


The  
Wickedest  
Ones



K.C. EVERLY

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# Before You Read

## **Content Warning and Tropes**

### ***Content Warning***

This book is intended for readers **18+** and contains sensitive content, profanity (a lot), and graphic depictions of sex (also a lot). If you're under 18 years old, come back later. We'll be waiting.

This book contains some themes that may be distressing to readers, including childhood trauma and abuse (discussed, not shown), alcohol and substance abuse, and concerns related to mental health.

### ***Tropes***

Bully redemption, return to small town, opposites attract, strong female lead, witty banter, second chance, found family, swoony romance, friends to lovers, all grown up.

Because we all deserve to shed the skin that no longer fits.

And to get mounted.

**Xx**

KC

# The Boys from Clear Lake

**T**he broken. The lonely. The angry. The empty. Four childhood friends. Four wild stories. One unbreakable bond. When it comes to love, they stumble and fall but always have each other's backs. Brothers by choice, friends for life. Get ready for laughter, tears, and unforgettable romances.

“Mischievous and playful. Intense and consuming. Angry and brooding. Handsome and good at shit. Kids tied together by missing pieces we'd filled for one another, shaping into men we could admire and be proud of.

“We'd held each other accountable, called each other out when needed, and showed up for the moments that mattered. The boys were my family, and they always would be.”

The Boys from Clear Lake series is best read in order of release, though each book can be read as a standalone.

*Same As Yesterday*



*The Wickedest Ones*

*Broken Like Me*

*Carried Away*

## A Note

*The Wickedest Ones* is the second book in *The Boys from Clear Lake Series*. It is written as a standalone and can be read and understood without reading the rest of the series.

It is *best* enjoyed when read after *Same As Yesterday*. Some jokes or “Easter eggs” in the story may be missed otherwise, and some nuances of the friendships in the book are best represented when read in order.

But maybe you’re a rule breaker, do things at your own pace, live life how you want, goddamnit! Or maybe you’re just strapped for time or not in the mood to read another book when your TBR pile is abhorrently long (no such thing!). Well, friend, you can start with *The Wickedest Ones* and read through it while understanding the storyline and relationships within the book. Jump in and meet The Boys in any story—we’re happy to have you here.





# Prologue

*Reed*

“Move,” he barked, a squared shoulder bumping mine. I stepped aside, muttering under my breath. I hated Jonathan Campbell.

Unfortunately, his locker had been next to mine since our freshman year. I’d hoped that by sophomore year he’d have settled into some decency, but he hadn’t. People like Jonathan probably never would.

“Fucking nerd,” he mumbled, reaching into his bag and pulling out a textbook he threw into his locker. Jonathan was a jock of the worst kind—an absolute cliché of a human.

“Hey, handsome,” a sultry voice cooed over my shoulder. I didn’t turn to look. The comment wasn’t directed at me.

“Look at those tits,” Jonathan hissed, slamming his locker shut and leaning against it so his shoulder blocked half of mine.

*Are you kidding me?*

Not this shit again. The last time this happened, I waited ten minutes for Jonathan to stop sucking face with his girlfriend so I could shut my locker. I ended up late to geometry and received detention. Mrs. Carmichael had no sympathy for the plight of an average kid who happened to be stuck next to the popular jock asshole with the hot girlfriend who was just as much of an asshole as him.

“Viv, baby,” he mumbled, running his thumb along his bottom lip in a slow sweep. “You look good in that top.”

Jonathan paused, crossing his arms over his chest and stretching his letterman jacket along his thick shoulders in a way that made me wonder if it would rip. “But what’s wrong with your hair?”

Vivian Harlow—the bitchiest, brattiest, and, unfortunately, the most painfully beautiful girl in our school—joined Jonathan’s side, pushing me further from my locker.

“What do you mean?” she asked, her hand self-consciously running over her blonde ponytail.

“Your hair is up. Your ears stick out too much for that look.” Jonathan frowned and reached to yank the scrunchie from Vivian’s hair.

“Ouch!” she cried, rubbing her head. “Asshole!”

Jonathan laughed, resting his hand against his locker, a grotesquely thick patch of hair on the back of it. “Chill out,” he said.

Vivian flushed, and I couldn't take it.

“You're a real asshole.”

I said it. Except what I thought I'd said in my head was something I said *out loud*.

Vivian whipped around. Her eyes narrowed, and her usually plump lips thinned into a line of disapproval.

“What's your name?” she asked, a bite to her tone.

I shifted uncomfortably. Vivian *still* didn't know my name. Like me, she'd grown up in Clear Lake. A small town with one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. It wasn't like she hadn't ever had a class with me. She had—several, including fifth-period civics that semester.

“Reed,” I said softly.

Jonathan snickered. He'd moved to Clear Lake when we were in middle school, so I *would* give him a little more grace with his lack of familiarity, except we'd been partners in freshman-year biology.

Vivian didn't bat an eye. “Reed? What kind of name is that?” She glanced at Jonathan with his lips curled in a sneer and turned her attention back to me. “Reed? Like, those things that grow in a swamp?”

I said nothing.

Vivian eyed my open locker, still blocked by Jonathan's shoulder. Littered with books and more books, Vivian scoffed. “Looks like someone is a nerd.”

Jonathan huffed a laugh. “Fucking nerd,” he repeated, this time enunciating. There would be no muttering any longer. The man found his voice! And what poetic words he had to share with the world. “I’m going to call you Swamp Nerd.”

“Congratulations,” I mumbled. “You managed to combine two concepts.”

“Hey!” he cried, his meaty paws balling at his side like I upset him.

It was ridiculous. He was at least five inches taller than me and had actual muscle. Like, man muscle at fifteen. Me? I was the youngest in our class with a late July birthday, had just started puberty, and my arms looked like pool noodles. I was no threat to him or anyone, and that’s probably why my dissent was most surprising.

A slow and cruel smile crept along Vivian’s lips. Her eyes, hazel with strong hints of green, glowed like a cat in the dark—claws out and stalking its prey.

“Swamp Nerd,” she repeated, stretching the name out.

It wasn’t the name that hurt my feelings, not really. I was a bit of a nerd, and I liked to keep to myself. I had friends, three of the best, but if I hadn’t met them in kindergarten, I probably would have preferred being alone. Why?

Because of garbage people like Jonathan and Vivian.

I didn’t take the bait, deciding I’d rather walk away from my open locker and risk theft or vandalism than stand in the hallway with those jerks.

Before turning to leave, I looked at Vivian. *Really* looked at her, staring into those hazel eyes. Her smile wavered momentarily, the corners of her mouth dropping slightly before she caught it and pinched them back up.

I gestured to Jonathan. “I thought I was being helpful by pointing out he’s an asshole. Guess not. Maybe you’re an asshole, too.” I sighed. “You’re better than that. You know you are.”

She was. I’d seen it, but I wasn’t about to remind her of what she’d so clearly forgotten.

I left, turning my back and sensing that both were watching me. I didn’t care either way.

“Reed!” Noah called, jogging to catch up with me just before I turned left and headed for the gym. “Hold up!”

I stopped and waited for my best friend, catching sight of Vivian down the hall. She was still next to Jonathan’s locker, but he’d left. She stared at mine with a blank expression, and for a moment, I wondered if she would mess with my stuff. But to my surprise, she closed the locker for me.

It was another few seconds of staring before she turned on her heel and left in the opposite direction.

At least my books were safe.

“Clear your busy calendar,” Noah said, walking me into the locker room, “because Karoline Allman wants a double date, and she’s bringing Veronica Henly for you.”

*Not a chance.* I kept quiet.



“Pray tell,” a playful voice chimed in. “Since when does Reed Watkins have a busy calendar?”

I wished I didn’t have gym class with the boys. “Shut up, Ty.” Sometimes, my best friends were the worst.

Noah laughed, patting me on the back. “Reed is a man of the world, Ty. No doubt his calendar is filled with all kinds of debauchery.”

“Reading about debauchery isn’t the same as committing acts of it,” Ezra, the last of my best friends to apparate, grumbled as he walked into the locker room and threw down his gym bag.

Ty, by far the most handsome of us all and, therefore, the smuggest, sat on the bench next to the lockers and unlaced his shoes. “We all know you rich fucks are well-versed in debauchery.”

Ezra, dark and brooding in every sense, didn’t bother to feign offense as he dug through his gym bag for clothes. “Rich fucks are the worst degenerates. Debauchery can be fun, but rich people don’t do it for the right reasons.”

“What *are* the right reasons?” Noah asked.

Ezra’s lips twitched, and his eyes gleamed for a moment. “Because you just can’t help yourself. Like if I were at the football game and was sitting three steps down from a pretty brunette in the bleachers. A pretty brunette with a sweet smile who isn’t very good at keeping her legs crossed at the ankle when she’s excited and watching football. And since

debauchery is so *damn fun*, maybe I can't help myself when I slide up a few rows and slip a hand beneath her skirt."

I groaned, burying my face in my shirt. Ty laughed, full-bellied and deep, as anger replaced Noah's easy grin.

"Are you talking about Jaime?" Noah damn near squeaked the words, the thought of us touching the girl he'd been in love with forever—and too chicken shit to admit it—overwhelming his good sense to know that Ezra was messing with him.

Ty draped an arm over Noah's shoulders and shook him. "He's messing with you, Noah."

Ezra squinted and raised his shoulders. "Am I, though?"

Noah, settling, let out a breath and chewed on the inside of his cheek. "Now I know why Reed avoids the world," he muttered. "People are the worst. You dipshits included."

"People *are* the worst," I agreed, though that wasn't why I preferred avoiding them. I liked the quiet. Plain and simple. Alone in my thoughts, peace around me. Calm.

Everything I didn't have in my house.

"One day, I'm going to disappear into the woods. Me and my books and maybe a dog," I said, liking the words as they rolled off my tongue.

Noah snorted. "Let's be real. You'd get a cat."

He wasn't wrong. That was a better fit. A touch moody and sensitive. A creature of routine.

"Fine, a cat."

“You can be a forest ranger,” Ty suggested. “Live in a lodge and have roaring campfires in your fireplace all year. Lots of buffalo plaid and spend your days whittling sticks.”

“I don’t think that’s what forest rangers do.”

Ty shrugged like he couldn’t be bothered to correct the image.

Noah stepped in. “No way. This guy and his books. He’s a storyteller. Have you seen what he submitted for the district short story competition?”

Ty and Ezra shook their heads. I hadn’t shown them. I’d only shown Noah because, like me, he had a bit of a sensitive nature.

“Excellent stuff,” Noah said, looking more proud of me than anyone else in my life.

“When do we get to see?” Ty asked, shooting me a look.

Ezra slapped my back. “Don’t hold out on us. We should be the first you show. Not some district committee.”

Thank God for the boys. More like brothers than friends, I was grateful for their company and companionship. Everyone else, though?

I didn’t need them.

# Thirteen Years Later



# One

*Vivian*

“Thank you, caller. And now we have Julie from Detroit. Julie, what’s your dilemma?”

A thundering whine hit the airwaves, the tone so bitter that I turned down the volume on the car stereo.

Down, not off. I wanted to hear what Julie had to say.

“Well, I’m getting married in two months—”

“Congratulations!” the host said, her cheerful voice contrasting with Julie’s.

“Don’t interrupt,” Julie said, taking a breath and continuing her story.

Julie was getting married in two months to a rich man with poor friends. Friends who couldn’t afford to travel to Vegas for her fiancé’s bachelor party or stay the entire wedding week at the Ritz Carlton in New York. She insisted her fiancé dump his

friends as groomsmen for their inability to attend *all* the wedding festivities.

“Am I the asshole?” she finished.

I stared ahead at an endless stretch of ink-black sky and a highway empty of traffic. That woman.

The diplomatic and neutral host opened the line for callers to contribute their opinions, and there were many.

“You are definitely the asshole,” I muttered, flipping off the radio.

A few years ago, I may have sympathized with that woman’s privileged plight of things not going her way, but not these days.

A few years ago, *I* was the asshole. Not the rich asshole getting married and making unreasonable demands of my friends—as if I had many real friends—but I was the person who felt the world revolved around them.

For much of my life, the world *had* revolved around me. The brightest star in the sky. The prettiest girl in a room. The belle of any and all balls. So many balls. And not just the kind with dancing.

For as long as I could remember, I was the *It Girl*. The one men noticed. The one women noticed, too—mainly because they wanted to be me. Blonde hair, big round eyes, long legs, and tits that floated on my chest. A trim waist, round hips, and flawless skin. The perfect pitch to my voice, a combination of playful, flirty, and smoldering sex. Jesus. I was phenomenal.

Until I wasn't.

People didn't just hand you things because you had a pretty face. Being the *It Girl* in high school didn't mean I would be employed, successful, and famous. I could pivot, though, relying on the people who could overlook the sting of my personality when they were staring at the allure of my body.

Until they weren't.

I turned the radio back on and flipped through it until I found some smooth jazz. I hated smooth jazz. The worst kind of jazz, which wasn't even good on its best day anyway, but I was a glutton for punishment. It was late, I was tired, and I still had another hour before I made it to Clear Lake.

Torture would keep me awake when two Red Bulls and a coffee hadn't done shit for the blariness in my eyes. I couldn't afford to fall asleep and crash my car.

Literally, I could not afford it. I could hardly afford the gas I'd put in the tank.

It was only a few hours' drive from Seattle, but I'd left late—way later than I should drive after a shit night.

As it turned out, coming home early after being fired and finding your boyfriend of four years eating out the girl from the apartment three floors below could light a fire under your feet to get up and go. Whether you were well-rested enough to make the drive to hell.

Fittingly, I was sure the devil waited for me.

I combed my fingers through my hair as I imagined my mother, all five-foot-ten of her beauty queen glory, staying up so she could revel in my defeat as if it were her success. My mother was the worst.

Unfortunately, the worst was also my only option at that point. Dustin was one of the few people who liked me, but clearly, I'd misread *that* situation, as evidenced by his tongue in our neighbor's pussy.

Acquaintances described most other relationships in my life. While my best and only real friend, Jeremy, would have let me crash on his couch for as long as I needed, I didn't want to cramp him or his fiancé, Ari.

Besides, they had a studio anyway, and the man had no shame. He had little regard for decency and privacy, and I didn't want to listen to him plow his fiancé every night with only a room divider between us all.

Had I *not* been shoved out the front door of Bimbos and told to find a new place to work, I could probably float some cash from Jeremy and Ari for a temporary apartment. I wouldn't need long. Just another six weeks before I finally got access to the trust fund my father had set up before he died three years ago.

Except I *had* been shoved out, humiliated. Bimbos was a new gig for me, but I was no stranger to bouncing around the bar scene in Seattle. I'd spent years working at a charming dive bar called The Unicorn before leaving for a position I thought would lead to more opportunity.



I didn't want to bartend forever, so when Jordan Kline offered me a job in a new club he was opening, I left the cushy gig I'd spent years working for for a chance to be a consultant and manager for this investment of his. Men like Jordan? Filthy fucking rich.

Also, just filthy. Full stop.

It was fine for a while, but when he started brushing up against my ass or cornering me in the break room, suggesting I get on my knees to handle his *business*, I walked away. I was many things, even back at my worst behavior, but I was not the girl who blew her boss to keep a job.

For *years* I'd worked in the service industry, slinging drinks and flirting like I gave a shit about the people wagging their tongues in front of me each night. For *years*, I'd let men ogle me, women scowl at me, and my self-esteem filled up only when my tip jar overflowed.

After turning down Jordan Kline, getting fired, and *maybe* throwing a rack of bar glasses to the floor on my way out, my employment prospects were pretty grim in an industry that rewarded looks I no longer had and charm that never existed in the first place.

I wasn't in the best mood after that, but at least I could go home and take a shower. Get the filth of the day off of me. I paid my half of the rent this month, and I'd have two weeks to figure out how to make the next month work.

The month after that? Wouldn't matter. I'd be twenty-eight and have full access to my trust fund. It wasn't a massive pile

of cash, but it was enough to give me a cushion as I figured out my next steps.

The elevator was broken in the apartment building because... that kind of night. Six floors weren't a killer, but I was out of breath when I made it to my door, unlocked it, and let myself in.

That was probably why I couldn't say anything when I realized Dustin buried his face between Eden's legs. Her apartment was three floors below ours, causing occasional mail mix-ups, which is how I knew her name.

That tempting and forbidden fruit of her loins was delicious enough that Dustin hadn't heard me come in and didn't notice that Eden was frozen on the spot. The spot was our couch, which was really *my* couch that I bought four months ago.

Thankfully, I went for stain-resistant fabric on the sectional—double thanks for the two-year fabric protection warranty.

You know what?

Just burn the couch—the entire goddamn thing.

Eden scrambled to push Dustin away, dropping her skirt over her slender thighs. Thighs that didn't rub together when she walked. Thighs that couldn't care less if it was above seventy-five degrees in the summer because chafing was inconceivable.

Thighs like I used to have, but no longer did.

Maybe that's why Dustin hadn't buried his head between mine in so long. Afraid he'd suffocate.

I said nothing as Eden, red-faced and ashamed, ran out of the apartment. Dustin dropped back, leaning against the coffee table and closing his eyes as he pulled his t-shirt to his lips to wipe his mouth.

“Viv—”

I should have shouted or yelled. Told him to fuck off and get out. But I couldn't. Because I was now jobless and broke, and he wasn't.

Dustin worked as a programmer for a start-up downtown. He made six figures, had health insurance, and got paid sick days. We split our expenses, and I could hardly manage *with* his help.

Me, though? He needed nothing from me. Eden was further proof of that.

I should have paid attention to the red flags years ago. The blustering overconfidence. The way he thought everyone was always flirting with him like he was so damn handsome.

I mean, he *was* handsome, but so were a lot of other men, and they weren't all assholes.

I dropped a hand to my hip, a fullness that wasn't there when Dustin first met me. Twenty-five additional pounds, either. He liked my hip bones when we met—enjoyed it when he could see them. Like it was an accomplishment to have a malnourished girlfriend.

A thyroid disorder would change that quickly. Now my thighs looked nothing like Eden's, my body filled out, and

while I *knew* there were bones beneath the plump flesh on my hips, I hadn't seen them in a long time. My stomach was soft, my arms doughy, and my face rounded.

Most importantly, irrespective of my unfamiliar new curves, I was taking care of my health. Most important to me. Not Dustin. But fuck him for it. Let him choke on bones.

I packed as much as I could carry. I had no idea how I would manage the six flights down without the elevator, but I'd rather push the suitcase—and myself—out the window than stay in the apartment with Dustin.

I didn't need to yell at Dustin, fight him, or convince him to love me. None of it would matter in the end. And just like I wasn't a girl who got on her knees to blow her boss to keep a job, I wasn't one who got on her knees and pleaded for some asshole to love her.

“*Of course* you can come home,” my mother gushed.

I called her fifteen minutes from my apartment, my Honda Civic with a full tank and late-night talk radio, ready to settle in for a long drive.

“You never visit, and getting proof of life would be nice.”

I didn't visit my mom for very specific reasons. If she wanted proof of life, I would rather cut off my pinky and mail it to her than sit down for brunch together. That drive? That trek home? It was excruciating, and that dread was independent of my humiliation.

Judy Harlow, my mother, was a malignant narcissist. Everything was personal to her, including my appearance, life circumstances, successes, and *especially* my failures. She took pleasure in the suffering of others. It pleased her fractured ego, which was so shattered that she enjoyed the destruction. It made her feel better about her inadequacies.

Judy was self-obsessed, power-hungry, and outcome-driven. She was the reason my father, Arnold Harlow, left his life insurance in a trust for me to access when I turned twenty-eight years old.

My father's death brought me to therapy three years ago. My father's death helped me see my mother's toxicity and how it permeated my life. The way she planted seeds deep in the soil of my heart, watering that same insecurity and hate, blossoming the worst kinds of behaviors.

It was my father's death that started my road to recovery. So, while I missed my father and still grieved him—I was, in some ways, grateful for it. Because when my dad died? It forced me to live, and living looked different in the last two years.

I wasn't good at it yet. It'd be a lie to act like I'd abandoned all of my shitty behavior, but I *wanted* to, and most days, I made a concerted effort to do it.

My dilemma, as it stood, was that I was homeless, jobless, and broke. But only for another six weeks. I just needed to survive six weeks with my mother—who taught me to be a terrible person *and* encouraged it—while tearing up the weeds of her influence and not letting them grow back.

And I thought I could do it.

## Two

### *Vivian*

**S**taring into the wide blue eyes of Judy Harlow, a sea of complicated emotion and judgment, I wondered if there had ever been a time in my life when I trusted her.

Walking up the steps of her front porch, greeted by the deep frown of my mother as she wrapped her cardigan tighter around her thin waist, I couldn't remember a time when I had.

"Vivian," she said, her frown sinking deeper on her face and stressing her few wrinkles. I'm sure my mother, Miss Washington 1983, once *looked* like an angel. But I wasn't entirely convinced she'd ever played the part.

"Hi, Mom."

Dragging my purple suitcase behind me, exhausted and weary from the longest goddamn day, I stepped inside the split-level Colonial where I had grown up. It had been three years since I was last in Clear Lake, and that was for my father's funeral.

Arnold Harlow was a deeply flawed man, but he was at least kind—though he wasn't around much.

“Your room is ready. You can stay down the hall in the guestroom.”

My mom pointed past the kitchen and living room, along the oak wood floors, to the end of a dark hallway that had never been my bedroom. When my dad was alive, it was his office. My mom rearranged some things.

“I assume you'll be staying until the check clears?” my mom asked, interrupting my thoughts. I didn't miss the bitterness behind the sugary inquiry.

Discomfort rose in my throat. Or maybe it was bile. Either way, I bit it back and nodded. “If that's okay.”

Still standing in the entryway, my mother watched me with a slight squint, her face trying to decide on an emotion. Finally, it settled on offense.

“Vivian Lee Harlow. You think a mother would turn out her daughter when she's been rejected and humiliated, and life has kicked her down so brutally and embarrassingly?” She rested a hand on her chest and sucked in a sharp inhale.

I mean, *yes*, I think she would, but not tonight.

Tonight, she could bathe in the upper hand of my need for her. She could feel essential and influential, like she held all the cards between us and wouldn't dare show me her hand. She could describe my life pitifully rather than use kindness to say something a normal parent might.



But my mother wasn't a normal parent.

I didn't fight her with a retort. There was no point, and as my old therapist once said, arguing with narcissists was like wrestling a pig in shit. We all know how that goes.

So I don't wrestle. I don't fight. I don't get covered in shit, and I leave my mom happy.

I walked my suitcase down the dark hallway, turned left, and flipped the light switch to my father's old office, hoping tomorrow would be better.



“You look like you crawled out of a well.”

My mother's morning greeting confirmed that today would not likely be better.

“I was planning on showering before I go into town. Check it out and see what's new or different,” I casually replied as we sat at the kitchen table and sipped cups of coffee.

It was a quiet morning, not quite summer, but just a few weeks away from it. Mornings in Clear Lake were still crisp, but the air was fresh, and the afternoon would be warm.

My mother waved her hand. “Nothing changes here. I don't know why I stay. When your father died, I could have gone anywhere, and yet I stayed here to hold on to his legacy, keep his house, and make sure people didn't forget him.”

That's not why she stayed, but my mother liked to be a martyr.

“I sacrificed so much for that man, and he left me with *nothing*.” Her eyes roamed over me, shadows of disdain to follow.

The house was paid off, but she had to sell many high-end possessions to support her lifestyle. His car, her jewelry, furs. She was running out of things to sell.

“Yet he leaves you the life insurance.” She sighed, heavy and with resignation. “Well, I don’t mind you staying as long as you need, but I expect rent for the weeks you’re here as soon as you get that check.”

I said nothing. My mother got up, set her cup in the sink, and hung her head.

“It wouldn’t kill you to split that money, either. Half of your DNA is thanks to me, and even though you’ve filled out, you still have a pretty face. You certainly didn’t get that from your father.”

My cup slammed on the table with more force than I intended. Saying nothing, I left the kitchen, grabbed my keys, and walked out the door.

The car radio was still set to jazz, and I quickly flipped the station, afraid I would turn murderous if I didn’t.

The drive into town was short and quiet. There wasn’t much traffic in Clear Lake, and when I hit the downtown corridor, it was wide open parking and empty shops. The town wouldn’t come to life until summer officially arrived. Then it would flood with tourists. For now, I thought I liked the quiet.

My mother wasn't wrong that things hadn't changed. Downtown still had one cafe, several specialty stores for tourism, a few restaurants, and small businesses. A law firm, a thrift store, and if I kept driving and hit the split toward the highway, there'd be a Walmart.

For now, it was coffee I was after.

*Rise 'N Grind.* A handwritten note hung just below the open sign on the cafe door. The scribble was almost illegible and punctuated with an ending smiley face.

*Dearest Patrons, please excuse the mess. We are growing and renovating! :)*

I stared at that smiley face. An adult did that. *An adult.*

The sign wasn't lying. Walls covered in tarps and the incessant sounds of buzzing saws and hammering greeted me before the smell of coffee beans. But I was tired and needed caffeine, and other than Walmart, I had nowhere else to go.

"*Oof.*" A hard shoulder knocked against my own, catching me off guard.

"Hey," I complained, rubbing my arm as I met the dark eyes of the man who ran into me.

"Sorry," he grumbled, his voice a little scratchy and his face hidden behind a thick beard. He quickly looked away. "Are you okay?"

*No, I'm not okay. I'm a complete mess.* But it had nothing to do with the Brawny paper towel guy having shoulder-checked me.

“Fine,” I muttered. “Just watch where you’re going.” I didn’t mean to sound, well, mean, but I did, and I made no apologies for it.

He nodded, stalking off to a table in the corner, sitting in front of a laptop, and not looking at me again.

Turning my attention to the counter, I was greeted by a woman with what could only be described as the friendliest face in existence. Her smile was bright, like the high watt of a lightbulb, and her eyes, a light brown not too dissimilar to my own, sparkled.

She put me at ease immediately.

I did not do that for her. Shit. I knew that look.

“Hello, Vivian,” she said, her smile gone and her tone clipped.

“Hi.” I gave a small wave and a nervous smile.

I didn’t recognize her, but she sure as shit recognized me, and given her reaction? I was guessing we’d gone to high school together.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

To be fair, I remembered few people from high school. It was hard to create space for others when I’d only thought of myself.

“I don’t.”

Her shoulder-length black hair was in tight coils, framing her soft face, a face I couldn't place. She was pretty, but couldn't have been pretty in high school if I didn't remember her. I remembered the pretty girls because they were the ones I was friends with or aware of. Either way, both were my enemies.

She pointed at herself. "Missy Granger."

I let the name roll around for a bit. "I'm sorry, I don't remember. It's nice to meet you, Missy."

"You met me in fifth grade. You don't remember me?" She reached up and ran a hand over her hair. "You told everyone I had rats living in my hair. It was before I figured out how to take care of it. My mom died when I was in fourth grade, and she'd always done it for me. My dad is white and didn't know what to do with my hair, so he did nothing. You got all the kids teasing me. In middle school, Matty Miller put a plastic rat in there while we ate in the cafeteria."

Melissa Granger. Now I remembered her. As much as I wished she had painted her story inaccurately from the wearing of time, she hadn't. I did that.

"Yes." I bit the inside of my cheek. "I'm sorry."

I was. How horrifying for her. I had no idea. Standing awkwardly, rubbing my arm, I stared at the counter, unsure what to say.

"I don't suppose I'm going to get that coffee."

Because *that* seemed a reasonable follow-up. Good grief.

Her mouth tipped downward, and she shook her head—those now gorgeous curls bouncing and full of life. “No. You *will* get that coffee, and it’s on the house.”

My jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

Reaching for a cup, she didn’t look at me. “Takes a real miserable asshole to be so mean to people,” she said after a moment. “If you were that miserable, I don’t have to hate you.” She shrugged like that made all the sense in the world.

And it kind of did.

She slid the cup across the counter and pointed down the coffee bar. “Cream and sugar over there. Fix it up how you like.”

She didn’t smile or bid me a good day. She didn’t even look at me again, and her kindness felt like more of a punishment than her wrath.

I made my way to the creamer, looking over my options even though I typically drink my coffee black. I just wanted an excuse to linger, and I wasn’t sure why. It embarrassed me to get dressed down with compassion when I didn’t deserve it.

Rather than grow anger and hurt in her life, the kind that had taken root in my heart for years, Missy allowed for humility. Or maybe she just felt sorry for me. Big Bad Vivian Harlow, the biggest bitch in the entire school, now stood in a coffee shop in Clear Lake. Broke, dumped, jobless, and most definitely not at her best in *any* sense.

Missy served the next customers. Her smile returned, megawatt and welcoming. The customers greeted her in kind. There were conversations and quick catch-ups, laughs, and playful banter. She looked happy.

Had I ever looked happy like that? Sure, I'd laughed and flirted with customers and smiled plenty, but I seriously doubted anyone looked into my eyes and saw sincere joy. And even though it was creepy to stare at Missy, I didn't stop. Then, when her line cleared, I approached her again.

"I'm sorry, Missy." I tried to stand tall despite the crippling weight of my shame. She deserved a better apology. "I'm sorry that I was mean to you, and I'm sorry I didn't remember your name. Both are shitty. I was shitty."

My lungs burned like I'd swallowed glass. The sting of humbleness was one I still hadn't quite acclimated to.

My hardness, my meanness, my heavy guarding—it was a means of control to get what I wanted. Giving it up for anyone was a defeat, but it was also the only way I could battle the beast I was.

Thank fucking God for therapy.

"Thank you, Vivian. But you should know, as upsetting as that teasing was, it didn't knock me down."

I wondered how I would have handled something like that at ten or eleven years old. Not well, that much I knew. Rejection had been a foe I sidestepped for most of my life until it started

piling at my feet like brickwork to the mausoleum that was my identity.

I wasn't typically a shy person, but my smile was reserved all the same. "Good. Don't let some asshole decide how you feel about yourself."

Missy furrowed her brows, taking me in a little more. "What brings you back to Clear Lake? I can't say I've heard of you coming back recently. Is your mom still in town?"

With no waiting customers and a shop filled with content patrons, it seemed Missy was turning her attention to me. And while I used to adore attention, these days, I avoided it.

"Um." I spun the cup of coffee between my hands, wondering how to answer. Settling on the truth, I told her about losing my job, apartment, boyfriend, and dignity by dragging my tail between my legs to stay with my mother for a while.

Missy nodded along, listening and interrupting with a few questions.

"Why don't you come work here for a bit?" she suggested. "If you're in town, broke, and want to be away from your mother, come take some shifts. I'm expanding, and I can hardly keep up with things."

"You own this place?"

Missy beamed. "Sure do. I bought it two years ago, and I've been expanding ever since. I have some plans to open another shop in Evans Ridge. I can't keep up. The pay is decent, and



the tips are great.” She gave a pointed look. “Assuming you can be friendly to the customers.”

Bold assumption.

“I’m not sticking around,” I said, choosing not to address the topic of my geniality.

“That’s fine. You can take the swing shifts. Carson, Dawn, and Lily are my full-time staff, and there are a few other on-call baristas. Have you ever made coffee before?”

“Not outside of my kitchen,” I admitted.

That didn’t faze Missy. “Okay. Come on back. Let’s review.”

Despite all my reservations, I followed her behind the counter, a shadow on her heels, as I observed her work.

“Why would you do this?” I finally asked. It made little sense. People didn’t just do things to do them. There was always a reason, something they wanted to get from it.

Missy thought for a moment, leaning against the counter with one arm propped on her hip.

“Sometimes you just know someone needs some kindness.”

# Three

## *Reed*

**G**rinding to dust. My molars were grinding to dust, making me want to tear my hair out or stomp some fingers to stop the constant and violent hammering behind the tarp.

Missy's cafe was under renovation, and she was apologetic about it, but the internet at my cabin was garbage, and I needed a place to work. I had a deadline for this manuscript, and my creativity was leaking out of the fillings I destroyed because of this noise.

I got up and walked behind the tarp, peeking to see a group of men half-working, half-laughing. One strappy lady stood in the center, barking directions at her crew as they screwed around.

"This is why it's taking so long, Ron." I pointed at the useless crew.

Veronica didn't even look at me. Keeping her back turned and telling some asshole twice her age to flip the fuse box for the back room, she said, "You need a hard hat if you're back here."

"Come on, Ron. Missy said you'd be done today by ten." I checked my watch. "It's ten-fifteen."

"You know, last I checked, you weren't Missy, and as far as I'm aware, you don't work here," Ron called.

"I work here—" I argued, but she cut me off.

"Not the same thing, Reed. Quit being a baby."

Grumbling and in a bad mood, I was too focused on ensuring Ron saw the vulgar gesture I shot her to pay attention to where I was going—running smack into someone as I burst from behind the tarp.

"*Oof*," she huffed, the fast whoosh of her breath escaping her mouth as the impact of my shoulder hit her. "Hey." She rubbed her arm, glaring at me with a scowl.

I recognized that scowl.

*"Looks like someone is a nerd."*

She'd had the same scowl on her face that day during our sophomore year when she'd created the nickname I endured through high school. Swamp Nerd. She was consistent, at least. I'd give her that.

"Sorry, are you okay?" Manners—a terrible habit I held regardless of circumstance. I'd kick myself for my decorum

when I overthought about this encounter later.

She bit a response about being fine and telling me to watch where I was going as if I targeted her. As if accidents didn't happen. Though I suppose, in Vivian Harlow's perfect world, they didn't.

Stalking off to where I'd been working in *Rise 'N Grind*, I sat at my table. Keeping my eyes on my screen, I avoided looking at her. Mostly. I hadn't seen Vivian since we were seniors in high school, and she walked along that stage to get her diploma with the same tight scowl on those plump lips—a waste of their fullness, really.

Like in high school, she didn't recognize me, let alone remember my name. Keeping my eyes on my work, I rolled my neck. Not my business what the hell Vivian Harlow was doing back in town. It was not my business that Vivian was standing with Missy or that Missy...

Holy shit. Missy *called her out*.

I'd never seen Vivian express any emotions except disgust and superiority, but whatever she and Missy talked about left Vivian feeling remorseful.

All right, Missy laced my coffee with something.

Rubbing my eyes in disbelief, I watched Vivian jump behind the counter with Missy, chatting and... Missy teaching her how to make coffee... What the fuck? Did Vivian understand making coffee was serving others?

So confused by the scene unfolding before me, I didn't notice Ron pass my table and slap a hand on my shoulder.

"All done," she said, sitting across from me and kicking her feet onto the empty chair beside mine. "The air belongs to you again."

I muttered something profane, avoiding the shit-eating grin on her face, and pointed to the counter. "You remember her?"

Ron scrunched her nose like she smelled something offensive. "Of course. You don't forget the girl with her head shoved so far up her ass she could lick her nostrils clean." Ron dropped her head back and cackled.

"I—does that make sense?" I stared at the two unlikely companions, unsure if I was asking about Ron's joke or what I was witnessing.

"You look like a creep." Ron crossed her arms over her chest with a smirk. "That whole 'lumberjack fucked a bear and had a Reed' look isn't helping." She waved her hand at me.

I liked my beard, and she could piss right off. Just because we were friends didn't mean she'd get a weighted opinion about my choices in life.

Veronica Henly and I dated in high school. Our junior year, to be specific, and she was the first woman I'd ever been with. It was an utter failure, but I got a pretty good friend from it. Even if she was one to bust some balls and give me shit about my life. I guess everyone needed a Ron to keep life balanced.

“I thought you liked my beard.” I reluctantly pulled my eyes away from Missy and Vivian and found Ron’s amused face staring back at me.

I swear she could see inside my head, and it was unsettling. I ran a hand over the thick, wiry hairs covering my face.

“No,” Ron corrected. “I said I liked that you are *my* beard.” She kicked a boot against my thigh, her short legs struggling to reach me beneath the table. “It keeps my parents off my back.”

Ron’s parents were ultra-conservative. While Ron was out to those she was close with, she still hadn’t told her family.

I made a sound in the back of my throat, maybe a grunt, and left it at that.

“Maybe she’s here for the reunion?” Ron suggested.

As if Vivian Harlow wanted to attend our ten-year high school reunion. Hopefully not. She’d hated everyone plenty enough back then and punished us for it. We deserved safety in adulthood.

I scrubbed a hand over my face and tried to focus on the work before me. I needed to submit this manuscript, or my editor would have an aneurysm.

“Why would she come back just for that?”

“Really, Reed? To shove in our faces that she’s Vivian Harlow.”

Thinking it over for a minute, I nodded in Vivian's direction. "Look at her. She's behind the counter with Missy, learning to make coffee. What's that about?"

"Probably some sort of prank," Ron answered breezily. "She's going to make a cup of coffee and then jump out with jazz hands and say, 'Psyche! These smooth and unblemished hands don't do peasant work. Fools! I pissed in your coffee!'" She nodded. "Yeah. Undercover Princess."

"Undercover Princess?"

Ron grinned and tapped her index finger on the notepad next to my laptop. "Send that idea to your fancy Hollywood people."

A laugh rumbled low in my chest. "Those 'fancy Hollywood people' are more likely to wipe their ass with my manuscript than produce it."

Ron stood up and stretched. "You have to send it in first."

"If it wasn't so damn loud in here, maybe I could get it done."

"Go home, Reed. Get fiber-optic internet like real people. Then you don't have to work here. You hate being around people, and you hate distractions. What are you even doing here?"

Slamming my laptop shut, I massaged my temples. She had a point, but I'd keep that to myself.

"You're right," I agreed. "I'm going home."

After collecting my things, I walked out with Ron, stopping for one last look as I left. Vivian chewed her bottom lip, concentrating on frothing milk. Completely unaware I was watching her.

Guess people don't really change.



As the days went on, I stayed in the cafe longer than usual, hovering for hours beyond my typical schedule, and it wasn't shitty internet to blame.

It was a burning curiosity, like watching one of those reality TV shows where ordinary people get dropped naked in the middle of a rainforest and try to survive. And like the discomfort of swatting flies from sunburnt skin or stumbling barefoot over unfamiliar terrain, Vivian was woefully unprepared for whatever she'd signed up for.

The work itself wasn't the issue, but the steady stream of customers who recognized her was far more precarious. She wasn't exactly friendly, but she wasn't rude either.

Sometimes she gave a clipped smile or, more generously, a neutral face. I couldn't blame her. Watching people flock into the cafe to verify that Vivian Harlow was serving coffee was almost painful.

Even with puckered disapproval, Vivian was beautiful. She still wore her hair long, a soft honey color that probably shined prettily in the sun. Her eyes, brown with those bursts of green and gold, were still just as wide and observing. The sharp



ridges of her cheeks had filled in with age, and her body had filled out, too.

There hadn't been a time when Vivian wasn't attractive, but now she looked like a *woman*, which made her divine.

Not that I cared.

She'd always be that same stuck-up, conceited, hubristic snob who thought she ruled the entire world because she was better than the rest of us for simply having stellar genes and the good fortune of a symmetrical face.

Vivian had spent years showing her true colors, and even though she'd had one moment of gray in my life, it didn't erase the darkness she shadowed upon the world.

"Should I start charging you rent?" Missy stood next to me with a coffee pot. She raised her eyebrows to offer a refill, and I slid my mug over with a grunt.

"You've been in here more than usual, Reed."

She left the observation open-ended, and I focused on the ended.

Missy rested the coffee pot on her hip as she shifted her weight and glanced at my laptop. "What are you working on?"

"Googling how to murder," I mumbled, running the pad of my thumb along my bottom lip to catch my smile and keep it down.

She nodded. “I’d have thought with all the bodies you have buried on your property that you would already know how to get the job done.”

I smiled up at Missy. “Careful, Mis, you learn too many of my secrets, and I’ll invite you over.”

Dropping her head back, Missy barked a laugh that caught Vivian’s attention briefly before she turned back to the customer.

“Well, first, if you invite me over, you won’t have to go to the trouble of murdering me because I’ll have already died from shock.”

She was on to something. I’d always felt a need for privacy in my space. Peace. Calm. Growing up, I got little of it, but I could create boundaries as an adult.

Not that I had a problem with people in my space. I was just protective of it.

The boys were just about the only people I invited over, and even that was rare with our split lives. My mom was my only other house guest, which was suddenly feeling very pathetic.

“Second?” I asked, moving the conversation along.

Missy shrugged. “Second, I’d love to learn your secrets, given you know so many of mine.”

I chuckled at that. Thanks to my keen eye and suave matchmaking, Missy and Ron had been dating for several months.

Okay, more like Ron's aggressive confidence and Missy's easy embrace of others. But given they were both my friends first and independently, I thought it had something to do with me.

"I have no secrets." I held up my hands.

She pointed at my laptop. "Except what you're working on."

That earned an enormous sigh. "I'm not hiding my work, Mis. I'm a writer. We are bitterly uncertain of everything except that what we're working on is shit. It's not about secrets. It's about kindness in keeping the trash on my side of the street."

Missy clucked her tongue. "I see you're in a good mood today. But tell me for one minute that your last book wasn't a roaring success, and I'll eat this apron." She tugged on the small rectangle of fabric covering the front of her dress.

"Bon appétit," I muttered, even though she was right.

My last book had done well enough to allow me to work on my current project with a financial cushion from this book's advance. There were talks of turning it into a screenplay and some back and forth with pushy studio heads who wanted to make adaptations I refused.

I might view my writing as trash, but it was *my* flaming garbage heap.

"Don't use a pen name for this one," she suggested. "Let this entire town know what a literary genius we have sipping

coffee all day with that bright smile hidden under all that *beard*.” She emphasized the word, like the beard’s presence annoyed her.

“I like my beard,” I said brusquely. It seemed to be a topic of conversation lately. Probably because it was so impressive.

Collecting my things, I drained my mug in one long pull. Missy grimaced, and I recognized how uncivilized I looked. But fuck these people.

“I’m going home.”

Vivian stood at the counter with a tight smile and exasperated eyes as she waited for Mr. Schumer to order his afternoon tea. She wasn’t exactly patient, but she gave him time to consider every option on the menu before he ordered the same earl grey tea he’d gotten daily for years.

If I squinted hard enough, I could pretend someone else was standing behind that counter in regular blue jeans and a modest high-cut t-shirt. Without miniskirts, tight tops, and layers of makeup, Vivian almost looked like she fit in.

Following my gaze, Missy gave me a pat on the shoulder. “She *almost* seems like a normal person, huh?”

I shook my head, bringing my eyes back to Missy. “Nothing about her was or is normal.”

Missy tilted her head to the side. “I don’t know, Reed. She’s Vivian Harlow, but she’s also not.”

“A tiger doesn’t change its stripes, no matter how much you want it to be a house cat. The day it does? *I’ll* eat that apron.”

Missy's eyebrows raised high on her forehead, a smile spreading across her face as if she knew something I didn't.

"Grilled, boiled, or fried. You let me know how you want it."  
She winked and sashayed to another table.

Fucking Missy. I loved her. Usually.

"You know what, Mis? Come on by my house after work."

Her middle finger shot up as she ignored me, and while I didn't have Missy's attention at that moment, suddenly, I had Vivian's.

Curious, like she was trying to put the situation together, Vivian looked from Missy to me and back to Missy. Something was in her expression, but I knew damn well it wasn't recognition.

And that was fine because, as far as I was concerned, it was time to get fiber-optic internet.

# Four

## *Reed*

I stared at the blinking cursor, willing myself to *just fucking finish already*.

It shouldn't take this long to finish a draft. It shouldn't take this much mental energy to shift my focus to the stark white page before me with the black cursor waiting expectantly for *something*.

I had nothing. Nothing but a story from long ago. So long, I wondered if it had happened at all. So long, the bones of it had turned to dust, and the heart rotted out.

Kids weren't renowned for their stellar memories. Maybe I'd made the whole thing up and got lost in a daydream, as I was prone to do. As a kid, I preferred to disappear into my imagination because the world around me was unstable, unsettled, and unsafe.

That only shifted at the end of kindergarten, when I took on three best friends—who were still my best. Three guys who

understood what it felt like to be scared or vulnerable or hardened by the realities of a home worth escaping.

We couldn't voice it then, too young and having no context for it, but everything good in my life was because of that bond with those friends.

And it was a villain who'd been the catalyst for bringing us together.

I doubted Vivian remembered. I doubted she'd even care if I were to remind her of it. But for one moment on one afternoon, the mean girl had been the savior and done better for me than anyone else at that point.

Tommy Falchuck, a piece of shit fifth grader, had made life a living hell for me in kindergarten. Why? I could only guess. He was opportunistic, I suppose. I was small for my age, quiet, and not likely to defend myself.

It wasn't the first time he'd messed with me, and on a day just shy of the last day of school, Tommy decided it was the right time to block the kindergarten bathroom. Standing in front of the door, his body—which seemed massive at the time—stretched frame to frame. Arms wide and leaning with a sneer, he said, “Sorry. Bathrooms are closed.”

My cheeks heated as I balled my fists. “They're not,” I said softly, nearly bursting at the seams.

I'd spent all year scared of the school bathrooms. It was weird and irrational, and I knew it even as I prepared for first

grade when I'd have to leave the kindergarten bathroom behind. I'd hold it all day if I could.

That day, I couldn't. The weather was warm in June, and we'd had P.E. outside. I drank my entire water bottle.

"Oh. My bad. Come on in, then." Tommy made no move to let me pass and gave me no space to get by.

It was a challenge. Usually, I ignored them. I couldn't, though, not that day. I wished I'd taken the risk of dehydration, but it was too late for that.

I did my best to muster a forceful presence, puffing out my chest and lowering my voice. "Let me through."

Tommy just laughed and stood there. He stood there until I peed my pants. Then he laughed harder.

"You're a jerk!"

It wasn't me who'd said it.

Spinning around, I saw the narrowed eyes of a girl who looked to be on the warpath. Her blonde hair shone with the light of the sunshine as she stood in the hallway and leaned against the window bay across from the bathroom. With the hazy glow, she looked like an angel.

Even then, I knew Vivian was anything but. Thankfully, she was in Mrs. Domingo's class and not mine.

My hands darted to cover the front of my shorts, darkened with the stain of my piss. I wanted to cry. God, I wanted to cry. Her eyes flickered to my hands, then back to Tommy.



Saying nothing, she pushed off from the window, walked up to him, and kicked him right in the balls. Tommy fell so hard on his knees that I heard the crack as he hit the floor.

Vivian gestured to the bathroom. "It's open now."

Tommy, groaning, got on his feet, scurrying away with a different kind of embarrassment.

My eyes were probably wide enough to roll out of my skull, but I hurried inside, unsure what to do. There were no hand dryers, and my shorts were wet. I couldn't go back to class, so I hid in the bathroom for the last twenty minutes of the day.

I heard the halls flood with excited chatter and shuffling steps when the bell rang. Kids were going home. Happily. Me? I would have preferred to live in that bathroom rather than go home, even with piss-stained shorts.

The bathroom stayed empty as the halls quieted. Until two kids came in. I recognized them from Mrs. Domingo's class. Noah was the leader of recess kickball, but Ty was the best at it.

Standing pressed against the sink to hide my crotch, I stayed quiet. Noah took a step toward me, shucking a bag off his shoulder. It was my bag.

"Here," he said, dropping it by my feet. "Vivian asked me to bring this to you. She got it from your classroom. She said you might need some help."

Swallowing, I nodded and slowly reached for it, too stunned to remember to hide my shorts. Ty's eyes shifted precisely

where I didn't want them to go, and I only noticed when he bit the inside of his cheek and glanced away.

Noah, looking between us, saw what Ty had seen. He puffed a breath and scratched the back of his head. My cheeks got even hotter. I wished I could hide. Hide my shorts, hide the embarrassment written all over my face. Hide so that I merely faded from existence.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Noah snapped his fingers. "Be right back."

He disappeared, leaving his backpack behind and his dirty Converse squeaking against the tile floor.

