

SYMPHONY OF SOUND DUET
BOOK ONE

THE
SOUND
OF
SILENCE

SHE DOESN'T REMEMBER.

HE WANTS TO FORGET.

KATHERINE JAY

**THE
SOUND
OF
SILENCE**

THE SOUND OF SILENCE – SYMPHONY OF SOUND DUET BOOK ONE

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Acknowledgements

About the Author

Author's Note

This book contains subject matter that some people may find triggering. A list of the main potential triggers can be found on Katherine's website:

<http://www.katherinejayauthor.com>

Please note, triggers are not listed here to avoid spoilers for the book.

Playlist

PLAYLIST

Symphony of Sound Duet

The Sound Of Silence - Disturbed
Perfectly Broken - Banners
Picces (Hushed) - Andrew Belle
Creep - Radiohead
Blinding Lights - The Weeknd
I Wish It Would Rain Down - Phil Collins
Until I Found You - Stephen Sanchez
I Write Sins Not Tragedies - Panic! At The Disco
Chandelier - Sia
Silence - Sarah McLachlan, Delerium
Battle Scars - Guy Sebastian, Lupe Fiasco
Too Much Love Will Kill You - Queen
Lover - Taylor Swift
Bring Me To Life - Evanescence
White Noise - Coasts
Incomplete - Backstreet Boys
Forever Now - Cold Chisel
Everybody Hurts - R.E.M.
What's Left Of You - Chord Overstreet
Take It Slowly - Garrett Kato
Oceans - Seafret
Breathe Again - Harrison Storm
Bitter Sweet Symphony - The Verve
Firework - Katy Perry
Carry You - Ruelle, Fleurie

Dedication

To everyone that taught us it's okay to make noise...
thank you.

Prologue

Willow - Twelve Years Ago / Age Fifteen

Arhythmic tone pulls me from a weird dream and into the present. I try opening my eyes, but my eyelids feel heavy and the brightness behind them makes me pause.

As the fog lifts from my mind, I open my mouth for air, but nothing happens. Panic rises as a throbbing pain radiates inside me. I can't swallow. I can't *breathe*.

Thrashing from side to side, I lift my hands to grip my neck, but they barely move. There's a disconnect between my mind and body. Nothing is working.

The beeping gets louder as I continuously gasp, desperately working to fill my lungs. Something scratches the walls of my throat, and I gag a few times until the air finally flows and that panic subsides.

For a heartbeat.

The relief is short-lived as a new pain takes over. A pain so bad it feels like I'm being stabbed in the head, and I can't stop

myself from crying out. At least, I think I do, but the ringing in my ears makes it difficult to hear.

I try lifting my hands again, and this time they move, albeit slowly, allowing me to grip my head, desperate to stop the throbbing ache threatening to drive me to tears.

I can't cry. I'm not a crier.

A door creaks before whispers flow around me, but with the way they filter into my mind, distant and echoed, I'm not even convinced they're real. I'm not even convinced any of this is real until I feel a pinch on my arm, and the sting of it brings everything into focus.

I'm not alone.

A tingling sensation shoots up my arm before a warmth spreads throughout my body. And as my head lolls to one side, a vision plays on my mind. It's patchy and confusing, but I can sense the full extent of it lingering just out of reach...

"What's the rush?" I call out, trudging through the trees as we make our way through the forest.

"Why are you going so slowly?" she counters with a laugh.

Ignoring the fact that she sounds a little off, I try to keep up, but hate that I'm missing the views.

The beeping starts up again, or maybe it was always there, only now it's louder and more frantic. My heart pounds in my chest, almost matching the incessant sound, while my head

spins and my body sinks into the pillowy goodness beneath me.

My mind drifts again, and this time the vision has my chest tightening in pain.

“Stop! Don’t. Get away from me. You don’t understand.”

I try to scream “no” but the fog overwhelms me, and the last thing I see is her terrified expression before I succumb to the darkness once more.

Chapter One

Willow - Present day

“Goddammit. Another one?” I hold the broken gold clasp up to my face and sigh. *Why can't I get it right?* Once again, I've set unrealistic expectations on myself, but here I am, at—I glance down at my phone—*shit*, ten p.m., and I'm still working away.

No one except my friend Sara even knows I'm doing this, so I'm not on any timeline. This is just for me. And yet, I can't help feeling like a failure at the end of every day, when my little display cabinet remains empty. *Maybe because I feel like that every day, regardless of what I do.*

Picking up the fine 18 karat chain, I coil it in my palm and run my finger along the twisted links. It's almost finished. Something that's been consuming my life for *years* is close to completion. I should be proud of myself. I made this. From scratch. No one in the world has this design. And it's beautiful. But I feel empty. I can't even bring myself to finish it and get the damn clasp to work. It's almost like I'm sabotaging myself, knowing that when it's done, people will judge me for

it. And I'm not ready for that to happen. I don't enjoy the attention.

After gently placing the piece back into its box, I secure it in my safe and start closing up, something I should have done hours ago. I'm just about to flick the lock on the back door when my phone rings, making me jump.

"Hello?" I rush out without checking the screen.

"You're still there, aren't you?" Sara's friendly, yet mildly concerned voice comes through the speaker, and I grimace. She's about to scold me.

"Y...yes?" I hesitate, hating to admit it out loud when I told her I was leaving at six. I'm never here this late, but with the celebrations coming up this weekend, my days have been a lot busier than usual.

"Willow! It's *ten*."

"I know."

"And I begged you to tell me if you were going to stay late so I could stay with you."

"I know that too." But I was never going to let that happen. Sara has a family, and while we may co-own Audrey's Gifts and Homeware, she only works here part-time.

"You know I don't like you being there after dark," she says slowly in her best motherly tone and then quickly adds, "or anyone... I wouldn't want *anyone* working this late."

I huff out a laugh at her obvious cover. She's well aware that I loathe the fact that everyone in this town still treats me like I'm fragile. Like I need protecting. Like I'm *broken*. And she consciously tries not to. But when she does, at least she's doing it for the right reasons, *not* because of my past...so I can't fault her for that.

"I'm leaving now," I say to reassure her. "But I'm happy to keep chatting while I pack up if it will make you feel better."

Sara laughs like I'm joking but then quickly accepts my offer, filling me in on her eventful evening spent trying to get her toddler to sleep after her mom gave him candy close to bedtime. I laugh along with her as I double-check the back locks, even though I just locked them, and make my way to the front, switching off the lights as I go. I've just stepped out into the darkness when the roar of a motorcycle fills my ears, pulling me up short.

So, it begins.

I'm not ready for everyone to come back this weekend. I much prefer our town when it's quiet. When I can hide away. When—

"Is that a motorcycle?" Sara asks, and I choke back a silent scream.

"*Jesus.*" I forgot she was there.

"Oops," she giggles. "Sorry. But is it?"

"It is."

“Oooh, is it a guy? Is he hot? I’ve always had a thing for men on motorcycles. I wonder if he has tattoos. How is it that no one in this town has a bike? Maybe Grant will have a midlife crisis and—”

“Sara!” I whisper-yell, cutting her off. “I can’t see him. It’s dark. But if I get any details, I’ll let you know.”

Taking a step forward, I peer out from behind the brick wall, hoping it’s not someone I know, but of course it is. Everyone from my high school was invited this weekend.

“Yes, please share *all* the details.” Sara giggles, cutting into my thoughts again. “Although I’m sure we’ll all know by morning.”

I’m sure we will. The communication flow in this town is, at times, inconceivable. Something could happen at one end of the main street, and by the time I’ve walked to the other end, every person and their dog knows about it.

Except for the one answer I have yet to find.

Sara’s son calls out in the background, and my dark walk home is forgotten. I’ve always told her that her family comes first, and in this instance, that’s a blessing.

Disconnecting the call, I peek around the corner again and see Tate Weston dismounting the same beat-up Harley he had back when we were at school, while a few of his old friends gather around. I’m still shocked by how many past students RSVP’d for their principal’s retirement, but I’m guessing the

“open bar” note had something to do with it. No matter the reason, I’m not thrilled about seeing everyone.

Tate turns around, and a cocky smile lights up his face as the girls all fawn over him. *Nothing’s changed.* He’s always been popular. But no matter how much time has passed, he will continue to make me uneasy. There’s just something about him. A feeling I get.

I make a dash to the alleyway that connects the main road to the backstreets, and within a few seconds I’m completely alone. Exactly how I prefer to be.

I’ve lived in this town my whole life, and yet, I still feel like an outsider. And considering it’s been years since my accident, something tells me that’s never going to change.

Chapter Two

Jesse

The puck glides across the surface exactly on target, slipping past our goalie in an epic score. My teammates cheer, but I ignore the fanfare and turn away. The second the photographers arrived—putting an end to our private practice session—I was done. It's the offseason; I don't need to deal with this.

One of my teammates calls me a selfish motherfucker as I skate off the ice, and while he's not entirely wrong, I still flip him off as I go, making the rest of the guys laugh. My lips twitch and I almost break out in a smile, until the sight of my friend, our team's media liaison, reminds me of what I agreed to, and I groan.

"Pippa." I nod, giving her a sour look as she walks toward me.

"Are you all set?" She beams, bouncing on her toes, like we're heading on some kind of grand adventure, instead of spending hours in the car traveling to her dad's retirement celebration.

I whip off my gloves and helmet, raising an eyebrow before attempting to avoid it one last time. “Do I get to stay home if I say I’m *not* ready?” I ask with a fake smile.

Pippa rolls her eyes as she folds her arms across her chest. She’s used to my shit, and she doesn’t care for it. “Nope,” she says popping the *p*. “You owe me.”

Dammit. Worth a shot.

Ignoring her for a second, I lose the grin as I move toward my gear in silence, dropping onto the bench seat with a thud. When I’ve made myself comfortable, I sigh in resignation. “Give me twenty minutes, but you better have snacks.”

“Oh trust me, I have snacks. And music. And road trip games.”

My eyes flash to hers as my scowl deepens. “You better be joking about the games.”

Pippa laughs as she backs away. “We’ll see,” she says, throwing her hands in the air as she spins, full of her usual sass.

My head falls back, and I huff out a wary laugh.

What the hell am I getting myself into?



Thirty minutes later, we're on the road, and I already regret it.

Pippa and I have known each other since my first year playing for San Francisco's hockey team, but only became friends after I saved her from an awkward situation on a team night out. She told me she owed me one, or two, and I've kind of been taking advantage of that over the years. The number of media requirements she's gotten me out of is higher than I care to admit. But...it's safe to say, the tables turned back in her favor a long time ago, and now she's cashing in.

"My dad's very excited to meet you," she says after we've been driving for an hour. "He's going to die when you step up to do your speech."

Yet another thing I reluctantly agreed to.

We're on our way to Pippa's hometown to celebrate her hockey-loving dad's retirement as the school principal. Apparently it's a big deal, and since Pippa hasn't been home in years, she wanted company and a date. Actually, date's the wrong word. I'm her fake *fucking* boyfriend.

"Now that this is happening, are you finally going to tell me what's *really* going on?" I ask to stop myself from thinking about the speech.

"Yes, thank you for agreeing to this almost blindly by the way."

I stare at the side of her face and roll my eyes. "You didn't really give me a choice. I owed you, *remember?*"

“True, but I did sweeten the deal by setting up the clinic.” She flashes me her best smile before setting her eyes back on the road, taking a deep breath as her happiness slips away. This is part of the reason I agreed “blindly” as she called it. Because I knew there was more to it, and considering she’s one of only a few people that I actually care about, I couldn’t say no.

No matter how badly I wanted to.

But I didn’t make it easy on her. In fact, I think my exact words were, “What the actual fuck? Why would you *possibly* need me to be your boyfriend?” Which leads us to now.

“I do appreciate the clinic. It gives me something to look forward to. But I need to know why we’re really here.” I ran my first clinic for disadvantaged children a few months ago, and loved being able to give back. It’s the only way you’ll get me to do anything outside of playing hockey. But I don’t love everything else that goes with this week. “I need something more, Pippa.”

Pippa sighs and her shoulders drop. “Fine.”

“Fine?” I throw back. “Sorry I’m forcing you to tell me why I’m playing the role of your fake boyfriend when I hate people, I hate road trips, and I don’t do relationships.”

“Okay. Jeez. It’s just not easy for me to talk about my past. You of all people should understand that.”

Fuck, I hate that she’s right. I don’t talk about my past. Ever. That shit’s behind me for a reason. “I still need to know.”

Pippa nods. “Well, as I mentioned, it’s been a while since I went home. I’ve been so busy. And I *want* to see my family. Well, most of them anyway. But—”

“Pippa. I don’t need your life story.”

“God, you’re annoying.”

“Right back at you. Now, go.”

“I’m *trying*. *Anyway*, long story short, my older sister and I don’t get along, I think I told you that part, but what I didn’t tell you was that we don’t get along because she’s engaged to my ex, and she’s organizing Dad’s retirement celebration, so I wanted to rub my happiness in her face and one-up her by getting you to do a speech.”

She sucks in a deep breath after not taking one for her entire explanation and then turns my way.

All I can say is, “damn,” as I cringe. Her sister and her ex? I guess that explains why they don’t get along.

“Damn is right,” Pippa says, releasing a long sigh. “Jonah was my boyfriend in high school. We were together for a year, and he told me he loved me, but the second we broke up, he moved on to my sister.”

“What a fucker.” A small part of me feels for her because her words suggest she’s still hung up on her childhood sweetheart, but there’s another small part of me that wonders if she’s holding something back. Pippa doesn’t seem like the type to get hung up on anyone.

“He told you he loved you...”

“He did...and I ended it.” *That’s what I thought.* “But that doesn’t give him permission to hook up with my sister.”

“No, it really doesn’t. But why do I feel like there’s more to it?” Pippa cringes again, confirming my suspicion. “Don’t tell me you’ve slept with him since he got with your sister?” I joke to lighten the mood, but Pippa falls silent and looks away, her lips pulled into a lopsided frown. *Damn.* Guess that makes her argument for needing a fake boyfriend stronger.

“Really?” I ask, though for some reason, I don’t feel all that surprised.

“Yes. I’m an awful person. We’ve been together a few times since they started dating. When he’s been here for work. But *not* since they got engaged.”

I bite back a smirk and nod. “How decent of you.”

Pippa shrugs with a slight grimace. “Don’t pretend you have a moral compass, Jesse. It doesn’t suit you.”

Oh, I have a moral compass. A small one anyway. That’s why I’m so bitter all the time. If I didn’t have one, life would be grand. Not that I tell her that. We’re not the type of friends that get deep and meaningful. Hence the reason I had no idea this had happened to her.

My lips thin as I lean back and cross my arms. “Okay, so now we have that cleared up, I just wanted to reiterate that I’m not going to kiss you. I get why you’re doing this, but I haven’t changed my mind. No PDA. And it ends as soon as this week is over.”

“Why?” she sasses. “Everyone already thinks we’re together.”

I bite back another groan because I fucking hate when people know my business, or *think* they know my business. It’s true, they all assume that Pippa and I are more than just friends, and God, it pisses me off. Neither of us have those feelings, nor will we ever. At least, I won’t. And Pippa’s adamant she feels the same. Her words were, “I have no ulterior motives when it comes to you, if that’s what you’re worried about. You’re too much of an asshole *and* a recluse. If I was dating someone for real, he’d be much more fun.” She wants a man I will never be, so we’re good.

“Just agree with me.”

Pippa rolls her eyes again. “Fine. Minimal PDA, no kissing, and it ends on our drive home.”

Close enough. “Thank you.” *One week.* I only have to pretend for one week. It would be shorter, except that Pippa couldn’t get the hockey rink for the clinic until a few days after the retirement party, and since it’s the only part of this trip I’m looking forward to, I agreed. Because let’s face it, I’m just going to hide away in the hotel when I’m not required for my fake boyfriend duties, so it’s no different to home.



It's such a long boring drive that at some point, I drift off, only to be awakened by an annoying sound.

God, I hate road trips. I spent my childhood living out of a backpack in the foster system, constantly moving from place to place whenever I wasn't wanted anymore or the family couldn't take care of me. I have more horror stories than positive ones. And now, I spend my adult life road-tripping to play hockey. I can't believe I'm doing this. For that reason and the fact that I don't do "family" time. *Ever*. Even the word makes me shiver uncomfortably. My last foster family in Seattle was the closest I came to a "real" family, but I was sixteen by then, so they treated me more like a friend than a son. In all honesty, I have no idea what having a family really means. Or what it feels like. So, why the hell would I agree to hang out with someone else's? Especially one as complicated as Pippa's.

I drift off again, only to be awakened a second later with the same noise. "What the actual fuck?"

"It's your phone, asshole," Pippa sasses, at the same time I wake from my brain fog and recognize the tone.

"What?" I snap into the receiver, still getting my bearings.

"Hastings. You're more pissy than usual. What's going on?" my agent, Seth, asks, his voice so chipper, I want to punch him.

"I'm on my way to Pippa's thing," I say, giving him the vague answer I previously gave him, even though I'm certain

he has all the details. Pippa would have cleared it with him first.

Seth chuckles, but I can hear him trying to hide it. “That’s right. You’re voluntarily doing a speech for her dad. How very un-Jesse of you.”

“Fuck off. What do you want?”

“Just called for a chat. Are you ready to fill me in on any of the specifics?”

“Nope.” Not a chance. I don’t ever want to admit what I’m doing out loud to anyone. *Fucking fake dating bullshit.*

“So you’re going on this *mystery* trip, *away* from San Francisco, with Pippa’s *family*. All things you usually avoid. Do I need to be worried?” he asks, his voice now laced with concern.

What? My eyes flash to Pippa’s, to check if she heard, while my mind spins with likely reasons for his question. He does this sometimes—drops hints that he knows more about my life than he’s admitted. *Is that what he’s doing now?* Seth’s known as an enigma among the sporting elite because it’s almost impossible to predict who he’ll take on as a client. He’s rejected many world-class athletes during his career, but we only had *one* brief phone call and he agreed to take me on. Being the cocky asshole that I was, I never questioned it. But over the years, I’ve wondered why.

Although, I’m likely overreacting—he could just be worried about my contract. At twenty-eight, I’m nearing retirement,

but I want to play for at least three more seasons. We've got an excellent shot at the cup and I need to be a part of that. The problem is, my contract ends this season. I'd like to hope that's what has him concerned, that I'll do something to mess up my chances of getting a new contract, but I have no idea.

"You have nothing to be worried about," I say and I mean it. "I'll be my usual self, just in another location."

Seth scoffs. "Oh, good. So, you'll still be a grumpy asshole?"

"You got it," I deadpan, while Seth laughs.

"Alright. Have fun. I'll call you if I have anything to say."

"Thanks. Later."

He hangs up and I silence my phone, immediately closing my eyes again. I'm done with this day already.

Chapter Three

Jesse

Pippa pokes me awake sometime later, and I yawn comically, stretching my arms and neck as I focus. But when my eyes lock on the landscape around us, I freeze. “Where are we going?”

With snow-capped mountains and dense forest as far as the eye can see, I realize I probably should have asked her exactly where we were headed before now, because this is not what I was expecting. At all. Unless we’re still midtravels. *God, I hope it’s that.*

Pippa frowns as she blinks my way, confusion set in her brows. “Uhh, my hometown.” She shrugs like it’s no big deal. *And yeah, I got that much.* But she failed to mention that her family lived in a small town in the middle of fucking nowhere. She told me she went to school in Salt Lake City, Utah. *Salt Lake is a city.* And this looks eerily similar to one of the many small towns I grew up in. *But it’s not the same. And it’s not that town.* Something I’m going to have to keep reminding myself.

“Why do you look like I’ve deceived you somehow? I told you it was a long drive,” Pippa argues, showing a little bit of sass. “Where did you *think* we were going?”

“Utah!” I exclaim. “I thought you were from Salt Lake City.”

“What? Nuh-uh,” Pippa says and my stomach twists. “I said I went to *school* in Salt Lake City.”

“Yeah, and we’re going to your dad’s retirement party. You said he was your high *school* principal.”

God, how did I get this so wrong?

“Different schools,” she says with a shrug before mumbling, “I went to two.”

“You what? You never mentioned that. The only time you’ve ever said anything about school, it’s been Salt Lake City! Why the hell would I ever think you lived anywhere else?”

“Why does it matter? I was only there for my last two years. We’re going back to where I grew up.”

Motherfucker!

I hate small towns. And right now, all I can picture is a small fucking town. *Please don’t let her hometown be small.*

“Please don’t be mad,” she says with a fake pout. “Unless it’s mad-ly in love.” She laughs while I groan. “Seriously, I can’t have you messing this up for me.” She puts on a sweet smile, and I scoff before offering her a fake grin in

return. “Please,” she begs. “It’s important. When you meet them, you’ll understand.”

I sigh. “Heaven forbid Jacob finds out you’re still pining over him.”

“It’s *Jonah*, and I’m not. I just... I just want him to see that I’m fine. That I’m better than fine. And piss Ashley off at the same time.”

Is she fine? If I read between the lines, I’d guess that she isn’t.

“You’re a catch, Pippa,” I say to cheer her up. “You don’t need to prove anything to anyone.” I mean it. She is a catch. She’s just not someone I want to fish for.

Pippa smiles in thanks, and I try to relax as we continue on, but when we approach a newly painted welcome sign, I remember why we were arguing in the first place—*I have no idea where we are.*

I open my mouth to ask when the name of the town hits me like a brick to the face, and I’m rocked to my core. *Jasper Valley, Oregon.*

“*Oregon?* You grew up in Oregon?”

My skin prickles as my eyes dart around the landscape.

Fuck. Fuck. Were we always driving in this direction?

Moving my hand to my pocket, I grip my phone and contemplate checking how close I am to my nightmare, but decide against it. Oregon’s a big place, and it’s better if I don’t

know. Nothing good could possibly come from dredging up my past. Especially when I've spent so much time concealing it.

"I did. It's a gorgeous little town. You'll love it."

Again, fuck! I can tell you right now that I won't.

We skirt around another mountain, deep within the wilderness, and have just entered some kind of civilization when Pippa turns onto a one-lane bridge. A bridge that makes my heart stop as my mind fills with images of the last time I traveled over it, for what I thought would be the *last time*.

It's been twelve years since I've been this close.

The trees thin, and I pray with everything I have that we're just passing through. But when Pippa points to another sign, welcoming us to our home for the next week, the blood drains from my body.

Hepburn Falls, Oregon.

Neighboring town to the place I vowed to forget. The place I left behind.

A million thoughts invade my mind, but I force them away, focusing on one... It's been twelve years. It's going to be okay. *I'm going to be okay.*

So why do I feel a thick layer of dread in the pit of my stomach? And why does it feel like everything I've been running from is about to come crashing into me with full force?

Blocking out the darkness threatening to consume me, I stare at the sign as more details come into view. I never once visited the actual town of Hepburn Falls. I never felt like I belonged.

Unlike the town I lived in over the mountain, this town could be compared to something straight out of the movie *Pleasantville*. While the world around them was overgrown and hazy, this town, *Pippa's hometown*, liked to paint a picture-perfect lifestyle—a summer's day by the lake, kids splashing in the water, parents socializing without a care.

But even back then we all knew it was a lie. They weren't *all* happy. I know this because... *No, I can't think about her. This is going to be tough enough.*

We come to a stop in a small parking lot, and I'm once again distracted from my inner spiral. Taking note of what is clearly an *inn*, my heart pounds as I realize just how fucked I am. Not only am I trapped in a town so close to my own personal hell, but I'm about to spend a week in a place where everyone knows everyone else's business. *What if someone recognizes me for something other than hockey? From my past? I'm not ready for questions on that.* While it was rare that *Pleasantville* folk visited Mossman Hills, it wasn't unheard of. And though I may have only been a teen when I left, I'm not sure I've changed that much.

Only my last name.

Pushing the nightmare from my mind, we unpack the car and head toward the quaint establishment with our bags in

tow.

A bell chimes over the door as a shiver runs through me, and the first thing I notice, apart from the outdated floral pink lobby, is a familiar smell of... *is that Christmas?*

Before I can ask any questions, a door I hadn't even noticed—covered in the same vomit-inducing print as the wallpaper—flies open, and a short woman with a curly, gray bob comes rushing out. “Pippa! You're here,” she gushes, wrapping Pippa in a warm hug. “It's so lovely to see you.” Her eyes lock on me next and her smile increases. “And you must be Jesse. I've heard so much about you.”

She what? That's exactly what I was worried about. Fuck my life.



I take my time in the shower, while Pippa unpacks every item from her oversized suitcase, and when I'm done, I find her braiding her long white-blonde hair with a smile from ear to ear. It looks shady if I'm being honest.

“Why are you getting dressed up? I thought we were just going to the local diner?” I ask, motioning to her tight leather pants and flowy crop top, while making myself comfortable on the couch. The very couch that's about to take on the role of my bed for the next week. *Another fantastic development.*

“This is how I always dress,” Pippa says in confusion, unable to see the issue.

“That may be true, but we’re not heading out for a night in the city. We’re in bumfuck nowhere right now.”

“Hey! This is where I grew up.”

I freeze at her words, unsure why I hadn’t processed that information earlier. Pippa grew up *here*, what if... *nope*. I don’t even want to think about it. It makes me shiver just knowing that I’m back.

I stop arguing about her attire now that I have more pressing things on my mind, and slip into my sneakers, ready to go. Pippa scruffs my already mussed hair on her way to the door, and laughs when my hand automatically mimics hers, my fingers running through the mess, as if that will fix it.

“Come on, pretty boy,” she jokes. “A delicious meal awaits us.”

Rolling my eyes, I reluctantly follow her out and come face-to-face with our *lovely* host, like she’s been waiting for us. “I trust everything is to your satisfaction,” she says, not-so-subtly peering over my shoulder to see in our room before I have time to pull the door closed. “I’m sorry we didn’t have a twin room,” she continues on with a smile. “Like I said, we can get you a rollaway bed, but when Pippa said she was bringing her boyfriend, I assumed...”

That we’d share. We get it.

“Pippa wants to save herself for marriage,” I say with an innocent smile, lying through my teeth. “And the couch is fine. I’m just happy to be close to her.” My eyes flash to Pippa’s as our host visibly swoons.

“Young love,” she says with a sigh. “Is there anything more beautiful?”

Pippa’s miserable attempt to hold back a laugh somewhat amuses me, so I decide to try and break her. “There’s really not,” I say with reluctance. “It’s so precious.” Clutching my hands to my chest, I watch to see if that pushes her over the edge, but she bites her lip and holds strong.

“I’m a very lucky lady,” she says with a grin, threading her arm through mine. “Thank you for the extra bedding though. It’s much appreciated.”

We walk away in silence, but the second we step out into the warm night air, Pippa loses it.

“You know that’s getting back to my parents, right?” she says through her laughter. “There’s no way they’re going to believe I’m saving myself.”

“What did you want me to say? That we’re not sharing a bed because our relationship is a sham and I have no interest in fucking you?”

She smacks my chest as her head ping-pongs in all directions, making sure no one was listening to my admission.

“Relax, we’re alone.” I laugh until Pippa links her fingers through mine, pulling me across the street in search of food.

The minimal PDA. My hand tingles painfully from her touch, and I desperately want to let go, but since I agreed to this farce, I have to make it believable. No matter how uncomfortable it makes me feel. And right now, I feel nauseous.



Apart from the whispered conversations aimed our way, I survive dinner and relax on our short walk back to the inn. In fact, as we reach the door, I'm almost ready to celebrate making it through the first day until a thought hits me and I pause, frantically patting my pockets.

“Ah shit. I think I left my phone in the booth.” *Of all the things.*

Pippa's eyes flash toward the diner as she plays with her thick gold necklace, running the charm back and forth along the chain. I can see her mind ticking over, weighing up whether or not she can make the journey again in her ridiculously high heels.

“I'm not making you come.” I scoff holding back an eye roll. “I'll run and grab it. You head inside.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep, I can find my way. I'll be back in ten.”

I wait until the door clicks shut before turning and jogging back toward Darla's Diner, tension coursing through my limbs, praying my phone hasn't landed in the wrong hands.

All eyes are on me as I fling open the door, and a brief silence falls over the room. *Goddammit, this is going to be a long week.*

Our server has my phone waiting for me when I approach, along with a cell number on a napkin. I give her a thankful smile as I take the phone but leave the number in her outstretched hand, not even hesitating as she waves it in front of me. Yes, she's pretty, and while it's only now occurring to me that I'm going to have to be celibate all week, I'm not about to give these people ammunition for gossip.

With a quick thanks over my shoulder, I force a smile and pocket my phone as I jog through the door, stepping right into a sudden downpour. *What the hell?* I change my mind, there's no room for celebrations, not even one day down and I'm already over it. *Fun times ahead.*

Chapter Four

Willow

Sweat pours down my back as I squat down for the last time, finally finishing my workout. I'm doing everything I can to distract myself, but none of my usual fixes are working at the moment.

After a quick shower, I towel dry my long blonde hair and work it into a messy bun—anything I can do to tame my wild waves.

Sara calls as I'm picking up my bag, right on cue, checking in.

“You're there again? Aren't you?” she questions, as soon as I answer the phone. I could consider not picking up, but she'd just send Grant to hunt me down. In the long run, this is easier.

“I can't believe I gave you the details of the security app,” I say with a teasing groan.

“Even if you didn't love me, you really had no choice. It's my business too.” I can picture her sassy grin and I mentally shake my head. “Are you locking up?”

“I’m not. I just finished up at the gym, and I’m heading back to set the alarm now.” *There goes that extra hour of work I wanted to do.*

“Good,” Sara says in her loving tone. “Now tell me, how’d today go?”

I sigh because I know she’s referring to my designs, and I still haven’t had any luck with the damn clasp I’ve been working on. Although in fairness to me, I was pretty great at procrastinating all day. “It’s not quite done but I’m close.”

“You’ll get there, and it’s going to be perfect.”

I wasn’t even sure I wanted to tell Sara about my new venture into the world of jewelry. She’s an amazing friend and I love her, but I keep all my cards close to my chest. This town likes gossip more than they like money, and the topic of Willow is always worth its weight in gold.

Regardless, I took a chance and placed my trust in her beautifully moisturized hands, and she hasn’t let me down. In fact, she’s never let me down, on anything, and it’s about time I completely trusted her.

“I’ll be in tomorrow afternoon,” she says, as I head back to our store. “I’m not going home until you do.”

“I know.” I hold back a laugh. “And because I’m nice I might actually leave on time.”

Sara stays on the phone while I pack up my things, and by the time she hangs up, I’m keying the alarm.

As I walk down the main street, there's a buzz around town that usually only comes in the winter. It seems everyone from my childhood is back, and now I'm forced to reflect on the fact that *I never left*, wondering what it would be like to be a visitor here after seeing the world—or at least seeing another part of it.

What's sad is that I can't even imagine it. I can't even see myself outside this small town. Not that anyone has ever encouraged me to fly.

"You can do anything you want, Willow, but why not do it here?"

"You're such an important part of this community, we couldn't imagine it without you."

"This little shop can be anything you make of it. The world is yours."

Is it? Is the world really mine? Or just the world between the mountains?

The welcoming light of Darla's Diner comes into view, just as the heavens open up with a rare summer downpour, making me inwardly scream. *Dammit.*

I run toward shelter, reaching for the door as it flies open, propelling me back toward the road.

Everything happens so quickly as I squeeze my eyes shut and brace for impact, only to be jerked to a stop, my arm almost ripped from its socket as I'm pulled back up. A strange

feeling hits me as another silent scream fills my mind, only this one is more panicked and doesn't at all feel like mine.

My heart pounds in my chest as the adrenaline flows, and it's only when I'm able to focus that I realize I'm still being held. Whoever caught me isn't letting go.

Rain cascades down my face, soaking through my clothes, making me wince before finally opening my eyes.

The first thing I notice is the unfamiliar features that have my breath hitching. From his strong, chiseled jaw to his rough stubble and perfect mouth. A mouth so close, I can feel his breath as our lips almost perfectly align. *Not that I'm thinking about that. Why would I be thinking about that?*

I nervously nibble at the inside of my cheek, watching his lips part before he speaks.

"What?" I whisper and the word comes out breathy, making my face heat as I blush.

"Are you okay?" he asks and I quickly nod, feeling oddly comforted in his arms.

His chest rises beneath my palms, and my eyes flash to where I have my hand splayed over his pecs, further adding to my embarrassment. My entire body warms this time, and a strange feeling takes over.

This is a completely new experience for me, and I have no idea what to do with it.

Taking a deep breath, I finally lift my gaze, and my heart stops.

Chapter Five

Jesse - Twelve Years Ago / Age Sixteen

*T*ate lights up a cigarette and I cringe before punching him in the arm.

“Fuck, that one hurt,” he says with gritted teeth, rubbing the spot where my fist connected. “Are you seriously going to do that every time?”

“I’m just here saving your life.”

“Yeah, because that’s what’s going to kill me,” he mumbles, causing a silence to fill the air. And all I can think is... How the fuck did I end up with this life? I’m supposed to play hockey. I’m not supposed to be stuck in this shitty little town with no way out.

“What time did she say she was coming?” I ask, changing the subject as I tap my foot impatiently on the dirt. I don’t want to be here while Tate meets up with some chick he likes, but I also have nowhere else to go.

Tate glances toward the walking track just as we hear multiple voices floating toward us. Guess that’s my answer.

Folding my arms across my chest, I stand tall and stare blankly ahead, praying I don't get stuck on this mountain with some annoying best friend, since his girl's clearly not alone.

I've just blown out a breath when two girls walk into view and my world stills.

It's her.

My eyes flash to Tate's, and he barks out a laugh. "Well, damn. I did not expect to see her here."

Me either, and I'm not sure how I feel.

But there's one thing I do know... I'm going to make the most of it.

Chapter Six

Jesse

I hold on tightly as the woman in my arms calms down. Her eyes flutter a couple of times before her lids slowly open to reveal the most striking sea-green eyes I've ever seen. Eyes so unique, I've only seen them on one other person before. *Fuck.*

Recognition hits me deep in the gut, and I spring away from her so fast you'd think her touch was setting me on fire. And maybe it is. Or it should be. Because I'm going to hell if I don't turn around and leave, right now.

The girl startles at my sudden retreat and almost falls again, but I reach out to steady her, only stepping away when I know she's balanced.

"Sorry, I—"

"I'm okay," she whispers, cutting me off, a light blush coating her cheeks as she smiles. "Thank you for catching me."

My hand lifts to the back of my head as I scratch my neck, my own body warming. “No sweat. It was my fault. Now that you’re good, I’m going to...” Trailing off, I gesture behind her before stepping around and walking away. Not even stopping when she calls out another thanks.

What the hell was that?

Instead of rushing back to the inn, as promised, I wander around for a bit, my mind full of unwanted images as a dull pain radiates through my chest.

This can't be real. It can't.

I don't know how much time has passed before I finally make it to the room, but I'm still so messed up, I pray that Pippa's asleep. The last thing I need is for her to be asking any questions.

Holding my breath as I open the door, I sigh in relief when I'm met with darkness, thankful that my prayers have been answered.

But if I could ask for one more, I'd say... *Please let me forget.*



I wake with a start as something pulls me from my dream, the haunting green eyes still tormenting me. I can't be thinking

about her right now. I can't think about her *ever*. *She should be long gone.*

Lying silently for a beat, I stare up at the ceiling hoping for a distraction, when the sound of Pippa puking her guts out filters into the room. *That explains what woke me.*

Letting out a silent groan, I throw back the covers and push the events of last night into the dark recesses of my mind, dragging my feet the three steps it takes to reach the en suite. When I fling the door open, I find Pippa curled up around the toilet, hugging the porcelain like it's her soulmate, and I can't stop my reactive cringe.

With sweat-soaked hair plastered to her forehead and her skimpy silk pajamas clinging to her shivering body, she peers up at me with a grimace.

Goddammit.

Forcing a sympathetic smile, I wet a washcloth and crouch down beside her, holding it to her head until she reaches up and takes over. "Are you going to live?" I ask, taking a step back to distance myself from the sight.

Pippa squeezes her eyes shut and groans, mumbling as she drops her head back to the wall. "I can't believe I caught something."

Caught something?

"Couldn't possibly have been the questionable looking burger I told you not to eat," I say, impressed that I'm able to keep the disgust out of my tone.

“No. No. Darla would never allow that to happen,” she croaks out, her eyes still closed. “Her diner is her life.”

“What about the truck stop donut?”

Pippa covers her already closed eyes with her hand and cringes. “Okay, yes. It could have been that,” she admits, and a laugh sneaks out of me.

“Do you think you’ve expelled it all from your body?” I ask, needing a yes.

Pippa opens her eyes and stares down at her stomach as though she can see through to the contents inside her. Just when I think she’s going to answer, her hand flies to her mouth and she scrambles to lift herself up, making it just in time for another epic vomit.

I did not sign up for this shit.

I wait it out until she’s done, and then offer her another cool cloth. That’s the best she’s going to get. I’m not holding her hair back, and I’m certainly not cleaning up this mess.

She smiles up at me but it’s clearly forced, and with the ghost-like complexion she’s sporting, it looks kind of scary.

“Thank you,” she rasps, as she wipes her face. “Any chance I can ask another favor?”

My eyes widen in shock before I grimace. Considering the position she’s currently in, I can’t imagine I’m going to like whatever she’s about to say, but I also feel bad saying no. “You can ask,” I hesitate, making it clear that doesn’t mean I’ll say yes.

Pippa flips me off, and I smile at the fact that despite looking like death, she still has some life in her. “I have a list of errands I’m supposed to run today,” she begins, and I groan before she’s even finished speaking, crossing my arms over my chest when she adds, “I’m going to need you to help with that.”

Goddammit. I take it all back; I’ll clean up her puke. That’s got to be better than fucking event errands. “Can’t they wait until tomorrow?”

“Nope. They can’t.”

“Why the hell are you even helping with that?” I ask, because I genuinely don’t get it. Pippa filled me in on a bit more of the drama with her sister, who’s organizing it, and I’ve got to say... even though I despise cheating, whether you’re the cheater *or* the other person, I kind of get why she doesn’t feel bad about it.

“Mom asked.” She shrugs and that’s all she gives me before dropping her head to her arm and groaning to herself.

Right, okay. *Fuck!* “Where’s the damn list?”

A small smile graces her face but she tries to suppress it. “Thank you,” she says, without looking up. “It’s on my bedside table. If you go in order, it works for timing.”

Of course it does. Pippa has organization nailed in all facets of her life, except her personal one—that’s a disaster. “How long is it going to take me?” I ask after blowing out a breath.

The wince I get in response does not bode well for me, but when she squeaks out, “a couple of hours,” I relax. I expected her to say the whole day.

After ordering some dry toast to the room, I throw on the same jeans and tee from last night, then grab the list. Better to get this over with now, so I can do my own thing in the afternoon.

“Oh, and while I already have you in a *mood*...” Pippa calls out as she slowly surfaces from the floor. “Mom invited us to a family dinner tomorrow. One we *have* to attend. Thank you.”

My shoulders drop but I don’t respond. I can’t. I’m choosing to pretend she never spoke. It’s better than what I really want to say.

Pippa smiles apologetically and opens her mouth to say something else, but whatever she reads in my expression stops her. She knows me well enough to leave me be.

Securing my hat in place, I turn abruptly and throw open the door, flinching when it hits the wall with a loud crack. But I keep walking. I’m ninety percent sure I broke something, and I need this day to get better, not worse.

Stepping out into the warm summer air, I get my bearings before heading toward my first stop.

A horn blares when I step out in front of the only car I’ve seen on the road, and I internally laugh. Of course that would happen. Sure, it was my fault; I’m not paying any attention. But it still pisses me off. Holding back a string of curses, my

eyes rise in boredom as the driver shakes a fist in my direction before driving away. *And here I was thinking small-town folk were supposed to be welcoming.*

Taking a deep breath, I count to ten and make myself relax, needing to chill so I don't irrationally pack up my things and hightail it out of here. I owe Pippa. I agreed to the week with her, and I'm a man of my word.

With my focus back on the list, I cross the street and find the location I need—Hepburn Hardware. All I have to do is collect some wire and drop it off at Lucia's Florist. Seems simple enough and yet... *what the fuck am I doing?*



Task one was *not* simple. While the rest of the list was easy enough and the wire collection was fine, the damn florist has had a “back in five minutes” sign posted across the door for three fucking hours. That's all I have left. Drop the stupid wire and I'm free.

I've been waiting so long, I actually contemplate having a third beer as I sit in the bar across the street, watching the door like a stalker. Instead, I remain focused, desperate to keep myself distracted so my mind doesn't drift back to the blonde from last night. So I don't think about the way her breath hitched, or the way her eyes shone in the moonlight. The way

she felt in my arms, or the way my heart slammed in my chest, begging for release. *Dammit! Hurry the fuck up, florist.* Sitting here alone with my thoughts is dangerous. It can't be *her*, and yet, considering where we are...it really fucking can be.

Head in the game, Jesse. Think of the task. Wire. Florist. Family dinner. Party. Clinic. Done. Simple. I can do it. *I can do it.*

I'm staring so intently at the florist now that when movement catches my eye, I startle, almost losing my footing as I jump up. Grabbing the table, I physically stop myself from racing right over, and expel a deep breath. *About fucking time.*

Settling my tab, I adjust my cap low on my head and check for traffic, making sure to avoid another incident, before jogging across the street. I want this over with, and yet, as I reach the entry, I pause. I've jiggled this handle so many times that my cock's jealous of the attention, and I'm not sure I can take another rejection. If I find the door locked, I can't be held responsible if I "accidentally" break the adjoining window, using the wire they so desperately needed.

Reaching out slowly, I palm the warm steel and press down, sucking in a breath as I do. When the latch clicks open, I audibly sigh in relief. I'm more than ready to rid myself of this bullshit. *Do they really need all this crap?*

Just like at the inn, and every other shop I've walked into today, a bell chimes as I enter, further cementing my foul mood.

The inside looks more like a garden center than a florist, with overhanging potted plants and creepers covering every wall. There are a few bunches of flowers sitting on stands along the walkway, but that's the only part of the space that resembles the florists I've seen. *Not that I visit them regularly. Or at all.*

"Hello! Anyone here?" I call out as I duck under some low-lying ivy, making my way toward the back.

Of course, no one answers. *Does this shop even want business?*

Dropping the wire on the counter, I watch as it bounces a few times before running my hands down my face. With clenched teeth, I bark out another "hello" and wait for a response, reminding myself this is a small town, not the ever bustling San Francisco. Things work differently around here and—

"Won't be a moment," a soft voice rushes out, cutting off my thoughts, immediately drawing my attention. *That voice.* I stare at the door, waiting anxiously to see who walks through. Hoping like hell it's not her, while at the same time, knowing with every fiber of my being that it is.

And I'm right.

The woman from last night brushes her hands over her simple white dress as she steps through the threshold, and I feel like I've been gut punched. My heart leaps into my throat as my body tenses, her presence amplifying my dark frame of

mind. She's here, standing in front of me, and I don't like it. I need to leave.

"It's been one of those days," she continues, still busying herself, giving me a chance to watch her in silence while my mind explodes.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I..." Her eyes meet mine and she freezes. "Oh, hi," she says with a warm smile. A smile that makes her more beautiful than I've ever imagined her in my mind, something I don't need to be noticing right now.

A burning anger consumes me as I push the past out of my head and stare her down, focusing on the fact that she's the florist that's been wasting my time, *nothing more*.

"*Hi?* That's it?" Her brows rise in surprise, but I ignore it, determined to continue my rant. "You've been closed *all* morning, claiming you'd be back in *five minutes*, and you greet me with a hi. I just need you to take this shit off my goddamn hands so I can be done with it." *And you. And this nightmare.*

I huff as I finish my outburst before exaggeratedly pushing the wire in her direction. I expect her to huff back or at least get flustered, but her smile turns apologetic and she nods.

"I'm terribly sorry. I don't actually work here. I'm just here as a favor to the owner." She shrugs before her smile falters. "The owner who went into labor while out for a *five-minute* breather. Hence the sign." Her voice rises slightly toward the end and my eyes narrow, seeing through her sweet disposition.

I'm guessing she wants to yell at me. Actually no, I'm not guessing, I *know*. *Because it's her*.

Shaking off my thoughts, I cross my arms over my chest, and obnoxiously sigh. "How—"

"I've just got to make sure all this is correct, and then you can be on your way," she says, her sugar-coated tone back in place. "But is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yeah, I want my three hours back," I mumble, a little shocked that she's still maintaining her warm composure. It makes me want to push her a little, to see if I'm right about her.

"I feel your pain," she replies sweetly and my jaw drops. "My morning—"

"I don't give a... I don't care about your morning," I lie, because for some fucking reason I actually *do* want to hear the undoubtedly soft rant about her day, and that pisses me off even more. "Just check the damn wire so I can leave." I know I'm being harsh, but I'm suddenly desperate to see if I can make her snap.

"Yes, of course. This piece is—"

"I don't need a play-by-play. Just *do* it."

"Jesus! Are you always such an ass?" she yells, her eyes briefly widening, making me almost smile. *I knew it*.

But fuck... It really is her.

“I thought Pippa was doing this?” she continues with attitude, making me pause. *She knows Pippa?* Of course she fucking does. It’s a small town.

I’m about to throw her another smart-ass response when the guilt hits me and I think of my friend—*girlfriend*—and how I’m supposed to be making a good impression on these people.

“Ah...Pippa is currently indisposed, so I’m helping her out, as a *favor*.” *You know. Like you are.*

The florist—who isn’t really a florist but will remain a florist in my mind until I can forget her—frowns. “Indisposed? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” I stupidly reassure her. “Just a mild case of food poisoning.”

A hint of a smile tugs at her lips, drawing my attention there just as she bites down on the pink flesh. *Well, that’s not a very sweet reaction.* My length twitches in my jeans, and I inwardly curse myself, holding back a groan. This better not be a fucking problem. *It’s just a week. I can get through a week without using my dick.*

“God, Pippa will eat anything.” She laughs and I almost choke on my tongue until I realize she’s not talking about my cock. I’m the only one with the uncharacteristically dirty thoughts.

“I guess it’s nice of you to help,” she continues. “Even if you are all moody about it. Thank you. Tell her I’ll have this

taken care of and ready to go for Friday.”

After brushing some hair behind her ears, “the florist” smiles, lighting up her mesmerizing features. And while I want to argue, all I can do is stare back at her, completely stunned, waiting for my brain to rewire itself.

When I’m finally able to snap out of it, I clear my throat and take a step back, nodding as I do.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure,” I say sarcastically, though it’s not a complete lie.

Even so, I turn on my heel and make a dash for the door, suddenly needing air more than I’ve ever needed it in my life, and that’s saying something.

I’m so fucked.

Chapter Seven

Willow

My reluctant savior turns to leave, and I expel a silent breath. My body sags to the counter, narrowly missing the wire he practically threw my way.

A memory of last night hits me and I shiver. I've felt attraction, but that was something else. Like a slap to the face, or... No, that's not right. Whatever that was took over my entire body, like all my senses were misfiring, and I have never experienced anything like that before. And because it felt like I had no control over my actions, I never want to feel it again.

Especially after *that* little interaction.

Last night, this man was a stranger. A stranger that had my frozen heart slamming against my chest for reasons I can't even begin to understand. But today... Today he's an asshole, and if I had money to spare, I'd wager he's also Pippa's boyfriend. And while I should play nice, he's pushed me too far for that.

“Wait!” I call out as I stalk toward him, my eyes burning a hole in his back. He stills, but doesn’t immediately turn around. “Just because you’re some kind of hockey star,” I grate as I reach him, “doesn’t mean you get to be an ass. And —”

My words cut off when he finally spins, smirking, in a manic kind of way, until he sees how close I am, and the smile falls from his face. I almost falter, but I hold strong. “Just because you’re famous doesn’t mean you get to bring your *foul* mood with you to Hepburn Falls. People around here *won’t* stand for rudeness.”

His eyebrows rise slowly as his gaze rakes over my entire body, working his way from my bare legs to my flushed face. And if looks could kill...

“Is that why you walk around with that *fake* innocent thing you’ve got going on?” he asks with a venom in his voice I’m not used to, making me shiver. “Because I’m here to tell you,”—he takes the slightest step forward until he’s close enough that my personal space feels invaded—“I saw right through that bullshit facade within seconds of you opening your mouth.”

My heart races, as my eyes bounce between his, noting his intense stare. And despite the butterflies creating havoc in my chest, I put on the sweetest smile possible, brush my thick wavy hair behind my ears, and nod. “My sincere apologies,” I say in a voice coated in sugar, just like Dorothy from *Wizard*

of Oz. “I shouldn’t have been so awful to you considering how you saved me last night.”

The big brawny hockey star—who I’m going to assume is Jesse, since he didn’t correct me—narrows his eyes, clearly not buying into my kind nature. And he’d be right. I’m usually a pro at keeping up the good girl charade, but this morning has been a shit show, not to mention, I’m still thrown by the way my body reacted to this man. That alone is enough to explain why my mask failed me.

Taking a step toward him, until we’re almost flush, I pat his arm condescendingly and let out a soft giggle. The challenging look instantly drops from his face, and he moves out of my reach, running a hand through his already mussed hair. *Of course, it’s lush and sexy hair, making it hard not to be attracted to him despite his unfortunate attitude problem.*

“You know what?” he says, pulling me from my leering. “Let’s forget it all. Anyone would have done the same. I bumped into you; I caught you. It’s done. Time to move on. I’ll see you around.”

What? I was only getting started.

“Hey—”

“Goodbye, B... Florist,” he yells with a wave over his head, and *what the hell?*

“Were you about to call me a bitch?” I yell back, because apparently I can’t stop this madness now that I’ve started,

despite this being completely out of character for me. *Now, anyway.*

Jesse continues to storm off without acknowledging my question, and he's out the door in record time—not even giving me a backward glance.

Asshole is putting it mildly.

As soon as the door clicks shut, I deflate.

What is it about that man that has me so rattled and angry, but also has my icy heart thawing? I'm emotionally drained from such a tiny encounter, like my entire body needs a rest after five minutes in his presence.

And that's truly unnerving.



I'm swamped for the rest of the morning—having to move between Lucia's Florist and my store next door—which means I'm able to push Jesse from my mind. Mostly. It's not like our small gift and homeware store is busy right now—we make eighty percent of our yearly income during the winter ski season—but it's still busy enough for me to be exhausted by the time Sara arrives.

“Can I tell you—I'm shocked at how many people there are around town,” Sara says as she drops her bag down and looks

out the window. “I think more people are here for this than the school reunions they host each year.”

I huff out a laugh and pass her my hand cream seconds before she reaches out for it. “Well, that makes sense, considering a school reunion is just one year level, and this could be students and teachers from over twenty years.”

Sara mumbles something as she considers that. “I guess that makes sense. I can’t imagine traveling back to my school in my late thirties. I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

“Oh, same.” *Not that I left.*

“Speaking of...” Sara hesitates and I know she wants to ask me if I’m okay, but also wants to respect my boundaries.

“I’m fine,” I answer without her having to say it. *I’m always fine.* “But thank you for checking in on me.”

“Technically, I didn’t.” She shrugs with a suppressed grin. “I was going to ask if you could steal me a centerpiece.”

I bark out a laugh because we both know she wasn’t going to ask that, but I appreciate her changing the subject. And taking my mind off the *jackass* for a moment.

“Lucia sure knows how to style a wedding,” I say, referring to the centerpieces she’s arranged for this event.

Sara stares at me with her jaw open before throwing her head back to laugh. “Oh. My. God. How did I not realize that? Ashley’s turning her own father’s retirement party into a wedding. Now that I’m thinking it, it’s all that I see.”

“I’d say it’s more like a practice run.” I smile. “But yes.”

Sara laughs again. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be laughing,” she says without stopping.

“Oh, you absolutely should be. Why aren’t you coming again?”

I would do anything to have her there, someone in my corner, even if she doesn’t know why I need her. But I’d never ask. Especially when her beautiful smile turns apologetic in an instant. “I’m sorry—”

“No, Sara. I’m sorry. You have nothing to apologize for. I know you can’t get a sitter.”

“I still feel bad.”

“Please don’t. I’ll be fine. Plus, Pippa’s back.”

When my lips pull into a smile, Sara’s follow. “Have you seen her yet?”

“Not yet. She’s got food poisoning. But tomorrow, she won’t be able to keep me away.”



With Sara keeping me company, the afternoon flies by, and before long, we’re closing up. As I pull the door shut and wave goodbye, I think about heading to the hospital to check

in on Lucia, but the idea of an hour drive doesn't thrill me. Instead, I take the easy road, dialing her husband's number as I walk.

"Willow, my hero," he answers almost immediately. The happiness in his tone means he's either staring down at his newborn baby, or he got high stealing Lucia's pain meds. "We have a daughter, Willow!" he exclaims and I chuckle. *The former then. Thank God.*

"I'm so happy for you, Chris. I can't wait to meet her."

While Jesse wasn't wrong about my *fake sweetness*, as he called it, the smile currently plastered on my face is real. We've shared a shop wall with Lucia for the past three years, and she and Chris had been trying to conceive since before we took over the lease. I'm happy for them. Truly happy.

I'm knee deep in all the feels today.

Chris takes me through the birth, in great detail, and by the time he hangs up, I'm walking up the front steps to my home.

Key in the lock, I'm just about to open up when a comforting voice has me spinning instantly and racing back down to the sidewalk.

"Pip!" I yell as thick emotion clogs my throat and tears spring to my eyes.

My beautiful sister is home. The only one of us to sprout wings and escape small-town life.

"Careful. I have a sensitive stomach," she says as I come to a stop in front of her, hesitating before pulling her in for a hug.

She may be sick, but she still looks as perfect as I remember her.

After wrapping her arms around me, Pippa squeezes tightly, despite her warning, and it gives me so much comfort.

“God, I’ve missed you so much,” she whispers, as I step back, holding her at arm’s length, needing to see how much she’s changed.

“The feeling’s mutual. How are you? Other than the unfortunate food poisoning.”

“How do you know it’s food poisoning? Maybe it’s something grossly contagious.” She laughs at her own joke while her eyes curiously mimic mine, most likely forming her own assessment of how I appear.

“I have my sources.”

“Small towns,” she says with a shrug and she’s not wrong. Even if Jesse hadn’t told me, I also heard it from Mom *and* Mom’s next-door neighbor.

We stare at each other for a beat before Pip pulls me in close and kisses my head, making tears prick my eyes again. “It’s so good to see you.”

We were always close growing up, but over the last decade we’ve seen each other less and less. I’ve often considered listening to her words of advice and moving closer to her, but I wouldn’t even know how to start over. My life here is simple, and I couldn’t imagine trying to fit in somewhere new.

No matter how badly I want to.

After one last hug, I step back, dropping my hands from Pippa's arms while mentally noting she really hasn't changed that much. And I can guarantee I haven't.

It's funny how different we are considering we share the same parents. Where Pippa's all legs with a model-like figure, I have a sportier build—thicker thighs, more muscular—my addiction to fitness being the main contributing factor in that. When I run or work out, I'm able to still my mind, completely immersing myself in the exercise. When I need to switch off, it's the only thing that works. *Most of the time.*

As Pippa brushes her long, platinum-blond hair away from her face, I'm drawn to the other difference between us—she inherited my mother's thin wispy hair, while I have our grandmother's thick mess. It's not beyond taming, but it takes effort, and I usually have no reason to put in the time.

Honestly, if you didn't know us, you'd have no idea we're related.

“You look tired, Willow. What's that about?” Pippa asks as she brushes *my* hair away from my eyes.

“Lucia had a baby today. I've spent most of the day running both shops.” *And I barely slept last night after my first run-in with your boyfriend.*

Pip's eyes widen and she smiles. “No shit... they finally got their kid.”

I wouldn't exactly put it that way but... “They did. And I couldn't be happier for them.”

“Willow, Willow. Always such a sweet soul.”

I hold back an eye roll and instead huff out a laugh at how wrong she is. It’s strange to think that my sister’s boyfriend seems to know more about the real me after only knowing me for five minutes.

“That’s me,” I say with my signature grin. “Always pure honey.”

Pippa laughs and curls her arm around my shoulder, leading us up the stairs toward my house. “I’ve got so much to tell you, Wil. How about catching up?”

“I take it you don’t want food?” I say, holding the door open for her to enter.

Squeezing my arm as she walks past, Pip shakes her head almost violently. “You are correct. But I wouldn’t say no to water.”



We spend the next hour filling each other in on the past few months—which takes Pippa much longer than it does me. She tells me about the events she’s been to, the ideas she’s pitched, the people she’s met, but she never once mentions Jesse. Which is odd considering Mom gushed about them being in

love, but not odd when I consider it's Pippa. I'm still shocked she *has* a boyfriend.

Shit. Where did that come from?

I smile brightly to hide my awful thoughts, and tell Pippa about my plans to design more of my own pieces. I've already added making essential oils and matching bath salts to my list of talents, and they're actually our best-selling items. *Now I just need to get the jewelry-making right.*

Like I knew she would, Pippa's eyes shine with love as she tells me how proud she is of me. And while I'm grateful for her genuine excitement, it only increases the guilt I have for my earlier notion. *What the hell was that?*

"Now that we're all caught up on the work side of life," Pippa says, her smile widening. "What about other areas? Any men in your world that I should know about?" she asks, her eyebrows sitting high on her forehead.

I try to hide my cringe, but like a hawk, she zeroes in on it, crossing her arms over her chest. "Please tell me you're not still *anti-men*."

"I'm not *anti-men*. I just don't want a relationship right now."

"You're missing out."

"Oh, do tell me about the *amazing* hockey superstar you've taken off the market. I remember a time when you told me he was a bit of a manwhore. Not that there's anything wrong with that."

Pippa's eyes flash with something closely resembling nerves before she shakes it off and smiles, launching into a detailed description about how good her love life is. "He's so caring... attentive... and the way he looks at me..."

I couldn't imagine him being anything like that after our brief encounter, but what do I know.

"So in short... you're in love?" I say with a smile, even though there's something niggling inside me. Something telling me I shouldn't be happy about that. *But why?*

Pippa laughs, shaking her head back and forth in an exaggerated fashion, a nervous energy to her motion. "I wouldn't say we're in love. But... ah...maybe one day." She shrugs.

