ass all the way back to the soggy tourist town I left for good effing reasons. So *now*, I have to use my overpriced Ivy League education to help gullible people pick out colorful rocks—most of which aren’t actual crystals, by the way—that these intellectual giants believe will alleviate their poverty, cure their illnesses, and/or help their dysfunctional relationships with ‘vibrations’ because some long-haired, vegan-leather-wearing, self-proclaimed witch who fancies herself a pedagogue, *without a geology degree*, by

the way, insists that her friend's sister's aunt's breast cancer shrank because she shoved a moss agate into her cleavage.”

Taking a much-needed breath, she lifted her head from her palm and began to tick bitchy reasons off on her fingers, because now she truly was wondering which component lent her the most aggravation and was balls-deep in helpful self-analysis.

“Combine that with the fact that the basement of this building is currently ankle deep in brackish ancient pipe and toilet water, the landlord is at an ashram in India and unreachable by modern means of communication, my left sock is too tight, the ceiling fan is squeaky, I've seen way too much of Guillermo's plumber butt crack today, and instead of a good night's sleep, I have a lumpy twin mattress in a second bedroom apartment where I listen to my twin sister pork her new fiancé every night through old-as-shit plaster walls. Oh, and *then* you come in here with your multiple nose rings, failing natural deodorant, and white-lady dreads with the audacity to suggest that *my shop's* palo santo wood is subpar, and you want me to sell it at a discount? I can't imagine why I'm being a bitch right now, can you?”

Lyra didn't break eye contact with the customer, even as the substance-enlarged pupils misted over before the woman replied, “This isn't your shop, it's Liz's, and she will hear about this when she gets back.” With that threat delivered, the woman hiked up her (unfortunately) braless tits and flounced out the door along with her long skirt, cowboy boots, a cloud of pachouli, and perpetual unemployment.

“Whatever, narc,” Lyra muttered to herself, returning to idly leafing through one of the magazines Liz Billings sold at the counter of Star-Crossed, Townsend Harbor's premier (but by no means only) metaphysical shoppe.

Lyra had never been fired from a job before but wouldn't mind explaining to future employers why she'd failed to help local spiritualists pick tarot cards with the right “vibe.”

Checking the time, she bit down on the inside of her lip, tearing a chunk away. How much longer would the plumbers

take in the basement? The water pumps and hoses had been going forever. The fans were pushing a slightly moldy, sewer-y smell into the main floor, and she was pretty sure that old couple over there just slid a whole-ass “crystal ball” and pewter stand into a grocery tote.

Lyra narrowed her eyes, deciding what to do.

She *could* call the cops... But also, did she really want to bust a couple of shoplifting septuagenarians over a glass orb that sold for sixty bucks when it came in bulk from China at, like, seven dollars a pop?

There were eleventy more in the back, and look how in love these two blue-hairs were. He was even helping her carry the ill-gotten gains.

And here everyone thought chivalry was dead.

Lyra smoothed down her already perfectly controlled low ponytail and peeked around. The shop was a kaleidoscope of colors, with shelves filled to the brim with silks, wands, flowy clothing, tarot cards, jewelry, geodes, herbs, tonics, tinctures, spell jars, the odd unguent, and handmade candles. Sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows, casting a warm glow over the worn wooden floorboards.

And here she stood amidst a cacophony of crystals wondering how her life had taken such an unexpected turn.

A chime lent a whimsical sound to the moment, and the scent of sandalwood and lavender swirled through the disturbed air as Gemma, Lyra’s twin sister, stepped through their adjoining door. Though they were mirror twins, nothing about them matched. Where Lyra tended to dress like she was about to do a guest spot on CNN, Gemma’s vibe was thrift-store chic with homemade accessories that usually jangled way too much.

She made it work, however, as her brunette hair and verdant green eyes made just about every color, shape, and fashion crime look like it was on purpose.

The building on the Victorian waterfront street their stores occupied were charmingly eccentric, with its exposed brick,

gingerbread trim, and original creaky floors. Star-Crossed was just the kitschy, new-age next-door neighbor that Bazaar Girls, Gemma's yarn and craft boutique, needed.

Not a bad place to nurse a broken heart.

Well...a broken life.

Townsend Harbor was lovely and quiet, Water Street bustling with tourists and travelers. And the novelty of having two twin women running twin vintage shops was a nice promotional injection of cash for both businesses housed in the coveted old building.

Lyra tracked her sister's progress toward her as Gemma stopped and offered to help the older couple bring their "shopping bag" to the front of the store so Lyra could check them out.

Though they'd been caught, the couple offered Gemma kind—if somewhat toothless—smiles and relinquished their bag as if that'd been their plan all along.

Lyra rolled her eyes. Since when had Gemma become the successful one?

Since she'd doubled down on Bazaar Girls, taken up with her live-in boyfriend, Gabe, and truly begun trusting herself to make her dream come to life.

Gemma *belonged* to their hometown, and everyone here fiercely fought for her to make her life and her business a success.

Where do I belong?

The question choked off Lyra's next breath as she watched her twin settle the bag on the counter and unpack the glass ball, two books on—*bwark*—Tantric sex, and an amethyst dildo.

"Two of these things make sense..." Lyra griped to her sister. "But what do they need with the glass ball?"

Gemma blinked. "It's a crystal ball, not a glass ball."

“False,” Lyra said. “Any glass with less than one percent of lead content is not considered crystal. Technically, the application of the term ‘crystal’ to glass is super inaccurate, as glass is an amorphous solid.”

Gemma held her hands up. “Okay, the prosecution rests, Lyra, geez. Besides, I don’t think it matters how much lead is in something for it to divine the future for these guys.”

Lyra put her hand to the side of her mouth to whisper, “What future, Gemma? Spoiler alert, they’re giving Methuselah a run for his money, and I bet they don’t have longer to live than—”

Gemma slammed her hand over Lyra’s mouth. “Psst. Fffft. Shhhhhhhht,” were the urgent sounds that escaped her. “Don’t you dare speak a number, Lyra—you don’t want to be responsible for their early deaths!”

Early? That ship had sailed two decades ago.

Lyra bit down on her sister’s palm and freed herself using the same slap-fight kung fu they’d employed as kids. “For the last time, Gemma, I had nothing to do with predicting that fortune-teller’s tent fire at the festival. It was coincidence. Hell, it was *inevitable* that someone with a million superfluous scarves and fringy whatnots hanging from her tent would fall victim to her million open-flame candles.” Slapping the magazine closed, Lyra shoved it back in the slot, giving up on her idle curiosity about what sort of homegrown herbs helped to stimulate female orgasms.

Orgasms just weren’t her thing.

Especially not after getting an eyeful (and handful) of what *those* two slippery-fingered olds were going to be doing later...

If they paid for their shit.

Gemma fiddled with the starched collar of Lyra’s blouse under her fitted navy blazer. “Um...you doing okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” was Lyra’s automatic answer.

“For all the reasons you just said when you told off Matilda Crenshaw just now.”

“Heard that, did you?” Lyra plopped her chin into her palm again.

“Like you said, these walls aren’t the best at muffling noise.” Gemma patted her arm. “Also, I don’t think Liz would like you swearing at the customers.”

“That’s why I said *effing*,” Lyra said. “Also, Matilda said *bitch* first.” God, sometimes family turned you back into your teenaged self... She really needed to get out of here.

Again.

“You can really hear Gabe and I through the walls?” Gemma blushed through the question, fondling a necklace with a tiger’s-eye pendant hanging on its rack.

“Well, mostly you,” Lyra muttered. Which...fucking irked *the most*, because Gemma was having more orgasms in one week than Harrison Lynch had given Lyra in a lifetime.

By kind of a huge margin.

“Sorry.” Gemma adjusted the adorable knitted beret above her corona of dark hair as she matched the peachy hue with a blush. “Gabe isn’t loud because he likes to bite when he— Um —Well, I’ll just be careful to be quieter.”

Lyra sighed, releasing a bit of her bitchiness through her tight throat. “Don’t you dare. You guys have that new relationship smell. If you weren’t nice enough to take me in, you’d be fornicating in every room of the house and spending your entire weekends naked.” It was what she would do if she had a piece of man meat like Gabe “the babe” Kelly following her around like a puppy.

If that puppy was a tattooed Rottweiler with a spiked collar who liked to bite when he...

Lyra bit her own lip for new reasons.

Not that she was checking out her sister’s man or anything, even though the Southie mechanic had prison muscles and some sort of aversion to shirts. It was just that he was in

possession of magic talents in the bedroom that Lyra had heretofore never found in the opposite sex.

She couldn't help but be super curious.

And crazy jealous.

She hadn't had to bite down to silence an orgasm since—

“Anyways, I'm sorry,” she said, pushing that thought into the chained compartment where it would live forever. “Guess I'm still washing the blunt East Coast off me.”

Gemma giggled. “To be fair, people have been calling you a bitch way before you left for the East Coast.”

Lyra leveled Gemma her best attempt at a sarcastic but not bitchy look. Then she realized there was no such thing, so she shrugged and walked around the counter to put the abandoned palo santo wood next to its other smoky, fragrant neighbors of incense and sage.

Bitch.

The word stung, but Lyra knew the shoe fit. Ever since she'd slid into this world seventeen seconds before her sister, she'd been beset with mild to moderate irritation. People thought she was a bitch? They should get a load of what she didn't say.

Shrugging, scanning the crowded shop for any remaining customers, she said, “What can I say, it's a gift.”

The old couple lingered by the crystal balls, the woman clutching a handful of tarot cards like they were Willy Wonka's golden tickets. Both kept glancing over at the twins, and Lyra wondered how long it would take them to slide the tarot cards into the pocket of his cargo pants.

She tapped her foot, anxiety pooling in her gut along with the backed-up sewer water in the basement. She needed them *out* so she could deal with the plumber currently cursing at the pipes below. She could literally feel the vibrations of his work beneath her feet.

To her astonishment, the couple finally made their way to the register. She rang them up and hurried them out before

flipping the sign to “Closed.”

Sagging against the door, she scrubbed her hands over her face.

It wasn't that she'd *meant* to abandon her life back east. The intention had been to just take a little sabbatical.

But a world like hers unraveled quickly, and she realized she'd allowed her ex, Harrison Lynch, to put everything in his name. After he'd smashed their relationship into a million pieces, she'd crawled back to Townsend Harbor with her tail between her legs, too numb to do anything but go through the motions of her old life.

Now here she was.

Stuck.

No roomy high-rise apartment with a great view. No partner track (thanks to Harrison's subsequent slander). No fiancé with flawless style and a heroic capacity to believe his own bullshit.

A little money saved, and no direction in life.

“Gemma? Lyra?” Guillermo's voice echoed up through the floorboards. “You better come see this.”

Great. *Just great.*

Sighing, Lyra descended into the basement, the smell intensifying with each step. At the bottom, she found the plumber elbow-deep in a pipe, his expression grim.

“The clog's farther in than I thought,” he said through gritted teeth. “There's a place back here where the roots of that ash tree between the buildings have grown into the foundation and the plumbing. Gonna need to get it removed before I can finish the repairs.” He shook his head, pulling a cluster of small roots free and lifting their soggy, mud-laden gnarls to show them.

Lyra's stomach twisted into similar knots.

Please, not the tree... That would mean...

“You're going to need an arborist.”

Fuck.

She licked her lips and forced a tight smile. “What if I paid you to just yank the tree out and install new pipes? Would that work?”

The plumber frowned. “Young lady, you ain’t listening. I can’t do a thing with these pipes until that tree’s gone, and I can’t move the tree, either. Cy the Tree Guy is gonna have to do it.”

Panic surged in Lyra’s chest as she turned away, groping for the rickety stairs.

She couldn’t call *him*.

Couldn’t face *him*.

Not after all these years.

She emerged from the basement in a cloud of dread. Through the shop window, she could see the old ash tree looming in the alley, its gnarled branches reaching toward the building like skeletal fingers.

Damn that tree.

Damn her luck.

And *damn* Cy Forrester for still living in this stupid tourist trap of a town.

Hadn’t he been going places? What happened to that football scholarship he’d been awarded?

How crazy that they’d just been talking about biting down during orgasms...

She could still taste the elixir of salt and desire on his neck when—

“Oh, I was going to tell you! You’ll never guess what Cady found in her bookshop.” Gemma crested the stairs and rummaged in her bag to pull out a tattered paperback. “That old copy of *The Crystal Cave* you used to love. I know how you feel about all this woo-woo stuff now, but I couldn’t resist. Remember when you went through your goth phase? What was that, like, fourteen? Fifteen?”

“Thirteen-ish.” Lyra managed a weak smile. Trust Gemma to remember the little details that slipped by everyone else... But ask Lyra’s severely ADHD sister to remember to pay the light bill?

There was only a sixty percent chance of follow-through.

Looking down, Lyra ran a thumb over the secondhand novel. Once upon a time, stories of magic and mystery had captivated her imagination. Now they only reminded her of empty dreams that would never come true.

“Thanks, Gem.” She took the book to avoid hurting Gemma’s feelings, hating that old echoes of teen angst and insecurity lingered among pages she’d probably never be brave enough to crack open again.

“No problem! Hey, I’ll go get us some sushi while you call Cy and tell him what’s up.”

Gemma disappeared before Lyra could beg her to switch jobs, and finally she sagged, giving in to the inevitable.

Cursing every person, building, tree, and decision (past and present) that had brought her to this moment, Lyra dialed before she could change her mind.

The phone rang twice. “Cy the Tree Guy.”

His voice was as deep and rugged as she remembered, conjuring up memories better left in the whispering dark.

She gripped the phone tight, staring at a life-sized statue of Ganesha, his elephant head adorned with a garland of marigolds. “Yeah, hi, I need to schedule an emergency tree removal. The pipes in the basement of my shop are blocked by encroaching roots, causing backup and water damage.”

There was a pause. “Lyra. It’s been a long time.” Though his tone was neutral, she thought she detected a hint of warmth.

Seven years.

No way he recognized her voice after seven years.

Though, to be fair, he talked to Gemma sometimes...

“Yeah.” She explained the situation in a rush, her cheeks burning. “The plumber says the tree has to go. I was hoping you could come take a look, give us an estimate.”

“I’d be happy to help out. I can swing by within the hour, if that works?”

“Sure,” Lyra chirped, closing her eyes, cursing her traitorous heart as it fluttered in anticipation. “I appreciate you coming on such short notice.”

“No problem at all. See you soon, Lyra.”

The line went dead.

Cypress Forrester would be here within the hour...

The one and only man with whom she’d not had to fake her orgasm.

TWO

Abatement

REDUCTION IN HAZARD, EITHER BY TREATMENT OF TREE OF
REMOVAL OF TARGET.



CYPRESS WAS CURSED.

He had first begun to suspect this in childhood. The suspicion had deepened into a solid hypothesis in his teenage years. In college, it had been confirmed once and for all with an event so bizarre and catastrophic, it derailed his entire life.

Far from the all-star NFL running back the entire town had once believed he'd become, Cy had sprinted his way into an athletic scholarship only to have fate sack him all the way back to Townsend Harbor. Back into his family's tree service business.

Until this exact moment, he'd made a kind of tentative peace with it.

Peace that was abruptly shattered when a familiar pair of sea-green eyes glared out at him from the front window of Star-Crossed metaphysical boutique.

A powerful wave of déjà vu rocked Cy back on his battered work boots as the midnight-blue velvet curtains jerked closed.

This wasn't the first time he'd been on the receiving end of Lyra McKendrick's ocular wrath.

She had stared him down every time fate saw fit to fuck with him by shoving her into his path.

He'd heard of someone undressing you with their eyes, but usually that stopped when the skin layer had been reached.

The look Lyra wielded could peel the flesh from a weaker man's bones.

And Cy had earned it.

Had earned it in ways he tried really hard *not* to think about as he stood on the front porch, waiting. He'd already had enough trouble keeping his mind in check just after hearing her voice on the phone.

Seven years, and still that throaty purr reached right for his cock.

Which was weird, considering Lyra had sounded like having to call him to come look at the mammoth ash tree in the shop's small yard was right up there with chewing glass.

Her words had been polite enough. It was the *way* she said them that made *Thank you* sound like *Fuck all the way off and sit on a drill bit when you get there*.

Cy cast a wary look down at his utility belt, which held several drill bits in varying sizes.

No thanks.

He knocked on the thick wooden door a second time, setting the wreath of witch bells jingling.

Hearing the floorboards creak on the other side of the door, he stepped back quickly, wincing as the sudden movement sent a searing flash of nerve pain through his left leg.

He shifted his weight, allowing himself to mentally dick-punch his orthopedic surgeon, who had assured him the pain would gradually lessen over time.

Five fucking years ago.

The door swung open, and Cy experienced a moment of profound disorientation at seeing Lyra's face beaming a broad smile at him.

Because she wasn't Lyra, but her twin sister, Gemma. A fact that her colorful hand-knit sweater vest and plaid skirt would have given away, even if the noticeable lack of a homicidal glare hadn't.

“Hey, Cy!” she said. “So good to see you!”

“Hey, Gemma. How’s it— *Christ*.”

Having visited Star-Crossed at least once a month for the last several years, Cy was used to the place’s distinctive aroma as part of the greeting.

Cedarwood. Jasmine. Clove. Lavender. And yes, patchouli.

But what blasted past Gemma was something closer to what gusted through the windows of his work truck if he happened to be downwind of Fertile Myrtle’s Manure in the late-summer heat.

Definitely not the worst thing he’d ever smelled, but nothing you’d want to dab on your pulse points.

“I know, right?” Gemma asked, picking up on the reaction he’d tried to suppress. Reaching up to her shoulder, she grabbed a length of the brightly colored scarf looped around her neck and pulled it across her mouth and nose. “Come on in,” she said in muffled invitation.

“Actually, I thought I’d just go ahead and get started.” Cy jerked his chin over to the side of the old house, where a squatting plumber showing two inches of butt crack stared at the ground and scratched his head.

Which was probably a nice vacation for his balls.

“You’re sure you don’t want to come in and see—”

“No,” Cy said, assuring himself it was his eagerness to try out his new toy, *not* the threat of sharing enclosed space with Lyra McKendrick that made him balk.

It hadn’t ended well for them last time.

Well, for him.

Triumphant Seamen Cream Cow hadn’t exactly been the headline he’d been hoping for after setting several division records in the bitter brawl with Townsend Harbor High’s sworn rivals, the Spokane High Wolfpack.

As the running back who’d scored sixty-four of the seventy-two points, Cy had been riding high on that fateful trip

home. Otherwise, he might not have acted on the dare that had ended so disastrously.

“You don’t even want to see where the leak started?” Gemma asked, looking puzzled. “The plumber already pulled up part of the basement floor, and—”

A crash made Gemma whirl around just as a sharp “Goddamn it, Larry!” was growled in the background.

Something small, fast, and dark shot out between Gemma’s calves, making her steady herself on the doorframe.

Cy hunched and lunged just as the cat made a break for the porch railing, feeling a gust of relief when his hands closed around the warm, furry weight of its body.

At least his reflexes were still decent.

The glossy black cat promptly began yowling and death-rolling like an alligator in his grip.

“Easy there,” he said, trying to soothe the writhing bundle. “You’re all right.”

But Cy wasn’t.

The abrupt and uncalculated shift of his center of gravity had made his leg lock up. Crouched with the sole of one boot on the porch with his right knee wedged against a planter, he wouldn’t be able to stand up again without bracing himself.

Which wasn’t likely to happen with about fifteen pounds of feral feline rabbit-kicking at his unprotected wrists.

Why the hell hadn’t he put on his PPE before coming to the front door?

Because you wanted Lyra McKendrick to see your body, his unhelpful mind answered almost immediately.

And damned if that little voice didn’t have the most annoying habit of being exactly right.

However catastrophic the life-changing college car accident had been for his leg, it had been the impetus for Cy’s obsession with building his upper body. A development he

told himself totally wasn't a psychological need to compensate.

"I told you, you can't just stand there with the door open." The phrase's crisp syllables had the cadence of a well-worn lecture. "If you're not going to—"

The words snapped off just as a pair of pointy-toed high heels stepped into view.

Cy's gaze slowly moved upward, beginning with the slim spikes of shoes that probably cost more than his first car.

His first five cars, maybe.

Above the elegant arch of her foot, the severe crease of navy-blue trousers made a sharp line up her shin and softened only slightly when meeting a knee whose exact circumference had been imprinted in his palm.

It had been the first place Cy touched her.

Next had been her thigh, whose curve was—like her hips—mostly hidden by the trousers' wide cut. The blazer and blouse beneath it seemed designed with a similar purpose in mind, the dip of her waist and swell of her breasts barely hinted at beneath layers of silk and wool. Expertly tailored to make her an elegant composition of angles whose edges failed to hone the surge of ardor that seemed to rise from the soles of his feet.

"There you are."

From the direction of Lyra's steely gaze, it wasn't exactly clear whether it was Cy or the cat that was the target of her rage.

Cy looked up, and seven long years vanished in a blink.

Electricity thickened the air like leaf smoke. Invisible, yet touching every molecule of the atmosphere between them.

He'd heard a million trite phrases dedicated to this very sensation, but had only felt it one other time. In the back of a bus barreling through the Snoqualmie Pass in the early hours of a Sunday morning.

Cy recalled that the body supposedly replaced all its cells every seven years, one of the few pieces of information his impact-addled brain had retained from high school biology.

Then surely what he felt now had to be phantom pains.

Her breath on his neck. Her mouth, wet, hot, and heady as young wine. Her hips digging into his belly. The hard mound of her pubic bone rocking against the sweet ache straining his jeans. The sharp pressure of her nails digging into his back.

The sudden force that sent them tumbling into the aisle in a tangle of limbs.

“Just hand it to me.” The coolness of her words was just the slap Cy needed.

It.

Clearly *not* a cat person.

Which didn't surprise him, given how catlike Lyra was herself. From the leonine golden-green eyes and capricious temperament to the unstudied, slinky grace.

Not to mention an unusually abrasive tongue. Unlike the power suit, this was not of a new vintage.

In fact, her ability to verbally eviscerate their classmates had been a significant factor in the circumstances that lead to their fateful vehicular clinch.

As did that tongue's aptitude for playing the bassoon, which his teammates had insisted was pretty much the woodwind equivalent of a blow job.

“I've got it.” Gemma stepped forward and, thank fuck, reached down to slip her hands under the cat's shoulders without Cy having to shift. She held the animal out in front of her with stiff arms to avoid the helicoptering lower half as she carried the creature inside. “I'll put Larry in the massage room.”

“Make sure you put the water and litter box in there too,” Lyra called over her shoulder.

“No food?” Cy asked, half teasing to distract her as he gripped the porch railing to get to his feet.

Her lips flattened into an unamused line. “We’re transitioning Larry away from free feeding.”

Cy would bet his limited-edition onyx Wyrmswood Dungeons & Dragons dice that she’d researched optimal feline care when she learned that Star-Crossed came with a four-legged bonus.

A fact that she didn’t appear to be altogether pleased about.

“So how long is this going to take?” she asked, folding her arms across her chest.

Cy felt his forehead crease. “How long is what going to take?”

“For you to saw the root out or whatever.” Lyra gestured vaguely in the tree’s direction.

“Well, first I have to figure out exactly what the problem is.”

She heaved a beleaguered sigh. “As I mentioned on the phone, there’s a root that’s grown into one of the pipes connected to the first-floor bathroom. In order to fix it, you’ll need to—”

“I’ll need to make a map of where *all* the roots are,” Cy interrupted. Experience had taught him just how little the average person knew about what arborists actually did.

The old industry joke about customers thinking that all you needed for a tree company was two guys, a truck, and a chainsaw had proven irritatingly accurate. The irony that this was how his father’s business had actually started notwithstanding.

“And how do you plan to do that, exactly?” she asked.

Whether she was asking just to be polite—doubtful—or to determine how extensive this process might prove to be—much more likely—Cy found himself answering at a length that made him cringe when he recognized the reason.

He wanted to impress her.

He wanted to show her that even though he'd washed out of college and ended up back in the town she'd very successfully blown, he'd made something of himself.

"...and after I capture enough visuals with the drone to make a 3D model, I can use ground-penetrating radar to create a complete map of the root system so I can determine the best course of action."

Lyra blinked at him, and Cy felt the tips of his ears grow hot. In the years since Cy had joined the family business full time, he'd become embarrassingly immersed in the tech, despite his father's abject resistance.

At least he'd stopped himself before he got to directional felling and sectional dismantling.

Fucking nerd.

"So, I ask again, how long do you think that will take?"

"About an hour."

He tried not to be insulted by how relieved she looked.

"Fine," she said. "Just...do whatever you need."

Turning on her heel, she marched back into the shop and slammed the door behind her.

What Cy *needed* was for the series of unfortunate and uncanny events, like the one that had interrupted his feverish back-of-the-bus make-out session with Lyra McKendrick, to fuck off.

He'd heard of seven years bad luck for breaking a mirror, but...a cow? Hitting deer and elk in that pass was far from an unusual occurrence. Racoons, maybe.

But—again—a cow?

Closet role-playing gamer that he was, Cy had entertained the idea that the livestock roadblock was actually some kind of shapeshifter. Whatever it was, it had been packing some serious hit points. Or so the fellow nerds in his online Dungeons & Dragons group might have said.

The entire football team and half the marching band had piled out of the bus to see the carnage while they waited for another vehicle to come ferry them back to Townsend Harbor. Lyra had stayed on the bus.

Then, as now, the sight of her looking at him through a window felt like an omen.

A sign that his entire life was about to change.



“HOW’S IT GOING OUT HERE?” GEMMA BREEZED ACROSS THE lawn, her smile bright and a tray bearing two tall glasses of an amber substance clutched in her hands.

Not because she planned to enjoy a refreshing beverage with him, but because Guillermo the plumber refused to leave. Or to shut the fuck up.

A combination that was making Cy twitchy and tense.

Even through the over-ear noise-blocking headset he’d put on, despite having no intention of using a chainsaw, the man’s questions had peppered him like buckshot all afternoon.

A stark reminder of why, on the whole, Cy preferred the company of trees to people.

“Going great,” Guillermo said, helping himself to one of the glasses. “I think we’re pretty close to putting together a plan.”

We.

Like the man had done anything other than sit around with his thumb up his butt trying to steal glances at Lyra as she rearranged the chaotic herd of fall mums around the firepit on the back patio.

“My honey-crisp lavender mead,” Gemma announced as Cy took the other. “I figured since the sun’s over the yardarm and all.”

Watching over the rim of his glass, Cy didn't miss the greedy flick of the plumber's dark eyes toward Gemma's chest.

"This is delicious," Guillermo said after taking several lusty and very audible swallows.

Cy knew instinctively the man would be hitting on her if Gabe Kelly hadn't already staked his claim. And even ancillary figures in Townsend Harbor's network knew that crossing Gabe Kelly put you at direct risk of becoming orca chowder in the Puget Sound.

"So, you and your sister are twins, huh?" The plumber's question dripped with suggestion that Gemma didn't seem to register.

"Yep," she answered. "Seven minutes apart."

"Oh wow." A sneaky glance at Gemma's legs in their knee-high argyle socks. "Is it true what they say about twins? That special bond thing?"

Cy's knuckles whitened around the cool, condensation-kissed surface of the glass. He wanted to take the mead from the man's hand and smash it against the nearest tree trunk. Followed by the plumber's thick skull.

He hadn't felt this sort of acidic, blood-boiling anger since right after the accident that ended his college football career. Then, it had been throwing himself into work that proved the best therapy.

Cy would dearly like to do that now, if he could somehow send this human shit-fly packing.

"It sure is," Gemma said. "Sometimes we can even feel each other's emotions."

If that was true, it was a wonder that Gemma wasn't also eyeing Cy with outright hostility.

"Okay, okay," she said, holding her hands up in mock surrender. "I'm not saying that we're, like, psychic or anything—I mean, Lyra probably is, even if she's still in denial—but

we've definitely picked up on each other's thoughts, and feelings, and sometimes even physical sensations."

Heat crept up the back of Cy's neck.

"Do you have to be physically near each other for that kind of thing to happen?" he asked.

"Oh, no," Gemma said brightly. "One time, I had this very...um, intense, uh...experience, and Lyra flew all the way home from Philadelphia because she thought I was in trouble."

"And were you?" Guillermo asked.

"Oh, I was in trouble all right," she said with a saucy smile. "The best kind."

"I'll bet." The plumber's oily smirk made Cy's pulse begin to pound in his ears.

The air felt suddenly charged, as if some invisible force was gathering around him. His nerve endings tingled like forked lightning.

Uh-oh.

Cy remembered this feeling. It usually preceded his knuckles being split on someone's teeth.

The sensation was familiar but also strangely foreign at the same time. He wasn't this guy. Hadn't been this guy in years.

Why now? And why, when it was Gemma—

He hadn't even been able to finish the question in his own mind before the answer came to him by way of visual aid.

Lyra stepped out onto the back patio. Gone was the sleek business suit she'd been wearing when they arrived. In its place were a pair of faded jeans and an old t-shirt. Her hair was tied back in a simple ponytail.

And despite himself, Cy couldn't keep from drinking her in.

The way the jeans clung to her curves in all the right places. The hint of cleavage peeking out from beneath the V-neck of her t-shirt.

For a moment, he forgot about Guillermo entirely and just stared, unable to look away.

And even though Cy knew it was impossible, part of him still yearned for what he'd been denied all those years ago.

Her forgiveness.

His one attempt at apologizing had ended just like their dry-humping had. With him frustrated and her pissed.

He'd ventured to the band hall during his lunch period to seek her out. She'd initially played along with his request to talk to her, but every time he opened his mouth to explain, the bassoon had blatted out a flatulent note to block his voice.

Cy couldn't exactly blame her. He'd have hated him too, if he'd been a band geek who learned that the angry jock only made out with her on a dare.

It was what she *didn't* know about the dare that he'd been so desperate to tell her. A truth that still remained locked behind his lips.

And maybe always would.

"...do you think?"

The onslaught of memory had been so acute, he was almost relieved when Gemma's voice broke him out of his reverie.

Cy shook his head as if to clear it, turning to Gemma. "I'm sorry?"

A strange smile curled one corner of her lips. "I was asking whether you think we'll be able to save the tree."

"Well," Cy began, but stopped when he followed the direction of Guillermo's heated gaze to see Lyra marching toward them across a lawn, sending orange, gold, and red leaves flying like confetti.

"Hey," Gemma said, greeting her sister. "Cy was just about to deliver his prognosis."

"Neat," Lyra muttered.

Cy took a deep a breath, letting the comment roll off his sweat-dampened back. “I think it would be best to relocate the tree.”

Lyra gaped. “The whole tree?”

“The whole tree,” he said.

Lyra craned to look up at the canopy of the ash, her eyes moving back down the thick trunk before finding Cy’s again. “Is that even possible?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if it wasn’t.” Cy knelt to examine the base of the tree, running his hands over the gnarled bark. “This tree has been here a long time. It’s got strong, healthy roots, so it should handle the move well as long as it’s handled carefully.”

“What all is that going to involve?” Lyra asked, arms folded across her chest.

Cy provided the briefest of summaries. Marking out the roots, preserving the root ball, the general contractor that would need to be involved where the roots impacted the house’s foundations, the replanting process, etc.

Through it all, Lyra watched with a dubious expression, her lips pressed in a thin line.

“And how long do you expect all of this to take?” she asked.

“My best guess?” Cy glanced down at the iPad displaying the model of the tree’s intricate root system. “Two weeks.”

Lyra’s eyes widened in shock as color stained her cheeks. “Two weeks?”

Cy stood, brushing the dirt from his palms as he stepped closer to her. “It is a big job,” he said gently. “We’ll need a general contractor to evaluate the foundation before we can move any of the roots that might potentially destabilize it. Then city permits for replacing the affected plumbing lines, since they run out to the main supply via Water Street. Not to mention permits from the historical society, since this building is on the register.”

Lyra seemed to deflate a little, her shoulders slumping as she gazed up at the towering branches. “Well, I’ll need to talk to Elizabeth about this. As she’s the building’s owner, I won’t be able to agree to anything without—”

Gemma cleared her throat.

“What?” Lyra asked, eyes narrowed.

Twisting her fingers in the hem of her sweater, Gemma kept her gaze fixed on the tree’s trunk. “So, Elizabeth pretty much said that if any complications with the building should arise in her absence, whoever is primarily responsible for running Star-Crossed has her full permission to act as proxy, because they’ll be the most energetically aligned with space’s material destiny.”

“Oh come *on*.” Lyra threw her hands up in frustration. “Translation: she probably fucking *knew* that the roots were tearing apart the plumbing and just decided to do fuck all about it so someone else would be on the hook while she was gone. This is bullshit.”

All those *fucks* were having a curious effect on him. As was the sight of their high school’s ice queen in full fury.

Lyra was one of those women who were even more beautiful when she was angry. The way her reddened cheeks made her eyes blaze an ever-deeper green. The way her lips darkened to an even juicier scarlet.

“Bullshit or no,” Gemma began, “we should probably—”

“Fine.” Lyra huffed out an impatient breath. “I’m assuming you’ll need to be here to oversee that personally?”

It was impossible for Cy to tell whether she hoped this was or wasn’t true.

“Absolutely,” he said cheerfully, unable to resist the urge to needle her just a little. “You and I are going to be seeing a lot of each other.”

He hid a smile, enjoying their banter despite her irritation. Or perhaps because of it.

Lyra's lips parted on a quick but definitely perceptible inhale.

They stood like that for a long moment, gazes locked in challenge.

"When do you want me to get started?" Cy asked.

Never, said her face. "Tomorrow," said her mouth.

"Perfect," Cy said. "I'll be here at eight."

"Eight a.m. sharp?" she asked, her chin lifted at an imperious angle.

"Sure," he said, despite knowing full well that being anywhere at any time sharp wasn't exactly his forte.

"Fine," she said again.

Then, without another word, she spun on her heel and marched back toward the building

Admiring Lyra's ass as she strode purposefully across the yard, Cy had a surprising thought.

Maybe this odd turn of events wasn't part of the curse at all.

Maybe it was a chance at redemption.

Cy had lived long enough to know just how rare those truly were.

He didn't intend to waste it.

THREE

Familiar

A SMALL ANIMAL OR IMP KEPT AS A WITCH'S ATTENDANT



LYRA TOSSED UNDER HER FLORAL SHEETS, SWEAT POOLING between her breasts. The night had been warm, sticky even, and she was grateful to notice the ocean had kicked up some early-autumn wind to cool things down.

Still, her mind refused to quiet. The bedding in Gemma's guest/craft room was cozy but ancient, and Lyra was pretty sure it would only take an hour to count the total number of threads in the sheets. To add insult to injury, a rhythmic thumping had startled her from her usual fitful sleep, the steady beat somehow both maddening and arousing.

She flung off her covers and rolled to her side, pressing an ear to the wall. Demanding mewls were muffled, accompanied by a few sounds she didn't even want to identify. "Christ, they're at it again."

Grabbing her pillows, she wedged them against her skull in an attempt to use them as earplugs and pulled the sleep mask back over her eyes.

As the wind began to blow, the thumping grew frenzied, even through her memory-foam mufflers.

Wait a sec.

She froze, lifting the pillow from one ear. The sounds were less conjugal and more...concerning.

Lyra sprang to a sitting position, yanking off her sleep mask as the light bulb in her brain finally clicked on.

Gemma and Gabe were out camping in the woods with Gemma's best friend, Cady, and her new husband, Roman Fawkes. They'd said something about this being one of the last nice weekends before autumn storms hit.

Glancing out the window, Lyra realized they might get blown away overnight should the bluster build to a good sea gale.

Shit.

So, who was in their bedroom? Had they already thrown in the camping towel and snuck back home without waking her?

Creaky as this building was, the likelihood would hinge somewhere between barely possible, and no fucking chance.

Still. She should check.

She snatched up her phone and clicked on the flashlight, padding across the creaky floorboards of the attic apartment. The place smelled of old wood, a hint of Gemma's vanilla incense, and the vague mustiness of more than a century of sea storms.

Clad in silk sleep shorts and a loose tank, heart pounding in her ears, Lyra felt like the curious idiot in every gothic or slasher film who *shouldn't* be inching toward the strange noises in the night.

But absent Gabe, who always seemed to have a baseball bat or the errant machete at hand in case of intruder, it was her responsibility to hold down the fort.

The fort being a hallway full of framed needlework with sayings like *I don't always whoomp, but when I do, there it is!* and *I'm not hoarding if all my shit is cute.*

Sighing, Lyra aimed her phone's flashlight down into the dim hallway toward her sister's room. No sign of sentient life, but the noises were louder here, emanating from behind the closed door of the main bedroom.

"Guys?" she croaked. She cleared the sleepy cobwebs from her throat before trying again. "Hey, Gemma? Gabe? Are you home?"

Lyra crept down the hall and pressed her ear to their door. Now the sounds *really* made no sense. Frowning, she pulled the door open.

The room was full of stuff but empty of humans. Moonlight filtering through the window created more shadows than shapes.

The noises were louder still, but finally they made sense.

The sudden gusts of wind tossed branches of the ash tree, molting gold leaves against Gabe and Gemma's windowpane in semi-rhythmic patterns.

A ghostly sound of distress turned the blood to ice in her veins. Shivering, Lyra crossed the charmingly cluttered room to open the window before the sound drove her mad.

Two eerie glowing eyes reflected the light from her phone. "Larry?"

The dark creature yowled as the branch he clung to was tossed about like a willow reed. Claws scrabbled against the bark as Larry struggled to pull himself higher. His round belly swayed, almost causing the poor thing to lose his grip completely and plummet three stories to the uneven earth.

Lyra snapped on the room's light and threw the window wide open. "Larry, you fat bastard, you get in here right now," she ordered as though she wasn't currently warding off an imminent heart attack.

Larry looked over in a way that convinced her that he'd flip her the bird with both claws if he didn't need them to save him from plummeting to his death.

So yeah, they sort of handled demanding commands in the same way.

The damn cat was going to be the death of her.

Or that tree was going to be the death of him, which... Gah, she just couldn't allow that. She wasn't, like, a cat person per se, but she also wasn't a monster.

Usually.

Okay. No big whoop. She *might* be able to get him if she could hinge her hips out the window and grab the scruff of his neck.

“Here, kitty kitty,” she crooned. Clicking her tongue, she soothed him with syrupy words for long enough to relinquish her dignity in the hopes he’d saunter across the limb and leap into her arms...

No such luck.

Scooting Gemma’s nightstand away from the windowsill, Lyra positioned herself as well as she could. She leaned out the window, grabbing the nearest branch within reach to steady herself as she stretched her arm out toward the beast.

“Come on. Come here. Good boy... I promise not to murder you if you come in right now.”

Larry hissed and swatted at her hands, backing away before clinging tighter to the branch.

Lyra hissed back in frustration. He’d retreated too far to even hope of getting him now.

Of course the fucking cat wouldn’t come easily. When had *anything* in her life *ever* been easy?

She hauled her thighs onto the windowsill and reached for the next branch up, cursing under her breath. The rough bark scraped her palms as she struggled to lean out even further. Branches creaked under her weight.

Heart pounding, Lyra inched her hands along the branch toward the cat, her legs clinging to the nightstand in a chancy and probably humiliating posture. “*Come on*, Larry. I’m risking life and limb here to save your fluffy butt. Help me out?”

Larry peered down at the ground far below and let out a pathetic mewl.

Lyra’s stomach lurched as the branch dipped dangerously beneath her weight.

“All right, that’s enough.” She edged back toward the window, her arms trembling. “You’re staying there until

morning.”

Larry yowled in protest, but Lyra ignored him. She half climbed, half fell back through the window, collapsing onto the floor of Gemma’s bedroom in an undignified heap.

Her mind raced as she caught her breath, glaring at the cat clinging to the tree branch. She couldn’t leave Larry out there all night, no matter how annoyed she was. But there had to be a way to rescue him without breaking her neck.

A can of tuna didn’t work.

Neither did a saucer of milk.

When a shiver-inducing gust came off the water, almost turning the tree branch into a catapult, Lyra was forced to face her worst nightmare.

She was going to have to ask for help.

Cursing a blue streak, she grabbed her phone and desperately scrolled through her contacts with a scowl.

It was two a.m. Who could she even bother at this time of night? A million movies and TV shows would suggest she could call the fire department.

And in any other town, she totally would.

It was only that... She may or may not have ripped some middle-aged, mustachioed douchebag a new asshole at Sirens, the favorite local pub and grill, before discovering he was Townsend Harbor’s fire chief. (Not to mention best drinking buddies with that tool bag Mayor Spewart—er—Stewart.)

In her defense, old Magnum Mustache had been hassling a waitress who was very obviously new, and then he’d left her coins for a tip. Coins! To drive his insult home, he made sure the poor kid realized she’d made a mistake in front of everyone.

Seeing the waitress that close to tears had sent Lyra into a rampage, where she very publicly speculated at the size of his micro penis and the overcompensation thereof being the cause of his petulant, patriarchal behavior before handing the

waitress a twenty and suggesting in front of everyone he was a miser because he couldn't afford it.

He may or may not have hissed under his breath that she'd better not require emergency assistance anytime soon.

Well...wasn't the first time her runaway mouth got her into a bind. Wouldn't be the last.

So who could help Larry?

A familiar name popped into her head. She batted it aside.

Nope. Not going there.

Who else? Townsend Harbor didn't have an animal control officer, but...

Roman Fawkes, Cady's husband, was an ex-marine who spent most of his time in the woods, seeing as he worked for the forest service and had an aversion to things like walls and closed doors. Motherfucker was built like a brick shithouse and could probably just shake the ancient tree until it started raining Larrys.

But alas, the camping crew planned to be far enough out there to be off grid. No social media. No emails. No phone calls.

No thank you.

They'd invited Lyra along, but she'd not only declined to be the fifth wheel, but also refused to break her personal creed of never having to squat to pee where any old night creature could bite her on the ass.

Now she had regrets.

Maybe she could get a broom or something? Poke the cat until it got irritated enough to climb down?

But the danger remained: what if the dumb, furry fucker fell?

Didn't cats land on their feet, like, 98.5 percent of the time? Or was that a myth? At this point, all her cat knowledge came from clickbait articles she hadn't meant to read.

Climbing the tree was out of the question—she had no idea how to do that without ending up stuck herself.

“Come on, man,” she called to Larry, hands out in supplication. “If you can just shimmy back down the trunk, we’ll get you inside, and I promise I won’t even be mad. I’ll feed you until you look like Jabba the Hut. I swear.” She fanned her hand over the tuna just in case he’d gotten hungrier over the past couple of minutes.

Larry stared at her, his round body quivering as he dug his claws into the branch.

“Clearly, you’re not the negotiating type,” Lyra muttered, rubbing her temples in frustration. The absurdity of the situation threatened to push her over the edge, but her desperation to see all four of Larry’s paws on safe ground had her thinking crazy thoughts.