It was seconds before Ty gave me an easy smile and cracked a joke about wet pants. He was trying to make me feel better. I wasn't sure if I could. His playful smile slid into a hardened expression when I explained what had happened.

Noah returned, a soccer jersey balled in his hands. "It's not long enough to hide your shorts, but you can tie it around the front. It will look weird, but probably better than that." He gestured to the stain.

Ty chewed on his bottom lip. "I hate Tommy Falchuck. He tripped me at lunch, and I skinned my knee."

Noah nodded. "Yeah. He shoved me last week, and I hit the flagpole. Bruised my elbow."

"Too bad he's so much bigger than us," I said softly. Even with the silent bathroom and an echo from the tiles, it was hard to hear me.

Noah chuckled. “Yeah. But one day, we’ll get taller and can punch him right in the nose.” He slammed his fist into his palm. It was an empty threat. “I won’t be six forever.”

“Sucks being small.” And it did. I was one of the smallest in our grade and the youngest.

Ty hopped from foot to foot, dancing excitedly. “I know someone who isn’t small.” He clapped a hand on my shoulder, pushing me along as I tied Noah’s jersey around my waist. “Let’s go find Ezra.”

We did, and later that afternoon, we went to the park where Tommy Falchuck was riding his bike with the girl he had a crush on. Somehow, he was managing a smile instead of his shitty sneer. But he lost that when the four of us pushed him off his bike and bloodied his nose, running like the wind to Ty’s house before Tommy could recover and hunt us down.

The four of us stuck together after that day. It was safer in a group, and Tommy couldn’t retaliate before the summer break. We stayed together even after that summer—and all the summers since.

After that day, I had a place to escape that wasn’t just in my head.

I still sometimes wondered what would have happened if Vivian hadn’t taken down Tommy for me. If she hadn’t gone to my classroom to get my bag and then asked Noah and Ty to bring it to me and help me.

If I'd been forced to walk back to my classroom with embarrassment dribbling down the front of my shorts and humiliation glowing on my face. Would I have ever outlived that?

If I hadn't befriended the boys, bonded from the start.

Groaning, I scrubbed my hands over my face. Just because Vivian helped set me on a path I was grateful for didn't mean I owed her a goddamn thing.

# Five

## *Vivian*

**S**urely, there was a sharper knife than the stack of plastic butter knives on the counter, and when I found it, I would happily start swinging.

“Wow,” yet another person said. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

I bit back a retort, allowing a thin line of my lips in response to his surprise instead. “Yep. I didn’t either.”

Lily, the barista on shift with me that afternoon, shuffled behind me as she prepped the espresso bar with drinks for Carson, humming with a smile. She and Carson had a running bet on how often this conversation would occur during an eight-hour shift.

“Can I get you anything?” I drawled, desperately willing my eyes to stay forward-facing rather than rolling back into my skull the way they were desperate to do.

*Just place your order, please. Stop staring at me and reminding me that my life is shit.*

Despite her compassionate and mature reaction to my appearance in her coffee shop, I was confident putting me on as cashier was Missy's sly punishment for my past sins.

"It's just, we all thought you'd be..." he trailed off, like they always did, waiting for me to finish that thought.

This had been a super fun game all week.

"I'd be?" I liked to leave it open. It was more amusing that way.

*We thought you'd be famous.*

*We thought you'd be married to someone famous.*

*We thought you'd be some powerhouse CEO.*

*We thought you'd be an influencer on Instagram, traveling the world.*

A truly missed calling.

But this time, the man in front of me surprised me by finishing not with what he thought I *would* be, but with what he thought I *wouldn't*.

"We thought you wouldn't be back in Clear Lake, taking orders and fucking up coffee."

Okay, that one hurt. My espresso pulls had significantly improved since my first day.

Angry Man looked about my age, with dark blue eyes like sapphires and dark roots at the base of his shaved head, but

like all the others, I didn't recognize him.

While I might not have known him, he probably knew everyone else, and word spread like a fire of embarrassment in this small town. Rather than burn, I held my chin up high. Fuck these assholes.

Clenching my jaw, I nodded. "Mhm. You, me, and everyone in this entire town. What do you want?"

"Nothing," he said with a sneer, stepping out of the line. "Just to see that the pathetic rumors were true."

My mouth dropped. "What the hell?"

"I was five-foot-two until I hit a growth spurt our senior year. You made sure everyone called me Small Fry from freshman year until I shot up, and once I did? It was too late. The damage had been done."

He slapped his hand on the counter, knocking over the tip jar of change that had grown little in the last three hours of my shift, despite a steady line of customers.

Closing my eyes, I exhaled a long breath. "Daniel Fry," I said with a nod, opening my eyes to his angry face. "Yes. Sorry about that."

His eyes burned with the heat of Hades' balls.

"You should be. You were a miserable bitch then, and I'm glad you're still one."

Instead of smashing a napkin dispenser over his head like I wanted to, I smiled at him. Raising my middle finger and

slowly tracing it over my lips as if applying lipstick, I puckered up and blew him a kiss.

“You’re a real charmer. I’m sorry I was a bitch back then, but I see you’ve taken over the role these days.”

Danny glared at me as he stalked off. I kept my head high, pretending the encounter hadn’t shaken me.

The next customer stepped up—a woman with a cute pixie cut and dark features. I didn’t recognize her, but as I learned, that meant little.

“Hi,” I greeted. “What can I get you?”

“Wow,” she started. “I didn’t expect to see you here...”

I never found the knives, which I now thought Missy was purposefully hiding, but I survived the rest of my shift.

Even if my dignity did not.



“You’re lucky they didn’t shiv you,” Jeremy said, the deep timbre of his voice filling my ear with a welcomed comfort.

He wasn’t wrong, but more importantly, he wasn’t insulting me just because he was right.

“Well, they’ve been coming out with torches and pitchforks all week.” I collapsed on the double bed in the guest room of my mom’s house. Lifting onto my elbows, I switched the phone to my opposite shoulder. “And you know what, Jerm? I deserve it.”



There wasn't much in the guest room besides a bed. There were no pictures on the wall, no ottoman or sitting chair in the vast space that could easily accommodate more. Not even a dresser to store my clothes.

All cream-colored—linens, walls, curtains, rug—and low lighting. It was like a weird sensory deprivation experiment to drive guests crazy. It was also so totally my mother. Unaware or uncaring about how others may experience comfort or anticipate their needs.

“You don't deserve that, Viv,” he said. “Not like that. Maybe some grumbling, but not these kinds of bellows. Not now. There's an expiration date on this shit, you know?”

I tucked my legs underneath me.

“Joel Stiner is the boy who got a wad of my Bubble Yum in his hair after he wouldn't let me cheat off his test in algebra. He had to shave his hair, and his head was a weird, lumpy shape. The poor guy had to wait *months* to look normal again.” Jeremy laughed. “He came in to say hi. He wasn't mean, but he was gloating.”

“Nothing to gloat about, Viv. You're working. Nothing embarrassing about that.”

Jeremy wasn't wrong, but I ignored him and kept on.

“Cory Covey came in with his gorgeous wife. Probably to rub in my face that I told the entire school that he was the sloppiest kisser ever.” I couldn't hold my laughter. “My

besties, Taylor and Ashley, called him the human Saint Bernard.”

Jeremy laughed, too. “That one’s not so bad. It sounds like things worked out for him.”

I continued down the list. “Alicia Montgomery was the girl I teased relentlessly for going to fat camp in middle school. She’s a babe now, by the way.” I looked down at my leggings and how the elastic band rolled over my stomach, giving me a few belly waves. “And look at me.”

Jeremy sighed impatiently. “Look at you. You look good. Don’t do that shit. You girls and your garbage attitudes. Ari pulls this same stunt, and she’s gorgeous. You’re curvaceous now, and last I checked, you still had men wanting to take you home from the bar.”

“Because they thought I was a TINA,” I said matter-of-factly.

Jeremy laughed. “You weren’t a TINA.”

“I *was*,” I complained. “I *am*.”

TINA—There Is No Alternative. It was a shitty acronym we used at the bar on nights when our humanity was running low. And unfortunately, I must have been one for the men who tried to take me home.

“You’re pouting,” Jeremy said.

“I’m not—”

“You *are*. You let that asshole Dustin make you feel like shit for years after you let your parents make you feel like shit for years. Not to mention all the *other* men you let make you feel like shit. There’s value to you being you, Viv, whatever package that comes in. And your package isn’t even damaged, okay? So shut up. Looks are just one part of a person, not even the most important.”

“I’m not a good person, either. I never had much else to offer.”

“You’re working on it,” he said, with a hint of humor. He couldn’t be bothered to appease me—that’s how I knew Jeremy was my best friend.

“Oh, fuck off,” I bit, suddenly not missing him.

Jeremy chuckled. “Hey, Ari is coming in right now, but do me a favor?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “Don’t beat up on my friend, okay? It sounds like everyone else is doing a good enough job of it.”

We said goodbye, and I hung up with the only person whose phone number I had—and used—for social relationships. It felt sad and deserving. An entire week of reminders of what a bitch I’d been growing up wasn’t doing much for morale.

“Vivian!” my mother’s high-pitched call echoed through the hallway, an excitement in its wake.

I didn’t like the sound of it, and I was tempted to throw the blankets over myself and hide. Nothing good came from my

mother being excited. Nothing. She didn't get excited for the usual reasons.

She didn't get excited when my cheer team won the state championship. She didn't get excited when I earned student of the month. She didn't get excited when I won the second-grade spelling bee. She didn't get excited when I got my first promotion or was offered an exciting opportunity as a consultant for one of Seattle's most anticipated nightclubs.

Anything that excited me hadn't excited her.

What *did* excite her was when I was voted prom queen. When strangers stopped to tell her I was *so pretty*. When I got mono junior year and lost ten pounds.

So when my mother got excited, it was for reasons that weren't in my best interest. Though in her warped reality, they were in *her* best interest.

"Vivian!" she repeated. "I know you're back there. Your car is in the driveway."

Taking a deep breath, I presented myself for execution.

"Yes?" I asked, opening the door.

Shoving past me without invitation, she let herself into the room, settling on the bed. Her bright eyes sparkled with a look of utter joy, which meant whatever she wanted to talk about would make me want to gouge my eyes out with my thumbs.

I flexed them, ready for action.

“You’ll never believe who I ran into today,” she said breathlessly.

“If it’s not a long line of people who hate your guts, then I’m not interested.”

She continued, ignoring me. “I ran into Jonathan Campbell!” She clasped her perfectly manicured hands to her cheeks, eyes wide with surprise, as if I’d told her *I* had run into my old high school boyfriend.

It wasn’t eye-gouging news, so I let my anxious thumbs settle at my side, waiting to see if she’d add anything to that story. A run-in was probably benign.

Jonathan and I dated off and on in high school. He was the captain of the football *and* basketball teams, handsome, and living with some real big dick energy—though his dick was rather average.

We dated because we were supposed to date. Life and social norms dictated that the two most attractive and popular people would come together in an expected union.

Honestly, I don’t think we’d ever actually liked one another. Probably because we were so painfully similar in all the worst ways.

“It’s funny,” she started, beginning a story that would not be funny. No story that followed the start of “It’s funny” was ever actually funny.

“I was having lunch at Ruby’s Diner, and he came in on *his* break.”

See? Not funny.

“I think you mean ‘what a coincidence,’” I mumbled, but my mom ignored me.

“He recognized me! Can you believe it?” she gushed like she was twenty years younger, hopeful he’d take her home.

She probably was hopeful he’d take her home anyway.

“I can believe it. We spent plenty of time hanging out here.”

My mom fluffed her coiffed bleached locks with a satisfied look. “Men always remember me.”

My stomach rolled with the threat of reproducing my dinner. “Yes. Anyway, is that all? You ran into Jonathan Campbell at Ruby’s, and he recognized you?”

She could always drag out a story, my mom. It kept the attention on her longer.

Her smile shifted into a scowl. The same one she’d passed on to me. It made me pause to consider whether it looked any better on my face. Somehow, I doubted it.

“*No*, that’s not all. Jesus, Vivian. You can be so rude sometimes, always interrupting and rushing me. I don’t think you listen to what I say, let alone care.”

I didn’t.

“I’d like to hear the rest,” I lied.

Her smile returned. “Well, I mentioned you were back in Clear Lake for an extended vacation. As it turns out, he’s single and would love to catch up. So, he’ll be coming by

tomorrow evening to take you out. He wants to take you to *Chateau Perle*.” She clasped her hands, a giddy shimmy of her shoulders to follow. “That’s so fancy and *expensive*.”

Neither mattered to me, but they mattered to my mother.

Nope, that run-in was *not* benign. It was malignant, like cancer, and just like a disease trying to destroy me, my mother was happily invading my life, orchestrating a slow death.

“No,” I said flatly.

Her shoulders stilled, and her hands fell into her lap as her jaw dropped equally fast. “Excuse me?”

“No. I don’t want to go on a date with my high school boyfriend to a fancy restaurant. You should have asked me first or given him my number to ask me and let me work out the details if I wanted to go.”

My mother was never good with boundaries, so it’s not like I expected these things.

Rather than get angry, my mother’s eyes welled with tears, and her lip trembled. *Oh, God*. That reaction was so much worse than her ire. The anger passed quickly. Her crying lasted *hours*.

“I do everything for you, Vivian. *Everything*. And you don’t appreciate it. No matter how tirelessly I work for your happiness.” She sniffled, running her thumbs under her eyes to catch any leaks.

*Hold your boundaries*. I could *hear* my therapist’s voice in my head. It didn’t matter, though. Holding boundaries was

easier when I was away from my mother. Being in that room with her transported me back to childhood.

“Fine, I’ll go,” I conceded. Because honestly? It was just easier. Besides, a free dinner at a fancy place wasn’t the worst way to spend an evening. It’s not like Jonathan and I were the same people as ten years ago.

How bad could it be?



# Six

## *Vivian*

I couldn't believe I was doing it, but there I was, sitting across from Mr. Captain of Life Itself, and he... had not changed.

“The hardest part of owning your own business is finding qualified employees who can do the job,” Jonathan said, pushing around his salad like he was trying to move it onto my plate.

“There’s a real struggle to find good salespeople. You need charisma, the ability to read a room, and a sharp eye for an upsell.”

Finishing the last bite of my gnocchi, I wiped my mouth with my napkin and nodded. “Sounds like there’s an overlap in skill set with bartending. I swear, I had to—”

“Yeah, it’s a struggle and requires a special skill set. It took me years to build the dealership into what it is today,” he

interrupted, glancing down at my empty plate with a look I couldn't read.

Nope, he had not changed. Just as blustering and self-centered as the last time I saw him nearly ten years ago. At least he wasn't mean anymore. It wasn't like he was being a jerk. He just really, really liked himself.

Unfortunately, he was still unfairly handsome, giving him a solid footing for self-absorption.

While he wasn't mean, he didn't leave any room for my contributions. Eventually, I gave up, eating in silence with a perfected nod as I looked around the restaurant to focus on anything other than his droning.

"I still see Taylor Lamington sometimes. She said you two haven't talked in a while," Jonathan said. "She said she hasn't seen Ashely in years either. The three of you were like sisters. You should call her."

"I tried—"

"She's working as a vet tech over in Evans Ridge. Studying to be a veterinarian."

I listened to him go on about my best friend from high school, though *friend* was a loose term. Taylor had been my frenemy. We were always in competition, but acted like we adored one another. Jonathan knew that. He'd been witness to it, encouraged it.

The pictures, the note passing, and the constant game of one-upmanship were fuel to get out of bed from thirteen to

eighteen.

It'd been no secret that Jonathan wanted to fuck Taylor throughout high school. Ashley, too. He probably had, and no one told me about it.

“Do you remember when Travis took that ball to the face? He was so angry, but the idiot should have known I had the best arm and aim.”

Jonathan continued with whatever glory days high school memory reel was taking place in his mind, and I wondered what people saw when they looked at us.

“Yes.” I sat back in my seat and reached for my wine. “He was such an idiot.”

Jonathan sipped on his tequila as his eyes observed me over the lip of his glass. “We always got along so well, Viv,” he said, his voice dropping an octave.

With his thick blonde hair, clipped and neat, light blue eyes, and full lips, I could imagine that move was very sexy to many women.

My libido wasn't immune to grand gestures of hotness, but Jonathan's look? It wasn't one of lust or even attraction. It was the look of a man who wanted to take home something he could say he conquered in some quest to prove he could.

I knew that look. Any invitation wasn't about his desire for me. We had no chemistry, but that wouldn't stop his pursuit.

He'd probably put his hand up my dress when we got in the car to entice me to return to his place. He lived somewhere

nice and wanted to show off some things—a big TV, fancy art, a hot tub, or whatever.

He'd make a move immediately, cornering me because he thought I was desperate for him. He might finger me for a few minutes but not bring me to orgasm because his impatience would get the better of him, and he'd fuck me with his pants still on.

Then he'd send me home, proud of himself for railing his old high school girlfriend and bragging about it with his friends while simultaneously putting me down for everything he didn't like about me.

“High school was a long time ago,” I said, which was my best attempt at politeness.

Jonathan nodded, swirling his whisky and taking another sip with his eyes on me. “It was,” he agreed. “We're both grown up now.” He set his glass down and leaned forward. “Which means we can do grown-up things.”

That line probably worked for many women.

“It's been nice catching up.” I gestured for the waiter to get our bill.

Unfortunately, my polite brush-off only seemed to give Jonathan the idea that I was getting the bill so I could hurry home with him.

“You sure you don't mind driving twenty minutes back to my mom's house? I can always take an Uber if it's more convenient.”

I tried to reset expectations. A woman down to bang would not offer to put herself in an Uber.

“I’ve got you.” He winked, paying the bill and standing to pull my chair for me.

A few minutes later, a valet brought the car around. A Mercedes-Benz S-class that reeked of Jonathan’s cologne, like maybe he’d doused the seats along with his suit. Letting myself in, I leaned against the passenger window and crossed my legs.

The black cocktail dress my mother came home with was shorter than I liked, but given I’d packed no formal clothes, I had agreed to wear it. My closed legs, however, screamed anything but agreement.

“Thank you for the dinner,” I said, breaking the awkward silence between us. “It’s nice to see you’re doing so well.”

That was mostly a lie. I couldn’t care less how he was doing after such a disappointing dinner, but the empty air between us made me uncomfortable.

He hummed. “You too.”

Interesting. I told him nothing about myself or how I was doing.

“Me too?” I couldn’t keep quiet. I was many things, not all great, but demure was not one of them. I had reached my limit. “You didn’t ask me shit about myself.”

Jonathan scoffed, squeezing the steering wheel. “I did. I asked you plenty.”

He didn't take his eyes off the road, the long stretch of highway illuminated only by the headlights of his dick-mobile and a half moon. The sky was clear, and I imagined the stars would be visible out here in the county where homes were sparse and traffic non-existent.

"Oh, yeah?" I crossed my arms and glared at him. "What do I do for a living?"

He furrowed his brows in concentration, and I had to give him credit. He was finally attempting to think of me. Nothing registered because he hadn't bothered to ask, and when I'd tried to tell him, he'd talked over me.

"Listen." I softened my voice. "I'm not mad. It's fine. We don't have chemistry anymore. I appreciate the catch-up, but let's not pretend this will be anything more than that."

I'd intended to give him an out. For us both to acknowledge that this date wasn't actually a date. We were both curious to see one another, and now we had. But Jonathan didn't just want an out. He wanted a gun-blazing, blistering ending.

"You think I'd want to take you out again? Or even take you home and fuck you?"

Though my words had been an attempt to smooth over any discomfort with the evening, his were intended to hurt me.

"You're crazy. I wouldn't take you home. Not like that." To add insult to injury, he ran his eyes disapprovingly over my body.

“Christ,” I muttered, smoothing my hands over my face.  
“Yeah, okay, Jonathan. Thanks for being a real stand-up guy.”

He snickered. “You’re still a bitch. You’re just not a hot one anymore.” He glanced at me, the look so brief it was more offensive than his shit attitude. “Tits are still nice, though.”

“I *am* hot,” I snapped, whipping my head to look at him.  
“And I’m half a bitch these days. So you can fuck right off.”

Jonathan didn’t just slow the car. He pumped the brakes and brought it to a screeching halt as he turned to me with wild eyes. I recognized that look. I’d rejected him, and then I stood up to him, and he wanted to punish me for it to make himself feel like a man again.

“Your heart is just as ugly as you. You were lucky to get that face, Vivian, and it’s all you have left because you’re a bitch. A chubby bitch.”

I rolled my eyes and shifted my body against the door to get as far from him as possible. “As if it hurts my feelings that my curves offend you. Please. You’re just pissed you can’t handle a real woman. You need an insecure girl who believes the shit you spout to keep from recognizing what a pile of shit *you* are.”

It was a bit of blustering. I wasn’t necessarily as confident as I wanted to be, but I was petty as fuck, and I’d choke on any lie if it meant cutting him off at the knees.

His knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel even tighter. “You were lucky I took you out tonight, even

though I'm punching below my weight class. I just felt sorry for your pathetic mother."

"Your weight class?" I shrieked, flames licking my chest angrily for agreeing to this stupid date. "You're an even bigger bitch than me!"

Fumbling with the door, I flung it open and scrambled out. "And my mother *is* pathetic, but not as much as me for thinking that maybe you'd grown up in the last ten—"

He didn't even let me finish before speeding off, the door of his Mercedes slamming shut with the wind of his escape.

"Years," I finished.

Watching the taillights disappear down a dark road did little to settle me. I was angry, yes. Freaking *livid*. But I was also five or six miles from my mother's house on a county road at ten o'clock at night. *And my purse was in that asshole's car.*

I groaned, nearly dropping to my knees. I didn't even have a jacket, also in that asshole's car, and the heels I wore wouldn't allow for a comfortable walk back.

*I deserve this.*

Stretching my arms wide and spinning in a circle, I gave an unhinged smile to the night sky. "You happy, universe? Are you happy? Spank me with a little karma while you're *fucking me over?*"

Silence. Nothing but silence.



A slight breeze kicked up, rustling the trees in the woods along the road, and suddenly, there wasn't silence around me. The forest hummed to life as bushes stirred, owls hooted, and leaves crinkled. Maybe a twig snapped.

Either way, there were *things* in that darkness, and I had little doubt they were hungry things, and I was sitting out like a buffet.

Kicking off my heels, I gripped one in each of my hands to use as a weapon when my nightmares came to life. Then I started the long walk to my mother's house—the ultimate walk of shame. I wondered if she'd still be up in the couple of hours it would take me to make it back.

Great. Just great. Plenty of time to beat myself up for my shit life choices.

When I caught sight of two tiny pinpricks of light in the distance, I wasn't sure if relief or panic hit my chest first. Those pinpricks grew in size as they hurried toward me, the headlights of a car that would either be my salvation or my death. I wasn't sure which I was praying harder for.

I waved it down, heels over my head, jumping around on the shoulder of the road so it wouldn't miss me.

The roar of a pickup truck greeted me first, its gray body next, looking like a shark in a dark sea. Coming to a slow roll, it didn't stop until after it passed me. For a moment, I didn't think it would stop at all.

Jogging to the passenger door, I opened it, looking inside the cab.

“Nope.” I slammed the door without getting in. “I’m not ready to die.”

I turned and walked in the opposite direction.



I thought he would let me go, but the driver’s side door creaked, and I watched a grizzly bear crawl out of the truck’s cab.

“What the fuck is that about?” he growled, doing no favors for his image as a beast who might devour me.

I pointed a shoe at him. “I’m not ready to die tonight, and you look like the kind of man who will take me to an abandoned barn, murder me, and use my skin to fashion a lamp for your living room. No, thank you.” I continued walking backward on the balls of my feet, not putting my back to him. “You look like the man to do it.”

“You’re on the highway late at night, barefoot, hardly dressed, and turning your nose up at rides? Seems I don’t want to take you anywhere, anyway. You’re clearly crazy.” He went to get back in his truck.

“Hey!” I cried. “I’m not crazy! You’re scary.”

And he kind of was with those big dark eyes and that dark hair, long enough to roll to the base of his neck. An equally dark beard that hid his face wasn’t improving the seriousness

of the situation. The man was just... dark. He looked like a fugitive.

He smiled, his beard breaking to make space for teeth white enough to see from this distance. At least he had good dental hygiene. And maybe a nice smile.

Then again, so did Ted Bundy.

“You think I’m scary?” He crossed his arms. “Imagine what’s waiting for you out there.” He nodded to the woods. “Goodnight.”

As if on cue, a screeching echoed in the distance, like some small animal meeting its demise. I hated nature. It was the worst—second only to my imagination.

“Fine!” I huffed, stopping him as he was halfway in his truck. “You can give me a ride if you don’t murder me.”

I walked to the passenger side door and reluctantly opened it. Grizzly Man now sat in the driver’s seat, looking at me like he was equal parts annoyed and amused.

“Wow.” He scratched his beard. “You’re awfully generous to allow me to give you a ride when you have no other options.”

“Yeah, well. You’re a TINA.” I scooted into the seat but kept my shoes in my hands.

He shook his head and sighed. “I don’t know what that means. Where are you going?”

“Portland.” I pointed a heel south. “If we hurry, we can get there by daybreak.”

His mouth dropped. “*Portland?*” He shook his head. “No fucking way.”

“Fine,” I conceded. “Then to Fire Side, please. It’s where my mom lives, and I’m staying there.”

He said nothing, flipping a three-point turn on the empty highway, heading back in the direction he’d been coming from. After a minute, he glanced over. “You were kidding about Portland.”

“I was,” I confirmed with a nod. “But honestly, it doesn’t sound so bad right now. Going to my mom’s house is another level of Hell, like nine circles of it, and explaining my night to her might kill me.” I thought it over. “You know what? Take me to Mexico. I’ll start over.”

“You wouldn’t make it long. What are you doing out here by yourself?”

“It’s funny,” I started, even though it was not. “Date turned bad. He left me on the side of the road, my purse is in his car, and I’m the hothead who didn’t think through any of it before I got out of the car.” I smiled and batted my eyes at him. “So yes, to your earlier point, I am crazy.”

“Suspected as much,” he said with a low huff, reaching over to turn on the radio. “Pick what you want.”

I found the jazz station and turned it up. Grizzly Man grimaced but didn’t fight me on it.

“What’s your name?” I asked, looking at his profile. “I’ve seen you at the coffee shop a lot.”

That observation caused him to stiffen. “Yeah, I work there when I need reliable internet.”

Who the hell didn’t have reliable internet? Maybe he was a monster.

“Your name?”

His jaw clicked. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

*Shit.* I looked over my shoulder into the truck bed. It was difficult to tell, but I didn’t think any shovels or pitchforks were back there.

“I do not, but in my defense, I don’t recall ever going to school with Sasquatch. I’m guessing you looked different back then.”

“It took me a while to get the beard. I’m Reed.”

“Reed.” I mulled it over. “I’m Vivian.”

He nodded. “I know who you are.”

His eyes stayed on the road, though the implication of his words rolled along my skin. Judging by the impatient tone, I guessed he could have qualified that statement with an, “And yet I picked you up anyway.”

“Swamp Nerd,” he said after a long beat. “You called me Swamp Nerd.”

My stomach dropped just as my hands flew over my face. “Oh God,” I groaned, slamming my eyes shut.

Vague memories of a scrawny kid sprang to mind. We had to have been sophomores just before lunch one year. It wasn’t

junior year because Charissa Belflower was still a head cheerleader. She'd just told me that Gary Barnett complained I was too heavy for lifts, and she asked me to skip lunch.

I tried to think back to that day, but I remembered his voice more than seeing his face.

*"You're better than that. You know you are."*

He'd said that to me when Jonathan and I teased him—bullied him. He was probably the only person who'd ever said something like that to me. Nobody thought I was better than that. Nobody expected me to be.

It confused me and made me feel ashamed. Maybe for the first time.

"I didn't recognize you with the beard. I'm sorry," I said, meaning it. "You didn't deserve that."

"It doesn't bother me."

It should bother him, but I would not be the one to convince him of it. Instead, I let the rest of the drive to my mom's house transpire silently. It wasn't awkward, and even though the smooth jazz made my teeth grind, I was glad for the ride.

"Three houses in." I pointed halfway down the block. "The one with the white Land Rover in the driveway." He looked at me, raising his eyebrows. "My shitty Honda Civic is that silver one on the street."

Reed pulled along the curb, idling the truck as I gathered my shoes from the floor. He jutted his chin toward the house before I could thank him for the ride.

“Looks like you broke curfew.”

Turning, I saw the wild eyes of my mother, three feet from the truck, with her arms crossed tightly over her chest and her frown so deep it was heading for her toes.

“Oh, great,” I muttered, pushing my door open and dropping out of the high cab. “Well, um. Thank you, and please avert your eyes from the disaster about to unfold on the lawn. If it gets bad, turn the hose on her.”

“The hose—”

I shut the door, ready to rumble. “Hi, Mom,” I said cheerfully.

“That’s not Jonathan’s car,” she hissed, trying to keep her voice down but failing. She was angry. Why, I didn’t know.

“It’s not,” I confirmed. “Were you up waiting for him to bring me home?”

“I was taking out the garbage!” she snapped. While plausible, it could also very well be a lie. I wouldn’t dissect it.

“Okay, well. The date was a disaster. He ditched me, and luckily Reed was driving by and saw me walking home.”

I heard his door open, but I didn’t look back. Fantastic. If he wanted a front-row seat to the show, enjoy.

My mother’s eyes darted from me to Reed and back to me. “Are you an idiot? You let Jonathan go?”

I dropped the heels to the sidewalk, letting them bounce into the grass.

“I’m not whale hunting. It’s not like I could spear him and refuse to let go until he got too tired to fight. Besides, he was awful. I don’t know what you thought would happen. Jonathan and I were never good people together. Apart, either.”

“He’s successful!” she cried. “He’s handsome. Women *want* him.”

“And yet he is still single. A good reason for it, too.”

“You seem to forget that you are also single.” She pointed her finger at me and lowered her voice as Reed stepped to lean against the front of his truck.

“You couldn’t keep Dustin, and he had to find someone else. Your life is not exactly impressive, and yet Jonathan agreed to go out with you. To give you a chance anyway. You blew it. You always do this. I work so hard for you, to get you the best things, to make your life good, and you throw it back in my face like it’s not good enough. Like I’m not a good mother.”

She wasn’t a good mother, but pointing that out now wouldn’t help.

“He called me a bitch.” I shifted weight from one leg to another. “No, I take that back. He called me a chubby bitch and effectively told me I’m lucky I have a pretty face because the rest of me isn’t worth his attention or his super-average dick. But yes, please tell me how I should be grateful he offered to buy me dinner.”

“You *are* chubby,” she hissed. “What do you expect?”



“Jesus, Judy!” She didn’t even blink when I called her by her name. It was a signal that we were about to hit a breaking point. Mine or hers, one of us would tip over the edge of a cliff we couldn’t climb up from.

“I have hypothyroidism. I exercise, eat well, and take my medication, and it’s *still* difficult to control my weight, but even if I could. Really? *Really?* You think thick thighs mean someone can’t want me?”

“That’s an excuse.” She was whisper-yelling now—the hiss of her words with a low-volume sting to keep the conversation between us.

Reed cleared his throat, and my mom dropped her arms to her sides as she balled her fists and forced herself to calm down.

“You made a mistake,” she said, barely getting the words out. “And I made a mistake trying to help you. You’re ungrateful and take from everyone without caring what it does to them. You’re selfish. You’ve always been selfish. You don’t want my help? You’re not welcome to stay here. Go.”

Okay, this circus wasn’t entertaining any longer. The elephants had escaped and trampled the crowd. The lion ate its trainer. The tent collapsed in on itself and suffocated everyone beneath it.

“Mom—”

“No.” Her tone was entirely too airy for the heaviness of her punishment. “You’re not welcome here.”

I should have seen that coming. I was out of practice with finessing my mother's mercurial moods, or I'd become careless. I was flippant with her, and she reminded me why I never came home, let alone stood up to her. Years of therapy were erased in a week, and I was ready to grovel. It was going to be painful.

"No problem," Reed piped up, walking around to the passenger side of his truck and opening the door. "Come on, Vivian."

My mother's mouth dropped. "Excuse me?"

He nodded to the cab. "Let's go."

"I—" I snapped my mouth shut, biting the inside of my cheek as I weighed my options.

I didn't know what Reed was offering, but I sure as shit knew what my mom was. Beg for her forgiveness, kiss her ass, and tell her what a piece of shit I was, and she'd let me stay at her house. I couldn't believe it, but at that moment, I chose the risk of barn murder over groveling.

Saying nothing, I got into the truck. Reed shut the door behind me, returning to the driver's seat as my mother hurried over. With a heavy fist pounding on the window to get my attention, my mother yelled, called me names, and told me I was ruining her life.

Reed, seemingly unbothered by the grotesque display of human dysfunction, started his truck and pulled away from the curb, taking me who knew where.

Somehow, that didn't worry me.

# Seven

## *Reed*

If I had just left dinner at my mom's house a little earlier, I would have been home well before spotting Vivian Harlow walking along the highway like some ghost haunting me.

I didn't know it was her at first, not until I slowly rolled past. As tempted as I was to keep going, I couldn't. The county roads were mostly empty at night, but any traffic coming through was more often than not drunk drivers or drug runs. It wouldn't have been right to leave her out there. No matter how much she insulted me.

I did not look like a serial killer.

Not really.

My mom's stupid decision to buy cheap furniture that needed unnecessarily complicated assembly stalled my return tonight.

If I hadn't gotten caught up in assembling those shitty bookshelves, I'd be blissfully ignorant of Vivian's struggles—drinking bourbon at home and enjoying a good book. Quietly. Alone.

And there I was, driving along, picking up a girl.

Fuck me. My mom would be so happy.

But no, it wasn't just picking up Vivian and giving her a ride. It was lingering in her family business. Stepping in when I shouldn't have. Offering her an escape instead of letting her sort it out herself. What was I thinking?

"I don't have my purse," Vivian said quietly, biting at her nails as we drove in the direction I'd come from minutes before. "Maybe I could get a motel to agree to let me stay if I could use your credit card for a security deposit. I swear I'll get my stuff back tomorrow and pay you. My keys and phone were in my purse in Jonathan's car, but I can drop the money off when I get my stuff back."

God, I felt terrible for her. Which was wild because never in my life did I ever think I'd feel sympathy for Vivian.

"It's fine. Let me pay."

Heading into town, I stopped by an ATM to get some cash. She'd probably need some supplies for the night, some money for a cab to get her back to her house. Doing some mental math, I landed on giving her more than enough and calling it a day.

“Here,” I said, getting into the truck and handing her the cash.

She shook her head, staring at the money in her palm. “Oh, I couldn’t—”

“Yet you will,” I finished, leaving the bank and heading along the main drag to the Palm Inn, the only motel in Clear Lake, a town with no palm trees.

Pulling into the lot, I internally groaned as I looked up at a neon sign that flashed *No Vacancies*.

Vivian *actually* groaned. “Tonight is so utterly fucked,” she said, more to herself than to me. “Okay.” She took a deep breath, threw her shoulders back, and got out in a speed walk to the reception.

“Where are you going?” I scrambled out of the truck to follow her.

“To get a room,” she said, like I was an idiot. Yet she was storming into a motel as if she were going to strong-arm a room when she had nothing. Not even shoes.

Her bare feet softly plodding along the asphalt made my heart somersault, and she was right to talk to me like an idiot. I kind of admired her spirit.

A sleeping man at reception jolted awake with the ringing bells of the swinging door, choking mid-snore and sitting up with a start.

“Hello,” Vivian said, her voice measured and calm. That was good because she looked confronting with frizzy hair, no

shoes, and a look of war on her face. “I know your sign says no vacancies, but surely a room must be available?”

Henry Smith sat up and blinked a few times. He had a friendly enough face, a bit generic, and I doubted Vivian recognized him from high school. Yet at that moment, he looked like the king of the world on his throne.

“A room?” he asked with a broad smile. “*You* need a room?”

She nodded. “Yes, ideally. But honestly, tonight is not my night, and I’d take a broom closet if that’s all you have available.”

Henry’s eyes shot to me, and he licked his lips excitedly.

“Henry,” I warned. I didn’t like how his eyes gleamed in the neon lights from the motel window.

Vivian looked at me, then at Henry.

“Shit,” she muttered, realizing Henry knew damn well who Vivian was. She knew just as well as I did he wouldn’t help her, even if he could.

“Have a good night, Henry,” she said, defeated and waving over her shoulder as she slumped out of the lobby.

I waited until she was out of earshot. “You really have nothing?” I pulled my brows together in a desperate plea.

Henry shook his head, running his hand through his long hair. “I don’t, but if I did, I still wouldn’t give it to her.”

Knocking my knuckles on the reception desk, I shot him a serious glare. “You’re fucking me over here, Henry.”

Henry did not seem bothered about that.

I followed on Vivian’s heels, watching her pace in front of my truck and mutter under her breath. I didn’t know Vivian well, but she looked like she was unraveling. When her head shot up with panicked eyes, she confirmed it.

“This is what everyone wants, isn’t it?” she asked, her arms wide and eyes wild. “Everyone wants the bitch to get her comeuppance. The pretty, mean girl from high school has become fat, ugly, and a loser. The girl who tore other people apart gets shredded in adulthood as everyone else thrives and blossoms with the potential *she* tried to convince them wasn’t there. I’m getting what I deserve, and no one cares otherwise. They want the villain in the story to suffer.”

I sighed, resigned to comfort her. It was an odd feeling.

“The first eighteen years of your life shouldn’t define the remaining ones,” I said softly. “Maybe your story isn’t about stoning the villain to death. Maybe yours is a redemption story.”

She stopped her frantic pacing. “Try the first *twenty-six* years of my life. It’s only been in the last couple of years that I decided to be a decent human being. And that’s just a *decision*. The actual change in behavior is an entirely different matter, and I’m still not good at it.”



“Ah, so early in your redemption arc, are you?” I ran my hand through my beard. It was a comforting motion, self-soothing—part of why I didn’t shave.

She said nothing, just gave a hurried puff of breath and dropped her head in frustration.

“I have failed in life at so many things. But the biggest failure has been being a decent human. I am my mother, and I am paying for that. No one in this town is wrong to treat me like shit.”

On that, we disagreed. I might not like Vivian and hated and despised her behavior in high school, but no one deserved to be treated like shit.

“You’re not like your mother.” I tucked my hands into the pockets of my jeans and stared across the parking lot at the swimming pool. I could only imagine what it had been like to have a mother like Vivian’s.

My mom wasn’t perfect. No parents were, but Vivian’s mother was more akin to a sack filled with venomous snakes than a source of love and security. I didn’t need to spend more than ten minutes in her space to understand that. It’s why I’d felt the need to offer Vivian an out.

The shit her mother had said to her—how she made Vivian feel like it was her fault that someone treated her like garbage and said terrible things to her... the horrible things her mother contributed...

“Come on,” I said, getting into the truck. “You can stay in my guest room.”

“I—what?” She remained in the parking lot, making no move to get in.

I leaned across the cab and opened the door.

“You can stay in my guest room.” I could hardly believe I was offering it, but I didn’t know what else to do with her.

“As your guest or... as your lamp?”

Though her face was dead serious, I sensed the humor in her voice. Vivian could be kind of funny.

“Depends,” I grumbled, starting the truck. “Are you going to make me listen to jazz again?”

That earned a laugh from Vivian, a surprisingly light sound.

“That was a test.” She climbed into the truck. “If you didn’t murder me for putting on smooth jazz, then you aren’t likely to murder me at all. So sure, I’ll borrow your guest room if you’re okay with that.” She hesitated. “And thank you.”

I pulled out of the Palm Inn and headed toward my cabin.

“Is it in the county?” she asked, staring out at the darkness from the window.

Save for a half moon, there weren’t any lights out here, and we still hadn’t seen another car. Fortunately, I’d passed the jazz test. Otherwise, I could reasonably understand why she’d worried I would murder her.

“It is. My cabin is about another fifteen minutes up the road.”

“You live in a cabin?”

“I do. Been there since moving back from New York City after college.”

Vivian’s mood seemed to pick up. “New York City? Really?”

She scrunched her face in contemplation. I couldn’t fault her. New York probably seemed an ill fit, judging by my current state of life.

“Did you return to Clear Lake to escape some indescribable crimes?”

“I can describe my crimes just fine.”

She dropped her head back and laughed, and I was beginning to like that sound.

“Clever.” She sighed, returning her look to the window. “Did you like New York?”

I gripped the steering wheel. “I did. Mostly. It was loud, busy, and crowded, but I liked the energy of it.”

“Why leave?”

I’d often asked myself that, but the answer had always been clear. “My mom. I came back for my mom. To be closer to home. To help her.”

Vivian snorted. “Cannot at all relate.”

My palm smoothed over the steering wheel, my grip relaxing. “It wasn’t only for her. I enjoy having a quiet place to work. Besides, sometimes you don’t know what you’ll want until you figure out what you don’t. In New York, I learned I don’t want to be far away, and I need a sense of peace. Distance didn’t give it. Quite the opposite.”

She tapped her finger against the window. “Why are you being nice to me? When I don’t deserve it?”

I didn’t skip a beat. “Who says you don’t deserve it?”

“I wasn’t nice in high school.”

“Or elementary and middle,” I reminded her.

She ran her hands along her legs, and I did my best to keep from looking at their bare skin beneath her dress.

“I’m not even very nice now,” she went on.

“Could be true.” I turned off the highway onto the dirt road leading to my cabin.

It was a bumpy ride, jostling the both of us, but she didn’t complain. I’d left some lights on, and the cabin always looked charming at night with the glow in the windows.

Vivian sucked in a breath as I parked the truck.

It shouldn’t have mattered if Vivian was impressed with my home. I shouldn’t have cared either way.

But I did.

With two acres, loads of hiking trails, and a creek along the back half of the property, it felt like a little slice of heaven for

me. Too far out for people to stumble along it without a purposeful visit, it was a quiet place to write.

“You know,” I said, turning to her. “Maybe you’ve never really had people be nice to you, either.”



Vivian couldn’t be bothered to talk to me in twelve shared school years, but she was hard-pressed to be quiet at my house.

At first, she was reluctant, but bringing out a bottle of bourbon helped. Truthfully, I needed it more than her. I rarely had house guests; overnight guests were even fewer and far between.

Worse, I was just as hard-pressed to be quiet. I couldn’t shut my mouth, just volunteering information left and right. That wasn’t me. This entire night wasn’t me.

“I can’t believe you live in this place,” she said, taking a long drink from her glass and looking around. Her gaze ran over me for a moment before she smirked. “Guess it makes sense, given you’re a lumberjack. You *would* live in a log cabin.”

“It is fitting,” I agreed.

She wrapped her hands around her waist and strolled through my living room again. She’d been pacing it the last half an hour.

“I just thought you were the kind of guy who would have a house with no curtains and sleep on a mattress on the floor. You know, one flat pillow that’s a thousand years old and stained yellow.”

“That’s oddly specific, Vivian.”

She stopped before a blown-up black-and-white photograph of a cypress tree on the edge of a cliff, its ragged roots hanging from the dirt.

“I didn’t think you’d have art and rugs and…” She paused. “Taste.”

I think she meant that as a compliment.

Her eyes continued scanning the main floor’s open layout. The chef’s kitchen looked into the spacious living room, with a large fireplace as the centerpiece instead of a TV. The living room opened onto a sprawling deck overlooking the hillside. Behind the house was a creek where I could sit outside with a drink under the stars and listen to the gentle babbling of its water.

A long hallway led to a bathroom, a guest room, and my library, which also served as my office. My bedroom was upstairs, a loft-style room with a master suite and a private balcony. The cabin wasn’t huge, but it was more space than I needed.

“What do you do?” she asked. “I mean, for a living?”

“Write.” I finished my drink and headed to the kitchen to pour another, willing myself to shut up.

Vivian trotted on my heels. “What do you write?”

I uncorked the bottle, her eyes following the movements of my hands.

“Books.”

I was purposefully being vague now. It was just so damn uncomfortable to have her in my house. Like a dream that made little sense. Or maybe a nightmare. It wasn't clear which.

She snorted, then quickly brought her hand to cover her nose as if the sound were offensive. It wasn't, but I wouldn't tell her that.

“No shit, Grizzly Man, but what kind of books?” She tapped her finger against her chin and narrowed her eyes. “Let me guess? Inspirational self-help?”

I gave a half-hearted smile. “No, fiction.”

She reached to pour herself another glass of bourbon. “Same thing. Anything I'd read?”

Stretching her arms across the counter brought the hem of her dress dangerously high on the backs of her thighs as she grabbed the bourbon. I took another sip of my drink and looked away.

“Depends. What do you like to read?”

Vivian's eyes lit up. “Guess.”

“Guess?” I hated guessing games, but guessing anything about women felt dangerous.

She took her drink and sat at the kitchen table, keeping her eyes on me. “Guess what kind of books you think I like to read.”

I pointed a finger at her. “You’re testing me again. It’s like that goddamn jazz. I just can’t figure out what you’re testing here.”

She said nothing, grinning wickedly, and I joined her at the table. Setting my drink down, I dropped my elbows to my knees and ran my hand through my beard as I looked at her.

“You think I’m going to make some dumb joke about you not reading, or maybe the only thing you read is your monthly Cosmo.”

Vivian’s smile dropped, her mouth flatlining.

“But that’s not true. You mentioned nine circles of hell with your mom. You’ve read the *Divine Comedy*, obviously.” I paused, sipping my bourbon as I watched her throat bob with a swallow.

“Or maybe you think I’m going to say the only things you read are trashy romance novels or bodice rippers.” I held up my hands. “Nothing wrong with those. All books have their place in fantasy and entertainment. Go to my library, and you’ll find a few.”

Vivian opened her mouth to say something, but I cut her off.

“Yes, it’s true. I read all genres. But you...” I thought it over. “You’re quick-witted. Sarcastic humor. You’re a Vonnegut fan, and I’d bet my favorite flannel on it.”



I knew I'd nailed it when her pretty mouth dropped into a wide *O*.

I leaned back in my chair, taking my drink with me and crossing my arms over my stomach, satisfied.

Of all the things being quiet taught me, the power of observation and attention to detail was perhaps the most beneficial.

"I'm guessing people have underestimated you your entire life. Saw what you thought you should show them. But you underestimate yourself, too."

She cleared her throat, recovering from her surprise. "I won't say you're wrong, but I refuse to confirm your guess." She paused. "But you can keep your favorite flannel."

Vivian got up from the table, leaving her glass this time. It wasn't clear if this was just a natural stopping point in the conversation or if I'd made her uncomfortable. I could do that sometimes. Come on a little strong. Intense.

The perils of being a neurotic writer.

"I can sleep on the couch," she said, heading toward the living room.

"You can, but the guest room is more comfortable. Down the hall and to the left. The bathroom is across the way, and towels are under the sink if you want to shower. There's a spare toothbrush in the vanity, toothpaste, too. Hold on."

I went upstairs, feeling Vivian's eyes on my back as I did, and returned with a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, handing them

to her.

“These will be big but are more comfortable than your dress.”

She took them, not making eye contact and maybe feeling just as uncomfortable as me. While I’d come to find tonight that I liked the look of her eyes, it was best to avoid them.

“I still don’t understand why you’re being so nice to me,” she said again, “but thank you.”

She started toward the guest room, and I headed upstairs. It was late, the day had been long and unexpected, and I was tired.

“I’m sorry I was mean to you in high school, Reed.” She stopped but didn’t look at me. “You were probably a shy kid just trying to survive, and I made it harder than needed.”

“I wasn’t shy,” I corrected. “I was quiet and introverted. That’s not the same thing. My life was hard, but not because of some stupid name you gave me.”

It felt like she should hear that.

Vivian’s hand gripped the doorknob as she hesitated. “I know it seems crazy, but sometimes I felt like life was hard, too.”