Her admission relaxes me a little, but again, I have to stop myself from questioning why. Instead, I place those thoughts in a box marked "unsafe for release," and vow to forget them.

"I met him today," I say so we can move away from the topic of love. "When he dropped by with the wire for the flowers."

Pippa's eyes widen before she smiles, though it comes out a little forced. "He didn't mention that."

"Probably because I didn't tell him who I was."

At that, she laughs out loud. "Uh-oh. Was he an ass?"

"You know it. You always said he was. I'm guessing, or rather hoping, he's different with you." I raise an eyebrow and wait for the confirmation.

“Of course he is,” Pippa says, squeezing my arm. “But...”

My eyes flash to her as concern mars my features. “But?”

“He did get us kicked out of the inn.”

“He what?” A laugh bursts out of me as I picture all the ways he could have done that. That’s something I *can* imagine after meeting him. “What happened?”

“He slammed the door when I mentioned our family dinner. Put a hole in the drywall.”

“That would have broken Marley’s heart.”

“It did.” Pippa places her hand on her chest as though she feels for our innkeeper, but the sassy grin suggests she doesn’t.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I was kind of hoping my amazing sister would take us in. It’s only a few days. Marley said we could stay there until Friday, because that’s the earliest she can get someone to fix it.”

The thought of having Jesse here is not ideal, but what can I do? I’m a people pleaser.

Pippa stares at me with an expectant grin and I smile. I know I can’t say no. I *never* say no, but something tells me this is a very bad idea.

Chapter Eight

Willow

Sleep has always been an issue for me, and last night was no exception. Actually, it was worse. As I pull myself out of bed, my eyelids feel like they're duct-taped closed—like I'm going to have to pry them open with some kind of tool. And I'm not a handy person... I call my dad for that stuff.

Taking a deep breath, I slap my cheeks a few times before blindly making my way into the shower, hoping that will help. And twenty minutes later, I can finally see, but I'm running incredibly late.

An image of Ashley waiting at my store, tapping her foot against the pavement, comes to mind, and I huff out a laugh. No doubt she's already there with her pointer finger resting against the face of her smart watch, giving me the evil eye, ready to not-so-subtly alert me to the time.

Why, oh why did Lucia's baby choose *this* week to come into the world? She wasn't due for another three.

Ugh. I shouldn't be blaming Lucia or her precious daughter. I never should have agreed to help bridezilla in the first place. As Sara concluded, she's definitely treating Dad's retirement party as a rehearsal for her wedding. To see if the town is equipped to handle it.

And it seems she has *nothing* to worry about, because everyone—including me—is bowing down to her every whim. I swear she has some kind of magical power. She must, because even Pippa is helping, and those two haven't spoken a word to each other in years. *Although, I'm almost certain Mom would have guilted her into it.*

After locking my door, I take my time heading to the main street, where my little store is located. It's only a ten-minute walk, but I can easily make it twenty, and I'm in no hurry to see my flustered older sister. Bypassing the shortcut through the alley, I follow the road around, noting who's out and about on this not-so-quiet Thursday morning. Like always, I smile at anyone who passes by, but when I see who's standing in the doorway as I arrive, my smile fades. *Jonah.*

No matter how hard I try to accept everything that happened, I've always felt uncomfortable around him. He's never specifically done anything to warrant my reaction, but it drives me crazy that he's dated, and slept with, *both* of my sisters, and doesn't seem to be ashamed of it.

"Where's Ashley?" I ask, by way of greeting, forcing my lips to curl into a pleasant grin.

Jonah smiles so wide it looks comical. “She wanted to double-check her dress for tomorrow—she thinks she may have put on some weight with how stressed she’s been—so she’s over there getting fitted.” She’s at a dress fitting? *Yep, she’s definitely making this whole ordeal bigger than it needs to be.*

“Hopefully it’s all okay,” I say, though I don’t really care. “Last-minute alterations might add to that stress. And we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

“Definitely not.” Jonah laughs like I’m joking, or maybe he actually enjoys my sarcasm. “She’s hard enough to live with right now. What happened to the simpler times?”

You mean back when you were cheating on your girlfriend with her sister. Was that easier?

“There’s always something.” I shrug, not really sure how I’m supposed to respond to that. “Anyway, I have the table decorations and the flowers inside. Is that what you’re here for?”

Jonah nods and gestures toward his beat-up truck. “Load ’em up,” he says with a grin.

Um, what? I’m not loading—

“Just messing with you, future sister.” He laughs before waving his hand toward the door. “Lead the way.”

Ugh.



A short time later, I watch Jonah's taillights disappear out of view just as another unwelcome sight comes into it. Pippa and Jesse exit the Hepburn Falls Inn, arms linked, looking so out of place you'd think they'd never been to a small town before. And maybe Jesse hasn't. He acts like an entitled city boy.

Pippa talks animatedly about something, while Jesse's eyes are trained on the ground. He looks up occasionally to reassure her he's listening, but he's emotionless. Whatever she's saying means absolutely nothing to him, good, bad, or indifferent. I can see it clear as day from here.

Midspeech, Pippa unhooks her arm and tries to intertwine their fingers. She's so focused on her story that I'm not even sure she realizes what's happening as Jesse subtly flinches, hesitating for a moment before connecting their hands, his eyes scanning their surroundings. Clearly looking for something...or someone.

Tucked away in the nook of my doorway, I stare, analyzing what his body language could mean, but when a throat clears from behind me, I jump, snapping out of my scrutinizing gaze, realizing I've been a voyeur in their moment for too long.

"Can you believe she's dating Jesse Hastings?" a voice says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Looking over my shoulder, I smile at my nosey neighbor, the other person we share a wall with, Debbie. She flashes me a knowing grin in return, but for the life of me, I have no idea what she thinks she knows.

“It’s about time,” I say in response to her question, ignoring her expression. “She deserves to find someone great.”

Debbie frowns. “But you’re not happy about it?”

What? “Pardon?”

“Your face did this little scrunched-up thing as you spoke about them, and you had a very confused look on your face when I interrupted you just now.”

I did? What the hell?

“I’m just upset about not getting my sister to myself while she’s back. She’s been gone for so long; I was looking forward to some one-on-one time.”

Debbie’s expression morphs into one of sympathy, and she squeezes my arm. “Oh sweetie, talk to her. Tell her how you feel. She needs to dedicate time to you while she’s here. She should know that *you* specifically need your family.”

Me specifically? Because I’m so different from everyone else?

“We’re all here for you, Willow. But there’s only so much we can do.”

Again, what? When is this going to end?

“Thanks, Debbie. I’ll make sure she finds time for me.” Ignoring the crux of her little speech, I pat her hand where it’s glued to my skin and pray she’ll remove it. I don’t bother telling her that Pip and I caught up for hours last night. To be honest, I’m not even sure why I lied. Or why I appear to be unhappy with my sister’s relationship. Because I’m not unhappy about it. I don’t think... There’s just something. *Ugh!* Nope. Moving on.

“I better get inside,” I rush out, stepping toward the door. “Sara’s on her way, and I’ve got to open up at Lucia’s.”

“Of course.” Debbie smiles, moving back toward her store, “Have a lovely day.”

I say thanks as I walk away, but somehow, I can’t see that happening. It’s already off to a bad start.



Just like with most things in life, I run late to dinner. Sara and I got to talking and I completely lost track of time. Lucky for me, Ashley and Jonah still haven’t arrived when I walk in, so I don’t feel as bad.

From the doorway, I watch Pippa and Jesse walking shoulder to shoulder across the room, and from her downturned face, I can tell she’s already struggling. *And she hasn’t even faced Jonah yet.* While I doubt Pippa ever planned to end

up with him—they were never a good fit—having someone you cared deeply about choosing your sister over you has to be hard.

Being the loving boyfriend she claims him to be, Jesse's hand hovers near the small of Pip's back as he leans in, whispering something in her ear, but not quite touching her. A smile pulls at her lips before her eyes flash to his and she laughs.

My heart clenches like an invisible hand just reached in and gave it a squeeze, forcing it to pay attention, and a strange feeling takes over me. I know it's not jealousy. Jealousy *isn't* a foreign feeling to me. But this, *this* is something I've never felt before. And I have no idea what it means.

Forcing myself to look away, I take a deep breath as I prepare for how the night's going to play out. The only time my parents enforce family-wide dinners is when we're all in town, so this has been a long time coming.

Movement breaks me from my daze as I stroll toward the impending chaos and I have to blink a few times to snap out of it. I refocus just in time to see Mom waving at me, a small frown on her face until I force myself to smile.

Like always, all eyes are on me from around the room, but there's only one expression that registers. *Jesse's*. And I can say, with one hundred percent certainty, he's not at all happy to see me.



I have two options when I reach the table—sit in the seat next to Mom, meaning either Ashley or Jonah will have to sit beside me, or sit next to Jesse. Both choices feel like the wrong one, but Jesse has to be the lesser of two evils, right? *I hope.*

Mom, Dad, and Pippa are in a conversation when I take my seat, and they don't stop on my account.

“Hi, everyone,” I say anyway, busying myself putting my purse under the table, before straightening up my knife and fork. Trying to ignore the fact that Jesse's drilling me with his stare.

When I've pretended for long enough, I accept the inevitable and look his way, making sure I give him the most adorable, yet visibly fake smile, I can. “Jesse.” I nod. “Nice to see you again.”

Jesse scoffs before his eyes flash to my sister and parents, a sneer forming on his face when he sees they're still distracted.

“Tell me something,” he says, leaning in close so that no one else can hear him. “Did you know your sister dated your man *before* getting together? Or was that a surprise to you? It just doesn't seem like a *sisterly* thing to do.”

Sucking my lips into my mouth, I inhale deeply to hold back my shocked laugh, and instead, shake my head. He thinks I'm *Ashley*. That's insulting. "I can assure you; I've *never* dated anyone my sister has been with," I whisper-yell back. "I too find it deplorable. You have the *wrong* girl."

Jesse releases a breath and his shoulders drop in what appears to be relief, though he quickly tries to hide it.

And his reaction confuses me.

"Then you must be—"

"Willow!" my mother exclaims as though she's just noticed my arrival. "How are you?"

"Tired and stressed," I answer honestly, causing my father to frown. "But happy to be here," I add, for my mother's enjoyment.

"And we're happy you're here too. All my children are back together." She grins, clasping her hands together and holding them to her heart.

"All the children that count, anyway," Pippa mumbles in a joking tone, though we all know she's deadly serious in her own opinion.

"Where's Ashley?" I ask. "She's never one to be late."

Mom waves her hand in the air like I'm talking nonsense. "She's not late. She's busy. I told her not to worry about what time she got here. We'd wait to order."

Of course, we will. I'm not entirely sure when Ashley became the favorite, but it's been so long that Pippa and I just kind of came to accept it. Although this is a little more extreme.

"Okay," I say with a smile. "I guess we'll wait."

And wait we do.

It's another fifteen minutes before Ashley and Jonah walk past the window on their way in, and Mom doesn't say a word. She doesn't even comment to Dad under her breath. Meanwhile, Pippa's had to keep the conversation going because I'm too busy stuck in my head, and Jesse's keeping to himself.

"Oh Pippa?" Mom gasps. "You didn't introduce Willow to Jesse when she arrived," she rushes out before Ashley and Jonah sit down, as though she needs to get this out of the way so the conversation can move to her golden child.

"It's okay. We go way back," I say, affectionately bumping my shoulder to his before instantly regretting it, praying the lighting is too dim for anyone to notice the pink hue undoubtedly coating my skin.

I feel Jesse's eyes flash to mine, and without looking, I know it's not going to be a pleasant expression. Pretending I don't notice, I laugh at my mom's panic because at least it takes the focus off me.

"How do you—"

“Don’t stress, Mom,” Pippa interjects. “They met yesterday at the florist.”

Mom relaxes, trying to hide her obvious concern, worried about another scandal brewing between her children and their significant others. While everyone seems to have forgotten about it now, there was a time when the Ashley, Jonah, and Pippa saga was a constant source of gossip. And then my drama took over.

“Oh yes, Debbie mentioned you were helping Lucia,” she says with a smile. “Please let me know if you need a hand. I know you have Sara this weekend, but I could probably give you a couple of free hours on Monday.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I say, genuinely grateful for the offer. “I might just take you up on that. Lucia has someone booked to —”

“We’re here,” Ashley announces when they reach the table, completely ignoring the fact that Mom and I are in conversation. And unlike when I did the same thing, Mom pauses and turns to her darling number one.

“Did you get everything done, dear?”

“We did.” Ashley beams. “Everyone’s been very accommodating.”

I’ll bet. I mentally roll my eyes while in reality a smile lights up my face.

Jesse grins, along with the rest of the table, only I have a strong feeling that the first smile he’s shown for the night is in

response to my fake expression, rather than my sister. And when my eyes flash to his, sure enough, he gives me a pointed look confirming my suspicion. He's enjoying this.

What is with him? I don't think I've done anything wrong, but he seems to have something against me. I've heard of instalust or love, but *instahate* is new to me.

My smile widens in response, only making him even more obnoxious, and it's then that I remember I'm stuck with him for three nights, or is it four? *Goddammit*. Does he even know that? Is that why he's so pissed off? I wish I'd been a fly on the wall during that conversation.

As soon as Ashley and Jonah sit down, a server finally appears to take our order. Honestly, you'd think someone advised them to wait for our queen's arrival because where were they before?

Ashley and Mom keep the conversation flowing, and it's not until I'm halfway through my fettuccine that I notice Pippa hasn't spoken a word since Ashley or Jonah said hello.

"Oh Pippa!" I exclaim excitedly so the entire table can hear me. "I forgot to tell you that in the two days you've been here, you've definitely become the talk of the town. You *and* Jesse. It's like you're the king and queen."

I have no idea if any of that's true, but I know it will boost Pippa's confidence and piss Ashley off at the same time, so it's a win-win. And judging by the half grunt I just heard beside me, I'd say it's a triple victory.

As suspected, Pippa laughs out loud before playfully rolling her eyes, as if she didn't bring Jesse home hoping that would happen, and for a little while after that, conversation flows naturally.

Maybe I was wrong to be worried.

There've been no arguments, no snide remarks, nothing. Pippa and Jonah even have an actual conversation about whether or not she gets to watch Jesse's games. Yes, it's curt and a little forced, but it happens. Maybe bringing Jesse home *was* a good idea.

We've just finished up a playful argument about the new chain restaurant that's moved in across the street, when Ashley brings the entire ceasefire to an end using only six short words.

"So, Jesse. I'm curious, why Pippa?"

"Ashley!" Dad scolds as Pippa blurts out, "Excuse me?"

While technically Ashley's words could be considered genuine curiosity, her tone suggests otherwise.

Jesse stiffens slightly, but I doubt anyone else notices, and I almost mimic his stance, wondering what he's going to say.

He's known in the hockey world as a reclusive mystery, so if that's all an act, tonight he's playing his part well, only really answering questions when he's asked. Albeit, politely at least.

"I meant nothing by it," Ashley lies. "I just—"

“That’s easy,” Jesse interrupts, a smile on his face as he looks toward Pippa with genuine warmth. “She’s Pippa.”

How can so little mean so much? A mix of emotions hits me as Pippa smiles in return. I’m happy for her; I’m sure I am. And yet the ache in my chest says maybe I’m not. Is it because I want that? I’ve never wanted it before...but maybe since I’m in my late twenties now, my wants and needs are changing? *Surely, that has to be it.*

Dad nods at Jesse with a smile on his face and then launches into a conversation about hockey. I’m actually surprised it’s taken him this long to bring up his favorite topic, but I suspect that maybe he’s been trying to play the protective father role first. It’s safe to say Jesse’s comment won him over.

When the strange feeling flowing through me doesn’t subside, I excuse myself to use the restroom, but instead sneak outside through an emergency exit, needing a quiet place to breathe.

I’d almost forgotten how beautiful the courtyard was, because I only come when everyone’s home, it’s been so long since I’ve eaten here. But I’ve used this as an escape many times before, and I’m grateful to find it empty again now.

Inhaling slowly, I let the air flow back into my lungs hoping it will calm me, but this time it doesn’t help. Especially since I barely get two minutes alone before the door flies open, and Jesse rushes out, quickly closing it behind him.

Without turning around, he runs a hand down his face like he’s trying to wash away his miserable expression, before

leaning forward and banging his forehead against the wood paneling of the exterior wall, mumbling something to himself.

Stunned to see him out here, I take a minute to process it and spend the time just staring in his direction, trying hard not to focus on any particular aspect of him, so I don't accidentally check him out. So I don't take in the way his ass looks in his fitted black pants, or the way his forearms bulge under his shirt... *Dammit.*

"Hiding away?" I blurt, interrupting his moment and making him startle. I probably shouldn't have done that, but it's better than secretly ogling him from the shadows.

Jesse turns to face me, and his eyes widen before he curses under his breath. Saying something that sounds like buttercup? But that can't be right.

Closing his eyes briefly—as though it'll change the scene before him—he sighs, a subtle frown appearing. "I didn't realize anyone was out here," he says grumpily. "I'll leave you alone."

When he turns back toward the door, an unexplained panic runs through me, and I find myself rushing forward to stop him. "Wait. *Please,*" I say, but the voice that comes out of my mouth sounds foreign. Jesse's eyes flash to where I'm gripping his bicep before he shakes himself free. I hadn't even realized I'd reached out for him, but now that I'm conscious of it, I wish I'd given the thick muscle a squeeze before he pulled away. *Jesus.*

With his gaze on mine, Jesse's expression sends a chill right through me. He's positively seething. But God only knows why. "I can't do this now. What do you want?"

"I don't even know," I half yell because he evokes that reaction from me, and I really have no freaking idea.

Pain flashes across his face, but in an instant it's gone, and his nostrils flare as he studies me intensely, looking for something. "Do you know who I am?" he barks out after a moment, startling me with his tone. *Not that I let him see it. And what an odd thing to ask?* Of course I know who he is. We've just spent the last couple of hours sitting next to each other. Or does he mean it in an "I'm so much better than you" kind of way?

"Yeah. *Hot shot,*" I say, resting my hand on my waist as I pop my hip, giving him some sass. "I do. So what if you're a star—"

"You know what?" he says, cutting me off "Forget it. I'll see you back in there." While he still seems annoyed, I don't miss the way his body subtly deflates before he shakes his head and curses again, visibly defeated.

Turning on his heel, he pounds a fist against the door as he pushes through it, leaving me rooted to the ground in utter confusion, my heart still racing like it has the other times I've been alone in his presence. *What the hell kind of conversation was that?*

Chapter Nine

Jesse

The door slams shut behind me, and I suck in a breath. *Willow. Fucking Willow. I feel sick.* Why'd she have to be so goddamn beautiful, and how the hell is she Pippa's sister? Of all the people in the goddamn world.

I didn't even know Willow had a sister. Although, I didn't even know her name was Willow. I never really knew much about her at all, apart from her stunning green eyes and confident smile. A smile that seems to be missing from her now.

I'm still trying to process it all as I take in another gulp of air and drag my fingers slowly down my cheeks before turning and coming face-to-face with the reason I'm stuck in this nightmare. An easy smile plays on Pippa's lips until it fades on seeing my expression.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm good," I lie. I can't drag Pippa into this. "I just—"

“God, I’m sorry. I knew you were going to hate the whole socializing thing, but you look a lot worse than I thought you’d be.”

“I’m fine. It’s just a lot. And it’s a struggle not to reach over the table and shove Justin’s face into his meal.”

“It’s Jonah.” Pippa grins. The exact reaction I was going for, hoping to distract her from how I feel. “Thank you for defending me in there,” she adds, motioning back toward the seating area.

“I wasn’t just defending you, Pippa. It’s the truth. While we may not be…” Pippa gives me a pointed look, so I stop before admitting our dating status out loud. “You’re still a friend and that’s why I’m here.”

“That and you owed me,” she says, her lips pulling into a thankful but sassy grin.

Before I get the chance to respond, a breeze hits me from behind before someone—one guess who—slams into my back. *Why the hell hadn’t I moved?*

I turn to see Willow rub her head where it just collided with my shoulder blade as she curses under her breath. “Ow! What are you…” she trails off when she sees Pippa, hiding her snark, as her warm albeit fake smile comes into play.

“Hi, Pip.”

“So, that’s where you were hiding,” Pippa says with a soft laugh. “I’m guessing this one was headed that way too,” she adds, pointing to me. *So, she didn’t see me come in?*

“You know me so well,” I muse with as casual a tone as I can muster, while inside I’m feeling all kinds of messed up. “I was just on my way out. I didn’t know your sister had the same idea.” That part is definitely not a lie. There’s no way in hell I would have stepped a foot out there if I’d known.

“Oh, don’t worry. You and Willow have the whole antisocial thing in common.”

Willow laughs uncomfortably before brushing her hands down the front of her casual, form-fitting dress, making my traitorous eyes follow her every move. I can’t stop myself from watching the way the material clings to her perfect curves, or the way the soft color complements her eyes... Jesus. *Fuck!*

Since when do I have thoughts like that? I don’t notice that shit. Ever. And Willow is off-limits; everyone in this damn town is.

Pippa and Willow chat as I will myself to finally look away, searching for another escape. Meaning, I’m no longer paying any attention when Pippa elbows me in the ribs, forcing me to listen.

“Maybe you can work with Jesse on a special order. My birthday *is* quickly approaching,” Pippa says, squeezing my arm.

What? I shoot her a puzzled expression as I rejoin the conversation, but she just laughs. “Willow’s starting to design jewelry. You were just asking what I wanted for my birthday.”

Huh? I definitely hadn't asked that. My brows furrow as they discuss our relationship like it's real. As though we've had this amazing love affair for months. And considering Pippa mentioned that she and her younger sister were close, I was certain she would have told her the truth. *Though maybe they're not as close anymore?*

When I don't answer after Pippa's explanation, her face scrunches before she changes the subject. "Anyway, we should get back," she says, her eyes briefly flashing to Willow. "We don't want the others to think we've conspired and ditched them."

"They probably haven't even noticed we're missing," Willow responds, her voice light and full of warmth as she giggles. *And dammit...why do I have to like the way that sounds?*

There are a million reasons this situation is messed up, and Pippa being my fake girlfriend is just the tip of the iceberg. All I know is that when it comes to Willow, I need to stay the hell away.



The rest of the dinner runs smoothly enough. I answer questions when asked, I smile, and I nod. All while trying hard not to focus on the woman sitting beside me, or the way her

arm occasionally brushes mine when she leans forward to talk, or how she grips the material of her dress when she's uncomfortable with a question being asked of her.

I also spend my time blocking out her scent, her laugh—however fake it might be—and her voice. It's like I'm suddenly in tune to everything about her, and it's really fucking annoying.

When the others stand to leave, Pippa pulls me back down and asks Willow to stay for dessert.

I want to say no or question her motives, but I don't. Instead, I offer to pay for the entire meal, and wait patiently for everyone to leave, enjoying the look on Jonah's face when Pippa's parent's thank me profusely.

"We're not really staying for dessert, are we?" I ask, when it's just Willow, Pippa, and me left.

"We are," Pippa states, her eyes on my stomach. "Your body sounds like it's going to eat itself. Why didn't you order more food?"

I ordered plenty; I just couldn't bring myself to eat most of it with my stomach twisted in knots. The girl from my nightmares is Willow. Willow is Pippa's *sister*. I almost want to laugh, but I can't. Nothing about this is funny.

With Pippa's parents no longer in front of me, I don't feel the need to play a part anymore, so I sit silently while the girls talk, groaning occasionally when conversation moves toward gossip.

“You’ll have to excuse him,” Pippa says, digging her long, perfectly manicured nails into my thigh. “Jesse can’t help being a grumpy asshole sometimes. He’s obviously reached his nice guy limit for the night. But rest assured, he’s an angel to me.”

Well, that’s a downright lie. I seriously doubt anyone would ever think of me as an angel. Especially Pippa.

“One of those angels they banished to hell?” Willow asks, her face alight with happiness that I can only imagine stems from essentially calling me the devil. Something I use to my advantage.

“If that’s the case, someone as sweet and innocent as you are should surely stay away. We wouldn’t want to tarnish your reputation.”

Willow doesn’t flinch, but Pippa sucks in a breath, her nails digging farther into my leg. Without looking her way, I can feel her heated gaze, while Willow’s soft smile remains.

“Reputations can only be *tarnished* if you care about them, *Jesse*. I gave up on that a long time ago.”

Though I don’t show it, her words are like a stab to my chest, the pressure of the knife crushing my soul.

“Is now a good time to discuss our living arrangements?” Pippa interrupts with a weariness to her voice that has my eyes flashing to hers.

“What living arrangements?”

“You got us kicked out of the inn,” she says nonchalantly. “We’ve got until tomorrow and then we’re homeless.”

“What the actual fuck?” I have no words. She’s obviously referring to the tiny dent in the wall from when I slammed open the door. *How the hell did she even know about it?*

“It’s fine. We’re going to stay at Willow’s,” Pippa adds and my pulse spikes.

Like hell we are. “I’ll talk to our lovely host and get it all fixed up.”

“It’s fine; it’s locked in,” Pippa counters.

“So, unlock it.”

“*Jesse.*”

I can feel Willow’s eyes ping-pong between mine and Pippa’s as we talk, and it takes everything in my power not to look her way.

“There’s no point putting Willow out when there’s a perfectly suitable room at the inn.”

“It’s not perfect according to Marley,” Willow says with her tongue firmly lodged in her cheek so that she doesn’t laugh. Of course she’d choose *that* moment to speak, making me want to snap. *Whose side is she on, anyway?* I would have thought she’d hate to have me stay with her.

“I’ll settle up the check and meet you both out front. We can talk about this later,” I say before jumping up and walking away, not allowing either of them to respond. I can’t stay at

Willow's house. What a joke. I'd rather drive the ten or so hours back to San Francisco after the celebration ends and come back again Monday, or try my luck sleeping under the stars. Both options are less dangerous than Pippa's brilliant plan.

Kicking us out because of a scratch and—

"Hold up, hot shot," Willow calls out and I cringe, an icy feeling coursing through my veins. The couple at the table next to me laugh at my expense as she continues whining. "I can pay my way."

Ignoring her, I continue on my path and hand over my credit card, telling the cashier that I'm paying for the whole group.

"I know you heard me," Willow demands as she reaches me. "What's your problem?"

She may be angry, but her voice is barely above a whisper as she leans in. She's so close that her breath cools my skin, sending a shiver down my spine.

"I don't have a problem," I snap back, also whispering. "I'm just paying for our meals."

"I don't need you to pay for me. And that's not what I meant."

I know what she meant, but I'm not discussing it. I can't discuss it. "Too late," I say with a shrug as the cashier hands over my receipt. "Bye, Willow."

Walking away, I leave her standing in place with her arms crossed over her chest, undoubtedly shooting a glare into the back of my head. It should satisfy me that I've riled her, but it doesn't. Making her hurt physically pains me. But the alternative is much worse.



On the way back to the inn, Pippa threads her arm through mine, obviously ignoring the metaphorical steam coming out of my ears. She's been doing this more and more since we arrived, and it's driving me crazy. *Is she no longer capable of walking alone?*

"I can't believe Ashley didn't even thank you for volunteering your time," she says out of nowhere, referring to my impending speech, her tone laced with bite. *And damn...* I'd somehow managed to forget about it. I'm actually glad Ashley never brought it up. And I doubt Pippa actually cares. I'm sure she's just finding reasons to be pissed off. "Do you think she looked washed out in that dress? It definitely wasn't her color," she continues, changing the topic so quickly that I actually chuckle.

"Careful, your jealousy is showing, and we're supposed to be in love."

Pippa laughs out loud, giving my forearm a squeeze, making me involuntarily cringe. “Funny thing is I have no feelings for Jonah,” she says, without noticing my reaction. “I’m not sure I ever did. I’m more pissed off. And upset. At both of them. And myself a little.”

“That’s fair, and actually makes me feel better about all this.” I wave my hands around in front of us so she knows “*this*” means us. “You’re an awesome chick, Pippa. *Most of the time*. You could have any guy you want. Never settle for douchebags.”

“Most of the time?” she says, pulling away as she bites her lip.

“Right now you’re on my shit list,” I admit and feel her mock annoyance before I see it.

“I didn’t break the wall.”

“Neither did I!” I snap a little too loudly for being outside at this time of night. “Plus, that’s not what I’m pissed about.”

“I know.”

“You know? Then why would you keep our living arrangements a secret until the last second?”

“*Ugh*. I just wanted to have it all taken care of so you didn’t say it would be easier to just go home.”

Damn, she’s got me there. That’s exactly what I would have suggested. In fact...

I open my mouth to say just that when I catch sight of something that has the hairs on my arms standing on end.

“If it isn’t the big famous hockey player,” my old foster brother, Tate, says, stepping out of the darkness and into our path. With his gaze locked on mine, he folds his arms over his chest, making sure his bulging muscles are on full display. *So it’s like that then.* Another guy I don’t recognize stands a little way behind him, on guard, as though he’s going to approach, but after butting out his cigarette, he walks inside the bar.

Bile rises in my throat, but I swallow it down and take a step forward, subtly moving Pippa behind me. “Tate.” I nod, maintaining my composure despite my mind reeling at having him standing before me.

Tate doesn’t acknowledge my greeting. Instead he watches his friend leave before his eyes flash to Pippa, and his lips slowly pull into a frown. “I heard you were here, Robin,” he says, using my old nickname to try and unnerve me. “Never thought I’d see you again, to be honest. Especially not with one of the *Sanders* sisters.”

“Shut it, Tate,” Pippa huffs out. “You’re too old for the bad boy act. You should have stayed away.”

Huh? They know each other? I chance a quick look over my shoulder to see the anger in Pippa’s gaze. *There’s definitely history there.*

“Why the fuck would I stay away?” Tate says, taking a step closer, trying to be intimidating, his response leading me to clench my fists at my sides as a smirk appears on his face. “I

was invited,” he continues. “Just. Like. You. And trust me, I’m not just some *bad boy*. I’m someone’s worst nightmare.”

He winks my way, as his smirk turns sinister, making sure I know that *someone* is me. And that little gesture confirms exactly what I feared. *Being here is dangerous.*

“Jesse, Jesse, *Jesse*. I’ve got to say, I was shocked when a friend said he saw a photo of you two wandering around town. Does she know?”

“Know what?” Pippa says, at the same time I say, “What photo?”

Pippa’s face reddens and she avoids my gaze. I want to ask her again, but the present company answers for me.

“You mean you didn’t stage it for publicity? It’s all over the Internet. You and Pippa, looking cozy on your way out of the local inn.”

What the hell?

Holding my impassive stare, I internally fume. I know he’s trying to rile me, but how the hell did us being here get out so quickly? And why does it feel like Pippa knew? I mean, of course she knew. She’s all over the media.

“It happens. The paps love me.” I shrug, flashing him my cocky grin while grabbing Pippa’s shoulder. “Nice seeing you again, Tate.”

I turn Pippa toward the inn without waiting for a response, ignoring my unease. And as I reach for the door, I contemplate

all the things I'd do to hurt him if he ever spilled our secrets, even though I can't do any of it because I'm in the public eye.

We're almost home free when he gets in the last words, freezing me in place.

"Say hi to Willow for me, Pippa. It's been too long."

Motherfucker! It takes everything in me not to turn around and beat the shit out of him. But I know what he's doing, and I need to stay strong. I have to trust that he'll keep quiet. I can't let him get to me. I can't let any of this get to me. There's too much riding on it.

Chapter Ten

Jesse - Thirteen Years Ago / Age Fifteen

“Why don’t we stay out for a little while longer,” Tate says with a grimace, knowing it’s unlikely to make a difference. “If we give it another hour, he might be asleep.”

It’s wishful thinking, but... “It’s inevitable. If it’s not tonight, it’ll be tomorrow, and it’s fucking freezing out here. Come on, let’s go.”

We make our way slowly back to the shitty little complex we call home, kicking rocks as we go. I know Tate’s going to blame himself for the beating I’m about to receive, but I also know he’ll tell me to fuck off if I try to make him feel better about it. This is life. We were lumped together in this foster home a year ago, and we both made choices on how we’d survive it. I’ve learned to take the hits, to hide the bruises, and I no longer feel any of it. I’m past the point of caring at this stage.

“Are you meeting up with that girl again?” I ask, to change the subject and get him out of his head. “Or has she already realized what a tool you are?”

Tate laughs before giving me the finger. “We can’t all be pros when it comes to the ladies. But I’m one step ahead of you. If Tiffany knows I’m a tool it’s because we’ve at least had a conversation.”

Touché. “Fuck off. I’m waiting for my moment.”

“Yeah, yeah. Good luck with that.”

The closer we get to home, the quieter we become, as if it will help. And when we reach the door, we fist bump for luck before opening up. If I’m stuck in this life instead of the one I always dreamed of, at least I’m not completely alone.

And really, it could be worse.

Chapter Eleven

Jesse

The second the door clicks shut, Pippa and I both have questions, but since mine is more pressing, I ask first.

“What do you know about the photo?” I accuse and watch as the guilt appears on her face.

“Ugh.” She sighs. “If I tell you, do you promise not to get pissed off?”

“Absolutely not. I’m pissed already.”

Pippa laughs, but I fail to see what’s funny. “I guess that’s true,” she says. “In fact, you’re always in some kind of mood, so I just have to hope it doesn’t get worse.”

“Go on.”

“I didn’t plan it, but I didn’t try to stop it.”

“Jesus.” I sign with frustration, running a hand through my hair. I should have known this would happen. “God, I hate this.”

“Jesse?”

“No, shit, I don’t mean you. I mean the goddamn photographers.” *Although I don’t love this situation either.*

Pippa frowns as her arms cross over her chest. “I’m sorry. I should have told you. But you’re hard to talk to sometimes.” *She’s not wrong there.* “If I see them again, I’ll tell you, but I’m not sure it will make it any easier.”

I hate that she’s right, but... “I’d rather not know...just... please put a stop to it if it’s career damaging.”

“What would be career damaging?” *Fuck. Why did I say that?*

“Beating the shit out of Jimmy,” I say with a shrug, thankful I had a reason to distract her with.

Pippa shakes her head and tries to hold back a smile, but it shines through. “I do not condone that violence, but thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m going to head off to—”

“Wait! Now that I’ve admitted my truth, what about yours, Robin?” *Shit, shit, shit.*

Ignoring her use of my nickname, I wave a hand in defeat, because I literally walked right into that question the second I saw Tate. “I hate that nickname, but ask away.”

“How do you know Tate?” she whips back before I’ve even finished speaking.

I have no way of answering that truthfully without bringing up more questions, so I’m about to spin some utter bullshit

when Pippa throws me a bone.

“Did you meet him when you lived in Seattle?” *Thank God. Sometimes her need to keep talking is incredibly helpful. Like now.*

“I did,” I say quickly, and pray she’s not planting a seed to catch me in a lie. “But it wasn’t a pleasant situation, and I’d rather not have run into him today.”

Pippa nods in understanding, and I release a silent breath.

After everything that happened twelve years ago, I was fostered by a new family in Seattle, while Tate stayed behind. I was only there for a few years before being signed by San Francisco, but thinking back, I remember someone mentioning that Tate had moved there after high school, though I never looked him up. I couldn’t. I needed to focus, and I knew I was the last person he wanted to see. He made that even more apparent when I saw him just now.

“I get that,” Pippa says, her voice a little raspy. “He creeps me out. I caught him staring at Willow many times in an ‘I don’t know if I want to kiss you or kill you’ kind of way, and I only kept my mouth shut so I didn’t scare her. But if he ever touched her...” She trails off as my stomach sinks, but I’m grateful that it sounds like nothing ever happened. And I’m almost certain Pippa would have kicked his ass if he came close. Although by my calculations, she was in Utah when it all went down.

We don’t discuss Tate past our common dislike, and then Pippa disappears to get ready for bed, while I’m left reeling.

It's hard enough seeing Willow and finding out she's Pippa's sister. But Tate too? If I survive this, it'll be a miracle.



The next morning, I take a photo of the minute scratch on the wall in our room and shake my head. We're getting kicked out for this? *What the hell?*

"Are you sure you're not messing with me?" I ask Pip as she rolls over to face me, having decided she's too comfortable to get out of bed.

"I'm not messing with you. Ask Marley yourself."

Oh, I will.

Phone in hand, I beeline straight for the front desk and pray that by some miracle she's not there, but of course she is, smiling back at me like she's never been happier.

"Mr. Hastings, how can I help you?" *So formal now.*

"I want to talk to you about the scratch in our room."

"Oh yes, thank God I found someone to fix it so quickly."

"It's a scratch."

"It's a *defect*, and I don't like defects."

I can't stop myself from glancing around the room, and have to bite my tongue so I don't tell her that her entire decor is a

defect.

“Okay, well, send them in. Pippa and I don’t mind them fixing it while we’re there. That way we can still check out Tuesday.”

I smile before turning to leave, not wanting to give her a chance to argue.

“Oh no, that won’t do,” she calls out and I pause. “I’ve got someone else checking into your room this afternoon.”

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and release it slowly before calmly turning around. “Why would someone be booked into our room today? It’s Friday and we’re not leaving until Tuesday.”

The little old lady smiles and points to a sign on the wall behind her before telling me the cleaners will be there at noon. That’s it. *She’s* the one leaving no room for argument. She just says her piece and disappears back through her camouflage door, leaving me completely stunned.

Snapping out of my shock, I read her stupid sign and huff out a laugh.

“This inn is a place of love. Damage to any part of this establishment, no matter how great or small, will result in instant eviction. Thank you.”

And I was hoping I might still change her mind.



My phone rings as I'm arriving back to our room, but I don't need to check it to know who it is...and he can wait until I'm inside.

"Yo," Seth says, when I finally answer, acting like this is a casual call when I can guarantee that it's not.

"Yo, yourself. What's up?"

"I wanted to check in. You know...make sure you're still functioning in society."

I'm certain he's spoken to Pippa, but I amuse him anyway. "If I'm being honest, the answer to that is *barely*. Can I come home, Dad? Please?" I put on a voice like I'm a kid stuck at summer camp, and actually smile when Seth laughs. "I'm glad you see the humor in my dire situation."

"Well, according to my sources, you're just there to do a motivational speech. How was I supposed to know you needed rescuing?"

"Your sources? You mean Pippa? I don't need rescuing. I'm fine. I can handle it. I can handle anything."

"I don't doubt that. Plus, you look well."

"I what?" My eyes flash around the room as if I'm about to see his cocky face staring back at me through a window, but that's insane. *Why would he be here?*

Seth laughs out loud for a good thirty seconds—completely at my expense—before finally calming down. “Oh, this is good. You mean, you haven’t seen them?”

“Seen what?”

“The photos of you and Pippa playing happy family.”

“There’s more?” She said she’d tell me. Or did I tell her not to? Jesus, I can’t even remember.

Seth chuckles again. “So, so many.”

I bang my head against the wall a few times before realizing what I’m doing and panic. I’m supposed to be finding a way to stay here, not making it worse.

“You okay over there?” Seth asks, and I’m not sure if he’s referring to right now, or in general. But it doesn’t matter. Both answers are the same—no.

“I’m fine,” I say loudly before muttering, “Fucking Pippa.”

“Ah yes, Pippa,” Seth says, obviously hearing me. “Your girlfriend according to reports,” he says with a smile in his voice.

“Yep.”

“You don’t think you should have mentioned that so I could corroborate your bullshit story if it got out?”

“How do you know it’s bullshit?”

“I didn’t. Till now.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I almost drop my head against the wall again but stop myself just in time.

“Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me. And I think the photos are good for your image. But I want nothing to do with whatever it is you’re actually doing. I’ll leave you be, but if I find out you’re trying to swindle some little old lady out of her life savings, I’m going to ask for hush money.”

I roll my eyes, even though he can’t see me, just as Pippa walks in from the bathroom, wrapping a towel around her wet hair.

“Can I ask one thing though?” Seth asks, drawing my attention back to the conversation.

“Will me saying *no* stop you?”

“Nope.”

“Go ahead then.”

He takes a breath and lets it out slowly. “Why do I have Ryan Blakey asking me where you are?”

“Huh?” Ryan’s one of my younger teammates, but we have little to do with each other outside of the team.

“You two got something going on?”

“Not that I know of? Maybe Coach told him I’d run some drills with him and failed to pass on the message.” *Though doubtful because it’s offseason.*

“Maybe?”

“You sound weird.”

“He just came across a little panicked. It was concerning. Just promise you’ll tell me if there’s something going on or

something wrong. We need to be thinking about the end of your contract. We can't have any trouble if you want to be re-signed."

"I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. I'm not doing anything illegal here, if that's what you're thinking." *Not this visit anyway.*

Seth scoffs, and I imagine him raising an eyebrow. "Despite my earlier joke, you and illegal activity would never cross my mind."

"Okay, then."

"Okay."

We say our goodbyes, and when I hang up, Pippa's staring at me with wide eyes. "What? Why is everyone acting weird?"

She snaps out of her daze and busies herself packing her bags. The very thing I'm delaying in the hope that Marley will change her mind and let us stay. Wishful thinking, I know.

After dumping one of her bags at the front door, Pippa tells me to hurry, forcing me to bite back a smart-ass response. *Hurry? She's lucky I'm not going home.* I am in no rush to pack and get to Willow's. I need to figure out what I can do to change Marley's mind, but after that... *we will be talking about those photos.*

Chapter Twelve

Willow

With Dad's celebration this evening, Sara sends me home at midday to give me time to get ready, knowing I'm likely to stare at my options for a few hours before deciding. That, and the fact that I've been a bit spaced out all day.

Ever since Pippa mentioned her birthday coming up, I've struggled to keep my emotions at bay with my mind on my best friend, Jade. Her birthday was two days before Pippa's and exactly a month after mine. *Was*. Past tense. I used to tease her for the short time I was older—how does it feel to only be twelve when I'm a teenager, fourteen feels *sooo* grown up, you'll understand soon. But I can't tease her now. She'll never be twenty-seven... Hell, she barely experienced life as a fifteen-year-old. And no matter how much time passes, I will never get over it. Not that I'll ever admit that. *I'm fine*. Even Sara assumed I was just nervous about the event, and I didn't correct her. I never do.

I'm half walking, half jogging up my drive, still lost in thought, when I notice a smiling Pippa and a very pissed off Jesse waiting, making me inwardly curse. While I knew they were coming, seeing them here is so much worse. "Sorry, hope you haven't been waiting long," I say with a smile. "You should have come past the shop," I add, passing Pippa my bag while I move to open the front door.

Jesse's scowl increases, and I almost chuckle to myself. *God, that man is infuriating.*

"Not long at all," Pippa says, following me inside, while Jesse mopes behind her.

I give them both a quick tour, and when we're back in the kitchen, Jesse glances between the hall and the living room before his eyes flash to Pippa's, and the look he gives her can only be described as growly. He's not happy about something. *But when is he happy?*

I beeline for my room to distance myself, and hear their hushed voices as soon as I close my door. I try to come up with funny scenarios as to why he's in another mood when it hits me... my house is small, and the two bedrooms share a paper-thin wall. Jesse probably realized he'll have no privacy for the next few days.

I'm not sure what's worse though—Jesse sulking because he has blue balls, or them deciding they don't care if I hear anything, meaning I have to listen to it all.

Why the hell would I say yes to this? Oh right, the people pleaser thing I can't seem to shake.

Choosing to push the issue from my mind—actually, choosing to push *all* my issues from my mind—I grab my dress off the hanger and lay it out on my bed. After releasing my hair from its tight hold, I move over to the dresser and open the top drawer, staring down at my options. I usually value comfort over all else, so most of my bras are cotton or nylon. And by most I mean all except two. The two I bought as “just in case” bras and have never worn.

I run my fingers over the delicate lace of the strapless that fits with my dress, and contemplate my choices. I’d previously decided I wasn’t wearing this tonight and picked out another one instead, but now I don’t know. Something’s changed. I want to feel sexy for once. My dress is beautiful and I’ve been told I *look* beautiful. But I want to *feel* it.

And it absolutely has nothing to do with—

Bang. Bang. Bang!

Shit! I freeze with my hand hovering over the lace bra as Jesse uncomfortably asks if he can come in.

Shoving the bra deep down into a sea of others, I rush out a “yes” before slamming the drawer shut, hiding the evidence. *Why? Who the hell knows?*

It’s another minute before he opens the door, and I’m so impatient, I almost step forward to open it myself.

“Do you have a spare comforter or something?” he asks, his eyes focused anywhere but on me.

Huh?

“I’m sleeping on your couch.”

“You’re what?” My face scrunches so hard, I almost get a headache.

“I’m being respectful, Willow!” he grates. “Do you have anything to spare or not?”

Respectful? What?

“Um, you don’t have to do that. Fuck away like rabbits for all I c...care.” I cover my mouth as the lie catches in my throat, causing Jesse’s gaze to flash to mine, his eyes narrowing as his nostrils flare. *Is it that I lied or said fuck? Because the latter felt weird for me too.*

Pippa chooses that moment to join us in my room, rolling her eyes as she enters. “He’s lying. We had a disagreement and I told him he had to sleep on the couch. Please just help us out.” *Well that seems extreme, but okay.*

“Sure. It’s not super comfortable for sleeping, but you’re welcome to it. I’ll get you some bedding.”

Schooling my features, I walk away, holding back my confusion until I round the corner to the laundry room. Something doesn’t add up.

I’ve just grabbed a sheet from the cupboard when Pippa joins me with an apologetic look on her face. “Sorry about that. He tried and failed to get Marley to let us stay and now...”

“He’s moody.” *Again.* “I get it, but does that really warrant separate beds?”

Pippa sighs as she stares out the door, her mind clearly lost in something. “Hypothetically,” she begins and I instantly give her my full attention. “If you were—never mind.” She cuts herself off and changes the subject. “I’m sure Jesse and I will have it cleared up soon.” *Okay.* “Should we start getting ready?”

“Yeah, we should. I need all the time I can get.” I laugh like I’m joking, keeping the conversation light, when what I really want to do is ask about the hypothetical situation. She clearly doesn’t want to talk about it, and I know why. It’s more proof that we’ve drifted apart over the years.

Pippa laughs, and even though I know she’s laughing at my comment, not at my thoughts about our apparent distance, it still pains me.

“You’re going to look beautiful, Willow. You always do. And I’m grateful you’re coming. I better remember to thank Mom for whatever knife she’s holding to your back,” she says, and it has me wondering just what kind of a person she thinks I am.

“There’s no knife. It’s a big deal for Dad, so I want to be there. I just...”

“Hate crowds?”

“And attention, and socializing, and dressing up, and—”

“Pippa? Where do you want your dress?” Jesse calls out, interrupting us.

“I’ll be there to help you tonight,” she says, before walking to the doorway. “It’s going to be fine.”

God, I hope she’s right.



Knotting the strings of my dress around my neck, I spin on the balls of my feet and look over my shoulder, taking in the sight of my semi exposed back. It may only be cutouts, but it’s the most I’ve ever exposed publicly, and it terrifies me. Though I have to admit, it invigorates me at the same time. Just like the bra, I wasn’t sure if I’d actually get the confidence to wear this dress when the time came. But now, I’m going to treat it like a metaphor for taking my life back. To show the world that I’m not the sweet little angel they believe me to be. *To prove Jesse wrong.*

I hate to admit that’s a part of it. I hate that he saw right through me, and I hate that he’s the reason I actually stopped to question it. *Why am I always keeping the peace? Why am I always pretending I’m fine? Why do I feel the need to smile, when I sometimes want to cry?*

My wings were broken long ago, and there’s nothing sweet about the person I’ve become. I’m just damn good at hiding that part of myself.

Until it comes to Jesse.

It's like his mind has a one-way connection to mine, and I have no idea how to stop it.

It's only been three days since our lives literally crashed together, and if this were an alternative reality, if we were mystical beings, I would have concluded that he stole a piece of me during the chaos. A way to see into my soul.... But it's not a fantasy world. It's real. And I can't for the life of me figure out what's going on.

Or what I did to warrant this little war he seems to be waging.

Stilettos in one hand, I lather my lips in a soft-pink gloss and make my way toward the living room, gathering my strength as I go.

Pippa and Jesse are ready in the entryway, looking deep in conversation, when the floor creaks beneath my feet, causing them both to pause and face me. Pippa's eyes widen and I almost shy away, but when my gaze meets Jesse's intense stare, my focus shifts.

No, it doesn't shift. It blurs.

My heart races as I swallow a lump in my throat, and a new energy runs through me, imagining what his look means. It doesn't take long to realize... I want it to be attraction. I want him to *want* me. To be noticed. Because God, do I notice him.

Pippa steps forward, bringing me back to my stark reality, and I panic. *Oh god, oh god. This is bad.*

Guilt consumes me while she smiles obliviously. “Damn, Willow. You look absolutely gorgeous. Right, Jesse?”

Pippa glances Jesse’s way, but it’s so brief she doesn’t notice his sullen expression. Or the way his sinful eyes penetrate mine with... *Is that disgust? Did he just figure out my thoughts?*

When he doesn’t answer, Pippa moves on, adjusting her own striking gown as she speaks. “Are you almost ready? We thought we could go together.”

Jesse turns toward the door, ready to walk out no matter what I say, but still looks my way for an answer.

Turning to the side, I try to avoid his unnerving stare, and nod as I slip my left foot into my ridiculously high heels, raising it to the couch to secure the straps.

The split in my dress separates instantly, causing the material to fall away from the thigh, giving anyone that’s watching a peep show. *Big mistake.*

Closing my eyes, I pause silently, hoping the lack of movement will camouflage me enough to hide away, praying no one notices as the featherlight silk brushes against me, sending a shiver through my entire body. But when neither of them mentions it, I relax, dropping my foot to the carpet before bending over to buckle the other shoe, thankful my dress stays in place this time.

“That’s no fucking better,” Jesse grates through clenched teeth before I hear an “*oomph*” and imagine Pippa just slapped

him in the chest.

A warmth coats my skin, as my cheeks undoubtedly pinken, but I put on a smile and ignore it all. It's too late to do anything now. "Okay, I'm ready. Thank you for the company."

"Our pleasure," Pippa says with a smile. "Although part of it may be for selfish reasons. Providing a united front and all that." She shrugs.

"You, selfish?" I say, biting back a grin so she knows I'm joking. "I never thought I'd see the day."

Pippa gently pinches my nose as I walk past, her smile widening as she does, and I silently thank her. She used to do the same thing when we were younger, when she sensed my mind was traveling toward a dark place—I was more obvious about it back then—and just like in the past, it works to calm me now.

I release my lip from between my teeth and let a genuine smile shine through, my nerves from earlier dissipating. This is my sister. My sidekick. And Jesse is her boyfriend. So what if it feels like he knows me. Like no one's ever known me before. That piece of information is the *only* thing that matters. He's hers.

Oh and he's an ass. That's worth remembering if my mind wanders again.

Our drive to the school is quiet, and as we pull into the parking lot, I'm shocked to see how many cars are already

there. Supporting my dad. Coming home.

We saunter the path to the grand entrance, and Jesse leads the way inside, holding the door open as we move through. I could almost count the gesture as chivalry if it didn't look like it pained him to do it. In fact, nothing about him looks comfortable, except for the way his stupid tailored suit molds to his stupidly muscular body. *Dammit.*

I force my eyes shut to rid myself of my thoughts and then open them again slowly, taking in the crowd of guests, noticing quite a few people that I thought I'd never see again. I suck in a breath as the reality of what I'm doing really sets in.

I barely made it through school. Why the hell do I want to be back here?

A shiver makes its way down my spine as I fail to calm my breathing. But as I move past Jesse, I swear I hear him whisper, "you're not alone." Only when I glance his way, he's looking in a different direction.

Just my imagination then. My head even nailed his gruff tone.

Ignoring the looks we get as we move toward the center of the room, I take in another breath and concentrate on blocking out my feelings. All I've done is walk in the door and I'm already regretting the "take back my life" decision I made. Just a few hours and I can go back to my bubble of an existence. The countdown is on.

Chapter Thirteen

Jesse

If I thought I was going to be the only one feeling completely out of place tonight, I was wrong. Willow's been ready to bail since the moment we walked inside. Which I only know because I haven't been able to take my eyes off her for more than a second. I've already admitted to myself that I think she's beautiful, but tonight she's striking beyond words, and God, if that doesn't make my life so much more complicated...

I'm also using it to distract myself from the fact that sometime within the next few hours I'll be standing in front of these strangers, pretending they give a shit about what I have to say, while hoping like hell that nobody mentions that I grew up in the next town.

My chest tightens but I ignore it. I've done this speech to schools before—it's the only public speaking I ever agree to do—but that's because it's usually aimed at teenagers, not the middle aged and beyond. Teens thrive on motivation; I see it in their eyes. My aim is to give them the extra drive they need

to get through their final school years, to reach for their dreams. But here? I'm not sure what to expect. And God, I hate that.

Just get through the night.

For the first hour, Pippa drags me along to guest after guest, showing me off like a trophy. And despite the warm greeting she bestows every time, it's obvious they mean nothing to her. She's just going through the motions and playing her part.

Much like her sister seems to do in her everyday life.

"Pippa, love. You look wonderful," her father says as he approaches us with a smile.

"Thanks, Daddy. Are you having a good night?"

I want to question her on the use of the term "daddy"—she doesn't seem like a Daddy's little girl—but of course, I don't. Instead, I smile beside her.

"I am," he says with an answering grin. "I've got my girls here and my friends. I could do without the speech, but at least I have a hockey superstar to support and follow me. I can't complain. I'm going to be a hero when Jesse steps up onto the stage. I'm hoping he motivates the students I'm leaving behind." He chuckles to himself and I smile back at him. All while Pippa gasps.

"You weren't supposed to know."

"Well, I do. And Jesse, thank you. I'm grateful."

I nod, because I never quite know how to take compliments, then hover nearby as Pippa and her dad talk until he's called away, finally giving us a moment to ourselves.

“So, I’m speaking *after* your Dad?” I question, realizing I never really asked for a rundown of the night.

“You are. Is that okay?” she asks, suddenly looking nervous.

“It’s fine. I’m just getting things straight in my mind. Do you know what time that is?”

Pippa’s face scrunches before she frowns. “I don’t, I’m sorry. I should have asked Ashley but...”

“You didn’t want to talk to her.”

“Exactly.”

I guess it doesn’t matter what time it’s on. I don’t plan to drink much tonight anyway, so it won’t really make a difference.



Another hour passes without us even crossing paths with Jonah and Ashley, and I’ve got to admit, I’m a little disappointed. I almost wanted to spend time with him, to see if I could rile him up enough to pick a fight with me. To give me a reason to knock some sense into him. *After my speech*. The way he treated Pippa is fucked-up—I finally got the full story

on our walk around town the other day—but on top of all that... Willow was uncomfortable around him at the family dinner last night, and it drives me mad not knowing if there's a story there or if she's just taking Pippa's side.

Our moment to shine arrives after the appetizers are cleared up but before we've moved from the table. Ashley sits down beside Pippa, gushing about how wonderful the event's going, while Jonah hovers behind her.

"Thank you for agreeing to talk for us, Jesse," Ashley says, and I bite back a smile. "I forgot to mention it last night, but we're all very excited. It's coming up in a little bit."

I'm surprised she even remembers I was there last night considering the only time she spoke to me was when she asked why I was with Pippa.

"Anything for Pippa," I say, as Pippa reaches for my leg—a move I thankfully see coming so I don't flinch. Instead, I plaster a loving smile on my face, channeling my inner Willow. "You've done a great job, Ashley," I agree, wrapping an arm around Pippa's shoulder before giving Ashley a little verbal jab. "It almost reminds me of that gala we went to last month, but those centerpieces were ice sculptures. Blew. My Mind. Remember, Pippa?"

Pippa's lips turn into a sassy grin before she recovers, adding to my lie. "Oh my God, yes. And the hors-d'oeuvres were to die for. I'm still dreaming about them."

We're being completely childish, but the tight smile on Ashley's face makes it all worth it.

“So, John,” I say, turning toward Jonah. “Do you work here in town?”

Jonah’s brows furrow as his eyes flash between Pippa’s and Ashley’s. “Yeah, I’m in construction. I helped build the extension on Pippa’s parents’ home.”

I knew that.

“Wow, I had no idea. That’s impressive.” Again childish, but I need some fun to get through the night.

Jonah once again glances between Pippa and Ashley, as though he expects one of them to come to his defense, to jump in and tell me how amazing the extension was. But Pippa sure as hell isn’t going to do it, and Ashley tuned out of the conversation the second it stopped being about her. I almost feel bad until I remember what this asshole did.

After Jonah hesitantly thanks me for the kind words, I excuse myself to use the restroom and, with a wink, ask Pippa to direct me. Since the toilets are very obviously marked near the entry where we first walked in, I let Ashley and Jonah interpret that how they will.

For some reason I expected Pippa to give them both more attitude or actually say something, *anything* during our short chat, but she was relatively quiet the whole time. She must genuinely be messed up over it all. My guess is that she needs me here for support more than anything else, so that’s what I’ll do. I’ll keep her away from Ashley and Jonah for the remainder of the night. I can be her security guard. Just another role to play.

When I'm on my way back inside, after agreeing to meet Pippa near the bar, I pause at the sight of Tate across the room. He's chatting with the guy I saw last night, and both their eyes are on Willow, putting my senses on high alert. I'm still shocked to see him after all these years, and the idea that he transferred to this school, after I moved away, seems to have induced an incessant tightness in my gut.

He was *there*.

He was on the mountain with us. With me, Willow, and Jade. We discussed this. I honestly don't understand why he'd take the risk. Unless he had no choice? Or maybe he never felt like he had as much to lose as I did. After all, he stayed behind.

Despite making regular eye contact, he thankfully keeps his distance, though I don't miss the way his eyes seem to follow Willow around the room, like he's trying to unnerve me or he's genuinely as fucked-up about this situation as I am. *God, I wish I knew which it was.*

After ordering my beer and Pippa's cocktail, I turn my back to the bar as I wait, subtly searching for Willow again, my anger spiking when I find her.