“Fuck you, Larry,” she finally said, sizing up the tree and wondering what twisted fate had led her to this bizarre moment in life. “Fuck you for making me do this.”

She stared at her phone for a couple of seconds before she jabbed the call button and pressed the phone to her ear, waiting.

On the third ring, a sleepy voice answered. “Lyra? What’s wrong?”

She took a deep breath, actively hating that she was past the point of no return. “I need your help.”



CY FORRESTER ARRIVED IN HIS WORK TRUCK WITHIN MINUTES looking thoroughly disheveled. He moved with an odd paradox of grace, though his steps against the stairs were uneven. His movements were clean and powerful, not unlike that of a cat, his muscles flexing in a tight shirt.

Lyra noticed something she’d pretended not to see earlier. After seven years Cy was handsome as ever, but there was

something in the set of his jaw, a tightness in his eyes, that didn't exist before.

He'd always been a tall and fit athlete, but now his body was even more defined. Thick bones, weathered hands, deep chest...

Every flex beneath his ochre skin was like an electric pulse to Lyra's senses. She bit her lip, averting her gaze as he crested the stairs.

"All right, where's the troublemaker?" he asked, strolling into the apartment as if he'd been there before.

Maybe he had. Gemma was friends with everyone and anyone in Townsend Harbor, and the Forresters were obviously as local as a family could get.

As in...pre-colonialization local.

Lyra pointed up at the tree branch. "I tried everything, but..." She trailed off, cheeks suddenly heating when they both noticed she was wearing little more than cheeky boy shorts and no bra beneath her sleep tank. In the middle of the night in a chilly windstorm.

Turning away so her high beams were pointed in another direction, she cursed the pleasant tightening of her nipples that triggered a similar response south of her bellybutton.

When she glanced back guiltily, Cy flashed her a lopsided grin that turned her lady parts liquid. "Not much of a tree climber, huh?"

"Obviously. Could you please just get him down?" Lyra grumbled. "Don't you have some kind of tool for this?"

Fuck. She didn't want to think about his tool. Er, him using tools.

Also, his scent was warm and woody, with the lingering odor of summer rainstorms and fresh cedar. His skin emanated a gentle warmth that made her almost reach out to rest her chilly hands on his forearms.

He needed to leave *ASA-F-P*.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” he said, leaning against the windowsill and bending out to check the structure as well as the tree.

“What?” Lyra looked up from where his t-shirt hiked up and the waistband of his sweats crept low beneath the two dimples at the base of his spine.

Never in her life had she prayed for plumber crack.

But what was going on beneath the cotton pants was like two round, firm Christmas hams, and Lyra couldn’t remember an ass so fine in recent recorded history. Even his from back in the day.

Not that she’d watched it during the mind-numbing football games she had to sit through for marching band. His hindquarters had been amazing then, but now?

Made sense that climbing trees for a living or whatever really worked those glutes.

As if sensing her regard, he turned to face her, settling his butt onto the windowsill to hide it from her lecherous view.

“I’m going to lever out here and push Larry’s flimsier branch closer to the stable limb further back into the alley. What window is that?” He jutted his chin over toward the back of the building.

“That’s my bedroom window,” Lyra replied. “*Temporarily.*”

Their eyes caught and held.

“That limb runs beneath your window,” he said, his voice the furthest thing from businesslike. “I’ll use a switch to entice Larry to hop the shortened distance to the larger branch and use it to climb in your room.”

Lyra swallowed around a dry tongue as he scooted his body out into the night until only his knees were caught on the windowsill, holding him in place as he reached for the branch.

The sight nailed Lyra’s feet to the floor.

Abs. OMG. So many abs mounded beneath the thin, tight tee as Cy engaged his core strength to stabilize himself as he shoved the branch over toward its bigger neighbor.

A panty-drenching *splooosh* sent her racing from the room and into her own.

She took a few gulps of non-Cy-scented air before shoving the window open and bending out to entice the cat into the house.

Larry meowed plaintively, but had enough presence of mind to see the opportunity for what it was. Without much prodding, the cat pounced on the larger branch.

“It’s working!” Lyra couldn’t keep a note of victory out of her voice as she glanced over to—er—where Cy had just been.

He was already sliding Gemma’s bedroom window shut.

“Come on in, Larry,” she coaxed. To her astonishment, the cat trotted along the limb with the reflexes of his much younger, slimmer self.

A strangled noise cut through the night.

This time from behind her.

Lyra glanced back to see Cy filling the doorway with his wide shoulders, boots planted to the floor in a stance both innately confident and overtly sexual.

She couldn’t see his eyes in the shadows, but the caress of night air on the backs of her bare thighs felt like his gaze.

Straightening, Lyra narrowly missed braining herself on the window before she whirled to face him.

He’d made it halfway into her bedroom.

By the time she remembered one goddamned word of her native language, he was towering over her. The streetlamps cut intricate shapes into the angles and planes of his strong, dark, broad features.

He bent at a slight angle, just low enough for his face to hover close to hers...

Before he scooped Larry off the windowsill and curled his strong arms around the portly cat. “Well, this explains a lot.” His lips parted into a shockingly white grin. “Looks like Larry’s gonna be a mama soon.”

“*What?*” Lyra gaped down at the cat’s swollen belly as realization dawned. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope.” Cy stroked the little blaze of fur between the now-purring kitty’s eyes before the creature shoved her face into his hand and ground her cheeks against strong, stroking fingers.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Why was that doing things to her?

Like, *inappropriate* things!

“Larry’s not pregnant. He’s a boy,” she blurted.

His chuckle lifted every hair on her body to vibrating attention. “These nipples say otherwise.”

Don’t say nipple, she silently begged, wishing hers would calm the hell down.

“People our age know better than to assume gender,” he teased gently.

Lyra scoffed. “I mean, the owner called him Larry— I mean her— You know what, doesn’t matter—is he—*she*—they?—going to be okay?”

“Oh yeah. She’s doing fine.” Cy made a soft, pleasant sound as he gently tested Larry’s belly with his other hand. “I can feel the kittens in there—you want to try?”

“I’m good.” Lyra turned sideways to avoid touching him as she dove into the hallway and retreated toward the open kitchen space and living area.

She immediately flipped on all the lights until it was noon-bright, and not even a little sexy, before grabbing one of Gemma’s oversized sweaters from the coatrack by the stairs and belting it over her flimsy night attire.

“What Larry is going to need soon is a safe, dark place to give birth,” Cy said as he drifted into the room and set the cat

down.

Lyra groaned, dragging a hand through her hair. “This isn’t a complication I need right now.” She shifted from foot to foot, acutely aware of Cy’s proximity in the intimate space. His earthy scent enveloped her, stirring up a confusing mix of desire and trepidation.

She cleared her throat, avoiding his gaze. “Well, thank you for your help. I can take it from here.”

“Are you sure?” Cy eyed her doubtfully.

“Are you kidding?” she shot back.

Larry chose that moment to crawl under the couch, meowing irritably as if they’d woken him—*her*—up from an anxious sleep...

Sleep that she really should get back to.

“Hey, um... Thank you for coming over here so late and lending your...expertise.” Was it absolutely necessary to wear a shirt that couldn’t seem to contain your biceps? At this hour? “Tell me what I owe you for the emergency visit.”

“It’ll cost you a cold beer.” Cy moved toward the kitchen and rested a hip against the counter as if he belonged there. “Unless you can’t cover the bill, then I’ll steal one of Gabe’s and repay him when he gets back from camping.”

Lyra bit back a retort, realizing he was teasing her. “Fine, if it’ll get you out the door.”

“Harsh.” Cy kept his light tone, but they both knew she’d meant it.

Lyra grabbed a couple of porters from the fridge and popped the tops before handing him one.

“To impending cat parenthood,” Cy said, gently clinking the neck of the bottle with hers.

“May the kittens be healthy and quickly find good homes that are not mine.” To keep from staring at him, she tipped her head back and drained half the bottle in one go, feeling warmth bloom in her belly.

Cy watched her with an arched brow but didn't comment as he sipped at a more leisurely pace. His gaze eventually drifted around the room.

Gemma's décor was a maximalist mash-up of cottagecore, dark academia, and a slapdash but kinda pointless shot at hygge.

Somehow it worked to create a startlingly intimate atmosphere.

Lyra tamped down her impatience, willing her heartbeat to slow. Any minute now, he would finish his drink and bid her goodnight.

Then she could breathe again, alone at last in the solitude of her room.

Cy leaned back and studied her with those steady, dark eyes. "So, Lyra McKendrick. Now seems like a good time to clear the air about why you hate me."

Stopping just short of a spit take, Lyra struggled to swallow her beer and suppress an impressive burp. Grabbing her composure with two desperate hands, she said, "Don't feel special. I pretty much hate everyone."

That lifted one corner of his full mouth, but the smile never touched his eyes.

"You know what I'm talking about," he pressed, tightening his fingers around the beer bottle as if the reminder of the past kicked up just as much tension for him as it did for her. "You and me...in the back of that bus..."

The tension had stretched far enough for Lyra to snap, and her porcupine quills emerged on a snide sneer.

"Oh, you mean the night you turned me into a late-nineties movie cliché by giving me my first orgasm on a *fucking dare* from your football buddies?"

FOUR

Prash Wood

TYPE OF REACTION WOOD WHICH IS WEAKER THAN NORMAL
DUE TO THIN CELL WALLS AND DECREASED FIBER CONTENT;
PRESENCE INCREASES THE LIKELIHOOD OF FAILURE.



So, CY *WAS* THE ASSHOLE, IT TURNED OUT.

Nursing a lukewarm beer, he sat at the extreme opposite end of the couch from Lyra, whose hands remained primly folded in her lap as she refused to meet his gaze.

He had known she was mad, but he'd assumed it was "girl mad," as his sister Kiki called it. The kind of mad that specifically related to a breach in the unspoken rules of romantic engagement. Like not calling. Or your ex-boyfriend failing to continue to pine for you for the rest of his natural life before dying miserable after having settled for a woman who was obviously your inferior.

But *this*.

By giving me my first orgasm on a fucking dare.

He no longer regretted bailing his online D&D game smack in the middle of a battle with an aboleth to come haul Larry's idiotic ass out of the tree. Not even walking away fresh off rolling a natural twenty on a critical hit was enough to dampen his spirits.

And yet he still felt like a total shit.

That, for the last seven years, Lyra assumed that he'd been so cold and calculating. That the whole thing had been to collect on a bet.

The very thought made him want to crawl between the couch cushions.

"It wasn't my football buddies."

Lyra glanced over at him, her face still a guarded mask. “Excuse me?”

“No one on the football team dared me to do anything,” Cy explained. “It was my sister, Kiki. She dared me to ask you out.”

Her pretty mouth twisted into a shrewd grimace. She wasn’t buying it.

Additional information would be required.

“So, we had this thing where we’d try to outdo each other with ridiculous dares.”

Cy’s mind flashed back to some of the more outrageous challenges Kiki had proposed, like scaling the water tower or eating an entire ghost pepper without flinching. And then there was the dare that changed everything: asking Lyra McKendrick out on a date.

“Why the hell would she do that?”

“Because she was tired of the kind of girls I was bringing home.” His oldest sister by six years, Kikisoblu Nootka Rose Forrester had become a secondary mother to Cy after cancer stole their own. The only Forrester child named for a person—Chief Seattle’s daughter—instead of a tree, she’d often lorded the fact over her siblings. Juniper and Hazel, nine months apart and four years older than Cy, had been long gone by the time he hit high school. And so were not around to give him shit about his two main romantic criteria.

That, coincidentally, both fit in a bra.

Lyra’s dark brows shot up as she nodded. “Yeah, well, I can’t say I disagree with her.”

“I hadn’t realized you were paying so much attention to my dating life,” Cy teased.

She gave him an incredulous look. “The whole school was. You were kind of a big deal, remember?”

He remembered.

Bitterly, most days.

The only thing more humiliating than achieving local celebrity status in high school was sticking around long enough to lose it.

“Anyway, Kiki basically dared me to choose a date to the senior prom based on IQ points instead of cup size. So, I picked the smartest girl I knew.”

Lyra’s cheeks turned the peachy color that Cy was already coming to adore. “You are *so* full of shit.”

“We all are,” Cy pointed out. “But not about this.”

Lyra swiveled to face him, causing her sleep shorts to ride up on her smooth, muscular thighs. “There’s a serious lack of evidence to support these allegations.”

What was it about her spouting legalese at him that made Cy want to drag her into his lap?

“My not being full of shit, or my asking you to the prom?” he asked.

“Both,” she answered. “Whereas my case revolves around one indisputable fact.”

“Which would be?”

A smug smile pursed her lips. “You never asked me to prom.”

He couldn’t dispute that. “Kinda hard to do with your tongue down my throat.”

Lyra’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open in an intensely endearing expression of outrage. “Excuse me? *My* tongue down *your* throat? You must have been hit harder than I thought, because I seem to remember you being the one to make the first move.”

In that, she had him at a disadvantage. Because Cy had no memory of the precise circumstances of how their ravenous encounter began. Only the physical sensations of where their bodies met.

“I did, did I?”

“You most certainly did,” she said, sitting up straighter on the cushion. “I was sitting back there, minding my own business and studying for my AP exam in political science, when you came sauntering back there and—”

“Sauntering?” Cy interrupted. “I sauntered?”

“You sauntered.”

“Care to demonstrate?” he asked.

“Fuck off,” she said playfully.

“Fair enough. Please, continue.”

Lyra reached for her beer and took a swallow. “As I was saying, there I was, minding my own business and studying for my AP exam in political science, when you come sauntering back there and sat down next to me without even asking.”

Cy felt himself cringe, an indicator that she was almost certainly telling the truth. It was just the kind of swagger he used to have back when his hormones outstripped his common sense by an order of magnitude.

“And then what?”

“Then I asked you what you thought you were doing, and you said, ‘Baby, you must be gibberellin, because I’m experiencing some stem elongation.’”

Cy pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a very, very long sigh.

Yeah. He’d done that shit, all right.

The embarrassing part wasn’t that he’d said it. The embarrassing part was that he’d memorized at least twenty more.

You’re so hot, you denature my proteins.

Can I be the phasor to your electron and take you to an excited state?

You make my anoxic sediments want to increase their redox potential.

Like technology later would, biology had appealed to Cy for one simple reason: a peek behind the binary curtain. A glimpse of the mysterious information system that ran through absolutely everything from duckweed to digital signatures.

Fucking. Nerd.

A side of his personality Cy had been too busy playing jock to let anyone see.

“Biology was the only subject I was decent at.” He shrugged. “You work with what you’ve got.”

Lyra picked at the soggy label on her beer bottle. “It made me laugh.”

That, he remembered.

In the strange half-light of the bus with a giant orange supermoon playing hide-and-seek with the tree line, he’d seen her face as clear as day. He’d sat there for what seemed an eternity as she pinned him with that expressionless, sharp-eyed gaze that some of their classmates had diagnosed as “resting bitch face.”

And then, suddenly, she’d burst out in a single, unselfconscious bray of laughter before quickly clapping her hand over her mouth.

Because everyone else on the bus had been asleep. It had taken him that long to work up the nerve.

“I was just surprised you didn’t kick my ass into the aisle.”

“I was in shock.” Setting her beer back on the table, Lyra shifted positions, curling her knees up onto the cushion...and closer to Cy. “How would you react if the scary, angry jock who had never even acknowledged your existence plops down by you all of a sudden and hits you with a terrible botany-based pick-up line?”

“Terrible?” Cy clapped a hand to his heart, feigning hurt. “Come on. I slaved over that one.”

One corner of Lyra’s lips lifted in a wry twist. “You found it on Reddit, and we both know it,” she said, poking his shoulder.

The voluntary physical contact only half offset his shock. Lyra had hit him with several pieces of life-altering information in the last ten seconds.

That she'd seen him as angry and scary. That she'd correctly guessed the origin of his source material.

When he wasn't getting his head cracked on the football field or begrudgingly scaling giant oaks and elms to help his dad, Cy had been stalking Dungeons & Dragons strategy forums to prepare for the online game he'd been part of for ten years now.

A hobby not one other soul—besides Kiki—knew he had.

Everyone else had assumed the long hours spent with the blue glow of the computer monitor leaking beneath the threshold of his locked door were spent jerking it to online porn.

And Cy had been happy to let them.

Explaining how the eclectic group of gamers was his lone escape from the reality of the person he'd loved most in the entire world slowly—then quickly—dying on the other side of his bedroom wall would have *ruined* his image.

So he'd just hit people a lot instead.

An option that wasn't available to him when he'd returned to town to recover after his accident. Now, he just kept a smile plastered on his face to cover the molten core of self-pity and loneliness that haunted his every waking moment.

Like a goddamn adult.

“Busted,” Cy admitted. “I knew I was going to make an idiot of myself, but I figured if I could at least do it in a way you didn't expect, it might buy me a few extra seconds before ___”

“I insulted you so you'd get up and leave me alone?” She shot him a knowing side-eye.

“Pretty much.”

Lyra blew out a gusty exhale and let her head fall back against the couch cushions as she stared up at the ceiling. “Basically, you’re telling me that you came to the back of the bus because you thought I was pretty and smart and had been planning this for long enough that you did actual internet research for a topically appropriate come-on line that might spare you the wrath of my infamously sharp tongue.”

“Yeah,” Cy said, setting his own beer bottle aside. “That’s about it.”

“Well, shit.” Lyra’s face rolled toward him on the cushion. “Now I kinda feel bad for wishing you dead by especially creative and painful means all these years.”

Cy tipped the last of his beer down his throat to distract himself from the subtle warmth of Lyra’s bare knee radiating against his forearm. “You almost got your wish.”

A crease appeared between her brows.

So, the spillways of Townsend Harbor’s gossip mill didn’t stretch as far as the East Coast.

She didn’t know.

“What happened?” she asked gently.

“A car accident,” he said. “I, uh...hit a cow.”

Lyra blinked at him, her brow furrowed as she studied his face for an extended beat. Perhaps, he thought, attempting to decipher if he was fucking with her.

“No.” Her voice carried the tolling finality of a gavel strike.

“Yes,” Cy said.

“No.”

“Still yes.”

Lyra pushed herself upright, her pretty painted toes brushing his knee as she did so.

“That’s just... No. There’s no way. The odds against something like that happening to one person *twice* not only in

the same lifetime but in a period of— How many years was it?”

“Two.”

She shook her head emphatically, and the bun at the base of her neck barely hung on. “The odds against something like that happening to one person *twice* in two years—that’s just... just...”

“Astronomical?” Cy suggested. “Believe me, I spent a lot of time thinking about it while I was in the ICU for a month.”

The cloying scent of antiseptic and bleach. The constant beep of monitors. The dull, pervasive ache in his pelvis and leg where they had been crushed by the force of impact. The maddeningly persistent itch beneath his cast as it slowly healed a femur that surgeons had Frankensteined back together with a series of pins and bone grafts.

The gnawing, desolate emptiness that had crept into him during the ugly stretch of hours between midnight and dawn when the wall-mounted TV was his only company and the entire world shrank to an airless box.

With people dying on the other side of the wall.

Lyra lightly rested her hand atop his, and the contact dragged him from the clutches of dangerous memories. Her expression was full of the kind of grave condolence he’d come to hate, and Cy steeled himself for the inevitable platitudes that people often offered those whose lives they were embarrassingly grateful not to have.

You’re so strong.

I don’t know how you do it.

I could never...

“Have you considered that you might be the target of some kind of livestock vendetta?”

Now, it was Cy’s turn to lose it. Not the polite chuckle he’d curated for company, but the helpless, chest-rattling bray his sister Kiki had once described as a dyspeptic donkey.

It was, Cy had found over the years, weird enough to be wickedly contagious.

And Lyra apparently wasn't immune.

She was silent at first—the entire couch shook as her curled-up body shook with an internal combustion of mirth.

Which only made Cy laugh harder.

His abdominals seized almost painfully. Tears streamed down Lyra's cheeks as she at last dragged in a whistling gasp that brought a face approaching an alarming shade of magenta back toward a non-EMS-requiring pink.

“I mean...seriously,” she said, wiping her cheeks with the sleeve of her belted sweater. “What the fuck did you do?”

“The crazy part is,” Cy said, then paused to wait for more air, “the nearest farm was over a hundred miles away. And it wasn't even missing any cows.”

This set them off on round two.

Cy glanced up to see Larry staring at them from the bookshelves beside the TV, her yellow eyes narrowed in rebuke.

Like that little asshole had any place to judge.

“Oh my God,” Lyra moaned in husky, wrung-out tones he'd only ever heard in one other context.

After he'd made her come.

He violently shoved the thought into a locker and mentally spun the combination lock as they again recovered their composure.

Or what little of it remained.

The combination of hysterics and beer had slackened both their bodies in ways that did nothing to help Cy's already stirring blood. Her hand still rested gently on his, only, not on the back of the couch.

But on his thigh.

Seven inches higher, and her long, elegant fingers would be brushing his—

“Maybe it was the ghost of the cow our bus hit in high school!” Lyra blurted with a rush of excitement.

Her fingers tightened on his knuckles in a flash that traveled up his arm, through his chest, and straight to the root of his cock.

“Did you ever think of that?”

Cy wasn't sure which shocked him more—that Miss Practical actually seemed to be suggesting this as a viable possibility, or that she didn't realize that she was effectively holding his hand.

He was almost afraid to answer. Didn't want the return to reality to make her break the contact.

“Briefly,” Cy admitted. “Until animal control had to come herd it out of the way so the paramedics could get to me.”

“Was it hurt?” Lyra asked.

“A little,” Cy said, piqued by her concern. “But now it's out at my sister Kiki's place. None of the local shelters would take it.”

The furrow returned to Lyra's brow. “But I thought you went to college in Michigan.”

“I did. Had to arrange an entire convoy to get that fucker back to Townsend Harbor.”

A cheap ploy on his part, trotting this out, but well worth it to see the way her entire face softened.

Forehead. Eyes. Cheeks.

Mouth.

“This doesn't change anything, you know,” she teased. “And it doesn't mean I forgive you for completely ignoring me after you kissed me.”

“One,” Cy said, “I know my memory isn't a hundred percent, but I definitely remember you being the one to kiss

me. And two, I *tried* to talk to you, but you resorted to vengeance via eighteenth notes.”

Lyra’s already rosy cheeks deepened in hue. “Okay, so I *may* have been the one to lean in, but you were definitely the one who made first contact.”

Was she right about that?

Had Cy closed the final gap separating his mouth from hers?

Cy wheeled backward in his mind, reviewing every available imprinted image of the selves they’d been that night.

The angry kid and the ice queen.

They’d been about as close as they were now.

Then, as now, her gaze had dropped to his lips before returning to meet his eyes with a mischievous glint that made Cy’s heart beat faster.

“I may have made first contact, but you were the one who licked my lip,” Cy said, his voice low and husky.

“Bit it, too.”

As soon as she said it, Cy received a jolt of the same sweet pleasure edged with pain that had so inflamed his younger self. And was having a curiously similar effect on his present one.

In the years since the accident, his libido had been like a controlling Dungeon Master at best, his body the mildly uninterested player. The few times he’d attempted anything resembling a romantic action, the DM only gave him a withering “You can *try*” that had his various body parts shrugging and rolling for initiative.

Whether or not the necessary biological follow-through actually arrived had generally been just as random as a dice throw.

And never swiftly.

But now...

Now.

Something woke in him and began to move, uncoiling from the base of his spine, stretching to fill his limbs.

“I grabbed your hair,” he said, wanting to own his part as she had. Completely immersed in the memory now, he felt the warm silk slide through his fingers.

“You did.” Lyra’s chest had begun to rise and fall with faster, shallower breaths. “So I grabbed yours.”

Cy had worn it longer in those days, having to wad it into a topknot, which his teammates had given him no end of shit for, and tuck it beneath his football helmet. The sensation returned to him now, prickling at his nape before spilling goosebumps down his arms.

“Your nipples were hard.” Cy glanced downward to find that the same alchemy that had begun its work on him must be affecting her as well. “So I felt them through your shirt.”

“No,” she said, a little breathless. “Beneath it.”

“You’re right,” he said, as the sensation of her bare breast materialized against his palm.

“I know.”

Their eyes locked, and in a moment whose odds were just as astronomical as the accidents that had brought him here, Cy and Lyra lunged for each other at exactly the same second.

Their mouths crashed first, and their bodies followed the force of impact, sinking onto the couch in an urgent tangle. Her arms wound around his torso, one hand on the back of his neck, the other on the small of his back beneath the t-shirt. Her thigh hooked over his hip, causing Cy to shift his leg to keep his boots away from the couch as much as to keep the sole of her bare foot from landing on his calf.

Lyra’s tongue slid against his with an exploratory, possessive swipe that made his brain turn to static.

They made out like the fate of the goddamned world depended on it.

And maybe it did.

Maybe what he felt now was the exact same force that made birds such an occupational hazard every spring, frequently toppling off the most precarious of tree branches but continuing to furiously fuck on the wind as they flapped and fell, pulling apart milliseconds before disaster.

Sometimes not pulling apart at all.

Because maybe this was it.

Maybe this was all.

The thought made Cy frantic with need. He wanted her with every cell of his body, with every breath and beat of his heart. He wanted her with all the life he had left.

He grasped Lyra's waist and rolled them over until he was the one on top, memorizing the entire length of her body with the entire length of his. And still it wasn't enough.

They clawed at each other's clothes, desperate to feel skin against skin.

"Oh my God," Lyra breathed against his lips when they finally came up for air.

"What?" he asked.

"I forgot how good you are at this."

Cy stared down at her with something like wonder coloring in the space between his ragged breaths.

He'd been *good* at this.

Such a simple statement, but it careened into him with an impact that nearly dwarfed the one that had forever altered his body as well as his brain chemistry.

Cy sank back down to her with a growl, tasting her neck, her sternum, teasing with his tongue the hard, dusky peaks of her nipples before sucking one hard.

Lyra surged beneath him, driving her further into his mouth as she hooked her thumbs through the waistband of her shorts and panties and wriggled them down her thighs.

Cy couldn't get his fingers there fast enough.

With their mouths still fused in rabid contest, he found her silky heat by feel alone.

She was *soaked*. Hot, slick, and so ready that Cy damn near came in his pants.

Yet another of the high school symptoms Lyra's presence seemed determined to resurrect.

As if sensing this, Lyra reached for the buckle of his belt, quickly freeing him.

Cy pushed himself onto his forearms, looking down into Lyra's eyes just in time to see the smoldering lust shift into abject terror at the exact moment her fingers closed around his cock.

Not exactly the reaction he'd hoped for, but—

“God damn it, Larry!”

Something hard and sharp hit the back of Cy's head, followed by an avalanche of smaller objects landing at various spots on his back and legs.

He instinctively shielded Lyra, waiting to look around until the barrage had ceased.

Larry darted away in Cy's peripheral vision, leaping up on top of the bookcase as if to get a better vantage point to admire her handiwork.

Carefully, he shifted off Lyra, knowing that the moment hadn't just been broken—it had been obliterated.

As Lyra's spine straightened, she crossed her arms tightly over her chest, and her eyes narrowed at the round-bellied black cat serenely lapping at her paw.

“Who puts a shelf like that directly over a couch?” Lyra asked. The shift in her posture and energy was palpable, and her self-control snapped back into place as taut as a rubber band.

Cy couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment as she slipped back into clothing as efficiently as if he weren't in the

room. He shrugged back into his shirt and began to pick up the debris.

“So uh...” he said, breaking the silence that had settled between them. “I could take those plants home with me and repot them.”

Lyra glanced over at the sad, uprooted plants and then back at Cy. A hint of gratitude flickered in her eyes as she replied, “Okay, thanks.”

Together, they gathered the broken pots and spilled soil, carefully scooping the remnants into one of the half-empty moving boxes that were scattered around Lyra’s cluttered room.

“All right,” she said, pressing her lips together as she surveyed the aftermath. “I think that’s everything.”

“Great,” Cy responded, forcing a stiff smile. He hoisted the box under his arm, trying to ignore the lingering warmth from where their fingers had touched in the hand-off. “I’ll get these guys all fixed up and bring them back tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” Lyra agreed, her voice slightly strained. They walked together to the front door, each step heavy with unspoken strain.

“Goodnight, Cy,” she said softly as she held the door open for him, her smile polite, but distant.

“Night, Lyra,” he replied, stepping out into the cool evening air. Their gazes locked for a brief, charged moment before he turned and walked away, the box of broken plants cradled in his arms.

As Cy made his way back to his truck, he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that he might have made a colossal mistake.

“Damn it, Larry,” he muttered, the weight of his uncertainty settling heavily on his shoulders as the truck roared into the lonely night.

Spell

A VERBAL FORMULA BELIEVED TO HAVE MAGICAL FORCE



A WEEK LATER

SHIT.

It was both a curse and an enterprise.

An enterprise because Myrtle LeGrande was the owner of Fertile Myrtle's Manure, and she was the one hosting this Sunday brunch.

And a curse because Lyra had obviously misunderstood the assignment...

She'd turned onto the winding dirt road leading to Vee and Myrtle's, a charming, ramshackle house nestled in a sun-dappled forest clearing. As her Jetta bumped along the uneven gravel, she clutched the bottle of Veuve Clicquot she'd brought to what she'd *assumed* to be a lovely, low-key brunch with her favorite septuagenarian couple.

But as the house came into view through a copse of trees, Lyra's smile inverted, and her stomach tried to crawl into her colon.

A dozen cars were parked haphazardly around the yard, and she could hear raucous laughter and the shrieks of children drifting through the open windows.

Ugh. Kids.

She needed at least an hour more in a day to prepare herself for interactions with sticky, noisy sociopaths with no

respect for couture.

She smoothed down her fitted sundress and worried over her strappy sandals. So much for a lively chat in the rose garden.

Maybe she could back quietly out of the driveway and make up some bullshit excuse about how she was allergic to anyone under eleven?

The arched oak door flung open to present Vee Prescott in an eye-melting orange caftan somehow lent elegance by her flowy, effortless glamour and helmet of platinum hair.

“Lyra, darling, you’re just in time!” She *clop-clopped* down the lilac-strewn lane in canvas wedge heels that would make a pole dancer worry over ankle safety. “We’re celebrating Jose’s adoption. He’s officially a Forrester now!” She waved an errant spatula at a dark-haired boy of about seven chasing a tabby cat around the corner of the house.

Forrester? The Forresters were here?

Fuck.

Fuckity fuck fuck.

Lyra held up the champagne. “Sounds like a reason to celebrate.”

And by *celebrate* she meant *drink*.

Vee held open the wood gate as Lyra did her best to summon a genuine smile. She’d been looking forward to one of their acerbic political bitch-fests wherein they solved the world’s problems over crepes and always came to the same conclusion.

That women should rule the world.

“Tell me I didn’t miss the memo that this was a potluck,” she lamented. “Am I late?”

“Oh tosh,” Vee said, snatching the wine bottle from her and gliding back up the cobbled walk like a carrot-colored silk flag flapping in the slight breeze. “We do some sort of open-carousel brunch once monthly, you know, for our nearest and

dearest to wander in and out, chat, eat, drink, rest, play, and, my favorite”—she leaned in with her hand to the side of her mouth— “indulge in a bit of gossip.”

“I think you invited the wrong twin.” Lyra laughed. “Gossip is Gemma’s department.” Mostly because law school made Lyra feel like everything anyone told her came with an implied NDA.

“Oh, she was invited, but she mentioned she had to do inventory at Bazaar Girls today.”

If inventory was a code word for Gabe, then sure. Gemma was “doing inventory.”

As Lyra followed Vee into the house, she was greeted by the cheerful chaos of dozens of people laughing, chatting, and helping themselves to a veritable feast. The smell of sizzling bacon and warm maple syrup filled the air, and the kitchen counters overflowed with towers of fluffy pancakes, platters of scrambled eggs, and bowls of fresh fruit.

Myrtle, Vee’s wife, was clad in overalls and an equally retina-piercing yellow shirt. She bustled about with her enviable stores of energy, cracking jokes left and right while expertly flipping pancakes on a long griddle.

“Maybe Caryn would like to help us drink this,” Lyra mentioned, handing over the champagne to Vee. She watched in quiet horror as the cork was popped and it was unceremoniously dumped into a pitcher of orange juice, creating an extravagant, hundred-dollar mimosa.

“Lyra, darling, grab yourself a plate and dig in!” Myrtle said, her laughter ringing through the kitchen. “We’ve got enough food to feed an army of powerlifters.”

“Thanks, Myrtle,” Lyra replied with a tight smile. Internally, she chastised herself for not anticipating this kind of gathering. She knew that Vee and Myrtle were beloved pillars of the community and loved nothing more than bringing people together.

Lyra scanned the crowd, a knot of anticipation forming in her stomach. A couple of middle-aged men were flipping

through Myrtle's collection of vinyl records, arguing over whether to play Pink Floyd or Janis Joplin. A few familiar faces from town were perusing Vee's collection of vintage erotica.

A handful of preteens lurked nearby, hoping to catch an eyeful when the grownups weren't looking.

Kids darted in and out of the house like cats, probably looking for the distinct pleasure of tripping someone laden with a plateful of food.

Just as she was becoming overwhelmed, Lyra spotted Marty Forrester, Cy's father, building a stack of pancakes that rivaled the Leaning Tower of Pisa. His booming laugh carried over the chatter of guests as he passed the plate off to a skinny, towheaded waif with huge, hungry eyes.

From what Lyra remembered, Marty and his late wife had been fostering children since the eighties. They'd only had only two biological children—Cy and his older sister Kiki, but Townsend Harbor boasted a veritable platoon of Forresters under forty of almost every age, race, sex, and creed.

Currently there were fourteen souls in this house calling Marty "Dad," but—Lyra scanned the entire vicinity, including what she could see out the window—Cy did not seem to be among them.

Her shoulders slumped, but she couldn't tell if it was from relief or disappointment.

It was only a kiss.

Okay, the train had begun to chug toward Pound Town, but thanks to Larry, they'd not made it out of the station.

Nor had they made any promises or plans to see each other again.

Still... She couldn't deny the flutter of moth wings in her long-dormant womb at the very thought of him.

Christ, she must be ovulating.

It wasn't as if he'd ghosted her. Quite the opposite. A text from Cy had arrived the morning after the Larry debacle. Lyra

had stared at the casual message for a long moment, searching for subtext and finding nothing.

Cy: Tree permit is stalled in the city. Looks like it'll be a few days. Gemma said she'd see what she could do. I'll let you know when it's ready.

She had debated how to respond, if at all. In the end, she'd settled on something equally casual and noncommittal.

Lyra: No worries. Talk to you soon.

His reply had come quickly.

Cy: Sounds good. Enjoy the weekend.

Quite possibly the least sexy text exchange ever.

Which was a good thing. Right?

Maybe he regretted their impromptu make-out session just as much as she did.

Maybe he was avoiding her. The thought made her cheeks burn, but she couldn't immediately identify the emotion behind the fire.

"Did you park your car over by the shed?" Myrtle chirped at her. "Caryn and Ethan Townsend might make an appearance, and we're running out of spaces."

"She did, dear." Vee smoothed a smudge of flour from her wife's cheek and anointed the spot with a kiss. "I'm interested in talking to Caryn about her new affordable housing initiative. I'd never have guessed her sympathies ran in that direction. She's really doing excellent work."

"And her son's brewery is doing the Lord's work!" Myrtle crowed. "I swear his Nitro Stout is better than Guinness."

"I'll serve you your divorce papers tomorrow morning," Vee, a U.K. native, teased, then kissed her spouse again before whisking a paper plate from between two quarreling kids to hand to Lyra.

Lyra couldn't help but smirk at the mention of Townsend Harbor's founding family. "I'm surprised to hear Caryn's coming over," she remarked. "I thought she—" *Was a rank,*

one-percenter bitch with a huge chip on her shoulder. “She ran in different circles,” she finished carefully.

“That debacle at the Nevermore Bookstore seems to have humbled her,” Vee replied.

Myrtle plopped a blueberry pancake on the next outstretched plate. “Yeah, and since she started boffing Roy, she’s chilled the fuck out, man.”

“Chilled the fuck out, man!” a little one with a milk mustache yawped from where the French doors opened to the deck and the sprawling meadow of a backyard.

From beneath a wealth of enviably thick silver hair, Marty shot Myrtle an exasperated glance before abandoning his plating duties to scoop up the kindergarten-aged blasphemer and tuck the giggling kid over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Excuse us while we have the *words only adults use* discussion.” His departure outdoors was with the good-natured ease of a parent practiced in such untimely and slightly hysterical interactions.

Lyra watched him go with an odd sense of surreal prophecy. Cy would age like his father. Tall, proud, and barrel-chested. Long-limbed, with a lanky grace and an easy smile. Maybe his stomach would outgrow his chest in the same way. Not diminishing his strength or musculature, but advertising a love of many such syrup-soaked breakfasts.

Maybe the fine grooves she’d noticed branching from his eyes would deepen into the attractive weathered lines and deepening brackets characterizing Marty’s features.

Lyra shook her head, trying to dislodge the disquieting thoughts.

Chances were that the kiss hadn’t made things awkward between them, even if her own feelings remained... unidentified. The delay on the permits meant time to gain perspective, to determine what she wanted from Cy, if anything at all.

As someone fresh out of a toxic-as-shit relationship, she wasn't looking for romance. She wasn't even looking for a fuck buddy. She wasn't looking for *anything* until she figured out where she would pursue the next phase of her life.

Somewhere else.

Still, she couldn't forget the tenderness in Cy's eyes as he gazed at her, or the warmth of his embrace. The delicious pressure of his body against hers. Even though they had days until he was scheduled to work at Star-Crossed, she found herself watching for his truck to appear during the work hours or hoping for a glimpse of him around town.

Man, she really needed to keep it in her pants before she became any more pathetic.

The chatter and laughter of the guests mingled with the clinking of silverware as everyone began to move outside with their overflowing plates.

The backyard was a charming oasis, with an eclectic mix of mismatched tables and chairs arranged beneath towering trees and bright umbrellas. Sunlight dappled the leaves above, casting a warm, late-morning glow over the lively scene.

Lyra took a moment to admire the surroundings while her eyes adjusted to being back outside. Hiding behind an intentionally private arborvitae, warehouse-sized outbuildings in the far corner of the property hid the outhouses Myrtle was paid generously for providing to just about anyone in need in the county. From the county fair, to local music festivals, construction and roadwork sites, to the local campgrounds, Myrtle's portable potties cornered the market. Beside the aluminum structure parked her antique work truck with her logo advertising her second business, Fertile Myrtle's Manure. *We have the best sh*t in town!*

Suppressing a chuckle, Lyra noted the addition of a beautiful greenhouse on the opposite corner of the acre-sized backyard, its high walls and curled iron frame providing a touch of elegance beneath tempered, opaque glass.

The city girl in Lyra retreated at the verdant sight, and straps of something that felt like longing for all things simple and lovely belted her ribcage.

As she sipped her mimosa, she glanced around the yard, wondering where to sit.

She almost dropped her plate when an unexpected sight turned the straps of longing into a vise of need.

Cy.

Cy Forrester “ran” from a handful of kids, catching the smallest beneath his arm and swinging him around in circles. His tousled ebony hair fell over his broad forehead and a playful smile split his full lips.

The children squealed in delight and scampered back toward him, chasing his big frame across the lawn.

He jogged more than he ran, adopting an uneven gait that made it easy for the little ones to keep up and “catch” him.

I’m for sure ovulating, she thought, feeling her entire body come alive beneath her light cotton dress. There was no other explanation for it.

She didn’t even *like* kids, usually. They were unpredictable and prone to vast quantities of excreta from every single one of their orifices.

Just...no.

And yet...

His capacity to roll around on the ground at play with children in the most unselfconscious of ways touched something in her. Something deeper than sexual.

Fucking biology and its stupid biological clock making bullshit. She was just in the prime baby-making season of her life, that was all. And her traitorous hormones got one whiff of this genetically gifted umber god and decided to dump every sex-demanding chemical directly into her bloodstream.

Well, she decided, she’d just have to counter those chemicals the old-fashioned way.

Day drinking.

Cy paused and looked up just then, finding her staring like a dick-addled THOT.

Their eyes locked, sending a lightning-hot shock through her spine.

His eyes were wide and his mouth was open with surprise at first, jaw slackened with panting breaths as he registered the dress. He blinked twice, standing like an oak tree as two persistent and wiggly crotch goblins tried to wrestle him to the ground.

He raised his hand in an almost hesitant wave.

Their gazes held for a few seconds too long, and Lyra did everything she could to suppress the warmth spreading through her chest as her heart rate quickened.

Managing a polite nod in his direction, she smoothed the skirt of her sundress and strode over to join Vee and Myrtle, hoping she appeared more composed than she felt.

“Gemma!” Marty greeted her warmly, standing to pull a chair out from under the table he shared with Vee, Myrtle, and his oldest daughter, Sheriff Kikisoblu “Kiki” Forrester. A woman with frizzy blonde hair that Lyra recognized as Cady Bloomquist’s mom, Sheila, sat at his elbow and tossed Lyra an incredibly welcoming smile.

“How’s things at the shop?” Marty asked.

Kiki spoke up before anyone else could correct him. “That’s Lyra, Dad. Gemma is the one who brings by art sets for the kids and looks like a walking Wes Anderson movie.”

Lyra laughed at that, noting that a breeze stole the notes of mirth and tossed them in the direction she was very carefully *not* looking right now.

“Oh,” Marty said with a sheepish grin. “Sorry. Never seen you out of a suit and your hair in that style my late wife used to call a headache ponytail.”

Lyra fought the urge to smooth the hair she’d blown out to fall loose to the middle of her back as she accepted the seat.

“Thought that today was a good day to let my proverbial hair down,” she said before draining the rest of her mimosa from her flute.

Better slow down... She drove herself here, and Townsend Harbor wasn't big enough for Uber or Lyft. Old Ricky Crawford owned a taxi, but if she remembered correctly, it smelled like body odor and twenty years of driving drunk people home.

Though Lyra did her best not to look, her gaze was inevitably drawn back to Cy. He had rolled up the sleeves of his button-down shirt, revealing tanned, muscular forearms.

Not fucking fair.

“Lyra is running the new-age shop next to Gemma's Bazaar Girls while she's recovering from dating that douche-weasel she brought to your daughter's wedding,” Myrtle explained to Sheila, who was nursing a bottled iced tea with a metal straw in a way that screamed *sober*.

Lyra didn't know much about the woman—not enough to be embarrassed, anyhow. Gemma and Cady had been besties since junior high, when Cady had come to live with her aunt after Sheila's latest drug-related incarceration.

Now, it seemed, the woman had cleaned up her act and was putting her life, and her relationship with her daughter, back together.

“I remember the fella,” Sheila rasped in a voice created by decades of smoking things she ought not to. “Charming. Great dresser. Smooth talker. Until that sexy mechanic laid him out with one punch for disrespecting your sister.”