She said nothing else, closing the door behind her and leaving me halfway up the stairs, wondering when the world had shifted so heavily on its axis.

Never did I imagine that Vivian and I might have something in common.

# Eight

## *Vivian*

**G**ood grief, these pillows were fluffy. Rolling onto my side, I huffed out a breath. Despite brushing my teeth, the spice of the bourbon coated my mouth. Bourbon I'd shared with Reed at his cabin because he'd effectively rescued me from my mother.

I flipped to my other side, the softness of the sweatpants contrasting a man who seemed anything but.

Except that wasn't true, and I knew it. The rugged exterior of darkness was not at all reflective of the tender man beneath it.

That bubbled in my stomach—a more pressing concern than the thought of waking up in the morning and cleaning up the mess with my mother.

Sighing, I flopped onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. This bed was ridiculously comfortable, and yet I couldn't sleep.

Fluffy pillows were just the start. The sheets were at least of hotel quality—and not the Palm Inn. The down comforter was heavenly. The sherpa throw at the foot of the bed was nearly orgasmic. I was almost angry that it was too warm to wrap in all the blankets.

The room itself was just as homey. A queen-sized bed with a sleigh frame that looked like it'd been hand-carved from reclaimed wood, a beautiful ornate antique dresser, and even a *chair* in the room.

The cream carpet on the floor was a soft shag, unlike the scratchy wool rug in the desolate guest room I'd slept the previous night. This man thought about what being a guest in his house would be like. Like he thought of other people.

Wild.

And unsettling. The rolling waves in my stomach didn't quiet, shifting to a flip-flop instead as I thought about Reed's attention to detail. Not just in his beautiful home, but in his observations about me.

Had anyone ever thought to look at me before? *Really* look at me? Not my face. Not my body. Not the glaring sheen of a guard too thick to penetrate without permission. Had I permitted Reed? I think he just... did it. Maybe because he wanted to.

Maybe I wanted him to.

“Shut up.”

I pressed a pillow over my head. This restlessness was stupid. Reed felt sorry for me and brought me to stay in his guest room because there was no alternative.

TINA for life.

I shut my eyes and tried to will the thoughts from my head. The entire night was one big mind-fuck, and the sooner I could fall asleep and forget it, the better.

But even with my eyes closed, I couldn't shake the thought of Reed.

Regret pooled in my stomach with how terrible I'd been to him when we were younger. How shitty it was not to have recognized him. How that must have made him feel—to be ignored.

Especially when he seemed like a man who saw everything with those big brown eyes. They were softer beneath the candescent lights of his cabin than they'd been in the middle of a dark highway. Somehow that felt scarier than when I thought he would murder me.

Because a man who might see me? Who might *want* to see me? Well, he'd probably ruin me.

I don't know when I finally fell asleep or how long it took me to get there. My mind raced in the dark for what felt like hours, but eventually, my eyes opened to the light of day.

Sitting up, I licked my dry lips and smacked my mouth several times. It felt like someone shoved cotton balls in there, which meant I'd slept with my mouth open. And likely snored.

I hoped there was good insulation in these walls.

With a bladder ready to burst and a mouth desperate for water and cleansing, I opened the bedroom door and peeked down the hallway. All seemed quiet, and I hurried across to the bathroom.

Before I could switch on the light, a deep, low growl met my ears. There was a pause, and I wondered if I'd imagined it, but I knew it was real when it came again.

Flipping on the light, I nearly pissed my pants. Or Reed's pants, rather.

"What the fuck!" I shrieked. A dark monster crouched on the toilet, baring its teeth at me.

Another low rumble from its vicious throat caused me to turn on my heel and run for my life. Instead of gaining distance, I gained a face full of wall. A thick wall. *Where the hell did that come from?*

It took less than half a second to realize the wall in front of me was a chest, and I was sandwiched between two beasts. One bear and one... rabid raccoon, maybe?

"Dammit, Rocky," Reed bit as he gripped my arms to steady me before I bounced onto my ass. "Get out!"

"What *is* that?"

What looked like a cat hopped off the toilet and sauntered out of the bathroom. But there was no way it could be a cat. The thing was the size of a dog.

“He’s a cat,” Reed said slowly, releasing my arms and stepping back. “Rocky.” Reed ran his hand across the back of his neck, eyes cast to the floor between us. “He, uh. He uses the toilet here and is a bit territorial.”

“Like his litter box is in here?” If it were, I wouldn’t know it. The bathroom was honestly the cleanest I’d been in, and there was no cat box odor.

Reed shook his head. “No, he uses the *toilet* in here. He trained himself to do it, and I just let him. It’s his bathroom. I should have mentioned that.”

Approximately five seconds of rapid blinking passed before I said anything. “You have a giant cat that uses the toilet, and this is his bathroom? Like... a roommate?”

“He’s a Maine Coon,” Reed explained. As if I’d understand what that meant.

The squinting of my eyes must have tipped him off.

“They’re big cats, as you can see.” Reed gestured to the shower. “They like water, too. Rocky likes to get in the shower.”

I raised an eyebrow, and Reed smiled. Even with all that beard, I could see it was a handsome one.

“I have to turn it on for him, obviously. He’s smart, but he has some limitations.”

“Like being a cat.”

Reed’s smile didn’t falter. “Like that.”



He took another step back, effectively removing himself from the bathroom and giving me a chance to notice that he was dressed and ready for the day.

His hair, while a little long, was styled and tucked behind his ears. He wore basic jeans and a t-shirt, but the expanse of his shoulders and back pulled the fabric tight, making the simple ensemble very easy to look at.

I cleared my throat, fully aware I looked like something his monster cat would drag in, and my breath probably smelled just as delightful. I brought a hand over my mouth self-consciously. "I should get ready."

"Sure." He paused, looking at me with those fierce eyes. "You're not the first woman I've seen in the morning. Don't overthink it."

The sudden jealousy at the thought of other women waking up in Reed's house hit me hard, catching me completely off guard and making my head spin. *What the hell?*

As if sensing it, he gave an amused smile and left down the hallway, a wave thrown over his shoulder. "Breakfast if you want it."

I closed the bathroom door, locking it. Not because I worried Reed would come in, but because I feared that the beast of a cat might. That nightmare seemed like the kind of creature that would sit on your chest all night, waiting for you to wake up before it ate your face. Couldn't even give you the courtesy of killing you in your sleep.

Staying at Reed's house had been a real trust exercise.

Hurrying to ready myself, I joined Reed in the kitchen as he slid over a plate of waffles and some juice. I stared at the carbohydrates and thought of a time I would have turned it down.

"Eat," Reed grumbled like he could see the wheels in my head spinning. "I make them from scratch, and they're delicious."

I picked up my fork and knife and dug in.

"You're a humble man, I've noticed." As soon as the first bite hit my mouth, I conceded defeat. "Ohhh." I melted.

He smirked, sitting down with his plate. "It's good to enjoy things in life. Not suffer through it."

Once again, his comment unsettled me. He wasn't explicitly talking about these waffles or my hesitance with eating them.

"So," I started, steering the conversation to safer territory. "Just you and your beast here?"

Reed took a bite and nodded, wiping his mouth with the napkin from his lap before adding, "And the voices."

"Hilarious," I quipped, mostly believing he was messing with me. "And you just write? Out here? On your own?"

He nodded. "Yep. Amongst other things."

"Like?"

Reed pushed his plate away and relaxed into his chair. "Read. Write for pleasure, not work. Build things. Hike. Rock

climb.”

“By yourself?”

*Stop asking if he's by himself!* Really, I wanted to ask if he had a girlfriend, but my courage today ended with carbs.

Another amused smile. “Yes, by myself.” His eyes met mine. “Usually.”

The blush on my cheeks was noticeable, so I dropped my head and paid attention to my food again like it was fascinating.

“And you?” He crossed his arms over his chest, the flexing of his biceps bringing my blush a deeper crimson.

*Dammit, Viv. Get it together.*

“Me what?”

He raised his eyebrows expectantly. “What do you do with your time?”

I shrugged. “Mostly waste it, to be honest.”

The laugh that escaped Reed was deep and rumbling, like the start of an earthquake, shifting my foundation. A small crack emerged, letting a little more of him in.

The entire situation was bizarre, and I did not know what was happening to me.

“Tell me about it, and I’ll tell you if it sounds wasteful.”

Pushing my empty plate closer to the center of the table, I crossed my arms. “What, are you a judge or something?”

His smile didn't waver. "Come on, what do you do with your time?"

He didn't seem so dark in the light of day, though his eyes were just as consuming as the night before. I suddenly wanted to pull his face closer to inspect them.

But that would be weird, and despite my history with my mother, I understood personal boundaries.

"I work. When I have a job."

Reed nodded. "What did you do before you came back to Clear Lake?"

The number of times people expressed surprise to find me back in Clear Lake because they assumed I'd do *big things* made my simple career feel lackluster.

"I was a bartender," I said. "Mostly. I was hired as a consultant for an exclusive club after an investor bought the bar I worked at, but I got fired just before coming here. It's actually *why* I came here." I bit my lip, thinking it over. "Well, part of why I came here. I got fired, came home, found my boyfriend mouth-fucking our neighbor, had no money, no home, so I came back."

Reed's eyes widened, and he clicked his tongue. "Wow. That's a cascading waterfall of shit." He shook his head. "So, what do you do with your time?"

"What do you mean, what do I do with my time? I just told you."

Joining the conversation, Rocky strolled into the living room and plopped onto a sun patch along the carpet.

“No, you told me things that happened to you. What do you do with *your* time? Not your boss’ time or your boyfriend’s time.”

“Ex-boyfriend,” I corrected. I twisted my hair into a bun on the top of my head and held it up with my hands. “And not much.”

Reed sighed like I exasperated him with my answer. He was probably just exasperated with *me*. I’d infiltrated his home, space, and life, and while I didn’t know Reed well, I got the sense that he wasn’t a man who enjoyed the invasion.

“Don’t underestimate yourself, Vivian.” He leaned forward and tapped his finger on the table.

I wasn’t sure if his persistence annoyed or flattered me.

“Fine,” I huffed as if his interest were torture.

Maybe it was, though. I couldn’t think of a time when anyone had pushed to get to know me. Pushed to fuck me, yes. Pushed to be in my life, sure. Even Dustin, a man I lived with for four years, assumed I had no interests or opinions, and I hadn’t felt safe to share them.

I wasn’t sure if what I was feeling at that moment was safety, but it was undoubtedly courage.

“I enjoy doing things people wouldn’t expect and keeping them to myself. Like it’s my little secret,” I said, my eyes on

Rocky because even though the cat made me nervous, Reed's focused look terrified me.

"I like to read fiction, but I enjoy learning about things, too. Random, strange, and useless shit. Not because I'll ever need or use it, but because I like it. Having these secret pockets of knowledge that don't belong to anyone else." I shook my head, brushing off my embarrassment. "I don't know why. It's a little weird."

Reed tilted his head, considering what I'd said. "Why hide from others?"

*It's easier to wear a mask and hide than to let people see and judge me. Because surely what they see will bring criticism.*

I plastered a familiar fake smile I'd perfected. "I'm not hiding. I'm just not sharing."

He nodded like maybe he understood, though I suspected it was more his manners than anything.

"Tell me something interesting you've learned recently." He got up, collecting our plates to take to the sink. Rinsing them, he said, "The weirder, the better."

I thought for a moment, feeling put on the spot. "Well, I was reading the other day that many bones in our feet don't harden until adulthood."

"Is that so?" he asked, loading the dishwasher and wiping his hands on a dishtowel beside the sink.

"Yeah. You have twenty-six bones in each foot. Many of those bones don't ossify until you're twenty-one years old.

They're cartilage, hardening over time." Pointing at my feet, I chuckled. "Even more bizarre that women wear uncomfortable shoes, am I right?"

Okay, not my best.

Reed graciously ignored it. "If you're going to walk, do it comfortably. Except *you* have no shoes. How are we going to get you on your feet today?"

"Yeah," I said, scooting out of my chair in a rush. That sounded like an invitation to leave. "Um, if you don't mind bringing me to my mom's house, I think I can smooth things over enough to be allowed back inside."

Reed clenched his jaw, and I wasn't sure if he was annoyed with me or my mother. Either way, I needed to get my things. No matter how good his waffles were, it wasn't like I could live with this burly bear man.

"She's not a good person to you," he said, loosening his jaw enough to speak.

"Nope," I agreed, pushing in my chair. "But in four weeks, I'll get access to a trust fund my father left me, and then I won't need her any longer. Besides, working for Missy means I can pay my mother rent from my paychecks, which means *none* of the trust will go to her. Given that, I don't mind staying at her house." I paused. "Aside from the fact she's terrible."

It was a satisfying thought that my mother couldn't weasel a single dime of my dad's life insurance. It was why I accepted

Missy's offer of work. Being out of the house was nice, but paying rent from a job that made my mother cringe was even more rewarding than gaining access to the trust.

Grizzly Man's jaw somehow clenched even harder. "You're paying your mother *rent* when you're down on your luck and have nowhere else to go?"

Sweet, innocent, surly, burly Brawny Man. Tender-hearted and inexperienced with narcissists.

"It is what it is. Anyway, I don't mind. Better than paying half my asshole ex's rent. Do you think my mom is bad? She quickly burned through my father's money, but my ex makes three times what I earned and still insists I pay half of everything. Even when I got the flu and couldn't work for a week and a half, he gave me a *loan*." I sighed. "With interest."

"Jesus Christ." Reed scrubbed his hands over his face before dropping his head back and staring at the ceiling. "What the *actual* fuck?"

"I know," I said, heading to change. "Messed up, right?"

"Vivian." Reed followed me down the hallway, disbelief thick in his tone. "You can't let people treat you that way. That's—" He stopped, his tongue poking into the side of his cheek. "I don't even have the words."

I laughed, maybe more patronizing than intended. "And you're the writer!"



“How can you be so nonchalant about the people who should take care of and help you, taking advantage of you and treating you like shit instead?”

He didn't get it because he didn't have to. When you spend your life being taught all of your flaws and imperfections are disgusting and shameful, you become a person who doesn't hold value.

Because no matter how beautiful you are, how skinny you are, how inviting you may be—no one is perfect. There will always be flaws and imperfections. Always something to improve. Hear it enough; eventually, all you see is what's wrong with you. Then you stop believing you deserve anything at all.

It's slow, happening over time in small, unnoticeable events. Much like the bones in your feet progressively ossifying. And just like bones, your spirit can harden, too.

“I'm not nonchalant,” I said, stopping at the door to the bedroom. “I'm used to it. There's a difference. I don't need you to feel sorry for me.”

Something flashed in his eyes, and I didn't doubt what he said next was true.

“I don't feel sorry for you, Vivian. I feel *angry* for you.”

I'd been a woman shocked plenty in my life. Bartending brought all kinds of colorful and eventful occurrences my way. A ruthless dating history did, too. But standing in the doorway

with Reed's raw emotion, his *honesty*—well, that was maybe more surprising than anything before.

“Still changes nothing,” I said. “I’m going to get dressed.”

Reed shook his head, running his thumb along his bottom lip in thought. “No, it changes nothing,” he agreed. “But that doesn’t mean nothing can change.”

# Nine

*Vivian*

“**Y**ou don’t have to do this.”

It was probably the tenth time I’d said that in as many minutes, but Missy brushed me off again.

“I know I don’t have to do this. I want to.”

Ron, her girlfriend, sat with palpable opinions about the entire situation.

“She wants to,” Ron agreed, her crossed arms reflecting that Missy was alone in that sentiment. “You can’t stop Missy from doing a good deed.”

Maybe it was my nerves. Maybe it was the tension in the small apartment. Maybe it was the fact that self-deprecation had become my newest hobby, but I couldn’t hold back.

“If a charity case is what you desire, then I’m your wet dream.”

That only earned a grimace from Ron. Which wasn't quite the effect I was going for, but Missy at least gave a polite laugh.

The two didn't seem to have much in common besides being women and friends with Reed. Where Ron was rough, challenging, and no-nonsense, Missy was soft, friendly, and someone who would probably go off with a stranger at the park to look for his lost puppy.

I liked them both for it.

When Reed suggested I stay with Missy until I could access my trust, I thought he was crazy. Not just crazy—insane.

I had a perfectly okay enough place, and while my mother was still angry with me, she wouldn't likely keep me away for long. She was running low on money and probably needed the rent.

But Reed insisted I not go back to her house. Nope, scratch that—he refused to let me. Like he was my father or something, grounding me.

And I had a strong urge to call him Daddy suddenly, and believe me, I wanted to smack myself for it. But taking the reins and doing something for me, standing up for me... it was sexy.

I'd keep that to myself. While an afternoon of girl talk sounded fun in theory, my audience was Team Reed, and I didn't trust that the conversation would stay between us for

one minute. I'd never had girlfriends, not genuine ones, and I didn't expect their loyalty.

“So he's just going to walk in and get your shit?” Ron asked as I paced Missy's living room.

There wasn't much space in the one-bedroom apartment, but I managed a tight loop behind the couch, around a recliner, and through the dining room. It was hard to stand still and wait when I wasn't sure whether Reed would return.

Maybe he was playing the long con, punishing me slowly by making me believe his kindness was genuine, only to pull it out from me. Point and laugh. Tell me what a dumb bitch I was.

Then again, maybe my mother had eaten him. Driving into the bowels of suburbia to retrieve my suitcase from my mother's house was a weirdly brave mission. And stupid.

“That's what he said.” I picked up the pace and added some nail-biting for good measure.

Missy, standing in the kitchen and making tea, shot a look at Ron across the room. A silent communication between the two of them I was not privy to.

When Reed called Missy and explained the situation, Missy hadn't hesitated to agree to let me stay. While I worried Reed was playing me somehow, there was no doubt Missy's generosity was sincere. We were a bit like oil and water, the two of us.

I insisted I could go into my mother's house myself to get my belongings, but Reed insisted on taking care of that, too.

"I know you *can*, Vivian, but you shouldn't have to." That was all he said. Like it really was that simple, and it really was okay for people to help you.

I still wasn't buying it. *Nobody* does that kind of shit without their own self-interest. I just needed to figure out his.

"And you're sleeping on the couch until you get on your feet?" Ron glanced at Missy again, this time not hiding her reservations about the situation.

I appreciated Ron's rough edges, particularly their contrast with Missy's soft ones. I was a sucker for unexpected pairings. From my dating experiences, the expected ones were the most boring.

"Or until Missy kicks me out."

I tried to sound like that wouldn't bother me. My first paycheck would come at the end of the week, and I could afford the Palm Inn for a few nights to figure something out if needed. Assuming Henry Smith could find it in his cold, dead heart to forgive me.

Missy pointed a firm finger at the curio cabinet of knick-knacks in the corner. "So long as you don't break my horse figurines, you're welcome to stay on this couch as long as you need."

So weird.

Promising to stay away from her glass horse figurines wasn't difficult. But I worried about sleeping on the couch in a one-bedroom apartment's only shared living space.

Missy swore she'd tell me if I overstayed my welcome, but part of me didn't believe her. So I asked Ron to hold that responsibility, even though she was trigger-happy with the eject button.

Fifteen minutes later, a heavy rapping on the door broke the lingering silence. Reed didn't wait to be called in. He opened the door and stepped inside.

His face was hard to read, as usual, but he held my purple suitcase in one hand and my purse in the other.

“Holy shit!” I jumped off the couch. “You actually got my stuff!”

It felt like Christmas.

A shitty Christmas, but Christmas, nonetheless. My mother was temperamental and emotionally unstable. She would either guard my possessions with her life or have donated them by seven a.m. The fact Reed was standing in Missy's doorway was a miracle.

Fortunately for Reed, this epic reconnaissance mission was complete, and he could be done with me. He survived enemy terrain, retrieved the hostage, and made it out without so much as facial scarring.

He deserved a medal of honor. Instead, I gave him a sincere smile, possibly rarer than any medal.

“How was she?” I asked, relieving him of the last of my burdens and taking my suitcase.

Reed shifted uncomfortably, like he was trying to move the weight of that unease from one foot to the other. “It wasn’t an issue.”

The tips of my ears burned. That couldn’t be right.

“What are you not telling me?”

Missy and Ron cuddled on the couch and looked at one another, weighing the decision to stay and watch this disaster or run and take shelter.

“It wasn’t an issue,” he repeated.

Unlike most men in my life telling me anything that might be hurtful, Reed maintained eye contact. “I got your things, and you have a place to stay. You’re good for a bit, yeah?”

Translation: I’m done with you. Can you be done with me?

Swallowing the thick lump caught in my throat, I nodded. “Yeah.”

Giving a wave to Missy and Ron, Reed left. The women called out quiet goodbyes, nearly whispers, and I hurried to follow Reed. He was only four feet out the door when he heard me and turned around.

I didn’t do this. I almost *never* did this, but at that moment, I could think of nothing else I wanted to do more.

Throwing my arms around Reed’s waist and tucking my cheek against his chest, I hugged him. Just as I thought, it was



a bit like hugging a tree. But that tree, however hesitant, reached its branches to hug me back. Sort of.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He smelled like soap and sandalwood, a little salt of the earth, and though it was usually Acqua di Giò that got my heart pumping with an olfactory orgasm, I liked this scent, too.

“No problem.” Extracting himself from what was likely an uncomfortable situation, Reed pulled away and patted my arms.

He. Patted. My. Arms.

I cleared my throat and took an extra step back, willing myself not to flush. Reed’s hands planted into the pocket of his hoodie, and he smiled, though it looked more like a grimace, and we said goodbye.

When his frame disappeared around the corner, I exhaled.

*That* was precisely why I kept my hands to myself.



I did my best to keep my footprint small in Missy’s life. You know, although I lived and worked with her.

With no other friends in Clear Lake and having had no contact with my mother in nearly a week, I didn’t exactly have much going on. Which meant I was often at the apartment.

Because Ron wasn’t out to her family, the two also spent a lot of time at the apartment. As much as Missy insisted I

wasn't an imposing third wheel, Ron pulled me aside two days ago to inform me otherwise.

Since then, I'd been wandering around Clear Lake, going on walks, and listening to self-help podcasts.

They weren't helping.

Jeremy offered to go to my old apartment and pack up my things, but Dustin was making it difficult for him, insisting I deal with it myself. Yet Dustin was refusing my calls and not returning my texts, so I wasn't sure how to deal with it anyway.

I had no long-term employment plans, and the resumes I sent out and jobs I applied for in Seattle were met with crickets. Jordan had undoubtedly screwed me over like he warned when I laughed at his crooked dick waving in the wind of his unzipped chinos.

That left me nearly twenty-eight years old and unsure what to do when the only thing I knew suddenly became unavailable.

No amount of podcasts hosted by twenty-two-year-old women telling me to practice gratitude and naked yoga could help improve my life.

Lost in my thoughts, I hardly noticed the old man limping into the cafe, but his pathetic shuffles caught my attention after a moment.

“Mr. Schumer?”

Mr. Schumer came in every afternoon like clockwork. He'd glance over the menu with excruciating precision, as if he wasn't yet familiar with his options, ask endless questions about the tea selection, and then order his usual earl grey.

It was borderline maddening, but he had a sweet smile. I sensed his routine reflected a degenerative memory more than being purposefully annoying.

He always had an unsteady gait, but today he dragged one leg like it was dead weight, and his arm was wrapped in a sling.

He was just shy of one thousand years old, and while he was pretty damn mobile for how many centuries he'd lived, he couldn't be comfortable.

"Good afternoon, Amanda," he said, a familiar twinkle in his eye.

I pointed to myself. "Vivian."

"I know." He brushed me off, even though, like every other afternoon, he did not remember my name.

"Are you okay, Mr. Schumer? What happened?"

As if noticing his injury for the first time, Mr. Schumer glanced at his arm with a startled expression. "I'll be damned!"

Missy stepped over, placing a hand on my shoulder and gesturing to Mr. Schumer.

“Mr. Schumer fell off a ladder in his yard,” she explained gently, like she was talking about a toddler who skinned his knee. “He was trying to pick the roses at the top of his wife’s rosebush, but he lost his balance.”

As if jogging his memory, Mr. Schumer perked up. “That’s right! Betty loves her roses.”

The kind smile Missy gave him told me that maybe Betty wasn’t around any longer.

“Mr. Schumer, you really can’t do that,” Missy scolded, though her tone was still gentle.

She handed him the tea menu, and he turned his attention to the list of options. He pushed up his glasses from the bottom of his nose and looked it over.

“How long do you steep the jasmine?” he asked, paying Missy no mind.

Both sets of my grandparents died before I was born. If I were being honest, old people creeped me out.

Mr. Schumer, with his wrinkled dockers hiked up to the middle of his rotund belly and checkered dress shirt tucked into them, looked like a man ready to collapse into a pile of dust. He always had saliva in the corners of his mouth, which seemed impossible given his lips were so dry. Sometimes, spittle would fly out and hit the counter when he ordered. Once it hit my cheek.

“Two minutes.” I held my distance.

“Humph,” he grunted. “I’ll take the earl grey.”

Missy had it ready for him and slid it over as if it appeared out of nowhere. “I put an ice cube in so you don’t burn your tongue.” Missy was thoughtful like that. “Now promise me you’ll stop doing your yard work. You’re going to get hurt again.”

Mr. Schumer glanced up from the bridge of his nose. “You’ve always been pushy.”

Missy agreed and stepped around the counter to help him to a table. Mr. Schumer spilled his tea when sitting down. Missy quickly pulled the towel tucked in the back pocket of her jeans and cleaned it up for him, offering a refill on his tea before sitting to join him at his table.

It was all so... nice.

“The geezer looks like he’s about to keel over, huh?”

Blinking twice, I turned to the woman standing at the register. With a wicked grin and equally wicked green eyes to match, I would recognize her even when I lived to be as old as Mr. Schumer and remembered no one else.

“Taylor.”

My composure was completely off balance as I stood face to face with my best friend from high school, Taylor Lamington. If given the chance, the one who would have happily stabbed me in the back *and* the front.

I hadn’t heard her come in, let alone prepared for the fact I might see her. My decision to show up at work in leggings and a hoodie felt poorly planned.

“Hi, Viv,” she said with a hint of laughter. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Continuous blinking seemed like a reasonable response to the situation. In between shuttered eyes, I noted her flawless skin, impeccable makeup, and beautiful blonde beach waves, though we were hours from an ocean. She looked as stunning as ever, wearing a cream, off-the-shoulder bohemian dress.

“Mhm. Yep, you’re seeing me. Here.” I did my best not to cringe. There was no shame in working at a coffee shop and couch surfing, goddamnit.

Taylor had always held a sweet smile and soft words, yet could strike a lethal blow to one’s self-esteem. I once admired it, looked up to her, and took notes. I watched my back, too, because Taylor was loyal to no one except herself. We’d been quite the pair.

“Well, bestie.” She clutched her hand to her chest. “I’m *so* glad I ran into you! When Jonathan told me you were working here, I couldn’t believe it! But then he explained your”—her eyes ran up and down my face—“predicament.” She stretched the *T* to add a little extra sting to it.

*Which part?*

“How kind of him,” I mumbled. “And you’re in Evans Ridge?”

Moving the conversation away from me was my best line of defense. There were no customers behind Taylor and no excuses not to talk to her dumb, pretty face.

“I am. Just starting veterinarian school and living my best life.”

She gestured to a table in the corner where a man sat with his face buried in his phone. I recognized him as a customer four or five patrons before Mr. Schumer. He was handsome and polite but ordered oat milk in his latte and was obviously a psychopath.

“Tyler and I got married a few months ago, and he’s just the *most* supportive partner. Look.” She held out her hand, nearly eclipsed by a giant, yellow canary diamond.

“Yes, obviously supportive,” I agreed. “Tyler, you said?”

She nodded, admiring her ring.

“Taylor and Tyler?”

Her eyes darted to mine as she bared her teeth in what I suppose was a smile. I’d hit a nerve.

“Yes,” she said. “Taylor and Tyler. It’s *adorable*.”

Yeah, okay.

“Mmhm.” I reached for a coffee cup, pulling it from a sleeve beside the register. “Do you want a coffee or something?”

She shook her head. “No, no caffeine for me.” She pressed her hands to her stomach and leaned over the counter conspiratorially. “I’m pregnant,” she whispered.

“Yeah? Congratulations, Taylor.”

For that, I smiled. She deserved the sleepless nights and a destroyed vagina.

“Thank you. It’s so exciting that we’re all grown up now and adults. Buying houses, getting married, having babies. I can’t wait to see everyone at the reunion and catch up. You are going, right?”

“Nope.”

Never had the shop bell relieved me more than when a group of teenagers came through the door, laughing and shoving one another toward the register. Taylor stepped aside but didn’t leave.

“You have to go!” she whined, letting the teenagers through. “Come on, Viv. Let’s all catch up.”

I’d been catching up with our high school class for two weeks now, and I could say with certainty that there was no need to punish myself further.

“Please,” she begged. “Come on. You don’t have to hide and avoid everyone just because your life is embarrassing.”

Okay, ouch.

“My life isn’t embarrassing.” I ignored the pock-faced teenager staring at me with his mouth agape.

Taylor shrugged. “I mean, I heard you were living on Prissy Missy’s couch after your mom kicked you out and your boyfriend dumped you. You’re working in a coffee shop. I can understand why you’d feel embarrassed about your life, but you shouldn’t hide just because of it. You’re stronger than that.”



She made a *tsk* sound. “Not everyone can win in life. It doesn’t make you pathetic.” Her eyes rolled over me, clearly not believing that.

If there was one thing Taylor loved more than herself, it was attention, so she did not keep her voice down. She wanted to humiliate me, and she wanted an audience.

Dozens of eyes stared. Watching. Judging and laughing—pitying at best, malicious enjoyment at worst. Missy stood from her seat.

The entire room went silent, though that couldn’t be true because undertones of conversation buzzed quietly in the background.

*They’re talking about me.*

*They’re enjoying this.*

*They all hate me.*

*I am not embarrassed. I am mortified.*

*I can’t breathe.*

“You okay there, Viv? You look like you’re going to pass out.”

The fake sympathy in Taylor’s voice was almost as suffocating as the thoughts in my head. There wasn’t enough room for it all.

“Excuse me.”

Pushing off the counter, I stumbled back a few steps as a room full of voyeurs enjoyed my disgrace.

It was certainly long overdue in most of their eyes. The mean girl was getting bullied, scuttling as she grasped any dignity left. There wasn't much esteem, not in this room, not with these people, but maybe it was in the break room.

I hurried off to look, not caring whether the teenagers got their afternoon frappuccinos. Fuck them. Fuck all of them. But mostly?

Fuck me for coming back here.

# Ten

*Reed*

“**A**nd the big reveal? They’re all aliens!”  
*Good fucking God.*

I rolled my eyes, grateful this meeting was a phone call instead of a video call.

“Interesting idea, Marv. Especially since this is a contemporary fiction coming-of-age story.”

Marv was the third producer I’d spoken with today. I would give him credit. His suggested manuscript change to my book was undoubtedly the most creative yet.

“Which is why no one sees it coming, Reed. Listen, think it over. I’ve got the perfect actor in mind for the part of Brady, and the executives are *thrilled* to bring Sasha Kelly to write the screenplay if you agree to sign with us.”

Sasha Kelly was a highly coveted screenwriter, which made Marv’s suggestions even more offensive. He was wasting both

her talent and my own.

An alert on the other line told me there was an incoming call, and I quickly got off the phone with Marv, promising to think it over and get back to him. I had no intention of either.

“Hello, sweetie.”

“Hey, Mom.” I switched the call to speakerphone and got up to stretch, walking a small circle around my desk as I pressed my knuckles into my lower back.

Being a writer was great if you didn’t mind living your life as a sloth. Somehow, doing nothing made my body sorer than rock climbing or running trails in the woods.

“I wanted to see if you were coming for dinner on Sunday,” she said, her voice fading momentarily as she covered the receiver and mumbled something, then returned. “We’d love to have you, and I’m making your favorite. Lasagna.”

I stiffened. “We?”

She didn’t even bother to hesitate. “He’s just here for the weekend, Reed, and he wants to see you, too.”

I stopped my pacing, standing rigid. “I don’t want to see him.”

“Reed—”

“Let me know when he’s gone and how much he took from you this time.”

“Reed—”

As much as it pained me, I hung up on my mom, standing dumbstruck in my office.

My mom would call in a week. I had serious doubts my dad would even make it through the weekend. But she'd choke on her pride for a while until she couldn't make her mortgage payment because she let him borrow whatever cash she had, thinking that maybe he'd stick around this time or that he would finally love her if she gave him enough. It didn't matter that the man was a bottomless pit.

He didn't love her. Or me. He didn't want to see me and share lasagna more than I did. My dad hadn't tried to contact me since I was sixteen and hit him with a baseball bat after he sold my mom's car to pay off his gambling debt, not telling her first.

She couldn't get to work and lost a good job and benefits. I had to work part-time at Betty's Burgers to help my mom save up for a new car. Worse, I had to listen to her blame herself for the fact she didn't have more to give him.

I wasn't a violent person, and save for a few scuffles in my childhood, I didn't use my fists to solve anything. But that night? I enjoyed the sound of the bat cracking against his back and watching him crumble to the floor.

My dad left. My mom was in tears, begging him to stay while yelling at me for messing it up for her. She couldn't see—and still didn't—that I was doing her a favor. He didn't come around again until I was older and moved to New York.

They started the same song and dance they'd done for years. He came around when he needed money or a place to stay.

My mom's shitty choices were almost enough to keep me from leaving Clear Lake, but the boys reminded me I owed it to myself to be happy. New York made me happy for a while and was great for my career, but being so far away and getting calls when my mom fell apart wasn't easy.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay in Clear Lake, but at least being here meant my dad rarely came around. When he did, I avoided the entire situation.

I loved my mom, but I resented her weaknesses. The residual guilt of that felt paralyzing sometimes, so I didn't touch it.

Collecting my things, I headed to town. My heart thumped the entire time, bouncing around in my chest like my truck bouncing along the potholes of the county road. Probably just about as battered, too.

It had been nearly a week since I'd gone into *Rise 'N Grind* to work. Finally, after years of shit from everyone, I had fiber-optic internet installed. I could easily work from home or chat with the boys without my computer freezing on me.

But I'd spent the entire week thinking about being at that coffee shop, and fuck me for it.

It'd been a while since I let myself get caught up in thoughts about a woman. It was just so much easier not to. To be on my own, enjoying the peace. And Vivian? That woman was a

storm, disrupting any sense of calm and bringing swells of choppy water that could pull a man under.

But just like a storm, there's a static in the air the moment before it starts. An electricity circulating, and you know when the lightning strikes, it will damn near scare you out of your skin. Then it does, but once your heart settles, you realize you liked that feeling.

Pulling into a spot in front of *Rise 'N Grind* was a bit like that moment before the lightning.

“Hey, Missy.”

I stepped inside a shop with no line. It was the quiet time between the morning rush and mid-day lunch. My favorite time to be here was when Ron's crew wasn't drilling and hammering. But that was a rarity these days.

As if on cue, the saw started, and the tarp along the side wall fluttered with the commotion.

“Hey, Reed,” Missy said, stocking napkins. “You working here today? It's been a while since we've seen you. I was beginning to think you were dead in that cabin, and I'd have to recover your body.”

I pointed at the coffee pot on the counter. She nodded, and I reached over to grab it along with a mug before serving myself. “Wouldn't be a body to recover. Rocky would likely eat it all.”

Missy didn't argue.

“Everything okay?” She stopped to lean against the counter and take me in.

“Yep. Just working from home for a bit, that’s all.”

“That’s all, huh? Well, glad your behemoth cat didn’t eat you, and you’ve been keeping busy.”

It didn’t seem like Missy had anyone else working with her, but maybe someone was in the back or on break. Lily or Carson.

Or Vivian.

My palms were sweating from how much I hoped it was Vivian. *Shit.*

That wasn’t good.

I cleared my throat and gestured around the quiet coffee shop. “By yourself today?”

Missy finished up what she was doing and headed behind the counter to start on something new. “Yep. Carson will be in soon. Covering for Viv.”

It took a lot of self-restraint to keep my voice cool, but I think I managed.

“Is she sick or something?”

Missy looked around, assessing whether anyone was listening, then lowered her voice. I had to move closer to hear her, leaning over the counter to get it all.

“This is the second day she’s been out. There was an incident. Two days ago.”



Shit. She probably slammed a mug over a customer or something.

“What happened?”

A sudden jack hammering cracked the surrounding air. Missy jumped, plugged her ears with her fingers, and tried to shout over it. I shook my head to show I couldn't hear her, and Missy rolled her eyes.

Her own damn fault for doing renovations during the day, but she couldn't get city permits for work at night.

“Vivian's been getting shit for the last couple of weeks,” she said once the shop quieted. “People coming in here and gawking at her like she's a freak show. *Taylor Lamington* came in two days ago.”

Taylor Lamington. Like Vivian, only less impressive. More a shadow of intimidation, whereas Vivian was an eclipse.

Vivian was obvious in her terrorizing, but Taylor spread her wrath like a silent disease. The woman had probably changed little. Ashley, their third wheel in the trifecta of cattiness, was just as potent in her terror. They had all scared me. Still did, to be honest.

“I take it Taylor is still Taylor?”

Missy's eyes went wide, and she bristled. “Oh yeah. Just an enormous pile of shit wrapped in a pretty box. She humiliated Vivian and didn't even bother for privacy during the attack.

“Vivian took it for a while, then disappeared. She said she was taking a break, left, and didn't return for the rest of her

shift. She's barely been at the apartment, and I think she's avoiding me. I told her to take the next few days to care for herself. I honestly don't know if she'll be back."

I nodded along, running my hand over my beard. I couldn't fault Vivian for wanting to abandon the ship when the town pointed its cannons right at the mast with orders to shoot to kill. When the water overtook the ship, there wouldn't be a damned person who would hand her a bucket to bail herself out.

It was enough to make me feel sorry for her, making me resent her simultaneously. I didn't want to feel sorry for Vivian. Each moment I saw her humanness was another opportunity for whatever rattled around in my head to shift into my chest. Maybe move a little lower, too.

Yet, I'd been nice to her. No, not nice. Kind. I'd been kind to her, which was worse. Nice was a polite gesture. Kindness was an intentional moral judgment. Something done for another person because they held enough meaning for it. So what did that say about me and these feelings?

I wouldn't linger to figure it out.



"You're an idiot."

Mumbling and grumbling the entire short walk to Missy's apartment, I wondered what the hell I was doing.

I wouldn't linger in *Rise 'N Grind* to figure out my feelings about Vivian. I'd been honest when I made that silent

declaration.

I failed to tack on any caveat about hunting her down to see if she was okay.

“Big fucking idiot,” I muttered for good measure. I’d done enough already. Giving her a ride and a place to crash. Getting her shit. *Caring*. “Big, big fucking idiot.”

She helped me once. More than a decade ago. I’d helped her plenty in the short time she’d been back. We were even. I should go home and leave it all alone.

“Do it, you big, big, *big* fucking idiot.”

I didn’t do it.

Missy’s apartment wasn’t far from the coffee shop, and after saying goodbye to her, I *intended* to go home. I had a shit ton of work to do anyway, and getting held up in other people’s problems wasn’t a good use of my time.

I seemed to waste an excessive amount of time on it anyway.

*Why do I do this?* Vivian wasn’t a project to take on. A bookshelf to build or a rock to climb. Though I could probably climb on her just fine.

*Nope*. Not going there.

I clenched my jaw, rapping a heavy fist on Missy’s door. I hadn’t meant to knock angrily, but I also hadn’t meant to give myself a half-chub on the walk over. Maybe living alone in the woods wasn’t as good for me as I thought. I was becoming delusional.

There was no answer. I knocked again, tightening my jaw until it popped. Yeah. I was an idiot.

At least I was an idiot unwitnessed.

I left, heading down the corridor and around the corner. And ran smack into someone.

“*Oof*,” she huffed. A familiar sound that had haunted me for the last couple of weeks.

“Vivian.” My voice was a combination of steely resolve and relief. I didn’t like either. One was protective because of whatever she was making me feel, and the other was a clear sign I felt something at all.

“Reed!”

My eyes took control of my good sense, roaming over her body as I held her arms to steady her.

She wore form-fitting yoga pants and a tank top tied into a knot at the hip, showing just a peekaboo trace of her soft stomach. Her thick thighs curved around her plump ass, sliding up to her waist in a voluptuous hourglass figure that only made me clench my jaw harder.

Vivian stepped back like she could hear my thoughts. “What are you doing here? If you’re looking for Missy, she’s at the coffee shop.”

With her hair swept up in a ponytail and her cheeks a bright pink, I wondered if she’d been out on a run or something. She looked like she’d been exerting some effort, and I caught

whiffs of grass rolling off her as she skirted past me toward the apartment.

“I’m not looking for Missy.”

Vivian stopped in her tracks, holding her keys in her hand, tucked between her knuckles like she worried I would attack her. “Then why are you here?”

Shit. I didn’t want to get nervous now. I wasn’t fifteen anymore. Shifting from one foot to the other, I thrust my hands into the pockets of my jeans.

“I was looking for you.”

She nodded, her ponytail bouncing behind her. I’d only seen her with her hair up once, and I liked the look of it. It made her face softer and her cheeks rounder when there wasn’t hair to hide behind. Not that Vivian ever needed to hide her face.

Vivian must have caught me looking at her ponytail because suddenly, those pink cheeks went red. She reached her hand up self-consciously to tug at her hair and let it fall to her shoulders.

“Why?” she asked.

*Because I was worried about you.*

*Because I wanted to make sure you are okay.*

*Because when I’m not forcing myself to think of something else, my mind wanders to you.*

“Missy asked me to check on you.” *Christ.* I withheld a groan as I lied through my teeth.

Her face fell, making me feel like a piece of shit. She deserved to know someone was thinking of her, and not just the person responsible for her work schedule.

“Oh. Well, um. I haven’t thrown myself in front of a bus yet, so we’re good.” She gave a thumbs up and let herself into the apartment.

I followed her inside, surprised she didn’t shut the door in my face.

“Are you okay?”

She tossed her keys onto the table before pouring herself a glass of water in the kitchen.

“No.”

“No?” I repeated, watching her take the entire glass down in one go.

“No.”

She set the empty glass on the counter, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Minor scratches ran along her palm, thin little pink lines like paper cuts. Catching my stare, she dropped her hand and smoothed it on the thigh of her pants.

I cleared my throat. “No?”

This was productive.

Vivian sighed, crossing her arms. “I said no, and it’s a complete sentence, Reed.”

Meaning she would say nothing else about it. Right.

“Can I do anything to help?” I offered.

She chewed on her bottom lip, saying nothing. Maybe I made her nervous. I stepped back to give her some distance, though my gut told me to get closer.

“No,” she finally said. “Still a complete sentence, by the way.”

It was all a bit of a frosty reception, and I couldn't blame her. Only one person hated me, and I hadn't seen him since I was sixteen. I could only imagine how it felt to receive disdain from *an entire town*.

“Is it because of Taylor?” I asked softly, hoping she'd maybe give me more than a one-word complete sentence.

Vivian's eyes shifted to the floor as she bit her lip harder. She was fighting the urge to shut down or flee.

“She doesn't deserve your upset. You never seemed to care what people thought of you. Why start now? Fuck her.”

Vivian glared at me, her mouth dropping with indignation. “You think I never cared what people thought of me? I cared too much.”

Her hands gripped the edge of the countertop behind her.

“I spent most of my life reacting because I cared about my image and the perception others had. I couldn't make them like me because I wasn't likable, but I could make them think about me like I was important. Like I had *power*.”

She dropped her arms to her side, half-collapsing against the counter like she had no energy for any of this.

“I was told for the entirety of my life that I was special because I was something other people weren’t. Simultaneously praised for stupid shit, like visible hip bones, perky tits, and straight teeth, but torn down for *anything* wrong with me. My eyes are hazel, not blue. My mother bought me colored contact lenses to remedy that, and I wore them when I was *nine years old*.”

Jesus.

“My first diet? I was eleven. I got my period early, and my mother warned me I’d gain weight as my body developed. In her mind, she was doing me a favor. You know what I did instead of telling her to fuck off?”

I shook my head, at a loss for words.

Vivian gave a bitter laugh. “I went to school and told Alicia Montgomery she was a fat cow and should sew her lips shut instead of eating.” She blinked a few times, taming the shimmer of tears in her eyes.

“I made that poor girl miserable because *I* felt awful about myself. Misery doesn’t just love company, Reed. It breeds armies and legions of pain, and I was the five-star general leading the charge.” She sniffled and wiped her pink-tipped nose. “Not to brag, but I was good at it.”

She intended it as self-deprecation, but I didn’t want to feed that beast, so I stayed quiet.

“When Taylor came into the coffee shop and asked if I was attending the high school reunion, it wasn’t because she



wanted to catch up or see how I was doing. It's because she wanted to hang me for my war crimes. When I said I wasn't going, she executed me on the spot instead. Either way, the crowd always enjoys the bloodshed."

She raised one shoulder dismissively, as if she hadn't told me something deeply personal. I didn't get the sense that Vivian was an individual who aired her emotional state, and I wasn't sure why she was doing it with me, but it felt like everything.

"I've always been the mean girl, and I probably deserve the last few weeks more than anyone, but I won't put myself in front of Taylor like a platter of failure and expect her not to feast on my humiliation like the vulture she is."

I couldn't argue with some of her points. She had been pretty shitty to people, and their residual feelings about her treatment weren't necessarily unjustified. But Taylor leading the chants of vengeance was irony at its finest.

"Then stop caring what people think," I said, standing beside her.

The look on Vivian's face led me to believe I'd suddenly sprouted a second head.

"Really," I continued. "You want your power back? Take it. Don't let them decide how you feel about yourself. Apologize, make amends, do what you can to correct your wrongs, and stop caring what others think of you. The best way to live your life is the way that makes you happy. Your expectations,

Vivian, no one else's. You did it the other way, and it didn't work for you.

"You're an adult now, and you can make different choices for yourself, including behaving better." I shrugged, the movement causing my arm to rub against hers. "Be better and start by not caring about other people's opinions."

Vivian stared at my arm against hers.

"Easy for you to say." A slow smile crept along her lips. "You walk around with a rug on your face and *clearly* don't care what other people think of you."

I didn't enjoy being the butt of jokes, but I'd take the brunt of her humor if it made her feel better. I ran a hand over my face, wondering what she'd think if I didn't have a rug covering it.

"I'll go with you." As soon as I said it, I wished I could take it back.

Vivian's eyes went wide, and her eyebrows furrowed with surprise. "You will?"

*Will I? Shit.*

Slowly, like I was trying to believe myself too, I nodded. "Yeah. I'll go with you. We'll go together to the reunion. You want to stop caring, and I *clearly* don't care." I gestured to my beard, and Vivian laughed, her face light for the first time since I'd seen her today.

"Don't you have your boy band to walk the red carpet with?" She held a smile on her face, and it surprised me she

remembered I had friends.

To be fair, sometimes I forgot, too.

Maybe sensing my surprise, Vivian looked away, kicking her toe against the tile and bouncing her foot nervously.

“I remember Taylor was *obsessed* with your friend. The blonde one. I was kind of hoping he’d make an appearance and be married to a woman opposite of Taylor.”

“Ty Jensen? Nah, that guy is definitely not married. Not sure he ever will be, but I can assure you, there’s zero chance he’d marry someone like Taylor. Our other friend, Noah James, is on tour with his band right now.” Vivian raised her eyebrows. “He married Jaime Sullivan. Remember her? They’re breeding like rabbits.”

Vivian scrunched her nose. “I remember Jaime. She was pretty and nice. I hated her.”

That lined up.

“She’s still pretty and nice, but I don’t think you’d hate her now. Ezra Collins lives in Seattle, but he’s still grumpy as fuck and thinks there’s no point in coming, given people are likely just as terrible today as they were yesterday.”

Vivian shrugged. “He’s not wrong.”