She's quietly chatting with an older couple, completely engrossed in whatever it is the woman is saying, while Tate's friend stares at her from behind, with an almost predatory expression. A big part of me wants to run over and rip his eyes out, even though I don't know him. There's just something about him that doesn't sit right. I get the sense that Tate's the

less dangerous of the two of them, and that's saying something.

It's not the first time I've noticed him tonight, and every time I see him, I have no doubt my blood pressure rises. Call me paranoid, but I don't like the way he seems to exude charm as he chats with people around the room, or the way he can flit between different moods and expressions in a heartbeat, morphing his appearance to suit any situation.

Normally I wouldn't notice any of that about a person, but it's almost like he's allowing me to see him for who he really is, wanting to make sure I feel uncomfortable. I just haven't figured out why.

My fingers ache from how tightly they're locked around the backrest of the stool, so when the guy takes a step in Willow's direction, I'm so worked up, I don't think about the consequences as I stalk his way.

"Where's the fire, and more importantly, where's my drink?" Pippa says, catching me as I blindly move past her, my attention fixed on my destination. "Jesse?"

The concern in her voice breaks into my rage and I stop, easing her mind with a smile. "Sorry, I thought I saw Jonah heading your way," I lie, though I'm not really sure why.

Pippa laughs, and I use the opportunity to glance back in Willow's direction. She's still in the same conversation, but the guy's gone, instantly calming my erratic heartbeat, while equally giving me a new reason to keep my eye on her. Not that I need an excuse.

Chapter Fourteen

Willow

When the dinner's half over, I overhear someone mentioning Jesse's speech and freeze. I'd actually forgotten he had a purpose other than being Pippa's man. The latter seems to have taken over my thoughts.

Since I've spent most of the time talking with my old teachers or friends of my parents, I have to admit, tonight hasn't been as bad as I imagined it would be.

Except when it is.

Except those moments when my eyes flash to Jesse and Pippa, and the sting of jealousy hits me. I don't like these new feelings, but I can't stop them. I keep picturing his gaze locked on me instead of her, his voice whispering in *my* ear, his touch... Actually, I haven't seen them touch, except when in the presence of Jonah, which I'm sure is a conscious effort on their part. *Here's to small mercies.*

As I listen to my mother discuss the board's decision to introduce mindfulness coaches at the school—my dad's last

legacy and something I'm happy they're finally doing—my eyes once again traitorously drift toward Pippa's table.

An uncomfortable pang hits me in the pit of my stomach as she reaches forward to brush her finger along Jesse's cheek. And while I wish I could look away, I can't. I watch every second because I deserve the torture. I deserve the guilt. Only when he subtly flinches, my stomach twists for a completely different reason. It's not the first time I've seen him react that way. And I'm trying to figure out why.

My mom taps me on the shoulder, forcing my gaze back to hers, and I comply. Though it doesn't stop me from thinking about it, and my mind fills with theories.

Have they broken up? Are they just keeping up appearances? Is it fake?

I hold back a laugh as the last idea hits me. *What is this... a romance novel?*

All I know is, something doesn't feel right.

I'm still stuck in my head when the main meal is served, and following that, the lights dim as the music morphs from mature classics to party hits, luring the guests toward the dance floor like sheep.

I don't move.

I'm not opposed to dancing in general. I used to love it, but these days I prefer keeping my seat warm watching the scene play out before me. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they dance.

Pippa drops into the empty seat beside me part-way through the first song and sighs. “Is it over yet?”

After a sip of my perfectly aged red wine—Ashley is nothing if not a perfectionist—I raise my glass in agreement, trying not to blurt out all the burning questions I’m dying to ask her. “Some would say it’s only just begun.”

“Ugh. I know. And that someone would usually be me, but I’m not feeling it. What should we do to pass the time...” she trails off with her hand lifted to her mouth in thought. “Oh, I know!” She suddenly cheers, drawing the attention of those around us. Not that she notices or cares.

“How long do you think they’ve been together?” she asks, pointing to a couple I’ve never seen before. Though something about the woman looks familiar.

I watch them and consider her question before deciding to play along. I could use the distraction. “I’m going to guess it’s a new relationship,” I say, referring to the affectionate and comfortable way he holds her, but also the fact they’re not looking at one another. Instead they’re both focused on the other couples around the room. “The chemistry is there but they’re still a little nervous around each other.”

“Oooh, that could be—”

“Wrong. It’s wrong,” a voice says from above my head, drawing my eyes toward the sound. The first thing I notice are his bright, ocean-blue irises, before my gaze roams over his face, taking in his striking features. I don’t recognize him at

all, and yet, I get this unexplained feeling when our eyes lock. *What is going on with me?*

“Okay, then, what’s the correct answer?” Pippa asks, never one to shy away from a new friend.

Gripping the back of my chair, he leans over and stares at the couple, whispering his response. “They’ve been married for almost two decades and are close to getting divorced.”

Well then, it seems I was way off. “I take it you know them.”

“Never seen them before in my life,” he deadpans, and I actually *laugh*. Something that’s rare these days. “I’m kidding,” he says with a playful expression. “The guy’s my uncle. And what I said is absolutely true.”

“And we believe you,” Pippa cuts in with an almost flirtatious smile, raising even more questions. *What’s that about? Am I right about her and Jesse?*

Our new friend winks her way, before turning back toward me, his nose brushing against my cheek as he offers me his full attention. “I’m Alex, by the way. And since I helped solve your little mystery, how about a dance?”

I look to Pip, begging her for an out, but of course, she throws me under the bus by enthusiastically nodding. “Go on. It might be fun.”

Biting back a remark, I allow Alex to pull me to my feet and follow him to the polished floor, joining the other partygoers in an upbeat dance.

The fast pace of the song means it doesn't feel intimate between us, and as much as I hate to admit it, it's not too long before I'm actually smiling. Which is probably why when the song ends I don't immediately walk away like planned. *Something I instantly regret.*

The tempo slows and Alex smiles down at me as he curls his hand around my back, pulling us close together.

When our bodies crash, I want to make a run for it, but don't really have a valid reason. *Unless you count the fact that I'm really freaking uncomfortable.*

Offering him a tight-lipped grin, I accept the inevitable and take a deep breath before slowly raise my hands to his neck. I only hesitate for the briefest moment, but it's long enough for someone to catch hold of my wrist and spin me away from Alex's grasp.

"Mind if I cut in?" Jesse says, and my jaw drops as he steps between us, locking Alex in a stare-down. *He hasn't been on the dance floor once, not even with Pippa.*

"Yeah, I do mind." Alex puffs his chest and steps forward. "We're kind of in the middle of something," he counters, pushing Jesse to the side as he reaches for me, neither of them noticing my annoyed expression. "Wait your turn," he adds, roughly gripping my hand before raising it to his shoulder, securing his palm at my waist. I don't like the way he manhandles me, but I also don't want to shy away. Especially in front of Jesse.

“My mistake,” Jesse says from behind me, suddenly calm, confusing the hell out of me. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

What?

I want to scream... *So why did you?* But instead, I ignore him, letting Alex take the lead.

We’ve just started to move when I’m pulled away again and spun around until protective hands lock me in place, his grip almost possessive.

“Touch her again and I will end you,” Jesse seethes, his anger exploding completely out of nowhere.

“Why?” Alex goads him. “Is it because...” He falls quiet, and I’m not sure if he mouthed something or stopped speaking altogether because of Jesse’s stare. Not that it matters either way.

I should leave, walk away from both of them, but the feel of Jesse’s hand locked around my waist and his deep raspy tone have me making all the wrong choices.

Jesse doesn’t move for a beat, and I know it’s because he’s still locked in a battle of wills with Alex. It’s not until his murderous expression fades that I release a breath, though I have no idea what comes next.

“Good decision,” Jesse mumbles, and I chance a look over my shoulder, catching Alex as he weaves through the sea of oblivious dancers, disappearing out of sight.

Reality hits at that moment, and I snap out of my Jesse-induced trance, blinking a few times as I do. I shouldn’t be

happy here. I've just moved from one bad situation to another, and I actually think this one's worse. Pushing against his chest, I try to free myself from his tight clasp, but it's pointless as he holds strong.

"What the hell was that?" I whisper-yell, teeth clenched to force a smile on my face, determined not to draw attention.

Without even flinching, Jesse's grip on me tightens as he moves me around, keeping in time with the music. "Eyes on me, Buttercup," he says, forcing a smile himself. "Just dance and keep up the charade. It's what you're good at."

I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off, but curiosity gets the better of me and I give in, doing as he asked.

Playing my part, I run my hands slowly up his body before linking my fingers behind his neck. He doesn't say a word, but his body stiffens at my light touch, a similar reaction to what I've seen with Pippa.

"Better?" I ask, even though I'd say he's hating every moment.

"Much," he lies, clearly uncomfortable. "Now dance."

As we sway to "Lover" by Taylor Swift, I ask the question that stopped me from walking away. "Why Buttercup?"

Jesse freezes as his eyes flash to mine, confusion set in his expression.

"You also said it at dinner last night. Have you given me a pet name? Do you *like* me?" I joke to break through the sudden tension between us—even though it's highly

inappropriate—and it works. Jesse grunts as his features soften.

He moves us again, and I assume that means he's not going to answer, until he leans down to whisper in my ear. "Do you know much about flowers, *Willow*? You do work next to a florist."

Shaking my head, I huff out a laugh and tilt myself back, looking up into his eyes. "Surprisingly, flower knowledge hasn't magically seeped through the walls and into my brain. So no, I *can't* say that I do."

"Well then." He shrugs. "You definitely can't assume that I like you."

This guy cannot take a joke. Only now I desperately want to reach for my phone to search buttercups. *Why the hell didn't I bring it?*

Tucking my head into the crook of his neck, I focus on the music while trying to ignore the world around me, blocking out the fact that I'm in the arms of my sister's man and not at all hating it.

When the song changes, I expect him to let go, but he doesn't. Instead, his hands glide farther around me—keeping me in place—and the pads of his fingers sink into my bare skin, his touch igniting something deep within me, making my heart take flight.

God, I'm a horrible person. I can't do this.

Loosening my hold around his neck, I pull back and create some much-needed space between us, even though it's barely more than an inch. "I've got to ask...why the jealous boyfriend act?" I say, using the question as my excuse for moving away. "I'm more than capable of handling myself around guys."

Jesse's eyes narrow as he throws out "I'm sure you can," making me certain he's not sure at all. "But I know that guy," he continues, "and he's not someone to be messed with."

Accepting the fact that he may have actually been looking out for me, I sigh. "I wasn't planning on *messing* with him. It was just a dance."

"It's never *just* a dance."

"Isn't it? Then what's this?"

"This is me saving your ass from the wrong guy."

He tugs at my waist with a force that leaves me no option but to fall back into his chest, then huffs out a laugh. I want to fight him. To break away from his grip. But at the same time, I don't...and that's all kinds of wrong.

For the next minute and a half, I'm hyperaware of every touch, every sound, and every move Jesse makes. This moment is taking over my senses, and I hate that it's bringing me to life. With the way my heart's racing in my chest, I'm surprised he hasn't noticed, or maybe he has but he's trying to ignore it. Trying to pretend.

When the song ends, Pippa interrupts, and the guilt I feel is all-consuming. I break away from Jesse so fast it may as well be an admission. “Pippa, I—”

“I finally got away from Jackie,” she says with a relaxed smile on her face, referring to our Mom’s friend. “Willow, thank Jesse for helping you out, and then I’m dragging him away.”

Huh?

Jesse smirks but there’s an edge to it. Almost like he’s an accomplice to my crime. Like he’s mimicking my feelings. But that makes no sense.

What makes sense is his reasons behind dancing with me. They must have seen something about Alex that I didn’t, *so Pippa sent Jesse to help.*

Swallowing a lump in my throat, I smile in return and do as she asked, thanking him for the dance, before leaving them alone and heading back to my table.

After only one more song, we’re asked to take our seats again as dessert is served, and the speeches begin. The moment I’ve been waiting for. *The moment before I can leave.*

While I’ve been in a rush to get out of here, the second my Dad takes the stage, my entire view changes. Tonight was worth it. Seeing the emotion in his eyes as we all rise to our feet in celebration and the genuine smiles he shares with my mom are things I’ll never take for granted. And when he mentions me and my sisters, I almost tear up. *Almost.*

It definitely puts me in a lighter mood for when Jesse steps up onto the stage. Not that my heart realizes that because it skips a beat as soon as he opens his mouth.

“For those of you that don’t know me... Hi, I’m Jesse, and to sum up my life... I play hockey. For those of you that do, you’re probably wondering what the hell I’m doing right now considering I *hate* public speaking. The thing is, I don’t hate it. I just hate being the center of attention. And the media. Mostly I hate the media. But please don’t tell them I used the H word; it gives them a complex.”

The room erupts in laughter before he continues on, and I hang on his every word, watching as he inspires everyone in the room while always referring back to my dad. Making sure everyone knows why he’s here.

He talks with confidence, passion, humor, and a genuine warmth that I wasn’t even sure he was capable of. Especially when he opens up about his past, making my heart break for him.

“I grew up in the foster system,” he says before taking a sip of water. “I was lucky to have found a few families along the way that nurtured my talent. But there were times I thought I’d have to give it all up.”

His voice wavers as he speaks of that time in his life, but it’s so subtle, I’d wager that no one else noticed it. Except maybe Pippa. Though when I look her way, her bright smile would suggest that she didn’t.

He doesn't spend too long talking about his personal life, but he says enough for his next points to hit home. When he talks about his drive, we know he pushed himself to his limits. When he talks about believing in yourself, we get it, because he's experienced times when he was the only one that did. And when he talks about stepping back and assessing your goals, I feel like he's talking directly to me. To my soul. Because God knows I don't do that. And I should.

He finishes up with a joke, and it's safe to say he's won the hearts of everyone in front of him, even those that support rival teams.

Like Dad, he gets a standing ovation with Pippa cheering the loudest. I have the strongest desire to run to him, to shower him in praise, but instead, I quietly support him from the sidelines.

The dance party starts up again while he walks off the stage, and the guests at my table all get up. I know I should move, but I'm still stuck on Jesse, struggling to look away. And because of that, I see the way his body sags the moment he steps out of the limelight. That wasn't easy for him. While it was obvious he's done that speech a million times before, with the effortless way he delivered it, it's clearly a struggle for him. And I have to wonder how much of his past affects him.

Do we have something in common?

I don't rush off right away like I thought I would after talking to Dad. Instead, I stare at the plethora of bodies, watching as they all dance to their own beat while listening to

the same song. The more I watch, the more I envy them—to be so carefree, even if it's just at this moment. To be able to forget everything in their world but the here and now. To *live*.

To not have the weight of the past threatening to crush them.

I want that. But it's been so long that I think it's safe to say that's not an option for me anymore.

“Are you ready to leave?” Pippa asks, cutting into my vision and breaking my thoughts. “Or have you decided to stay?”

“She's leaving,” Jesse huffs out as he joins our side, sliding his jacket over his shoulders, his eyes never even glancing my way.

Pippa's face scrunches in confusion, but I don't give her the chance to speak before I rush to agree. “He's right, I'm leaving.”

I follow behind, watching as Pippa and Jesse walk ahead, noticing the way his hand hovers at her lower back without ever actually touching her.

I know that means something, but since I'm almost certain I'm never going to find out, I force myself to look away, my gaze locking with Alex from across the room.

A feeling of unease takes over me, only subsiding when his lips pull up into a genuine smile, and I have to hold back my confusion until I walk outside, breaking our connection.

Jesse may be an asshole, but he's clearly worried about Alex, and while I can't see what he sees, for some stupid

reason, I trust that he's looking out for me.

I just pray that I'm right.

Chapter Fifteen

Jesse

I can still feel her skin beneath my hands. The way it set me on fire, burning my fingers so harshly that I don't think even time will erase the scars.

I hate the human connection. Skin to skin contact makes my body itch and my chest constrict to uncomfortable levels. Willow's touch, though, sent a spark through me I've never felt before. I wanted more. I wanted it all. But fuck, that's so much worse. She's already my nightmare; I can't let her turn into my weakness too.

Being around her is dangerous, and yet, I'm drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I know the risks. I know exactly what will happen if she remembers, but I can't seem to stop myself from getting just that little bit closer. Wanting to take a chance. Risk it all.

Seeing her dancing with that fucker had a rage simmering inside me I haven't felt for years, not since that day. But instead of walking away, instead of removing myself from the

problem—a problem that shouldn't be mine—I went to her. *I Fucking Went To Her*. And God, was that a mistake.

Even now, as I lie awake, I can't get her out of my head. Which I guess makes sense since I'm in her goddamn house.

For twelve years I've made sensible decisions. *What the hell am I doing now?* The dinner's over, Pippa's done her bit, and I've done mine. I should be leaving. But something tells me I won't. I don't know if it's because I've turned into some kind of masochist, putting myself through the torture I so strongly deserve. Or is it her? And if it is her... how do I make it stop?

How do I control myself, so I'm not thinking about the way she felt pressed against me? Or the rise and fall of her chest as I whispered into her ear. Or the touch of her fingers on the back of my neck.

Even now it sends a shiver right through me.

Not to mention that fucking knot at the back of her dress. The flimsy looking piece of thread holding it all together. One little tug and the entire thing would have fallen away, leaving her stripped bare before me in nothing but her bra and that tiny thong she thinks we didn't see. *Jesus!*

As my mind conjures up the perfect picture of what I imagine her naked body to look like, my briefs tighten under the sheet. My hand itches to relieve my aching cock, but I hold back, punishing myself for the woman who's on my mind. The woman who shouldn't be there.

Switching gears for a second, I force my thoughts onto other topics and Tate comes to mind, along with his friend whose name I didn't even catch. *What was Tate playing at?* He didn't seem fazed by his friend dancing with Willow, but the second I pulled her away, he signaled for his retreat. *Was that a warning?* Showing me they can get to her without her even knowing. And what the fuck was that guy referring to when he mouthed that he knows things? What does he know? What has Tate told him?

None of it makes any sense. Tate's got just as much riding on this as I do. We both need to stay away. So why can't I heed my own warning? And more importantly, how the hell did I allow myself to get that close?

Having said all of that, there is a silver lining. My focus on Willow helped to ease the stress I was feeling in the lead-up to my speech. Even as I mentioned my past, something that usually gets me down, all I could think about was her and her part in it.

I'm not sure how long I lay awake thinking—minutes, hours, I don't know—but at some point I must drift off because I wake up to Pippa tapping me on the shoulder repeatedly, getting harder each time. It doesn't hurt, but God, it's annoying. And after last night, I'm not in the mood. “What the fuck, Pippa?”

“Why were you tossing and turning last night?” She grumbles and it completely throws me as I look around the

room. We're at Willow's. *How did she know I was tossing and turning?*

"Why were you awake?" I counter, throwing my pillow at her as she steps back.

"I couldn't sleep. The guilt got to me. I don't like that we're still lying to Willow about being a couple."

"Excuse me?" I sit up and run my hands down my unshaven face before massaging my temples and sighing in disbelief. "I'm doing this for *you*, Pippa. You never said you wanted to come clean."

Pippa frowns. "No, but she's my sister, and since we're living here, we should at least tell her, right?"

I contemplate that for a second and decide that even though I never wanted to do it in the first place, I can't stop it now. "Wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Yes, *wrong*." *So fucking wrong*. "As soon as one person knows they'll all find out, and then you'll get embarrassed and upset, someone will leak it to the media, and they'll all have a field day on our lies." I'm being overly dramatic and avoiding the real reason she can't know, but Pippa thrives on drama, so I'm banking on it helping me. "We're not telling Willow. You can fake it until we get home and then we can have some kind of epic breakup."

Pippa's eyes light up and she smiles as she kneels down on the couch, bouncing beside me. "Your fault?"

“Sure. My fault. You can make it as awful as you want. Now go away.”

Pippa huffs out a laugh but her brows furrow and she eyes me curiously. “You’re in a mood.”

“*Go away.*”

“Is it because I made you move in with my sister or because I made you do a speech?”

“You got me. It’s both.” *That will do.*

“Yeah, well, I know you,” Pippa states proudly, tucking her hair behind her ears with a huge smile on her face.

“You *think* you know me,” I grumble under my breath but she ignores me. “Speaking of your sister. Do you think you could check the bathroom to see if it’s safe for me to go in there?”

“You’re good,” she says quickly. “She went out.”

“She went out!? What time is it?” *And why does that worry me?* Sure, the sun’s barely up but she’s not my concern, and until yesterday, she lived alone. She can take care of herself.

Pippa frowns, and just when I think she’s going to call me out on my concern, she shrugs. “I don’t know. About six?”

I silently release a breath when it’s not as early as I thought, but it still annoys me. “And why are you awake again?”

“I told you, I couldn’t sleep because of the guilt.”

“Well, get over it. It’s almost done.”

The door slams open and Willow slumps over catching her breath. Panic has my palm flexing, ready to jump up, until I notice she's in workout gear and hold back.

“Pleasant run?” Pippa asks, drawing Willow’s attention.

“What?” she says, removing the earbuds from her ears before taking a sip of her water.

“I asked if you had a pleasant run?”

“Oh, yes. I did, thanks. I needed to run off some...things. It worked.” Her eyes briefly flash to mine, and she shakes her head as though ridding herself of some thoughts.

“I’m going to grab a shower and then I can fix us all breakfast.”

“Don’t worry,” I say, jumping up. “I’ve got it. You take your time.” I need to keep myself busy and not feel like I’m indebted to her for allowing us to stay here.



After breakfast, Pippa disappears to make some phone calls, leaving Willow and me alone.

She sets about doing the dishes, while I fold up the sheets on the couch. The silence between us is awkward, but I’m not sure if it’s because I have so many thoughts running through

my head or because she's actually uncomfortable with me being here.

I'm about to tell her I'll get out of her hair when she talks first. "Your speech was wonderful last night," she says, somewhat shyly, raking her long blonde mane through her fingers. She opens her mouth to say more but I cut her off.

"Thanks. I'm sure happy it's done and dusted."

She huffs out a laugh, but says nothing more, thankfully understanding my attempt at moving on. She continues with her cleaning until she pauses again. "I looked up buttercups."

My eyes flash to hers as a small smirk pulls at my lips. "Of course you did. And..."

"*And...* You think I'm poison?" Guess it didn't take long to figure out what I was alluding to.

"Or maybe I just think you're full of... sunshine."

"Not a bad thing to be full of. But no, it's definitely the poison thing. Question is, why?"

"Because you could ruin me," I blurt, without thinking it through. *Dammit.* I wince. Nothing like handing someone a loaded gun. Even if my statement isn't entirely accurate.

"Is that why you've been such an ass? To warn me away? To protect yourself?"

"No."

"No?"

"No... I've been doing that to protect *you.*"

Willow's breath hitches as her eyes bounce between mine, undoubtedly looking for the truth in my words. I stare back at her. Unwavering. Because if she's looking to catch me in a lie, it's not going to happen. Though I meant what I said—she could ruin me—the thing is... I could destroy her. In a heartbeat. If that's what I wanted. And maybe I should, because the alternative could be much worse.

“Oooh, so you think you're dangerous,” Willow teases, the corner of her lip lifting into a smile. She has this shy and innocent thing going on ninety-five percent of the time, but with me, she's got spark. “Are you worried I'm going to fall in love with you only for you to break my heart?”

She's mocking the situation, but I wish that were the case. If this was just about her falling in love with me, life would be easy. I couldn't give two fucks about people's feelings toward me. But it's better she believes that than knows the truth.

“Sure thing, Buttercup. That's it.” I wince again because I really shouldn't be using that name. It keeps slipping out without me realizing it, and it needs to stop.

Willow's lips thin and her brows furrow, but if she sees through my attempt to appease her, she doesn't say it.

“Oh...kay. Well, I'm off to work. Do you need anything before I go?”

Why does that statement fill me with so much relief?

“No, I'm good. But thanks.”

She walks away without another word but pauses at the door, her hand clenching around the handle before she shakes her head. “You’re a good guy, Jesse. I don’t know why you try so hard to convince people otherwise.” She chuckles to herself before leaving, freezing me in place as her words hit me.

God, I wish that were true.

Chapter Sixteen

Willow

“*B*ecause you could ruin me.”

I may have played Jesse’s words off like a joke, but the truth is, they were anything but. He rattled me. *What the hell does it even mean?*

It’s all I could think about on my walk to work, and I still haven’t figured it out now that I’m here. My stupid heart wants me to believe it means he feels something, like I do, but that’s insane. *Right?* Not to mention wrong.

It’s not that I think I have actual romantic feelings for him, but there’s a connection I can’t deny and it’s eating me alive. I shouldn’t even be thinking about it.

And then he had to tell me he was protecting me... God, that had me spiraling even further.

Is it possible he feels the pull between us but knows the damage it would do to Pippa’s and my relationship? Or is it something else? *Jesus*. What does it matter? I shouldn’t even be allowing these thoughts into my head. I need to push that

shit right out of my mind. And yet, I still feel like their relationship is ending anyway. They never touch, I never catch them in quiet little moments, and they barely even smile at each other. Not to mention the separate beds.

Connection or figment of my imagination, it doesn't matter. It *can't* matter. So like everything else messed up in my life, I try to force it away.



For most of the morning, I keep myself busy trying to finish the damn clasp on the necklace, while Sara runs the shop. I even start on Pippa's chain as procrastination.

I couldn't say how much time passes, but since my fingers hurt from the tools, I'm going to guess it's been a while.

When I'm almost at the point of giving up, Sara's voice breaks into my frustrated mind.

"Have I given you enough time to get over your dad's celebration yet? Or do you need more?" she asks casually as she grabs a glass of water.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I wanted to ask how it went last night. But since you were in a strange mood when I arrived this morning, I kind of pushed it aside."

“Thank you.” *I think.*

“So, can I ask now?”

I bite back a smile knowing this would be killing her and pause before answering. “If you must.”

“Thank God. Yes, I must.”

She does a little fist pump and launches into it. “How was it? Did Ashley do a good job? How did your dad’s speech go? Did you dance? Was the food good? Any attractive men worth mentioning? And did you bring me a centerpiece?”

“Geez, would you like to take a breath?” I giggle.

“Yep, just did.”

“Shall I answer in order of importance?”

“Please.” She nods.

“I asked Mom to get you a centerpiece. Dad’s speech was lovely. Food was okay. Wine was delicious. I danced. There may have been a hottie or two, and Ashley did well. Did I miss anything?”

Sara’s face scrunches before she answers. “How was it?”

Damn. I picked the worst one to miss because I knew her question had a deeper meaning.

“It was good. *I* was good. I promise.”

“Okay. Thank you. I won’t bring it up again.”

I offer her a soft, appreciative smile. I love that while she still worries about me, she respects the fact that I don’t like

talking about it, and I hate the way this town smothers me.

“So, tell me about these ‘hotties,’” she says, using my term instead of the way she worded it, taking the conversation in a new direction.

As asked, I describe the attractive men in great detail, while leaving out one important fact—who they were—and by the time we’ve finished speaking, my tummy’s rumbling for lunch.

I offer to stay and eat, but Sara sends me home for a quick break before she has to leave, and when I walk in the door, Jesse and Pippa are watching a movie.

On opposite ends of the couch.

In silence.

My sister is the queen of PDA. I’ve even seen her attempt it with Jesse, so I think it’s safe to say they’re fighting again. Or broken up. *Although, wouldn’t they tell me that?*

Pip’s eyes meet mine as I move into the kitchen, and she smiles, giving me a quick wave, while Jesse pretends I don’t exist. And after our conversation this morning, that doesn’t surprise me.

“I’m making lunch. Have you both eaten?”

“I’ve eaten,” Jesse says at the same moment Pippa asks for food. *Did Jesse go out? Alone? Why didn’t he wait for Pippa?*

I make a chicken salad while trying to tell myself I’m not over here analyzing their relationship. But of course, I

am. And when they both start chuckling, I can't help but look over, wanting to see why.

Pippa stretches her foot out to poke Jesse's thigh, and her eyes lock on the side of his face, waiting for a reaction. *As do I.* When he looks her way, his laughter turns into a knowing smirk, causing my insides to churn.

God, maybe I'm seeing what I want to see?

After handing Pippa her bowl, I head back to work to eat mine, feeling like an outsider in my own home. And for the first time in forever, I actually wish that someone would notice.



I'm once again lost in my new designs when the bell chimes above the door, signaling our first customer for the afternoon. Lifting my head, I smile in preparation, but startle slightly when I see who it is.

Alex looks around the store as he confidently glides my way, his eyes raking over the shelves before finally settling on me. "Willow. We meet again."

"Alex, hi. I didn't know you were staying around." Hopeful thinking on my part. I'd assumed he'd be heading home today like most out-of-towners.

Alex playfully shakes his head. “I’m heading home Monday. I’ve got some business here that I need to attend to.”

His words seem innocent enough, but the way he says them is a little unnerving, like he’s not referring to actual business, but something else.

“Great,” I say, ignoring the butterflies in my stomach, offering him a smile. “It’s a wonderful time to be here. How can I help you?”

Flattening his palm on the counter, Alex stretches his fingers out to where my hands rest next to the till. “I was actually looking for you,” he says with a flirtatious grin. “I was hoping to catch you without your bulldog boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I protest too quickly.

“That’s right.” Alex grins. “He’s your *sister’s* man. Doesn’t act like it though.”

Ugh, another wave of guilt hits me, and I almost sarcastically thank Alex for bringing it up when I had somehow forgotten it for five minutes. I should leave his comment alone, but I find myself defending Jesse without really thinking about how that might look. “They’re both just protective of me,” I say with a shrug, moving my hand away and stepping back.

“Understandable,” Alex says with a terse nod.

“What?”

“It’s understandable,” he repeats. “After what happened.”

“What happened?” I squeak out, though I have a feeling I know what he’s about to say.

“I may have asked about you.” He smiles apologetically, but it’s almost as fake as my own. “What can I say, I’m interested.” He pauses. “Especially with the way everyone in this town seems to be constantly keeping an eye on you.” He pauses again, and I have to wonder if it’s intentional. “Anyway, it didn’t take long to discover that you went through something big a few years back, and that you’ve been pretty guarded ever since.”

Jesus, I want to tell him to mind his own goddamn business, but I’m curious how much he knows. “Okay. Did you find out what it was?”

“I found out *everything*.”

The way he says *everything* makes my chest tighten. It feels like he’s implying he knows more than I do. And maybe he does. *Someone does*. Only I never thought that someone would be willingly sharing the information.

I hate that he has the upper hand, so because of that, I don’t ask him for more details.

“Well, now you know *why* my sister’s boyfriend is looking out for me,” I say, even though Jesse doesn’t know what happened. Pippa promised she’d never tell him about it. Or anyone. Not because I’m ashamed of it, but because I hate being the girl everyone pities. *The one that can’t remember*. And lucky for me, Pippa’s very supportive of my need to block it out. Half the time she pretends nothing even

happened. Which is easy for her to do considering she was away at boarding school at the time.

Alex smiles again. “Like I said. Understandable. But I guess what I’m wondering is... Does that mean they’ll snap my head off if I ask for a date?”

My eyes widen but I quickly school my features. *Is this guy crazy?* Does he not remember Jesse’s “touch her and die” speech? I’m paraphrasing but it was something along those lines, and the intent was there. In fact, the look he gave Alex is still ingrained in my mind. He definitely meant it.

Alex stares at me expectantly, taking a step closer as he waits for an answer.

“Oh, you’re serious.” I bark out a laugh before covering my mouth with my hands.

“Deadly.”

“I don’t think they’d harm you for asking,” I say and then pause. “But I can’t guarantee your safety if I say yes.”

Alex smirks as he bounces his fingers on the wood of the counter. “And would you say yes?”

“Nope,” I say honestly. “So you’re safe.”

My answer awards me a laugh, but there’s an edge to it. I’m guessing he doesn’t get rejected very often. Not that I’m rejecting *him* per se. I’m rejecting men in general. Have been for a while now.

“I guess you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“No, you most certainly can’t.”

“Well, I’ll take this...candle?...and be on my way.” He holds up my Forever Love oil and bath salt pack, and waves it in front of my face with a serious expression, despite not understanding what’s actually inside the box.

I hold his gaze to see if he’ll break first, but he doesn’t waver until I giggle. “It’s essential oils and you don’t have to do that.”

“What if I want to? In case I need to gift it to a special someone.”

I bite back my smile, because he’s being a little bit cute, and then take the box out of his hands. “Would you like it gift wrapped?”

“Most definitely. What do you take me for? A monster?”

I smirk at that, though I have a feeling Jesse’s answer would be yes. Yet, I’m struggling to see his issue. Alex seems quite charming, and other than knowing more about me than I’d like him to know, he hasn’t actually done anything that would make me think otherwise.

Taking my time, I place the box on the teal paper and start wrapping. “You can choose a gift card from that box if you’d like,” I say without looking up.

“Thank you.”

“There’s a pen there too, if you want to write something.”

Alex doesn't respond, making me look up curiously. "Would you mind doing that? My handwriting is atrocious."

Keeping a straight face to match his, I finish up the packaging before reaching for the gift card he chose and the pen.

"To my future girl," he begins, and I write as he talks. "Will you be mine? Yours truly, Alex."

"Well that's sweet. It's sure to impress."

"Why, thank you. I'm a romantic at heart." His lips pull up to the side, revealing the most gorgeous dimple as he winks. And I can't deny it, my heart skips. He's definitely a charmer.

Although don't they say charming and attractive men can be even more dangerous because you never see their dark side coming? *Damn*. The thought sends a chill down my spine, and I internally scold myself for letting my mind go there. This isn't a serial killer documentary.

When I'm done, Alex pays with a smile before walking away, and I find myself moving from behind the counter so I can watch him. He steps into the warm air and stops just outside of the building. He's still for a moment, lost in thought before turning abruptly and marching back inside.

My eyes flash to the counter, looking for something he may have left behind, but there's nothing there to find. "Let me guess. The smell of my limited edition Christmas oil sucked you in."

“Of course, but that’s not why I’m back. I wanted to give you this.” He hands over the wrapped gift with the cheesiest grin I think I’ve ever seen. “So, will you be mine?”

I instantly burst out laughing. I was pretty sure that’s where he was going with the entire ordeal, but I didn’t think he’d try it so soon.

“Didn’t we just have this conversation?” I say between laughter.

“We did,” he says, bouncing his eyebrows. “But I was kind of hoping this gesture would change your mind.”

“It’s sweet and funny, I’ll give you credit for that.”

Alex’s eyes light up. “So, it’s a yes?”

“It’s a maybe.” *Shit!* Where did that come from? And why don’t I feel like the world is going to end because I said it?

“I’ll take a maybe...for now,” he says with a frown. “But I’ll be back to try again.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Looking forward to it. Am I? The words don’t feel like a lie, and yet they must be. *Right?*

Chapter Seventeen

Willow

I'm closing up for the day when Lucia's grandmother Bea walks up the steps, making me pause.

"Bea. How are you?" I ask, as I hold open the door for her, switching the outside fairy lights back on.

"I'm doing well, dear," she answers with a smile. "Thank you. But how are *you*, more importantly?"

Huh? "I'm great," I lie, purposely not responding to her "more importantly" comment. I know she's asking about last night. I'm actually surprised more people haven't popped by to check in. But I'll bet they're all curiously talking about it, even if it's not to my face.

After giving me a sympathetic nod, Bea follows me inside and busies herself smelling my new release scents, spending extra time at the Christmas Spice and All Things Nice one I had made for Christmas in July. It's one of my favorites—a mix of mint, chocolate, cinnamon, and vanilla—but it's dangerous, as it has me constantly craving unhealthy treats.

“Have you met Lucia’s baby?” I ask, changing the subject before she questions me. It feels strange saying it like that, but I’m only now realizing I haven’t been told her name. “Does she have a name yet?”

“She does,” Bea says, a little slowly, as though she’s distracted by something on her mind. I’d be worried that her tone had something to do with Lucia or the baby if I wasn’t one hundred percent certain she wouldn’t be standing inside my shop if there was something wrong. “But are you sure you’re good? Last night must have been hard. I hope everyone was looking out for you.”

“Last night was lovely. Dad’s speech was perfect and the food was delicious,” I say politely, when what I really want to say is... *It’s been twelve years, I’m fine. How long do I have to wait before you all let me live my life as though I don’t have a piece of it missing? As though I wasn’t in an accident I can’t remember. As though I’m somehow less of a person. When is it my time to just be me? Not a reflection of my past.*

Bea hesitates, ready to say something else, but she nods and picks up the essential oil she’s been looking at.

“This smells wonderful, Willow. I’d say it’s your best one, if I wasn’t still in love with last Christmas’s special.”

That one was surprisingly popular considering it was basically just a Christmas tree in the bottle with a touch of honey. Maybe the sweet honey smell mixed with the pine made all the difference.

“In fact,” she says slowly, brushing her hands over her light, knitted cardigan, “I’d buy your entire shop if I could. You know that, right?”

Okay, here goes, she’s about to ask more.

“I need to talk to you about Lucia. Is Sara around?”

Lucia? I could have sworn...

“She’s not. What’s going on?”

Bea slowly walks toward me, occasionally stopping to smell a scent or to delicately brush her fingers over my display. When she reaches the counter, she takes a deep breath and turns around before connecting our hands, the gesture making me uncomfortable. *Have I done something wrong?*

“As I mentioned, Lucia and Chris have decided on a name for their precious little girl.”

“That’s fantastic. I can’t wait to hear it.” *But why do you look so panicked?*

Her breathing shallows as her eyes dart around the room, looking for something. If it’s help she’s seeking, she’s not getting it. We’re the only two in the shop.

“I’m sorry to be here out of the blue, and in your sacred place, but I wanted to be the one to tell you. And you know this town—gossip spreads faster than fire.”

She’s right. It does. But I wouldn’t have thought Lucia’s daughter’s name would qualify as gossip.

“After a lot of thought, Lucia’s named her daughter Jade, and she wanted me to talk to you about it.”

My world stills, and everything around me fades away until I’m left with darkness and a ringing in my ears. *So much for not being a reflection of my past.* Taking in shallow breaths, I try to push through, but it’s a struggle. I can only vaguely hear words being spoken before a pressured sensation rests on my back. “Willow. Willow.”

My heart races as I work hard to fight my demons. It feels like a lost cause until I’m finally able to bring myself back, focusing on my senses. The light shining from the lamp on my counter, the smell of my Forever Love oil permeating the air—strawberry, vanilla... I run through it all as my store slowly comes back into focus, and I see Bea still standing in front of me with tears in her eyes.

“I told her not to do it. I’m so sorry.”

What? Oh right, Jade.

It’s been years since someone spoke that name to me. Probably because they knew it would garner this very reaction. But I think about her. I was only just thinking about her. And now I’m going to be faced with a constant reminder every single day. Another reason for people to stare. To pity me.

“No... It’s okay. It’s a lovely name.” I don’t ask why, but I want to. She didn’t know Jade. She only moved here after Jade was gone. She wasn’t there.

“It was Chris’s mother’s name,” she says without prompting. *Oh.*

“Then it’s perfect.”

I try to smile, but if it looks as fake as it feels then she’s never going to buy it. And from the pitied smile she returns, I know she hasn’t, but I keep up the charade anyway.

After I wave off her attempt at comforting me, Bea buys the Christmas oil and pats me on the shoulder before she departs.

I hold strong, but as soon as the bell chimes above my door, I shudder and a high-pitched cry escapes me.

Jade.

Jade.

My breathing shallows as I run her name through my mind over and over. With this reaction, I should probably talk to someone about it... Mom, Dad, even Pippa? But no, I can’t. Even though they won’t let me move on, they’ve all moved on. And other than me having to tell them I’m okay, over and over, they don’t want to talk about it. So I won’t. I can handle this. I can. But God, I miss her. If Jade were here, she’d know what to say to get me through this. She’d know how to help. But she’s not, and I’m stuck doing this alone.

I pinch my leg to snap myself out of my spiraling thoughts and will myself to move on. I’m a strong, independent woman. I am not a prisoner of my past. *Letting go in three...two...one.*

I close up the shop for a second time and slowly make my way home, stopping via the diner to buy myself some time. If I

walk inside looking how I feel, then there's no way Pippa will leave me alone, and I'm not in the mood to talk about it.

Weary-eyed, I stumble through my front door with takeout in hand and a fake smile in place, ready to head straight to my room, but when I'm met with silence, I'm able to relax.

After putting my keys on the shelf, I kick my shoes off and sigh in relief, feeling instantly calmed by the safe haven I've created for myself. I pull my long hair free from its restraint and shake my head out, almost falling over. *Am I really that drained?* Huffing out a laugh, I flick my hair out of my eyes and jump at the sight of Pippa and Jesse in front of me.

“Jesus! What is wrong with you?”

Why the hell were they so quiet?

“What's wrong with *you*?” Pippa laughs. “We were standing here the entire time. You were in your own world.”

“Right, okay. Just tired. Why are you standing in the middle of the hallway though? Actually, you know what? I don't care. As you were.”

I walk away without another word but not before catching Jesse's curious expression. I can't quite pinpoint what it is, but it's a mix of annoyance and concern and maybe even nerves. But that seems unlikely.

When I reach my bedroom door, I curse myself for my brief outburst and spin around in a hurry. “I'm sorry. It's been a weird day. Are you both good for dinner or...”

“We’re fine, Willow. Are you okay?” Pippa asks while Jesse stays silent, paying attention to my every word. There’s a weird tension between them again, but I ignore it. Now’s not the time to worry about that too.

“Never better,” I lie, before smiling as I walk into my room, their hushed whispers following me as I go.



I barely eat the dinner I bought. Instead I push it around the box until I can’t look at it any longer. I’m completely drained from my conversation with Bea, but after all these years, I shouldn’t be letting it get to me. I lost my best friend, and I can’t remember what happened. But I’ve mourned her. I need to separate the two Jades in my mind or I’ll never move on.

After settling into bed, I somehow drift off but startle awake sometime later with tears in my eyes and no memory of my dream.

Sitting up, I take a few sips of water before attempting to sleep again. But of course it doesn’t happen, and I stare at the ceiling for a good hour before deciding to do something about it.

Jumping out of bed, I throw on a pair of sweats and a light hoodie before grabbing my picnic blanket.

The fresh air often helped when I was young, and I'm hoping that hasn't changed. Granted, I usually had Mom or Dad to keep me company. But I'm the adult now. I'll be fine.

I tiptoe to the front door, conscious of a sleeping Jesse a few feet away. But as it turns out, I could have stomped my way here, because just as I reach for the door handle, he speaks, startling me instead. "What are you doing?"

"*Jesus*. I'm just getting some air," I say without looking his way. I do not need to see a just-woken, mussed-hair version of Jesse.

"It's the middle of the night, Willow. Open a fucking window."

God, that tone. Why does it make my insides melt?

"It's not the same," I say, now looking his way but avoiding eye contact. "And I'm just going to the front steps. Go back to sleep and you'll never even notice I'm out there." Like I'm planning to pretend you're not in here.

Jesse doesn't say anything else so I head out the door, relishing in the crisp night air as it hits my face. After laying the picnic blanket out on the second step, I sit down just as the door swings open again.

With his eyes squeezed shut, Jesse steps out into the elements, and from the grimace on his face, I'm going to say he doesn't really want to be here. I don't blame him. It's much cooler than I thought it would be, and he's not dressed for it. No, he's wearing freaking gray sweats and a short-sleeved

tee. One that rides up, giving me a glimpse of his skin as he runs his hand through his messy hair.

“What are you doing? Where are your clothes?” I ask, biting back my feelings.

“I’m getting some air,” he repeats my earlier response. “And it’s summer—how was I to know it would be cold?”

“It’s not cold, it’s fresh,” I say, holding back an eye roll. “And why do you need air?”

Jesse moves down to my step, forcing me to shuffle over so he can sit beside me. “I couldn’t sleep,” he says with a shrug. “Same as you, I’m guessing.”

Yep.

“Why can’t you sleep? Are you up worried about your fight with Pippa?” I cringe as the words leave my mouth, but like always he ignores me.

“Why can’t *you* sleep?” he counters, without giving me an answer.

“I was worrying about your fight with Pippa.” I deadpan, digging myself an even bigger hole.

Jesse’s eyes widen before morphing into a scowl so quickly he could give a girl whiplash. “Really?” he asks with a dash of attitude.

“No, not really. I can’t back that up.” I try to hold back a smile at my joke, but struggle, because, come on, it was a little bit funny. Not that I expect him to get it.

Jesse stares at me for a beat until recognition crosses his face. “Did you just quote Austin Powers?”

“I did,” I say with a huge grin as he rolls his eyes trying to hide the slight curl of his lips.

“Do you ever think about what it would be like to watch those movies again, now,” I say, moving the subject away from his relationship with Pippa. “Humor has changed so much. I wonder if people seeing them for the first time today would still enjoy them.”

“Wow. I often wonder the same thing,” Jesse says, his eyes on the road in front of us while mine flash to his face.

“Really?” *That surprises me.*

He turns to me with a deadly serious expression before shaking his head. “No, not really. I can’t back that up.”

My mouth drops open as I process the rarity of what just happened. Did he really say that? I’m motionless as I drink it in, but I can’t stop the smile from spreading across my face. “Wow, indeed,” I say, bumping my shoulder into his arm as a laugh escapes me. “Who knew there was humor underneath all that grumpiness.”

“Yep. Who knew.”

We both fall silent after that, and this time it’s comfortable. At least, it is until I decide to open my big mouth and say something I probably shouldn’t. “What’s your deal with Alex?”

“Who?”

“Al... The guy I was dancing with at the dinner.”

Turning to Jesse, I watch as the lightness disappears before my eyes, his relaxed expression morphing back to his usual scowl. “Why do you care?”

Can this guy ever give a straight answer? “I don’t care. I was just curious.”

“Why?” he pushes.

“Because he came to see me today.”

“What?!” Jesse jumps up, spinning around to face me. He’s naturally taller than I am, but right now he looks like a giant, and with the way his nostrils are flaring, not one of the friendly variety.

“What did he say?” he asks, his hands clenching and flexing by his sides.

“Is there something you were expecting him to say? Do you have some kind of beef with him?”

Jesse stills, giving me a look as though I’m speaking in gibberish. “Beef?”

Throwing my hands up in the air, I huff in exasperation. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“Like I’ve already told you... You should stay away.”

“That’s not actually what you said.” I’m being a little bit petty now, but I just want him to be honest with me. There’s more to it. I know it. “You *said* he’s not to be messed with.”

“Either way. Did you listen?”

“Mostly.” I mean, I had stayed away all by myself. It’s not my fault he sought me out.

Jesse fumes, not at all happy with my noncommittal answer. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means I said ‘*maybe*’ when he asked me out.”

“Are you crazy?” he raises his voice and then cuts himself off when he remembers where we are. Taking a step forward, he leans down until he’s up in my face and sighs. “He’s like the male version of you, Willow. He personifies sunshine when he wants to, but it’s all an act.”

“Oh, so we have something in common.” Resting back on my hands, I create some space between us and look him dead in the eye. “All the more reason to say yes.”

I don’t know why I feel the need to push his buttons, but here we are.

“*Willow*,” he warns in a tone that’s not to be messed with. But I do. I mess with it.

“*Jesse*,” I warn right back. “Why do *you* even care?”

“Because, I—” He pauses abruptly, and the fight disappears from his body. “I don’t. I don’t care,” he says, dropping to sit beside me again. “Do what you want.” His tone reflects that of someone who actually cares a whole lot, but I let it slide. Although I do stupidly feel the need to put his mind at ease, even if he won’t tell me why I need to do that.

“I wasn’t planning on going out with Alex. Satisfied?” It’s not a lie. Even if I considered it for a second, I know deep

down I never would have said yes.

Jesse's brows furrow as his gaze meets mine. It's obvious he never expected me to agree with him. "Yeah," he whispers with a nod. "I am."

"I don't suppose you have it in you to say thank you."

"Trust me when I say that you *not* going out with that piece of shit doesn't warrant a thank you from me. It's saving you from a lot of pain. Pain you couldn't possibly imagine." He pauses and shakes his head, almost like he's shocked he's telling me all this. "Believe it or not, I don't want you to get hurt. I deserve the thanks. But I'm not asking for it. I just want you to know my feelings."

Your feelings on that topic anyway. There are so many more you're hiding away.

"Okay, thank you. And since you just flipped back to semi nice mode, I'm going to quit while I'm ahead and go back inside."

I see the smallest hint of a smile before he hides it and nods. "Sounds like a good idea."

We both stand, and I fold up the blanket before tucking it under my arm. "Guess you'll be back to being grumpy by morning."

Jesse nods again. "Like this never even happened."

"What never even happened?"

"Exactly."

I walk away with a grin on my face, and though I don't see it, I have a feeling Jesse would have a similar expression if he allowed himself to feel happiness.

My heart races as I reach my room and softly close my door, leaning against it. I release a slow breath as I process our exchange, and it's only once my body uncoils that I realize how tense I was that entire time.

Despite the warning, I don't think it's Alex I should be worried about. I have a feeling that if anyone's going to cause me pain, it's the man I just left on my porch.



My foot slips on a rung, and I scream before regaining my balance, climbing the ladder higher and higher. My heart jolts at my misstep but I keep going. I have to keep going.

Looking above me, I try to locate my destination, but it's too far out of reach. The ladder's never-ending. As though it goes right up to the clouds. But that can't be right. All ladders lead somewhere.

Picking up the pace, I will myself to keep going. Faster and faster. The sooner I reach the top, the sooner this will end.

The air around me changes. I must be getting close. Just a little bit more.

I push myself to go faster, and just as I get into a good groove, my foot slips again, but this time, I don't catch myself.

The air rushes from my lungs as my heart lurches in my throat and my weightless body falls.

"Nooo!"

Suddenly, I'm not alone. Why aren't I alone?

"Jade, no."

I frantically reach out, trying to grab on to something, anything to stop the fall, but it's no use. I need to accept my fate.

"Willow, you're okay."

What? Jade?

No. It's a man. Familiar. Who said that?

My head thrashes from side to side, searching, but I can't see a thing. There's nothing. I'm falling into nothingness.

A chill runs down my cheek and I cry. "No, no, no."

No!

Sucking in a huge breath, I open my eyes just as a vision flashes across my mind.

"Jesse?"

*Slowly catching my breath, I look around the room, certain he must be here, but come up empty. *Stupid nightmare.* Ladders? It makes no sense.*

Taking another deep breath, I squeeze my palms into my eyes and count to ten, telling myself over and over that it was just a dream.

My emotions were all over the place yesterday, and after waking earlier in the night, I should have known a nightmare was coming. *But why did it have to feel so real?*

Chapter Eighteen

Willow - Thirteen Years Ago / Age Fourteen

Jade sings to herself, off-key, as we lie in the grass, staring up at the sky. “Maybe I’ll be an actress,” she says after she’s finished the song. “I don’t think I’m going to make it as a singer.”

I burst out laughing before rolling to face her, resting my head on my hands. “You’d be an amazing actress, but if you leave this town, you better be taking me with you.”

She blows out a raspberry before raising her eyebrows. “As if I’d even let you stay if you wanted to. It’s you and me forever. Sorry to say, you’re stuck with me.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. So where should we go?”

She pretends to ponder my question before smiling wide. “Hollywood! Obviously. Let’s jump on a bus as soon as we turn eighteen.”

I laugh again before lying back down, my gaze settling back on the clouds. “What will I do while you are off becoming a

star?"

Jade rolls over this time, reaching out to grab my hand. "You can do anything you want to do. You're amazing, Willow. We're amazing. We're going places; I can feel it."

My heart warms, because she's right. We are amazing. Only four more years until we can break free. At eighteen, I'm gone. I'm ready to leave this town. We both are. It'll be our time to shine.

Chapter Nineteen

Jesse

I startle awake as though someone slapped me, and a cold sweat coats my skin. The house is dead silent, so I'm momentarily confused as to why I woke, until I realize it doesn't matter. I'm fine. Closing my eyes again, I try to drift off, but the second my head sinks into the pillow, I'm awakened again. Only this time I'm alert enough to process it.

“Nooo!” *Willow.*

Adrenaline kicks in and my heart pounds as I run toward her room, skidding to a halt in front of her door.

She's quiet again so I pause, not wanting to wake her if she's okay. *Fuck, did I imagine it? Am I going insane?*

“Jade, no,” she whimpers, and my heart thuds so hard I swear it's going to break out of my rib cage.

I'm reaching for the door handle before I've even taken my next breath and find it physically impossible to pry myself away, the pain in her voice too much to bear. The door creaks

open and I sneak into the room, struggling with the darkness as my eyes take a moment to adjust.

I move toward the bed using sound alone, and it's only when I'm close enough that I can feel her presence that a faint outline of her face finally comes into view. "Willow, you're okay."

With her eyes squeezed shut, she grips the bedsheet between her fingers and shakes her head back and forth, crying, "No, no."

She stops moving after that, as though she's accepted whatever fate her dream has dealt her, and I can't help myself. I gently run my finger down her cheek, finding a few rogue tears as I go.

My chest tightens, and I know I shouldn't be here, but with my brain apparently relinquishing its rights to decision-making, I stay put until her breathing slows.

What am I doing? *Leave, Jesse.*

Stepping back quickly, I run a hand through my hair and look around the room, hoping it'll give me the answer I need. Stay or go? Stay or go? But when Willow murmurs it makes my decision easier, and I creep away slowly, clicking the door shut just as she sucks in a breath and says, "*Jesse?*"

It takes everything in me to ignore her, but I rush back to the couch and fall on top of it, closing my eyes as I shove a pillow over my head, my short shallow breaths making it difficult to calm down.

Despite knowing she's okay, a lump lodges in my throat, my pulse taking longer than it should to return to normal. And when my adrenaline high wears away, I'm left with a throbbing headache and a ringing in my ears. There's no way I'm sleeping after that.



“Again, why are we here so early?” Pippa groans as her face drops into her hands.

“It's not that early,” I say for the third time, but I'm lying. It's only six thirty. I woke up at five for a run. Actually *woke* is a lie. As I predicted, I was still wide awake after Willow's nightmare, worried about her. *And maybe a little worried about me.*

When I'd returned from my run, Willow was gone, so I made Pippa join me for breakfast. The less time spent at that house, the better.

“You owe me big-time for this. I was having very pleasant dreams,” she says, bouncing her eyebrows with a grin.

“Come on, Pippa. I don't need to know that.”

She barks out a laugh. “Oh, are you jealous?” she asks, batting her eyelids.

More like grossed out. I stare her down with a blank expression. “So jealous,” I deadpan. “I want you; I need you. Oh baby. Oh baby.”

Pippa’s jaw drops as she gapes. “Did you just quote *10 Things I Hate About You*?”

Fuck.

Tucking her knees under her on the booth, she bounces in excitement. “Did Jesse Hastings just quote a rom-com? This is huge! Why is there no media around right now?” She exaggeratedly searches the room.

“Fuck off.”

Sitting back down, Pip pulls her lips between her teeth and tries to hold back her smile. “Okay, I’ll stop. But I happen to know someone else that throws out the occasional movie quote here and there. You wouldn’t know anything about that, though, right?”

“Right,” I say bluntly, refusing to give her anything else. I can’t believe I just did that. I do *not* quote movies. Especially nineties rom-coms. *Goddammit.* I blame the lack of sleep... and Willow.

“Okay,” Pip says again, thankfully leaving it alone. Though I am curious as to why she’d ask me about Willow, but I can’t question her or she’ll read more into it. And I don’t need that right now.

God, Willow is getting under my skin. It’s making me wish I’d said no to Pippa; then I’d have avoided all of this and never

seen her again.

When we've finished our breakfast, I leave Pippa to order more coffee and head to the restroom. Anything to delay our inevitable venture back to Willow's place. Though I have no idea how I'm going to avoid her for the next couple of days. She's everywhere. If I'm not seeing her, I'm hearing about her, or worse, thinking about her. I'm losing my goddamn mind.

I have no idea how long I've been washing my hands when my phone vibrates in my pocket, causing me to jump. I read the text from Pippa on my way back to the table, and for once, I want to thank her for being so annoying.

Pippa: The longer you take, the more I add to the check.

I send her a middle finger emoji as I smile, and an idea pops to mind. An idea that will help distract me, and she's going to love it.



I'm silent when I slide back into the booth, but Pippa doesn't take any notice. According to her, I'm a moody asshole in general, so this is pretty much normal. Though when I ask her to play tourist with me—to avoid Willow's

house—I can tell she senses it's more than my usual grumpiness. And yet, I knew she'd agree.

We spend a couple of hours wandering around, taking in the sights until Pippa complains about the heat. And I don't blame her. It's the hottest day we've had so far. If I wasn't reluctant to go back to Willow's, I'd have given up an hour ago.

"One last store and then I'm going to need a drink. I'm thinking housewares," Pippa says, motioning somewhere down the street.

"Let's just get a drink now," I say, hoping we can bypass everything and go straight to the break. *I need a hard drink and it's barely ten a.m.* "Housewares aren't really my thing."

Pippa scoffs. "Neither is candy, but we still went to the candy shop."

"That was for *you*."

"And so is this." She smiles and grabs my hand, giving my fingers a squeeze.

Closing my eyes, I subtly wince at her touch but plaster a fake smile on my face, once again channeling Willow's way of life, not even realizing how quickly that smile would drop.

"Willow!" Pippa calls out as we walk through the door, and I come to a halt, holding back an incredulous laugh. I knew the gift and homeware shop was Willow's. *How did I forget?*

Willow looks up at the sound of her sister's voice, but doesn't notice me lagging behind her. And I'm thankful for the few seconds of respite it allows me to prepare. "Pippa, hi," she

says with a smile, subtly hiding something under the counter in front of her.

“Got time to show us around?” Pippa asks with a lift of her shoulders. At the word *us*, Willow’s eyes flash to where I’m still hovering near the door.

A light shade of pink coats her cheeks as she brushes a hair out of her eyes. “Jesse,” she says as a greeting while all I do is nod. “Of course. Come on in, and I’ll give you a quick tour.”

Her hand briefly drops out of view and then she stands, brushing her palms over her dress. “Where do you want to start?” she says, clearly hoping nobody noticed. But we both did.