Lyra smothered her shame with a derisive snort of laughter, though the memory lent her very little levity. “He was good at hiding his true nature until he came to Townsend Harbor.”

Was he, though? Or had she just accepted some of his behavior because she'd been dazzled by his pedigree and bank account?

Not a question she wanted to analyze at brunch. Or without her therapist.

“This place will do that to a person,” Kiki said from Lyra’s left, her lithe body leaned back on the chair, one ankle crossed over her knee. “People come to Townsend Harbor to find something like a vacation, a place to hide, a place to find peace, but they usually just end up finding themselves.”

“Or showing their ass, in Harrison’s case,” Lyra muttered.

Myrtle pointed across the lawn. “Speaking of, Braedon is watering the hydrangeas.”

They turned to see the kid who’d parroted Myrtle’s cuss word had abandoned his elastic jeans and pullups and was trying to aim his stream of pee at a specific blossom above his head.

“That’s my cue.” Marty pushed himself up from his chair, abandoning his half-eaten breakfast.

Cy had already beelined for the tinkling kid, and instead of freaking out or humiliating him, he lowered the flower to stream height and let the boy finish before sweeping him up beneath the armpits and conducting him toward the house. “Next time, we’ll remember that we only water the Cheerios in the potty, yeah?”

“But you peed in the backyard at Papa Marty’s!” the kid protested loudly.

“That’s because everyone else had fish taco food poisoning and all four bathrooms were full,” Cy explained in the direction of the adults.

“That was a stinky day,” the wriggling kid announced.

“Yeah,” Cy agreed. “That was the stinkiest day.”

Marty caught up with his son and clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll grab the diaper bag and meet you in there.”

As the men disappeared into the house, Lyra could swear her ovaries released an egg into the chute.

What was *with* her lady bits lately?

“Don’t see something like that every day, huh?” Kiki’s gentle aside broke Lyra out of her thousand-yard gaze at the now-empty doorway.

“*Whaa?*” She stared at the woman who shared intense, dark eyes with her brother and tried to decipher how weirded out she was that Kiki had noticed.

The native woman was pushing forty, and wore her hair in a smooth ponytail similar to what Lyra was fond of, with a few tendrils free to sweep at her high, proud cheekbones. She relaxed in jeans, a fitted tee, and hiking boots, but still managed to emanate the authority her position as county sheriff afforded her.

“Men handling the preschooler emergency while all the women stay in their seats to eat.”

Lyra shook her head, struck oddly dumb. She and Gemma were the product of a couple of older, professional, only children, and they’d grown up without cousins.

Her folks had parented like all the books told them to, making sure they hit medical and development metrics on time and loving them both honestly, absolutely, with just a little bit of that all-American Gen X aloofness.

All in all, it had been fine. Good. And equitable.

But even in their progressive household, Mom had been the she-fault parent.

Lyra hadn’t realized she’d yet to tear her gaze away from the door through which the men had disappeared until Myrtle spoke with her usual cringy candor. “Our Cy must be killing it with the ladies,” she speculated. “Thought he’d follow in Marty’s footsteps and find a college sweetheart to make beautiful brown babies with.”

Lyra almost choked, side-eyeing Kiki to gauge her reaction.

The sheriff was staring back at *her*.

“Cy doesn’t really date,” she said with a shrug, lacing her fingers over her ribs. “At least...not for a good long while.”

“Well sure!” Myrtle said around a bite. “He’s probably sowing some oats. Laying some pipe. Pollinating the old—”

“Have a latte, dear—there’s extra foam,” Vee cut in, handing her wife a mug. “These speculative idioms should be redacted in polite company.”

“Your face should be redacted,” Myrtle muttered into her coffee cup.

“Hmmm?” Vee tilted her one good ear.

“Nothing. I love you.” Myrtle’s features brightened at the presentation of a change of subject. “Oh hey! We should set Cy up with someone. Who’s single? Lyra, you could use a man who doesn’t work for some big-city firm of Grabby, Rapey, D-bag, and O’Toolbox. Whatcha looking for in a boyf?” She leaned over to Sheila, who’d scooted her chair around to find more shade conspicuously close to the one Marty vacated. “That’s what boyfriends are called now. Boyfs. But girls are not called girlfs. They’re baes. Which is not the equine allusion I assumed it was initially.”

Kiki’s face relaxed into a genuine laugh, but Lyra had to take a second to focus on not swallowing her own tongue.

They didn’t know she and Cy had... *Nah*. He wasn’t the sort to kiss and tell.

Was he?

Kiki saved her from having to reply. “Sorry, ladies, but at the end of that road lies disappointment,” she explained with a fond half-smile. “I’ve already lost two friends to the black hole that is Cy’s love life and attention span. So, as much as I think he would benefit from the right partner, I could lose my job if I unleash his form of emotional derptitude on the unsuspecting women of this fair hamlet.”

“Rookie mistake!” Myrtle laughed before slurping at her latte. “What you do with someone like that is set him up with one of those women you want to get back at for being a real catty bitch. You know, one of your disposable friends.”

“My what now?” Kiki’s eyebrows lifted.

“Not that humans are disposable. Like bodies or anything,” Myrtle hurried to explain to the local sheriff. “Just some friends are not always...missed when they storm off, is all.”

Vee all but slapped her hand over Myrtle’s mimosa-lubed mouth. “To clarify, we categorically don’t consider any of our friends disposable.”

“Pffft,” Myrtle snorted, unabashedly showing off her foam mustache dusted with nutmeg. “Not even ‘Windy’ with an ‘I’?” She used the kind of air quotes that gave off the impression she’d like to send Windy through a woodchipper.

Vee gave her wife a look that would have withered half the garden, but Myrtle met it with a very masculine sense of fecklessness. “I told you, *darling*, Windy is just a friend. She’s going through a heinous divorce. Her fourth, I’m afraid.”

“Aw, man.” Sheila faked a humorous whine. “I’ve never even been divorced one time—have I even lived?” Though attractive, Sheila had the kind of skin and hair that suggested she’d done her fair share of living, and then some.

“Trust me, you’re not missing out,” Kiki said bitterly before she knocked back the rest of her mimosa and reached for the pitcher. “One was enough for me.”

Lyra chuckled, shaking her head. She’d forgotten how much she enjoyed the colorful cast of characters her hometown always offered. In Philadelphia, her social circle had felt polished and predictable in comparison.

Okay. That’d been a nice way to say basic and boring.

“I hope you don’t mind my saying we’re glad you left that dreadful ex of yours as far away as possible,” Vee said, refilling Lyra’s glass. “You’ve learned a powerful lesson about wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

“He was a sheep in Wolf of Wall Street clothing,” Myrtle spat with an overdramatic pantomime of yanking her brunch on the table. “Didn’t like him from the start. Had a real Donny Jr. vibe that made my lady bits shrivel.”

If Lyra minded, it was only because the truth hurt sometimes. “I don’t even know what I was thinking,” she said,

almost relieved they'd brought it up so she could set the record straight. "By the time I realized all his genius thoughts were memorized talking points, his self-proclaimed culinary skills meant he could cook seven things really well, and he'd earned almost none of his own money... It was almost like I'd locked it in and didn't see a way out. I just...truly didn't think there was anything better out there for me."

What she was realizing, but couldn't express in this company, was that she'd not thought enough of herself to consider that a better man would want much to do with her. She'd talked herself into a sort of Bill and Hillary existence, figuring that was how the modern career woman got anywhere these days. By being part of a power couple.

"I guess I was so busy trying to prove to everyone how together my life was, I couldn't see through his fuckery until it was turned on someone I loved."

When she thought of the things he'd said to her sister, she wished she could go back in time and steal the punch Gabe got to deliver. She was entitled to it.

"Don't feel bad." Kiki put her hand on Lyra's forearm, and for some reason the absolving gesture misted Lyra's eyes over a little. "We've all been fooled by the wrong man."

"Some of us so badly, we jumped ship to the other team," Vee said, her eyes dancing with mischief. Beneath the dance, though, was the echo of a pain Lyra was experiencing in real time.

"Unca Thy!" A high, sweet voice pierced the afternoon. "When you finith pancake? We want to plaaaaaaaay!"

Lyra's head whipped around so fast, she worried she gave herself whiplash.

Somehow, Cy had pulled up a chair at the adjacent abandoned table behind her, and was digging into a mountain of breakfast while scrolling through his phone.

"I'm working on a sugar coma, Daniel." He stopped to boop the kid on the nose, which elicited a feral sound. "At my age syrup doesn't make me hyper anymore, just sleepy."

Um...his age? They hadn't turned the big three-oh yet.

"I don't *ever* want to be old," the boy whined.

"Tough titties, kid." Myrtle cackled. "Which, incidentally, is the whole part and parcel of the getting old thing."

For the second time this morning, Cy captured Lyra's gaze with his. The chaos of the gathering receded, and all Lyra knew was that if he kept looking at her dress like that, they were going to be in trouble. If they each reached out, they were close enough to touch.

Which meant he'd probably heard everything.

Tantra

WEAVING THE THE PHYSICAL WITH THE SPIRITUAL AND
SEXUAL



AS SOON AS LYRA COULD BRING HERSELF TO STOP ADMIRING how the bronze in Cy's shirt brought out the gold flecks in his eyes, she'd remember to be irked that he eavesdropped.

Well, maybe eavesdropping was a harsh word for it, but she wouldn't have hated it if he'd made his presence known so she didn't flip-flop down douchebag memory lane.

Also, she wished he'd look away. Only because she couldn't seem to bring herself to do it.

"Cypress promised me a favor in exchange for Myrtle's magic pancakes, darling," Vee told Daniel in her best Mary Poppins impression. "Let's go find you something to do, shall we? Cy, you want to come with me, I'll show you which of those heavy pots need moving."

Cy broke eye contact first, and something pierced Lyra right in the chest.

A pang of longing.

Nope. She had to shut that all the way down.

She refused to look at him as he unfolded from his chair and followed the tiny woman and even smaller child across the property. Excusing herself from the table for a restroom break, Lyra went the opposite way into the house in search of a second to collect her messy thoughts and cool her overstimulated ovaries.

With the party in full swing outside, the quiet of the house was both jarring and relieving. A few people wandered in and

out of the kitchen to refill plates or discard them in the sink, but the hallway was long, dark, and deserted.

Lyra peeked in open doors out of curiosity more than any need to relieve herself, and stopped when she found a kid of about eight perched in a sitting room, clinging to a book with one hand and obsessively fidgeting with his shirt.

His clothes were rumpled and didn't quite match, and he kept twitching and squirming in a way that suggested he was several steps past uncomfortable and moving toward suffering.

“You okay?”

His eyes darted to her, then immediately away as he brushed long bangs from his big eyes. It was the blond boy from before, the one who'd tugged at her heart in the food line.

The large-print hardcover book took up his entire lap, and, with his little legs straight out on the deep old sofa, he was just gut-wrenchingly adorable.

“Do you need me to go find your dad?”

“Marty isn't my dad,” he informed her. Not with the defensiveness often attributed to a child in the system, but with the candor of someone stating a fact he had no emotional ties to.

“Yeah, sure,” she agreed. “Is there something you need help with?”

He leveled her an aggrieved stare far too old for such a round, freckled face. “My shirt won't stop tickling me. I can't read!”

“Uh-oh.” She moved carefully toward him, stepping around a settee. “Where is it tickling?”

“Here.” he tugged the cuff of the short-sleeved button up down his tiny arm, but it popped back into place. Then he shoved it up his bicep, but didn't have enough of one to keep the bunched fabric in place.

His little cheeks were turning red, and his eyes misted as if he'd been done a great injustice, was fighting off some sort of

gathering storm, and would rather die than let her see it.

Lyra knew the exact feeling.

“I hate that so much,” she said. “Can I try something that might help?”

He gripped the book tighter, still not looking at her, but dipped his chin in silent permission.

Sensing his wariness of a stranger’s touch, she was careful to grasp the hem of the sleeve and roll it up four times until the edges of the sleeve no longer touched his arm. It looked a little dorky, but the relief on his wan features was transcendent.

“Better?”

“Yeah,” he sighed.

“Want me to do the other one?”

He glanced at her shoulders and nodded. Still no eye contact.

Heart actively melting into her guts, she stepped around to his other side and perched carefully on the couch to roll up his other sleeve. “I’m Lyra,” she said.

“Lyra has Vega,” he announced, coming alive the moment his other sleeve was done “tickling” his arm. She could see the little abrasions where he’d been scratching and picking at the place the hem had touched his skin. “Vega is the second brightest northern star. When I read the *Starman Chronicles*, Orpheus had an artificial intelligence weapon called Lyra, and she could see the future. Attack before her enemies struck. Orpheus was strong, but she was best.”

Lyra grinned. She’d have loved a story like that at his age. Back when she devoured fantasy and magic tales to escape metaphorical tickly sleeves of her own.

“Oh yeah?” She wasn’t sure what kind of feedback the kid wanted, but he seemed satisfied with her noncommittal validation. “So what’s your name?”

“Ben. Is that why you wear no sleeves?” he asked when she’d finished her precise folds. “So they don’t tickle?”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t mind sleeves so much, but...” She leaned in a little. “I’m really picky about socks.”

“I *hate* socks,” he said, turning the page as if he’d read it.

“Yeah, me too. But I have to wear them for work.”

“I hate socks and shirts, and when I’m old I won’t do work that makes me wear socks and shirts.”

Good luck, kid, she wanted to say.

“I had to do the work,” she explained, for the first time not truly believing that. “But I learned some tricks to help me wear socks.”

This time he dragged his gaze away from the story and lifted his eyes all the way to her nose. “What tricks?”

“I learned if I buy socks all the way up to my knee, they’re okay. If I have them all the way down to my ankle, they’re okay. But if they are *anywhere* on my calf, I can’t think straight. I hate everything all day.”

“Everything all day.” He nodded sagely in agreement. “I can read now. You can go.”

“Oh. Um. Okay.” She pushed herself up from the couch in time to find Marty standing in the door regarding her oddly.

“Sorry,” she said, stepping into the hallway and trying to remember the last time she apologized to anyone and coming up with a blank. “He was...um... Well, his sleeves were bothering him and he needed help rolling them.”

Marty nodded, his eyes seeming to look into her rather than at her. “You did a good thing. He’s growing so fast I can’t keep his shirt sleeves at optimum length for his spectrum needs.”

“His what, now?” She cocked her head.

“He’s autistic. High-functioning, mostly. But once he wore a hand-me-down with a tag, and I don’t know if I’ve seen a more epic meltdown in all my days.”

“I see,” she said. Despite recent destigmatizing of the spectrum, it wasn’t something she knew an awful lot about. “I

didn't realize it had much to do with how your clothes fit.”

Marty became animated, as one did when able to use some hard-won research to inform other people. “For souls like Ben, nothing fits. Not sounds. Not emotions. Not light and movement. It's all so jarring. He can't block out what other people can. And when it's all too much, the whisper of a hem can feel like jagged glass.”

Interesting... She knew what it was like to feel out of sync with the world, to be overwhelmed by sights and sounds that others barely registered. In times of high stress, she could become so myopic that traffic noise threatened to throw her off her game.

Luckily, she could lock it down. Little Ben didn't have that luxury.

“You have your hands full,” she said, a little in awe of what this man had to put up with.

“Wouldn't know how to live otherwise.” He crinkled his eyes in a smile and stepped aside, giving her ample room to pass.

“Oh darling, there you are!” Vee said when she found her way back to the kitchen. She was piling ice into a professional-grade blender and bustling around for drink ingredients. “Be a love and pop into the hothouse for me? I have some edible hibiscus that would go great with dessert.”

“Sure thing.” Lyra swept out of the house to the deck, making her way across the expansive lawn toward the grove of trees surrounding the vintage greenhouse partially shrouded by the dense forest beyond the lawn.

Dessert? Did a pancake-laden breakfast really require dessert? Probably not. But it seemed like this dessert was going to be of the alcoholic variety.

Phew... Was she down to drink like the locals on a Sunday? TBD.

Head on a swivel, she checked for Cy, but he remained conspicuously absent.

Surrounding the greenhouse were raised garden beds with every kind of fruit and vegetable native to the PNW. Crops were rotated for seasons, and now the tilled earth was laden with pumpkins, squash, stalks of brussels sprouts, and late-blooming lavender. Surrounding the beds was a black wrought-iron fence tall enough to keep out demons.

Or, more accurately, the bouncy deer who made a meal of any unguarded garden.

The greenhouse was hot and humid, the air thick with the cloying scents of loamy soil and exotic blooms. The sterile smell of metal and glass permeated everything else, but Lyra could detect the sharp hint of tomato plants and the distinctive perfume of tea roses.

Her head bowed, she walked down a row lined by containers so overflowing with flowers that their white petals spilled onto the floor. Luminous green leaves from fat, healthy trees rustled gently overhead, dripping long stems with orchid-like blossoms that swayed despite the absence of a breeze.

A scrape and a grunt planted her feet to the floor, just in time for her to see Cy dragging an entire ass potted tree across the cement on the other side of the greenhouse.

Jerking to stand, he turned as if she'd made a sound to startle him.

She watched as his gaze traveled up her body, from her loose hair to the peaches-and-cream sundress. The hunger emanating from him was palpable—she could feel it as thick as the humidity in the air.

He straightened then, his broad shoulders square, looming like a predator about to leap into a sprint to catch his prey.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Cy said, his voice deep and lethally serious.

“Vee sent me for... Um...hibiscus eating—er, edible blossoms...” She drifted off lamely when a dangerous heat ignited in his eyes and made her forget what she was sent here for in the first place.

“Did you follow me?” he continued like he hadn’t heard her, slowly stalking up the aisle as if fully intending to give her a head start.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she scoffed, though her sarcasm was weak before the magnitude of pure, primal pheromones that rolled off him in waves.

He advanced closer, carnal intent advertised in every sleek move of his body as he pulled his work gloves from his hands and discarded them on the floor.

Those hands. She’d never forget how they felt on her skin.

She was pretty sure he meant to put them on her now.

“Are you trying to drive me wild, Lyra? Is that how you’ll get your revenge?”

Lyra blinked. “Revenge?” Jesus, she was really getting a ton of use out of those speech classes she took in law school.

He stopped in front of her, eyes half lidded, muscles rigid and chest heaving, as if keeping a lethal beast in check. He towered over her in a way that was devoid of intimidation but terrified her all the same.

Lyra could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. The intensity of Cy’s gaze made her feel like he was seeing right through her. She knew what he was capable of and couldn’t imagine what he must be thinking right now. Tension thickened the air between them, and the silence pulsed with unspoken desire.

Her heart thumped unevenly, and her mind raced with thoughts and emotions she couldn’t identify, let alone put into words. Cy was close enough for her to smell the earthy scent of his sweat. His raw masculinity made her stomach clench with an intensity that was almost painful.

His breath was hot on her cheek, eliciting an electric shiver down her spine. He was so close, she could feel the heat emanating from his skin, feel the intensity of his attention as if it was a living, breathing thing.

“I’m not after revenge,” she managed, lifting her chin to meet his hungry gaze.

“No?” His jaw worked to the side as if she’d said the one thing he hadn’t wanted to hear. “Then you shouldn’t have worn that fucking dress.”

Their mouths met and melded.

Clashed.

It was a fierce, bruising kiss that left her breathless and trembling with a hunger that was almost unbearable. Cy gripped her waist, pulling her toward him, his full lips demanding and insistent.

Lyra gasped as his hard body pressed against hers and his hands roamed over her back and hips. Immediately, his erection pressed against her stomach, and a thrill of excitement shot through her.

Never had she felt so desired, so wanted, so alive, then when she was being kissed by Cy Forrester.

His mouth was hot and demanding, his tongue probing deep into her mouth as if trying to consume her. Lyra responded with equal passion, running her hands over his back and chest, tracing the hard muscles beneath his shirt.

For several long moments, they remained lip-locked, lost in a haze of lust and desire. Then, with a sudden clarity, Lyra realized what they were doing and pulled away, panting for breath.

Cy seemed surprised, as if he’d forgotten where they were. He stepped back, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

Lyra’s heart thrummed in her chest. A flush of heat radiated from her ears to the tips of her toes, culminating in her core.

She wanted him. She wanted this.

As if reading her mind, Cy smiled and closed the gap between them again. He picked her up by the hips and walked her back to the potting table. He had to sweep aside gardening gloves, a tangle of hoses, and a discarded water pump to make room for her ass before setting her down. Their eyes locked as he claimed another kiss. Lyra felt a thrill of anticipation shoot

through her as she wrapped her legs around his lean waist, pressing herself against him as if she could be imprinted by the planes and cords of his powerful body.

He kissed her neck and jawline before making his way back to her lips, his hands slowly sliding up and down her bare calves like waves on the shoreline until they settled on her parted knees. His touch electrified every nerve ending, sending sparks of pleasure coursing through her veins.

“I’ve been starving all day,” he confessed. He lightly trailed his fingers over the nape of her neck before tracing circles around one of Lyra’s clavicles, causing a deep moan to escape from both their lips as she arched her back.

How was it that every place this man touched became an erogenous zone?

It made no sense. But here she was. A woman with a handful of lovers, none of them successful...but him.

Arguably her most innocent sexual encounter had still been the best.

Lyra felt herself grow more aroused with each passing second as Cy began to explore her body with masterful precision. He moved lower still, pressing gentle kisses along the low bodice of her dress.

He looked into Lyra’s eyes with primal hunger before growling, “Let me taste you, Lyra.”

A thousand alarms went off in her head. A million red flags waved behind her lids when she closed them.

But her lips only formed two words.

Fuck. Yes.

Jerking her skirt above her knees, he stared into her eyes as he splayed his hands on her thighs before pressing them apart.

Lyra’s mouth dropped open in astonishment. This wasn’t the Cy she knew—the respectful, confident businessman who’d only just tossed his foster siblings around at play.

This was someone else. Someone pulled from his personal shadows. Ruthless and demanding.

“Hold on to something,” he warned.

Lyra’s breath abandoned her lungs when he thrust aside her panties and dove between her legs.

He pressed his lips between the folds of her body, instantly finding her pulsing clit.

Christ, she was so ready. She should be embarrassed by how wet she already was. She should have made him work for it a little.

Everyone else had. Too much. Enough to kink their necks or get muscle spasms in their fingers. Hard enough to give up, sometimes.

But Cy pressed his lush lips to her most sensitive spot, tracing languid circles with his tongue as he teased and toyed with her until she was a quivering mess, unable to keep her hips from grinding against his face.

Lyra had never felt anything like this before.

The sensation was so strong, so overwhelming, that tears began to well in her eyes as Cy’s ministrations grew more intense. His tongue seemed to know exactly what she needed, flicking and tasting and teasing until she was gasping out nonsensical words in sheer, astonished pleasure.

“Cy!” She moaned his name as a violent shudder rocketed through her body, launching her from their heady atmosphere into the one high above them. Stars exploded behind her lids, little bursts of lightning that might have been concerning if she could keep a thought in her head.

The aftershocks continued to ripple through her long after Cy relented, wiping his mouth with his knuckles as his dark eyes bored into hers.

She felt boneless, barely able to support her own weight as he rose from between her legs. He kissed the inside of each thigh tenderly, slow to push himself back to his feet, and Lyra was glad. Because she knew what that glint in his eyes meant.

That long, hot cock had pulsed and branded her through frustrating layers of clothing, and finally he would drive it into her.

“Protection?” he panted, his ochre skin taut across his features as if he were in pain as he undid his belt.

“IUD.”

“Good.”

He dragged her to the very corner of the smooth table, seizing her ankles in his strong grip and resting them on his shoulders.

“I want to see every-fucking-thing,” he said from between clenched teeth.

The hot, blunt shape of his cock circled the opening to her body, borrowing her liquid silk.

Then, with one strong movement, he finally, *finally* thrust home.

SEVEN

Notch-Stress

LOCATION ALONG A TREE STEM WHERE THE UNIFORM
FORCE FLOW IS INTERRUPTED. THE RESULT IS LOCALIZED,
HIGH STRESS AREAS WITH A GREATER POTENTIAL FOR
FAILURE.



PARADISE. BLISS. HEAVEN.

Words that failed as miserably to describe the concept they represented as keenly as they failed to describe the exquisite torture it was to *finally* be inside Lyra McKendrick.

And in this moment, all others failed utterly.

Cy made himself hold very still, savoring his desperate need like the first sip of a good whisky. Appreciating the warmth first. Noticing how much hotter the liquid heat of her center was compared to the silky skin of her neck beneath his palm.

Then the feel. The soft swell of her ass pressing against his upper thigh. The slightly firmer crease at the back of her knee draped over his forearm. The way she fluttered around him when a laugh escaped her.

“So...uh, whatcha doing?” she asked, gazing up at him with heavy-lidded eyes.

Flexing his fingertips against the pulse at her jugular, Cy dragged the tip of his index finger down her sternum, stopping when he'd reached the level of her heart. “Remembering how good it feels to want.”

Lyra's breath hitched as her pupils dilated and he felt her tremble against him.

“Watching you all morning, touching you like this in my mind...” He rolled one rosy nipple beneath his fingertips. “It's all been foreplay.”

It had always been Cy's favorite part of any game. The buildup. The waiting.

"Every minute you have to wait for what you want makes you want it that much more." He gently compressed the stiff peak between his thumb and forefinger and felt her contract around him.

Cy stared down at her, mesmerized.

Even in autumn light that always seemed tired before the day was done, she rivaled the most beautiful things Cy had ever seen. A single sunbeam slicing through the downpour among the mossy, enchanted tangle of the Hoh Rainforest. The first flight of a bald eaglet he'd watched grow from a naked, pink hatchling to a downy chick to a shaggy juvenile.

Rainbows from the prisms hung against the greenhouse glass danced over her skin, lending unnaturally intense hues to unlikely parts of her body. Crimson flashing against her cheek. Emerald dappling an eyelid. Indigo riding the waves of dark hair falling long and loose around her shoulders.

He connected the dancing dots as he moved downward to find the place on her flat abdomen where he throbbed against the deepest part of her. Gently pressing down with the heel of his palm, Cy paused when he could feel the resistance of her inner wall between these two parts of him.

Lyra's lips parted on a startled little gasp.

"Know what I love?" Cy asked, changing only the angle of his hips to intensify the contact.

She shook her head emphatically, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

"I love that I never know what the fuck you're going to say." Cy's breath sawed raggedly in and out of his chest. "*Fuck*, you feel amazing."

The desire to move was torture, but he wanted to savor every second of it, to draw this pleasure out for as long as possible.

"Cy?"

“Yes?” he asked.

“Can you please rail me before God drops a goat on the greenhouse?”

He laughed while inside her.

Fuck.

So delicious.

But she had a point.

“You want me to rail you?”

Lyra arched her back in lieu of an answer, shamelessly tempting him with the friction.

Cy responded by drawing himself almost all the way out of her in preparation to bury himself again.

“Cy? You in here?”

His hips jerked to an abrupt stop at the sound of his father’s voice booming from the greenhouse door.

Startled by the interruption, Lyra let out a sound that was somewhere between a gasp and groan of dismay before Cy quickly pressed his palm over her mouth.

“Be right there,” he called back.

“If you find Lyra, will you let her know?”

“Will do!”

A creak, then the greenhouse door banged closed.

Cy exhaled the breath that had left his ribcage aching and rested his forearms on the worktable where Lyra lay spread-eagle to get better leverage.

“Oh Cy?” Marty called again.

“For fuck’s *sake*,” Cy growled under his breath, pounding a fist on the wood surface. “Yeah?”

“Ethan and Darby just got here!”

Christ. Had Vee and Myrtle invited the entire goddamn county?

“I’ll be right out,” he said through a jaw clenched in frustration.

The door banged closed a second time.

Cy looked at Lyra, already knowing that, once again, Fate had seen fit to take a giant shit right in their lascivious laps.

“At least it wasn’t Larry this time,” Lyra said, sitting up as Cy stood.

“I’d prefer that it was Larry,” he muttered, carefully tucking himself away before helping Lyra brush off her dress. “Here.” Cy plucked a few hibiscus blossoms from a nearby tree and handed them to Lyra. “You go ahead. I need a minute.”

They both glanced down at the still very present bulge in his jeans.

That he should suffer a priapic opportunity attack now of all times was bitter irony enough for the douchiest of DMs.

“Sorry about this,” he whispered to her, then pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “See you inside?”

Cy felt a pang of longing at the sight of her walking away from him, her sundress flouncing from the curve of her ass.

“So is that what sauntering looks like?” he called after her.

Lyra didn’t look back, but scratched herself between the shoulder blades with a stiff middle finger before exiting the greenhouse door.

Alone, Cy took a deep breath and reached for his catalog of boner-killing images. He imagined his dad in a pair of Daisy Dukes and a tank top, riding a mechanical bull. He envisioned Ethan in a clown costume doing the Hokey Pokey with Myrtle’s three-legged llama, Darrell.

And slowly but surely, the second heartbeat eased from his jeans.

Running a hand through his hair, he checked himself in the distorted reflection of Myrtle and Vee’s gleaming chrome lavender distilling drum. It would have to do.

He found Ethan parked in a rocking chair on Myrtle and Vee's sprawling front porch, a beer in one hand and purse that could double as a pink disco ball in the other.

Ethan's square jaw was set, his eyes narrowed to rectangular slits, his cleft chin aimed at the sprawling bolt of sod where Cy's screeching foster brothers and sisters flapped around like coked-out geese. A combination of clues that could only mean one thing.

Ethan Townsend was happy, basically.

Which made sense, because he'd been radiating *get off my lawn* energy since they'd become best buddies in their sophomore year.

"Hey there," Cy said, suppressing a wince as he trudged up the steps. His adventures with Larry the other night had cost him dearly.

"Hey," Ethan said. "How's it going?"

Other than the fact that Cy had finally been inside the woman he'd been feverishly dreaming about since high school and been rudely interrupted by his father, it was going—

"Good," Cy said, easing down into the chair next to Ethan's.

Setting the purse carefully in his lap, Ethan reached down and lifted an icy bucket of beer. Cy gratefully took one, lifting it to read a label that had clearly involved the assistance of a graphic designer.

"Pumpkin porter?" he asked, eyebrow raised as he set the cold beverage in the fork of his crotch under the pretense of digging his keychain bottle opener out of his pocket.

Ethan cleared his throat. "It's seasonal."

"No judgment." Cy cracked open a bottle, savoring the brew's crisp bite as he took a deep swig.

As much as he gave Ethan shit, Cy had been genuinely delighted to see the ways that the fuchsia-haired hurricane that was Darby Dunwell had disrupted his friend's previously orderly life.

“Haven’t seen you in a while.” Ethan’s habit of lopping off the subjects of his sentences to make what amounted to a formal interrogation seem like an informal conversation had always struck Cy as kind of hilarious.

“Had a lot of work to do lately,” Cy said, lifting the bottle for another pull. “It’s seasonal.”

Ethan shot him a look. “You still thinking of hiring another employee, or...”

“Or?”

The former sheriff’s Adam’s apple bobbed on a conspicuous swallow.

Cy was violating their unspoken rules of verbal engagement by calling Ethan’s tactical bluff. He already knew what his friend was getting at and decided to give him a conversational goosing.

“With all that work, I mean. Seems like it might help to have someone—”

“Who can do more of the physical labor?” Cy asked.

“Didn’t say that.”

“Didn’t have to.”

More than once, Ethan had expressed—in the most moderate way possible—his concerns about Cy overdoing it once he was able to work again following the accident.

Which was funny considering that, once upon a time, Ethan had also made it his business to drag him out of his self-imposed hermitage at least once a week. Cy’s very own blond, blue-eyed, all-American activities director—for reasons, in his darker moments, he feared may have as much to do with concern for his mental and physical wellbeing as general enjoyment of his company.

Most of the time, Cy could ignore it. Being one of only a slim cross section of Salish who comprised Townsend Harbor’s total population, he’d had to do a lot of ignoring over the years. Turning the other cheek. Covering his discomfort with a well-placed joke and/or forced smile.

But every now and then, a kernel of suspicion turned into a canker of doubt that required one of these fucking awkward conversations to disinfect.

Ethan waited him out, keeping his icy gaze trained on Cy as he maneuvered the rocker back and forth at an infuriatingly even pace that threatened to stretch into perpetuity.

“Yes,” Cy replied, trying to keep his tone light despite the lingering frustration. “I’m still thinking about it.”

“Happy to help with leads if you need any,” Ethan said, lifting his own bottle. “All the favors you’ve been doing around town, I’m surprised you have time for work at all.”

Cy suppressed a groan. As the only Townsend Harbor resident with a bucket truck, he was also the unofficial Reacher of Really Tall Shit and had, on occasion, gone out to assist with certain emergent situations.

Emergent situations like Larry’s acrobatic adventure the other night.

“So first I’m not getting out enough, and now I’m getting out too much? That it?” His irritation at having his second encounter with Lyra interrupted had made him edgy and tense, and Ethan’s well-meaning concern wasn’t exactly helping.

“That’s not—”

“Ethan!” Marty Forrester, patriarch of the Forrester clan and perpetual adopter of strays, threw his arms wide as he stepped onto the porch. “How you doing, son?”

Son?

Son?

“Can’t complain,” Ethan said, shocking Cy by accepting one of the cigars Marty pulled out of the breast pocket of his denim shirt. “How about you?”

“Rattling, but I’m rolling.” Marty gave Ethan the full wattage of the affable, easygoing grin he was known for around town.

That Cy's father was suddenly an Ethan Townsend fanboy was fucking hilarious. Marty hadn't always been the Townsend family's biggest supporter. In fact, when Ethan first started inviting Cy over to the Townsend Mansion after football practice, Marty had been more than a little dubious about his motivations.

"Why doesn't he ever come here for dinner?" he'd asked one night when Cy had actually made it home in time to eat with the ever-rotating herd of foster kids who ended up sharing their roof.

Cy had made a show of looking around their dining room, crowded with not one, but *two* folding tables and an additional oval monstrosity whose perpetually sticky surface was already completely surrounded.

"Where would he sit?" Cy had asked. "*On* a child?"

"I just don't understand why he's so chummy with you all the sudden. Guys like that can afford to *buy* friends."

The implications had been more than a little insulting. But Cy hadn't dared tell his father the truth—that he and Ethan had started buddying up after a locker room brawl with several members of a rival team.

Their coach—a wildly permissive man who spent more time lecturing about self-esteem than strategy—hadn't informed either of their parents for reasons Cy could no longer recall.

And Cy hadn't been about to narc on himself. Not when, from the time he was small, he was reminded that his every action reflected not just on his family, but the Indigenous community at large.

As a Townsend of the Townsend family, Ethan, too, had been under a kind of constant scrutiny. A fact that had led both to save their rage for acceptable outlets like football and online RPGs.

"Has anyone seen Darrell?" Myrtle appeared in the doorway, a champagne glass in hand and concern pinching her always-animated features.

Cy glanced at the now-empty paddock where he'd seen the three-legged llama pastured when he was chasing his nephew, Daniel, around.

"I sure haven't," he said, earning mumbled agreement from Marty and Ethan.

"I swear, that wooly tripod doesn't know how good he has it." Myrtle blew out an exasperated breath. "And don't you light those smelly things on my front porch," she said, darting a mock-serious scowl at Marty. "They stink to high heaven."

Ethan, Marty, and Cy looked at the army of bright pink Shit Shacks down the hill, then back to each other.

"Of course not," Marty said, pocketing his lighter with deft sleight of hand. "We were just going to go for a walk down by the garden, weren't we, boys?"

Cy could think of about eighty things he'd rather do—to Lyra, mostly—but rose on his complaining knee and followed anyway. Probably wise to get some physical real estate between them until he'd taken several cold showers.

"What you got there?" Marty asked, his attention fixed on the bucket swinging from Ethan's hand.

"Pumpkin porter," Ethan said. "Want one?" Condensation dripped from the base as he lifted it.

"That reminds me. I tried your new spiced cider stout the other day, and—" Cy's father whistled as he knocked the cap off on his horseshoe-shaped belt buckle. "Was *that* good."

Ethan glanced over his shoulder, catching Cy's notice and giving him an eyeroll.

And just that one shared moment of covert criticism was enough to evaporate Cy's lingering doubt like the sun burning off fog.

The rush of gratitude he felt for Ethan was as immediate and intense as it had been the day Townsend Harbor's golden son jumped into a fight he hadn't even started. He had quite literally had Cy's back.

So how could Cy still suspect Ethan of maintaining their friendship out of a sense of civic duty after all this time? What kind of dick did that make him?

“Trust me, you won’t be disappointed.” Marty lightly punched Ethan’s shoulder and cut the end of his cigar before cupping a lighter to the tip as Ethan puffed it into life. “Careful. One spark and this whole place could go up.”

The spicy-sweet smell of tobacco filled Cy’s nose as he tried to tune out their conversation.

“Speaking of doing well,” Marty said, grinning proudly at Ethan. “I hear your lady friend’s coffee business is going franchise.” The creases at the corners of his dark eyes deepened.

“Yep.” Ethan exhaled a silky scarf of bluish vapor into the gathering dusk. “She’s killing it.”

The simple fondness in his friend’s voice woke an ache in Cy’s chest. He’d managed only one long-term relationship in his adult life, and it had ended in sickening heartbreak. Following the accident, inflicting the busted-up, bitter husk he’d become on anyone else just didn’t seem like a reasonable thing to do.

Even after the worst of the pain had passed and his body—or what remained of it—began to heal, he’d jealously guarded his solitude.

So why, now, was he resenting every obstacle and inconvenience that interrupted his few stolen moments with Lyra McKendrick?

He glanced toward the west, where the sun was slowly setting behind Myrtle and Vee’s cozy, chaotic house.

Where was Lyra inside it? What was she thinking? Was she frustrated, like him? Or was she glad that they’d been interrupted before things could go any further?

“Well, my boy here might not be tearing up the football field anymore, but he’s running the shit out of our family business!” His father clapped him on the back.

A muscle in Cy's jaw clenched involuntarily.

"Thanks, Dad," he ground out before taking another swig of his beer to swallow down his annoyance.

"You should see him out there, Ethan. It's like he's part squirrel."

"It's fine, Dad," Cy snapped, unable to contain his frustration any longer. "There's no need to compare me to a rodent to try to make taking over the family business seem like a silver lining."

The smile melted from his father's face, and Cy felt a stab of satisfaction that was immediately replaced with regret.

Days like today were a perfect reminder of why he preferred to stay the fuck at home. No one's questions to answer. No one's feelings to hurt. No one's well-meaning bullshit to shovel.

"You guys heard about the new bakery that's opening up in town?" Ethan, who had probably never eaten a baked good on purpose, asked.

"Oh yeah?" Marty said.

But Cy was already tuning them out again. His gaze had drifted across the lawn, where, at the edge of the garden, Lyra stood talking to a tall, broad-shouldered figure.

Cy squinted against the setting sun, trying to make out who it was. A flash of hair the color a fox pelt, and the recognition was instant and unwelcome.

Dr. McMuscleBro—or so Cy had nicknamed him in his darker moments—Townsend Harbor's new veterinarian.

He leaned in to say something to Lyra, cupping her elbow in his large—probably manicured—paw.

When Lyra's jagged laugh echoed across the lawn, it occurred to Cy how difficult the good doctor might find it to stitch up patients with a hand that had gone through a woodchipper.

His fingers tightened into fists at his sides as the question that had haunted him earlier returned for a second pass.

What kind of dick did that make him?

A jealous one.

The realization brought with it a caustic brew he hadn't imbibed since he'd been little more than a boy grieving for his mom, seeing every other family in their perfect town seemingly living the perfect life while his own went to shit. Which made him want to smash everything else.

Starting with Dr. McMuscleBro's perfect nose.

Cy wanted to run over there and shove the smug motherfucker away from her. Spout some dumb macho shit about staying away from his girl.

But Cy was no longer that kid, and Lyra was not, had never been, *his* girl. He was an adult now, not a walking hormone with no more control over his own feelings than he had over his dick.

So why the fuck was this all coming back?

The answer came to him on a breeze that somehow, inexplicably, carried a burst of her scent all the way across the field.

And damned if she didn't turn to look at him the very second the burst of her essence lit up his brain like a Christmas tree.

"You okay, buddy?" Ethan asked.

"Uh, yeah. Just sore," Cy replied, forcing a smile and dragging his gaze away from the infuriating scene unfolding before him. "Think I better call it a day, actually."

He and Ethan traded a meaningful look. "Take care, man."

"Will do," Cy said with a nod, then turned to his father. "Night, Dad."

"Goodnight, son," Marty replied, a sincere smile replacing his earlier joking demeanor.

And with that, Cy trudged away, his heart heavy with a maelstrom of emotions he had no desire to confront and his mind vibrating with a single, solid thought.

He needed to stay the fuck away from Lyra McKendrick before the chemistry they both were obviously completely incapable of controlling caused an explosion that burned them both.

EIGHT

Sabbat or Esbat

A FRENETIC PAGAN CELEBRATION OF THE FULL MOON OR
OTHER HOLY DAYS



“UH-OH,” LYRA SAID AS SHE FLIPPED OVER A CARD AND LAID it on the silk-covered folding table with the gravitas of a Vegas dealer. “The tower card.”

Checking the shop’s wall clock, she barely stopped herself from counting the seconds. Business had been booming the couple of weeks before Halloween, and she’d closed up every night at six, exhausted.

It was now six-oh-five, and stragglers were not fucking off as quickly as she’d like.

“The tower?” her tarot client said. “What does that one mean?”

Refocusing, Lyra mentally searched through the bank of info she’d hastily memorized while cramming for this new side-hustle like she had for the LSAT.

Christ. You publicly predict *one* very predictable fire *one* time in a place like Townsend Harbor—settled by famously superstitious Celts and Nordens—and suddenly everyone thinks you have a touch of what they called “the shine.” One of those old-timey words for ESP.

Lyra’s chosen place of business helped exactly nothing in this respect. In fact, this last week, people started coming in to beg her for tarot readings, offering her the same kind of money she would have charged hourly for legal work.

At first, she denied any and all requests. But in the weirdly silent, lonely week or so since her mind-flaying orgasm in the

greenhouse—nine days, two hours; didn't matter—she'd taken to reading through a few of the books in her inventory.

Which led her to ask the famous last question: how hard could it be?

Now, looking into the misting eyes of the panicking client in front of her, she would have given her left arm for a courtroom. People took this shit way too seriously.

“It's probably not a big deal,” she told the thirty-something woman who kept stroking her trembling little purse dog for support. “All this card usually means is that a variable out of your control is about to change drastically. Could it be a crisis? Sure! But it can also mean that something will be destroyed or dismantled, which usually needs to happen to make way for growth.”

“Destruction? Dismantling?” The woman facing her slapped her hands over her gaping mouth, eyes filling with tears that threatened to spill over some truly intense eyeliner. “What do you predict? Will it be a fire or something?”

Lyra lowered her head and pretended to study the card so the lady—Brenda? Barbara?—wouldn't see her roll her eyes.