He was wrong, and my standing in Missy Granger’s kitchen with Vivian Harlow was proof of it.

“I wasn’t planning to go, either.”

Vivian met my eyes. “I know, yet you’re offering to take me so that I can prove a point. Why?”

So many reasons, none of which I could tell her. So I told her the only one that mattered.

“You deserve a friend,” I said, meaning it. “I’ll be your friend.”

I meant that, too.

# Eleven

*Vivian*

*I* *if he stands me up, so help me, God...*

Rolling my head side to side, I took a deep breath and cracked my neck, thinking how satisfying it would be to crack Reed's neck when he didn't show up.

Standing outside the gym at Clear Lake High and waiting on a pity date for a ten-year high school reunion was not living my best life.

I checked my phone again. It was nearly eight o'clock. Reed was supposed to meet me at seven forty-five. The reunion didn't start until eight, but I wanted to be early. Missy and Ron wouldn't show until closer to nine, opting to go to dinner because, as Ron said, "We see these boring fucks all the time."

Me, though? I wanted to be there, stake my claim, find a table in the corner, and sit and watch so I could assess the

situation. I didn't want eyes on me when I walked in, which meant I had to get there *first*.

But I'd seen six couples go inside in the last fifteen minutes. Six hand-holding, grinning couples heading through the doors of a worn and aging gymnasium like this was the event of the year.

And yeah, maybe showing up early was prolonging my torture, but I really, really, *really* wanted to get inside and settle in with little notice.

Then again, my red A-line dress with a flared skirt was a bit *obvious*.

But when I saw this dress in the boutique window in town? It spoke to my heart—the color of the blood that pumped through it, but also as a statement. Here I am, motherfuckers.

“Vivian Harlow!”

I'd recognize the call of that shrew anywhere. Ashley Peppercock.

“Vivian!” she called again.

Ashley was a brunette Taylor Lamington, and that darkness wasn't just limited to her physical features. Ashley took sincere satisfaction in burning reputations like she was a forest fire for social standing.

While I may have been outright mean or bitchy to people, I never spread rumors or attempted to ruin reputations. I believed in face-to-face verbal combat. Ashley and Taylor

believed in removing an entire spirit and soul from an adversary's body by any means necessary.

“Ashley,” I said, resigned to the fact she would not miss an opportunity to judge me in the flesh. “You came.”

She let go of the hand of a handsome man, tall and striking, with hair so blonde it was nearly white. His eyes were a clear blue, practically translucent.

A vampire. Ashley Peppercock brought a vampire to our high school reunion.

Ashley hugged me briefly before holding me at arm's length as she took me in.

“You look great, Viv,” she said, her voice somewhat kind. It was... weird. “I'm glad you came. Taylor called me and told me she ran into you the other day. She wasn't sure if you'd make it.”

Ashley dropped her hands and smoothed the skirt of her tight dress, a long and black slinky number with silver threads that sparkled beneath the lights in the parking lot.

She looked mostly the same, save a few lines beside her mouth when she smiled, which she did a lot tonight. Also weird. I don't think I'd seen Ashley hold a smile for so long.

She gestured to the man with her, dressed in a deep blue suit, a black dress shirt underneath, and a black tie, contrasting with the lightness of his features. “This is Oliver, my husband. Oliver, this is Vivian.”

I accepted his hand, noticing it was warm and deciding he probably had a pulse after all.

“Vivian,” he said with a thick accent. Some British Colony roots. “I’ve heard a lot about you in the last few days since we arrived.” He glanced at his wife, a smirk on his face as he jerked a thumb toward her. “She’s been nervous since we decided to attend this evening. She informs me she wasn’t particularly well-liked.”

I nearly choked on my laugh. “Excuse me?”

Ashley blushed, the apples of her cheeks turning a soft pink, making her look even prettier. “Yeah. I mean, let’s be honest, Viv. We were popular, but not because people liked us.”

“We ruled by fear,” I explained to Oliver.

“Are you nervous about being here?” Ashley asked. “I planned to visit my parents, but wasn’t sure if I would come until about an hour ago.” She nudged Oliver. “He suggested I come, but I’m so nervous because I was an utter asshole when we were kids.”

“I’m nervous too,” I answered honestly. “I’ve been here a few weeks, and let’s just say every interaction I’ve had with people from high school has been less than warm.”

Ashley nodded sympathetically. “I heard.” She paused, glancing at Oliver and then back at me. “You want to come in with us?”

Did I? Yes, I think I did. Reed was standing me up, probably rightly so, and adult Ashley had proved to be a pleasant



surprise. Maybe we'd be friends. At the very least, I had an ally tonight who understood the pain of atonement.

“I—”

“There you are!” I heard his voice from over my shoulder, the gravelly timbre pushed out in a huff of impatience.

Ashley's eyes widened as Reed approached, but mine went even wider when I turned around to look at him.

“What did you do?” I screeched.

That stopped Reed in his tracks, and he stood a foot away with a scowl on his face. His very visible face. Without that thick beard, his face had a light stubble and a neat trim of dark hair that looked more like a shadow than the night sky.

“Hi, Reed,” Ashley whispered. Oliver looked at her and shook his head. I didn't get the impression that he was upset, and in a split second, I decided I liked Oliver.

Reed? I wasn't sure about.

He ran a hand over his tidy jaw, a strong line he'd unfairly hidden. His intense eyes were just as dark as always, but without a thick beard, he looked softer. Friendlier, maybe? Younger. Approachable.

I bit my lip and blinked twice. I wanted to approach him right now.

This man was handsome, and even though he was still rugged and a little wild with his hair tucked behind his ears, he looked dapper in a black suit and a pressed white dress shirt,

unbuttoned at the top and without a tie. Casual, yet sexy. It was a look I wouldn't have believed if I didn't see it for myself.

“What's wrong?” he asked with a hint of humor that told me he knew damn well how good he looked.

“Nothing,” Ashley whispered. “Absolutely nothing.” She licked her lips, not taking her eyes off Reed.

Oliver tugged on her elbow. “Come along, dear. Let's get inside before you melt.”

I really did like Oliver. And maybe Ashley now, too.

This was going to be a weird night.

Reed gave a wave as they left, facing me with a grin. A grin. With *dimples*. The man deserved a punch to the arm for hiding them for so long.

“You shaved.” It didn't need to be said, but I was still too stunned not to say it.

“I did. Glad you noticed. Sorry I'm so late. Something came up. I didn't mean to keep you waiting.” He paused, adjusting his suit jacket and buttoning it to frame his body. “Did you think I was standing you up?”

*Yes, and it made my stomach sink and my mood sour.*

I cleared my throat. “Are you ready to go in?”

“Are *you* ready to go in? I'm not at risk of a bucket of pig blood getting dropped on me.”

“Why do you think I wore red?” I quipped. “At least they won’t stain my dress.”

Reed offered his elbow, a gesture that surprised and possibly enlivened me. Tugging my purse onto my other arm, I accepted his accompaniment.

Even more surprising than the offer, Reed didn’t flinch when I touched him.

“I’m surprised you own a suit.” I let him lead the walk into the gym. “One that’s not made of other humans’ flesh, that is.”

Reed stopped at the entry’s double doors and leaned to whisper in my ear, “You look good too, Vivian. Very good. You’re going to knock them dead.”

He *winked*, pulling me into an auditorium aglow with stringed fairy lights and a disco ball in the center of an empty basketball court filled with ten thousand balloons.

Tables skirted outside the court, a few filled with the early arrivals. Thank God there was a bar near the connecting auditorium stage, a multipurpose space that doubled as the cafeteria in the school on regular days. A DJ looked bored as he played the greatest hits of our high school years. The current song had not held up with the wear of time.

“At least it’s not jazz,” I said, nodding at the DJ and ignoring the heat blazing my cheeks at Reed’s compliment. Best not to acknowledge that he affected me at all. Even better not to compliment him back.

The handful of couples at the tables lifted their heads as we entered. Only Ashley and Oliver waved. They sat alone at a table while the other couples filled out two others.

“Let’s sit with them.”

Reed gave a heavy sigh.

“She’s like me,” I explained. “Recovering bitch. I promise she’s not so bad anymore, and Oliver, her husband, is a human. No matter how pretty he is.”

Reed fiddled with the cuffs of his jacket, looking uncomfortable with the attention of people’s eyes on us. Or maybe it was simply discomfort with his attire. The man wore jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies daily.

Reed huffed a laugh. “He does look rather angelic.”

I snorted, the unexpected and unattractive kind that embarrassed me. Covering my nose as my shoulders shook, I said, “Sorry.”

Reed tugged my hand away from my face. “Don’t do that. Don’t apologize for things that don’t need apologies.” He gestured to the tables. “Save those apologies for when you truly need them.”

I groaned, exaggerating a collapse like my bones had turned to jelly. More people were coming in by the minute. I wanted to flip the script of the town narrative about Vivian Harlow to one I’d written myself, but it still made me nervous.

“Okay.” I straightened up, standing tall and pulling my shoulders back. “Let’s do this.”

The yellow glow from the strings of lights danced playful reflections in Reed's eyes. The dark irises lightened. He stared at me... approvingly. It was an unfamiliar look, at least when given in my direction.

Ignoring the fluttering in my stomach, I headed straight to the bar.

“Drinks first.”

Reed agreed. “Strong drinks. What can I get you?”

*A tall drink of water because I am thirsty as fuck.*

I shook the thought and gave a weak smile. “Whatever you're drinking is fine.” I nodded toward the bar. “Looks like Henry Smith is the bartender tonight. Don't tell him you're with me, or he'll also poison your drink.”

Reed smirked. “Is that why you want what I'm having? Going to switch them when I'm not looking.”

I faked a pout. “Am I that predictable?”

Reed shook his head, a piece of hair falling against his cheek as it came untucked from behind his ear. Without thinking, I reached to tuck it back for him.

Maybe it was a habit from being in a relationship for the last four years. Or maybe it was simply something I wanted to do, but as soon as my hand touched his face, I realized my mistake.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, watching Reed's eyes go wide. “You just, uh, had loose hair.”

I took a step back. He needed space. The man was so goddamn tense whenever I breached his personal bubble.

“Drinks,” I reminded him.

We trudged to the bar, shuffling in the wake of my awkwardness. *Don't touch people!* Definitely don't poke the bear.

But he'd shaved! And suited up! And come out of hibernation! Surely that meant maybe I could touch him? He certainly wasn't a bear anymore.

*No, Viv. Don't touch him. He patted your arms the last time you attempted physical proximity.*

He. Patted. My. Arms.

Reed jutted his chin toward Henry. “Go make it right.”

Henry Smith sat behind the folding table set up as a makeshift bar, his arms crossed against his chest as he glared down his nose at me. I was maybe three feet away from him, but I *felt* the heat of his disdain in every atom of air between us.

“Excuse me?”

Henry tightened the ponytail at the back of his head before he resumed crossing his arms and glaring.

I muttered from the side of my mouth, “That man will surely poison me.” I'd been joking moments before, but now I was sure dehydration was a safer bet.

“Make it right, Viv.” Reed’s clipped tone left no room for an argument. “You want your power back? You want redemption? You want to stop caring what people think of you and stop living based on other people’s expectations? Start with Henry.”

I peeked over my shoulder, and Henry sneered at me. Surrounded by all the wine and spirits at this event, Henry held every ounce of power.

“He wouldn’t even give me a broom closet to sleep in,” I whined. “He’s not giving me an old fashioned. And there’s *zero* chance he’s giving me forgiveness.”

Reed looked at Henry, assessing the situation. He went to scratch the beard that was no longer there, dropping his hand when he realized it.

Did he regret his choice to let it go? It had to have taken some dedication and commitment to get that beard where it was. Why did he shave at all? Surely not to impress the people in this gym. Me included.

“This isn’t about Henry, and you know it. This is about you being a decent person. Not because you want or need Henry’s approval, but because you need to show yourself that you can do it.” He jutted his chin again. “Go.”

Jesus.

“Fine,” I snapped. This was a hostage situation. “I’ll do what you want.”

Reed bit a laugh. “No, you’ll do what *you* want, and judging by the fact you showed up tonight, I think you want to do this on your terms.” He glanced at Henry. “Not on his.”

*Damn right.*



# Twelve

## *Reed*

**B**eing typical or expected may define predictability, but it did not describe Vivian.

For the last hour, she stood behind the bar with Henry Smith, mixing drinks and creating a cocktail menu themed for the reunion.

*Old Fashioned Humiliation*

*Launch Me to the Cosmo to Escape*

*Greyhound Out of Town*

And maybe my favorite, *Long Island Iced Out of Social Events Tea*.

The woman wasn't shying away from anything, and with each familiar face that approached, Vivian smiled bigger and prouder. She looked in her element, which was shocking because Vivian serving people, let alone *these* people, wasn't what I expected.

It certainly wasn't what I predicted.

And that was Vivian in a nutshell.

Standing with her hands on her hips in her sexy red dress, Vivian's bare legs peeked from beneath the table. She wore her hair twisted up, exposing her long neck. With a breathy laugh that sounded sincere—fuck. Vivian was stunning.

And I was creepy, lurking off to the side as I sat with Ashley and Oliver, listening to them talk about their lives and feigning some interest. Not because I cared, but because Vivian had seemed excited that there might be a friendly face in this crowd.

I half listened with insincere attention, occasionally smiling to be polite. Without my beard, I could no longer hide my scowl.

Grumpy asshole.

When Vivian got the guts to approach Henry, she'd asked him to make her an old fashioned. Henry, accepting the gig only because no one else from the reunion planning committee would do it, did not know how to do more than mix well drinks.

Vivian gave him some simple instructions, but he was guarded—probably thinking Vivian was mocking him. But to his surprise, and mine, she told him about her career in bartending and offered to pop back there and help.

It was brilliant. It meant people had to approach her, allowing her to address them and win them over with bottom-

shelf liquor.

After a while, I grew restless. Ashley and Oliver were perfectly friendly, but I didn't people much unless it was with *my* people. I held a steady gaze between Vivian and the door, waiting for Missy and Ron to arrive.

It didn't matter how much I pushed Ezra to come tonight. The man couldn't be bothered, even though Seattle wasn't far. Noah was on the road, and Ty was working on a big project and couldn't fly up. And that? That was the extent of my people.

I could have followed Vivian's steps and tried to be social, but that was her deal, not mine. I was just there to... I don't know. Supervise, maybe.

Shit. Why *was* I there?

The woman didn't need me after all. No matter how hardened the face that approached, it softened after a minute or two of talking with Vivian. With an apology, a self-deprecating joke, or a fantastic cocktail, Vivian slogged through a line of classmates and shifted opinions.

Now and again, she looked up to meet my gaze, dropping her eyes and giving what seemed like a shy smile. Sometimes she *beamed*, her face exploding into a grin, and how it made my heart beat erratically was a little concerning.

Rather than think about it, I finished my third drink and stood to get in line for a fourth.

I didn't know when my cut-off would be. I drove tonight, but I could crash at Missy's. Nope, scratch that. I couldn't do that anymore. What little space she had in her apartment was occupied by the same woman who took up all the space in my head these days.

Whatever, surely someone would give me a lift. Or I could sleep in my truck. Yes, that.

I stood in line behind Gary Barnett, the stupid mouth-breather he was, tapping my foot impatiently. He leered at Vivian. I could see it whenever he turned to mutter something to Danny Fry. Low rumbles of laughter rolled between them, and I gritted my teeth, just imagining the comments they had.

Alicia Montgomery stood at the front of the line, chatting animatedly with Vivian. Though I was four people back and the music was loud, I could hear their giggles before I saw Alicia reach across the table and hug Vivian tightly.

Carrying a drink in each hand, Alicia passed me and chirped, "Hey, Reed. Nice face."

I nodded, pushing the sleeves of my dress shirt past my elbows. It was hot and getting crowded in this goddamn gym, and it didn't matter how friendly people were. I didn't want to be there.

I'd been in a piss-poor mood when I arrived, but seeing Vivian gave that sense of dread and doom some reprieve. It probably should have relieved me, but it only pissed me off. I didn't want her to affect me at all.

I was late, not a good start to the night, but only because I'd been dealing with my mom's crippling depression after my father left. This time, he took an antique ring that belonged to her grandmother. She didn't realize it for several hours after he went to get them breakfast and never returned.

After three days of tears and despair, she finally called me to help pick herself up. The mortgage was due, and she gave him money to fix a bad serpentine belt on his car that probably wasn't broken anyway and to get new tires because his were threadbare.

Guaranteed, he hadn't needed either, but my mom knew nothing about automotive repairs—or learning lessons.

For a minute, I was afraid I'd have to cancel on Vivian, and it disappointed me. Christ. That was an uncomfortable acknowledgment. I didn't know if I could have let her down like that.

But watching her flirt, laugh, and have a good time, she didn't need me tonight. And I didn't think I wanted to be there any longer. It felt good to see her happy, finally. Good to see people not hating on her. Good to see her confident.

Too good.

When it was my turn at the bar, she nudged Henry with her elbow. "What do you think, Hen?"

Henry eyed me for a moment and shrugged. "You're the professional, Viv," he answered like they were long-standing friends.

She crossed her arms and tapped her chin contemplatively. “Well, he’s certainly looking dapper in that suit.”

Henry agreed. “A bit James Bond.”

“But Sean Connery Bond,” Vivian clarified. “A classic handsome. Rugged.”

I rolled my eyes, shifting my weight to the other leg impatiently. “Just give me a bourbon.”

She shrugged, her dress strap sliding lower on her shoulder. She didn’t bother to adjust it, and I fought the urge to reach over and do it for her. The way she brushed my hair out of my face earlier.

I could see the peekaboo view of the red lace from the top cup of her bra near her armpit where the strap had fallen. My attention decided it was better spent there than on the glass in front of me.

A few drinks emboldened my imagination, drifting to ideas about sliding my hand beneath that pretty red dress to see what other surprises Vivian might have for me. It didn’t hurt that she said I looked dapper in this stuffy as fuck suit. And handsome. I thought she might think that once I shaved my beard.

I took a swig of my drink, emptying half of it in one go.

“You have many more, and you’re going to be pissing blood,” Henry warned. “The committee did not have a budget for quality liquor.”

Forget pissing blood. I needed to be careful before I grabbed Vivian, tossed her over my shoulder like a Neanderthal, and carried her out of the gym to be alone with her.

“We’re only supposed to serve a maximum of two drinks per person,” Vivian chimed in. She lowered her voice. “But for you, I’ll make an exception.”

Her shy little smile was sexy, and I picked up the last of my drink and finished it, setting it down.

“Another, please.”

Another what? Another minute with her? Another pass of her attention? Another shy smile? Another breathy laugh because she was relaxed for the first time since I’d seen her in this town?

All of it. Another of all of it.

“And for me?” an annoying fucking voice said from over my shoulder, stealing Vivian’s attention. “Aren’t we friends still, Viv?”

Jonathan Campbell slammed a meaty hand on my back as he pushed his way to the front of the line. “Seems you have yet another part-time job in this town.”

She frowned. “Your wit is admirable.” Vivian placed her hands on Henry’s shoulders and turned him squarely toward Jonathan. “Here you go, Hen. I’m taking my state-mandated break.”

Henry observed the two of them, unsure if he should intervene. Jonathan was looking to cause trouble for Vivian,

and Henry, despite his earlier treatment of her, was a loyal man. Vivian was now his friend, and he looked ready to flip the table for her.

I stepped aside as Vivian brushed by. “Come with me, Reed?”

Abandoning my empty glass on the table, I followed on her heels. Not missing an opportunity, Jonathan laughed and tagged along, too.

“Look at that. You’ve got Swamp Nerd doing your bidding, yet again.”

Snapping her head around, Vivian wasted no time to shove her finger into Jonathan’s chest.

“His name is Reed, asshole.” She reached for my arm and tugged me along. After several drinks, I wasn’t fighting it.

“Swamp Nerd,” he hissed with a low chuckle.

Vivian stopped dead in her tracks, facing him. “Nerd or otherwise, *Jonathan*, this man is kind and thoughtful. His head isn’t swollen from an oversized ego that doesn’t match the reality of his life. You might want to consider your manners.”

“Reality of life? Like living on Prissy Missy’s couch because your crazy mom kicked you out, and your lapdog boyfriend had to clean up your mess?” Jonathan crossed his arms and smirked.

While most men here wore suits or dress slacks and a nice shirt, Jonathan wore his letterman jacket. Flanking him were Danny Fry and that goddamn mouth breather, Gary Barnett.



They snickered as if Jonathan had said something worth recognizing.

Vivian glared at him. “I clean up my own messes. Dick.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Do you? Is that why you sent your boyfriend to my dealership to get your shit? Because you were too much of a coward to get it yourself after going atomic bitch on me?”

Shit, this was getting ugly—and fast. I wasn’t sure why Jonathan needed to say anything to Vivian or why his cronies had to crowd her, but I didn’t like it.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and tried to steer her away. “He’s not worth it.”

“Rescuing her again? She has a magic pussy, huh?” The amusement in Jonathan’s tone enraged me. He looked at me as if we were pals sharing a secret.

It couldn’t be helped. I was going to punch him. I pulled my arm off Vivian’s shoulders, my fist balling, but Vivian stepped between us, handling it herself.

“I *do* have a magic pussy, Jonathan. And unfortunately, your wand was disenchanting.”

She walked through the crowd gathered to watch the confrontation, many of whom were now laughing at Vivian’s expert swipe.

Ouch.

Jonathan didn't care for that *at all*, but when he moved to continue following Vivian, I stayed in place like a brick wall and put a hand on his chest, pushing him back. "I will hit you, and I will enjoy it. Let her go."

Jonathan was still taller than me by a few inches and in decent shape, but I wasn't a scrawny kid anymore. I had little doubt that I could at least give him a run for his money.

Guys like Jonathan, though? They didn't actually want a fight. They just wanted to intimidate, and he was failing at intimidating Vivian. The woman was a fortress.

And I loved it.

"Go away, Jonathan," Ashley said, pushing up from her seat and waving her arms at him like she was shooing away a pest. "You're being a jerk."

Since I left the table, Taylor Lamington and her husband had joined, and Taylor sat watching Ashley's intervention and chewing on her lower lip. She tugged on Ashley's arm and encouraged her to sit down, but Ashley didn't.

Jonathan rolled his eyes at Ashley and flipped her off. "You're not high and mighty, Ashley. You were just as much of a bitch."

When Oliver stood up, a solid wall of a man, Jonathan took a step back. "Did you have something you wished to say to my wife? Please address it with me."

Vivian snorted, that same sound that caught her off guard and embarrassed her, and I couldn't bite back my smile. It was

weirdly endearing.

“Go away,” various voices chanted. “Leave her alone.”

Suddenly, the gathered crowd shrunk in on Jonathan, pushing him like a tidal wave out of the gymnasium. Danny and Gary followed in his wake, the three grumbling until they disappeared.

Joel Stiner led the crowd with his fists in the air. “Let the party continue!”

Cheers rang out, a few hollers and a wolf whistle, and dozens of people resumed whatever they were doing before the class asshole interrupted.

“Are you okay?” I asked Vivian as she eyed our dancing and partying classmates who once hated her. Now they defended her.

She shook her head. “I need a minute. Excuse me.”

The skirt of her dress flared as she hurried into the hallway, her feet carrying her surprisingly quickly, given the heels she was wearing.

“Shit,” I muttered, unsure if I should follow.

I combed my fingers through my hair, thinking it over. It didn't matter how much I told myself Vivian could take care of herself or how much I knew I should let her—I was a fool if I tried to pretend I would leave her alone.

“Vivian, wait up!” I jogged in her shadow, but she didn't stop.

She picked up her pace, exiting the side doors that spilled into a dark and empty hallway. I recognized that hallway. My locker had been toward the end.

Vivian didn't slow, breezing down the hall like she had somewhere to be.

*She's panicking.*

I'd done it plenty of times in this building to know what it looked like. With only the green shine from a glowing exit sign and flood lights outside the external doors, there wasn't much light, and I doubted she'd go far.

I was right, and she stopped about three-quarters of the way down, staring at something.

A locker. Jonathan's old locker.

No, that wasn't quite right. It was *my* locker.

She stood in front of the rusted metal, looking at it like it would reveal the secrets of the universe.

"This was yours," she said softly as I approached. "I remember the day Jonathan and I bullied you." She placed her hand on the locker door.

"I don't remember your face or whether there was hurt in your eyes or if you scowled at me, but I remember what you said."

Vivian slowly met my eyes as she pointed at her pinned-up hair.

“Jonathan was being an asshole about my hair. I remember because it took a lot of guts to wear it up. Like an act of rebellion. He hated that my ears stuck out.” She snickered. “I almost asked my mom if I could have surgery to pin them back. She’d have happily said yes, I’m sure. No flaws for Vivian!”

The thought made my stomach shift uncomfortably. Vivian was beautiful, and her ears were charming—the perfect shape. Inviting, like my lips wouldn’t mind nibbling them for an extended time.

Given her feelings about it, she’d still worn her hair up tonight. It made her look even more beautiful.

“I was such a jerk to you. Not because you’d done anything wrong, but because Jonathan had hurt my feelings. I was embarrassed and felt ashamed of myself. I wanted to hurt you, too. I called you names. And you?” She dropped her head as her fingers flexed on the locker. “You said maybe I was an asshole like Jonathan. You said—”

“You’re better than that. You know you are,” I finished for her, remembering the entire series of events as if it had just happened.

I’d never been so physically close to Vivian before that day. Never had her so much as look my way, and suddenly, I’d been the focus of her attention.

She nodded. “Yes, that. You left. You didn’t even bother closing your locker. We could have trashed your shit, but I’d

been so mean to you that you'd rather deal with that than stay a second longer with me.

“Jonathan tried to dump your locker, and I snapped at him to leave. He was still pissed about my hair—like it was an offense to him if I didn't look my best. It wasn't hard to wave him off. Then I closed your locker, and I stared at it.

“You'd stunned me. No one ever expected anything other than the worst parts of me. Your words—”

“I saw,” I admitted. “From the end of the hall, on my way to gym class. I turned around and saw you close my locker.”

There had been something about her reaction that day that was filled with enough humility to make me wonder why she was so terrible on the outside. There was good on the inside. I'd seen it once. I wondered why she tried so hard to hide it.

Now that I knew her better? There was a lot of good hiding on the inside—more than I'd realized.

I took a deep breath, unsure why I was saying it, but the words danced along the tip of my tongue and kicked from my mouth before I could stop them. “When we were in kindergarten, you helped me.”

Her eyes met mine, squinting as she struggled to put the memory together. I did it for her.

“You saw Tommy Falchuck bullying me. Saw me piss in my pants. Instead of laughing with him, you kicked him in the balls. Took him down. Then you got my bag from my classroom, and two kids from your class brought it to me. You

told them I needed help. Those two kids? They roped in one more to get revenge on Tommy. Those three guys became my best friends in this entire world. Without them, my life would have been very different.”

Vivian sucked in a breath, her head shaking slightly. “I don’t really remember that.”

Leaning closer, I held her gaze. I wanted to see her. I wanted her to know that I saw her.

“I do. I will remember it every day for the rest of my life. It may have been one good deed in a cesspool of bad, but for one kid—*four* kids—it made all the difference in this world.”

“I wish *that* was what I remembered from my past.” She kept her head held high and eyes on mine. She meant what she said next. “Thank you for remembering it for me. I’m sorry I was mean to you in high school... and everyone else.”

I brushed a loose hair behind her ear like she’d done to me earlier. “I know.”

“Do you think I’m still a terrible person?”

“Not at all,” I said softly.

Satisfied with that answer, she let out a long breath. “Good. For some reason, your opinion matters more than that gym full of people.” She paused. “What did Jonathan mean when he said you cleaned up all my messes?”

I had hoped she’d gloss over all of that.

I cleared my throat. “Uh, well. I stopped by his dealership after I picked up your suitcase. He wasn’t particularly friendly, but he gave it to me after some words.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Some words?”

I had zero intention of sharing those words with her, but Jonathan didn’t appreciate the profanity and threats—probably part of what motivated his shit behavior tonight. I reminded her, “I was persuasive then. Remember, it was when I looked like a serial killer.”

“Still do,” she said, eyes flitting over my face. “More Ted Bundy than San Quentin Charles Manson now, though.”

“Jesus, Vivian,” I muttered. “Why do you know this?” She didn’t answer.

“Wait, just to clarify. You drove to Jonathan’s dealership *after* you got my suitcase?”

“Yes.”

The surrounding hallway was so quiet that I could hear the soft *whoosh* of her exhaled breath when she leaned back and pressed against the locker.

“And my mom? Did she need the same persuasion as Jonathan?”

Fortunately, Mrs. Harlow didn’t need profanity and threats. I scratched the back of my head and shifted uncomfortably.

“Um.”



Vivian's face dropped. "What aren't you telling me? I knew you weren't telling me something that day you dropped off my stuff."

I was many things, but a liar wasn't one of them. Omitter, maybe. Self-denier, definitely. Liar? Not at all.

"I didn't see your mom."

"Oh." Vivian crossed her arms, her posture becoming guarded with the topic of her mother.

I couldn't blame her for it. Her mother was a witch, and the morning after Vivian crashed at my house was only further confirmation.

"So she just left my stuff on the porch or something?"

I grimaced and rubbed my head faster. "Or something."

"Reed!"

"Fine, fine." I waved my hand for her to calm down. "I showed up, and your stuff was on the porch. All over. Like she'd opened the door and just threw out armfuls of your things. I packed them up and brought them back to you."

Her eyes went wide.

"It was no big deal," I said. "I didn't think you needed the details."

She pushed off the locker, her arms dropping, and stood so close to me that I could feel the heaving of her chest with the weight of her emotion.

"No big deal? I didn't need the details?"

Shit.

I messed up. I should have told her, but I didn't want to make things worse between her and her mother. She'd gotten her things back. It seemed good enough. Maybe the best outcome given the circumstances.

"I thought I was helping." I tucked my nervous hands into the pockets of my slacks.

Christ, being transported back to that awkward sophomore standing at my locker with a woman larger than the world was not on my itinerary tonight.

"You *were* helping," she snapped. "Fuck you for it."

My head shot up. "What?"

"Fuck you for it," she repeated. "I didn't ask for your help."

This woman. Stubborn as all hell and too prideful to acknowledge she needed something from someone else and—God forbid—appreciated it.

"No, you didn't *specifically* ask for it," I agreed, "but you needed it and didn't have many options. Acting like I forced kindness upon you and it was *awful* is clouded, is it not?"

She bit her lip and shook her head, closing her eyes.

I couldn't get any closer to her, chest-to-chest now, and feeling the soft warmth of her breath as it hitched when I lowered my mouth to her ear. That adorable ear. The one begging for my lips.

“You didn’t ask for my help specifically, but you needed it. And you know what? I was happy to give it.”

She bit harder on her lip.

“You don’t like taking help from others because you don’t understand why anyone would want to help you. You think it’s a trick or a manipulation. But you know what?” My voice was a whisper hitting the shell of her ear. “I think you were happy to take it.”

She gasped softly as her lips parted. I thought Vivian would be happy to take more from me than just my help.

Standing so close to her, the warmth of her body radiating, the smell of her hair intoxicating, and the sounds of her shallow breaths... I was happy to give more than just my help.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” I murmured, resting my arm against the locker and leaning deeper into her. “Tell me you don’t want more than my help. Tell me your body isn’t just as ignited by me as mine is by you.”

Vivian licked her lips, looking at my mouth and then back at my eyes as she shook her head. “I don’t—”

“You’re lying, Vivian.”

“I am,” she whispered. “Fuck you for that, too.”

She closed her eyes, her chest rising faster now that I caged her between the locker and my body. Something told me that Vivian would not be a woman who deferred to anyone. In any circumstance.

Good.

I ran a finger along her arm, and a trail of goosebumps followed. “You want me to leave you alone? I’m not sure I can do that, but tell me, and I’ll try.”

Her eyes shone with the fire of a woman who found her confidence again. The delectation of that look could bring me to my knees. And man, how I wanted to get down and worship her.

The smile that curled at the corners of her mouth told me it might not be so far-fetched to think I’d be on my knees soon enough.

“Not so shy anymore, are you?” She tilted her head to take me in.

“I told you. I was never shy. Just quiet. There’s a difference.”

She raised her hands, draping them over my shoulders and smoothing along the length of my arms. Her touch was electrifying, and my body immediately responded to her proximity.

When was the last time I’d wanted someone like this? When was the last time I’d wanted to be touched by someone like this? With her hands on me, I wondered how I’d lived such a solitary life.

This feeling was *everything*.

“One thing, though?” She leaned forward, bringing her mouth so close that her lips fluttered near mine, ghosting

without a touch.

“Hm?” I murmured, waiting for her to make the move to bring us together. It had to be her. If it was me, I might not hold myself back.

“I don’t like quiet when I’m getting fucked, so you better find that voice.”

# Thirteen

F<sup>alling.</sup>

Falling.

Falling.

Into the fever of his kiss. Into the pleasure of his roaming touch. Into the revelry of his eyes.

Into a space that felt dangerously like admiration. Adoration. Affection.

Lust. It had to be lust because more was too much, and if there was one thing I didn't want, it was to fall.

So I didn't. I grasped Reed's arms instead, holding myself up despite the need to collapse beneath the heat of his mouth and hands, exploring my body in this empty and dark hallway. The air between us, what little existed, filled with the sounds of our heavy breaths and soft moans as we kissed.

Deep pressing lips and a hand fisting my hair brought urgency to his burning kiss, his tongue slipping between the

seams of my lips. It lit me on *fire*.

He felt good. So good. His mouth on mine, his hands on my skin, his thick erection pressing against my abdomen. His eyes on me.

“Mmm. You feel good,” Reed rasped, his hands running down my ribs and gripping my hips.

They lingered with a tight squeeze before dropping below the skirt of my dress, wrapping around the cheeks of my ass as he dug his fingers into the flesh. His lips fell to the nape of my neck, licking, kissing, and biting with small nips that quickly brought another moan.

“You taste good too. Your skin. Fuck.”

I’d become embarrassingly self-conscious about my body in the last few years, but there was a time when my body ruled everything. It generated power and brought attention and affection. I’d lost that power and felt inconsequential. Ugly. Irrelevant. Unlovable. I had a partner who didn’t offer assurances or encourage me to believe otherwise.

But Reed? His enjoyment of my body and being with me was palpable. He wasn’t responsible for my confidence, but he was a reminder that it could exist. At that moment, I wanted to reawaken a part of myself that felt dormant.

“I do taste good,” I agreed, enjoying the feel of his lips as they worked down my neck and crested along my collarbone. His teeth nipped softly. “Taste more of me.”

Pushing on his shoulders, I encouraged him lower.

“You’re trouble,” he mumbled, his hand sliding down the bodice of my dress, exposing the cup of my bra.

His thumb circled the hardened peak of my nipple, but he made no moves to expose my breast. I wasn’t sure if that was to leave me in agony for more or keep things somewhat modest in the event someone stumbled upon us. Either way, my soaked panties were screaming for him, and I didn’t think I could wait.

Smiling briefly as his eyes found mine, Reed skated his hands beneath my dress, cupping my ass before hooking his thumbs into the waistband of my panties.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

A gentleman. The fool. I didn’t need his manners, but I did need his mouth.

“Don’t ask. Just do. I’ll tell you if something’s not okay.”

Welcome back, Vivian.

“God. You’re soaked.” He slid my panties down. “I can’t tell you how much I like that.”

I stepped out of them, leaving the silky briefs on the floor. “A writer with no words?”

He gave a low rumbling growl, quickly picked them up, and shoved them into his pocket. “I’m keeping these and don’t want an argument.”

I wouldn’t argue with him. A man who wanted my panties was a man who revered desire, and that was a man I wanted to



be with.

Sinking to his knees, he ran his hands along the back of my legs and pulled me closer.

“Try to keep it down when I eat your pussy. I don’t want to get detention.” His head disappeared under my skirt as his mouth kissed the inside of my thighs, going higher, higher...

“Oh!” I gasped, his mouth at my core and tongue lavishing in slow strokes. Reed ate pussy like he kissed, taking his time and giving all of his intensity to the task at hand.

Grasping at his hair, I pulled as his licks shifted from broad strokes to a flicking against my clit. My head dropped back, hitting the locker, and I tried to catch my breath.

Nope, not going to happen. I’d suffocate on pleasure and die a smiling woman. Totally good with that.

“You do taste good.” Reed pulled away only to look up at me with a sexy smile and dimples. *Dimples.*

I reached down to run my hand along his cheek and over his jaw, the stubble scratching against my palm. The way time could change someone. Reed was a man, and a good one at that.

He buried his face again, giving me little chance to respond with words. My body, however, found its response, bucking against him as he sucked my clit while one hand cupped my ass and the other joined to bring me to climax. Real team effort.

My thighs clenched, and my stomach tightened. Reed increased his pressure and slipped two fingers inside me, curling them to find that soft spot that could make me see stars.

“Oh God, Reed,” I cried, grasping his shoulders for support as he fucked me with his fingers and devoured me with his mouth. My fingertips dug into his shoulders. “Don’t stop. I will kill you if you stop.”

I really would, and the sweet chuckle he gave against the heat of my skin would not change that.

The sounds my body was making from his touch were obscene. The slickness of my pleasure, the unintelligible profanity from my mouth, the sound of his fingers fucking into me. But the heat of Reed’s efforts indicated he liked it. He groaned against my pussy, licking faster and sucking my clit harder.

Few things were sexier than a man who enjoyed giving head. This was no chore for Reed, and I would reward him for that later.

“I’m going to come,” I moaned, tugging his hair and earning a grunt from him.

Resolute and determined, Reed ignored my rough hands and didn’t let up, keeping his mouth on me while I rode the wave of my climax as it radiated through every cell in my body. Pretty sure my fingers and toes went numb at some point.

I was having a sex stroke.

When my body relaxed, settled, and sated, Reed sat back on his heels, sighing heavily. “I very much enjoyed that.” He kissed the inside of each thigh and pushed himself to stand.

Unsteady on my feet, I leaned against the locker for support, nodding enthusiastically as I struggled to catch my breath.

“I very much enjoyed that, too,” I confirmed.

Pulling on his shirt collar, I brought his lips to mine. Tasting myself on him, I made no apologies for enjoying the mess of our kiss. “Best extracurricular activity ever.”

The hungering kisses from before slowed to a languid pace, despite the hard-on in Reed’s pants—poor guy. I was relaxed and content, satisfied and feeling good. He could be white-knuckling it for all I knew, but the man wasn’t pushing for more, and that only spurred me on.

Reaching for him, I palmed along his length, fisting him as best I could through his pants.

“Holy shit, Reed,” I whispered. “Tell me that’s a prosthetic.”

*No, don’t tell me that. Let this be real.*

He squeezed his hand over mine and followed the movement, slowing my pace.

“I won’t pretend your surprise doesn’t make me happy, but I went down on you because I wanted to, not because I was going to fuck you against my old locker.”

I dropped my forehead to his chest, shaking my head. “I wouldn’t fuck you against your old locker.” *Lying bitch!* “Maybe blow you, but I’m sincerely worried you’ll break my jaw.”

A laugh rumbled in his chest, and I felt him shake. “I’m well-endowed, but it’s not prohibitive to sexual enjoyment. Trust me.”

“I trust you,” I said, liking the feel of him in my hands. “But we’re going to have to have a conversation about where you’re allowed to put that thing.”

He kissed the top of my head and stepped back, the empty air between us catching me off guard. Did this man just back off from someone touching his dick? What world was I living in?

“It will fit in all the places I plan on putting it, Vivian, but I enjoy talking with you. Happy to talk about whatever you want. My dick or otherwise.”

He adjusted himself, and like the creep that I was, I didn’t take my eyes off the tent in his pants.

“You are?” I mumbled.

Reed smiled. “Eyes up here.”

Yeah, fat chance of that.

He ignored my insolence and held out his hand. I took it, and he tugged me down the hall with him, my heels clapping with my unsteady gait and my body still thrumming from my orgasm.

“Where are we going? You can’t bring that thing into a room full of people, Reed. You’ll hurt someone. That’s a weapon.”

I didn’t think it was ever going to get old.

Reed scrubbed a hand over his face. “It’s just a dick.”

My voice was hardly a whisper. “But I bet it’s a nice one.”

He grumbled something under his breath, stopped outside the doors to the gym, and grabbed my arms. “You’re going to get your things, say your goodbyes, and drive me home.”

“Drive you home? What am I, your designated driver?”

Reed gripped my chin, pulling me in for a hard kiss before releasing me.

“Yes, you are, but more importantly—I said I wouldn’t fuck you against my old locker, but I didn’t say I wouldn’t fuck you at all. Hurry.”

He slapped my ass as I sprinted into the gym to say my goodbyes, Reed hot on my tail to ensure I was quick about it.

To my amazement, people *wanted* to say goodbye to me. And not because they were praying for me to leave.

“It was *so* good to see you,” Ashley said, pulling me in for a hug as Reed anxiously watched on and avoided everyone.

Probably because he smelled like pussy.

“I hope to see you again before Oli and I leave, but if not, please, can we keep in touch? Maybe you can come to visit.”

That sounded nice. “I’d like that,” I said, meaning it.

Taylor hovered by Ashley as she clung to a mocktail with a death grip. “Vivian. It seems you’ve made some friends tonight. I’m surprised you showed up, but I’m glad you did.”

I didn’t quite believe that, but I’d take it.

I jerked a thumb toward Reed, a smirk on my face. “Thanks to this guy. I can’t say I would have come without him.”



“You couldn’t resist, could you?” Reed grumbled, sliding into the cab of his truck. He feigned his grumpiness. The man thought I was hilarious.

Adjusting the seat so I could reach the pedals, I grinned. “You love it, Reed. Nothing like a double entendre to make you feel *alive*. Besides, you’re just jealous you, *the writer*, didn’t come up with it on your own.”

“Too much blood diverted from the brain,” he muttered, crossing his arms and trying to hide his smile. With his beard gone, it was much more difficult.

I casually nodded at his crotch. “How does that thing not split your pants?”

“You’re not going to stop, are you?”

“Nope,” I said, popping the *P*.

He tilted his head. “You’ve never been with a man with a big dick before?”

I grimaced, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel. “Not *that* big. That thing is monstrous. Have *you* been with a

man with a big dick before? Because until you have, let's not talk about intimidation.”

He laughed, settling more comfortably in his seat. “No, I haven't been with a man with a big dick before, but you scared the shit out of me for years. I won't pretend it doesn't thrill me a little to think something about me intimidates you.”

I started the truck and pulled out of the high school parking lot. Driving through the main drag of town was quiet, with no cars or people out, even though it was hardly ten o'clock on a Saturday.

The Shoot, a pub on the outskirts of the county, would be full, but otherwise, Clear Lake was a ghost town at night. I doubted we would pass another car in the twenty minutes to return to his cabin. I had been lucky that Reed was driving so late the night he found me walking on the road. I kept that to myself.

Just like I wouldn't tell him that many things about him intimidated me. His trouser anaconda was low on that list. The way my heart skipped when I sat beside him topped it.

The command he had over my thoughts, like a thief stealing my attention? Worrisome. The way he made me feel like he was seeing me—seeing *through* me? Terrorizing.

I cleared my throat. “Did you have a nice time this evening? Being social? Around other humans?”

He grumbled again, staring out the passenger window at the obsidian sky.

“Speak up,” I teased.

Reed sighed. “Yes. I had a nice time this evening, okay? Other than that fucking ape trying to upset you, I mostly enjoyed myself.” He leaned closer like we were sharing a secret. “You got him pretty good. Here I thought I’d have to step in, but as expected, you handle your business.”

“Damn right,” I said with a nod. No secret about that. “I am many things, Reed, but a pushover is not one.”

He went back to staring out the window. “I like that about you,” he said quietly.

There was something heavy about the admission, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. We had already drifted dangerously out of sexy energy territory and into *feelings*.

His very-endowed manhood and my ability to handle it had given me pause, but talking about liking one another... I wasn’t sure I was ready for *that*.

“You’re going to have to drive me home,” I said, changing the subject. Sort of.

He huffed. “I will. Tomorrow.” Looking at me and sharing those dimples, he batted his thick eyelashes playfully. “Is that okay?”

More than okay.

“Two sleepovers? Doesn’t that put you over your people quota?”

“Depends on the people.”



I wondered which other people he let stay at his house, but asking would drift into history territory, which was aligned with *feelings*.

“You sure you want me to stay? I might snore.”

“You do snore.”

It wasn't news to me, but I hoped he was just teasing. The amused smile on his face told me he was not.

“You need thicker walls,” I muttered, glancing at the dashboard clock. We were just a few minutes from his cabin, and the night was still early. We'd have plenty of time to... talk.

“Can I have a drink when we get to your house?” I blurted.

Reed chuckled.

“Shut up.” I was well aware he was picking up on my nerves. “It was supposed to be me who got shitfaced tonight. That's why I had Missy drop me off before she and Ron went to dinner.”

As far as I knew, they still hadn't shown up to the reunion by the time we left. They probably just waited for me to leave the apartment so they could fuck in private.

I should find another temporary living arrangement.

Reed's hand drifted across the seat, sliding over and resting on my bare thigh. “I'm not shitfaced. I don't like to drive when I drink anything, but I would be fine now. I just wanted an excuse to get you to my house.”

He rubbed along my skin, staying below the hem of my dress but teasingly close to breaching its fabric barrier.

“You don’t need excuses. Just ask.”

His amusement didn’t wane. “Just ask? Like that’s not offensive?”

It was my turn to shrug like it was no big deal. And it kind of wasn’t. It’s not like I hadn’t had plenty of one and done. “It’s not offensive to be wanted,” I said.

“Huh.” He ran his free hand along his jaw in thought.

“You looking for a girlfriend?”

That startled him out of whatever was going through his head. “What? No.” His hand on my thigh stilled. “I don’t want a girlfriend. I... can’t really do that.”

“Well, I don’t want a boyfriend. I just got out of a four-year relationship and don’t know who I am and need to figure that out,” I said. “But I like you, Reed. I think you like me. I’m attracted to you, and feasting on me instead of that buffet at the reunion was a pretty clear sign that you’re attracted to me, too.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“There you go with your words, Reed.”

He glared at me and gave my thigh a tight squeeze.

“You eat pussy like a man well experienced. I’m guessing you’ve had plenty of practice, and from my understanding, you’re out here alone most of the time. No girlfriends. You’re

handsome and, dare I say, a great guy. The no girlfriend thing is obviously a choice.”

He opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, then promptly closed it before thinking it over and saying, “Could be.”

Pulling onto his road, I sighed, blowing a strand of hair out of my face. Half my updo had come undone, and I wasn’t the least bit sorry for it. It had been oh-so-fun to mess it up, and I looked forward to destroying the rest of myself tonight.

I just hoped we limited the destruction to mind-blowing sex.

“In a few weeks, I get my money, and I get out of here,” I continued, parking his truck and cutting the engine.

He left the lights on in his cabin, which looked magical against the backdrop of a pitch-black night.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to use that time to hang out.”

“Hang out?” he asked.

“Yep.” I tossed his keys to him as I let myself out. He followed, sliding out of the cab as I headed toward the front door. “It’s this thing people do when they like each other. Shared physical proximity. Do activities together.” I lowered my voice seductively. “Do each other.”

I had no idea what my plans were after I got access to my trust, but I was sure they didn’t involve Clear Lake. Reed didn’t even know what hanging out was, apparently. Keeping expectations realistic was something I could do.

It was true that I shouldn't get lost in someone before figuring out who I wanted to be. The mess of the last few years still hadn't settled, and now I was homeless, jobless, and aimless. And Reed? He didn't have to be alone. He chose to be.

I could ignore the fact his kisses sank me. The way my body blazed beneath his touch. His ruinous attention. He wasn't the first guy to make me come, and he wouldn't be the only one. I'd said plenty of goodbyes to men. There was no reason for Reed to be any different.