Pippa eyes her curiously, and I can see her mind ticking over. I take a few quick steps forward to stop her, but she shakes me off, running to the other side of the counter, trying to get a look at what Willow has to hide. They scuffle for a few seconds before Willow huffs and Pippa holds her hand triumphantly in the air. “Ha! Got it.”

“Childish much?” Willow grumbles and I almost smile. *Almost.*

Opening her hand, Pippa reveals a very expensive-looking necklace, and my stomach knots as a burning sensation fills my chest. *Who the hell is giving Willow jewelry?* If I find out *that* guy is behind this...

“Wow, Willow. This looks expensive. Have you been hiding a boyfriend?”

Willow rolls her eyes, her expression doing nothing to hide how absurd she finds that notion. But why? She's so fucking beautiful it pains me. Not that I want her to have a boyfriend but... *holy shit*, I need to rein in these thoughts.

"I made it, Pip," Willow says with a hint of nerves, saving me from my madness. "Well, I didn't make it today. I...I finally finished it. I've been working on it for a while."

"What?" Pippa's face lights up like a kid looking at candy, and she smiles proudly. "You said you were only just *thinking* about making jewelry. You've already started. This is amazing, Sis. Can you show me what it looks like on?"

"Sure, turn around." Willow steps forward, reaching for the necklace, but Pippa backs away with her hands in the air.

"Oh, no. The first piece you design needs to be worn by you."

Willow pauses, her brows furrowing as she nibbles on her bottom lip, slowly raising her hand to her neck, holding it there like a necklace. The sight makes my throat dry as I picture my hand in its place while I lean forward and set her lip free. *Jesus. What the fuck was that?*

"Ah, okay," Willow says, cutting into my thoughts. "Will you help?"

I notice Pippa shaking her head out of the corner of my eye, and when she waves her long, manicured nails in the air, I know what's coming. "Definitely not...nails," she says before looking my way. "Jesse, can you please help her do it?" she

adds, turning back to Willow. “I’m going to grab one of your love potions from the display. I think we should do a marketing campaign with your designs.”

Pippa hands Willow the necklace before walking toward the other side of the store, giving me no chance to argue.

Not that I can with my mind locked on what she said. *Love potion?*

Willow and I watch Pippa until she ducks out of sight, and then the silence between us is deafening.

Taking a deep breath, I turn around and find Willow already trying to secure the necklace in place, the struggle evident on her face, but she’s a determined little thing.

I only watch for another few seconds before I’m just as frustrated as she is. “Oh for fuck’s sake. Give it to me,” I say reluctantly, my voice coming out a little rusty.

Without a word, Willow holds the necklace out for me, her throat bobbing as I reach forward to impatiently grab it. But once the delicate gold sits between my fingers, I still, suddenly acutely aware of what I’m about to do as Willow spins slowly, lifting her hair and exposing the slightly flushed skin on her neck.

I gulp, a tense feeling taking over me, and after raising the necklace over her head, I hold my breath, deciding that inhaling her scent is the worst thing I could do right now.

My fingers brush against her skin, and my heart races as she quivers, sending me into a panic. Though her reaction was

subtle, I notice and slam my eyes shut to block it all out, instead focusing all my energy on getting the clasp together. *Correction, that is the worst thing I could do... because holy hell.*

I ignore the way she feels beneath my touch. The way I affect her. The way *she* affects *me*. *But God, it's hard to pretend.*

As soon as I'm done, I step back and clear my throat, my fingers still tingling.

Willow startles as though coming out of a trance before turning back around, a shy smile on her face.

We're silent again until Pippa squeals from behind me and runs toward Willow, pushing me out of the way. "I was certain that the oils were your thing, but *this*... I think jewelry just might be your calling. It's absolutely stunning, Willow. Don't you think, Jesse?"

"Beautiful," I say honestly, and I'm not just talking about the necklace.

Willow blushes on top of her already pink skin, drawing my eyes to her chest before I spin around, busying myself with the rest of the store. *This is bad.*

Pippa and Willow take a few photos and chat about some ideas while I head outside, not even bothering to say goodbye.

And it's not until I'm out of her space that I can breathe.

Fuuuck!

I *want* Willow. Like I've never wanted anyone before. I want to run my fingers over every inch of her skin, I want to feel her quivering body beneath me, and I want to fuck the fake smile right off her face. But more than anything, I just want to kiss her. Everything about her is sucking me in. She's a succubus, and she fucking haunts me... Makes me crave things I've never wanted before.

And I really need to get the hell out of here before I act on it.

Five days down. Two days to go.

Chapter Twenty

Willow

I'm screwed. Totally freaking screwed.

As Pippa apologizes for Jesse's quick exit, all I can think about is the way he made my entire body break out in goose bumps after only the slightest touch, and the fire he ignited deep within me, something I never thought I'd feel.

There's no denying it anymore—I want him. I've never really wanted anyone before. But I want him.

Oh God.

I smile and nod while Pippa tells me about her marketing ideas for the shop, and when she finally follows Jesse out the door, I fall in a heap on my desk.

How could I let this happen? I'm betraying my sister. Just like Ashley did. I'm not that person. I've *never* been that person. But I can't get him out of my head.

I can't go home. I can't be around them.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Sara asks out of nowhere, making me jump. *I didn't even know she was here.*

“Jesus! Where did you come from?”

“Sorry.” She giggles but at least appears a little apologetic. “I assumed you heard the bell.”

Shit! “I didn't. I must have been in another world.”

Sara's expression turns sympathetic and I internally cringe. “That was your sister and the hockey star, right?”

“It was. I'm sorry you missed them.”

“Is everything okay with you two?”

What? “What do you mean?”

“They just left the shop and now you're a mess.”

“Why, thank you,” I say sarcastically, running a hand through my hair to fix it up.

Sara laughs. “You know what I mean.” *Unfortunately I do.* “I just wondered...” She trails off, and I'm not sure if she's doing it because she expects me to fill in the blanks or if she's giving me a chance to steer the conversation in another direction. So, I go with a little of both.

“There's nothing going on with Pippa. I'm just tired. It's been a day.”

“You mean, it's been a week,” Sara says and I laugh. She's not wrong. The last five days have been odd.

I'm about to tell her as much when a sassy grin appears on her face and she leans in to whisper. “I have to ask... what's

he like?” *Dammit!* Why didn’t I see that coming?

He’s annoying, moody, obnoxious, mysterious, breathtaking, all-consuming...

“He seems nice enough.”

“That’s it?” Sara laughs incredulously. “That’s all you’re going to give me?”

“For now,” I say honestly and she pauses, considering my response.

“I’ll take that.” She smiles. “But I’m here whenever you want to talk.”

I smile back as my heart races and my mind whirs. Sara always tells me she’s here for me, that’s nothing new, but with the way she said it just now, I have to wonder if I’m being obvious about my feelings. Not that I’m going to ask. “Thanks, Sara. I know.”



After closing up the shop, I walk the long journey to my parents’ property, arriving there when it’s dark.

Kicking off my shoes, I let myself in and follow the sounds of chatter to the kitchen, finding my mom and dad with one of their neighbors, Maeve.

“Willow!” Mom practically squeals when she notices me.
“Just the person I wanted to see.”

I stop in my tracks, raising my hands as if I’m under arrest and frown. “Why? And hi, Maeve.”

Dad laughs at my antics, while my mother ignores me.

Maeve smiles with a cup of tea raised to her mouth. “It’s lovely to see you, dear. I heard you looked beautiful at your dad’s celebration.”

“She was gorgeous,” Mom says before I have the chance to respond, and then immediately launches into her question. “Now that you’re living with Jesse, we want the gossip.”

My brows rise, and when I glance over at Dad, I find his hands raised just like mine were. *Don’t worry, Dad, I know you’re not part of the “we.”*

“You want the gossip on your own daughter?” I ask, hoping Mom will hear my words and realize what she’s asking.

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint... There’s nothing to tell you. It’s only been two nights.”

Maeve frowns as Mom sighs, like I’ve ruined their entire evening.

“What makes you ask?” I say, even though I should drop it. “You’re acting as if you were expecting something.”

Mom bites her cheek and looks to Maeve before her eyes meet mine again. “We were just talking... Did you notice

they're not very *affectionate* with each other?"

I did. "Nope. Not really."

"Oh. I just always remember Pippa being so flaunty with her relationships, and they don't seem to... I don't know."

"We might be wrong," Maeve adds. "But I saw them at the diner and she just seemed different."

I've definitely noticed it; I just hadn't realized anyone else had. "I'm sure it's just that she's grown up and she's taking this relationship more seriously."

Mom thinks on that for a moment and her face lights up. "Of course. That's it. Oh Maeve, it had to be that."

Or it's fake. Woah. That idea clearly keeps popping into my head as a way for me to eradicate my guilt.

"Enough about that then. Are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?" Mom says with a frown.

The what? Shit? Moms always know. Butterflies swarm my stomach as I subtly clench my fists to stop my hands from shaking.

"Ah... what elephant?" I ask.

She gives me a look that says I'm not fooling anyone as Maeve smiles beside her. I look to Dad for help again, but he's not even looking my way anymore.

Mom's face morphs into something akin to giddiness, and I internally groan.

“I want to know all about the handsome mystery man you were dancing with,” she says with a bounce to her eyebrows.

“Me too,” Maeve adds. “Your mom filled me in, said he knows Jack and Elaine.”

I don’t know Jack and Elaine, but *thank God that’s all it is*. I release a breath and sigh, my muscles instantly relaxing now that I know she’s talking about Alex. “What about him?”

“For one, who is he? And two, why did Jesse cut in? It looked like the two of you were connecting.”

“Who?” *Dammit.*

“Mystery man.” *Of course that’s who she meant. I’m an idiot.*

“He was nice, but you know me... One dance with a stranger was more than enough, and Pippa noticed. She sent Jesse over to rescue me.”

“How lovely of them both,” Mom says with a fake grin, making me wonder if I get them from her.

“Say what you really want to say,” I challenge, all while Maeve’s head ping-pongs between the two of us and Dad sips a glass of wine.

“It’s nothing,” Mom says, before telling me it’s actually *not* nothing at all. “I just thought it was nice that you were finally...ah...putting yourself out there. You didn’t look like you needed saving. Maybe it’s all up here?” She points to her head, and I huff out a laugh. *Where does she think thoughts and feelings come from?*

“And you know we’re all rooting for you, dear,” Maeve adds. “Wouldn’t it be lovely to find someone who could take care of you?”

It would certainly be better to have just *one* person “taking care of me” instead of this whole damn town thinking it’s their responsibility.

“I would like to find someone one day,” I say sweetly because it’s Maeve. “But I’m still grateful Jesse cut in.”

“I guess it makes me feel a *little bit* better about him. Maybe he is a good guy for Pippa.”

A lump forms in my throat, but I force out a “definitely,” without giving my feelings away. *I think.*

“I mean, I knew that if Pippa was dating him, he had to be giving her something good, right, Maeve.” Mom bounces her eyebrows again as a small smirk plays on her lips, causing Dad to finally react as he cringes along with me.

“Ew, Mom. No.”

Her smile fades instantly as she realizes where our minds went. “Hush. I didn’t mean *that*. I meant stability... money.”

Oh. “Sorry. I’m not with it today,” I say with a grin. “I haven’t been sleeping well.” *Dammit.* I wince. *Why’d I have to go and open up that can of worms?*

The room falls silent, and I know I’ve just set up my own ambush.

Pulling three mugs down from the top cupboard, Mom goes about preparing us all a tea. “I think we should sit down,” she says before turning to Dad. “Honey, can you finish up with dinner?”

Dad nods, giving me a sympathetic pat on the back as I walk past, following Mom and Maeve into the dining room, knowing she’s going to keep prying until I’ve satisfactorily eased her mind. With Maeve just there for the ride. Which would piss me off if I still cared. But since everyone in this town seems to know my business, why hide it?

With the exception of my current feelings—they need to stay buried.

I pull out a chair just as Mom hits me with her question, not even letting my ass touch the seat. “Is it because of Jade?”

My gaze shoots her way as my brows furrow in confusion. *Why would she come to that conclusion?*

“Bea dropped by after she saw you,” Mom continues, answering my silent question. Of course she did.

“That’s nice of her.” *I guess. Why do I still live in this small town with its complete lack of privacy?* “I’m fine.”

“Then why aren’t you sleeping?”

Because I think I have feelings for my sister’s boyfriend... and maybe a little because of Jade.

“Because I’m stressed about work.”

“Oh Willow.” Mom reaches across the table and connects our hands, her thumb stroking my palm. “I forgot that I’d offered to help tomorrow. I’ll come by in the morning.”

I’d forgotten too. Or maybe I just assumed it wouldn’t happen. “Thank you, I’d love that.”

Mom nods, and I open my mouth to discuss details when she says, “But about Jade.”

Ugh! I mentally stop myself from groaning out loud. I would have been better off facing my guilt at home.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I plead.

Mom’s face drops and she comes across offended. “With me?” she says with a pout as Maeve rubs her arm to comfort her.

Goddammit. “With *anyone*,” I stress, because it’s true. “I’m sorry, Mom. It was a long time ago. I promise, I’m *fine*.”

I am. Mostly. It’s actually the least of my worries right now.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jesse

I'm anxious as I contemplate the best time to discuss what's on my mind with Pippa. But when she walks out of her room and immediately starts making plans for our remaining days, I decide that time is now.

“Can we head home straight after the workshop tomorrow?” I blurt, cutting Pippa off. I've done my bit, it's time to go.

“What?!” Pippa spins around so quickly she has to grip the wall for support.

She's standing before me in her pajamas—a revealing barely-there silk camisole and shorts—but I feel nothing. She's gorgeous, and her tits are practically on full display, but I don't even get a twitch. It would be so much easier if I had feelings for *her*. It's a much safer option than where my mind keeps drifting.

Ignoring her state of undress, I move to join her in the kitchen and grab a bowl for dessert, acting as if what I said was a completely reasonable request. All the while I feel her

eyes boring into the side of my face as she waits for more information.

“I got a text from Coach when you were in the shower,” I lie. “He needs me home.” Another lie. “It’s important.” Lies, lies. So many lies.

Pippa’s brows dip and she plays with the ends of her hair. “Graham texted you during the off season?” she questions, knowing that’s unlikely, but I stick with my story.

“He did,” I say as confidently as I can. “Are you happy to go? Or should I make my own way?”

“Your own way?” she mocks, her arms crossing in front of her, pushing her tits up until they peek out of her top. *And yet...still nothing.*

“I’m a resourceful man,” I say, even though I have no idea what I’ll do if she says no.

“No one is driving you ten hours.”

“I’ll hitchhike.” I’m bluffing and she knows it.

“Stop being a dick. When does he need you?”

“Tuesday?” I croak out but it sounds like a question.

“Ugh. I guess we don’t have a choice then. Okay. We’ll leave straight after the workshop tomorrow morning.”

Thank fuck. It may only be a day early, but it’s a win.

Smiling, I pat her head on my way past before walking into the bathroom and throwing my things in my bag. “Thanks for

being a team player, Pip,” I call out and wait for her to chuckle.

Right on cue, she starts to laugh but pauses. “Ugh. Why didn’t I cash in on the favor I now owe you. Is that still an option?”

“Nope. It’s way too late for that.” I laugh when she groans, my mood now lifted.



Willow doesn’t come home that night until I’m lying on the couch attempting to sleep, and if Pippa hadn’t told me where she was, I know it would have kept me up, wondering if something was wrong. When I really shouldn’t care.

Closing my eyes, I pretend to be dead to the world as she walks past. Lucky I did, because she pauses right near me, and I swear I can feel her intense gaze before she moves on, allowing me to finally breathe again.

After another sleepless night, I wake early and finish packing my things before heading out to get Pippa a coffee. She’ll be better company if she’s caffeinated.

A bell chimes over the door at the diner, and the sound makes my body tense like never before. Fucking bells. The sooner I get back to San Francisco the better.

Since it's still early, the place is quiet, but when I notice Tate in a back booth, I contemplate turning around and braving Pippa's pissy mood. I was certain he'd be gone by now. He *should* be gone by now. But so should I.

"Hey Robin! Fancy seeing you here," Tate calls out before I can leave.

I force a smile and wink at the cashier before responding. "Since there aren't many options for coffee at this early hour, I'm going to say the chances were high."

Tate slides out of his seat and strides toward me, his usual smirk in place. "Order your coffee and then we need to chat," he states, before turning and walking away again.

Since I don't want to make a scene, I do as he says, adding a breakfast burrito to my order before following him in silence.

"What the fuck was that bullshit you pulled at the function?" he asks the moment I sit down, his teeth clenched underneath his fake smile. With all his projected confidence, I've rattled him. And that makes me even more concerned about just how fucked-up this situation is. Not that I let him see that concern.

"The bullshit *I* pulled?" I ask, crossing my arms in front of me. "*You* sent your friend to dance with her! Shouldn't you be wanting to *stay the fuck away*? And what have you told him?"

"I haven't said a word." He scoffs. "And I don't control Alex. He does whatever the hell he wants." *Alex*. I don't need

to hear his name. That dick is on my shit list. “Plus he has nothing to do with this.”

“And yet you signaled for him to back off?”

His brows furrow before the corner of his lips curl into a smirk, presumably realizing I noticed. “Is that what you think that was? Fine. Yes, it was a message.”

“A message? Really? How about you just man up and say it to my face.”

“I was trying to make sure *you* stayed the hell away. I was around her for *years* and nothing happened. She doesn’t remember me and she doesn’t remember that day. *I kept my distance*. You blow into town for five fucking minutes and you’re moving in with her. How did you expect me to react?”

He’s not wrong, and that’s exactly why I’m leaving. “Believe it or not, I have no plans to dredge up the past. I know what will happen if she remembers, and I know it won’t bode well for any of us. I’m trying to stay away. But you and your man need to *leave her be*. When are you heading home?” A little part of me worries about leaving him here with her, but I don’t think it’s wise to stay any longer.

“I’m leaving today. Home to Seattle. Within the hour.”

“Good. Me too. So we won’t have any issues. We can both go back to our blissfully happy, Willow-free lives.”

Tate snorts out a laugh. “I’m glad one of us is blissfully happy.”

Guilt hits me as he finishes his coffee and rises from the booth. When all the shit went down twelve years ago, I left. Somehow I lucked out with an amazing foster family and was able to follow my dreams. Tate wasn't so lucky. From what I was told, he ended up with another family in the area that wasn't much better than ours was. And the guilt I feel about leaving him still eats me alive.

Because he told me to go.

For the short time we lived together, we were like brothers. I may have never experienced what it was like to have parents, but I had Tate. And even though, like a brother, he was annoying as fuck, we had each other's backs. We went through things no one should ever have to go through. And in the end, it changed us both.

"You dating Pippa means we will always have a problem," Tate says, interrupting my thoughts. "So if staying away doesn't work out, we'll have to think of some other way to deal with it. But for now, it's goodbye." He storms off, leaving his threat hanging in the air and my nerve endings on edge. I see red. *Who the hell does he think he is? And how did we let this all go so wrong?*

"Why'd you come back if you're worried?" I yell as he reaches the door. "Why not stay away for good?"

Tate pauses, his hand gripping the handle as he looks over his shoulder. "It's not *me* I'm worried about."

With that, he pushes out into the street, raising a hand above his head in a half wave.

The server delivers my coffee and food, but just looking at it makes me want to throw up. That entire conversation has my skin prickling. I know he's right. I'm more connected to her than he is—always have been—but what the fuck did that threat mean? And to think I'd just been feeling guilty.

My stomach sinks as a knot forms in my chest. I really need to get out of here, now more than ever. For my sake *and* hers.



“We’re leaving,” I say as soon as I walk in the house not even worrying if Willow is home. “If it’s not already in your bag, it’s staying.” I slam the front door, startling Pippa as she texts on her phone, her sour expression telling me coffee was a good idea.

“The workshop’s not for a couple of hours,” she says, reaching out to take the cup from my hand.

“That may be true, but it will take us just under an hour to drive there, and I need preparation time.” *Seems like a valid excuse.* Thank God, they don’t have any hockey facilities here.

“Fine,” she says. “My bag’s over there. I just need to send this text.”

My anger fades when she doesn’t argue again, and I whisper a quick thanks before packing her car.

“Can we stop past Willow’s shop to say goodbye to my mom?” she asks as we pull out of Willow’s driveway, no emotion in her voice. She looks so defeated that I almost pull over and tell her we can stay the remaining night, but I can’t.

“Yeah, ah, we can do that. Is Willow there?”

“No, Mom’s managing the shop while Willow grabs some supplies from the next town. I said goodbye for you by the way. You missed her.”

“Thanks,” I deadpan, like I don’t care, but a sharp pain coats my chest at the thought of never seeing Willow again. I just can’t dwell on it. *Let’s hope the town she’s going to is not the same one we are.*



We say our goodbyes to both of Pippa’s parents—turns out her dad was there too—and then we’re finally on our way, leaving my nightmare behind us.

Pippa’s only silent for a few minutes before she turns my way, a grumpy look on her face. “So, what’s so urgent that Coach needs you home?”

“Contract stuff,” I lie, but it’s a pretty decent one if I say so myself.

Pippa huffs but drops the subject and turns on the music instead, leaving me in peace.

I offered to drive hoping it would calm me down, but if Pippa spends the entire time giving me the silent treatment as she messes around with her phone, I don't think that's going to happen.

Taking a deep breath, I open my mouth to speak when flashing lights and rolling sirens draw my attention. My eyes lock on the heart-clenching accident blocking the bridge out of town, but before I've had the chance to even question what happened, Pippa's ripping off her seat belt and sprinting from the car, confusing the hell out of me.

That is, until I remember something she said earlier and my own crippling panic sets in.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jesse

Broken images flash through my mind. A footprint. A hand. Blood. So much blood. But I can't move and I can't scream. Though I'm not even sure I want to do either of those things. My eyes remain locked on the crash a few hundred feet in front of me, but I can't see anything. It's blurry, unfocused. Almost like I'm trying to see without glasses even though I have 20/20 vision.

I try hard to push through the fog, but it takes five fucking minutes for me to break out of my spiraling thoughts. And another minute to get my bearings.

As soon as I'm able to think clearly, I inwardly curse myself for wasting time and fling my door open, taking off in a run in the direction Pippa disappeared.

When I find her, she's standing behind police tape, yelling at an officer blocking her way, her fists clenched by her side as she stands tall, ready to fight. But judging by his sympathetic expression, the officer in front of her doesn't want to fight back.

“I understand, and I’m sorry, but like my colleagues said, I can’t let you through.”

Jesus! How many people has she spoken to in a brief space of time? Or has it been longer than I thought?

“You must know *something*,” Pippa pleads as my eyes seek the charred mess hidden behind them, only partially blocked by the police car in the middle of the bridge. And even though I’m closer now, I still can’t make out what I’m looking at. Car, truck, minivan. It’s impossible to tell anything through the billowing smoke and black destruction.

“I don’t have any information yet. I’m sorry,” the officer repeats, and from his weary eyes and dropped shoulders, I’m guessing he’s telling the truth.

“It can’t be. Please,” Pippa mumbles under her breath before shaking.

Stepping in behind her, I hesitantly cup her shoulder to let her know that I’m there but stay silent. She barely acknowledges me as we both stare at the scene in front of us, but after a moment, her hand rises and she grabs my fingers, giving me a squeeze.

Word must have filtered back to the town because it’s not long before a crowd gathers and whispers fill the air, everyone trying to determine whether a loved one is missing. My heart stays lodged in my throat the entire time, my need to leave this town long forgotten. *What if it’s her?*

Pushing that thought out of my mind, I again wait frozen while more and more people ask for information, but like Pippa, get nothing but apologies.

“Have you tried calling?” I ask, my voice coming out scratchy, drawing attention to the fact that I haven’t spoken a word since our car came to a stop.

Pippa peers over her shoulder with a blank expression, her face ashen, her eyes full of unshed tears. “Who?”

Her response gives me pause. “Willow?”

Pippa’s eyes widen before her gaze flashes to the burned-out car. “You think it’s Willow too?” She sucks in a breath and her hand flies to her mouth. “Oh my God. You think it’s *Willow*.” She expels a high-pitched squeal before doubling over, and I barely catch her as she falls to the ground.

Shit. I just made things so much worse.

“Shh. It’s okay. We don’t know. No one knows. I just—”

“*Police have confirmed the driver was male,*” a voice says from behind me, and the relieved sigh I expel is so loud the person next to me shoots me a glare. But I don’t care. The weight of everything I was holding hits me at once, and I drop to the ground next to Pippa, wrapping an arm around her shoulders at the same time her quiet sobs turn silent, and she shakes uncontrollably.

“Pippa, it’s okay. Your sisters and parents are—”

“Oh God,” she says suddenly, her voice shaky. “Please don’t be him.”

I stare at her in confusion until my phone buzzes in my pocket, breaking the spell. Ignoring it, I run a hand through my hair before helping her stand. *Who is “him”?*



When the crowd grows out of control, we're forced away and advised that information will be released in due time.

Of course, there's a lot of backlash toward that, and as we walk back to Pippa's car, I hear a cop mumble something about "living in a small fucking town," but for the first time, I don't agree with him.

Yes, I hate being here. I hate the feel small towns give me; I hate the vibe. The hurt I experienced growing up left scars behind that I'll never get over. But seeing everyone come together like this, the concerned faces, the anguish, the *support*...it's impossible for that not to affect you. So, when we get back to the main street, and Pippa suggests we head to the diner just like every other member of the town, I easily agree.

My phone buzzes again as we squeeze into a small booth near the back of the room. It's the fifth time it's rung since we got in the car, so I rip it out of my pocket to silence it, only to see my teammate's name flashing across the screen. The same teammate that's been asking Seth about me.

My brows furrow as I try to figure out why he's calling. But it's not important. Right now, I need to ask Pippa who she's worried about. "Pippa, I—" A thought strikes me and I pause midsentence, changing the direction I was going.

"Pip, why is Ryan blowing up my phone?" I try to remain neutral, but when her eyes flash to mine I know what I said affected her.

"What?" she asks, looking like a deer in headlights, confirming my suspicion.

"Why is Ryan blowing up my phone?" I repeat, slower this time, ready to spell it out for her.

Her entire body sags, and a relieved smile appears on her face. *What the actual fuck?*

"Pip, what's going on?"

"I could kill him."

Huh? "Ryan?"

"Yes! I was worried it was either Willow or Ryan in the wreck."

Again, what the actual fuck?

"I'm going to need you to explain it more clearly, Pippa. And from the very beginning."

Burying her face in her hands, she mumbles inaudibly while shaking her head.

"Louder, Pip," I demand, close to my breaking point.

“Ryan and I hooked up last summer and then slept together a few times in secret during the season. But you know me. I kept things casual. Anyway, we...” She stops abruptly, her eyes widening as she stares at me, tugging at the hem of her sweater. Her telltale sign for nerves. “What’s the look? Are you mad?”

Mad? I’m livid. Why isn’t he here instead of me?

Taking a deep breath, I bounce my shoulders and will myself to calm down, but it’s no use and I find myself speaking through gritted teeth. “Why isn’t he here if you’re together,” I say with a curt tone. “Did you actually think any of this through? I’m hoping to get a new contract with the team when mine expires this season, and now it’s going to look like I’m in some kind of love triangle with a teammate. This is insane.”

“We’re not together. We haven’t been together in months. He got nervous about dating a member of staff and—”

“He changed his mind?”

“It seems so, yes.”

“Shit.”

“I told him not to come.”

“But since you completely panicked back there, I’m going to guess you didn’t think he listened.”

“Correct.”

“And you know what your panic means?”

She's silent for a beat, so I take a few sips of the water that suddenly appeared in front of me, patiently waiting for her to answer. Pippa thanks the server for us both before her lips pull up into a lopsided grin. "I don't know. Probably for the same reason you were so *panicked* at the possibility of it being my sister."

Water comes flying out of my mouth as I uncontrollably start coughing, somehow croaking out, "I...what?"

Pippa laughs. "Well if that wasn't an admission of guilt then nothing is."

I still pretend not to know what she's referring to until she adds, "You have a thing for Willow."

Jesus. Fuck! I want to tell her she's wrong, but since I feel like I just got busted with my hand down my pants midjerk, I can't. My throat dries and it pains me to swallow, but I'm too worked up to get a drink, in case she says something more.

"I don't—" My phone rings again, saving me from whatever I was about to say, and I hand it to Pippa without saying a word, watching her smile drop as she answers.

"Ryan?" she whispers into my cell.

I get up to walk away, intent on giving them privacy, and instantly lock eyes with Willow across the room, her shattered expression almost bringing me to my knees.

We both freeze, but the second she registers me standing in front of her she takes off in a run, crashing into me at full speed, her arms lifting to cup my face. "You're okay?" she

whispers, her voice choked with emotion, and the sound of it breaks my heart.

On instinct, my hands move around her, gliding along her back before locking her tightly against me. Her head falls to my chest as I rock her slightly, whispering reassurance in her ear. “It’s okay. We’re all okay.”

I’m not sure how long we stay like that, but for something so dangerous, being in her arms feels too good to stop.

Whispers start up that the driver was in his eighties, and the energy shifts in the room. Willow and I pull apart, but our connection remains as we watch some people cry out in relief, some cry in pain, and one sprint from the diner at an alarming speed.

My heart clenches for the stranger, and it’s a new feeling for me...empathy toward someone I don’t know.

When the commotion dies down, Willow’s equally pained expression meets mine. “Why didn’t Pippa answer? I’ve been calling her.”

Good question. We could have all avoided so much heartache.

“I don’t know, Willow. I’m sorry.”

Releasing one hand from around her, I brush a hair away from her eyes before letting my hand fall, caressing her cheek on the way down. I wait for my skin to crawl, but it doesn’t. Instead my pulse spikes and a warmth spreads through me. Willow closes her eyes, but only a second before they shoot

open and she springs back, just like I did the first night we ran into each other barely a few days ago. *And fuck, it hurts.*

“Oh God, I don’t know why I did any of that. I’m so sorry.”

The words “I’m not,” sit on the tip of my tongue, but I bite them back. This is not a situation we should be in. “It’s fine,” I say instead, an evenness to my tone. “Emotions are high at the moment. Mistakes happen. Let’s see Pippa.”

I feel my walls slip back in place, making me realize how close I was to completely letting my guard down.

I’m pissed off with myself so I don’t wait for her to follow before walking back toward Pippa and sliding into the seat opposite her.

Pippa offers me a shy smile as she hands over my phone and grimaces. “How badly do you need to get back to San Francisco?” she asks unexpectedly, but I’m only half paying attention. I throw a glance over my shoulder to see Willow talking to a young woman with two small children, and it’s not until I see she’s fine that my mind travels back to what Pippa just said.

I don’t answer her question, mainly because I’m sick of all the lies, but instead I ask *why*.

“According to the guy sitting behind me,”—she subtly points toward an older man with a handlebar mustache. A man I recognize from the bar across from the florist—“the road’s closed until at least tomorrow.”

“Shit! What about the hockey clinic?”

Pippa sighs. “I’m about to call them to reschedule. A lot of the kids were coming from here or farther out anyway, so they won’t be able to get there.”

Ignoring the fact that I’m stuck here for another night, I focus on the kids. “I’ll come back. See if you can find me some time in the next few weeks, and I’ll come back.”

Pippa’s eyes light up as she smiles.

“But...” I cut in before she makes plans. “I’m driving straight up and back with only a night of accommodation, and I’m staying next to the facilities”

Willow appears as Pippa rushes out, “Deal,” and then her attention shifts.

She and Willow hug and cry and smile and cry some more. At least Pippa cries; Willow’s tears remain unshed. Meanwhile, I’m so anxious I can’t get my knee to stop bouncing.

“I need air,” I blurt, interrupting them before racing toward the exit.

Pippa follows me out, and when I turn to ask her—no, beg her—to stay at her parents’ place instead of Willow’s, I catch sight of Tate walking down the street. Not a care in the fucking world. *He never left.* Or maybe like us, he tried but got stuck in this godforsaken town.

His eyes lock with mine, and his face drops before it’s replaced by a scowl. Does me still being here invoke the threat? Is he going to hurt her?

A darkness swirls inside me as we stare at each other, and my need to leave dissipates in a heartbeat, a question coming to mind. Am I willing to risk derailing my entire life, everything I've worked hard for, just to keep her safe? Just to protect the girl that could ruin it all?

Yeah, I think I am.

In fact, no one could stop me even if they tried.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Willow

I don't move for an hour after Pippa and Jesse leave the diner, cursing myself for how I reacted to seeing him. *What the hell is wrong with me?* I'd love to say I was only distraught because I thought Pippa was in the car, but that's an outright lie.

When word spread about the accident, I felt the blood drain from my body as I shook. I'm not the sort of person to jump to ridiculous conclusions, and yet, as soon as I heard about the crash, it wasn't just Pippa I was worried about. *Both* Pippa and Jesse came to mind.

Ever since meeting him, I've had this lingering feeling deep within my soul that he was trouble or that something big was coming. There's something about him that feels dangerous, like I could lose him at any moment, and he's not even mine to lose. He will *never* be mine.

When I saw him standing in front of me—alive—my heart started beating again, and I couldn't stop myself from running

into his arms. Arms that he freaking wrapped around me. *He hugged me back.*

And now, I'm screwed.

This is worse than when I realized I liked him. Because for the first time in my life, he made me feel wanted. And I can't freaking handle that.

God, what am I doing?

When I've spent too long in the diner without ordering anything to eat or drink, I bury my thoughts and make my escape. Wrapping my arms around myself, I set off toward my store, hoping that it will keep me distracted. But when no one even walks past my window after three hours, I realize it's a lost cause and head home, my heart lodged in my throat the entire time.



It's quiet when I unlock the front door, and my relief is palpable. What's even better is that I don't see or hear from Pippa and Jesse for the rest of the day, giving me some much-needed respite. I've spent the past decade staying away from drama, keeping to myself, and now I seem to have landed face first into what could be a massive scandal if my feelings ever got out.

When I'm heating some leftovers in the early evening, Pippa walks in, a sheepish look on her face. "So, we're staying in town," she says, as though it's new information for me. "Jesse suggested we stay at Mom and Dad's, so we don't disrupt your life anymore, but you know what they're like."

"Perfect in small doses?" I shrug.

"Exactly." Pippa smiles.

"You're welcome to stay here," I offer, my heart racing at the prospect. "You can stay as long as you need."

"Yes. Thank you." Pippa sighs in relief. "Honestly, the thought of staying with Mom..."

"I get it. It's fine. Where is Jesse anyway?"

"Out for a walk. I think he's still shaken over everything that happened."

I swallow a lump in my throat and decide to apologize to Pippa for my behavior. It's the least I can do considering the secrets I'm keeping. "About the diner," I begin hesitantly. "I thought something had happened to you and when I saw Jesse... I just kind of lost it."

Sympathy crosses Pippa's face and she shakes her head. "Oh God, Willow. I *completely* understand."

"You do?" I ask, not liking the way she said "*completely*."

"Yes, and there's something I need to talk to you about. I should have told you earlier, but—"

Her phone rings, cutting off whatever she was going to say, and when she checks who it is, she sighs dramatically, holding it up for me to see. “Hi Jesse,” she says with a grumble.

Just the sound of his name warms me, and I hate myself for it.

“My parents said no,” Pippa lies, throwing a wink in my direction. “No, it’s fine,” she continues. “Willow said it’s all good.”

Jesse swears so loudly that I hear it from the other side of the table, and my chest tightens. That’s all I need to confirm our moment was one-sided. *Did I imagine his response?*

As Pippa speaks, I busy myself in the kitchen, desperate to know what she was going to say. But when she hangs up, I don’t even mention it. Instead I help her move all of their stuff back into the spare room.

We’ve just remade the bed when Pippa sits down and pats the space beside her.

“So,” she begins and then huffs out a laugh.

“So,” I repeat back to her, pretending to be a lot calmer than I actually am.

Pippa tugs on the end of her hair and grimaces before giving my leg a squeeze. “Please don’t hate me for asking this,” she begins, making me incredibly nervous. “But... is there something going on with you and Jesse?”

Holy shit! “What? Of course not. I’m not—”

“Jesus, Willow. Sorry, wait.” She cuts me off, and a darkness fills my chest to the point of being uncomfortable, while I swallow back my fears.

After huffing again, she looks my way with a grimace. “I have something to tell you. *God*. Telling the truth seems so much harder than telling the lie.”

What lie? *And why does that make me nauseous?*

“That’s usually the case if you’re hiding the truth behind the lie.”

She nods before finally opening up. “I asked Jesse to be my date this week so I could face Ashley and Jonah.”

“Okay.” *Am I right about them?*

“It’s all fake,” she says, as relief hits me. “We’re not really together.”

The weight of everything I’ve been feeling lifts from my shoulders, and I inwardly sigh. *It’s fake*. Thank God.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner, I—”

The front door slams open, putting an end to our conversation, but as I stand, Pippa grabs my top and pulls me back down.

“I’ll explain everything in detail later,” she whispers. “But for now, all you need to know is that you can’t tell Jesse that I told you.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, I know that’s awkward because you’re living with him, but it’s important.” Her eyes plead with me to listen, so I put my feelings aside and nod. I can do that.

When we finally leave the room, we find Jesse standing in the kitchen, his pissed-off demeanor back in place.

“How was your walk?” Pippa sasses as though she didn’t just drop a bomb on me, her smiling eyes on Jesse.

“It was perfect,” he says, focused on Pippa, working hard to make sure his eyes don’t drift to where I’m standing beside her. “I should have made it longer.”

Well, okay then.

Pippa’s phone rings, and she doesn’t bother excusing herself before she turns away and answers. “Hi, Mom.”

Not that I care. *It’s all fake. Their relationship isn’t real. I was right.*

Jesse and I stand silently, neither of us really acknowledging the other until Pippa hangs up.

“I’m going to watch a movie with Mom,” she says, waving her phone toward me. “A proper goodbye this time. She asked if you want to come?”

I almost glance at Jesse while I decide but hold myself back. Something tells me he wants me to say yes, and I should, but I’m not in the mood for more lectures from my Mom, especially after today.

“No, that’s okay,” I say with a smile. “I’m going to have an early night. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

Worry flashes across Pippa’s face, but I wave her off. “Do you want me to stay?” she asks, making me smile.

“Are you going to rock me to sleep?” I joke to avoid talking about my feelings.

“No, but... you know what I mean.”

“I do. And I promise, I’m fine.” *Although I wouldn’t mind finishing our conversation.*

Pippa nods, and when I look Jesse’s way, he’s a little white.

“If you’re sure, then I’ll head off,” Pippa says, and I know she’d genuinely stay if I asked her to, but I don’t. “I’ll be home around midnight, so if you’re awake, maybe we could go for a walk and talk?” *It’s like she read my mind.*

I manage to nod, before Jesse mumbles, “Fucking Sanders sisters and their midnight escapes,” sending both Pippa and me into a fit of giggles.

After she’s eaten the rest of my leftovers, Pippa heads off, waving goodbye with Jesse following her out. He says something about heading to the bar for a drink, and I don’t blame him. I don’t really want to be alone with him either, though it still stings a little.

I try to watch TV for a while, but I can’t stay still; there’s too much built-up energy running through me. It’s dark, it’s late, and I have Jesse’s grumpy words running through my head, but I ignore all of that and head out for a jog.

As soon as I take off, the air seeps into my lungs, instantly relaxing me. But it's not enough. Pushing myself more than I have in a long time, I gradually increase my speed until I'm hitting my limits, my movement taking all of my focus.

As I turn toward the lower mountains, the looming peaks above me shadow my path, making my heart clench, just as it always does. I concentrate on the soil beneath my shoes, the rocks I need to dodge, and the feel of the breeze rushing through my hair, but I barely keep it together before heading back toward town.

If I could force myself to climb higher, I know I'd get a much better workout, but no matter how hard I try, I'm locked to these lower hills. Although, maybe that's not such a bad thing.

I run my usual five-mile loop, and by the time I'm back at my front steps, I'm a mess. With my hands crossed behind my head, I walk up and down the street a few times until my breathing returns to normal, or something that closely resembles normal, before falling in a heap. Apparently still not over everything I've been trying to run from.

It's another few minutes before I snap myself out of it, and when I finally enter the house, it's empty, something that I'd previously come to take for granted.

"Hello!" I call out just in case, and wait a moment for a response. Nothing. *Thank God.*

After kicking off my shoes, I pull my sweat-soaked running top over my head before rolling my leggings down my thighs.

Sports bra and panties come next and then, like always, I dump it all into the laundry sink and head straight for the shower.

As I walk through the house completely naked, I can't help but smirk. Though I've done this a million times before, it suddenly feels forbidden. Knowing that Jesse could walk in at any moment and see me like this—see *all of me*—gives me a thrill I wasn't prepared for. I kind of want to push him a little. See if he'll admit the truth. But I know the answer.

With my mind still whirring after the shower, I decide there's only one course of action. So after throwing on my old bikini and a tee, I grab a towel and make my way out to the hot tub, praying it will help me relax.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jesse

The dull roar of the chatter calms me as I drop onto the bar stool and wait for the server to take my order. But the second I let myself think, a million images race through my mind, sending me spiraling. There's no rhyme or reason to my thoughts and yet they somehow all lead me back to the same topic. Willow.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since our moment in the diner. Actually, if I'm being completely honest, I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since I first saw her again, and it's making life difficult.

I've never really been a big drinker, but suddenly I'm spending extra time in a bar and just struggling on a basic level. *What am I doing?* I need to keep a clear head. I *need* to snap out of it. I'm stronger than this. I don't *do* feelings... anymore. And if it was anyone else I wouldn't be having feelings now. It's just so fucking hard to stay away from her.

The bartender makes his way over and knocks on the counter in front of me. "What will it be?" he asks with a soft

grin, and what should be simple feels like a loaded question. Five minutes ago I would have asked for their most exclusive whiskey, but now...

“I’ll take a burger and water, thanks.”

I eat my dinner and welcome question after question about hockey and the players in the league, enjoying the distraction. I may be seen as an asshole at times—*mainly because I avoid the media and anything other than my actual job*—but I’m generally happy to talk about it, as long as it doesn’t get personal. *It always gets personal.*

After discussing my thoughts on our chances of securing the cup for the fifth time tonight, I’m at my limit. And ten p.m. seems like a safe time to head back considering Willow was having an early night.

It’s quiet when I walk in, and my relief hits instantly. The tension in my body has been wound so tight, it feels like a cord snaps as I finally relax.

I sneak quietly past Willow’s closed door and grab my workout gear before heading out to the back deck. I can’t handle another sleepless night, so my plan is to completely wear myself out before bed. But like all good plans, there’s a chance this one will fail.

Repetition and repetition does nothing to fix my issues. Physically I’m exhausted, but my mind is still running at a million miles per hour. And if I’m being completely honest with myself, I know *exactly* what I need. I need to expel a

different kind of energy, one that I can't rid myself of in this damn town.

Throwing myself back into it, I keep trying, determined to see this through. But when I'm nearing the end of my last set, the door creaks open and all my hard work is gone.

Lifting my head, to see around the tub, I find Willow walking out with a towel in her hand. From my position on the floor, I get a clear view while there's little chance that she'll notice me, and I take full advantage of that.

The low light gives her a soft glow, and she's positively mesmerizing. After all these years, she's still the most beautiful person I've ever seen. I can't look away.

I watch silently as she drops her towel, then runs her fingers through her wild hair before securing it on top of her head. My throat bobs as she turns her back to me, exposing the smooth skin of her neck, taking my mind back to what it felt like to touch her. My hand tingles at the thought, and I'd give anything to be back in that moment, or any other moment where I've been that close. To feel my body come alive again. To feel *anything*. But the cost wouldn't be mine to bear.

Shaking off my thoughts, I move to stand just as she lifts her tee over her head, leaving her in nothing but a skimpy red bikini. I internally groan as I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing myself to forget what I saw, trying hard to push the image out of my mind, but it's impossible.

She's breathtaking.

I hear a light splash and open my eyes in time to see her sink down into the water, a soft sigh escaping her lips.

Needing to be far away from this situation, I assess the chances of making it to the door unseen but lose all focus when I notice her reaching up around her neck, her fingers lingering on the strap of her bikini top. *Dammit.*

“Don’t even think about removing that,” I bark out as I stand, almost giving her a heart attack.

She yells, “*Jesus*” as her hands drop, clenching one at her chest, the other gripping the ledge for balance. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“The floor.” I shrug.

“The floor? What in the world?” She stands but stops suddenly, her eyes flashing to her half-naked body before she sinks back down.

In a huff, I pick my towel up and wave it in the air as if that will prove I’m not stalking her. “I was working out. I thought you were asleep.”

Willow nods, but it’s a little more exaggerated than normal. She’s obviously still freaked out. “Okay. Okay,” she says, still nodding. “Why’d you yell at me?”

“I didn’t think you’d want me here if you were getting naked.” *And I didn’t think I could handle it if you did.*

With confusion set in her brows, Willow’s gaze drops to her chest before her eyes flash back on mine. “Why would I get naked? I’m in a bikini.”

“I don’t fucking know. Why would you be alone late at night in a hot tub?” A thought hits me and my eyes flash to the door, half expecting someone else to walk through. But also not. “You’re alone, right?”

“Of course I’m alone. And I’m in here because I *goddamn* want to be, *and* it’s relaxing. Why else would I be here?” Her voice rises, and the intensity of her gaze burns a hole in me. I almost smile. I love this version of Willow. The fire in her eyes. The passion. When she says a big fuck you to the part of her that thinks she should act a certain way and the other part of her that’s always holding back. This is the girl I remember. This spark. And fuck, does it turn me on.

“I honestly have no idea why you do what you do, Willow. Nor do I care,” I lie, further infuriating her. Which now that I think about it, is actually not my smartest idea. I can’t risk her becoming that girl again. *Remembering*.

“You are an extremely frustrating man,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest, briefly drawing my eyes to her breasts as they swell up out of the water. “You know that, right?”

“I do and I don’t plan on changing,” I say, but even to my ears it sounds distant and lackluster.

Willow frowns, but doesn’t comment. “Do you want me to leave so you can finish up?” she asks, motioning to the deck.

Fuck no, If she gets out of that hot tub I can’t guarantee that I won’t stalk after. “Do what you like, but don’t leave on my account. I can block you out.” I drop my towel back down to

the floor as Willow huffs, and I can't stop myself from picturing her pursed lips as she simmers with annoyance.

Ignoring her when she does it again, I get back to my workout, restarting my push-ups even though I was almost done.

I'm on my thirty-ninth rep, for the second time, when she moans softly, making my body tense. I try to ignore her again, certain she hasn't even realized she's done it, but when it happens a third time I know that I'm wrong. "Mmm, so good."

She's messing with me.

Sweat coats my brow as I power on, determined to prove to her I'm not affected, that I'm in the zone, but when the jets start up and a soft mewl escapes her, I can't hold back the curse that flies out of my mouth. "*Fuuck.*"

Willow giggles and it's almost my undoing. "What happened to blocking me out?" she sasses.

"I am," I groan. "Why are you interrupting me?"

My attempt at ignorance only has her laughing even more, and I hate that I fucking *love* that sound. "Fine," I say without looking her way, terrified of what I might see. "I can hear you and it's distracting. Can you relax in silence?"

The water sloshes before drops hit my back, and it doesn't take much to know what she's doing. I stay strong, keeping my gaze locked in front of me, but it does nothing to stop the picture my mind conjures up—the vision of Willow leaning over the side of the tub, her arms resting on the ledge, her tits

billowing out of her top as they're pushed up toward her chin. "I can try to be silent," she says and it sounds goddamn seductive. "But it feels too good."

Jesus Christ. "So you said," I grumble.

"Want to join me?" she jokes, and I picture her finger between her teeth as she tries to rile me up. If only she knew how badly I want to say yes, she wouldn't be joking then.

"Nope," I lie. "I'm good."

"You sure?" Her breathless voice has me finally looking her way, and I catch her fake pout as she pretends to be flirty. But when her eyes meet mine, she laughs at herself while a pinkish hue coats her skin. *She's killing me and has no idea what she's actually asking.*

"Stop trying to be someone you're not, Willow," I grate, much sterner than I expected. "And I don't just mean now. I'm done. I'll see you in the morning."

I don't bother grabbing my towel as I push up off the deck and attempt to walk away. But of course I never make it. I've just reached the door when she calls out.

"I'm not the only one being fake, Jesse. We both have something we're hiding."

I know I should keep going, but I never do the right thing when it comes to her. I always want the last word. Turning around, I open my mouth to rebut her claims but freeze at the sight in front of me.

Instead of lying low, protected by the bubbles, she stands tall, her hands curled around her hips in defiance. Drops of water cascade down her body, and it takes everything in my power not to let my gaze follow them. My throat constricts as I attempt to swallow, and while I'm almost certain she would have noticed too, I no longer care about any of it. Taking a tentative step forward, I watch as her body pebbles with goose bumps and her eyes widen.

"You have no idea," I rasp, and without allowing myself to process how stupid of an idea it is, I'm stripping out of my clothes and stalking toward her, leaving only my briefs to cover my junk.

I may be hiding a lot of things, but my attraction to her is fooling no one, and I'm so fucking sick of pretending.

Am I insane? Yes.

Is there a chance she'll tell me to fuck off? Also yes.

Do I care about any of those things right now? Apparently not.

After tomorrow, I'm gone, so I'm taking my chances tonight.

I'm definitely going to hell for this.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Willow

“**M**ove over; I’m joining you,” Jesse demands as he slips into the scalding tub, his eyes focused on the water, doing everything he can not to look my way. He sinks his shoulders under the bubbles in one quick movement, letting the heat consume him as though he’s immune to the burn. And maybe he is.

The edge of my lips curl, but it’s not enough to be a smile, my false bravado long gone. *What was I thinking pushing him like that?*

When Jesse’s eyes finally find mine, after an excruciating long time, he raises an eyebrow in challenge.

“Are you expecting me to tell you to leave?” I rush out, standing taller as I try to appear more confident than I really am. “Because I don’t care what you do; I can block you out.” I throw his words back in his face and stare him down. Despite the low light, I can just make out his eyes darkening as they rake over my body like he’s seeing it for the first time.

Although maybe he's only now finally letting himself process it.

He shakes his head as he runs a hand through his hair, wetting it as he goes. "I wouldn't have left even if you did," he says, taking a deep breath. "You don't understand how much I need this right now."

His admission shocks me until I realize he's probably talking about needing the bubbles to help his muscles. Not needing the time alone with me.

"Rough workout?" I ask, going with my aching muscle assumption.

"Rough *day*," he counters. "Every second spent in this town is bringing me one step closer to the grave."

What an odd thing to say. "Isn't every second like that? No matter where you are? Every second is a second closer to dying."

He laughs but it's somewhat incredulous. "Yeah, only being here feels like it's speeding up the process."

I have no idea what he means by that, but he looks so torn up about it that I'm terrified to ask. Could he mean me? That I'm the reason he feels closer to death? *No, that's absurd, right?*

"Why didn't you go with Pippa?" I ask, changing the subject, moving to a less depressing topic. Although one that may very well be just as dangerous if he finds out I'm pushing his buttons on purpose.

“She didn’t ask me.” Jesse shrugs, and my eyes follow the movement.

“Why?” I rush out, unable to let it go.

He lays his head back on the rim of the tub and releases a slow breath as his eyes fall shut, allowing me uninterrupted time to stare at him. “I have no idea,” he says after a long pause. “I’m not her keeper.”

“No, but you *are* her boyfriend... right?”

The last part of my question hangs in the air, and I swear the temperature gets hotter. I promised Pippa I wouldn’t ask him about it. But I can’t stop myself. Because if he says yes, it’ll break me to think he’s still lying, even though he’s here. *But if he says no...*

Jesse’s eyes remain closed as his arms spread out, gripping the edge of the tub beside him. His chest rises above the surface, drawing my attention to his taut body and the script tattoo above his heart. My eyes lock on the water pooling in the ridges of his abs before following a drop that escapes, slowly gliding toward his navel and the solid V that dips beneath the bubbles.

I swallow a lump in my throat as my body prickles with heat, a nervous energy consuming me.

I shouldn’t be staring like this, but since I’m unable to take my eyes off him, I watch as he dips lower into the water, only stopping when his shoulders break the surface. One of his knees gently brushes mine, sending an electric current through

me, and I'm so wrapped up in the way he's making me feel that it takes a moment too long for me to realize his pained expression as his entire body goes rigid.

"Fuck, I shouldn't be here," he rasps, standing abruptly and leaping from the hot tub in one swift movement. The water falls from his body, and I internally beg my eyes to look away, but they disobey the direct order and instead glide over every inch of his exposed skin only stopping when I come a distinct bulge in his shorts. *Is that for me?*

My stomach twists in knots as I gnaw on my bottom lip, working it between my teeth until I'm certain I'll bleed. Everything about this moment is new to me. I've been attracted to guys. My body has reacted to guys. But this is like a carnal urge mixed with soul-shattering feelings, and I'm terrified of what it means.

I don't know how much time passes as I assault Jesse with my eyes, and I'm so lost in the contours of his muscles and the sharp lines of his chest that I don't even realize he's stopped toweling himself off until a pained growl rips from his throat as he turns around to escape my gaze.

"Jesus Christ, Willow. You can't look at me like that."

His words break me from my trance, and my body heats with embarrassment. This time it's me closing my eyes and sinking into the water, going deeper until I'm completely submerged. Deciding it's best to stay here until I'm positive that he's gone.

I barely get a second of respite before the water ripples around me and I'm yanked to the surface. My eyes flash open at the same time I'm dumped on the bench seat. "What the fuck are you doing?" Jesse snaps.

"I'm hiding," I snap back. "You should have walked away."

"Yeah, I really should have but I thought you'd slipped."

"What?"

"Who goes under the water in a hot tub? *No one*. For fuck's sake."

He sits down directly opposite me and runs his hands down his face, mumbling about how often I need saving.

I want to yell at him. To tell him to fuck off. But I'm too exhausted to fight, and I don't really understand why he *keeps wanting to fight me*.

He stays silent for a minute, lost in his own torment, and I wonder if I should be the one walking away. But after another beat, he looks up at me with dark eyes and so much anguish that my heart hurts. *If it's fake, why does he look so broken?*

"What are you doing to me, Willow?" he croaks out, barely above a whisper. "You're slowly tearing me apart, but I can't stay away. I'm not even sure I'll be able to leave you here and go back to my previous existence, never knowing whether or not you're okay."

There's so much to unpack from his words, but the first that comes to mind is, "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

Jesse's Adam's apple bobs, my question clearly affecting him, but he shakes his head. "No reason. You're right. I should go."

He lifts himself out of the water again but stops with one foot still on the step. Waiting for something. And while I'm ninety-nine percent certain that something isn't supposed to come from me, I take a deep breath anyway and whisper the word, "Stay."

I have a strong feeling that if he leaves right now, I'll never see him again.

"*Willow*," he warns.

"I'm not asking for anything. I'm just telling you to stay."

"That's asking for *everything*," he rasps and then stills.

He doesn't move for what feels like forever, but then curses loud enough to wake the neighbors before sinking back down to the seat. "Why the fuck can't I stop thinking about you?" he asks, but I think it's rhetorical. At least I hope it is because I don't have an answer.

Running his fingers through his hair, he slides closer, causing my heart to come to a jolting stop. "Tell me to forget you. Tell me it's wrong."

My breathing shallows as my heart pounds again. *It's not wrong. So why is he still fighting it?* "Tell me the truth about Pippa and then I'll decide."

Jesse's brows furrow until he processes my meaning and his body sags. Shaking his head, he huffs out a loud sigh that

leaves me drenched in a cold sweat.

“I’ve never even thought of Pippa romantically,” he whispers, his voice scratchy. “And the feeling’s mutual. It’s all a ruse for your sister and Jonah.”

Now it’s my turn to sag. Every part of me feels free as though his words just unlocked chains that had been choking the life out of me. But if that’s true, why is it wrong to be with me?

As if hearing my silent question, Jesse huffs, “That being said, it doesn’t change a thing.”

My body screams at me to stay silent, to just let this play out, but my head wins, and I whisper the words he doesn’t want to hear. “If it’s so wrong, why do I feel so deeply connected to you? Why does it feel like I knew you in another life? Another time.”

Jesse groans, his fist clenching by his side. “Don’t think about past lives or past anythings, Willow. If it was just now, would that change the way you feel?”

“No,” I say honestly. “I’d still tell you to stay.” Past life or not, he’s awakened something in me I never want to lose.

He slides closer, this time encroaching on my personal space, and my breath hitches as my entire body comes to life.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” he whispers, his breath warming my already heated skin.

“What if I do?” I counter, even though he’s one hundred percent right. I have no clue about any of this.

Jesse curses as his hand lands on the seat beside my leg, the tip of his thumb lightly brushing my skin. I audibly suck in a breath, and thank God we're in a hot tub so he can't see the effect he has on me.

With his eyes squeezed shut—as though just being this close is agony—he leans in until his nose skims across my cheek, letting out a relieved sigh when he does.

His thumb brushes against me again as his lips move toward my mouth, and the slow pace is torture.

My pulse races as I quell my desire to reach for him, sensing this is something he needs to do. But when his lips come within an inch of mine, he pauses and I feel the energy shift. My heart pounds against my rib cage, threatening to break through, as goose bumps coat my warm skin.

“Fuuck.” Jesse’s eyes flash open, and he expels a sharp breath, his gaze locked on my mouth, while my own breath lodges in my throat, silently waiting for his next move.

Hesitatingly slow, his thumb slips between the space separating our mouths, and he swipes it across my lip, the roughness of his skin sending a shiver to my core. With wide eyes, he gazes up at me and stills, his expression full of uncertainty.

“I don’t like to be touched,” he whispers and the emotion packed into that statement breaks me. I try to look away, subtly giving him some space, but he doesn’t let me. Instead, he growls, moving his thumb to my chin as he turns my head

to face him. “Don’t pull away from me now. Not when I’m baring my soul for the first time in my life.”