Pfft, she wasn't a one-trick pony. She was never predicting a fire again.

“Who knows?” She shrugged. “This card often is linked to institutions or corporations. The government, maybe? Some large, powerful organization who is likely to fu—er, mess everything up regardless of this card pull. So, if we're being honest here, if those kinds of soulless institutions are dismantled, will we even notice or care at this point?”

Purse dog squeaked as Brenda—Bonnie? Brooke?—clutched the bag even closer. “My husband is on the board of the second largest airline in the country,” she wailed. “Are you saying his company is going to be dismantled?”

In what world had Lyra been saying that?

“No,” she said, hoping to stave off the woman's need for a Xanax. “That's the thing about tarot... It's not like a predict-the-future sort of endeavor. It's more to help open your eyes to

how the world around you—or the universe inside of you—is being affected by inner or outer forces.”

Yup. She’d just said that with a straight face.

Fuck.

“So what do you think is dismantling?” demanded Brenda (didn’t matter what her name was; it was Brenda to her now). “You pulled the card. I paid you to interpret it. So...?” She slouched back in her chair like a kid being fed brussels sprouts in a nineties commercial.

Lyra stared at the tower, trying to pull a good message out of the storm clouds in the background. “I mean... Maybe it’s a dismantling of the patriarchy?”

“Maybe?” Brenda sneered in a way that made Lyra decline to inform her that she had lipstick on her teeth. “I didn’t give you two hundred bucks for a maybe.”

Lyra reached for the deck, hoping to distract from the tower with a different card.

“What was that face?” Brenda demanded in a pitch that drew a bark from her purse.

“Nothing.” Lyra tried to shove the card back into the deck, but Brenda snatched it from her hand.

“Death?” she shrieked, pulling the notice from the few remaining customers before they silently began to shuffle toward the door. “What the fuck?”

Oh yeah. She’d read about this. “That card’s not so bad.” Lyra shook her hand in front of her face as if warding off the foul scent of unnecessary fear. “It’s just another transition card. So, these work well together. Something is coming to an end, but we pulled this fool card before, so that means a new beginning. Literally could pertain to anything...” She put the death card by the tower card and tried to ignore an ominous feeling.

“It could mean death, though,” Brenda said. “Like my little Trinket here?” She pursed her lips and dropped a kiss on the dog’s head.

Fighting extreme amounts of both irritation and exhaustion, Lyra let out a long breath. “I wouldn’t plan the... departure of a beloved pet around a card pull at a local new-age shop, know what I mean? Want my prediction? Things are going to be just...great.” What other supportive bullshit did people say? And why did this woman care so much about what she thought would happen in the future?

Was this how cults started?

“I can’t believe this.” Brenda gathered her purse, her charmed, bedazzled phone, her dog purse, and a couple of shopping bags, pinning Lyra with a glare. “You’d better pray nothing happens to Trinket. Or my husband’s job.”

“What are you going to do, sue me?” Lyra said. “Look, your dog is going to die, eventually. No one needs cards to tell you that—its face is all gray. But I’m sure your husband’s job will be fine.”

Brenda gasped the gasp of a thousand basic bitches. “I. Am. Out. Of. Here.”

She teetered away on her red-soled, too-high heels and almost ran straight into Gemma and Cady, who’d shut down Bazaar Girls and were helping with the closing chores in Star-Crossed.

“Cool, well, it’s been...sort of okay meeting you.”

Cady snort-chuckled, but Gemma directed a disapproving frown at her twin. “You should be nice to clients, or they won’t come back.”

“Promise?” Lyra put the cards back into their box and made her way to the front door, taking inordinate pleasure in sliding the bolt home.

For the first time, she noticed that Cady, the proprietress of Nevermore Bookstore, had traded her usual jeans and snarky t-shirt for canvas cargo pants, a flannel, and knee-high wellies.

Additionally, Gemma was in their mom’s old painting overalls over a grease-stained button-up that had the name “Kyle” stitched into the pocket. She’d very obviously pilfered it from Gabe’s mechanic shop.

Didn't take a fortune-teller to predict some fuckery. "What are you two up to?"

"Oh, nothing..." Cady was way better at the fake innocence routine, with her owl-bright blueberry eyes, round cheeks, and angel-gold hair in two braids. "It's just a bit of B&E. No one will even notice. It's almost dark now."

Lyra planted her feet in front of the door. "Explain yourselves or you're going nowhere."

Unfazed, Gemma busied herself plucking errant stones of the wrong color that the feckless customers had refused to return to their appropriate dishes. "Those assholes from the picture frame store cheated in the Halloween window display contest. And we have to get them back." She punched her palm like a street kid ready for revenge.

Lyra's eyes narrowed. "Get them back how, exactly?"

"Better you don't know." Gemma smiled cryptically before turning to Cady. "I made a list of what we have left to do. First of which is go to the Wine Seller."

Cady nodded, throwing her tote over one shoulder. "Then we pick up the goat?"

Lyra's internal record scratched. "The goat?"

"And probably to Frank's Hardware for some paint," Gemma said. "Maybe we get the paint before the goat."

"Are you painting the goat?" Lyra asked, threading through a hanging display of Himalayan flags to chase the girls to the door adjoining her shop with Bazaar Girls.

"While we're at Frank's, we'll check for a few rail spikes—if not, maybe Roy has them at his salvage place." Cady checked her phone. "I'll call to see if he's still open."

"Ah yes. Good idea," Gemma agreed, twisting her hair up off her neck and securing it with the elastic from her wrist.

"What are those for?" Lyra's demand was again ignored.

"Did you see the delivery to the Driftwood Gallery from the lumberyard?" Gemma turned to her best friend,

scandalized. “Not enough for a house, but one could certainly build, say...a deck. Or if Olaf Karlsson is doing it, a pyre.”

Lyra scampered in front of them. “Okay, guys, I really am gonna need you to tell me what you’re planning for this goat.”

Her sister eyed her skeptically. “Sounds like someone wants to go get Randall herself.”

“Randall?”

“The goat,” Cady explained sagely.

“Whatever you’re planning, I think you should leave innocent goats out of it,” Lyra said.

“Naw, Randall will be fine!” Gemma assured her, her smile oddly too bright.

“Fine as in...alive?”

“Of course!” Cady replied. “We only need a little milk.”

Lyra relaxed. “Oh. Whew...” *Then...* “Wait. You’re milking Randall?”

They both gave her the *what’s the big deal* shrug. “She’s a good milker,” Gemma said, as if that were bloody obvious this whole time.

“Well, excuse me for not assuming Randall was a lady goat who could be milked.” Lyra crossed her arms over her chest, wondering why she felt defensive and a little left out.

Maybe because of the way her twin was eyeballing her. “I thought you knew better than to assume gender these days, Lyra.”

Grunting, she crafted maybe the weirdest defense of her life. “There isn’t any social precedent that dictates I should extend goats the courtesy of a gender identity. Like if you can milk them...they’re ladies. Randall should be named Rhonda or some shit.”

Both women gasped, and Gemma mimed clutching her pearls. “OMG, Lyra! You’d never say that about another human!”

“Yeah,” Cady chimed in. “Maybe we should send you to Kiki’s to borrow Randall. You can apologize to her while you drive her back.”

Gemma shook her head. “No, Lyra has to stay here for Full Moon Sabat.”

“The what?” Lyra was so lost. What fresh level of hell was this?

A plaintive yowl filtered down from upstairs.

Lyra frowned and stepped away from her sister and Cady. “Don’t go anywhere. I need to check on Larry. She might be having kittens.”

Was it the same asshole misgender-naming all of these pets?

She ran up the stairs two at a time and stopped in front of the door to her bedroom. Inside, Larry was attempting to settle in a cardboard box full of paperwork.

Lyra scooped the fat black cat into her arms, soothing her as she squirmed and complained against her chest. “It’s okay now, girl,” she whispered as she stroked the cat’s back.

After retrieving blankets from her closet, she laid them in the box for Larry to settle in and tucked a clean towel around the makeshift nest.

Immediately, Larry wound into a ball, breathing hard but purring louder than Lyra had known was possible.

Not that she cared, but she had read eleven articles on how to assist in a kitten birth and was glad to learn that basically you did nothing but make sure the mama was not in distress.

To be fair, Larry always seemed slightly distressed, but at the moment she peered over at Lyra with a hard determination that made her heart threaten to burst open.

“Don’t worry, Mama, I’ll be here.”

Planned or no, these kittens were coming, and she was going to make sure they were the safest, cleanest, comfiest goddammed kittens ever born.

As if on cue, a notification chimed from her phone, alerting her that someone had tripped the shop's security camera.

“Who the fuck?” Someone was unlocking the door to the shop!

Lyra raced out of the apartment and down the stairs, snagging Gabe's baseball bat on the way out.

Not today, Satan.

She thumb-typed in 911 and hovered over the send button as she charged down the stairs and into the shop, ready to do battle with the dark-haired man on the camera.

What she found when she reached the bottom floor was a handful of expectant faces peering over a stanchion of self-help books as if *she* were the interloper.

Lyra tucked the bat away when she realized the entire group looked like the rejects from a Renaissance fair.

This must be whatever fuckery Gemma had referred to before she abandoned her own twin to go ruin some lactating goat's evening.

“Can I help you?” she asked in a tone that posed the real question, *What the fuck are you doing here?*

“Don't mind us. We'll set up over here.” A dark-haired man with—no shit—laces in his blouse sauntered toward the back corner with what only could be identified as a rucksack.

“I *do* mind.” She advanced through the aisles to cut off his progress.

“Liz said you might.” Another woman with long, frizzy gray hair streaked with purple flowed rather than walked over to the “reading area,” a corner where cushions and pillows were tossed in a colorful chaos that usually made Lyra's eye twitch. “She told us to just show up on the full moon because you're a ‘more forgiveness than permission’ kinda gal.”

Welp. Liz wasn't wrong.

“I’m Raven.” The lone male extended his hand to shake. “While Liz is gone, I’m de facto Shaman for this Sabat.”

“Cool. Listen...*Raven*.” It almost choked her to say it. If his name wasn’t something like Jake or Brian on his driver’s license, she’d hang up her tarot cards forever. “I don’t know what you’ve got going on here, but I have a pregnant cat about to give birth upstairs—yet another thing Liz didn’t prepare me for—and no time for...” She flapped her hands at the crowd that’d somehow added four new members since she got there. “Whatever this is.”

“Sabat,” he said with the infinite patience of someone who didn’t need to worry about showering to get up for a job. “We’ll stay out of your hair. We just gather beneath the full moon to charge our crystals and moon water, sing and chant, and discuss the mysteries of the cosmos. Maybe do a few rituals.”

“Can’t you do that at your house?” she whined, doing her best to tamp down on her infamous irritability. She was recognizing some regular customers joining the group, and she’d tank the business if she got too out of line.

“Nope,” he said apologetically. “The ley lines are here, and the circle is cast. But if you’d like to join us later, we’ll be discussing the emerging sciences, such as the effects of solar flares on inner quantum mechanics.”

“That’s not a thing.” Lyra shook her head.

“Numerology.”

“You mean math?”

“Astrology.”

“Not a science.”

When so many would be offended, Raven looked over at her with a look she despised.

Pity.

“You’re a Gemini, aren’t you,” he asked.

Fuck him for a lucky guess. “That’s irrelevant.”

“Of course it is.” He patted her forearm before wandering toward where people were claiming their cushions.

Lyra’s entire operating system crashed into blue screen for a full ten seconds as the emergency alert system droned one long note in her ears. Oh, so she was today years old when she found out she was probably going to prison for murder.

And her victim’s name was Raven.

Or Brian or whatever.

Shaking her head, she let her temper spur her forward. “Hey, Raven, we have a no-bag policy, so you should probably ___”

“Since when?”

It wasn’t the words that pinned her feet to the floor.

It was the voice that spoke them. A smooth baritone threaded with hints of midnight and the slippery things he did to her with that mouth.

Her gaze snapped toward the doorway, where Cy was standing, his silhouette encompassing the whole threshold as if crafted by God to be framed like this.

He wore a t-shirt that hugged every contour of his muscular torso. His jeans were snug around his lean hips, making her heart pound in her chest. Those full lips that seemed to always be on the verge of a smile. His eyes were pools of midnight, so dark they reflected the silver light of the moon. His blue/black hair cascaded over his forehead, and her fingers itched to brush it aside.

“What are *you* doing here?” she asked instead. They’d silently agreed through polite texts and avoidant behavior to ignore each other and their stupid, sizzling chemistry until the tree-removal permit went through.

They’d been doing so well.

“I come to Sabat every month.” His explanation only served to pose more questions. “How have you been?”

“Fine. Busy.” She looked away, fiddling with the hem of her shirt.

“You don’t have to worry about Raven’s bag—it’s just his goon-goons,” he said.

She blinked at him once. Twice.

“Excuse me?”

“Drums!” Raven called, extracting a little set of hand drums from the bag.

Oh. Good. She was *hoping* for a cacophony of Bohemians to fuck up Larry’s labor.

“I’m so sorry, but we’ll have to cancel tonight.” She put on her most apologetic smile. “Larry’s going to give birth and it’s too chaotic. We can reschedule for next month if you’d like.”

A woman with dreadlocks frowned. “But sister, the full moon’s energy is most potent tonight. We must hold the ritual now. We will dance and chant for Liz’s companion Larry and her newborns!”

If Lyra wasn’t so irritated, she’d be charmed. Still, she had enough sanity left to attempt handling this diplomatically.

“I understand, but—”

“I’m a regular at these rituals,” Cy continued, “and I’d be happy to lead tonight’s ceremony so you can tend to your cat.” His gaze was shuttered, revealing nothing of his thoughts. “That way, everyone gets what they need.”

Those in attendance relaxed into their cushions as if he’d settled all questions, which served to just piss her off.

Lyra stared at Cy in dismay. She didn’t want him here, didn’t want to be indebted to him. Didn’t want uninvited people and their fucky moon water energizing messing with Larry’s evening, but they were paying customers, and he knew it.

Ugh. She was out of options.

“Fine,” she said stiffly. “Just make sure you lock up when you’re finished.” Because Liz had handed some fluffy shirt-

wearing a key to her shop without telling anybody, and now that was something else Lyra had to worry about.

Some guy named Raven who could just let himself in whenever the fuck...

Without waiting for Cy's reply, she turned on her heel and headed upstairs to Larry's room. The sounds of chanting and drumbeats followed her, a mocking reminder of the pulse that thrummed in her lady bits whenever that man was within a hundred yards of her.

She found Larry curled up in the corner of her box, meowing piteously.

"That's my good girl. You're going to be just fine." Heart squeezing, Lyra checked under Larry and saw with relief that a kitten was already halfway out. "I know it's hard. Everything is so hard right now. But we'll do this, okay? I'll be right here. But I won't bother you... I'll just...let you do your thing."

Larry meowed again, softer this time, and pushed her head into Lyra's hands. Lyra smiled, heart melting at this display of trust. She'd never been one for emotional attachment, but Larry had crept under her defenses when she wasn't looking. Now here they were, sharing this profound experience together.

"We're a team, you and me," Lyra whispered, gently encouraged when the first kitten began to squirm.

She lurked anxiously through the birth, coaxing each new life into the world with soft words and soft light. Larry hardly made a sound, producing three slimy bodies in an hour, licking them clean as she worked on delivering the next.

After the fourth kitten, Larry let out a distressed meow and began panting like a well-exercised dog. She stood, abandoning the squirmy newborns, and paced her box, attempting to get comfortable. Unable to do so, she repeated the behavior a couple of times.

Lyra's heart stuttered—something was wrong. Larry lay down and strained for several minutes without progress.

Lyra's mind raced as she tried to think of what to do. She needed help.

Gritting her teeth, she made her way to the door of the room, listening to the sounds of the drum circle and chanting that still echoed up the stairs. Taking a deep breath, she headed down, steeling herself for what she was about to do.

"That's it," she said, plunging into the center of the circle. "Everyone out!"

"But we're not done charging our moon water on the patio," Raven reminded her as if she'd lost her mind.

He'd not have done it if he'd known how close she was to losing her shit for real.

Lyra whirled to hand Raven his own ass when Cy's hand landed on her shoulder. "What's wrong? What do you need?"

The question brought detestable tears to her eyes.

No one ever asked her that. Nobody.

"Larry isn't doing well. Something's wrong, and the nearest emergency vet is an hour away. Can you clear these guys out while I take her?"

Cy took one look into her eyes and sprang into action. "Go upstairs and get Larry's box. I'll take care of things here."

Old Lyra would have taken him to task for issuing an order...but enough of her mental and emotional health hinged on Larry and her babies surviving the night, so she found herself swiveling on her heel and following his instructions.

By the time she'd conducted a panting, distressed cat down the stairs, all signs of the moon ritual had been erased as if by magic, and Cy was ushering the last old lady out the door.

Marching over to her, he relieved her of the burden and held the door open with his boot. "Hop in my truck. Kiki's is only seven minutes from here, and she'll know exactly what to do."

The drive to Kiki's farm felt like seven lifetimes, and Lyra found herself looking to Cy often, amazed that she drew

reassurance in every part of him. The confident, careful way he drove. The conversation he had on the phone with his sister.

The hand he put on her arm.

Finally, Cy pulled up in front of a well-maintained farmhouse, cutting the engine. She let him lead the way into the house, where Kiki greeted them at the door. “I’ve got everything set up to examine the wee ones. Cypress said it was a difficult birth?”

“Her breathing just keeps getting more labored,” Cy said grimly when Lyra found it impossible to speak around the lump in her throat.

“Bring her inside,” Kiki instructed the pair, leading them into the warm, welcoming farmhouse. The scent of fresh-baked bread mingled with the earthy aroma of the outdoor alfalfa and something garlic-infused cooking for dinner.

“Is Daniel here?” Cy asked.

“With his father,” Kiki said over her shoulder in a tone that displayed exactly how unhappy she was with that fact.

She led them to a back room and quickly set to work examining Larry, her skilled hands moving deftly over the cat’s trembling body. “Her labor’s been going on too long. She’ll need some help,” she explained, grabbing a small medical kit from a nearby cabinet.

“Whatever you need me to do, just tell me,” Lyra said, her voice shaking with barely suppressed emotion. She’d never felt this fiercely protective of another living being before, and it both terrified and exhilarated her.

“Here, hold her steady while I do this,” Kiki said, handing Lyra a pair of latex gloves. As the two women worked together under Cy’s watchful gaze, Lyra realized that she wasn’t just fighting for Larry’s survival—she was fighting for her own.

She held Larry’s quivering body as Kiki prepared her for the procedure, feeling both the fear and fragility of life and death in her hands. She closed her eyes, willing this little creature to pull through. For them all to be okay. She didn’t

feel the hot tears on her cheeks, or the unsteadiness of her knees, until the fifth kitten finally emerged, mewling and slick with life.

The moment Larry relaxed, the room seemed to deflate as readily as their lungs.

Lyra couldn't look up until she noticed Larry reach for the new addition and lustily clean the kitten.

"That's a good sign," Kiki said with a radiant smile, trading Lyra's rubber gloves for a tissue.

Fuck, Lyra thought as she very carefully didn't look up at Cy.

She couldn't remember the last man who'd seen her cry.

Topping

PRUNING TECHNIQUE TO REDUCE HEIGHT BY HEADING OF
LARGE BRANCHES. GENERALLY CONSIDERED POOR
PRACTICE.



CY STOOD IN THE DOORWAY OF THE SPARE ROOM TURNED makeshift animal rehab, taking in the transformation his sister Kiki had wrought in their childhood home. Like the county where she now served as sheriff, the once cluttered, sprawling old Victorian home where they were raised seemed to have benefited tremendously from his older sister's calm, orderly presence.

As had his life.

Just stepping over the threshold had lowered his blood pressure by several points.

It had been too long.

A fact that his sister had not-so-gently needled him about every time Lyra's back was turned. As it was now.

Bent toward the golden glow of the warming lamp next to the blanket-lined plastic tub that served as a bed for Larry and her litter of seven newborn kittens, Lyra looked like an angel.

Albeit a slightly cranky, begrudgingly maternal one.

"Don't think dragging the girl I tried to get you to date in high school out here is going to excuse your flagrant shirking of brotherly duties," Kiki said from the side of her mouth.

"What shirking?" Cy muttered back. "I came to brunch, didn't I?" After Kiki had given him no end of shit for several days prior.

"Before disappearing to aggressively prune Myrtle's hibiscus trees for nearly the entire time. Which she's telling

everyone is because you're sexually frustrated."

And for once, the well-meaning geriatric gossip girl was right.

Cy sighed heavily, feeling the need inside him swell to almost unbearable heights. He had been so close—so *fucking* close—to finally finishing what he and Lyra had started on that bus all those years ago when his father had come blustering in as oblivious as a goddamn tornado.

Just as he had so many times in this very room. It had been his, once upon a time. A place to play video games until his sanity felt like a distant memory. A place whose four corners he'd filled with dreams of getting out of Townsend Harbor.

A place he'd dreamed of Lyra after their fateful encounter on the bus.

And here she was.

Real, and alive, and having not the first clue that Cy stood there drowning in the common stream of both their thwarted encounters.

The taste of her tongue. The scent of her skin. The damp heat of her—

"You've been isolating again." His sister's accusation punched through his fantasy.

"Bullshit."

Okay, so he'd been spending a lot of time alone lately, but wasn't being okay with your own company supposed to be a good thing? A sign of self-acceptance or whatever the hell the therapist who'd led those group meetings he'd participated in for all of a month after his accident said?

It wasn't like he'd been actively avoiding anyone. He just found the presence of most other humans exhausting.

Kiki hugged her arms around a torso disappearing into her oversized flannel shirt. "I know you, remember? And every October, you—"

“Thank you again.” The words brought them both up short. Lyra was looking at them, her green eyes brightened by a sheen that had Cy’s heart pounding like a jackhammer. Her gaze lingered on his sister before finally meeting his own. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

Kiki waved away the sentiment with a gruff chuckle as she pushed off the wall and strode across the room.

“It was nothing,” she said, catching Cy’s eye as Lyra pulled her into an unexpected hug that made something inside him ache. “I’m just glad I could help.”

They released each other and stepped back.

“I just can’t believe the setup you have here,” Lyra said, glancing around at the impressive array of medical supplies.

“A necessary one, unfortunately.” Kiki adjusted the dial of the heating pad tucked beneath the blankets in Larry’s box. “I don’t know what it is about a country road that makes every asshole in the state figure this is a good spot to offload unwanted pets, but they’ve been doing it since we were kids.”

Cy’s jaw reflexively clenched at the flood of unwelcome memories. He’d seen too many abandoned and injured animals turn up over the years, their trust shattered by the very people who were supposed to care for them.

“I was thinking,” Kiki began, lifting her arms in a stretch. “Maybe you ought to leave Larry and her brood here overnight? I have some late-season racoon kits I have to get up every two hours to feed anyway. It’d be easy enough for me to check on these little guys while I’m at it.”

“You’d really be willing to do that?” Relief colored Lyra’s voice as she absently stroked the spot between Larry’s ears.

Cy bit his lip to keep from breaking out in a grin. He wondered if she even realized she was doing it.

“You bet.” Kiki’s mouth distorted in a yawn so obviously fake, he rolled his eyes. “Just stop by whenever to pick them up.”

“Don’t you have to work tomorrow?” Cy asked.

“I actually have someone who stops by to look after the current patients while I’m gone during the day,” Kiki said, speaking to Lyra instead of him. “Which Cy would know, if he ever came to visit.”

The barb of guilt landed squarely in Cy’s chest. Exactly where his sister had meant to.

“If you’re sure you wouldn’t mind,” Lyra said. “I haven’t quite kitten-proofed my room yet, and—”

“I’m positive,” Kiki insisted. “These guys will be no trouble at all.”

He doubted if this was the case, but felt an intense surge of gratitude for his sister despite his lingering irritation.

“All right, then.” Lyra leaned over the box, scratching below Larry’s chin to tilt her sleek black muzzle upward. “I’ll be back for you tomorrow morning. Under absolutely no circumstances are you allowed to pull your usual bullshit,” she said with great affection. “You’re a custodial parent now. You need to set a good example.”

Larry’s copper eyes met Lyra’s for a slow blink.

Watching her murmur encouraging things to the cat produced feelings in Cy much like those he’d experienced when his father relayed to him that Lyra had helped little Ben navigate an episode of sensory overload. She had absolutely no idea what a balm she was. That, far from icy or rigid, she was like a long, cool draft from a hidden spring.

The thought sparked an idea.

“Ready?” Cy asked.

Lyra nodded, quickly blinking away the sheen that had glazed her eyes as she gave the cat’s fur a last affectionate ruffle.

Kiki walked them out to the front porch, where they lingered beneath the caged light hooked to a bright orange extension cord that snaked the length of the railing.

His sister was always, *always* working on something. Even when they were kids, and those somethings often meant co-

opting supplies in ways that didn't necessarily reflect their original intended uses.

A trait she'd inherited directly from their father.

Looking out over the darkened property, Cy felt a familiar pang.

For several years now, they'd been trying to convince their father to move into the bougie tiny house Kiki had built by hand on their property with that express purpose in mind.

Maybe, they'd reasoned, if they could downsize his house, they could downsize his household. Convince him that it was time to transition to a volunteer foster grandpa instead of a foster parent.

Marty Forrester was having none of it. His stubbornness was as ingrained as the roots of the trees that surrounded their childhood home.

"You'll call me if anything happens?" Lyra asked, hesitating on the top step.

"Of course," Kiki said, giving Lyra a quick, friendly side-hug. "But you have nothing to worry about."

Turning her attention to Cy, Kiki leaned in, looping her arms beneath his. "Dare you to not fuck this up," she said before smacking a kiss onto his cheek.

"Dare you to mind your own goddamn business," he muttered back.

"Night!" Kiki called brightly as they made their way to Cy's truck.

Once inside, he punched the ignition and backed out of the driveway his sister had paved earlier that summer, waiting until they hit gravel to turn to Lyra.

"You okay?" he asked.

Stupid question, really.

Her hands sat in her lap, knotted tightly enough to leave her knuckles white-tipped. Her mouth was pulled down into a

worried line, and she kept darting glances out the side window as if debating whether to sprint back to the house.

“I’m fine,” she said, her voice tight.

“We can go back,” he suggested. “I can turn the truck around right now and—”

“No,” she said sharply enough to startle herself. “No,” she repeated, softer this time. “I know that Kiki’s house is the best place for Larry to be if something happens.”

“But?” Cy asked.

A sharp jerk of her shoulders that tried to pass for a shrug. “But nothing.”

“But?” he repeated.

“But what if something *does* happen?” She bit her lip before turning to Cy, her gaze now pleading. “It’s surprisingly common for new mothers to develop mastitis or eclampsia or toxemia, or for the kittens to have problems with their breathing or suckling. There’s also the possibility of infection or parasites that might require medication or even surgery.”

“And you’re afraid that Kiki won’t catch it in time?” Cy asked, keeping his gaze trained on the road.

“I’m afraid—” Lyra’s voice thickened. She sniffled and quickly swiped at her face. “I’m afraid Larry will be in pain and wonder why I’m not there.”

In a move as risky as any he’d yet taken, Cy reached across the console and took her hand.

Or took her fist, anyway. Tense as a tree knot against his palm as he wrapped his fingers around it.

“You saved Larry’s life, Lyra,” he said quietly.

“Please.”

“You did,” he said. “Twice now, you trusted your instincts, and you were right.”

She snorted and shook her head. “My instincts didn’t even tell me Larry was a girl.”

“Your instincts told you Larry is an asshole, which has far more catastrophic consequences. You made the right call.”

She shot him a chilly look. “Then why do I feel like I failed?”

“Because you hold yourself to ridiculously exacting standards that no human could achieve.”

The words tripped from his tongue before he could call them back, and now, there was no way out but through.

Lyra stared straight ahead, her profile like the prow of a ship cutting through the forest’s dense shadow. “But a bitch could achieve them.”

Cy wasn’t sure if the imagined sounds of ice cracking came from her frosty exterior, or the conversational surface beneath his boots. Either way, caution was warranted.

“Gonna need some supplemental context for that statement,” he said.

Slowly, but gradually, her fist began to loosen beneath his.

“Townsend Harbor is ruining me,” she said. “Before I came back here, I was so...so...*sharp*.”

She lifted her hand from his, and it seemed as though she was finally able to find the words she’d been searching for.

“I had a plan and a career I was determined to stick with. My apartment in Philadelphia was amazing, and I had friends who were just as motivated and ambitious as me. But now, I’m back here.” She shook her head, her gaze pinning him. “It’s like the air here makes me duller, makes me feel less...capable. Like all the power that once drove me has been sucked away.”

Cy swallowed ash. “Maybe your ambition will return once you’re back in Philadelphia.”

He said it as much as a reminder to himself as an encouragement. Because he had absolutely no doubt that this had been her plan all along.

She paused for a moment before continuing. “It’s not just my ambition that I’m worried about.”

“What *are* you worried about?”

“People around here, they think they’re helping by letting me fall apart. By supporting me enough that I can dissolve into pieces. But all they’re really doing is helping me be broken.”

“You’re not broken,” Cy said, more sharply than he intended.

“But I am,” she said. Her nails were digging into her knee, but she didn’t seem to notice. “And in a town like this, there’s no escaping it. Because everyone remembers who you were supposed to be, and like it or not, they’re comparing. They’re comparing, and they’re wondering why you— Look out!”

Cy’s gaze snapped to the windshield, and his heart leapt into his throat as he saw a white blur ahead of him on the road. He slammed on the brakes and skidded to a stop just in time for Myrtle’s three-legged llama, Darrell, to cross the street.

Pausing at the road cut to chew a mouthful of weeds, Darrell stared back at them with his one good eye, unperturbed by their close call.

Lyra and Cy locked eyes, silent for a full second before they were hijacked by hysterical laughter. They laughed until their sides ached, until neither of them could breathe, until it finally faded away into an easy silence.

At last able to catch her breath, Lyra wiped her eyes and smiled. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“For what?” he asked as Darrell continued to graze in the background.

“For risking karma to make a point.”

What that point might be, Cy had no fucking clue.

He was too busy marveling that, for the first time in five years, it hadn’t occurred to him to be bothered by the sound of screeching tires.



“THEY TOTALLY KNEW.”

Cy followed Lyra’s gaze to the window, where Myrtle and Vee stood arm in arm, waving from the front porch as they pulled away from her property after returning Darrell.

“How would they know?” he asked.

“Aside from the fact of our driving around the back roads of Townsend Harbor together after midnight?” she asked.

“You’re forgetting about Larry,” Cy pointed out, remembering what he thought to be an impressive piece of storytelling on his part.

Lyra settled back into her seat, crossing her legs as she looked out on the snatch of road revealed by the truck’s headlights. “They didn’t believe you.”

Cy glanced at her profile. “What gives you that impression?”

Lyra smiled, a knowing look in her eyes. “Body language,” she said. “I’m a lawyer, remember? I’ve sat through enough jury selection processes to know when someone is skeptical.” She shot him a sideways smile. “Also, I probably left an ass-print in the potting soil on the worktable.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “I know for a fact I swept your ass-print into the herb planter.”

The stinging slap she delivered to his thigh did fuck all to shrink his dick.

“Speaking of planters, thanks for the job you did on Gemma’s plants,” she said. “They didn’t suspect a thing.”

Cy slowed for the fork that would either take them directly into town, or away from it. “So they’re back?”

“Yep,” Lyra sighed.

“Eager to get home?”

“Nope,” she said. “Why?”

“I have an idea.”

TEN

Limb

SAME AS BRANCH, BUT USUALLY LARGER AND MORE
PROMINENT.



CY KILLED THE ENGINE AS THEY HIT THE CLEARING.

“Where are we?” Lyra asked, squinting through the windshield.

“You’ll see.” After unbuckling his belt, Cy opened his door and walked around the truck’s cab to open hers. “This way,” he said, offering her his hand.

Together, they walked through the dense forest, illuminated by the silver moonlight filtering through the trees. The scent of damp earth and pine filled the air as they moved deeper into the woods. Finally, they reached their destination: a hidden hot spring nestled within a granite grotto on Kiki’s property.

“Wow,” Lyra breathed, her eyes widening. Steam formed an ethereal mist that drifted lazily through the air, obscuring the moon’s glow on waters that were a deep emerald by daylight. Above them, the sky stretched out like a vast canvas, the stars winking among the clouds in the Pacific Northwest night.

“Who even knew this was here?” she marveled, her tension visibly melting away as she took in their surroundings.

“My dad showed it to me and Kiki when we were kids,” Cy explained, pride swelling in his chest. “I used to sneak out here after our chores were done.”

Lyra stepped closer to the edge of the water, dipping her fingers in and issuing a contented sigh at the warmth. She looked back at Cy, her eyes shining.

“This is amazing,” she said softly, the hint of a smile playing on her lips.

“Glad you think so,” Cy replied, indecently pleased with the sight of her delight. “The water’s magic, you know.”

As predicted, her smooth brow accorded at the center. “Magic?”

“Yep,” he said. “Guaranteed to rinse away any and all stress from unexpected cat parenthood and/or suspicious septuagenarians.”

Lyra crossed her arms across her breasts. “Is that so?”

“Nope,” Cy said, reaching into his pocket to drop his keys onto a rock. “But I can give you some pretty impressive statistics about hydrotherapy if you need a compelling reason to get naked beneath a full moon.”

Though he couldn’t see it, Cy could practically hear Lyra’s swallow. “Naked?”

Reaching for the hem of his thermal, Cy hauled it over his head. “We’re miles from anyone else.”

“All right,” she finally agreed, a mischievous smile spreading across her face. “But no peeking.”

Cy raised his hand in a mock salute as he turned away to give her some privacy, glad to have some of his own.

He had to tell her.

He’d known this moment would come. Or rather, he’d hoped it would, which was a strange thing to realize after so many years of concealing this particular part of the accident’s aftermath.

He’d certainly given it a lot of thought, but none of the scenarios he’d rehearsed in his head seemed to have a single thing in common with the present moment. The talking points he’d planned felt as flat and dead as the sole of his boot. He needed to work up to this. Carefully and thoughtfully prepare her. To find the exact right way to—

“I have a prosthetic.”

Well, shit.

Nowhere in his vivid fantasies of this very moment had those words left his lips. And now, here they were, solid as the rocks surrounding the steaming water and just as capable of dragging him to the bottom.

Lyra turned to face him. “I know.”

Cy blinked at her.

He’d already begun steeling himself against the regular carousel of reactions he typically received from people when they fielded this information.

And field it they did. Then catch it and quickly grind it in hopes of stubbing out the sting.

“Who told you?” he asked.

“No one.” She pulled off her sweater in the headlights’ golden glow. “I saw your ankle when you were picking up Larry’s box earlier.”

Only when he realized that he could taste the night air did Cy realize his mouth was open.

She’d *seen* it?

But she hadn’t acted any different. Hadn’t missed a single beat. Hadn’t dropped any hints that would allow him to bring it up while still saving face. Or whatever it was he’d been saving.

Lyra McKendrick simply *knew*.

And it didn’t matter.

It hadn’t affected the way she looked at him. Spoke to him.

It hadn’t even affected the way she gave him shit.

Standing there with the cotton wad of his shirt clutched in his hands, Cy felt unsteady for reasons that—for once—had nothing to do with his own misfortune.

He had managed to keep this one thing a secret from all but his father, his sister, and Ethan, but he couldn’t hide it from her now.

Not here, not tonight.

“I’m sorry,” she said, folding her pants neatly and placing them on a flat rock. “I shouldn’t have just blurted it out like that.”

“It’s okay.” Cy eased himself down on a nearby boulder to remove his boots.

Wearing only a bra, panties, and an expression of concern, Lyra came and sat beside him. “What I mean is, I didn’t mean to pre-empt you.”

“Please,” he said, unable to keep his gaze from sinking into the dark ravine of her cleavage. “Pre-empt me.”

To be naked with a woman and *not* have to talk about it for once? There was a refreshing thought.

So why the hell did he find himself unspooling the entire complicated tale for her?

The accident. The aftermath. The surgeries. The agonizing physical therapy. How he’d effectively cut himself off from everyone and everything once he got back to Townsend Harbor. How he’d gradually begun to reintegrate himself for Kiki and Ethan’s benefit. And, okay, for his father’s benefit as well.

Lyra listened intently, silent while a pair of barred owls called to each other somewhere in the trees after he’d finished.

“Well, that explains the repressed rage.” Lyra’s shoulder brushed his as she hugged her legs to her torso.

“Repressed rage?” Cy repeated.

“Yep,” she said.

Cy gave her what he hoped was a neutral look. “I don’t have repressed rage.”

“People as nice as you are to everyone always have repressed rage,” she said with the certainty of fact. “Believe me. I’ve lived on the East Coast for the past five years, and I’ve known you for even longer than that. It’s a topic I’m more than qualified to speak on.”

“It’s not your qualifications I doubt,” Cy said. “It’s the application.”

Lyra only shrugged, which was all the more maddening now that the idea wouldn’t leave his head.

Yeah, he’d been an angry kid, but that was pretty normal for someone who’d lost his mom, right? Following the accident, there had been a lot of pain and frustration, but Cy would like to see anyone come through what he had and not want to curse the heavens...or whatever.

Curse.

That word again.

It rolled around his head like a marble, refusing to settle and stay.

It was the intimacy it implied. That he’d been singled out for suffering.

The very idea of it rankled him. Rinsed him in stinging self-pity. And yet that was exactly how he felt.

“*If* I had any rage, and I’m not saying I do, I don’t understand what that has to do with being nice.”

“Well,” Lyra began, then lost the rest of her sentence to a shiver.

“Wait,” he said. “Let’s get in.”

He’d put this off long enough.

Cy bent at the waist to peel his jeans over his knees, revealing the black polymer cuff swallowing up his left calf.

Lyra’s gaze moved over it as if it were just another part of him, neither pitying nor perfunctory. As if it didn’t define him in any way. As if what she’d felt in the greenhouse was no more affected by this discovery than it would be by a birthmark. As if the questions she asked were motivated by curiosity rather than concern.

“Do you have to take your prosthesis off to get in the water?”

“Not this one,” Cy said. “It’s made by a company in Iceland that specializes in waterproof locks and adapters.” He knew she’d likely have no idea what the terminology meant but went on anyway. “I’ve been working directly with one of their consultants on a new line that supports outdoor climbing use. In fact, they’re integrating 3D printing into the fitting process, and...and I should definitely shut up before I bore you to sleep and you get hypothermia.”

“Don’t,” Lyra said. “Don’t shut up, I mean. I’d really like to know.”

In that moment, Cy felt something shift. Not inside him, but around him. Beneath him.

It made the world seem solid enough for him to offer her his hand.

Lyra took it without hesitation, following his lead as they walked to the large, flat rock by the steaming pool’s edge.

Carefully, Cy sat down, and they slid in together.

The sudden warmth of the water enveloped them like a sensual embrace, contrasting sharply with the chilly October air that nipped at their exposed skin. He watched her face, eager to drink in every detail of her reaction.

“Wow,” she sighed, her eyes widening in delight. “This is delicious.”

And it was, just as it had been the first time he returned here after his accident.

Never had he thought that sharing it with another human could intensify the feeling of sacred solitude he’d found here. And yet with Lyra immersed beside him, every sensory detail he’d so loved since he was a boy was distilled into an even more powerful draft. The water’s soothing heat. The refreshing contrast of the cool breeze. The heady tea of dead leaves and damp earth.

“You were saying?” Lyra prompted him.

“I was saying that I’d much rather you finish your thought about repressed rage than ramble on about transtibial imaging

and supracondylar sockets.”

He watched as she waded through the murky water, bobbing to face him.

“When you get called a bitch as much as I do—”

“Who called you a bitch?” Cy asked, suddenly infused with a potent, protective wrath. “When?”

“Cy—”

“I’ll fucking rip their tongue out and stuff it up their asshole.” The water’s temperature seemed to rise by several degrees, boiling sweat to his brow.

“See? Now that’s the kind of thing you need to express on your own behalf.”

Cy allowed the thought some room to stretch its legs.

There was a fair amount of frustration in his day-to-day life. From the extra steps his prosthetic required during his morning routine to the heightened anxiety he felt every damn time he slid behind the wheel.

And that didn’t even touch the pain silently grinding him down daily, while the helpful smile remained welded to his carefully arranged face.

How many times? How many times in the course of one life had he smiled when he wanted to snarl? Grinned when he wanted to growl?

“I guess you might have a point,” he said.

“I know I do. What I think we need to do is— Yeek!” she gasped, and lurched toward him, comically clinging to his arm.

“What is it?” he asked, savoring the feel of her warm body against his chest. “What’s the matter?”

“I stepped in something slimy.”

“Probably just a little algae,” he said. “There are only certain kinds that can survive at this temperature, but the ones that can are prolific.”

“Kinky,” she said, turning her face up to meet his gaze. She parted her lips as if to say something more, but instead, she anchored her hands on his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Instinctively, Cy scooped beneath the curve of her ass, relishing the pleasant ache as blood began to pulse toward his groin. He pulled Lyra against him, holding her close as the warmth gradually seeped into their skin. Above them, the night sky kept its silent watch, the stars the only witness to the understanding passing between them, unspoken but undeniable.

It was so fucking beautiful.

Cy wanted to memorize everything about this moment. To catalog the exact scent of evergreens mingled with the earthy, mineral-infused water suffusing the air around them with a primal energy. Cocooning them from the autumn chill. He wanted to map every single point where her body melded to his.

Because in nature, moments this beautiful rarely lasted. A sunset. A snowstorm. Spring blossoms. Autumn leaves.

There and gone in a blink.

“Whatcha thinking?” Lyra asked.

The companion question to the one she asked when he’d held very still inside her in the greenhouse.

“I was just wondering what the best dates are to see the constellation you’re named after. Why?” Cy asked. “What are you thinking?”

She nuzzled her face into the crook of his neck, raising gooseflesh on his arms as she inhaled deeply. “I was just wondering why you smell so goddamn good.”

This answer, along with the sudden uptick in affection, had Cy pulling back to search her face. “You all right?”

“It’s the kittens,” Lyra lamented. “I’m experiencing some kind of oxytocin-induced sensory overload.”

“I think it’s contagious,” he said, reeling with a sudden surge of affection for her.

“I’m being serious,” she insisted.

“So am I,” he said.

Cy smiled and helped Lyra settle into a rocky shelf beneath the water before seating himself beside her. The water lapped around them at chest level, leaching the tension from Cy’s neck and shoulders.

“This is nice,” she said.

“Mmhm,” he agreed, letting his eyes fall closed.

He wasn’t sure how long they’d sat there when a slight shift in the light preceded the sensation of her lightly brushing his damp hair away from his forehead.

Cy held very still as her fingertips moved over his brow, his cheekbone, down the line of his jaw.