Reed unlocked his door and let us in, following behind me with his head down. He frowned like he was thinking of something he wouldn't share.

I realized it then. *That* was his intensity.

It wasn't the depths of his somber eyes, the darkness of his hair, or even the beard that had concealed his face. It was that look, the one he had now. The one that made it seem like he was lost in his thoughts. Thoughts that were only his.

I shook the need to hear them. They weren't for me, and they didn't need to be.

"How about that drink?"

Reed looked up like he realized I was with him for the first time since we left the truck. The heaviness in his posture shifted, his shoulders relaxing and his lips drawing into the smile I'd become quite fond of.

Realistic expectations. I could do it.

Probably.

# Fourteen

*Vivian*

“**Y**ou never really know people, do you?” Reed ran his hands over his face as he shook his head in disbelief. “Like, a reverse harem or something?”

I kicked back the last of my bourbon. “Yep. You didn’t think to ask Ashley about those ‘roommates’ she was going on and on about?”

Reed shrugged. “Honestly, I was half-listening. Most people bore me, and I had my focus on someone else.”

The sweet smile he shared wasn’t lost on me. I noticed him watching me all night as I tended the bar.

We’d been back at Reed’s cabin for an hour, enjoying a second round of drinks as we talked. *Talked*. An easy conversation about all kinds of shit. Effortless.

Sitting on his kitchen counter, I let my legs dangle as I softly tapped the back of my heels against the cupboards. Reed sat

across from me at the kitchen table, his eyes not leaving me since I'd hopped up there.

Now and again, I caught his look raking over my thighs, maybe hoping I'd forget I wasn't wearing panties and relax my legs a little more.

The low hum of sexual energy passed between us, a playful volleying that hadn't disappeared, but the foreplay of conversation was surprisingly enjoyable.

"You should have asked more questions." I set my glass down. "She lives with Oliver and his two best friends and is loving life."

"Christ," Reed mumbled, crossing one ankle over his opposite knee. "She said she had a husband. I just assumed..."

I'd be lying if I said it hadn't shocked me, too. But hey, get it, girl.

"How does her husband not get jealous? I love the boys like brothers and would do anything for them." Reed grinned and took a sip of his drink. "Not that, though."

"Some men like sharing a woman." I let my knees drift a little wider. His eyes followed the movement. "And many women struggle with getting quality attention and affection from *one* man. The idea of three? Shut the front door."

Reed laughed, the vibrations rolling through his body and shaking his shoulders as he got up, stalking me until he stood

within reach. He pushed my knees apart to fit himself between them.

“I don’t want to share a woman,” he said, his hands slowly sliding along my thighs. “I want all of my focus and attention on her, and when I do, it’s as good as three men.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I tilted my head to appraise him. “Confident?”

Not missing the opportunity of a bared neck, Reed dove in, the heat of his breath fanning along my skin.

“You tell me, Viv.” His grip tightened on my thighs, and I let my head fall against the cupboard above me. “Come to bed with me.”

His lips roamed the smooth skin below my ear before his teeth nipped on my lobe with a soft bite.

He was taking his time, his hands running in steady lines up and down my legs but making no moves toward the heat of my center. No matter how much my body screamed for his touch, I would not speed it up.

The skill of his mouth combined with the softness of his lips was addictive—or possibly *afflictive* when I realized I didn’t want him to stop kissing me. God, maybe ever.

His hands left my skin, shifting to bunch the fabric of my dress over my hips. Looking at the patch of hair where my thighs met, Reed groaned.

He shook his head. “If you don’t come to bed with me, I don’t know what I’ll do.”



I didn't want to ache with his words. To feel my heart buoyed by his desire or get excited at the thought that maybe he wanted me just as much as I wanted him. It was a vulnerability I wouldn't hand over, but it was a longing I couldn't escape.

Tonight though? I didn't have to try. I could have him, take my fill, and worry about the consequences later.

Wrapping my legs around his hips and locking my ankles, I pulled him closer. My hands snaked along the back of his neck, my eyes meeting his as I bit his bottom lip. "Take me."

"Where?" he whispered, his eyes dark with pleasure.

"You can start with my mouth and then my pussy."

Reed couldn't hide his amusement. "I meant I want to hear you tell me to take you to bed."

"Oh, God," I groaned, covering my face with my hands as my cheeks burned. "Okay, try that again. Let's start over. Tell me to come to bed with you."

Reed couldn't stop laughing, and hell if I could blame him for it.

"Take me," I said, sounding more bratty than seductive. Reed's eyebrows shot up, and he gave a low growl. Like maybe he would punish me later for my bad attitude.

Yes, please.

"Take you where?" He pressed his forehead to mine, a smile still on his lips, but his laughter disappeared.

My breathing picked up, the tops of my breasts rising and falling with shortened inhaleds the closer he got. “To bed. Take me to bed.”

His hands returned to my body with their unhurried brushes and passive touch. Torture. A slow death. I would choke on desire. I was sure of it.

“Are you on birth control?”

His hands didn't behave this time, sliding along the soft skin inside of my thighs. One diverged, riding up my hip with a firm grasp as the other rubbed me, his fingers spreading my pussy before circling steadily over my clit.

Scooting my ass closer to the edge of the counter to leverage my hips, I nodded. “I am, but I don't fuck without condoms. Ever.”

My hips moved to match the pace of his careful touch. Reed kissed me, deep and slow, his tongue fucking my mouth as sweetly as his hand on my pussy.

“I don't either,” he murmured, pulling away and keeping his eyes on me. “Just covering bases.”

Gripping the collar of his shirt as he slid a finger deep inside me, my mouth fell open in a silent gasp. In and out, an unhurried pace despite the heat of my body demanding more. But Reed was a patient man.

I rolled my hips to get more of him, my voice strained. “I don't, Reed. Not one of those ‘I don't fuck bare ever, and you're the exception because I like you so much.’”

And that was true. Even with my long-term ex-boyfriend, I required condoms for sex. I'd take no chances, regardless of how small a risk of birth control failure, to do to a kid what my mother did to me.

He increased the pressure of his hand, my body squirming and trying to take more, but his heavy grasp on my hip pinned me as he kept his pace, holding his smile.

"I don't need to be an exception." His lips parted, his brows furrowing as he watched me writhe beneath his touch. "I just need to know the expectations."

"Okay," I panted. The thrusting of his finger increased with the addition of a second.

"Can I come in your ass? Can I come on your pussy, if not inside? Can I come in your mouth?"

I whimpered, liking the idea of Reed all over me. "Not on my pussy. I take no risks with pregnancy. Have you been tested since your last partner?"

"Of course. Have you?"

Admittedly not. "No, but I will. My ex and I used condoms, but we should still be careful until then."

"What else is off limits?" His eyes watched my face with an agonizing ardor that could probably make me come without the stimulation of his hands on my body.

My cheeks flushed, his touch burning with a heat that started in his eyes and extended to his fingertips. Like he'd share that fervor everywhere, all over.

The anticipation of more was blissfully painful, and my body pressed harder against him to find the friction it so desperately needed for release. Reed slowed his hand, edging me from the orgasm I'd been chasing.

“What else is off limits?” he repeated. “There's little I won't do to you, Vivian. Tell me your limits.”

I couldn't catch my breath, gyrating to encourage his hand to continue, but he held out.

“Withholding orgasms,” I groaned.

His kiss was punishing as his lips hit hard to mine, consuming my entire mouth. He pulled away, tugging my lip between his teeth.

“You'll come. I promise. But I'm a man who values passion. I need to know what you're okay with. You can always change your mind as we go, but it helps to set some basic ground rules first, including what you know is off limits.”

Not going to lie, I wanted to know what kind of shit Reed was into, but I was also a little nervous. I was a woman with experience, and I'd been fucked in different ways and places and considered myself adventurous, but Reed's passion had me questioning whether I could handle myself as well as I thought.

“No pain play,” I whispered, shaking my head. “I don't like pain. Not intentional, anyway.”

He nodded, pressing his forehead to mine again as his hand found me, and I melted into him.

“Good, because I don’t like to cause pain. What else?” His eyes. They wouldn’t leave me, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted them to.

“That’s mostly it,” I gasped, trying to get the words out. “Like I said, I’ll tell you if I’m not okay with something.”

Reed nodded, his hand increasing the pressure as his fingers slid inside me again, thrusting while his thumb circled my clit. “Noted.”

“But just because I don’t like pain doesn’t mean I like it gentle.”

Reed groaned, his voice husky. “Definitely noted.”

“Fuck me, Reed. I need you to fuck me.”

He shook his head slowly, eyes locked. “I want to watch you come on my hand first. Do you keep your eyes open or closed? With my head between your thighs, I didn’t get to see last time.”

*Oh, Jesus.*

“Keep watching me.”

He groaned again, deeper, and with a pained exhale. My muscles tightened with the familiar whisper of a building climax. He could feel it, too.

“I can’t stop watching you. I don’t think I want to. Let me see you come.”

My eyes slammed shut with the first pulsing of my climax, my lips parting with a silent gasp and a sharp inhale through

my nose. I held my breath as everything moved through me. Reed's hand gripped my hip to leverage against his hand and ride the wave of pleasure with his touch.

“Closed,” he breathed against my lips. “Beautiful.”

Removing his hands from me, he lifted one, slicked in my pleasure, and brought his fingers to his mouth. “Delicious. Come to bed with me, Vivian.”

Never in my life had a man waited so long to have me when he had the chance. It wasn't a lack of desire. It was an incredible level of discipline.

Admirable.

And maybe a little scary, because a man like that?

He gives, but then he takes, and I prayed there'd be something left of me when we were done.



With his finger tracing lazy circles around my breast, Reed propped himself on his elbow and wrapped his lips around the pink peak of my nipple.

“I like your tits, Viv. So much.”

“Stop,” I whined, pushing his head off my breast and laughing. “I can't take anymore.”

Reed growled, rolling on top of me until his body eclipsed mine, his already hardening cock pressed against my pussy in a glorious threat.

“Oh, I think you can take more.”

He'd fucked me twice already, the second time not fifteen minutes ago. It was late, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to walk in the morning, and he was absolutely right. I could take more.

Reluctantly, he rolled off of me. “But that doesn't mean we should. Get some sleep. You're going to wake up with my head between your legs and my tongue licking up your thighs, and then I'm going to bury my cock in you again before we have breakfast.”

My thighs clenched together as I shifted onto my side, snuggling into the crook of his arm. Where I was soft, Reed was hard. And not just *hard* hard, but a pleasant expanse of tight muscle and strength.

He looked good in his clothes, so it wasn't a shock to see that he held up when naked. Still, it wasn't easy to shake the feeling that maybe we weren't evenly matched.

Reed wrapped his arm around me and pulled me closer, running his hand along my ass to give the meat of it a healthy squeeze. “And I didn't say where I would bury it.”

“We're going to need more lube for *that*.”

Reed yawned as he pushed his hair out of his face and collapsed on the pillow. “Another bottle in the top drawer next to you. And don't you dare tease me. I'm a big fan of your ass.”

Oh, I knew. It was a certain man who pawed an ass so enthusiastically while taking a woman from behind.

Though really, Reed did everything enthusiastically when we were naked together. The man had stamina, and he was undoubtedly dedicated and attentive. Reed was right—he probably was the equivalent of three men.

Sex with Reed was an experience I wasn't sure I'd soon forget. That uncomfortable pain of stretching to take him for the first time would fade. But the memories of his mouth on my body, his breath in my ear, the dirty shit he liked to say, and the unapologetic and avid need to touch every part of me until my toes curled and my eyes disappeared into the back of my skull? I might remember that on my deathbed.

The awareness of his positioning, how he plunged, drove, and pushed his body with mine. The way he hovered over me, watching me squirm with anticipation, waiting eagerly to take everything he offered.

When he laid me on my back and held my leg, running his hand along the length of it and resting it over his shoulder to have deeper access. Pushed into me with a slow and lazy effort, only to pick up with a punishing thrust as soon as I'd acclimated to him.

His face contorted in pleasure and pain, like he couldn't settle on whether I was the best feeling in the world or tearing his soul from his body. Maybe that was the same thing.

The slack jaw, his head lifting with each thrust as he assessed my reaction to him. His brows pinched like he was



studying every line on my face, every response to his movements.

When I came, our eyes locked in an intimacy that made me feel like he'd ripped into my body to see how everything worked. Could he see the way my heart pounded for him?

I hoped not.

The second time he took me wasn't exploratory at all. It was rough and fast after he'd gone down on me, immediately after fucking the first time, eating me until he was hard again, and I'd whimpered from two more orgasms.

I'd never come so much in one night, my legs shaking to close around his head as he pushed my knees wider and told me I would come again.

Not that I could. There was no encouragement. It was all demand. I *would*.

I nearly cried, so sensitive from release, but Reed was ruthless, relentless, and so *good* at it.

Ready for me again, he flipped me onto my stomach, pushing my chest into the mattress. He lifted my hips, notching against my pussy as he licked along my spine, shoving my face into the pillow and fucking me as he held me there.

Reed *mounted* me like a man who wanted to claim the woman beneath him. Hard, then harder still.

It was amazing, and when he shoved a finger in my ass, and then a second, I could do nothing more than squirm and whine

and mewl until I was confident I would combust. Then I did.

Everything with Reed felt consuming, so I don't know why I expected sex to be different. I wasn't sure if it was hungering to engulf one another or an ominous warning that we might choke on the closeness, wounding us. Or, more likely, wounding me.

Because the thing about Reed? His intensity belonged to him. Like a companion, it followed him everywhere, possibly defining him. I enjoyed the captivation of that intensity, but I worried it would consume me if I weren't careful.

Reed sighed, the heat of his breath rolling over the crown of my head and rustling my hair. "You good, Vivian?"

It wasn't normal to feel this desperately attached after sex, no matter how good. To want to climb inside someone's head and see everything they were thinking, so you'd know how you stacked up. And not just in your ability to please or take them well, but to understand how their eyes saw you, judged you, and if they thirsted for more.

"I'm good," I whispered, hoping that was true and praying I could believe it if I said it enough. "Hey, Reed?"

"Hm?" he mumbled, his hand running along my arm in a sweet, sweeping stroke.

"There's something else I thought of that's off-limits."

He huffed a soft laugh. "You already let me put my fingers in your ass. A dick isn't that big of a deal."

“Shut up.” I hit his stomach. “You’re not the first. No, this has nothing to do with my ass or your dick.” I considered how to say this, deciding that just coming out with it was probably best. “We can’t act like this is more than it will be, okay? Three weeks, Reed, and I’m leaving Clear Lake.”

His hand stilled, and his body stiffened. He kissed my head.

“Noted.”

# Fifteen

## *Reed*

**A** man of my word, my day started between Vivian's legs.

Pretty sure I could start all days like that and be happy, but given her intentions of leaving town in a few weeks and her request that we not act like this was more than hanging out—whatever the hell that meant—it was best to enjoy this as a moment.

Beyond the moment? That was reality, and I'd never much cared for it. I spent my days in fiction, fantasies, and daydreams.

It was much more pleasant.

So when I slid into Vivian, her mouth dropping in pleasure with a silent parting of her lips, I reminded myself that this was a bit of make-believe, too.

Her moans could make me go blind with need, and each driving effort of my body heightened her response. The

woman was greedy for more.

Vivian—she could handle it. My intensity didn't scare her, make her look away, or get shy. It encouraged her, lifted her confidence, and she could match me thrust for thrust.

I'd never been with a woman like Vivian before. I could say what I needed, touch what I wanted, and make no apologies or hold back. She was vocal, clear, and enjoyed pleasure. Being with her was both divine and dangerous.

Flipping her onto her stomach, I pressed her body flat against the mattress before entering her from behind. She tried to lift her hips, but I kept a hand on her lower back to hold her down.

Moaning again, she squirmed beneath me as she worked her hand to her clit. She was tight with her thighs squeezed together like that, and I was too excited to last long. I just needed to hold out for her climax before I let her cunt take everything from me. My body craved release, my balls tight and aching.

I leaned down, hovering over her as I brushed my lips along her ear. "The things you do to me."

She moaned again, her hand working faster as she humped it against the bed.

"To be inside you. To fuck you as your cunt cries for more." I slammed harder into her. "It *enlivens* me."

She whimpered. The long blonde tendrils of her hair were a total mess as she thrashed her head side to side with the

building of her climax.

“The impatience to have you, the ache of never wanting to stop.” I picked up my pace as her thighs clenched tighter. She was done for. “Vivian, you are heaven.”

And maybe telling her that made me the devil. While everything I said was true, it probably danced a tantalizing line between this moment and our reality.

“I’m coming,” she cried, inhaling a deep breath and holding it as her climax started.

It was her giveaway. She’d hold her breath until she couldn’t stand it any longer, then gasp, coming up for air like a woman drowning in her pleasure. It was melodious, and I could listen to the songs of her climax on repeat if she’d let me.

Slapping her ass, I pulled out, letting her settle for a moment as I reached into the nightstand. Uncapping the lube, I coated my fingers and played with her ass for a while, Vivian panting and moaning.

“Spread yourself,” I rasped, my voice low. “Play with that pretty cunt while I fuck your ass. Come again before I take this, too.” I slipped another finger inside her.

I wanted her ass last night but refrained, afraid Vivian wasn’t honest with me about her comfort. But as I’d quickly learned, Vivian wasn’t one to do anything she didn’t want to do.

I lubed my dick until it dripped down my balls, pouring more into the crack of her ass and working it inside with my fingers. Being well-endowed, I wanted to be careful.

Thankfully, Vivian was a woman experienced. She knew when to bear down. When to breathe. How to let me inside of her.

“Viv. I can’t,” I groaned. She felt so good. I eased forward slowly, so slowly that I had to bite my lip to keep from fucking her the way I wanted. But the thought of going too fast and hurting her killed me.

Finally, what felt like eons later, I was fully seated. “You’re killing me. Fuck me, Viv. You have to fuck me. Set the pace.” Because I wasn’t sure I could hold back.

She did, moving forward with a slow roll before rocking back. Then again. And again. She fucked me, moaning and panting on my cock as she stroked herself.

“You... can...” she grunted, her toes curling against the mattress.

She was going to come. I recognized the gasp for air as she held her breath on the precipice of her climax. I could fuck her, she was saying, and I did until she found her release again. Hard and deep drives, pulling out to the tip before thrusting back inside, my fingers gripping her hips and holding on for dear life. Vivian braced her hands against the headboard, palms flat but fingertips flexing as she took what I gave.

I let go, a few ardent pumps bringing my orgasm in the wake of hers. When I was empty, I collapsed on top of her, enjoying the feel of her heat as she caught her breath. My weight wasn’t

helping, so I rolled beside her and brushed her hair from her face.

“Look at me, Vivian.”

Her eyes were closed as she rested with her head on the pillow. She rolled her lips together and shook her head.

“I’m dead,” she muttered.

“Surely not,” I whispered, tracing her jaw with my knuckle as I studied her face.

For weeks, she’d held so much tension in the lines of it. Frowns and scowls and sadness. This morning, she looked light, weightless. And maybe a little delirious. I hadn’t exactly gone easy on her last night.

“Just write ‘death by dick’ on my tombstone, okay?” she huffed. “I’m sure it will elicit a lot of sympathy.”

I chuckled. “What do you need? What can I get you?”

She sighed, opening one eye and peeking at me. “I need a shower. And coffee. A gallon of coffee. And those waffles. From scratch. Don’t think you can cheat me with box mix now that I know the difference.”

I kissed her cheek, causing her to open both eyes and meet me with a smile.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Scooting off the bed, I didn’t bother looking for my clothes before slipping into the bathroom to dispose of the condom and get a shower going for Vivian. She peeked into the



bathroom a moment later and pointed at the steamed glass. “Is that for me?”

I nodded, and she grinned, pushing open the door and stepping into the bathroom with one of my t-shirts on.

“What the hell is that?” I gestured to the shirt.

She looked down, then back at me. “Not okay? I probably should have asked first.”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the bathroom vanity. “It’s not the shirt. It’s the fact you’re dressed at all. Why aren’t you naked? Take that off.”

With wild hair and a freshly fucked flushed face, Vivian looked exquisite. But she should be naked. And not just because I wanted her in the shower, but because she should be naked. Any chance.

She looked uncomfortable. “It’s light in here.”

I pushed off the vanity, standing face-to-face with her. “It is.”

“You can see everything in daylight.” She tugged on the bottom hem of the shirt.

“I can,” I agreed, swatting her hand from the shirt. “Hence why I want you naked.”

She puffed her cheeks and exhaled a long breath. “I’m self-conscious, okay? I don’t want to be, but I fucking am, and it’s embarrassing.”

Ah, I understood. She'd recovered confidence quickly in the last week, finding her footing, but I'd be a fool to think her past wouldn't continue to creep into her present.

After everything we'd done together, it seemed strange she'd think twice about being seen in the light of day. It wasn't pitch black in my room. I'd seen plenty of her—more than she probably realized. Considering all we'd just done...

“You don't need to be embarrassed when you're with me, Vivian. I want to see every part of you.”

I thought it was a rather sweet thing to say, but judging by how Vivian's face completely fell, I wondered if I'd made a mistake. “What?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

It was a moment before she put her hands over mine and helped me to lift the shirt over her head. It fell to the floor with a soft *whoosh*, and she dropped her hands to her side, running nervously along the tops of her thighs.

“Well? You wanted to see all of me. Here you go.”

Christ. I wish she could see herself the way I did. Vivian was a voluptuous woman with curves for days and a thickened body that my hands could explore with hunger.

I liked a woman with soft flesh and shapely surprises. Her body was well-proportioned, shoulders dipping inward to a healthy waist before broadening to wide hips and a rounded ass.

Those thighs. Soft yet strong, with legs going for days. And her tits. Those glorious, glorious goddesses and perfect, light pink nipples. I wanted to fuck her tits later. I didn't do it last night, and I regretted that.

“Here I go,” I affirmed, wrapping my arms around her and dropping my head to nuzzle her neck. “You have no idea how beautiful you are. How sexy. How desirable your curvy body is. How enticing it is to touch every part of you. How *stacked* you are.”

She tried to push me away, but I wouldn't let her.

“I don't look like I used to.”

I nodded into her neck, running a hand up to cup her heavy breast, lifting it as I rolled her nipple between my fingers.

“No, you look even *better*. You look like a woman. A real damn woman, and it is everything good in this world. Don't you dare pretend this isn't the stuff dreams are made of. The wettest dreams.”

Vivian laughed and pulled me closer this time instead of pushing me away. “You've been out here by yourself for too long.”

Standing in that bathroom with this magnetic woman made me realize she was right. But also, maybe wrong. I'd rather be alone than out here with someone who wasn't right for me. I wasn't a man to settle, and I wasn't a person to be with others just to avoid being alone.

But I'd never found a woman that felt right for me. I'd had a few serious relationships in New York and plenty of hookups, but nothing stuck.

The closest was an ex named Janey, but when I flew her out to Clear Lake to visit a couple of years ago, it was apparent that what we had in New York was limited to New York.

While she liked the idea of being with a writer, my intensity alternating with my need for space wasn't something she could handle.

It wasn't something most people could seem to handle. Creativity came at a price, and my moodiness or need to be alone could feel deeply personal to a partner. Juxtaposed with moments of ceaseless desire or concentrated need, I realized a long time ago that I probably wouldn't find someone who could keep up.

Partners inevitably wanted partner things. Marriage, kids, double dates, and neighborhood barbecues. My energy and commitment weren't consistent, and I eventually stopped pretending it ever would be.

The boys often joked that I was a bear just waiting for my Goldilocks to stumble into my life, falling into a content sleep in my bed after she'd discovered the ones before were too hard or too soft. But mine? It would be just right.

I wasn't convinced wolves hadn't eaten my Goldilocks in the forest before she could get to my house.

“I’m just fine out here in my cabin,” I mumbled, kissing Vivian quickly and giving her a gentle nudge. “But... Do you want me in there?” I nodded toward the shower.

Vivian rolled her eyes. “I swear, if you so much as *look* at me, I will collapse. Leave me alone.”

I don’t know why it sent a burst of delight through me that Vivian wanted to be left alone, other than she wasn’t clingy. She was game for plenty, but she didn’t expect more from me. Which... maybe made me sad. Shit. Did I want her to want more from me?

“I’ll get started on breakfast,” I said.

Vivian was already in the shower, the water running over her body and giving me pause to question whether I should push staying after all.

“I’m using your toothbrush,” she commented, turning her back to me and reaching for the shampoo, uncaring of my reaction.

And damn, if I didn’t like that, too.



“Holy shit, who is that gorgeous woman? A supermodel?” Ty asked, his face popping onto the screen of our group video call.

Noah’s wife, Jaime, rolled her eyes and flipped him off. “I’m a temporary placeholder while Noah finishes an interview.”

She stood up from wherever she was sitting, running a hand over her growing belly. “Supermodels don’t look like this, but I love you anyway, Ty.” She paused, looking left and then right. “Don’t tell Noah you’re my favorite.”

Noticing me for the first time since I jumped on the call a minute earlier, Ty’s eyes went wide. “Reed, is that... is that *you?*”

Ezra’s moody face entered the group call before I could answer, and another square appeared. “Well damn, Noah. You’ve gotten much better looking since I saw you last.”

Jaime *was* beautiful, and while she deserved plenty of compliments, even she knew this flattery was intended to grate on Noah’s nerves when he realized his best friends were flirting with his wife. He wasn’t a jealous man by nature, but few things got under his skin like Jaime.

“Reed?” Jaime asked playfully. “Where’s my compliment?”

I laughed, shaking my head and glancing over my shoulder at the stairs. The shower was still running, and thank God for that because I’d nearly forgotten it was Sunday morning, which meant group check-in with the boys. And Jaime, apparently.

“You’re naked,” Ezra said, pointing at the screen and looking at me. “And not frozen. What the fuck is going on over there?”

“I’m not naked,” I grumbled. “Just my face. I shaved. It’s not a big deal.” I hesitated. “I got fiber-optic internet, too.”

Jaime whistled. “You look good, Reed. I think you’re my favorite now.”

Ty scoffed, but I wouldn’t hide my smile. When Jaime paid you a compliment, you listened.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Ty waved his arms wildly. His handsome grin was casual in a way that gave him a perpetual playfulness, making him seem carefree and unconcerned.

He wasn’t, of course. Ty had a high-pressure job as an attorney in San Francisco and was in the middle of a big project, taking up more time than he had in a day.

“You have reliable internet?”

“I do.” I shifted from one foot to the other, resting my laptop on the counter to cook while talking. I had no idea if Vivian was a woman who took long showers, but this morning, I was hoping for it.

As much as I wanted to see her descending those stairs and praying she’d be naked this time, I didn’t want to seem suspicious by cutting off the call early.

“Huh,” Ezra mumbled. “Something’s not adding up, Reed. What aren’t you telling us?”

Jaime’s eyes lit up. “Oh, this is *fun*. I’m glad Noah won’t shut up when people ask him about making music, and I hope his interview goes *forever*. Spill the tea, Reed.”

I shook my head, reaching for a mixing bowl and pulling ingredients from my pantry before returning to the screen and pointing a whisk at the camera.

“There’s nothing to tell. My beard was scratchy, and I was tired of using Missy’s coffee shop for our calls and work. That’s all.”

Ty made a *tsk* sound and wagged his finger. “Oh, that’s not all, Reed. You’re so damn obvious. You loved that burly beard. Pretty sure you were going to die with more hair on your face than on the rest of your body, and that’s saying something.”

Ezra’s eyes lit up even brighter than Jaime’s. “Hey, Reed? What did you do last night?”

I never should have called and pleaded with that asshole to come to the reunion as a buffer with Vivian. It was before I *wanted* to be alone with her. Regret flooded my belly, a deeply unsettled feeling.

Ezra knew, and he wouldn’t let it go.

“Oh!” Jaime clapped. “What did you do last night, Reed?” She looked out of frame momentarily, scooting over before reaching up to tug on something. Down came Noah, his stupid grin leaving no room for pleasantries or warm-up.

“What did you do last night, Reed?” he chimed in. “And what happened to your face?”

How much to tell? Did it matter? Did I want to say anything? In a few weeks, Vivian would be gone anyway. It’s not like she was sticking around, and this would become a *thing*.

I knew where we stood and what the expectations were. I wouldn’t call the boys in a tizzy in three weeks, crying about



the reality of my situation. My eyes were wide open.

So maybe I should leave my mouth shut.

“Reed went on a journey back in time, didn’t you? Go, Canaries!” Ezra was more than thrilled to out me.

“Oh, shit!” Ty laughed. “That’s right. It was our ten-year high school reunion. You shaved for that? I never saw you as much of a conformer.” He shrugged. “Looks good on you, brother. It makes you seem... I don’t know. More man than beast. You look happier.”

Ezra’s grin was sinister. “Yes, Reed. You look happier. Like you *unloaded* some stress.”

“Shut up, Ezra,” I warned.

Jaime and Noah looked at one another, then at Ezra. Noah drawled, “You can’t do that, Ez. It’s unkind.” I nodded in appreciation, but Noah held up his hand to finish. “To *us*. It’s unkind to us, leaving us out. What’s Reed refusing to tell us?”

I groaned. “Fuck off.”

Noah frowned. “I liked it better when you froze all the time, and we could talk without you interrupting.”

They all laughed but stopped immediately when they heard the woman upstairs calling me.

“Hey, Reed? I’m taking your shirt because I’m not squeezing into that dress at nine a.m., but you’ll have to give me back my panties!”

Four sets of eyes went wide as jaws dropped wider and questions shot out simultaneously.

“Who is it?”

“You shaved for *her*?”

“You steal panties?”

“You goddamn dog!”

That last one was Jaime, and she seemed unconcerned with any backstory, just enthused that I had a girl over.

“Reed? Where are my panties?”

From the sounds of it, Vivian was at least still upstairs. I slid the laptop to the opposite end of the counter, facing the front door instead of the hallway behind me if Vivian made her way down.

I sighed as all four friends laughed hysterically, like this was the best moment of their lives.

Clearing my throat, I called, “I said I was keeping them, no arguments.” I dropped my head and tried not to die as my friends laughed harder.

There was a breathy huff from the loft and some stomping around, probably Vivian going through my things from last night. I’d tucked the panties in the top desk drawer in my library. She wouldn’t find them, but I wouldn’t tell her that.

“Reed!” Jaime screeched. I quickly turned down the volume. “Don’t you dare leave whoever she is hanging, but dammit, don’t leave *us* hanging. I’m pregnant!”

She said it like it was reason alone to give her anything. Jaime liked being pregnant, Noah liked getting her pregnant, and I didn't feel one bit sorry for her.

Running my hands through my hair and reminding myself not to tear it out, I leaned closer and lowered my voice.

“*Fine.* Yes, last night was the reunion. I offered to go with Vivian Harlow. I shaved for her because I knew she'd think I was handsome. Honestly, though, I don't think the beard mattered at all. And we're just friends.”

I thought Noah's eyes would bug out of his head. Ezra, already privy to most of this information, cackled like an asshole. Ty and Jaime had their mouths flapping in the wind with stunned silence.

Jaime blinked a few times before coming back to life. “Vivian Harlow? *The* Vivian Harlow? The meanest girl in our school? The girl who was mean simply to be mean?”

“Yep. That one. She's different than you remember.”

*She's so much more than you knew.* I wanted to tell them, but it wouldn't come out.

Ezra quirked a brow. “Sounds like she's learned how to play nice.”

Ty erupted in laughter. It wasn't that funny, but Ezra was never known for his sense of humor. We had to give him the wins where we could.

“Reed, do you steal all of your friends' panties?” Jaime looked at Noah and then back at me. “Have you stolen

Noah's?"

Noah grumbled and leaned in to attack her neck with kisses, sending her backward as she disappeared in a fit of giggles, and the only thing left on the screen was the back of Noah's head. This was the worst fucking call ever.

"Are the waffles ready?" Vivian called. "And can I sit at your kitchen table with my bare ass on the seat? Pretty sure there's still lube dripping from my ass, but that's a *you* problem because you've well and truly hidden my panties, you dick. Bet you're just going to jerk off into them later."

Of course, I was. But my friends didn't need to know that.

I heard her footsteps and caught sight of her feet as she headed down the stairs.

"I have to go," I whisper-hissed. "I didn't steal her panties. She gave them to me. Yes, we slept together." Vivian was halfway down the stairs. "Several times, and I'm not planning on stopping until she leaves town in a few weeks. No more questions, and don't you assholes continue talking about me when I'm gone."

I paused.

"Oh, and Ashley Peppercock lives with three men, all her husbands." I slammed my laptop shut, the echoes of my friends' laughter the last thing I heard before Vivian entered the kitchen, looking around with her hands on her hips.

"Where are the waffles?"

# Sixteen

*Vivian*

“**H**ow many times do I need to apologize? You’re welcome to rake me over the hot coals of guilt for another three hours, or you can let me finish my shift and *let it go*.”

Missy glared at me with her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she ignored the customer at the register. “We thought you were dead.”

The man at the counter cleared his throat. “Excuse—”

Missy shot him a look. “In a minute.” She turned back to me. “We had no idea if you were okay. You didn’t come home, you weren’t answering your phone, and we thought...” she trailed off.

“That someone kidnapped and murdered me?” I offered.

Missy shrugged. “It’s possible, but honestly, we thought something must have happened, and you just cut and run.” The tone of her voice made it sound like the idea upset her.

“I’m sorry,” the man interrupted again. “I just really have to go—”

“Just a minute.” Missy held up her hand, but I stepped in.

“Hey, Jim. The usual?”

Jim, a regular who came in on his lunch breaks from working animal control, nodded with relief. “Yes, please, Vivian. I have to get a pitty wandering the park and need a pick-me-up before I go. These calls make me nervous.”

I started his non-fat vanilla latte and gave a sympathetic smile. “Jim, all the calls make you nervous.”

He took his drink and sighed. “You get bit enough...”

“Sorry, Jim,” Missy mumbled, her arms only loosening slightly. “Vivian, you have to tell me what happened!”

I shook my head, leaning against the counter and fiddling with a bar towel in my hand, twisting and bending it anxiously. After a second night with Reed, I’d only reappeared in society because I had to work.

I felt bad I’d made Missy worry, but I didn’t have a charger for my phone for the two days I’d been gone, and honestly, it hadn’t even occurred to me that someone would care.

There was also the fact that when he wasn’t feeding me, Reed was fucking me. We’d been busy.

When Reed dropped me at Missy’s apartment this morning, she nearly had a fit. Seeing that I was wearing a pair of his gym shorts and one of his t-shirts, she came close to fainting.

“Come on,” she hissed, glancing at the tables of chatting customers.

It was a busy day, and we hardly had a pause between patrons. This allowed me to avoid talking with her, but with the morning and lunch rushes passed, her persistence had all the time in the world. Afternoons could drag on.

I sighed. “*Fine*. How much detail do you want?”

Missy’s eyes grew with excitement. “I want all the details! Everything.”

I frowned, unsure if I believed that. It was one thing to tell Jeremy about Reed’s sexual appetite and complain that walking and sitting were damn near painful these days. He loved it, the perv that he was.

Besides, we’d been best friends for years, and I doubted much would shock him at this point. Missy, though?

She collected horse figurines.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded enthusiastically, so I told her. Not *everything*. She didn’t need to know some gritty details, but I told her almost everything, and when I was done, she stood with her mouth agape as she fanned her face.

“Good lord. How’d you survive all that?” She thought for a moment. “No wonder he was the only man Ron ever slept with.”

I agreed. “That’s how you *know* Ron is into women. You don’t get a bite of something like that and never eat it again unless you sincerely don’t have a taste for it.”

We stood with our hands around our stomachs, laughing so hard that neither could catch our breath. It was absurd to think of Reed and Ron having dated in high school, let alone *boned*.

The sound of the bell ringing over the shop door broke our giggles with the appearance of the very man we’d been talking about.

“Reed!” Missy cried, fanning her face and trying to dry the tears that had formed. “Hey.”

We composed ourselves, but it took a moment. Reed stood uncomfortably, probably aware he’d been the topic of conversation. His black jeans and t-shirt were doing little to help lighten his grimace, but damn if he didn’t look handsome.

Taking notice, Missy strolled from behind the counter, poking Reed’s cheek with her finger. “Almost unrecognizable. You clean up nice.”

Reed swatted her hand away. “Yeah, well, I’m still pissed you skipped the reunion, but *had* you made an appearance, you would have seen me in a suit and looking clean.”

And really sexy.

Instead of hitting the reunion, Missy and Ron hit the apartment after dinner. Just like I thought, they looked too good to behave.



Missy squeezed his arm. “I also would have seen you leaving with Vivian and then not worried she escaped this town before saying goodbye.”

Reed shifted, looking even more uncomfortable. He cleared his throat and changed the subject. “You were laughing at me before I came in, weren’t you?”

“Not *at* you,” Missy said carefully, pulling on her apron and adjusting it.

Blowing past her, I stood beside Reed and bumped his hip with mine. “I was just explaining that no one kidnapped and murdered me over the last couple of days and that we were hanging out.”

No one had murdered *me*, but someone had damn near murdered my pussy.

Reed looked unsure of what to do with that information, or maybe he was unsure what to do with me. I didn’t get the sense that he was a natural hugger, which was perfectly fine because I certainly wasn’t. And the last thing I wanted was another arm patting.

*He. Patted. My. Arms.*

It didn’t take him long to decide how he wanted to handle me or our greeting.

“Fuck it,” he mumbled, grabbing my face with his hands and pulling me in for a kiss that didn’t belong in public. “You look good, Viv.” He tugged playfully on the high ponytail I’d pulled my hair into. “What are you doing after work?”

Missy's big smile nearly eclipsed her entire face. "That was hot."

I ignored her. "I have an errand to run, but it shouldn't take more than an hour. Why?"

"I want to take you on a hike."

Missy leaned against the counter, planting her elbows and resting her head lazily in her palms as she looked on. "That's romantic."

Reed shifted his weight again and shook his head. "It's really not." He squeezed my arm. "Come anyway. If we leave by five, we'll get to the lookout by sunset."

I blinked. Then blinked again. Then one more time for good measure. "So we can hike back down in the dark?"

"Of course not," Reed scoffed.

Good, because hiking wasn't my calling, and doing anything in the dark at night in the woods was only the stuff of nightmares.

"We'll camp at the top," he finished. "Come down in the morning. I have an extremely heavy edit I have to get through, and if I leave Rocky for too long, he'll take over the house and change the locks."

My excessive blinking hadn't stopped.

"Viv, I'm *kidding*." He paused. "Rocky can't change the locks. His name isn't even on the deed."

I crossed my arms. “You weren’t kidding about the camping?”

Missy bit her lip as her eyes shined. “You guys are adorable.”

We both glared at her. Missy held up her hands and exhaled. “Yes, yes. Hanging out. I get it. This is just fun. Gotta pretend you’re not head over heels for each other.”

She continued mumbling and muttering under her breath as she returned to the counter. Mr. Schumer had shuffled in for his afternoon tea.

“Hi, Mr. Schumer,” I said with a wave as Reed grasped my elbow and tugged me to the side.

Mr. Schumer gave me a beaming smile before asking for the same tea menu and getting to work testing Missy’s patience.

“How long do you steep the jasmine tea?”

Reed lowered his voice, standing to the side of the counter. “Come with me. There’s nothing like sleeping under the stars.”

“There’s nothing like getting waterboarded either, but you don’t see me trying to drag you along for a little torture.”

That made him laugh, and I enjoyed having something to do with that.

“Come on.” He leaned closer to my ear, his breath warm on my skin. I closed my eyes, willing him to lick me or give me a little nibble. “Let me take you up there and fuck you until you

see stars. I can promise you, it won't be the ones in the sky that cloud your eyes tonight.”

He had an unfair advantage. His closeness, his scent, his breath on me, his words. They all leveraged the odds of my agreement.

“I can't believe I'm saying this, but okay.” I pushed a finger into his chest. “But I'm peeing next to the tent and not wandering into the trees alone.”

“Sweet Viv,” Reed cooed, touching my cheek. “There won't be a tent.”

“There... what?”

“Gotta go pack up,” he said with a grin, kissing my cheek. “Bye, Missy!”

Missy waved and cupped her hand around her mouth to holler at Reed. “You want it grilled, boiled, or fried? My apron?”

Reed flipped her off over his shoulder. I wouldn't ask what that was about.

“Hi, Amanda,” Mr. Schumer said, passing me as he slowly made his way to a table, Missy trailing behind him with his tea.

I pointed at myself. “Vivian,” I reminded him.

Though truthfully, I didn't recognize myself either.



“You smell like you’ve already been hiking,” Reed said, leaning in to get another whiff of me as we settled in his truck. “What have you been doing in the two hours since I saw you?”

I punched his arm, scooting closer to the window and giving my armpits a stealthy sniff—no body odor.

“Just running errands. I was on shift all day. You insisted on punctuality, and I didn’t get to shower.” I rolled my hand along my body. “This is my payback. You want to torture me by camping overnight? Well, I’m going to smell terrible.”

Reed shook his head. “You don’t smell terrible. I love hiking, and nature is the purest scent. You smell like freshly mowed grass. A childhood favorite, I might add.” He lowered his voice as if it weren’t just the two of us in the truck. “Besides, I’m going to get you dirty tonight.”

I rolled my eyes. “Cheesy line.”

“Fucking filthy.”

“Try again,” I said, looking out the window at the passing scenery. “Talking about heavy edits. You need to heavily edit your pickup lines.”

“Yeah? You keep talking like that, Vivian, and I’ll have to stuff your mouth with my cock until you work on your manners.”

With a feigned indifference, I lifted one shoulder. “If you must. Guess I could learn to swallow my pride.”

As if blowing Reed weren't one of my new favorite pass times—or his.

Reed shot me a look, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he playfully squeezed my thigh. “I trust in your ability to swallow anything.”

I chuckled, my fingernail tapping against the window. “You do need to heavily edit your pickup lines.”

And though I had no doubt Reed was serious in his warning, we settled into a comfortable, mostly quiet drive. I think I liked that most about spending time with him. Our energy was charged *and* easy, moving smoothly between the two without thought or effort.

There wasn't much on the back roads to catch my attention besides thickly forested land. Of which I'd be entering soon enough.

Thankfully, Missy had a pair of sneakers I could borrow for this hike, and my yoga pants and a basic tee were outdoor appropriate. Other than ensuring I had a sweatshirt and a positive attitude, Reed told me he covered all our supplies.

Yet another goddamn trust exercise with him.

“This is going to change your life,” he said solemnly. “Being outdoors like this—prepare yourself.”

I sighed, maybe in resignation. “I'll do my best.”

We drove silently for a while before Reed quietly mumbled, “Thank you for coming. This isn't your thing, but you're trying it. I appreciate that.” He reached for my hand, lifting it

to kiss the back of my knuckles. “Who knows, maybe it will *become* your thing.”

That was doubtful. I was only doing this because Reed was kind of my thing.

Oh, God. Now I had the cheesy lines. At least I kept mine to myself.

“What’s your favorite part of camping?” I asked, moving my thoughts along. It was too precarious to leave them lingering on my feelings for Reed.

He thought for a moment before answering. “The peace of it. To be out where the world exists as it is, and that’s it. No stress, no obligation, no worry.” He paused and smiled at me. “No people.”

“Why don’t you like being around people?”

He shrugged, slowing as we approached a long bend with a pullout before the road straightened again. He turned into the gravel lot and parked, unbuckling his seatbelt.

“It’s not about people, not really. I liked New York, remember? It’s more about feeling settled, and it’s hard to feel settled when a lot is going on. I didn’t grow up with much peace, Vivian. Things weren’t calm in my house. They were often uncertain and chaotic. My father was an asshole. *Is* an asshole. He was always sucking the life out of my mom—whether stealing things from her or stealing years from her.”

One hand gripped the steering wheel, and the other rested on his knee, laced with mine. I squeezed his hand. With his eyes

focused straight ahead, I wasn't sure if he realized I was even touching him.

“My mom allowed it. She still does. This grown, adult woman who was supposed to take care of me became someone I was always taking care of instead. I want to blame my dad for that, but part of me can't help but blame her, too.

“I pleaded for her to be strong. To be strong for herself and to be strong for me.” He looked down at my hand and squeezed it back. “She didn't know how—still doesn't. She takes a while to recover every time he comes in and out of her life. I help her, but I resent it. It's a terrible thing to say, but it's the truth.”

“It's not a terrible thing to say, Reed.” And it wasn't.

He cleared his throat, patting my hand before opening his door. I followed his lead, letting myself out. We stood on opposite sides of the truck bed, Reed not looking at me.

“It's not a terrible thing to say,” I repeated. “It's a lot to carry that kind of responsibility for another person. But Reed?” He looked up, his dark eyes somber. “Sometimes you have to let people take care of themselves. Maybe that's where you find your peace.”

He gave a weak smile.

No wonder he enjoyed being alone. A quiet life was probably euphoric when your childhood was in chaos. I guess none of us were immune to our parents' shitty choices. Reed wanted peace when the world around him was so loud. I



wanted power when the world around me took all of my self-worth.

And no wonder Reed liked me. I wasn't naturally a pushover. He'd said that much. I wasn't like his mom.

"Shit." I shut the truck door and crossed my arms, leaning against it.

Reed took a large backpack from the truck bed, a couple of sleeping bags rolled up and tied along the sides. He handed me a second pack, and I pulled it on, tugging my lip in thought.

"What?" He pulled on his pack.

"You like me because I'm the opposite of your mom."

Reed adjusted the straps. "A lot of people are the opposite of my mom, and I don't like them."

"I like you because you make me feel like it's okay to be myself. Like I'm not rotten on the inside or the outside."

He locked his truck and pointed to the trailhead as he started walking. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No." I stared at the ground as I followed him. *It's a dangerous thing.*

Reed turned back to watch me, nodding slowly like he knew there was more I wanted to say. I bit my tongue.

Reed was risky because he was different. Maybe that was what I needed. And now that I knew I might be what *he* needed?

Well, that was a disaster waiting to happen.

Maybe I should rethink my timeline.



“You’re an opacarophile,” I said, admiring Reed’s comely profile as he stared at the horizon.

Deep red and blood orange swaths burst along the sky, painted like the embers of a dying fire. Darkness threatened to swallow the vibrant colors, creeping in to extinguish their beauty.

The sun had set some time ago, but Reed seemed to enjoy watching every moment of light until it faded into nothing.

He ran the pad of his thumb along his bottom lip. “I don’t know what that is, but I’m hoping at the very least it’s not a proclivity that would land me in jail.”

Pulling my knees to my chest, I wrapped my arms around them and planted my chin on top.

“An opacarophile is someone who loves sunsets.” I tilted my head to look at him. “You don’t just watch the sun disappear, do you? You watch *everything* disappear.”

He didn’t look at me; he just gave a slight nod. “There’s peace in the darkness. Don’t you think?”

I didn’t know how to answer that, so I stayed quiet. Sometimes Reed’s intensity could be profound, and when that happened, I felt woefully unprepared to manage it.

“What will you do after Clear Lake?” he asked. He pulled his knees to his chest to mirror mine, his head resting on them

as we stared at one another.

Our arms weren't so much as touching, but somehow, that look made me feel like he was jumping inside my skin.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Return to Seattle. Find a place to live. Find a job." I sighed, not wanting to acknowledge the reality of everything to come.

It felt like I was sorting the pieces of my life after someone had picked it up and dropped it on the floor. Shattered and unfamiliar, it was overwhelming to think of where to begin. First steps were always the hardest.

"I suppose I could try to get my old bartending job back," I continued. "My best friend, Jeremy, left a couple of years ago when the owner sold the bar to some asshole investor."

I wasn't sure how much I wanted to share, but Reed was listening intently, and I don't think I'd had the privilege of undivided attention to what I was saying before. I hated to waste it.