My breath hitches again as my eyes bounce between his, taking in his raw vulnerability. “I—”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve kissed someone,” he rasps, cutting me off. “The mere thought of it makes my skin crawl. It’s not something I’m proud of. But until now, I’ve never even wished that I was different. That I could handle being touched.”

My mind flashes back to when I saw Pippa grab his hand, and his reaction. But then I remember all the things she’s told me about him and his man-whoring ways. I don’t want to doubt what he’s saying but...

“You’ve had sex,” I blurt out. It’s not a question; it’s a statement. Something I know to be true.

He winces as though I’ve slapped him, but it’s valid and I stand by it.

“Emotionless sex has never been an issue as long as it’s quick and purposeful,” he grates, his eyes not meeting mine. “It’s intimacy I can’t handle.”

Raising my hand, I tentatively move toward his face, needing to touch him more than I need my next breath. A breath that’s currently trapped inside my chest as I decide what to do. My fingers come to a halt so close to his cheek that you’d struggle to slide a piece of paper between us, my chest hollowing as I finally meet his gaze.

“And with me...” I ask, trailing off, taking in his darkened pupils and shallow breaths.

“I can already feel your touch. Your fingertips are setting me on fire and there’s a goddamn space between us.”

He grabs my hand and holds it against his skin, leaning into my touch. “I want your hands all over my fucking body, I want your lips molded to mine, I want our tongues thrashing together. I want to hear the sounds you make. I want to make you scream. I want to take every piece of you, mind, body, and soul, and make it mine. And I don’t care how selfish I’m being. I haven’t been able to think of anyone else since you fell into my arms, and you’re the only one I’ve ever allowed this close. *Wanted*. This. Close. But I’m not sure I’ll be able to do any of those things. And I’m certain that I shouldn’t.”

He takes a slow drawn-out breath and once again squeezes his eyes shut. I prepare for him to pull away, but when his eyes open, they’re filled with something I never expected to see—hope. My heart stops beating. The world stills. And Jesse inches closer to me. “I fucking *need* you, Willow. And I’m willing to burn for it.”

His lips brush the corner of my mouth, and while it’s brief, it’s enough to breathe air back into my lungs and start my heart beating again.

Terrified of what I’ll see in his eyes, I focus on the rise and fall of his chest and how it seems perfectly in sync with mine. Both doing nothing to hide our feelings at this moment.

My eyes slowly rise to meet his pained stare, and my chest tightens. “Jesse, I—”

“Can I try something?” he asks quietly as though he never heard me speak.

I nod without thinking. I’ve known him for less than a week and yet I want him to try everything. *I want to try everything*, but God, it’s terrifying.

Jesse must see something in my expression because his hard gaze softens, and his eyes almost smile. “You don’t have to be scared,” he whispers, his hand back beneath the water. “I promise this’ll hurt me more than it hurts you.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” I whisper back, so softly he may not have even heard it. But it’s the truth. Because while we haven’t even kissed, he’s already stolen a piece of me, just like he said he wanted to, and I’ll never be the same.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jesse

Holding my breath, I try to ignore her quiet words because if I focus on how true they are, I might not go through with this. And I *need* it. More than I've needed anything in my life.

Willow stills, waiting for my next move as I reach out and slowly run my fingers down her cheek. She shivers at my touch. And while my eyes focus on the path my fingers are taking, hers are locked on my face, undoubtedly searching for my reaction.

Reaching her chin, I slowly exhale as I gently brush over her neck and across the column of her throat, which bobs as she swallows. Exploring her collarbone next, and then her chest, I keep moving until I reach the thin material of her poor excuse for a bikini.

The lighting may be low, but I can see the outline of her perfect nipples peeking through the faded fabric, especially now that they're beaming at me.

Her breasts rise and fall rapidly under my intense gaze, but I can't move. I'm stuck momentarily with my own heartbeat keeping in time with hers. Every part of me burns, but I welcome the fire. I deserve it. I'll gladly take all the pain. I'm more concerned about what this will do to her.

"Can *I* try something?" Willow whispers, drawing my attention to her beautiful face, a face that's haunted my dreams since I was sixteen and yet one I almost didn't recognize.

She softly smiles, and it hits me deep in the chest. She's too good for me. I know this. But I can't bring myself to stop.

"I promise to try not to hurt you," she continues, paraphrasing my words. If only she realized just how much power she has over my pain.

Her eyes bore into mine as she waits for my response, her previous confidence wavering.

Ignoring my pounding heart and the ringing in my ears, I finally nod when the silence becomes too much, sucking in a breath in anticipation.

Mimicking my movements, Willow runs her fingers down my cheek and across my neck, stopping at my collarbone, her hand resting just next to my tattoo.

She squints as though she's trying to make out the meaning in the darkness, but doesn't ask me what it says, perhaps sensing it's not something I want to or am ready to talk about.

Seeming to shake off her thoughts, she continues her explorations with a featherlight touch. Her fingers glide over

my pecs and along the ridges of my abs, making my muscles jump under my skin. She circles my navel before moving back up and stopping with her hand sprawled across my heart.

As her pulse flutters against me, my heart misfires and my breathing escalates to an alarming rate, but before I can ask her to do it again, her hand disappears, and she slowly reaches for the bikini cups of her suit, holding on as if she's going to remove them.

“One for one?” she whispers, and even though she sounds confident again, the pink tinge of her skin suggests otherwise.

I nod but don't move, taking a moment to compose myself. But on seeing my hesitation, Willow stands up and grabs my shoulder, careful to only touch my skin in places her hands have been before. *She fucking gets it. But why did it have to be her?*

Giving me a gentle shove, she shifts me until I'm sitting upright on the bench seat and steps forward, positioning her legs on either side of mine.

Then she waits.

“Is this okay?” she says with a wavering voice, and her nerves make me smile. Not because I like her to be uncomfortable, but because it puts us on more even ground. I feel exactly the same.

Grabbing her ass over the material of the bikini, I pull her toward me, and in one quick movement she's straddling my lap.

I've been in this position fully clothed before, but *fuuuck, this is different. So different. Better.* My body ignites again, burning every contact point between our skin, and when she readjusts herself, accidentally rubbing her heated core against my cock, it thickens beneath her.

Despite never going bare before, and never even wanting to, it takes everything in my power not to rid us of our bottoms so I can slip inside her.

Willow startles at the feel of my hardness pressed against her, letting out a soft mewl. "I was going to ask if this was comfortable, but I'm going to say yes?"

"No, Buttercup, I'm far from comfortable, but I'm trying. I'm really *fucking* trying."

She once again nods, seemingly understanding what I'm unable to explicitly say, and doesn't even question the nickname this time. Because how can she? By definition buttercups can cause severe burns when the bruised plants come into contact with human skin, sometimes leaving lesions that are difficult to heal. By comparison, one touch from Willow sets my body on fire, leaving invisible scars everywhere she burns.

"Do you want to stop?" she asks, doing an awful job of hiding her disappointment.

I roll her hips slightly, taking in the way her skin pebbles with goose bumps as she shivers. "No, I don't. We're just getting started."

She sighs in relief, but a flash of fear crosses her face, leaving me desperate to know what she's afraid of. *Is it me?* Because it should be me. It really fucking should be.

But of course it's not.

Only a second later, I discover what's making her nervous as she raises her hands to the back of her neck and unties her straps, letting the cups of her bikini finally fall away.

Swallowing a lump in my throat, I stare down at her spectacularly bare breasts and pert nipples, my eyes following the light dusting of freckles that spread from one side of her body to the other, highlighting a path for my mouth. *Jesus, that's a new thought.* But it's welcome. I'm practically salivating at the thought of tasting her. But not tonight. Tonight's about a different sense—touch.

Lifting my hands, I hover just out of reach, building anticipation between us. Willow's breath hitches with her eyes locked on my hand. Waiting. But after a beat, she rushes out the word "Please" almost breathlessly.

And that's all it takes.

Steadying her body with one hand, my other molds around one of her perfect tits, my thumb grazing her pebbled nipples.

Willow's chest heaves as I squeeze her in my palm, giving her a pinch before offering the same treatment to the other side. It's unhurried, purposeful, and pure torture, but the sounds coming out of her mouth have me forgetting all of my troubles, even my name.

Willow moans, bucks, and shakes as I roll her nipples between my fingers. And when I run my other hand up her chest, curling my fingers into her hair, her eyes slam shut as she bites her lip, sucking the flesh into her mouth.

“You’re fucking perfect, Willow. I really wish I could give you more.” *I really wish I could be the one biting her lips.*

Her brows furrow at my words, but when my hand drops to her leg, all is forgotten.

And since I’ve already taken this further than I ever thought I would, I push the boundaries even more, skating my fingers toward the apex of her thigh, pausing just before I touch her.

My heart beats to its own tune. A tune so dark it’s fit for a horror movie, but I keep going. Needing to feel how much she wants me. How much her body craves mine.

She moans again as her hips subtly buck, begging me to seal the gap between us, but I take my time, running my thumb across her bikini, keeping the material between us.

My fingers slide over her, teasing, until I feel the heat between her legs as I add pressure. I’m just about to pull back when Willow gasps, her body sagging against mine, connecting us more than we’ve ever been before. More than I was ready for, and I wait for my natural reaction. My repulsion. But it doesn’t come.

She moans again, and the sound has my balls tightening as an electric current shoots through me, her pleasure turning me on.

I can do this.

Her bikini bottoms are so thin that I'm practically touching her flesh, but since I'm not, that makes all the difference. But I want to try more.

Biting my cheek, I slowly slide the bikini to the side and plunge a finger inside her, freezing when her eyes flash to mine and she cries out—in what I don't know.

“Fuck, is this okay. Does it hurt? Tell me if it hurts,” I rush, because while it feels so fucking good to me, I have no idea what I'm doing.

“Yes, I'm fine. I'm good. *Great,*” Willow responds breathlessly, a shy smile in place. “I just wasn't expecting it. I'm sorry.”

She doesn't understand.

“Willow, it's not...I've never...” I trail off. Not wanting to say any more, because fuck, I feel so stupid with this admission. But when the fire in her eyes blazes brighter, I ignore my inner turmoil and focus on the moment.

I pump my finger inside her over and over as I rub my thumb along her sensitive spot, giving her all that I can. *For now.* It doesn't take long before she's writhing on top of me—breaths ragged, eyes closed—coming apart with my name on her lips. The sweetest sound I've ever heard.

My cock screams at me for action but I hold strong, continuing my ministrations until Willow comes back down to earth, slumping into me.

It's only as her breathing slows that I fully register how close we are, and my body recoils without my consent. My back hits the wall of the tub as I involuntarily push her away from me. Not enough to allow her to fall, but enough to create the space I need to breathe again.

Willow's flushed expression turns sympathetic and I hate myself for it.

"Please don't," I say, cutting her off before she's even opened her mouth.

"Don't what?"

"Tell me you're sorry. Look at me like you *feel* sorry for me."

"The only thing I feel sorry about is that I orgasmed alone. But I get the impression you won't let me touch you tonight."

My pulse spikes and my cock twitches at both her words and the raspiness of her voice. But she's right. I'm so far out of my comfort zone that I'm not sure I'd even enjoy it. But fuck, I loved seeing her fall apart. And I want more, even if it kills me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Willow

Jesse's gaze intensifies as I work to maintain my eye contact, trying to appear confident. He wants more, I know he does, but I also know he's not going to let that happen. In fact, I'm almost certain he's about to disappear.

My heart pounds in my chest as we silently stare at one another. Actually, my heart hasn't stopped its rhythmic pounding since Jesse first touched me, and I'm still struggling to process everything. Only one thing is clear—that was a first for both of us.

But how is that possible?

“So, you've...ahh...never partaken in foreplay before?” I ask nervously. I know he wasn't comfortable with his admission about it being his first time, and yet, something about it makes me feel special. And a hell of a lot more secure. While at the same time my heart breaks for him. He comes across so guarded that his moment of raw honesty has my mind in a spin. *Did something happen to him? I mean, of course something happened. But what?*

Jesse frowns as though reading my mind, but then his eyes glaze over, and I know instantly that he's putting on a mask. A cover for how he really feels.

"Forget I asked that."

"Why? It's a simple answer." He huffs out a laugh, confirming my suspicion. He's about to put on a front and pretend to be someone he's not. "I'm not a *complete* asshole," he says, his intense gaze locked with mine. "My cock's a very versatile tool. Believe it or not, it can be used to the same effect as my finger. The difference is that it's fitted with a glove."

No skin to skin contact.

"But you must touch naked flesh when you... when you..."
God, what am I even asking? And why?

"When I fuck? Is that what you want to know?"

Jesus. There's an aura of cockiness when he says the word "fuck," and I'm shocked to say it has my stomach twisted with nerves, while my chest heats with want. Talk about mixed reactions. Everything about Jesse turns me on, but there's an edge to him that has me on guard. And then there's this completely different version of him I'm desperate to know about. The version that may very well be his true self. And that's the version of him I want the most. Not whatever this is.

My tongue sneaks out to wet my lips as his head tilts to the side in question. It's only then that I remember he's waiting for me to talk.

I nod instead of answering, knowing that if I speak aloud my voice will give my feelings away. I'm not sure I want to know about his sexual habits, but I also want to know everything about him. *Why am I doing this to myself?*

Jesse nods in return but his face subtly cringes at whatever he's thinking, and I see the moment he decides to be a little more real. "It happens...but I try to avoid it. And more often than not, if I tell the girl to keep her clothes on, they stay on."

He shrugs like it's no big deal, but as my gaze drops to our almost naked bodies, my chest tightens. *Why is this situation so different? Did it pain him to touch me? He was hesitant, but he made the first move, right? Or did I? Shit. Was it me?*

An inner panic takes over as Jesse grabs my chin, trying to get me to face him. But I can't. Instead, I pull back and turn away, no longer able to look him in the eye.

"Buttercup, you're spiraling. Tell me why?"

Dammit. There's that nickname again. My eyes flash to his and I cringe. "Buttercup?"

"You're still dangerous, Willow." He shrugs unapologetically. "Even more so after today. Now answer my question?"

"Please."

His lips thin but he humors me. "*Please.*"

Taking a deep breath, I shift my focus to my boring as anything nails, picking at the edges, and ask what's on my mind. "Did I push you to do more than you wanted to?"

Jesse's body shakes as he huffs out a laugh. And I cringe again.

"You might have some kind of fucked-up power over me, Willow," he rasps, making my heart flutter. "But *no one* makes me do something I don't want to. Especially when it comes to sex."

Sex.

"You want to have sex?" I blurt stupidly, nervously.

Jesse frowns. "Not right now, no."

Oh. Why does that disappoint me? It shouldn't. At all. After tearing me apart with his fingers, I should be satisfied and ready to take it easy for a moment. Gain my bearings. A few hours ago he was fake dating my sister and now... I need to slow down. *We* need to slow down. But I also really want more.

"I—"

"Turns out your description of me as a fallen angel checks out, because after that, I'll definitely be spending my time with the horned beast down below."

My eyes widen at his sudden change of direction, but I quickly recover. *Why does he think this is wrong? Forbidden somehow?*

"If feeling like this is a sin, then I'll be down there with you. Because I think I want you to touch me again."

I cover my mouth, shocked that those words actually came out of me, while Jesse sighs. He briefly closes his eyes, and when they open again, his turmoil does me in. He's at war with himself, and the thought of that pains me. But while I deserve better than that, I've never wanted anyone more.

“Jesse, I—”

The water splashes as he springs toward me, palming my face with one hand as he flattens the other against the wall behind me, blocking me in. I startle at his sudden movement and feel myself slip, but before my head hits the edge, Jesse's hand flies out to soften the blow. Mildly.

I wince at the pain, instinctively reaching for the wound, and my hand lands on top of his. Jesse's eyes bounce between my face and where our hands are curled into my hair, his eyes wide with what looks like fear.

A broken thought hits me out of nowhere, and I shiver uncontrollably, seemingly snapping Jesse out of the strange mood he's in. “It's okay, I've got you,” he whispers, his hold tightening.

“It's okay, I've got you.” I repeat the words silently as I stare into his eyes, my mind whirring with images I can't quite decipher, my head rife with confusion.

“Sorry,” I whisper as I try to sit up, shaking off my thoughts. “I just...I feel like I've been here before.”

The words haven't even completely left my mouth before Jesse's springing away from me again, his eyes locked on

something over my shoulder. I follow his gaze curiously, but there's no one there. The doorway remains empty.

“Jesse, what's wrong?” *And why do you look like you've seen a ghost?*

Jesse shakes his head as if to say no, but I'm not sure what he's responding to. I open my mouth to ask when he hits me with a look full of remorse, leaning back as far as his body allows him.

“This can't happen again.”

“*What?*” I ask meekly, confused by his sudden change in demeanor.

“This. Us. It can't happen again.” He pauses for a second before shaking his head once more, his face now void of emotion. “I'm dating your sister, for fuck's sake. I'm leaving as soon as they open the damn road. And there is *nothing* between us.”

Jesus. I wince as his words physically sting me, closing my eyes to block him out. While I never expected declarations of love, I didn't see this coming. And I should have.

Instead of focusing on his truthful words, the ones that hurt the most, I hone in on the lie. “You can't use Pippa as an excuse when it's *fake*.”

“Is it?” he counters immediately and my stomach drops. “You barely know me and yet you were so quick to trust me.”

“Because I knew the two of you were lying.” I should just tell him Pippa told me, but I promised her I wouldn't, and I

want to see how far he'll take it.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he says, making my insides squirm. “You know nothing. This was just a sick little game to me. Wanting to test how far I could push you. To see if I could make you betray your sister.”

Tears prick the back of my eyes, but I hold strong. I can’t believe he’s lying. He’s purposely trying to hurt me. To push me away. I know there’s no love between them.

There’s no love between us either. Jesus.

I want to scream. To beg him to tell me the truth. But it’s pointless. If he wants me to believe he just cheated on his girlfriend, that means he *wants* me to feel like shit. He *wants* me to feel the pain. He *wants* me to hate him.

“Was it all a lie?” I whisper, my eyes penetrating his, needing to see his expression when he undoubtedly lies again.

“No,” he rasps, his emotionless state locked in place.

“Was any of it?”

“Yes.”

Oh God. Which part?

My body heats again but for an entirely different reason. I’m angry, I’m nauseous, but mostly, I’m embarrassed. I’ve never trusted someone so blindly like I did Jesse, and he ruined me.

“Do you kiss her?” I ask, even though I know the answer.

“No,” he states plainly. And while he remains mostly stoic, his nostrils flare ever so slightly as he adds, “but I *fuck* her.”

“You’re lying,” I cry out, hiding none of my emotions so he can feel the hurt he’s inflicting. “You’re fucking lying.” My voice breaks as a foreign pain radiates through me.

Jesse’s expression wavers as his fists clench at his sides. “Don’t push me on this, Willow.”

“Why?” I say, needing him to spell it out. “*Why?*”

“Because you don’t know me! You don’t know what I’m capable of.”

“You’re right. I don’t. It hasn’t even been a week. I can easily move on.” I lie through my teeth. “I *will* easily move on,” I add, hoping for some kind of reaction. And I get it. It’s just not the reaction I wanted.

“Good,” Jesse says, his cocky facade back in place. “Consider yourself one and done like the rest of my hook-ups.”

Without looking at me again, he leaps out of the water and grabs his towel as he walks away. He shoves the door as if to slam it shut, but catches it at the last second, closing it softly, and the action is like a metaphor for his personality.

I wait a second to make sure he’s not coming back before I sag under the water again, immersing myself in the warmth. Hoping like hell I can wash away the remnants of everything that just happened. His words, the look in his eyes, his *touch*. Mostly his touch.

Five minutes ago it set me on fire; now it burns me inside.

When I'm almost out of breath, I push to the surface and drop my head in my hands. Allowing Jesse to get that close couldn't have been more stupid. Allowing anyone to get that close to me is stupid. But his reaction might very well break me. I need the full story.

Drying off my hands, I grab my phone to text Pippa, but stare at the screen for a few minutes before pulling myself together enough to actually type out a message. I need to know the whole truth, and what better way to find out than by going to the source. Releasing a breath, I click on Pippa's name.

Willow: Are you still coming home for that walk and chat?

I should be honest with her, but I'm not ready to face what happened, so how do I explain it?

Pippa: Mom and I are still chatting. I feel bad leaving since I'm going home tomorrow. But I can come back now if you need me?

The reminder that they're leaving tomorrow is the last straw, and tears fill my eyes. I tell Pippa I'm fine before disappearing back into the water, only dropping my phone at the last second. I'm not fine. In fact, I've only ever been *less* fine once in my life. And that event is currently haunting me.

I stay under the bubbles until I can't take it any longer, hoping that when I rise, my life will be back to normal. But of course it's not. *And God, I hate myself for it.*



It's not until all the lights are off and the house is quiet that I finally drag myself out of the water and haphazardly wrap the towel around my body. I'm not cold, but a shiver runs through me as I picture Jesse sleeping peacefully, not a care in this world. At least, not a care for me. Bile rises in my throat as I walk toward the door.

I hate that Jesse was right. That I should have stayed away. That he might break me. Because his little lie certainly did just that.

I almost wish I'd never found out the truth, stayed blissfully unaware in silence.

But silence is going to be the death of me. There's too much of it in my life.

And I want it gone.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jesse - Twelve Years Ago / Age Sixteen

The water turns a light shade of red as I wash the blood from my body, scrubbing so hard, the cloth mars my skin. But I can't stop. I deserve it. I deserve so much worse.

What the fuck did we do?

As I watch the tainted water flush down the drain, my head flashes with perfectly clear images of what I'm sure will become my torment. If I even make it out of this in one piece.

Her best friend is dead, and all I managed to say was, "It's okay. I've got you."

And even that was a lie. I don't have her. I don't even know if she's okay. I don't even know her real fucking name.

The sound of their screams fills my mind next, and it takes everything in my power not to scream louder, not to try anything I can to drown it out.

Instead, I grip my head and remain silent. I have no choice. I've got more than one nightmare to contend with.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jesse

My chest tightens to the point of suffocation but I push through. Making her hate me is the only option in this scenario because it's going to end up that way eventually.

But fuck did that hurt. It's still hurting. I feel like my insides are tied up in knots, and my heart's taking the brunt of the force. I can't do this, but I also can't seem to walk away. Every second with her is torture, but it's also bringing me to life bit by bit. I'm struggling to process why her touch is so different for me, and yet deep down, I know. I know exactly why I can tolerate it. And I hate that I have to let her go. *Again.*

In the years after I moved from Mossman Hills, I contemplated many scenarios for how my past would catch up with me. But I never once considered this. I never thought I'd see Buttercup again, and I definitely never thought she'd make me feel things when I'd closed myself off to that.

But here I am, letting her get closer than anyone's ever been, letting myself be vulnerable.

I know it's messed up and wrong, but I don't know how to stop it.



Willow doesn't come inside until long after I left her, and my mind drifts while I wait, only allowing myself a second to think of my past, of why I hate to be touched, before shoving the memories back down.

It's only after I've switched off the lamp in the living room and lain still for a few minutes that Willow finally enters, easing my mind. I should look away, but the soft glow from the moon provides just enough light for me to watch her rush past with a towel clinging to her body, wet hair still dripping down her back. I force my eyes closed just as her door clicks shut and something, or *someone* crashes against it. *Fuck!*

What is wrong with me?

Yes, I've always been an asshole, but that was some next level shit.

A little part of me thinks I should be honest with her. About everything. But the more I know her, the harder that gets.

She should hate me. She *needs* to hate me. And if lying to her about Pippa gets that result, then it's what I have to do.

Many people will suffer if the truth comes out, and top of that list is Willow. Me being here is putting us all at risk.

When I can no longer hear movement in Willow's room, I head to the kitchen for a drink. I've just downed half a beer when the front door opens and Pippa stumbles in.

"Honey, I'm home," she sings as she greets me.

"Yep, you are," I say with a nod, my drink still raised to my mouth.

"Hmm, okay." She pouts. "Not the friendly response I was after."

"It's late," I grumble, figuring it's a good enough excuse. "And did you get drunk with your parents?" I add accusingly.

"No." She giggles and I huff out a laugh. That's a definite yes.

"Right. Then it's nice to see you so *happy*." I don't mean to sound sarcastic, because I do like when she's happy, but now's not the time. Not that Pippa notices my tone.

"Why, thank you," she says with a random curtsy. "I think it's nice too."

"Don't you think it's risky though? Getting drunk? You might accidentally spill about our relationship."

I know this because I've experienced her drunk loose lips in the past.

"You're probably right," she says with a sigh. "We could easily drop the act now, you know."

Fuck no. “Nope.”

“Nope?”

She heard me. “We’ve been through this already.” And now more than ever, I need her to keep up the charade.

“Ugh. Okay. Well, word on the street is that the bridge will be open by the weekend anyway.”

“The weekend! *Fuck!*” *Didn’t someone say tomorrow?* Just when I thought this nightmare couldn’t get any worse.

Pippa’s lips curl up into an overdramatic smile as she walks toward me before pinching my cheeks. “Aww, Jesse. You make it sound like it’s been torture for you. You love spending time with me.”

She’s playing, I know she is, but her touch makes my skin crawl, something her sister would have noticed. Willow barely knows me and yet *she knows me* and—*goddammit*—I need to push that shit out of my mind. She’s not the girl for me. She’s not *anything* for me.

Pippa holds my gaze, waiting for a response, so I force a smirk. “You know you’re the only one I’d do this for.”

“I do and I’m grateful. Only a few more days.”

Again... fuck.

Without another word, Pippa sashays toward her bedroom, and I’m finally alone again.

My entire body sags to the countertop, my face landing in my hands.

What the hell am I doing?

I need to stay low and keep to myself until the damn bridge clears and we can go home. We can *all* go home. Including Tate and Alex. It's just a few more days. I need to be better.



I try to sleep when the house goes quiet again, but I'm fresh out of luck. I'm contemplating getting up for a shower when the floor creaks, and Willow walks past in her tight workout gear, heading out for another ridiculously early run.

My gaze flits toward the gap in the curtains, and when I see it's still pitch black outside, an uncomfortable feeling runs through me. It shouldn't bother me at all. I'm not her keeper. She's been surviving fine on her own for many years before I came along.

She'll be fine.

So why am I throwing on my sweats and a tee to go after her? And why can't I stop even now that I've registered what I'm doing? *Stay the fuck away.*

When my feet hit the pavement, I switch over to autopilot and run. I don't even know if I'm heading in the same direction Willow went, and yet, I feel instantly calmer. As though just being out here in the elements will keep her from

harm. Plus, it's a small town. How many run routes can she take?

I've barely even warmed up when I reach one edge of town, and I'm just about to head back in the other direction when I notice a familiar silhouette ahead of me, barely illuminated by a nearby streetlight. It's not much, but it's enough to see the outline of her perfect body. The body I can't get out of my mind. The way I felt when my fingers pressed against her skin, or moved through her heat. The way she reacted to my every touch. Her moans, her breathless whispers. The look of recognition on her face. *Fuck!*

That look.

She's going to figure out who I am and if she does... I can't even think about it.

I try walking away, but it's impossible to take my eyes off her as she paces back and forth at the edge of the forest, her hands locked behind her head. After a moment she stops in front of an old looking sign and steps between the trees, out of sight, only to step back again and throw her hand in the air a second later.

She does this a few times until she curses out loud and turns toward town. Toward me. *Shit.*

Her eyes instantly lock on mine, as though she's blindly drawn to me like I am to her.

"Go away, Jesse," she calls out quietly when she's a little closer. "I left the house to avoid you."

“I didn’t even know you were out here until I spotted you just now,” I lie, but even to my ears it’s unconvincing. “I usually run up the mountain,” I add, “but I didn’t want to bother your... ahh...whatever that was.”

As she moves toward me, my heart beats faster until it’s pounding against my rib cage.

We’re on a completely open road with no obstacles in our way and yet she bumps her shoulder into me as she walks past. “The mountains are all yours now,” she says with some bite. “Enjoy.”

That’s all it takes for me to lose my mind all over again.

Spinning around, I grab her wrist before she’s out of reach and pull her toward me, making her slam into my chest.

“What were you doing?” I lean down to whisper in her ear, my lips hovering close to her neck. “Tell me and I’ll let you go.”

She shivers but stands tall, pulling back to look up at me. “Nothing,” she seethes. “I was clearly doing nothing.”

Now that she’s up close, I can see the details of her face, and it’s clear that she’s upset—not just angry and frustrated like she’s trying to portray.

And I don’t think it has anything to do with me.

“Did something scare you?” I ask, my hand itching to brush the hair from her face. *To touch her.* God, who am I?

Her eyes widen but she quickly recovers, ripping her hand from mine before taking a step back. “Just leave me alone. It was nothing. It’s fine.”

“Willow.”

“Don’t ‘*Willow*’ me. Go back to your *girlfriend*. I’m sure she misses you.”

I internally cringe as my stomach churns. I hate this. All of it. But it’s all my doing.

“How about we run home together?” I ask, because apparently I enjoy punishing myself.

“How about we don’t,” she states bluntly. “I’m not going straight home anyway. Enjoy your run.”

She takes off, without even a backward glance, and turns to the left instead of following the straight road to her house, staying true to her word.

My gaze follows her as far as my sight allows. We’re in a town full of people that know and love her, yet I can’t shake this feeling of unease I have.

What was she doing?

When she rounds the corner, out of sight, I jog to the sign she was staring at and pause.

“Hepburn Falls Trail. Mt. Beauty Lookout 1.6mi.”

She wanted to go to the lookout? Now?

After a quick glance over my shoulder, I follow the path she refused to take, pushing through the overgrown forest as I

head to higher ground.

The farther I go, the more uncomfortable I feel as a realization hits me. She couldn't go up the mountain. She was scared. *Fuck*. Is that a new fear or is... Nope, I know the answer. But I continue on anyway. Even if it's only for my own personal torture.

By the time I reach the clearing, I've got scratches all over my bare arms, and my calves ache. This path isn't an easy walk, especially in the dark. But the second I get to the lookout, my pain fades away as I stare out into the vast landscape in awe.

Something in me just knows this is what Willow wanted to see. Not just the view in general. But *this* view. The sun rising over the horizon. The colors. The beauty. The new beginning.

The new beginning.

The thought of that hits me hard. What I wouldn't do for a new beginning. To be exactly where I am now, but to have come at it from a different direction. To have taken a different path.

But while I can't change the past, staying in this town—in Willow's house—is risking more damage than I've already inflicted. I've used up all my get out of jail free cards. Staying here isn't a new beginning for me. It could very well be my end.

Chapter Thirty

Willow

I drop onto the rocks and sigh, just as the sun peeks out from above the trees. Orange and yellow swirls paint the sky, and I can't help but smile. I made it. Here's to another day. Pulling my phone out of its case, I snap a picture and save it to my "happiness" folder. The folder I often visit when I'm at my lowest. When I need to remind myself that each sunrise can be the beginning of something. A new start.

While I can't change the past, I can rewrite the rules. Every day is a new opportunity to curate the life I want. To make it happen. I just have to figure out what the hell that life is.

When the sun settles high in the sky, I stroll back. I'm in no rush to go home and face Jesse again. But when I arrive, he's still out, and unfortunately, Pippa's asleep.

I get ready for work and listen at her door when it's time to leave, hoping to talk to her. But when I'm once again met with silence, I send her a text to join me for lunch and head off, determined to push the entire Jesse incident out of my mind. At least, until I see her.

Our morning's busier than I would have expected for a Tuesday, and it's not until our fifth customer asks about the same Fresh New Love oil that a thought occurs to me.

Pulling up my business's social media account, I see Pippa's tagged me in a post. She's hugging a guy wearing Jesse's team-issued cap, while holding my creation up to the camera. You can clearly see her in the image, but it's impossible to tell who the guy is, unless of course you know him. And I do. It's Mason who owns the bar across the street. Only that's not who she's implying it is. And I can see why she chose him. He may not be Jesse, but they have a similar build.

After reading the caption, my stomach clenches as a nauseous feeling takes over, making me even more desperate to speak to Pippa.

To my new love with a certain hockey player. ☐

#musthavebeentheoils

#Audreysessence

#Freshnewlove

I'm not upset that she used my oils; that's perfect for business. But I can't say I'm excited about the fact that she's putting their relationship on social media, practically announcing it to the world. Even though it's fake. My stomach swirls as I reach for my glass of water, needing a moment to myself. And when the bell above my door chimes again, I

almost scream out “*don’t buy it! It’s a fraud,*” but hold myself back. I’ve never hated that bell more than I do right now.

“Hi, welcome to Audrey’s,” Sara says, thankfully stepping in when she sees my expression, signaling for me to head to the back. Where I stay until it’s time for lunch.

She sells two more scent and salt packs—a Fresh New Love and a Bright New Day—before turning my way as soon as the last customer’s gone. “What did I miss?”

I show her Pippa’s post and she barks out a laugh. “Well, that explains a lot.”

“It does.” I smile. “She’s actually meeting me for lunch now, so we can find out all about it.”

“You didn’t know?” Sara asks with a frown.

“Nope.”

We keep chatting as I wait for Pippa, but twelve thirty comes and goes, and then it’s one, and then one thirty, then Sara heads home, and still nothing. No Pippa.

After sending her two texts, I give up and quickly shove down my food. It’s not until three forty-five that I get a response.

Pippa: Shit, sorry sis. My phone died last night and I forgot to charge it. Let’s catch up for dinner together tonight. Mom’s cooking your fav

Ugh. Dinner with Mom and Dad is not at all what I had in mind, but at least we'll get some alone time on the walk home.

Willow: Sounds good. I'll meet you there after I close up



Five thirty comes around faster than usual due to our increased sales, and I can't complain at all. I'm just pulling the door closed, ready to meet Pippa, when a tap on my shoulder has me jumping out of my skin.

"Jesus, fuck! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," Alex says as I turn around, my hand clenched to my heart as a breath leaves me.

He raises his hands to show me he's "harmless," and an apologetic look settles on his face, yet he steps forward and invades my personal space anyway, making me move back..

"Again, I'm sorry. I thought you'd seen me approach, but maybe you were lost in thought?"

"Oh, yes I was. It's okay. Not your fault. What can I do for you? Let me guess... the Fresh New Love oil?"

"The what?" His brows furrow and he scratches his head as his eyes flash toward my shop.

I huff out a laugh. “Never mind. Are you here to buy something?”

I’m pretty sure I know the answer to that question, but it’s out there now and at least it gets the conversation started.

“No. I’m not. But I can. If it will increase my chances.”

“Again?” *He’s not going to give up.*

“Oh, Willow. Last time was a ‘maybe,’ so I’m back to change it to a yes. Are you any closer to letting me take you out?”

My promise to Jesse floats through my mind, but since I currently don’t care what Jesse thinks, I push it away. “Can I give you another ‘maybe’?” I say as my lips thin. “I’ve just got some things going on and I—”

“I’ll take it. But I will be back. Probably tomorrow. With flowers.”

He points toward Lucia’s store, and I can’t help but return his warm smile. It’s so genuine that I try to see through it. To see what Jesse sees. The reason he’s so “dangerous” as he says. At least I think that’s what he said. It was something along those lines. Either way, he doesn’t like Alex, and I’m dying to know why.

Alex steps forward again, running a hand down my arm as he whispers goodbye before walking away.

And his touch does nothing for me.

Jesse only needs to look in my direction to have my traitorous body lighting up, but Alex... nothing.

Damn Jesse.

Like this morning... I'm so angry at him, and yet, the second I saw him standing under the street light, my heart skipped. Him being there may have been purely coincidental, but it didn't feel that way. It felt like he was there to protect me. And while I hated him seeing me in such a low moment, I didn't hate the thought that maybe he cared. Maybe someone understood that there was more going on than my peachy life suggested. Or maybe it's all in my head.

When I reach my parents' place and realize I'm still thinking of Jesse, I curse myself. And after a quick internal scolding, I vow to push him far from my mind. For Pippa. For me.

Squaring my shoulders to project a confidence I don't feel, I walk up the drive, pausing when Pippa comes rushing out the front door.

"Pippa? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, I just had to talk to you before you went inside," she says a little rushed. "I know I still need to explain everything in more detail, but Jesse's here." *For fuck's sake.* "And I wanted to remind you not to tell anyone what I told you. Including him."

"I know. But you never told me why."

“Jesse would prefer to keep it a secret,” she says with a shrug.

Yeah, I bet he would. Asshole.

I’m absolutely fuming. After everything that happened between us, I still can’t believe he lied. He wanted me to hate him. He planned this.

Pippa disappears down the hall as we walk inside the house and then joins us in the dining room from the other direction, as though she’s just been to the bathroom.

And the reality of Jesse’s secret *really* hits me.

If hate is what he wants, hate is what he’s going to get.

Chapter Thirty-One

Willow

I doubt dinner could be any more awkward than it is right now. I don't want to be here. Jesse doesn't want to be here, and I love Pippa, but she's being her usual oblivious self.

Even my parents are more quiet than usual. *But what do they think is going on?*

“Oh Willow!” Mom says suddenly, breaking another period of silence. “I saw three people carrying around one of your bags today. I always love seeing that. I'm so proud of you.”

My skin flushes, and I have no doubt that a pink color is now coating my cheeks. Mom smiles in anticipation of my response, but all I can manage is a half grin in return.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say instead. “It was a busy day. I almost sold out of my Fresh New Love oil. You and Jesse wouldn't know anything about that, right, Pippa?”

I turn to Pippa to see her bite back a smirk while Jesse's eyes bounce between the two of us, clearly confused.

“I know nothing,” she lies. “And Jesse certainly has no idea.”

My lips rise in a smirk. “No, I guess he wouldn’t.”

“What did you do, Pip?” Mom asks, never one to let things slide.

“I just helped with a little online presence,” she says with a proud grin. “Or I suppose, we did,” she adds, pulling Jesse into a side hug as she winks at me.

Jesse flinches and his brows furrow, but when my mom and dad look his way, he covers with a smile. “Always happy to help where I can.”

“We’d never ask you to use your fame to help our little girl,” Dad says, deciding to contribute to our conversation and embarrass me. “But thank you for whatever you did.”

Funny that I’ve been making a living all on my own without their social media influence. But sure, it’s all Pippa and Jesse. *Ugh. God, what am I? Twelve?*

Twelve. What I wouldn’t give to be twelve again, to start it all over. Maybe the second time around would be different. Maybe I’d remember. Or maybe it would never have happened.

My head aches as I try to recall the strange feeling I got with Jesse last night. I can’t for the life of me figure out what triggered it no matter how hard I try, but a little part of me wants to believe it’s progress.

I know I have all this information stored away somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind, but when I want to locate it, I'm met with complete silence. Like that part of my brain has a system malfunction, or worse, it's no longer accessible.

For the past twelve years I assumed I wasn't fixable, despite doctors telling me it was possible, and now, I might actually believe them.

"Speaking of fresh new love," Mom segues, and I internally cringe as her words pull me back to the present, replacing one of my life's problems with another. "It's so lovely to actually get to spend time with you again, Jesse. Pippa speaks highly of you."

Jesse smiles but he's clearly uncomfortable. *Maybe it's awkward because it's fake*, Jesse.

"Thank you," he says quietly, which makes him sound humble and genuine. He's a pro at this. "It's been great finally getting to know Pippa's family. She never shuts up about you all."

Dad raises an eyebrow as his eyes flash to Pippa's. "All good things, I bet."

"Of course, Daddy." She beams and I have to bite my cheek to stop myself from laughing. I can guarantee there's been nothing nice said about Ashley.

"Either way. We're happy to see Pippa's found someone decent. She's made some questionable choices in the past—"

“Like Ashley’s fiancé?” I ask because I can’t stop myself. They love Jonah, so it seems fitting to point out that he’s one of those choices.

“Let’s not talk about them when they’re not here, Willow,” Dad subtly scolds, while Mom frowns beside him. Pippa by comparison gives me a subtle smile in thanks.

“While on the topic, when are you going to find someone?” Mom asks, changing the subject, making me almost choke on my food. *Way to get back at me, Mom.* I should have known she wouldn’t let it slide after the other night. I’m about to throw them my usual spiel when an idea comes to mind.

“I actually have a date this weekend,” I lie, pretty damn convincingly.

With my eyes purposely locked on Mom’s, I still notice Jesse stiffening in my peripheral vision, and it brings me more joy than it should.

“Ooh, that’s exciting,” Mom says while Pippa’s gaze flashes to mine so quickly I’m surprised she doesn’t get whiplash.

“Bullshit. Who?” she asks, her eyes subtly moving to Jesse before settling back on me. “I need all the details.”

“Pippa!” Mom scolds but Pippa just shrugs.

“Do I know him?” Mom asks, repeating Pippa’s question in a nicer way. “When did you meet?”

“It’s the guy you asked about from Dad’s dinner. His name is Alex and—”

“The fuck?” Jesse huffs under his breath, but it comes out much louder than he meant. He curses again, much softer this time, but it’s too late. All our eyes flash his way as he visibly swallows.

Mom and Pippa stay silent, but I can tell by the look on Dad’s face that he’s not letting that go.

“You got something to say about this Alex guy, Jesse?” he asks after a beat.

Jesse, to his credit, sits tall and owns his opinion. “He’s bad news.”

I can’t help but scoff. “Come on.”

“Willow?” Dad questions.

“He’s a good guy, Dad. He and Jesse just don’t see eye to eye.” I have no idea if he’s a good guy or not, but I’m going with it anyway.

“We don’t see eye to eye?” Jesse questions, folding his arms across his chest as he stares at me in challenge.

“That’s right. And why is that? What have you got against him? I’d love to know.”

“Willow,” Pippa interrupts before he answers. “I trust Jesse. If he says someone is bad news, I believe him.”

“And you trust him fully, right?” I say, my eyebrows raised in question.

“She means no offense by that, Jesse,” Mom says, clearly not wanting to upset Jesse now that she’s accepted him for

Pippa.

“Bullshit. I mean total offense. Alex has been nothing but nice to me. He makes me feel alive. Something that *no one* else has ever done.” I’m talking absolute garbage here, but I can’t seem to stop myself. And when Jesse’s shoulders tense and his nostrils flare, I want to keep going. “I’m an adult. If I want to date him, I’ll date him. If I want to do other things, I’ll —”

“Okay. We get it,” Pippa cuts me off seconds before I completely embarrass myself in front of my parents. *Fuck him.* I was going to say fuck him. And from the look of disgust on Jesse’s face, he understood me perfectly.

“If Jesse’s worried about you being with Alex then I think you should listen to him,” Dad says, nodding toward Jesse like he’s done him a favor.

“Jesse doesn’t know me well enough to understand that I can take care of myself. But,”—I turn to Jesse—“you’ll be gone in a few days anyway and none the wiser. So how about you stay out of my goddamn business.”

“Willow!” Pippa shouts.

“This isn’t like you at all,” Mom adds.

“No, it’s okay,” Jesse says. “Willow’s right. She’s old enough to make her own decisions. Even if those decisions are bad ones. And we *will* be gone in a few days... but so *will he.*”

He smirks like that thought pleases him, so I throw a metaphorical knife his way. “Then I better make the most of

my time with him now.”

All eyes are back on me, so no one notices the scowl on Jesse’s face. But I notice, and a little part of me feels vindicated. I don’t want to date Alex. I never did. But knowing that the idea of it has Jesse all ragey makes me happy, albeit a little confused. He says he doesn’t want me, so what’s this all about? Why is he still so protective, while at the same time pushing me away?



Conversation moves from my love life onto football—my Dad’s other favorite pastime—and before long, Alex is forgotten.

Jesse’s not overly talkative through the rest of dinner, but he answers questions when asked, which is more than I want to do right now.

When my phone rings and Lucia’s name flashes across my screen, I excuse myself. After listening to one of Mom’s “we shouldn’t have phones at the table” rants, I head into a bedroom to answer.

“Hi Lucia, how are you and your little one?”

Yes, I know her name, but I still can’t bring myself to say it.

“Jade’s wonderful, thank you. And I’m... ugh... I’m alive.”

And now I feel bad for not calling her more often. “I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch sooner. I—”

“Oh, God no. Please don’t apologize. Gran mentioned she spoke to you and you were giving us some quiet bonding time.”

What?! Thank you, Bea. I guess sometimes it pays off to have everyone in your business. “We all need some adjusting time.” I shrug, even though she can’t see me.

“You’re absolutely right. And I’m so grateful to you.”

“You’re welcome,” I say as guilt consumes me. Truth is, I can’t face her. I can’t look at her little girl, when her name brings me so much uncertainty, so much heartache. I lost *my* Jade, and I still have no idea what happened. I’m not sure I’ll ever fully get past that.

“Anyway, sorry to bother you so late, but I have someone coming in from Angel Lakes to take over the Hadley wedding on Saturday. Would it be okay if you let her in and give her my spare key?”

“Of course. Anything you need.”

I can hear in her voice that handing over the wedding pains her. As it would if it was me. She’s done all the groundwork, it’s her business, and now someone else will finish it while she’s stuck across the bridge.

I agree to keep my eyes and ears open for her, and then we say our goodbyes, but when I hang up, I can’t bring myself to

go back to the dining room right away. Maybe if I take my time, dinner will be over and I can just leave. Wishful thinking, I know. Mom's probably told them all to put their forks down and wait for me. Although, I'm not Ashley.

Taking a deep breath, I open the door and find Jesse walking out of the bathroom opposite of where I'm standing. He freezes in the doorway with his scowl still locked in place, like I've made it a permanent fixture. I stop for a second, needing to see if he has anything to say, but we end up just staring at each other, at some kind of impasse.

Huffing out a laugh, I roll my eyes and turn away. "Unbelievable," I mutter under my breath just as I'm pulled back toward him in a move reminiscent of this morning. And just like that instance, it excites me.

My pulse spikes as a rush of adrenaline hits me, and I'm struck with a sick realization. *I like this*. The unknown. The will he, won't he. The chase. I want it all.

But only because it's him.

There's an air of mystery around him I find so freaking intriguing. Everything he does reels me in. No matter how much I want to hate him.

When I turn his way, he's seething but tries to hide it behind one of his many masks.

"I know you're pissed off," he says, his fingers still wrapped around my wrist. "But don't do this because you think it will

get back at me. I assure you, it won't. You're putting yourself in harm's way for *nothing*."

Ouch, that hurt. And I don't mean his grip.

"I know you think the world revolves around you, Jesse. But *this* isn't about you. Alex asked me out. I—"

"Stay away from him, Willow." His grip tightens but it's not painful. It comes across more panicked than threatening.

"Or what?" I ask anyway.

"You're the only one that will end up hurt." His eyes flash with anguish but I ignore it.

"I'll take my chances," I say, ripping my hand free from his grasp. "But I appreciate the concern."

With that, I walk away. Okay, I storm off. But the situation warranted it.

I don't hear him follow me, so when I round the corner, I rush into the laundry room, needing a second to catch my breath.

That was intense.

I've spent a huge part of my life avoiding strong emotions, and now I can't escape them. What is it about Jesse that brings so much out of me? He's changing the rules, *my* rules, when I wanted to be the one to do that. He's bringing me back to life and he doesn't even want me.

Where the hell do I go from here?

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jesse

*F*uck. Fuck. Fuck.

What a mess? All I had to do was *not* fucking touch her and everything would have been fine. Mostly. Or maybe it wouldn't have, but at least my conscience would have been a little bit clearer.

I came to this stupid dinner so that Willow would see Pippa and me together. So she'd believe me. But, I can't take my eyes off her as she walks away. And I hate that this new attitude she has only makes me want her more. The confidence... the snark...it's everything about her.

If there's a silver lining, it's that she appears somewhat closer to hating me, and that's best for both of us. But dating Alex... *Fuck!* I want to break something. If my stupid mistake, my lack of control, sends her straight into harm's way, I'll never forgive myself. But telling her the truth could cause just as much damage. If not more.

Taking a moment before I go back, I stare down at the hand I had wrapped around her delicate wrist and flex my fingers.

That's twice now I've reached for her, when I'd normally flinch away. What is it about her that makes me seek her out? And why the hell did it have to be *her* touch that I welcome? The only touch that I can tolerate. No, not tolerate. It's more than that. I *crave* it.

I'm not going to lie to myself and say I was completely comfortable with everything we did together last night... but I wanted to be. I wanted to kiss her, hold her, fuck her bare. Only I have no idea how I'll physically react to any of those things, but I can't imagine it'll be good.

When I get back to the table, Willow's only just taking a seat, and no one notices me entering.

"Honestly, Willow. I haven't seen this attitude from you since before—"

"Not now, Mom," Pippa cuts her off, smiling in my direction. "Let's just move on and enjoy dessert."

I smile as I take a seat, nodding at Pippa's dad when he looks my way.

On the outside, I'm calm, but inside I'm completely rattled.

Before? Fuck.

Willow doesn't say a word for the rest of the night. And after finishing her dessert in record time, she makes an excuse to leave, opting to walk home alone rather than wait another

few minutes for me and Pippa to go with her. And I'm actually relieved by that.

We say our goodbyes, and like always, Pippa grabs my hand as we go, making me suck in a breath so I don't react. We walk peacefully for a few minutes until she pulls me to a stop.

"I know I joked about you having a crush on Willow, but I need to know... Is your issue with Alex a jealousy thing, or should we actually be worried?"

Dammit.

Deep down, I knew this conversation was coming, but I was kind of hoping she'd just trust me without asking.

"Look, I don't know him personally, but I don't trust the guys he associates with. I wouldn't want Willow or anyone to be caught up in that. And there's something about him. I just haven't figured out exactly what." *Could be the fact that he told me he knows things.*

I purposely avoid confirming or denying the jealousy part of her question, partly because I'm in denial about it to myself. But if she notices, she says nothing.

"Do you mean Tate?" she asks, after considering my reasoning. "He's an asshole but he's harmless."

"He's a lot of things, Pippa, but harmless isn't one of them."

Pippa sighs. "I still can't believe you know him. I'd love to hear that story."

“I’d prefer not to talk about it.” *So please don’t ask questions.*

Pippa pauses with her lips pursed, and I wait.

“She seems so... determined,” Pippa says after a beat, moving on from my past with Tate, taking away some of my stress. “We usually talk about stuff like that. Actually...” She trails off and huffs out an incredulous sigh. “We don’t. It’s me that talks to her about it. She’s never really mentioned a guy. Even when I ask. But I don’t want to fight with her. How do we make her see reason?”

From her wistful tone, I’m going to guess this is the first time she’s really reflected on her relationship with Willow. And when she looks up at me as though expecting me to have all the right answers, I’m even more convinced.

She won’t like my response though. In reality, *we* won’t do anything. *I* need to back the fuck away from this. “I’m sure you’ll think of something,” I say, and genuinely hope that she does, because... “Either that, or she’ll realize it on her own.”



First thing the next morning, I pay a visit to the mayor’s office to find out the truth about the bridge. This town runs on hearsay, and I need something a little more concrete.

The receptionist behind the counter confirms Pippa was mostly right. The plan is to have it drivable on Saturday at the latest. Just in time for my charity event Sunday.

Three more nights.

The days I can handle; it's the nights that seem to be my downfall. But at least I now have an end date.

Tate's sitting on his motorcycle outside the bar as I make my way home. With a cigarette hanging from his lips, he stares at me from across the street. Waiting.

The angel on my shoulder tells me to keep walking, to ignore his glare and the expectant look on his face, but the devil on the other side is much more persuasive, and when I see a flicker of uncertainty cross his face, my decision is made.

What was I saying about backing off?

"I thought I told you to keep your dog off Willow?" I say, jumping straight into it.

Tate smiles as he shakes his head, but it looks a little unhinged. "Good morning, Jesse. Lovely to see you on this fine day."

"Just answer the fucking question."

"Okay. okay." He butts out his cigarette and raises his hands in the air. "But I thought I'd already told *you*, I'm not his keeper."

“Do you really think it’s a good idea for him to get close to her?” I ask, taking a step in his direction to ensure we’re out of earshot, needing our conversation to be private.

Unfazed by my proximity, Tate simply shrugs. “Why would it matter? He doesn’t know anything.”

“Are you positive about that?”

“I am. He doesn’t know anything, and she’s never met him before this week. He’s unlikely to trigger something.”

“Maybe not him alone, but she’s met *you*,” I counter. “And —”

“And yet...” He scratches his head like it’s one big joke, and I want to throttle him. “*Nothing happened.*”

“Tate—”

“Jesse! Jesse Hastings! Is it really you?” Tate and I turn around to see a young boy running toward me. “I heard you were here but—”

“Oh...*oh*... Stop, honey,” a woman calls out after him, as though she’s just noticed he’s taken off. She catches up to him at the same time that he comes to a stop in front of us. “I’m so, so sorry,” she says, slightly out of breath, not really looking our way. “Nickie, you can’t just interrupt someone like that, even if he is... ah... hi.” She looks my way and falters, her words suddenly breathy, “Hi. Um. I’m... sorry. We’ll, ah, leave you be.”

The little boy stares up at me with stars in his eyes, while hers are full of hearts... and I internally sigh. How am I seen

as the asshole of hockey when I've always been gracious to my fans? Even when they interrupt me. "No, it's fine. We were just chatting. And yes, it's me. Are you a hockey fan?"

"You bet. That shot you took, right before those two guys slammed into you in the final game... that was *epic*."

"Thank you," I say with a genuine smile. "It's always nice to meet someone that loves the game as much as I do."

"My friends think San Francisco has a chance to win the cup this season." *We're definitely getting closer. If not this year, then the next. And that's why I need to stay on the team.* "Can I get a photo?"

I'd prefer you didn't. "Of course."

The kid asks his mom to take a few pictures and then she asks for a selfie at the end. I happily oblige but hate knowing Tate's still behind me, watching it all. Boring a hole in the back of my head as though this is some kind of ammunition he can use.

After a few minutes, the boy and his mother walk away with smiles on their faces while I wave goodbye. When they turn to cross the street, I feel Tate's presence before his breath warms my neck, making me physically ill. "You'd be wise to never forget how much you've got to lose. Wouldn't want anything to ruin your stellar career."

I step away but he keeps talking, and there's an edge to his previously confident tone. "I can't stop Alex from getting close to Willow, but I can promise to keep an eye on him."

Why would he even do that? Unless he thinks Alex is dangerous.

“Your promises mean nothing to me,” I say instead of my thoughts, slamming into him as I spin around. “But if he so much as touches a single strand of hair on her head without asking first, I promise you he’s a dead man.”

Tate doesn’t even flinch, but something about his expression feels off. “First, Jesse, my promises should mean *everything* to you. I’ve never said a *word*. To anyone. And second, as I said before, shouldn’t you be worried about your career?”

I ignore the first part of his response and focus on the second. “Not even a little,” I say with confidence and strangely mean it. My career means everything to me, now more than ever, but if that fucker hurt her...

“And what if I was recording this conversation?”

“Tate, if I was concerned about you ruining my career, this conversation is the least of my problems.”

He huffs out a laugh. “I suppose that’s true. Oh the things I know.”

I clench my fist by my side to stop myself from wringing his neck, and instead put on another fake smile. “You seem to forget... We’re in this together.”

“If that’s still the case, let Alex and Willow play out naturally. He’ll be gone on the weekend and all will be good.”

He walks back to his bike and slides on, securing his helmet on his head as I stare at him in confusion. Something doesn’t

add up.

“Why? Why are you so invested in this?” I ask, desperate to figure out the connection.

Tate rolls his eyes like I’m being ridiculous and shakes his head. “Because he likes her, and I want my friends to be happy.”

“You expect me to believe that.”

“I don’t care what you believe. But it’s happening.”

He pulls the visor of his helmet down and speeds away without another word, leaving me more confused than ever. Something’s at play here. I have no doubt. I’ve just got to hope it all disappears when the bridge reopens. Because that’s what it’s about, right? They’re bored because they’re stuck here? Fuck, I hope that’s the case.

“What was that about?” Pippa asks, coming out of nowhere, scaring the hell out of me.

“Nothing. It was nothing,” I say, willing my heart rate to return to normal. The last thing I need is for Pippa to get involved.

“Tell me you didn’t say something about Alex and Willow?” she asks and I relax a little. I’m fine with her believing that’s all this is.

“I didn’t say something about Alex and Willow,” I repeat her words back to her. Just like she asked me to.

She eyes me suspiciously for a beat before shrugging her shoulders and linking our arms. “Okay, are you heading home?”

Home? How I wish we were going home, but unfortunately she means Willow’s. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Willow

*G*od, he makes me so mad. I almost want to hook up with Alex just because I know it will piss him off. But at the same time, I don't. It makes no sense.

Why didn't he just stay away from me in the first place?

I'm still fuming over everything the next day, having not slept at all. The combination of Jesse, Jade, and minor cases of déjà vu are definitely not helping.

The bell above my door chimes while I'm out back getting some extra stock, and I audibly sigh. I'm not in the mood. *The fucking bell.* I've been trying to work on Pippa's necklace for most of the day, but can't get my head into it. And I'm so close to being done.

"I'll be right there," I call out, but it lacks my usual sunshine.

Trying to rush, I stand on my toes to reach the last box I need, and curse when only the tips of my fingers brush against the wooden crate. *Dammit.*

“Need help?” Pippa asks from behind me, making my heart jump as I spin around and almost fall. “I am taller after all,” she adds, steadying me with a smile.

“That you are.” I smile at our inside joke. She and Ashley are practically the same height, only Ashley probably has half an inch on her and never lets her forget it. To make up for it, Pippa teases me about being the shortest. “Go ahead. It’s the blue box.”

Pippa laughs as she grabs the ladder and drags the box forward before passing it down to me, doing exactly what I should have done. She gives me a smile as she jumps down and pretends to dust her hands clean.

“Easy peasy,” she says before lifting herself up onto the back counter and crossing her legs. She grabs one of my experimental oils and smells it before slowly running her hand over the delicate bottle.

“Mmm, maybe we should feature this in my next photo shoot.”

“You mean the one with you and your boyfriend?” I laugh, picturing her and Mason in another social media campaign.

“Yes, exactly that. And you may have noticed I never actually named names. People see what they want to see.”

“But it’s Jesse you were alluding to,” I say and then decide to bite the bullet and ask for the details. “So, what’s going on there?”

“Ugh. I’m sorry. I should have filled you in from the start, but I thought it was easier to keep it from everyone. I should have trusted you. Now, I’m fine with the world knowing. It’s Jesse that wants to keep up the charade.”