And everywhere she touched, small sparks lit up the darkness behind his eyelids.

“Lyra—” Cy began, but his words were cut off by the warm press of her lips against his.

“Shh,” Lyra whispered, before kissing him again, more deeply this time. “Come here.”

Cy let himself be guided toward the ledge on the side of the hot spring, leaving him in the water from the knees down.

Naked in the moonlight from the thighs up.

To his great surprise, only mild alarm rose when he realized what she intended to do.

The few memorable encounters he’d had over the last several years were brief, and typically conducted while at least partially clothed. Never in that time had Cy allowed another human close enough to place her hands on his bare knees while she—

He sucked in a sharp breath as Lyra’s warm, wet hand found him, circling the base of his cock before slowly gliding

up and down his length with achingly deliberate movements.

It was the most exquisite torture Cy had ever experienced. He closed his eyes as her slender fingers explored every inch of him before settling into featherlight strokes that had him trembling with need.

With each touch, Lyra grew bolder, more demanding, the intensity increasing so gradually it bordered on tantric. He could hardly hear his own voice above the rush of blood in his ears.

“God, baby,” he moaned. “That feels so good.”

“Who said you could call me baby?”

Cy didn’t even have time to formulate an answer before her lips closed over him.

His hips jerked involuntarily, driving him deep enough into the lush heat of her mouth to make her throat contract. “Shit,” he rasped. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“Don’t be.” Lyra lifted her head, looking him straight in the eye. “I love how responsive you are.”

Cy’s breath caught as she brushed her wet lips across the swollen tip, smiling as she slowly took him deeper, deeper, until he felt the head of his cock brush against the back of her throat. She convulsed around him, but his attempt at retreat was foiled by her firm grip on his hips.

“Lyra.” Cy opened his eyes to tell her she didn’t need to do this, but found himself looking into the gaze of a lioness. All heat and hunt. She moaned around his cock, and the vibrations seemed to rumble all the way to his core, waking a beast long dormant inside him.

He thrust his fingers into her hair, clutching at the silky strands, beginning to move his hips as he guided her—working to match her pace as she pulled back to use the light suction of her lips, the graze of her teeth, the press of her tongue, to drive him insane.

He wasn’t sure how long he could stay silent, or even if he wanted to. A low growl escaped him when he felt her tongue

flick against the underside of his tip.

“*Fuck*,” he gasped, feeling himself nearing the edge of no return.

They’d fallen into a rhythm accompanied by the gentle slap of sloshing water and the answering thrum in his ears. In his chest.

In his very bones.

“*Fuck*, Lyra. You’re going to make me come.”

She lifted her heavy-lidded eyes to him. “About fucking time.”

With those words, the end rolled through him like a riptide, each wave crashing with a ferocity that left him shuddering like an exhausted animal. He tightened his grip on her hair, losing himself in the sight of her long, slender neck as she tipped her head back. Reveling in the tight clench of her throat, he released a feral cry. His voice echoed off the ancient stone as he plunged headlong into bliss.

When it finally ended, he collapsed back against the rock, his body still twitching with aftershocks. Lyra watched him from the pool’s edge with a satisfied half-smile on her lips.

Cy wanted to say something, to find words adequate to express the magnitude of his relief. His release. Instead, he simply reached up to cup her cheek and run the pad of his thumb across her lower lip.

“Christ,” he moaned, wincing at the heat hitting his oversensitized skin as he slipped back into the water. “That wasn’t at all how I’d planned for this to go.”

“How so?” she asked.

Cy swiped the sweat from his face. “I brought you out here to make *you* feel better.”

“Who says that I don’t?” she asked with a wicked smirk. “Aside from being a little dizzy.”

Cy levered himself out of the water, helping Lyra up after him.

A rush of cool air made steam rise from their bodies like misty apparitions as they gathered their clothes and picked their way back to the truck. After hunting behind the seat, Cy came back with a towel that he handed to Lyra.

“How about coming to my place?” he asked, catching her gaze for a moment.

The question seemed to surprise her as much as it had him. He couldn't remember the last time another human had actually crossed the threshold.

“Like for a sleepover?” she asked, toweling the ends of her dark hair.

Levelled by a fresh onslaught of desire, Cy pulled her to him. “*Like*, so I can do very bad things to you.”

ELEVEN

Kindred

A GROUP OF GATHERING HEATHENS.



LYRA STUMBLED THROUGH THE CABIN DOORWAY INTO CY'S arms. Their lips crashed together as he kicked the door shut behind them. He slid his hands under her shirt, tracing the curve of her spine as he backed her against the wall.

“God, you drive me crazy,” he growled against her mouth. She could feel the evidence of his desire pressing into her belly, sending a rush of heat pooling between her legs.

Men just didn't do that to her.

Ever.

Let alone twice in a day.

When had she become so thirsty? She blamed it on the moonlight filtering through the windows, the rhythmic melody of the night creatures outside, the clean, woody scent of Cy that made her dizzy with need.

He yanked her shirt over her head and reached for the clasp of her bra, cursing under his breath. “So beautiful. I can't wait to taste you again.”

A shock of arousal shot through her at his words, and desire coiled tight in her core.

Cy lifted her easily, guiding her legs around his waist as he carried her to the bedroom. Her heart raced with equal parts anticipation and trepidation. She wanted this—wanted him—but the intensity of her need frightened her.

After what he'd shared. What she'd done. It was all so real. So much. So...incredible.

Lyra didn't trust something so good. Never had.

He tossed her onto the bed before stripping away the remainder of her clothes in hurried, greedy movements. When he paused to remove his prosthetic leg, she saw a flicker of vulnerability in his eyes.

She touched her lips to the skin that was smooth and twisted, cold to the touch like a winter night. She felt his body tense as he braced himself for the pain she might cause him, but his fear soon melted away as his apprehension was replaced by an inferno of hunger burning from his eyes.

He blazed a path up her body with his lips, stopping to lick and nibble along the way. He trailed his hands along her curves, leaving a lingering heat on her skin as he explored every inch of her.

She gasped when his finger split the seam of her sex. Pleasure radiated from her core and down the length of her body. He growled low in his throat, pressing her thighs open with his palms, exposing her completely before lowering his head.

The first stroke of his tongue sent her hips bucking off the bed. She cried out, tangling her hands in his hair to keep him there.

Her breath came in ragged gasps as she moved to meet each thrust of his tongue, every caress sending a wave of pleasure crashing over her body. He shifted position, lowering himself deeper between her legs and lapping at the slick heat pooling there.

Lyra shuddered under the force of his touch, all rational thought forgotten as wave after wave of sensation roared through her veins like wildfire.

He devoured her with single-minded purpose, wringing pleasure from her body until the coil of tension in her belly snapped and shattered into a million pieces.

As her climax ebbed, she became aware of Cy moving over her. His eyes gleamed with primal hunger in the pale

moonlight as he poised at her entrance. “I’m going to fuck you long and hard, Lyra. You ready for that?”

She pulled him down for a searing kiss, wrapping her legs around his waist in silent invitation. He slid home in one smooth thrust, stretching and filling her so exquisitely that she thought she might come undone all over again.

This was dangerous. Too much, too fast. But as Cy began to move, Lyra surrendered herself to the magic of the moment. To the solace she found in his arms.

Cy rocked into her with deep, languid strokes. His hands roamed over her body, mapping the curves and hollows as if he meant to commit them to memory.

Lyra arched into his touch, admitting that she craved the intimacy as much as the physical pleasure.

She’d never felt so connected to another person. So seen.

He shifted, hooking her leg over his shoulder to drive into her at a new angle. The change in position set her nerve endings alight, sparking little lightning strikes of ecstasy with his every thrust.

“You’re so beautiful like this,” he rasped, gaze smoldering as he watched her come undone. “So open. So wet. So mine.”

Heat flooded her cheeks even as her inner walls clenched around him. She was balanced on a razor’s edge, teetering toward oblivion once more.

To her astonishment, he denied her.

Lyra’s breath caught as Cy pulled away and lifted her body from its prone position. “On your hands and knees,” he whispered, brushing his lips to her ear before he bent her over.

Lax as her bones were, she complied. Her limbs trembled as they supported her. This wasn’t the gentle lovemaking she was used to—this was something entirely different. Rough, primal, verging on dangerous.

And she loved every second of it.

She positioned herself on the bed, gripping the headboard as Cy drove into her from behind. A broken moan escaped her lips.

So full. So deep.

“Look at yourself.” Cy fisted a hand in her hair, forcing her gaze to the mirror on the wall. “Look how gorgeous you are when I fuck you.”

Her reflection was wanton and wild, cheeks flushed and eyes heavy-lidded. As he thrust into her again, she gasped at the sight of him behind her, all dark skin and lean muscle.

“Touch yourself,” he ordered her.

She obeyed, sliding a hand between her legs.

But instead of letting her find her own pleasure, Cy surprised her by caressing the cleft of her ass, playing with the bud there, slipping a finger inside, then another.

It felt incredible.

With each stroke of his hand and thrust of his hips, Lyra found herself spiraling higher and higher. His fingers expertly teased her until she was quaking on the brink.

“I want to feel you come around my cock.”

The intensity of his words forced her over the edge once again. Wave after wave of pleasure cascaded through her until she could no longer contain it, and with a guttural cry she clamped down around him as pleasure imprisoned her body in rude, shuddering spasms.

His answering groan reverberated in her ears as their bodies quivered in shared ecstasy.

At the last moment, Cy pulled out of her body, jettisoning warm pulses of his pleasure against her bent ass with guttural sounds.

When they were both spent, Lyra collapsed forward onto the bed, boneless and content.

Cy retrieved a warm washcloth from the adjoining bathroom and tenderly wiped her down, cleaning away their

shared sweat and pleasure until she felt like herself again.

“You okay?” he asked, brushing a damp lock of hair from her forehead as he stretched out and gathered her into his chest.

She huffed out a laugh. “*That* was incredible. I’ve never... Not like that.”

“Good.” He kissed her, surprisingly sweet. “Because if you give me twenty minutes, we can do it again.”

A warm contentment seeped into Lyra’s bones as she nestled into the shelter of his embrace. She wanted to ask him more about his leg. About his life. About the house they were in and the time he spent here.

And she would any moment.

It was just that...she felt like she could breathe for the first time in forever. That she could relax.

It was a strange sensation. One she’d not realized she was lacking until she found it. Feeling like she was truly where she was supposed to be, instead of driving ever forward, wishing to be somewhere or someone else. To achieve more. To reach further.

Right now?

Nothing else mattered.



LYRA BLINKED AWAKE AS SUNLIGHT STREAMED THROUGH THE windows, momentarily disoriented. Then memories of the previous night came flooding back in lurid detail, bringing a flush to her cheeks.

Oh balls. He’d wanted more last night—*she’d* wanted more—and she’d fallen asleep on him.

She sat up with a yawn, noting the empty space beside her. The sheets were still warm, so Cy couldn’t have been up too long.

The aroma of bacon and coffee wafted under the door, and her stomach rumbled in response.

Swinging her legs off the side of the bed, she searched for her clothes, only to realize they were scattered somewhere by the front door. Heat infused her face as she recalled how they'd torn at each other's clothes in their haste to fuck.

Before last night, she thought that was only something people did in the movies.

Finger-combing her hair, she glanced around the room, trying to orient herself to a morning after she'd not expected in a million years.

Cy had a clean but spare main suite done in what she'd call bachelor chic. Solid colors, white sheets and walls. A few Salish renderings of totemic animals hung on the far wall, and she'd almost bet it was the only art in the house.

Spying one of Cy's flannel shirts draped over a chair, she shrugged it on and slid out the bedroom door. Not feeling ready to face the kitchen yet, she wandered down the long hall, peeking into any doors left ajar. The cabin was rustic and lovely, passably neat but with a clutter of knickknacks that were obviously gifts, heirlooms, or useful items. She found another bathroom. Spare bedroom.

And then pressed the door open to Cy's office.

Lyra gasped in awe as she stepped into the room. She had expected to find a typical, manly office: perhaps a toolbox, some hunting and fishing paraphernalia. But this...this was something else entirely.

The room was crammed with shelves of books and magazines devoted to robotics, artificial intelligence, computing technology, and other advanced topics. Atop the desk sat two large monitors connected to a tower computer with an array of blinking lights that indicated it was still running. There was also a variety of gadgets—a 3D printer, soldering irons, and wires lined in neat rows.

Someone had died and gone to nerd heaven in here.

And that someone had knocked on her womb last night.

Lyra slowly made her way along the wall of books, admiring the titles as she passed them. There were textbooks on coding languages and mathematical concepts, engineering manuals, biographies of inventors, encyclopedias of science, articles on emerging technologies, entire tomes devoted to topics like robotics or biology... The sheer amount of knowledge housed in this single room was staggering.

She rounded a corner, eyes widening when they landed on a poster hung at eye level: a detailed schematic diagram of a robotic limb—a project close to Cy's heart, no doubt.

Several shelves next to the PC were lined with figures—all variations of the similar models: a human soldier, armed and decked in futuristic gear. Some were painted, others cast from metal and polished to a shine, and still others posed on multi-jointed robotic limbs. It looked like they were fighting in some kind of futuristic war.

Holy shit. Cy Forrester, football star and outdoorsy hottie, was... *a gigantic fucking nerd.*

Like he needed anything else to make him hotter.

Suddenly self-conscious about snooping around his workplace without permission, Lyra quickly backed out into the hallway.

She didn't need to know this about him right now... Not when her heart was so oddly squishy.

Drifting back toward the main area, she found that the cozy living room easily flowed into the open-space kitchen. Cy stood at the stove, shirtless and barefoot, maneuvering a skillet with the ease of long practice.

Her heart did a funny little flip-flop at the domesticity of it all. The thought of waking up to this every morning was dangerously appealing.

And there was the problem.

Domesticity wasn't her goal. Commitment inevitably led to hurt, and she'd had enough of that pain and bother to last a lifetime.

Besides, Townsend Harbor was just a waystation. Not a final destination by any means. She couldn't get stuck here.

As much as she might wish otherwise, this thing with Cy was temporary. A casual fling to satisfy her curiosity and slake her lust. Nothing more.

Squaring her shoulders, she steeled herself against the unwelcome ache in her chest. By the time Cy glanced over his shoulder with a smile, she had her defenses in place.

"Morning," he said, dishing pancakes onto two plates. "Sleep well?"

"Like the dead." Lyra took a seat at the table, shoring up her walls with every breath. "Smells delicious."

Casual and carefree. That was the name of the game. No matter what her traitorous heart—and newly lusty lady bits—might want.

Cy set the plates on the table and took a seat across from her. "I was thinking, after we pick up the kittens from Kiki's, I'll drive you over to Star-Crossed so they can get settled in. Then maybe we can go for a hike, have a picnic by the river?"

His enthusiasm made her chest clench. This was exactly what she didn't want—expectations and entanglements and the possibility of real feelings. She needed to nip this in the bud before things got messy.

"Cy, listen." Lyra set down her fork, meeting his gaze head-on. "I had a really nice time last night, but I want to be honest. I want to be clear...that this is just casual. Yeah?"

A flinty emotion flickered in his eyes, but he hid it quickly behind a mask of indifference. "Yeah. Of course. No strings attached."

"Exactly." She gave a brisk nod, ignoring the guilt twisting her insides. "After the number Harrison did on me, the last thing I want is to jump into another relationship with all the... complications that can bring."

"I get it," he said, sliding a pancake on a plate.

She wasn't sure he did. "One of the things my past relationships—specifically Harrison—has taught me is that, as much as I like to believe different, I don't always know what I'm doing. Especially when it comes to men." She shifted, trying to figure out how to say big, scary things with small, tepid words. "I don't correctly analyze the effect the person will have on my future plans. Or on the other people in my life. Or... Well, I've always picked men based on what I'm now realizing are flimsy and arbitrary metrics of optics over function. Or maybe it's better to say contacts and convenience over real connection. I need to figure out what that means. Why I'm this way..."

"So we'll take it slow," Cy said with a lackadaisical shrug. "I have no problem with that."

"I was with Harrison so long that what we had is kind of all I knew. And I just feel like maybe committing myself to one person exclusively again isn't the best way to go about healing from it, if that makes sense."

His lush mouth lifted in a sly sort of half-smile. "I'm not trying to cuff you, Lyra. We're just having some fun. I get it."

Did he, though?

"I'm saying you won't be the only man I'm—uh—sleeping with," she blurted.

God, she was such a huge asshole.

"You don't owe me an explanation." His jaw tightened, betraying the nonchalance in his tone. "We're on the same page. No commitments. No exclusivity."

Lyra frowned, disliking how callous she sounded but unable to stop. The only way out of this with her heart intact was to build an impenetrable wall between them.

Even if it meant being cruel to be kind.

"I'm glad we understand each other." Picking up her fork again, she plastered on a smile. "This pancake is delicious, by the way. You'll have to give me the recipe."

Casual and carefree.

“Yeah. Sure.” Cy stared at his plate, pushing bits of pancake around with his fork. An uncomfortable silence stretched between them, fraught with something unspoken.

Lyra cleared her throat, scrambling for something to fill the void. “So, um...did you still want to hang out?” She grimaced, regretting her clumsy attempts to distance herself. The day he had planned sounded lovely, an idyllic escape in the company of a man who understood her in a way few others did.

Still, she couldn’t take back her words now. She had made her position clear, and the only thing left to do was stick to it. Even if it made the moment between them strained and awkward.

“A hike sounds nice.” Her voice came out brittle. “Fresh air and exercise. Just what I need.”

He snorted, the sound devoid of humor. “Whatever you need.”

The sarcasm in his tone made her flinch. She searched for something to salvage the mood but came up short. In the end, she settled for shoveling another bite of pancake into her mouth to avoid speaking at all.

The tension in the room thickened until she thought she might choke on it. She had gotten what she wanted—distance from Cy and his dangerous ability to make her feel.

Now all that was left was to live with the consequences.

Cy sighed and ran a hand through his hair, mussing the dark strands. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be a dick.” His apology did little to ease the knot in her stomach. “It’s just... I care about you, Lyra. More than I expected to, and I know I’m probably not supposed to say that yet. But last night didn’t *feel* casual to me. In fact, every time we’re thrust together somehow doesn’t feel casual at all. It feels...” He trailed off, burying his gaze in the pool of syrup drowning his bacon. “It feels like the beginning of something...something that should have happened a long time ago if life didn’t derail us.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he held up a hand. “Don’t. In the interest of not repressing, I need to say this, whatever you decide to do about it. Every single time fate shoves us together, the connection I feel is real. *And good*. It’s more than sex, and I think we both know it.”

His words struck a chord deep within her, resonating with a truth she didn’t want to face. She stared down at her plate, a flush creeping into her cheeks. “You’re not wrong,” she acquiesced. “But that doesn’t change what I said. I can’t make any decisions right now. I can’t, like...*plan* anything here. Now. With the first guy I touched since breaking it off with my fiancé.”

“I know you’ve been hurt.” His voice softened as he came to stand behind her chair. Warm hands settled on her shoulders, kneading away the tension. “I’m not anything like Harrison. I’m not going to create those problems in your life.”

She wanted to believe him. Wanted to give in and accept the comfort he offered. But she couldn’t take the risk.

“You deserve someone who can give you their whole heart,” she said quietly. “And I’m not sure mine is ready to be given again.”

“I’m not asking you to.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “And I’m not going anywhere. We can let this happen as slowly as it needs to.”

The assurance should have made her feel relieved. Instead, it only intensified her anxiety. She had let Cy *in* further than she intended, and now extracting him from the situation would be harder than she’d thought. Especially because she wasn’t sure she wanted to.

But she was fairly certain it was the intelligent thing to do.

Pushing back from the table, she stood and straightened her clothes with trembling fingers. “We should go. Kiki’s probably wondering when I’m going to come get Larry.”

The fact that he’d driven here made her want to cry a little. She needed space from this adorable house. From the things

she knew about him. From the axis-shifting pleasure they shared last night.

She was overwhelmed by feelings and sensations. She needed to *think*.

Cy grabbed her hand. “Hey. Don’t panic. We don’t have to talk about it.”

She bit her lip, wavering. It would be so easy to give in and lose herself in the comfort of his presence, if only for a little while longer.

But being around him made her weak. And she just couldn’t afford that now.

With effort, she shook her head. “It’s okay. I just need to make sure Larry is okay, and Star-Crossed is opening soon...” Gently removing her hand from his grip, she offered a weak smile. “Thank you for breakfast. And for understanding.”

He studied her for a long moment before nodding. “You’re welcome.” He swiped their breakfast into the sink and strode toward his room. “I’ll get dressed and grab my keys.”

Lyra watched the tension knot the cords of muscles along his spine, remembering how powerfully he’d driven into her last night. How he’d dominated and worshiped her at the same time.

Steeling herself against the regret welling in her chest, she retrieved her clothes that he’d draped over the back of a chair so they wouldn’t wrinkle. She tried not to think about the thoughtful gesture as she dressed and hastily braided her hair before reaching for the door.

Pausing with her hand on the knob, she glanced over her shoulder to find him watching her, a mixture of longing and resignation etched into his features.

Then she stepped outside, escaping into the cool morning air and the escape it provided. She took a deep, steadying breath, clinging to the remnants of distance and emotional sovereignty she had fought so hard to maintain.

It was the right choice. It had to be.

Even if it didn't feel that way at all.

TWELVE

Wound

AN OPENING THAT IS CREATED WHEN THE TREE'S
PROTECTIVE BARK COVERING IS PENETRATED, CUT, OR
REMOVED, INJURING OR DESTROYING TISSUE.



CY GRIPPED THE STEERING WHEEL, KNUCKLES WHITENING, AS the truck rumbled down Water Street.

If there was anything worse than an awkward silence, it was one only interrupted by the mewling of newborn kittens.

Held firmly on Lyra's lap, the box rustled every now and again as Larry repositioned herself to nurse. Lyra stared out the window, absently stroking the new mother's sleek black head as she purposefully avoided acknowledging Cy's presence.

A fact that had surely been noticed by Kiki, who was sandwiched between them.

Lyra had insisted that she be seated closest to the door as she'd be exiting first, but Cy suspected this had far more to do with a desire to put as much distance between them as possible rather than pure practicality.

The tension in the cab was thick enough to cut with a chainsaw, making the seven-minute drive to town seem like it took about seven years. Ample time for his unhelpful brain to begin spooling out the kind of images that made him want to oil his axe.

You won't be the only man I'm with.

There was something about being informed of this fact while she sat across the kitchen table eating food he'd made for her in an embarrassingly moony mood that made the revelation especially devastating.

The pancakes shrank into a starchy wad in his stomach.

That had been his first mistake. Lyra had no way of knowing that a spread worthy of a lumberjack was part of his regular daily routine.

Assuming she'd want to spend the day with him had been the second. Aside from the fact that he'd already committed to help build a retaining wall at his dad's house, Cy had been an idiot to suppose that Lyra's experience of their encounter in his bedroom matched his own.

Simply put, she'd rocked his world.

Just because the saying was trite didn't mean it wasn't accurate.

When he met her eyes in the mirror while he moved inside her, his entire existence had shifted abruptly off its axis.

Cy's gut twisted into knots, anger and regret warring inside him.

Why had he confessed his feelings for her? He knew she didn't want anything serious. Now he'd made a fool of himself and probably scared her off for good.

He risked a glance at Lyra as they made the last turn before they reached Star-Crossed. Desire and possessiveness rose in equal measure. The thought of her with other men made his blood boil. He wanted to wrap his arms around her, claim her as his, consequences be damned.

"Here we are," he said gruffly, pulling up in front of the store. He itched to put the truck into park, leap out of his seat, and run around to get her door, but after the way the morning had gone, he didn't dare make any gesture even remotely adjacent to chivalry.

Which Kiki found unacceptable, if the pointy elbow digging into his ribs was any indication.

"Thanks for the ride." Unbuckling her seatbelt, Lyra awkwardly scooted forward with the box on her lap.

"Welcome," Cy said.

The door slammed behind her with a bang that echoed in his chest.

Kiki didn't waste any time. She scooted over one seat and waited until they'd pulled away from the curb to punch Cy hard in the bicep. The pain crackled down his arm, briefly numbing his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Jesus." He reached up to rub the now pulsing spot. "What was that for?"

Her deadpan expression made it clear she wasn't going to let him off the hook easily. "Already?" she asked, shaking her head.

"Already *what?*" Okay, so now he was just blatantly playing for time, but it seemed important from his present vantage.

Shifting in her seat, Kiki angled her torso to stare at Cy's profile. And even though his peripheral vision had also been affected in the fateful car accident, he was certain that she didn't blink.

Maybe for the first time in his life, he felt a pang of sympathy for the unfortunates who found themselves on the other side of the interrogation table from his sister. Rumor had it that she'd even made a career criminal, who'd somehow evaded capture for ten years after knocking over a series of banks, cry.

Cy's left armpit began to sweat.

And still, Kiki didn't say a word.

"Look, it was late when we finished at your place last night and Lyra didn't want to wake Gabe and Gemma up, so I let her crash at my place."

Actually, come to think of it, *that* had been his first mistake.

Part recovery ward, part man cave, his modest home had been his inner sanctum for the last several years. A place where he could return to sleep, shower, shave.

And game.

He fought a sinking feeling in his stomach as he remembered how Lyra had attempted to quickly arrange her face into a neutral expression after discovering his gaming room.

Sure, he hadn't expected her to get hard for movie posters or the mint first-edition League of Legends figurines. But the exact replica of Henry Cavill's gaming rig complete with ROG Strix GeForce RTX 2080Ti?

That was worth at least a semi-stiffy.

For anyone who'd seen Henry Cavill's PC rig, anyway.

"How are you an even worse liar now than you were in high school?" Kiki demanded, breaking her silence.

At this, Cy experienced a surge of nostalgic warmth. On occasion, in high school, when he had come rolling in at an hour that made their father question whether indeed he ought to be allowed his own set of wheels, Kiki had always covered for him, somehow coming up with surprisingly plausible scenarios that typically cast Cy in a heroic light.

...and if it weren't for Cy, the whole den of coyote pups would have drowned.

Never mind that they hadn't had a flash flood in Townsend County in thirty years.

Kiki propped her work boot up on the dash.

"Hey," Cy protested. "I just had that detailed."

"Really?" Her dark eyes narrowed at him as she moved her foot, leaving a faint but powdery checkerboard of the boot's traction-happy sole. "Because they seem to have missed the size-seven shoe-print on the ceiling."

Fuck.

He didn't dignify the comment by glancing up to see the damning evidence. He didn't need to.

Cy felt his face flush, remembering the way he and Lyra had begun groping each other even before the tires stopped rolling in the driveway.

Lyra's soft lips had tasted like honey, her skin deliciously musky from the mineral-rich water. She had wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him closer while they sank down on the bench seat, mimicking the configuration of their back-of-the-bus tangle almost exactly. Drowning in each other until all sense of time escaped them both.

Double fuck.

Recalling such a sweet memory under such bitter circumstances only hastened the thunderheads darkening his mood. He should have known better than to think he could hide anything from his sister.

“Okay, fine. We slept together.” Cy sighed, some of the tension leaving his shoulders at the admission. “But we’re keeping it casual.”

The words tasted bitter on his tongue. He thought back to waking up with Lyra in his arms as sunlight filtered through the windows of his cabin. For a few perfect moments, he’d felt content and at peace in a way he hadn’t known since before the accident.

Only to have it obliterated with her cool, matter-of-fact announcement that she intended to pursue other options.

Other men.

It wasn’t like Cy didn’t understand. He had no desire to be a brief rebound. But damned if he could get comfortable with the idea of being a stud in her stable.

And a lame one at that.

The dull ache that had woken in his chest spread to his body and brain.

“Casual,” Kiki repeated, dragging him out of his muddy thoughts.

“Yeah,” Cy said.

“Casual like the time you nearly broke the jaw of that guy that Delia cheated on you with?”

The memory hit him like a sucker punch to the gut. His fists clenched tightly as he recalled the rage that boiled within him, the way his muscles tensed and coiled like a cobra ready to strike. He could still feel the reverberations of the impact as his knuckles connected with the man's face, the satisfying crunch of bone that threatened to give way under his fury.

"Things are different now," he replied, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Are they, though?" Kiki said, her eyes searching his face for any hint of doubt. "Or are you just trying to convince yourself that you can handle Lyra dating other people because you're hoping she'll eventually choose you?"

Cy gritted his teeth, feeling the anger simmering beneath the surface. He hated that this accusation stung.

With a deep breath, he forced a tight-lipped smile. "If I say I can handle it, I can handle it."

"All right," she conceded, though the worry in her eyes remained. "You can talk to me. You know that, right?"

"I know."

I know that you'll find a way to call me on my bullshit. I know that you'll tell me what I don't want to hear. I know that I'm making a mistake, but I don't want you to talk me out of it.

"Slug bug blue!" Kiki announced, then frogged him on the thigh hard enough to send an electric flash sizzling along nerves that were no longer there.

"Fuck's sake," Cy muttered, but his grip on the steering wheel loosened slightly as they turned down the road that would take them out to their father's house. "Are you still going to do that when I'm eighty-five and you're ninety-one?"

"Probably not when you're eighty-five." His sister shot him a sideways smirk. "You're totally going to get Tupia's skinny thighs."

Cy suppressed a snort. Kiki had teased him about inheriting his grandfather's slim shanks since they were just

kids and his grasshopper-skinny thigh would fit in the circle of her fingers.

He'd packed on considerable muscle in high school, lifting becoming his first immersive obsession following their mother's death. And Ethan's example.

Before the locker room dust-up where Cy nearly had his ass handed to him by a pair of linebackers built like one of Myrtle's Shit Shacks, he'd had only one asset to justify his presence on the Townsend Harbor High Seamen.

Cy was *fast*.

Just how fast, he only discovered following his mother's funeral, when he lit out from a house crowded with mourners, attempting to outpace his grief.

Following his accident, that particular option was lost to him, and working took its place. Throwing himself into long days and lonely nights bathed in the monitor's blue glow.

He'd become quite adept at pushing himself beyond what felt like his physical limits, and he could work for hours with his body's screaming drowning out the unwelcome thoughts. And any mental energy he had left when that was done could then be sunk effectively into gaming strategy.

He only hoped it would work as well for coping with Lyra's revelation as it had with the suck-hole of self-pity that had threatened to consume him during his recovery.

The truck rumbled to a halt in front of the home they had moved to during Cy's senior year, its façade both familiar and suffocating.

He stared at the chipped paint and overgrown hedges, memories of arguments echoing in his mind. The warm but chaotic atmosphere that awaited him inside was a stark reminder of why he'd been so eager to leave for college. A decision his father had accused him of making only to emulate Ethan Townsend, whom he'd started spending even more of his time with once they moved to this place.

His father had cited needing more space for the foster kids. But they'd both known what it was really about.

The home where Kiki now lived was haunted by his mother's memory.

"Ready to do this?" she asked as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

The short answer was no. The idea of spending his entire day working on building a retaining wall to the soundtrack of shrieking kids and the tag-team hectoring of his father and sister sounded like as much fun as having his toenails pried off with a pair of hedge clippers.

But the sooner he got this out of the way, the sooner he could slough the accusations of isolating himself off his back.

"Let's do it," Cy said.

They exited the truck and walked through the backyard to find their father already carting out a wheelbarrow of stones for the rock wall.

Because he didn't want Cy to do it.

Another of the areas in which his father and Ethan seemed to have developed an unlikely bond: the mistaken belief that his injury now made their perpetual intervention to spare him physical labor necessary.

"Morning!" Marty called, mopping sweat from his umber brow as he parked the wheelbarrow by the base of the dirt mound on the back patio.

"Morning, Pop," Kiki called back, bundling her onyx hair into a bun above a flannel Cy suspected she'd stolen off one of her many brief conquests.

"Just...uh, getting some of this out of the way before you got here."

Cy and Kiki exchanged a look.

"And here I thought the whole reason we were here was to prevent that very thing from happening," Cy said.

His old man's jaw took on a familiar stubborn set that always made Cy's eye twitch. "I want to keep doing what I can do as long as I can do it."

“That sounds familiar,” Kiki muttered.

Cy shot his sister a pissy look, but rolled up his sleeves, eager for the distraction.

Only, his mind didn't want to cooperate.

As he lifted the heavy stones and felt the rough texture against his palms, he couldn't help but recall the contrast of Lyra's silky hair slipping through his fingers. The scent of sun-warmed soil only brought back the way she'd tasted when he pushed her damp panties to the side when he finally got her to his bed.

He shook his head, trying to banish the thoughts, but they persisted, each sensual recollection intensifying the ache in his chest.

“Careful there, buddy,” his father warned, mistaking the source of the tremor in Cy's hands as he placed a stone on the slowly rising wall. “You don't want to drop any of these.”

“I know,” Cy grumbled, gripping the next rock more firmly. He refocused on the task at hand, feeling the strain in his muscles as he worked, relishing a tangible pain he could understand and control, unlike the emotional turmoil roiling within him.

“Wow. She's really got you fucked up, huh?” Kiki teased, nudging him with her elbow as they worked side by side. “You've been working like a man possessed all morning.”

“Nope,” Cy grunted, his focus on maneuvering a particularly stubborn stone into place. The effort was beginning to take its toll. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He stopped to mop it before the drops could sting his eyes with salt. “Just trying to get this over and done with.”

They worked in silence for another several minutes.

“So, how are things going with the business?” she asked, leaning against a large boulder.

“Busy,” Cy replied.

“Any interesting jobs lately?”

“Not really,” he answered, carefully keeping all thoughts of the work he had left to do for the tree at Star-Crossed as far away from his conscious mind as possible.

“Uh-oh.” Kiki smirked. “Here comes Dad with refreshments.”

Cy’s back barked at him as he stood. Sure enough, their father was approaching with a tray clutched in his hands, a broad grin on his face. The precariously balanced pitcher of lemonade sloshed as several small bodies zoomed around his legs.

“Okay, you guys,” Kiki said, corralling the young charges toward the yard. “Go destroy things in that general direction.”

“Thought you two could use a break,” their father said, setting the tray down on the wobbly picnic table Cy had also been meaning to fix. “Oh shoot. I forgot the salmon spread in the fridge. Would you mind grabbing it for me?” he asked Kiki.

She caught Cy’s eye over their father’s shoulder. They both knew it was a tactical maneuver, but what the topic of discussion would be, Cy could only guess.

“Sure thing.”

Traitor, Cy mouthed.

Taking a deep breath, he poured himself a glass of what he knew would be too-tart lemonade and steeled himself for the inevitable opener.

“So, uh, I heard you had a run-in with Darrell last night,” his father began casually, though there was an edge to his voice that betrayed his true intentions.

Translation: *Myrtle called at the ass-crack of dawn to crow about you and Lyra showing up at their property.*

“Yep.” Cy’s salivary glands contracted painfully on an acidic swallow.

“Awful nice of Lyra to help you wrangle that bastard back home.”

Translation: *No way am I letting this go.*

“Sure was.”

“Yep.” His father took a long swallow from his own glass. “That Lyra sure has been helpful lately. First the greenhouse, now this.”

Cy exhaled maybe the longest breath of his entire life.

“Dad, I’m only going to say this once. You don’t need to worry about me and Lyra McKendrick.”

Marty thumbed condensation away from the bottom of his glass. “She’s been through a lot, son.”

“I’m aware,” Cy ground out.

“Seems like your time with a lot of your recent lady friends has been pretty short-lived.”

“I guess.” If he wasn’t careful, Cy was in danger of pulverizing his molars.

“Woman like Lyra McKendrick is the kind worth maybe slowing things down for, don’t you think?”

Oh, the rich fucking irony.

“Sure does.”

“Giving any thought to it?”

In fact, Cy had given it a lot of thought. Had given it just about *every* damn thought, if he was being honest with himself.

But what about *Lyra’s* thoughts?

The deluge he’d been trying to stave off all morning swept over him in a merciless blast.

What *exactly* had she been thinking as she sat across the table from him, deciding how she wanted to tell him that she intended to keep her options open? How long had she spent choosing her words? Crafting her argument?

Because he had no doubt she had. Like the lawyer she’d been sure to remind him that she was, she had made her case. And Cy would be damned before he’d make a plea.

“I’m not really in a great place to start anything right now, Dad.” He took another sip of his lemonade and instantly regretted it. The acid felt like it corroded rather than lubricated his vocal cords. “With all the work I’ve got on my plate—”

“How’s that going, by the way?” Kiki swept over to them, one of their mother’s favorite bowls carefully cradled in her hands.

“Good,” Cy said, immeasurably grateful for the change in topics. “Got more work than we know what to do with.”

“Just remember, if you need any advice or want to run anything by me, I’m always here.” The picnic bench creaked as Marty swung his leg over it.

“Appreciate it, but I’ve got things under control,” Cy said, hoping to put an end to the conversation. He knew his father had trouble letting go of the business he’d built from scratch, but Cy was determined to prove he could at least handle this without requiring a whole damn village of reinforcements.

“So, you’ve got enough manpower for the jobs next week?” His father’s voice ripped through Cy’s focus like a chainsaw through bark. “Moving that ash is going to be a hell of a lot of work. There are bound to be a few unpleasant surprises once you get below ground.”

“Not when you have a 3D model of the roots,” Cy pointed out.

“Speaking of the tree,” Kiki interrupted in an obvious bid to defuse the mounting tension, “I’ve gotten a slew of complaints about the safety barriers you have up around the yard. Seems certain residents feel they’re ‘unsightly.’”

Unsightly.

A Caryn Townsend word if ever there was one.

“Do you have any kind of ETA when those will be coming down so I can tell Caryn when she’ll be able to extract her panties from her ass?”

“Couple weeks,” Cy said. “But I can tell her myself. I’ve got a major job to do up at the Townsend Manse grounds this

week too.”

“Two major jobs in one week?” their father asked. “You’re *sure* you don’t want to call in someone to help?”

And all at once, something clicked.

“You know, Dad,” Cy said, fixing a contemplative look on his sweat-stiffened face, “I think you may be right.”

Marty’s pleased expression only served to make Cy feel like more of an asshat.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Cy said. “I think I’m going to call in Jack to take care of Star-Crossed. He’s still doing contract work, right?”

“I think so,” Marty said, chewing a bite of pillowy bread mounded with the pale pink spread.

Kiki, on the other hand, wasn’t missing a trick. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have Jack handle the Townsend Mansion job so *you* can handle Star-Crossed?”

“Maybe it’s time I delegate some more,” Cy replied, trying to sound nonchalant. Inside, though, the wheels were already turning.

“If you think that’s best,” Kiki said, each word loaded with special significance.

Cy’s jaw tightened as he held back a snarky retort. He knew that his decision stemmed from a petty desire to avoid Lyra—and maybe even irk her a little—but he couldn’t help it. And anyway, if other men were what she wanted, the least he could do was support her decision.

“Oh, I do,” he said.

Kiki slapped her hands on her dirt-caked jeans. “We’d better get back to it before this sky decides to piss all over us.”

Following her glance up at the sky, Cy noticed gunmetal-gray clouds gathering, casting ominous shadows over the backyard.

“Let’s do it,” he said with considerably more enthusiasm.

For now, he had a battle to plan.
The next move would be Lyra's.

THIRTEEN

Smudging

THE RITUAL OF CLEANING THE ENERGY OF A PHYSICAL
SPACE, OBJECT, OR PERSON.



WHY ARE YOU SUCH A BITCH?

Lyra sat in her car staring down at the paperwork the doctor had handed her after blowing her entire world open at nine thirty on a Tuesday morning.

Now she had an answer to the most prevalent question of her life.

An explanation.

Or at least a diagnosis.

ASD, or autism spectrum disorder.

It all made a little bit more sense to her now. The constant, low-grade irritation caused by things a neurotypical brain would easily allow to fade into the background. The fit of her clothing. Constant noises caused by machinery, or worse... other people. Flashing lights or discordant visual stimuli. Fucking light horizontal stripes on dark clothing that seemed to ruin her entire day...

Or, rather, the entire ass-end of the 2010s.

Not to mention the mental and emotional exhaustion of masking socially inappropriate reactions to said stimuli. Making sure her facial features didn't give away her discomfort. Selecting a field of study that spoke to her inflated sense of injustice and fairness.

Even Harrison made more sense.

According to the doctor she'd been seeing for the past handful of weeks, selecting a partner based on how they filled a compatibility quotient on a list, rather than how they touched your heart, was part and parcel of the autistic experience.

Lyra folded up her documents and shoved them in her bag, then started her car and drove on autopilot toward Water Street, where Cady and Gemma were covering for her at Star-Crossed.

Did it change anything, this diagnosis?

Not really. Not unless she wanted it to. That was the thing about a spectrum...everyone landed on it somewhere. If she leaned into it, she'd need to disclose it to friends, loved ones, and employers. Or she could keep going how she was going—treating her symptoms like overblown personality traits and dealing with the consequences.

That was her privilege and prerogative as someone so “high-functioning.”

Lyra blew her cheeks out, wishing she could process all of this in a cold, dark room somewhere for about a year.

Gemma had received an ADHD diagnosis earlier in life, and somehow, Lyra had become burdened with becoming everything Gemma could not.

Organized. Punctual. Detail-oriented. Successful.

But...what was successful, though?

Lyra got all the grades, checked all the extracurricular activity lists, graduated high school with an Associate's degree, then university undergrad with an Ivy League law degree, and locked down a blue-blooded professional fiancé with very straight teeth.

What had she done through all of that but suffer? Suffer and steep in her illusion of superiority while Gemma had given herself permission to be...herself. To go after what she wanted, not what other people told her to want. To fall in love with the man who loved her back.

She'd chosen a life that would fit her diagnosis in it. With people who would make room for her and all the extra stuff she brought with her.

That just hadn't been in Lyra's list of options.

At least...not as they'd been presented to her.

New questions plagued her as she wound through the idyllic coastal town where she'd grown up. What did she do now? What did she want to do? Whom did she want to do it with?

She did her best to ignore the image that flashed into her mind.

Cy cooking her breakfast in his cozy, indescribably incredible home. Cy illuminated by a full moon reflecting off liquid pools of water displaced by their naked bodies. Risking life and limb—literally—to rescue a cat that wasn't his own.

A confident, capable man who navigated his own loss through a balance of strength, will, and ingenuity.

The man who'd taken her apart and put her back together. First with his capacity for vulnerability. Then with his fucking unreal body.

She spent more time pretending not to want him than she should. Creating healthy distance, and then missing him like the cock-thirsty idiot he made of her.

Fuck!

Lyra almost rolled through a stop sign into a family of cycling tourists as she realized he was supposed to be at Star-Crossed today. The contractor and plumber had made enough headway with the foundation for him to strip the tree roots from the pipes and pull up the root ball in order to transplant the ash somewhere else.

She needed to stop allowing entire weeks to disappear in between their intense, and often incredibly physical, interactions. It wasn't that she'd *meant* for a fortnight to pass between texts—it was that she'd informed Cy that she needed

to put another dick or two in between Harrison's and his before she got too attached.