"Jeremy was my lifeline to the place, and when he and Dana—the previous owner—when they left, it was just me from our old crew. The investor is a prick. He's been buying up bars, restaurants, and clubs all over Seattle. When he offered me a position as a consultant for a new club, I couldn't leave The Unicorn fast enough. I didn't always want to bartend, and the pay was fantastic as a consultant. Plus, I was good at it."

I shook my head, my lips curling. "No, I was *great* at it. The logistics and planning, coordinating, and networking. I helped

that asshole build the hottest club in Seattle, and the only thanks I got for it was a shove out the door three months into its opening.”

Reed said nothing, just continued staring like he wanted me to keep going. Like he was listening. It was everything I needed and nothing I wanted. I wasn't sure if it made me fall harder for him or hate him.

My feelings embarrassed me. My mother framed the world in black-and-white, all-or-nothing terms. It's what narcissists do. I knew this, yet I couldn't shake it myself.

Shit. What if I was like my mother?

That was *precisely* why I didn't need a relationship. Maybe Reed was right that my story was one of redemption, and I was early in my arc. I didn't need the plot twist of falling in love and losing myself before I was sure of the person I wanted to be.

Reed's gentle elbow nudging my arm knocked me out of my thoughts. He lifted his eyebrows, encouraging me to go on.

“All that to say, I could grovel for my old job. Jordan doesn't run the ground operations and might overlook my *insubordination*.”

Like rejecting your boss' advances violated company policy.

“With Jeremy and Dana gone, my connections are shit, and there's no way Jordan will give me a promotion or influential position ever again, even if he hired me back. And honestly? I want more than what I had.”

“What do you want?”

Reed asked it as if it were the most straightforward question.

“Still trying to figure that out. I don’t want to be a bartender forever, relying on tits for tips and being treated like anything other than a professional.”

“No, Viv. You’re telling me what you don’t want to do. What is it you *want*?”

Looking out at the blackening sky, the bleeding hues nearly gone, I suddenly understood Reed better.

“I want peace,” I said, admiring the darkness. “Peace with myself, more than anything.”

Reed slid closer, one arm wrapping around my shoulders as he nuzzled my neck, his soft lips brushing my skin.

Everything in me melted, and I dropped my head back with the sensation of his touch. He didn’t reach for more, keeping his lips on my neck before brushing along my jaw, settling into the other side of my neck.

“Reed,” I moaned softly, my hands grasping his arm as he steadied himself against me.

“Shh,” he murmured, his mouth seeking mine with a soft run of his lips. “Let me give you peace tonight. Drain your mind of all the worry and what-ifs until the only thing left is the quiet comfort of satisfaction. Focus on what feels good. That’s all.”

His kiss deepened, and my lips parted to let him in. He offered the quiet comfort of satisfaction, but nothing was quiet about my screams. Loudest of all, the ones from my heart's erratic beating.

Reed guided me down to the soft earth beneath our blanket. With an ink-black canopy littered with bright stars, I cleared my mind until nothing was left except us.

# Seventeen

*Vivian*

“Is it your thing yet?” Reed’s hips rose to deepen his thrusts.

Running my hand through my hair as I circled languid and relaxed movements over his body, fucking him slowly, I bit my lip and smiled. “*This* is my thing.”

Reed wanted confirmation that camping under the stars would change my life. But after an entire night in the woods with him, talking and making love and staring at one another, it wasn’t the sleeping bags or the open sky that shifted my heart.

“You feel so *good*,” he groaned, his voice breaking as his hands grasped my hips to quicken my movements. “I could wake up every morning fucking you to the sunrise.”

I wasn’t sure either of us had slept, but I wouldn’t argue with him.

For a quiet man, Reed was a talker during sex. And I loved it. It wasn't just when he told me how good my pussy felt, what I did to his cock, or what he was desperate to do to me. It was his affirmations, his affections, and his adoration. Fucking Reed was like poetry.

“Don't stop,” I pleaded.

“I couldn't if I wanted to. I would live inside you if you'd let me.”

His head dropped back onto the sleeping bag, lifting to watch where our bodies connected as he furrowed his brows in a pained expression.

*Don't say that.*

I bit my lip, dropping my hands from my hair until one caressed my breast and the other stroked myself. Reed's eyes lit up, and he groaned.

“Tell me how good you feel. You're making a mess, Vivian. Tell me how good my cock feels when I'm inside you.”

“Reed.” It was damn near begging at this point. Not for an orgasm, but for him not to sink me. Destroy me. Consume me. I could disappear with him. Lose myself.

“Tell me,” he gritted, his fingers gripping the flesh of my hips so tightly I was sure there'd be bruises.

I welcomed them. A reminder of his hands on my skin, his desire for me, and this moment. Because Reed was right—the night had changed my life, whether or not I liked it.



“Tell me how it feels while you come on my cock. Because nothing else exists when I’m inside you, Vivian. You feel like everything good in this world, right here taking me like a fucking queen. God, I love when you ride me like this.”

*I can't breathe when you're inside me, but I'm not living if you're not.*

“You feel so good. I feel so good. So full,” I said instead.

His hands released my hips, cupping my face to bring me closer. Our lips hovered an inch apart, but Reed didn't kiss me. He watched me, his eyes not leaving mine through each upward thrust of his hips or groan of pleasure when I moved over him. He didn't close his eyes or shift his gaze, pinning mine in a way that felt far more intimate than the fact he was buried deep inside me.

“You're killing me,” I gasped.

“Fuck, Viv,” he breathed. “Rest in peace, but I'm coming with you to hell because I can't stop.”

My stomach tightened, and I dropped my hands to his chest, pressing down on him to leverage my body so my clit hit the base of his cock to send me over the edge of an abyss. The darkness of a cavern I never wanted to crawl up from.

“I'm coming, Reed. God. You feel too good.”

As the wave of my climax crested between us, he pulled my mouth to his for a hungered kiss as a soft grunt brought his orgasm to tangle with mine.

Limbs wrapped and shared, chests rising with hard breaths, and eyes staring wide into the face before them, I collapsed. Reed padded my bottom lip with his finger as he traced my mouth and smiled.

“Let’s live on this mountain. Wake up every morning like this.”

“You—you can’t,” I whispered. “You can’t say those kinds of things, Reed.”

He pulled his hand away, his smile dropping. “Why?”

Scooting off him, I sat on the sleeping bag and reached for my pants. “You know why.”

The asshole. He knew full well. I understood Reed was a consuming man. A man who lets himself get caught up in fantasies or ideas.

Reckless abandonment of reality made him a successful writer, but it was a shitty thing to do when I’d asked him not to pretend this thing between us would be more than it was.

Slipping into his clothes, Reed stood up and adjusted his pants as he hunted for his shoes.

“Because you’re leaving? Do you need to leave? You said yourself, you have nothing you’re going back to. Why rush it?”

I knew that staying was a slippery slope into a relationship with Reed, and I wasn’t sure if either of us could handle that. I’d just left a long-term one that didn’t work out because I had

shit taste in life and was trying to figure myself out. And I wasn't sure what Reed wanted—from anyone.

“Do you always talk like this during sex?” I asked, pulling on my socks and trying to keep my voice casual.

Reed stopped what he was doing, his hand dropping away from his shoes as he weighed his words. “Like what?”

I glared at him and crossed my arms. He knew damn well like what.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair and ruffling the top. “I like words,” he said flatly. “I just say what I'm thinking at the moment. I didn't think it was a problem. I told you I was a man who valued passion.” He smirked. “You seem to like it.”

I did. Too much.

Clearing my throat, I packed up my sleeping bag. “We should get going. I need to make it to work by nine.”

Reed nodded, moving slowly. “You know. It doesn't mean it's not—”

I held up my hand, forcing a smile. “I had a great night with you. A great morning, too. Thank you.”

Saying nothing, he loaded up the packs, handing me the smaller one. Trying to smooth things over, I shot him a half-smile.

“Don't go easy on me. I can handle the big stuff.” I jutted my chin toward his crotch and attempted to widen my smile.

Reed smiled politely, but it was clear neither of our hearts was in it.

Because I'd decided I would take my heart out of it. Reed was a storyteller, and a good one at that.



“You’re scared and being unreasonable,” Jeremy said, his face taking over the screen as I turned on my video and set my phone atop Missy’s kitchen counter. “You’re freaking out because you like him.”

“And setting arbitrary rules on how long you should wait before moving on,” Ari hollered over Jeremy’s shoulder, her bright red hair contrasting with his dark shag.

Pulling a pot from the cupboard, I filled it with water and turned on the stove. “I’m not setting arbitrary rules. I’m just trying to figure myself out.”

It had been three days since my camping trip with Reed, and I hadn’t seen him in the interim. Work filled my days, and a night at The Shoot with Ashley and Oliver had passed the time well enough. I wasn’t a woman sitting around twiddling her thumbs and waiting for a phone call, but I had to admit that Reed’s disappearance confused me.

Like I’d done something wrong.

Missy tried to explain that Reed was like that. Could be hot and cold. He’d have days where nothing was going on with his writing. Then days when creativity would hit, and he’d have *everything* going on with his writing.

Which, I suppose, made sense. Reed was a man who could consume an entire person, but surely that meant he could be consumed, too. I just wished it was me who was overwhelming him.

It took me about a day to get Missy to give up Reed's pen name, and I'd spent the last few days reading two of his books. One that launched his career and the other that torpedoed his success. Unsurprisingly, they were beautifully written.

It was a wonder he didn't shout from the rooftops and encourage everyone to read his work. Then again, knowing him, it also made sense.

"You know who you are, Viv," Jeremy shot back. He pulled Ari into a headlock and kissed her cheek before releasing her to slip into the background. "What's *actually* the reason you don't want to stay and see where things go, hm?"

"Shut up," I grumbled, turning my back to the phone and mouthing *shit*. Sometimes it was the worst to have a friend know you so well.

"Vivian."

I faced the phone with a scowl.

"Careful, or you're going to crack the screen with that glare." Jeremy shook his head, laughing.

"I've never been with someone like him before," I said. Instead of sounding like a nearly twenty-eight-year-old woman, I sounded like a child whining that she didn't get what she wanted for her birthday.

“Isn’t that the point of seeing him?” Ari shouted in the background. “Level up your life, Viv!”

“You have got to tell your fiancé to stop listening to Mona Abaroa and her ‘delete your negativity’ cult bullshit,” I said to Jeremy. “All that toxic positivity is dumb.”

He waved his hands and looked behind him, panicked. “Don’t you dare get me in trouble just because you’re pissed off that we’re telling you the truth.”

I hated he was right. “Look. *Yes*, I know myself. And *yes*, I like him.” I paused, swallowing audibly. “And *yes*, it scares me.”

Terrified me, to be accurate. Because while I *was* trying to figure my shit out, I was also learning to love myself. If I were being honest, I feared I wasn’t enough. Maybe not enough for Reed as things stood, but definitely not enough to survive him. Because it would crash. All things crashed. My entire life had been one big fucking crash.

Jeremy dropped his head and clapped his hands above it like he was praising the gospel of my vulnerability.

“You’re not as cute as you think you are,” I deadpanned.

Ari giggled behind him. “Yes, you are.”

“I’m hanging up,” I threatened, and Jeremy finally stopped clapping.

I rubbed my temple. “It isn’t just his hot and cold. It’s that he’s settled in what he wants and how he lives his life, and I’m not.” I shrugged. “So, where would that leave us?”

“Why do you need to figure that out now?”

“I guess I don’t.” And I didn’t, but Reed seemed incapable of anything casual. “He’s just intense, that’s all.”

Jeremy snickered. “So you’ve said. Repeatedly. But Viv, you don’t think you can hold your ground? Please.”

How could I hold my ground when Reed felt like an earthquake, liquifying the entire foundation beneath me?

And maybe I could take a moment to appreciate being rocked to my core if I thought there was something special about me. But there wasn’t. This was just Reed. That was clear with his, “*I like words.*”

“I’m not staying in Clear Lake,” I said.

Jeremy pointed his finger into the camera, his face serious. “You better not.” He relaxed his expression. “Have you asked this guy if *he* insists on staying in Clear Lake?”

Oof. I didn’t like the shift in my stomach with Jeremy’s question. “He lives here. He owns a cabin here. His mother is here.”

Jeremy waved his hand dismissively at my list. “That wasn’t what I asked you.”

It wasn’t. He was right, but it was still an absurd question that didn’t warrant an answer.

“Don’t overthink it. That’s not a good look for you.” Jeremy scratched his head and leaned back on the couch. “You’re trying to solve a puzzle before you have all the pieces. When

are you getting your cash money? When are you coming back to us?”

The water boiling over the pot on the stove caught my attention. “Shit!” I hissed, pulling the pot off the burner and reaching for a towel to clean the water, sopping up the white frothy mess. “Um, I have a meeting with the lawyer the day after my birthday. Funds should be released within twenty-four hours after signing the paperwork. I’m already looking at apartments.”

My birthday was in exactly ten days, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t marking off the days on the calendar.

Even though I was staying with Missy, I couldn’t afford the first and last month’s rent in Seattle, *plus* a deposit. I needed my trust, and I was so close to getting it. And proud of myself for surviving to get it.

“I don’t like the idea of you running from something good for you,” Jeremy said, “but I’d be lying if I said we won’t be happy to have you back.”

I smiled. “Yeah?”

He nodded, and Ari appeared over his shoulder with a grin and a goofy nod to match his.

I once read that some traits of happiness are inherited. Given both of my parents were miserable and mirthless, I assumed I would be the same.

Looking at the faces of my friends, I realized I might not be a writer like my new playfellow, but I *could* rewrite my story.



And I could be my own happy ending.

# Eighteen

*Reed*

“**F**ucking finished.”

I groaned, running my hands along my face and puffing a long-held breath. After rounds of heavy edits and rewrites, my third book was *done*. And with fiber-optic internet, I hadn't left my home in...

I blinked my bleary eyes. I didn't even know what day it was, let alone when I first sat down.

Had I slept? I think there were a handful of times when my head fell to my desk for dreamless respite. The stubble along my jaw told me it'd been days since I started this. Piles of dirty plates and empty Stumptown nitro cold brew cans showed I had some sustenance in my time here.

Shit, had I fed Rocky? Thank God for the cat door. That motherfucker had probably hunted half the forest by now.

I was the worst roommate.

Stretching and scrubbing my face again, I settled on a shower as my first stop for emerging from my writing bubble.

When I hit *send*, and my beautiful, consuming manuscript was off to the editor for a final look-over, I felt like my lungs could breathe air again.

For a year and a half, I poured over this project. Wrote, edited, trashed, and started over—only to finish and be told it was a great *first round*. An improved second round. A better third round. And now, hopefully, a completed fourth round.

After washing days of grime away and shaving, I felt human again. Keeping a tidy face seemed like something I wanted to try for a while, even though I kind of missed my beard.

I cleaned my workspace, ensured my cat was still alive, and checked my phone for messages. Unsurprisingly, there were only a few waiting for me.

After I missed our weekly call, the boys sent various texts, checking in on our group thread. The end conclusion of the thread was that I was dead or writing. Given there were no wellness checks from the police—which, yes, happened when writing my first book—I knew which they'd settled on.

I quickly shot a text, letting them know I was still breathing.

Otherwise, there were some messages from my mom asking for cash this month to float her for car repairs. A message apologizing for needing to ask for the money in the first place because she'd given hers to my dad. A message thanking me

for sending some support. It had helped her more than I'd known.

I'd yet to send her anything, but at least she appreciated it. I might get angry or impatient with my mom, but she was always grateful for the help and only asked when she was desperate. I think... maybe she got angry and impatient with herself sometimes, too.

Tucking my phone into my back pocket, I tried to shake that thought.

That was it for messages—nothing from Vivian.

I don't know if I expected her to check in or whether it disappointed me she hadn't.

When I dropped her off after camping, she was quiet. Reflective, maybe, but not angry. I sensed she didn't appreciate the way things had ended after sex. Like I'd done or said something wrong.

I wasn't stupid. When she asked if I always talked like that during sex, she was asking if I meant what I said. She'd be crazy to think I didn't. Her pussy was a haven, and her ass was superb, and I wouldn't tire of fucking her mouth. Her tits were glorious, and touching her brought me to life.

But that's not what she was talking about.

She was asking about the tenderness of my words. The adoration of my need. The allegiance of my heart.

I hadn't lied to her. I *did* say what I was thinking at the moment. I *am* a passionate man, and I enjoy expressing that

with the medium I'm most comfortable with—words. Just because I got carried away sometimes didn't mean I wasn't truthful with what I was saying. I could be a lot sometimes. Extreme. Excessive. Acute.

Which is precisely why I didn't get into shit like this. Fuck if desire didn't lick my spine with a delicious heat when I let myself go, but the burn of reality would be a painful recovery when the flames extinguished, and all that was left was a pile of ash.

Vivian and I weren't fighting. Were we? Was she upset with me? Did I owe her an explanation for my disappearance? I wouldn't give it to anyone else—so why did I feel like she deserved it?

“Shit.” I stumbled out of my house, facing direct sunlight for the first time in too long and hissing with the sting of it.

Pulling myself into my truck, I sat for a moment, gripping the steering wheel and staring straight ahead, knowing full well I was going to find Vivian. Seek her out.

Because maybe I could be fervent, but dammit if Vivian couldn't consume me the same.



“You just missed her,” Missy said, examining her nails and ignoring my pleading eyes. “Can't tell you where she went or what she's doing, but I can tell you that disappearing for *five days* without so much as an acknowledgment after you dragged her away in a romantic tizzy is just shit, Reed.”

All effort kept my eyes from rolling as I gnashed my teeth together. “There’s nothing romantic about camping, Missy.”

And that was true. I watched Vivian pop a squat and piss on her sneakers by accident when a squirrel startled her along the trail.

“Not the point,” Missy said, dropping her hands to rest on the counter between us. Her grip tightened against the edge, her mouth running flat.

“Is she mad at me?” I winced, waiting for Missy’s answer.

She left me to dangle for a moment, likely for her enjoyment, then pursed her lips. “No.”

Wait, what?

“No?”

Missy shook her head, her curls bouncing. “No, she’s not mad, Reed. She asked me if you were okay, and I explained you get caught up when writing. Sometimes you disappear for days, just like you can *hover* for days.”

That was a generous way to describe my weird push and pull with the people I let into my life.

“She didn’t ask again, other than wanting to know about your books. You idiot, not even bothering to tell her you write under a pen name.”

Missy pushed off the counter, stepping over to the register as she watched Mr. Schumer enter.

“You know, you could, at the very least, just tell her what’s going on in that dumb head of yours. You’re lucky she’s not like that needy New York girl you flew here.”

Missy’s face brightened as Mr. Schumer shuffled next to me. I stepped to the side to make room for him.

“Think she’s at the apartment?”

She shrugged, wiping her hands on her apron before starting Mr. Schumer’s tea. She gave him a menu—a prop.

“Mr. Schumer! Your sling is gone. Are you feeling better?” She smiled brightly as he took the menu.

The old man looked down with a pinched face. “What?”

Missy patted his arm. “I hope you’re not doing your yard work, Mr. Schumer. Those rose bushes can get hazardous.”

He licked his dry lips and snorted. “Betty wouldn’t let me touch her roses. Besides, Amanda has been taking care of it all.”

Missy nodded, not waiting for him to bombard her with questions today. “Let’s take your earl grey to sit, shall we?”

Mr. Schumer looked around him and scratched his head. “Did I ask about the jasmine?”

“You did,” she lied, crossing into the lobby and taking his elbow to escort him to his table.

“You’re so bossy,” he grumbled, following along.

I checked my phone for messages—still nothing from Vivian. I should probably text her at the very least.

“You want something, Reed?” Lily asked, coming from the storeroom with a long sleeve of takeaway cups. She set them on the counter, wiping her hands on her jeans and giving a radiant smile. Lily, like Missy, felt a little like sunshine.

Me? Not so much.

“No, thanks,” I mumbled. “Just...” I didn’t even bother finishing the thought.

Lily threw me a pitied smile. “You know, I like to walk when I’m out of sorts.”

Yeah, okay.

I bobbed my head slowly, starting a message, deleting it, and trying again. “Glad that works for you.”

Should my message be an apology? An update? If she wasn’t upset that I’d disappeared, did Vivian even want me to reach out?

Her birthday was next week. That meant we still had several days before she planned on leaving. I didn’t want her upset in the time we had left.

Shit. I wasted *five days*.

It couldn’t be helped. I had to finish that manuscript, but the thought of losing time between us was disappointing.

*That’s not good.*

Lily’s smile shifted to an annoyed frown. “Go for a walk, Reed.”



“Sure, Lily. I’ll add it to the list.” Chewing the inside of my cheek, I continued doubting myself and my next moves.

Lily sighed and smacked the counter. “Reed. I’m trying to help you.”

That caught my attention. “Help me? I’ve been stressed and could use some exercise, Lily, but I don’t feel like going on a walk right now.”

“You’re dense.” She rubbed her temple before pointing toward the door. “Head south on Rilen and take a left on Pioneer.”

I stood up straighter. She must have overheard me and Missy. “Oh, you know where Vivian is?” Christ. I was an asshole sometimes.

Lily nodded, dropping her voice. “Yes. I live on the corner of Pioneer, and I saw her on my walk here. I can’t say if she’s still there, but good luck. She might not be mad at you, but Missy’s right about everything. You’re one intimidating guy, Reed.”

“I’m not intimidating,” I grumbled, then shut my mouth, thinking better of an argument. “Uh. Thanks, Lily.”

Knocking my knuckles on the counter, I waved to Missy on my way out. She flipped me off and returned to chatting with Mr. Schumer, who looked more cantankerous than me.

It wasn’t more than five minutes before I spotted Vivian, just as I turned onto Pioneer like Lily instructed.

Manicured, green lawns and perfectly clipped and trimmed bushes lined the residential street. Lush foliage and landscaping gave an idyllic suburban feel.

If I took a photo, there was no doubt the Icelandic poppies along the nature strip combined with the impeccably coiffed yards trailing to the lakeshore at the end of the road could be an alluring advertisement for Clear Lake.

All yards were exquisite masterpieces except the brown and dead grass Vivian stood in. Her back was to me, her hair in a tight ponytail. She wore yoga pants and an old t-shirt tied into a knot in the back, revealing her deliciously plump ass.

*Keep it together.*

She stood with her hands on her hips, kicking at a lawnmower that seemed unwilling to start.

“Asshole!” she huffed, pushing the primer on the mower and pulling the start cord. Nothing happened, and she let out another angry chain of profanity before shoving the entire thing away and kicking it.

She didn’t hear my footsteps on the sidewalk in her fit, so when I stood so close that I could tap her shoulder, she jumped out of her skin.

“What the hell!” Vivian cried, grasping at her heart and trying to catch her breath. “You creeping weirdo. What are you doing?”

Adorable.

“What am *I* doing?” I held my arms out, gesturing to suburbia. “Have you become a gardener since I last saw you?”

The corners of her mouth lifted slightly, and her eyes narrowed. “I *have*. That’s what happens when you disappear for a year.”

She turned her attention back to the mower and pumped the starter again.

“Christ,” she grumbled. Pointing at the ancient and rusting machine in front of her, she scowled. “Do you know how to fix these?”

“Vivian, what are you doing?”

She sighed, collapsing onto the grass and dropping her head in her hands. “I thought I was helping, but I killed Mr. Schumer’s lawn, and he doesn’t know it only because he can’t remember I did it. I also over-trimmed his dead wife’s rose bushes. I don’t know if they’ll grow back next year.” She puffed her cheeks. “For, like, three weeks, I was doing so well.”

With her eyes wide and fixed a few feet in front of her, I was pretty sure Vivian wasn’t talking to me.

I sat down, tucking my legs under me and reaching for a strand of dead grass to pluck and pull apart between my fingers. “You’ve been helping Mr. Schumer?”

She snorted. “Depends on your definition of help.” She released a long breath and threw her head back with laughter.

“Remember how I told you I enjoy doing things people don’t expect of me?”

The side of my mouth quirked upward. “I do.”

Her hand covered her mouth as her laugh deepened.

“Guaranteed, Mr. Schumer didn’t expect me to decimate his property.”

“You’ve been taking care of Mr. Schumer’s yard for weeks?”  
Vivian was right. That was certainly unexpected.

She shrugged one shoulder, relaxing back on her hands. “I felt bad for him. He’s old, his wife died, and his memory is gone. When he hurt himself trying to take care of his rose bushes... I don’t know. I came by and offered to help. Honestly, it seemed a low risk. He thinks my name is Amanda, and I figured if I messed it up, no one would know it was me, anyway.”

She watched me pick another blade of grass, light green and only mildly dry. Pointing, she scoffed. “You take one that’s still alive? Monster.”

I handed the blade to her, and she took it, tying it into a knot.

“Even when I’m trying, I still mess it up.” She stood, wiping her hands on her pants and brushing them off. “I’m going to at least water his roses. I’ll see if I can borrow a mower from the Rhiners next door.”

“Hey.” I got up, grabbing her arm. She looked at me with her wide hazel eyes. The green popped in the sunlight, softening

the darker shades of brown. The combination was stunning.

“What?”

“Are you mad at me?” I blurted. *Jesus*. So cringy. “I should have told you that my process—”

“You told me you had heavy edits.” She gently pulled her arm from me. “And no, I’m not mad. You didn’t need to explain anything about your process. I promise I wasn’t sitting around wondering what you were doing and waiting with bated breath.”

What was that supposed to mean? And what had she been doing? And who had she been doing it with? Not that I wanted her sitting around and waiting for me to call her, but... maybe that was what I wanted.

*Asshole.*

I took a step back, running my jaw back and forth.

“I didn’t say you were and wouldn’t expect you to. I just thought I should apologize. I can get wrapped up in the process, overcome by it. Time can disappear for me. And after I dropped you off, it felt like things were off. I shouldn’t have left for so long after that, at least not without an explanation.”

Vivian cupped my face and patted my cheeks. “Nope. We’re just hanging out, Reed. You owe me nothing. Apology or otherwise.”

What if I wanted to owe her something?

“You’re really not mad?”

She didn't respond, heading to the side of the house and unfurling a hose. My eyes followed her. "Vivian. You're not \_\_\_"

"No, I'm not mad at you." Her voice was so soft that it unsettled me. But not as much as what she said next.

"I'm not *mad*. You don't owe me anything. This is casual. But I'm..." She took a deep breath, smoothing her ponytail. "I'm hurt. And I don't want to acknowledge or admit that because it's vulnerable and not my thing. So let's never speak of it again."

Something was happening in my chest. It was tight and loose simultaneously, and I didn't know what to make of it. "Vivian \_\_\_"

"Nope." She held up her hand, blocking her face so I couldn't even get a look at her.

I chuckled. I couldn't help it. It certainly didn't improve matters, and the impatient grunt she released from behind her hand made that clear.

"Vivian. I *am* sorry I hurt your feelings. I didn't think, and it was—"

"Thoughtless," she contributed helpfully. "It was thoughtless. You've spent a lot of time acting like you're thinking about me obsessively, which side note—that's concerning." I shook my head, my chuckle now a full-on laugh. She lowered her hand and shot me a look. "Then a lull of not thinking at all."

Tucking my hands into my pockets, I dropped my head and nodded. “Yeah. I got caught up. Next time—” Would there be a next time while Vivian was around? She’d be leaving soon.

“Next time, you’ll send me proof of life at least once daily,” she finished.

Vivian turned on the hose and walked to a sad patch of naked rose bushes. Watering them, she whistled as she worked. I wasn’t sure whether it was an attempt to move on or distract from the implication of her comment.

“Of course,” I said softly.

Pointing at the pathetic bushes, she said, “See? Messed it up.”

I continued watching, unable to take my eyes off her. Not just because she looked good—she did in her tight athletic wear and dancing on the edge of spiraling like she was barely holding it together. The pairing of her physical beauty and the vulnerability of her falling apart did something to me. I was probably fucked up in the head.

“You at least tried.”

She smiled, not looking at me. “Still the same outcome.”

Something about the way she said it made me feel sad. For her, sure, but maybe sad for me too. I wasn’t sure why.

Then I had an idea.

“You know what you need?” I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it sooner. I *was* an idiot.

Her head tilted. “Some gardening tips?” Shutting off the water, she tossed the hose down and shook out her hands.

“Yes, definitely, but also a win. You need a win, and I’ll help you get one.”



“Thank you, brother. I can’t believe I didn’t think to call you sooner.” I juggled the phone on my shoulder as I finished packing my bag.

“Don’t thank me,” Ezra grumbled, the gravel of his voice thick like concrete. He was a man who didn’t hesitate to help those he loved, but anyone outside of that could fuck right off. “Let’s see what she has to say before you decide whether I’ve been helpful.”

Zippering my bag, I checked Rocky’s water and made sure the cat door was open for him before locking up and heading to pick up Vivian.

“Listen, the fact you’re willing to take even ten minutes to see if you have a job for her means a lot.”

“Ten?” He laughed. “I’ll give her five, Reed. Because of Vivian Harlow, I spent half my childhood listening to people whistle *In the Air Tonight* down the hallway at school whenever I’d walk by.”

Yeah. Vivian hadn’t overlooked Ezra as a target in our youth, either. Ezra had the unfortunate last name of Collins, which wouldn’t be a problem if his given name wasn’t Philip.



Philip Collins.

Also not a problem if people didn't shorten Philip to Phil.

Yes, like *that* Phil Collins. The drummer, eventual singer for Genesis, and later, a solo artist responsible for such classics as *You'll Be in My Heart*. And, of course, *In the Air Tonight*. I mean, that drum break? Get out of here.

Ezra had been going by his middle name since we were kids, never caring for his given name anyway, being his shitty grandfather's namesake.

It hadn't been an issue. Not until Vivian learned that Ezra's given name was Philip. From middle school onward, she had people singing *In the Air Tonight* or drumming on their lockers anytime he walked by.

Vivian was a *big* fan of the '80s.

"Yeah, about that. She's not like she was." I ran a finger along my shirt collar, loosening it and trying to relax.

Ezra clapped his hands. "Fantastic! She's a patron saint. Can't wait to chat."

"Yeah, she's not quite that either." I pulled onto the road, switching him to speakerphone. "Just keep an open mind, okay? Some investor on the club scene screwed her over, and she has few options."

Ezra paused. "Who?"

"Who what?"

I rolled down the window and allowed one hand to ride the resistance of the breeze as I flew down the highway, eager to get to Vivian. I still couldn't believe she had agreed to come to Seattle with me for the weekend.

It had taken me longer than it should to put together the fact that Vivian might benefit from sitting down with one of my best friends who owned a bar and club in Seattle—a successful one.

Maybe he couldn't offer her a job, but he might provide her with guidance or connect her with someone who could.

From the sounds of it, she was in a bad spot. I was fortunate that my job was fulfilling. Hard and frustrating and compulsive and obsessive, but fulfilling. It could be disheartening to try your best and still not have shit work out.

Which, from the way she spoke of it, had been Vivian's life recently.

I told her at the peak of our hike that I wanted to give her peace, and I'd meant it. At that moment, the peace I could offer was a respite from the worry and uncertainty running through her head that night, but maybe I could provide more.

“Who was the investor that screwed her over?” Ezra cut in.  
“What happened?”

“Oh.” I pulled my arm in from the window and scratched my jaw. “Um, I'm not sure. I think she mentioned someone named... Jordan, maybe? Said he bought the place she was working before offering her a gig consulting to help him open

a new club. The Unicorn. That was the bar she had been working at first.”

That, I remembered. It seemed fitting that a one-of-a-kind woman would work at a place called The Unicorn.

Ezra muttered under his breath and then exhaled loudly into the phone. “All right, she can have ten minutes.”

“Ez,” I said, turning off the highway and heading along the main drag of town toward Missy’s apartment. “Not that I don’t appreciate that on her behalf, but why the change of heart?”

“Jordan Kline is the investor she’s talking about. I’m well familiar with him, and I’m guessing if he’s making Vivian’s life hell, she will need some help to sort it out.”

“And you, you grumpy, stubborn goat, will help her?”

Ezra had a big heart for those who’d earned his trust, love, and loyalty, but outsiders? He could be a nightmare—brooding, angry, and punishing.

There was a quiet moment, maybe just a beat too long, then he spoke. “You shaved for her, Reed.”

“So?”

“You don’t change for people. Not in the twenty-three years I’ve known you.”

I shook my head, running my tongue along the back of my teeth as I clenched my jaw. “I do plenty for other people.”

My mom, the boys, someone in a pinch—I’d always stepped in and helped people, even when I didn’t want to.

“Ah-ah,” Ezra said with a laugh. “You do plenty *for* other people. You do almost nothing *because* of other people. You’re fucked, brother. I’ll see you when you get here.”



Ezra’s words echoed through my head as I pulled up to Missy’s apartment. As I trudged to the door. As Vivian pulled me inside and peppered my face with kisses and gratitude for thinking of her. For wanting to help her. As if it still surprised her that someone would want to.

Those words rang through my ears as Vivian pushed me onto the couch, straddling my lap and lifting her dress, promising we were alone. A light humming of acknowledgment in the back of my mind as she ground against me. Her fingers nimbly flicked open the button of my jeans, sliding down the zipper and finding me already hard for her.

Those words sank into my heart, dipping with the heat of her mouth as she lowered to take me, her hollow cheeks working along my length with fervor. Sank even deeper as she spun around, her pussy in my face, and I licked her while she sucked me until we were both a mess.

Those words rattled along my bones, stroking them with the same shudder as my release. Because the truth of those words lived between our heavy breaths and shared pleasure. I was doing plenty for Vivian, but that was *because* of her. Because she deserved it. Because she was worth it.

# Nineteen

*Vivian*

“Are these ‘blow me’ lips?” I asked, studying my face in the sun visor mirror and fluffing my hair. I pointed at the bright red lipstick I’d put on for my meeting with Ezra.

Reed drummed his fingers along the steering wheel. “I don’t know what ‘blow me lips’ are, Vivian, but inferring your meaning has got me riled up. I’ll need you not to do that before we roll in to see my best friend, okay?”

I smiled and batted my lashes. “That would be one awkward hug when you see Ezra. Sorry, I’ll stop.”

I closed the visor and set my hands in my lap, smoothing the skirt of my sleek blue dress, one that Missy lent me that made my tits pop.

“Besides, that boner would spear the man dead, and I’m praying he’s willing to help me. Can’t have you kill off my only prospect for a job in this city.”

The corners of his lips twitched, and he ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head. “Your lips look sexy as fuck, and I expect them wrapped around me as soon as we’re out of here, but Ezra doesn’t care about that kind of stuff.” He paused. “Just don’t go singing to him.”

Letting myself out of the truck and taking a deep breath, I agreed. Best to avoid discussing the ways I’d tormented that glowering skyscraper when we were kids.

Ten minutes later, we sat at a booth in the back of a club called The Apocalypse as a cute server with a styled pixie cut brought a bottle of water over and offered drinks.

Treating this meeting as a job interview, I declined, but Reed asked for their top-shelf bourbon like the good friend he was.

Leaning close, he whispered, “I’m not paying for that.”

I was too nervous to laugh. Craning my neck, I scanned the club. Although it was early in the evening, the place had a healthy attendance.

Reed told me it would pick up after nine, and I believed it. The vibe was sophisticated and sexy, with dark walls and built-in refurbished wood shelves. Hundreds of electric candles lined the shelves, giving the space a sensual ambiance.

The club seemed ongoing, even though it was one large, open space. Floor-to-ceiling shelves with more candles divided the floor into four distinct sections.

Three bars lined the edges of the club, and backlighting gave a soft glow that reflected the impressive stock of alcohol. Full

shelves of varying quality liquor spread to the high ceilings, and a library ladder to get to it all.

“This is a bartender’s wet dream,” I whispered, looking around. “It’s beautiful, and that bar is insane.”

Reed nodded. “Ezra doesn’t half-ass anything. You’ve never been here?”

People mingled in the booths that lined the split floor, as others started their evening dancing.

“Once,” I answered, “but it was a couple of years ago when Jordan first took me on. The club wasn’t like this. Jordan wanted us to scout the place, but it looked different. The entire thing was open, like a warehouse, and there was a bar in the center, just one giant circle with bartenders working all around the counter. Did he renovate?”

The server brought Reed his drink and winked at him. My stomach shifted, and I bit my tongue to avoid saying something bitchy to her. If Reed noticed, he ignored it. He took a sip and nodded.

“Yep, he renovated the club. Ty got him an insane deal for a takeover a few years ago, and he’s been working on building this place up. It’s been a work in progress, and I bet you can help him. He needs people around him he can trust.”

My heart picked up speed. “You think he can trust me?”

Reed took another sip of his drink, slid his other hand beneath the table, and squeezed my thigh. We stared at one another, the slow pull of a smile on each of our lips.

“Brother,” a deep and graveled voice said, tugging Reed’s attention away from me.

“Ez.” Reed rose from the booth to pull a very tall man in for a hug. Reed wasn’t short, but this man was *tall*. He was at last six-four, and his solid build seemed to add another foot.

The two embraced, holding onto one another with a sincere grasp of friendship that made my heart sputter momentarily. I wasn’t used to seeing such honest affection.

Taking one another in, Reed slapped Ezra’s arm as he pulled away and gestured to me. “You remember Vivian Harlow.”

Ezra offered his hand. His lips curled into a smile, perhaps playful, though possibly punishing.

“Vivian, how could I forget? It’s lovely to see you. Listening to any good music these days?”

He dropped my hand, his eyes dancing with amusement. The man looked like he belonged in a cologne ad with that stylish haircut and fitted suit. My cheeks went red.

“She’s into jazz,” Reed said, jerking his thumb in my direction.

I threw an elbow into his gut, and he grasped his stomach and wheezed.

Ezra motioned for us to sit down. “I’ve seen your resume, Vivian. You’ve had quite a run in the Seattle nightlife. Reed tells me you’re in a tough spot regarding employment. You were working for Jordan Kline?”



It wasn't professional to groan when desperate for a job, so I bit my tongue and nodded instead.

“Yes, for the last two years. Before that, I worked my way up at The Unicorn with Dana Bolano. If you reach out to her, she'll be happy to tell you about my promotions and shift into bar management prior to my consultation work.”

My best bet was to steer him away from the last couple of years and focus on the praise Dana would give.

“Why are you no longer working for Jordan?”

Dammit.

Of course, he'd want to know about my past employment besides my current skill set.

“He didn't find me agreeable.” I settled on that.

Ezra raised his eyebrows, his hands clasped together and resting on the table. His entire aura was intense like Reed's, but whereas Reed poured emotion, Ezra didn't—as if he were void of any.

“Oh? In what way?”

Reed squeezed my thigh under the table.

“He'd be able to give more detail why.” I was floundering. I needed to take a deep breath and calm down. I didn't know why it was so difficult to answer the question, other than thinking about it made my stomach churn.

For all I knew, Ezra and Jordan were business associates. Or worse, friends. They no doubt ran in the same circles. Seattle

nightlife wasn't on par with LA or New York. It was a small community of ownership.

I was already tap-dancing on the thinnest of ice, with the heaviest of humbleness because of my past treatment of Ezra. I didn't want to add disparaging his friend to my list of offenses.

"You've said that twice now," Ezra said. "He didn't find you agreeable? Why? Were you rude?"

I mean, probably, but I shook my head.

"Were you defiant of his authority?"

I considered that. Technically, *yes*.

"Did you have poor hygiene?" Ezra went on. "Act unprofessionally? Give me something, Vivian. Otherwise, I'm making assumptions."

I bit my lip. Powerful men backed other powerful men. It was the way of the world. I could tell the truth or take the hit myself and hope that Ezra would hire me. Shit. What if Ezra was no different from Jordan?

The fact that Reed loved him told me there was no possible way.

I crossed my arms, feeling uncomfortable. Silence hung heavy between us as I weighed how to answer.

Ezra cleared his throat before I could. "I'm sorry, Reed. I told you I'd give her five minutes, and time's up." He made a move to stand.

Reed's measured voice stopped him. "You said ten minutes, and you'll give her another five."

Ezra looked amused, and for a moment, I thought he would blow out of there. To my surprise, he sat back down.

"You're right. I did." He sighed, turning back to me. "Jordan has high expectations for those who work for him. Some would say impossibly high standards, but those people have not met me. If you couldn't handle working for Jordan, The Apocalypse is not for you."

I filled my chest with a deep breath, speaking before I changed my mind. It wasn't me who had anything to be ashamed of.

"Jordan hired me because I am experienced, skilled, and capable. Jordan fired me because I wouldn't get on my knees and suck his dick in the storage room."

Reed's jaw fell onto the table. "What the fuck, Vivian?"

I ignored him, holding my chin up as I watched Ezra's face remain neutral. Maybe he and Jordan were colleagues, friends, or lovers for all I knew, but I would not feel like shit for something that wasn't my fault.

At this rate, Ezra wouldn't give me the job anyway. The least I could do was stand up for myself.

"I don't regret keeping my dignity, but it cost me my job prospects in this city. I've spent my entire working career in Seattle's bar and club scene, and thanks to Jordan, I can't even get a call back from Applebee's. So clearly, I am desperate."

I gestured to Reed as Ezra held his neutral expression.

“*He* thought maybe you could help me. Maybe you can’t, or you can and don’t want to. You wouldn’t be the first person I was a jerk to who had no desire to give me a hand up. But I’d rather keep making shitty coffee for minimum wage and tips than pretend for another minute that I am not fan-fucking-tastic at what I do. Jordan doesn’t deserve to hold power or sway over anyone’s career prospects, least of all mine.”

I stood up, the back of my bare thighs peeling off the vinyl booth after I sweated through the last ten minutes of Ezra’s surly job interview.

Ezra rubbed the bridge of his nose, wincing. “Vivian, wait.”

I had half a mind to storm off, but while I’d given a neat little speech about being okay with minimum wage and tips, I wasn’t. I turned around.

Ezra rose from his seat, smiling as if the last ten minutes hadn’t happened.

“Reed has spoken of your tenacity, passion, and intelligence. He was not misleading. I sense you could be an important addition to helping us to promote and build our reputation. You did it for Jordan. Perhaps you’ll do it for us. Would you consider coming tomorrow morning to discuss compensation and an official role at The Apocalypse?”

Reed grinned, but I gave a curt nod. “I’ll come by tomorrow morning.”

“Nine o’clock.” Ezra offered his hand. I took it with a firm shake. “You really are lovely.”

Reed stepped in, pushing Ezra’s hand away. “Shut up, Ezra.”

Ezra gave a mischievous grin and winked, buttoning his suit jacket and walking off with a wave over his shoulder.

“Is he always like that?” I asked, releasing a breath once he was gone.

Reed nodded. “Yes, but he’s not a sociopath.”

Could have fooled me.

Reed placed a hand on my lower back and escorted me out of the club. I didn’t sense he was comfortable in the place, which made me appreciate that he’d come along all the more.

“Congratulations, Vivian,” he said, opening the truck door for me before letting himself in.

“Thank you, Reed. Really. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to figure out how to make it back to Seattle, shy of groveling at Jordan’s feet and praying he didn’t insist I stay down there.”

I propped my chin in my hand as I leaned against the window.

In recent years, the industrial area south of downtown shifted and expanded to entertainment venues because of the sheer size of properties in the neighborhood. Properties that had previously been used for manufacturing and storage. The

Apocalypse was one of a handful of clubs that had opened within a two-mile radius in the last several years.

The surrounding streets were quiet enough to hear the soft bumping of club music from the building, but otherwise, nothing was going on at night down here.

The sprinkling of lights across the water made a beautiful evening backdrop, and even though we were still in the city, it almost felt like we weren't.

“Vivian.” Reed reached for my hand. “You have got to promise me you will *never* put yourself in that position with that asshole or anyone like him again. Please.”

“Of course, I won't,” I said, looking out the window. “It's not like I purposefully did it, anyway.”

Reed shook his head, his eyes dark and nearly fanatical. “No, but you don't seem to know your worth. Like you don't know how special you are and don't think you deserve to be treated well.”

A reasonable woman would probably hear that and think it was sweet. Me? It infuriated me.

“I've been terrible most of my life. You spend a month with me and think you know if I'm special or deserving of anything?”

It surprised me I could keep my voice at a conversational level despite the yearning to yell and scream and tell him to piss off.

Maybe I *was* upset that he'd disappeared for days without saying anything.

*That's not good.*

"You are special," he said softly. "I didn't need a month to know that."

"Tell me again how you like words, Reed," I challenged.

*I like words.*

How many women had he shared the same sweet and afflictive admirations he'd whispered in my ear? How many other hearts had fluttered as he was deep inside them, talking about heaven and forever and endless shared pleasure?

And why did it bother me so much?

His face fell, and it almost made me feel bad.

Almost.

"I'm sorry. I handled that all wrong."

I refused to look at him. Not because he said something wrong this time, but because I hated how he made me feel.

I didn't want to care so much about what he said or who he said it to. And I certainly didn't want to care whether he meant it when he said those things to me.

"I suggested we hang out and have fun for a few weeks. It was supposed to be casual," I said, watching a sedan park at the opposite end of the lot and three laughing and squealing women get out.

Linking arms, they skipped into the club. Probably having the time of their lives.

Lucky bitches.

Reed squeezed my hand. “I don’t even know what hanging out is, as evidenced by my missteps.”

That at least earned a laugh. I was upset at myself, not at him.

“Hey,” he said, dropping to catch my eyes. He cupped my chin when I didn’t look at him, lifting my face to his. “It has been fun.”

On that, we agreed. “It has.” I cleared my throat and pulled my face away from his hand. “We have a few more days of fun before we say goodbye, so let’s go do something.”

I wasn’t in the mood to do anything other than crash at whatever accommodation Reed had arranged. Get in my sweatpants, tuck under the covers, and sleep.

I hadn’t realized how much tension I’d been carrying at the thought of returning to Seattle and pleading for a job from someone who probably hated me.

But I needed to be in action to avoid the discomfort with this swirling pit of feelings between us.

Reed started the truck, letting it idle as he stared at the dashboard. “No,” he said, shaking his head and turning it off again. “Fuck this. I *don’t* know what hanging out is.”

“It’s spending time with someone, relaxing, socializing—”



“I know the definition of the term. What I mean is that I don’t know how to do that. To be with someone casually. It’s either a one-night stand or a relationship. And when I want someone, I want all of them.”

His shoulders dropped, and he collapsed his forehead against the steering wheel, turning to face me with a grimace. “I’ve tried to be breezy, but I’m a gust of a human. I avoid relationships because I can be hot and cold. Here and then gone. It’s not intentional or reflective of my feelings. It’s just who I am. My friends understand and love me despite it, but it’s easier to stick on my own than to expect others to adjust.”

“I picked up all of that,” I said.

Reed snaked his hand to my leg, running it along the inside of my knee as his eyes followed.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be a man who has children or settles in suburbia and has dinner with the neighbors.”

He sounded apologetic, as if everyone wanted those things, and he was letting the world down.

“I like space, and I like quiet.” He paused, his hand shifting higher on my leg. “I like passion, and I like closeness. It’s not an easy combination to tolerate.”

“It’s not,” I whispered, staring at his hand on my leg.

“I’ve never met a woman who could deal with me.”

I closed my eyes, sinking into the feel of his touch.

He leaned closer, sliding along the bench seat until he was pressed against me.

“I’ve never met a woman I wanted to deal with me.” He kissed my shoulder, his hand gripping my thigh tighter. “Until you.”

# Twenty

*Vivian*

*I* *t's a trap, don't fall.*

Don't fall into the soft lips and languid kisses. Don't fall into the bottomless eyes of a man who can see into the depths of your need. Don't fall when there is nothing to catch you except heartbreak.

"You can't say that," I whispered, pushing Reed away. "Stop saying those things."

Reed closed his eyes, and his forehead pressed to mine as he shook his head. "I mean those things. I don't do this, but here I am, doing this."

He leaned into my neck with the unfair advantage of pleasure, his warm breath ghosting my skin with his kisses. Few things curled my toes like Reed's lips on my body, and his touch on the sensitive flesh of my nape could melt me.