“You mentioned that. Why?”

“He has a good reason. It wouldn’t look good for him if the media caught wind of all this. Plus his contract ends this season and he wants to re-sign with the team. So, we’re breaking up when we get home.” Her lips pull into a mischievous smile, and I can only imagine the grand “breakup” she’s planning. I almost laugh until her words register.

God, what a fucking mess. She’s right. It wouldn’t look good for Jesse if this got out. And it would look even worse if the media found out that he was with his fake girlfriend’s sister at the same time. Is that my answer? Is that why he’s pushing me away?

“Okay,” I say, pulling myself from my thoughts. “I get why you’re doing it *now*. But how the hell did this grand plan come about in the first place?”

Pippa grimaces as I jump up beside her. “How long have you got?”

Patting her leg, I reach for the box of chocolates I have for emergency cravings and hand it over. “Unless I get another customer, you’ve got me for as long as you need.”

And it’ll take my mind off the other thing.



When she's finished filling me in on the details, I stare at her in shock before laughing hysterically. I'm not sure if I'm laughing because of the hole she's dug herself or because of the shit I've been through because of her plan.

"So Ryan's out of hiding and now he wants more?" I ask when she gets to his part of her story. I remember her telling me about Ryan months ago, but she told me he ended things.

"I honestly didn't even think about him when I set this up. He's barely looked at me for months."

"But now he's back?"

"Apparently."

"Could be seen as a silver lining for coming home."

"Uh-uh," she says as she bumps her shoulder back into mine. "This is the silver lining, getting to spend time with you."

"That has been a bonus," I say truthfully. I've loved having her here; it's her fake boyfriend I'm struggling with. "So, are you planning to tell Jesse that I know? Can we finally have a lie-free existence?"

"Oh, God, no," Pippa says, barking out a laugh. "At least, not until we're on the way home or maybe even midbreakup."

I want to laugh along with her, but the thought of Jesse once again upsets me.

He's leaving. He was *always* leaving. And maybe that's a good thing. *Talk about indecisiveness. Do I want him here or not?*

"Plus," Pippa continues, "he's really desperate to keep it a secret, and considering it was his favor to me in the first place —"

"You're doing it for him."

"Exactly."

Exactly. God. Why is this all so hard? And what is Jesse thinking?



Pippa hangs around for the next hour until I'm ready to close up the shop, and it's not until we're walking home that she brings up Alex. I'm surprised she waited this long. I thought she would have mentioned him earlier.

"I'm sorry I didn't really stick up for you last night. But Jesse rarely cares enough to hold grudges unless they're earned," she says, entwining our fingers. "Or the person works in the media," she adds with a laugh.

So, what did I do to earn one?

“It’s okay, Pip. I get it. You know Jesse and you don’t know Alex.”

She stops walking, and I’m pulled back from her grip. “Neither do you,” she says as I turn to face her, releasing a long breath.

“You’re right, I don’t,” I say with the smallest hint of attitude. “But we’ve had a few interactions of late and he’s always been nice, sweet even.” I’m not sure why I keep defending him. Pippa’s not Jesse.

“You’re really thinking of going out with him, aren’t you?” she asks with a smile.

No. “Maybe?” I shrug. “It’s not like the streets are swarming with options, and you know it’s been forever since I last went on a date.”

Pippa laughs at that. “That’s true. How do you cope? It’s only been a couple of weeks for me, and I’m in desperate need of a good fucking.”

“A fucking? Really?” I laugh out loud, pulling Pippa into a side hug as we start walking again.

“Yep.” She bounces her eyebrows. “Pity my fake boyfriend won’t touch me.”

“Hmmm?” I say, pretending not to be affected by her words, but *shit. Does she actually like him?*

The second the sound leaves my mouth, Pippa’s eyes flash to mine and she winces. “Oh shit. I’m kidding. I don’t want that at all.”

“You mean you’re not secretly pining for him?” I chuckle nervously as my insides squirm, waiting for her answer. I can’t believe I never thought of that possibility sooner. *I’m an awful person.*

“I can say with complete certainty that I do not have any feelings for that man, other than the platonic kind. I never have.”

I gulp down a lump in my throat, still not completely convinced. “And you don’t think those feelings might change?” I say, hoping the concern stays out of my voice.

“Willow. Jesse will never be the guy for me. I don’t have any romantic feelings toward him. Yes, I’m aware that he’s hot as fuck, so I probably would have gone there if we’d met under different circumstances, but we didn’t, and that’s it.”

While I don’t like the thought of that ever happening, the solace I feel courses through me, and I can’t stop my smile. Though I do try to hide it.

Pippa discusses Jesse in an almost brotherly way after that, and the man she describes seems different from the guy I feel like I know. The guy I may never fully understand.

An uncomfortable feeling forms in the pit of my stomach, but I ignore it and laugh again, instead allowing a sense of warmth to fill me. I’m happy they have each other. Even if it makes my feelings awkward.

“Back on the small-town thing,” Pippa asks suddenly after a moment of quiet. “Why *are* you still here? Haven’t you ever

thought about escaping?”

All the time. “I wouldn’t even know where to start or what to do. And you know Mom would freak out.”

Pippa’s shoulders drop as pity crosses her face. “It’s been twelve years,” she whispers, not entirely sure she wants to say the words out loud, because we never talk about it. No one talks about it. Unless it’s to tell me they’re sorry. Or to check in on me. *Or break the news that they now have a granddaughter named Jade.*

“It will always seem like it was yesterday to Mom. She’ll never forget.”

And I can’t remember.

I change the subject back to Pippa as we walk up my driveway, and as I suspected, she doesn’t question it. Instead, she tells me about a rumor she heard regarding her childhood nemesis. I usually wouldn’t laugh at someone else’s misfortune, but my emotions are all over the place, and I can’t be held responsible for my actions.

“Can you believe it?” she says with a snort, making me laugh even more. At this point, I think I’m laughing about my messed-up life more than Pippa’s story.

Opening the front door, I shake my head and step through the threshold, running straight into Jesse’s hard and very bare chest. Which of course makes me giggle even harder.

Why do I keep doing that?

Jesse's hands shoot out, and he grabs my shoulders to steady me before stepping back. He opens his mouth to say something but closes it again, and a look of disgust crosses his face. "Watch where you're going," he barks out as he steps even farther away.

"Jesse!" Pippa scolds from behind me, but I shake it off and hide my frown, the reality of our situation hitting me in the face. Quite literally as I just removed my face from his pecs.

"It's fine. I wasn't looking."

I leave them arguing in the entry as I head straight to my room. And it's not until I've shut the door that I realize... Jesse didn't flinch. My face and hands were all over his bare chest, and he didn't even react. Is that just progress stemming from the fact that he allowed me to touch him? Or is it me in general?

And more importantly, why am I still allowing myself to care?



As I walk the deserted streets, I feel a presence behind me. Someone lurking in the shadows. I try to turn around and check, but something's stopping me, something's keeping my gaze locked ahead, and no matter what I do, I can't figure out what's restraining me.

Increasing my speed until I'm almost at a slow jog, I try to shake off my unease, but the feeling of being followed still lingers.

The farther I go, the higher I seem to travel, but that can't be right. That's not where I want to go.

With my heart pounding against my rib cage, I try to change course, but my feet continue propelling me forward, and when I reach the peak, the restraints disappear and I finally feel free.

Taking a deep breath, I turn around to keep moving, but a shadow clouds my vision and I scream, leaping out of its way. My foot slips as I spin, and with nothing to hold on to, I fall off the edge, plummeting through the air.

My body jolts on the bed as though I just hit the ground, and I bite back a groan. Another freaking nightmare. At least this time Jesse wasn't in it. At least, I don't think he was. Or was he? *Ugh.* My heart races as I sit up for a drink of water, and it's not until I've taken a few deep breaths that I'm able to lie back down and reflect. It's been years since I've had these nightmares. It's strange that they're happening now. Is it because of Jade? Or is there something else?

Just like in the dream, I can't shake the feeling that there's more to it, and I need to figure out what that is.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Jesse

I'm exhausted after another sleepless night. Hearing Willow's cries, but not being able to go to her, was like watching someone twist a knife into my gut but being unable to react to it. It was soul shattering.

Not only because I can't stand hearing her in pain, but also because I'm terrified that I'm the cause of it.

After her restlessness stopped, I laid awake thinking about the last few days. Had it really only been just over a week since I first saw her again? A week since I landed back into the nightmare *and* dream I thought I'd left behind.

Jesus!

Just before the sun rises, Willow sneaks out for her usual morning run, without even glancing in my direction. I contemplate following her but decide against it. No good could ever come from her knowing I care. I want the opposite from her. I want her to hate the look of me, to despise my very being, to forget I ever existed. And I want her to move on.

More than anything, I want that.

Taking my time to pack up the couch, I slowly make breakfast before Pippa wakes, praying she'll distract me for the day. But when an hour passes, and she still hasn't moved, I leave. I can't be here when Willow gets back.



On my walk into town, I call Seth. While he's unlikely to help, he might at least convince me to get the hell over it. They'll probably be his exact words.

"Jesse, my man," he says, answering on the first ring. "How's your vacation?" He chortles like he's just told the funniest joke but stops when I don't give him a smart-ass response. "I'm worried. What's going on?"

"I'm stuck here, Seth."

"Where?"

"The middle of fucking nowhere!"

"Okay," he draws out like he thinks I'm full of shit. "Why are you stuck?"

"Haven't you heard the news?"

I tell him about the accident but don't mention Willow at all in my description. He makes all the right sounds in response,

and when I finish, he sighs.

“Well, that’s not ideal. You’ve got that charity event on Sunday and the—”

“I’ll be there.” *There’s no way I’m staying here past Saturday.*

“Honestly, I’m surprised the media hasn’t reported on it. Unless they assumed you were already home?”

“Who fucking cares. Point is, this place is slowly killing me.”

Seth laughs. “Since when are you dramatic? Deal with it. It’s two more days. Find something or someone to keep you entertained. But be discreet.”

I huff out a laugh because there it is... “*deal with it.*”

“You know I can’t find someone; I’m dating Pippa.”

Seth laughs again, much louder this time. “I love that your life has suddenly become a soap opera. It would be a little bit funny if it happened to anyone. But you...it made my year.”

“Fuck off. If I’m not home by Saturday night, it’s your responsibility to get me out. It won’t look good for my career if I do anything rash.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll look into it. But for now, I’ve got to go.”

“Before you do... You want a soap opera? Ask Ryan to tell you why he’s been calling.”

I hang up without giving him a chance to question me on it, then walk around town until I know Willow will be at work.

When it's safe to return, I head back, spending the rest of the morning working out—in the living room, since I can't go near the hot tub anymore—and in the afternoon I watch mindless television with Pippa.

“Want to go to the diner for dinner?” I ask, when the credits roll on our last movie.

Pippa winces, offering me an apologetic grin. “An old friend asked to catch up before we go... but leave your phone on. I'm sure I'll need bailing out pretty early on as I have a feeling she just wants some gossip on you. Let's get a drink after that.”

I don't ask why she's going if she knows that, and reluctantly agree, hating that I'm so reliant on her. There's only so many times you can hang out in the bar alone when you're famous. *Fucking small-town gossip.*

After taking a second shower and throwing on some sweats, I grab a beer and busy myself with my phone, catching up on the latest San Francisco news.

When Willow gets home, she avoids all eye contact as she quietly heats her leftovers. But before heading to her room, she stops in the hallway, spinning around to face me.

“I see your *girlfriend* ditched you again.”

The sass on her. Fucking Buttercup.

Resting back on my elbows, I kick my feet up on her coffee table and shrug, refusing to let her get to me.

She mumbles something about “couple goals” before flipping me off as she walks away. I almost laugh, but when

she slams her door and a new silence falls over the house, I realize this situation is nothing to laugh about.



At nine forty-five, Pippa still hasn't messaged, frustrating the hell out of me. Being here with Willow isn't a smart idea, and the longer I stay, the harder it will be not to drink myself stupid out of boredom and nerves.

Bouncing my knee, I pull up Pippa's contact and type out a message.

Jesse: Where are you? I'm coming—

Holy shit. Willow steps into view and I press send halfway through typing, my thoughts completely forgotten. She's wearing a faded white tee that's so old it's practically see-through—and almost nothing else. The swells of her breasts are visible through the thin material, and as she walks past, I'm paralyzed by the unwelcome hold she has over me, unable to look away.

Padding lightly into the kitchen, she stretches up to reach a glass above the sink, and my eyes flash to her toned legs before raking over her entire body, taking in her—*shit*, she is naked.

My cock swells, and I have to fight myself not to reach down and grab it...but that's not what has me freaked out.

What's worse is the way my heart beats for her. The way it thumps in my chest to a rhythm that belongs to no one else. Like the stupid muscle remembers.

She turns to reach for something, and I notice the hint of black material beneath her top. She's not naked, but close enough, and to my cock, there's no difference. It's the other parts of me that feel something else.

Yes, I have needs, and I'm desperate for a quick fuck, but this is more than that. Right now, I want to drop to my knees and worship her until she screams. I want to sink my fingers inside her again and listen to her moan my name. I want to devour her. Feast on her. Have her begging for more. I. Want. It. All.

But I can't have any of it.

When she's finished her drink, she bends over to put the glass in the dishwasher, and I lose all control as an irrational rage courses through me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I bark out, pretending I haven't just been a voyeur in the Willow show again.

She jumps at the sound of my voice, and her hand flies to her chest. "*Jesus!*" she cries out, her eyes wide with shock. "I thought you went out with Pippa."

"I'm still waiting. Why are you naked?"

“I’m... I’m not naked,” she rushes out, still a little frazzled.
Mmm, technicality.

“Why are you *practically* naked?” I repeat slowly.

Willow stares at the scowl on my lips and something switches inside her. I see the moment anger takes over, and she raises her eyebrows defiantly. “You may have forgotten, since you’re one foot out the door, but this is *my* house,” she states, pointing to her chest as she moves across the room toward me. “If I want to be *practically* naked, I will be *practically* naked.” She stops a foot in front of me, and a hint of a smirk crosses her face before she schools her features. “In fact...”

She lifts the tee over her head and throws it at my face, making me swat it away. “If I want to be naked, I’ll *be* naked.”

I toss her top to the floor just in time to see her fingers curl into the string of her thong, ready to pull it down, but in record speed, my hand shoots out as I jump up to stop her, my fingers wrapping around hers.

Jesus Christ. “Willow...”

“What?” she challenges, her eyes locked on mine.

“You can’t do this.”

“Like I said—”

“I know what you *said*,” I hiss, running my spare hand down my face in frustration. “It’s fucking torture,” I mumble under my breath.

“What?”

Dammit.

“Nothing.”

“Why would this be torture to you, *Jesse?*” She rips her hand from mine but steps closer, her proximity making my pulse spike. “You have a *girlfriend*. You don’t *want me*. This shouldn’t do *anything* for you.”

She’s right, it shouldn’t... and I’m trying so hard to focus on her face, to show her I’m unaffected, but when she sucks in a breath and her breasts brush against my clothed chest, I’m fucked.

Grabbing her shoulders, I move her to the side and step out of her orbit, getting back some much-needed space. “That’s right,” I lie. “It does nothing for me. *You* do nothing for me,” I grate between clenched teeth before taking off down the hall. I need distance. I need to get away.

Storming into the bathroom, I slam the door shut before ramming my fist into a towel hanging on the rack, connecting with the wall behind it, hoping the softness drowns out the sound.

It doesn’t. The sound bellows in the silence like I’ve broken through the drywall... for a second time since arriving in this damn town.

I’ve just taken a breath when the door flies open again, and a furious Willow walks in.

“You think it’s that easy? That you can just storm out? I wasn’t done talking.”

She's still naked, so it's hard to focus, but her words ring loud and clear. She doesn't believe a word out of my mouth.

"I have nothing more to say," I state plainly, trying to keep my emotions out of it.

"So you're choosing to keep lying?"

"When have I lied?" *Other than almost every word I've said in the last ten minutes. And every day since we met again.*

Her eyes widen and she shakes her head before turning away. I hold my breath, waiting for her to leave, but at the last second she turns back around, a rebellious look in her eyes.

Dropping to her knees on the hard tiles in front of me, she pulls my sweats down in one effortless movement before reaching for my briefs. I don't even get time to process what she's doing before they're the next to go, my uncomfortably hard length springing free between us.

"*Holy fuck,*" I groan. "What are you doing?"

"Proving that you want me."

Willow waves her hand in front of her, and I don't need to look down to know she's referring to my cock currently raised to attention and dripping just for her. Of course, I fucking want her. She's all I think about. But that doesn't mean I'm going to act on it... again.

"You're naked," I state the obvious. "Show me a guy that wouldn't get hard over that."

Willow raises her eyebrows in challenge, but I hold strong, and for a split second her confidence wavers. I've come to realize that Willow's true personality sits somewhere between the confident and sassy version she shows me and the always pleasant, caring, shy girl she shows the world.

In this instance, I expect her to stand up and walk away, but instead, her face softens and she tentatively reaches out, wrapping her delicate hand around my girth. *Fuck. Fuck.*

I hiss and suck in a breath, ready, but my body doesn't react the way it normally would. I don't flinch away. I don't shiver. Because instead of making my skin crawl, her touch feels like heaven.

She pumps me a few times, and when I shockingly let it happen, she peers up at me through her lashes, the sight making my cock twitch beneath her fingers.

I've never seen anything more perfect.

"Tell me to stop," she whispers before her tongue sneaks out, slowly running across my tip.

A guttural groan rips from within me, and my body tenses, but I still don't say a word. I can't speak.

I should do as she says and tell her to stop, but right now, the words won't come.

"Okay." Willow nods, taking my silence as permission, gliding her tongue over me once more.

"Just." Lick. "Tell me." Lick. "If." She sucks me into her mouth and I almost see stars until she releases me again. "I'm

doing it right.”

“What?” *Goddammit, she hasn't done this before.* I pull back as the word leaves my mouth, but she grabs my ass to hold me in place.

“*Willow.*”

I still can't bring myself to say the word stop even though I absolutely should, but my mind is now stuck on the fact that no one else has ever moved through her lips. I'm the first to feel the vibrations of her moans, to fill her mouth. And she's the first one I've ever allowed to touch me like this. It feels like some kind of poetic shit, and I shouldn't be happy about that.

Squeezing my ass harder, she sucks me farther down her throat while I try to hold back. A task I'm finding impossible considering this is the best fucking thing I've ever felt, and I'm losing my goddamn mind.

Losing *myself*. To her.

But when she pulls off me for a second, readjusting her position on the floor, reality hits me with full force.

I can't let her do this.

Sinking my hands into her hair, I pull tightly on the strands until she's forced to look up at me, then stare into her eyes, my face void of emotion.

My plan was to be intimidating. To scare her off. But the look on her face is my undoing. Especially when she ignores

me completely and wraps her lips around my length, sucking me deeper.

“God, Willow, we can’t. You don’t understand... Ah, fuck.”

Her teeth lightly graze my shaft and I jolt forward, desperate for release. My jaw clenches as I tense, trying to clear my head, trying to think of something else. But when she continues her pursuit to end me, I lose the battle.

With her hands splayed around my thighs, she takes me deeper, making me grunt in agony. And when my tip hits the back of her throat, my body spasms as she cries out with watery eyes, the vibrations from her voice sending me over the edge.

“You *need* to get off. Fuck, Willow. *Pull off.*”

She sucks harder and her nails bite into my skin, the combination of pleasure and pain too much to handle. I curse at the top of my lungs, groaning her name while exploding inside her, watching as she drinks every last drop.

When she’s done, she stands up and wraps a towel around herself, her eyes locked on the floor, while I quickly redress.

I don’t know if it’s because she’s pissed or embarrassed, but I need to comfort her.

Lifting her chin, I wait until she’s looking at me before I speak. “Willow, I—”

A loud crash echoes through the house, cutting me off, and Willow jumps, opening her mouth to undoubtedly scream. Pushing her into the wall, I cover her lips with my hands, my

eyes pleading with her to be quiet. Waiting and hoping to hear Pippa's voice. Knowing she always announces herself.

Willow takes a deep breath and nods in understanding, but her body shivers against mine.

The house falls silent, and my concern grows as we stand pressed together. The warmth of her breath coats my skin, and it's strangely comforting, knowing she's in here with me. That she's safe.

I'm about to pull away when another crash has Willow's face contorting with fear, and I can't stand still anymore.

Leaning forward, I move her hair away from her ear and whisper as quietly as possible. "You're safe here. I'm going to check it out."

Despite the calmness in my voice, my heart pounds in my chest as I take a step back, always assuming the worst. *I've lived through worse.*

Willow frantically shakes her head and propels forward, sinking into me with her hands gripping my tee as she burrows her face into my chest.

I freeze at the intimacy of the moment, my hands locked stiff beside my body. But when I try to move away, she silently objects, and I give in, pulling her into me for a hug before pressing my lips to her hair.

A tightness consumes my chest as I release her, but I ignore it, moving toward the door.

"I promise, you'll be okay."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Willow

As soon as Jesse closes the door, I'm met with silence again, and it's deafening. It's always deafening. My heart slams against my chest cavity, and despite how worked up I am, it has nothing to do with what just happened between us.

Which I suspect is due to shock.

Pressing my ear to the door, I try to find out what's going on outside, while attempting the impossible...to calm myself down. My emotions are running high.

When I can't hear anything, my stomach swirls, and I contemplate opening the door for a peek.

Hesitantly reaching for the handle, I snap my hand back and shake my head just as another loud noise penetrates the air and Jesse calls out with an urgency to his tone. "Willow!"

Without questioning it, without thinking about what I might find on the other side of the door, I run to him. And the second I turn the corner, I see why he needs me.

Pippa's out cold, hanging from Jesse's arms as he stands up and navigates his way through the mess.

My heart clenches as I run toward them, my hand gripping my towel while I move things out of my path.

I've just reached for Pippa's hand when a sharp sting radiates through my foot and I falter, my eyes slamming shut. I only pause for a second before taking a deep breath and ignoring it, instead focusing on the scene in front of me, looking for any signs that Pippa's okay.

"What happened?" I ask Jesse even though I'm doubtful he knows any more than I do.

"I wish I could tell you," he says, confirming my thoughts. "I found her slumped over in the kitchen, barely an inch from that." He points to a pool of vomit on the floor as his teeth clench, clearly uncomfortable with the situation he's found himself in.

And now I'm worried about both of them.

Lifting my hand, I run a finger down Pippa's cheek to see if it rouses her, while searching her body for injury. Though now that I'm closer, I can smell the alcohol leaking from her pores, and it doesn't take long to put the pieces together.

My body stiffens as I bite back my emotions, my mind flashing back to when we were younger—to the numerous times I found her this way, or close to it. To the fights. To the anguish. This was a common occurrence for Pippa after her

time at boarding school. *After my accident.* But I didn't think she still drank like this.

"How often is she like this when you're home?" I ask as Jesse carries her to the couch and I follow behind them.

Jesse peers over his shoulder, his eyes meeting mine as his brows furrow. "Never. She's never been like this. That I know of."

At least that's something.

Jesse lays her down as I run back for a wet cloth, pressing it to her forehead. When I gently stroke her hair, she stirs, and I can't help the sigh that escapes me.

I was right. She just passed out.

"Can you help me get her to bed? She's drunk. She needs to sleep it off."

"She's not drunk. I've seen drunk Pippa before. She's a loud, obnoxious, happy drunk."

"Yep." I've seen that version before too. "But this happens when she drinks with purpose."

Jesse frowns. "What do you mean?"

"She wanted to get blackout drunk. She knew exactly what she was doing. Thank God, she made it home."

"Fuck."

Fuck, all right.

If I didn't know the truth, I'd assume it was because her boyfriend was cheating on her with her sister, but since I'm

pretty sure it's not that, I'm wondering if this has something to do with Ryan.

"I'll talk to her in the morning," I say, stepping aside for Jesse. "But for now, she's breathing. She's just out of it. Let her sleep it off."

Jesse reluctantly helps me get Pippa into bed, and I try not to smile at his softer side. He really cares about her. Even if ninety percent of the time he's an ass to me, I'm happy that he's maybe good to her.

When she seems somewhat comfortable, I tiptoe out of the room and fall back against the wall. It's only when I flatten my foot to the floor and an agonizing pain hits me that I remember what happened and have to stop myself from crying out.

Rising back to my toes, I plaster a smile on my face and wrap the towel more tightly around myself.

"Well. That's enough excitement for tonight. I'm just going to..." Trailing off, I point toward the bathroom before turning away from Jesse, hoping he doesn't follow.

I've only taken one step when his booming voice halts me.

"*Stop*. Why the hell didn't you tell me you were hurt?"

"What?" I glance down without focus, the lie easily slipping from my lips. "I'm fine."

Jesse actually growls, clearly unconvinced. "You're fine?"

"Yep, just a graze."

"There's blood *everywhere*."

“What?” My eyes flash to the floor again, and this time I see drops of deep red splattered where I’ve been walking. Bile rises in my throat, but I swallow it back down. *I’m okay.*

“*Willow?*” he grunts, his tone making me cringe.

“Why do you sound mad right now?” I ask, needing to focus on something else.

“Because you’re bleeding and acting like nothing’s wrong.”

“Excuse me for being more concerned about Pippa.”

“Well, now that she’s fine—”

Pippa chooses that moment to call out in her sleep, drawing my attention, while Jesse’s eyes stay on me.

“We should check on her. Maybe she needs water.”

“She has water.”

“Maybe she feels sick.”

“She will definitely be feeling sick.”

“Well, we should help her. I’m worried—”

“I’m not worried about Pippa, *dammit*. I’m worried about *you!*”

That shuts me up.

“Just let me see your foot,” he says on a breath, his tone significantly softer but still laced with frustration.

“I’m sure it’s not that bad. I can probably—”

“*Willow!*” he scolds, before bending and lifting my foot, forcing me to grip the wall for balance.

I glance down just as blood drips to the floor, causing my body to flush as nausea consumes me. “*Oh*. I don’t feel so good.”

Blood on the floor is one thing. Blood dripping from an open wound in my foot...completely different story.

Jesse chuckles, drawing my attention to his face as his lips pull into the most breathtaking smile I’ve ever seen. He shakes his head with his grin still in place, and I watch as a few stray strands of his messy hair fall to his brow.

It’s mesmerizing. Everything about him is mesmerizing.

And when his gaze finally meets mine, my heart stops, and a feeling of warmth spreads through me.

Sucking in a breath at how beautiful he is, I try to hide my feelings, but when I frown, I know I’ve failed.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” he asks, misreading my expression.

“Um, yes?”

It really freaking hurts, but my words come out hesitant because I’m stuck on my thoughts of him. Wondering why he doesn’t smile like this all the time. Why he keeps this part of himself hidden. *What happened to make him so sad all the time?*

Jesse stares at me for a beat and then his smile curls into a smirk as his brows rise. “Are you okay there, Wil?”

“Wil?” I ask softly, the new nickname penetrating my heart even though it’s just a shortened version of my name.

“Would you prefer Buttercup?” he jokes, and it brings me delirious joy. Especially when he winks. *He winks.*

“Definitely not.” I giggle, loving when his stunning smile returns.

“Come on, I’ll help you to the couch and then get to work fixing you up.”

Jesse stands up and hooks my arm around his shoulder, settling his arm around my waist. I feel his fingers curl into me next, and I can’t help but lean into him.

After helping me hobble to the couch, he sits me down and kneels in front of me, lifting my foot once more.

When his face scrunches, and I see another few drops of blood fall, my eyes slam shut.

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” I ask, laying my head against the cushion, trying not to think of the pain.

“Not a clue,” Jesse admits, and I huff out a short laugh.

“Okay,” I mumble, not really in a position to worry about that. “Carry on.”

Jesse chuckles again, and I commit the sound to memory. Wishing I could play it on repeat... or save it as my ringtone... or keep doing things that bring it out of him.

“I think you’ve lost more blood than we realized, Willow.”

“What...why?” My eyes shoot open as I squirm in a panic, only stopping when Jesse holds me still, shaking his head.

“I’m kidding.” He smirks. “You just seem a little delirious.”

Shit. “I do?”

“You do.”

“Oops.”

After huffing out another laugh, Jesse stares into my eyes, making me swallow a lump in my throat. Butterflies fill my chest, and I’m so distracted that I don’t realize what he’s doing until a sharp pain hits me.

“Jesus. Shit. Ouch,” I complain, blinking a few times in shock.

“Sorry, I had to get this.” He holds up the shard of glass that he just pulled from my skin and offers me a lopsided grin. “You really need to be more careful. This could have hit something important and caused permanent damage.”

Where was the glass? I didn’t even see it. “Okay.”

“No, Willow. It’s not ‘*okay.*’ I’m serious. *Be careful.*”

“Yes, sir.” I salute him and cringe. Maybe I have lost more blood than we thought. *Yes, sir? What the hell?*

Jesse’s eyes widen before he looks away. “I’ll get something to clean you up. Do you have any bandages?”

He walks away without waiting for a response, so I call out with directions and wait patiently for my doctor to return. All the while thinking about his smile and laugh. The effect he has on me. The way everything he does consumes me. *Why him?* What is it that has me instantly drawn to him? And why does it sometimes feel like he thinks the same?

While sometimes it doesn't.

He's quiet as he goes to work tending to my gash, while my heart races, on edge from our close proximity and the gentleness of his touch.

When he's done, he pauses with one hand still curled around my calf and the other holding my foot, staring at my wound in silence, seemingly lost in thought.

I want to say thank you. It's the right thing to do. But I don't want to interrupt his moment, and I'm terrified he's about to push me away again.

After a beat, he shakes his head as though ridding himself of what's in there and runs a hand through his hair.

"You're all good," he says, reaching for something on the floor.

I nod a few times just as a soft item lands in my lap. My eyes widen as a memory of me on my knees flashes to mind, and I internally cringe.

Without unwrapping the towel, I pull the tee over my head and will myself to disappear. To somehow gain the power to turn invisible. Because now that the adrenaline has worn off, my chest heats, and embarrassment takes over.

I had zero intentions when I first followed Jesse into the bathroom, except to prove him wrong. But God, did things go in a direction I never could have predicted.

I was so furious, I couldn't stop myself from highlighting his lies, pointing out the physical reaction he has toward me.

Only it backfired, because the second I had him naked, I lost all sense. All rationality. All control. And I've never done that before.

From Jesse's silence, I know he's thinking about the same thing, so I get in first, before he has the chance to reject me.

"Thanks for the help. With Pippa, and with my foot. I'm going to head off to bed. I've gotta be up in a few hours for my run."

Jesse snaps out of his thoughts. "A run? What about your foot?"

Standing up, I hesitantly put pressure on it and sigh in relief when I'm okay.

"I'll be fine. But thanks."

Jesse's slight frown would suggest he doesn't believe me, but he allows it to slide. "Can I come with you?"

Huh? I freeze. Does he mean now or—

"For your run," he clarifies. "Can I come with you when you run?"

Oh. "Um, yes, of—"

"I won't mess with your groove. You won't even know I'm there."

That's where you're wrong, Jesse, because I feel everything around you. "I'll see you at five."

"I'll be ready."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Jesse

I'm dressed and ready to go when Willow walks out of her room the next morning. We're both silent as we head off. There's no discussion about the direction we're running or the pace. We just run. Actually, it's more like a slow jog, because Willow is definitely in pain. Either way, it feels like we've been training together for years.

We make our way around the town in a loop, and when we reach the mountains, Willow slows. I know she's thinking about the lookout, but she doesn't say a word. In fact, she doesn't even glance in the direction of the sign, making me wonder if she's trying to avoid it on purpose.

I want to ask her. I want to see if she'll go up there with me, holding my hand. But at the same time, I want to forever remain silent on the topic, because it could lead to something I *never* want to talk about.

I've become such an indecisive fuck since I arrived here. I can't figure out if I'm coming or going, and I've never been like that. Not since I was a kid. I know what I want out of life,

I have a plan, and I honestly never thought I'd *ever* question it.

But with Willow... I am. I'm questioning it to the point of risking everything else. And for what? And why?

Why is her touch so addictive? Why can't I get enough? And why do I want them to open the bridge so badly, yet a little part of me wants to burn it down.

Last night was by far the hottest thing to ever happen to me. From the second Willow grabbed my cock, I knew I was fucked. The intimacy of the moment was *almost* more than I could handle, like a beautiful and welcome torture... But fuck, it was everything. And seeing her on her knees for me, her lips wrapped around my length, her eyes on mine. *I can't even describe it.*

Then I saw her foot... It's like she wants me to feel every emotion. Emotions I've never fucking felt before. Seeing her hurting does something to me, and I hate it.

Pippa was passed out in my arms, and all I wanted to do was get her off me, but Willow... I couldn't stay away, couldn't keep *my* hands off *her*.

This is why she's dangerous. She has a power over me. Always has. And I need to fight it. I need to remain in control.

As we jog, I try to keep my focus on the road, on our surroundings, but it's impossible, and my gaze continues to find her. Watching the way her body moves with each step,

how her skin glistens with sweat, and the way her chest rises and falls with each breath.

It makes me wonder what she'd look like as I pushed into her. Would her skin glisten while she screamed my name, her body moving in rhythm with mine?

I need to stop. *Stop!*

Shaking off my thoughts, I scold myself just as she veers left like she did last time, heading in the opposite direction of her house. After running for another mile, we end up off the beaten track, and it's not until the forest thickens that she slows before coming to a stop.

After a quick cooldown, Willow sits on a collection of boulders and finally breaks the silence, patting the space beside her.

"Are you really dating Pippa?" she asks, filling the emptiness in the air.

Jesus! What a way to start the morning.

I shake my head, needing some distance, just as Willow sighs.

I contemplate lying to her again, but when her eyes bore into mine, something tells me it's not going to work this time. *Not that I'm convinced it worked last time either.*

"No," I say, my voice coming out raspy.

Willow holds her stare, and I almost repeat myself, thinking she hasn't heard me, but she nods. "Thank you."

“Thank you?” *That can't be a good thing.*

“For not lying to me again.” *Shit.*

Running a hand through my hair, I hesitate as I try to think of something to say. What does one say about pretending to fake date someone else. How the fuck did life get so complicated? “Willow, I—”

“I already knew.”

“What?” I’m acting shocked, but deep down I knew she wouldn’t have done what she did last night if she didn’t know.

“Pippa told me before the hot tub. I’ve known the truth since then.” She shrugs as though it’s no big deal before muttering, “Not that I ever truly believed it.”

Motherfucker, she knew the entire time. “I...” I’m speechless as Willow huffs out a laugh.

“I probably should have known that,” I finally say after a beat.

“You mean because of what I did?”

“Well, yeah.” *That’s exactly what I mean, but I shouldn’t have said that. The last thing I want to do is talk about last night or the hot tub.* My nose scrunches as I realize it’s inevitable. I can’t just pretend it didn’t happen. Especially considering it’s all I can think about.

Willow nods again. “You’re right. I never would have touched you either time if I thought you and Pippa were

together.”

I sit down beside her but keep enough distance so that we don't touch. With my gaze focused intently on the trees in front of us, I sigh. “Either way it shouldn't have happened. Whether you knew it or not.”

“Why?” she challenges me.

“So many reasons, Buttercup. *Too* many.”

Willow's brows shoot up to her forehead, and her mouth drops open. “So you're back on that?”

“Back on what?”

“Buttercup. You called me Buttercup again.”

Jesus. I didn't even notice. My head just goes there when I'm thinking about the consequences of my actions. When I think about that day. Because that's who she is to me... She's Buttercup.

“Yep, we're back on that.”

“But you wanted me. I could see it in your eyes.”

Fuck yes, I wanted you. I still want you. “I wanted what you were doing. There's a difference.”

My words hang in the air until I turn Willow's way to see her nod again. She brushes a stray hair behind her ear and closes her eyes, her lashes brushing against her cheek. “You're right,” she says, before her beautiful green eyes flash open, locking on mine. “There *is* a difference.”

Fuck. Her face is void of emotion, but somehow I know she's not actually agreeing with me. She can see through my words, and that just proves my point. She's dangerous.

"I'm leaving tomorrow and... I'm not good for you, Willow. You deserve so much better."

Willow huffs again. "You're not the guy you pretend to be, Jesse."

I can't help but laugh because of the irony of that statement. "Spot on." *No truer words have ever been spoken.* "I'm so much worse."

Willow doesn't argue with me this time, and we both fall silent. I consider running back on my own just to avoid any awkwardness, but when the first light of the sun paints the sky, I pause, my heart racing in my chest. I don't need to look at Willow to know this is why we're here. That I was right about her chasing the sunrise. It's why she runs so early.

But why do I know that? Why do I fucking know so much about her?

"I always loved the sunset," she says, pulling me from my thoughts, her eyes locked on the tree line. "When I was a kid, I refused to go to bed until the day had fully crossed over to night." A hint of a smile graces her lips, making my pulse spike as she continues. "But after my...after a while, sunrise became my thing, and I try not to miss them."

After her...

An excruciating tightness fills my chest as my stomach swirls with guilt. After her life changed forever. After I... *fuck.*

“Willow—”

“This is one of the best places to see the full effect,” she says, cutting me off, and God, am I grateful. I’m a little concerned about what I was about to admit.

“Where else do you go?” I ask instead, keeping the topic on the sun.

“The Breaker Ranch is good, and so is the Pine Valley Winery, but this is my go-to.”

I nod even though she’s not looking my way, and while I have no idea what those two places are, I know that she’s missing out on the best one.

Following her line of sight, I take in the view, and I agree... The sunrise really is beautiful to watch from down here, but the lookout...

Another guilt pit forms in my stomach, but I ignore it, and when I glance her way, I’m drawn to the beauty beside me. Looking at Willow is like looking at the sun. The light she projects, after all she’s been through, blinds me, making it impossible to see things clearly. And yet, no matter how many times I wish it was different, I couldn’t stop looking if I tried. Even though it’s bad for me. Bad for her.

We watch the sun rising in peaceful silence, until it disappears behind a cloud. Willow shakes her head with a

smile and turns my way. When her eyes lock on mine, a little part of me wants to say *fuck it*. But it's that little part that presents a stronger argument for leaving.

After shaking her head, she turns back to the sunrise and takes a deep breath, uttering the words I never wanted to hear come out of her mouth.

“Twelve years ago, I was in an accident.” She pauses and my heart stops. Can I really sit here and listen to her talk about this without saying a word? God, I've got to try.

“My friend Jade died, while I ended up in a coma. And that's all I know. Something life-changing happened to me. It changed the trajectory of my future, it changed my personality, and I don't fucking remember it.”

From what I've noticed since I arrived, I think that personality is coming back. Not that I tell her that. Instead, I let her continue. Despite how hard it is to listen to her open up and bare her soul when I can't tell her I already know.

“I lost my best friend—the closest person in the world to me—I lost my memory, and I lost my soul that day, and so I come here, hoping one day something will click, and I'll find myself again.”

She shakes her head and huffs out a laugh. “I have no idea why I'm telling you this. I never talk about it anymore.”

I know it's my turn to speak but I have no idea what to say. “I'm sorry—”

“Ready to go home?” she asks, cutting me off as she stands to her feet and dusts her hands over her ass.

It takes me a second to process the change in direction, before I jump up beside her. “Willow—”

“Nope. Just like you, I don’t need pity. I get enough of that around here. So, are you good?”

No! I’m not fucking good. Seeing you hurting is breaking me. I fucking hate this. “Yep, I’m good.”

We slowly jog back, and when we arrive at Willow’s, she heads straight to her bedroom with a quick “thanks” over her shoulder. I’m not sure what she’s thanking me for, but the second her door shuts, I practically fall onto the nearest chair, as though all the tension just left my body. And maybe it did. Because every second with Willow has me wound up. Especially after her confession.

Listening to her speak about the incident with such resignation, when I could easily fill in the missing pieces, is hell. But I deserve all the pain I’m feeling.

Willow can’t know the truth. But not telling her is agony.



Despite the fact that I just went for a run, I only stay around long enough to have a glass of water, then I’m out the door

again for another workout, needing to burn off more unwanted energy. I'm halfway through my leg routine when Pippa walks into the gym, looking extremely worse for wear.

I can't tell if she's seen me or not because of the dark sunglasses she's wearing—inside—but when she raises a single finger in acknowledgment, a small laugh escapes me.

"I knew I'd find you here," she says as she plops down onto the bench beside the mats I'm on.

"There aren't many places I can hide in this town," I grunt out as I continue my reps.

"Very true. And yet, I feel you're constantly hiding." *Wow*. And here I was thinking she was avoiding me.

"Hiding in plain sight?" I say, brushing it off.

Pippa's silent for a second, and I have no idea what she thinks of my response because her face doesn't change. She's always most expressive with her eyes.

When she still hasn't said a word, I change the subject.

"What happened last night?" I ask, watching as Pippa cringes before huffing out a breath.

"I'd rather forget about it. No need to hash it out."

"Fair enough."

"I can remember parts of it," she says, lifting her phone in the air before filling me in, even though she just said she wouldn't. "I know why I started drinking. But as for the rest... I'm going to assume I've purposely blocked it from my mind

because—” She freezes midsentence and her face drops. “Not that anyone can actually do that, right?” she asks after a moment. “You can’t just delete something from your memory by choice. Can you?”

What the fuck?

“I have no idea. It’s not my specialty.”

Does she think Willow did that?

“No, I suppose it’s not. Although you have been responsible for people losing their memory before.”

Holy shit? I cough to hide the fact that I just choked on air and jump straight into my next set, trying hard not to overreact even though I feel nauseous.

“Oh yeah? How do you figure that?” I ask, hoping she can’t hear the panic in my voice.

“I’ve seen the guys you’ve smashed into a wall. And watched their eyes roll into the back of their heads.”

Hockey. She’s talking about hockey.

“They’re fine,” I say, shaking my head with relief. “We have concussion protocols. That’s the risk you take when you play the sport.”

“Whatever. I was joking. Point is, I got some news and I drank, then I think Ryan and I had a fight, and I drank even more.”

“News?”

“It doesn’t matter. But fuck, I was out of it.”

“That much I know,” I say with a frown. “Willow seemed genuinely worried about you. She specifically asked how often you get drunk like that. Is that something you used to do?”

Pippa’s face contorts, and she lifts her sunglasses for the first time, looking me in the eye. “Maybe a little bit,” she says with a lopsided smile, holding her finger and thumb an inch apart.

I wish I found it funny like she does, but substance abuse is never a laughing matter.

“Right. Any reason?” I try to keep the judgment out of my tone, but I must fail because Pippa’s stance changes and she crosses her arms over her chest, ready to unleash her rage on me.

“You’re not Mr. Perfect, Jesse. Far from it. People make mistakes, and people cope with their problems differently.” She may be whisper-yelling at me, but it’s still loud enough to draw attention. Attention I don’t need.

“Let’s shelve this conversation until we get back to your sister’s.”

“No.” *Fuck.*

Leaving my weights on the mat, I move closer so I can whisper in her ear, keeping a *nothing-to-see-here* smile on my face.

“Pippa, you were a fucking mess last night. I’m all for people getting drunk, but to drink yourself into oblivion... You

held a fucking knife up at me, Pip.” A piece of information I didn’t mention to Willow.

“I did not.”

“You really fucking did. What if I had been your sister? I’ve lived with someone who drank to deal with his problems.” *And his solution was to beat the shit out of me.* “I refuse to do it again.”

In the blink of an eye, Pippa visibly softens. “Jesus, Jesse. I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not telling you to stop drinking. Hell, you know I drink. Just please, know your limits. Or at the very least, have someone walk you home. What if you’d been attacked or hit by a car?”

Pippa reaches out and squeezes my leg, but it’s thankfully over my shorts. “Aww, you’re grumpy because you’re worried about me,” she says with a small smile.

I wouldn’t say that, but sure. “Just be careful.”

“Okay. Anything for you.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jesse

Pippa leaves when I head off to the shower, blowing me a kiss as she walks out the door. If I was a nicer guy, I'd probably pretend to catch it, but I just roll my eyes and turn away.

Taking my time in the locker room, I'm in no hurry to exit the building. I have nowhere to be, and going back to Willow's—even when she's not there—isn't high on my priority list.

I came to work out my frustrations and somehow wound up with more. I didn't mean to be an asshole to Pippa, but certain levels of drunkenness are like a trigger for me, and I don't want to associate Pippa with that memory.

I'm practically dragging my feet as I pass Willow's shop, and to stop myself from staring through her window, I pull out my phone, pretending I'm interested in something on the screen.

But it's pointless.

My eyes flash to the door just as she comes running out of it, darting across the road without bothering to look for traffic.

Without noticing I'm there.

She stops beside a car, where an older lady is trying to lift two boxes out of the trunk. At once.

I watch for a second as Willow leans in to help, but when I see more boxes, I rush over to join them.

“Maeve, let me grab those,” Willow says as she lifts the boxes easily. “Are you taking these to the salon?”

Maeve smiles warmly. “Oh, thank you, dear. Yes, I am. There’s another...”

She pauses when I reach the car and grab the four remaining boxes in one go. They’re not at all heavy like I expected, but they’re awkward to carry.

“You’re Pippa’s football guy,” Maeve says, her tone not giving away her feelings on the matter.

“It’s hockey, Maeve. But yes, that’s him,” Willow says with less enthusiasm than she’d have at the dentist. “I could have gotten those boxes too, you know,” she adds under her breath when I move into step beside her.

“I’m sure you could have,” I respond with a shrug because, in honesty, I don’t know why I’m here.

When we get to the salon, Maeve stops, her eyes narrowing as she looks at the boxes in my hands. “I could probably sell

those boxes now and fund a vacation,” she says with a chuckle.

Huh?

“You know. Because you’ve touched them. If you signed them too, I’d get even more money.”

Willow laughs, and I wish I could see the funny side to this, but since it’s the story of my life, I don’t. I once had someone try and sell one of my used tissues. It’s fucking insane what people do.

The damn bell chimes as we enter, and the ladies in the shop glance over while they talk. It looks like they’re about to resume their business until they all seem to notice me at the same time and collectively fall silent.

“Ladies,” I say with a nod, while Maeve tells them off. “Back to it. It’s like you’ve never seen a handsome man before. You’re all married!”

They ignore her and continue to stare as I’m led to the back. I gently place the boxes where I’m directed and then turn to make my escape.

“Hockey man,” Maeve calls out as I reach the door. “Do you think you could help me for another minute?”

I close my eyes and inhale slowly before turning around with a forced smile. “Of course.”

Willow bites back a grin as she walks backward toward the exit. “You’re in good hands, Maeve. I better get back to the shop in case anyone’s waiting.”

I glance out the window and can see the front door of Willow's store. No one's waiting. I'm not doing this alone. "You're fine. There's no one there," I say, subtly motioning for her to come back.

"They could be inside," she says happily with a shrug, and it's then that I remember...

"You left the shop open?" *Fucking small towns.*

"I trust everyone here."

My mouth falls open, and I have to stop myself from running over to shake some sense into her while yelling, "*That's your problem. You trust too easily.*"

Willow laughs at my expression, probably understanding it completely. "I'm kidding, Jesse. My co-owner, Sara, is there."

She heads off without another word, leaving me to unpack with Maeve as she fills me in on her life story. This salon was her baby, and even though she's retired and it's now owned by her daughter, she can't stay away.

"I've been told it's bad for me. That I should give it up to keep my stress levels down. But I think it's keeping me alive."

Maeve, Maeve, Maeve. I've never related to anything more.

When I'm finally done ten minutes later, I take a photo with all the ladies and sign their appointment book before heading to the door. I've just reached for the handle when Maeve calls out. "Look after that one; she's precious."

Since she'd already started another conversation while I was posing for selfies, it would be safe to assume she was talking to someone else, but I know instantly she means Willow.

Turning around, I raise an eyebrow and wait for her to continue because something tells me that's not the end.

"While it goes mostly unspoken, we all know what she's been through, and she's very protected in this town. Please help protect her heart." Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, and I feel like she's reached into my chest and clenched *my* heart, making sure I understand. *Loud and clear, Maeve. Loud and clear.*

"I—"

"He's dating her sister, Mom," Maeve's daughter calls out, rolling her eyes.

Maeve raises an eyebrow before she laughs softly. "I know that. Doesn't mean he can't look after her."

A lump catches in my throat as I smile, and when her eyes meet mine again, she nods, her expression full of concern.

She knows how I feel.

Apparently, I'm not only fucking up internally, but my feelings are showing. I can't even think back to what I did that would have alerted her to that.

I nod back and slip out the door, hoping that if Maeve cares about Willow as much as she says she does, then she'll keep that information to herself, and by the time I get back to Willow's for lunch, I'm physically and mentally exhausted.

I don't know how much longer I can keep going like this.

When I'm Jesse the hockey star, no one gives a shit about the real me. They decide who and what I am, and I just go along with it because hockey's my savior. If I didn't have it, I'm not sure how my life would have turned out. I don't even want to think about that. It's my escape. But here...

"Been home long?" Willow says as she walks into the kitchen, cutting into my thoughts. "Did you get a history lesson on Hepburn Falls?" she adds with a laugh.

I wish I could join in on her joy because I love seeing her happy, but I'm not in the mood. Maeve's parting words are running on repeat through my mind. "It was fine," I say, before switching on the TV.

I can feel Willow staring at the side of my face, and I don't need to look to know that she's about to give me some sass.

"Why are you acting weird?" *There it is.*

"I'm not. I'm just tired."

She's staring so intently now that I swear she's going to burn a hole in my temple. But then she surprises me. "*Fuck,*" she groans almost under her breath.

"Fuck?" I ask, turning her way.

She slowly blows out a breath, her lips shaking with the vibrations. "What did Maeve say?" she asks, a hint of resignation in her tone.

“Huh?” I ask, seemingly uninterested, but she’s not buying it.

“What. Did. She. Say?” She repeats each word individually, making her question clear. But I ignore it.

“That she owned—”

“About me!”

Laying my head on the back rest, I huff out a breath and pat the seat beside me. I don’t want to have this conversation, but at the same time, I do. I want to know how much more she’s willing to share. How much she *remembers*. But having her rehash it is a risk.

“She just mentioned that you’re protected here.” *Among other things.*

“Mother fff...” She pauses. “I’m never going to be able to move on, because this damn town won’t let me!” She runs her hands through her hair, giving it that just fucked look, and my heart jolts, reminding me that no matter how much I want her, or how much she wants me, I will *never* be good enough for her. She deserves someone who can give her that look without the heartache that comes with it.

“Willow, I—”

“I’m not fragile, Jesse. I don’t need anyone looking after me.” Her head falls back as she looks at the ceiling.

“I know, I—”

“Do you?” she cuts in, her gaze flashing to mine. “Because you seem to think you know what’s best for me. You’re just like everyone else, and you don’t even know what happened...”

Her eyes widen in some kind of realization, and my heart stops, my next words caught in my throat.

She’s silent for what seems like a lifetime until she drops onto the chair beside her and sighs.

“Am I fragile?” she whispers, her voice choked with emotion. “Is that the type of person I project? Is that it?”

Fuck. Her words are like a jab to the heart. I have never thought that about her. *Never.*

“Willow, you’re one of the strongest women I know.” *And yet I don’t think she could handle the truth. Fuck, what am I doing?*

“Then why?” Willow rasps. “Why do you keep pushing me away like it’s for my own good?”

“Because it is. You’re not the issue in our scenario. I am.”

“And what if I don’t care?”

“*Willow,*” I warn but it lacks my usual venom.

She holds my stare for a moment and it’s unnerving. Just when I think she’s going to argue, her gaze intensifies as though she’s seen something in my eyes, before she nods and stands up.

“Okay.”

Okay?

“I’ll leave you be.” She walks away without another word, and I almost chase her until her phone rings.

“Pippa?” she answers distractedly.

Willow pauses on the spot before she walks back into the kitchen. “Of course. Where are you?” she says with a strange tone. “I’m on my way.”

Then she’s back out the door, leaving me staring after her.
What was that about?

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Willow

Pippa's sitting on our old tree swing when I arrive, and without me saying a word, she slides over to make room before starting to swing. I knew something was wrong as soon as I saw how drunk she was, but she said she was okay when I texted.

“What’s going on, Pip?”

Pippa shakes her head as she huffs out a sigh. “You mean Mom hasn’t called you gushing?”

My brows furrow until I remember she has called and I’ve yet to call her back. *Shit.*

“She called, but I haven’t returned it. I’m avoiding a lecture on my attitude. What am I missing?”

I expect Pippa to huff again or give me a smart-ass comment. What I don’t expect is for her to pull the swing to a stop and blurt, “Ashley’s pregnant.”

“Oh, wow,” I say, careful to keep the emotion from my voice. I’m not sure what to say to that. It explains why Mom

was favoring Ashley more than usual, and it's great for Ashley, but... "Are you okay?"

"That's why I needed Jesse here," she says instead of answering my question. "I knew. I just *knew*."

My eyes widen as I turn her way, and she must feel them boring into her because she shakes her head and glances over. "I mean, I didn't actually know. But..."

"But?"

"I've... ahh... I've slept with Jonah a few times..." She pauses. "Since he and Ashley got together."

I scrunch my face because she seems so nervous to tell me when in fact, "I know." *To a degree.*

"You know? How? Was it Jesse?"

Jesse knows? "What? No. *You* told me."

"What?"

"You called me drunk one day and you told me. It was right before I begged you not to drink anymore." But I'm guessing it continued on. The sex, not the drinking.

"Oh." Pippa's quiet for a beat and then she stands. "The last time we slept together, I had a pregnancy scare. Jonah flipped out. Started calling me a bunch of awful things and told me to stay away for a while."

"Oh God."

"Yep. I had grand plans to come here guns blazing with Jesse, to rub my perfect relationship in their faces. But as soon

as I saw them, I just froze. All the pain came rushing back. I almost feel bad for making Jesse come with me, but I also don't." She chuckles to herself. "I'm glad he was here."

I stare at her for a second as I process everything. "Fuck," I mutter. *What an asshole.* What an awful situation.

Pippa stares right back at me, almost in shock until she bursts out laughing.

"Fuck, alright. But when did you start swearing again?"

Ugh, she noticed too. "I'm just trying it out, seeing if it suits me."

Pippa's lips pull into a small conspiratorial grin and I cringe. "I like it," she says, but I ignore the words and focus on her expression.

"What's that look for?"

"I think Jesse brings it out in you."

Of course, he does because he drives me freaking cra—

"And I mean that as a good thing."

Oh. She doesn't just mean the swearing. "No, no. It's—"

"It's definitely him. I just haven't figured out why. But it's a good thing," she repeats.

"It's a coincidence."

"Maybe. But don't you find it strange that he's turning you into the girl you used to be?"

Yes, it's been on my mind all week. "I—"

“I think it’s because you’ve found someone you want to be yourself around. You found someone who makes you feel safe. Maybe.”

Her words shock me, but I try to keep a straight face. *Is that it?* He definitely makes me feel protected in a different way from how the town does. But... “I didn’t mean to—”

“Stop. Before you apologize for something you do not need to apologize for, I want you to know that as long as he treats you right, like I know he can, then I think you should go for it. Yet another reason I’m glad I made him help me.”

What?

I stare at her again. I have no words until a thought hits me. “Are you trying to deflect?”

“No, I really wanted to talk to you about that. But I also didn’t mind the change of subject.”

“Pippa, you haven’t been drunk like that since—”

“I know. And I promise I’ll be fine. It was just a shock. One I was prepared for, but it still killed me. I don’t even want him. But I hate feeling like I mean nothing.”

“He’s a piece of shit, Pippa. Don’t let him dictate your worth, or anyone for that matter. You deserve so much happiness. What about Ryan?”

Pippa laughs. “I don’t know. I liked him but... I promise to at least talk to him when I get home.”

“Good.”

“Alright,” she says, sitting back down on the swing. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“I finished your necklace,” I say shyly after a beat. This one was surprisingly easier than the first one. Once I could focus. Maybe because it was my second attempt.

Pippa’s eyes light up with joy as she swings us higher. “You did?”

“I did. Want to come and get it?”

“I do. But I think I’ll send Jesse.”

My eyes flash to her, but she keeps her eyes focused ahead, a smile on her face.

“Pippa...”

“No, it’s a great idea. You two need to talk.”

She’s probably right, but God, does that terrify me.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Jesse

After moping around for an hour in the afternoon—with Willow now affecting my days on top of my nights—I'm flipping through the music on my phone when Pippa walks in, her eyes immediately finding mine.

“My necklace is ready.” She smiles. “And Willow wants you to pick it up.”

What? “Ahh, nope. Why didn't you just get it?”

“Because it's a present from you.” *In other words, I need to pay for it.* “Willow asked for you. Maybe she wants you to see it before I do.” She shrugs.

A pang in my gut tells me to say no, to keep my distance for as long as I can, but I reluctantly agree. *What's one more bad decision?*

An hour later, I move on autopilot toward Willow's store, determined to get in and out without issue. But when I glance up and see her standing in the window, my world stops.

I should have stayed away. I should have gone with my gut and sent Pippa.

Then I'd be none the wiser.

This burning sensation in my chest wouldn't exist.

Because I never would have realized just how far gone I am.

She has headphones on as she restocks her window display, and the most beautiful smile on her face as she sings along to her music. My chest tightens and I can't breathe as Maeve's words hit me with full force. "*She's protected in this town.*" And she fucking well should be. That's what I'm doing. All I've *ever* wanted to do is protect her. And leaving her alone is the best way to do that.

I continue to watch her as her hips sway, and the light from the sun creates a halo over her head. She's an angel, and I want more than anything for her to be *my* angel.

Don't do it. Walk away.

I stand frozen while an internal battle rages between what I want to do and what's right.

Unfortunately, the rational part of my brain loses out, and as I open her door, I'm hit with the invisible field that keeps pulling us together. The tension we never lost.

"Willow?" I call out and cringe when something hits the floor in her direction. I have to physically stop myself from running to her, knowing I probably just startled her.