And...well... Even though several dicks had presented themselves—whether in the form of an unsolicited pic from a dating app, or in person at a bar, club, or occasion—she hadn't found one worthy of allowing anywhere close to her general person.

It just wasn't fucking fair. Once you'd sampled a body of Cy's caliber, it was almost impossible to go back to basic dick.

Myrtle had hit the nail on the head at last week's Stitch 'n Bitch when she brought in her handmade huckleberry ice cream. "Once you put this masterpiece in your mouth, everything that comes before or after is just soft serve."

Lyra tried not to make parallels as she spotted the "Cy the Tree Guy" truck parked out in front of the shop with safety barriers blocking the sidewalk.

Pulling around the building, she slid into her reserved spot behind the shop, allowing a bitter laugh to escape her.

Soft serve.

If only that hadn't been so apropos where other men were involved. If only she hadn't thought about Cy's taste every single day they'd been apart.

Which made sense now because...she was autistic. And once a person with ASD stumbled upon a texture, flavor, sound, scent, and sight they found appealing, they generally stuck with it.

For better or worse.

And Lyra would be goddamned if Cy Forrester didn't check every single box as the best of all senses...

Rubbing her hands over her face, she flipped her sunglasses up to push back her hair and eyed the alley between Star-Crossed and the currently vacant building next door.

The autumn sun was as full as a ripe peach high above, dripping its juices across the horizon as Lyra gathered herself enough to step out of the car. The sweet scent of honeysuckle

filled her nostrils, mingling with the rich earthiness of freshly turned soil.

Instead of the object of her errant thoughts hard at work, she spotted Cy's handsome sometimes-employee Jack—tall and well-built, his sandy hair tousled—bent over in front of the store. He vigorously wrestled with the gnarled tree roots that had taken up residence beneath the cobblestone walkway.

“Hey there, Lyra!” he called out cheerfully, wiping sweat from his brow and leaving a streak of soil in its place. His streaked t-shirt clung to him like an enthusiastic groupie, revealing the contours of his I-work-outside muscles. “How you holding up?”

It was a question she'd heard a lot lately, and she was getting fucking tired of it.

Of course all of Townsend Harbor knew she'd broken up with an asswad of a fiancé recently, but you'd think the pitying questions would become less prevalent, rather than increasing in frequency.

“Doing, um...doing awesome, Jack, thanks.” She flashed him a grin that she hoped didn't show too many teeth before gathering up her bag and travel mug of coffee from the car.

“Good to hear!” Wiping his hands on his torn jeans, he loped toward her with all the bright-eyed enthusiasm of a Labrador. “Can I help you carry anything inside?”

“This is all I brought.” She presented her mug and took a sip. “But I appreciate the offer.”

“Of course. I'm here for anything you might need...or want.” His lopsided grin produced attractive lines around blue eyes sparkling with—nope, she wasn't imagining it—interest.

Like sexual interest.

Uh-oh.

A world did not exist where she flirted with an employee of Cy's. Or a friend. Or even an amicable associate.

Which...if she thought of it, probably included the entire town.

Ugh.

“Well, um, thanks for your work on the tree situation...” she managed, crunching her heels over the sand and gravel that made its way onto every blacktop this close to the water.

Jack nearly tripped over himself to reach the back entrance to her building and hold it open for her. “You know, the local music store is having their fiddle jam-fest on the balcony at Sirens if you’re feeling well enough to go with me tonight.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed you for a fan of fiddle music.” Lyra didn’t know Jack enough to remember his last name, but she had seen his garage band perform at several local venues, and the vibe was closer to *screamo* than *strings*.

“Yeah, well, Cy said you’d be into that sort of thing,” he said, looking at his boots, then flicking her a smolder from beneath his lashes. “Mentioned you were a pretty good musician in high school.”

Lyra narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “He did, did he?” she asked, trying to keep her tone light. Her mind churned like butter, a mix of irritation and curiosity. “What else did Cy mention about me?”

“That you were in the market for something *casual*.” Jack shrugged, clearly oblivious to the storm brewing inside her. “I told him I was—you know—freshly single and looking for a little fun on the rebound. Nothing serious, and he said he knew for a fact you were in the same boat and suggested I should ask you out.”

“Did he now?” Lyra crossed her arms, tapping her foot on the ground. Her heart raced like a caffeinated squirrel, but she reined in her frustration. Frustration that was underscored by hurt she didn’t know how to identify, let alone define.

She forced a polite smile, struggling to hide the sting.

“I thought a lady as pretty as you wouldn’t be solo for long, so I’d better ask tonight... Besides, a fiddle festival is pretty low impact if you’re not feeling up to much.” Jack’s gaze was hopeful and curious, and if Lyra hadn’t been pissed

about two entirely separate things, she might have even considered the offer.

“Look, Jack,” she began, then immediately gentled her tone. None of this was the poor guy’s fault. “I appreciate the invitation, but—despite what your boss led you to believe—I’m a little too underwater with everything to see anyone, however casual, at the moment.”

Or ever. In his case.

“Aw, no worries,” Jack replied, his grin unwavering. He scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “I understand. It’s all good. I’ll just focus on these tree roots and let you get back to your day.”

“Thank you,” Lyra said, softening her tone further. She watched as Jack returned to his battle with the roots, his admittedly impressive biceps flexing rhythmically. It was a sight that could’ve coaxed a blush from a stone statue.

But not from her heart of stone—at least, not today.

As she entered Star-Crossed, her thoughts swirled like the entire cluster of prismatic wind catchers that sprang to life as she rushed past.

What in the everlasting sake of fuck had possessed Cy to send his employee to ask her out? Was he playing some sort of game, or had he simply misread her intentions?

Her heels clicked angrily against the wooden floor, mirroring the rapid-fire beat of her thoughts.

“Lyra!” Cady greeted her from behind the counter, a burst of blonde sunshine on an otherwise turbulent day. “How are you doing?”

On the customer side of the counter, Cady’s husband loomed in his usual PNW uniform of dark jeans, boots, and a Henley stretched over don’t-fuck-with-me shoulders. “You feeling any better?” he inquired lightly, confirming a suspicion that’d been forming for a couple of days now.

Rather than answering, Lyra held up a finger to the couple, then marched over to the door between Star-Crossed and

Bazaar Girls. Yanking it open, she seized her sister by the wrist and dragged her back toward Cady and Fawkes, before bringing herself to speak.

“What the hell are people saying about me?” she asked, cutting straight to the chase. “And don’t pretend it’s nothing, Gemma, because you are the lynchpin of the Townsend Harbor rumor mill, and the past couple of days people keep treating me like I’m dying or something.”

Gemma blinked, taken aback. “Rumors?”

“And then Cy’s employee said he’d heard I’m in the market for some stray dick and offered to take me out,” Lyra finished, her voice tight.

“Who, Jack?” Cady’s mouth dropped open as she peeked through one of the alley windows visible between stanchions of new-age and international music albums. “Um... I mean, he’s cute. You could do worse.”

Fawkes snorted and leaned on his elbow. “Nah. He seems like a man who would wear a necklace on a date.”

Lyra blinked up at him, distracted by the relevance of his statement. “Is that a euphemism for something?”

Cady smacked him on the arm. “No, Fawkes is just really against the idea of male accessories.”

“Jack’s...nice.” Gemma wrinkled her nose at the prospect. “But *I* heard he makes his own beer in his bathtub.” She and Lyra shared identical shudders of disgust. “Like, who wants a lager filtered through your drain hair? No thanks.”

Cady nodded, her eyes going wide behind her cat-eye glasses as she tapped a memory out of the air. “He’s probably a serial killer, come to think of it. One time, I watched him buy Cap’n Crunch.”

“And?” Lyra scowled.

Cady gestured expansively as if telling a ghost story beside a campfire. “No berries. No chocolate. No peanut butter. *Just* the crunch...”

Gemma gasped. “What kind of *monster*—?”

“Whoa, hold up.” Lyra held up her hands to ward off one of Gemma’s tangents. “This doesn’t address the problem. Something is being circulated about me out there, and I have to know what it is.”

All eyes turned to Gemma, whose color was deepening in real time to match her tomato-red knitted cap. “I haven’t been saying anything about your love life, Lyra, I promise. But...I might have mentioned something at the Bare-Naked Book Club to keep the town busybodies off your back.”

“Such as?” Lyra demanded, crossing her arms.

“Nothing crazy,” Gemma admitted sheepishly. “Just that you were undergoing some, like...medical tests and diagnostics.”

Lyra scoffed, dropping her forehead in her hand. Now it was all making sense... “Gemma, you realize that now the town has turned it into something chronic or terminal and has been treating me like a leper or someone who needs to be in hospice?”

“Oh, shit, Lyra. I’m so sorry!” Gemma insisted, her eyes wide with sincerity. “You’d been going to all these appointments lately. And I thought I was doing you a favor by letting everyone know they should give you some space to sort things out.”

Lyra sighed, deflating slightly. She couldn’t stay mad at her sister for trying to protect her. “I get it,” she said, rubbing her temples. It’d taken several visits to her GP and a few specialists to arrive at her diagnosis, and she’d been especially wary of bothering her sister or family about it. She needed to talk to her sister, especially, about the information she’d received, but at the moment she was chewing on a gristly bite of truth she couldn’t seem to swallow or spit out.

“Jack said it was Cy that prompted him into hitting on me,” Lyra informed them sourly.

“Wait, he did *what*?” Gemma’s jaw dropped. “After you guys—” She glanced up at Fawkes. “After the other night?”

Offering a grunt of masculine effrontery, Fawkes pushed off the counter. “I’m going to pretend I don’t know what you’re talking about over there.” He pointed in a random direction but headed straight for the door after planting a kiss on his wife.

Cady dropped her chin into her hand, committed to the conversation. “So, he proceeds to rearrange your insides with multiple orgasms, cooks you breakfast, gives you space for a week or two, then tells his employee to go ahead and get in your pants? Has Cy gone and lost his damn mind?”

Gemma gave Lyra a conciliatory glance, but Lyra had made peace with the fact that anything her sister learned, her best friend would find out in short order.

And probably everyone else, eventually.

“It’s easier to read the future than whatever’s going on in that man’s mind.” Lyra rolled her eyes and scowled into her reflection in the mirror behind the register. “I have half a mind to go rearrange his stupid face for pulling some bullshit like this.”

“Maybe you should,” Gemma offered, to everyone’s surprise. “Tell you what. How about you go to Townsend Manse to yell at Cy while Cady watches the shop? And I’ll activate the Townsend Harbor text tree to make sure everyone knows that any rumors about your health are just that—rumors.”

Lyra laughed in spite of herself. “Cady has her own shop to watch.”

“Fawkes finally talked me into hiring help.” Cady shrugged. “And now I’m emotionally invested in this situation, so I’d better stick around to hear about what happens next.”

“Plan activated.” Gemma grinned, poking Lyra playfully in the ribs. “Now, go give Cy the business, and I’ll handle the rumor mill.”

“‘The business’ is referring to sex,” Lyra explained to her sister, who’d already abandoned her to help a customer.

Indulging in a massive, full-body aggravated groan, Lyra marched right back out the shop's back door without even setting her coffee down.

As she drove through town, she couldn't help but place all the odd looks and whispers that had followed her around lately. Now it made sense: the concerned faces at the bakery when she ordered a single slice of cake, the pharmacist offering her pamphlets on various support groups, and even Vee from Vee's Lady Garden sidling up to her with offers of "marital aids" for when she felt ready to "get back in the saddle."

"Ugh," Lyra grunted. Her sister's well-intentioned rumors had turned into a minefield of awkward conversations and unsolicited advice.

And now it seemed Cy was caught up in the whirlwind too.

Determined to clear the air, Lyra set off toward Townsend Manse, her pace augmented by annoyance as she navigated the tree-lined streets of Townsend Harbor. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. How could Cy have been so high-handed? And sending his employee to ask her out—who did he think he was?

She rolled up the tree-lined drive, parked at the edge of the castle-like grounds, and set off toward the garden. As she marched along, her irritation bubbled and simmered, and thoughts raced like a freight train.

She spotted him apart from a few other workmen, hacking diligently at an intricate and precise arborvitae. His muscular frame was hard to miss, even amongst the verdant foliage.

"Hey!" she shouted, hands curling into fists as she strode toward him. "We need to talk!"

Cy looked up, clearly startled by her sudden appearance. "Lyra?" he said, brushing dirt off his hands onto his jeans. "What are you doing here?"

"Cut the act, Cy," she spat, face burning with anger. "Did you really send your hot employee to ask me out?"

“Hot?” he said, taken aback by her fury. “You mean Jack?”

“I sure as shit mean Jack!” Lyra snapped, jabbing a finger in his direction. “You pull some passive-aggressive bullshit like that instead of talking to me like a grownup?”

Cy’s face fell, and a glint of shame was quickly covered by his own ire. “I’m at work right now, Lyra,” he said, squeezing at a knot of stress in the back of his neck that was probably named after her. “Can we talk about this at a more appropriate —”

“We can talk about this right the fuck *now*,” she huffed, “and you can try using your words—or better yet, your brain.”

Cy crossed his arms defensively. “I was trying to do what you wanted, Lyra. You wanted space. You wanted other men. He expressed interest, and I wasn’t trying to be a possessive asshole, so...” He made a helpless gesture. “What the fuck was I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. Not throw the first available dick in my direction,” she said, feeling her pulse pounding beneath what felt like very thin skin.

He ground his teeth together, visibly struggling to keep his cool. “If what happened between us is so goddamned casual, then why are you so pissed off?”

“I’m pissed because—” Lyra stopped as every word she ever learned abandoned her. “I just thought that—” That what? That he’d call? That he’d grovel?

That he’d care, even when she’d asked him not to?

“What I *want* is—”

But before she could finish her sentence, the sudden blaring of sirens cut through the tension. Both Lyra and Cy turned their heads toward the noise, and their jaws dropped in unison as they watched a chaotic parade of trucks, fire engines, and ambulances pour through the tree tunnel that arched over the Townsend Manse driveway.

FOURTEEN

Raising

SELECTIVE PRUNING TO PROVIDE VERTICAL CLEARANCE;
ALSO KNOWN AS LIFTING.



ALL THESE YEARS LATER, AND THE SOUND OF SIRENS STILL sent ice skidding through Cy's veins.

His breath hitched, and his heart gave a single, painful lurch before settling into a hectic hum that made the world around him go weirdly quiet as a different one assembled itself.

The slanting rain. The asphalt as curvy and slick as a snake's back. The kaleidoscope of diamond-like raindrops catching his headlights as his car somersaulted into the ditch.

The strange, muffled interval that followed the terrible din. How he'd hung there upside down by his seatbelt, curiously detached from the whole scene.

How the sound and the pain came together in a flash of screaming red.

Just like the ones he was seeing now.

Glancing down the hill, Cy followed the emergency vehicles, their lights flashing as they raced past the driveway while others peeled off to ascend the winding road leading to Townsend Manse's immaculate property.

"There you are." In the cacophony, Cy had seen neither the back door of the main house open nor Ethan crossing the sprawling Italianate piazza behind the manor.

But now he was marching across the unnaturally green lawn as if the devil had a molten meat prod aimed squarely at his ass.

“Why didn’t you pick up?” Ethan asked, eyes shadowed by his glowering brow.

Cy blinked at his friend, feeling a strange sense of detachment.

He hadn’t seen his phone. Couldn’t even remember the last time he’d looked at it. He’d been so sunk into the vibrational Zen of a chainsaw that even Lyra’s presence had taken an inordinate amount of time to register.

He stepped closer to her without quite knowing why and didn’t miss the surprise that crossed Ethan’s face when Lyra reached out and rested a hand on his forearm.

He cleared his throat. “What’s going on?”

“There’s a wildfire—”

The screeching of brakes swallowed the rest of the word as Gabe and Fawkes came roaring to a stop, each in their respective service trucks. But not before scattering leaves Cy had spent a good portion of the afternoon corralling into orderly piles after assuring Caryn Townsend that she wasn’t being charged for the extra time.

Time Cy had needed to kill while Jack worked on the old ash at Star-Crossed. Immature? Definitely.

Effective? Apparently.

Both men jumped out and began tossing gear on the lawn as more private vehicles came careening up the drive.

The sound seemed to summon the manor’s owner, who stormed out of the house, her platinum bob uncharacteristically mussed and her eyes flashing.

“Look at those tire marks! I just had a new concrete drive put in, and now look at it!”

Ethan gave his mother a sharp look that reset her attitude almost immediately. Clearing her throat, she smoothed her hair and voice simultaneously.

“I mean, while I’m more than happy for our property to be used during volunteer fire department drills, I was told that I

would be given advance notice *before*—”

“This isn’t a drill.” Ethan bent to grab a bundle that Gabe had chucked at his feet. “There’s a wildfire at Myrtle and Vee’s.”

The tang of adrenaline was metallic on Cy’s tongue as he was suddenly aware of the column of dark smoke rising from the direction of Vee and Myrtle’s land.

He’d smelled what he thought was burning leaf smoke earlier. A far from uncommon scent this time of year, but he’d been so wrapped up in his feverishly immature fantasies of high school vengeance against her imaginary suitors that he hadn’t even noticed.

Caryn’s complexion paled, and she reached out to grab her son’s arm. “Is everyone all right?”

“They’re fine,” Ethan said grimly. “But the wind is blowing the blaze right toward town.” He stuffed his legs into the heavy canvas pants and yanked them up his hips. “If that old barn goes up—”

He didn’t finish the sentence.

He didn’t need to.

They’d tried to convince Myrtle to demolish the decrepit building despite her insistence that—like her—it was a historic structure. Cy had even pointed out that they could rebuild it using the trees on their property that had been felled by last winter’s storms.

Myrtle, however, had been adamant. She wanted to restore it, and the time and effort she’d already put into the project made it difficult for Cy to argue with her.

“County firefighters are already on their way,” Ethan said.

The urgency in his eyes was enough to put any thoughts of Cy and Lyra’s previous conversation on hold.

Fawkes and Gabe joined the fray as well, their faces set with determination. A mix of faces Cy recognized from around town milled about, some looking anxious, others focused and ready for action.

“You got another kit in your truck?” Cy asked, already shrugging out of his flannel.

“Look, Cy—” Ethan began.

Cy didn’t wait to hear the rest, marching over to Fawkes’s truck and grabbing a bundle of gear. He had no idea what he was doing, but he couldn’t stand by while his friends were in danger.

“Cy,” Ethan said, the unspoken implication hanging heavily in the air between them as Cy quickly pulled on the protective clothing.

His jaw clenched as he shot Ethan a stubborn glare. “Give the brief.”

“I know you want to help,” Ethan said, shifting uncomfortably under Cy’s heated gaze. “But I think—”

“You’re wasting time,” Cy snapped. “Give the goddamn brief.”

The rest of their group, including Fawkes and Gabe, had drawn closer now, their attention homed in on the escalating argument.

Ethan sighed, rubbing the back of his neck as he reluctantly shifted his gaze toward the assembled gathering. “All right,” he said, his voice low and steady. “Here’s the plan. We’re going to form two teams of three and tackle this thing from both sides. Gabe, you take the area closest to the barn. Fawkes, you take compost pasture with the volunteers from town.” He glanced around at their expectant faces before continuing. “We’ll start by clearing away any brush or debris near the barn so that we can create a firebreak on both sides. We’ll need to set up a perimeter around the barn with hoses and wet down any brush that’s close to it. If necessary, we’ll have to burn out a line ahead of the fire to prevent it from spreading further. And most importantly, we need to make sure everyone stays safe. No risks, understood?”

The group murmured in agreement as Cy felt acid eat its way up his throat.

His name was conspicuously absent from the plans.

“What can I do?” he asked, hating the note of urgency edging his voice.

“You can stay here and direct the other volunteers as they arrive.”

The air around them crackled with tension as Cy processed what Ethan had said.

He should let it go. Fall in line and do as Ethan suggested.

But he couldn't.

Or wouldn't.

As with Lyra the other morning, he seemed categorically incapable of gracefully weathering rejection. Making people say the quiet part out loud.

“Or Gabe could stay behind,” Cy suggested, already marching toward his truck. “Seeing as I know every goddamn tree bordering the property and can climb better than any of you.”

“Not anymore.”

Cy's hand froze over the ignition. A blaze of an entirely different kind climbed the back of his neck.

He felt the weight of the stares from his friends, the judgment and pity in their eyes.

He forced himself to turn around, meeting Ethan's gaze head-on.

“I'm still capable,” he said firmly, his voice a low rumble.

“I need you here,” Ethan said softly. “There's no one else I trust more to direct the rest of the volunteers when they arrive.”

The moment seemed to stretch on for an eternity as Cy processed what Ethan had said.

He couldn't deny the truth in it, but admitting that fact felt like swallowing broken glass.

With a heavy exhale, he reluctantly nodded in resignation. “Fine.”

Cy trudged back over to Lyra and Caryn as the group dispersed, his disappointment giving way to a seething rage and defeat that had crept up on him like a shadow.

He felt useless, embarrassed, and utterly frustrated by the entire situation. Benched. Left on the sidelines while others fought the battle.

Lyra approached him, her eyes alight with determination. She crossed her arms over her chest, surveying the flurry of activity as the caravan rolled out to fight the wildfire. Cy steeled himself against the lukewarm consolation and pity that always followed these kinds of interactions.

“What a total crock of shit,” she said dryly. “You’re probably more qualified than any of these volunteers, maybe even the firefighters. And yet here you are, stuck on the sidelines because of this idiotic macho ableism.”

Cy blinked at her in surprise, his rage momentarily forgotten. It was as though she had plucked the thoughts straight from his mind and given voice to his frustrations. He could feel the weight of her words settle around him like a warm blanket, offering consolation and comfort.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Caryn said, shocking him even further. “As if I’m not amply capable of instructing any volunteers that arrive on *my* property. It’s beyond insulting.” She folded her arms across her breasts, scuffing at a tire track in her golf-course-perfect grass with the sole of her sandal.

Lyra and Cy exchanged a look.

“So if Cy and I were to head over to Myrtle and Vee’s—”

“I would be more than capable of directing any late arrivals,” Caryn said. “Of course.”

“Shall we?” Lyra suggested, a challenging glint in her eyes.

“We?” Cy asked. The idea of her physical proximity to any danger immediately had his pulse drumming in his ears.

She arched a dark eyebrow at him. “And here I thought if anyone would understand the importance of complementary

skill sets in a crisis situation, it would be you.”

“How’s that?” he asked, assuming she was going to leverage the opportunity to needle him about having sent Jack over to her store.

“You know, like the reason you want barbarian, bard, *and* a ranger on a campaign?”

Cy stared at her, his jaw nearly hitting the ground in surprise.

Had she actually just used Dungeons & Dragons strategy terms to illustrate her point?

“Good point,” he said.

Because he needed to say something so he didn’t spontaneously propose to her.

They loaded up into the truck and slammed their doors.

Cy’s mind raced as they motored toward the rising column of smoke, scanning the surrounding landscape. If only he could see how far the fire had progressed on the side of the barn closest to the creek...

“The drone!”

Lyra jumped, her hand flying to her heart. “What’s that?”

“The drone,” Cy said, thumping the steering wheel. “If we can get high enough above the property, I can use the drone to figure out the best place to create a firebreak on the side of the property closest to town.”

“How do we go about doing that?”

Cy provided an extremely abbreviated version of the strategy. “If we can clear a path wide enough from here to the river, the fire will eventually burn its way out.”

“Why do you look so worried?” Lyra asked.

He slowed the truck at a fork in the road that would lead them safely into Townsend Harbor or directly toward the blaze, depending on the path they chose. “We’ll need to get a little closer to the fire in order to do it.”

They exchanged a prolonged look.

In that moment, Cy was taken back to the night they had returned from their trip to the hot springs. How they had stumbled into his room, drunk on the night and each other. How he had tasted the salt of her sweat. How, in his bed, he had buried himself inside her as deep as he could go.

How that rare moment had felt like the eye of the hurricane.

He was in it again now. The warmth of her gaze, the intensity of her focus, and the understanding in the way she looked at him all combined to suffuse him with absolute calm.

He could feel himself wanting to lean across the cab and kiss her, wanting the reassurance of her physical touch.

Instead, he shifted his eyes back toward the road.

What she said was: “Step on it, Forrester.”

What he heard was: *I trust you.*

The simple truth of it cut through the haze of self-doubt and humiliation that had settled over him, allowing him to see himself through her eyes. As a man she was willing to ride toward a fire with. A man capable of keeping her safe.

And no matter what may or may not happen between them romantically, he would be forever grateful to her for the version of himself she saw. The version of himself she allowed him to be in that moment.

The roar of Cy’s truck engine melded with the crackling flames as he turned down the road that would lead them behind Vee and Myrtle’s property. Fat flakes of ash fell like feathers as the scent of smoke thickened within the truck’s cab. Lyra quickly killed the air conditioner and flipped on the windshield wipers without Cy’s having to ask.

In silence, they stared out the arc swept clean by the black wiper blades. Ruts in the hard-packed dirt road jostled them past flickers of orange winking through the trees.

The scent of smoke gradually lessened as they climbed toward the scenic turnout Cy had in mind.

He quickly unbuckled his seatbelt. “I don’t suppose it would do me any good to ask you to stay in the cab?”

“What do you think?” Lyra replied, unclipping her belt and wrenching open her door.

Blinking his eyes against the occasional stinging gusts, Cy climbed into the bed of his truck and unlocked the chest of gadgets his father had mercilessly teased him for investing in.

Looking at the sleek black metallic machine with its four rotors gleaming in the hazy light, Cy got to work setting it up, handing Lyra the iPad so he could focus on keeping the expensive machine from being sucked straight into the roaring draft.

As the drone lifted off, Lyra gasped. “Look at that.”

Cy peered over her shoulder as they watched the screen together in awe. The fire had already consumed almost a quarter of the property, and it was quickly spreading toward the creek.

He steered the drone closer and noticed two figures slightly obscured from view by an outbuilding near the back fence. He quickly navigated his way down to take a closer look and found what he had been hoping for: a small patch of earth that remained untouched by the flames.

“There!” he said, pointing to the screen. “That’s where we need to create the firebreak.”

Lyra nodded in agreement, her gaze fixed on the mesmerizing glow of the digital flames. “But how do we let them know?”

Cy hadn’t actually gotten that far in his plan. Somehow, he doubted Ethan would have his cell phone tucked into his fire-retardant vest.

“I have an idea,” Lyra said, digging in her pocket and pulling out her cell phone.

Cy heard two rings before a familiar voice crackled onto the line. Myrtle.

“Lyra honey, could I call you right back?” Cy heard her ask in a deceptively kind, calm tone. “I’m just a little busy.”

A painful knot clutched at Cy’s throat. This kind of thing always slayed him. Women handling horrific circumstances with unassuming grace and concern for others.

Like his mother had until the very end.

“Listen, Myrtle, Cy and I are on the hill behind your property, and I need you to tell Ethan that there’s a spot behind the barn on the—” Lyra paused, looking to Cy.

“The east side,” he said.

“The east side, where they can construct a firebreak,” Lyra said. “Have them move the volunteers to the east side.”

“The east side,” Myrtle repeated. “You’re sure?”

In this question, he heard the first filament of fear.

Lyra looked Cy directly in the eye. “We’re sure.”

We’re.

We. Are.

Myrtle’s voice came back on the line, a note of relief laced through it. “Okay, I’ll let him know. You both stay safe.”

Lyra hung up and turned to Cy. “Let’s go,” she said.

They scrambled back into the truck, and Cy gunned the engine, heading back down the road toward the property.

As they neared the fire, they could see the volunteers working together, digging the trench and battling the blaze.

“Can I ask you something?” Lyra said, turning to face him.

“Sure,” he replied, trying not to notice how her soot-streaked cheeks only added to her allure.

“Cy, I—” she began, but was cut off by a sudden, deafening crack.

The ground rumbled beneath their tires as a huge tree, consumed by flames, came crashing down.

“Watch out!” she shouted.

But it was too late. The burning behemoth of a branch slammed into the ground, sending up a shower of sparks.

And cutting off their path to escape.

FIFTEEN

Purning Times

1000 C.E. THROUGH 17TH CENTURY WHEN NINE MILLION+
PEOPLE WERE TORTURED AND BURNED BY CHURCH AND
PUBLIC OFFICIALS FOR ALLEGED WITCHCRAFT.



THEY WERE GOING TO HIT THE TREE.

Lyra tucked into herself, covering her face with her hands.

The ground seemed to shake as the truck skidded before Cy wrenched the wheel, rapidly accelerating as they left the asphalt and careened parallel to the burning tree. Lyra felt her heart race, and every muscle in her body tensed up as she braced for impact. But instead of smashing into the blazing obstruction, Cy managed to swerve around it at just the right moment, avoiding disaster by mere inches.

The truck wheels hit a rut and veered wildly off course, skidding sideways on the grass before finally coming to a stop before a ditch. The sudden jolt caused Lyra's head to hit against the window with a dull thud.

"Fuck. Lyra, are you okay?" Cy shouted, ripping his seatbelt off to get to her.

Lyra coughed as acrid smoke stung her eyes and throat. Flames licked at the twisted metal of Cy's damaged truck, the fire roaring like a hungry beast.

"I'm okay," she said, blinking and testing her muscles to make sure.

"We have to stop it before it reaches the road!" Cy shouted over the blaze. "Everyone else is focused on the fire racing for Townsend Harbor, but the backdraft will ignite every farm, ranch, mill, and cabin from here to the coast."

Lyra's mind raced. They needed water, and lots of it. The creek was on the other side of the fire line, and on this side, the high-powered hoses and well pump at Vee and Myrtle's place were too little and too far away.

Then she remembered something.

They'd passed a ruptured water main up the road, gushing gallons of water into the ditch a day or so ago. Judging by the depth of the water in the ditch, the utilities department were still as back-assward as they used to be, and they'd yet to bother fixing it.

She grabbed Cy's shirt. "The water main over by the highway."

His anxious features split into a grin. "Fucking brilliant." His smile fell as quickly as it'd appeared. "It flows downhill into the wrong ditch, we'll need to redirect the water back uphill."

Lyra thought of the tangle of hoses coiled in Vee's greenhouse, and an idea sparked. "We could create a makeshift pump to get the water uphill. Vee has hoses and a gas-powered pump in her greenhouse."

"On it," Cy said, jumping in the truck and leaving his bumper behind as they raced back toward Vee and Myrtle's. In no time, they dragged the hoses and pump up the road and assembled them near the broken water main. Lyra primed the pump while Cy worked the choke, sputtering the engine to life.

The fire raged closer, swiftly consuming the highway in its path. Water spewed from the hoses like a torrent, cascading across the road and into the ditch on the burning side as Cy and Lyra desperately tried to flood each side of the road. The flames crept closer and closer, but once it reached the ditch, the intense heat gave way to plumes of smoke and steam as what was once a vibrant stretch of road became nothing more than a charred gash of destruction.

And yet...they'd won. On this front, at least.

A helicopter passed over them, the pilot giving them a thumbs-up as he flew toward the main blaze, dumping flame retardant on the crux of it.

A vibration against Lyra's pocket had her digging out her phone, and she answered the moment she saw Gemma's name.

"They're containing it!" her twin exclaimed before she'd even greeted her. "Fifty percent and climbing. It's going to be okay."

"Are you safe?" Lyra demanded.

"Oh yeah, I was in town trying to figure out what to save, and... All I could think of was our memories and albums at Mom and Dad's house. Projects from school. Mementos. I was sure it was going to all be gone."

Lyra glanced over to the plume of smoke in the distance and swore she could see it diminishing in real time. "It didn't make it to Mom and Dad's," she said. "But I doubt everyone out of town will have been so lucky."

"Already activating the text tree. We'll go make sure people are taken care of. You stay safe out there."

"Love you."

Lyra turned to see Cy leaning against the truck, his shirt as soaked and soot-stained as her own. His strong, angular features were arranged in the oddest of expressions. Somewhere between relief, recrimination, and worship.

She stared at him, her chest and throat too full of emotion to say a word.

She didn't need to.

Kicking his hip away from the truck, Cy opened his arms, and she stepped into them, burying tears she hadn't wanted to shed into his wet shirt.

Gentle hands danced up and down her spine as he made a guttural noise. "God, Lyra. You were amazing."

She smiled, giving a sniff. "We were amazing. If it wasn't for your quick thinking..." She couldn't finish the sentence.

Townsend Harbor might have disappeared today. One of the oldest working Victorian sea ports left in America. Home of the longest running grocery, at 130 years, the thickest hemp rope, and the 2009 state high school tennis champions, for which they still hadn't bothered to take down the congratulations sign.

Her hometown.

Cy dropped a kiss on her crown. "You're the one who figured out how to stop the fire in its tracks. I just drove the truck." She lifted her face to meet his, and a teasing grin lit his eyes. "This town owes you a debt of gratitude, and no one even knows it."

"No one needs to know it," she protested. But secretly, she was proud of how she'd been able to think on her feet and come up with a solution. Maybe Gemma was right, and she did have a gift. If so, she was ready to embrace it.

"Don't sell yourself short," Cy said. "You're someone who can see how things will work and understands how all the pieces should fit together." He glanced at her, his expression softening. "It's one of the many things that make you extraordinary, Lyra."

Her breath caught at the emotion in his voice. The fears and doubts that had once held her back seemed to fade in the glow of his words.

"It might be because I'm autistic," she blurted, blowing her plan to tell him over a calm meal all to hell.

He cocked his head to the side, scrutinizing her with a concerning crease between his brows.

"I received the diagnosis a few days ago," she answered his unspoken question. "I was working up to telling people...I guess it can help explain why I'm such a bitch."

"You're not a bitch. I'll never let anyone call you that." Cy pulled her in tight, dropping a kiss to her crown. "It doesn't change anything, Lyra," he said. "But I'm glad I know...I'm glad you told me."

She felt her eyes misting over as she gazed at him. “Can we, um...go home?”

By the time they’d limped the truck back to Cy’s place, the smoke from the main fire had waned, though the residual turned the sunset a blood-orange hue.

Lyra’s muscles ached, and her clothes reeked of smoke, but a contentment settled over her like she’d never before felt in her life.

As Cy guided her through the door of his home, the lights flickered on, enveloping them in a warm glow. His grip on her wrist tightened as he walked her toward the bathroom, stopping to peel away her clothing one article at a time. They shared each other’s breath in silent reverence until the last layer was removed and she stood just shy of naked before him.

He took a seat on the wide ledge of the tub before motioning for her to come closer. Still without speaking, she reached out and released the clasp that held his prosthesis in place, allowing it to slip from his body with such trust and ease, this could have been her one hundredth time rather than her first.

The hot water enveloped them in a warm embrace as they settled into the vast tub. Cy washed her first, treating her with adoration and tenderness rather than passion. He seemed to want to understand her body in a way that could only be felt—to learn every inch of her from head to toe. Not like a lover, but an intimate. He washed her hair, behind her ears. His breath was warm against her shoulder as he caressed her neck.

Lyra leaned back and breathed in the feeling of being loved and cared for as his fingers moved around her throat and chest, over her breasts and down to her stomach, then to each leg. Cy left trails of shivers behind him as his hands traveled along her limbs.

Once he was finished, she gently reciprocated, taking the same effort in washing his body and using extra care with his limb. She used delicate, broad-headed strokes to remove any dirt or sweat collected during their battle against the fire. As

she bathed him, his muscles noticeably relaxed beneath her fingertips until all tension melted away completely.

She slid her hands over his chest, the hard planes of muscle, the ridge of scar tissue along his knee and lower. He inhaled sharply at her touch but didn't pull away.

She wanted to know him, too. It was important to her.

He was important to her. This man. This wounded, wonderful man with his soulful, dark eyes and a heart big enough to encompass the entire world.

“Stay?” Spoken in a low rumble, the word almost disappeared into the swirling, steamy atmosphere of the bathroom.

It contained questions she wasn't ready to answer.

And a request she'd be a fool to deny.

Once the water turned tepid, they used the detached showerhead to rinse down and then dried off before lurching to the bedroom in exhaustion.

Once enfolded in his embrace, she reached between their bodies, wrapping her hand around his erection and stroking slowly.

A groan rumbled in his chest. “Lyra...we should talk—”

“Shh.” She silenced him with another kiss, losing herself in the taste of him, the feel of his hands and mouth on her.

There were words to be said. Things to be worked out. Nuances to unravel.

But none of that mattered right now.

He returned the kiss with passion and need, rolling her onto her back. He explored her body with a sense of wonder, feathering worshipful caresses over her curves, igniting a fire beneath her flesh.

His mouth seared her own, fanning the flames into an inferno.

When he thrust himself into her, she gasped out his name in rapturous surprise, clinging to him for dear life. Every stroke of their bodies built the intensity higher and higher until it felt almost unbearable. With each movement they drew closer, enraptured, until finally the pleasure erupted, coursing through her body with blinding force like a raging sea beating against the shore.

At her low cry, Cy thrust into her a final time, clutching her close as he found his own release with a guttural, primal sound.

Gazing up at him, Lyra felt her breath taken by a surge of warmth and affection flooding her. In this moment, she could sense the threads of connection binding them together, as if every time they'd been thrown together, the universe might have been giving them some kind of directive. Telling them what was meant to be.

She lay in Cy's arms until his breath had deepened and his muscles went slack but for the occasional twitch. She watched the shadows of the trees play across the wall in the moonlight, trying to calculate the trajectory of the breeze.

Her body screamed for sleep, but she couldn't seem to let it drag her under.

If she slept now, morning would come for her. Morning was where the truth lived, and somehow her truth was shifting. Transmuting. Becoming more nebulous and opaque.

After a bit, she gave in to the need to pee, then her restless spirit sent her drifting around the cabin like a ghost, committing it to memory.

The main living space wasn't as spare as the bedroom, adorned in colorful woven rugs and pottery crafted by local Salish artisans. Lyra wandered through, trailing her fingers over the knickknacks and trinkets that hinted at Cy's heritage. There were carvings of ravens, otters, and whales. Dreamcatchers dangling from the ceiling. A collection of sea glass, stones, fossils, and shells lining the windowsills.

She felt at peace here in a way she never had before. The clean lines and natural materials soothed her senses, a balm after years surrounded by the cold sterility of chrome and glass.

It was a welcome change to look out the window and see reflections of the stars in the harbor, rather than smog and light pollution. The peace of Townsend Harbor brought her comfort in ways she hadn't realized she needed until now. The serenity of its salty air held sway over her heartstrings in a way she hadn't expected, especially after living in a city where every moment seemed to be filled with chaos, noise, electric energy, and movement.

Too much, sometimes.

How had she ever preferred it to the tide lapping against the shoreline?

Sure, there were amenities in the city. Energy. Endless distractions. Money to be made. Things to see. People to impress. All of which she'd held a place for. All of which she'd chased.

But in this quiet moment, she had to ask herself—what would she do when she caught it? Would it ever be enough?

Weighed down by these questions, she returned to Cy's bed and curled against his sleeping form, listening to the steady beat of his heart. If she were smart, she'd return to the apartment above Star-Crossed and figure out her next steps.

But she couldn't bring herself to go. Not yet. She wanted to stay cocooned here a little while longer. To bask in the warmth and comfort she'd found, if only for a day. A week. A month. Longer?

Would she tire of the peace?

Her mind was quiet for once, not buzzing with plans and to-do lists. She wasn't berating herself for her mistakes or perceived failures.

She was content.

She never realized how much that was lacking before.

The thought should have terrified her. But in the peace of this moment, she embraced it. Embraced *him*.

Would the future take her from here? Maybe. But she knew now where a sliver of her heart would always live.

Here, in the shelter of Cy's arms.



THE NEXT MORNING, LYRA WOKE TO SUNLIGHT STREAMING through the windows and the rumble of Cy's snores beside her.

She propped herself up on an elbow, studying his sleeping face. The hard lines had softened, making him appear younger and more vulnerable.

Last night came rushing back to her—the fire, the wreck, that exquisite intimacy they'd shared. Her cheeks heated at the memory.

Cy stirred, blinking open his eyes. For a moment he seemed disoriented, then he focused on her and smiled. "Morning." His voice was gravelly with sleep.

"Good morning." Lyra brushed a lock of hair off his forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Hungry." He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm.

She leaned up and kissed his warm shoulder. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Better than I have in a long time." He slid his hand down her back, cupping her rear as he urged her on top of him. "But I think I could use a bit more rest."

Lyra laughed, bracing her hands on his chest. "Is that so?"

"Mmm. And I know just where to find it." His hips rocked against hers, and she felt him hard and ready beneath her. "If you're up for it, that is."

"Lucky for you, I don't have anywhere else to be except work." She leaned down, nipping at his jaw. "Fuck work."

With a growl, Cy flipped them over, pinning her to the bed. Lyra gasped as heat flooded her veins. She'd unleashed something primal in him, and she loved every moment of it.

"You're trouble, you know that?" Cy's voice was rough with desire. "The sweetest kind of trouble."

"You love it," she teased, curling her leg around his hip.

"I do." He kissed her then, deep and claiming, as he slid into her waiting heat. "God help me, but I do."

Lyra moaned, clutching at his shoulders.

Those words.

I do.

She pretended she hadn't heard them. Pretended they hadn't meant anything.

Pretended...that they'd not shattered the shards of ice surrounding her heart.

SIXTEEN

Gall

A LOCALIZED SWELLING OF BRANCH OR STEM GENERALLY
CAUSED BY FUNGI, BACTERIA, INSECTS OR A PHYSIOLOGICAL
DISORDER.



CY RINSED HIS LUNGS WITH CRISP AUTUMN AIR AS HE AND Lyra strolled down Water Street. Pumpkin spices, wood smoke, and the briny scent of the sea air mingled with the occasional salty whiff of popcorn or smoked turkey legs. Which was a welcome distraction from the smell of his blouse.

Yes. A fucking *blouse*.

“I reek of mothballs and patchouli,” Cy grumbled, bending to sniff the puffed shoulder of his shirt.

“Probably because Raven lives in his grandmother’s basement,” Lyra said, shooting him a sideways grin. “We’re just lucky that he was willing to lend the shirt to you on such short notice.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate your sense of irony,” Cy said, slowing for a beat, “but you really think coordinated costumes were the way to go?”

Lyra laughed, the sound carrying on the breeze. “Oh, come on,” she said, tugging on the billowing sleeve. “We’re so meta.”

For about the thousandth time since he’d picked her up, Cy stole a glance at the outfit that had nearly caused him a stroke. A tight black corset with purple lacings pushed her luscious tits nearly up to her neck and whittled her waistline to the classic hourglass. From the swell of her hips, layers of purple and black chiffon danced on the breeze, revealing hip-high glimpses of her long legs clad in fishnets that looked like black spiderwebs. Her dark hair hung in long, loose waves below a

wide-brimmed, pointy hat embroidered with gold stars. Around her neck, a bejeweled spider pendant mostly covered the hickey he'd given her in their passionate post-fire tangle.