"I don't hang out, but for you, I will try." His mouth slid to my collarbone, my nipples tightening with the anticipation of

more.

He didn't give it, keeping his lips above my breasts and trailing a line of kisses across me.

"I don't let people stay over, but for you, I will. I'll give you a key to my house. I don't meet mothers, confront ex-boyfriends, show up where I don't want to go." Reed cupped my cheeks with his hands and commanded my eyes. "I don't. Not for anyone but you, Vivian."

"Reed."

"I sure as hell don't take the woman I'm falling for to another city to find a job, even though it means she'll leave me. Not unless I mean it. You can tell me to stop talking, but it makes nothing I say less true."

"Reed."

I wasn't sure if it was longing, begging, or desperation for him to stop. Or maybe to never stop, because everything he said stoked the pieces of my heart that felt too tender to share. But for him? At that moment? I was ready to hand it all over. For a man like Reed, I would burn.

I *did* burn.

I was sure my chest would explode with emotion, and my skipping heart wasn't helping to settle the feeling. I believed him. I sincerely, genuinely believed him.

I was falling, praying that my collapse wouldn't end in pain or shattered pieces. This man, this ruinous and invasive delight. He could destroy me.

But he could also build me up. Raise my heart, my spirit, and my confidence.

Pushing him back against the seat, I slid over, straddling his lap. My knees spread against his thighs, exposing the heat of my center to his hardness.

“Vivian,” he groaned, bringing his hands into my hair. “You —”

I cut him off with a kiss, my mouth parting to welcome the sweep of his tongue as he split the seams of our lips. He gripped my hair tighter, pulling my head back to expose my neck as his mouth broke from mine to lick along my nape.

“Don’t say anything,” I whispered. “Not a word. Just be with me.”

It was a plea, the emotion behind it pained. I didn’t want to think about the weight of his words or my need to hear them. I wanted his revelry and his adoration. His affection and his obsession.

But tonight, more than that, I needed just him.

Reed nodded, reaching for the glove compartment and popping it open to grab a condom. He shrugged when I raised my eyebrows. “I was an Eagle Scout. Always be prepared.”

I hurried to work his pants down as Reed watched, groaning when I took the condom and rolled it over him.

“Oh, Viv,” he hissed as I pushed my panties to the side and slid onto him. “Oh, Vivian.”

“Shh,” I encouraged, rising and rolling my hips as I gripped his shoulders and lowered to take him deeper.

He groaned again but added no words to his pleasure. His hands dropped to my hips, gripping tightly as I rode him with no words between us.

The sounds of our sex, the slapping of bodies and heaving breaths, the slickness of my pussy, and the smacking of mouths were all we had.

And it was everything. The absence of words felt more intimate than all the salacious and desirous things Reed had ever said to me.

My stomach tightened, and my core clenched as Reed thrust into me, pushing himself deeper, his hips raising to meet me. Sliding his fingers between us, he stroked me with a precise touch.

My knees scratched against the seat, the skin burning with the friction, but I didn't care. I wouldn't stop. I *couldn't* stop. I never wanted to stop.

The start of my orgasm was a blissful rapture of affection as I let myself meet his eyes. I don't think he'd taken his eyes off me the entire time I rode him, but it took all my courage to look back.

He didn't need to say anything because his eyes said *everything*. Even if I wanted to speak, I couldn't because that pinning look stole the very breath from my body.

“Reed,” I whispered, tears threatening me as our foreheads pressed together. Our mouths an inch apart, we shared heavy pants between us.

His brows furrowed, his jaw going slack as he felt the first waves of my climax.

“I know,” he breathed, his voice so tender, yet so goddamn wounding.

I wasn't going to fall for him. I already had. And at that moment, I knew he'd done the same.



Although my body was as relaxed as a noodle and just as cooked, I couldn't help but bite down the fear there was a coming storm.

The calm and placidity of being with Reed mixed with the fear that a disturbance was on the horizon.

Was that what love felt like?

No, that was what insecure attachment felt like. Thanks, Mother.

“The bedroom is at the end of the hall. There's an ensuite if you want to shower. The fridge is stocked. Ignore the office.”

Reed pointed down a long, tiled hallway, the elevator opening directly into the apartment as he entered, tossing his bag down. I stopped to get a sense of my surroundings.

“This is a fancy Airbnb you seem familiar with.”

He reached for my bag, taking it from my hand and dropping it next to his before wrapping his arms around me and diving into my neck as we swayed back and forth.

“It’s Ezra’s apartment,” he mumbled against my skin.

I dropped my head back and laughed. Seizing the opportunity, Reed nibbled on my ear.

Giving him a gentle push, I extracted myself from his grasp and took in the space. Despite Ezra’s moody and sterile exterior, his apartment was surprisingly bright and warm. It was minimalist, with mid-century modern furniture, and tidy, but he had bright yellow throw pillows, which seemed absurd.

I gestured to the pillows. “He picked those?”

Reed shrugged. “No idea. He only stays here when he needs to or doesn’t want to drive home after work.”

“A penthouse apartment with a private lift and door service as an occasional crash pad?”

Reed pulled his shirt off, jangling his belt buckle in a sound that always hit my ears and traveled immediately between my legs.

My gaze dropped to his dick, and his lips curled into a smile. “Eyes up here, Vivian.”

Uncompromising, I kept my gaze where I wanted. Reed shook his head, toeing off his shoes and stripping down to his boxer briefs.



“He’s rich. Rich people do weird shit like have a house for every occasion. I’m taking a shower. Want to join me?”

“Or waste the opportunity to sully every surface of Ezra’s fancy and unnecessary apartment? Do you even have to ask?”

His hands had my dress on the floor within five seconds. Just minutes after that, my front pressed against the cold tile of an oversized shower as Reed pumped into me from behind.

He brought me to orgasm with his fingers not long after. An hour later, I blew him in the kitchen and swallowed him down as he leaned against a restaurant-grade stove and pulled my hair until I damn near screamed.

Not long after that, he feasted on me as I lay sprawled over a grand dining room table with a view of downtown.

It was fancy fucking, and by the time we made it through the apartment, I was grateful that Ezra’s crash pad was at least modest in size. I wasn’t sure I could take much more square footage.

Funnily, the one place we didn’t fuck was the bed, but we slept the hell out of its soft mattress and downy quilt. It sucked me into a deep and dreamless slumber.

When I woke up the next morning, Reed was in the shower again, and I started coffee and breakfast. Unlike Reed’s impressive homemade waffles, the extent of my culinary skills was two bowls of cereal.

Reed made no comments about my low-key offerings, eating Cheerios with a big grin like it was eggs benedict and making

my heart swell with affection.

“So,” he said, taking his bowl to the sink and rinsing it. “I’ll take you to meet with Ez and solidify some details, but what do you want to do after that?” The low timbre of his voice was suggestive, and it made me clench my thighs together to relieve some pressure.

I sat back in my chair, ignoring my libido. “Every hole in my body has been used and damn near abused. Whatever we do, there will be no sex involved.” I needed some recovery.

“Don’t get me wrong. I enjoy your body, but I wasn’t asking for more. I like you too much to fuck you to death.”

“Oh.” He didn’t miss my disappointment, smirking as he took my bowl away.

“I thought we could spend another day in the city. You can show me around some of your favorite spots.”

Mid-sip of my coffee, I nearly choked. “What?” I coughed several times, setting down my cup and patting my chest to recover. “Reed Watkins, Grizzly Man and all-around recluse, wanting to spend a day *in a city*?” I scrunched my nose in confusion. “Make it make sense.”

Reed leaned against the counter, his back to the sink, as he ran his thumb over his bottom lip and stared at me.

*Yeah, okay, I think my body can rally.*

“I want to see how you live and what you like. What you do when you’re not in Clear Lake and destroying an old man’s yard.” He hesitated. “I want to share that with you.”

Reed ruffled his hair, shifting in place. “Your jaw is hanging open.”

I didn’t bother closing it. I just nodded in acknowledgment.

“Your eyes will roll out of your head if they get any wider.”

I blinked twice.

“Okay,” Reed said, dropping his arms like dead weight. “I give up. I broke you.”

“You did,” I whispered.

Reed stood behind my chair, patting my shoulders as I stared blankly. “I lived in one of the liveliest cities in the world for years, Viv. I enjoyed my time there. I can handle myself. Take public transportation. Walk city blocks. Bump shoulders with strangers. Toss out casual profanity when people get too close.”

I craned my neck to get a better look at him. “I’m trying to imagine you in New York. You’re so intense, Reed. I believe you could handle yourself, but could New York handle *you*?”

He stepped back so I could scoot out of my chair. “I survived. New York survived. I moved back for reasons other than the chaos.”

“Did you, like, wear black turtlenecks and talk about highbrow literature while eye fucking dates over coffee?”

Reed laughed, following me to the entryway as we put on our shoes to leave. “That’s New York 101.”

“Well, don’t think you can wear turtlenecks with me, Reed. I have *some* boundaries.”

His brows tugged together in consideration. “Okay. You piss in front of me and use my toothbrush, but turtlenecks are your hard line?”

Grabbing my purse, I smiled and kissed his cheek. “They look like a busted condom of fabric. There’s no place for a turtleneck in this relationship.”

As soon as I said it, I froze. *Shit. Did I really just say that?* I slammed my eyes shut and prayed he was too distracted by my wit to focus on the fact I’d referred to us as having a relationship.

“Relationship?”

*Dear God.*

“I mean, we do have a relationship,” I rambled. “I have a relationship with the couch.” I pointed at Ezra’s sofa like it was a companion.

*Oh my God, could this get any worse?*

I wrung my hands, though I should have probably just shoved them in my mouth to shut myself up. “With the cashier at the grocery store, too. With the neighbor’s dog two doors down from Missy’s apartment.”

*Relationship* was a word with many, many possibilities and potential lineages of meaning.

Friends! Friendship was a type of relationship. *Christ*. Why couldn't I go there first?

Reed, a man of compassion, cut off my insane blabbering about the meaning of a word that could be defined not as a type of connection, but as humiliation. Relationships were defined by humiliation. Full stop.

“Vivian?”

I gave up. My crimson cheeks admitted defeat. Accept embarrassment humbly.

“There's no place for a turtleneck in this relationship. I accept your terms.” He kissed my temple and hit the call button on the elevator.

I said nothing, standing beside him and settling into a comfortable agreement.

The elevator opened, and Reed slapped my ass before stepping inside and holding the door with his arm.

“I like that smile on you.” He winked.

I ran a hand along my mouth and felt a grin I hadn't realized was there.



“That's disgusting. Don't touch it.”

I rolled my eyes, brushing off Reed's concern. “You have to touch it to get your gum up.”

He grimaced and pointed. “There are a trillion pieces of gum on that wall. So much disease.”

“Fine, spit yours, and I’ll put it up myself.” I held out my hand.

Standing in front of the Gum Wall on Post Alley beneath Pike Place Market and facing a fifty-foot-long brick wall filled with decades’ worth of chewed gum, Reed was not impressed. “This is a thing?”

He spit his gum into my palm, and I stuck it next to my piece, stepping back and nodding.

“It is a thing. A *tourist* thing, but a thing. Today, you’re a tourist.”

We’d already spent the morning walking around Pike Place Market and checking out local vendors. Reed enjoyed the fish guys tossing salmon like they were in a casual pickup game of football, and I enjoyed watching the ferries cross the Sound.

Mostly, I enjoyed holding hands and wandering with him.

My earlier meeting with Ezra had been brief. Like the evening before, he was concise and to the point. There wasn’t a specific position he was hiring for, but Ezra was always looking for loyal people to help him build his business and take things to the next level.

Ezra valued honesty, respect, and trustworthiness above anything else, but he made clear that he’d done his homework on my background check and knew I was capable. He offered

me the same consultation position I'd had when working with Jordan, but with a thirty percent pay increase.

He also told me Jordan wouldn't be a problem anymore. There was no further elaboration, and despite my attempt to get more information, Reed insisted I let it go. Given his relationship and knowledge of Ezra, I trusted Reed's suggestion and, for once, listened.

"I don't want to be a tourist," he argued. "I want to be your shadow. Spend the day like you would on a day off. Come on. Give me the Vivian Harlow experience."

I wrapped my arms around him and put my sticky hands into the back pockets of his jeans, pulling his hips to mine.

"You got the Vivian Harlow experience last night, and I'm pretty sure your friend grumbled something about needing to burn his apartment when you thanked him so profusely for the use of such an *entertaining* space."

Reed laughed, his shoulders shaking with the enjoyment of the memory. "You don't know Ezra. He deserves every mental image that flashes through his mind."

Stepping out of the way to let another couple slap their discarded gum on the wall, I tugged Reed along and picked up the pace toward the bus stop. If he wanted the full Vivian experience, he would have to ditch his truck for public transportation.

"Where are we going?" Reed asked, not questioning the mad-dash jaywalk I pulled him through to cross Pine and

Third and catch the bus to Capitol Hill. He didn't even flinch when a taxi nearly clipped his heels.

“You want the real experience of my day?”

He clasped his hand over his heart. “Oh, so desperately.”

I had worried I would lose myself in someone like Reed. His depth, passion, and consumption could eclipse me when I was still learning who I wanted to be. But standing with him now, I realized that not only was I strong enough to hold my own, but Reed *wanted* me to.

This wasn't a man who wanted to own, weaken, or overtake me. He wanted his match, and I was the woman to give it to him.

“Okay,” I agreed, holding up a hand to list off our day. “If it were a normal day for me, I'd get coffee at Vivaci and go for a long walk in Volunteer Park before stuffing myself with Tacos Chukis and meeting Jeremy and Ari for drinks at the Stumbling Monk. That's our day, and it's not glamorous.”

Reed grinned. “Sounds gluttonous, though. I'm in.” His eyes met mine, sweeping over my face as he squeezed my hand. “I don't need glamorous, Viv. I just need you as you are. Besides, you're captivating regardless. Stuffed full of tacos and all.” He gestured with his hand, giving me space to lead.

He had no idea that all a woman wanted in life was a man to feed her tacos and tell her she was pretty.

Reed was the first person to need me as I was, and part of me, as silly as it sounded, hoped he'd be the last. Because even



when I showed him the parts of me that weren't my favorite, he looked on with affection.

Which meant...

“If there's time before we drive back, there's one more stop I want to make.”

“Oh?” He walked next to me, dodging people along the sidewalk. “Is this a gluttonous or glamorous stop?”

I bit my lip. “Neither, but it's necessary. And it's *definitely* Vivian.”

# Twenty-One

## *Reed*

“I can’t say grand larceny was on my Vivian Harlow bingo board, but here we are.” I closed the truck bed and made sure the couch was secure. “You’re lucky it’s not likely to rain.”

She admired the satin-blue microfiber, running a hand along the armrest approvingly.

“I don’t give a shit if there’s a freak summer downpour that destroys this couch. It’s tainted with pussy juice and betrayal, but it’s *mine*, which means it’s not grand larceny. Besides, it’s not like we broke in. I had a key, and if Dustin didn’t change the locks, that’s *his* problem.”

I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t sexy to watch Vivian enter her old apartment with a steady stride and icy glare, prepared to take what was hers and to hell with anyone who tried to stop her.

As a man who preferred to avoid unnecessary confrontation and conflict, I was relieved that the apartment was empty and her ex-boyfriend was elsewhere.

“True,” I agreed to her points, “but you took his Instapot.”

She shrugged.

I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand, looking around the humid underground parking garage and hoping no one would report us for suspicious behavior.

“And the Xbox?” I asked.

Vivian bit her lip and looked out the window. “I’m going to smash that.”

I probably shouldn’t, but I kind of loved her level of pettiness.

“I had fun today,” I said, kissing her softly.

Vivian fisted my shirt collar and pressed her lips harder to mine, deepening the kiss and elevating my heart rate.

We’d fucked in the truck last night in The Apocalypse parking lot. What was another parking lot in the grand scheme of things?

Before I could get carried away, Vivian broke the kiss and leaned back in her seat.

“Thank you,” she said softly, tracing my bottom lip. “For everything. For helping me get a job, for taking me away for a fun sleepover. For wanting to get to know me better. And

maybe, most of all, thank you for sticking it to my ex-boyfriend.”

That was my favorite part of the trip, too, but I’d keep that to myself.

I started the truck, idling momentarily and considering how different it felt to be out of Clear Lake with Vivian. Despite the people, the city, the noise, the annoyances... It was good. I wasn’t sulking and didn’t feel the need to escape into myself.

I’d assumed the peace I sought meant quiet in my surrounding space and environment. With Vivian? It wasn’t so much *where* I found that peaceful feeling, but with whom.

“Shit,” she hissed, ducking down and pointing out the window toward the exit. “That’s Dustin’s car.”

The grated gate raised to let in a light-blue Honda Jazz.

“That’s your ex’s car?”

She nearly sank to the floor. “It has great trunk space.”

“Can’t fit a couch,” I mumbled, backing out of my spot and passing the Jazz with a slow roll so the douchebag wouldn’t miss my cargo.

The man driving rolled his window down, his mouth agape.

“Is that my—”

The squealing of my tires and the echoes of Vivian’s laughter cut him off, and we headed home.



Vivan's couch looked good on my porch.

Or maybe it was just that staring out my kitchen window and seeing her stretched on it with Rocky on her lap while she read a book felt right.

"Hello?" Ezra's gruff voice interrupted my mushy observations. "Are you even listening?"

"No," I replied, watching Vivian lick her thumb and turn the page of her book.

In the few days since I'd brought her back to Clear Lake and insisted that she stay with me, I'd spent a lot of time watching her when she didn't realize it.

Which, shit, sounded creepy.

Ezra sighed. I wasn't looking at his image on the screen, but I didn't need to. The grump was no doubt scowling.

"Someone's in l-o-v-e," Noah sang, a playful twang to his stupid song.

I ignored my friends and turned off the video feature of the call. It was easier that way.

"Going dark?" Ezra laughed. "You can hide us, mute us, or shit, hang up on us, Reed. Won't stop the fact we're going to talk about you and Vivian." Ezra paused. "My new favorite employee."

"What?" Ty, late to the party. He sounded breathless, probably getting back a little late from his usual Sunday morning surf.

“Oh,” Ezra said. “Did Reed not mention that I’ve hired Vivian as a consultant at The Apocalypse?”

“You dog!” Jaime’s high-pitched shriek pierced the line. Guess she’d joined Noah. “You big softie!”

“Which one of us?” I mumbled. “Ez for hiring her, or me for wanting him to?”

Jaime was silent for a moment, thinking it over. “Both of you marshmallows.”

Vivian turned another page, biting her bottom lip between her teeth as she stared intently at her book. She crossed her legs at the ankles, but she raised one foot to use her toe to scratch the opposite leg, then returned to her previous position. It was absolutely, positively benign behavior.

Yet it was impossible to turn away from her.

“It doesn’t matter.” I lowered my voice in the off-chance Vivian could hear me and was pretending otherwise. “She’s moving back to Seattle because Ezra gave her a job.”

“Hey!” he protested. “You asked me to consider her for a position, and honestly, I’m relieved for the help. Since the renovation, we’ve been scaling up exponentially, and finding loyal employees is hard. I just had to fire an employee because Jordan Kline planted her to gather information *over the last year*. Feeding that pile of shit details about my operations.”

Everyone murmured acknowledgment of how shitty that was, even though Ezra would undoubtedly brush off the deceit like it didn’t burn him deep. He’d had a lifetime of

manipulation from his father—an endless power struggle. Ezra never felt like he had the upper hand in any situation.

“If you trust her, Reed, I trust her. Vivian’s old boss said you couldn’t get much more loyal than her. I’m happy to take her on.”

“Jordan Kline infiltrated your club? The asshole who wanted her to suck his cock to keep her job?” I clenched my jaw, practically breaking my back molars at the thought.

I hated that someone treated Vivian that way. I hated that she lived a life where that didn’t eat at her insides like it ate at mine.

“What?” Jaime cried.

“Yes, that miscreant. Pretty sure he enjoys trying to fuck everyone.” Ezra sighed, ready to move on. He didn’t enjoy holding topics of conversation that made him feel weak. “The former owner of The Unicorn spoke so highly of Vivian that I would have hired her had she bothered to send me her resume on her own. Do you know how uncommon it is to find an employee who grows with your business? I need that because of how much of a mess I had to clean up after Kline.”

“Who’s this Jordan Kline asshole?” Jaime asked. “I’d like a word with him, please.”

Noah chuckled. “By ‘word,’ she means foot to his dick.”

“Happy to join in *that* conversation,” Ty contributed.

“Handled,” Ezra interrupted.

I smiled, a warmth radiating in my chest at the idea of my friends—no, my *family*—accepting Vivian so quickly, simply because she was important to me. It filled me with... something. Too much to hold in.

“She went to my mom’s house,” I blurted. “She—we talked about my mom briefly. About how bad she gets when my dad leaves. Vivian told me to let people take care of themselves, but then...” I puffed a long breath, running my hand through my hair. “Then Vivian took care of me. She went to my mom’s house while I was holed up like an obsessed lunatic, ignoring her. She *befriended my mom*, you guys.”

My mom’s cryptic texts about sending her help finally made sense.

Ezra hummed. “Why?”

It was a good question and one she’d given a vague answer for.

*“Everyone deserves dignity. Your dad is taking your mom’s, and every time you show up to clean up her mistakes, as much as she needs it? That takes some of her dignity, too.”*

I cleared my throat. “Teach a man to fish kind of thing. Instead of letting me step in, Vivian helped my mom get a new number, block my dad’s number, and change the locks. I don’t know if it will make a difference, but she did that. She didn’t have to. I didn’t ask. She just did it. Because... she wanted to do it for me.”

“Reed?” Noah’s voice broke through the pack.



My best friend, a heart perhaps as sensitive as my own. While I loved all of the boys, Noah and I had a connection that was special to the two of us.

“Is she your Goldilocks?”

He wasn't teasing or goading, and I kept my eyes on the woman for whom I'd bent and rearranged my comfort. Not because she demanded it, but because she deserved it.

“She is,” I said softly.

The whoops and hollers on the screen were so loud that Rocky skittered off Vivian's lap, and her head snapped up from her book. Her eyes met mine through the window, and she closed her book and grinned.

“I gotta go.” I hung up without a proper goodbye. Vivian tracked me through the window while I walked to the porch to join her.

“Hey,” she said, setting the book down.

“Hey,” I whispered back, hovering over her and nudging her knees apart to fit between them.

She gave no protest, relaxing her legs as I kissed her neck, wanting nothing more than to be close to her.

Tugging up her t-shirt to expose her bare chest, I kissed along her breasts, licking and circling each nipple in my mouth with an excruciating slowness despite my body's eagerness to dive inside her.

She moaned as I kept my mouth on her nipple and spread her legs wider, wiggling and squirming to work her shorts and panties down. I made fast work of my zipper to free myself, groaning when I realized I didn't have a condom. "Shit," I muttered.

Vivian shook her head, pushing me off her, and I trudged into the house to grab one. Because no matter how desperately I wanted to be inside her, I'd never ask her to push past her limits.

When I returned, hovering over her with our eyes locked and sliding inside her with a hissed breath, I tumbled into the depths of gratitude. She wasn't too much, too little, or not enough.

Vivian was just right.



"Happy birthday, beautiful."

She hummed, her hand reaching between her thighs to tangle in my hair as she twisted a lock around her finger.

Tasting Vivian was probably more of a treat for me than her, but her soft mewls and quickening breath with each tongue stroke left little question of her enjoyment. The warmth of her pussy encouraged me to pick up my pace, finding her clit and sucking her into my mouth.

"Shit," she panted, her back coming off the bed with the increased pressure. "Like that. More of that."

I smiled against her cunt, knowing damn well what she enjoyed and wanted more of. When her thighs threatened to suffocate me with clenching pressure, it'd be time to add some fingers and send her over the edge.

Teasing her for a while, I edged her close to climax before backing off and pushing up to run kisses along her bare skin, settling my mouth around her hardened nipple. Her body squirmed beneath mine, her hips shifting and rising to find friction.

“Fucking tease.” Her voice was strained, and it lit me on fire.

There was no doubt Vivian would get her release—and then some—but the fact it was *me* making her body wild and desirous, well, that got me off a little, too.

“Can’t help it.” I switched breasts and brought my hand between her thighs to feel her wetness. “Viv,” I groaned.

It took all the discipline I possessed not to come with a few pumps against her heavenly thighs. Pretty sure I didn’t even need to be inside of her to be at risk of exploding.

“It’s my birthday. You have to do what I want,” she whined. “I want to come.”

I slipped two fingers into the slick warmth of her, fucking her with my hand. “Do you, now? You’re a liar. You love it when I tease you.”

Her hips circled against my hand, her breath coming faster now. “I do. Oh, God. I do.”

My mouth crashed to hers. She moaned as she tasted herself on me, licking along my lips in a filthy kiss that could bring me to my knees.

Pressing the heel of my palm to her clit, I watched with intent eyes as her chin tilted to the ceiling and her pupils burst with pleasure.

Her eyes stayed open as we made love, riding me until every muscle tightened with the clenching of her release. Her body rolled over mine, urging me to be still and let her do the work.

My hands palmed her thighs, grasping them tightly to prevent me from grabbing her hips and lifting her to slam her down on my cock as my orgasm found me. Viv loved to be in control after I teased her for too long, punishing me for her own enjoyment.

Spent, empty, and sated, we collapsed on the bed with heaving chests. Vivian pushed her hair out of her face, blowing a long breath as she settled.

“Well, I can’t say that wasn’t the best start to a birthday in my entire twenty-eight years.”

Propping myself onto my elbow, I traced her nipple with my finger, circling it and admiring the pink tip.

“You said every birthday in your life has been utter shit.”

“Just because the bar is low doesn’t mean it’s untrue.” She pushed the sheets off and hopped out of bed, walking on the balls of her feet with a graceful stride as she made her way to the shower. “What else do you have for me?”

She turned to look over her shoulder, the sunlight filtering between the curtains and catching her hair with a soft glow. She was breathtakingly beautiful, naked and in my bedroom, baring herself to me after she let me make love to her.

I cleared my throat, worried I'd let my words get ahead of me.

“Could be there's a surprise or two coming your way.”

She skipped the last few feet to the bathroom. “Gonna hold you to that!”

I dropped back on the bed, running my hands through my hair and thinking about the rest of the day. Excitement pooled in my stomach at the thought of maybe giving Vivian a birthday she'd want to remember.

The stories of her birthdays from the past were heartbreaking. To be a kid competing with her mother for attention. To have a father who missed most of them, and the pressure to smile through it all because life was about appearances.

Knowing Vivian now, I could appreciate the emotional fortitude she needed to survive her childhood. Knowing Vivian now, it tore me up that it was necessary at all.

It wasn't exactly on her birthday wish list to go on a hike, but Vivian was a trooper when I took her on a loop around the lake, ending at the lookout over the south ridge with craggy rocks jutting into the emerald green water.

On a clear day, it looked heavenly, and even Vivian's breath caught—independent of the physical exertion to get there.

Of course, her breath caught not too long after when I backed her against a tree to show my appreciation for her willingness to join.

To my surprise, Vivian asked if we could do it again.

The hike, I mean.

In the early evening, I made her dinner. We ate on the patio, the creek babbling on the back side of the property tranquil and calming.

It was nothing fancy. A vinyl tablecloth, a few lit candles, and music softly floating from the kitchen—not smooth jazz.

Vivian loved it, though. Mostly because I'd made a stew in her ex's Instapot, and nothing tastes as delicious as retribution.

We held hands and talked well after dinner. Just before the sun set over the horizon, I pulled her away and drove her into town under the premise of meeting Ron and Missy to go to a movie together.

“A low-key birthday.” Vivian laced our hands together as she swung them merrily between us. “This has, hands down, been the best birthday, Reed.” She stopped and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Everything I do with you is just better.”

I stroked her cheek, a slow smile building on my face as I took a breath and tried to find the courage of my affection.

“Vivian, I—”

“There you are!” Missy cried, interrupting as she ducked out of her apartment entryway.

I wasn't sure if it relieved me or infuriated me that she'd chosen that moment to rush out of her apartment, but she was only following the plan.

“Happy birthday, Viv!”

I backed up and gave some distance so that Missy could bring Vivian in for a hug.

When they were done squealing and rocking each other back and forth, Missy took Vivian's hand and pulled her along.

“I forgot to get you your last paycheck, but let me swing by the cafe to grab it quickly so I don't forget.”

“It's fine.” Vivian waved her off. “I'll stop by on my way to the lawyer's office tomorrow. Trust me, if it's money, I won't forget.”

Missy looped her arm through Vivian's elbow, pulling her closer like she feared Vivian would tuck tail and run. She probably would if she knew what was waiting for her.

“Nonsense. Let's grab it now. The movie doesn't start for twenty minutes. We have the time. Ron will get the tickets and hold some seats.” Missy glanced over her shoulder at me, and I gave her an appreciative smile.

Missy unlocked the door at *Rise 'N Grind*, pushing it open and holding it to let Vivian go first. “I'll just pop in the back real quick.”

Vivian sighed. “Fine, but hurry because I don’t want to get stuck with shit seats and bottom-of-the-barrel popcorn and—”

“SURPRISE!” Dozens of voices shouted, nearly knocking Vivian over as Missy turned on the lights, revealing an entire coffee shop of familiar faces.

A lone party horn wailed as Mr. Schumer stood alone in the corner, looking confused about how he’d made it happen.

Vivian’s hands shot to her mouth, her eyes wide. “What the fuck?” she whispered. Her hands dropped, and her mouth hung open as she swiveled her head to look at us. “Did you do this?”

Missy beamed, glancing at me. “This was all Reed.” She slapped my back, nodding to the crowd. “He made phone calls and connected with other humans. And they came because they wanted to.”

She gestured around the room to friends, former classmates, customers, and acquaintances Vivian had made in Clear Lake. Given the foot she’d started on, it was pretty damn impressive.

“It’s not a hostage situation?” Vivian asked, combing a hand through her hair and scanning the room.

A wave of laughter rolled through the group as a “Happy Birthday” chorus circulated.

Henry Smith pushed his way forward, squeezing between Alicia Montgomery and Ashley Peppercock.

“Vivian, never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d ever be invited to your birthday party.” He held out his hand. “Happy



birthday.”

She slapped his hand away and pulled him in for a tight hug.  
“Thanks, Hen. I’m so glad we’re friends.”

Henry’s face reddened, and he stammered momentarily, not settling on discernible words. Vivian tried to pull away from him, but he didn’t let go. She laughed and patted his back.

“Hands off her,” Ezra grumbled, lifting Henry’s arm away from Vivian. Vivian blushed, because goddamnit, Ezra.

“Happy birthday, Vivian.” He leaned in to kiss her quickly on the cheek before standing tall to straighten his suit jacket. The motherfucker couldn’t even do casual for a surprise party.

She looked at me, shaking her head and gesturing to Ezra.  
“He came? I didn’t even know we were friends.”

“They all came for you,” I said quietly, pulling her closer.  
“People wanted to celebrate your birthday with you. We’re your friends.”

Vivian pointed at my jeans. “There’s yelling from your pocket.”

“Oh, shit,” I muttered, reaching for my phone. Grinning, I held it up for Viv to see her friends Jeremy and Ari waving wildly on the screen.

Meeting them on our trip to Seattle allowed me to include her best friend in the celebration, although he couldn’t make the drive to Clear Lake. And Ezra had not liked the idea of a carpool.

Holding a hand to her temple, Vivian shook her head and took it all in with wide eyes.

“Happy birthday, Viv. You deserve it.” I kissed her temple and pushed her toward the crowd to enjoy the attention.

Henry stepped closer to Vivian, his arm brushing against hers as he smiled enthusiastically.

Animal Control Jim hovered behind Henry, waiting his turn while rubbing his hand nervously over a bandaged arm. Vivian gave them each plentiful attention.

A steady stream of people greeted Vivian over the next hour. Once everyone had said hello and Vivian stood comfortably tucked under my arm with a gigantic grin, Missy whistled to get attention.

“Listen up!” she hollered, standing atop a chair and waving her arms. “Tonight, we’re celebrating Vivian, a woman who terrorized every single person in this room at some point in time.”

Everyone looked around at one another for any outliers, but there weren’t any. Vivian blushed.

“But the thing I learned about Vivian when she’s been with us is that who she was isn’t who she is now. To me, that’s more admirable than if she’d just left us all the hell alone when we were awkward, gawky kids. Because that means she had to learn to grow. And growth? Most people don’t like it. It’s uncomfortable.” Missy raised her plastic tumbler of

champagne and toasted Vivian. “To Vivian, who has grown so much.”

Vivian shifted next to me, sighing and shaking her head. “Do you think she knows how that sounds to my thick thighs?”

I leaned down and nipped at her neck. “I dream of your thighs every night, Viv, and there’s nothing better than being between them. Stop it.”

She squeezed my waist, snuggling in closer. “I love that you did this for me, Reed,” she whispered.

*And I love you.*

I bit it back, no matter how much I wanted to tell her. Tomorrow her birthday wish would come true. She’d have her money and job, no longer needing this town.

# Twenty-Two

*Vivian*

“Ms. Harlow?” a polite voice chirped from the  
“M reception desk.

She gestured toward an office on the right. “Mr. Covington will see you now.” The woman stood from behind the desk to escort me.

It was probably unnecessary, given the office was modest, but I followed her anyway.

Reed squeezed my hand. “Want me to come in?”

His toe tapped softly against the faded carpet. I wasn’t sure if he was eager or perhaps nervous about being there with me, but I knew he wouldn’t offer it if he didn’t mean it.

I squeezed his hand tighter. “Don’t you dare leave me.”

I hadn’t intended for the desperation to coat my throat so thickly, but there we were.

Despite the straightforward process of releasing my father's trust, Reed offered to accompany me to meet with the lawyer. I hadn't wanted to ask him, afraid it was a burden or too much.

But Reed never made me feel like too much.

What Reed had done for me made my heart soar. Which then kind of made my heart *sore*.

As much as I wanted to be done and sever any last thread of my mother's influence, I didn't want to let go of the hand of a man I'd fallen for.

Our time wasn't meant to be forever, but I wanted every second to slow until it felt like forever.

Pulling my shoulders back, I followed the woman to the door marked *Drew Covington, J.D., LL.M.*

"Mr. Covington?" The woman knocked once before opening the door and letting Reed and me into the room. "Ms. Vivian Harlow is here to see you."

"It's just Drew, Daisy."

Mr. Covington stood, buttoning his suit and smiling. Gray peppered his dark hair, and he reeked of authority. I trusted him immediately.

The woman blushed and nodded, leaving the room quickly. "Yes, sir, Mr. Covington. Drew, sir."

He offered his hand to me, then to Reed, and gestured for us to take a seat. "Please."

He sat down and clasped his hands on the desk. “Vivian, I’m Drew. My father, Larry Covington, was good friends with your father. They did business together for years until my father’s retirement.”

I nodded, trying not to tell him I didn’t need a history lesson. *Just give me the papers to sign!* The papers. The last thing tying me to my mother, this town, and the past.

“Cool,” I said, glancing at Reed and leaning forward in my chair.

Drew smiled politely. “Yes, well. He’d be handling your case today, but unfortunately, he had a stroke three weeks ago and is still recovering.”

Okay, I felt like an asshole.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled as Reed shifted in his seat and said, “That’s terrible.”

“Thank you, but he’s expected to make a full recovery. You’re stuck with me until then.”

*Stuck with you until I cash that check.*

Drew clapped his hands together. “Okay. I think our best defense is to go on the offense. We need to establish your father completed his trust before a cognitive decline from treatment or the disease. There are numerous testimonials to support his cognitive functioning wasn’t hindered at the time of signing, and fortunately, your father had the forethought to get a physical before the final document signing—”

“I’m sorry,” I said, rapidly blinking. “What are you talking about?”

Drew rested his elbows on his desk and cocked his head. “Your case. Your mother’s contestation of the trust.”

“*What?*” I screeched, clawing at my throat as it constricted and robbed all meaningful breath from my lungs. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you not get the documents?” Drew asked, scratching his head and opening the file on his desk to look through it. “Daisy sent them to 65 East Olive, Apartment 6B.”

“I—I don’t live there anymore,” I stammered. “My asshole ex-boyfriend didn’t tell me I had legal documents arrive for me.”

I was *for sure* going to smash his Xbox now.

Reed held my hand, saying nothing as he stared at the ground and clenched his jaw.

Drew cleared his throat. “Okay, Vivian. Listen, take a breath. It’s okay.”

I scanned the room in a panic, as if looking for answers on the walls. All I found were Ansel Adams’s photographs.

“Your mother contested your father’s trust, claiming your father had a lack of capacity for creating the trust in the first place because of his brain cancer and subsequent cognitive decline.”

Heat pricked my cheeks, and my scalp tingled. *Of course*, my mother would do something like this.

“But he hadn’t even been diagnosed yet!” I argued. “He was diagnosed weeks later! He—” I stopped, biting my lip.

Had he known he was sick when he created the trust? Or had it been an incredible coincidence that he’d protected his assets from my mother right before learning he had terminal cancer?

Drew held up his hand and gave a gentle smile. “I know. There’s an excellent document trail that supports the original trust and your father’s wishes. I’m confident we’ll handle this, and the outcome will be favorable. Unfortunately, the trust will be tied up with paperwork unless you can convince your mother to drop the claim.”

His brows furrowed as if it annoyed him to say. “Sometimes the least painful path forward is finding a compromise with the trust. Splitting the—”

“No,” I said forcefully. “Not a chance.”

Reed squeezed my hand.

“Okay.” Drew nodded. “Then we continue as planned.”

Drew walked me through the following steps and what he needed from me. While I couldn’t be sure because this was all wildly foreign to me, I suspected some of what Drew offered to handle on my behalf went above and beyond his expected role.

I thanked him profusely on my way out and made a mental note to send him an Edible Arrangements.



Once outside, I collapsed into Reed's arms, crying. I *never* cried in front of a man. Not my ex. Not any of my exes. Not my father. And I certainly didn't want to cry in front of the man I had fallen in love with.

Despite my need for a tough exterior, with Reed, I could crumble and know he didn't see it as weak.

"Why?" I sobbed. "Why would she do this to me?"

Reed held me tighter and kissed the top of my head. "We'll figure it out."

"It's not even about the money. She can never just let me have something for myself."

He ran his nose through my hair, exhaling softly. "I know."

We swayed together in the parking lot of the law firm downtown. Traffic dragged along the main street, and people crowded the sidewalks, popping into specialty shops as the summer tourism season was in full swing.

Meanwhile, disappointment and betrayal swallowed me, yet again, at my mother's hands. I don't know why I expected anything different. She'd been consistent for twenty-eight years.

Finally, Reed stepped back, wiping the pads of his thumbs along my cheeks to clear my tears.

"Hey," he said softly, his eyes fixed steadily on mine. "There are many things you have that your mother can't touch." He kissed my cheek, mumbling truths I finally believed.

“You have strength.” He brought his lips to kiss my other cheek. “You have perseverance.” His mouth found the shell of my ear, kissing that next. “You have determination.” He moved to the opposite ear, chuckling. “You have stubbornness.”

I huffed, though I didn't mean it.

Reed pulled away, finding my eyes again. “And you have love. Your mother doesn't, and she can't take that from you.”

I closed my eyes, resting my head against Reed's chest, and let myself believe that.



The night Reed and I made love in his truck, silence in our words but a cacophony between our eyes, I knew I had fallen for him.

At the time, I wondered if the feeling of a coming storm was love. Now I knew the coming storm wasn't love. It was my mother.

It was time to batten the hatches and hunker down because there was no way I would let the Category 5 storm of Judy Harlow take everything from me.

“Vivian.” She opened the door just enough to lean against the frame, but not enough to invite me in. “This is unexpected.”

Wise or not, I needed to confront my mother. Reed didn't comment, getting into my car and accompanying me to her

house after leaving the lawyer's office without question.

She glanced from me to Reed as he stood holding my hand. Whether it was a reminder of support or to prevent me from taking a swing at my mother, I wasn't sure. Both were appreciated.

"Who is this handsome compatriot?" she cooed, running her hand along the door jamb.

She didn't recognize the hunk without his beard, but I wouldn't remind her or make introductions. Throttle her? Yes. Prioritize manners? No.

A slow smile curled over her lips as her eyes ran over Reed's face. "You're him, aren't you? Reed, right? You called me last week."

My eyes shot to Reed, my fists opening and closing with anxious energy. "What?"

My mother's smile widened. "Oh, you didn't tell her?"

Reed ran a hand through his hair, messing it as he shifted his weight from one leg to another.

"It was a surprise party, Mrs. Harlow. I wasn't exactly supposed to tell her." He shrugged, looking at me. "I thought she might want to remember it was your birthday, at least."

He called my mother. The biggest, most wicked witch. Because he wanted her to remember it was my birthday and tell her he was throwing me a party.

Whatever trouble she thought she was causing by outing Reed's call, she was wrong, because it only elevated my affection for him. She probably had been horrible to him when he called, and he tolerated it, hoping it would help me somehow.

I looked at my mother and blinked a few times.

"You didn't call. You didn't text. You didn't show up." Of course, she didn't. It was a party for me, and my mother disliked sharing.

Reed hadn't told me he called her, and he was right for that. It surprised me how much it hurt to learn she knew about my birthday party and ignored it.

Facing my mother as she stood in the doorframe, casual and relaxed like any other afternoon social calling, I did my best to hold it together.

"What are you doing?" I asked through clenched teeth. "Why are you trying to ruin my life? Twenty-eight years wasn't enough for you?"

My mother fluttered her eyelashes, a smirk on her bright pink lips. "I have no idea what you're referencing. I am your mother. I've only done what is best for you, even when it came at a price to me and—"

"The trust," I cut her off. "You're contesting the trust. *Why?* You know he made his decision in sound judgment, and you know he did it because he hated you."

She scoffed. “Hated me? He spent your entire life avoiding *you*. He was not of sound mind when he created that trust. I only mean to protect his memory by respecting what he would have wanted, had he the cognitive ability to think it through.”

My mother stepped out of the house, closing the door behind her. Her bare feet plodded along the teak wood planks as she strolled a few feet to the chair. Sighing, she gracefully slid into it and crossed her legs.

“I didn’t want it to be like this, Vivian. I gave you the option of being reasonable, and you chose aggressive posturing instead.”

Her calm only stoked my rage, but when I stepped toward her, a confrontation on the tip of my tongue, Reed tugged on my arm and encouraged me to hang back.

His quiet support was a reminder that who my mother expected me to be and who I was were not the same woman.

She wanted the argument. She wanted me to bite. She wanted to believe I caused all the problems in her life. My ungrateful, condescending, and contemptuous retorts were only further proof of that in her eyes.

“I’m sorry that instead of choosing love and support in your life, you’ve decided that malevolence and bitterness are a better fit. It’s lonely to live that way, and I know because I spent many years doing the same.” I looked at Reed.

“Thankfully, people can change.”

Pulling back my shoulders, I stood tall. “I hope you can find that change for yourself.”

Grasping Reed’s hand tighter, I headed down the steps. “Come on,” I said softly. “Let’s go home.”

My mother stood up, a frown burrowing deep on her face. “You can’t leave.”

I didn’t look back. “I can. Goodbye, Mom. Mr. Covington will be in touch.”

“Vivian!” she cried, her foot stomping on the porch and rattling the planks beneath it. “You cannot leave me!”

Reed stood next to my car, watching my mother until I got into the driver’s seat and started it. He said nothing as I drove us back to his cabin.

Stretching and holding my hands against my lower back, I shuffled into the cabin in a daze. Confronting my mother could leave me nearly comatose for days. An emotional vampire, she could steal everything in my heart and leave me numb.

We didn’t speak as Reed walked me into the bathroom and started a shower for me. He washed my hair and let me cry. We stayed quiet as he dried me with a towel, dressed me in his t-shirt, and pulled back the covers of his bed to tuck me in.

I stretched out, Reed lying beside me, and sunk into the soft mattress, enveloped in the safety of his arms.

Reed said nothing as we were in bed. Sleep was elusive despite the emotional exhaustion of my day, but I’d expected him to be asleep by now. His whisper surprised me.

“Go to sleep, Viv.”

He kissed my head, his lips grazing along my temple and his warm breath fanning my hair. It was a tender sweep, not intended to rouse me, but everything this man did enlivened my body.

The surrounding room was dark, but I could feel the energy when I rolled to face him. Heavy, laden with emotion. Despite his silence today, Reed wasn't quiet. I could feel everything between us that neither had said.

“Thank you, Reed,” I whispered, brushing his cheek with my nose and kissing him softly.

As heated as my feelings were for him, there was nothing that my body wanted more than the peace of being in his arms.

“Thank you for everything you did. Not just today. But all of it.”

He pulled me closer. “There's nothing I wouldn't do again for you, Vivian.”

“Reed?”

“Hm?” he mumbled, his finger tracing lazy circles over my shoulder.

“I love you.”

I didn't need to dress it up. I wasn't even sure I needed to hear it back, but I needed to say it at that moment.

I felt the softness of his smile as he nuzzled his face into my hair. "I love you too."

We said nothing else, and it wasn't long before we both fell asleep. In his bedroom, peace in the surrounding darkness, I'd found my light.



## Twenty-Three

### *Vivian*

“Clobbering someone!” Ron shouted, her face red with the exertion of her fourth failed guess.

Reed groaned, his hands slamming to his temples and rubbing furiously. He shook his head and brought his arm back over his shoulder again in a throwing motion.

I happily watched on, enjoying the look of his flexing triceps in that fitted v-neck.

Missy jumped off the couch. “Pitching!” She balled her hand into a fist of determination.

“Good fucking God,” Reed muttered, his hands dropping to the tops of his thighs and framing his crotch.

I sat on the couch next to Missy, crossing my arms. “Pitching a tent?” I offered.

Reed opened and closed his mouth without speaking, blinking in rapid succession. “Vivian, what the fuck?”

I shrugged and pointed to his crotch. “You’re pitching, and then you dropped your hands to your crotch.”

“Vivian.” He raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Jesus Christ.”

“No talking!” Ron snapped. She plopped on the armrest of Reed’s couch, hovering over Missy, who nodded in agreement.

Ron was the most competitive *by far*, and I worried this game would be the end of her.

“It’s supposed to be silent Charades, Reed. No talking.”

It was the third time this week we had Missy and Ron over for a game night, and despite Reed’s isolation and hermit lifestyle, I thought he was enjoying it.

Cards Against Humanity night was a smashing success. Ticket to Ride was an absolute delight. But Charades might kill him.

“I wouldn’t have to talk if you guys weren’t so terrible at this,” he muttered.

Ron and Missy glared at him, and he tapped his forehead with his finger.

“Okay, starting over.” He gestured to his face in a wide circle. Then he raised his arm over his shoulder again like he was throwing something, driving his fist down.

“Um.” Missy tapped her heel against the bottom of the couch. “Pitching?”

Ron rolled her eyes. “You already said that.”

For the last five minutes, Reed looked flustered. Now, he looked enraged. He gestured wildly to his face, repeating the throwing motion.

“Ax murderer,” I said, patting Missy’s shoulder as I headed into the kitchen to refresh my drink.

“What?” Missy and Ron cried simultaneously as Reed clapped his hands.

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “Finally. How was it not obvious?”

Missy and Ron stared blankly. “Probably because, uh, it wasn’t obvious. What the hell was all that throwing garbage?” Ron asked, taking a swig of her beer and wincing.

Reed replayed the motion. “You know, like throwing an ax?”

“Who the hell throws an ax?” Ron’s teeth gnashed together. “You chop wood with it, Reed. Chop!”

Reed gave an eerily calm smile. “You murder with it, too.”

Rocky slogged into the room, his bushy gray tail dragging lazily along the floor. I shot him a look like, *I get it, my friend*. He followed me into the kitchen, protesting at my feet until I gave him a firm pat.