“Won’t be a moment,” she calls back, her voice slightly shaky, making me wonder...*did I elicit that? Does she feel it too?*

Trying to keep to the task at hand, I focus on the counter instead of staring in her direction. It’s only when I see a small bell there that I realize why I startled her—I didn’t hear a chime above the door when I walked in. My gaze flashes back there to see the bell gone, and I bite back a smile. *Small wins.*

“You came?” Willow asks, sneaking up behind me, drawing my gaze.

Her cheeks are flushed and she has her lip trapped between her teeth. If I hadn’t just been watching her in the window, I’d think that I’d just caught her in the middle of something, with the doe-eyed look she’s giving me.

“I did. Pippa sent me for the—”

“Necklace,” she says, cutting me off, her hand moving to her neck as though the word invoked a memory for her. A memory of the last time we were here.

My eyes flash to where the delicate self-designed necklace sits perfectly against her collarbone, and I imagine myself replacing her hand with mine as I press her against a wall and... *Whoa. Holy fuck! Where did that come from?*

My cock twitches at the incredibly vivid picture, and I have to force myself to smile.

“Yes, the necklace,” I say, my voice wavering a little.

“I considered making something really awful and charging you double for it, but I changed my mind at the last second.”

My smile widens, unpermitted, but when I see the way Willow lights up in response, I don't actually mind.

“Why don't you show that part of yourself more often,” she asks shyly, her hand resting against her lips.

“I guess I need more things to smile about,” I say honestly, then instantly regret it when a look of pity crosses her face. “I didn't mean that for you to—”

“I know,” she says, a darker pink tinge rising up her neck. “The pity wasn't for you.”

My chest tightens as I take in her meaning. *Fuck*. She doesn't even realize that she's one of the *only* reasons I smile at all. And I want to tell her, but instead I change the subject.

“Let's see your creation. I'm sure Pippa's going to love it.”

Willow nods, and when she walks to the storeroom, I slip behind the counter to be closer, unable to take my eyes off her. Once again, I've fucked myself over. Constantly putting myself in situations I shouldn't be in.

She comes back out with the gold chain draped over her fingers, and startles at our close proximity, her chest rising as she sucks in a breath. My pulse spikes, and I swallow a lump in my throat.

“Here it is...” she says nervously, raising the chain in the air.

Stepping forward, I reach out to touch it but stop barely an inch away. “Do you mind?”

Willow shakes her head and takes a step closer, causing my heart to thud in my chest. I inherently know something is about to happen, but I can’t bring myself to stop it. I don’t want to.

Running the tip of my finger over the intricate design, I leave it in her hand for safekeeping.

“It’s incredible, Willow. She’s...” The words die in my mouth when I notice Willow’s throat bob as I look up at her. My focus shifts to her mouth at the exact moment her tongue slips out, glistening her lips before she bites down on the bottom one and moves it between her teeth.

Any good intentions I *ever* had desert me as my body moves forward of its own accord. Willow steps back until she hits the wall—just like I pictured it—and her hand falls by her side, the necklace all but forgotten as it dangles from her fingers.

“Jesse?” she questions but I can’t answer. I have no fucking idea what I’m doing.

Running a finger down her cheek, my eyes bounce between hers as I silently ask her to trust me, telling myself at the same time that I can trust her.

Willow takes a deep breath and nods with her teeth still pulling on her trembling lip. And it’s then that another realization hits... I have never wanted to kiss anyone more

than I do at this very moment. Actually I have never wanted to kiss anyone period. Except for her.

Taking the necklace from her fingers, I reach back and gently place it on the counter, my eyes never leaving hers.

Her chest rises and falls in quick succession, and I'm momentarily mesmerized by her. As though I'm seeing her for the first time. Or seeing more of her than I ever have before. Like I'm seeing into her soul.

"Fuck, Willow. I wish I'd met you in another life," I whisper, only it's a lie, because I did. I met her in another life. I should have wished that I'd met her in this one. Wished that the first time I saw her was when we crashed into each other last week.

Willow frowns. "I—"

Pressing my finger to her lip, I stop her from answering, knowing that whatever she says will affect the moment, and I'm not ready for that yet. I want to kiss her, and if I don't taste her in the next second, I may forever regret it.

Framing her face with my hands, I brush my thumb over her lip, releasing it from her teeth. Her eyes widen as her breath hitches. And as one of my hands sinks into her hair, I lean forward, pausing with barely an inch separating us, hovering there for a second as my heart races and my body tingles in anticipation.

"Buttercup, you are going to destroy me."

Chapter Forty

Willow

Jesse's whispered words echo through my head, seconds before he presses his lips to mine, creating a connection between us that's so much more than just the physical one. A moan rips from within me, but I don't have time to be embarrassed before Jesse's guttural groan drowns it out.

He hasn't even moved, and yet I can feel the touch of his lips everywhere.

With his head tilted to the side, he snakes his hand farther into my hair and increases the pressure of the kiss, his mouth finally caressing mine. His movements may be slow and soft, but the explorative way he's devouring me sends a bolt of electricity straight to my heart, not to mention my core.

Leaning into me until I'm forced to arch my back, Jesse tightens his hold, eliciting a soft gasp as my pebbled nipples press against his chest. His thumb runs along my jaw, opening my mouth as the tip of his tongue tentatively seeks entry, a groan ripping from within him as our tongues meet for the first

time. *His first time.* Though you wouldn't know it, because it feels like he's been kissing me forever.

We quickly find a rhythm, and just when I think it couldn't be more perfect, Jesse tugs at my hair, tilting my head back to possess my mouth.

My heart jolts in surprise, but I love what he's doing to me. His carnal urge sets my body alight. It may have been a while since I last kissed someone, but I can say with absolute certainty that it was nothing like this. In fact, no part of me can fathom it ever being like this with anyone else. The way my skin prickles with every touch, and my heart races in anticipation, or the way Jesse consumes every piece of me.

When he pulls back, I feel the loss instantly, but when he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, I can't stop myself from crying out, as a high-pitched mewl escapes me.

“Fuck, Willow. Your sounds—”

I've never made these sounds.

I cut off his words, framing his face in my hands before pulling him into another kiss, feeling incredibly powerful when he groans in response. But when *his* hands drop from my face and he steps back, I know I've made the wrong move. *Maybe he wasn't ready for me to take the lead.*

No words pass between us as we stare in each other's eyes, unmoving, our breaths coming out rushed but in a synchronized pattern.

I'm on edge, expecting Jesse to walk away, but that's not what happens. Instead, his eyes bounce between mine, searching for something, while his hand runs up the length of my arm, his fingertips leaving goose bumps in their wake.

I hold my breath as my chest swirls with nervous anticipation, waiting to see how this all plays out. His movements are painstakingly slow, and it takes everything in my power not to react. Not to make the first move.

His palm reaches my neck, and his fingers find their way back into my hair, making my breath hitch just as he lets out a curse, slamming his lips to mine, taking back control.

Spinning me around, he walks us back until my ass hits the side counter, before lifting me up with one hand and spreading my legs so he can step between them.

My core pulses with need as he presses against me, and I find myself wishing there was nothing between us.

With his fingers curled around my neck, he lifts my head and pushes his tongue inside me, consuming me in a bruising kiss.

Meeting his fervor, I dig my fingers into his waist and pull him closer, rolling my hips against his hardness. When he doesn't protest, I slip my other hand beneath his tee, running my fingers across his skin, feeling his muscles tense beneath my touch. He lets out another string of curses, but doesn't pull away or break our connection. Instead, he almost leans farther into me, allowing me to have this. Letting me explore his body even though it pains him.

Making my way across his chest, I splay my palm over his heart and relish in the feel of it pounding against me, making *my* heart jump as I take in the importance of this moment, committing the feel of him to memory in case we never get this time again.

With our tongues at war, Jesse's hold on me tightens, his fingers biting into my skin.

Unlike earlier, this grip feels possessive and I welcome it. I want him to own me. I *need* it.

Jesse breaks the kiss again, his lips moving to my jaw before brushing along my neck, and when he gently sucks where his fingers were squeezing me, my legs tighten in pleasure.

"*God, Jesse.*" My words come up breathy and full of want but I couldn't care less. I don't want to hide anything from him.

"Fuuck, Willow. Your taste, your sounds, your touch... your *need.*"

"Take me," I whisper, rolling my body against his, feeling his thick length harden when we touch.

He groans as his hand moves from my waist, slipping under my skirt and running over my heat.

Oh God.

He rubs me through my panties, before his fingers curl around the seam, his lips returning to mine as he teases my core.

Grabbing the back of his neck, I pull his head down to deepen our connection, as my legs clench in excitement.

“Willow,” Jesse whispers and it sounds like a plea. *But for what?*

“Jesse?”

One of his thick fingers slips inside me just as a voice calls out “Hello.”

Jesse springs away from me with so much speed and distance that he almost falls when his back hits the other counter behind him.

Considering my current state, I should be just as panicked, but I know the layout of the store. You’d have to be halfway down the aisle before you see this part of the room.

Taking a deep breath, I readjust my panties and smooth out my outfit, brushing past Jesse as I move to greet my customer.

“H...hi.” I stumble over my words, barely hiding my guilt. “Welcome to—”

“Ryan?” Jesse asks from behind my shoulder, his voice coming out raspy, making him clear his throat.

The gorgeous man in front of me raises his eyebrows as his eyes find Jesse, and I feel the energy in the room shift. So this is the guy chasing Pippa. But how—

“How’d you get here?” Jesse snaps, voicing my thoughts.

Ryan’s brows furrow before he huffs out a laugh. “You’re not even going to say hello?”

“I’ve been stuck here for days because of that damn bridge, and you suddenly just appear out of nowhere... Excuse me for wanting to know how the fuck that happened. Is the bridge open?”

I internally cringe as his words register. I know I keep foolishly believing that each moment with Jesse is going to be different from the last. But this one felt real. My body’s still tingling from his touch, my heart still beats to his rhythm, and the throbbing remains between my legs.

When I glance back at Jesse, the first thing I notice is his fists clenched at his sides. Is that because of Ryan’s appearance or because he interrupted us? *What I wouldn’t give to go back in time and lock the stupid door.*

Ryan’s silent for a moment—probably processing how much attitude he wants to give his teammate—before he shakes his head and sighs. “You can’t drive through yet, but you can now walk it. My truck’s parked at the other end.”

Wow. That’s commitment. It’s not a short walk, and it’s not the nicest area to leave a car. He cares.

“You walked here for Pippa?” Jesse says, his tone laced with surprise, once again mimicking my thoughts.

“I did.”

“Does she know you’re coming?”

“She doesn’t.”

Jesse brushes past me as he walks around the counter, only stopping when the men are side by side, and I can’t help but

compare them. Other than their distinguishing features, if you looked from behind, I'm not sure you could separate them in a lineup. They have similar builds, and they're almost identical in height. But when you take in the details... Jesse's rugged and raw, while Ryan has more of a clean-cut appearance. Not what I expected for Pippa.

"You know I've never had a problem with you, Ryan, and I would have gone to bat for you if you'd wanted to date Pippa and had issues with management. But if Pippa ever gets *that* drunk again because of a fight you've had, I won't hesitate to hurt you."

Ryan's eyes widen in shock before he curses. "Goddammit. She told me she was going straight home to bed."

"Yeah, well, that didn't happen," Jesse snaps, crossing his arms in front of him.

I should cut in and let them know it wasn't all about Ryan, but it's not my place to tell them that. Plus, I don't particularly want to help Jesse at all right now if he's pulling away again.

Ryan huffs out in frustration and I want to do the same. "This situation is so fucked-up," he says, shaking his head.

"You're telling me," Jesse agrees. "Try living it for the last week."

And there goes another stab to my chest.

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"Yep."

My eyes bounce between the two of them as they partake in some kind of standoff. But when Ryan says, “So...” and Jesse doesn’t answer, I’ve had enough.

“Oh for God’s sake. I’ll take you.” I probably should ask Pippa if that’s okay, since she may not want to see him, but I don’t have time for that. Grabbing my keys, I stride toward the men with purpose, only stopping to motion to the door. “Out. Both of you. I’m closing up.”

Ryan easily obliges, but Jesse watches me curiously.

“Now!” I yell and his eyes flash with something that looks very much like heat before he follows Ryan out the door, leaving me as confused as ever. *Didn’t he just say he didn’t want to be here?*

The men hover as I lock up the shop, and when I turn and almost bump into Jesse, my frustration grows. “I can take Ryan on my own. You’re free to *walk that bridge.*”

Ryan laughs as Jesse scoffs in annoyance, but as I drift past him, I notice confusion marring his features.

I’m halfway down the steps with Ryan right behind me when I realize I haven’t even introduced myself. Stopping abruptly, I turn on my high heels and wobble, until Ryan’s strong hand grips my arm to stop me.

“Thank you,” I say with a laugh. “I’m Willow, by the way. Pippa’s sister.”

A smile lights up his face. “I kind of gathered that. You don’t really look alike, but there’s something similar about

you.”

“It’s the sass,” Jesse says, knocking into Ryan as he passes—forcing him to drop his hold on me—before walking ahead in the direction of my house.

I want to bite back, but I drop it. I’ll deal with him later.



Ryan and I talk on the brief journey, but I continue to watch Jesse walking in the distance, my anger growing as he goes. I know that wasn’t just me in that moment, and yet, the second we stopped, he’s talking about home.

“Willow?” Ryan questions, and I realize I’ve drifted off with my thoughts again.

“Sorry, I’m just trying to remember if I had the air conditioner on in the shop,” I lie.

Ryan winces, running a hand uncomfortably through his hair. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have just turned up like that, but Pippa used to talk about you and your shop all the time. It’s the only place I knew.”

What?

“She does?”

Ryan smiles. “She does.”

A feeling of giddiness takes over. I thought it was nice that she wanted to help with marketing, but I didn't realize she spoke about me or my little business when she's home. The giddiness quickly subsides, making way for the guilt to seep in. I love her so much, but I've never made the effort to visit her. I've always expected her to come to me.

When we reach my house, Jesse's waiting on the front steps looking put out. I expect him to snap, but he shocks me instead when he says, "I didn't want to accidentally ruin the surprise," with a shrug.

I'm still not sure if it's going to be a good or bad surprise, but it's nice of him to be considerate.

"Very thoughtful of you," I say, trying hard not to smile because I'm still pissed off, but of course, it sneaks through. I walk past him and into the house with Ryan hot on my trail, no doubt desperate to find Pippa, and when we enter the kitchen, I'm grateful to find her there, pulling something from the fridge.

Putting on a smile, I brace myself for how she's going to react, but when she turns around and sees Ryan, her eyes shine with a hint of happiness before she hides it. I release a sigh, knowing I did the right thing, and step away as she speaks.

"Ryan?"

Chapter Forty-One

Jesse

“**W**hat are you doing here?” Pippa whispers, a slight edge to her tone. Ryan doesn’t answer right away, and the house falls silent as they stare at each other awkwardly. I’ve never wished myself gone more than I do right now. Yet, I fucking came back here with them. It was *my* choice. *Because I can’t be away from Willow.*

I’m about to say something, or cough, when Ryan finally grows some balls and moves to Pippa, his hands lifting toward her face. I can’t say for sure what happens next because I look away, but it doesn’t take a genius to guess.

Though I want nothing to do with this little reunion, and I’m pissed off that something between them sent Pippa spiraling, I can appreciate that Ryan deserves some credit for showing up. If he hadn’t...I know Pippa would have written him off completely. It’s a good move and shows that he cares.

If only he’d figured out his feelings before this week happened, then he could have been here in my place.

A sharp pang pierces my chest when my thoughts sink in, my traitorous gaze glancing in Willow's direction. While none of it's a lie—Ryan being here with Pippa would have saved me and Willow from a lot of heartache—the thought of never having been here pains me. *Fuck! How did I let it get this far?*

Willow was supposed to be long gone. A memory I'd pushed away. A darkness I was meant to forget. Part of a life I left behind.

I should say goodbye now and save us both from the inevitable, but I'm fairly certain it's too late for that.

She's everywhere. I'm in too deep. Her smell still lingers on my clothes, her sounds are still present in my mind... I feel her beneath my hands, on my lips, in my fucking *chest*.

Every second of our moment together plays on repeat in my head, slowly taking over my senses. From the instant our lips touched there was no going back for me. I need to taste her, consume her, make her mine, but fuck...I'm going to hell for it. Kissing her was a colossal mistake. But one I can't even bring myself to regret. And that's what makes it more dangerous. Because if I'm not prepared to walk away knowing all the facts, how can I expect her to do it?

As a strange energy takes over the room, my mind drifts back to our kiss. I always thought I'd recoil the first time I kissed someone again, but I knew, before we even touched, that wouldn't happen with Willow. She was always going to be my exception. I just never expected to find her. And now, the

more I get of her, the more I crave. Nothing has ever felt so right, and yet, it's really *fucking wrong*.

She's an angel and I'm the devil with my hand hovering over her throat, wielding all the power, knowing that with one squeeze I could end her. *Or I could be her savior.*

Fuck!

If we hadn't been interrupted, I would have gone all the way. I would have possessed every part of her until I was buried deep inside. I would have claimed her. Fucked all the other men out of her system, until I was all that remained. Because God knows she's etched in my soul, and while that pains me to my core, I know it's never going to change.

But Willow deserves better.

I hear my name mentioned in the kitchen, snapping me from my dangerous thoughts.

"How about Jesse and I give you some alone time?" Willow says, and I feel like I missed something.

"Thank you. Just ten minutes. I don't want to kick you out of your home." Pippa smiles in thanks as Ryan stands frozen beside her, and while she annoys me at times, I want to see her happy.

"I'll be in the yard," I say, before jumping up to leave. Giving them their alone time.

I sense Willow's presence behind me before I hear her steps, and my heart jolts. I've just made it to the end of the hall when her bedroom door creaks and the feel of her disappears.

Pausing with my hand on the door handle, I run through all the reasons I should keep going, but none of them stick. *Fuck it. I'm done being the good guy.*

In two quick strides, I'm standing outside her room. Consequences be damned.

Rushing inside, I gently push the door shut and flick the lock. A lock I'm almost certain wasn't here the last time I was in her room. *Is she scared of me? Or someone else?*

When I turn around, my gaze meets her half-naked form just as she registers my sudden appearance, her eyes widening in surprise. I rush forward to stifle her words, but a gasp slips free seconds before my hand covers her mouth.

Her face contorts with confusion, her hot breath warming my palm.

Leaning in close, I grip the back of her head, my lips hovering at her ear. "I'm going to need you to be quiet," I whisper, gently running my fingers through her hair, holding my breath when it makes her shiver.

She opens her mouth again but changes her mind at the last second and nods, her body relaxing under my hold.

"Good girl," I rush out, as a relieved sigh escapes me.

Step by step I guide her back toward the bed, only stopping when her legs hit the mattress. "I need to finish what we started, Willow. I think we both need it. Can you be quiet?"

Willow nods again, and the uncertainty in her gaze turns to longing as her captivating green eyes drop to my lips.

My nostrils flare, and I'd give all that I have to throw her down and ravish her, but I need to take my time.

“Is it safe to remove my hand?”

Willow nods a third time, and I feel her tongue sneak out as she licks her lips, her eyes flashing to my mouth once more.

“Good,” I rasp, trying to ignore my twitching cock as I picture that tongue licking a path along my length. “Do you want my fingers?” I ask, running my hand between her breasts, passing over the lace of her bra, my fingers itching to touch her again.

I wait for the nod, my permission to sink inside her, but when she shakes her head, I freeze, instantly stepping back. *Fuck.*

“I—”

Gripping my tee, Willow cuts me off and drags me back in, pulling my head down so she can whisper in my ear. “I want it all.”

Jesus. My pulse spikes as my cock hardens between us, making it wildly uncomfortable beneath my zipper.

Wasting no time, I slip my hand into the waistband of her skirt, ready to push the silky material down her legs. To hell with all my reasons, I—

“First,” Willow says urgently, breaking through my thoughts as her delicate fingers wrap around my wrist, halting me in place. “First, I want answers.”

Fuck!

My shoulders sag as I remove my hand and drop onto the bed behind her. I know Willow deserves something, but she doesn't know what she's asking, and I'm fucking terrified of what the answers might do to her.

Spinning on her toes, she grabs her shirt from the floor and pulls it on, fastening the buttons before crossing her arms over her chest. When she steps back, my chest aches, wanting her closer but knowing it's infinitely better that she's farther away.

The air around us changes when her eyes finally meet mine, but before I get the chance to speak, someone bangs on the door and we both jolt.

"We're going for a drive," Pippa announces. "You're free to come out."

"Thank you," Willow calls back but doesn't get a response.

Neither of us move until the front door slams shut, and it's like a bucket of water to my face, waking me up, readying me for what has to be done. "What do you want to know?" I ask, my gaze rising to meet hers, taking in the sudden nerves in her expression.

She blinks, her lids closing for a beat longer than necessary before she takes a deep breath. "I want to know why you keep reeling me in just to push me away? And why you think it's okay to kiss me one second and then wish yourself home the next." She's not yelling. She doesn't even appear angry. She's

hurting. And fuck, that's hard to see, knowing I'm the one hurting her. "I never pushed for this," she continues, motioning back and forth between us. "But I wasn't innocent in it all. The thing is... I *know* it's not one-sided. I just don't know why you're fighting it so much. Am I wrong?"

Releasing a drawn-out sigh, I contemplate my words carefully. "You're not..." I begin but trail off when her eyes light up ever so slightly. It's time to admit defeat. "Pippa and I were dating—"

"Nope," she interrupts.

"Nope?"

"That's right. You and Pippa were *never* dating. You don't get to use that as an excuse. Even after Pippa said it was fine to tell me all about your fake relationship, you *still* lied. Try again. This time with the truth."

"You didn't let me finish. How do you know I wasn't telling the truth?"

"Because I've never once felt like this was about Pippa. Even when you promised me it was."

Running a hand through my hair, I suck in a breath and release it slowly. "I'm not good for you. I—"

"You keep saying that and yet you haven't given me any real reasons." Throwing her hands in the air, she shakes her head before moving to sit on the bed beside me. "Are you married?"

“What, no.” I choke on air, her question coming out of nowhere. “Why would I be here with Pippa if I was?”

Willow nods in understanding. “Okay, do you have a kid you don’t want me to meet?”

My head drops back and I groan. “*Jesus*. No. It’s nothing like that.”

Willow slides closer, but I don’t look her way, closing my eyes instead.

“Have you ever killed someone, committed an unforgivable crime, or worse?”

The fuck! My eyes flash to hers as my body tenses. *Yes*.

She’s closer than I expected, making it impossible to think straight. Closing my eyes again, I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “Why can’t you just trust that I’ve been trying to do the right thing?” *Until now*.

“Just answer the question, Jesse.” Willow huffs. “Are you a wanted felon?”

“I’m on a billboard in Times Square, for fuck’s sake. It’s not hard to find me.”

“Then what is it? Because if you’re about to tell me it’s because you’re a fucking ‘player,’” she says using quote fingers, “I will lose my goddamn mind. That’s a bullshit answer.”

Fuck, I wish it was that.

“That’s part of it, sure, but...” I trail off again. I can’t believe I’m about to say this.

“But what?” Willow pushes, her frustration growing. Not that I blame her.

“If you’d let me finish, I was going to say that I’m done. I can’t fight it anymore. I’m not strong enough to stay away. You’re my fucking undoing.”

I pause and Willow stares at me with wide eyes, clearly expecting me to push her away again. And she’s not entirely wrong. While I know she’s not fragile, if she ever learns the truth, it will completely shatter her heart. And I need to make her see reason.

Better to break her heart than to crush her soul.

But I’m past the point of no return.

“You may not see it, but you’re so fucking strong, Willow. One of the strongest people I know. And I’m going to need you to use that strength to walk away. To turn around and never look back. You deserve a happily ever after. All I can give you is right now.” I swallow a lump in my throat as I attempt one last plea. “If ever there was a moment to use your self-preservation, it’s now. Because if you stay, it will ruin you, and I won’t be able to stop it.”

Willow’s quiet for a beat, and I hope to hell it’s because she’s seriously considering my words. But when she lifts her chin and gazes at me in challenge, I know that I’ve lost.

“And if I don’t want to?” she asserts, defiance in her tone.
“If I choose not to listen?”

“Would it change your mind if I begged?” I ask, pleading with her to trust me. “Because I’m not above dropping to my knees for you. *Anything* if it will keep you safe.”

Willow shakes her head, holding strong. *She doesn’t get it.*
“Why are you so convinced you’re going to destroy me?”

“I can’t...” My voice cracks as dread fills my chest.
“Willow, *please.*”

Her eyes soften as my plea finally breaks through her hardened exterior.

“Okay,” she rushes out. “Then answer me this... What would have happened if I’d just let you finish what you started? Like you asked? Would I have woken up tomorrow to find you gone?”

I can’t lie to her anymore. Not about this, anyway. “Yes.”

Her lips tremble, and I can see the moment her heart begins to break. She’s finally seeing me for the monster I am.

“Why is this so hard? We’ve known each other for a week. Why does it feel like an epically fated love story?” Her gaze drops from mine and she laughs to herself. “God, I’m crazy. This is crazy. I should just listen to you.”

She runs a hand down her face, her head shaking as she does. “It’s just... I don’t even know what it is. But I *feel* it.” She turns back to me and presses her hand to her chest. “Here. I feel it *here*. And I have no fucking idea what it means. But I

can't stay away either." She whispers and my heart bleeds for her. For both of us.

Grabbing her hand, I entwine our fingers but keep our hands close to her chest. "And if I'm right? If I break you?"

"Then I'll go back to despising you like I did in the beginning." She stares at me deadpan until her lips pull into a soft smile. "I know you sleep around," she rasps, her serious expression back in place. "Everyone knows that. But you told me you *never touch anyone*; you never allow anyone to *touch you* and you *don't* kiss."

"*Willow.*"

"No. Please don't *Willow* me. If you can't tell me why I should walk away, that's fine. But you can't expect me to listen. It's *my* heart to risk. Not yours. So I'm the only one that gets to decide whether this is worth it."

Removing her skirt and panties, she crawls on top of me, straddling my lap in nothing but her blouse. "And I'm willing to take a chance on you," she continues as the heat from her core burns me. "But I need something in return. I need you to show me how you feel. If you can't tell me... *show* me."

Her hands shake as she slowly unbuttons her top, her false bravado wavering. The tightness in my chest strengthens as I watch, but when she reaches around to the clasp of her bra, I have to stop her.

"Promise me you won't hate me until after I'm gone," I whisper, lifting her into my arms to lay her back on the bed.

Willow nods as she gets comfortable on the mattress, her chest lifting as her legs fall open.

I swallow a lump in my throat, knowing it's now or never. But when my eyes lock on her core, I'm only left with one final thought before all reason disappears.

Promise me you'll forgive yourself when you find out why.

Chapter Forty-Two

Willow

I've never been one to take chances. I don't step out of my comfort zone. I don't *live*. But something is screaming at me to risk it all now, and just like Jesse, I'm too far gone to question it.

I've been running scenarios through my head all week, and I still can't picture a world where I'd ever hate him. Though right now I'm having trouble picturing anything at all with the anticipation of his naked body pressed against me as we mold ourselves into one.

Sucking my lip into my mouth, my breath quickens as he stares between my legs like he wants to devour me, drinking me in with his mouth open and lust-filled eyes locked on my core, seeing the way I drip for him.

He drags his teeth over his bottom lip and his hand flexes, the movement making me bite my cheek to stifle a moan as my insides pulse with need.

As if he can see what he does to me, he snaps out of his stupor and groans before moving up the bed, lifting me with ease to position me on the pillows. When he has me where he wants me, he pushes my legs shut, and a feeling of uncertainty settles in my chest.

I thought he wanted this. I thought I was calling his bluff, making him admit his feelings, but was it all just to placate me?

Lying before him in nothing but a bra is unnerving enough, but in this moment I'm baring more than just my body. I'm baring my soul, and the thought of him rejecting me is torture.

With painstakingly slow movements, Jesse sits back, his throat bobbing as his eyes rake over my body, the intensity of his penetrating stare setting me on fire. My breath hitches as my heart and lungs stage a strike, refusing to function as I lie unmoving, waiting for his next move.

"You deserve the world," he rasps, his fists now clenched at his sides. "And I can't be that man—"

"Jesse." I cut him off, sitting up as my heart fires again, beating out of my chest. *Don't do this, Jesse. Please.* "I—"

"Wait." Jesse shakes his head, and I still instantly. "I can't be that man... but fuck, do I want to try. For you, I want to try."

He looks at me expectantly, but I don't know what to say. All I can do is nod, his words having rendered me speechless.

No, not his words—the raw emotion in his voice, the vulnerability in his gaze. That’s what has me at a loss.

Lifting up, I close my eyes and brush a featherlight kiss across his lips, tentatively reaching for his hand. When he doesn’t flinch away, I guide his palm to my chest, splaying his fingers over my heart, mirroring my earlier move.

“Be here with me. Now. In this moment. Block everything else out. It’s just white noise.”

Jesse stiffens, and his eyes burn with so much pain, I know I’ve fucked up. Something I said just triggered him in a way I’m yet to understand, but we can’t give up now. “It’s just you and me, Jesse,” I whisper, my voice breaking as I watch him. He tries so hard to project a no-care attitude, but there’s so much beneath the surface that I’m almost certain he’s never shared. With anyone. “It’s just us.”

Jesse shakes his head and blinks the pain away, a determined look replacing it. “I couldn’t stop this if I tried. I have never wanted anyone the way I want you. But I want to savor it. Take my time. Worship every inch of you. Because...”

He trails off, but I know what he was going to say.

This is it.

I’m not under any illusions. I know we can’t be anything more than this week, but I hate that it *feels* like it’s so much bigger than that.

I nod and take a deep breath. I'm not sure if I'm telling him I want the same or giving him permission to walk away when we're done. But I take my own advice and live in the moment. Focus on the here and now.

Reaching behind me, I unclasp my bra and let it fall, allowing him to see every naked inch of me, something no one has ever seen before. Hoping he'll see the real me. Silently begging him to see past the skin I wear and the mask I hide behind. To see the vulnerable woman who's opening her heart for the first time, the broken soul terrified of getting hurt, but even more terrified of never putting herself out there.

Without a word, Jesse nods, answering my silent request before laying me back down, brushing the hair away from my eyes. "You are a goddess, Buttercup. I will never in this lifetime deserve you."

His lips silence my argument as his hand curls in my hair, and it takes everything in my power not to skip ahead. Not to beg him to take everything from me because all I have is his.

He sucks my lip into his mouth, and we both groan when I buck up into him, his tantalizing nibbling sending a spark straight to my core.

Reaching for his tee, I try to remove it without touching his skin, determined not to push too far. But when he catches on, he shakes his head, grating the words "*touch me*" against my lips.

Oh God.

Breaking our kiss, Jesse jumps off the bed and rids himself of his clothes, standing before me in all his naked glory. My eyes glide over his perfect form, committing it all to memory while a need pools between my legs.

Jesse reacts to my gaze as if I'm physically touching him, and I watch, rapt with desire, loving the way his throat bobs as my eyes linger and the way his abs tense from my visual exploitation. But when I settle my sights on his cock, I don't get a chance to see what happens before he's fisting it in his grip and stalking toward me, a guttural groan filling the silence.

“Fuck, Willow. You are going to be the death of me.”

Spreading my legs wide, he positions himself between them and lowers his thick frame to my body, bracing his arms so that he stops just before we touch. “Don't hold back, Buttercup,” he rasps softly. “I need to feel you *everywhere*.”

His mouth descends on mine, and our bodies connect for the first time, eliciting a gasp from the back of my throat. My entire body comes to life as his warmth surrounds me, and I can't stop myself from crying out. “Oh, God.”

Wrapping my hands around his back, I rake my nails over his skin and cry out again when he shivers, his body rocking into mine as his hard length ever so slightly teases my core.

Needing more, I roll my hips seeking a connection, but it has the opposite effect when he pulls back and sits up, leaning back on his heels.

“Let me worship you. We’re in no rush.”

Without waiting for an answer, he lies back down with his head now hovering over my chest. His eyes meet mine as his lips lower to my breast and his tongue pokes out, quickly swirling around my nipple. A high-pitched sound fills the air, and it takes me a second to realize it came from me, distracted by the spark that shoots through me. Jesse groans against my skin as his mouth teases my sensitive bud, sending my pulse into hyperdrive. He tentatively bites down on my flesh, testing my reaction, watching to make sure it’s okay, and I silently scream as I rear off the bed, needing more, needing to feel the sting of his teeth before he soothes me with his tongue.

Jesse listens. He takes in my response and he gives it to me. Over and over. Alternating between pleasure and pain. From one breast to the other. Working me into a frenzy, until I’m aching for more.

When I writhe beneath him, my core teetering on the edge of explosion, he stops his pursuit and moves on, dragging his lips and tongue over every inch of my body, making it impossible to ever forget this moment. With every touch, every caress, he’s ruining me for all future men, and I both love and hate him for it.

His slow movements drive me wild as he explores, and when he reaches the apex between my thighs, spreading me wider, I just about lose all control. “Jesse, please.”

My nerve endings stand to attention as my heart threatens to beat right out of my chest, and I’m almost certain that if he

blew air across my center, I'd climax. Every part of me aches for him, and I've never felt anything like it.

Once again listening to my needs, Jesse spreads me with his fingers before running the tip of his tongue through my heat. The sensation on my core sends me soaring up off the bed, and when he does it a second time—groaning against me—my body jolts as my orgasm rips through me.

“Jesse. Oh, fuck. Jesse.”

“Fuck, Willow. *Jesus*. You taste so good.”

The sound of his pleasure mixed with the feel of mine elicits another scream as my body shakes uncontrollably, the explosion too much to take. “I can't. Jesse. Oh God.”

“You can,” he rasps, making sure his voice vibrates through me. “I want it all.”

Jesus.

Pinning my chest with one hand, Jesse pumps my heat with the other as I thrash around, giving him everything I've got. My hands sink into his hair, pulling on the strands with abandon, the only leverage I've got as Jesse controls what's left of me.

He grunts again as he sucks me into his mouth, and just when I think I'm going to have to beg, he slows his movements, giving me one last lick before he pulls back, a new hunger in his gaze. “I have never wanted to do that before. But fuck, I could eat you all day.”

Oh God.

I try to swallow, but my throat's so dry that it pains me, and when I suck in a shallow breath, the air struggles to fill my lungs, sending my heart racing in response.

And I *love* it.

We're both quiet for a beat as Jesse runs the tip of his finger around my belly button. I'm not sure where to go from here, but I'm not done. I need more. I need to feel him inside me. I need to hear him scream out my name when he comes. I want it all.

I want to make him forget his past like I've forgotten mine. I want him to go home with my name on his lips and the feel of me forever ingrained in his mind.

And I want him to come back.

More than anything, I want him to realize, like me, that this connection isn't fleeting. That it's going to be impossible to break whatever fucked-up force binds us together.

I want him to be mine.

Chapter Forty-Three

Jesse

I run a finger from her navel to her slick heat, and with agonizingly slow movements, follow the path with my tongue, watching as goose bumps coat her skin.

Her body quivers and a soft mewl escapes her, drawing my eyes to her face, my heart clenching at her flushed cheeks and sated expression. She has no fucking idea what she does to me. No clue how often I've pictured this moment. How desperately I crave her.

And as her eyelashes flicker, her innocent expression reminds me of how much we've both got to lose, and how important it is to keep her safe.

Pushing the dark thoughts from my mind, I watch as she runs her fingers through her messy blonde locks, her head jolting to the side when she gets caught on the knots. An image of my fist in her hair has me biting back a groan as I shift my focus back on her pleasure. She's had me salivating since she first opened her legs, and I'm not done with her yet. I haven't satisfied my hunger.

After running my hands down her legs, I grip her thighs and push her knees to her chest, spreading her as far as I can push it. She's exposed and vulnerable in this position, but when my eyes meet hers, I see nothing but wanton desire staring back.

And it kills me.

Teasing her again, I suck on her sensitive bud before pushing a finger inside her and curling it around, brushing my fingertip against her walls.

Her perfect ass wriggles in my face as she screams out my name, only making me work harder, increasing my speed as I add a second finger, pumping into her as I watch her fall apart.

Everything she does has me reeling. I've never been more on edge than I am here and now while I worship her, bowing down to her every need.

I may be the one in control of her pleasure, but she's the one calling the shots.

And right now, she wants more.

Working her to the edge, I alternate between my tongue and fingers, my muscles clenched as I will her to find her second release.

My cock aches against the bed, begging me to pump it, but I hold out. My time will come.

Willow's fingers find their way back into my hair, and my length twitches. She's gentle at first, but when she pulls my head up to look at her, I lose my fucking mind.

“Jesus Christ.”

With her lip trapped between her teeth, she watches my fingers as they disappear inside her, palming her breasts with her spare hand.

I pump faster, scissoring my fingers while circling my thumb over her most sensitive area. She sucks in a breath as her head falls back, and when she rocks against my hand, pinching her nipple as she chases her release, I come undone. The tether that’s keeping me sane threatens to snap, and I have no way to stop it.

As if sensing my resolve slipping, Willow moans out my name, her eyes flashing to mine. “I need more,” she rasps, her gaze almost burning a hole in me.

Breaking our visual connection, I flick my tongue across her heat.

More I can do.

Her body trembles and I’m sure I’ve got her, but when I add a third finger, she stills me as I move, trapping my hand between her clenched legs.

“No. I need you inside me. Now.”

Jesus.

Jerking my head back, I catch her gaze and suck in a breath as all my blood rushes to my cock, making it almost impossible to ignore. But when she pushes me away and sits up, showing me she means business, I’m ruined.

Snap!

Jumping up, I grab a condom from my wallet, thankful I still had it in my pocket. But before I can rip the packet open, Willow rushes to stop me, stealing it from my grasp and hiding it behind her back.

“Wait,” she rasps breathlessly. “I want to feel you bare, just for a second before you put that on. And I want you to feel me. I want this to be different. I want our time together to be different.”

“Fuck, Buttercup.” I’m struggling to think straight as her words fill my mind, but I focus enough to understand her meaning. And she’s so far off base that it hurts.

“Willow, it’s been different with you since the moment we met. None of this compares to anything I’ve experienced before, and I doubt anything ever will.”

Willow gasps as her eyes dart between mine, searching for the truth, or perhaps looking to see if she can catch me in a lie. I hold her gaze, standing firm, because I think that might be the most honest and real thing I’ve ever said to her.

She’s still for a beat, but when she finds her answer, she nods as her tongue sneaks out to moisten her lips. “I still want it.”

Fuuuck!

Length in hand, I pump it a few times as I move forward and kneel on the bed. My muscles twitch under Willow’s

intense gaze as her eyes track my every move, glued to my cock like it's a beacon she's tasked with guarding.

She sits back on her heels, and with her arms still locked behind her, she looks the picture of obedience. If this was anyone else, I'd want that. I only ever sought women who did things my way. But with Willow, I want more. I want to be her equal.

"How do you want me?" she asks, and I almost laugh at the irony. This is what I'd usually be desperate for, but now I want her to help lead. I want to know what she wants. I want to see the Willow who took control of my cock for the very first time.

"How do you want it?" I counter, my lips pulling into a smile when her eyes widen, and I can see her mind whirring.

Her gaze moves around the bed, until she seemingly decides and her cheeks flush with nerves. "I'd love to ride you."

Fuck yes! Me too.

I grab her waist, and she squeals out a laugh as I flip us around in one quick movement, positioning her so she's straddling my legs, my cock hitting her in the stomach.

"You sure?" I ask, my palms spread out around her hips as my thumbs run circles over her skin.

Willow nods and I lift her easily, shifting her weight to her knees. "Stay like that," I softly demand. "I want to try something."

Releasing my hold, I grip my length and angle it toward her, immediately running it through her core, covering myself in her slickness. Her head falls back as my balls tighten in an instant.

Flesh on flesh for the first time, and holy fucking shit.

I slam my eyes shut, giving myself an internal pep talk before I keep going, then glide myself through her heat a few more times, groaning at the intense feeling. *I need to try more.*

Holding my breath, I line myself up with her core and watch our connection as Willow sinks down on top of me, burying me to the hilt.

My body spasms, and I vaguely hear Willow cry out in pleasure, but I can't concentrate on anything other than the incredible sensation I'm experiencing.

When I'm certain I can move without exploding inside her, I roll her hips, pulling her toward me while I push back.

This is fucking heaven. If doing this is going to send me to hell, so be it. I will never regret this moment.

My chest tightens as a new rush takes over me, but I ignore it. I'm not ready to process feelings. I'm still fighting not to blow my load without protection.

Willow leans forward, spreading her palms over my pecs, and I know she feels it too.

But as much as I want to finish inside her, I only allow myself another few seconds of bliss before I lift her off me and

sheath myself, hating our little experiment because I'm not sure I'll ever get over it.

This time around, Willow lowers herself painstakingly slowly, and I have to fight myself not to take over. It feels like a lifetime passes as she moves inch by torturous inch, like she's testing my limits, and when she's finally full of me, I groan out a relieved sigh, deliberately twitching inside her.

When I'm able to focus again, my eyes find hers, and she smirks before biting her lip to hide it.

That little tease.

"The fuck?" I huff out as I laugh, genuinely impressed by her payback. "Well played, Buttercup. Well played. But now it's on."

I don't even let her react before I'm pulling her to my chest and rolling her over until I'm back on top. As much as I loved the view of her tits bouncing in front of me, this position gives me back control, and I need it for what I have planned.

Willow giggles, and a warmth fills my chest. Sex has always been about reaching the goal, a means to satisfy my needs, but this is so much more. And dare I say it, so much fucking better. I want this. Always. But again, I can't think about that now.

Curling her legs over my shoulders, I push in deeper and groan when she pulses around me.

With my teeth clenched, I start to move, and it doesn't take long for us to find our rhythm, our bodies crashing together as

we chase the euphoria.

I release one of Willow's legs, so I can push deeper, increasing my speed as she matches my fervor. Thrust for thrust she's there, slamming against me, pushing back, sending me flying over the edge.

"Fuuck, Willow. Yes."

Her walls tighten around me, and she comes seconds before I grunt through my release, and I've never felt more satisfied.

We fit. There's no denying it. And despite this being our first time together, it feels like we're one.

When Willow's breathing slows, I pull out and drop down to the bed, my body rigid beside hers. A small laugh escapes her before she rolls over and tucks herself into my side, curling herself around me.

I don't move at first, but when she nuzzles into me and reaches out to grab my hand, I give in, wrapping my arms around her before pressing a kiss to her head.

Completely sated and completely fucked.

I'm not sure how much time passes, but when Willow falls asleep, it's dark outside, and it takes everything in my power not to wake her up again, wanting to drag this night out, knowing we're so close to goodbye.

I lie still for a while, staring up at the ceiling as I contemplate what's next. I almost decide to wake her until she sighs in her sleep, and the smallest smile plays on her lips, changing my mind. If I could hold on to this moment forever,

I'd be a lucky man. With so much going on in her life, I've never seen her looking so content. So at peace. So settled. And I did that. Even if it was merely a fleeting moment, I eased her mind.

The very person who helped fuck it up in the first place.

I want to stay, but letting her wake in my arms feels like a cruel joke, like I'm setting her up for false expectations, when it's already fucked-up enough.

Dressing quickly, I step into the hall and quietly shut the door behind me, releasing a breath as I run a hand through my hair. The last thing I want to do right now is walk away. I want to hold on to our connection, relish in the feel of her tucked in protectively beside me, bask in her warmth. But come morning

"What are you doing?" I hear from behind me and startle, springing away from Willow's door as Pippa's abrupt voice enters my mind.

Jesus!

"Well?" she continues when I don't answer, not even giving me two seconds to respond.

"*Fuck!* Why are you creeping around?" I turn it back on her. "I was just checking on Willow," I lie, but hold out the hope that it's believable.

"I don't believe you," she says, proving me wrong.

"You don't believe me?"

“You heard me.”

I raise an eyebrow, keeping my expression neutral, as though she hasn't just caught me red-handed.

“Whatever.” I shrug. “I'm going to bed.”

I try to walk away, but Pippa grabs my shoulder and pulls me to a stop. I flinch at her touch, and for the first time she actually notices and instantly lets go.

“We need to talk. *Now*,” she says, motioning to the back door before storming off in that direction, leaving me no chance to argue.

As soon as I step foot in the yard, Pippa's on me like a pit bull. “Tell me what's going on.”

“What? What do you *think* is going on?”

“Don't mess with me, Jesse. You just walked out of Willow's room, looking like you've been sleeping.”

“Sleeping? The horror,” I deadpan, not in the mood to be scolded like a child.

Pippa huffs. “Shut it! You know what comes *before* sleep?”

I don't dignify that with an answer. Instead, I anger her even more. “Why do you sound jealous right now?”

Pippa gapes before she shakes her head in frustration. “That's not what this is, asshole. She's my baby sister.”

“So? You joked about me crushing on her.”

“*Yeah*, because I could see something blossoming. I even told Willow to go for it. But I didn't think you'd go all the way

before actually spending time with her.”

Fuck. She’s got me there, because neither did I. Though I’m not about to agree with her.

“I’m not talking to you about this.”

“So you’re admitting it?”

“For fuck’s sake. It’s actually none of your goddamn business. I don’t even know why we’re having this conversation.”

Pippa shakes her head as she rolls her eyes, acting as though I’m the childish one in this situation, but I hold strong. I’m not backing down on this. She holds my gaze until I see a thought pass through her eyes and her body deflates.

“You’re right,” she says, her tone significantly calmer. “But I care about her, Jesse. And I haven’t been the best sister over the years. She’s been through so much, and she’s... I’m just not sure you’re the right person for her if you’re going to be you.” *Wow, okay.*

“I know you’re just trying to protect her.” *Like the rest of this town.* “But—”

“No, you don’t get it,” Pippa huffs out. “I’m all for her having some fun. I’d probably even be okay with her trying things with you *down the road.*” She pauses, choosing her next words. “I just...not now. I thought you actually had feelings. Not your usual shit.”

I ignore her second verbal attack and focus on the *not now*. What does that even mean? I want to ask her, but since I still

haven't flat out admitted anything, I can't exactly do that.

"Okay, sure."

Pippa's eyes narrow and she frowns. *Looks like that was the wrong thing to come out of my mouth.*

"Please tell me you didn't just screw her and run."

"No!" *I can honestly say I didn't "screw" her. It was so much more than that.*

"Have you done anything?"

"No," I repeat, but my traitorous voice comes out less confident that time. I stand tall, hoping she won't notice.

"Dammit, Jesse." *She noticed.*

"What? What do you want from me?"

Pippa sighs and then stares through me, and it's unnerving. But when she finally speaks, it's so much worse. "Just...don't rush it. It should be special."

What? It should be... My eyes widen as Pippa's words make sense. *Goddammit!*

How the hell did I not see that?

She admitted she'd never sucked a cock before. I saw her nerves when I first touched her. She...*dammit.*

Locking my hands behind my head, I pace the yard, cursing under my breath, realizing the only answer is that I must have seen it... I just pushed it from my mind.

She's a fucking virgin. Actually, she's not anymore and... *fuuuck!* I knew she was inexperienced, but the thought that she was untouched never crossed my mind, not even for a second. But it should have.

"It's too late, isn't it?" Pippa says, alerting me to the fact that she's still here. I'm about to tell her to fuck off until I process her words.

"No, it's not."

Leaving Pippa in the yard, I race back inside and straight into Willow's room. She's still fast asleep, so without waking her, I slip under the covers and close my eyes, wrapping my arms around her. Yes, it's too late to give her back her virginity, but it's not too late to make it *mean* something.

Because it means everything to me.



I sleep like a log and wake the next morning with Willow's naked body wrapped around me. And God, it feels nice.

When she hears me stir, she moves away, but I stop her, locking her arms more tightly around me. "Good morning," I rasp.

"You stayed?"

A smile pulls at my lips as I roll over, taking in her beautiful just-woken look. *God, I wish I could get used to this.* “I did.”

And I wish I didn't have to ruin the moment.

Willow's smile drops when she notices my expression, and her body goes rigid. “Are you okay? Why are you already dressed?”

“I'm fine.” I ignore her second question. “Question is, are you?”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I wasn't exactly gentle with you last night, and—”

“Don't ruin the moment, Jesse. I would have said something if I wasn't enjoying it.” She softly smiles again, but when I don't join her, it turns to a scowl.

“You regret it!” she accuses, pushing a hand to my chest when I try to move closer.

“I *don't* regret it.. That was... I don't even know how to fucking explain it. I wasn't joking when I said you'd ruin me. But this isn't about me. This is about you, and not telling me it was your first time. We should have taken it slow. We should have—”

Sitting up, Willow rushes to wrap the sheet around her body, covering herself up, and I lose track of my speech. “I'm not a virgin,” she says, clearly offended.

“What?”

“I’m inexperienced, but I’m not a virgin.”

She’s not? “But Pippa...” *Fuck.* I drop back on the pillow and run my hand down my face. My chest burns as I grit my teeth. Why does that revelation unsettle me more than her being a virgin did? And why do I suddenly feel the need to break something? *Or someone.*

Fuck, I’m jealous of the guy. Whoever he was. Or was there more than one? *Jesus! Get a grip.* This is *not* important.

“You okay there?” Willow asks, calling me out on my internal freak-out.

“Yeah. I’m fine. But I’m curious. Does anyone actually know the real Willow?”

Because I thought Pippa did but—

“You do,” she whispers, her voice breathy. “I don’t know how,” she continues, lifting her shoulder in the smallest of shrugs. “But you do.”

The burning subsides as my chest tightens and I gaze up at her, completely lost in her eyes as her words play over and over through my mind. While on some level she’s right, there’s still so much more I’ve yet to discover.

“It’s not enough. I want to know it all.”

Lifting, I release the sheet from her strong grip and let it fall between us before settling my hand over her heart. “I want to know everything.”

Cupping her face with my spare hand, I guide her lips to mine as a wave of reverence shoots through me, before it's replaced by the sting of reality. I want Willow more than I've ever wanted anything, including hockey. But having her comes at such a high price. *Can I really ask her to pay it?*

Willow moans against my mouth, and I forget all of life's problems. Like always, she sucks me in and the outside world ceases to exist, so all I see is her. All I ever want to see is her.

“Willow, I—”

A loud knock echoes through the room as someone, likely Pippa, pounds on the door. Our lips part, but neither of us move away.

“I don't want to know the answer,” Pippa calls out, confirming my thoughts and making Willow hiss in annoyance. “But Jesse, if you're in there...the bridge is open.”

I suck in a breath before silence falls on the room. The bridge is open. It's time for goodbye.

And there is no way in hell that I'm ready for that.

Chapter Forty-Four

Willow

Jesse's the first to break through our quiet cocoon, and with a featherlight touch, he runs a single finger down my cheek before his hand falls away. "I want to stay..." he rasps, and I can see the truth to his words in his broken expression.

"But you can't," I finish for him, lifting the sheet to cover myself again as if it can shield me from the hurt coming my way.

"God, this feels like a shitty excuse, but I have obligations this weekend and preseason starts soon. And..."

"I know. Plus, it's only been a week, so—"

"Nope," he says, cutting me off with a finger to my lips. "Don't ruin the moment. Don't lessen this," he adds, a small smile playing at his lips as he throws my words back at me. "I don't know where we go from here. But let's talk, okay?"

"Now?" I stupidly ask. Or maybe it's hopeful, because things being left unsaid is my own personal hell. The sound of his silence is so much worse than any words he could possibly

say to me. But before Jesse even starts shaking his head, I know that's not what he meant.

“After we've had a chance to think about what we want,” he says, his brows furrowing. “After *you've* had a chance to think things through.”

He doesn't have to spell it out. I know he's still hiding something. The thing is, I meant what I said—it's my heart to risk, and while it scares the hell out of me to think about him breaking it, it's a better option than never knowing what might have been.

There's too much in my life that I'll never know, too much time that I'll never get back. And I can't knowingly put myself through that again.

“Does that mean I can have your number?” I ask, flashing him a grin, needing to step away from the heavy for a second.

Jesse chuckles before pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Yeah, I guess that can be arranged.”



I could have stayed in bed all day, delaying the inevitable, but Jesse was up and ready within minutes of Pippa giving him the news. And I don't entirely blame him. As he said, he's got

commitments this weekend. I'd imagine it's been stressful enough, and he still has a long drive ahead of him.

Taking my time in the bathroom, I walk into the kitchen just as Pippa drops a bomb. "We're staying for a couple more days."

"What?" Jesse and I say at the same time.

"I need to explain everything to Mom and Dad, and I should do it in person."

My eyes flash to Ryan's, expecting to see some kind of apprehension, but he shocks me by nodding. "I owe it to Pippa to be here for it. I've bailed before, and I'm not going to do it again."

He obviously likes her if he's willing to feed himself to the wolves, but I hope he's doing it knowing all the facts.

"And where are you staying while all that's happening?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

Pippa bats her eyelashes as she smiles my way. "My baby sister's?"

That's all I need while I mope around. "Of course."



When Jesse's packing the car, Pippa sidles up next to me, concern etched in her features. "Are you okay? Did—"

"You don't need to know the details," I say, cutting her off before she asks me directly. "But I'm good. Mostly. At least, I will be. Can we change the subject to you?"

"What about me?"

"Ah, Ryan?"

Pippa smiles. "I agreed to try again. He promised not to fuck it up this time."

"And you actually want a relationship? Because him turning up here suggests that *he* does."

"Yeah, I think I do."

She's silent for a beat before a small laugh escapes her. "Mom's right, you know."

Huh? My eyes flash to hers as I involuntarily frown. "About what?"

"You've really changed this week. You're more like the feisty Willow I remember from when we were kids. The rebellious teen. The girl who..." she trails off, and while I'm ninety-nine percent certain that what she was going to say would pain me, a little part of me still wants to ask. Only she continues before I have the chance.

"Unlike Mom, I don't think it's a bad thing. I kind of like it." She bumps her shoulder to mine and shrugs while my mind spirals. I smile but only my mouth takes part; it doesn't

reach my eyes. I'm well aware of the woman Jesse brought out of me, and the contrast to the woman I was before he arrived, but I'm still not entirely sure that's me. In fact, I'm positive it's not. I just haven't figured out who *I* am.

"Have you talked about what happens next?" Pippa asks, nodding her head toward Jesse through the window.

"Nothing can happen until he breaks up with his girlfriend," I joke, smiling when Pippa bursts out laughing.

"Maybe you can help me plan that. I think you've earned that much."

"That could be fun." I shrug, and while my smile remains, an uncomfortable feeling settles in my stomach. What I would give to have met Jesse at a different time.

The front door slams open, putting an end to our conversation when Ryan comes inside. Relief courses through me. I don't want to talk about Jesse with anyone, except Jesse. We haven't even figured out what's going on or why the hell we feel this irrevocable pull toward each other. Or maybe Jesse has and I'm the only one that needs to catch up.

"Jesse's going to drop me off at my truck on his way out of town," Ryan tells Pippa as he wraps his arms around her waist. "I'll be back in thirty." He presses a chaste kiss to her lips and she nods, holding back her smile.

Pippa and Ryan discuss the possibility of his truck not being there, but I tune out the conversation, with all my available brain space focused on the man who just walked in the door.

Lost in thought, Jesse runs a hand through his messy hair before securing a cap in place. His tight fitted tee molds to his body while his sweat pants hang low on his hips. I nervously nibble at my bottom lip as a shot of desire runs through me, my mind drifting back to last night. Thinking about the way he possessed my body and controlled me, but also the way he let go. The way he opened himself up and allowed me to see him. God, I'd give anything to be back there, or to at least know if we'll ever be there again.

And then there's his smile.

Revealing his playful side threw me for a loop, but God, was it perfect. Everything about last night was perfect. I don't even care that he snuck out because he came back. And waking up in the arms of Jesse Hastings is something I'll treasure for the rest of my life and maybe even beyond that.

With his hands in his pockets, Jesse comes to a stop in front of me, his gaze full of uncertainty. "I'm all packed," he says, lifting his shoulders into a slight shrug. *What does one say in this kind of situation?*

I nod and gather my strength. "You better get on the road if you want to make it home at a decent hour," I state plainly, my voice void of emotions.

Jesse nods in return and grabs an apple from the bowl on the counter. "Pippa, I'll see you back at the stadium. Ryan, you've got two minutes and then I'm leaving."

He's out the door after that, and my heart clenches until he holds it wide open, tilting his head for me to follow.

My chest warms and I don't waste any time, desperate for one last moment alone, for a proper goodbye.

As I step out into the blaring sun, a thought hits me and I can't help but smile. I didn't run this morning. I didn't chase the sunrise, and yet, I still had my new beginning. I've got to hold on to that. This may be goodbye for now, but I have to believe it's not the end.

When I catch up to Jesse, his eyes flash to my neighbor watching us from her yard, and my positive mood shifts. Tears prick the back of my eyes, but I bite down onto the flesh of my cheek, hoping to stave them off. Maybe it's for the best. Goodbyes are hard, and really, what did I think would happen out here? Of course we were going to have an audience. I can't believe I thought otherwise.

"I hate this," I whisper when we reach Pippa's car, my fingers itching to touch him.

"I know," he says, not giving away any of his feelings, but when my eyes meet his, he's saying everything in his expression.

The front door opens and Ryan steps out, waving to Pippa as he goes. This is it. Whatever we say now is our goodbye.

"How long before I hate you?" I joke, and love that it gets me the smallest of smirks before it fades.

"No need to rush it. It's coming," he says, something in his tone telling me he means every word. Or at the very least, he truly believes it will happen.

“Ready to make a move,” Ryan says, smiling between the two of us. He’s either completely oblivious of the tension, or Pippa’s told him everything and asked him to run interference.

“Yep,” Jesse says, banging the roof with his palm before opening the driver’s door.

“Why does this feel like the end when it’s only the beginning?” I ask, unable to hide the quiver in my voice.

Jesse frowns, and while his eyes remain locked on mine, I can see he’s lost in thought. A beat passes between us before he smiles. “I’ll be back,” he says in a strange accent.

He’ll be back? I swallow a lump in my throat and press my tongue to the roof of my mouth, hoping to chase away the emotions threatening to break free. That has to mean something, right? He wants to come back. For me? Or—

Realization hits me, and I fall against Pippa’s car as I burst out laughing. “You didn’t?” I ask, my words coming out mid giggle.