Lyra wasn't just a sexy witch, she was *the* sexy witch.

And if he didn't peel his eyes away from her, he was in danger of growing a stiff yardarm behind the laces of his knee-length leather breeches.

"*You're meta,*" Cy muttered. "I'm the punch line of a bad joke." The uneven clomping of his cavalier boot only served as punctuation.

Boot. Singular.

On the foot of his prosthetic, he wore a sneaker covered by a knee-high sock printed with a woodgrain pattern that proved surprisingly convincing. Like he was a peg-legged pirate.

"That's the whole point," Lyra said, scuffing through the confetti of leaves with gold-buckled shoes pointy enough to double as prison shanks. "We're throwing the town's stereotypes right back in its face. Which you were one hundred percent on board with, may I remind you."

"Your thighs were wrapped around my head. You probably could have suggested I scrape the rain gutters of Roy's junk shop clean with my teeth and I'd have been on board."

And indeed, with her bare breasts swaying above his head and his mouth on her slippery sex, he'd heartily agreed that wearing couples' costumes featuring his prosthetic and her alleged prognosticative abilities would make gossiping about them no fun.

As had her idea that they arrive late enough to make an entrance. Which was right up there with recreational flaying on Cy's list of Fun Shit to Do.

He really had to stop agreeing to things during sex.

The auditory soup of carnival sounds floated over on a gust of wind that showered them with a scattering of gold aspen leaves like fluttery coins.

“You’re *sure* you want to do this?” he asked, slowing on the sidewalk.

Lyra arched an eyebrow at him. “How many times are you going to ask me that tonight?”

Gazing into the depths of her gold-green eyes, Cy couldn’t find an easy answer. “Depends on what we end up doing.”

Lips painted a vampy purple curved into a wicked smile as Lyra slid her hands up his chest. Tugging the laces—*laces*, for fuck’s sake—at the shirt’s open neckline, she brought her mouth to his ear.

“Do you have any idea how hot you look?”

The heat of her breath sent shivers down his spine and set every nerve ending in his body ablaze. Suddenly, all he could focus on was the way her body felt against his, the soft curves pressing against hard angles. Desperate for more contact, he reached down and cupped Lyra’s ass through the peekaboo layers of her skirt.

“No,” he said, wondering if she could feel his pulse through her hip. “But I know how hot I feel.”

Which was *very*, and not in the good way.

“Tell you what.” A dark nail traced the contours of his lips. “We put in an appearance here, drop by the after-party at Raven Creek, then have an after-party of our own?”

Dropping his head, Cy lightly brushed a kiss across her lips. “I can’t think of a single thing I’d like better.”

“Good.” Thumbing a smudge of purple from his lips, she turned and threaded her arm through his. “Ready to scandalize the town?”

“The question is, *arrrrr* you?”

Lyra’s nose crinkled in an adorable grimace. “I suppose I have only myself to blame.”

“Aye,” Cy growled, falling into step beside her. “Now let’s get this over with so you can walk me plank.”

“Aye, sir,” she said with a little salute that did nothing to cool his rapidly heating blood.

Townsend Harbor Horrorween Fest was in full swing. A sea of bodies in colorful costumes, from *more* witches and werewolves to superheroes and mythical creatures, milled about on the portion of Water Street blocked off for the festivities.

And despite his reluctance, Cy felt a swell of pride at the cozy, chaotic scene. He glanced at Lyra, who seemed equally enchanted by the lively atmosphere. Her eyes widened as she marveled at the elaborate decorations that adorned every shopfront and lamppost.

“Holy shit,” she whispered, her fingers tightening on his biceps. “I’d forgotten how the whole town turns out for this.”

“How long has it been since you’ve been home for one of these?” Cy asked.

She blew out a gust of air. “About a century?”

“Ah,” he said. “So you’re pretty much a festival first-timer.”

Not that he’d been much of a joiner since he wound up back here. Cy was never sure if age was making him more misanthropic, or if the festivities got more manic every year.

“I went to the fall fest,” she reminded him. “And look how well that turned out.”

“Oh yeah.” He gave her a theatrically curious look. “Weren’t you the one who predicted that fire?” he asked, loud enough for several tourists to hear and glance in their direction.

Lyra pinched the inside of his arm through the shirt’s thick fabric.

He shrugged. “Just trying to play the part.”

“Keep it up, and the only part you’re being playing with is ___”

“Heeeey, you two!”

They both spun around to see Cady racing toward them, a bright yellow ball gown flaring as she twirled the last couple steps and caught Lyra in a hug. Behind her came Fawkes, dressed in black trousers about as crotch-hugging as Cy's, a regal blue jacket, and a crisp white shirt from which tufts of chocolate-brown fur sprouted.

They exchanged looks of covert suffering as Lyra and Cady gushed over the various details of each other's costumes.

"Ugh, could you *be* a more perfect Belle?" Lyra said with mock disgust.

"Definitely," Cady said. "But have you ever seen a more perfect Beast?" she asked, tucking herself against Fawkes's side and pressing a palm against one massive pectoral.

On that point, Cy was inclined to agree. Having watched the movie in question at least fifty times with a never-ending parade of Disney-princess-obsessed foster sisters, the comparison was startling. Down to a scowl that looked like it might be the result of a hidden pair of canines.

"Fair warning," Cady said, leaning into Lyra, "*everyone* is talking about how you two single-handedly saved Vee and Myrtle's place, so you should probably just prepare yourself for—"

"*There* they are!"

Cy's entire body tensed at the instantly recognizable voice.

Myrtle.

Glancing over the flounced shoulder of Cady's sleeve, Cy saw the ash-gray shock of hair cutting its way through the crowd that seemed to be giving her an especially wide berth. Only when the rabble parted did he see the reason why.

Her costume was approximately five feet wide.

It was a masterpiece of construction, Cy had to admit, from the bright pink bodysuit hugging her spindly arms and legs to the folded half-circle of fuchsia foam that stretched from her knees to her neck. Vee, on the other hand, was far more subdued and somehow managed to emit a dignified air

even when enclosed in the giant beige bell dotted with clusters of bright blue sequins.

It took an embarrassingly long time for Cy to make the connection.

Muffin. Taco.

In his defense, the taco's being pink had thrown him.

"Oh my gosh," Lyra said, catching sight of them. "Don't you two look...festive!"

"So do you, darling," Vee said, bending to kiss the air by both of her cheeks. "But your true identities are far more sensational, if you ask me."

"A lawyer and a tree guy?" Lyra scoffed.

And though he knew the words were literally part of his marketing copy, Cy couldn't help but flinch at how ridiculous those two professions sounded together.

"Heroes," Vee said, her eyes reflecting neon as they misted over.

"Damn right," Myrtle agreed. "That's twice now that my Darrell would have gone limping into the great beyond it if it hadn't been for you two." Pulling off a yellow Velcro rectangle Cy now realized was meant to be shredded cheese, she dabbed the corners of her eyes with it. "The world just isn't a kind place for a three-legged llama."

An awkward silence followed.

Because what did a muffin, a taco, a pirate, a witch, a princess, and a cursed animorph have to say to each other after a statement like that?

"You're entering the Significant Other Carrying Contest, right?" Vee asked, reviving the conversation.

"The *what* now?" Lyra asked.

Vee smiled. "It's a Norse custom most likely brought over by our former sheriff's great-great-great grandfather," she said. "Of course, it was originally a *wife*-carrying contest, which manages to be totally infantilizing in addition to a completely

brazen and vulgar display of male strength as social placeholder for virility, but they've updated the name to make it more inclusive. This year the prize is an impressive haul from Baked, and it's great fun."

Cy glanced at Lyra, an unspoken question in his eyes.

Dressing up in coordinated costumes to make a point was one thing. But officially declaring themselves as part of significant othership? That was a whole other thing.

The corner of her mouth curled in a smirk that sent lava pooling in his belly.

"Let's do it," she said.

"Marvelous," Vee said. "This way."

She and Myrtle started off, their giant costumes plowing a path for them to follow.

Lyra reached back and laced her hand with Cy's as they maneuvered through the crowd. Catching his eye, she gave him a sexy little wink that made his lacings on his leather breeches feel like barbed wire.

People were watching them, curious eyes moving over her first—naturally—before finding him through the tether of their clasped hands.

Pride swelled his chest at the frank envy on their faces, followed by a cold wash of fear.

Was the affection, like their costumes, designed to achieve a social agenda? Her version of a behavioral accessory? Or did she really want to hold his hand?

He was distressed to realize that the answer didn't matter.

Because this felt too good. Too natural. Too—

Lyra let go of his hand to root through her bag. Her cell phone jangled somewhere within. As she pulled it out, Cy caught an unintentional glimpse of the screen before she silenced it.

Harrison.

The name made his heart beat harder behind the itchy fabric of his borrowed shirt. Especially when he remembered just how many times that evening she'd already done the exact same thing.

He bit down on the acidic wash of jealousy as they came into full view of the starting line.

And there, already waiting, were Ethan and Darby.

In perhaps the most Ethan move ever, he was dressed in his former sheriff's uniform, down to the creased khakis and the badge he was supposed to return but had probably been keeping in the drawer with his pristinely folded socks.

Darby, on the other hand, had gone for sexy convict, her black-and-white-striped halter top and ruffled skirt leaving little to the imagination.

Next to them, Gemma, clad in a white toga, rubbed Gabe's muscular shoulders with the attentive care of a boxing coach, leaning in to whisper something that made him laugh when she reached the waist of his gladiatorial loincloth.

Because of course he'd chosen a costume that required as little clothing as possible.

The tips of Cy's ears began to burn when they all looked up at his and Lyra's approach. Ethan's mouth slid into a firm set.

They hadn't spoken since the fire.

Not a word. Not a text.

Lyra's hand found his again, and she squeezed tight as if catching his thoughts in midair.

"You're sure you want to do this?" she asked out of the side of her mouth.

Cy knew why she was asking. Knew that it had nothing to do with making a spectacle out of himself or starting the rumor mill buzzing.

She was worried about his leg.

"Trying to steal my line?" he teased.

“No, it’s just—”

“O. M. Geeee. You guys look amazing!” Having abandoned her muscle management duties, Gemma rushed over to hug her sister. “PS,” she said, turning her attention to Cy, “I don’t know *what* you did to my sister, but I like it.”

“Um, I’m wearing this costume ironically,” Lyra said, frowning as her cauldron-shaped clutch began to glow and vibrate once more. And not from some magical force.

Cy’s jaw tightened in response.

“Attention, everyone!” Mayor Stewart, somehow even more pompous in the powdered wig, cravat, and waistcoat of an eighteenth-century fop, clapped his hands together as he stepped up to the starting line. “Let’s review the rules before we begin. First and foremost—”

Gemma made a show of miming sticking her finger down her throat to make herself vomit behind the mayor’s back while Lyra’s phone continued to buzz.

“—and all appendages of the partner who is the designated rider must remain completely elevated from the ground at all times in order to avoid disqualification. Points will be awarded for—”

“I’d like to be your appendage’s designated rider,” Cy heard Gemma say to Gabe, who pulled her against his body with a protective forearm.

The gesture was so effortless and comfortable that it made Cy’s chest ache.

Because he wanted what they had. He’d wanted it for much longer than he’d been able to admit. And now, there was no way to un-know.

“On your marks—”

“That means you’re supposed to lift her.” Myrtle, who already had her skinny legs anchored over the foil skirt that doubled as Vee’s muffin cup, poked a bony finger into Cy’s ribs.

He'd been so lost in the tangle of his thoughts that he hadn't even realized the others were already assuming a variety of carrying configurations.

“Get set—”

What happened next, Cy could only attribute to muscle memory. Thousands of drills in thousands of football practices, his body bending at the knees and waist, his head, neck, and shoulder sloping down and—

“Go!”

Lyra yelped in surprise as Cy slung her over his shoulder and *ran*. Ran like he hadn't since before his accident. Ran like the devil was chasing him.

Lyra clung to him with a grip that he knew would leave bruises tomorrow, but he didn't care. The air rushing past his ears, the chill of the night against his cheeks, the ground passing beneath his feet in a blur, made every single ounce of pain worth it.

He pushed forward faster, weaving around other runners, maneuvering tricky turns until they were side by side with Ethan and Darby, their strides in perfect synchronization. Just as they had all those years ago on the football field.

The cheers of their friends faded into the background as they raced ahead of everyone else until the finish line was in view.

He was winning.

He was going to *win*.

Or would have, had the pink wing of Myrtle's taco shell not caught the back of his knee.

Cy lurched several steps and managed to catch himself before he fell, depositing Lyra carefully onto the ground just past the finish line as he collapsed, panting.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her eyes wide with worry as she knelt down beside him.

Cy could only nod, too winded to speak.

Gemma and the others rushed over, eager to help him up, but a strong hand pulled him to his feet before they could get there.

Ethan stood in front of Cy, his expression solemn and apologetic. “Good race, man.”

The phrase carried the weight of an entire apology. Cy accepted it with a grateful smile, clapping Ethan on the back.

“And the winner, by a”—Mayor Stewart paused, a crease appearing in his forehead as he examined Myrtle’s costume—“a *something*, is Myrtle and Vee!”

The crowd erupted in a thunderous cheer.

“Fortunately, we’re more than happy to share our winnings,” Vee announced, gesturing to the Baked food truck with a grand sweep of her arm. “Step right up.”

“Want to?” Lyra asked, tugging Cy gently toward the booth.

What he wanted was to do any damn thing that would keep that smile on her face.

“Sure,” he said.

As they approached the psychedelically painted vehicle, the scent of freshly baked goods wafted through the air, mingling with the aroma of earthy herbs. A tall, Bohemian-looking man with a shock of curly blond hair and a surprising number of piercings greeted them with a warm smile.

“Welcome to Baked,” he said with a lazy smile that suggested he regularly sampled his own wares. “I’m Jasper. What consciousness-expanding experience can I arrange for you today?”

“Hey, Jasper,” Lyra responded, returning his smile. “My sister, Gemma, speaks very highly of your offerings. ‘To die for,’ are the words I believe she used.”

“I mean, death is just a change in states, but right on.” Jasper chuckled. “As far as the offerings, we’ve got a little something for everyone, depending on what you’re into.” He

waved a skinny, tattooed arm at the array of colorful cupcakes with various cannabis-inspired names and flavors.

Cy eyed the colorful rows, intrigued but hesitant. He'd smoked his own weight in hash in high school, but hadn't really indulged much since drug testing had become a condition of his college scholarship.

"What's your favorite?" Lyra asked.

Jasper's grin was all dimples. "Let's see." He tapped his chin thoughtfully, surveying the display. "If you're looking for something mellow, I'd suggest the Cannabliss—it's an indica-based chocolate cupcake with lavender frosting. Or, if you prefer something a little more uplifting, the Pineapple Express is pretty rad. It's a sativa-hybrid pineapple and coconut cupcake with lemongrass frosting."

Lyra turned to Cy, her eyes lighting up. "What do you think?"

I think I'm in love with you.

"Uh, Pineapple Express, I guess?" he said.

"We'll take two," Lyra added.

"Boss." Jasper ducked below the counter and carefully handed them each a cupcake. "Let love in."

Too fucking late.

"Wow," Lyra said around a mouthful. "This is actually really, really good."

Cy nodded his agreement. The cake was tender, the frosting melt-in-your-mouth buttery, the herbaceous kick of the extract barely detectible. "Dangerously good," he said after he'd swallowed.

"I think I must have had low blood sugar or something." Lyra peeled back another section of the wrapping. "That, or my brain is still recovering from lack of oxygen after being held upside down while wearing a corset." She tugged at one side of the laces.

“Sorry about that,” Cy said before taking a big bite of his own. “I panicked.”

Lyra shook her head, chuckling at the absurdity of the situation. “I guess we’ll have to train harder next time.”

Next time.

The implications of those words hit Cy like a freight train.

God, he wanted there to be a next time. And a time after that.

But half the shit she said was teasing. How could he even know?

“Agreed,” he replied with a mock-serious nod. “How can we expect to win when we didn’t even have a proper training montage?”

“Training montage?” Lyra licked frosting from her fingers and wadded the wrapper.

Cy took it from her and added his own, tossing both into a nearby receptacle at the edge of the crowd.

Without consciously meaning to, they’d begun to wander away from the crush, which suited Cy absolutely fine.

“You know. Dramatic shots of me running and doing push-ups while you sit on my shoulders shouting at me and some kind of testosterone-inducing jock jam plays in the background.”

“Oh, I’ll sit on you, all right.” She’d just gotten close enough to hook a finger through one of his leather belt loops when her purse began to buzz once again.

The tension tightening her features was immediately visible.

“Go ahead,” Cy said, swallowing his own discomfort. “Answer it.”

Their eyes met, and she knew that he knew.

“I’m so sorry. He’s been calling all day,” Lyra said, digging through her purse. “Let me just tell him off so he’ll

leave me alone.”

They found a secluded spot beneath a large oak tree, the gnarled branches casting a network of eerie shadows on the ground. Lyra hesitated for a moment before hitting the speaker button on her phone, giving Cy an almost apologetic look.

“This is Lyra,” she said in a clipped tone.

“Finally.”

Cy felt his fists clench involuntarily at the sound of Harrison’s voice. It was hard to reconcile that smooth, cultured tone with the damage he knew it had inflicted upon the woman who made him feel murderously protective.

“I trust you haven’t been ignoring me out of pettiness?” Harrison asked, the condescension dripping from his words like venom.

“Of course not.” Lyra’s tone was icy calm. Perfectly in control. “I’m at the Townsend Harbor Horrorween Fest.”

“When is that little hamlet ever *not* having some kind of festival?” Harrison asked dismissively.

Lyra didn’t dignify the comment with an answer.

“Anyway,” Harrison prattled on, “the reason for my call —”

“*Calls*,” Lyra said. “As in fifty.”

“Did it not occur to you to wonder *why* I wanted to reach you so urgently?”

Oh, Cy really, really wanted to knock this guy’s teeth down his neck. So much, he actually felt a pang of jealousy at Gabe, whose knuckles had known the distinct pleasure of knuckle-mapping Harrison’s caps.

“Actually, no,” Lyra said. “Not having to wonder why you do the incredibly arrogant and frequently inappropriate things you do has been one of the best parts of calling you my ex-boyfriend.”

Get him, baby, Cy silently cheered.

“Ex-*fiancé*,” Harrison corrected her.

The word cracked across Cy’s face like a whip. Once upon a time, Lyra was going to marry this man. Had actually accepted his proposal and allowed him to slip a ring on her finger. Had chosen a date, and a venue.

Had been ready to share her body, her mind, her *life* with him.

And in what universe did she go from that to Cy?

“I was calling because Doug Grier called me asking if I thought you’d be interested in a position as a senior staff attorney for Pinyon Environmental in Denver.”

The words dragged Cy out of his head, and he watched excitement leap onto Lyra’s features before she quickly schooled it away.

“Sure they did.” Despite her attempt at sounding utterly disinterested, he could hear the subtle but unmistakable hint of curiosity.

Harrison was silent. Motherfucker knew how to work her, all right.

“Why didn’t they call me directly?” Lyra asked, attempting to bite her cuticle before realizing the long, dagger-like nails she’d applied for the evening were in the way.

“The Griers are close friends of my father’s, as I’m sure you remember. Bob heard about our breakup and wanted to make sure that the offer wouldn’t create any awkwardness.”

Lyra popped the nail off and bit her cuticle.

“I assured him it wouldn’t,” Harrison continued. “Just because our romantic partnership didn’t stand the test of time doesn’t mean I’d deny you a professional opportunity that’s practically tailor-made for you.”

The colossal prick even managed to sound magnanimous.

“It’s a fantastic opportunity, Lyra,” Harrison said, obviously encouraged by her silence. “And you and I both know how rare those kinds of opportunities are.”

“Thank you for letting me know, Harrison,” Lyra replied, trying to keep her voice steady. “But I’ll have to get back to you.”

“Fine,” he replied, a hint of annoyance creeping into his voice. “But I wouldn’t keep them waiting if I were you. Your name might have been first on the list, but it is a list.”

The implication sizzled on the air even after Lyra disconnected the call and dropped her phone back in her bag.

“What a fuckstick,” she said, sagging back against the tree.

Cy made himself wait for a full breath before speaking. “But the job sounded pretty interesting.”

Lyra’s attempt at a nonchalant shrug was wholly unconvincing, her gaze distant, as if she were envisioning an entirely different world. Far away from Townsend Harbor.

“Might at least be worth considering,” he said.

Their eyes locked, and Cy was afraid that, for once, he knew the answer before she did.

Lyra McKendrick couldn’t stay here.

Shouldn’t stay here.

As much as she might even want to make this place her home, convince herself it would be enough, time would wear those mantras thin.

Cy should know. The very same thing had happened to him.

And however much Lyra’s presence here had helped him forget that, he’d be damned before he damned *her* to the same fate.

“Want to get back?” she asked.

Cy nodded, but the smile he plastered on his face felt brittle, in imminent danger of shattering to reveal the roiling brew of disappointment and resignation below.

“Hey, look!” Lyra said, pointing to a nearby booth. “They’re doing face painting. Want to top this night off by

getting a completely irrelevant symbol smeared on our faces in pore-clogging and irresponsibly sourced paints?”

“Or we could try the haunted house,” Cy suggested.

Not so much a house as a rambling mechanized maze, the structure was a Horrorween Fest staple. Though the withered mannequin vampires and dusty zombies that popped out of random cupboards as the creaky carts passed needed updating about three decades ago, Cy had always dreamed of riding it with a girlfriend.

Mostly because the darkened corridors made for the perfect make-out spot. For about three minutes, anyway.

“You’re on,” Lyra said, allowing him to lead her in that direction.

Canned thunder sounds interspersed with emphysematous howls greeted them as they stepped up to the ticket booth.

“Creep it real,” the young attendant said, sounding bored as she tore their tickets.

Cy and Lyra stepped into the next carriage and pulled the padded safety bar across their laps. Their heads nearly knocked together when the cart lurched forward.

Doors bearing a purposely sloppy *Enter if you dare!!!* swung open at the last second.

And whether the interior had been upgraded, or Cy’s cupcake had officially kicked in, he was mesmerized.

Glowing lines described the silhouette of a sprawling Victorian mansion, its many windows flickering with mournful faces. Overhead, a chandelier with drippy tapers rocked and swayed, sending its crystal pendants madly tinkling.

“Whoa,” Lyra whispered next to him.

Okay, so it was the cupcakes, probably.

“Crazy, right?” Cy asked.

But no sooner had the question left his lips than a pale fist punched through the wall, causing Lyra to nearly leap into his

lap.

Which was pretty much exactly how he'd imagined this happening when he was in high school. The reality of it proved to be a thousand times better.

So much better that by the time they came up for air, they were nearly to the end of the ride. As witnessed by the werewolf that leapt out in front of their cart.

Not that either of them saw this as a reason to halt their passionate lip lock.

"Aww, come on!" a muffled voice growled through the mask. "I only have one line."

Cy and Lyra reluctantly separated.

"Go ahead, then," he said, covertly adjusting the lacing on his too-tight breeches.

The werewolf fluffed his neck fur and cleared his throat before hunkering down with paws lifted. "Get out of my house before I eat your liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti!"

"That's not even your line." Lyra snorted. "It was Hannibal Lecter's. And PS, in the book, it's fava beans and a big Amarone." Her triumphant smile glowed blue beneath the blacklights.

Fuck, Cy was going to miss her.

The cart trundled toward the exit, leaving the befuddled lycanthrope in its wake.

Cy helped Lyra out of the cart and walked down the rickety stairs behind her, trying to soak in every last detail.

"Hey, Cy?" Lyra whispered, her breath warm against his ear.

"Uh-huh."

"Thank you."

"For what?" he asked.

“For tonight,” she said. “And last night. And for everything.”

She turned and slipped her arms about his waist, pressing her face into his billowing shirt.

“Anything for you,” he whispered into her crown, meaning every syllable.

They stayed like that for a length of time Cy couldn't begin to measure, releasing each other only when foot traffic began to stream past them toward the dock.

“I think it's time for the fireworks.” Taking her hand, Cy led her to a spot by the water where they could sit while they watched the display. As the first sparks exploded into the night sky and reflected off the water, he realized how perfectly it mirrored their own relationship—a dazzling, ephemeral burst too beautiful to last.

SEVENTEEN

Samhain

CELTIC CELEBRATION THAT IS THE ORIGIN OF HALLOWEEN.



UNDER THE WANING HARVEST MOON, LYRA WATCHED AS Townsend Harbor residents spilled out of the Halloween carnival like a colorful parade. The scent of cotton candy mixed with firework smoke hung in the crisp air while children darted around in costumes, chattering excitedly about their candy hauls. She glanced at Cy at her elbow, who was deep in conversation with Vee and Myrtle, his dark eyes twinkling as he laughed.

“I remember when you and Ethan were little teen squirtles.” Myrtle jabbed at Cy’s ribs with a sigh of nostalgia. “Baby hoodlums trying to kick up trouble. It was so adorable, I could have squeezed your little cheeks until they exploded in my hands.”

At Lyra’s other elbow, Gabe bent down to mutter, “There are some things only old ladies can say with impunity.”

Chuckling, Lyra glanced over in time to spy Gabe’s phone screen, where his thumbs flew in a text conversation. The incoming message read: *You suck more ass than your mom.*

Flinching, Lyra looked up to see that Gabe had caught her peeking.

“Sorry,” she mumbled. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

Gabe gave one of his *I couldn’t give a fuck* shrugs and kept typing a response.

“But don’t feed the trolls, bro,” Lyra advised. “This fucker doesn’t deserve the space in your head.”

“Nah.” Gabe chuckled, waving a hand. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just reconnecting with Mark, my favorite brother. This is our love language.”

Lyra shared a mystified look with Gemma, who was tucked into Gabe’s other side.

“I just pasted his head on a picture of this big, hairy schlong.” He turned the phone for all to see and appreciate his work of art.

To their surprise, Myrtle laughed the loudest, while Vee said, “Should be criminal to shove all that pulchritude into one Irish family.”

Lyra had to admit, even pasted to an unfortunate dick pic, Gabe’s brother was, in a word, *foine*.

“Yeah, he’s the hot one.” Coming from Gabe, who was hot enough to moonlight as an exotic dancer to make ends meet, that *meant* something.

“If he’s the hot one, what does that make you?” Lyra asked.

“The mature one, obviously.” Gabe grinned over at her, his neck tattoos standing out in stark relief beneath the carnival lights. “Now, excuse me—I’m going to raid the cotton candy while I teach this hairy twat snot a lesson.”

Lyra and Gemma put their heads together to watch him saunter off in that loose-limbed way of his.

“You’re going to spend your *life* with all that...maturity,” Lyra said.

Gemma sighed, her eyes soft as she watched her man clean out the candy cart like he was daring the diabetes gods to pass judgment. “Yeah, but just think of how hot our babies will be.”

“You guys will have the hottest, most bad-ass babies.”

“One of us has to.”

As she burst into laughter, Lyra’s corset squeezed her ribs like a boa constrictor, reminding her the night was both young and growing long at the same time.

“You guys coming to the after-party at Raven Creek Brewery?” Vee called out, adjusting her muffin in a way that made all the present males study their bootstraps intently.

“Actually”—Lyra hesitated, glancing at Cy—“I made some secret plans for after the carnival.”

“Ooh, mysterious,” Vee said, winking at her suggestively.

“You going to get some of this pirate booty?” Myrtle asked, flicking the laces of Cy’s poet shirt.

“Leave the poor boy alone.” Vee herded her pink taco of a wife toward their truck. “Thank you two again for everything you did for us, darlings. Let’s do a meal soon.” She pressed double air kisses to everyone’s cheeks.

As she walked toward her own car, Lyra felt the weight of her decision pressing down on her.

As much as she enjoyed the festive atmosphere, she couldn’t shake off the earlier phone call with Harrison. All her life, she’d wanted to do something that mattered. Something that could change the world for the better. This job as an environmental lawyer dangled in front of her like a shiny bauble, tempting her with its promise of prestige, position, and a higher purpose. But there was something holding her back—a magnetic pull toward this small town and the handsome, earthy man beside her.

The thought of re-establishing her career was an alluring prospect. It’d been her plan all along...

But, she realized, her heart was rooted here. She felt like she had something special in this town and was just reaching an age where she recognized and appreciated it truly for the first time.

Cy slid into the passenger seat, concern flickering in his gaze. “You look a bit pale. You need an early night?”

Lyra shook her head. She felt a little pale, but often did after such intensely stimulating events. The myriad flashing lights, loud signs, and lingering airborne debris, the mélange of scents, from food trucks to wood smoke, and the consistent cacophony of sounds often washed her skin in a thousand fire

ants that were only lured away from her by a calming distraction.

“I want to show you something,” she said, driving them carefully through the overcrowded town and out toward the dark ribbon of road that led to Fort Warden.

Built into a hill that ended abruptly in a sharp cliff, Fort Warden had been conceptualized to protect against America’s greatest Victorian enemies which they could see across their narrow ribbon of the Puget Sound.

The British Canadians.

Once peace had been brokered, the fort was abandoned until the World Wars had prompted the installations of anti-aircraft weapons and maritime surveillance.

Now, almost a century later, the forested hilltop had reclaimed the decrepit concrete bunkers and rusted the bolts where the weapons used to stand. In its place was something of a local playground, somewhere to hike and explore and enjoy the view of the American and Canadian islands from the crest of the cliff.

Lyra parked at the bottom of the hill and retrieved the small cooler she’d packed along with a picnic basket.

“Didn’t take you for the midnight picnic type,” Cy said as he relieved her of the cooler’s heavy burden.

“Yeah, well... Didn’t take you for an MMORPG type, but here we are.” Beneath the vast sky, their laughter danced on the wind as they climbed the gentle hill, mingling with the distant sound of waves lapping against the cliffs below. At the end sat a large concrete platform that jutted out over the cliff. Once a gun mount, it was now like an oversized patio, offering an unparalleled view of the water and beyond.

“I haven’t been out here in years,” Cy said, leaning over the railing to gaze out over the crumbling gun batteries and the nineteenth-century officers’ quarters now used as vacation rentals. “Used to ride our bikes up as a kid to explore. Climb all over the useless weapons and shoot pretend Nazis out of the sky.”

With a grin, Lyra spread out a blanket and began unpacking the contents of the basket. Flameless candles flickered to life, casting a warm glow over the cheese, fruit, and wine. She'd learned her lesson about open flames, considering her prediction of the fortune-teller's candle mishap, and their recent war with a forest fire.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to romance me, Lyra McKendrick," Cy teased, his eyes twinkling.

"Good thing you know better," Lyra replied with a laugh, handing him a glass of Syrah and kissing its rim with her own. "I don't know shit about romance. But I will warn you now, I'm trying to get in your pants."

"At least you have the decency to feed me before—what did Myrtle call it?—plundering this booty," Cy retorted, feigning indignance as they settled down on the blanket. "I'm making you work for it this time."

Despite the playful banter, Lyra couldn't shake the lingering unease that had plagued her all evening. She attributed it to the stress of the party and Halloween's overwhelming tourist presence in Townsend Harbor. While she'd been busy with tarot readings at the shop, Gemma had hired a woman who could both read auras and claimed to be a medium.

A medium who had *not* been impressed when Lyra congratulated her on her dual spiritual gifts... It might have been that she'd used the word "twofer."

Somehow, Lyra had still made more customers cry with her straightforward fortunes, and she barely even brought up dead relatives.

She really needed to stop doing that.

Whatever disturbance she was feeling in the Force, it just refused to settle. Even though the evening was temperate, but chilly enough to drive them to snuggle into each other, Lyra noted a tension in Cy's body that hadn't been there before. It

seemed he was chewing on a gristly thought that just wouldn't go down easy.

Likewise, her world was tilted a bit off its axis. The tilt had been increasing all day, until it was causing vertigo. The night sounds were a bit too loud, the fruit too sweet, the cheese too fragrant. Even her favorite sipping wine was sour on her palate, like it'd perhaps been corked.

She suddenly needed some help breathing. "I'm a little dizzy. Could you...undo my corset?"

"Of course," he replied, concern creasing his brow as his deft fingers worked at the laces. Once free, Lyra let out a sigh of relief, now clad only in her sexy witch shift and revealing spiderweb tights.

"Thank you," she murmured, leaning in for a brief, tender kiss that quickly deepened as they lost themselves in each other for a moment.

This, at least, soothed her senses and alternately brought them to life.

"You know you always smell delicious," she murmured against his mouth.

"Yeah?" He pulled back. "What do I smell like?"

She thought about it. "I don't know... Something woodsy, for sure, but salty too. Like popcorn."

Cy's snort didn't quite turn into a laugh. "Does popcorn turn you on?"

"It's the sexiest of all the corn," she said, relaxing back into the cradle of his chest and arms.

As they gazed at the waning moon and the lights of the town sparkling across the water, Lyra couldn't help but think about the choices before her: the job offer, her newfound happiness in Townsend Harbor, and the man wrapped around her who had become such an important part of her life.

"Tonight is...perfect," she whispered, trying to commit the magic of the moment to memory. She took in the glitter and

glow of urban sprawl further across the water, beyond which Seattle lay just barely too far south to be seen.

“I used to sneak out at night and come up here alone,” she went on. “I’d imagine what it would be like to live on the other side, with all the opportunities that the city offered. The bright lights, the freedom...”

With her back pressed to his chest, she could feel Cy’s inhale as he prepared to say something, but ultimately didn’t.

She hesitated, her heart racing as she considered how much to reveal. “Now, I find myself thinking—well, maybe not thinking—more like feeling...I don’t know, different.” Wow, had one of her professors called her “erudite” at one point?

Maybe falling for someone really did turn your brain to mush. Because that’s what she was doing, wasn’t it? Falling.

Or maybe, judging on how sore and weird her body felt right now, she’d already landed.

Landed in love? Was *love* the word she was working her way up to using?

Her heart throbbed and her stomach churned with nerves and carnival food.

Just say it, you fucking ween, she berated herself. Don’t use the L-word if you can’t spit it out, but fucking tell him how you feel. Tell him he’s the sexiest man alive. That he’s the only one who can make your body feel like it’s supposed to. Tell him that he makes your mind quieter and your heart louder. That you love his smile, his empathy, his kindness, and his ass. Tell him you think of what beautiful brown babies you’d make sometimes. Tell him that—

“I think you should take the job.”

Lyra’s inner record scratched. The stars stopped twinkling. The moon pulled sinister clouds over itself as if to hide from the stew of emotions brewing inside of her.

“What?” She was a hundred percent certain she’d heard him the first time but was kindly giving him a chance to redact

or redirect.

“The job at the environmental firm,” he said as if she’d forgotten. “You should take it. It’s perfect for you.”

“I don’t know that it is,” she said. “I mean...the opportunity is one I’ve wanted forever but, I-I just... I don’t know what to think.”

“What is there to think about?” Cy’s voice had garnered strength. “It’s a no-brainer. You’d be crazy not to leap at it.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” She jerked away from his touch. “I’m trying to tell you how important you are to me, and you decide this is the perfect time to, what, dump me?”

A wave of anger crashed over her like icy water, extinguishing the warmth that had been building between them.

“I’m not dumping you, Lyra. We’ve never even defined what *this* is.” Cy attempted to reach for her, but she cut him off with a fierce glare.

“Well, fuck me, Cy, I was trying to do that before you started being ridiculous.” She pushed herself to her feet, crossing her arms over her middle.

Not because she was defensive. Just because she was cold.

Cy clenched his fists, his jaw tight with determination as he stubbornly insisted, “No, Lyra. Your staying in Townsend Harbor for me is ridiculous. I have nothing to offer you but a tiny cabin in the woods, a small business, and a quiet life that can’t compare to what you could have out there.”

He gestured vaguely toward the distant city lights, growing more animated with each word. “You’re the one who said you were looking for casual, and now you have the chance to work for a firm that fights for the environment, imposing restrictions on corporations to reduce their carbon footprint. That’s something big, something worthy. Sure, we’re drunk on the sex we’re having, but if you committed to that, to me, eventually you’d come back up here and dream of leaving. You’d hate me for trapping you in a life you *always* knew you *never* wanted.”

Lyra whirled toward the water, throwing her hands up in a sarcastic gesture. “Oh, so we have had a fortune-teller in this town all along! Tell me, *Nostra-dumbass*, what other decisions are you planning on making for me?”

When she glanced back, he had both his boots planted on the ground and his arms folded over a wide chest heaving with his temper. “That was uncalled for.”

Lyra’s eyes could already be blindfolded with dental floss as her simmering anger boiled over. She took a deep breath, preparing for the verbal onslaught she was about to unleash. “What’s uncalled for is your presumption to know what’s best for me, what I want, or what decisions I should make. What, did you wake up this morning in 1956?” She stepped closer, her voice low and cutting. “How dare you treat me like some dick-drunk THOT who doesn’t know her own mind? I might be conflicted, but I’m not stupid, and I don’t need some man to tell me what’s best for me.”

Cy’s expression was equal parts tempestuous and grim, which threatened to break her heart into shards of glass. “I’m talking about what’s best for us both, Lyra. Think about it. I belong to this land. I have roots here. Responsibilities. And you? You have wings. I’m not telling you what to do. I’m just refusing to be the reason you don’t spread those wings.”

Oh no he didn’t. He didn’t get to be the hero here.

“Your stubbornness is doing you no favors right now,” she continued, her words slicing through the thickening atmosphere like a heated blade. “You’re so invested in this idea that you’re not good enough for me. You’re so sure that I want more than what you can give me that you’re not even willing to let me decide for myself. And you know what? Maybe you’re right. Maybe I do want more than a life in Townsend Harbor, but that doesn’t mean I can’t want you too. That we couldn’t have had this conversation.”

Lyra’s voice cracked as she spoke, the anger and frustration giving way to a deep sense of sadness. She had never felt so conflicted in her life. So hurt. So angry.

Not even at Harrison. She hadn't wanted Harrison like she'd wanted Cy. Not really. She'd accepted him as part and parcel of the life she'd been chasing.

The life that was now chasing her.

"Trust me, Lyra." Cy's voice was lethally low, dangerously dark, and so bleak it destroyed the last shreds of her hope. "I *know* what it's like to have your dreams taken. I couldn't stop what happened to me, and now I have to live with all the regrets. And all the what-ifs. Even though I've carved something that looks like contentment here, I'm trapped in a body that is no longer complete. And *that*...that is what I can't face someday. Your pity. Pity that will turn into a sense of obligation. Then resentment. I won't do it, Lyra. I won't do it to either of us."

"Oh," she said, her bones vibrating with a soul-deep weariness that made every part of her feel like it weighed double. "I get it now," she said quietly, turning to pick up their ruined picnic. "You're not an asshole... You're just a coward."

EIGHTEEN

Heart Rot

DECAY PRESENT IN THE HEARTWOOD (CENTER) OF A TREE.



“ARE THOSE BEARD PLUGS, OR IS THAT A TREANT INFESTATION on your face?”

Cy grimaced at his blurry reflection in the smudged monitor, painfully aware that being a dick to a D&D chatbot had now become the chief outlet for his rage.

And through the lamest possible means.

That shit wouldn't even fly when his bard was attempting a vicious insult.

Coward, on the other hand...

Cy experienced one of the full-body flinches that had been rolling through him every time the word floated into his skull. Which had been about every ten seconds over the last week.

Each time, he suffered an equally vivid recollection of the way Lyra's face had melted from affectionate to appalled when he suggested she take the job in Denver.

Now it was her lips, stretching from their gentle smile into a tight line. Now her smooth brow, folding into a crease. Now her eyes, flickering with warmth and the reflection of the flameless candles she'd hauled up a fucking cliff for his benefit, dimming to a dull distance.

And now a bonus fuck-you from his short-term memory—her arms protectively curling toward her torso like shriveling shoots.

Protective, against *him*.

The thought made him shove himself backward in his desk chair, sending several empty beer cans skittering away from the chair's rollers in the process.

Beer. Now *there* was an idea worth entertaining.

Cy stood, his muscles protesting after hours of disuse and a small avalanche of crumbs falling from the creases of his sweats.

The old floorboards creaked under him as he shuffled toward the kitchen. Yanking open the fridge, he consulted shelves nearly bare, save for a few condiment bottles and a questionable Chinese takeout container.

With a sigh, he grabbed his last Raven Creek Pumpkin Pilsner. The caps already littering the counter scuttled under his palm as he reached for the opener and added to the already alarming number.

He took a long swig of beer, and the liquid sloshed in his empty stomach. When was the last time he'd eaten something that didn't come sealed in a packet that came with at least one nutritional warning?

It didn't feel important enough to remember.

Beer in hand, he trod the vaguely gritty path back to his desk and groaned as a beam of sunlight stabbed through a gap in the blackout curtains. The piercing light woke the headache he'd been fighting since that morning.

At least it was a change from the pervasive ache in his chest.

Lyra McKendrick was gone.

Or would be soon, anyway.

And that was for the best. Even from his present pathetic vantage, he couldn't deny it.

Nor could he distract himself from that knowledge, apparently. Not by any of the methods that had made his downtime bearable in the past several years, anyway.

Not picking fights with the members of his longstanding online D&D game. Not acquiring several more limited-edition League of Legends figurines. Not thumbing through his nerd library. Not admiring the collection of objects that had been passed down to him from generations of ancestors whose strength he had always felt anchoring him like the roots of the tree.

Not even work, which had always been his chief source of effective avoidance in the past.

Cy didn't dare take a single step toward town. Because God knew that if he did, the universe would find some way to shove Lyra McKendrick in his path.

No. There was nothing to do but hurt. Hurt, and ignore the well-meaning phone calls and knocks on his front door.

Knocks like the one currently intruding into the muffled sanctuary created by his noise-canceling gaming headphones.

Looking at the Discord chat from his party, Cy tried to decide exactly how pissed they'd be if he excused himself to get rid of whoever it was.

Fuck it. *Let them* come for him. He could use a fight.

Pulling the padded cans away from his humid ears, Cy pushed himself up from the chair and drifted to peek through the curtains covering the window facing the front porch.

And emitted a distinctly unmanly sound of surprise when he found Ethan Townsend staring at him through the filmed glass.

Cy sucked in a quick breath and staggered back a step, the bolt of fiery pain in his leg only serving to stoke the fires of his irritation.

What the fuck? he mouthed.

Ethan only maintained his steady gaze, arctic eyes narrowed into rectangular slits, his cartoon character hero jaw set in its granite grimace.

“And don't you give me that bullshit cop stare,” Cy shouted at the glass as if continuing a conversation they'd

never actually begun. “That shit doesn’t work on me.”

Again, Ethan said nothing. And weirdly, Cy felt himself inexplicably scuffing toward the front door.

Okay, so maybe the look wasn’t complete bullshit after all.

He sighed, steeling himself as he turned the lock and opened the door a crack. A crack that Ethan barreled through without so much as a *good morning*.