We were buddies, this giant beast and me, and we no longer fought over bathroom usage. We’d come to a comfortable understanding and agreement about privacy.

Mostly, I used Reed’s ensuite and left Rocky’s space alone.

“It was the face,” I called over. “As soon as you pointed to your face. Because you look like an ax murderer.”

Reed grinned. “See?”

I didn’t tell him I’d caught sight of the card as he pulled it out of the box.

Reed collected empty bottles around the living room, clearing them and joining me in the kitchen.

He poked Rocky with his foot and encouraged my bestie out, grumbling about how he couldn’t believe no one got his shitty clues faster, and that was precisely why he never had people over.

It was all posturing. Reed had fallen asleep every night this week in a good mood after seeing our friends off and sending them home. We’d only fucked one of those nights, so it had to be the friendship, though he wouldn’t admit it.

Getting Reed to invite people over in the first place had been a big deal. I still couldn’t wrap my head around the fact Missy and Ron had never stepped foot in his house before this week.

Reed wrapped his arms around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder as he stood behind me and watched me rinse the dishes in the sink.

“You saw the card, didn’t you?” he murmured against my ear.

I scoffed, half-heartedly brushing him off. “*No*. You do look like an ax murderer.” I smirked, craning my neck to kiss his cheek.

Reed's hand slipped under my shirt, grazing my belly lightly. "You like my face."

"I love your face," I corrected. Reed leaned in and brushed the hair from my neck, planting a soft kiss on my skin.

"Get a room!" Missy shouted from the couch. "We're still here!"

Reed grumbled, letting me go and heading back to join our friends. "Yeah, and that's the problem!"

We didn't play additional rounds of Charades after that, and Ron and Missy left an hour later. Reed invited them over on Sunday night, and the women happily accepted.

Ron offered to grab a pizza, and Missy would bring the beer. Reed would pick the game.

I would be in Seattle.

We all tiptoed around the fact I couldn't be included when making plans.

Reed would help me move what few things I had on Friday. My first day at The Apocalypse was on Saturday. Reed would hang out for the weekend and go home on Sunday. Life in Clear Lake would go on. Without me.

Despite the litigation with my mother's contestation of the trust, there wasn't much of a reason for me to stay. I had some money from working the last six weeks, and while it wasn't enough to afford first and last month's rent *and* a deposit, Reed floated me the missing balance.

I hadn't wanted to take it, but I didn't argue. As uncomfortable as it was for me, I would let him help.

Besides, I could pay him back after my first payday at the club. With or without my money from the trust, I would be okay. I clung to that realization with every thread of optimism I had, which wasn't much to begin with.

As the days sped ahead, dread replaced my optimism—a trepidation with leaving.

I considered staying. Calling Ezra, declining the job, remaining in Clear Lake, and being with Reed.

But doing that would mean I was relying on getting my trust, and while Drew was confident things would settle in my favor, it would take time.

Trust money aside, sidestepping a fantastic job opportunity to stay in town and continue working for Missy wasn't what I wanted.

I asked Reed on the night he found me wandering on the side of the road about why he went to New York. New York, the antithesis of the Reed I knew.

*"Sometimes you don't know what you want until you figure out what you don't."*

I still wasn't entirely sure what I wanted, but I knew I was whittling down what I *didn't* want. I also knew I had to figure it out for myself because I had spent my entire life concerned with what people wanted or expected from me. What they loved or hated about me. I had shaped myself to

accommodate, and when I couldn't, I punished others to hate myself less.

The air between us that night was weighted. We said little, Reed slipping into bed after me, naked and encouraging my shirt and panties off to sleep skin to skin.

He enjoyed being close, though he said more with his body than his words tonight. The craving pass of his hands over my hips. His kisses stoked and awakened a familiar building between us.

A soft moan as he tugged my bottom lip between his teeth, my nails raking over his back as my body grew more impatient with each pass of his tongue in my mouth.

An unbearably languid stroke of his fingers over me, heated and aching for more. A longing to feel his thrusts and the relief when he pushed inside me.

Reed pinned my wrists above my head, driving into me with an ardent need as he groaned and grasped tighter. My fingers wrapped around his, connecting and joining in sweet anguish. Time disappeared between us, replaced only by pleasure and revelry.

It wasn't enough, yet somehow it was everything. When the passion of our bodies shifted to tender kisses of release, I knew with certainty one more thing I didn't want.

I didn't want to say goodbye.



“It’s a dump.” Reed smacked his lips, looking around the tiny, one-bedroom apartment.

I pushed him out of the way to get a better look. My budget wasn’t popping yet, and while I fully intended to upgrade my life when I could afford to do so, that time was not now. Admittedly, renting an apartment, sight unseen, was a risk.

“It’s not a dump,” I argued, ignoring the dampness and trails of black mold along the sliding track of the living room window.

Reed pointed his toe at a large stain on the carpet. “Looks like they used the place for dumping garbage.” He raised his nose and sniffed. “Kind of smells like it, too.”

I opened the window despite the chill of the late evening air. “The landlord said this place has been empty for a while. It just needs to be aired out.”

“Or lit on fire,” Reed muttered.

I liked to think taking the apartment was a ballsy move, and I prided myself on my big balls. But as I let my eyes take in the place, I realized Reed was right.

“It’s temporary,” I said, mostly to myself. “Few places offer month-to-month leases on my budget, let alone furnished. In three months, I’ll move. I’m not even going to unpack.”

I stepped past my purple suitcase and examined the couch. It was a three-seater with brown velour upholstery and looked like it might be filled with decades of spilled semen.

“I’ll get some blankets to throw over the furniture.”



“Let me take you home.” Reed reached for my hand, his eyebrows pinching in concern. “This is not where you should be.”

“Three hours is a long commute,” I said softly, pulling away from his hand. “I’m sure as shit not doing it five days a week. I can clean this space and sit on towels or whatever. Besides, I’ll be so busy I’m probably only coming here to sleep, anyway.”

Reed pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek and stood with his hands on his hips. “Only coming here to sleep? You’ll likely suffocate on toxic fumes if you spend a full night here.”

“Stop.” I waved off his concern and picked up the bag of groceries to put away.

Reed followed me into the galley kitchen. “Or die of respiratory failure from the mold problem.”

I hummed, shuffling through the groceries and picking out the produce to put in the fridge, ignoring him.

“I’m just going to miss you, that’s all.” His voice was so soft that I struggled to hear him.

Lifting to straighten, I kept my back to him. My heart thundered against my ribs, and I wasn’t sure I could face him without bursting into tears.

“I’ve gotten used to having you around. Thinking of you being gone makes my lungs feel stuck, like I can’t breathe. Thinking of you being here makes my stomach churn because

you deserve so much more.” He ran a finger over the grime on the counter next to us. “You deserve a home that feels as warm as you.”

I whipped around, skepticism replacing tears. “You think I’m warm?”

He grinned. “Fine,” he conceded, pointing at the kitchen sink. “But you at least deserve to live in a place where drinking from the tap won’t give you cholera.”

I took his hands in mine. “I *will*.” Glancing at the beige solid surface countertops, splotches of stains artistically splattered to match the stained melamine cupboards, I grimaced. “In three months. I promise.”

Reed shook his head, taking his phone from his pocket and muttering. His fingers danced over the screen momentarily before he held it up for me. “Home Renovation is open until ten. Let’s go.”

“Reed.” I laughed, tugging on his arm. “Stop. This is *fine*.” It wasn’t, not really, but it was tolerable. I wouldn’t need much in this transition. “It makes me proud that I’ll be staying here,” I admitted.

Reed squinted and shook his head, and I continued.

“My entire life has been about appearances, right?” I gestured around. “Look at this place. I’m not putting on a front or living above my means to convey an image. It’s a lot of humble pie in this ’80s wet dream bachelor pad, okay? I’m digging in with my knife and fork, napkin tucked and ready,

and I will enjoy every miserable bite until I can afford a candlelit dinner and filet mignon instead.”

I folded the paper grocery bag and stuffed it under the sink, ignoring a pile of old sponges that were no doubt teeming with generations of bacteria.

“Believe me. I will get that filet mignon, even if not today.”

Reed’s scowl softened, and he took a deep breath. Clearly, he didn’t like this, but he wouldn’t fight me.

“I’ll give you a fat piece of meat,” he said with a straight face that betrayed the humor dancing in his eyes.

Despite his playful joking and innuendo, Reed took me to bed and did nothing more than keep me in his arms. He kissed me softly with delicate brushes of his mouth before alternating with deep and hungering strokes of his tongue and lips.

His hands tangled in my hair, and mine tugged through his, but the fevered pace of making out didn’t advance. Somehow it felt more intimate, and when we finally fell asleep, I was just as sated as if he’d screwed me senseless.

Reed was gone when I woke the following day, leaving a note stuck to the door with a wad of chewing gum. I hoped it had been his.

*You stunning woman, I’ll see you when you’re done earning your fancy dinner. Don’t let Ezra push you around. He slept with a night light until he was seventeen.*

*Please don't reveal the source of your intel.*

*Love,*

*Reed*

My hand flew to my nose as I snorted a laugh and tucked the note into my purse to carry around. Having it close felt comforting.

I don't know where Reed had gone, and if he'd wanted to tell me, I was sure he would have. I left a note about seeing him later, nothing fancy or funny, but I puckered up with some bright red lipstick and pressed my lips to it before weighing it down with a stained coffee mug.

Dressed in a fitted pair of black slacks and a loose white blouse, I took a deep breath and shook off any insecurity. It was time to transition into business bitch mode and knock the pants off my new boss.

Except it wasn't his pants knocked off when I arrived. It was my confidence and composure to be stripped bare when I walked into the club, greeted by Ezra looking handsome and brooding as ever.

He escorted me to a back room to meet the management team. Typically unfazed by these meet-and-greets, I choked when I entered the spacious room. Unfamiliar faces filled the conference table. All of them were female.

Ezra guided me to the table with his hand splayed on my lower back, dropping it as I sat and tried to find my confidence.

Old instincts die hard. Other women had always been a weak point for me.

Talk about personal fucking growth.

“Vivian,” he said. “Allow me to introduce you to our general manager, Alice Alexander.”

A woman with tight black ringlet curls raised her hand and smiled, her dark eyes lightening with the introduction.

The prominent beauty mark on her cheek shifted placement as her smile grew bigger. Old Viv would have been intimidated by her confidence and welcoming energy and tried to shoot her down.

Instead, I shot her an equally broad smile. “It’s a pleasure.”

“Our lead promoter, Shonda Snyder.” Ezra pointed to a stunning woman next to Alice.

She nodded, her mouth staying firm but somehow appearing friendly. Old Viv would have been jealous of her unblemished complexion, a flawless deep mahogany.

Instead of hating her, I admired her. “It’s wonderful to meet you.”

Ezra gestured to the woman next to Shonda. “Riley Campbell is our head mixologist.”

The woman rolled her eyes and pushed her red hair out of her face. “Bartender. No need to be pretentious.”

Oh, I think I was going to like her.

She had an ample bosom—the kind of tits that would earn a lot in tips. Old Viv would have felt challenged, sneering and shit-talking until she broke this spirited woman.

Instead, I faced her and kept my tone warm. “I was a bartender for years.”

Riley nodded her approval.

“As you can see, Vivian, I value honesty and free speech in my place of business.” Ezra shoved one hand in the pocket of his slacks and smiled. “Ladies, this is Vivian Harlow. Vivian, you will join this team of exemplary professionals.”

Ezra’s smile dropped. “And I pay the rest of these people because I’m generous.”

“Piss off,” a woman grumbled. Like Ezra, she had a brooding energy and sharp, angular features. She wore a fitted blazer and scalloped neck blouse, thin threads of layered gold necklaces of varying lengths draped over her well-endowed chest.

Between her glowering and stylish appearance, it took me no less than a few seconds to put together they were related.

“Bizzy,” Ezra said, his tone clipped. “One day, I’m going to lose my generous spirit and make you go work for Dad.”

She flipped him off before waving to me. “Lovely to meet you, Vivian.”

Ezra gestured to a woman next to Bizzy. Unlike her siblings, who had similar coloring and sharply defined features, this woman was blonde, with a round face and ample freckles. She wasn’t carrying the same moody energy. She sat nearly folded in on herself, her tiny frame shrinking beneath an oversized sweater as she tugged nervously on the sleeves.

Ezra’s voice softened. “This is Bree, my baby sister. She’s been filling in where needed while going to school. She’s the conscience of this place.”

Bizzy snickered, and Ezra glared at her. “I employ them so they’re not homeless. Their attendance here is entirely unnecessary.”

It seemed he ran a tight, insular ship. Coming from the stock I did, I couldn’t imagine trusting blood relatives for anything, but apparently, Ezra was a risk-taker.

He clapped his hands, breaking the silence in the room and startling me, though no one at the table batted an eye.

“Vivian is loyal and trustworthy,” he said, sitting at the head of the table. “She will do for us what Reeva could not.”

There was muttering from all sides, some arm crossing and eye rolls. I wondered what Reeva did or didn’t do, but whatever it was, the disapproval was universal.

“Welcome, Vivian,” Ezra said, meeting my eyes. “We’re so happy to have you.”

# Twenty-Four

## *Reed*

**W**ith palms so sweaty I could hardly hold my phone, I took a deep breath and dialed.

Ezra picked up on the sixth ring, threateningly close to going to voicemail. The asshole carried his phone on him like it was an extension of his body, so I knew the delay was intentional.

“Yes, my friend?” The playful intonation wasn’t lost on me. Asshole.

“How did it go?” I may as well cut to the chase. Ezra knew why I was calling, even if Vivian did not.

Ezra sighed, the long exhale filtering through the phone tucked against my shoulder as I wiped my wet palms.

“It went well. The ladies loved her, and they were the best of friends by the end of the day and—”

“Great, but I’d rather hear about her day directly from her. How did it go with the apartment?”



Ezra sighed again, dragging this entire conversation out. It was purposeful. Typically, Ezra was brief, to the point, and not one to waste time. He had little of it.

“It’s handled.” His vague confirmation was good enough.

“Thanks, brother.”

I’d spent the entire day running around and trying to get things ready for Vivian. Or myself, really. It was selfish, I knew, and I’d done everything without asking.

What if my stepping in pissed her off? What if she didn’t want this? What if I’d crossed a limit for her? Sure, I knew her sexual limits, what few there were, but her emotional boundaries had been far more ambiguous.

She didn’t require finessing or caution, but I didn’t want to mess it up. I was well aware of my intensity. Well aware I could be moving faster than she wanted. But fuck it. Sometimes you have to go for the things you want after a lifetime of learning what you don’t.

And I could say, without a doubt and with every ounce of confidence in my body, that I did not want to lose Vivian. I would push the earth to keep her. I would push myself even harder.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” Ezra said with a low rumble.

I shifted on the couch, its worn cushions thin and uncomfortable, and stared at the door, waiting for Vivian to come in. She was due home an hour ago and wasn’t back yet.

My nerves nipped at the bottom of my stomach, shifting pressure into my chest.

“Yeah, well. You still haven’t seen the day. For all I know, you won’t. Let’s see what she says first.”

Ezra laughed this time, the deep timbre rolling like fog over a canyon. When Ezra laughed for real, he really laughed. It didn’t happen often.

“Reed, if you think she won’t be thrilled, then you’re a fool.”

“Yeah, but what if—” I didn’t have time to finish the thought.

Keys jingled the lock, and the deadbolt turned. Instead of unlocking the heavy-duty security bolt, Vivian had locked it. I heard cursing on the other side of the door as she tried to enter and failed.

“I gotta go,” I hurried, hanging up and slipping my phone into my pocket.

“Jesus Christ!” Vivian cried, bursting through the door.

She wiped strands of hair from her eyes, pulling the stuck pieces from her bright red lipstick. That same sexy shade I’d been thinking about since I came back at lunch to the note with her lips all over it.

I spent the rest of the day thinking about how much I wanted those lips all over me.

She blushed. “I’m still getting used to the locks.”

“How was your day?” I asked, standing to pull her into my arms.

The softness of her body against mine settled my nerves, and I nuzzled into her neck to inhale the scent of her skin. Vivian didn't wear perfume. She didn't have scented body wash or lotion. Yet she smelled wonderful. Fresh and feminine and clean.

Familiar.

She sunk into me, her arms wrapping around my shoulders and pulling me until our chests were pressed together tightly. I wasn't sure either of us could take a full breath.

“It was amazing,” she said, her voice light. “Ezra has an all-female management team. They are smart, feisty, and talented women. It intimidates the hell out of me, but I can learn a lot. Ezra was already excited about some of my ideas, and Alice, the general manager, wants to sit down and solidify an action plan.”

I kissed her temple and rested my cheek on her head. She tucked perfectly against me.

“I bet you have all kinds of superb ideas in that head of yours, Vivian. You're creative and intelligent and observant.”

She pulled away, toeing off her shoes and kicking them next to the door. “You're generous.”

Her shoulders slumped, and the corners of her mouth were down-turned, the energy between us heavy. It wasn't disapproval or upset.

It was sadness.

“Hey.” It took two steps to get to her in this tiny living room, and I tugged her chin to look at me. “What’s going on? Are you okay? I thought you had a good day?”

She sniffled, her eyes focused on my forearm in front of her. “It was a good day.”

“That doesn’t seem like a reason to be sad.”

She shook her head. “It’s not, but saying goodbye is. You go home tomorrow.”

I squeezed her face gently and pressed my lips to hers. It was a chaste kiss, but I didn’t want to linger.

“Come on,” I said, walking to the door and kicking her shoes back to her. “There’s something I want to show you.”



“Are we going to Ezra’s penthouse?” Vivian asked, biting her thumbnail as we walked into the lobby of Ezra’s building.

She lowered her voice, her eyes catching the doorman posted near the entrance. “Are we going to sully his crash pad? Because that might be worth the risk of getting fired.”

Stepping into the elevator, I pressed the button for the third floor. “Nope.”

“Oh.” She crossed her arms, nibbling on her lip contemplatively. “Well, I won’t lie and say that doesn’t disappoint me.” She pointed to the brightly lit button. “What’s on the third floor?”

The doors opened, and I reached for her hand, leading her down a long hallway until we were at the end. Slipping a key from my pocket, I opened door 322 and held it, waiting for her to enter.

“If this is another surprise party...” she trailed off, standing in the entryway with her arms folded over her chest as she waited for me to flip on the lights.

I did, revealing an empty apartment.

“No surprise party, but... Surprise,” I said softly.

The tiled entryway wasn't an extravagant expanse of Italian marble, like Ezra's fancy penthouse. No floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. Still, I didn't think Vivian would mind looking at traffic on 4th Avenue when the alternative was her current apartment view of a methadone clinic.

“There are two bedrooms down the hall,” I said, pointing in the general direction. “A half-bath off the kitchen and a full bath between the bedrooms. The laundry room is over there.” I nudged her forward. “I was thinking the second bedroom could be an office, but I can work anywhere if I have to. The garage parking is tight, but it's attended twenty-four seven—”

“Reed,” Vivian cut me off. “I am not taking an apartment from you. It's bad enough that I borrowed money for the dump I live in. I can't afford this place right now, and I'm not borrowing more.”

I smirked. Despite her protests, it was a dump, and I'd been right. As if a blanket over the couch could hide the odious state of the apartment.

"I'm not getting an apartment for you." My hand ran over the back of my neck. "I got an apartment for me... and hopefully you."

She dropped her purse onto the floor with a *thunk*. Blinking, she opened her mouth. Then promptly closed it. She stepped forward to say something, thought better of it, and stepped back again.

"Reed... I... This..." Shaking her head, she settled on, "What the fuck?"

There was no furniture in the apartment yet. It had been such a spur-of-the-moment decision that I hadn't any time to get things together.

It was uncharacteristic of me and possibly stupid, but I knew I wouldn't regret it. Even if she said no, broke my heart, and sent me back to Clear Lake with my tail tucked between my legs, I'd never feel ashamed of taking the chance.

Leaning against the wall, I watched Vivian move around the empty living space, taking in the surrounding area. The building had a variety of apartment rentals, but all were of superior quality to Vivian's current place.

Renovated and updated within the last five years, this place had quality fixtures, high-end appliances, and no risk of ringworm when walking barefoot inside.

“I’m so confused,” she mumbled, tugging her bottom lip between her fingers. “You got this apartment?”

I wanted to invite her to have a seat, but there was nothing to sit on besides the floor. Pushing off the wall, I followed her down the hallway as she poked around.

“Bear with me,” I started, which earned me a laugh as she darted into the master bedroom.

“No,” she corrected. “There’s a bear with me. Explain yourself and your attempted coup of my apartment lease.” She disappeared into the walk-in closet.

I loved this woman. So much.

“Last night, I couldn’t fall asleep. I spent all night restless, after the last *week* feeling restless. I don’t want to leave you. I don’t want to drop you off and drive away as you fade in my rear-view mirror, wondering when I’ll see you again. You’ll be busy with a new job, and there’s nothing tying you to Clear Lake.”

She appeared from the closet, her eyes soft. “Oh, Reed. There’s plenty tying me to Clear Lake.”

I shot her a half-smile. “Yeah?”

She nodded, dragging her feet through the shag carpet until she was toe-to-toe with me. Lifting her lips to press a soft kiss, she whispered, “You know Rocky is my best friend now.”

Grabbing the back of her head, I pressed her lips harder to mine. “Brat,” I murmured between the crash of our mouths.

She laughed, her body shaking against me. Running my hand through her hair, I kissed her for a few more seconds before forcing myself to stop and get her answer.

“I wanted you to stay in Clear Lake with me, but it’s not what you need or want.”

“But you’re what I need and want, Reed,” she argued.

“Then you’ll get me. Let’s live here.”

She glanced around the vacant bedroom. “Like, here? In this apartment. An *apartment*. In a city?”

“I thought that was pretty obvious, given we’re standing in *this* apartment. Am I not being clear?”

Vivian pushed my arm playfully before looking around like she’d missed something the first time. She started pacing the room, a frown on her face. Lifting her thumb to her mouth again, she began chewing on her nail, deep in thought.

“Vivian.”

She looked at me, blinking, then dropped her head. “I can’t,” she said after a moment. “You can’t release a serial killer into a city and not expect blood on your hands.”

I stepped closer. “Come on. Look at this hairless face. I’m innocent.”

Her smile was fleeting. “Yeah, you handsome jerk. But it’s a metaphor, Reed. You think you’ll be happy in a place like this?” She blinked a few times, nodding to herself. “No, I won’t let you do this.”



There was a chance she'd say no, and I thought I'd mentally prepared for it. As my heart slid from my chest to the floorboards at my feet, sinking between the cracks and heading three floors south to the basement, I realized nothing could have prepared me for heartbreak.

“Yeah, okay, Viv. I get it,” I said, though it wasn't true.

She shook her head, her eyes meeting mine. “No, I mean, I won't let you do this. Not that I don't want to do this. I'll tell Ezra thank you for the opportunity, but I'm going to stay in Clear Lake. I liked working for Missy, and I finally got you inviting people over, and I wanted to play Codenames and—”

“Fuck that,” I cut in. “No. Zero chance of that. I'm not letting you walk away from something that makes you feel good and something you want for yourself.”

“Well, you make me feel those things, and I don't want to walk away from *you!*” she cried.

How was she not getting it? “You don't have to. That's why I got this apartment. We'll live here. You don't have to walk away from anything.”

She shook her head, her eyes wide with disbelief. “You think you're just going to live here and be happy because it's where I want to be?”

“Well, yeah,” I admitted, tapping my toe against the floor and thrusting my hands into my pockets.

For a grand romantic gesture, this sure was going to shit at an accelerated rate.

“You’re not, Reed. Maybe at first, but going anywhere you don’t want to be will make you resent me. I won’t ask you to change for me.”

I thought of what Ezra told me when I called him and asked for help to sort out her employment situation.

*“You do plenty for other people. You do almost nothing because of other people. You’re fucked, brother.”*

“I’m doing this *because* of you,” I said softly, pulling her back into my arms. “Because I love you. Because you deserve to have someone make concessions for you. You’ve asked nothing of me, and I’m doing this with eyes wide open. I want to do this for you. I want to do this *with* you.” I hesitated, fighting the sting of vulnerability when she could tell me to piss off, regardless of my courage.

“I moved back to Clear Lake to help my mom and find some peace. I didn’t find peace in that town or the quiet of my cabin. That was an escape, hiding because it was easier.” I pressed my palm against her chest, over her heart. “I found my peace here. I found it with you. It isn’t a city. It isn’t about noise or people. It’s a feeling.”

She puffed her cheeks and blew out a long exhale, her hands resting on her head as she shook it.

“I felt unsettled for most of my life in a chaotic household. I did my best to escape it. But that need for peace came from a place I didn’t fully understand until I fell in love with you. I have that peace now, no matter what’s around.”

Vivian was still exhaling. Somehow. She might pass out if she didn't take a breath.

“Fuck. Yes, but...”

I grinned. “Yes, but?”

She thrust a warning finger into my chest. “Yes, but we need some ground rules.”

Vivian could have asked for the world then, and I would have moved heaven and earth and all things between to make it happen. *She said yes.*

Pressing my body against hers, I backed her against the wall, diving into the soft warmth of her neck. Sucking and kissing, trailing tight nips below her ear and down to her collarbone. I groaned and pushed my hips against her, immediately hard.

“Reed,” she moaned, rolling her head back to give me full access. “I mean it. We have to talk about it.”

“Yeah?” I mumbled, my mouth trailing to the top of her blouse as my finger tucked into it and popped the buttons until the fabric opened. “Talk to me, Viv. You have my attention.”

My lips found her nipple over the silk of her bra, taking it into my mouth with the fabric as my other hand pawed at her breast.

“Jerk,” she muttered, unbuttoning her pants and quickly pushing them off.

She looked sexy pressed against the wall, her eager hips driving to meet mine as her panties slid down her legs and

disappeared with a swift kick.

I pinned her hips to leverage her against the wall as Vivian wrapped her legs around me, crossing at the ankle. She was wet, making a mess of my jeans as she ground against me.

“Fuck me,” she breathed, her fingertips digging into my shoulders as her hips circled wildly.

“No,” I murmured against her mouth, my hand stroking her. It wasn’t just the apartment that was empty. My wallet was too—at least of what I needed. “No condom.”

I circled with enough pressure to make her buck against me, but not enough to send her over the edge yet. I still wasn’t sure if I wanted her to come on my hand or my mouth. Watching her come was pretty, but tasting her was divine.

The conflict on her face sank me.

“It’s fine, just this once. You can be my exception.”

I wasn’t sure if the twisting of her lips was desperation to get fucked or pain at giving up on her own rules. She was so proud when she told me she didn’t make exceptions. I wouldn’t ruin that for her.

I pulled back, tucking her hair behind her ear as our eyes locked. “Oh, Vivian. I am your exception, but not because you’d let me fuck you bare.”

I was the exception because she let me love her and loved me back. Nothing would make me feel closer to her than that.

“Come on my hand so I can watch your eyes roll back in ecstasy, and I’ll have you properly later.”

I increased the pressure of my thumb, slipping two fingers inside her until she was hysterical, her thighs trembling and her nails gripping my shoulders with a sharp sting.

“Mouth, cunt, ass. All of you, Vivian. I want all of you.” Pressing my free hand against her chest and locking eyes, I said softly, “I mean all of you. This heart is mine too, because mine is yours.”

She came with my name on her lips, and when she settled and her feet hit the floor, she dropped to her knees.

It wasn’t long before it was her name filling the surrounding air, echoes of pleasure against the white walls of our bedroom as I found my release.

This place, empty of things but full of delectation, adoration, and peace.

# Epilogue

## *Vivian*

**W**e called them “Negotiations of Defiance,” the rules Reed and I established to ensure we were both comfortable and cared for.

Not because either of us were particularly hostile or oppositional—if anything, we were uncharacteristically accommodating—but because we were defying expectations. Our own expectations, mostly.

Growth could be like that. You don’t realize it’s happening until you’ve ossified—much like the bones in feet.

Reed and I were like feet.

Reed was a man who sometimes needed space, mainly when he was in a creative flow, and I was a woman who didn’t mind giving it to him.

Besides, Reed’s intent focus could certainly keep me full for the days he retreated to Clear Lake to write when he needed

space without distractions. That passion hadn't faded, even in the months we'd been in the apartment.

Things had been going well at the club, and I quickly settled into a routine, despite the concentrated learning curve under Ezra's weighty expectations. Because they'd been going so well, I could condense my work into four days a week.

My weekends weren't Thursdays, Fridays, or Saturdays, given club life, but it didn't matter anyway because Reed set his schedule. He always made sure he was with me on my days off.

Monday mornings were my favorite—the start of my weekend. They often began with slow and methodical love-making before coffee.

This Monday was no different. Reed pressed his morning erection against my ass, his aching awakening my own. I bit my lip and buried my face into my pillow, moaning softly as he lifted my leg and slid inside me.

He could do that since he'd had a vasectomy just after we moved in together. We were both adamant we didn't want children, and I wanted Reed to be my exception.

“Fuck,” he groaned, my leg draped over his arm as he thrust in long, slow strokes, watching where our bodies connected.

“You feel like heaven. Only you're real.”

I sucked in a sharp inhale as he shifted his position, guiding me flat on my back so he could take a nipple into his mouth.

My hips lifted to meet him, greedy to take as much as he could give me, and Reed groaned again.

“Touch yourself for me,” he said, his voice a husky combination of sleepy and desirous.

One hand anchored me to his bicep to steady myself through his thrusting while I slid the other down to work myself to climax.

His orgasm followed just a shadow behind mine, our unraveling harmonious.

“Three more days of that. Happy Monday,” he mumbled against my neck, collapsing on top of me as his body pinned me to the bed. I could feel the smile on his lips against my skin, and it was contagious.

“Can’t you get Ezra to let you have even more days off? You’re a machine. No doubt you could pull a three-day workweek.”

I pushed him off me, kicking the sheets to the side and sitting up with a yawn.

“No doubt,” I agreed. “I like working, though.”

Reed rolled onto his back, tucking his hands behind his head. “Even with that dickhead, huh?”

“Careful,” I warned. “That dickhead is also your landlord, and he’s already giving us a deal on this place. I don’t want to get kicked out and have to go live in that bombed-out, moth-eaten, derelict, run-down—”



Reed lifted a pillow and threw it at me. “Look who developed champagne taste.”

“It was filet mignon,” I corrected. “And I told you I’d get it.”

The look he gave me could sink my stomach and make my heart hiccup simultaneously. Reed nailed a perfect combination of smoldering and adoring.

“Besides,” I continued, heading toward the shower. “Ezra has been going easy on all of us lately. It’s unexpected.”

Reed snorted and reached for my empty pillow, tucking it behind his head as he propped himself up to look at me while I strolled naked into the bathroom. “He’s had a sunny disposition for a while now, and it’s *scary*.”

Leaning against the doorframe, I frowned. “Scary? Your brazen, glowering, intimidating friend suddenly starts smiling freely, and you describe it as scary?”

I mean, when I thought about it, he was right. The man had probably come unhinged. Reed merely shrugged.

“When do you want to hit the road?” I called from the bathroom. Examining myself in the mirror, I decided a shower was in order. Reed had destroyed me last night.

I’d be quick about it. We had plans to spend our weekend in Clear Lake. I wasn’t sure of the time, but neither Reed nor I were early risers, and the drive would be met with traffic.

It was worth it, knowing we’d see Missy and Ron later tonight. While I loved my friends in Seattle and the widening

social circle the women at work provided, I missed my friends.

My friends!

Reed grumbled something as he kicked the blankets off and followed me into the bathroom to get ready. We were also having dinner with his mother, and he wasn't as excited about the trip.

"Better than with my mother," I'd pointed out.

I hadn't spoken with Judy since my confrontation at her house, and there were no plans to change that.

Drew finalized the trust distribution last month, effectively shutting my mother down. My mother threatened to appeal the decision but had so far left things alone.

For how long, who knew, but at the suggestion of my therapist, I let go of worrying about things I couldn't control.

If there was one force I couldn't control in my life, it was Judy goddamn Harlow. What I *could* control was the energy I gave her. These days? It was very little.

Driving to the cabin not too long later, an indescribable feeling of contentment struck. Months ago, I was broken, lost, and uncertain as I drove into Clear Lake. I was homeless, jobless, and couldn't afford a combo meal at McDonald's.

I'd been gifted the incredible fortune of belonging not in a town or city but in the heart of a man I loved. And that? That was what it truly meant to be at peace.

I had been so afraid of losing myself in Reed. Instead, I found myself through him. For the first time, I liked what I was looking at.



“I knew this would be your thing,” Reed mumbled, running his nose through my hair as we sat and watched the darkness swallow the last of the gold and pink hues.

With a chill in the air, I snuggled closer to Reed and pulled the blanket tighter around us. When he brought me up here months ago, I was reluctant and whined for half our hike to the lookout.

This evening I took no breaks on the way to the top, and even though I still struggled not to pee on my shoes when I dropped a twig on the trail, I didn’t complain once. I was too busy smiling.

“I like this lookout,” I said, gazing at the night sky as more stars appeared by the second. “The company isn’t so bad, either.” I bumped his shoulder with mine.

Reed shifted to lean back, propping himself on his elbows. “You certainly can’t see the stars like this in Seattle.”

“No,” I agreed. “You can’t.” It was a simple observation, but it quickened my heartbeat. “Do you regret moving?”

He didn’t hesitate. “No. I enjoy our life together in Seattle. Besides, it’s not as if we don’t still have this. I like that we’re a little unconventional, living between two worlds, don’t you?”

His eyes followed his finger as it ran along the arm of my sweater, the soft fabric making a quiet *swish* beneath the wake of his touch.

I thought for a moment. “I do.”

He kicked his feet out before him, stretching as he dropped flat to stare at the pitch-black sky. “I appreciate that we fit. Like the author of the universe wrote you for me, and me for you.”

I stretched out next to him, moving the blanket from our shoulders and draping it across our legs. He wrapped his arm to cradle me.

Neither of us spoke again for a few minutes, the soft buzzing of the woods around us coming to life and a crisp breeze kicking up from the forest floor below the cliff. Reed broke the silence.

“That night when I picked you up on the side of the road and when we were at the motel, and Henry refused to help you. Do you remember your breakdown in the parking lot?”

I covered my face with my hands and shook my head. “I prefer to remember it as a brief moment of collapse, but yes, I do. Please go on with this fascinating and welcomed memory.”

Reed pulled my hands away from my face.

“You said you deserved what was happening. That everyone wanted to watch the villain get their comeuppance.”

Yes. I remembered that parking lot meltdown well. It had been a miserable moment in my life. One when I realized I wasn't just disliked but *hated*. And that hate, brewed and percolating, had simmered for years.

It made me feel like the biggest asshole, regardless of my recent intentions to be otherwise.

Reed propped onto his side. "I joked that maybe it was your redemption story, and you were just early in your story arc."

My lips tugged into a tight smile. He had been trying to make me feel better.

"I spent so long wanting to be alone and on my own. Not just for the peace after such a *loud* childhood, but because, the boys aside, people have always disappointed me. For a long time, I vowed not to rely on others for anything. I wanted to keep to myself. Until you came along, I was pretty good at it."

He dropped his head back, looking at the night sky. "I joked about your redemption, but this is *my* redemption story."

His eyes met mine, not dropping even when he sat up and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a small box.

"Holy shit," I whispered, my eyes focused on the black box as he opened it.

"This is my redemption story, Vivian, because while I may still want to be alone, I want to be alone with you. I'd say that's progress. I thought you were a storm disrupting my calm, but now I realize you were the electricity my heart

needed to beat. I love you and want to spend my life growing with you. Marry me.”

My hands flew over my mouth. “Reed,” I whispered. “You can’t take it back. Once you ask—you can’t take it back. You know that, right?”

He chuckled, taking out the ring. It was a simple princess cut in a silver band. Classic and beautiful, I loved it more than I ever thought I’d love a piece of jewelry.

“I’m well aware. And once you say yes, you can’t take it back.” He slid the ring on my finger.

“Hey!” I protested. “You didn’t even let me answer.” I held my hand close to my face, inspecting the ring in what little light the half-moon cast over us. “What if I say no?”

Reed watched as I admired the ring, his lips tugging into a sweet smile. “You won’t say no. My redemption story intersects with yours. We were meant to fall in love. It started years ago when you hijacked my locker, but I felt it all those months ago when I kissed you in front of it.”

The air seemed to silence around us, the thundering of my heart the only thing I could hear. “You did?”

Reed leaned forward, cupping my face as his thumb brushed my cheek. “You didn’t?”

I did. God, I did.

“I’m going to be your wife,” I whispered, affection dancing between our eyes. “You’re going to keep expecting more from

me, okay?” I reached to cup his face, our elbows crossed as we mirrored one another. “Because you make me better, Reed.”

“I’m going to keep expecting you to see your worth. There’s a difference.”

This time, when Reed filled my ear with admissions of pleasure, longing, love, and fondness while making love in the woods, I knew his words were just for me, and he meant every single one.

Months ago, my goal was to survive six weeks without the rotting weeds of my mother’s influence taking root. Cracking the foundation of my recovery from her earlier influence, love had taken hold, growing and blossoming in the most unlikely place—my heart.

Vivian Harlow wasn’t the villain. She wasn’t the asshole. She wasn’t the bully.

And she was going to get her happy ending. Because sometimes, even the wickedest ones get a second chance.

# Three Years Later





# Clear Lake

*Reed*

“Do you think it would have done better if you’d gone with the alien reveal at the end?” Noah asked, biting into an apple and staring out at the lake.

I grumbled, shifting in the Adirondack chair and running my toes through the gritty sand. A hidden stick poked me, digging into my big toe and earning a deeper grumble of discontent.

I wasn’t in the mood to listen to my best friend give me shit about the film adaptation of my book tanking at the box office.

“Good thing you use a pen name,” Ty pointed out. “Less humiliating that way.”

He lay on a towel, tanning his already bronze skin in the afternoon sun.

Clear Lake wasn’t a substitution for sunny California beaches, but watching Ty’s big, goofy grin, you wouldn’t know it.

I flipped him off.

We'd been coming to this cabin every summer for the last thirteen years since graduating from high school. Despite busy lives, kids, wives, and life circumstances, we made it happen every single year. No matter what.

And every year, we gave each other enough shit to make up for all the time in between when we weren't together.

This afternoon was a giant dump of amusement with the flop of my first and only screen adaptation.

Noah checked his watch. "Where is Ezra?" He shaded his eyes and looked back at the cabin. "He said he couldn't be here the first night. Fine. But we're halfway through day two, and the asshole hasn't shown his face."

Ty pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head and looked at Noah. "You were a bit like this for the first year you and Jaime got together. Do you not remember?" Ty jutted his chin toward me. "Reed's been even worse in the last few years."

I flipped him off again.

"I've been even *better* in the last few years."

Even with an unsuccessful shifting of my writing and other frustrations, I *was* better.

My wife helped with that, and if there was one thing Vivian did for me, it was to inspire. So much so that my most recent book was a young adult dystopian novel—a flipped fairy tale retelling of the villain becoming the hero.

It was outside my typical writing style, and genre-specific fans hadn't crossed over, but it was the work I was most proud of.

Ty sighed and dropped his sunglasses back down. "Sure, we'll go with that."

Noah's fingers drummed against the chair as he looked over at Ty. "Say what you will, brother, but it's a good life. You should consider it."

Noah and his wife had spent the last five years between the road with Noah's band and their home in Portland, popping out babies like nobody's business. And, I suppose, it was nobody's business.

I never saw the man happier than when he was with his girls—his three daughters, yes, and Jaime, too. She'd just given birth six weeks ago, fucking up his regular touring timeline.

According to Noah, Olivia was a "whoops," but knowing him, there was no whoops about it. The only whoops was likely Jaime foolishly agreeing, but the woman wanted to be bred like a prized horse.

And honestly? Good for them.

Noah, for the first time, took time off from the band's regular tour schedule. Jaime insisted she was fine at home with the girls, but Noah wouldn't leave her, no matter how often Ezra and I reminded him we were there to help. They'd considered getting a place in Seattle for Jaime to stay when the family

couldn't join him on the road so she could be closer to her best friend and, of course, us.

Vivian, always a surprise, had taken to being an aunt to Charlotte and Diane, or as we affectionately called them, Chuck and Didi. Though we only met her six weeks ago, we all fell in love with Olivia.

Vivian was always the first to rush to help Jaime when she needed it, and damn if it didn't make me love her generous heart all the more. It took some years to brush off the dust and debris of her past, but once she did, Vivian was one of the best people I knew.

"Squeezing on that tour bus and listening to The Wiggles instead of rock 'n' roll sounds amazing," Ty said dreamily, his chin propped in his hands as he kicked his feet. "Tell me how many times in a day you wipe an ass that isn't yours?"

Noah pointed at Ty. "Hey, Chuck and Didi are potty trained, and we worked damned hard for that."

Ty and I applauded while Noah took a bow.

"You don't have to have kids to be happy, Ty," I pointed out. "Vivian and I certainly don't want any, and we're thrilled about that." I shrugged apologetically at Noah. "Not that it isn't great, I'm sure."

Vivian insisted Rocky was a child to us, but that motherfucker was independent and self-sufficient. A roommate rather than a charge. Opinionated, too.

Rocky wasn't as keen to adjust to city living. Back and forth from Clear Lake to Seattle wasn't doing it for him, so we'd left him in charge of the cabin full-time.

I was there semi-regularly for a quieter place to work, and Vivian joined me plenty. But Missy and Ron checked on him and ensured he wasn't throwing parties while Mom and Dad were away.

Noah grinned, that easy-going smile that came so effortlessly for him. Unlike the emptiness when we were kids, there was an entire life behind that smile now. Genuine contentment. It looked good on him.

"You and Vivian are stupidly happy, and it's annoying, but I'm happy for you, Reed. I still can't believe you found someone to deal with the push and pull of your intensity. Your creative energy is another level." He turned to Ty. "*I don't care about wiping asses for the few years it's needed, and maybe kids aren't for you. But what about a partner? Someone to keep your bed warm at night?*"

Ty brushed his blonde waves out of his eyes. He'd let his hair grow longer in the last year, and the casual look suited him.

"What about a partner? I'm working to make partner, and it's kicking my ass. If I land this, I can finally earn my place at the firm." He shook his head. "Sweat equity is real, and it has nearly killed me, but I'm *so* close to making partner. If I close this, I can finally *breathe*."

As if to prove his point, Ty let out a long exhale. His lips curled into a playful smile. “As for someone to warm my bed at night... Never been a problem.”

There were simultaneous eye rolls between Noah and me.

“How’s your mom doing?” Noah asked, ignoring Ty.

I ran my hand along my jaw, the scruff of my beard a familiar comfort. I didn’t wear it long, but I did wear it, deciding I missed it after months with a naked face. Vivian liked the way it tickled her thighs.

“It’s better, and I’m grateful for it. Viv is the champ on that one.”

I’d taken Vivian’s advice of letting my mom take care of herself and do more without me stepping in, and she was. Vivian assisted, reminding her about boundaries when needed, but my mom hadn’t let my dad in the house in the last two years.

I watched a boat speed by on the lake, the ripples of waves lapping against the shore as kids screamed and cheered down the beach.

Noah nodded. “Your mom loves Vivian.”

I hadn’t realized how much my mom wished she’d had a daughter until I started bringing Vivian around.

Vivian was patient with my mom. She had a lot of empathy for her, helping my mom figure out how to stand up for herself with my dad.

My mom, in return, was giving Vivian some maternal comfort. Vivian cut her mother out of her life, and while it was better for her mental and emotional health, it hadn't been easy. My mom's life was a mess, but she had a lot of love to give. Vivian deserved to get it.

A deep, rumbling voice trailed behind us. "Everyone loves Vivian. She's my favorite work wife."

I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw, reminding myself that Ezra loved to fuck with me because he and Vivian had become good friends in the last few years of working together.

It didn't bother me, not really. I loved that Vivian had a large social circle of friends. I loved that she valued her work and was so successful that Ezra opened a second club and left Vivian in charge of The Apocalypse. But that asshole wanted to ruffle feathers, even these days.

Noah stood from his chair, nearly rushing the imposing man. Ezra was still a force despite having softened slightly in the last couple of years.

"You asshole." Noah embraced Ezra in a fierce hug. "What the hell took you so long?"

Ty and I got up, joining the circle of embraces, hugs, and pats on the back. For as acute as Ezra could be, the man was a hugger. And a damn good one, too. Despite cutting off his emotions to most things, he'd never shied away from his affection for us.

“Brother,” I mumbled, hugging him even though I saw him regularly. It didn’t lessen the duration of his clutch.

Ty hugged Ezra the longest. The two hadn’t seen one another in person since last summer, and though Ezra had planned to visit San Francisco when his baby sister settled there a few months ago, he’d been unable to make it down.

Ty arranged this entire trip, no doubt thrilled to celebrate with Ezra. The two of them had always had a unique bond.

Pulling away, Ty slapped Ezra’s arm. “Brother, where have you been?”

Ezra grinned, the light spreading to his eyes and softening them. “You’re not going to believe it...”

**Xx**

Keep up with The Boys! Ezra and Sunny’s story is next, and it’s absurd but fun ;)

**Broken Like Me** is available **here**.

**Liar, Liar, he lights my pants on fire...**

It all started with a lie and an omission on the tail end of a bad day.

One year ago, I left my past behind, desperate to shed an identity I no longer want. So sometimes? I’m *\*cough\** not



exactly honest about it.

Ahem.

When my best friend suggests a blind setup to turn my terrible night into a celebration of my newfound independence, I hesitate. But only for a moment.

I was looking for a night of freedom, but I never expected that a blind setup would lead me straight into the arms of the wrong guy.

Really.

Because unbeknownst to me, that brooding, angsty, and dangerously alluring man? He's not my blind setup. As I lied about my identity, he omitted to tell me he was hiding his own.

Our one-night stand leaves us consumed by an overwhelming obsession with one another. But secrets have a way of surfacing. Especially when he offers me a job at his club.

I can't deny the pull of a man like Ezra. He can't stay away either—no matter how much we taunt one another.

Amidst the tangle of deception, can we find truth in our feelings?

# Afterword

Hello Dear Reader,

As an indie author who self-publishes their work, I appreciate *every single* one of you and *every single* page you've read! Sincerely, thank you, thank you, thank you. I write to tell stories that people enjoy reading, and if you've enjoyed reading this book, I hope you'll be willing to leave a review. Every review counts, and I appreciate it from the bottom of my heart.

I also love hearing from readers and talking about stories (whether it's what I'm writing or what other people are reading and writing—seriously, romance is *the best* community of readers **ever**). Drop me a line via my website [www.kceverly.com](http://www.kceverly.com) or shoot me an email [kceverly@gmail.com](mailto:kceverly@gmail.com). Honestly, friends, I appreciate you so much!

And while I'm sure your email, like mine, is stuffed with more unnecessary than necessary correspondence, I'm always tickled when people sign up for my [newsletter](#). Don't worry, I

promise I rarely send out emails, and while I've been told that's very poor indie author behavior, I'm sticking with it ;)

**Xx**

KC

# Acknowledgements

## *A Very Special Thank You ...*

To every beta reader, every ARC reviewer, and every person who has ever laid eyes on one of my manuscripts or books—truly, thank you. Authors eat, breathe, and obsess over their stories, often forgetting that the rest of the world does not. To everyone helping to get this book out, I appreciate your time and effort, and patience.

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And to Zac—without whom I wouldn't be able to do any of this.

# Also By KC

## **Standalone Books:**

*Despite Your Crazy*

*Just A Phase*

*Tough Guy*

## **The Boys from Clear Lake Series (Interconnected Standalones)**

*Same As Yesterday*

*The Wickedest Ones*

*Broken Like Me*

*Carried Away*

(Trust me, you won't want to miss the rest of The Boys!)