“I did.” Jesse’s smile widens with his admission before he winks, killing any chance I had of walking away with my heart intact. He just quoted *The Terminator* movie, and if that doesn’t make me fall even harder... *I’m screwed.*

Throwing my head back, I laugh louder, no longer thinking about what he did, so much as laughing at the fucked-up situation. This is the most real I’ve felt in years, and it took a complete stranger to bring it out of me.

“Remember that smile,” Jesse says when I’ve calmed down, his eyes ablaze as they flash to my mouth, his stare heating my chest. “Because God knows I won’t forget it.”

Reaching between us, he subtly squeezes my hand before sliding into the car. It takes every ounce of my will power not to climb in on top of him and kiss him goodbye, but thankfully Ryan’s there to thwart that plan.

With a nod, Jesse pulls his door closed, and the motion snaps the invisible thread between us. Breaking my heart. I force myself to walk away, needing to escape before the first tear falls, but Jesse calls out just as I’ve taken my first step.

“Chin up, Buttercup.”



For the rest of the day, I go through the motions, playing my part in society, falling back into the life I had before. But by the time six o’clock hits, I’m sick of pretending.

He might be home by now.

His parting words are like a broken record, running on repeat in my head. Not because they’re meaningful, but because they’re not. At all. It’s just some cliché saying. And yet, something about them feels familiar. To me. Not just in general.

“Chin up, Buttercup.”

I can't help wondering if there's something I'm missing, a deeper meaning to the phrase, and the more I stew over it, the more anxious I become.

Of course I'd finally meet someone that evokes my emotions, only to have him leave. Of course it would be complicated, forbidden, and messed up.

Why can't I find it in me to date someone from here in town? Life would be so much easier if I could.

Instead, I just packed up my heart and sent it on a haphazard journey to San Francisco, while I stay behind, continuing on in my mediocre existence.

My last thought angers me, and I find myself hating every little detail of my life. Things I've never even questioned before. Is this where I saw myself when I was younger? Is a small-town business owner what I aspired to be? No. The answer is a resounding no. Because that's something I remember. I remember I had hopes and dreams of leaving this place. I just haven't found the drive to go after them.

Damn you, Jesse.

Why couldn't you have just been like the rest of the town and coddled me, never allowing me to open my eyes. Never allowing me to question what's out there.

Because now they're wide open and I want more. More of him. More of the world. More of myself.

Pulling out my phone, I text Jesse to let him know how I feel. No longer caring about the bullshit rules of dating, no longer questioning if I should wait.

Willow: You're right, I hate you. I wish we'd never met.

Translation: I miss you.

More than I should.

Throwing my phone on the counter, I drop my head into my hands and blow out a breath. What did I expect was going to happen? I should look at it like a fling. We had some fun, and now it's back to reality for both of us. But fuck that.

I don't want to.

He brought me to life again, and I know deep down, I've changed him. We can't come back from that. It's not possible.

I contemplate messaging him again, but my phone rings before I get the chance.

Jesse

Just seeing his name has my heart doing somersaults beneath my rib cage.

Taking a deep breath, I answer, my heart firmly lodged in my throat. "I tell you I hate you and you call me?"

Jesse huffs out a laugh. "Yep, because I don't believe you," he responds, his uncharacteristically light voice lacking its

usual gruffness. “Not yet anyway.” *And it’s back.*

“Are you really that convinced it will happen? That I’ll hate you?” I ask, wishing I didn’t already know the answer.

“Yep.” He sighs, and I picture him running a hand through his mussed-up hair, his soulful eyes begging me to listen, to understand. “It’s only a matter of time.”

I should let it go; pushing him on it won’t help my cause. But I can’t do that. I need him to see that for some stupid reason, I want him... every broken piece.

“You had the opportunity to ghost me. Why not speed up the process?”

He’s silent for a moment, and I can’t handle it. I’m just about to laugh it off and tell him I’m joking when he releases a long, drawn-out sigh.

“I’m not ready to let you go.”

My eyes fall shut as my entire body melts. It’s not a declaration of love, but it’s the closest thing I’m going to get, and right now, it’s everything.

“Does that mean you want to see me again?” I ask, my heart pounding so hard I take a deep breath to calm it.

Jesse chuckles, but something about it sounds defeated. He’s resigned to the fact that I’m in his life. “Yeah, Buttercup. I can’t seem to stay the fuck away.”

My breath hitches and my heart soars. Even the use of my nickname doesn’t sting as much as it used to. There’s

something almost comforting about it now.

Deciding to let him off the hook, I change the subject just as someone calls out for him in the background. “Are you all set for tomorrow?” I ask about the charity event he’s participating in.

“As ready as I’ll ever be. I have a love-hate relationship with these things.”

“I guess it’s par for the course when you’re a hockey superstar.”

“It doesn’t have to be. But I have the means to do it so...”

“Uh-oh.” *I’m totally swooning.* “Is Jesse Hastings showing a softer side?”

“I blame you,” he says with another sigh. “Don’t tell anyone.” His voice holds a smile in it that lights up my soul, but it’s fleeting when he’s called away again. “*Jesse. You’re up.*”

“I have to go but... can I call you tomorrow?” He hesitates. “After the event.”

An invisible weight lifts from my chest as my head falls back in relief. “Of course, I’d love that,” I say, unable to stop my smile. “And thank you for calling me. I feel bad for joking now.”

“Don’t. I get it. I knew what you meant and I... I’ll talk soon, okay?”

And you what? My pulse races, but I don't ask him what it was, what he's holding back. I have to take things slowly.

"Talk soon," I repeat instead. "Bye, Jesse."

When I hang up, I feel slightly more at ease than I did before the call. The tense feeling I've been bottling up subsides to make way for something else—hope.

I'm lost in thought, staring at the phone when his name pops up again... a message this time.

Jesse: I hate you too

An unexpected laugh bursts free, while a giddy feeling runs through me. They may not be the four little words one wants to hear... but to me they're better.

Translation: I miss you too.

Chapter Forty-Five

Jesse

*F*uck, I miss her.

It's barely been twelve hours but I don't think one minute has passed without her popping into my head, driving me fucking crazy. What is it about the Sanders women? They sure know how to worm their way into my life. I better remember to stay the hell away from Ashley. My lips tighten at my wild thoughts. Look at me, I'm even joking to myself now. *Fuck my life.*

"You're smiling," our team doctor says as he places a questionnaire in front of me. "That's new."

My smile widens as I roll my eyes.

"I'm sure I've smiled at some point during our six-year relationship," I joke, but on reflection, I probably haven't.

"Believe it or not, Jesse, but this is a first."

I cringe. "Sorry about that. You deserve better."

Doc barks out a laugh as he points to the sheet in front of me. “You know the drill. Answer based on your thoughts and feelings during the past month. Take your time.”

Taking a deep breath, I pick up my pen and tap it against the table as I read the first question...

In the last month, I have cried for no reason. Never - Rarely - Sometimes - Often - All the time

I finish the questionnaire in ten minutes and wait for the doc to return. When he walks in a few minutes later, his light expression is replaced with a frown.

“Your blood pressure is higher than normal. Anything you need to talk about? Could it be stress? Or should we be sending you off for more testing?”

Goddammit. And I just filled out that mental health checklist saying I was stress free.

Of course, it's stress.

I've spent the last week stressed out of my mind trying to keep away from Willow, and now I'm stressed about her being gone.

“Nothing major. You may have heard I was stuck in Oregon last week. I imagine it's just the stress of that. Not knowing when I'd get home.”

“Hmmm.” He scratches at his beard, his lips pulling to the side as he thinks through my response. “If that's the case, it should settle now that you're home. We've got time so how

about you come back in a week and we'll test it again. I won't report it for now."

Fucking medicals. If he thinks I'm stressed now, imagine how messed up I'll be if that stress stops me from securing a new contract. "Sounds good, Doc. I'll call tomorrow to make an appointment. Your team said they were going home." Which is fair considering I had to reschedule this appointment to after-hours so I could make it after my drive home.

Seth's calling me the second I walk out of the room, and I sigh watching his name lighting up my screen.

"Are you having me followed?" I ask as I walk out of the building.

"I'm not. But should I be? Do you need to be followed?"

"I don't. What's up?"

Seth laughs. "How did the appointment go? Did you get your regular clean bill of health?"

I grimace and consider not telling him, but he always fucking knows. "I have to go back and get my blood pressure checked again. There was a slight issue."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Relax or you'll have the same problem. I'm just a little stressed from my week away. I'll rest this week and then—"

"Tomorrow you'll stress out even more because you'll be in the spotlight?" he cuts in, his voice almost lyrical.

“Fuck off. I’m fine.”

“That’s what she said.”

I’m not sure that’s how that joke works, but I still huff out a laugh as I shake my head and say goodbye, hanging up before he has the chance to say anything else. The last thing I want is for this to become a bigger deal than it is. I am fine. Fine in the literal sense, not the urban dictionary definition.



Just like I said I would, I start my relaxing week that evening. My version of relaxing, anyway.

“Come on, ump! That call was bullshit.” My fists clench as I yell at the television, getting my frustrations out on the umpire stationed at third base. There’s no way that guy was safe. It’s the last inning and my team’s about to lose. I’m not entirely sure this is helping my stress levels, but at least it’s taking my mind off things. Off her.

Uh, who the fuck am I kidding? She’s never far from the forefront of my mind. Even the pitcher’s wife reminds me of Willow, with her long blonde curls and classically beautiful looks. I’ve had plenty of time to come to this conclusion because the camera keeps flashing her way. I think I’ve seen her on the screen more often than him. But that’s what you get when you marry a supermodel. She steals your thunder.

Evening turns to night, and as I watch darkness take over the sky and the shadows surface, it feels like a metaphor for my life. I had it all. At least, I had everything I thought I wanted. But one wrong turn and I'm thrown back into the black hole that was my previous existence, the life I managed to outrun. And while my nightmares lurk a short distance behind me, threatening me at every turn, I can't even be angry because I chose this fucking path. And by refusing to cut Willow from my life, I'm choosing to risk purgatory, to tempt fate, to live my life knowing that if the truth comes out, it will ruin both of us.

And the only reason for my madness... *her*.

Chapter Forty-Six

Willow

My store wasn't as busy as I would have hoped for a Saturday, especially considering the bridge had reopened. But I still let time run away from me, mostly from staring at the wall lost in thought.

Since it's been so slow, I could have left early, but it's only when the sun lowers in the sky that I realize how late it is and start to close up. Going through the motions that have become my daily routine is a clear representation of how I live my cookie-cutter life, like I don't have the means to change it.

But I do.

This is *my* life. Of course I can change it. I just need to take a chance and step off the ride, no matter how fast it's going.

I pack up my things, but the thought of going home to Pippa and Ryan has me instantly cringing. I never once considered the possibility of interrupting an intimate moment between Pippa and Jesse, but with her and Ryan, I'm almost certain it will happen. With Jesse, it's like I had a sixth sense, an inner

voice telling me that the scene playing out before me was wrong, it was abstractly skewed, and the real story was yet to come. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking on my part. Either way, I'd been right. And I'm likely to be right in this instance too.

I get Pippa's reasons for still being here, and I don't envy her having to explain it all to Mom and Dad, but I need my space now more than ever. I'll miss her like crazy, but I'm not sure how much longer I can keep up this new charade. The one where I pretend I'm not heartbroken and stupidly falling for someone I may never fully have. I guess the silver lining is that at least her focus has been on her own problems instead of mine, and she'll undoubtedly leave the moment after she tells them the truth, making sure she's long gone for the aftermath. I just have to hope she doesn't bring me and Jesse into her mess. I'm not ready to leave the tiny bubble we've created for ourselves, and I'm convinced that if we do, it won't end well for me.

My hand hovers over the light switch in the back room while I consider my options. It's my house. I shouldn't feel uncomfortable going home, but I'm also not in the mood to see a loved-up couple right now. Decision made, I keep the light on. If I'm going to hide away for a few hours, I may as well be productive.

After texting Pippa that I'll be home late, I connect my phone to the speakers and hit play on my music app. A familiar beat permeates the air, but I can't place it until the vocals kick in, making me burst out laughing. "Too Much

Love Will Kill You,” by Queen. I haven’t even decided if I love Jesse, but I feel this song down to the very essence of my soul, and it makes me wonder if the situation I’ve found myself in is lose-lose. Jesse’s adamant that being together will break me, but right now it feels like a piece of me is missing without him.

Either way, I’m damaged goods. And I’m sick of playing it safe. Sick of following the rules when I don’t even know who set them. Smile. Be courteous. Don’t wallow in sadness. Stay within the lines. Smile. Be grateful. Respect your elders. Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to. Smile. Don’t talk back. Smile. Smile. Smile.

I’ve been faking my smile since the moment I woke up in the hospital, and Jesse’s the only person to ever see through it. The only one to question me.

I blow out a breath as my head drops back against the wall with a thud, and even after banging it a few times, I still can’t see sense. Though I’m not entirely sure what the right thing is anymore.

My phone vibrates again, and when Mom come up on the screen, I decide I can’t hold back anymore.

“Mom, I—”

“Hi, sweetie, it’s late, but Pippa said you’re at work. Do you want me to send some food home with her so that you eat?”

Straight to the point.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll grab something, but I need to talk—”

“Oh. It’s just that you’re looking thinner and—”

“Stop, Mom! Let me speak.”

It goes silent and I almost curse at her, thinking she hung up, when she lets out a long sigh. “Sorry, I’m listening.”

Taking a deep breath, I dig my nails into my palm as my eyelids fall shut. “I need to know what happened to me,” I whisper, my voice not as confident as I would have hoped.

“What are you talking about?”

She knows, and the fact she’s pretending not to angers me. “You know exactly what I’m talking about, Mom. And I’m sick of pretending it was nothing. Something happened to me, and I need to know what.”

She sighs again. “I thought we decided to move on. No one knows.”

“Someone does! The driver who found me said he saw someone with me as he was approaching. I wasn’t the only one there. Someone knows, and I don’t understand why no one bothered to find out.”

“Honey, I understand this week has been stressful for you. You’ve been working long hours, helping Lucia. Then there’s the baby name, and Pippa being home. And I’ll bet Ashley’s news has you thinking about your own future. You’re exhausted. That’s all this is. We decided a long time ago it was better to move forward—that no good was going to come from living in the past. And you’ve been doing so well.”

“Have I?”

“Yes! You’re happy.”

I pause because she’s right. I am. Right now. But it’s a first and it’s only because of Jesse.

I rub my temples and calm my rage. Maybe I need to tackle my question from a different angle. “What if I want to know?” I ask, my tone holding sadness instead of wrath.

“Oh, sweetie. I wish I could help.”

“Me too,” I say, defeated. *Me too.*



Like always, a shiver runs through me when I think of my past, but there’s a difference between those times and now. Now I feel stronger. I can’t just be the compliant girl that accepts that bullshit answer anymore.

Someone knows. But who?

With a quick full body shake, I pull myself together and change the song to something unrelated to anything going on in my life. “I Write Sins Not Tragedies,” by Panic! At The Disco.

And with a new determination, I lock the front door and set about thinking of a plan.

Dancing my way to the work bench, I feel my lips lift into a smile, and the knowledge that it's real has it widening. I can do this. A little part of me even wants to sing at the top of my lungs.

“*Oh—*”

“Willow.”

Jesus! A voice stops me in my tracks as my heart jolts. *I'm not alone.* I know I should turn around, but the realization that I've just locked myself inside with a potential stranger is crippling. I can't move. I can't breathe. And I feel like I'm going to puke.

“Shit, Willow. I didn't mean to scare you again.”

With the ringing in my ears, it takes me a second to place the voice, but when I do, I'm not sure I feel any better.

“Turn around, Sanders.”

And that doesn't help. My pulse skyrockets as I will my legs to work, forcing myself to spin around to face him.

“Alex?”

“In the flesh,” he says and I think he smiles, but in the lower light it's hard to tell. It could be a smirk.

“Sorry, hi.” I gather my strength and plaster on the fake smile I was just complaining about, determined not to let him throw me... *any more than he already has.* “What are you doing here? I've closed up.”

I still haven't officially said no to going on a date with him, so I'm going to assume that's why he's here. But it's been several days since he's even asked.

"I just stopped by to say hello. Where were you just now?" he says, his gaze tracking me as he saunters my way, like the hunter stalking his prey. *Oh God, was Jesse right?*

He comes to a stop barely an inch in front of me, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Where was I?" I ask in confusion. Confusion that thickens when he laughs.

"I meant up here." He reaches out and points to my head, the tip of his finger lingering on my skin. "You didn't hear me come in."

"Sorry, I was brainstorming something for work," I lie. He doesn't need to know my business. In fact, I don't even know why I'm apologizing. *He snuck into my shop.*

"Right." *He doesn't believe me.* "It's nice to see you smile."

I gulp back the negative words that were about to come out of my mouth and smile again. That was actually a nice thing to say. Doesn't mean I'm not still a little on edge, but the spine tingling has settled.

"Thank you."

"It's been a strange week, huh?"

I huff out a laugh because that's the understatement of the century.

“It has, and I’m sorry I never really answered you.”

“There’s still time. We’re heading home tomorrow, and…”

He keeps talking but it fades to background noise when I notice Tate peering through the window.

The darkness casts a shadow over his features, but from the little light there is, I can just make out the edge of his lips turned down into a frown.

Are they friends? Or is he looking at me?

The only person I’ve heard Alex mention was his uncle. I assumed he was visiting family.

“...so, what do you say?”

Shit! “Pardon?” I haven’t heard a word.

Something akin to anger flashes across his face, but it’s so fast, there’s a possibility I imagined it. And when a sympathetic smile appears, I’m even more convinced.

“Is everything okay?” he says, squeezing my arm as he glances over his shoulder. “You went back into your head.”

If he notices Tate, he doesn’t say anything, and I’m not sure how I feel about that. He’s clearly there. Staring. It feels like something that warrants a comment.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize again. “I just have a lot going on,” I lie. *Again.* And then because I seem to have turned into a woman who can’t keep her mouth shut, I blurt, “Do you know Tate?”

Alex glances around, before his gaze rests back on mine, giving nothing away.

“I do,” he admits, his voice lacking emotion. “And this may ruin my chances but...” He curls his lips into a comedic grimace. “We met in jail,” he says with a laugh, as though he’s joking. But I’m pretty sure he’s not. “We were in for the night, accused of being drunk and disorderly.”

“*Okay*. And were you?” I ask with a forced grin, my eyes briefly flashing Tate’s way.

Alex laughs out loud and squeezes my arm, a little harder this time. “We were.” He smiles, saying the words proudly, like it’s a badge of honor, and while it’s sort of a relief that it wasn’t anything worse, it’s also *not* a relief.

“Well, it’s nice you found each other. Anyway, I’ve got a long night ahead, and—”

“Say no more. You’re busy. I get it.” He holds his hands up and takes a step back. I’m so relieved I bend down in some ridiculous half curtsy, half wave kind of thing, before turning to walk him to the door.

I’ve barely taken a step when he grabs my shoulder, pulling me to a stop, his fingers sinking into my skin as he turns me to face him.

“Wait. The date?”

That’s a no.

“Oh. Uh.” I subtly try to step out of his hold, but he steps closer.

“Before you answer, I have something to say.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

Jesse

“Jesse! Jesse! Can you tell us about today?”

I raise an eyebrow to Seth and he steps in, taking over on my behalf. When I agreed to this event, I promised to donate my time, my money, and my expertise. I specifically stipulated that I would not be donating brain cells by answering bullshit media questions. This isn't a circus. It's a skills workshop for disadvantaged children—a much larger version of the one I planned for Pippa's hometown.

So, unless they're donating their time, or money from their own back pockets, I have no interest in what they have to say.

I walk away without so much as a wave and meet the team in the locker room. Today's event is being held at San Francisco's football stadium with football and baseball stars, basketballers, hockey players, and more taking part. It's actually one of the better events I've been involved in.

“The man is here,” basketball legend Jai Whitehall says before throwing a ball at my head.

Catching it easily, I throw it back his way but don't otherwise respond. Anyone that's heard of me knows I'm only here because I want to give back. I have no interest in socializing or pretending to be someone I'm not, and I am not someone that messes around in the locker room.

"Alright people, friends," the head of the foundation says, as he walks in the door, undoubtedly proud of the turnout. "Thank you all for coming. The kids have started arriving and there's excitement in the air. Are you ready?"

Cheers ring out around me, but I ignore it all, heading over to a quiet corner to get changed. Today's a big deal for these kids. They never get the support they need to pursue their sport. And now's their time.

Other than a small stint of awful luck growing up, I was fortunate enough to find a few families that encouraged and nurtured my hockey dream, but many others don't get that chance. This is our opportunity to give them a leg up. Every kid today will not only be learning skills from some of the country's finest athletes, they'll get a bag of equipment for their chosen sport. It may not go a long way to helping them achieve their goals, but it's a start.

After pulling a brand-new jersey out of my bag, I strip off my tee just as Seth sinks down onto the bench beside me, his media responsibility presumably done.

"I'm impressed with the caliber of players here," he says, his lips curling into a grin. "Why'd they pick you?"

"No idea," I deadpan.

“Maybe the organizer doesn’t know how much of an asshole you really are,” he jokes and I flip him the finger. “I’m kidding. Maybe it’s the fact that I know you came up with the idea.” *Fuck*. “You’re a good guy, Jesse. And being here is good for when we start contract discussions. It’s great to see everyone banding together.”

My eyes meet his, and I’m struck by the emotion behind them. It feels like he’s telling me he’s proud of me, for something other than hockey, and I’m not at all prepared for the warmth his words give me.

My chest tightens, and all I can do is give him a small nod in thanks, but when he gives me the hint of a smile, I know he gets it.

Standing up, he shoves his hands in his pockets and takes a step closer. “Whatever it is, let it go. It’s been eating you alive for long enough.”

My eyes widen, but I hide my shock before he notices. I’ve always had a feeling he knew more about me than he was letting on, but why choose now to bring it up? After all this time, he mentions it when I’m struggling the most.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, and it comes out surprisingly steady considering it’s a complete lie.

Seth lifts his hand to pat me on the shoulder but stops before he makes contact with my bare skin. *Yep, he knows*. But is he doing it to freak me out or to comfort me?

As if reading my mind, he drops a photo of me and Willow into my lap. “I will always be on your side, Jesse. Hurry up and break it off with Pippa, so we can celebrate you finally finding something real.”

“Where—”

“Don’t worry, no one’s going to see that. I paid them off. You owe me a shit ton of money.” He winks before walking away, while I’m left reeling. I have so many questions, but I don’t really want the answers. Instead, I study the photo in front of me and suck in a breath.

I look happy. Correction, *we* look happy. And that didn’t happen often enough. But I know why it is. I found her.

I found the one person who sets me on fire instead of making me burn, and I spent most of our time together pushing her away. The last thing I ever want to do is drag her into the black hole that is my life, but it’s been twelve years. I’ve outrun my past for this long. Surely that means that I’m free, that the worst of it’s behind me.

All that aside, how do I tell her the truth? How do I look her in the eye knowing that one of my truths has the potential to cause irreversible pain? To break her. And the other will make her hate me.

My soul shattered a long time ago. I never thought I’d be whole again. I never wanted to be. I don’t deserve it. But I can’t for the life of me stop the train wreck even though I see it coming.

I've never felt anything as strong as this.

If only it wasn't destined to end.



When the time comes, the workshop has me busy enough to keep my thoughts clear. And before long it's time for the celebrity head to head, an addition that was suggested as an extra money raiser. Throughout the event, participants and donors were asked to vote on who they wanted to see compete against each other in a neutral sport. Sending us all out of our comfort zones.

The announcer makes his way to the stage, and everyone gathers around in excited anticipation. Except me. Ignoring the fanfare, I continue working on a drill with a ten-year-old foster child—who is eerily similar in personality to a certain blonde I can't get off my mind. At first I thought I was projecting, but when I saw her flash a smile at an older boy who'd pushed her aside, before giving him the finger when his back was turned, I actually laughed.

Fuck, I wish she was here.

“Okay, you've got this! Let's try it one more time.”

Lining up for the play, I move toward our makeshift goal with the substitute puck in my possession. My opponent

watches me closely, her eyes locked on the ball as she anticipates my move. I fake left and move right but she's onto me, stealing the ball exactly like we practiced.

"I did it!" she cries out just as my name's called over the PA.

"You did it," I say back with a grin, suddenly wishing I hadn't wasted so many years separating myself from my past in the system, instead of using my experience to give back.

The announcer calls my name again, and I comically cringe, making the little girl laugh. "I have to run," I tell her, motioning to the stage. "But feel free to tell everyone back at school that you stole a shot from Jesse Hastings. They don't need to know it wasn't on the ice."

Her jaw drops before she thanks me again and waves goodbye.

I make it up on the stage just as NFL star Dylan Mathers and baseball legend Eli Barton arrive. *My competition.*

"Of course, I'd get lumped with you two," Dylan says with false annoyance.

"Are you nervous, Mathers?" Eli says with a laugh at the same time I say, "You agreed to be here," a small smirk on my lips.

"I'm not nervous. I just didn't know I'd get stuck with the two players my wife drools over."

"Fuck off, I've seen the two of you together. She's only got eyes for you," I reassure him, but for the life of me, I can't

figure out why. I usually keep out of other people's business.

Dylan's brows raise but he recovers quickly. We've met a few times before, so even he knows that was out of character. He's about to respond when they announce our sport.

"Jesse, Dylan, and Eli will try their hand at"—he pauses for dramatic effect—"lacrosse."

"The fuck," I mumble with a forced smile while Eli bursts out laughing and Dylan shakes his head.



Waving to the crowd, I step up for my turn at the catching drill with eyes on the prize. I'm determined to kick some ass, especially after Eli proved better at passing.

I'll admit, I don't hate all this as much as I thought I would. I may even be enjoying it. "Alright. Let's do this."

"Jesse!" Seth yells out from across the crowd, his voice slightly panicked. I ignore him at first—he probably thinks I'm going to embarrass myself—and get into position, pulling my cap lower on my head, showing them I mean business.

"Don't worry, I won't make you two look too bad," I joke and then pause with my stick half raised in the air, making the crowd laugh. *What the hell is going on? I don't joke like this.*

“Jesse! I need you. Now!” Seth yells, louder this time, leaving no room to argue, causing an ill feeling to settle in my stomach.

Dylan grabs my gear as I throw it to the ground, and I feel him and Eli watch as I jog over to Seth, trying hard to keep the emotion off my face.

“What’s so urgent that you’d interrupt—”

“Willow’s missing.”

My heart stops as everything fades to black, my brain working overtime to process what he said. “What do you mean she’s missing?”

“Pippa’s been trying to call you. No one has heard from her since last night.”

“What?” *That can’t be right.*

“She—”

“No, I heard you, but...” I check my watch even though I don’t have to. I know the schedule for today, and it means she’s been missing for a while. “It’s almost three p.m.,” I say, stating the obvious, buying myself some time while I internally freak the fuck out.

“Pippa asked if you’d spoken to her. Thinking...” He hesitates. “*Hoping* Willow might have told you her plans.”

“Does it look like I know?” I snap, but instantly regret it. I shouldn’t be shooting the messenger, but... this can’t be happening.

There's an annoying as fuck ringing in my ears, and I can see Seth's mouth moving but I have no idea what he's saying. *Willow's missing. Willow's missing.*

"Fuck! Sorry. I haven't spoken to her since before my medical appointment yesterday, and..." I pause, the world around me coming back into view. My eyes flash to Seth's, begging him to help me. "You need to get me there, Seth. I need to be there."

"There's nothing you can—"

"What if it was Amber?" I interrupt, asking about his wife, knowing that's my best shot.

Seth visibly pales and I know I've got him.

"I'll see what I can do."



With the event long forgotten, I rush through the crowd, dodging unknowing bodies as they try to get a moment with me. My focus solely on the locker room, on checking my messages.

I skid to a stop near my bag and, in my panicked state, take much longer than I should to fish around for my phone. When I feel the texture of my heavy-duty cover, a deep sigh expels from my lungs. But it's short-lived. I've got ten missed calls

and six messages from Pippa, one from an unknown number, and nothing from Willow.

Nothing.

I flick through Pippa's frantic questions, and when I come to the unknown, confusion sets in.

Unknown: Thought you'd be pleased to know she rejected him.

What the fuck does that mean?

I don't have time for some random bullshit, so I ignore it and quickly change. But as I'm on my way back to find Seth, a thought hits me, and a tightness settles in my chest.

Is that Tate? Is he talking about Willow and Alex?

Dialing the number, I wait on edge, like I'm balancing on the tip of a knife, but no one answers. *Fuck! Fuck!*

Pacing the floor, I run a hand through my hair, pulling on the strands until it pains me, needing to confirm this is real. *Why couldn't I have just left her the hell alone? If this is my fault...*

A fresh wave of guilt hits me, and I realize that when it comes to Willow I will always feel this way, but if I find her... No, fuck, not *if... when* I find her I'm going to tell her my truth. Most of it, anyway. I need to let her make up her own mind, because she at least deserves that. There are just some things...

Seth finds me hiding away from the crowd and approaches with a forlorn look in his eyes. I'm shaking my head before he's even reached me. I refuse to listen to anything but a resolution.

"Jesse—"

"Nope. Figure it out. I'll pay anything."

"Jesse—"

"Fuck, Seth. I can't lose her!"

"Jesse!" Dylan calls, pushing through the sea of people to meet me. "Sorry for listening in, but I've got a plane."

"What?" My eyes widen and I almost hug him. *Almost*. "You've got a plane?"

"Well, not me personally. Long story, that you don't have time for, but my sister knows this lead singer...and anyway, I've got you a private jet."

"*Fuuck*." Emotion clogs my throat. "Dylan, I—"

"I know. You don't have to say anything." He shrugs like it's no big deal, but when his eyes meet mine, I see it. The understanding. He's almost lost someone before, maybe not in the physical sense like me, but he understands a shattered heart.

"Thank you," I say, clearing my throat so he doesn't hear it crack before turning around, not wanting anyone to see my eyes water. "Thank you."

Chapter Forty-Eight

Jesse

There's media surrounding us when we arrive at the tarmac, but for the first time, I don't give a shit. It's already been fifty minutes since I found out about Willow, and there's still no news.

The flight time to Oregon is just over an hour and thirty-five minutes, then it's another hour and a half drive to Willow's.

Each second feels like minutes, the minutes feel like hours, and the combined journey feels like days. By the time we land, I'm ready to murder someone... and I plan to start with Alex and Tate.

Seth grunts when I refuse him a food stop on the drive. And when he interrupts my brooding, I almost make him victim number one. "You didn't have to come."

"I didn't have to come? Really? Jesse, you're in no state to drive." He's right, I am in no state to drive, but he's still goddamn annoying.

“Since we have time to kill, tell me, how long have you had a thing for Pippa’s sister?” he jokes, and I consider punching him except that he might lose control of the car and swerve us off the road.

“I just met her, but I’m not fucking talking about this right now. Why aren’t you more concerned?”

Seth groans. “I’m freaking the fuck out, Jesse. I’m just trying to take both our minds off it. I’m here helping you out, so the least you could do is be honest.” His eyes flare with hurt, and I imagine he’s pissed I didn’t see what he was trying to do. But I can’t talk about her. It’s just going to make it worse. I need to change the subject.

“Why’d you say yes?” I ask, swiveling my body to face him.

“What?”

“Why me? Why’d you agree to rep me when you had multiple superstars banging at your door?”

Seth’s fists clench on the steering wheel, but he doesn’t otherwise react. “Believe it or not, I know potential when I see it,” he says with a smile. But if I’ve learned anything from Willow, it’s how to hide behind a facial expression.

“I’m not buying it.”

“You really want to talk about this now. Here. When we’re so close to your old town.”

I fucking knew it!

I open my mouth to speak, but Seth cuts me off. “Before you go freaking out, you had to know I’d do a background check.”

I’m not sure if that eases my mind or makes me feel worse. Not that any of this matters; we both know I’m just using it as a distraction.

“Why me?” I repeat, because at this point, I’d do anything not to push him out of the car so I can take over to speed up the drive. I’m not opposed to breaking the law.

Seth curses under his breath before his eyes briefly flash to mine. “I was in the system too, you fuckface.”

A relieved laugh escapes me as my head falls back to the headrest. “Fuckface? Really?”

“You’re a little shit, you know that. Why’d you have to know so fucking badly?”

Good question, and one that you do not need the answer to. “It was just bugging me.”

Seth huffs out a laugh of his own. “Sure it was. Did it work to distract you?”

“Nope, I still feel nauseous. What if something happened to her? What if—”

“She’ll be okay. She’s probably just visiting a friend and doesn’t even realize she’s missing.”

I sigh, closing my eyes with a nod even though I’m almost certain that’s not what’s going on. It’s not like Willow at all.

But playing detective won't help either.

God, what have I done? I should have told her I knew her from the start, but then, maybe that would have been worse.



“Stop!” I yell when we arrive into Hepburn Falls, and I have to resist grabbing hold of the steering wheel.

Seth slams his foot on the brake before frantically searching our surroundings. “What the fuck?”

“I need you to pull in here,” I say, pointing to the space next to Tate’s Harley.

“Jesus. You could have led with that, instead of making me think I was about to hit someone.”

I don’t bother responding as he swings into the parking space and mumbles something about going straight to Willow’s. Instead, I’m jumping out of the rental car before he’s even switched off the ignition, my sights set on the fucker walking out of the bar.

If he has anything to do with this, he’s a dead man.

Tate smiles as I approach, but when I’m close enough for him to see my expression, the smile fades. “Jesse—”

He shuts up when I slam him against the brick wall, my forearm locked against his throat. I hear a gasp behind me, but I can't be worried about that right now. I need answers.

“Where the fuck is Willow?”

“Get off me.” Tate tries to push back but it's useless. There is no way in hell I am budging right now.

Ignoring his struggles, or maybe reacting to them, I push harder as my other hand pins his arm down by his side. “Answer my goddamn question.”

“I haven't seen her since last night,” Tate squeaks out, his voice strained by the pressure I have on his windpipe. Pressure I have no intention of releasing.

“Where the fuck is she?” I repeat, my teeth clenched so hard it sends a shooting pain through my jaw. “If you know anything—”

“Get your fucking hands off him,” someone says from behind me, and I'm going to guess it's Alex joining the party. I'm a little bit pissed it wasn't him that walked out first because I'd much rather be crushing his airflow.

Loosening my grip slightly, I look over my shoulder to confirm it's him before asking my question a third time. “Where. Is. Willow?”

“We haven't fucking touched her,” Tate yells, but when his eyes meet Alex's, his gaze is laced with uncertainty.

“Oh, I've touched her.” Alex chuckles as my fist curls, ready to plant it in his face. “But I have no clue what you're

talking about. Maybe she's just avoiding you."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"I don't give a fuck what you believe."

"Jesse, think about this," Tate whispers, drawing my attention back to him. He waits until I'm staring him in the eye before he continues. "If she's really missing, you're wasting time."

His gaze softens, begging me to listen, and I get a glimpse of the guy I used to know. The guy who knows everything.

"Fuck!"

I release my grip and step back as he coughs a few times. Alex steps forward, his fists clenched to retaliate, but Tate waves him off.

When I turn to walk away, Seth's standing by the car, watching with a tense expression, his hand hovering near his pocket.

After taking a deep breath, I huff out a laugh and walk away from my only lead, a new panic taking over.

"Robin," Tate calls out, and I pause but don't turn around. "I hope you find her."

I continue on my path toward the car, but look back as I open the passenger door, nodding to Tate before I jump in.

"Fuck, that was tense," Seth says when I'm seated, pulling his phone from his pocket.

“You didn’t stop me? You stand to lose a lot of money if I screw up.”

“Some things are more important than money. Are we going to Willow’s?”

I stare at him for a second, shocked that he’d risk so much, though I shouldn’t be. I’ve always known Seth was a decent guy; I just didn’t realize how far he’d go for me. Even pretending to have a weapon. “Yeah, let’s go to Willow’s.”

I direct Seth with my heart wedged in my throat and a newfound respect. And while I now feel better with him beside me, when we pull into Willow’s drive, I take a moment before getting out. I’m not ready to face the reality of her not being there. There was a part of me that hoped this had been a sick joke, a way to get me back here, but deep down I knew that wasn’t it.

I finally exit the car as Pippa runs outside to meet me, throwing her arms around my neck, crashing into my chest. “Where is she, Jesse?”

My chest tightens as the reality of it all truly sinks in. “I wish I knew, Pip. I’m sorry.”

Pippa studies me for a second and her face falls, her eyes welling with tears.

“I don’t even know how long it’s been. She said she’d be home late, but then when we got home, her door was closed... I assumed she was there... *God*. Her bed was made when I went in earlier. It’s perfect, Jesse. Like hospital corners and

shit. Does she do that before she runs or after? Who has time for that at all? And is that something I should know? I should know that, right? I—”

“Pippa.” I pull her back into my arms and squeeze her tightly. “That’s not something you should know. Take a deep breath. We’ll find her.”

I’m the picture of calm while inside I’m dying. But I’m telling the truth. I’m going to raise hell until she’s safely back in my arms. *We will find her.*

Pippa pulls away, and her expression switches from concern to understanding, her eyes softening as she smiles. “You fell for her, didn’t you?”

I’m not sure what to say, so I let the question hang in the air. I’m not about to admit that to anyone right now. Especially Pippa.

“What about her tablet?” Willow’s dad calls out from where he’s just stepped out the front door, his ashen expression doing nothing to calm my stress.

Pippa’s eyes flash to his in confusion, until understanding registers. “I thought of that. It might have a ‘find my phone’ app, but I don’t know the password.”

I’m about to ask if anyone’s called the police when Willow’s dad begins to say more, but stops when he registers my presence. I’m sure he’s wondering why I’m back. Just like the photographer I can see hiding behind a tree across the street.

“Sara said she knows it,” he finally says, shaking off his thoughts. “She sometimes needs access for the shop.”

“Let’s take this inside,” I announce, motioning for everyone to move indoors as my eyes flash across the street once more, hoping to keep things more private. *Although is that the right move? Should I be speaking to the photographers? Begging them to help find her? Plastering her photo across multiple platforms?*

Fuck, I hate feeling so helpless.

The second we step into the hall, Willow’s mom rushes out to meet us. “Where’s the tablet, Pippa,” she says quickly. “I... Jesse?” From both reactions, I’m going to assume no one told Willow’s parents about the two of us. Which makes sense considering we don’t even know what we are. But right now, being looked at like an outsider sucks.

“The password?” I ask, my eyes moving over everyone in the room until I find Sara, ignoring the shock I feel when I see Ashley huddled against Jonah, stress clear on her face.

Pippa rushes into the living room, drawing our attention, and grabs the tablet from one of Willow’s drawers.

Sara crosses her fingers for luck and cringes as she tells Pippa to “try Robinhood16,” making me freeze.

“What?” I question at the same time as Pippa.

When the password gets repeated, Pippa eyes me suspiciously as she types it in, forcing me to internalize my freak-out. *Willow remembers.*

“How long has she had that code?” Pippa asks, and I can tell she’s trying to keep her emotion off her face.

“She changes it every three months. I think she gave me that one on Monday... no, Tuesday.”

The day after the hot tub.

Fuuck.

My heart stops until a realization hits me. “I’ve got to go,” I say, taking off without acknowledging any responses. *I know where she is.*

Chapter Forty-Nine

Jesse - Twelve Years Ago / Age Sixteen

*“G*od, I feel like such a bitch for ever thinking I had a bad home life,” Buttercup says as her eyes flash with guilt. *“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”*

“Don’t. Don’t do that. I didn’t tell you that to make you feel bad. In fact, I don’t even know why I told you.” Except that I get this feeling we’re the same. That deep down, we’re both just trying to make it through this life as we wait for the next one. I’ve seen it in her eyes. The longing. The sadness.

Buttercup smiles as she takes a step closer, her hand brushing against mine. “Maybe you trust me,” she says with a slight lift of her shoulders. “Or maybe you feel the same connection I do?” The slightest pink tinge flushes across her cheeks, and I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.

“Or maybe it’s both,” I rasp, hesitantly connecting our fingers without drawing attention to it.

Yes, we’ve been talking since she arrived on the mountain, and it feels like we know each other, but this is still only the

first time we've had a conversation. Though, there's no denying the connection. I've felt it since the first time I saw her.

"Robin..." she whispers, trailing off, making me once again regret playing the fake name game. I want to hear her call me Jesse. I want to hear my name whispered from her lips as I make her mine.

"Buttercup—"

"I think you should kiss me," she rushes out and I freeze. Fuck, I want that. But—

"Don't think about the reasons you shouldn't... and just do it," she adds, cutting me off.

Well, okay then.

Leaning forward, I brush my lips slowly against hers, loving the feel of her as I test it out a couple of times, before deciding not to waste what will likely be my one shot. When she figures out that my life is so much worse than I admitted, she's going to run for the hills. Or down them in this case.

Pulling her close, I sink my free hand into her hair and angle her face toward me, staring into her striking green eyes as I ignore the images that try to push themselves into my mind.

I've just leaned in to kiss her again when we hear raised voices from behind us, and spring apart.

"Fuck, are they arguing?" Buttercup asks, her eyes flashing toward Tate and Lily. I haven't been able to focus on anything

other than Buttercup since she walked into the clearing, so I have no fucking idea what's happening between them.

But when I look over and see Tate pocket something, I internally cringe. Motherfucker. I know exactly what he's doing.

"It definitely looks heated. But—"

"We're leaving!" Lily yells as she marches toward us, aggressively grabbing Buttercup's wrist to pull her away.

An unwelcome image flashes through my mind as I picture the bruise bracelet she'll have come tomorrow, but I hold back my rage when Buttercup rips her arm away.

"What the hell, Jade? What's going on?" she asks with a rage of her own.

"We have to go," Lily... Jade says, grabbing Buttercup again. "Now!" She takes off in a run, dragging Buttercup behind her, and it's enough to make me see red.

"Stop!" I yell at the same time Tate does, before we both run after them.

Chapter Fifty

Jesse

Sharp branches attack my skin as I run through the dense scrub toward the lookout. I know I'm bleeding; I can feel the drops running down my leg, but the sting of the gashes barely register.

Finding Willow is all I care about; I can focus on the rest once she's safe.

"Willow!" I call out for what feels like the hundredth time. "I swear to God, Buttercup, if you're just up here enjoying the view..." I huff out a delusional laugh because wouldn't that be something. What I wouldn't give to find her sitting on a rock, earbuds in as she drinks in the serenity.

Peaceful. Happy. Still blissfully unaware of the truth that lingers somewhere deep within her mind.

If only.

The trees clear out ahead, and I breathe a little easier. I'm almost there. Just another minute.

But a minute to what? Because do I really think she's here?

I want to believe, yes, but deep down, I know she's not. This is merely a detour from my path on the off chance that I'm wrong.

I'm just delaying the inevitable.

I push through the last of the trees as the sun sets on the horizon. It should be a beautiful moment, the way the colors paint the sky and the stars take the stage, but when I find the viewpoint empty, I hate everything about it.

All the air rushes from my lungs as I drop my face into my hands, cursing the heavens. It's almost nightfall and we still haven't found her. She's alone, possibly scared, and it's all my fucking fault.

Bile rises in my throat as my gaze travels up the skirt of the mountain, to the direction I have to take. It's been hours now. Something must have happened for her to stay away, to not come home.

She remembers. She fucking remembers. I can't even imagine what that's doing to her head. *Or is she hurt?*

I take off in another run and my legs ache. It doesn't matter how fit you are, this trail isn't for the fainthearted. I've been here before, many times, but the paths are long gone and the forest overgrown. The once beautiful landmark left to rot in silence after tragedy struck all those years ago.

I continue on my journey, forcing myself to focus on the light, acutely aware of the darkness that awaits me if I allow myself to think about it.

Every step brings me closer to madness, but that means I'm closer to her.

What if she's not there? I can't handle another dead end. *But what if she is?*

Curling my hands around my mouth, I bellow out her name, desperate for her to hear me. "Willow?"

Nothing. Where the fuck is she?

"Willow!"

It's another ten minutes before the tightness in my lungs dissipates and the sound of rushing water permeates the air.

Images of the last time I was here flash through my mind, and I have to blink continuously to stop them from blinding me. *Buttercup*. She has to be here.

I can *feel* it.

I can *feel her*.

The higher I get, the faster I move, but when I burst out into the clearing, everything stops—my body, my heart, time.

Willow.

"Fuck, Willow."

Crying out, I almost fall to my knees as relief consumes me, seeing my entire world in front of me.

But it's short-lived.

Willow's curled up in a ball, rocking back and forth, muttering something under her breath, completely unaware of

my arrival. I want to run to her, but if I'm right and she remembers me, that could do more harm than good. Taking a few tentative steps forward, I wait for her reaction, my insides churning the closer I get.

A stick snaps when I'm a few feet away, and her eyes flash to mine, her grief-stricken stare looking right through me.

Another piece of my heart splinters as I raise my hands in surrender, but something must penetrate through her fog, because I see the moment she comes back to me. I see the light brighten behind her eyes.

“Jesse?”

Thank fuck.

A crushing weight lifts from my shoulders, and I suck in some air. With that one little word, I feel like I can breathe again. She's alive, she's with me, and that's all that matters.

“God, Jesse.” Willow bursts into tears as I rush to her side, pulling her into the comfort of my arms.

“You're okay. You're okay.” I repeat the words over and over hoping they'll somehow stick, because we both know that she's not. She's never going to be okay again.

We're silent at first, with me unable to let go of her, holding on for dear life. But when she pushes back to look at me, I allow her to break away, content at just being able to touch her.

“Willow.”

“I’ve been so scared,” she cries, as I brush the hair from her face and the tears from her cheeks. “I didn’t think anyone was coming. I didn’t even know if anyone knew I was gone. I just wanted to know. To see if it helped. To see if it did anything. Because Jesse, I’m going insane.” To anyone else she’d be talking in riddles, but I know what she means. I know why she’s here. “I need to know what happened,” she continues. “You made me want to find out. You made me stronger, and God, I missed you. I missed you so much and I...I can’t even explain it—”

I press a finger to her lips, and palm her face with my other hand. “Fuck, Willow. I missed you too. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here. I’m so sorry—”

“No, you have nothing to be sorry about.”

What?

She lifts to crawl into my lap, but cries out and falls back down, clutching at her foot.

“You’re hurt?” *Fuck. Why the hell haven’t I checked her out?*

Ignoring her objections, I assess every inch of her body with scrutiny, my fingers brushing across her skin, needing to know she’s okay. For my peace of mind more than her own.

When I reach her foot, Willow shakes her head almost violently, her hand subtly rubbing her ankle. “I’m so stupid, Jesse.”

“Let me see it.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Please. Let me do something.” I slowly reach down and remove her fingers from their hold, replacing her hand with mine. “You were gone and I was back home, helpless. Fuck, if something had happened...” I trail off because if I think of something happening to her, I’m likely to spiral, and I need to be strong for her. She’s the one in pain.

Her intense gaze bores into the side of my face as I tend to her ankle, gently assessing the damage. The swelling looks bad, but I’ve seen worse, so it’s likely to be just a sprain. *I hope.*

“It’s going to need medical attention soon, Willow. Have you tried standing?”

I look up to see her shake her head again as her face contorts, the mere thought of standing paining her.

“Okay, it’s okay. I’ll help you. Or carry you. Either way, you’re going to be all right.”

I gently run the tip of my finger across the already purple skin and watch as her body breaks out in goose bumps. My breaths quicken as her pain becomes mine, and emotion clogs my throat. Yes, this could have been so much worse, but I can’t stand to see her hurting.

“God, Willow. I—”

She palms my cheeks as I did hers and lifts my head until I’m facing her, forcing me to see everything she feels. And what I witness is devastating.

I expected the pain and the fear, but what I didn't expect was the uncertainty and defeat.

“What happened?” I ask, my voice cracking as a sea of emotions floods me.

Ignoring my question, she leans forward and brushes a kiss across my lips, her mouth lingering without applying any pressure. It's the briefest touch, but it ignites my soul and gives me more hope than I could ever deserve. She may taste like tears and dust, but the only thing that registers is that she tastes like she's mine. So when she tries to pull back, I hold her close, whispering against her lips. “God, I was so scared.” *I'm not ready to let go.*

“I'm sorry,” she whispers back as she breaks our connection. “I should have told you.”

And I'm not ready for this.

“Remember I mentioned my accident?” she asks, waiting for me to nod before she continues. “It was years ago, but...” She pauses as my heart plummets. If she's telling me the story, it means she still can't remember my part in it, *and I'm going to have to tell her.*

“I've spent so long pretending to be okay,” she says as she brushes her thumb across my cheek, her eyes following the movement. “But I've always felt so numb, and never knowing about that part of my life only made me feel worse. But with you, it was different. I felt alive. *I feel* alive and it gave me the confidence to seek answers. But I should have told you everything,” she whispers through her tears. “I should have

asked you to come with me. I wasn't thinking. I just had the strongest desire to come here."

As she talks, the news headlines flash in my mind while an invisible hand twists a jagged-edged knife deep into my chest.

Police are investigating an incident on Mt. Beauty, after a young girl was found...

"I didn't think I'd ever come back here. I've tried so many times, but never made it. I always wondered if it would help. If I'd remember, but... It doesn't bring her back. What good is remembering?"

Hepburn Falls: A young girl has died and another is fighting for her life...

"I can see her lifeless body. I can hear her screams. Only I'm not sure I ever saw or heard any of that. It could just be my mind playing tricks on me."

The young girl found alive after Mt. Beauty tragedy still hasn't woken...

"It was here. I'm here now and I still can't remember."

Police say the young girl at the center of the Hepburn Falls incident has no memory of the event. Investigations

remain open.

“And then I hurt myself, and I thought that was it. No one knows I’m here. Am I destined to die in the same place Jade did?” She pauses, her sad green eyes meeting mine as her lip quivers. “But you found me.” She smiles. “You *found* me,” she repeats with a lightness to her tone as if she’s finally able to relax. Until the moment she thinks about her words and the meaning behind them registers. Her smile fades, and her hands drop from my face.

“You found me, when no one else has.”

Man questioned over the incident...

“You were there.”

At least one other person was confirmed to have been at the scene but police have yet to identify...

“It was you.”

Doctors say the young girl may never regain her memory.

Fuuuck. It was me. I was there. And while she can’t remember, *I will never forget.*

Her eyes flash with panic before she tries and fails to stand up. I move to help her, but she jerks away with so much force she almost falls backward. A look of horror crosses her face, and it hurts more than any physical wound could ever hurt me.

“Are you going to say anything?” she cries out, scrambling back to put some distance between us. I rise to my feet and take a few steps away, needing to ease her mind, but it doesn’t work. She wraps her arms around herself and shivers as she sucks in a few quick breaths, suddenly terrified to be near me. *Jesus.*

I don’t know what to do or what to say. There’s so much she needs to know, but I can’t—

“You know what?” she says, cutting into my thoughts. “Your silence says it all.” A new emotion settles on her face, and it’s the one I’ve been expecting. The moment I’d been dreading.

“I’m sorry, Willow. I—”

“You made me promise not to hate you until you were gone.”

And there it is. “I know.”

“How could you do this to me? How could you let me fall for you, knowing...” Her voice breaks as she trails off, and my chest burns. She can hate me as much as she wants, but it will never be half as much as I hate myself.

“Tell me what happened,” she whispers, her voice full of venom.

I shake my head and open my mouth to speak, but she knows before I've said a word that I'm not going to tell her what she wants to hear.

“Don't even bother with whatever bullshit you were about to say. Just answer me this. I'm going to repeat my question from the other day,” Willow says, defiance in place. “Have you ever killed someone, committed an unforgivable crime, or worse?”

This time I don't bother trying to lie. “Yes,” I rasp.

Willow's eyes well with fresh tears, and the pain she's projecting is agony, but it's the deep-seated hate I can see that crushes me.

“Uh! I can't remember any of it,” she cries out. “Was it a game? Did she do something to you? Was it supposed to be me? Was I meant to—”

“No, Willow. Stop. It's not—”

“Why wouldn't you tell me? I've been suffering for *years* and you've had this peachy life with no consequences.” Her voice rises until she's yelling, and I'm pretty sure anyone looking for us will now know where we are. I can't take it anymore. Her pain is killing me. “Why the hell would you keep it from me? How could you—”

“Because I'm in love with you!” I yell back, the words slipping from my mouth without my permission.

Willow's body stills as her eyes widen. She stares intently, and I can see a million questions in her gaze, but I never

expected the disgust that comes when she finally speaks.

“You love me?” She laughs sardonically, shaking her head.
“You wanted me to hate you but you love me?”

“Yes,” I rasp again, completely defeated.

“Because you knew this day was coming.”

“Yes.”

“You need to leave.”

“No, Willow—”

“Go!” she yells as loud as she can.

Not happening. “You can hate me, you can yell at me, you can do anything you want to hurt me. But I am *not* leaving unless you come too.”

A throat clears behind us, drawing both our eyes to Tate as he steps into the clearing, a sympathetic frown on his face.

It takes me less than a second to decide I have no choice but to trust him. He’s here. I don’t have anyone else to ask for help.

“Can you call Pippa?” I say before tossing him my phone and turning back to a now panicked Willow.

“Are you going to hurt me?” she whispers, her eyes flashing between mine and Tate’s as she grips the hem of her tee.
“Were you there too?” she asks him.

I feel my heart split, opening up to release an outpouring of regret through my body.

“Never, Willow. We’d never hurt—”

“You already have.” She shakes her head, cutting me off.

All the emotion drains from her face until she’s left with nothing, her expression blank, her spark distinguished. She’s gone. I’ve taken everything from her.

And she doesn’t even realize she’s taken everything from me in return.

If I’d just stayed away, this beautiful woman would have remained whole. And I’ll never forgive myself for that.

“Willow, I—”

“Willow!” Pippa yells, drawing our attention as she rushes into the clearing with Ryan right behind her. Her eyes assess the scene before she runs to Willow’s side and drops to the ground in front of her.

My brows furrow as I look toward Tate, knowing he hasn’t even lifted my phone to make the call.

“I was one step ahead of you.” He shrugs as Ryan and Pippa lift Willow to her feet, both of them acting like I’m not even there.

“Come on, let’s get you home.”

Willow’s a shell of her former self as she moves my way, barely able to stay on her toes. When her eyes lock on mine, she holds my stare and metaphorically delivers the final blow. “I want nothing to do with you,” she whispers, further

breaking my heart. “But since I need answers, I’ll be in touch.”

“*Willow*,” I plead, though I have no idea what I’m asking. She has every right to be angry. Even if she doesn’t know the full story.

Pippa’s eyes flash to mine, confusion marring her expression, but she doesn’t speak. She doesn’t try to help.

And as they disappear into the thick forest, every decent piece of me goes with them.

I drop to the ground as darkness seeps into my soul and my body goes numb, the scene around me fading away.

I’m not sure how long I’m there when I feel a presence above me and slowly glance up to see Tate holding out my phone. He says something, but it doesn’t register, the fog that fills my head proving difficult to push through.

“What?” I repeat, trying to stay sane just long enough to concentrate.

“You *lied*,” he repeats, emphasizing the last word, telling me he’d been watching us for a while.

That may be true, but... “Technically, I didn’t.”

Tate frowns as his hand settles behind his neck. “*Fuuuck*,” he drags out. “You really love her.”

My shattered heart pulses at the word *love* but it’s pointless. It means nothing now. And since it’s not a question, I don’t say anything to confirm or deny it.

He knows the answer, just like he knew how I felt back then.

I love her. More than I've loved anyone else in this entire fucked-up world.

And the reality of it is...

I always have.

Chapter Fifty-One

Jesse - Twelve Years Ago / Age Sixteen

The rhythmic tone seeps into my brain, and I worry I'll never be able to shake it. Being here physically pains me. My skin crawls, my body aches, and my heart hasn't stopped racing since I walked through the door.

But I can't leave.

I have to see this through.

Nurses come and go, all with sympathetic expressions, their pity visible in their eyes. Pity that only gets stronger with each passing hour, as the chance of recovery reduces.

The machine beeps erratically and my entire body stiffens. I stare straight ahead, acting my part as the nurses and doctors rush in. And when the machine flatlines, I fall to the bed, shaking for effect.

It's over.

For some people that torturous sound signals the end, but for me it signals a new beginning.

I'm free. Almost.

To be continued...

Thank you for reading the first part of Jesse and Willow's story. Their story concludes in *The Sound of Forever* available in December.

If you want to check out any of Katherine Jay's other books, you can find them all on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited. If you haven't already, you can read about pro football player, Dylan Mathers, featured in this book, in his story *When Nothing Else Matters* – book one in the Heartstrings Series.

Whats next...

*Jesse and Willow's story
continues in...*

**THE
SOUND
OF
FOREVER**

*What happens when the truth is more
heartbreaking than the lie?*

Books by Katherine Jay

SYMPHONY OF SOUND DUET

The Sound Of Silence (Jesse and Willow)

The Sound Of Forever (Jesse and Willow)

HEARTSTRINGS SERIES

When Nothing Else Matters (Summer and Dylan)

Still Here Without You (Joel and Delilah)

It Had To Be Us (Logan and Dani)

Truly Madly Deeply Mine (Wes and Lucy)

A Sky Full Of Stars (Thomas and Lainey) – coming soon

Ain't No Sunshine (Nate and Cory) – novella

For more information, visit

<http://www.katherinejayauthor.com>

And if you want to stay in-the-know for all things Katherine Jay, come and join my Facebook Reader Group The Angsty Lovers Playlist for fun, exclusive content and sneak peeks. Or sign up for my newsletter here for monthly updates.

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And thank you all for supporting indie authors. If you enjoyed this book, please shout it from the rooftops and leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Bring on book two!!

About the Author

Katherine lives in Australia with her hubby, two kids and a mind full of characters. She spends her days partaking in role play, building fortes and dancing. While her nights are spent reading and writing.

Katherine writes emotional and angsty romance with love that's worth fighting for and characters full of heart.