If it was still morning. Keeping track of the time of day was another of those things Cy had allowed to slide off his list of immediate concerns. Like answering the phone.

Ethan crossed the room in three strides, yanking back the curtains. Sunlight flooded in, making Cy want to hiss like a vampire.

Wrong RPG, coward.

“Smells like a distillery in here,” Ethan said, kicking the herd of cans that had accumulated next to Cy’s couch.

“Make yourself at home,” Cy muttered sarcastically as his friend brushed past him, his work boots echoing on the wood floor as he strode toward the kitchen.

Cy bristled, embarrassment heating his cheeks as he heard further invectives growled at what Ethan discovered in the kitchen. He returned with a beer in hand.

Ah. After six p.m. Had to be, if Ethan was joining Cy in a drink.

“So, I don’t mean to be dick,” Cy began, retrieving his own beer. “But do you mind telling me what the fuck you’re doing here?”

“A welfare check.” Ethan’s fingers tightened on the amber bottle. “Seeing as you won’t answer your phone.”

“I’ve been busy,” Cy said, avoiding his friend’s gaze as he closed the door and sagged onto the couch.

“Doing what?” Ethan said, looking around the disheveled living space with raised eyebrows. “Freebasing beer, wallowing in self-pity, and jerking off your joystick?”

“One, it hurts that you still haven’t acknowledged that I’m a PC gamer,” Cy said in a pathetic bid to mask his embarrassment with humor. “And two, I’m wallowing in regret, not self-pity.”

Cy wasn’t sure if it was just the light, or if the wall of Ethan’s flannel-clad shoulders actually softened slightly.

“I get it,” Ethan said, running a hand through his hair. “You and Lyra had a thing, and now she’s leaving for Denver.”

So, she *had* taken the job.

Good.

“That blows,” Ethan continued. “But you can’t just marinate in your own self-pity like an ogre in some goddamn swamp.”

Had Ethan Townsend actually just compared him to *Shrek*? Since when had he even been aware of the existence of something as frivolous as CGI animation?

“You rehearse that on the way over?” Cy asked, relishing the acid bite of his anger.

Ethan’s jaw twitched. His prominent Adam’s apple bobbed above his flannel collar. “Lashing out at people who give a shit about you isn’t going to change what happened.”

No, but it might make it so Cy could brood about it in peace. Or at least isolation.

“Thanks for the psychological analysis,” he said, his frustration bubbling like a rank brew. “But I can handle my own shit.”

“Really?” Ethan scoffed. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re just marinating in it.”

That his friend was exactly right did nothing to improve Cy’s mood. “What’s it to you?”

“Because you’re my friend, and I fucking hate seeing you like this.” The sudden thunder of Ethan’s voice on the stale air only made Cy feel more scooped out and hollow.

He kept his stinging eyes trained on the array of remote controls on his coffee table.

“Then don’t.” Cy cut his eyes toward the front door as he took a sip of his beer.

Ethan’s face turned a shade of red Cy hadn’t seen since their match against Boise High, when one of the defensive linemen made a comment about how much he’d like to 69 Caryn Townsend during Ethan’s cadence of called numbers right before the snap.

But instead of taking the opportunity to make his exit, Ethan walked around the coffee table and sat down.

“No,” he said, as if answering a question Cy hadn’t asked.

“No *what?*”

“No, I’m not leaving. So you go ahead and keep firing off this angsty teenage bullshit as long as you want.” Ethan settled back into the couch, and the worn leather creaked beneath him as he reached for a copy of *Den of Geek* on the side table. “I’ll wait.”

Cy shifted in his seat, the mix of guilt and defensiveness bubbling up inside him, making it difficult to breathe. He stared at the half-empty beer bottle in his hand, feeling the glass sweat against his fingers.

“I just need some time to myself, okay?” he said, attempting to inject his tone with something like penitence.

Ethan licked his thumb before turning the page and taking another sip of his beer.

“What I mean is, I process things better on my own.” Cy was dragging his memory of therapeutic terms as urgently as cops dragged a lake for a corpse, and for reasons just as dire.

“Huh,” Ethan grunted. “Can’t say I would have added more cut scenes to *Realm of the Rat King*, but what the fuck do I know?”

“*Nothing.*” Cy snatched the magazine from Ethan’s hands and tossed it onto the coffee table. “You don’t know one

fucking thing. About gaming, about what happened between me and Lyra, about—”

“About what you’re going through?” Ethan finished for him. “You’re wrong,” he said when Cy didn’t answer. “When Darby was going to leave town, I—”

“You don’t need to do this,” Cy interrupted.

“Do what?” Ethan asked.

“This thing where you show up and tell me how you pulled your head out of your ass in time to save your shot with Darby. How you’ve learned so much about expressing your feelings and have grown as a person as a result. Nothing you say is going to change the fact that Lyra leaving town is the right thing.”

“Actually, I was going to say that when Darby was going to leave town, I acted like just as much of a pathetic asshat.” Ethan cleared his throat and picked at an imaginary spot on his jeans.

“Why are you here, Ethan?” Cy gripped the beer bottle tighter, willing his hands to stop shaking. “Why are you *really* here?”

“To see how you’re doing,” Ethan said.

“So you can make sure the invalid isn’t in any immediate danger?” Cy spat, not even trying to conceal the toxic sludge of hurt and resentment in his gut. “Kind of like you did when the wildfire broke out?”

The room went silent as Cy’s words hung heavy between them like acrid smoke. He watched as Ethan’s face shifted, the impenetrable calm fading to a tired resolve.

“If you mean wanting to make sure my friend will be okay, then yeah, I guess I am,” Ethan admitted.

“What you did was humiliate me.”

Pulpy as Cy’s insides were at present, apparently all the shit he hadn’t resolved was going to come seeping to the surface.

“You’re right,” Ethan said in a more measured tone. “And I’m sorry. I have a responsibility—”

“I’m not one of your fucking responsibilities.”

A crease appeared between Ethan’s brows. “Is that why you think I came here?”

“Isn’t it? Isn’t that pretty much why you’ve always been coming here?” The adrenaline surged through Cy’s veins, causing his heart to race and his muscles to tense. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and the metallic taste of anger still lingered on his tongue.

However else this day ended, it would be with an answer to the question that had plagued him since he was still a boy.

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck. “I was wrong, okay?” he admitted. “I shouldn’t have made that call during the wildfire. But I did it because I fucking care about you, you numb shit. And when you won’t even talk to me about what’s going on, how am I supposed to know if the superhero shit you’re pulling around this town is actually you thriving, or just taking unnecessary risks because you feel like you have something to prove?”

Cy clenched his fists, his knuckles turning white as he fought the urge to hit something.

“Don’t I?” he said, his voice thick. “In high school, it wasn’t just my father who wondered why a golden god like Ethan Townsend would want to spend his time with someone like me.”

What he was talking about was Ethan.

Who he was thinking about was Lyra.

Because the exact same line of logic applied to both, and the former was less catastrophically devastating to think about.

Looking at Ethan’s face, Cy saw that he knew it, too.

“But when I got accepted to Montana State, got an athletic scholarship, people stopped asking those questions. Then I ended up back here after the accident, all of a sudden everyone is wondering whether I was capable of walking that path in the

first place. So I either have to deal with that doubt or make it look like this other path is the one I really wanted to walk all along. Running the family business. Pulling cats out of trees and goddamn llamas out of the road. Being part of the mellow, happy, helpful Forrester family.”

Cy shook his head bitterly. “And then Lyra shows up here, and this entire goddamn life I wanted for myself once upon a time is shoved in my face, and I just have to sit here and know that it’s too fucking late for me to be anything but Cy the Tree Guy.”

The refrigerator hummed to life in the stretch of silence that followed his impromptu rant.

“Apparently it’s not too late for you to be a titanic dumbass.”

The beer bottle froze halfway to Cy’s lips.

This was not, in fact, the gentle and/or impassioned reassurance he’d been expecting.

Ethan set his beer aside. “If you really don’t know why I wanted to hang out with you in high school and have insisted on forcing my friendship upon you since you’ve been back in town, then you’re even thicker than you’ve been acting lately.”

If that was true, then Cy was thick as fuck. Not that he could bring himself to say this out loud.

“I was an angry little cock in high school,” he said. “The first time you ever even spoke to me was after we got into that fight with that linebacker who had a unibrow and an underbite.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “Do you even remember what the fight was about?”

In fact, Cy didn’t. Only that driving the guy’s nose straight back into his brain had seemed vitally important. He shook his head.

“He made a comment about my mom,” Ethan said.

Confusion bunched Cy’s brows together briefly before his earlier memory about Ethan’s high color and the fight in

question fused with a thunderclap of realization.

The game had been a mere week after his own mother's funeral.

The entire goddamn town had traveled several states to cheer the newly minted bereaved on from the stands. It had only taken a sickening tragedy to change the hand-lettered signs from Ethan's name to Cy's. Which had only added to the simmering rage that erupted when he ran into the foul-mouthed linebacker coming out of the locker room.

"You were a fighter, Cy," Ethan said. "That's what made me want to be your friend. And I'm sure it's what made a woman like Lyra McKendrick plan a candlelight picnic on a goddamn cliff for you."

Cy blinked in surprise, his heart doing an odd little dance in his chest at the mention of her name. Reviewing the time they'd spent together, he was hard-pressed to produce even a single instance that met that description.

Never mind wondering how Ethan knew about the picnic part.

"I haven't been that guy in a really long time." Cy sank back into the cushions, staring at the carved wooden bowl painted with the stylized raven in profile. "In fact, I'm not even sure I know who the fuck I am anymore."

Ethan leaned back on the couch, taking a swig of his beer before speaking again. "Boy do I know how that feels." He paused for a moment, a wistful grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "One minute you're a respected officer of the law preserving the peace and rich traditions of a historic community, and the next, you're fucking a former burlesque dancer over a swing your grandfather built on the side of the highway in full view of God and the county tax adjuster," he said, a faraway look in his icy eyes.

"What?" Cy asked.

"What?" Ethan repeated.

"You just said—"

“My point is, sometimes not knowing who you are is a good thing.” He cleared his throat and straightened up. The tips of his ears glowed tomato red. “Sometimes it’s exactly what needs to happen so you have the chance to decide who you really want to be.”

Cy mulled over Ethan’s words, the gears turning in his head.

Who he really wanted to be was the man sitting next to Lyra McKendrick in the glow of flameless candles. The man on the receiving end of her sharp wit and sharper tongue. The man who made her legs shake and her body melt.

“So get off your dumb ass and go get her,” Ethan said, once again continuing a conversation that had partially taken place in their heads. “But maybe shower first, because fuck, bro, you look like hammered shit.”

Cy’s reply was more grunt than laugh, but it shifted some remaining pocket of shadow within him.

“Thanks, Ethan,” he said, trying to infuse the words with the full magnitude they deserved.

“You’re welcome, Cypress,” Ethan said in an impressive replica of his mother’s overly crisp diction.

They pushed themselves off the couch, and Cy walked his friend to the door, waiting until he’d closed it again to sprint to his bathroom.

He knew what he had to do.

And he couldn’t wait another second to do it.



AN AMBULANCE.

Cy’s heart pounded like a jackhammer as the vehicle’s scream tore through his inertia, making him step on the gas as it gunned away from the curb in front of Star-Crossed.

The nerves that he'd fought all the way over turned into a howling chorus of doubts as he slammed on his brakes and steered his truck into the first available spot.

His prosthetic felt like a lead weight as he lurched toward the shop, the building seeming to shrink into a distance he'd never be able to cross.

Please, don't let it be her.

Don't let it be her.

Don't. Let. It. Be. Her.

Words that became a mantra propelled him at last through the front door.

He scanned the room, greedy for any sight of Lyra. Instead, he found Gabe behind the counter, animatedly talking to a woman who was mostly paying attention to his bulging biceps.

"This, uh, purple one here can really help calm the mind and ward off negative energy," Gabe said in his thick Southie accent, waving an oversized purple obelisk in the air. "Of course, you could just slip it between the seventh and eighth ribs of whoever it is that's bringing that negative energy into your life in the first place, am I right?" He mimed a stabbing motion to the customer, who looked equal parts concerned and confused.

"Where's Lyra?" Cy demanded, his voice coming out more forcefully than he intended. The worry gnawing at his insides was making it difficult to think straight.

He knew the answer before the words even left Gabe's lips.

"On her way to the hospital," Gabe said, setting the crystal aside. "Gemma went with her."

Sound took on a strange underwater quality, muffled by the thunderous beating of Cy's own heart. Sweat instantly bloomed on the palms he pressed to the counter, steadying himself as a wave of dread crashed over him.

“Take it easy, big guy,” Gabe said, his body tensing as if in preparation to spring over the counter if need be.

“What happened?” Cy’s stomach churned with worry, and his fingers curled into tight fists above the glass display.

“I don’t have all the details, but—”

“Lyra fainted.”

The sound of Vee’s cool, imminently sane accent lowered Cy’s blood pressure by several points. She breezed into the store, dragging the scent of an English garden and a sense of control in her wake. “She complained of dizziness just before she collapsed, but was conscious and lucid by the time the paramedics arrived. Gemma said she was initially disoriented, and her breathing was a bit shallow, but other than that, she seemed stable.”

“How’d you get here so fast?” Gabe asked.

“Gemma has been texting me from the ambulance,” Vee announced as she slid behind the counter, shooing Gabe out the other side. “I can look after Star-Crossed if you want to keep an eye on things at Bazaar Girls.”

Whether she thought that Gabe would be more comfortable with crafts than he seemed to be with crystals, or she was just trying to get rid of him, Cy was immeasurably grateful.

“On it,” Gabe said with a little salute.

Vee turned to Cy once he was gone. “Well?”

He stood frozen. “Well?” he echoed.

Vee’s expertly shaped brow rose at an angle Cy thought of as being distinctly British. “Are you going to stand there with your thumb up your arse, or go to the hospital to be with the woman you love?”

Cy turned on his heel and didn’t look back.

As he climbed into his truck, the engine roared to life, thankfully drowning out the chaotic tangle of his thoughts. He

gripped the steering wheel tightly. The leather was warm against his skin, anchoring him to the present moment.

He made the journey not on wheels, but wings, flying through an unprecedented lucky streak of green lights.

As the truck rumbled into the hospital parking lot, the world around him seemed to blur into a whirlwind of color and sound. Cold, sterile corridors. Fluorescent lights. The steady beeping of machines. The smell of the antiseptic mingling with the scent of wilted flowers.

Lyra was in there now.

In the place where he'd sat with his mother through chemo treatments, sucking down sugary Popsicles. Believing her when she told him that she was going to be just fine.

Believing they had time.

He needed to believe now, too.

Standing outside the imposing edifice, Cy watched the dying sun cast long shadows over the façade, painting a deepening contrast between darkness and light. He felt as if he were caught in that very same limbo, torn between hope and dread.

The uncertainty gnawed at him, threatening to consume him whole. He thought back to the countless times he'd run from difficult situations, from the pain of losing his mother to the fear of what others might think of him. Then he could run no further and allowed himself to be swept along with the collective momentum of their hometown.

But now, he would stay and stand.

He would fight.

For the woman he loved.

For himself.

For the future he hoped fate hadn't fumbled.

NINETEEN

Aura

THE LIFE-ENERGY FIELD WHICH SURROUNDS ALL LIVING THINGS



THE HARSH FLUORESCENT LIGHTS OF THE ER STABBED AT Lyra's eyes, and the chemical smell of disinfectant made her stomach churn. Again. They'd extracted at least a gallon of blood for tests, leaving her feeling even more drained and weaker than before.

Gemma fluttered around her like a concerned mother bird, adjusting pillows and offering sips of water. It was adorable, really, but if she didn't stop, Lyra was going to throw ice chips at her.

"Do you think it's dehydration?" Gemma asked, wringing her hands. "Have you been drinking enough lately?"

Lyra groaned. "I've been guzzling water like a fish. Try again."

"Diabetes, then?" Gemma rifled through the stack of medical pamphlets on the table next to Lyra's bed. "It runs in the family, you know."

"My blood sugar is normal. Keep guessing." Lyra fiddled with the IV in her arm, feeling the tape tugging at her skin. She'd felt off for days, lightheaded and queasy, but hadn't wanted Gemma to know she was worried. Her sister meant well, but she'd insist on moving Lyra into her parents' house and calling them back from their months-long tour of Thailand so they could monitor her around the clock.

No thanks.

Gemma peered at Lyra, eyes narrowed. "You've been under a lot of stress since even before you moved back here.

Do you think it could be something like a panic attack or a stress-related illness?”

Lyra shrugged. She hated the idea of falling victim to stress when she relied on herself to be impervious to it. But maybe that was part and parcel of the whole ASD thing? “Could be?”

“Has to be!” Gemma threw her hands up. “You need to slow down. Take a break from the shop. Maybe we can check you into one of those places celebrities go when they’re ‘exhausted.’”

“I’m probably fine,” Lyra said through gritted teeth. She loved Gemma’s concern, but she didn’t need to be smothered.

“You’re not fine! You collapsed, Lyra!”

“Maybe I’m turning into a vampire,” Lyra replied with a snarky grin, trying to lighten the mood. Her stomach clenched with worry, though, and she couldn’t shake the nagging thought that it might be something serious.

“Could be Lyme disease,” Gemma continued, undeterred. “Or heat exhaustion?”

“Please, Gem,” Lyra scoffed. “It’s autumn and the weather hasn’t been above seventy degrees for a month. Also, Larry and the kittens are tick free, and so am I. There’s no way it’s Lyme disease.” She tried to chuckle, but her laugh fell flat as her anxiety gnawed at her insides.

“Hantavirus?”

“That’s only in the South.”

“COVID?”

“Negative.”

“Do you think you were drugged? Did anyone hand you a drink or snack?”

“Gemma,” Lyra groaned. “*Stahpuh.*”

“Okay, okay,” Gemma relented, placing a comforting hand on Lyra’s arm. “We’ll figure this out. Just try to relax.”

“Me, relax?” Lyra quirked an eyebrow, her gaze flicking to the myriad of medical equipment surrounding her. “I’m chilling, Gem. *You* relax.”

The curtain slid open, and a nurse entered. “The doctor will be in shortly with your test results.”

Lyra thanked her, relief flooding in.

Finally, answers.

She didn’t know which prospect terrified her more: that something was seriously wrong, or that there was no explanation at all.

“Look, I’m just trying to cover all the bases here,” Gemma said when they were alone again. “We need to figure this out.”

“Let’s leave the diagnosing to the professionals, shall we?” Lyra sighed, rubbing her temple. Her head pounded like a jackhammer, and she hoped whatever was wrong could be easily treated and forgotten.

“Fine,” Gemma huffed, crossing her arms. “But you better believe I’m going to keep an eye on you.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less,” Lyra conceded, reaching out to squeeze her sister’s hand. She knew Gemma only had her best interests at heart, and despite the incessant fussing, she couldn’t imagine facing this ordeal without her.

“Know what I was reading the other day?” Gemma said, leaning against the edge of the hospital bed to show her some article on her phone. “There is something called Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, or broken heart syndrome.”

“Gemma—”

“Hear me out!” Gemma flapped a hand at her as she read from the medical article. “It is when the heart muscle becomes suddenly stunned or weakened. It mostly occurs following severe emotional or physical stress. Could it be that? You and Cy haven’t talked for days, and you can’t deny that you’ve gotten paler, thinner, and more miserable in his absence.”

“Broken heart syndrome?” Lyra snorted, rolling her eyes while trying to ignore the hollow void in her chest. “Please. If

anything, I'm suffering from dick withdrawal. The man could throw hip like no other."

"Lyra!" Gemma gasped, feigning shock before dissolving into laughter. The sisters shared a moment of levity, the sterile atmosphere of the hospital room momentarily forgotten. "Seriously, though," Gemma said, her expression softening. "You've changed since you've been back in Townsend Harbor. You're more... Well, you're less disconnected. More present. And it's not just stuff with Cy—it's everyone here. I think they matter to you more than you like to think."

Lyra considered her sister's words, her gaze drifting toward the window as she recalled the connections she'd made—with Vee, Myrtle, and even Larry and the kittens that had wormed their way into her heart. She couldn't deny that something within her had shifted since coming home. And then there was her recent ASD diagnosis, which had shed new light on her own self-understanding.

She hadn't realized just how much she'd changed until Gemma pointed it out. She'd become more open, kind, and empathetic—qualities she'd never imagined herself possessing, let alone using.

"Lyra," Gemma said, her voice gentle but insistent. "Are you in love with Cy?"

The question slammed into Lyra like a freight train, forcing her to confront emotions she'd been trying to ignore. "I don't know if I'm in love with him," she admitted quietly. "I love things about him. The way he smells. The uneven gait as he walks. His smile, his skin, and the sound of his voice. I look for him in town all the time, wishing we'd run into each other randomly like we used to."

She threw her head back against the pillow. "Know what's pathetic? I almost fucking called him the other night. I mean, who does that? Only monsters do that." She looked down at her hands, clenching and unclenching them as she thought about Cy's strong grip, the warmth of his skin, the way his laughter rumbled through her. "God, give me a second and I'll do all the desperate things I used to make fun of other women

for doing,” she continued. “Like surprise him with breakfast in bed or leave cute notes in his pockets.”

Gemma’s eyes widened as she grinned at her sister. “Lyra, I hate to tell you this, but that sounds exactly like love.” She sobered slightly. “But does loving him mean picking between Townsend Harbor and Denver? Would you have stayed if he asked you to?”

Lyra’s heart clenched at the question, and her mind raced with possibilities. She knew that choosing between her career and her newfound connections would be no easy feat. But the mere thought of leaving Cy behind sent a sharp pang of longing through her chest.

“I think—”

The thick white privacy sheet was batted aside, and Cy appeared as if summoned by their conversation. He stalked in with a wild look in his eyes, a beautiful mess of rumpled clothes and an expression of frantic determination.

“Wha—” Lyra’s voice caught in her throat as she gazed at him, her heart racing in tandem with the monitor beside her. His dark hair, damp from the shower, clung to his forehead, framing those wise, soulful eyes that had haunted her every thought for days. The strong lines of his face seemed even more pronounced, giving him an air of vulnerability that only intensified her attraction to him. His broad shoulders seemed to bear the weight of the world, and she longed to reach out and touch the taut muscles of his arms, to feel their reassuring strength once again.

“Damn, that rumor mill went fast, even for Townsend Harbor,” Gemma remarked, eyeing Cy with a mixture of amusement and concern. “How’d you get in here? This is supposed to be a secure ER.”

“Slid in through an automated door after a doctor left,” he replied, not taking his eyes off Lyra. “Saw her name on the board, and I just... I had to see her.” His skin hung a little looser from his bones, as if he’d lost weight from worry, and he moved like he was in pain, favoring his left leg.

To Lyra, he was devastatingly handsome in his disarray—a beautiful mess of concern and vulnerability. She realized just how much she'd missed the details of his face—the way his expressive brows danced when he spoke, the creases at the corners of his eyes when he smiled, the strong curve of his jaw that she loved to trace with her fingertips.

Cy turned his attention to Gemma. “What happened? Is she okay?”

“Lyra fainted while helping a customer,” she explained, her tone serious yet laced with humor. “But don't worry, her vitals are fine. They're just running some tests.”

“Did they say what might have happened to her? Is she going to be okay?”

“*She* is right the fuck here,” Lyra snapped. She might be confined to a hospital bed, but she wasn't about to let Cy talk about her as if she wasn't in the room.

“Lyra, I—” he began, his voice catching as he stepped closer. He looked like he wanted to gather her up in his arms, but the tangle of vital monitors and IV lines held him back.

Lyra reached out and took his hand, feeling the rough calluses beneath her fingertips that spoke of his connection to the earth.

“I went to your shop to find you,” Cy confessed, his dark eyes filled with concern. “I realized you were right—I *was* being a coward. When I saw you being carted away in the ambulance...” He broke off to force himself to breathe, apparently.

Damn, he really was worried.

Lyra was touched by his admission—and frustrated that she couldn't offer him more in the way of medical reassurance. “Cy, I'm sure it's just something weird.” she tried to soothe him as she squeezed his hand. “I had an insanely stressful job before coming back, and things haven't exactly been a walk in the park since I've been here. Maybe I just need more iron or something.”

Cy's brow remained furrowed, his anxiety etched deep into his handsome features. "We...we can't leave things the way we did, Lyra," he said, his voice raw with emotion. "You were right. You were right about everything. I've realized something important, that the walls I built around myself had become a prison. No one ever really tried to climb over them, but dammit, Lyra you were the only woman stubborn enough to do it..."

He glanced up at the monitor displaying the heart rate elevating at his every utterance.

The intensity of his admission left her breathless. A tidal wave of emotions crashed over her as she struggled to put her own feelings into words.

Just as she was about to respond, the door to the room swung open and the doctor strode in, frowning first at Cy and then at her chart.

"Ms. McKendrick," he said before pausing for a moment as if considering his words. "It appears that your syncope was caused by a relaxing in blood vessels due to..." He caught himself, eyeing Gemma and Cy as he asked, "Do you want to receive this medical information privately?"

Cy's grip nearly cut off the circulation to her fingers, but he visibly bit his tongue.

"It's okay. You can say it in front of them."

"All right. Well, Miss McKendrick, the only variant I can see in your blood work is hormonal, specifically caused by pregnancy."

"I have an IUD," Lyra said. "So that's probably not it."

"That's exactly it," the doctor insisted like a fucking know-it-all. "I'd say you were about four weeks along..."

The words hung in the air like a lead balloon.

Pregnant.

She was *pregnant*.

And it *had* to be Cy's.

TWENTY

Parent Branch or Stem

THE TREE TRUNK OR THE LARGER LIMB FROM WHICH
LATERAL BRANCHES ARE GROWING.



PREGNANT.

Cy stared at the doctor in disbelief, the word repeating in his head like an echo.

Pregnant...nant...nant...

The white walls seemed to close in on him, making the room feel even more claustrophobic. A persistent beep from the heart monitor punctuated a silence that seemed to stretch on without end.

Only when he registered that he could *taste* the disinfectant did he realize that his mouth was hanging open.

“Y-you’re sure?” he stammered, his hands clamped into claws on the bed railing. “I mean, is there any chance this could be a mistake?”

“It might have been an accident,” the doctor said, “but it’s not a mistake. The blood test is ninety-nine percent accurate.”

Cy’s mind raced, his thoughts a whirlwind of confusion and disbelief as he glanced over at Lyra.

Her beautiful face was pale as milk, her eyes peeled wide enough to show white around the entire circumference of her irises. Unlike Cy, she hadn’t yet seemed to realize that her mouth was frozen open.

“But *how*?” Cy asked.

The doctor squinted at him behind his wire frames, trying to gauge the nature of the question.

“She has an IUD,” Cy said. “That’s supposed to be at least as effective as the test you just gave her, right?” Hearing the edge of hysteria in his voice, he clamped his jaw shut.

“The odds are slim,” the doctor began, “but—”

“But given our history, are you honestly surprised?”

Lyra’s voice startled him. For a moment, shock had made Cy forget she was in the room entirely.

“Oh shit.” He spun to face her. “Are you okay?”

She blinked, nodded, then burst into tears.

No, not tears.

Body-racking, breath-stealing, voice-contorting sobs.

Were they characters in one of the cartoons Cy had been so obsessed with as a kid, the tears would have been squirting sideways from the corners of her eyes.

But this was real life, where a real woman incubating a real embryo as a result of his really shitty choices was howling like a wounded coyote.

And with dawning horror, Cy realized that he had absolutely not one fucking clue what to do.

“Shh—” He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder but abruptly abandoned both the gesture and the sound simultaneously, not wanting to silence her feelings or be the source of unwelcome physical touch that might worsen any potential sensory overload. “It’s okay,” he said, instantly realizing that what he’d intended to be comforting sounded trite and dismissive. “What I mean is, it will *be* okay.”

But do you know that? Can you know that? he heard Kiki ask in his head.

“What I’m trying to say is, whatever you decide will be okay. With me,” he quickly added.

Lyra’s face dropped into her hands and, somehow, she cried even harder.

“Not that how I feel about what you decide is the important thing here. Because it’s not.”

The bawling halted just long enough for Lyra to drag in a big, watery gasp before she resumed at an ever-increasing volume.

“Which isn’t to say that I don’t have any feelings about this. Because I do. I’m not some kind of sociopath that just goes around knocking up women and not feeling some kinda way about it. I’m just saying that my feelings—which are entirely my responsibility, by the way—aren’t something that should affect your decision.”

Her inhales now came in quick, reedy double taps for every dramatic, rib-rattling wail.

“Which doesn’t mean I’m trying say you have to make this decision by yourself. We made this happen together, and I’m totally willing to handle the consequences together too.”

Lyra’s back heaved once, twice, before resuming its rhythmic shuddering.

“Not that I have any idea what it’s like to be the one whose *body* has to handle the consequences. Because I don’t. No man does. Which is a grave miscarriage of biological justice, if you ask me.”

Miscarriage? Really? Kiki demanded in his skull.

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“And I’m not saying your body has to handle the consequences at all. With this new job and everything, being pregnant is probably the last thing you want.”

Lyra’s sobs stretched into one, long keen whose note reminded Cy of nothing so much as the ambulance that had brought her here.

“Unless it is,” he said quickly. “In which case, I’m one hundred percent here for that too. Say the word, and I’ll pick up my shit and move to Denver. Because I can actually run the family business remotely, which I discovered while I was

ossifying to my couch in self-pity over the last couple weeks. No matter what happens between us, I'm going to be there for my baby."

Encouraged by the brief pause in her ratcheting whimpers, Cy hurried on.

"And not just in an every-other-weekend kind of way. I'm talking late-night feedings, dirty diapers. Even the blow-outs." Cy shook his head. "Once you've stuck your hand in a rotten stump full of maggots, there isn't much that can throw you."

Now, the sounds disappeared altogether, her shaking shoulders the only clue that she was coming completely unraveled.

"As a man, I mean. The kind of shit women put up with on a monthly basis. That's just... *Whew*," he said, swiping a hand across his forehead.

Stop, he bellowed at himself in his head. *Just stop*.

But alas, for reasons that remained utterly incomprehensible to him, Cy didn't stop.

Not by a long shot.

"Not that I'm squeamish about that kind of thing," he said. "I mean, I grew up with sisters, so if it's a girl, you better believe I'm buying tampons. Or pads. Or cups. I hear those have really come a long way."

It wasn't just her shoulders shaking now, but the entire hospital bed. The frame jiggled with a rhythmic *squeak squeak squeak* that might have been vaguely suggestive under other circumstances.

"Which is something I feel totally comfortable discussing, by the way. Like, say, we wanted to give our daughter the sex talk before she leaves for college—"

A soggy snort rattled from Lyra's sinuses.

"I mean, *if* she wants to go to college," he said, suddenly aware of how far ahead he'd gotten. "Or trade school, or whatever she—or they—choose. But, uh, my point is—"

Lyra lifted her face.

And Cy's knees threatened to give out on him.

The way her eyes crinkled. The way the corners of her lips turned up ever so slightly.

Lyra wasn't crying at all.

She was laughing. Laughing so hard that tears streamed down both her cheeks.

Strange how similar hilarity and grief could look.

"Which do you...do you...think"—she fought her clenching throat for every word—"is less likely? Getting pregnant...*while* on an IUD, or—"

She lost it again for several breaths.

"Or...being involved in two separate...cow-related car accidents?"

And then, just like that, Cy was laughing too. He laughed until his abs ached and tears ran down his cheeks, and the sound filled up the entire room.

Laughed until the doctor cleared his throat, reminding them both that he'd witnessed this entire spectacle.

"Well," he said, straightening. "The rest of the tests looked completely normal. I'm going to send you home with some anti-nausea medication, but I'd recommend that you follow up with your regular OB/GYN to discuss your options."

"Thank you, doctor," Lyra said in a raspy voice that threatened to set Cy off again.

When the doctor had hustled out of the room, Cy pulled a tissue from the cardboard box next to the bed and handed it to Lyra. A bright yellow plastic band with the words FALL RISK slid down her slim, pale forearm as she mopped the corners of her eyes.

The sight of the bold block letters juxtaposed against her elegant wrist ambushed Cy with a deluge of wild tenderness.

Wasn't that the fucking truth?

Because really, how could anyone *not* love this woman? How could anyone look at her, listen to her, speak to her, and not fall completely and irrevocably under her spell?

Whether she ever decided to believe it or not, Lyra McKendrick *was* magic. The mysterious, supernatural spark between mundane and miraculous.

“I meant what I said,” he heard himself saying.

Balling the tissue in her fist, Lyra smirked at him. “Which part?”

“No matter what you decide—”

“I’ve already decided.”

Though he knew it had to be his imagination, the lights in the room seemed to dim, and his lungs refused to inflate.

“I’m going to have the baby, Cy.” Her eyes shone with determination as she looked into his.

He blinked, momentarily stunned into silence.

“You’re sure?” he asked, hardly daring to believe it.

“I’m sure,” she said.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Because I really will help,” he said, his heart swelling with a joy that seemed to infiltrate his every pore. “Whatever you need. Whatever this looks like. I’m here.”

“I know that,” Lyra said, reaching up to lace her fingers with his. “That’s why I want to do this, Cy. I want to do this *with* you.”

He stared down at her, and the walls of the room dissolved away as he let himself sink into the green-eyed gaze he’d thought forever lost to him.

“I want to have this baby because it’s *your* baby. Because I know what a wonderful father you’ll be.” A fresh sheen of moisture welled in her lower lids. “From the moment you showed up at Star-Crossed with that ridiculous tool belt,

you've made my life easier even when it makes yours harder. You put up with me even when I'm being a royal pain in the ass."

"I don't put up with you," Cy said, no longer able to resist molding a hand to her downy cheek. "I *enjoy* you."

"Hey." Lyra sat up straighter in the bed. "It's my turn to make declarations here."

"Sorry," he said, taking his hand back.

She reached for the plastic water glass on the rolling bedside tray and took a sip. "Where was I?"

"Pain in the ass?" he reminded her.

"Right. Even when I'm a royal pain in the ass, you drive me all the way home to make sure I'm safe."

"I'm pretty sure I was being the pain in the ass that time," Cy said. "Seeing as I'm the one who ruined your picnic."

"Ruined it to make sure that I wouldn't miss out on an opportunity that you thought would be best for me," Lyra said. "Even if it meant letting me go."

With each word, Cy felt warmth flood through him, a mixture of pride and gratitude that left him feeling sympathetically lightheaded.

"I know you think that everyone around town only appreciates you because you're always showing up to do random favors," she said, finding his hand again. "But that's not true. They love you because you're you." The dark fans of her lashes descended as she glanced down at the thin white blanket covering her legs. "And so do I."

Too overcome to speak, Cy drew her hand to his lips and kissed it before holding it to his heart.

"And anyway," she said, "I figure that if the universe went to all this trouble to shove us together, it would be fun to fuck with it by cooperating for once."

Trouble.

Cy had seen enough of it to last him twenty lifetimes. The pain. The loss. The broken hearts. The broken bones. The accident that cost him part of his leg but brought him back to Townsend Harbor, where with Lyra, he'd regained part of his heart.

In this moment, Cy couldn't regret a single scar. Not when this present reality was the result.

He gently cupped Lyra's face in his hands, tracing circles on her cheeks before moving his thumbs to the dips of her temples.

And then he kissed her.

The kiss seemed to last an eternity, and yet it felt like only a moment. The warmth of Lyra's lips spread through him like a wave, and he could feel himself melting into her, the sensations intensified by the knowledge that returned to him again and again.

She was carrying his child.

A life they'd made together as accidentally as an acorn falls from an oak.

And they would watch it grow, together.

"Awww!" Gemma's voice swelled from the doorway. "You guys."

Lyra laughed, and it was the purest sound Cy had ever heard.

As they pulled away, he couldn't help but notice that the world around them seemed brighter, more vibrant.

"Can I assume that all of Townsend Harbor already knows I'm knocked up?" Lyra asked, glancing over his shoulder.

Gemma gave a huff of exaggerated outrage. "You've got to give me a little more credit than that."

A beat.

"They just think you have hantavirus."

Lyra rolled her eyes in fond exasperation as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. “Better than leprosy, I guess.”

“You know that’s totally treatable now,” Gemma said matter-of-factly.

Cy was surprised to discover that, for once, he hoped the rumor wouldn’t spread, and was even more surprised at the reason why.

He wanted to be the one to tell his father.

Father.

Cy was going to be a father.

“Ready to head home?” Lyra asked, accepting a plastic bag of her street clothes from Gemma.

Only when her twin disappeared again did Cy realize she’d been talking to him.

“Home as in my place?” he asked, his heart already lifting with hope.

“Sure,” she said, peeling off the hospital-issue socks. “Unless that’s too fast.”

“Too fast?” Cy laughed as he helped her to her feet. “You’ve obviously forgotten that I still hold several records within the Townsend Harbor High athletics department.”

“Enjoy it while you can,” she said, giving him the smirk that filled his gut with lava. “Because if our track record is any indication, this kid is pretty much guaranteed to be fast.”

And, like the training montage he’d teased her about needing, an entire lifetime came to him in a blink.

He saw their child, a toddler with Lyra’s eyes and his smile, racing around the house as laughter echoed off the walls. He saw them in the stands, cheering until they were hoarse at every one of their kid’s soccer games.

Finally, he saw them standing on the sidelines of a football field, screaming until their lungs burned as their child sprinted into the end zone, victoriously obliterating Cy’s own best time.

Because, like records, curses were made to be broken.

Epilogue



LYRA'S EYES TRACED THE PATTERNS ON THE CEILING AS THE ultrasound tech spread the cold, sticky fluid on her stomach. She took a deep breath, mentally preparing for the impending checkup on their baby.

Even though they'd found the best obstetrician in Denver, a part of her always panicked when taking a peek at the little life she percolated.

There was always the chance of bad news.

Beside her, Cy beamed with excitement, his dark eyes glistening like polished obsidian as his smile was joker-wide.

"Can we find out if it's a boy or a girl?" he asked eagerly, gripping Lyra's hand.

"We said we would wait," she reminded him. "I want it to be a surprise."

"*You* said we would wait," he whined, using his best puppy-dog eyes on her. "You know curiosity is killing me over here."

"Good thing you're not Larry, then," she quipped, glancing at him with a teasing smile.

As the ultrasound tech adjusted the equipment, she overheard their conversation and chimed in. "I love a happy couple. Makes my job fun. Tell me what you guys do."

"I'm an arborist and Lyra is an environmental lawyer," Cy announced.

Lyra loved that after all these months, he still said it with such pride.

“A lawyer.” The tech’s brows lifted. “Baby going to derail that for a bit? Or do you have help?”

“Actually, I’m going to be a stay-at-home dad,” Cy said with genuine excitement. “Lyra works for a women-owned business, so they’re all about helping her achieve work/family balance, but ultimately she’ll be out of the house more than me.”

“I can save the world and breastfeed at the same time,” Lyra joked, trying to wrap her head around the whole idea.

“Well, isn’t that the sweetest?” the ultrasound tech said, breaking Lyra’s reverie. “Let’s take a look at your little one.”

As the image of their baby appeared on the screen, Lyra felt a flutter of excitement in her chest—a sensation she knew would only grow stronger as the days went by.

Her pulse quickened as the ultrasound tech shifted the wand, her eyes widening at the screen. “Hold on a sec,” she said, a hint of surprise in her voice. “I think I see... Yep! Two heartbeats.”

“Two?” Lyra echoed, her stomach lurching with shock.

Cy grinned, his excitement contagious. “Twins! I knew it!”

“Knew it? How could you possibly know that?” Lyra’s thoughts were like a needle in an old record, skipping over hidden grooves now made visible by astonishment.

“Call it intuition,” he replied, his eyes locked on the screen. “Or maybe it was all those articles I’ve been reading about twin pregnancies. I guess the odds were higher than we thought.”

“I was hoping that old myth about skipping a generation was still a thing,” Lyra muttered, the reality of the situation sinking in.

“Think about it.” If Cy were a kid, he’d be bouncing, but wasn’t for obvious reasons. Still, she took comfort as he squeezed her hand. “We’re going to have twice the love, twice

the laughter...and maybe twice the chaos, but I'm used to chaos. I know how to make sense of it."

Lyra couldn't help but smile at his unwavering enthusiasm. "That makes one of us."

"Don't be scared," he said, pressing his forehead to hers, his voice softening. "Think of the memories we'll make, raising our kids both here and back home. They'll have their roots in Townsend Harbor, just like us. And who knows where your wings will take them."

"Summers by the sea," Lyra mused, the image warming her. She could almost feel the salty breeze on her skin, hear the gulls crying overhead as their child—gulp—*children* picked sea glass from the tide-worn rocks. The idea of returning to their hometown, even if only for a few months each year, suddenly felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"Exactly," Cy said, his eyes mirroring her own wistful expression. "And who knows? Maybe one of them will inherit my green thumb."

"Or my bitchiness," she added with a chuckle. "Either way, we'll endeavor to give them the best of both worlds."

"Speaking of worlds," the tech chimed in, "I think it's time we got back to this one. Are you ready to see your babies?"

"More than ever," Lyra whispered, her heart swelling with love for the two tiny lives inside her.

Together, she and Cy watched as the ultrasound revealed the first clear images of their twins—two miracles that would soon change their world forever. And as they held each other close, they knew that no matter what challenges lay ahead, they had everything they needed to create a beautiful future for their growing family: time, love, trust, travel...

All with their roots firmly planted in the fertile soil of Townsend Harbor.

About Cynthia



Cynthia St. Aubin wrote her first play at age eight and made her brothers perform it for the admission price of gum wrappers. A steal, considering she provided the wrappers in advance. Though her early work debuted to mixed reviews, she never quite gave up on the writing thing, even while earning a mostly useless master's degree in art history and taking her turn as a cube monkey in the corporate warren.

Because the voices in her head kept talking to her, and they discourage drinking at work, she kept writing instead. When she's not standing in front of the fridge eating cheese, she's hard at work figuring out which mythological, art historical, or paranormal friends to play with next. She lives in Texas with the love of her life and

two fluffy cats, Muppet and Gizmo.

I love stalkers! You can find me here!

Visit me: <http://www.cynthiastaubin.com/>

Email me: cynthiastaubin@gmail.com

Join my Minions: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Cynthiastaubins/>

Subliminally message me: *You were thinking of cheese just now, right?*

And here:



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About Kerrigan



Kerrigan Byrne is the USA Today Bestselling and award winning author of several novels in both the romance and mystery genre.

She lives on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington with her husband, two Rottweiler mix rescues, and one very clingy torbie. When she's not writing and researching, you'll find her on the beach, kayaking, or on land eating, drinking, shopping, and attending live comedy, ballet, or too many movies.

Kerrigan loves to hear from her readers! To contact her or learn more about her books, please visit her site or find her on most social media platforms: www.kerriganbyrne.com



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